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**When Everything's Made to be Broken (I Just Want You to Know Who I Am)**

by Cassiopeias_Sky

**Summary**

When you inadvertently become a witness to a murder and are suddenly a target for death, it takes a specially skilled soldier and his team to keep you alive and your family protected.

When it becomes personal and more than just a job, Bucky finds that there is no limit to what he will do to keep you safe.

**Notes**

Okay…I’m doing it. I’m posting my very first fanfic.

This will eventually be a reader x Bucky fic. The reader, by the way, is a civilian. No super powers, no fighting skills, and by no means perfect.

Warnings: Language (I have a potty mouth) and violence. This will get pretty dark later on, and there will be smut. If that’s not your thing, you may want to avoid this story.
You’re late. Of course you’re late. You’re ALWAYS late.

You frantically walk down the mostly empty halls searching for the correct room, trying not to run since you are in a government building and don’t want to look crazy, but don’t see any signs posted anywhere. The speaker probably already started, you think to yourself. You should just go home – it’s not like this was for school, so you aren’t really out anything if you miss the presentation, it’s just that it seemed really interesting and the topic did apply to your major. You are also actually out of the house by yourself for the first time in what seems like ages - your mom had volunteered to watch your 3-year-old twins, which is even more incentive to not give up and go home just yet.

After another 5 minutes of searching you finally stop, ready to call it and just sit in a coffee shop for an hour, when you see the sign. It’s right in front of you; you made it! You give yourself a mental high five. But apparently they changed the time, because according to the sign the presentation started over two hours ago. You debate for a moment, wondering if you should sneak in and see if it’s even still happening, and decide to go for it. You’re already there, after all.

As you walk in, you immediately notice that there are only two other people in the large room, one of which is holding a gun that fires the moment the door closes behind you. The second person’s head explodes, shot at point blank range.

“Such bad luck for you,” growls the armed man, raising the gun to you.

You freeze, but then are pushed violently out of the way by what feels like a brick wall as you hear the sharp sounds of gunshots. Another brick wall catches you and hauls you to your feet, dragging you out of the room and just around the corner.

Blue eyes stare into yours, and you vaguely hear Brick Wall #2 asking, “Ma’am, are you hurt? Are you okay?”

“Um…I don’t know…what just happened?” you stutter.

“Steve – we gotta go! NOW!” Brick Wall #1 shouts as he explodes through the door, grabbing the shoulder of your coat and pushing you forward as you hear more gunfire behind you. It almost sounds as if it is ricocheting off of something, but you don’t have time to think about it.

They seem to know where they’re going, and as far as you can tell they are less dangerous to you than the armed guy that’s trying to kill you, so when they use a key card to open the doors of what looks to be a private staff hallway and shove you through, and then into some sort of closet, you don’t argue.

“Ma’am, I’m really sorry about this, but you’ve just become very involved in a mission that we messed up big time,” whispers Brick Wall #2 as he puts his hands on your shoulders. “We’re going to do our best to keep you safe, but you need to do exactly as we say.”

You swallow and nod. “Okay.” You begin to tremble.

You’re absolutely terrified. It hits you: you’ve just witnessed a murder, and are now a target yourself.
“I’m Steve,” he continues, “and this is Bucky.” He gestures to the other man. “May I have your name, Ma’am?”

You give him your name, staring at the two men wide-eyed. They look normal enough at first glance (if you can overlook how ginormous they both are) but then you notice that under their jackets they are both wearing what looks to be some sort of armored uniform top that you’re pretty sure shouldn’t have gotten past security, and black cargo pants that look suspiciously full of knife and gun shaped things…so you’re also pretty sure it isn’t candy that’s attached to the belts at their hips. You try to concentrate on breathing, because no matter how many times you’d convinced yourself that you’d be a total badass if anything like this ever happened to you, in real life this is scary as fuck.

Steve smiles at you, obviously trying to reassure you, before looking over at his partner. “Buck, he’s going to be giving his team a verbal description of her very soon, if he hasn’t already. We need to get her out of here, now.”

“You’re absolutely right – but I think we’re gonna have to call Stark in for backup. We don’t have any way to get her anywhere safely without leaving someone behind, and I’m not willing to do that.”

“It’s my fault, Buck, I’ll stay and – “

“The HELL you will! I’m not leaving you behind! Besides, it’s goddamn Stark’s fault, not yours.” Bucky turns to you. “Do you have a car here?”

You nod. “Yes, I’m parked in the Visitor’s lot out front.”

“Alright.” Steve nods; clearly he’s made a decision. “Bucky, you bring her out to our SUV – if they see her getting into her car it will just make it easier for them to trace her if they get her plates. I’ve already let Sam, Nat and Clint know that the mission is a bust, so they should already be heading back to our vehicle. Sam will have to take your bike.” Bucky looks unhappy at that but doesn’t say anything. “As far as I know, their cover hasn’t been compromised,” Steve continues. “I’ll cover to make sure you get her out safely, and then I’ll follow in her car. No one is left behind.”

You wordlessly hand him your keys. Bucky looks at you. “We need to change your look; this will be a lot easier if you aren’t immediately recognizable to him.” He walks around you, taking off your jacket as he goes. Steve shrugs his off and puts it on you as Bucky removes the stick holding your hair up in a twisted bun. You had actually taken some initiative and straightened your long auburn hair, so taking out the bun wasn’t a curly disaster like usual. Bucky takes off his baseball cap and places it on your head, gently pulling some of your hair forward over your shoulders as he does so. “There. That should be good enough for now” he says, as he appraises his impromptu makeover. “You okay?” he asks, eyebrows raised.

You take a deep breath and nod, afraid to speak because you don’t know what sounds will come out of your mouth.

“Hey.” He leans forward as he says your name, lightly grabbing your upper arm. “We’re gonna keep you safe – I promise. You’re not getting hurt under my watch.”

You nod again; you really have no choice but to trust them if you want to get home to your boys.
Chapter 2

Steve and Bucky quickly go over the plan with you again. The good news is that the building should be closing to the public shortly so there aren’t many people left in the halls; the bad news is that you have no idea how many people still in the building are innocent bystanders and how many are with the guy that is now after you. Anyone could be a threat.

“Don’t do anything stupid.” Steve looks pointedly at Bucky.

“How can I?” Bucky retorts. “You’re taking all the stupid with you.” He puts his left arm over your shoulders, as planned, and begins walking you out of the employee areas into the public space. Despite you being tall, Bucky is at least four inches taller so it’s easy for you to tuck yourself into his side. “Keep your head down, like you’re looking at your phone,” he quietly reminds you, “I’ll get us to where we need to go.” You nod as you pull your phone out, and when you see his left hand hanging over your shoulder you vaguely wonder why he’s wearing gloves. The fall days had turned cooler earlier than usual and it was definitely a bit chilly due to the rain today, but it certainly wasn’t cold enough for gloves.

You have to trust where Bucky is guiding you; between the angle of your head and Bucky’s baseball cap your face should be fairly hidden from view, but you also can’t see more than a few feet of the floor in front of you. He greets people periodically and tenses with each interaction, but so far no actual threats have materialized.

It’s going as planned, you tell yourself. The façade of you two being a couple walking together seems to be a good cover; maybe you can actually pull this off. You and Bucky are less than 40 feet from the entrance when you hear Bucky mutter, “Goddammit.”

He leans in to whisper in your ear, “keep your head down, and if I push you forward you need to run through those doors. Don’t look back, and don’t stop. Run to the black SUV in the second row on the left – the rest of our team will be waiting for you.”

You nod.

“Hey!” you hear someone shouting behind you. Bucky tightens his hold on your shoulders, and picks up the pace a bit. “Hey, Red! Stop!”

You bristle at the generic nickname – you have one uncle that is allowed to call you that, and this man is not him. The footsteps behind you speed up, and you feel Bucky tense beside you.

“Hey, excuse me, sir?” you suddenly hear Steve engage the man, and what follows sounds like a solid punch to the face. You don’t turn around, though, as Bucky rushes you through the doors and out to the waiting vehicle.

He all but shoves you into the backseat of the SUV. It looks like he’s about to go back for Steve, when Steve exits the building and you see a flash of red come between him and the door. Steve abruptly slows to a walk, and calmly walks to your truck. All of the attention is now at the door, where Tony Stark has arrived as Iron Man; it sounds like he’s making some sort of flashy speech, but he’s too far away to hear him clearly. Not only is all of the attention off of Steve and on him, he is making it physically impossible for anyone to exit the building.

“Well, that’s effective,” you observe.

Bucky snorts, glancing over at you. “He’s a goddamn showoff.”
“Alright kids, buckle up,” says the driver, meeting your eyes in the rearview mirror. “Let’s get moving. I’m Nat, by the way.”

She pulls the vehicle out, and you breathe a sigh of relief when you are finally out on the road - the more space you can put between you and that building, the better. You look back, and see something shoot into the darkening sky.

“Well, that’s Tony taking off. They must not have made him feel very wanted.” The man in the front passenger seat turns around with a giant grin. He looks friendly, and you immediately like him. “Hi, I’m Clint! Sorry that you got caught up in our mess; we’re gonna do our best to make things right.” He’s looking right at you when he continues, “Looks like Steve got caught up – he’s just to the right of you, Nat. And Sam’s just behind him on Bucky’s bike.” Clint must have killer peripheral vision.

“I need to go home,” you suddenly blurt out.

“I’m sorry, but that’s not going to be possible,” Nat says from the front. “We’re going to have to bring you to a safe house while we clean up our mess – your life is in serious danger right now.”

“No! I need to go home!” you say again, stronger this time. “I need to get back to my kids! This isn’t optional, I can’t just leave them!” Panic starts to set in; logically you know they would be safe as your mom is watching them and would never leave them alone, but the idea of them thinking they’ve been abandoned by you is completely too much for you to handle.

“Fuck,” exclaims Bucky. “You have kids?”

Clint turns back to you. “Hey, me too!” but you ignore him.

“Yes! I have 3-year-old twins, and I need to get home to them.” You pause at the look on Bucky’s face. “What, did you seriously think that no one would notice if I suddenly went missing?”

Bucky levels an annoyed look at you. “Well, it would certainly be more convenient. Clint, get Steve and Stark on the line.”

A few seconds later, the calls are connected and are coming in over the vehicle’s speakers.

“Steve here.”

“Yeah, me, too. So…where are we taking her? Bermuda? Fiji? I hear Honolulu is nice this time of year. She deserves to go somewhere nice since we royally jacked up this job. An all-expense paid extended vacation, compliments of yours truly, I-Only-Make-One-Mistake-Every-Five-Years-And-Sadly-This-Is-It Stark.”

Bucky rolls his eyes and huffs. “Stark, there’s –“

“Home. You can take me home,” you interrupt.

Bucky sighs. “She’s got young kids. We can’t just take her out of the area, she’ll be missed. If there’s a missing person’s report filed, her name and picture will eventually be in the news, they’ll put the pieces together, find out who she is and then she’ll be a target until she’s dead.”

Not that you didn’t already know that, but that was startlingly blunt.

“Yeah…” Stark muses, “we’re gonna have to rethink this. I’ve got ears open to their radio frequencies – they haven’t mobilized yet because I sort of melted all of the cars in the parking lot.
Oopsies…sorry, not sorry. On the bright side, they haven’t mentioned her plates yet so I don’t think they got them. They do, however, have yours. Their backup will be arriving in approximately 5 minutes, so we need to figure this out, and fast.”

“I live less than 10 minutes away, and I have a big enough garage to hide your car.” By this point, you’re almost ready to beg. “Please, I just want to go home.”

“Tony, can you safely monitor their movements from her place?” Steve asks. “We have some planning to do, and it might actually work to our advantage to stay in the immediate vicinity for now. They won’t expect it, and probably won’t be looking in this area for very long. They will likely think we’ve already fled.”

“Did you really just ask me that question? Seriously. You’d think you’d know a guy by now.”

You can almost hear Steve bite his tongue. “Okay ma’am, you’re getting your wish. Give Nat the directions, and we’ll follow.”
The Avengers are in your garage.

The Avengers are in your garage.

The AVENGERS are IN YOUR GARAGE.

And so is your mother.

Fuck.

It’s a three stall garage, but it’s a really tight fit with everyone, the two vehicles, Bucky’s motorcycle, and Tony’s suit. Sam leaving to keep watch was really the only thing that kept everyone at some level of comfort. You wouldn’t allow anyone in the house just yet because the boys are already asleep – you’re pretty sure there’s going to be raised voices with the following conversation and the last thing you need is for them to wake up and start asking 584 questions that you don’t have the answers to.

You stand off to the side, feeling self-conscious and awkward. Now that everyone has removed their jackets (and Iron suit), the exhibit of human physical perfection that is currently on display in front of you is both intimidating and impossible to ignore, and you can’t help but feel inadequate in comparison. It’s the first time you’ve had a chance to really observe these people and you quickly decide that God gave to all of them with three hands. They are well armored, but under that armor they are clearly very…healthy. Is there some sort of rule somewhere that states that you have to be built like a Greek god to be a superhero?

Glancing over at Bucky, it suddenly becomes very clear why you heard ricocheting bullets and why he was wearing gloves; he has a metal arm. A metal arm? Averting your eyes quickly so as not to make him uncomfortable if he notices your gaze, you can’t help but wonder what happened.

You steal a glance at Nat, noting her petite stature and firm…everything. This girl doesn’t jiggle. You, on the other hand, well, you’re tall, so there’s that. Unlike Nat, you jiggle. Your body still (and probably always will, you concede to yourself) bears proof of carrying twins, although you are generally well proportioned. You stop and firmly push down your quickly spiraling thoughts with reminders to yourself that you’re strong and healthy (you have to be if you want to keep up with your boys) and that they find comfort in your form. You comfort yourself with the idea that they might think Nat isn’t squishy enough to be comfortable when they need a hug. And seriously, why the hell are you even thinking this right now?

The team in front of you is currently trying to convince your mom of the need to place you and your twins under their protection at an undisclosed location; not that anyone needs her permission,
but it will be a hell of a lot easier with her cooperation. She, of course, isn’t having it, and is refusing all justifications and explanations offered. You are her only child and her grandchildren are her world, so the idea of the three of you being off the map is completely incomprehensible to her. She’s on her 4th (maybe 5th ?) cigarette in less than 20 minutes, when she loudly states, “Fine! But I’m coming with!”

It’s time for you to step in.

“Oh my God! MOM!” you say loudly, and you hold your forehead in your hands. You know exactly how stubborn she can be; it’s a trait she’s passed along to you and everyone else is being too nice to get through to her. “Stop! Just stop! You need to listen to them!”

She looks at you. You could swear she just sucked down half a cigarette in one drag.

You slowly start to walk toward your mother. “I watched someone get murdered tonight. I saw his goddamn head explode! I am now on someone’s hit list. The only hope the boys and I have of returning to a normal life at this point, with our family, is if we can all disappear without them finding out my identity until they,” you point to the others in your garage, “can get rid of the threat. If they find out my name, and if it gets up to their superiors, we may never get to come home. And that’s the best case scenario! I need you to cover for me – I need your help to disappear. I need you to do your part – tell people that wonder where we are that I took the boys out to the west coast to visit their dad’s family. Tell them that I just up and left with the boys because we needed a change of scenery, that I needed to escape the memories, and that you don’t know when we’ll be back. It’s a plausible story, but only if you’re here to tell it.”

She looks at you, finally silent, and you continue. “As soon as I get the word that the people that are trying to kill me have been…” you find that you can’t make yourself say the word ‘killed,’ “… neutralized, and they,” you point again to the others with you, “are able to confirm that no one else knows my name or what I saw, then I will be able to come home. With the boys. But until then, we need to disappear. I need to keep my babies safe, Mom - that is my number one priority, and it damn well better be yours, too. If you disappear with us, then the whole game changes. There will be missing people reports for us and Amber alerts for the boys. Our whole family will be looking for us, including Dad, and they will make sure our pictures are all over the news in the effort to get us home. If that happens - if you come with - you are going to be handing my name over to the guy that wants me dead. And then it’s not just the guy and his team that wants me dead – it will be his entire organization, because their target will now have a name and a face.” You pause. The look on her face is heartbreaking. You continue softly, “I know that you’ll miss us, God, mom, I know how much you’ll miss the boys. We’re gonna miss you, too. But you have to stay here and be our cover.”

“But when will you be back? When will I see you again?” she demands, and the desperation is clear in her voice.

Steve steps in. “Ma’am, we’ll do our absolute best to resolve this as quickly as possible, but the best case scenario is at least a month or two, probably more. Her life is on the line – we have to be absolutely sure that all threats are neutralized before we bring them back. We can’t take any chances; if we can’t be 110% sure that his organization doesn’t have her information, then there’s a possibility that we may have to infiltrate their organization to confirm that the threat is gone. Unfortunately, that takes time. But ma’am, we will do everything we can to bring your daughter and grandsons back to you and your family as soon as possible, and you have my word that we will keep her and the boys safe.”
It was a sad goodbye, but you had expected that it would be. You watch your mom leave with a heavy heart, wondering when you will get to see her again. The two of you talk almost every day; as much as she sometimes frustrates you and drives you up a wall, you’re very close. A tear falls down your cheek as you close your eyes and exhale, trying to wrap your brain around the enormity of your situation.

The team had given you some privacy to say your goodbyes, but you figure that it’s probably time for you to get back into the garage and figure out what’s going on.

Upon entering, it’s clear that you’ve just walked into a shit storm.

“Steve! You can’t be serious!” Bucky hisses – he looks pissed.

“Buck, you’re the one with the skillset best suited to keep them safe without additional backup. Fixing our mistake is going to be a huge undertaking, and we need everyone possible in the field –“

“Which is why I should be out there!”

“You’re the most qualified for this job, Buck,” Steve continues as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “If they breach our security, your hand to hand combat skills in close quarters are going to be sorely needed. Not only that, but the fact that you were an assassin means that you’ll have a better chance than any of us of thwarting an assassin. Plus -“

“So have Nat stay with them! She could do this just as well as I could!”

“Plus,” Steve sternly continues again, “your face is less widely known than the rest of us. Your chances of anonymity if it becomes necessary for you all to leave the safe house are much higher than any of us. And we need Nat in the field – she already has her assignment.”

“But –“

“Don’t make me pull rank on you, Buck.”

Everyone has been silently watching the exchange between the two men, but at this last comment they all visibly tense up.

Bucky draws himself up and clenches his jaw as glares at Steve. It takes almost a full minute before he tersely replies, “Fine.”

Everyone looks slightly surprised at his response, but they relax a bit.

Tony looks up, the first one to notice that you’ve reentered the area. “Good, you’re back,” he says, alerting everyone else to your presence. “We’re still working on the details, but we have some preliminary plans laid out and can give you a general timeline of how this is going to go down. I’m sure you’ve got some things you’d like to get ready before leaving.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” You have a headache and just want to go to bed, but that obviously isn’t in the cards.

“According to our intel, we’ve got at least 4 hours before we can move,” Steve explains. “They’ll be too close to us to move before then, but they are slowly moving out. The plan is to wait for them to leave, thinking they’re chasing us, when in fact we are sort of chasing them. There will be a few of them still in the area, but we should be able to avoid them.”

“Okay,” you murmur. You hear him speaking, but can’t really focus.
“It would be a good idea for you to pack, and we’ll help with anything we can,” Clint says gently. “I know what it’s like to travel with kids – they need 500 outfits, plus a few spares just in case, toys, movies, blankies, all that jazz. And since you’ll be gone a while, you’ll want to have everything you need.”

You nod. What did he say? You already can’t remember.

“And make sure you have what you need to take care of you,” Nat interjects. “Whatever you’ll need to make it feel like home – you have enough space in the back of your truck to bring more than just a few basic necessities, so take advantage of it. The good news is that we actually have some time before we need to move you, so you can grab what you need to make yourself comfortable.”

“Yep.” Your chest is getting tight.

You can feel Tony watching you intently before he breaks in. “The place you’re going to stay is actually one of my favorite hideaways – I spend time there occasionally myself. It’s not a S.H.I.E.L.D. location, it’s one of my personal homes. Don’t worry if you don’t have everything you need - it’s completely off the grid, but I have a system in place with a few select trusted people on my payroll that will obtain whatever groceries or whatever else you need, and a series of drop off points and drones set up to deliver the stuff so no one will actually know where you are. It’s kinda like an underground Amazon Prime, but faster. And better, of course. I wanted to go mainstream with it, but big brother doesn’t like drones,” he finishes with a roll of his eyes.

“Sure.” It’s getting hard to breathe, and you can feel five sets of eyes on you. Tony and Bucky are watching you especially closely, and it’s making you uncomfortable.

It’s quiet for a moment until Steve breaks the silence, eyebrows drawing together. “Are you okay? I know this is a lot -”

“Yep, I’m fine,” you interrupt. “You said we have 4 hours before we can leave?”

Steve nods, and is about to say something when you cut him off. “I need some space. I’ll be inside.”

You hear someone say your name, but ignore it and let the door shut behind you as you go into the kitchen. You need to think, you need to calm down, you need to breathe. God, why can’t you remember how to breathe? Anxiety creeps its way up, putting a chokehold on your throat.

“Nope,” you say to yourself, forcing your lungs to inhale, exhale. “I don’t have time for this.” You desperately need a distraction. Thinking quickly, you realize that you haven’t yet eaten so you begin making dinner. The plan from earlier today was to make lasagna (because yay, leftovers) so you stick with that because it sounds good, and also because you weren’t raised to eat in front of people without also feeding them, and a pan of lasagna should cover it. Well, realistically it will probably be more of a small snack for the beefy people in the garage, but hey, at least it’s something.


By the time you’re assembling the pan, you are finally able to take even, deep breaths.

You jump and turn when you hear your name softly spoken; you hadn’t heard Tony come in from
the garage.

“Do you need something?” It isn’t your intention to sound rude, but your nerves are so raw that you can’t help it.

“Couldn’t help but notice a little bit of an anxiety attack in the garage...something you deal with often?”

After covering the pan with tin foil, you slide the lasagna into the oven before turning to face Tony.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know. I get them too. Pretending it’s not happening, though, does tend to make them worse.”

Searching his eyes for any trace of pity or condescension, you only find empathy. You exhale a breath you didn’t realize you were holding, and nod. “Yeah. Anxiety has been something of a constant companion for...well, a while, I guess.”

Tony nods. “Any specific reason? Bad few years or GAD?”

“Both.” Huffing out a half-hearted laugh, you continue, “Lucky me.”

“I’d even be willing to bet that you have just a smidgen of PTSD thrown in there, too. Not trying to pry, but you are kind of our responsibility now, so we’re going to have to get the info we need to take care of you.” He actually manages to sound pretty sympathetic under the firm tone.

Nodding, you start cleaning up your mess from the lasagna filling. It’s not exactly a thrilling prospect, but you get where he’s coming from.

Abruptly changing the subject, he asks, “So where’s the baby daddy? You aren’t sporting a ring, so I assume you’re not married?”

“Nope, sorry, we need to know the answer to this. We have to know if he’s going to come looking for you or his kids, or if he’s some sort of threat to you.”

Shaking your head, you simply state, “We’re good on both counts.”

Tony says your name with a fair amount of exasperation, before conceding, “Look, I know this isn’t fun and is probably touching on some sensitive topics, but we need you to cooperate. And my You’re-Trying-To-Cover-Your-Anxiety-With-Bullshit Meter just went off the charts again, so even though I am slightly emotionally stunted, I do know something’s up.” He pauses before softly continuing, “We can keep you safe from him too, you know.”

“You don’t have to. He’s dead.” Loading the dishwasher to avoid meeting Tony’s gaze, you take a deep breath and continue, “Killed by a drunk driver while on his way to work at 9 in the morning over a year ago. I’ll do you a favor and skip the bullshit – Christopher wasn’t perfect - there was actually quite a bit of emotional abuse, if I’m completely honest – but I still loved him, some of the time, anyway. Before you say anything, yes, I realize that’s fucked up. But I did. And yes, I should have left. But I didn’t, and I felt like I couldn’t after the boys came along. God, did he love those boys.”
There’s a long pause before Tony speaks up. “I’m sorry.”

You shrug. “Thanks. You know, it wasn’t easy but I wouldn’t trade it for anything. He gave me my babies. Most days, I just try to remember the good times – in spite of everything, we did have a lot of them.”

Another pause, then Tony clears his throat. “So what do you do for work?”

“Self-employed – personal chef and chauffer for the little guys sleeping upstairs. On my,” you pause to add in air quotes, “‘down time’ I’m working toward my degree.”

“You know, it wasn’t easy but I wouldn’t trade it for anything. He gave me my babies. Most days, I just try to remember the good times – in spite of everything, we did have a lot of them.”

“Self-employed…so you mean you’re a stay at home mom?”

“I hate that term, but technically, yes. And for the record, contrary to that obnoxious stereotype, I work my ass off. I don’t just sit at home, watching soap operas and eating bonbons. Where did that come from, anyway? And bonbons are fucking disgusting! They’re always made with the shittiest chocolate imaginable, and you never know if you’re going to get a filling that slightly redeems the shitty chocolate, like caramel, or if it’s going to be a slimy, regurgitated cherry that makes you want to puke.”

Tony bursts out laughing at your random tirade, and you blush slightly before continuing. “Sorry…got kind of off topic…anyway, I decided to stay home because it just didn’t pay to put a set of twins into daycare – it costs more than what I would make in a week. So I stay home with them and go to school when they’re sleeping. Speaking of school…Tony, I can’t quit again. It’s a completely online program that meets in an online chatroom twice a week. Please tell me that you have the technology to hide my location when logging on to the internet so I don’t have to quit school again…I had to take some time off when Christopher died, and I just started back up this semester. If I quit again, I won’t go back,” you finish quietly.

Something about the desperation in your tone made Tony pause before answering. You’re pretty sure he’s going to shoot down your request, but he surprises you when he nods. “Absolutely. In fact, is your computer a laptop?”

At your nod, he continues. “If you get it for me, I’ll make the adjustments right now to hook you up to my network…I have the best wi-fi ever, by the way, and you don’t have to worry about them tracing you if they learn your identity. I think I’ll make it look like you’re connecting from Abu Dhabi…you know, if they end up finding out who you are, I can use this to our advantage…”

As you go to work setting up your laptop for him, he stops you with a gentle touch to your shoulder. “Hey, I know you probably don’t want me to bring up your anxiety again, but what are your coping methods for when you get panicky? I just need to know so I can arrange for whatever you need to be at the house before you get there, or shortly thereafter. Panic attacks are no joke, and I won’t take this lightly. We nervous wrecks gotta stick together,” he finishes with a wink.

“Baking, music, and art therapy are the big ones.” You chew your lip…why does he care so much? This doesn’t match the Tony Stark you’ve seen in the news. You’re starting to really like him; he kind of reminds you of a favorite uncle.

“Well, it just so happens that I had a fancy-dancy, state of the art, borderline professional kitchen installed at the place where you’re going. Should have everything there that you need for baking, so go nuts.”
“…Okay.”

“Hey, Kiddo, we’re gonna make this right by you. I’m so sorry you got dragged into this, but I promise we’ll keep you safe.”

Tony sounds so convincing and sincere, you actually kind of believe him. And did Tony Stark just call you Kiddo? What the hell is happening with your life?

“You’ll be stuck with Barnes for a while,” Tony continues, “but there’s no better guy for the job, seriously. Out of all of us, I really think that you will be safest with him. And for what it’s worth, under that standoffish, crusty, very convincing hobo impression he’s got going on, he’s really a decent guy.” Tony makes a face and makes a choking sound before continuing. “Those words tasted just as awful as I thought they would. Do you have anything I can use to rinse out my mouth?”

That actually got a small giggle out of you. “I take it you’re not his biggest fan?”

“Nope. But we’re back on the same team, so I’ve built up somewhat of a tolerance for him. Plus, the bad blood that’s between us isn’t technically his fault, so I’m doing my best to get over it.”

You both pause as the door to the garage opens, and Steve begins to walk in before abruptly stopping. You hear a dull thud, followed by an annoyed Nat, “Jesus, Steve, if you’re going to suddenly stop moving, you need to warn a girl! Walking into you is like walking into a wall.”

Steve looks around before quietly speaking. “It smells like home in here.”

He moves out of the way, and the rest of the team files in after him, looking somewhat awkwardly around the entryway as they all begin to remove their boots.

“Ma’am, may we come in?” Steve begins politely. “We’d …”

“Steve, you don’t need to be so formal,” you interrupt with a sigh. You’re tired, the conversation with Tony left you even more drained than before, and you don’t want to be treated with kid gloves anymore. “Come on in. Just keep it down – I don’t want to wake the twins up until we’re ready to go.”

“We’ll be quiet, Ma’am,” he replies, looking at his team with a stern look. They all just roll their eyes at him, and you wonder how many times a day this happens.

“Stodgy old fart,” Tony grumbles under his breath as he starts working on your laptop. You’re starting to agree with him.

“It’s not much, but I’ve got some lasagna in the oven that will be ready in about 30 or 40 minutes. And Steve, please stop calling me ‘Ma’am.’”

“Did you say lasagna?” Smiling broadly, Clint pokes his head into the kitchen. He kind of reminds you of a golden retriever, for some reason. “You didn’t have to go through the trouble, but I’m not going to turn it down!” What a goober.

Steve leads the way in, inhaling like a bloodhound on the chase. He turns to Bucky. “Doesn’t it smell like…”

“Yeah,” Bucky murmurs. He looks…sad, maybe? You just can’t get a read on this guy.

Nat steps up to you. “Do you want to know about the people that are after you?”"
You think for a moment before replying. “No, I don’t think so. They don’t need any more incentive than they already have to kill me. I think the less I know the better.”

She nods respectfully. “Okay.”

“Well, on second thought I do want to know one thing. If they figure out who I am, are they going to go after my family?” This is something that has been lurking in the back of your mind, but you almost don’t want to know the answer.

“No,” she says simply. “Unless you initiate contact, they will consider it more useful to monitor your family to see if they can get any info on your whereabouts than to hurt them.”

At your relieved look, Nat continues. “Most people in your situation eventually give in and call a loved one, thinking enough time has passed. That’s when things get ugly and family members die.”

“Oh.”

Clint elbows her in the ribs and Steve, Bucky, and Tony shoot her a dirty look.

“What? She needs to know the risks,” Nat states tartly as she shrugs.

“Um, I’m gonna go pack.” You desperately need to be alone for a few minutes. Thankfully, no one tries to stop you.
Upstairs in your room, you allow finally the tears to come, but they don’t. Worn from the day’s events and raw from your talk with Tony, you fall face down on the bed to try to wrap your brain around what’s happened today and fail miserably. You saw someone die. Violently. You now have to go to a safe house, and depend on a team of people you don’t know to keep your family safe. This can’t be real - this is the kind of stuff that only happens in movies or books, right? And the heroine is supposed to be a competent, gorgeous, super smart and athletic woman who doesn’t even blink or mess up her hair as she deals with the bad guys. But that’s not you. That’s not you.

Clumsy. Plain. Freakishly tall for a woman. Oversensitive. Heavier than you’d like to be. Awkward. An anxious mess. Scarred, physically and mentally. That’s what you are – captured by your demons and laid to waste by your own insecurities.


You’re nothing that anyone will ever want.

The demons are whispering loudly tonight.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, get a hold of yourself. This isn’t the time or place to throw a pity party, and you’ve got more important things to do than think about.” Speaking the words aloud finally kick you into motion. Rolling over onto your back, you heave a sigh as you look at the clock. There’s roughly 20 minutes until you need to go back down to take out the lasagna, so you get moving.

You start pulling out clothes and stuffing them into a large duffle bag. Into another goes your bathroom essentials such as bodywash, lotion, soap, and shampoo – if everything else is going to change, at least you’ll still be able to smell like yourself. It’s a small victory. You’re sure to grab the jewelry with sentimental value since you don’t know if or when you’ll be able to return, and the baby monitor unit from the night stand just in case the place you’re going is two stories. Making a mental note to grab your coloring books and a few of the more important cookbooks from downstairs, you realize you’re finished in your room.

“That’s it,” you muse aloud. “These two bags, plus my computer bag downstairs. That’s all I’m taking for myself to potentially leave my home forever.” Somehow you thought that there would be more, and the thought leaves you thoroughly depressed. “Oh, and my pillow! Can’t forget that…” Well, at least you have four things now. Yippee.

Quietly bringing your bags and pillow out to the landing at the top of the stairs, you grab another bag for the boys to pack their few toiletries. The team downstairs is still gathered around your table like some kind of war council, and no one looks up to see you crossing the hall at the top of the stairs. Moving into the boys’ bathroom and leaving the door open since the clicking of the closing
door might wake up the kids, you can’t help but hear some of what’s going on downstairs even
though they’re clearly trying to respect your wishes to keep it down.

“…careful…widow but…asshole…history of abuse…sweet, sweet girl…” That’s obviously Tony,
you think to yourself, since he’s really the only one you’ve spoken with at any length and is (or
was, anyway) the only one who knows anything about your past.

You hear a baritone response, but can’t make out who or what he’s saying.

“…might have…common with her…maybe…friend other than Steve…” Tony again. It’s hard to
tell, but he sounds kind of sarcastic with the last bit.

More baritone rumbling. You wish whoever it is would speak up; it makes you uneasy when
people talk about you, and even more so when you don’t know what they’re saying.

“Hey…not…hurt them…know you…good guy, even if you don’t believe it.” With the slightly
louder ending, you can tell it was Steve that just spoke; he sounds like he’s maybe getting a little
agitated. He’s got a distinctive East coast accent, you decide.

“But what if I do?” You heard that clearly, and you’re pretty sure it was Bucky. So was it Bucky
the whole time? He sounds upset and you wonder why, but you didn’t hear enough of the exchange
to really know what happened.

“Then our little truce is over, and I’ll find you and kill you with your own goddamn arm!” At this
comment from Tony, you hear chairs scrape and shuffling as well as multiple voices speaking
urgently yet quietly at once. Footsteps, the front door opens, closes, and all is quiet.

What the hell is going on?

Taking a deep breath to refocus yourself on your task, you grab the bag and prepare to go into the
boys’ room to pack. Channeling your inner (non-existent) ninja, you all but tiptoe in and move
straight to their dresser; the sweatshirts and jackets you want to grab from the closet will need to
wait until the boys wake up since the door makes enough noise to wake the dead. Thank God you
actually folded and put their laundry away this week – this would be so much more difficult if you
hadn’t.

Basically dumping their drawers into the waiting bag, you make quick work of the task before
checking on them and leaving the room, closing the door quietly behind you.

As you head downstairs with your bags you see Bucky sitting at the table motionless with his head
in his hands, the metal of his left arm catching the light from the kitchen. Steve is sitting next to
him, and it sounds like he’s quietly giving Bucky some sort of pep talk but you can’t make out any
of the words. Looking around, you don’t see anyone else – so did they go outside?

Steve glances over at you and gives you a small smile as you set your bags down in the hall and go
into the kitchen to take out the lasagna. As you take the pan from the oven, you can feel two sets of
eyes on you.

“Ma’am…” Steve abruptly stops talking when you shoot him a pointed look; you hate it when
people call you ‘ma’am.’ Clearing his throat, he says your name and starts again. “It smells
amazing in here.”

“Thank you,” you reply with a small smile as you place a loaf of garlic bread into the oven to
warm. Looking over at them, you see that Bucky is watching you with red rimmed eyes. You
shrug, “It’s just lasagna.”
“My mom used to make lasagna,” Steve begins. “She’d make it whenever we’d have guests over – or Bucky; my mom absolutely doted on him.”

“You’re such a punk,” Bucky muttered as he shook his head and turned his eyes down to the table.

“What? She did! Don’t act like you didn’t know it! You had her wrapped around your little finger with your ‘hello Mrs. Rogers, you look beautiful today.’ Next thing you know, she was asking THIS GUY what he wanted for dinner. Jerk. And it was always lasagna.”

You can’t help but smile over at the two men; they clearly have quite a history as the camaraderie is practically spilling into your kitchen.

“Well, she made good lasagna,” Bucky mumbles with a shrug.

“Yeah, she did.” Steve becomes quiet, lost in his thoughts or memories, maybe both.

It’s quiet a moment or so more until Tony, Nat, and Clint come back in from outside. Tony looks pissed, and the other two look wary.

What the hell happened? You still don’t know. The tension that’s back in the room is doing little to calm your own anxiety and fear.

“I hope you don’t mind, but Clint and I packed up the books and some toys from the living room and put them in your truck,” Nat said as she walked back into the space. “I don’t know if it’s everything you want, but we wanted to help out where we could.”

“Thank you, I’m sure it’s fine. The boys are pretty creative, so they’ll make do with whatever’s there,” you say quietly as you pull down some paper plates and plastic forks.

Clint takes them from you and sets the table, and begins explaining what he heard from Sam while they were outside. “Well, they’re not moving as expected – some have fanned out, but Krakken’s keeping more of his team closer than we thought.”

“Krakken?” you repeat, unsure of what Clint is talking about.

“Nikolai Krakken – the guy that pulled the trigger tonight,” Nat explained.

“The guy that’s after me is named after a terrifying, mythical, and particularly deadly sea monster?” Disbelief must be evident in your voice, as everyone turns to you and nods their confirmation. “Are you fucking kidding me?” You’re not sure why, but knowing his name makes the terror you’re barely containing even worse; despite telling Nat earlier that you didn’t want to know because you didn’t want to give him more reason to kill you, the fact is that knowing more is just going to horrify you further because it makes it more real.

“Do you want to know more?” Nat gently prompts.

“Nope. I have a very vivid imagination, and I’m sure that his name alone will add sufficient horror to my nightmares tonight, not that I needed any extra…uh…” Nat puts her hand to your shoulder “…any help with that.”

Seeing your unease, Tony suddenly declares, “Well, I’m starving and if I have to stand here any longer just smelling that food I’m going to gnaw my arm off, and then I’ll have to build a fake one for myself, which means I’ll have jokers like you guys saying ‘go-go gadget arm!’ And that’s kind of my line for Barnes over there….so…Is it ready?” You shoot him a thankful smile because you know exactly what he’s doing – he’s effectively both taken the immediate attention off of you as
well as changed the subject.

“Yep, just have to take the garlic bread out.”

“You made garlic bread, too? Kiddo, you’re an angel,” Tony says as he swoops past you to grab an oven mitt. “I’ve got this, you go sit down.”

Moving to take the empty chair in front of the window, Clint gently takes your arm and steers you towards the chair on the opposite side as Bucky and Steve both get up and shift down, Bucky taking the window seat.

“Is this some sort of team building exercise? Musical chairs before dinner?” You’re absolutely baffled at the movement.

Steve answers you with an amused grin on his face, “No, but with everything that’s going on and learning that Krakken’s men are still close, we need to keep you as protected as possible, and that means keeping you away from windows and doors. But maybe that’s actually not a bad idea…”

“No, Steve, no,” mutters Clint as he takes a seat beside you.

“So…you think someone’s going to just bust through the window? I thought they didn’t know who I am? How could they have found me?” Panic is seeping its way into your voice again.

“They don’t,” Nat quickly interjects. “At least, as far as we know, they don’t. But that doesn’t mean we want to take any chances.”

A flash of light catches your eye; Bucky is staring at the table, motionless except for the repeated flexing and release of his metal hand. He seems pretty agitated.

“It’s just a precaution,” she continues, as Tony places the lasagna and bread on the table before scooping out a serving for himself. There aren’t enough chairs in the dining area, so he just leans against the wall next to you.

“So…how far away is this place? Are we looking at a really long drive? If so, we’re going to need to stop periodically for the boys,” you ask as you begin picking at your food.

“Actually, it’s probably only 30, maybe 35 minutes west of here,” Tony says around a mouthful of food.

“Really? You have a private residence so close to here?” Not that you think he couldn’t, but it seems so far-fetched; most celebrities that live in the state live at least 90 miles southeast, in one of the bigger cities.

“Yeah, it’s quiet and I can be a recluse,” he admits, “Sometimes I just want to be alone.”

“I think you’ll really like the house, I had it constructed maybe 5 years ago. It’s kind of old fashioned, with lots of windows and light. My mom actually designed the floor plans - she was going to have it built for her own private retreat. When I found the plans, I couldn’t resist; I had to bring them to life for her. Your lasagna is fantastic, by the way.”

“Thanks, Tony, I’m really glad you like it.” You pause for a moment, thinking. “So, if you don’t mind me asking, how come your mom didn’t build the house? Did she just get too busy?”
Gaging by Tony’s response, this was really the wrong question to ask. Judging by everyone else’s response, the shit is about to hit the fan.

After a moment he stiffly replied, with steel in his eyes, “She’s dead. She couldn’t build the house because she’s dead.”

You follow his steely glare and see that it lands on Bucky, who is staring down at his plate with his jaw firmly clenched. You can hear him breathing harshly through his nose as he grips his fork tightly; if it wasn’t an inanimate object, it would be screaming for mercy right now.

What the hell happened?

Everyone else is on edge, seemingly waiting for either Tony or Bucky to make the next move.

“Well,” he begins softly, “she was a wonderful woman. She did her best to protect me, and now that’s what the house does.” He stands up straighter and continues, “All of the windows are made from bulletproof glass, and there are panic rooms on every floor. Speaking of which, I want you to take the master suite.”

Tony finally breaks his glare to look back at you. “Um…” you begin, wanting to ease the tension that you inadvertently caused. “It’s really awesome that you did that for her. It’s a wonderful way to honor her memory.”

Tony finally breaks his glare to look back at you. “Well,” he begins softly, “she was a wonderful woman. She did her best to protect me, and now that’s what the house does.” He stands up straighter and continues, “All of the windows are made from bulletproof glass, and there are panic rooms on every floor. Speaking of which, I want you to take the master suite.”

You’re about to object and say that you’ll just take a guest room when Tony cuts you short. “No, you will take the master suite. One of the walk-in closets is the panic room for the second floor – so it needs to be your room.”

“Then I should probably put the boys in…”

“No.” Tony interrupts again. Seeing that you’re about to argue again, he continues, “Okay, you know how when you fly somewhere, and when they give the safety instructions the flight attendants always tell you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others?” You nod. “Same concept. If something happens when you’re upstairs, you get your ass into that panic room. Barnes can bring the boys to you if they’re not already there, but he’ll have less to worry about and will be able to do his job better if you are where you’re supposed to be if there’s a breach.”

“We’re going to keep you safe.”

“…Okay.” God, this is terrifying to contemplate. Panic rooms? Seriously?

“Hey, it won’t come to that,” Steve interjects gently. “This is all ‘just in case’ and speculation of a possible worst case scenario. We’re going to keep you safe.”

Releasing a breath you didn’t know you were holding, you only nod. Looking around, you see that everyone looks at you with confidence…except Bucky. He’s still staring at the table so intensely that you think the finish is going to flake off, and he’s back to flexing his metal hand.

“There’s also an AI presence set up – Barnes, pay attention here – she’s set up just like FRIDAY so all of the commands should be familiar to you since they’re pretty much the same as in the tower. The biggest difference is that her voice is modeled after my mom’s voice and vocal patterns.”

With Tony’s last comments Bucky finally looks up from the table, meeting Tony’s eyes, but doesn’t say a word. He looks absolutely livid.

Tony moves his hard glare from Bucky and back to you, softening as he does so. “Oh, and her name is SUNDAY – she runs the house,” he explains, “including everything from the independent power grid and security to environmental programming to clean the air and even set the Roomba to
vacuum. She can’t load the dishwasher, though. From any point in the house you can ask SUNDAY to lock down, close windows, locate people or regulate temps. If you give the command, you can have certain doors shut and locked, which might really work to your advantage with kids. Hell, she’ll even start the fireplace for you in your room if you’re too chilly to get out of bed. Oh! And if you ask her to, she can let you know when the kids are awake.”

“Wow.” All you can do is blink at Tony. “I don’t know –“

“I’ll show you when you get there, and if you have any questions later you can ask Barnes. You’ll pick it up quickly; you seem like a smart cookie, and SUNDAY is designed to be intuitive.”

“Okay.” This is starting to get really, really overwhelming.

“Alright, so here’s the plan to get you there,” Steve steps in, “we’re going to get you and your boys packed into your car. Tony will drive; Bucky will follow on his bike to offer cover should anything happen. Which it won’t, but we’re still taking the precaution. Sam’s still keeping to the skies, but won’t follow for the same reason that Stark’s not taking the suit – we don’t need Krakken or his men to see anyone and narrow down your location. Tony will take one of his cars on-site back here to get his suit. Everyone else has their assignment – finish your food now, because according to Sam’s intel, we need to prepare to depart in roughly half an hour.
Chapter Notes

This is a short-ish part, mostly because I had to take a huge ass part and split it up, and the ending of this part was really the only place to do it.

I don't think there are any extra warnings applicable to this part... *squints at screen* I really don't think so...

It’s time to go.

Clint and Natasha begin to rise from the table. “We’ll help bring them down.”

“Thanks, but I think Bucky should probably be the one to help,” you say reluctantly; he already looks like someone pissed in his Cheerios, and you’re pretty sure this isn’t going to improve his mood.

“What? Why? They’re willing to help, let them do it,” Bucky snaps, glaring at you in either resentment or panic…maybe both? You’re not going to back down, though; you may be insecure, shy, and somewhat of a pushover when it comes to yourself, but when it comes to your children you have a backbone of steel. Besides, for some inexplicable reason, despite his outwardly hostile appearance you aren’t the least bit afraid of him.

Leveling your own glare in his direction, you calmly state, “You’re the one that’s going to be staying with us. They’re going to have to get familiar with you, so we might as well start now. Besides, handing them off to too many different people that they don’t know tends to get them a little overwhelmed, and I’d like to avoid that. Sticking to one new person is going to be the best bet to avoid an epic dual meltdown, especially at this hour.”

Out of the corner of your eye, you can see everyone else nodding in agreement.

“It’s just…NO! Have someone else help you!” he all but yells.

Panic. It’s definitely panic. Under normal circumstances you’d probably have more empathy for the guy, but right now you just don’t have the patience; you feel whatever remnants of calm and civility that were still present fall away. You’ve officially hit your limit. You’re just DONE.

“They’re three!” he continues, when no one else moves to help you. “I don’t know what to do with a goddamn three-year-old! What if I hurt one of them? What if -”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, calm your tits!” you snap, leaning over the table toward him. “They’re not newborns, they’re three! They’re pretty much indestructible at this age!”

The room is silent at Bucky simply stares at you, wide eyed.

Tony breaks the silence a moment later. “Well, Barnes, she told you. Better get your tits up there and grab one of the boys.”

If looks could kill, Tony would have burst into flames on the spot. He just smirks at Bucky.
You turn around, grab their jackets and shoes and start up the stairs, fully expecting that Bucky will follow. A moment later you hear him push back from the table and put on his jacket before he catches up to you as you open the door to the boys’ bedroom.

Jimmy is nearest to the door, so you wake him first.

“Jimmy, baby, it’s time to get up.” He rolls over and lazily opens his blue eyes to your gentle touch.

“Morning, Momma?” His sweet voice and smile never fails to melt your heart.

“No, not yet baby, but we have to take a short trip. We’re going on a little adventure, but you can go back to sleep in the car, okay?” you explain softly.

“Momma, who’s that?” asks Artie, sitting up and looking at Bucky as he rubs his eyes. You knew he would probably wake up when you woke Jimmy – the little bugger is a light sleeper.

“This is Bucky.” Motioning for him to come forward, you continue, “He’s coming with us on our adventure.”

“Hi Bucky,” they both say, staring at him.

“Momma, he tall,” exclaims Artie.

To your surprise, Bucky softly replies with a chuckle, “Yeah, buddy, I am. You look like you’re gonna be pretty tall yourself when you grow up.”

Artie smiles up at him, still rubbing his sleepy brown eyes. “Momma’s friend?”

“Yeah, baby, Momma’s friend,” is your gentle reply as you smooth his hair back from his forehead.

Out of the corner of your eye, you see Bucky shoot you a surprised look.

“Hey, you both need to listen to me for a minute, okay?” It’s time to use the Mom Voice. “You need to make sure that you both listen to Bucky. No matter what. If he asks you to do something, you need to do it right away. No arguing, okay?” Not that your instructions will stick, but you figure that you might as well get the idea started.

They drowsily nod.

After putting on their jackets and shoes, you grab their small noise machine, their nightlight, and the monitor and shove them into the waiting bag along with some additional jackets and sweatshirts from the closet. You go to swing it onto your arm when Bucky wordlessly takes it from you and puts it over his shoulder.

Surprised, you glance over at him. “Thank you.”

He nods curtly in response.

Picking up Artie, you ask Jimmy if it’s okay for Bucky to bring him downstairs to the car. As you knew he would, Jimmy smiles and raises his arms up to Bucky who hesitantly picks up the child as you grab their favorite blankies and stuffies.

You look over to see Jimmy snuggle into Bucky’s neck, already ready to go back to sleep.
“Um…” Bucky begins, looking unsure. “I thought…aren’t…aren’t they afraid of me?”

You study him for a moment, taken aback by the question. “Should they be?”

Is this what that conversation was about? Is Bucky just afraid that the boys would be scared of him? You belatedly remember his metal prosthetic, and suddenly Bucky makes just a little more sense. Mentally scolding yourself for not thinking of this earlier, you decide not to bring it up.

“It’s just…um..” He looks like he wants to say something but remains silent.

“It’s just what?” you prompt gently. “You have long hair and scruff? You’re dressed in black? You’re huge, what, almost six and a half feet tall and look like you could bench press a car?” You purposely don’t mention the prosthetic.

Bucky just looks at you and doesn’t say a word.

Pausing to shift Artie a bit higher in your arms - God he’s heavy - you sigh before continuing. “Look, I’m actively trying not to raise judgmental assholes. I do my best to teach them to look beyond what they see and to wait for peoples’ actions before making any assumptions. I realize that to some people you’re probably pretty intimidating – I mean, when you had your jacket off I think I counted three guns and four knives – and to some people that might be pretty scary.” You shrug. “As far as I’m concerned, despite the amount of weaponry you carry around with you, and in spite of the circumstances that I met you, you haven’t given me any reason to be afraid of you. So I’m not. They aren’t going to be afraid of you either unless you give them a reason to be.”

He looks completely lost for words as he holds your son.

“Well,” you say as you look around the room one last time, “I guess it’s time to go.”

Bucky follows you down the stairs and into the garage where he watches you attentively as you strap Artie into his car seat, before carefully securing Jimmy into the other by following your example.

“You’re probably going to want to check this,” he mumbles before stalking over to his bike.

As you give each of the boys their blankie and stuffed animal, Tony lets you know that they’ve already loaded the truck and asks if you’re ready to go.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess,” you say as you get into the passenger seat.

You don’t look back as you leave your home.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Part 6! This one got kinda long…lots of descriptions, so please bear with me.

Additional warnings specific to this part: Mention of murder, violence, death

The ride is pretty uneventful, thankfully. Tony makes periodic small talk as he drives, trying to put your mind at ease.

Roughly 15 minutes into the drive, he finally gets your full attention with an apology. “I’m sorry things got so tense back at your place – we didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable and add to your already stressful day,” he says with a wry look. “I took some below the belt digs at Barnes that I probably shouldn’t have…not that I’ll ever admit that to him.”

You regard him with a sideways look. “You know, you’re a lot different than I thought you’d be.”

Tony laughs under his breath. “Yeah, my media presence is intentionally douchey. It’s something I picked up from my dad, not that that’s necessarily a good thing. If the general public knew I actually had a heart, small as it may be, they’d be up my ass each and every day.”

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me,” you assure him with a smile. “Not that I’d have anyone to tell anyway.”

A comfortable silence stretches on for a while, before you ask, “So, what is this SUNDAY thing?”

“Oh, yeah! It’s an AI that I have set up at the house. I think you’ll really like her!”

Tony animatedly explains her to you, giving you the general gist of how she works.

“Wow…” you say when he’s done. “That sounds amazing. You really designed her yourself?”

“Yes! Thought about just sending FRIDAY over there, but I wanted something to fit with the house better, so I designed SUNDAY to be more mom-like. That, and I like to tinker with stuff.”

He pauses for a moment before continuing. “You kind of remind me of her.”

You’re completely taken aback at this revelation. “Huh? I remind you of a computer program?”

“My mom,” he clarifies in a somewhat exasperated tone, keeping his eyes on the road. “You look nothing like her, it’s not that - I think it’s something about the way you carry yourself…and how you sort of automatically take care of others.” He shakes his head. “You had the shittiest day imaginable, because of us. You watched someone die, which made you a target, so you have to at least temporarily give up your life. Again, because of us. And then you turned around and fed us. Most people wouldn’t do that. I sure as hell wouldn’t. So if I seem a little overprotective of you, I apologize. I just… I couldn’t protect her… maybe I can do a better job protecting you. I know I’m probably overcompensating, but at least I’ll own it. According to my shrink, I do that a lot…the overcompensating part, anyway.”

You glance over at him. There’s something on your mind that you need to say, so you take a deep breath. “Just do me a favor, okay?” You wait until he nods his head. “For now I’ll follow any
instructions you give – I really shouldn’t be making any big decisions since I’m likely in psychological shock right now.” At his surprised glance you continue with a shrug, “I recognize the signs. I don’t think I told you earlier when we were discussing my classes, but I’m studying psychology with a focus in therapy.”

“Ah,” he nods. “It suits you.”

“Anyway,” you continue, “at some point, hopefully soon, I’ll start dealing and the shock will wear off. So just keep me in the loop, and don’t exclude me from any decision-making that impacts my or my kids’ futures. I get what you’re trying to do, and I appreciate that you guys want to keep us safe, but don’t strip me of my agency or self-determination in the process. Don’t automatically assume that you know what’s best for us – eventually that will piss me off.”

Tony heaves a rueful sigh. “I haven’t always been the best with that, but I’ll try.” You throw him a hard look, until he sighs again. “Okay okay, I’ll do better than try.”

“Thank you.”

“You know, I was going to say this earlier but didn’t want to bring up the whole ‘shock’ thing, but since you mentioned it…you function rather well for someone who’s in shock,” Tony says after a moment.

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” you murmur.

* * *

A few short minutes later, Tony turns your truck onto what seems like a seldom used utility road in the middle of the woods. It’s really far out into the country and away from any cities or big towns, so there aren’t any lights other than what’s coming from the truck and Bucky’s bike. Since it’s so dark, it’s really fucking creepy. Like Jason from the Friday the 13th movies creepy.

“Are we almost there?” you ask. You’re surprised, really, as you actually have a vague idea of where you are.

“Uh, yeah. We’ve got about 5 miles on the longest, twistiest driveway I could manage, and then we’ll be there. The long, unpaved road can make it a real bitch to leave in the winter, but you won’t have to worry about any annoying door to door sales people.”

Tony presses a button somewhere (you don’t see where) and you hear a feminine voice speak up. “FRIDAY, please wake up SUNDAY and have her open up the house,” he says nonchalantly.

“Right away, boss,” answers the disembodied voice.

God, that’s weird.

A few short minutes later, the road takes one more turn and then emerges from the trees, bringing the house into full view. It’s still a good half mile away, but you can already see from here that it is absolutely breathtaking.

SUNDAY had (or at least you assume that it was her) turned on the lights in the house, so it was a welcoming sight. From what you could see, the home looked to be an old Victorian with heavy country influences. It had a turret on the front left corner and a gorgeous wrap around porch that, as you got closer, you could see had a swing in the opposite corner where the porch ended. It was huge, but it was nothing like what you had expected; this place looked like it jumped out of a fairytale.
“And what were you expecting?” Tony asked, jolting you out of your thoughts.

Oh shit, you must have spoken those last parts out loud.

“Oh, um, it’s beautiful…” you manage to say.

“Did you really think it would be ugly?” Tony actually sounds offended.

“No, of course not! I guess I was just expecting something a little less warm and welcoming, and a little more modern and…technical, I guess?” Never in a million years would you have guessed that Tony owned a home like this.

“Well, that’s my mom’s influence. This was her dream home, so it really is a reflection of her.” Tony smiles as he takes the truck around the corner and pulls into the garage at the back. “I do really think you’ll like it here. Hopefully it will feel more like a home and not so much like you’re in hiding from a murderous lunatic.”

“Gee, thanks for the reminder,” you mutter under your breath. Like you’d be able to forget.

Bucky pulls his motorcycle in beside your truck. Once he cuts the engine, you hear something familiar in the background.

“Are we near water?” you ask quietly as you open the door to get Artie out of his car seat.

“Yeah, there’s a lake about 100 yards behind us,” Tony replies. “Why?”

“I could hear it, so I was just wondering,” you reply. You pause before continuing, “Is a lake home really all that secluded? Don’t you have lots of people boating by?” You grew up in this state – lakes are popular and usually quite busy at any time of the year.

Tony looks at you with a raised eyebrow. “I own the whole goddamn lake, and all of the land around it. So yeah, it’s pretty secluded.”

“Oh.” Well, okay then. “I guess I didn’t know you could even do that.”

He continues talking as he starts grabbing bags from out of the back of the vehicle. “My mom originally purchased this land shortly before I was born; most people have forgotten that the lake exists. It also helps that I kind of hacked Google Maps to make sure it doesn’t show up when people do a search.”

“Well, that’s effective,” you murmur as you slowly and gently lift your sleeping son.

Bucky quietly steps up to you. “Do you want me to take Artie?” he asks softly.

“Yes, please, I’ll get Jimmy out.” You’re surprised, but least he’s not arguing this time. You hand over your son, who thankfully stays asleep.

“SUNDAY,” Tony begins, “please dim the lights in the house in the house.” Turning to you, he quietly says, “follow me – I’ll show you the room closest to yours so you can put the boys down.”

He opens the door leading into the house, and silently leads you up a staircase immediately to your left. At the top of the stairs, the entire area opens up to a center rotunda that’s open to the area below, with another set of stairs curving along the wall directly across from you. Tony turns right and follows the gently curved balcony to the end of the hall, where two sets of doors sit across from one another on another small balcony overlooking the family room below.
“This can be their room – if it makes you feel better, it is the room farthest away from any stairs, so any intruder would have to get past Barnes’ room as well as your own,” he says quietly as he opens the door. “I’m sorry about the one king bed – there aren’t any rooms with two, and I’m guessing you don’t want to split them up.”

“This is perfect, thank you,” you murmur as you walk in, Bucky following right behind you.

From what you can see in the semidarkness, it’s a stunning room – the far corner opens up to a small balcony overlooking the back yard and there are two other windows to let in light.

You put Jimmy down, and thankfully he stays asleep. Taking Artie from Bucky, you settle him in next to Jimmy, gently telling him to go back to sleep when he briefly opens his eyes. After tucking in their stuffed animals, you finish by tucking pillows under the fitted sheet to keep them from rolling out of the bed before the three of you silently step out of the room.

“Tony, can you have, um, SUNDAY lock that balcony door? They can be curious little shits and –“

“You just did,” he gently cuts you off.

“Oh. Okay.” That’s going to take some getting used to, as your mom would say.

“SUNDAY, please be sure to let us know if one of them wakes up.”

“Will do,” says a disembodied voice. Weird. So weird, even if there was a slightly mom-like tone to the response.

Tony leads you across the balcony and opens the double doors. “This will be your room,” he says as he walks in. Bucky walks past Tony, muttering something about mapping out the layout.

You stop short the moment you step into the space. You’ve never seen such a perfect bedroom in your life. It’s huge, with a luxurious king size bed opposite a window that reaches the length and breadth of the wall across it. All of the furniture in the room looks to be high end, but the kind of high end that isn’t intimidating. No pretty but uncomfortable pieces here; everything is something you would have picked for yourself.

Straight through the bedroom, you think you see a bathroom, but there is another hall going slightly to the left. Following it, you find a private sitting area with two sets of French doors leading to a ginormous private deck (and is that a hot tub on the deck? Seriously?!), another huge window, and a cozy fireplace. From here you have a perfect view of the lake Tony was telling you about earlier, as the skies have cleared and you can see the moonlight reflecting in the water. Like the bedroom area, the room is nicely appointed with comfortable looking furniture that begs to have someone sit and read for hours.

Through the door is the bathroom, and…wow. There’s a large, step-up whirlpool tub surrounded by windows, and a huge, glass enclosed walk in shower that looks like it could hold 4 people. You can’t resist – you take a peek and see that there is a rain shower head.

“This is fucking incredible,” you murmur as you look through a third door leading out of the most luxurious bathroom you could ever have imagined. Tony has been following you, but now he walks past you and into the hall, and you follow.

“This is the walk in closet,” he points to the first door, “and here is the panic room.”

Bucky is already there, inspecting the area.
You heave a rueful sigh. “And here I’d almost forgotten why we’re here,” you say as you look into the sturdy looking room.

Bucky turns to you and levels a very stern look in your direction. “If something happens and you’re up here, you get your ass into this room. I will make sure the boys are safe – that is MY JOB. I know your instinct will tell you to go to them, but Krakken has never, ever gone after a target’s children. That doesn’t mean we’ll get lazy and not protect them, because we absolutely will, it just means that he’s got a precision focus on his target.”

He pauses, as if trying to decide whether or not to continue. He finally does, but you wish to God that he hadn’t. “There have been more than a few children that witnessed their parent’s death. Don’t do that to your kids. Just get your ass in here.”

In your peripheral vision you see Tony nodding. You release a loud exhale; shit just got real.

“I can’t promise how I’ll react in a situation where I feel like they’re threatened and need me – you’re right about the instinct part. But I’ll do my best to trust you.” It’s the best you can offer.

Bucky opens his mouth to say something, but Tony interrupts him. “That’s all we can ask.”

“Barnes,” Tony continues as he begins walking out to the hallway, “there are two other bedrooms, but you should probably take the one closest to both sets of stairs.”

Bucky quickly checks both rooms before disagreeing with Tony. “I’ll actually take the room at the end of the hall – it gives me better visuals of both sets of stairs – from the other room, I’m completely blind to the back set.”

“Okay, makes sense,” Tony says, before he heads down the curving staircase. “Let me give you a quick rundown of the rest of the house, and then you need get some sleep.” That last statement is clearly directed at you as he gives you a somewhat fatherly glare.

“At this point, I almost think I should just caffeinate and stay up…you do have coffee here, right?” you ask as you squint at Tony with a modicum of suspicion. “Please tell me you’re a decent human being and you have a coffee stash.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “What do you take me for? I’m a genius that routinely works through the night obsessively while ignoring everyone and everything around me. Which, by the way, I don’t recommend. Of COURSE I have a coffee stash.”

He leads the way down the stairs, and shows the back of the house first. “Study…family room…kitchen,” he says as he gestures like Genie from Aladdin. “Note the doors leading out to the veranda in the study and where the family room meets the kitchen - there’s also a side entry over by the stairs we came up that is adjacent to the entry to the garage.” You glance over to Bucky while Tony speaks – it looks as though he is mentally cataloguing everything. “The panic room on this floor is behind the bookcase in the study…”

Tony abruptly turns on his heel and walks you to the front of the house where you see matching sets of French doors on each side for the foyer. “Here’s the formal sitting room with a music room in the turret and,” walking across the foyer, “here is the formal dining room. Since these rooms have doors, you can have SUNDAY close them off to the kids if it makes your life easier. Oh, and there’s a gym and a media room downstairs, but you can look at those later.” Tony makes sure he has your attention before finishing, “I really want you to make yourself at home here; use any and all of the spaces you would like. The only space that’s off limits is my workshop above the garage, but that room is inaccessible to anyone but me anyway. Oh, and don’t worry about the boys
spilling, staining or breaking things – if it happens, it happens.”

You exhale, “if you say so. Just be warned; they have a destructive side.”

“So do I,” Tony says with a wink.

“Pretty sure they could give you a run for your money,” you murmur as you look around. This home is simply stunning, and you can’t stop staring even though your eyelids feel like they weigh ninety pounds each. What surprises you, though, is that it isn’t at all stuffy or pretentious. It’s beautiful but welcoming, and despite the size it gives off a very homey vibe.

“Barnes and I need to go over a few more things, so you go get some sleep.”

When you scowl at him suspiciously, he continues with his hands up in a gesture meant to placate, “Nothing earth shattering – I’m not excluding you or keeping you out of the decisions, we just need to discuss security. He can fill you in tomorrow, if you’d like, but right now you need to go to bed.”

You really don’t have it in you to argue; besides, you know he’s right. You’re so incredibly tired, physically, mentally, and emotionally, and it’s highly unlikely that tomorrow is going to be any easier. “Alright,” you acquiesce, “I’m going to bed. I should probably tell you – I will be spending tonight with the boys.” As you expected, Bucky opens his mouth to protest but you cut him off. “I’ll start sleeping in the other room tomorrow night, I promise, but tonight I need to be close to my babies. Besides, it will be a real shitshow in the morning if they wake up in a strange room and don’t see me, and I do NOT want to deal with that.”

“That’s fine,” Tony interjects before Bucky can respond. “It’s just one night, and only for a few hours. But tomorrow night on it needs to be the other room.”

“I know, I know, g’night,” you mutter, already on your way back up the stairs. You feel both sets of eyes on you as you ascend, but are too tired to look back. You’ve been doing your best to hold yourself together, however at this moment you’re at the end of your willpower and are really looking forward to just collapsing into bed with your twins.
God, is there anything worse than morning? Especially a morning that comes after such a stressful day and after such a short amount of sleep, most of which was interrupted every fifteen minutes or so with a chilly set of three year old toes going places they simply don’t belong. Like your armpit, for example, or your mouth (how did Artie get upside down, anyway? And wasn’t Jimmy in the middle when you crawled into bed?). They don’t seem to wake each other up, but you certainly can’t sleep through it; it’s like they’re playing Twister in their sleep.

You’re certain that you’re more tired now than when you came to bed, so when Artie starts giggling and putting his finger in your nose, you keep your eyes shut as you gently grab his fingers. “Baby, Momma needs a few more minutes. Can we please cuddle for a little bit?”

You hear a shuffle from the far side of the bed. “Momma, breakfast,” Jimmy prompts.

Well if they’re both awake, you’re fucked. It’s just time to get up.

* * *

At least Tony wasn’t lying – he has an adequate coffee stash, along with your favorite powdered creamer and sweetener of choice which, apparently, is personally insulting to Bucky as he watches with clear disdain while you prepare your coffee the way you like it.

“Jesus, is there even any coffee in there?” he asks as you let the creamer pour in.

You turn and level a glare at him – it is too goddamn early in the morning for this, and this is your first cup. You’re tired, uncaffeinated, and feeling very harassed because the boys apparently wanted their breakfast 20 minutes ago even though they were still sleeping, and they keep reminding you of this fact every 18 seconds because they are just starving.


Whoa, that sounded better in your head; Bucky actually draws back a bit at your comment and almost looks a little hurt.

“You’re clearly a dark and bitter guy.”

Open mouth, insert foot.

“Fuck! Sorry, unlike your coffee,” you correct with a sigh, as you dramatically gesture toward his own cup, which is filled to the brim with the black liquid. “I like my coffee blonde and sweet, unlike what you like, which is clearly black coffee, which I find to be dark and bitter.”

And now you’re babbling.
“Geez, it looks like you scooped that shit out of a tar pit.”

Good God, woman. Shut. Your. Mouth.

His only response is to reach over your shoulder and into the open cupboard behind you, invading your personal space as he does so, grabbing the lid for his cup and then stalking outside.

“Apparently you haven’t had your Lucky Charms either,” you mumble under your breath as you search through the rest of the cupboards, trying to find something to feed the ravenous and demanding brood behind you.

* * *

The rest of the morning is spent explaining to Artie and Jimmy (again) why they’re not at home, getting settled in, and trying to stay awake. You periodically see Bucky outside, walking back and forth around the property. Occasionally you see him carrying guns, but the next time you see him, his hands are empty. Is he strategically squirrelling them away? He must be…you guess you never know when you’ll need an assault rifle handy when you’re out mowing the lawn. God, he’s like a maniacal chipmunk getting ready for the zombie apocalypse. The thought makes you giggle until you realize that his precautions are probably completely warranted, and then it terrifies you that he feels the need to plant firearms around the property.

“Momma! Play with us!” demands Artie as he runs over and all but throws himself into your arms. His attack hug breaks you out of your thoughts, and you smile.

“Okay, what do you want to play?”

* * *

Lunch is finally over, which means it’s naptime. Which, by default, means you finally have a bit of time to yourself.

You know you should probably take a nap, but you also know yourself well enough to realize that you’re too keyed up to sleep. The four cups of coffee you’ve had aren’t exactly going to help, either.

After wandering aimlessly through the house, you finally find yourself standing in the kitchen. Tony wasn’t messing around when he designed the space, and you have to admit that it’s absolutely stunning. The whole house is stunning, actually, but the kitchen…oh, the kitchen. It’s everything you have ever wanted in a kitchen. It’s bright and airy with double wall ovens, a 6 burner cooktop, a generous walk in pantry, a farmhouse sink, tons of counter space, and all the pots, pans, gizmos, and gadgets you could ever possibly need. All of it top quality, too.

“It’s like God Himself designed this kitchen,” you murmur, as you trace your hand along the granite countertops. Even the flow is perfect. But one of your favorite parts of the kitchen, you muse, is that it’s an eat in kitchen. Sure, there’s a formal dining room, but the kitchen had a farmhouse style table nestled in nicely with the space that makes it feel intimate and cozy despite the size.

Thinking that the quick breakfast and lunch you had made hadn’t done the kitchen justice, you decide to release some of your anxiety and bake cupcakes. You grab your iPod (because baking calls for music) and your cookbook for the recipe, and set out to make sure you have everything you need on hand.

The pantry is exceptionally well stocked, the spice cabinet is a veritable treasure trove of spices,
seasonings, and extracts, and Tony somehow had made sure that the fridge had been freshly
equipped with dairy, meat, fruit, and veggies; must have been the drones he was talking about. You
found, to your absolute delight, that you had everything you need to bake.

Setting your iPod to play randomly, you pull out everything you need. Stress begins to melt away
as you whisk the dry ingredients together, preheat the (amazing) double wall ovens, and take out
the professional grade KitchenAid mixer that you have decided to name Ethel. Seriously, this
kitchen has everything and considering the circumstances, you couldn’t be happier.

The sugar and butter go into the mixer bowl, and you turn it on and leave it to cream the
ingredients while you begin placing liners into the cupcake tins.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING? AND WHAT IS THAT GODDAMN NOISE?”

Almost jumping out of your skin, you turn around to see Bucky glaring at you. You hadn’t heard
him come in, but then the mixer was loud enough to drown out most noises.

Turning off the appliance that had so obviously offended Bucky, you stare at him. “Geez, you
scared the shit out of me!”

A muscle in his cheek twitches as he continues his glare.

“I’m stress baking cupcakes, is that okay with you?” It comes out quite a bit snarkier than you
intended, but your heart is still racing and you can’t help yourself.

“It’s loud.” More glaring.

“Yeah, well, she’s a professional grade stand mixer. She’s powerful; she’s gonna be loud.” Still
snarky.

Bucky raises an eyebrow. “She?”

Trying not to blush and failing completely, you huff, “Yes, she, I named her Ethel.”

You could swear that his lips turned up a bit, and he almost looks like he’s biting back a laugh.
Now both eyebrows are raised. “Ethel?” he repeats.

Momentarily taken aback by the almost smile, you are focused on his lips for a moment too long
because suddenly you notice that Bucky has a really nice mouth. The thought catches you
completely off guard.

He watches you a moment more with startling oceanic eyes. It’s at this point that you realize he
must have showered and shaved at some point today; the longish brunette hair that hung in his face
yesterday was now pushed back, and his strong jaw was on full display without any scruff. Bucky
changed, too – you’re not sure where he got the clothes (Tony’s drones, maybe?? They really are
better than Amazon Prime), but he’s wearing jeans and a black t-shirt with a blue and black plaid
flannel shirt left unbuttoned over it to keep him warm while he’s outside. He’s gorgeous, you think
to yourself, but what you notice most are his eyes; he has really kind eyes. Even with his hair
partially covering them, how did you not notice those eyes yesterday?

“How much longer?” he demands, interrupting your mental musing.

“What?” you ask, completely confused.
“With the mixer – Ethel – how much longer?”

What does this man have against mixers? Or does he just have a vendetta against baked goods?

“Oh, well, probably another steady 3-4 minutes, and then intermittently for a few minutes after that. Then I’ll need to use it to make the icing, so probably another 5 minutes, but that’s still maybe an hour away.”

Bucky simply nods sharply and walks out.

“What the actual fuck?” you mutter to yourself as you continue with your baking.

* * * *

Two hours later the cupcakes are baked, iced, and put away. You feel much better, and the boys are up from their naps and are playing with their cars on the kitchen floor.

Brown and blue eyes look up at you and smile as you get their attention. God, you love them so much.

“I’m going to run outside for a minute, do you think you can keep playing nicely in here?” The kitchen got childproofed while you were waiting for the cupcakes to cool, so you know they’ll be okay on their own for a short amount of time. Plus, SUNDAY randomly assured you that she would alert you if the boys got into any kind of trouble. So. Weird.

“Yes Momma! We good boys!” they all but yell before going back to playing. They’re absolutely thrilled with how far those little cars can go on the hardwood floors.

Grabbing a cupcake before you lose your courage, you walk out through door adjacent to the kitchen to see if you can broker a truce with Bucky. If you’re going to be stuck together it might as well be under friendly terms, and it’s not like you actually have anything against him; the tension between the two of you is most likely due to the situation. At least, you hope it is.

You find him on a ladder next to one of the posts of the wrap around porch at the front of the house. You aren’t quite sure what he’s doing, but he seems pretty intent on something above him so you make sure you aren’t too quiet when you approach; the last thing you need is to startle him and cause him to fall.

Belatedly, you realize that you’re giving yourself way too much credit. A snowball probably has a better chance of surviving hell than you do sneaking up on Bucky.

“Hey…Bucky,” you begin awkwardly.

Bucky’s eyes cut to you briefly before looking back up at whatever he’s doing. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah, I, uh, I just thought you might like a cupcake.” When he doesn’t move from his task, you place it on one of the rungs of the ladder. “And, um, I’m really sorry about earlier. I didn’t mean to get snarky with you.”

His hands go still but he doesn’t say a word. You aren’t looking for an apology from him, but you still want to clear the air. Bucky, however, doesn’t even look at you, so you softly add, “Dinner will be in an hour or so, if you’re hungry. You don’t have to eat with us if you don’t want to, but I’m making more than enough mac & cheese and chicken, so please join us if you’d like.”

Feeling a bit rejected at his complete lack of acknowledgement, you turn around and walk back the
way you came.
Chapter 8

Cooking in this kitchen is just a joy, you muse, as you pull out plates for dinner.

At the unexpected sound of your name from behind you, you spin, almost sending the dishes crashing to the floor. The only thing that prevented mass plate casualty was Bucky, who caught you and steadied your arms before the plates could be dropped. You hadn’t heard him come in, and you had even been listening for him.

Wide eyed you breathlessly exclaim, “Good God, are you some kind of ninja? No one should be able to enter a room so quietly!”

Bucky chuckles softly at that, meeting your eyes while still holding your arms, before a serious look crosses his face. “Hey, can I talk to you for a minute? I’d like –“

“Momma Momma MOMMA!” Artie comes tearing into the kitchen with Jimmy hot on his heels. “Dinner ready? We’re hungry!”

“Mack-ee cheese ready?” implores Jimmy at the same time while pulling on the hem of your shirt.

“Yes!” you say with a smile, “Go pick out your spot at the table!”

Suddenly they realize there’s another person in the kitchen.

“Ducky!” Jimmy exclaims as he moves from tugging on your shirt to tugging on Bucky’s. “Hi Ducky!”

You crack up before reluctantly correcting your son, “No baby, his name is Bucky, not Ducky.”

Artie stares up at Bucky with big eyes and a goofy grin, before shyly speaking, “Hi Bucky.”

Bucky just looks down at them with a shocked look on his face before finally speaking. “Hey guys, how are you doing today?”

“Hungry!!!”

“Then go sit down,” you interject, “so we can eat.”

As they rush to their seats, you turn back to Bucky, and apologize for the interruption, “I’m so sorry – they’re rude little heathens sometimes. What were you saying?” It’s hard to focus when he’s looking at you with those eyes…and he’s still touching you.

Bucky must have come to the realization at the same time as he belatedly releases your arms and takes a step back. “Um, nothing important, can we just talk about it later?”

“Yeah, sure,” you nod, guessing that it’s something he didn’t want the kids to hear. If that’s the case, you appreciate his thoughtfulness. “I’ll be here all night,” you finish wryly.

Another small chuckle; God help you, you’re starting to like the sound of it. You mentally tell yourself to just stop already – no good can come of you crushing on the guy that was ordered to protect you. Besides, you’re pretty damn sure that you’re just a job to him. Although he is actually friendly right now…so maybe the cupcake truce worked?

As you move to put the plates on the table where the boys are playing some sort of game with their
socks, Bucky hesitantly asks, “Did you say there was enough for me to join you?”

You’re absolutely floored that he’s taking you up on your offer. He almost sounds shy, and it’s kind of endearing.

“Absolutely! If you could do me a favor and grab some forks, we’ll be all set to eat.”

It surprised you how easy and normal it felt with the four of you at the dinner table. Bucky was engaging the twins, and they found him absolutely hilarious.

It’s impossible not to notice how different he looks when he’s not brooding; his smile lights up his face and his laugh is infectious. And he’s fantastic with kids, so why was he so panicked last night? You wonder as Bucky helps himself to his third plate of pasta.

“This is amazing,” he says around a mouthful of food. “I’ve never had mac & cheese like this – whenever Steve or I make it, it comes from a blue box.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that!” You’re not sure why, exactly, you feel the need to defend Kraft, but you do. “I actually really love that stuff, I just felt like cooking.”

“So is cooking like…what did you call it earlier, stress baking?” he asked. He almost looks hopeful.

“That’s exactly what it is. Don’t be too surprised if you see a lot of big meals in the upcoming weeks.”

There’s a slightly soft look in his eyes when he replies with a gigantic grin, “You’ll get no arguments from me.”

A moment passes, and then another, as you hold each other’s gaze. You’re only jolted out of the spell by your son’s announcement.

“All done, Momma!” Jimmy loudly declares. “Cupcakes now??”


Rude little heathens.

* * *

The time between dinner and bedtime is always a rushed shuffle full of play time, bath time, story time, snuggles, one last snack, and bedtime songs. Bucky disappeared outside again (to the massive disappointment of the twins) but you wouldn’t have had a chance to find out what he wanted to talk about anyway since the boys kept you so busy.

As soon as they were snugly tucked into their bed with their last lullaby leaving your lips, you went back downstairs to finish cleaning up from dinner. The sooner you can get the kitchen cleaned, the sooner you can go to bed. You’re pretty sure you can hear your pillow crying out for you, telling you how much it misses you.

Removing the dishes from the sink and putting them into the dishwasher only takes a few minutes, but then it’s time to clean the pots and pans. Recognizing good quality kitchen items when you see them, you make sure to keep these, as well as the knives, out of the dishwasher.

Focused on scrubbing the first of the pans in the warm soapy water, you sense rather than see
Bucky come up to stand beside you on your right, sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He grabs the pan from you when you’re finished, careful to avoid touching you with his metal hand, and rinses and dries it before setting it off to the side and grabbing the next pan.

The rhythm continues in a comfortable silence until Bucky releases your name in a sigh. “I’m so sorry. About yesterday and earlier today. Jesus, I was such an asshole.” Another sigh. “There’s no excuse – but I just wanted you to know that it has nothing to do with you.”

He looks like he’s going to say something, but cuts himself off. After a second he starts again, “It’s just that…Look…Steve and I grew up together. He’s my best friend, and really my only family now. I know that he doesn’t look it, but he used to be just a scrawny little pipsqueak.” Bucky grins as he remembers. “His mouth was always bigger than his common sense, that’s for damn sure, but then so was his heart. I always made sure to look out for him, you know, to have his back, and after everything we’ve been through and everything he’s sacrificed for me, I just…I wanna have his back, and I can’t do that from here.” He pauses, then puts down the pan he just finished drying. “He really doesn’t need me, but I guess old habits die hard.”

Without thinking, you turn towards him with a smile and place your hand on his forearm, squeezing gently. “Hey, it’s all good, Bucky.” Belatedly realizing what you just did as the feel of cool metal against your palm registers in your brain, he flinches and stares at you without blinking. You slowly release his prosthetic as you bite your lip. You have no idea how many boundaries you may have just violated and you fervently hope that you haven’t done any irreparable damage to your slowly building rapport. Just because you feel comfortable around him for some inexplicable reason doesn’t mean that he feels the same.

“Oh God, I’m sorry. Since I became a mom I’ve suddenly started just invading people’s personal space. I totally didn’t mean to encroach on your bubble; I know that not everybody appreciates other people being too touchy feely.” You purposely leave out mentioning the prosthetic.

Bucky stares at you for a moment longer, then blinks. “It’s all good,” he says softly, repeating you from just a few moments before and holding you hostage with the sadness in his blue eyes. He shrugs as he looks away. “Just not used to people touching me.”

Slowly releasing your breath and unsure of what to say, you turn back to the last of the dishes. What has this poor man gone through? You vaguely remember seeing something about him on the news, but Christopher had died about the same time that the whole Avengers thing occurred, so you really hadn’t been paying much attention.

“So… Bucky, thank God, doesn’t let the now awkward silence go on. “Are there any more cupcakes? Those were the best damn cupcakes I’ve ever had,” he says with a goofy grin as he turns to you.

Okay… if baked goods are what it takes to make him smile at you like that, you’ll bake damn every day and twice on Sundays.

Smiling brightly, you turn back to him. “Of course! They’re hidden here,” you say as you open the cupboard and take the sweets out. At his questioning look you explain, “The boys are both smarter and stronger than you’d think – I’ve caught them on more than one occasion working together to get something they’re not supposed to have…like cookies and soda. They can be sneaky little shits.”

Bucky laughs at that as he takes out two cupcakes and it’s music to your ears.
“Well, I think I’m going to call it a night,” you say, and you can’t bring yourself to care about how regretful the statement sounds. “I’m exhausted and for some unfathomable reason, the boys are both morning people and will be up no later than seven. I must have done something really bad for karma to kick me in the ass this way,” you sigh.

Bucky smiles again and again you can’t quite read his expression. “Okay, I’ll lock everything up after I do a round outside. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” you murmur with a small smile as you head toward the stairs. You’re a bit reluctant to go, but at the same time so incredibly tired that the idea of falling into bed trumps pretty much everything else.

You’re just about to take the first step up the stairs when Bucky speaks up. “Oh, hey, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, what’s up?” you reply as you turn around, unable to decide if you’re thrilled or put out at the fact that he called you back.

Bucky keeps his eyes trained on one of his cupcakes as he speaks. “Um, were you…were you singing to the boys earlier? Before you put them to bed?”

Oh God, he heard that!? You feel your face flush and your ears get hot.

“Um, yeah?” you answer weakly. The only people to ever hear you sing without the radio blasting in the background are your kids – the idea of someone else hearing you is absolutely mortifying, and you fervently wish the ground would open up and swallow you whole.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he must see your discomfort, “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop on a private moment or anything. I just came in to change because I ripped my shirt, and when I didn’t see anyone I came looking for you to make sure everything was okay. Once I figured out that you were tucking the boys in, I went back outside.” He looks uncomfortable now, like he thinks he did something he shouldn’t have done.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Bucky, you didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just…” you shrug, “a little embarrassed, I guess,” you finish with a wry smile. “I don’t know why, I’ve sang to them every day since before they were even born, but I guess I’m not used to anyone else hearing.” Letting out a rueful sigh, you continue, “It just seems to help them fall asleep, probably because they associate those songs with comfort and bedtime.”

Bucky studies you for a minute. “It’s really sweet that you do that for them.”

You shrug as you start to yawn. “I’d do anything for them, even humiliate myself.”

Yawns are contagious; he lets one go as well. “You should get some sleep,” he offers lightly.

‘Yeah, I should,” you acknowledge, “and so should you.”

“I will. G’night.”

“Night.”
“Arghmf,” you grunt as you roll over to check the time for the fifteenth time in as many minutes, and a huff escapes you as you see that it isn’t even midnight yet. Despite how tired you are, sleep is evasive.

You flop onto your stomach, re-fluff your pillow (again), rearrange the teddy bear that you had hidden inside your pillowcase on the night you left your home (again), and push the covers off your lower half. You dangle your foot off the edge of the bed for roughly 30 seconds before snatching it back…better safe than sorry (because apparently you’re NEVER going to really grow up).

Unable to get comfortable and growing more frustrated by the second, you decide to get up and get a cold drink from the kitchen, and maybe peruse Tony’s little library to see if there are any books that catch your attention.

Quietly exiting your room and relying only on the soft glow of intermittently placed nightlights, you softly walk through the hall and then pad slowly down the stairs. Once you’re downstairs, you have to rely on the pale moonlight streaming through the windows to see where you’re going until you can turn on a light in the kitchen. You carefully head straight to the fridge to grab a bottle of water, and as you open the door and the cool light pours out, you notice someone sitting silently at the kitchen table and you bite back a scream before you recognize the figure as Bucky.

“Jesus, Bucky! Why are you just sitting there in the dark!?” you all but shriek as you turn on one of the lights, heart almost hammering out of your chest.

Nothing but his eyes move as he blinks and slowly moves his gaze to you.

He looks haunted.

“Are…are you okay?” you ask hesitantly as you grab two bottles from the fridge and walk over to the table. “Hey…” You don’t exactly know why, but you want to soothe the pained look on his face.

“I’m fine,” he whispers brokenly.

Bullshit.

You place a bottle of water in front of him as you take the seat across from his. “You don’t look fine,” you say gently. “Do you want to talk about it?”
He shakes his head.

“Okay.” You remain in your seat, calmly drinking your water in silence. You’re just about finished and ready to go back upstairs when he finally breaks the silence.

“Why do you care?”

Unsure of whether the harshness in his voice is due to hostility or just disuse, you think carefully before answering. “Because you look and sound miserable.” Honesty is probably best.

“But why do you care?” he presses roughly, avoiding your eyes.

“What wouldn’t I care?” you counter, unsure of where this is going. You probably couldn’t explain anyway, since you don’t understand yourself why you care so much.

“I’m not the type of person people care about.” God, he sounds just shattered. You want to pull him into a hug, but after the incident earlier while doing the dishes you don’t want to risk alienating him so you stay still.

“Well, I’m not your average person.” You pause before continuing. “Also, I don’t know the history between you two, but it sure as hell looked like Steve cares about you.” You’re not sure if challenging him is really the way to go, but maybe he needs the reminder. “And from the looks of it, we’re going to be stuck here together for a while, so I figure we might as well be friendly. I mean, we don’t have to sit around every night and braid each other’s hair while we gossip about our crushes, but I, for one, know that I’ll go crazy if the only people I can have a conversation with are three years old. It’s not like I can call my mom, you know.”

Bucky quirks an eyebrow at your small attempt at lightening the mood. You just shrug in response.

“How much do you know about me?” The tone of his voice is somber, and slightly dangerous.

The question hangs in the air for a minute before you answer.

“Not much,” you admit. “I know you were in the news, but at the time I was dealing with the death of the boys’ father. I wasn’t really in a good place to pay attention.”

He nods. “Okay, let me give you the rundown.” Bucky leans forward, supported by his arms on the table. He captures your gaze, and you find that you can’t look away from his tortured eyes. “I’m a murderer,” he begins bluntly. “I’ve been the instrument of death to so many people that I don’t even know the true number of lives that were lost because of me, either directly or indirectly. I spent decades as an assassin for an organization by the name of Hydra. Two of my targets during that time were Tony’s parents.”

Bucky continues to speak, going on in detail of how he was captured by Hydra after falling from a train, and subsequently what they did to him and then made him do. He describes the decades of torture, ‘calibrations,’ and cruelty that he survived, all in the name of becoming an unwilling weapon for a cause he didn’t believe in and had previously fought against. It almost seems like this torrent of words has been building up for years, and he’s just now finally able to release them. You hang on his every word, paying close attention to everything he says; not just because something is telling you that you need to know the information he’s giving you, but also because you get the distinct impression that he hasn’t trusted many people with his full story. If that’s the case, you won’t betray that trust; you give him your full and complete attention.

“So after the whole deal with the Accords, I decided to put myself back into cryo until they found a way to keep my mind fully in my control. One of our teammates, Wanda, went in and removed
whatever it was that made the triggers effective. But it really doesn’t matter; even though the
trigger words will no longer have any power over me, it’s too late. The damage is done. I have
more blood on my hands than I can stand, and more than I can ever hope to atone for even if I lived
another hundred years. God, I tried to kill Steve - multiple times! My best friend! Because I wasn’t
strong enough to overcome my orders. I bring nothing but pain and suffering to the people around
me. Which, since I’m being honest, was another large part of why I didn’t want to be here. I’m a
goddamn monster.” He rubs his hand over his face as he finishes and leans back to wait for your
reaction.

It’s almost a challenge, you think.

“You’re not a monster, Bucky.” You’re admittedly rocked by what he’s just said, but it’s pretty
clear to you, if not to him, that he’s a victim and not the villain.

“What do you mean, I’m not a monster? Haven’t you been listening?” he asks angrily, but his tone
doesn’t match his expression. He looks a little apprehensive; maybe lost. Definitely broken.

“Who you were isn’t necessarily any indication of who you are,” you begin slowly. “We’ve all
done shitty things, it doesn’t mean that they should define us forever. Furthermore, Bucky, and this
is important,” you wait until you’re sure that you have his full attention, “that man wasn’t you.
You didn’t do any of that by choice. You were a prisoner of war that was repeatedly subjected to
inhumane torture and forced to do things you would never have done otherwise. You, Bucky, have
such a strong character that your captors had to repeatedly force something on you that sounds way
worse than electroshock therapy, which on its own is some pretty messed up shit, in order to keep
you compliant.”

You pause and regard him for a moment as you lean back in your chair. “For what it’s worth, I
think that the fact that you never stopped fighting to regain yourself, and that once you did you
then took up arms against the organization that held you, is pretty solid proof that you’re a good
guy.”

Bucky shakes his head. “God, you actually believe that, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“You’re incredibly naive, you know that?” he says, almost accusingly.

“Maybe I am, but maybe I’m not,” you begin with a shrug, “Maybe it’s just that I’m not afraid to
see the good in you. I’ve had some moments of pretty intense terror in the last two days, but not
once was I afraid of you. You can tell me all the bad things you want, but it’s not going to change
my mind.” You pause for just a moment before continuing, “Hey, I know you’re scared, and you
have every reason to be. They did a lot of damage to you. But…look…I know I don’t know you all
that well, but I do have eyes. I saw your friendship with Steve, and I saw, just tonight, how you
interacted with my kids. You might not see this yet, but even if I don’t know you I know my boys,
and they adore you. They’ve had less than 2 hours’ worth of interactions with you, and they
already fucking adore you. They asked for you at least five times tonight before they went to bed.
Innocence like theirs isn’t naturally drawn to evil, but they’re drawn to you. You’re a good man,
Bucky, even if you don’t know it.

There’s a long pause as you both suddenly develop a fascination with your bottles of water that are
still on the table. You glance at the clock, and realize that the two of you have been talking for the
better part of three hours – it’s already a little after 3 am.

“So…” you begin hesitantly, wanting more than anything to soothe the pain on Bucky’s face.
“You and Steve are really from the early 1900s, huh? That, uh, that explains a lot about him.”

Bucky snorts out a laugh as he looks back up at you.

“He’s just so…” you can’t put words to it.

“Prim?” Bucky offers. “Stodgy? Prudish?”

You cackle out a laugh. “Yes, actually, all of the above.”

He smiles softly. “Yeah, that’s something that’s never changed about him. I used to try to set him up on double dates with me, but he almost never went. He was too busy trying to enlist for the fifth time, or getting his ass kicked for standing up for the right thing. And when he did go on a date, he would fall all over himself trying to figure out where he was supposed to keep his eyes and hands. And don’t even get me started on his dancing. The guy had absolutely no game,” he finished with a laugh and a small shake of his head. “Still doesn’t.”

“Ah…but I bet you were a real panty dropper, weren’t you?” you tease.

“Oh, well,” Bucky stammers as a blush creeps across his cheek, “I…I guess I dated a few girls, but I don’t know that I’d call myself a panty dropper.”

“Oh, come on!” you laugh, “with that smile and those eyes, I’m willing to put money on the guess that you got more ass than a toilet seat.” God, he’s adorable when he blushes.

Bucky looks at you, and you suddenly feel like the tables are about to turn. “So, do you like this smile and these eyes?” he asks playfully, with a smile that genuinely lights up his face and makes his eyes crinkle in the corners.

Oh shit. Oh SHIT. It’s your turn to blush, and you laugh gently as you duck your head.

Honestly, Steve probably has more game than you. Not knowing what else to do, because God knows you’ve suddenly regressed into your awkward 12-year-old self (not that she’s much worse than your current self), you simply shrug and say, “you’re in no danger of breaking any mirrors.”

He leans back in his chair with a lopsided grin, and takes a moment to watch you.

“Well, I should get back to bed – I’m already looking at needing at least 4 cups of coffee in the morning. Are you better now?” you ask as you get up from your chair.

“Yeah, yeah I’m good, actually,” he says with a smile, and you find that you believe him. “Thank you for listening. And um, for being a friend.”

“You’re welcome.” You pause before speaking again, hoping you’re not being too forward. “If you ever need someone to talk to, just come and find me. I’ll be happy to listen.”

Bucky gives just the tiniest of nods but keeps the smile. “I will. And hey,” he waits until your eyes meet his before continuing, “that goes both ways.”

You smile and nod to acknowledge his offer. “Get some sleep, Buck,” you say gently, as you return to your room to try to get a few hours of sleep.

* * *

You almost fall to your death when the twins race down the stairs in front of you, eager to start their day of play.
“It’s so incredibly unfair that you two don’t need coffee to function…” you blearily mumble to yourself as you clutch the railing.

Why is morning so early? And why does it have to come every day? Can’t it give you a day off? And why the FUCK are your kids morning people?!

You stumble into the kitchen and walk immediately to the coffee maker. It takes you a full minute to comprehend what you’re seeing, but your brain finally catches up.

Sitting in front of the Keurig is a full cup of steaming coffee with a note leaning against it.

Good morning,
Thanks for last night, I really can’t tell you how much I appreciate you being there for me - for being my friend. And for the record, you were wrong when you said you didn’t really know me. At this point you already know me better than most – other than Steve, I’ve never told anyone else so much about my past.

Anyway, I figured I owed you a cup of coffee for keeping you up so late. I made it the way you like it – blonde and sweet. And for the record, I’m not really a dark and bitter guy. I’m a dark and sweet guy! What you didn’t know is that I add about a quarter cup of sugar to my coffee. Shhhh… you’re the only one that knows, so don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to uphold.

~ B

PS - Once you wake up enough to make it to the family room window, take a peek outside. Stark and I have a surprise for the boys.

You laugh as you pocket the note and take a sip. Damn, he’s good. He really did make it just the way you like it.

Eyeballing the window, you decide that it’s not too terribly far away, so you shuffle over (taking your coffee with you, of course).

You almost drop the cup when you see what’s happening outside.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Okay, so it just occurred to me that the wonderful folks reading on AO3 are missing 2 small parts of the story - I have a companion piece going as well that tells things from Bucky's POV (just bits and pieces). I haven't published them here because I don't think they will always be written in order, so I'll probably have to have it finished before I upload it or it will be a nightmare. If anyone is interested, here is the link to the masterlist on my Tumblr account:

https://cassiopeiassky.tumblr.com/post/151678827559/masterlist

Additional warnings for this part: A bit of angst, brief mention of depression/anxiety

You blink a few times to make sure you’re actually seeing what you think you see. Rubbing your eyes doesn’t change the view, so you take another swig of coffee.

Nope, nothing changed. It’s still happening.

“Momma…what’s that?” Jimmy breathlessly exclaims. Artie doesn’t say anything, because his entire top half, mouth included, is smushed up against the window like he’s trying to use osmosis to get through it.

You laugh as you answer, “That, my little loves, is a swing set and slide being put together just for you by none other than Bucky and Iron Man.”

Actually, “swing set and slide” doesn’t do it justice. It’s almost an entire damn playground, with a tower, ramps, and net bridge, things to climb, regular swings, a tire swing, and you’re not sure but you think Tony is currently sitting on monkey bars as he and Bucky attach a canvas roof to one of the ramps. You glance over at the clock – it’s just past 7:30, so they had to have been working on this for hours to be this far along. You know that observation isn’t your best talent, but you’re damn sure this play area wasn’t there yesterday.

As if he can sense you watching, Bucky turns to you and waves as he flashes a huge smile.

Tony notices and turns as well, smiling and nodding quickly before turning back to his task.

You start herding the boys over to the table to a cacophony of protest. “Look,” you begin firmly, “I know you want to go outside and play, but first you need to eat breakfast.”

This, of course, sends Jimmy straight into The Meltdown to End All Meltdowns.

Bucky and Tony must have heard the screams, because they come flying through the door, looking around for the threat. You, meanwhile, are calmly drinking your coffee and watching your son while he makes the head turning scene from the Exorcist look only mildly disturbing.

“Is he okay? Do I need to do something?” Tony asks as Bucky looks on in horror.

You just shake your head before explaining, “Nah, he’ll wear himself out in a minute or two.” You
casually take another sip of coffee. “You know, I used to try to reason with them when they threw tantrums, which frustrated the hell out of me because, you know, they’re three and can’t be reasoned with. Now, if we’re not in public, I just let them go. He’ll stop when he realizes that I’m not giving in and he’s not getting any attention.”

And a moment later, just like that, the meltdown is over. Jimmy sniffs, and comes over to you lifting his arms; never one to turn away from your sons’ affections, you lift him into a ginormous hug before kissing him on the cheek and placing him at the table.

“Well, that was…terrifying…” Tony mumbles under his breath. Bucky just nods in agreement, still wide eyed.

“What, you’ve never seen the wrath of an angry three-year-old?” You laugh a little as you pour out cereal and milk for the boys. “Parenting isn’t for the faint of heart, gentlemen.” You place the bowls in front of the kids before turning to Tony and Bucky. “You know, you guys are pretty amazing. A swing set? Seriously? I can’t understand why you would go through all that trouble, but thank you.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, because I generally corner the market on good ideas, I really can’t take much credit for it,” Tony states. “Barnes came up with the idea, I just picked it up on my way over this morning.”

“How long have you been out there?” you ask, staring at Bucky, who happens to be avoiding eye contact. You wonder if he went to bed at all last night, and you decide to return the favor and make him a cup of coffee, although you have to wonder if caffeine even helps a super soldier. “It looks like you’re almost done.”

Tony shrugs, “It is done – and I dunno, since 4:00? 4:30? Something like that. Having the suit, access to my tools, and Go-Go-Gadget Arm over there does give me a certain advantage. Hey, I’m going to make more coffee, anyone want some?”

“I’ll make it, why don’t you just have a seat? You had a really early morning,” you interrupt before he can head to the Keurig.

“Did I?” Tony muses as he sits at the table. “Can you really have an early morning if you did not, in fact, go to bed? Oh, cream and sugar, Kiddo, if you don’t mind.”

“I used to wonder that myself for the first 4 months of their existence,” you say as you nod towards the twins and begin preparing Tony’s coffee. “It royally sucked. Why do you do it?”

Tony shrugs. “I don’t sleep much. Ever. It’s kind of a waste of time and I have things to do.”

“But a glorious and necessary waste of time! God, sleep deprivation is a bitch; I thought the twins were actively trying to break me.” You start another cup for Bucky as you bring Tony’s over to him. “Here you go, let me know if you need more cream or sugar.”

While Tony rambles on about his latest midnight project, you manage to covertly spoon the necessary amount of sugar into Bucky’s coffee before placing his cup in his hands. “Dark and bitter,” you declare with a wink visible only to Bucky.

“Damn, Barnes, she’s got you pegged already,” Tony quips under his breath.

Bucky takes a sip and then smiles into his cup. “Yeah she does.”

You see that Artie and Jimmy are already done inhaling their cereal, so you send them into the
living room to play with their cars. “Momma needs to eat some breakfast and have another cup of coffee, then we’ll bundle you up and go outside to play, okay?”

“Okay Momma!” they screech as they race to their box of toys.

“So,” you begin, staring pointedly at Tony as you take a seat at the table, “why were you on your way here?”

“Huh, what?” he asks, taken off guard.

“You said that you just brought the set on your way over – so why were you on your way here?” you press.

“You know what coffee calls for?” Tony asks as he gets out of his chair, “the Halloween candy I brought! It’s just around the corner, so I thought I’d bring some candy for the boys since they can’t go trick or treating.” He rummages through a grocery bag on the counter and comes back with a bag of Kit Kats.

He takes one out and breaks it in half before dipping it in his coffee. “Who knew these would go so well for breakfast?”

“Cut the bullshit, Tony.” You narrow your eyes at him, not letting him change the subject. “Why were you on your way here? What’s going on?”

Out of the corner of your eye you see Bucky nod approvingly before smirking into his coffee. “Looks like she’s got you pegged, too, Stark.”

“Shut up, Barnes,” he mutters before turning back to you with a sigh. “Not that we expected too terribly much in such a short amount of time, but we haven’t made any headway with Krakken whatsoever. We can’t find him, he’s still got his team in the area with no sign that they’re moving out, and…well…they’re good. We haven’t been able to breach much of their communication. Cap and I were really hoping this would be an open and shut deal, but it’s not looking good. I’m really sorry, Kiddo.”

You stare into your coffee for a moment before speaking again. “We’re not going home before Thanksgiving, are we.” Technically it’s a question, but you don’t even bother with the inflection at the end. You already know the answer.

“It’s extremely unlikely. Realistically, Christmas is probably out, too. We just can’t find the guy – there’s no trace of him anywhere, and the few team members we’ve taken have been useless.”

You just nod.

After a moment, Tony continues, “You know we can’t take the chance to let you go visit your family, right?”

“Yeah,” you nod, “Nat was pretty clear about that.”

“I’m really sorry.” At least he sounds sincere.

“I know, me, too,” you mumble. You feel Bucky’s eyes on you, so you do your best to look unaffected. Rationally you know that it’s just a couple of holidays – it really shouldn’t be a big deal, and your kids’ welfare is way more important. But what if this isn’t temporary? What if these are just the first of a never-ending list of missed family holidays? What if you never see your family again? You grab a Kit Kat from the center of the table and halfheartedly break it in half
before nibbling on it.

It’s quiet for a few minutes before Bucky gently breaks the silence. “Hey, do you need some time alone?” You glance over at him; he looks concerned. “We can take the boys outside for a while if you need some space.” Tony looks over to Bucky, mouthing the word “we” with a borderline horrified look on his face. It would be comical if you weren’t suddenly so depressed.

You nod slowly. “That would be nice.” You don’t know how Bucky knows you need that, but you’re thankful that he does. You need some time to process.

Soon the boys are bundled up and the two men are taking the two little boys out. It’s quite a sight, you muse. Tony isn’t exactly graceful with kids and even less so since witnessing Jimmy’s meltdown, but Bucky’s a natural.

You watch them from the window for a moment, and as before, Bucky notices you and sends a smile your way. You just nod and head back into the kitchen.

Maybe you can relieve some of your stress by preparing pizza dough for dinner.

* * *

God, it’s been a long day already. The boys (Bucky and even Tony, you think to yourself) had a blast with the play set outside, and now Tony is tinkering around in his workshop while Bucky is off doing whatever it is that Bucky does at this time of day.

The boys just went down for their nap, and you’re going to shower, finally. You’re going to shower so hard, you should take it to dinner first.

You get everything ready, and turn on the water to heat up before stepping into the gigantic glass-enclosed space. This shower is AMAZING, and you’ve wanted to try it out since the night you got here, but you were too tired to shower before bed that night, and yesterday kept you too busy (or again, too tired). When you think about it, you realize that this is only your second full day here. Good God, it feels like a week, at least.

So here you are, luxuriating in the gentle fall of water under the rain shower head and testing the different buttons and levers to see what happens with the other 6 showerheads that are protruding from the wall. It kind of felt a bit like a carwash when you had all of them on, but at least you finally felt clean.

Allowing yourself a good 45 minutes of standing under the hot spray went a long way towards relaxing you, and when you finally decide to step out, you’re in a much better mood and things don’t seem nearly so bleak. You go through your normal routine; dry, lotion, dress, and then condition your hair. You don’t bother drying it because your hair is so thick that it takes forever even with a hair dryer, so you just pull your damp hair up into a ponytail and finally make your way downstairs to get the pizza sauce started for dinner. Homemade pizza is tedious if you want to do it right, but you need that today.

Bucky is at the kitchen table, carefully cleaning and inspecting some firearms when you come downstairs.

As you walk past, Bucky startles you as he exclaims in an almost accusatory tone, “Your hair is curly.”

Well, that was really random.
You stop short, surprised, and turn towards him. “Yeah…”

“But it was straight yesterday and the day before.” Bucky gets up and walks toward you, his eyes never leaving your hair.

“Yeah…” you repeat, confused, not really sure where this is going.

“And it was straight earlier today…” He’s now inspecting your hair with an almost child-like innocence and curiosity, and you can’t decide if it’s incredibly weird or incredibly sweet. It takes a moment for you to realize that he’s probably not exactly up to date with the current day’s beauty standards and procedures.

“Yeah…I straightened it a few days ago. It takes over an hour with a 400 degree flatiron, but sometimes the change is nice.” You shrug. “Makes me feel pretty, and gives me a little bit of a break because the curls are a pain in the ass. I can usually manage to stretch it out for four or five days if I cover my hair when I shower, but the curls come back when I wash it.”

“Huh.”

Not sure what to make of this exchange, you turn to continue on your way when you hear Bucky inhale deeply.

“What the hell…” you whip around, and Bucky looks absolutely mortified. “Bucky…did you just sniff me?”

“Oh my God, I am so sorry!” he exclaims as he takes a step back, holding his hands up as if to defend himself from you.

Bucky Barnes, international super soldier and former assassin, turns several shades of red before his face finally settles on a deep hue reminiscent of a vastly overripe strawberry. With only a day’s worth of scruff and his hair pulled back into a haphazard ponytail, his blush is on full display. It’s actually really adorable.

“I’m so sorry!” he repeats, wide eyed. He sounds almost distraught, and at this point you have to bite your lip to keep from giggling.

“Yes, I understand. It’s just…you smell really, really good,” he quickly mumbles, avoiding your eyes.

“Oh.” That was unexpected. What was even more unexpected was the flutter you felt in your chest.

Feeling badly for him and not wanting him to feel embarrassed or awkward anymore, you step forward to softly touch his upper arm in a gesture meant to comfort. Bucky jumps a little at the contact; he’s wearing a long sleeved, dark blue henley, and you had forgotten once again that this is his cybernetic arm. You decide not to pull away this time though, because even though you realize belatedly that you may have just massively overstepped some boundaries (again), you don’t want him to think that your pulling away has anything to do with his prosthetic. “Hey.” You wait until his eyes meet yours before you smile gently and continue, “Thank you for the compliment.”

Bucky nods sharply as he slowly pulls away to return to his position at the table to resume his task, intently avoiding looking anywhere near your direction. You’re pretty sure that no gun will ever be cleaner than the one he’s currently focused on. As you turn and continue making your way into the kitchen, you hear him say softly, “I really like your curls. They’re beautiful.”

He spoke so quietly that you aren’t sure if you were really meant to hear his comment, so you just smile to yourself and start pulling out ingredients.
The sauce has been simmering for roughly 30 minutes when you hear Bucky sniffing the air. “What are you making?” he asks, sounding almost excited as he comes up to stand behind you.

You turn from the sausage you’re cooking. “Pizza.”

He looks around. “Not from the freezer?”

You laugh as you shake your head. “No, not from the freezer.”

He looks skeptically at the dough. “What’s Stark going to eat?”

“You?” you ask, laughing again as you stir the sausage. “What do you mean?”

“I know him, he’ll want to stay for dinner. I also know your cooking is awesome, so this pizza is going to be fantastic. That,” he points to the dough resting on the counter, “doesn’t look like a lot of pizza dough. If it’s as good as it smells, I’m not sharing with Stark. So…what’s he going to eat?”

Bucky explains himself very deliberately, and he looks so incredibly serious that you have a hard time not bursting into laughter.

“Bucky, I’m making four pizzas.” You see him eyeball the dough again, so you assure him, “yes, that makes four whole pizzas. You can have two, Tony can have one, and the boys and I will split the fourth – there’ll be enough food. I can make salads, too, if you want.”

“Salad isn’t food, it’s what food eats,” Bucky deadpans.

“I won’t argue with you there,” you reply with a shrug. “Maybe I can find some garlic bread or something…oh, and we can have cupcakes for dessert.”

“Um…” Bucky looks down sheepishly as he runs his hand through his hair. “I kinda…um…”

You look at him in shock. “You ate them all, didn’t you?”

“They were good,” Bucky says in a small voice.

“But…” you sputter, “Bucky, there were like 18 cupcakes…”

He nods. “Yes. That sounds about right.” He’s completely serious right now.

You can only blink. “Well, okay then. I’ll just make more tomorrow.”

Bucky’s face lights up as he smiles. “So…when’s dinner?” he asks, and he sounds an awful lot like
a like a little kid.

“Bucky. It’s not even 3 o’clock.”

“So?”

You huff out a laugh. “These things take time – the sauce has to simmer for at least 2 hours. Dinner will be ready around 5ish, maybe a little later.”

“Okay,” he smiles, as he returns to his place at the table.

Last night seems to have gone a long way towards making the two of you comfortable around each other, you realize, and you decide that the minimal amount of sleep was totally worth it.

* * *

Bucky comes in through the kitchen door at exactly 5 o’clock, with Tony right behind him. They sound like they’re arguing about some security feature that Bucky had tweaked, when Bucky stops mid-step. Tony narrowly avoids crashing into him, but bites back a remark as he takes a deep breath.

“Wow…it smells…” Tony begins.

“Amazing,” Bucky finishes.

You regard them with one eyebrow raised. “You know, you two look like you’re about ready to lick the smell off the walls.”

“Kiddo, if I could invent a way to do it, I would. What did you make? I’ll be staying for dinner, by the way,” Tony asks hungrily as he looks around the kitchen.

Bucky rolls his eyes, and mouths ‘I told you so.’

Instead of answering, you pull out the first of the pizzas from the double oven.

Tony walks over and reaches to snatch a piece of pepperoni, but you whack the back of his hand with the handle of the pizza cutter before he can get it.

“Nuh uh…that’s the chef’s privilege. Back off.” That beautifully crisp piece of pepperoni is yours.

Bucky snorts out a laugh as Tony just stands there, looking absolutely scandalized.

“Set the table, please, we’ll eat in about 5 minutes,” you say as you pull out the other pizza before putting in the next two.

“Oh…okay..” Tony moves to do as you instructed, but you hear him mutter under his breath, “you aren’t the boss of me.”

“And yet here you are, setting the table,” you shoot back with a satisfied smirk.

Bucky loses it and starts roaring with laughter, saying something along the lines of “someone finally put the SnarkMaster5000 in his place,” but you aren’t exactly sure what he said because he was laughing too hard. It was also hard to focus on his words; you were really enjoying the sound of Bucky’s uninhibited mirth.

“You know, I don’t remember you being this sassy the other day,” Tony comments dryly as he
finishes with the silverware.

You shrug. “Sorry.” You know you don’t sound that convincing. “Some of the shock is wearing off, so despite the continuing shitty circumstances and today’s bad news, I’m starting to feel more like myself.”

Tony smiles, “No, Kiddo, don’t apologize. It’s a good thing.”

Everyone gets seated at the table and starts digging in. You’re still serving your kids when Bucky takes his first bite.

“Oh my God,” he says around his first mouthful, as he shoves in a second bite. “Oh my GOD.” He proceeds to shove the entire piece of pizza in his mouth, and you’re starting to wonder if Tony knows the Heimlich maneuver because you’re pretty sure Bucky’s going to choke.

You and Tony are both watching Bucky with something akin to morbid fascination as he inhales a second piece, and he finally notices when he reaches for this third. No one else has taken a single bite.

“What?” he asks, sounding defensively confused.

“What are you, a Neanderthal? Have you actually tasted any of that?” Tony asks with a fair amount of disgust.

Bucky shoots a glare at Tony before looking at you. “This tastes just like Papa G’s,” he says before he shoves in another bite.

You have no idea what that means, and he doesn’t bother explaining until he’s finished with his third piece. You look to Tony but he just shrugs; apparently he doesn’t know either.

“Papa G’s was a pizzeria in Brooklyn that Steve and I used to eat at all the time when we were kids,” Bucky begins to explain as he grabs another slice. “I never thought I’d taste it again, but this is…this is dead on!” And now he’s working on annihilating his fourth piece. You finish serving Artie and Jimmy quickly to ensure that they actually get to eat; you’re suddenly not sure if four pizzas are going to be enough for the five of you.

There weren’t any leftovers.

* * *

Once you get the boys to bed you approach Tony, who’s speaking quietly with Bucky.

“So is there anything else I need to know?” you’re almost afraid to ask, but you don’t like surprises and would rather find out now.

“Not really – the plan right now is to keep doing what we’re doing,” Tony explains.

“We’re just discussing the tactical side of things, but you’re welcome to sit in if you want to,” Bucky adds.

You wrinkle your nose as you think for a moment. “Eh. I think I’ll just go to bed.” You’re so incredibly tired, and you pretty much mentally checked out at the word ‘tactical.’

Bucky gives you a soft smile as he nods. “Probably a good idea.”

“Go get some sleep, Kiddo. You aren’t going to miss anything. Hey, I’m probably going to take off
in an hour or so, but I’ll check in again soon,” Tony adds.

“Sounds good.” You pause for a moment before continuing. “Hey, thanks for the swing set, both of you. That was incredibly sweet of you to think of the kids.”

Both men just smile; they look very proud of themselves, you think.

You say your goodnights and head upstairs to get ready for bed. As you collapse onto the mattress, you fervently hope for a full night’s sleep.

You should have known better.

* * *

You awake to a scream.

Your eyes slam open and you lie still, holding your breath, waiting to see if you hear it again. You know it wasn’t one of your kids.

“SUNDAY,” you whisper quietly after a moment of silence, “what was that?”

“That was Bucky, dear. If I had to guess, I’d say he had another nightmare,” the maternal voice answers softly.

Another nightmare? You suppose it isn’t surprising, considering what he shared with you last night. Maybe that was why he was up in the first place. “Is he in his room?” you ask, wondering if you should go to him or leave him be.

“Not anymore, he’s made his way downstairs.”

“Okay, thanks SUNDAY.” You get up before you can change your mind, and pull on a hoodie before heading downstairs.

“Bucky?” you call out softly when you reach the first floor. You don’t see him, so you head towards the family room. “Bucky?”

“Yeah, I’m here, you okay?” replies a cracked voice coming from the couch. You find him sitting in the middle, shoulders hunched with his head in his hands.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I heard a scream and wanted to make sure you were okay…” You slowly make your way over to him.

“I’m fine, you don’t need to worry about me. Go back to bed.”

He sounds as broken as he did last night, as if nothing will ever be okay in his world. You don’t blame him, considering the horrors he shared with you.

You ignore his comment as you sit down next to him, seeing even in the dim light how he shakes. Not sure if it’s because of the dream or because he’s cold as he’s only wearing a tank top over his sweatpants, you grab a blanket from the back of the couch and drape it over his shoulders before you tentatively begin to rub his back in soothing circles.

“You don’t have to talk,” you murmur, “and you don’t have to be alone, okay?” He hasn’t pulled away from your touch, so you continue rubbing his back as a thought occurs to you. “Hey, I know you’re a tough, strong 1940s guy and all that, but I promise that I’m not going to think less of you if you need to talk about how you feel or express emotion. You’re not a robot, and you don’t have
to be strong all of the time.”

He nods, before he whispers, “I know, it’s just that… I can’t …because I…” his voice breaks as he starts quietly crying.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” you soothe as you gather him to you and slowly begin to rock him. Your heart breaks at knowing that whatever horrors visit him in his dreams are almost certainly vivid memories of his past. You also know that this is probably a manifestation of PTSD and that the dreams are actually a way for the brain to deal with trauma; without some sort of coping mechanism or therapy, he probably has these nightmares almost every night.

As you hold him, he clutches you as if he’s holding on for dear life; like a drowning man in the middle of the ocean, and you’re the only thing keeping him afloat.

His breathing becomes more erratic, and soon he starts gasping for air.

“Bucky.” You say his name firmly; you need him to pay attention. “Bucky, I need you to listen to me, I think you’re starting to have a panic attack.”

He nods violently, but doesn’t let go of you.

“Okay, it’s gonna be okay honey, but I need you to do something for me, okay?” You’re speaking in a gentle yet firm voice; your training and your own personal therapy techniques take over as you begin to help him ground himself.

“Bucky, I need you to tell me five things that you can see.”

“What?” he gasps, “I can’t –“

“Yes, you can,” you state adamantly, “now tell me five things you can see.”

“Um…” he’s still wheezing as he looks around. “I see a window…the TV…the chair…”

“Good, keep going honey, two more,” you gently encourage.

“The kitchen…the fireplace.”

“Good job Buck, now tell me four things you can feel or touch.”

He exhales loudly, “The couch under me…the floor under my feet…the…the…” he’s still having a hard time taking a deep breath.

“You’re doing great honey, I need two more,” you say softly.

“Uh…the blanket on my shoulders…and you.”

“Good! Now three things you can hear.”

“Three things…” he begins, “uh, your voice, the lake outside, and my voice.” His breathing is finally starting to even out.

“Good,” you murmur, “good. Now two things you can smell.”

He slowly exhales this time, before inhaling deeply. “I smell the pizza you cooked earlier…and I smell you.”
“Good. Now one thing you can taste.”

There’s a pause before he answers. “Ugh, I can taste that I forgot to brush my teeth before bed.” Ah, there he is.

You laugh a little at that. “Better?” you ask, although you already know the answer.

He sits up and pulls away from you before facing you squarely. “Yeah, I am. I’m a lot better. How did you do that?”

You smile at him in the dark room. “I’m going to school to be a therapist, remember? Although most of this is what I learned from my own shrink. It’s a grounding method for anxiety; I’ve used it a lot on myself.”

“Doll, you’re fucking incredible, you know that?”

You smile again, at the unexpected endearment as well as the compliment. “Just helping out a friend, Buck.”

He regards you for a long moment before speaking hesitantly. “Will you stay with me? Just for a while?” Another pause. “You make me feel better.”

“Of course I will.” You open your arms and he comes back into them, hugging you tightly before lying down on the couch with his head on your lap. You can’t help yourself; you start running your fingers through his hair as you lean against the armrest and support your head with your other hand.

Somewhere in the back of your mind it occurs to you that this should probably be awkward, but it’s not. At all.

“Would you…would you do something for me?” He speaks so softly that you almost can’t hear him.

“Of course Bucky, what do you need?” At this particular moment, you would probably do anything he asked if it made him feel better.

He’s silent for a long while before he finally voices his request. “Would you sing to me? Like you do your boys? Doesn’t have to be one of their lullabies, just maybe something to help me sleep?”

His request is sincere, so you force yourself to shove down your embarrassment and insecurity about your voice and try to think of a song with a slow, repetitive melody. It takes a moment, but then good ol’ Billy Joel comes to the rescue and you begin softly singing.

*Goodnight my angel time to close your eyes, and save these questions for another day*

*I think I know what you’ve been asking me, I think you know what I’ve been trying to say*

*I promised I would never leave you, and you should always know*

*Wherever you may go, no matter where you are, I never will be far away*

You’re still running your fingers through his hair, and you can tell by his even breathing that he’s already almost asleep.

*Goodnight my angel now it’s time to sleep, and still so many things I want to say*
Remember all the songs you sang for me, when we went sailing on an emerald bay

And like a boat out on the ocean, I’m rocking you to sleep

The water’s dark and deep inside this ancient heart, you’ll always be a part of me

You only hum the final verse as you’re almost asleep yourself; the past few days have taken a toll on you, and you’re exhausted.

You briefly have the thought that you should probably get up and go up to bed, but you don’t want to disturb Bucky. You also just don’t want to move. So you don’t.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Bucky's turn!!

Additional warnings specific to this part: Some angst…I think that’s it?

“The boys are waking, dear,” SUNDAY softly announces, rousing you from your sleep.

“Thanks, SUNDAY,” you acknowledge as morning begins to intrude, along with a literally painful realization.

You’d fallen asleep sitting up with your head in your hand, so your neck is tilted to the side in a painful position: you can already feel the headache at the base of your spine.

“Ugh, sleeping at a right angle is such a bad idea,” you mumble as you try to lift your head. You begin to roll your shoulders back to stretch, but pause when you realize that your fingers are still tangled in Bucky’s hair. Which of course is still attached to his head. Which is still in your lap.

You are now wide awake but he’s still sound asleep, so you take the opportunity to study what you can see of him. He’s laying just as he was when you drifted off; on his side facing away from you, with his left arm curled underneath him and his right hand resting on your knee. He’s breathing is slow and deep, and his lips are parted slightly. He looks...peaceful. And beautiful.

You’re not really sure what to do. The boys are waking, so you do need to get up. Plus, you have to pee. Badly. But you don’t want this to be awkward, and you’re not sure how Bucky is going to feel about this after being so vulnerable with you last night. And of course there’s the fact that you know there’s no chance whatsoever that you’ll be able to move without waking him, but as he begins to stretch you realize that whatever is going to happen is going to happen soon. Thick lashes lift and the startling blue of his eyes is revealed.

He surprises you when he rolls over onto his back and smiles up at you. “Good morning,” he says simply, voice raspy from disuse. Then, “You stayed.” He sounds amazed.

Well, if he’s not going to make it awkward, neither are you. So you just smile down at him and answer, “Of course I stayed.” On a whim, you playfully flick the tip of his nose, “But now you have to move, because I have to pee.”

He laughs gently as he shifts and sits, allowing you to finally get up.

You stand and stretch, taking care not to twist your neck any more than strictly necessary. Just as you take a step, Bucky says your name as he takes your hand in his metal one; when you turn and look back at him, he looks just as shocked as you feel; this is the first time he’s deliberately touched you with his left hand. He takes a moment to look at your hand in his before meeting your eyes. “Thanks, Doll. For everything.”

You give his hand a squeeze and smile broadly. “Anytime, Buck,” and you make your way upstairs.
The rest of the morning and afternoon passes relatively uneventfully. The weather is a little on the dreary and damp side and the boys are feeling just a little under the weather, so you set them up with one of your favorite movies – The Emperor’s New Groove.

Unable to sit still, you find yourself in the kitchen yet again. It shouldn’t surprise you, really, since it’s the best damn room in the house. And it is so incredibly well equipped that you’re convinced that there are treasures just waiting to be discovered – so far you’ve just found what you needed and moved on. Today, however, you decide to explore everything this kitchen has to offer.

You’re investigating the cupboards, finding all kinds of awesome kitchen paraphernalia that you hadn’t even known existed until now. Most of the items looked brand new (had Tony even used any of this stuff? Does he even know how to cook?) but some looked almost vintage. You wonder offhand if some of the pieces had belonged to his mom. Finding a beautiful antique-looking stockpot tucked away in the back corner of one of the cabinets, you take it from its hiding spot and place it on the counter before removing the lid.

“OH GOD!!!” you screech, throwing the lid down in horror at what you just saw as you violently jump back, trying to put as much space as possible between you and it before you freeze and can’t move.

Suddenly there is a strong, broad back standing between you and…it…and you notice as Bucky starts pushing you slowly backwards with his metal arm that he’s drawn a gun.

Not seeing any threats after double checking all the windows, he turns to you. “What’s wrong?” he asks sharply, clearly on full alert.

You just point to the pan.

He looks at you quizzically as he tucks the firearm into the back waistband of his jeans and turns to lift the lid.

“Oh, fucking really?! You gave me a goddamn heart attack over –“ he stops short when he turns back around and sees you; pale, shaking, and with tears in your eyes.

He quickly takes care of the problem before swiftly striding over to you.

“Oh, hey. Hey,” he soothes as he gathers you into his arms. “Hey, Doll, it’s okay, I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” he continues as you feel the cool press of his metal palm flat against your upper back, holding you tightly to him while his natural hand softly smooths over the hair at the back of your head. With your nose pressed to his chest, you inhale to calm your frayed nerves and can’t help but notice his scent. He smells amazing; a warm and comforting blend of laundry detergent, soap, fresh air, whatever cologne he uses, and him. It suits him perfectly and is uniquely Bucky. Reluctantly, you exhale.

Still holding you tightly, he continues, “It’s gone, Doll, it’s dead. You don’t have to be afraid, I won’t let anything happen to you. On the night that I met you I promised I’d protect you, and I will, even from spiders.”

He continues to hold and comfort you while you gather yourself. God, you HATE spiders. They. Are. Terrifying.

“It was fucking huge! It was…it was MEATY,” you exclaim into his chest.
You feel rather than hear the sudden laughter he’s trying to hold in.

“And HAIRY!”

“I know, Doll, I know,” he murmurs, still holding you close, still trying not to laugh out loud.

“It actually had thighs. Did the fucker do squats and lunges!? What the hell!” You shudder again at the memory before reluctantly pulling away, embarrassed by your reaction. “I’m so sorry, you must think I’m an absolute idiot for being so afraid of spiders.”

Bucky’s left hand had moved from your back to your waist as you moved back, and his right hand lightly moves to your chin and tilts your head up until your eyes meet his. “Doll, don’t you ever apologize for your fears, especially not to me. Ever. And you don’t need to be embarrassed – for crying out loud, I’m a grown ass man and I asked you to sing me a lullaby last night. And you know what? I’m not ashamed of it, only thankful that you were there for me.”

You’re already halfway there, so you pull him into an impromptu hug and can’t help but notice how he not only doesn’t flinch, but hugs you back all the tighter. “So this is what we do, huh?” you mumble into his chest.

“What’s that, Doll?” he asks after a moment; his nose is buried in your hair and you can feel him inhaling slowly but deeply; it gives you a warm and fuzzy feeling that you choose not to examine too closely.

“You protect me from bad guys and spiders, and I take care of you after your nightmares.”

If possible, he holds you even tighter. “Deal.” You can actually hear the smile in his voice.

You wrinkle your nose as you pull back, “Doesn’t really seem like a fair trade,” you muse. As far as you’re concerned, if he’s willingly on spider patrol, he’s a damn HERO. He should get a weekly parade.

He smiles widely as his eyes sparkle and crinkle at the corners. “Well, from where I sit, I think you’re getting the short end of the stick here. But if it really bothers you, then feel free to make me more cupcakes.”

You roll your eyes before asking, “Chocolate or vanilla?”

“Yes,” he replies, looking hopeful.

You can only laugh at his attempt to get double the cupcakes. “How about cookies instead?”

Bucky pauses for a moment; he’s still looking into your eyes, and you find yourself trying to memorize the exact shade of blue in his; there’s a tiny tinge of green, you decide.

“How about you just relax for a while – go watch the movie with the boys. I’ll take care of dinner.”

“Really?” You’re surprised by the offer. “Can you cook?”

Bucky barks out a laugh at your blunt question. “Yes, I can cook. Now go and relax for a while.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you,” you say with a smile as he begins to busy himself in the kitchen.

As you cuddle up with Artie and Jimmy on the couch, you can hear Bucky humming to himself as he gets to work cooking…something.
You end up falling asleep during the movie, and wake to a gentle touch on your knee.

You open your eyes to see Bucky kneeling in front of you. You blink at him a few times, disoriented from your nap.

“Hey Doll, dinner’s ready. The boys are already at the table,” he answers before you form the question.

A slow smile spreads across your face before you sleepily answer, “Thanks Bucky.”

He smiles back as he holds his hand out to help you up, and walks the short distance with you to the table. It’s impossible for you to ignore that he has his hand resting on the small of your back for most of the way before he pulls your chair out for you.

“Such a gentleman,” you murmur as you take your seat. He only winks at you as he moves to take the seat across from yours, and you can’t deny that your heart skips a beat (or four). You only briefly take note that Bucky made breakfast for dinner because you can’t stop staring at him.

You look around the table and notice for the first time that he has the boys seated across from each other instead of having one on each side of you, like you usually do. Jimmy is next to you and Artie is next to Bucky…who is patiently cutting up Artie’s pancakes and bacon.

“Bucky, I can do —”

He cuts you off without sparing a glance your way. “I know you can, but I want to.” He finishes and almost shyly looks up to you. “I was just thinking – here you go, buddy,” he pauses as he moves the plate in front of Artie, “you do so much for everyone else, but not for yourself. Let me help you; it’s the least I can do after what you’ve done for me.”

You push down the sudden rush of feeling that threatens to swallow you whole. “You saved me from Spidezilla, I’d say we’re more than even.” Your voice sounds tight and you know he picks up on it, but although he looks at you questioningly he doesn’t say anything. You’re thankful for that, because at the moment you’d be hard pressed to explain the sudden pensiveness that has overtaken you.

The rest of dinner is relatively quiet; Bucky and the boys talk, but you’re almost completely silent as you get lost in your thoughts. Something about the sight of him cutting your son’s food caught you off guard and opened a flood of emotion within you, sending you down a dark spiral.

He keeps glancing up at you, but you avoid his eyes and instead focus on your kids or your food. You have to give him credit – he makes damn good pancakes and hash browns, and he cooked the bacon perfectly. You try to think about that instead of the intruding thoughts that are wholly unwelcome, but despite your best efforts those thoughts are currently invading and consuming your mind.

Bucky looks concerned, but allows you your space as you get the boys through the rest of their evening and put them to bed.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Part 13 - We get a little glimpse into the reader’s past to see what makes her tick.

Additional warnings specific to this part: Angst, mentions of past abuse, brief mention of alcohol abuse

He finds you sitting on the porch swing. It’s chilly outside but you don’t feel the cold; all your attention is focused internally as you wander the lonely and dark paths in your mind.

Bucky looks to you for permission to sit down and you shift over to the side as an answer; the swing is more than big enough for the two of you. You didn’t notice that he’d brought a blanket with him, and he drapes it over your shoulders before he takes a seat.

He doesn’t say anything for a while, just calmly swings with you before he finally breaks the silence. “Where’d you go, Doll, back at dinner? You were there, but you weren’t really there.” Bucky sounds timid and unsure, and you hate yourself for making him feel that way.

You take a deep breath, and say the first thing that comes to mind. “I don’t need your help, Bucky. I can take care of the boys myself.” God, that sounded harsh, and it wasn’t even really what you meant to say, but you can’t find the words you need to express how you feel.

His voice is gentle and so incredibly kind when he responds, “I know you can, but the thing is… you don’t have to.” He pauses for a moment as he takes your hand, “Hey, what’s going on inside that beautiful head of yours?” His thumb is lightly rubbing across the top of your hand, and the soothing motion allows you to calm down just a little.

Where do you begin?

You take a deep breath and fight back the tears of frustration that are trying to spill. Glancing over at him, you see his eyes filled with concern and…fear?

“God, Bucky, I’m sorry. I’m not very good at this,” you mumble with your eyes downcast.

“Good at what, Doll?” he asks as he brushes some hair out of your eyes. He looks so concerned and sincere, and it hurts your heart that you’re causing this.

“Talking. Especially about my feelings; I’m just not good at it,” you sniff; you lost the battle against the tears. You wait for the annoyed snort, the eyeroll, the impatient tone – anything that tells you that you’re wasting his time - but it doesn’t come.

Bucky gently takes your face in both hands and turns you so you’re facing him. “Doll, you’re scaring me. This isn’t like you. What’s going on?” He searches your eyes, trying to find the answers he seeks. “Did I overstep my boundaries when I helped Artie with dinner?”

You shake your head and let out a shaky breath – here goes nothing. Or everything.

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong. I just…” And you stop. You just can’t find any more words,
and you brace yourself for the angry tirade.

But just like before, it doesn’t come.

You don’t say anything, but a wave of realization seems to wash over Bucky. Still tenderly holding your face in his hands, he begins softly, “Let’s try something different, okay? Why don’t I ask you some yes or no questions instead. Would that be easier for you?” His voice is soft and soothing, so you nod as another tear slips out. He gently wipes it away with his thumb before continuing.

“You seem really tense. Is it because of something I did?”

You shake your head.

“Are you afraid to talk to me? Afraid I’ll be mad if you tell me how you feel?”

You choose to be truthful, so you nod.

Bucky inhales sharply. “Did I do or say something to make you feel that way?” He’s holding his breath now.

You shake your head.

He lets out a shaky breath and nods to himself before his next question. “Did…did Christopher do this to you?”

You briefly close your eyes and nod slowly as another tear finds its way down your cheek.

His eyes harden and his jaw clenches, but his voice is still soft when he speaks again. “So you have a hard time telling others what’s going on in your head, because your experience tells you there will be consequences?”

You nod again.

“Doll, I promise that won’t happen with us.” Bucky pulls you into a hug and holds you tightly for a moment before asking his next question. “You don’t like to accept help, do you?”

“No,” you whisper. “It always backfires on me.”

He pulls back from you, wiping away another tear that made its way down your cheek. “Is that why it made you uncomfortable tonight when I helped?”

You give another small nod before continuing, “I know it doesn’t make sense, and no, Bucky, you haven’t given me any reason to believe that you would act that way, but I guess old habits die hard.”

His method of drawing you out worked, and his unexpected patience gives you the courage to start speaking. You look down, feeling utterly ashamed even though logically you knew you had no reason to feel that way. “Whenever I would ask for help, he made it seem like such an inconvenience. If he just did something without me asking, he’d get mad if I didn’t thank him enough. Sometimes, he’d use it to his advantage when we’d fight.” You swallow thickly before continuing. “So when you jumped in tonight…I guess…I’m just not used to there not being a catch or an ulterior motive. And I’m so sorry – I know that’s not fair to you, it’s just…I also…” you pause for a moment because it’s so hard to find the words you’re looking for, “I’m not good at accepting help because I don’t like feeling like I have to rely on someone else – it requires too much trust. I learned that it’s safer to be independent and just do it myself.”
He utters your name as he releases a sigh and tucks some hair behind your ear. “You deserved so much better, Doll, why did you put up with that?” It doesn’t sound like an accusation like most ‘why’ questions; it almost sounds like a plea.

“I got married when I was extremely young, so we were together for a really long time - much longer than most people my age. Christopher was only the second guy I’d ever dated, so it wasn’t like I’d had a string of healthy relationships to reference when things started to go sideways. I just figured that what happened was normal, and that it was just part of being married.” You huff out a bitter laugh. “People told me all the time that marriage is hard and takes work. I didn’t realize until a few years ago that it shouldn’t have been that hard, and that what he was doing was manipulative, controlling, and emotionally abusive. The problem is that by the time I’d realized that, I felt trapped and couldn’t leave. I also have this stupid thing about breaking promises, and I just kept thinking that I’d made a vow; for better or worse. And then to add to everything else, he’d isolated me so much throughout the years that I’d lost touch with almost all my friends. Until the boys were born I didn’t see my family all that much, except for my mom. I didn’t really have anywhere to turn, not that I would have asked for help anyway.”

Bucky opens his mouth to say something, but you continue before he gets a chance to get the words out. You whisper the next part, as it’s more of a confession than anything else, “I was actually kind of relieved when he was killed in that car accident. I know that probably makes me a monster, but it gave me an out without having to leave, without having to break a promise, or be personally responsible for tearing apart the boys’ world. Part of me still loved some of him - or maybe rather who he used to be - and I didn’t have the resources to make it on my own anyway.” You give a sad shrug. “I probably never would have left. I’d have spent the rest of my life miserable and died in an unhappy marriage.”

“No Doll, it doesn’t make you a monster,” Bucky is quick to reassure you when you pause. “He didn’t fucking deserve you, and he put you through hell. He was the monster.” He pauses and seems to brace himself before asking his next question. “Did…did he hurt you?”

You take another deep breath. “He used to drink, and he could get violent when he did; thankfully, he got sober before the boys were born. He only got physical with me once, a few years after we got married. He generally took out his aggression on walls, our pets, or other drunk people.” It actually felt good to admit it to someone; it was a secret that you’d carried around for years, and saying it out loud lifted a weight you hadn’t been aware you’d been carrying.

The dark look that comes over Bucky makes him almost unrecognizable before he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. You do the same; you’ve not allowed yourself to be this vulnerable in a long, long time…with anyone. You briefly wonder what it is about him that feels safe, even amidst the chaos in your own mind.

When you open your eyes, he’s returned to himself and gathers you into a tight hug. “Thank you,” he murmurs into your hair as he rubs soft circles onto your back.

“What? What are you thanking me for? I should be thanking you.” If he keeps wrapped in his arms like this forever and never lets you go, you decide that you’ll be perfectly content.

“You’re quiet for a moment before your confession leaves your lips, “I don’t think I could have with anyone else.”

“I know I couldn’t have done it with anyone else, and believe me, I’ve tried,” he replies softly, “I
told you things the other night that I haven’t even told Steve.”

“There’s just something about you –“ you both speak the same words at the same time. Neither of you comments on it, but you each hold the other closer.

You take a deep breath before you speak – you don’t want to bring it up, but you want to be honest with Bucky. “There’s a bit more…to tonight. About how I reacted during dinner.”

He pulls back slightly so he can look at you. “And what’s that, Doll?” he gently encourages.

You bite your lip before answering, “When this is over…they’re really going to miss you.” You stop for a moment, chastising yourself because that statement isn’t entirely honest. “We’re really going to miss you.” That’s better, you tell yourself.

“What –“

“When we go back home, and you go back home…or wherever they send you…when this is all over. I just…Bucky, they think you hung the moon, and when I saw you with Artie tonight I just realized that not having you around is going to be a tough thing to adjust to. They already lost their dad…”

“Hey, Doll, don’t worry about that. We don’t know how long this will be necessary – you might have to stay in hiding for quite a while, and by the time you can finally go home you might be sick of me.” You shoot him a look, and are gratified to see that he doesn’t look like he believes his own words. “Hey, we’ll figure something out. We’re friends, remember? I’m not gonna let any of you just walk out of my life forever, it’s just not going to happen. I promise, we’ll figure something out.”

The sincerity in Bucky’s tone makes something ease up in your heart. “Okay.”

“Are you better now?” he asks.

“Yeah,” you say with a smile. “Yeah, I am. Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Doll.”

You and Bucky just sit for a while, swaying gently on the swing in silence. Neither of you had completely disengaged from the last hug; his right arm is over your shoulder, holding you close with his cheek resting on the top of your head, while you lean into him with your arm resting across his waist and your head on his shoulder.

He reaches his left arm across you to pull the blanket snugger around your shoulders, and softly rubs your upper arm.

“So…um, can I…uh…can I take care of you and the boys?” He sounds so unsure of himself, but so hopeful at the same time.

You open your mouth to respond, but he speaks before you can begin. “And don’t tell me that I don’t have to. I know I don’t have to. But I want to. And I’m not saying that you can’t do it yourself – I already know that you can, Doll, you’re fucking incredible, but I just want –“

“Bucky.” You interrupt him to put him out of his misery. His rambling is adorable, but you’ve been in his shoes many times and prayed for someone to shut you up. “If you really want to take care of us, you can, or rather…we’ll take care of each other. Consider yourself officially adopted by my family.”
“I want to.” He’s smiling again - you can hear it in his voice.

“Just know that it isn’t always going to be easy for me to accept your help – I don’t think this is going to be something I can just shut off. It might take some time, but I’ll do my best to get there.”

“I can be patient,” he whispers, “I have no problem at all waiting.”

“Okay,” you whisper in reply.

The gentle motion of the swinging and Bucky’s solid warmth are a winning combination; you’re soon relaxing and falling into that tranquil space between wakefulness and sleep. At some point, you feel Bucky begin to shift and ease away from you but before you can miss his presence he’s already back, moving his arms beneath your knees and shoulders as he gently lifts you from the swing.

“Bucky…”

“Shhh Doll, go back to sleep. I’ve got you,” he whispers into your hair as he effortlessly carries you into the house.

His gait is smooth and graceful as he makes his way up the stairs and into your room. It’s too much effort to open your eyes, so you don’t, and so much easier to nuzzle your head deeper into the warm space between his neck and shoulders, which is exactly what you do. A contented sigh escapes Bucky as he stands in your room, holding you much longer than strictly necessary.

You hadn’t bothered to make the bed today, so everything is just as it was when you awoke in the middle of the night to go to Bucky after his nightmare. The pillows are already in place and the blankets are pushed aside, making Bucky’s job of putting you to bed fairly easy. He kneels on the bed to place you in the middle before pushing your hair aside and pressing a light kiss to your temple.

You want to acknowledge the sweetness of his actions and maybe ask him to stay with you for a while, but you’re too close to sleep and your mouth won’t open to let the words come.

The last thing you’re aware of before sleep claims you entirely is Bucky pulling the blankets up and tucking you in.
Chapter 14

At some point yesterday you had asked SUNDAY to wake you if Bucky had another nightmare. It’s good that you did, because tonight his tortured awakening is silent.

Descending the stairs, you find him in the same spot as last night. “Why didn’t you come get me, Buck?” you ask quietly as you sit beside him. “We have a deal, remember?” you ask as you gently tuck some hair behind his ear.

Bucky just shakes his head in his hands and doesn’t speak; like the past two nights, he’s shattered into a million pieces by whatever horrors visited him in his dreams, and it’s all he can do to hold himself together.

Tonight, you’re both shivering; you’d forgotten to grab a hoodie before coming down, and you’re chilled. You look around for a blanket but then remember that Bucky had wrapped it around you when you were outside earlier; it’s still upstairs in your room. You make a sudden decision.

You gather your courage and take a deep breath before taking his metal hand into your own and lacing your fingers with his. Standing, you tug gently at him to get him to follow.

In the darkness, you can see confusion on his face. “I’m freezing and we both need sleep. Come with me.” You take another deep breath as you give another tug to his hand; this time, he stands. “I have a nice, warm bed upstairs that will fit the both of us comfortably while I sing you back to sleep. This way we can both get some rest, and I’ll be close if you have another nightmare.”

You don’t give him a chance to argue; you simply pull him behind you as you return to your room. He still hasn’t spoken a word, and you’re starting to worry.

Finally reaching your room, you bring him inside and lead him to the bed. You were sleeping in the middle, so you turn on the bedside lamp so you can rearrange some of the pillows to better accommodate two people. He watches you, and he’s been so quiet that it startles you when he speaks.

“Is that a teddy bear?”


“Why?” He looks confused, but you’ll take confused Bucky over broken Bucky any day.

“Um…well…I guess I just like to have something to cuddle at night.”

Comprehension washes over his face, “Oh, since…um…he…”

“No,” you interrupt flatly, not really wanting to discuss it but also not willing to shut Bucky out. “Not since Christopher died. I’ve always had a teddy bear.” Bucky looks at you quizzically, so you continue with a sigh, “He didn’t like to be touched by me when he slept.” You look down; you aren’t sure why this still bothers you, but it does; you still feel ashamed, as if you are somehow repulsive. “In all the years we were together, not once did I fall asleep or wake up being held. There was someone less than a foot away from me, but nights were always incredibly lonely.” You shrug, “So I got a teddy bear. At least then my arms weren’t empty.” God, you sound pathetic.
Bucky watches you with a sorrowful look that you’re afraid is perilously close to pity. You avoid his eyes as you direct him into bed, instructing him to lay on his side facing away from yours so you can sing to him comfortably. You finish tucking him in before crossing to your side and shutting off the light. As you climb in he turns toward you, wordlessly snatches the teddy bear and pitches it across the room like it personally offends him before returning to lay on his side.

What the hell? You aren’t really sure what to say, so you don’t say anything.

You scooched over to him, lightly spooning him so he’ll be able to hear you. Once you lie still, Bucky reaches back with his right arm and grabs your hand from its place on your hip, tucks your arm under his, and holds your hand to the place over his heart. The angle of your arm makes it necessary to move even closer, but you certainly aren’t going to argue. You settle in to get comfortable, and you feel the tension in his body release as you think you hear him sigh in what sounds suspiciously close to contentment.

As you start to sing softly the familiar tune from Billy Joel, you can feel Bucky’s solid heartbeat under your palm.

Like last night, you drift off to sleep humming the final verse.

* * *

Waking up next to Bucky is an experience you’d be more than happy to repeat.

You slowly come awake, feeling snug and comfortable. In the dizzy in-between of consciousness and sleep, your brain registers complete content but also something different, and it’s that something different that finally pulls you completely into the morning.

You lie on your side with your eyes closed, and take in the various sensations. The sheets are the perfect temperature; not too warm, not too cold, and the pillow is soft and cool beneath your cheek. Behind your closed lids you can tell that it’s still pretty dark, but that’s to be expected at this time of year. You feel a heavy but not oppressive weight across your waist and a soft stroking motion against your upper back, and your own arm is draped over something solid and warm.

Bucky.

Your lips can’t help it; they curve up in a slight smile. So this is what all those stupid romance novels were talking about. This is the feeling that was described as you wake up in the arms of someone you…care about. Friends do this all the time, right? Even if they don’t…fuck it. You and Bucky can make your own goddamn rules.

“You awake, Doll?” Bucky whispers.

“’Mmm awake,” you acknowledge. You inhale deeply and stretch your legs a bit, not realizing until you do so that your legs are tangled with Bucky’s. “So much better than a teddy bear,” you mumble drowsily.

He laughs lightly as he continues tracing soft patterns on your back, “Damn right I am.”

You snicker a little at his self-assurance before opening your eyes. In the dim light you can see him lying on his side facing you, watching you with an expression on his face that you can’t exactly identify.

“What time is it?” You don’t want to get out of the comfort of his arms or the bed, but you can’t ignore the necessity for too long. Hangry three-year-olds are terrifying, especially in the morning.
“About a quarter after six,” he answers; he sounds just as reluctant to face the day as you do.

“Hmm, I have time to shower. So now comes the existential question; get up and shower, or stay in bed for twenty more minutes?” you debate aloud as you yawn, knowing which one you’d prefer, but also wanting to get your shower in before noon.

“Stay in bed with me,” he shamelessly implores with soft eyes.

Holy God, the thoughts that just started running through your mind…

“When SUNDAY tells us the boys are awake, I’ll get up with them and make breakfast. You can take your shower, and by the time you get downstairs I’ll have breakfast and coffee for you,” Bucky murmurs softly.

You open your mouth to protest out of habit, but shut it when you see him squint his eyes in determination, remembering the conversation and your subsequent promise from last night. “Okay,” you reply meekly. This is going to take some getting used to, but the ginormous smile on his face when you agreed to accept his help…wow…that will definitely make things easier.

“Do me a favor?” His voice is still gravelly from sleeping, and it’s doing…things…to you.

“Hmm?” Your wish is my command, you think to yourself.

“If you have any comfy clothes, like what you’d wear to the gym, wear those. There’s a couple of self-defense moves I want to teach you.” He’s suddenly all business – well, at least as much as he can be, considering that the two of you are still essentially cuddling in bed. Platonically, of course.

“You’re going to teach me how to fight?” you ask incredulously. The guy has NO idea what he’s getting into. There are days that you can barely walk and chew gum at the same time…

“No. I’m going to teach you how to fall and how to take a hit,” he corrects.

“How to fall and how to take a hit.” you repeat flatly. Well that’s not exactly badass, is it.

“Just trust me, Doll. I want to keep you as safe as possible.” He’s pleading with you now, so you just nod your head.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” he repeats, smiling again.

The conversation turns to lighter, inconsequential things as the two of you just enjoy each other’s company until SUNDAY lets you know that they boys are waking.

“That’s my cue,” he says with a wink, and seemingly reluctantly pulls himself away from you and out of bed. “See you downstairs in a bit.”

A few moments later you hear the boys’ peals of giggles, followed by Bucky’s laughter.

You already miss his warmth beside you.

* * *

Bucky had, thankfully, come to the realization that teaching you any sort of self-defense move
would need to wait until the boys went down for their nap. The last thing anyone needs is for Jimmy or Artie to try to emulate either of you. They get into enough trouble as it is.

Bucky sits across from you on the training mat; there’s not even a glimmer of humor in his eyes. He’s all business right now and is extremely focused.

“Alright, Doll, listen carefully. I’m going to do everything I can to protect you, everything, but sometimes shit just goes sideways so I need you to be prepared. If something happens to me and you can’t get to the panic room, you need to have some tools to keep yourself as safe as possible.”

You only nod. As much as you might not like to think about it, there is the distinct possibility that being here at the safe house will only delay the inevitable.

He goes through the basics; present the attacker with your shoulder and hip since those parts will absorb hits better. Try to stay relaxed, breathe out with the hit, keep your mouth shut to help avoid a broken jaw in the event of a hit to the face. Tense your stomach muscles for a hit to the abdomen, and for just about any hit, roll with it; move with the punch to absorb less of the impact.

It’s a lot of information to take in, but you’re doing your best. You suddenly remember him telling you that he’d been responsible for training other soldiers – this might bring back some pretty ugly memories, you think to yourself.

“Remember, you want to get through the attack with the least amount of injuries as possible so you can run away.” You nod. “Do you think you’re ready to try a few techniques?” He looks a little… scared, maybe… but resolute as he easily lifts himself from the mat and extends a hand to you.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess,” you reply as you rise.

“Okay…I’m not actually going to hit you; I’m just going to do a slow motion version of what a hit would look like.” He’s watching you intently, searching for any sign of hesitancy.


“Is this bringing up any bad…uh…memories?” he asks, searching your eyes.

Smiling softly up at him, you reply, “I was just wondering the same of you,” as you rest your hand on his forearm.

He doesn’t say anything, just continues to watch you, so you continue, “No, this isn’t bringing anything up. You aren’t him, you aren’t drunk, it’s not 2:30 in the morning, and we’re not in a shithole apartment. I’m good, Buck, I promise. Are you good?”

Bucky nods slowly. “Yeah, this is nothing like what I used to do. I’m good.”

And with that, you get started. It feels almost ridiculous at first, how slowly the two of you are moving, but things start to click fairly quickly. It feels like an odd sort of dance, but it makes sense. Right hook from Bucky; present your left shoulder and step back with your right foot. His fist comes in for your abdomen; exhale and tense your stomach muscles as you step back. Repeat with another angle, repeat with another side, repeat, repeat, repeat.

“You’re doing great, Doll, are you ready to move a little faster?”

“I think so,” you reply, nodding.
Moving to the center of the room, you begin again. You make a few mistakes, but realize your errors immediately and do your best to correct. Bucky is still going slow enough to do so, but you know you won’t have that luxury if you ever actually need to use this training.

You’re completely focused on his next move when your next step back brings you flush up against the wall. Bucky stands in front of you only a few tiny inches away.

It’s a little hard to breathe right now, and you attribute it to Bucky’s closeness. Stupid, you tell yourself, you were cuddling in bed with him less than eight hours ago, his proximity shouldn’t have any effect on you.

But it does. Oh, it does.

Both of you stand frozen for a moment before Bucky breaks the silence. “You might find yourself cornered or backed up against a wall, like this, since you’re not fighting back,” he begins; his voice is a little huskier than it was before. “This is the one time you’ll want to lean into a punch. If your attacker gets his full force behind a hit, and you have nowhere to go but into a wall, then your chances of being seriously injured skyrocket. If you lean into a hit, effectively limiting your attacker’s full range of motion, you can limit the amount of damage inflicted because he won’t have his full strength behind the punch.”

You nod; it makes sense, even in your currently distracted state.

“This may also be your best shot at running away – if you come forward when a punch is thrown, you might be able to throw your attacker off balance and get past him.”

He begins the motions, and you do as he described. When you turn around, he’s nodding his approval.

“Good job, Doll.” He glances at the clock; you do as well, and realize you’ve been at this for almost two hours. “I think that’s about enough for today, we’ll do more tomorrow,” he says as he lightly guides you over to a weight bench. “I want you to straddle the bench, close to the front.”

You give him a quizzical look at his instructions, but follow along nonetheless. You’re more than a bit surprised when you feel him straddle the bench behind you, his legs framing your hips and thighs.

“I’m going to help you loosen up so you don’t get tight. A lot of these moves don’t seem physically demanding, but if you aren’t used to these motions your muscles can get pretty stiff,” he says quietly as he puts both hands on your shoulders and starts massaging.

You think offhand that stretching would probably accomplish the same goal, but he’s got his hands on your neck and back, and whatever he’s doing feels so damn good that you’d bite your tongue off before saying anything to make him stop. Seriously, where did he learn how to do this? Did those bastards at Hydra decide that after they forcibly made him their weapon that he needed to undergo Massage 101?

Your eyes are closed, rocking slowly with his motions; you’re almost off in another world, and you don’t realize you’ve uttered a string of pornographic moans until his hands still.

Oh. God. The blood is rushing to your face and you’re probably purple with embarrassment.

“Enjoying yourself, Doll?” Bucky’s voice sounds tight, but there’s a hint of amusement.

“Oh, um…Bucky…shit…I’m so sorry about that, this just feels really good.” Nope, not helping, you
tell yourself. “Can, uh, can we just pretend that didn’t just happen?” You’re absolutely mortified, and your only saving grace is that you’re facing away from him.

“Now why would I want to do a thing like that?” he murmurs with his hands still on your shoulders and lightly collaring your neck.

“Uh…” Speechless. You’re speechless. Your breathing hitches and your heart is racing, unsure of what this means.

Both you and Bucky start when his phone rings, taking you sharply out of the moment. He all but jumps off the bench, heading to the windowsill where his phone is resting. “Barnes.”

You take a moment to take a deep breath and gather yourself…what the hell was that?

“Hey Clint...Yeah, okay...Really? Did Stark send..? Great, yeah, see you soon.”

Bucky pockets his phone as he turns back to you. “Clint’s on his way – he’s dropping off some stuff I asked for, and something for the boys from Stark.” He’s all relaxed confidence, showing nothing from your previous exchange. That’s okay with you – you don’t know what to make of it anyway, and are more than happy to pretend it didn’t happen.

“Okay,” you reply, as he walks over to you and extends his hand to help you up from the bench.

“We’re done for today – we’ll work on it more tomorrow,” Bucky says as he looks down at you. “I’m hungry, are you hungry? Do you want to grab a snack with me?”

You can’t help but scoff. “Bucky,” you begin flatly, “you’re always hungry.”

“And there’s always good food here, so I’ll call that a win,” he retorts with a smile.

“Fair enough,” you concede as you both make your way upstairs to wait for Clint.

* * *

It’s official. Bucky is Artie and Jimmy’s favorite person, and Clint just edged you out of the number two spot. If their little three-year-old brains can adequately grasp the situation, you know you won’t even make third place, because it belongs to Tony.

You lean against the doorframe of the boys’ bedroom, amused, as you watch events transpire.

The “something for the boys from Stark” turned out to be coordinating pirate ship beds; a green one for Artie and a blue one for Jimmy, complete with ‘Jake and the Neverland Pirates’ bedding, stuffed characters, and wall decorations. Oh, and a random life size Iron Man wall sticky that both Bucky and Clint snorted at as they removed it from the box.

You have to admit that these are some of the neatest beds you’ve ever seen. Tony evidently didn’t think them sharing a massive king sized bed was good enough...or he’s planning on you being here a lot longer than previously hoped. Either way, the twins are ecstatic.

“EEEEEEEEE!!!” is the only sound that escapes Artie as he shifts from foot to foot, shaking his fists in front of him in excitement. His already big brown eyes are even bigger than usual since he can barely contain himself.

Jimmy keeps waking back and forth, randomly giggling between exclaiming “Ahoy, matey!” over and over again – his blue eyes are sparkling, and like Artie, Jimmy’s dimples are on full display.
It’s so stinking adorable, you don’t even care that you aren’t in their top three.

The best part, you muse, is probably Bucky and Clint. They are both sitting cross legged on the floor, studiously trying to assemble the beds, but neither of them had bothered to read the instructions.

“What the fu----dge?” Nice save, Clint. “Is this from Ikea??” he mutters as he turns a piece over and over, trying to figure out where it goes.

“I’m a hundred goddamn years old…I can intuitively use any kind of weapon…I can drive or pilot pretty much anything that moves…I can figure this out,” Bucky mutters intensely.

The entire scene is hilarious, and you have a hard time keeping your giggles to yourself until both men turn to you with matching indignant glares.

“Why don’t I, uh…I’m gonna go make dinner,” you manage to get out before you abruptly make your exit, barely getting two steps down the hall before bursting into laughter.

“WE CAN STILL HEAR YOU,” oooh, Clint’s using what must be his Dad Voice. He clearly means business.


Bucky quietly, but not so quiet that you can’t hear, concedes, “She might have a –“

“No! I have kids, I’ve done this before, I don’t need any stupid instructions telling me what to do!” Clint interrupts. “Don’t worry, we got this.”

Artie and Jimmy didn’t even bother to spare you a glance to see where you’re going – there’s just too much excitement in their bedroom right now, and you’d have no chance whatsoever of removing them from either Bucky or Clint’s presence anyway. Hell, might as well take advantage of two or so hours they’ll be out of your hair…God knows it’ll take them that long to get the beds put together, and those boys WON’T leave until they’ve gotten to at least sit in them for a minute…you stop as you come to a sudden realization.

Generally speaking, you border on overprotective with your kids, especially after Christopher died. Even when other people have them (with the exception of your mom) you tend to either keep them within your line of sight, check on them every few minutes, or, at the very least, make a few well-intentioned phone calls or texts if you’re not in the same area.

You don’t feel the compulsion to do that right now. You’re okay with walking away to an area that you won’t be able to see or probably even hear your children, and actually get something done. And you’re totally okay with that.

Because you trust Bucky. Completely.

The realization shakes you a bit as you make your way down the stairs.

* * *

It takes them two hours and fifteen minutes to complete the assembly…about half an hour ago you heard Clint yell out, “Traitor!” in outrage, and you could only guess that Bucky finally gave up
and read the instructions. It was probably the only reason they finally came down the stairs, each carrying a giggling kid piggy-back.

“Good timing, guys,” you say, looking up at the four of them. You’d just finished setting the table, and Clint looks to you with hopeful eyes.

“I can’t help but notice that there’s five places set…”

“Yes, Clint, there’s a spot for you,” you confirm as you start moving food to the table. It’s almost becoming routine for you to expect a superhero to stay for dinner.

Bucky places Jimmy next to his seat, glancing up at you to make sure you’re okay with it. You nod and he grins – you’re starting to think that Bucky’s smile might be his superpower because you’re completely at ease, smiling back with none of last night’s trepidation.

Clint notices the seating arrangement, taking the spot at what is technically the head of the table between you and Bucky. He looks back and forth at the two of you but doesn’t say a word before he starts helping himself to a generous portion of bacon cheeseburger meatloaf.

“Just full disclosure,” Clint begins, “there’s a system in place, almost like a lottery, that decides who gets to come here when things need to get dropped off.”

“Really? Why?” you question. You know it’s out of the way, but it is really that bad?

“The food,” Bucky and Clint answer in unison.

You’re surprised and flattered all at once.

“Sam’s really upset that he lost this one – he’s still pretty salty about missing the lasagna,” Clint admits, sounding supremely smug. “He’s gonna be even madder when I tell him about this,” he points to his plate before shoving an entire cornbread muffin into his mouth. “Ermagerd, thith iswaw gooog,” he mumbles with his mouth full, crumbs shooting out onto his plate.

“Ew,” Bucky mutters, stealing Clint’s napkin to flick a wayward crumb back his way.

Thank God the boys didn’t just see that, or there would be a subsequent flying crumb war. Every day.

* * *

After the twins are finally tucked in for the night (which took forever because they were so incredibly excited about their new beds), you make your way downstairs to look for Bucky and Clint.

You finally find them down in the gym area, sparring.

Wow.

You’d seen your fair share of action movies, but watching something like this in person is incredible. They both move with amazing speed and precision, and despite your lack of knowledge it’s easy to see that they have distinctively different fighting styles.

Bucky’s large frame and brute strength is matched up against Clint’s speed and the agility afforded to him by his smaller stature. Watching them is mesmerizing.
The round ends in a draw (as far as you can tell, anyway), but Clint sounds cocky. “Wanna go at it with implements, old man?”

Bucky rolls his eyes before turning to you. “Hey Doll, come in and make yourself comfortable.”

You didn’t even realize he’d seen you.

“Boys go down okay?” he asks as he walks your way.

“More or less…they’re pretty excited about their new beds,” you reply with a shrug and a smile. The fact that he’d asked melted your heart a little.

“They’re at a really fun age,” Clint interjects. “And they’re very good kids. You’re doing an excellent job,” he complements as he grabs something…a staff…from the side of the room.

“Thanks, Clint. It doesn’t always feel that way, but I’m doing my best.” Seriously, Mommying is the hardest damn job you’ve ever undertaken.

Bucky leads you to the bench, leaving you there with a wink and a smirk. Fuck, you’re never going to live down what happened earlier today.

“Get ready, Big Bird,” Bucky taunts as he grabs a set of knives. Real knives, not plastic ones – and knowing Bucky, they’re sharpened to a razor’s edge. Jeez, they really mean business when they do this, don’t they?

They face each other, and in the blink of an eye they’re moving; it’s actually hard to follow along and keep track of which movements belong to which man. Damn. You already feel safe with Bucky, but seeing this…he’s like a one man army. His competence is incredible, and also…really fucking hot.

OH SHIT NO YOU DIDN’T. Nope, nope nopetty nope. You put the brakes on; you can’t afford to think that way. It won’t end well, it never does. Unrequited lo- nope, not finishing that train of thought…unrequited longing is a cruel, heartless bitch. You try to focus on the sparring in front of you instead of the stupidity within your mind.

Before you know it, the match is over with Bucky as the clear winner and Clint on his back with a rueful smile.

Bucky helps him up with a smile, “Thanks man, I really needed this.”

“Any time,” replies Clint. “And seriously, I mean it, any time. As long as I get to stay for dinner, anyway. Sam’ll be so pissed, it’ll be great. And one of these days I might even kick your ass. Hey, I should get going, so let me run to the car to get the other things you’d asked for.”

You don’t even bother wondering what it is…you’re assuming it’s nothing kid friendly if he hadn’t brought it in earlier.

You were right.

Once Clint leaves, Bucky parks himself at the kitchen table and starts inspecting his new goodies. You sit next to him, genuinely curious.

“These, Doll, are long range sniper rifles,” he begins before you can even ask the question, “Complete with scopes and ammo. Hopefully we won’t need them…but I’d rather be prepared.”
You nod – you aren’t even surprised anymore, just glad that there’s someone like Bucky keeping your kids and you safe.
Chapter Notes

Part 15 - this got SUPER LONG because first there wasn’t a good stopping point, and then I just decided to post the smut to get it out of the way so I can stop being anxious about it - seriously, it’s the length of three normal parts. I might end up slowing down to one update a week after this - I’ve now used up most of my ‘stockpile’ and have to actually finish writing out my ideas so I’ll have something to post...

Additional warnings specific to this part: Smut - unprotected sex (wrap it before you tap it kids) - I don’t think there are any other TWs but PLEASE LET ME KNOW if I should add something.

You’ve all been here for a little over 2 weeks now, and things have settled into a comfortable routine.

You start your day with the boys, and if he hasn’t already, Bucky does a round to check things outside. Coffee and breakfast together, and then playtime for the twins. You can usually get a good chunk of homework done in the morning while they play, and as you sit at the kitchen table playing the part of the dedicated student, Bucky is usually either playing with the boys or sitting at the table with you, cleaning firearms or coloring in your art therapy books. He really seems to like them.

Late morning usually sees the four of you going for a walk to enjoy what’s left of the fall colors, or simply playing outside if the weather is nice. The playset that Bucky and Tony built is a godsend – little boys that are tired from playing are usually too tired to be naughty. Usually.

Sometimes you and Bucky sit on the porch and talk as you watch over Artie and Jimmy, and sometimes the two of you join in with their playtime. Every so often he takes over completely and shoos you away to go read or color so you can have some time to yourself; you’ve never asked for it, and you have no idea how he knows you need it, but he does.

Bucky has quickly become one of your closest friends, and you know that he feels the same. If you were pressed it would be hard for you to explain, but it just feels natural and easy with him. Maybe it’s the fact that the two of you are the only two adults here, or maybe it’s just that you’re compatible; either way, you’re not sure and you no longer care. He’s sweet, funny, considerate, and ridiculously charming when he’s not in what you have dubbed Protector Mode.

Once noon rolls around it’s lunchtime and then naptime for the boys; you, of course, don’t get that luxury. Bucky is annoyingly adamant about training you in self-defense, and usually takes up at least an hour of precious naptime downstairs in the gym. So far you’ve successfully learned how to fall safely and how to take a hit without taking too much damage, and now you’re starting to learn a few basic offensive techniques. It’s nothing too advanced, it’s really a ‘just in case it helps’ kind of thing. Bucky still insists that you’d be safer taking a hit and trying to run away than trying to stand your ground (especially considering that if anything does happen, no amount of training will prepare you to actually fight the person coming after you since Krakken and his men are born and bred warriors), but he wants you to know how to throw a solid punch. You can respect that.
Once you’re done getting your ass handed to you, you can finally relax for a bit or get some chores done (laundry doesn’t do itself, you know). Sometimes you bake or start in on a big dinner while Bucky sits at the table and touches base with the rest of the team to get any necessary updates on the situation, and sometimes you just listen in on the conversation as you color, contributing when necessary. True to his word, Tony makes sure you’re involved, even though there’s not been much change in your situation.

More often than not, though, you bake. It’s still your favorite form of stress relief, but that’s really not why you do it almost daily. You’d never admit it to Bucky, but the way his eyes soften as he watches you move around the kitchen, even as he’s talking to Steve or Tony, makes your heart lift. Freshly baked anything tends to bring a smile to his face, so that’s another motivating factor. Also…the man eats. Everything you bake today is gone by tomorrow, if not the same night. Your dark chocolate chip cookies don’t stand a chance – they generally disappear within minutes of taking them out of the oven. Bucky told you at one point that coming here to protect you and your kids was the best thing that has ever happened to his stomach, because for the first time since he was given the serum he’s not hungry 24/7. You figure that has more to do with the fact that he isn’t competing with his teammates for food, but he insists that it’s your cooking.

Once the boys wake up from their nap, there’s more playing. Bucky tends to be quite a bit more relaxed after he hears from his teammates that Krakken hasn’t figured out who you are, so playtime can get a bit rowdy…and loud. You’ve had to kick them out of the house on more than one occasion in hopes that the boys (all three of them) will burn off enough energy to actually sit still at the goddamn dinner table.

You try not to think about how hard it will be on the boys when this is over, you all go home, and Bucky leaves. Despite his previous assurances, you know that it won’t be an easy transition.

You flat out refuse to think about how hard it will be on you.

It’s too chilly to be outside after the sun goes down, so everyone comes in for a movie, or sometimes everyone piles up on the couch while you read to them. Then it’s dinnertime, bath time, and then quiet playtime or movie night. Bucky is great about keeping the boys occupied on the two nights a week that you have to meet for your online classes, and even starts helping with their bedtime routine.

The first night he helps you tuck them in is the night you realize you’re in trouble; your feelings for him are officially no longer platonic, probably haven’t been for a while, and there’s no lying or denying anymore. It’s full blown Love with a capital ‘L.’ Fuck. The insecurities and taunting voices in the back of your mind keep you quiet – you don’t want to bring it up to him only to find that he doesn’t feel the same and effectively ruin the friendship you’ve built. It’s happened to you before.

Part of you thinks that you shouldn’t worry about it – the man seems to have completely forgotten about the concept of personal space when he’s around you. Bucky is constantly touching your arm, your hand, your back, or brushing the hair out of your eyes when you’re close. When you’re sitting together, he puts his arm around you. He no longer flinches when you touch him, even when it’s unexpected, and in fact seems to welcome and even crave your physical contact. Flirty comments and innuendoes have become fairly common – if you or Bucky haven’t blushed from something the other said, the day’s not over yet. Still…he hasn’t said anything about how he feels regarding you, and since he’s been pretty forthcoming about other things, you can’t help but wonder if he’s just an affectionate person that’s making up for a significant amount of lost time, and that you’re simply reading too much into his gestures. Probably just wishful thinking. You decide to keep your mouth shut and try not to think about it.
Once the boys are in bed, Bucky helps you clean up the kitchen and then does another perimeter check before the two of you relax together. Sometimes he asks you questions about pop culture references you made throughout the day (you keep a mental checklist), sometimes you watch movies, but most often you just talk. You’ve become open books to one another - Bucky shares his memories with you, both good and bad, and it seems to help him remember even more. When he ventures into painful territory, you’re sure to draw him close and allow him to rest with his head in your lap and your fingers in his hair until he circles back around to something not quite so terrifying; you know he appreciates the gesture because he told you once during a particularly ugly story that your touch is what gave him the courage to keep talking about it. He talks a lot about Steve; so much so that you feel like you know the guy. He also tells you of his time as Sergeant of the 107th, the dreams and ambitions of his youth, and the places he’d like to visit in the future. In turn, you tell him everything he asks. You have your own dark moments in your past, and those are the times that he tucks your hair behind your ear before pulling you close into his side.

The past few nights have been beautifully clear and unseasonably warm for early November, so he’s wrapped you up in a blanket and taken you outside with him to gaze at the stars from the back porch. Bucky seems to really like space; he points out the constellations with a barely contained enthusiasm. With a soft wind blowing, the smell and crispness of autumn in the air, and the sounds of the lake in the background it’s the perfect setting. Most nights you forget that this isn’t really real - you forget that this isn’t your home, that this is just a temporary safe house for you and your kids until the guy that wants you dead is dealt with.

You and Bucky have talked well into the night more than once, but he knows you don’t get enough sleep so he tries to make sure you get to bed at a reasonable hour. Bucky’s actually chewed you out a few times for not taking time to take care of yourself (and on more than once occasion you heard him muttering something under his breath about you being as stubborn as Steve), so after checking the outside cameras on his phone and locking up, he usually all but herds you upstairs to your room. Since the night you first brought him into bed with you because of his nightmares, it just became part of the routine. Neither of you really talked about it; the next night after it happened, you just grabbed him by the arm and brought him into your room when it was time to go to bed. You’d brusquely informed him that you’re too damn old to get up in the middle of the night and leave your nice warm bed to sleep on the couch in awkward angles, but that you aren’t going to let him suffer through his nightmares alone. He didn’t argue, and you didn’t change your mind so every night since then you’ve fallen asleep in each other’s arms. He still wakes periodically with his nightmares, but they don’t seem to distress him as much; sometimes the two of you talk about it for a bit, but more often than not he just wants to hold you or have you hold him while you sing ‘his song.’ He’s actually slept the last four nights straight through.

Yes, it’s a comfortable routine.

It changes a bit one random and rainy Thursday afternoon.

You’re in the kitchen, and have your iPod playing as you work on dinner. The boys are up, and are having a bit of an impromptu dance party with you. Bucky’s laughing, Jimmy’s dancing like a Peanuts character, and you’re swinging around with a giggling Artie in your arms to the tune of Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer.” Oh yeah, you’re raising your kids right.

The song ended, and you paused to see if you needed to rush over to change the song since it was set to play all songs randomly (you happen to have ridiculously eclectic taste and have some really not kid friendly music). You relax, though, as you hear the beginning strains of “Chattanooga Choo-Choo” by the Andrews Sisters. Bucky, on the other hand, jumps out of his chair. The next
thing you know, he’s gently removing your son from your arms with a soft, “Hey buddy, my turn,” before he takes you in his arms and starts dancing. And not dancing like you dance (other than swinging your kids around, you can’t dance…when you try you look a lot like a rubber frog in a blender), but real, honest to goodness dancing.

Holy shit. If this is what Bucky from the 40s was like, you were right. He was a fucking panty dropper. Despite his size, he has a dancer’s rhythm and grace and moves you in perfect synchronization with his steps. With him leading, you find that you can actually dance, and the feeling is exhilarating! You’re laughing, he’s laughing, and the boys are giggling and clapping their hands in time to the music (well, kind of).

“I can’t believe you have this song!” he exclaims with a 100-watt smile has he twirls you around and then dips you.

“I was a choir nerd in high school,” you explain breathlessly, “and I loved some of the music we did. This was one of the songs we performed and I thought it was great, so I got the original.”

You make a mental note to thank your old choir instructor when you get the chance.

You’ve never been so disappointed in your life for a song to end. Bucky doesn’t let you go, though, and soon you hear the opening chords to one of your favorites.

Bucky pulls you close as he starts slow dancing with you.

And I’d give up forever to touch you, cause I know that you feel me somehow

You’re the closest to Heaven that I’ll ever be and I don’t want to go home right now

He’s not twirling you anymore; no, he’s holding you as close as he can, bending down so his forehead touches yours, as he continues to move you to the rhythm.

And all I can taste is this moment, and all I can breathe is your life

When sooner or later it’s over, I just don’t wanna miss you tonight

The only thing you can see is the blue of his eyes, the only thing you feel is his warmth enveloping you.

And I don’t want the world to see me, cause I don’t think that they’d understand

When everything’s made to be broken, I just want you to know who I am

Slowly, so slowly, he tilts his head and brings his lips down to yours, and you both inhale deeply at the contact.

And you can’t fight the tears that ain’t coming, or the moment of truth in your lies

He brings his hand up to cup your face while the other presses you even closer, and you reach your arms up around his neck.

When everything feels like the movies, yeah you bleed just to know you’re alive

He parts his lips, seeking permission to deepen the kiss, and you part yours and pull him even closer in response.

And I don’t want the world to see me, cause I don’t think that they’d understand
You’re both jolted out of the moment as Jimmy starts screaming; apparently Artie wanted the blue car, and took it upon himself to take it with brute force.

It suddenly becomes crystal clear to you why some animals eat their young.

You evidently said that out loud, because Bucky laughs as he rests his forehead against yours, still holding you close as he brushes his thumb over your cheek. “We’ve got all the time in the world, Doll, I’m not going anywhere,” he whispers with a smile.

You smile back up at him, ignoring your screeching sons for the moment; they need to learn how to share anyway.

“This is a good song,” he murmurs as he lowers his lips to yours once again.

You smile into the kiss, loving the way he feels against you, the way he holds you, and the way he makes you feel so completely cherished. The way his soft lips move against yours make you forget your name, and the way his tongue melts with yours makes you go weak in the knees.

Jimmy screams again, louder this time, demanding your attention. Bucky smiles, and you sigh.

“I’d better check for blood,” you mutter, as you regretfully pull away.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” he assures you with another brush of his lips.

* * *

Curling up on the couch after dinner is a completely different affair after the kiss.

It’s almost bedtime for the boys, so you’re all in your jammies. You each sit in your usual spots; Bucky on the end of the couch with you next to him, and the boys flopped over on matching beanbag chairs on the floor in front of you (another gift from Tony; Clint was bragging about how chapped Sam was over losing the ‘lottery’ when he dropped them off). Thanksgiving isn’t too far off, so the boys are watching Happy Thanksgiving, Charlie Brown for the very first time.

So much the same, yet so different.

You are suddenly hyper aware of every touch and every glance from Bucky, but not in an awkward way. In fact, there’s no awkwardness at all, just an undercurrent of anticipation. Well, to be honest, it isn’t so much anticipation for you as it’s impatience…you really want nothing more than to put the boys to bed so you can make out with Bucky on the couch like a couple of idiotic teenagers. The way he keeps glancing at you with that soft, dreamy smile of his, his gaze moving down to your lips and then back to your eyes, tells you that he wants the exact same thing. For the first time in your life, you aren’t unsure or second guessing; his kiss told you everything you need to know. You’re elated to realize that your feelings aren’t unreturned; it almost seems too good to be true…but it is true. You know it now.

Instead of sitting side by side with Bucky, tucked under his shoulder as had been your habit, Bucky sits on the couch at an angle, leaving one leg on the couch and pulling you down to sit between his thighs with your back resting against his chest. His hard, incredibly solid, yet comfy chest. He keeps pressing soft kisses to the top of your head and nuzzling your hair, and his hand, which generally rests on your hip, is a bit higher up than usual; first playing with the hem of your shirt, then later tracing soft, mindless patterns on your skin right above the waistband of your plaid pajama bottoms. As for you, your arm rests on the leg propped against the couch, with your hand
on his knee. It’s the same familiarity you’ve shared with him previously, but somehow closer, more intimate, and it’s not from the slight change in position.

“Hey,” Bucky softly whispers in your ear; you shiver slightly at the unexpected sensation.

You shift slightly and turn your head toward him. “Hey what?” you softly inquire. Your shoulder is pressing into his chest, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

He lightly runs his fingers along your neck before softly kissing you. “I don’t think I’m ever gonna get enough of you, Doll.” He pauses before continuing, his eyes locked with yours, “I’ve wanted to do that for quite a while, and when I finally got my lips on yours, I thought it would quench the thirst. But it didn’t.” Another soft kiss, a little deeper this time. “I just want more.” Bucky closes those gorgeous eyes of his, rests his head against yours, and just breathes you in.

For a moment you don’t say anything. The thoughts running through your head battle for the victory of being spoken…this is so surreal…you can’t remember the last time you were this happy…you’re his for the taking…Never knew I could feel like this, like I’ve never seen the sky before… God, you sound like a Lifetime Movie right now combined with a really fucking awesome musical.

“Me, too.” Good answer. And it’s the truth.

With your reply, his eyes open and he smiles brightly as his gaze moves past you. “All done, little men?” he asks; you turn and see that Charlie Brown is over. Finally.

Jimmy’s practically passed out, but Artie gets up and turns his sleepy gaze your way.

“Yeah Bucky. All done. Momma?” He looks at you with those big brown eyes, and you know exactly what he wants. He’s going to get it, too.

You smile as you get up, holding out your arms. Artie all but collapses into them; he still loves being carried by you, and you love that he hasn’t outgrown that yet.

Bucky turns of the TV, shuts off all lights but the one over the sink, and gently collects Jimmy. As you quietly make your way upstairs, you can’t help but acknowledge how right this feels. As clichéd as it sounds, it really feels like your family is whole in a way it’s never been before. You roll your eyes at your own cheesiness.

As you and Bucky gently tuck your sons in, you see out of the corner of your eye that he kisses Jimmy gently on the forehead. He meets your eyes, and as you smile affectionately at him he crosses to do the same for Artie.

“’Night Bucky,” Artie murmurs, already half asleep.

“Good night buddy, sleep tight.” Bucky sounds so soft and tender, it almost breaks your heart a little.

He takes your hand as the two of you walk out of the room and close the door. Standing out in the hallway, he suddenly looks unsure.

“Hey, you okay?” you ask, putting your palm to his cheek. He leans into your touch, humming his answer as he puts his hand over yours and the other at your waist.

“Yeah, Doll, I uh…I just…it’s been awhile since I’ve...” His eyes go big in horror, “Not that I expect –“
“Bucky,” you interrupt. He takes a deep breath, as do you. “Bucky, it’s okay. I… I care about you. Deeply. We’re both adults; we can do what we want, whatever feels right, and we can stop when we want. I promise, I’ll let you know if I want to stop, and you do the same.”

He smiles and lets out the breath he’s been holding. “God, Doll, something about you makes me feel like I’m a 15-year-old virgin that has no clue what to do with myself. It’s like I’ve turned into Steve, before the serum. Awkward and nervous. My fucking palms are even sweating right now,” he admits with a laugh.

You giggle a little at his confession. “Mine, too, but you have nothing to worry about. You’re a damn good kisser,” you whisper as you pull his lips down to yours.

As his lips meld with yours, the nervous tension melts away. You let loose an undignified squeak when he suddenly moves and picks you up, bridal style, and carries you into the bedroom. Still kissing you, he shuts the door with his foot and carries you in.

He must have made the bed (he’s so ridiculously domestic sometimes… such a contrast to what people would expect if they didn’t know him) because the comforter is smooth beneath you as he gently lays you down.

Feeling just a little brazen, you look up at him with a grin. “So... wanna make out?”

“God, yes…” And his mouth is on yours again, and it isn’t sweet and gentle like before; it’s passionate and bold, as if finally admitting his want had finally broken through his unexpected shyness.

A moan escapes your throat, and he pulls back momentarily to look at you with lust blown eyes and a cocky smile before he kisses your mouth again.

Your hands are all over each other, exploring areas that are already familiar as well as those that are uncharted territory. You can feel the tighten and stretch of his back muscles when he eventually shifts so he’s lying on top of you, supporting himself with his arms but keeping as much contact as possible without suffocating you. You’ve got your legs hooked with his, holding him as close as possible. It’s the best feeling in the world, and you realize how much you want this. All of this.

All of him.

Your hand is carding through his hair when he starts kissing your neck, and you suddenly have no control over the sounds you’re uttering. You can feel it in your kneecaps for fuck’s sake.

And then, as it often does, reality steps in.

“Oh, shit,” you gasp, “stop.”

Bucky stills immediately. “What’s wrong, Doll?” he asks quietly, tucking some hair behind your ear. With concern in his eyes, he hesitantly continues, “Did I hurt you?”

“No, not at all!” you’re quick to assure him with a smile. “I’m enjoying every second of this – in fact, I really don’t want to stop. I just... I just realized that I don’t have any birth control here.” You’ve never been so disappointed in your life. Goddamn it, common sense, fuck you.

Seemingly satisfied that he hadn’t hurt you, he quirks an eyebrow and asks huskily, “What makes
you so sure that I’m gonna put out?”

Hmm. Sassy Bucky can be sexy.

You quirk your own eyebrow in answer and roll your hips against his bulge, and when his reflexively roll right back, you softly sing, “hips don’t lie,” and then at his slightly baffled expression add that to your ever-expanding mental checklist of Pop Culture Things that the Frozen Old Fart Missed.

Bucky looks over at his metal arm, and then back at you. “Well,” he begins softly, “that’s actually not a concern with me. The people that gave me this arm also sterilized me after they gave me the serum. Apparently I had given them enough trouble in the past with not complying 100% with orders that they wanted to eliminate any possible risk of me having a dalliance and breeding little super soldiers. They hadn’t yet tested what would happen with any offspring of a serum recipient, and they certainly didn’t want it happening outside of their labs. Dr. Banner, the leader of our medical team, tells me that I might be able to have it reversed but I haven’t bothered.” He pauses. “Trying to have it reversed would be the same as admitting that I want a family, and I’m not so sure I deserve to want that.” He slowly pushes himself off you, and stands.

“Bucky…” Your heart breaks on his behalf. Why did those fuckers have to take everything from him?

“Are you sure you would even want to do this? With me, I mean? Doll, you’re so incredibly amazing, you could have anyone you want. I don’t have anything good to offer you. I’m not even fully human,” he whispers brokenly, looking at his left hand.

It’s been awhile since his self-loathing has come up – and although you’re surprised at the sudden shift in mood, you’re perfectly aware of how things like this work. Being open and vulnerable with someone, especially if you’re not used to it, can have this effect at the most random times.

Without hesitating, you gently take his hand and plant a kiss into his palm; the metal feels cool and smooth against your lips. You slowly rise off the bed do the same at his wrist, the inside of his elbow, his bicep, and as you delicately brush aside the hem of his black tank top, his shoulder, at the exact spot where angry scar tissue connects with unyielding metal. You press your palms against the sides of his face and wait until his eyes meet yours.

“Yes. You are.”

He takes a ragged breath, but doesn’t break eye contact.

“Your prosthetic,” you continue, knowing that this is the first time you have actually acknowledged to him that his arm is anything other than an arm, “doesn’t make you less than fully human. What those fuckers did to you and what they made you do makes them the monsters. Not you.”

You don’t care if you have to say it a thousand times; you’ll keep repeating it until he believes it.

He seems surprised by the conviction in your eyes, but then smiles softly and exhales a shaky breath.

“And if I’m completely honest,” you continue, “I have to admit that there is a definite possibility that I may have a tiny bit of a kink for your metal arm. I think it’s sexy as hell.” You pause for a moment. “The guy it’s attached to is pretty decent looking, too,” you whisper with a wink.

Bucky chuckles softly at that, shaking his head ever so slightly, and bends to press his lips almost
reverently to yours as he murmurs your name. He gently pushes you back until your back is on the bed once more, bracketing your head with his arms. His glorious, defined, sexy as hell arms. He moves his lips from your mouth to your chin and makes his way along your jaw until he reaches your ear.

“And if I’m completely honest, I think I have to admit that I may have a kink for stubborn, independent redheads. I’ve never met anyone like you,” he breathes into your ear, nipping the edges lightly. “You’re fucking amazing.”

You sigh out a giggle, bringing your knee up to his hip, which he holds firmly as he slowly begins grinding against you. Your hips move in tandem with his as he moves his mouth from your ears down your neck.

“Now, where are your sweet spots, Doll?” he asks between kisses.

“I don’t know that I have any sweet spooooo…oh…oh God…” you gasp and grip your comforter as he alternately sucks and nips where your neck meets your shoulder. “Holy…holy shit…”

You honestly had no idea that that spot existed, but wow, you’re glad he found it.

Bucky quietly lets out a triumphant chuckle as moves his hand from your knee to cup your breast, and begins to gently knead it through the material of your bra and shirt. As you arch into his touch, you let go of the comforter to gently lay your hands on his back and quickly decide that isn’t close enough, so you slide them under his tank top to touch his skin. You can feel every muscle in his lower back move as he continues to move his hips against yours.

He seems to like your idea; he moves his hand from your breast to your stomach, pulling your shirt up and over your head, your bra soon joining your discarded shirt on the floor. He leans back down over you, intending to kiss your lips but you stop him, pushing him back slightly so you can remove his top first. He moves back slightly so he can grab the material behind his neck and proceeds to pull it over his head, and you take a moment to shamelessly stare at what’s in front of you. He’s breathtakingly gorgeous, but then you already knew that. You ache to trace his six pack (or is it an eight pack? Is that even possible? You can’t quite tell in the dim light, so you decide to investigate later) and oh God… his V-line, leading down into his low-slung sweatpants…

“I wanna feel your skin against mine,” you murmur, pulling him back down to you and holding him close, skin to skin. He doesn’t remove his eyes from yours as he puts his metal arm beneath your back to gently lift your farther onto the bed, settling himself once again between your thighs as he scoots himself up. You cradle his face in the palm of your hand and he leans into your touch, closing his eyes and sighing.

Soon, he turns his head, kissing your wrist as you had done to him earlier. He makes his way down your arm, and finds your breast with his mouth. Bucky manages to find another sweet spot; you move into his touch as he teases your nipple with his tongue.

“Hmm…almost like a treasure hunt,” he utters throatily against your skin while you begin running your fingers through his hair. His right hand begins softly tracing the lines of your hip before teasing at the waistband of your pajama pants. Bucky slowly shifts himself out from the cradle of your thighs so he can lie next to you, and brings his searching fingers to the drawstring and unties it. His mouth and tongue are still busy worshipping your breasts while you run your hand up and down his side, but moments later you are completely distracted as his hand gently begins exploring your core; softly teasing around the outside at first, but soon he’s caressing your folds and rubbing circles on your clit, and oh, he knows what he’s doing.
You can hear him begin to pant as he moves his mouth back up to yours, conquering your mouth again with his, a moan escaping him as he does so. The kisses become more demanding as he alternately dips into you and applies more and more pressure to your most sensitive area, and your hips begin moving with his rhythm. The sounds the two of you are making are absolutely obscene, and it’s incredibly arousing. Suddenly, Bucky stops and removes his hand while he whispers in your ear.

“I want to taste you.” He licks his fingers with hooded eyes and a feral grin, and then kisses your neck. “You taste so good, can I have more?” he whispers again in your ear, causing a shiver to run from your head to your toes.

Words have failed you completely at this point, so you only nod.

He smiles, shifting himself so he is sitting next to you. He hooks his fingers into the waistband of your pants, and slowly pulls them off, taking your panties with them. He stops and stares at you, and you suddenly become entirely and totally self-conscious as you realize that you are completely naked. Which is the point, but still… You try to grab some part of a blanket to cover yourself as your mind starts to race. What if he doesn’t like what he sees? You know your body is far from perfect, and your flaws are now all you can think about. He’s on the level of being Photoshopped, for fuck’s sake, and you’re entirely too human.

Bucky, ever observant, notices your sudden change in demeanor.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” You think he’s trying to sound nonchalant, but you hear the concern.

“it’s just… I’m not… I can’t” you huff, unable to find words that won’t make you sound incredibly insecure, but then again, you are. In this area, you always have been. Topless you can do, but this… You decide to just be blunt as you cover your face with your hands. “I’m self-conscious, I guess. I’m not exactly a cover girl, and it’s been a while since someone’s seen me like this.”

He looks at you incredulously as he gently removes your hands from hiding your face. “Are you kidding? You’re perfect – you’re gorgeous! Don’t you know that?”

You raise an eyebrow. “Perfect? Are you insane?” Damn it; he looks a bit hurt at your last comment. “I’m sorry, I just…”

“Hey. Sweetheart, look at me.” He waits until you do, and his eyes bore into yours. “You’re perfect; you’re just the way a woman should be. You’re curvy and soft, and incredibly, incredibly sexy. I could spend all day every day looking at you, touching you.” He lightly traces his fingers along your hip, bringing a shiver back to your body. “I love everything I see.” He pauses for a moment as he gazes at you before continuing. “You have a scar, here,” Bucky traces your C-section scar gently with his finger before lightly kissing it. “And some scars here, and here,” he says as he gently runs his hand over the lasting reminders of your pregnancy. “These are beautiful to me, because they are your scars from bringing life into this world. These aren’t flaws, Sweetheart, these are badges of courage and strength and life and love, and you’re all the more beautiful for having them. I think you’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen, with curves to die for, and I can prove it to you.”

Bucky shifts himself off the bed, and stands. As he watches you with hungry eyes, he starts untying his sweatpants. Your mouth goes dry, and he must see your eyes widen because he suddenly gets a satisfied smirk as he slowly pushes them down and removes them completely.

Bucky clearly doesn’t skip leg day. Seriously, those thighs.
Standing before you in nothing but a snug fitting pair of black boxer briefs, the man is magnificent. You almost forget what he was saying but then he puts one knee on the bed, shifting toward you, and pulls your hand to his bulge.

Like the rest of his body, his cock is ginormous and hard. Your cottonmouth worsens.

“This doesn’t lie, Doll. I’m rock hard – because of you.”

He leans over your and kisses you deeply and intensely. Your insecurities fade, and you wrap your arms around him to hold him tightly. He doesn’t let you hold him for long, though, as he breaks the kiss and smiles seductively at you as he pushes away.

“Now…I think I left off somewhere around here…” he murmurs as he gently rubs circles on your hip with his right thumb while his mouth takes over your breast again. He shifts his body as he kisses lower, and moves his hand down to tease you, leaving a trail of hot, openmouthed kisses while his fingers again play at your entrance. He stops to look at you one more time, making sure he has your consent before he moves your legs to continue his kisses to the inside of your thighs. He moves both of his hands to your hips, and kisses you everywhere but where you need it most. He looks up at you with his beautiful bedroom eyes, quietly murmurs, “Doll, you’re intoxicating,” and then closes his eyes as he slowly licks the length of your slit up to your clit.

You sigh as you lose yourself to the feeling of Bucky’s mouth at your center. It doesn’t take long before you’re gasping and your hips are rising to meet his rhythm – fuck, he’s absolutely amazing. As he briefly makes eye contact with you, his eyes roll back into his head and he moans softly as his tongue slips inside you. You wonder if it’s possible that he’s enjoying this more than you, and it’s enough to send you over the edge; he holds your thighs steady as you arch your back and clutch at the comforter, losing control through your orgasm while you gasp his name.

He continues to hold you as you slowly come down, then begins moving his way back up to lie next to you. He smiles his beautiful smile, and gently moves some hair from your face with smooth metal fingertips.

You move your hand to his chest, stroking up and over the planes of his shoulders.

“That was…wow…you’re really good at that, Bucky,” you breathlessly admit. His responding chuckle warms your heart, and between your release and him lying beside you, you feel calmer and more relaxed than you have in ages. You feel safe and wanted, adored and cherished.

Bucky closes his eyes and nuzzles into your neck, so you take the opportunity to nip gently at his shoulder. You gently begin to push him away as you sit up, and you guide his movements until he is lying down on the bed with you leaning over him.

He looks up at you tenderly as you smile and lean in to kiss him while running your fingers through his hair. His right hand comes up to touch your cheek, and you move until your naked body is straddling his hips.

His erection is straining through his boxer briefs, and he groans, jerking his hips up as you begin slowly moving against him while you lean down to kiss his jaw, his neck, then his shoulders.

You notice with a great amount of satisfaction that you’ve found some of his sweet spots, as well. His gasps and moans make you smile against his skin, and you hum softly in response. He holds your hips in a firm grasp as you move lower to the planes of his chest, and finally, finally tracing your fingers to his thick muscles as you’ve ached to do, planting wet kisses as you go. He watches you and reluctantly releases your hips as you shift farther down, now straddling his legs, and trace
his V-line lightly first with your fingers, then with your mouth, down to his waistband.

He chokes out your name and inhales sharply, head thrown back. You shift yourself off his legs so you can remove his underwear, and you stop and stare at his now free erection.

Holy. Shit.

“Well, uh, you’re… well equipped,” you mumble under your breath. You can’t stop staring. You turn back to him when you feel his cool metal fingers tracing up and down your lower back, and see him watching you with a tender look that can only be described as adoration. You smile softly as you crawl back up to reach his mouth with yours and straddle him again, allowing his hard cock to rub against your entrance. His hands immediately come to your hips. He moans,straining upwards, and you lean forward to whisper in his ear with a small nip, “Not yet, Love.” You surprise yourself with the unintentionally intimate endearment; if he notices he doesn’t say anything, but he holds you just a little bit tighter.

After a moment, Bucky slowly reaches both hands up into your hair and pulls out your already loose hair tie, causing it fall down around both of your faces. As he runs his fingers through your curls, he kisses you deeply, taking your breath away.

You reluctantly break away from the kiss; there are other things that need your mouth’s attention and you’ve never before been so eager to give it.

You trace the same path as before, revisiting the sweet spots you previously found as well as discovering one more. You finally settle yourself between his thighs and run your hands up and down his legs from his hips to his knees.

His thighs. Wow.

You grip them firmly, and lean over to delicately lick around the tip of his cock before taking him into your mouth as far as you can. Bucky just about jumps off the bed, and you hear him groan your name in a strangled voice. He’s way more than you can handle, so you use one of your hands to stroke the bottom as you use you other hand to alternate between fondling his balls and massaging his perineum.

As you bob up and down, continuing your ministrations with your mouth and hands, you hear him gasping and panting. The sounds he’s making are filthy and is incredibly gratifying. You can occasionally make out your name, but he’s so breathless and you’re pretty into what you’re doing, so you miss most of it.

“Sweetheart…I want you…I need…” he grunts, louder this time.

You stop sucking and pull off, leaning towards him and putting your hand on his chest.

“You have me, Love, what do you need?” you ask, as you move some hair out of his eyes with your other hand.

He pulls you into a desperate kiss and flips you both; you find yourself suddenly on your back with him cradled once again between your thighs.

“I need you……I want to watch you come undone …I need to see you and look into your eyes when I finish,” Bucky whispers roughly in between kisses.

“You have me,” you repeat as you stare into his endless blue eyes and wrap your legs around his hips.
He never once looks away from your eyes as he positions himself at your entrance, and slowly pushes his way inside you.

You both moan softly at the feeling, and he pauses for a moment while your body adjusts to his size. It’s been awhile so it takes a few moments, but, as always, he’s incredibly patient. He watches you closely and again brushes the hair from your face, waiting for your slight nod before continuing.

Bucky slowly begins moving his hips, gliding in and out of you carefully as he watches your face for any sign of discomfort. You gasp as you feel the tension rebuilding immediately within your core; you’re still sensitive from his previous ministrations and his body is so hard that it causes friction with every movement, giving your clit all the attention it needs. And on the inside...he must be working some sort of magic, because you’ve currently feeling sensations you’ve never experienced before. Neither has he, apparently, because he roughly grunts, “God, Doll, you’re incredible...I’ve...I’ve never felt anything like this.”

Knowing that the sentiment is reciprocated is a heady feeling.

You rock your hips with his rhythm, and he’s incredibly steady; you’d expected nothing less with the way he dances. You’ve completely surrendered control to the man covering you, allowing him to set the pace. He’s in no hurry, still kissing your lips, neck, and face as he takes his time with you. The room is filled with soft moans and gasps as you each bring the other closer to the edge, and then closer still.

You think you’re starting to see stars when Bucky softly demands, “Come for me, Sweetheart, let me see that gorgeous body unravel.”

Two more thrusts and you need no further encouragement as your orgasm slams through your body; the feeling is indescribable. You try to utter his name, but your throat is so raw and so tight that no words come out, only unintelligible sounds. You hear him get your name out in a strangled voice as his own release hits him a split second later, and you both simultaneously carry each other through the high and slowly come down.

You lay together in a tangle of limbs, forehead to forehead, as you each catch your breath. Your legs slowly slide down from around his hips to rest upon his legs, and Bucky softly nuzzles your cheek and then your neck, sporadically leaving kisses as he lazily trails back and forth. Once his breathing has evened out (because apparently even supersoldiers can get breathless during sex - definitely a confidence booster for you), Bucky shifts back to look at you with a soft smile before he gently pulls out of you, presses one more kiss to your lips, and pushes off the bed to go into the bathroom. He returns a few moments later with a warm washcloth and a hand towel for you to clean yourself while he graciously turns his back, giving you a moment of privacy while he gathers up the discarded clothes and hands you your pajamas.

“We don’t want the boys getting an eyeful in the morning if they get out of bed before we do,” he says with a wink as he pulls on his sweatpants.

You giggle softly as you pull on your clothes and crawl under the covers, and the thought crosses your mind that he’s officially ruined you for any other man.

You look up to see him gazing at you. “You’re so unbelievably...unbelievable,” he says quietly. You smile softly and hold your arms out to him. He turns off the bedside light and comes immediately into your embrace. As you tangle your legs together and get comfortable, he kisses your forehead while he softly strokes your back.
You’re almost asleep when you hear Bucky murmur your name.

“Mmmm?” you sleepily reply.

“Did you mean it?” he asks hesitantly.

“Mean what, Love?” you ask, eyes still closed. His reply is a long time coming, and you’ve almost drifted off again before you hear it.

“That I have you,” he finally continues; if he’d said it any quieter, you would have missed it.

“Course. Wouldn’t’ve said it if I didn’t mean it,” you mumble as you snuggle deeper into his embrace.

Bucky must have been holding his breath, because he exhales deeply and shifts to hold you a bit tighter.

“Then you’re mine,” he whispers fiercely as he kisses the top of your head, “All mine. And I’m yours.”

“Mm hmmm,” you sigh, as your sated body falls into a deep, peaceful sleep.
It’s still dark when you’re awakened by Bucky’s movements. He notices you stirring, so he leans over to kiss your forehead. “Go back to sleep, Doll, I just need to get up to check on something and grab my phone – I think I left it downstairs. I’ll be back soon.”

It doesn’t seem as if he woke with a nightmare, so you allow yourself to settle back into your pillow and drift off again.

You aren’t sure how much time has passed when you wake again, but you go from sleepy to wide awake with lighting speed. The bedroom door is cracked open, so you can see that there are lights on downstairs and you hear a raised voice that does not belong to Bucky.

*What the fuck is going on?!*

Heart racing, you grab a hoodie after scrambling out of bed as you rush to the door, but pause when you hear more talking.

“… I can’t fucking believe you! Best friend or not, Cap is gonna kick your ass when he gets here! And Stark… ooooooh, you know he has a soft spot for her, because she reminds him of his mom. That YOU fucking killed. When he finds out what you did there won’t be a safe place for you to hide.”

“Sam,” you finally hear Bucky speaking, calmly and firmly, and you exhale in relief. “Keep your damn voice down, the boys are sleeping. And not that I have to explain myself to you, but it’s not like that.”

“Really? Then how is it? Cause I see a guy not doing his job and screwing the –“

“That’s enough Sam; I’ll take it from here. Keep watch outside.” Steve’s voice is commanding but not overly loud, which you appreciate.

Your head is swimming – why are Sam and Steve here? You want to go downstairs to ask, but you’re almost afraid to make things worse as it’s pretty obvious that the ‘she’ Sam was referring to is you.

It’s silent until you hear a door close.

“What were you thinking, Buck?” Disappointment and anger come together to give Steve’s voice a definite edge.

“It’s not what you think, Steve.” He sounds almost dangerously calm.

“Really? What else could it be? We tried calling for two hours and there was no answer. *Two hours*, Bucky! We thought they’d gotten to you! Sam flies over here to check things out and make sure everyone is okay, and finds you slinking out of her room when he gets upstairs! What other explanation could you possibly have, other than you’re sleeping with the woman you’re *supposed* to be protecting?” Steve sounds absolutely livid. “I would’ve expected this out of you before the war…but not now!”

You take a deep breath and decide to make a move – now that you know what’s going on, you won’t let Bucky take the fall alone. Yes, you can concede that it does look bad, but it really *isn’t* what they think. As you come down the stairs you see that both men are at the kitchen table, seated
“We’re still under a microscope, Buck! And now because of what you’ve done, if something happens on your watch, I can’t protect you! They will eat you alive and say you took advantage of a helpless woman, and -“

You decide to interrupt since you’re now close enough for them to hear you speak. “To be fair, Steve, it does take two to fondue,” you say mildly as you reach the bottom of the stairs.

They both turn at the sound of your voice; surprisingly, neither of them had noticed you coming down. Bucky’s gaze softens as sees you, and Steve turns bright red. Turning to Bucky, he hisses, “You told her about that? I told you that in confidence!”

Bucky keeps his eyes on you as you walk over to him, a smile ghosting over his lips. “I told her a lot of things, Stevie. I told her everything I remember. And then when I remember something new, I tell her that, too.” He reaches out to you with his metal hand as you get close, silver plates glinting in the harsh glare of the overhead lights, and as you take his hand he brings yours up to his lips in a soft kiss.

Steve looks like he’s about to say something, but snaps his mouth shut; the confused look on his face is priceless, but you can’t focus on that right now. Ignoring him for the moment, you stand next to Bucky, looking down at him with your hand now on his left shoulder.

“You okay? I heard yelling.”

“Yeah, Doll. I’m sorry if we scared you. I’m fine, I promise.” He looks at you like you’re the only person in the world.

You take the seat next to him, and Bucky shifts his chair closer to you as he rests his hand on your knee. You turn to Steve, who has been watching you interact with Bucky with careful scrutiny, and wait for him to speak.

“Buck,” Steve begins slowly, ”I don’t know –“

“No, you don’t know,” Bucky agrees. “You haven’t given me a chance to explain.”

Steve nods, and there’s a long pause before he speaks again. “So explain.” He’s no longer full of piss and vinegar; he sits back and crosses his arms as he waits for Bucky to speak.

“She’s my best girl, Stevie,” Bucky says simply.

You’ve heard the phrase before and know it’s from their time, but you don’t know the actual implication of it. Clearly, however, it means something significant to the two of them as Steve’s eyes snap to you in what appears to be disbelief, and then back to Bucky before settling on back you for an almost uncomfortable amount of time.

You’re suddenly very aware of your bedhead.

“It’s not some twisted version of Stockholm Syndrome, if that’s what you’re wondering,” you say calmly, running your fingers through your curls. “It happened in a very normal way, just under very abnormal circumstances.”

Steve rubs his hand over his face as Bucky begins to speak. “Steve, I care about her, probably more than I’ve ever cared about anyone.” He turns to look at you for a moment and tucks some hair behind your ear as he speaks, “She feels like home.” He pauses as he gazes at you for a moment before turning back to Steve with a dopey smile, “She knows exactly who I am, and she
still makes me feel like I can be a good man – God knows I don’t understand how or why, but she sees good in me and she helps me to see it, too. She takes away my pain, puts me back together when I’m broken, and helps me sleep if I have a nightmare, but she doesn’t treat me with kid gloves. I don’t feel like a monster or a freak when I’m with her, I’m just…I’m just Bucky.”

Smiling softly at Steve, he continues, “And even though it’s hard for her, she lets me take care of her, too; she actually lets me reciprocate. No one has allowed me to do that in a really long time. She…she trusts me, Stevie.”

You smile at his confession, but keep silent as you can tell that this need to be resolved between them at this point. You’ve already said your piece.

Steve stays silent, so Bucky keeps talking, “If you want me to step down, I will. I’ll quit if that’s what’s best for the team, I have no problem with that. If you need to assign someone else to be here as her protector, that’s fine, too.” His voice hardens, “But I’m not leaving. I can be here as part of the team, or I can be here as her guy – it makes no difference to me - but I need her and the boys to be safe, and like you said when you gave me this assignment, I’m the one with the skillset best suited to keep them safe. I’m not leaving.” His tone leaves no room for argument, and you’re thankful for that.

Steve regards his friend, and you can almost see the exact moment when he changes from Steve Rogers, Captain America to Stevie, Bucky’s best friend.

He runs his fingers through his hair before speaking. “Buck…God, Buck, I’m…I’m really happy for you.” He nods and smiles as he looks at his friend, blue eyes sparkling, and you can see that the smile is genuine. “We’ll find a way to make it work – but this does have the potential to get really messy – you gotta know how this looks. And no, I won’t take you off the assignment. You’re right – you’re the best suited for the job, but we are going to assign a second and third person to stay here with you, alternating shifts so there’s always someone outside, and probably a fourth to stay within a 25 mile radius.”

And the Cap hat is back on.


Steve looks at you with regret-filled eyes as he nods. “I’m so sorry.” Steve takes a deep breath before meeting your eyes and continuing. “Krakken knows. He knows who you are.”
Hi all! I just wanted to get something out before the holiday since I probably won't be posting anything else until at *least* Saturday (probably wishful thinking). So here you go, at least there aren't any cliffhangers ;)

You immediately feel Bucky stiffen beside you as your body begins to feel as if someone dumped a bucket of ice water over your head.

“Steve. Details. *Now.*” The tone of Bucky’s growl is dangerous.

“Stark had cameras installed at your house, and we saw Krakken’s team break in earlier tonight. They were heavily armed – they weren’t there for a social visit. When they left, we followed them and as luck would have it, one split off to grab food. He’s currently…uh,” Steve hesitates as he glances over at you, “he’s in custody.”

“I’m a big girl, Steve, you don’t need to sugarcoat things,” you state flatly.

He looks to Bucky, who glares at him. “Steve!”

Steve heaves out a sigh, looking a bit like an uncomfortable dad getting ready to talk to his kids about the birds and the bees. “He’s, uh, he’s currently being interrogated. Roughly.”

“Nat?” Bucky asks, clearly expecting the answer to be ‘yes.’

“Yes.”

Bucky nods his approval. “Good. What else do you know?”

“Not much. I don’t know who Krakken has on their communications, but whoever it is, they’re good. We wouldn’t know anything if Stark hadn’t set up those cameras.”

You sit in your chair, becoming less and less aware of the conversation and more aware of the storm brewing inside you.

You aren’t really worried at this point; no, you trust Bucky, and since he trusts his team, you do as well.

You aren’t scared, although you might be later after you’ve had time to think about it.

You aren’t even anxious right now. Nope. You’re pissed.

Glancing at the clock, you see that it’s a little after four o’clock. You need to get up and move, to do *something* before the anger chokes you, so you abruptly rise and proceed to stalk into the pantry. Might as well get started on making fucking breakfast. It’s not like you’re going to get any more goddamn sleep.

“Doll…are you okay?” Bucky sounds a little hesitant; somewhere in the back of mind it registers
that he’s never seen this side of you.

You can’t bring yourself to care.

“I’m fine,” you reply tersely as you exit the pantry, bringing the flour you’d grabbed to the counter, setting it down none too gently. You start rummaging through the freezer, looking for ground sausage. You’d decided at some point between the table and pantry that you’d make biscuits and gravy since you’re likely feeding a crowd. Fuck, at least Sam will be happy.

“That goddamn fucking as*shat was in my house,” you mutter, slamming the sausage down on the counter. “What the actual fuck?” The feeling of intrusion is overwhelming. That bastard had no right to be there! Your pictures are still on the walls. Your books are still on the shelves. Your great-aunt’s hand embroidered kerchief is still in the hutch, right alongside the iridescent unicorn figurine that one of your uncles gave to you for your birthday the year he passed away. Did Krakken look at those pictures, taking in the faces of those you love? Was he standing there, trying to guess why these items are so sentimental to you? Did he touch any of it? Did he fucking take any of it?

You start rummaging through drawers, looking for the pastry cutter. You were sure you’d found one at some point, but you can’t remember where the stupid fucking thing is. “What an absolute douchebag!” you mutter. “Fucking Krakken. Probably made up his own damn last name to sound more impressive. Fucker’s name was probably Nicky Goldfish or something shittastic like that. Double or nothing the fucker has a face that looks like a plate full of assholes.”

After another minute of searching and swearing, you still can’t find the damn thing and your anger explodes, turning into rage.

“GOD FUCKING DAMNIT!” You slam the latest door shut and stomp back into the pantry, completely ignoring the two men sitting wide-eyed at the table until Steve opens his mouth. Idiot.

“Language!” He looks absolutely appalled. “You need to calm d-“

“Fuck off, Sparkle Boy!” you shoot back. “And don’t you EVER tell me to calm down! Star Spangled Man with a Plan my ass.”

You’re elbow deep in a bin of miscellaneous baking implements when you hear your name spoken softly from the pantry door.

“What!” you snap, turning around.

Bucky is leaning against the doorframe, his lips turned up into a slight smile. “I had no idea you had such a temper, Doll.”

His smile and softly amused tone shock you out of your anger. Rage suddenly spent, you stand there, silent, with a gaping pit in your stomach. You blink a few times, reminding yourself that he’s not Christopher, and neither is Steve, despite him using one of Christopher’s most over-used phrases for when you were anything but happiness and sunshine. You weren’t allowed to get angry when you were around Christopher; if you did, you paid for it.

“Shit, Bucky, I’m so sorry,” you breathe out; you’re suddenly very scared that you’ve just ruined everything with him.

“No,” he says firmly, pushing off the doorframe and walking towards you. “You shouldn’t apologize for being angry; in fact, I’m pretty damn glad to see it. After the first few days you’d seemed almost eerily calm about what’d happened and what you’d seen…I was starting to wonder
when the dam would break.” He pulls your now shaking frame into a warm hug; you melt into him, calming under his touch. “Wasn’t expecting it to be that impressive, though. Damn, Doll, that was something to behold,” he finishes with a chuckle as he presses a kiss to the top of your head.

“You’re not mad?” You already know the answer, based on his previous comments. Seriously, this guy is too good to be true.

“God, no. You’re allowed to feel, Doll, and to express those feelings even if it makes other people uncomfortable or inconvenienced.” He pauses as he laughs somewhat ironically. “Look at me go, I did learn something in that shrink’s office.”

“I don’t deserve you,” you moan into his chest, holding him tightly.

He snorts. “I think you got that backwards, Doll. Hey,” Bucky pushes you away slightly and cups your face so he can meet your eyes. “You didn’t deserve that prick that made you stuff your feelings. He was an idiotic ass.” He pulls you close again, holding the back of your head gently with his hand as he lightly strokes your hair. “As for me, I’ll take you any way I can get you. That includes you when you’re mad, sad, angry, whatever. I want it all. I just want you.”

As you and Bucky take the moment for yourselves, allowing the perfect quiet of the early morning to insulate you both from the rest of the world, the two of you simply hold the other and breathe. With no worries, no fears – just the two of you – you’re finally able to completely relax.

Bucky moves to cup your face in both hands; the contrast of warm and cool now feels like comfort and home. He brings his lips to yours in a soft, unhurried kiss. “By the way…good morning, Beautiful.” Another soft kiss. “I’m so damn glad I get to do this now.” He rests his forehead against yours as he smiles.

“Me, too,” you reply, smiling back. “And good morning to you.”

“You know, I had plans for this morning. They were good plans, too! Included a lot of cuddling and kissing,” he plants another warm kiss before nuzzling his nose against yours, “God, I’m never gonna get enough of you.” He sighs, “I’m really sorry we didn’t get to wake up together, Doll.”

“That’s not your fault, Love, but you’re more than welcome to make it up to me,” you murmur, pressing your lips to his and squeezing in one more hug before reluctantly pulling away. “You would prefer to stay where you are, but guilt is starting to eat at you. “I should go apologize to Steve…””

Bucky huffs out a laugh. “Eh, he had it coming. He really needs to get out of that stupid habit of trying to censor people’s language. I wish I could’ve got that on camera, though; the look on his face when you told him to fuck off was priceless. He’s not used to dames cussing him out.”

You laugh a little at that was you walk out of the pantry with Bucky following just behind, and approach Steve.

“Hey Steve,” you say lightly, “I’m really sorry about that. You aren’t the reason I’m mad, and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

Steve, surprisingly, just smiles at you from his place at the table. “It’s okay, as Bucky’s pointed out,” he sends a look Bucky’s way, “repeatedly, I really need to stop being such a cantankerous old fart. Besides, I heard what Buck said – sorry, supersoldier hearing and all – and I’d much rather you get feisty than take this lying down. It shows that you’re a fighter, and that’s good.” He actually sounds a little…impressed?
“Well, alright then,” you smile. “I’m gonna go start on breakfast. Calmly.”

“You really don’t ha-“

Bucky cuts him off, “Stevie, it’s her way of releasing stress.”

You shoot a grateful glance to Bucky for explaining it for you, and start looking through the drawers again for the stupid pastry cutter. Imagine that, it’s in the first drawer you open, which, coincidentally, was probably the first drawer you’d looked in earlier.
Chapter 18

There really is something incredibly therapeutic about being in the kitchen. You have the ability to forget everything else (you’re currently tuning out Bucky and Steve’s conversation) and focus completely on what you’re doing, and the motions are both soothing and relaxing. It’s something you inherited from your grandma. You get your temper from her, too.

You smile to yourself as you think of the first Christmas you spent at her house while married to Christopher.

Tradition holds that you all sit around the kitchen table after dinner and play cards. Everyone whips out their velvet bags of quarters (that, ironically enough, Grandma personally embroidered); Grandma’s bag always looks like she just got back from a bank heist. You were maybe three or four games in when she lost a hand with a big pot, resulting in her cussing out one of her sons-in-law spectacularly. Christopher had the audacity to admonish Grandma for her language – the poor guy didn’t stand a chance. “I’ll say ‘fuck’ if I want to, young man! This is my goddamn house!” was her very emphatic reply. It was fantastic.

Your smile fades as you realize that for the first time ever, you won’t be spending Christmas at her house, or Christmas morning at your mom and dad’s. Your hands still, leaving the pastry cutter unmoving in the biscuit dough, your task forgotten as you stare out the window.

You can barely see it in the darkness of early, early morning, but it’s started to snow.

“Hey, what’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?” Bucky murmurs as he comes up behind you, wrapping his arms around your waist. “You look sad.”

Heaving a big sigh but placing your hands over his as you lean back into him, you nod. “Just coming to grips with the fact that now that Krakken knows who I am, I definitely won’t be home for Christmas.”

Bucky rests his chin on your shoulder before speaking again. “Hey, we’re going to make it special for you and the boys, okay? I know it won’t be the same, but it’ll be good, Doll, I promise.” He gently turns you around in his arms before cupping your face and bringing his forehead down to yours. “Okay, so I know a lot of people don’t like it, but I’m a Christmas sort of guy. And as far as I’m concerned, Christmas starts about five minutes after Thanksgiving dinner ends. So how’s that sound? We can decorate up the place real nice, get a tree, and sing Christmas carols with the boys. It’ll be like Christmas threw up in here and it’ll last a whole month. What do you say, Doll?”

You huff out a laugh at that, “Sounds good to me.” You pause for a moment. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Make me smile, even when things suck?” You can’t help it, you’re smiling. The sadness is still there, but…you’re smiling.

“Well, Doll, it’s these eyes and this smile…” he trails off as he winks, calling back your words to him from your second night here.

Rolling your eyes but still unable to stop your smile, you can’t help but mutter, “You know, you’re pretty cocky.”
“Nah,” he chuckles, “just confident.” Another wink. Goddamn it, he’s good at that. “Hey, do you want some help making breakfast? I can make some hash browns and eggs, if you want. Sounds like Clint is on his way, and I have a feeling Stark is gonna show up; I know you, and I know you’ll want to make sure there’s enough food.”

You pull a face at this last comment. “Ugh, that’s going to be messy, isn’t it.” It’s not even a question. “SUNDAY?”

“Yes, dear?” You’ve finally gotten used to the bodiless voice.

“Can you please be sure not to let Tony in the house with his suit on?” You can deal with a confrontation, but you’d rather he be unarmed.

“Absolutely, dear, I hate how it tracks mud everywhere.”

You and Bucky both snort at the annoyed, maternal tone. He really did model her after his mom. “And can you please make sure he doesn’t override my request? Are you able to do that?”

“You are currently listed as the primary authority, so unless your life is in danger I will follow your instructions first.”

“Thanks, SUNDAY.” You look around, noticing for the first time that you and Bucky are alone. “Where’d Steve go?”

“He went out to talk to Sam. I’m really sorry, Doll, but everyone’s going to know about us.”

“So? I’m not ashamed of you, Bucky.” The look on his face is like the sun bursting out of the clouds on an overcast day. Did he really think…

A random and unpleasant thought suddenly occurs to you, and the words are out of your mouth before you can censor yourself. “You’re not going to pull that overdone superhero crap where you say you can’t be with me because it puts my life in danger, are you?”

“What? No!” He looks absolutely appalled that you would even suggest such a thing. “I’m pretty sure I’m not a superhero, but if I was, it’d be because of you. I’m not giving you up for anything; maybe it’s selfish, but I won’t. I just won’t.” He’s completely and utterly serious; good. “You told me, not too many hours ago, that you’re mine. I intend to keep it that way.”

“Good,” you say, clearly and intently as you brush a kiss across his lips. “Now, get moving on those hash browns.”

Your initial reaction to having someone cook in the same space as you is usually something close to ‘get the fuck out of my bubble.’ You can’t help it; you’re not sure if it’s because you want to be in complete control or if it’s just because you hate having someone underfoot; either way, you don’t like it. Hell, you don’t even let your kids bake cookies with you. They can watch from the table, but that’s it.

Oddly enough (or maybe not, given his track record so far), cooking with Bucky does not annoy you. At all. It’s a strange feeling, at first, having someone work beside you without having them get in your way, bumping into you, or using the things you need to use. The two of you, however, manage just fine even though you’re standing side by side. You could get used to this.

With him, anyway.

“Doll, you want the pepper?”
“Yes, please. Oh, here’s the salt for the hash browns, and…here’s a spatula for your eggs.”

“Thanks…do you want me to take out the pan of biscuits since you’re still making the gravy? Your timer’s about to go off.”

“Yeah, that’d be great, thanks Buck.” You both smile goofy smiles at the other as you work in tandem, completely in synch.

“Aw, what the hell, man??” You’re both torn out of your moment of domesticated bliss as Sam makes his presence known. “That day I found you with a plate of eggs and asked you to make me some, you said you couldn’t cook! You said Susan the intern came down and made them for you!”

“I lied,” Bucky replies simply, removing the biscuits from the oven and placing them on the counter and out of the way.

“Excuse me?” Sam sounds positively indignant.

Bucky looks at him incredulously. “You put Nair in my body wash, and I was uncomfortably smooth for weeks! I thought I had some sort of disease before I finally figured it out! I was just finally getting my arm hair back when you asked about the eggs, so I really didn’t feel like making you breakfast.”

You bite your lips together and put your head down to keep from laughing.

“Oh come on, it was a good joke!” Sam wheedles, pleading his case. “Who wears short shorts?” he starts singing in a falsetto voice, pointing at Bucky as he does some sort of weird little dance. “Bucky wears short shorts!”

“What the hell are you singing?” Bucky asks, “And why the fuck would I wear…short…shorts?” He looks so incredibly confused, and it’s hysterical.

You can’t help it; you erupt in a fit of laughter.

“She thinks it’s funny,” Sam points out the obvious, chuckling as he nods his head your way. “You’re just chapped that you didn’t think of it first.”

“Oh God,” you giggle, looking at Sam, “I don’t know what’s funnier, the fact that you actually did that or the fact that he has no clue that you’re referencing the Nair commercial…short shorts…” You put your hand to Bucky’s chest as you lean into him, almost doubled over from laughing so hard. “Oh GOD – I’m sorry Bucky – but – but the look on your face!” You can only gasp the words out though your laughter.

You suddenly feel Bucky’s chest start to twitch, and you know him well enough to know that even though he still has a straight face, he’s just barely holding it together.

Until Sam starts laughing…and snorts.

Bucky moves his hand to cover yours, still on his chest, and he finally loses it. The two of you are holding each other up, and it’s the only reason you aren’t both sitting on the floor. Sam, on the other hand, grabs the edge of the counter but still slowly sort of melts to the ground – the sight of which makes you and Bucky laugh even harder.

“Oh…oh shit…” you manage through your giggles, clutching your stomach with one hand because it hurts from laughing so hard. “The food…”
“Oh God, the eggs,” Bucky is still laughing, but manages to turn to the pan.

You both make quick work of checking your respective dishes, still giggling but luckily saving everything before it burned although there is an extra crispy spot in the hash browns.

As you work on stirring and seasoning the sausage gravy, Bucky reaches over quickly with his left arm to pull you close for just a moment and presses a kiss to the top of your head. You smile up at him as he lets go, and he sends a lopsided grin back your way.

You hear a heavy sigh come from behind you, followed by a rueful sounding, “Well, shit.”

You and Bucky both turn; Sam managed to get back to his feet, all signs of laughter now gone.

“You make me feel like I’m the only one who’s not having a good time,” he says with a laugh.

You snort out a laugh. “I’m not the one who put Nair in a supersoldier’s body wash. Payback’s a bitch, you know.”

Sam narrows his eyes at you and fights back a smile. “Oh, so I suppose you’re going to team up with him now? This is how it’s gonna be, huh? This is how it’s gonna be. Okay then.” He finally loses his battle against the smile and just lets it go, and you return it easily.

* * *

Sam is ecstatic about breakfast. You’re thankful that it’s still a little too early for the boys to be up, because the noises he makes as he eats are horrifying. You certainly don’t need your little mimics witnessing this.

Clint had shown up about a half hour ago, and much to his chagrin (and Sam’s obvious delight) had been sent to keep watch outside. He gave you sad puppy eyes until you promised you’d save a plate for him.

Bucky, Steve, Sam, and you sat around the table as you eat, discussing different options for keeping you safe.

“Hey, can I ask a quick question?” you break in, somewhat timidly. This isn’t your area of expertise (duh), so you’ve been quietly observing unless you were asked a question.
“Of course,” Steve quickly responds. “You have as much say in this as anyone.”

“Why didn’t SUNDAY let us know that someone was in the house?” It’s been bugging you since you’d heard that Sam was at the top of the stairs when Bucky had gotten out of bed.

“Well, if someone had kept his phone on him instead of leaving it on the kitchen table last night, he’d have gotten a notification that a friendly was here.” Sam directs an obvious stare at Bucky, who glowers back.

“Drop it, Tweety Bird,” comes the quick retort. They seem to live for antagonizing the other, but now that you know it’s there you can clearly see the current of friendship underneath the traded jabs and snarky comments.

Steve speaks before Sam can respond, “SUNDAY is programmed to recognize the team that’s working your case; so Bucky, of course, myself, Sam, Nat, Clint, and Tony are all recognized and allowed entry at any time unless specifically directed otherwise. It’s a precautionary measure to ensure that we’d be able to get in the house to help you if something happened to Bucky. Since we’re recognized as friendly, just as you and the kids are, SUNDAY wouldn’t notify you unless you asked.”

“Huh. Okay,” you shrug; it seems to make sense, you suppose.

“Hey,” Sam, seated across from you, suddenly stares at you with narrowed eyes. “Why aren’t you eating any eggs?”

“What?” His question takes you completely off guard.

“You didn’t make the eggs, and now you’re not eating them. Why?” The accusation in his tone is clear.

“Um…because eggs are gross?” He’s staring at you now, and Bucky snickers as he takes a huge mouthful of food.

Sam looks at you, eyebrow cocked. “Say what?”

“They’re gross. They’re either slimy or rubbery, and they smell like unwashed, sweaty feet,” you reply flatly. “I’ll stick with the biscuits and gravy, thank you very much.”

He blinks, still looking at you suspiciously.

“Wow, Sam, a little paranoid?” Bucky asks, pointedly shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth. Of course there’s nothing wrong with them, other than the fact that they’re eggs.

“Seriously, Sam, I wouldn’t let him poison everyone here just to get you back for your little prank,” you assure him.

You wait until he takes a bite of eggs before commenting again. “Or would I?” Just to seal the deal you end with a smirk and a wink; Sam stops chewing; he looks like he wants to spit it out but also doesn’t want to be rude, so he all but swallows the mouthful whole from the looks of it. Bucky manages to bite back his laugh but squeezes your knee under the table, and Steve looks between the three of you.

“That’s cold. That’s really cold,” Sam deadpans, looking at you. You just smile back sweetly as you take a sip of coffee.
“God help me, now there’s three of them,” Steve mutters into his glass of milk.

The sudden sound of yelling catches everyone’s attention – there’s someone at the front door.
“Steve, cover her and get her to the panic room! Now!” Bucky orders as he reaches for a knife. Sam pulls a firearm, and they silently move towards the front door as Steve all but drags you towards the study.

The angry yelling continues.

“Wait,” you say, pulling Steve to a stop. “That’s…”

“Fuck…it’s just Stark,” Bucky mutters, visibly relaxing as Sam holsters his gun.

You can hear him now, loudly arguing with SUNDAY.

“Let. Me. In!”

“Not until you remove your suit,” SUNDAY states calmly. God, if you were on the receiving end of that statement, you’d be infuriated by the serene tone.

“What? Are you kidding me right now?” Even from here, you can hear the scoff in his voice.

“I’ve been instructed not to let you enter with your suit.”


“Anthony Edward Stark, absolutely not! She’s perfectly safe. Override denied.”

The following silence might be unnerving if it weren’t for the snickers coming from Bucky, Sam, and Steve. The four of you return to the kitchen table to finish breakfast and wait for Tony’s next move.

Exactly eight minutes later the front door opens and you hear him enter. Even his footsteps sound annoyed.

Tony walks straight in with his hands in his pockets, pausing as he comes into view. He surveys the four of you eating, gaze settling on you before he walks into the kitchen and grabs a plate and a glass.

He takes a seat next to Sam, which happens to be straight across from Bucky, and starts helping himself to the food.

The silence is awkward, to say the least; Bucky, Steve, and Sam are all visibly tense. You refuse to let him get to you.

After his first few bites, Tony finally speaks, “Well played, using my own technology against me.”

You look up to see him leaning back in his chair, watching you with narrowed eyes. What is it with these people and giving you the squinty eyes this morning?

You finish your mouthful before speaking. “Wouldn’t have had to play anything if you’d just tried to enter like a normal person - sans suit.”

Tony nods, silently appraising you. Everyone else is silent, just watching the exchange. “You know,” he starts, taking another mouthful before he interrupts himself the way only Tony Stark
can, “these biscuits are fantastic, by the way. You know, as I was standing out there, trying to figure out how the hell I wrote a program that somehow allowed someone that’s not me to bypass me, FRIDAY reminded me ever so inconveniently of something you said when we were in the car on the way here.”

“And what was that?” you ask. Hell, might as well humor him.

“You said, and I quote, “don’t strip me of my agency or self-determination... Don’t automatically assume that you know what’s best for us – eventually that will piss me off.”” He takes a drink of orange juice as he finishes.

“And that was inconvenient for you?” you ask, eyebrows raised.

Yep, because as you know, I think everyone knows, I have a bit of a soft spot for you. And that makes me...uh...what’s the word I’m looking for, Capsicle?”

“Wrong,” Steve offers between bites of food.

Uh, no...help me out here.” Tony rolls his eyes almost as well as you do.

“You mean well and you seem to think it’s a good idea to try to control everyone as a way to protect them because you have a savior complex,” Sam says, waving his fork in Tony’s direction.

“Ding ding ding! We have a winner!” Tony turns his gaze to you. “And clearly you expected something like that was coming, resulting in you actually thinking to lock me out of my own house. I’m very impressed by that, by the way.”

You’re starting to get impatient and when you glance at the clock you see that the boys will be up any minute; it’s time to cut the crap. “So are you telling us that you have your savior complex under control? What’s your point, Tony?” It’s ridiculous that you’re having this conversation.

He sighs. “You know, when I got news this morning that Barnes hadn’t answered the phone for two hours, I got really worried. When Cap called me to tell me all was well and gave me the general overview, I got pissed.”

“You have no reason to get pissed, Tony, it’s none of your goddamn business,” you state flatly.

Tony slams his fist onto the table, startling you and causing Bucky to shield you with his left arm; both Steve and Sam look ready to jump. “It IS my goddamn business when an employee shirks his job and screws the client! Krakken has your info, he can actively search for you now which means shit just got real, and we have no room for someone not doing his job! This isn’t a savior complex, this is me trying to save – this is me trying to make sure you don’t die because of a mistake I made!” He stands, leaning forward on the table, and turns his sharp gaze to Bucky. “Barnes, you’re fired. Get the hell out.”

“Make me,” comes responding growl from Bucky as he rises out of his chair.

You tilt your head as you stare at Tony in disbelief, but Steve stands and speaks before you can open your mouth.

“Bucky, stand down,” he commands, “Tony, you don’t have the authority to fire anyone. I’ve already discussed this with Bucky, and we’re leaving –“

“Of course you did, Cap, and everything’s just hunky dory about this situation, isn’t it?” Tony’s sarcasm is in full force. “God, don’t you get it? She’s just gonna be the next name in a long line of
“Tony! He lo-“ Steve cuts himself off and starts again, quieter this time. “They care for each other, Tony. Yes, it looks bad from the outside, but she’s right; it really isn’t any of our business. And he was doing his job. Yes, he made a mistake when he left his phone downstairs, but he almost took Sam out before realizing who he was. Without any outside warning or help from SUNDAY. If there’d been an actual intruder, Bucky still would’ve kept her safe.”

Tony rolls his eyes and opens his mouth to speak but Sam cuts him off. “Hey, I’m good at what I do. I was silent when I got here, and silent when I entered the house. I didn’t make a damn peep. I hate to admit it, but what he did was actually pretty incredible, and it shows just how damn good he is. What if Krakken did get in, and somehow disabled SUNDAY? Would you have been able to do that? Without any help from any of your technology? Would your instincts wake you up out of a dead sleep? Tell you that there’s an intruder in your house, and that it was time to get up to protect the people you care about? No? I didn’t think so,” Sam finishes as he crosses his arms.

As Tony stands there, clenching his jaw, SUNDAY softly interrupts the conversation. “The boys are waking, dear.”

“Thanks SUNDAY,” you mutter, glaring at Tony as you push away from the table. You’re thankful for the timing, because you’re almost ready to reach across the table and strangle that controlling, patriarchal ass.

“I’ll come up and take care of them, Doll, so you can get ready for the day if you want,” Bucky says, looking at you and ignoring Tony.

You reluctantly turn your death glare from Tony to smile softly at Bucky. “Thanks Buck, I’d appreciate that.”

He nods, resting his hand at the small of your back as he leads you to the stairs.

Once you reach the top, where no one can see you from the kitchen area, Bucky pulls you into a warm embrace. “I’m so sorry about all of this,” he murmurs into your hair. “Stark’s right – I messed up.”

You pull away slightly, fixing him with a pointed glare. “No, he’s not right. Sam is, though. What was it that woke you up?”

Bucky studies your face for a moment before answering. “Something just felt off. I can’t really describe it more than that.”

You nod as you put your hand to his scruffy jaw; it’s been a few days since he shaved. “That will always keep us safer than any of Tony’s gizmos and gadgets.”

Bucky smiles slightly and leans into your hand. “I’d do anything to keep you safe. You know that, right?” His eyes, almost steel grey in the dim lighting, are staring into yours intensely.

“I do.” You absolutely do; in fact, the enormity of the potential of what he could do, if pushed, is a little frightening because you know without a shadow of a doubt that this man would stop at nothing to protect you and the boys.

“Good.” He presses a kiss firmly to your forehead before taking your hand and walking you towards the bedroom doors.

Both of you can hear the boys giggling in their room – since they got their new beds they’ve taken
to staying in them a little longer in the mornings to play. No complaints there.

“Alright Doll; you go and take a nap, read a book, take a long bath – whatever you need to do, there’s no hurry. I’ll get Artie and Jimmy dressed and fed.” Seeing the apprehensive look on your face, he pauses for a moment before continuing. “Don’t worry – Stark won’t do or say anything with the boys around. He’s an ass most of the time, but he’s not *that* big of an ass.”

With that he kisses your lips lightly and turns to enter the boys’ room, much to their screeching delight. They love when it’s Bucky that comes for them in the mornings.

* * *

The bubble bath is *awesome*, and is just what you need.

The only downside is that it’s giving you time to think. For the first few minutes you really have to struggle to not think of Krakken – that bastard is NOT going to ruin your bubble bath. Fuck you, Squid Boy. Taking a deep breath and exhaling, you instead direct your mind towards happier things.

Neck deep in bubbly, almost but not quite too hot water, you allow the memories of last night wash over you. Memories of vulnerability and reassurance, of breathless kisses and hot touches, of skin against skin and the soft sounds you both made. Memories of intense emotion and feeling, mostly left unspoken but constantly shown in each other’s eyes. Memories of Bucky. It’s impossible to stop the smile from growing on your lips as you think of him.

You almost told him last night. *Almost.* The words almost left your lips but you bit them back. Instead of telling Bucky that you love him, you told him that you care for him. A little while later you told him that he has you – something you know he caught because he asked you about it before falling asleep. You almost told him again then, but you didn’t.

Shaking your head at your own cowardice, you think to yourself that at least it’s a step in the right direction. You’re reasonably sure he gets the idea, anyway.

Leaving your room over an hour later with your hair twisted back into a braid (hot baths make for frizzy, fluffy curls) and dressed in jeans, a black tank, and the warm green flannel shirt that you’d ‘borrowed’ from Bucky at some point last week (it’s huge on you so it’s like wearing a blanket with sleeves and it still kind of smells like him – it’s the best thing ever), you suddenly hear peals of giggles followed by loud laughter.

Pausing in the hall overlooking the living area, you fight to stifle your own giggles as you watch the scene unfolding below.

Your sons have teamed up with Bucky to incapacitate and…God…*tickle* Steve. Bucky has his friend sitting in front of him in a light hold, holding his arms back while Jimmy tickles Steve’s sides and Artie goes for the feet.

A string of high pitched giggles erupts from the red faced blonde man, which of course only serves to encourage the boys to intensify their efforts. It immediately astonishes you how careful Steve is with the kids – Steve could easily kick Artie away, but he doesn’t – he just allows them to keep tickling him. Huh…must be a superhero thing.

“C’mon guys, get him, GET HIM!” Bucky encourages in-between unsympathetic laughs.

And then Steve squeals. Captain fucking America *squeals*.

Well, that’s it - you lose it, throwing your head back in laughter as you grab on to the banister so you don’t lose your balance.
Bucky looks up at you with a huge shit-eating grin before he finally lets Steve go. Steve wastes no time in scrambling away and up to a corner seat of the couch, curling his large self into a ball to protect himself from your viciously relentless three-year-olds.

Finally coming downstairs, Bucky and the boys greet you at the bottom step. “Feel better, Doll?” You nod and smile as you stoop down to hug each of your boys before they run back to torment Steve. Bucky pulls you close and leads you behind the stairs before he murmurs lowly in your ear, “Did I ever mention how much I like seeing you in my clothes? Cause you look damn good in them. The only thing that would make it better is if that shirt was the only thing you were wearing.”

You feel your face flush and your eyes grow wide as he pulls away and winks, but you notice that he isn’t quite as composed as he seems; he’s a bit flushed, too.

“Sorry,” he looks down sheepishly after a moment as he lets out a self-deprecating chuckle, “Oh God, that was such a bad line, but I couldn’t help myself.” He shrugs, “It’s true, though.”

He’s so damn adorable when he blushes.

“You do know that you already got the girl, right?” you ask, smiling up at him and trying not to laugh.

A smile nearly cuts his face in two as he replies simply, “Yeah.” He kisses you softly, mumbling “My girl,” against your lips. “My best girl.”

Oh, how things have changed since yesterday morning.

“So does that make you my guy?” you ask between kisses.

“Damn right it does.” He hugs you tightly, nuzzling his face into your neck and inhaling deeply before planting a kiss there as well. Pulling back a moment later, he drops another kiss to your forehead before taking your hand and leading you out from under the stairs and towards the living room. “We should probably rescue Steve.”

As it turns out, no rescuing was needed. Steve was curled up on the couch with both boys, telling them a kid-friendly version of his early days as Captain America.

Squeezing Bucky’s hand, you smile up at him before speaking, “Just in case I haven’t told you this before – you’re absolutely incredible with them. Thank you.”

Bucky looks down at you with an indecipherable look on his face. “Thank you for letting me help you.” He pauses a moment before continuing, “You told me that I was adopted into your family. As far as I’m concerned, that makes them my responsibility. I take that very seriously.”

“I know you do.” It’s the truth. There’s so much more that you want to tell him, but you can’t seem to make any of it come out.

He gazes at you before speaking again; he looks like he wants to say something, but he remains quiet for a few moments. “Well Doll, I’m going to run up and take a shower. Nat should be here around 12:30 with the information she obtained from Krakken’s crew member – I told her to come right after the boys go down for their naps. She wants to know if you want her to pick up anything for lunch.”

“Oh God, yes, Chinese food. Please! I don’t know how to make it and I’ve been craving it for over a week.” You don’t even care if you sound desperate, you just want fried wontons in the worst
way.

He chuckles a little at your intensity. “You should’ve said something, Doll; I would’ve found a way to get some here for you. If anything, the people that get our groceries would be able to get takeout, too. It just won’t be hot when it gets here.”

“Really?” That hadn’t even occurred to you. “They would do that?”

“Do you have any idea how much they’re paid to do what they do?” When you shake your head, he continues, “Stark pays them obscene amounts of money to be his personal shoppers, even when no one is staying here. He wasn’t joking when he told you to order whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted it.”

“Huh. Well, okay then. Speaking of Tony, where is he? And everyone else?”

“Sam and Clint are surveying the property to find the best places to build makeshift watchtowers, or ‘nests,’ as Clint calls them, and Stark is pouting in his workshop.”

You snicker at that last part, because you know it’s true. Tony could likely out-pout both of your kids any day of the week.

“Alright Doll, I’ll be down in ten,” he says before kissing the top of your head and bounding up the stairs.

Heaving a giant sigh, you make your way into the kitchen and over to the coffeemaker. You’re going to need a significant amount of caffeine to get through the day. Someone should really invent a caffeine patch…or an IV drip…

“Steve, do you want any coffee?” you ask as you start a cup.

“You know, that actually sounds pretty good right about now,” comes his reply from under the two kids currently trying to climb him. They clearly got bored with story time.

A quick glance out the window shows that it’s still snowing, and it’s the wet, icky type of snow that you get when it’s too cold for sleet but not cold enough for the pretty, fluffy variety. Unfortunately, this means that the boys are going to be locked up all day today, because this type of weather has a tendency to put a damp chill in your bones that’s hard to get out. It’s perfect weather for the current situation, now that you think about it. Fucking Krakken.

“Alright guys, it looks like it’s gonna be a day for movies and forts,” you announce, walking into the family room and gathering blankets. “Let’s see what kind of awesome fort you can make with these!”

“Momma! Watch Mickey?” asks Artie. He’s very fond of the mouse. You’re at the point where you want to tear your ears from your head to avoid hearing that damn ‘Hot Dog’ song again, but at least the show is educational when you need a distraction.

“Sure, Baby, I can put on Mickey.” Glancing over at Steve, you mutter with a sharp nod of your head, “Quick, while they’re distracted.”

He gets the hint and delicately extricates himself, moving silently into the kitchen without looking back. You follow just a moment later after showing the boys how to secure the blankets by tucking them in between the cushions on the furniture. You are, after all, a master fort maker. It’s time to start passing the secrets down to your heirs even if they are still a bit too young to fully grasp the concepts.
“Here you go,” you smile as you give him his coffee, then turn to start another cup in the companionable quiet. Once it’s made to your exact specifications, you heave a sigh as you start brewing yet another.

“Planning on two fisting the coffee?” Steve sounds amused, to say the least.

“No, it’s for Tony. If I bribe him with coffee, maybe he’ll let me in his workshop. The two of us need to clear the air, I think, or it’s going to be pretty tense around here.” You wrinkle your nose before speaking again. “I don’t like tense,” you admit as you put in Tony’s preferred amounts of cream and sugar.

“He really does mean well,” he says as he takes a sip of his drink.

“I know,” you sigh, nodding, “but that doesn’t make him right and it certainly doesn’t justify his behavior. I’m a grown ass woman; I can make my own decisions. I just…I cannot believe he’s actually acting like this.”

“He’s…he’s been through a lot. Lost a lot,” Steve says slowly.

“I know,” you answer quietly. “And I know that two of those he lost were because of things that Bucky unwillingly did when he was being controlled by Hydra.”

Steve looks as if he is lost in his thoughts for a few moments before speaking. “Bucky really told you about all of that, huh?”

You nod silently.

“He must really trust you.” He takes a deep breath before continuing, “I know these are really bad circumstances, but I’m…I’m really glad Buck found you.” Steve look so earnest right now – it’s a little heartbreaking.

“You nod silently.

“Me, too,” you reply.

You hear a door open, and a glance up to the overlook shows you Bucky coming out of the bedroom. As he comes down the stairs, you see that he’s on his phone.

“Hey Doll, I’ve got Nat on the line – Chinese is a go. What would you like to eat?” Bucky asks as he takes the last step down.

You tell him, and he laughs a little as he relays your instructions to Nat. “Yes, she’s serious….no, she really doesn’t like vegetables, that’s why she wants it without…You can take that risk if you want, but I can guarantee that she won’t eat it if it comes into contact with broccoli at any point during the cooking process…”

Yuck. Broccoli taints everything, and picking around it does no good. The flavor leaks.

“Nat, just order a second plate of General Tso’s! You usually eat an entire order by yourself anyway, and then you still mooch off the rest of us! Hell, have them put her broccoli on yours if you want it so badly.”

You beam a huge smile his way as you press a kiss to his cheek. You already feel like he’s your own personal hero, but this just set it in stone. And if you’d had any doubts, which you absolutely didn’t, this would have proved to you what kind of man he truly is. A man that will save you from broccoli is a good man.
You grab both mugs of coffee as Bucky gives you a knowing look, and head to Tony’s workshop.
You kick gently at the door; the two full cups of coffee make it impossible to knock.

When you don’t get an answer, you kick again, louder this time. You’re pretty sure you can hear Tony rolling his eyes on the other side. Well, tough luck, buddy. You brought this on yourself.

The door finally opens when you get ready to kick for the third time.

You hold up the steaming drinks. “You wouldn’t turn away a perfectly good cup of coffee, would you?”

Tony doesn’t crack a smile. “You know, I’d probably be less of an ass about this if you’d stop channeling the best qualities of my mom.” He steps out of the way, allowing you to enter. “I shouldn’t be surprised, though,” he mutters, probably to himself.

He directs you to a chair at some sort of workbench, and finds a stool for himself before accepting the drink.

“Thanks, Kiddo.” It’s quiet for a long moment before he begins to speak. “You know, when I was younger I did a lot of stupid things in the name of pissing off my dad. It was sort of a favorite past time of mine.” He shrugs his slumped shoulders and takes a sip. “We’d fight, and I’d go to my room. Mom would show up after I’d had some time to cool off - or sober up a little, depending on the night - and she’d always bring something in for me. Greasy food to settle my stomach if I was hungover, water and aspirin if I was still drunk. Chocolate milk and Combos if I was none of the above.” Tony pauses and looks into his cup like he’s searching for someone; you suppose he is.

You stay silent and quietly drink your coffee as you watch him. He can take his time – you’re in no hurry.

“She’d, uh, she’d take care of me before telling me that I was being an ass…which I assume, at some point, is coming from you as well.” He looks away from you. “I can’t say it isn’t deserved.” He fiddles with his cup a bit, avoiding your eyes before sitting up a little straighter. “So my AI programs are almost annoyingly intelligent. Did you notice that?”

Finally used to the sometimes abrupt way he changes subjects, you smile and give a small nod. It’s true – not only are they smart, but they seem to have their own personalities as well.

“Well, SUNDAY decided to start in on me before you got here. When I got into my workshop, there were four very large screens pulled up giving random facts about feudalism in the Middle Ages, the treatment of women during that time, the history of feminism and the struggle for equal rights, and my personal favorite, the current anti-discrimination laws covering sex and gender.”

Wow – you can’t help but snicker at that last one. SUNDAY was thorough.

“And then of course FRIDAY jumped in on it and they both teamed up on me, reminding me that you’re a grown woman and even if you weren’t that I wouldn’t have a say in this anyway because you’re not my kid, and, oh yeah, it’s the 21st century. And then of course that was followed by how what happened to my parents wasn’t really Barnes’ fault…” Tony stops for a moment to rub his eyes with one hand. “I can’t save my mom by saving you. She’s already gone.”

His sad eyes finally meet yours and you decide to put any remaining anger aside; this man needs a hug.
“I’m sorry,” he mumbles into your shoulder. “Ok, go ahead and chew me out now.”

“I don’t have to – you already chewed yourself out, and I’m not in the habit of kicking people when they’re already down. I do have a question for you, though.”

“What’s that, Kiddo?”

“Did you respect your mom?” you ask softly.

He pulls back and gives you a look, “Of course I did, I respected the hell out of her.”

“Then respect me too, please. That includes any and all decisions and choices that you may not agree with or like.” It needs to be said.

Tony nods. “I will. And this time, I really will.”

“Then consider your apology accepted,” you say with a smile.

He suddenly makes a face. “God, do I have to apologize to Barnes, too?” He looks like it hurts to even consider the idea, and it makes you giggle a little.

“Yeah, it’s probably a good idea.”

Heaving a dramatic sigh that could have blown one of your kids over, he huffs, “Fine. Might as rip the band aid off now, I guess. SUNDAY, can you please ask Barnes to come to my workshop?”

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You don’t stick around to witness the apology – you figure that should be between Tony and Bucky.

When they return to the living room together, you wouldn’t say that they are exactly friendly but they aren’t at each other’s throats, either. Bonus points for the fact that no one’s bleeding. It’s progress.

“Tony!!” screeches Jimmy, who is the first to notice their return. He takes down three quarters of the fort he and Artie had built in his efforts to reach the current object of his affection.

“Hey little man, how’s it going?” Tony asks, lifting Jimmy up into a giant hug.

Looking around for Artie, you hear a muffled whimper coming from a squirming pile of blankets, and finally, “Mooooooooommmaaaa!”

“I’m coming, baby,” you laugh as you work to uncover your son. Once you’ve removed the two top layers, Artie suddenly pops up like a daisy.

“Tony! Tony’s here!” he giggles, as he scrambles over the pile.

“What are you two up to with all these blankets?” Tony asks, bending down so he can hug both boys. Never in a million years would you have pegged Tony as the type to like kids, but he sure seems to adore the two little boys in front of him.

They tend to have that effect on people.

“Making forts!” Jimmy explains, with a stoic expression on his face that he reserves for very serious matters.
“You broke it,” Artie says pointedly.

“How about we make a new, bigger and better fort? How’s that sound!” Tony sounds almost as excited as they do.

“How about you guys help me clean up the living room and then settle down a bit before lunch,” you interject, mom voice in full force. Three sets of disappointed eyes flash to you, so you add, “You can make a new fort after your nap.”

“I’ll help. It’ll be HUGE,” Tony loudly whispers, wide eyed.

Both boys giggle, and you throw a grateful glance Tony’s way. He might not know it, but he probably just saved you from a dual meltdown of epic proportions. They don’t often have tantrums at the same time, but when they do it’s catastrophic.

***

Nat ends up arriving right as you and Bucky are putting the boys down for their naps. You hear greetings being exchanged, but focus on your task of tucking them in. You’re not sure if you’re ready to hear what she has to say.

“Love you, Momma,” says Jimmy, yawning even as he begins to insist he isn’t tired.

“I love you too, baby.” You press a kiss to his forehead and smooth back his hair.

You cross over to Artie, switching places with Bucky, and repeat the same ritual. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, Momma.” Artie curls on his side, hugging his stuffed Mickey close.

You and Bucky are almost out of the room when you hear a sleepy, “Love you, Bucky,” from Artie.

“Yeah, me too. Love you,” says Jimmy.

Bucky stops in his tracks, and for a moment doesn’t move a muscle save for the smile growing on his face. Watching him, you see his gentle blue eyes fill with tears. He turns slightly to murmur, “I love you both, have a good nap,” before swallowing hard and following you out of the room.

Standing outside the door, he looks to you with wet eyes but doesn’t say a word. Smiling up at him, you take him by the hand to make your way downstairs to meet with Nat. Those boys think Bucky hung the moon, so it isn’t at all surprising to you that they vocalized their feelings.

By the time you get downstairs the food is already sitting out on the table, and everyone else is seated. Sam is the only one missing, so you guess that he’s the one currently outside keeping watch. You shake your head slightly – you still can’t believe your world currently contains someone ‘keeping watch.’

As you and Bucky take your seats, you can feel Nat’s eyes on you but she keeps her silence. Her gaze is inquisitive instead of critical, and you appreciate that. Curiosity is better than judgement.

Bucky hands you a set of chopsticks and starts looking through the food, passing you your specially requested dish. Everyone else seems to take this as their cue to dig in and make their plates.
“Steve, do you want my chopsticks?” you ask when you realize that there’s not enough to go around.

Steve’s cheeks flush just a bit before politely declining. “It’s okay, I’ll use a fork.”

Clint speaks up, “He can’t use chopsticks – doesn’t know how.”

There are snickers all around; apparently this is a running joke for the team.

“I can’t help that my hands are so big,” Steve mutters, scooping out some rice with far more oomph than necessary.

More snickers – you kind of wish you knew the backstory for this teasing.

“Okay, we might as well get started,” Steve says in his official Captain America voice, effectively changing the subject. “What did you find out, Nat?”

She looks up at you, then back to Steve.

“Go ahead, Nat. She can take it.” He flashes a smile your way as he speaks. “Just don’t tell her to calm down if she gets upset.”

Bucky chuckles a bit as you blush, and Clint and Nat exchange confused looks before she shrugs and turns to you.

“Okay…well, they have a full search going for you. There are at least a hundred of Krakken’s men that have been assigned to this objective. Their orders are to take you alive, so my best guess is that they want to hold you for some sort of leverage since they are well aware that you’re under our protection. They know what you look like, so they’re running facial recognition software at all points they can hack, and they have people stationed to watch your family and friends.”

You nod your understanding - you appreciate the fact that Nat is talking to you, and not about you as if you aren’t in the room. It’s a little unnerving, though.

“They’ve been instructed to do whatever is necessary to gain custody of you – as far as Krakken is concerned, all moves are fair game. He’s actually deviating from his normal MO; he’s given the approval to hurt or take your kids or any other family member if it gains an advantage.”

Your heart feels as though it just stopped, and you distantly feel Bucky take your hand – you can tell through this touch alone that he’s pissed. So are you.

“They haven’t hurt anyone,” she quickly assures you, “You haven’t been in contact with anyone since you came here, so they have no reason to; at this point it won’t do them any good. They’ll assume that we wouldn’t tell you if something happened since our main objective is to keep you safe, and giving you that info might cause you to do something rash. As long as you continue to not contact anyone, they should stay safe.”

“What else?” Bucky prompts through a clenched jaw.

“They’ve been systematically checking our safehouses.”

You see Clint’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. “How do they even know where they are?”

“They have one hell of a hacker,” Nat replies dryly. “Just assume that all information kept or given outside our team has been compromised. We need to keep this tight and to ourselves. We shouldn’t
involve anyone else unless strictly necessary.”

She turns back to you. “Luckily, this is Stark’s personal holding and is off the books, so they don’t have this location in their files. Unfortunately, we don’t have anywhere else to move you if this location is compromised.”

“We’d find something,” Tony interjects.

Nat just shrugs, moving on. “We also need to keep low profiles – they’re running facial recognition on the six of us as well, hoping to narrow down her location by finding us.”

Looking around, you see everyone nodding.

“I’ll arrange for some random sightings of us around the world,” Tony begins. When you look at him questioningly, he continues, “Between my awesome and amazing technology that can create very lifelike images, and the fact that I have a couple of connections in the entertainment business that work on facial prosthetics for high budget films, I’ve got this covered. We’ll get a few agents to pose as us, just not…here.”

“Nat’s right, we can’t get anyone else involved, we –“ Steve begins, but Tony cuts him off.

“We don’t have to give anyone any details other than ‘here you go, wear this and look like Captain America around town for a few hours.’ I can take a suit and make some personal visits, and make a couple of legit appearances. I gotta get back to New York for a day or two anyway, I have some tech at the tower that might be useful.”

Nat nods and turns her attention back to you. “They’ve hacked and are currently monitoring your bank account, as well as those of your family. Which doesn’t matter, of course, since you aren’t using yours other than the autopay accounts you had set up, and no one has used theirs to help you. They’ve also gotten a hold of your school records. By the way, Stark, you did a good thing with setting it up so it looks like she’s logging in to her classes from different areas – they’ve been on several wild goose chases all over the world. Sounds like Krakken’s pretty pissed about the wasted effort.”

“I do what I can,” he mumbles around a mouthful of food as he gives a sarcastic salute. “Kiddo,” Tony turns to you, “I think that it would be best for you to quit school for now. Whoever they’ve got on their intel is good, and we can’t take the chance that I can outmaneuver them forever.”

You’re quiet for a moment before responding. “Fine. I’ll drop my spring classes, but I’m finishing the semester.”

Tony opens his mouth but you cut him off. “There are only a few weeks left, Tony. I’m finishing the semester. I’ve worked too damn hard to take that kind of hit to my GPA.” Swallowing hard, you look straight at Tony, “Please don’t let them take this away from me, too. I know it might not matter in the long run – if there are a hundred of Krakken’s people looking for me, I’m guessing that unless Krakken himself is taken out that this situation just went long term.” You see nodding heads in your peripheral vision, but Tony doesn’t move. “So my earning a degree is probably pointless; it’s not like I’ll be able to actually use it. But just in case, in the event that this shitshow has an end and I can go back to a normal life, I’d like to be able to pick up where I left off.”

Tony exhales loudly. “Just a few weeks, you said?”

“Yep,” you confirm, “I’m done after the first part of December.”

“Alright, I’ll make it work.” He doesn’t look happy, but he’s respecting your decision.
“Thanks, Tony,” you smile at him, and he smiles back, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “How’d they find me in the first place?” You don’t know why, since it really doesn’t matter at this point, but you’re curious.

“Traffic cams,” Nat explains. “They reviewed footage of what cars entered and exited the parking lot, and narrowed it down based on the time and proximity to our vehicle, since they were able to get our plates. With the person or people they have on their tech team, it was really just a matter of time.”

It makes sense, so you nod.

“We need to find out who’s running their intel,” Steve orders. “Nat, can you get that info?”

“I tried, but our guy doesn’t know.”

“You’re sure about that?” Tony asks.

“Oh yes, I’m sure,” Nat says with a smile that brings a sick feeling to your stomach. “He doesn’t know.”

Four sets of eyes turn to her.

“What? He’s still alive, and the good doc is seeing to it that he stays that way,” she finishes with a smirk.

“What else do you know?” you ask Nat. You’re pretty sure the crappy news hasn’t ended.

She takes a deep breath and bites her lip for a moment before turning to Bucky. “Krakken struck a deal with a high-ranking officer with Hydra to gain more manpower. I don’t know yet if that means Hydra is actually involved, or if it’s just a deal with the one guy to provide people as a personal favor. My new punching bag wasn’t privy to the specifics.” She pauses, watching Bucky carefully.

He’s clenching his jaw, and you’re surprised you haven’t heard any teeth breaking.

“What else?” he demands.

“I don’t know whether or not this is related, it might not be, but Krakken has employed some sort of scientist or doctor...I’m still looking into him for more details. It’s possible that he’s working on developing materials for biological warfare.” Nat gentles her voice considerably before continuing. “His name is Alric Metzger. He’s Arnim Zola’s great-nephew.”
Chapter 21

You hear Bucky’s sharp intake of breath followed by an audible swallow before he slowly, almost mechanically, pushes himself back from the table and stands up. Looking at nothing and seeing only God knows what, he woodenly runs his hand through his hair before walking around to the side door leading to the porch off the kitchen.

Everyone else is still, frozen in their seat. You watch Bucky for a moment, knowing exactly what Zola’s name means to him but unsure of whether you should go to him or leave him be to gather his thoughts. The need to be there for him quickly outweighs your uncertainty, however, so you rise and follow him outside.

“Hey, do I look like the Bucky Barnes whisperer to you? That’s her job now,” Tony mutters in response to something Clint asks…you’re not sure what, and at the moment you really don’t care.

“Bucky,” you call out softly in the falling snow, “wait up.” You walk after him quickly, not registering until your feet hit the wet snow that you aren’t wearing any shoes. Oh well.

You know he hears you because he slows down, even though he doesn’t stop. You have to almost jog to catch up to him – the man takes gigantic strides, and despite your own height you’re taking two steps to his one.

When you reach out to grab him by the arm, Bucky actually recoils from your touch, giving you the exact measure of the gravity of his current situation. Your heart plummets to your frozen feet, but you don’t give up.

You can’t leave him alone like this. You won’t.

“Bucky, stop!” you finally get in front of him, so his only choices are to either stop or push you out of the way. You’re not sure for a moment which way it’s going to go, but he finally stills. He still won’t meet your eyes, but you recognize the glassy emptiness left over from his nightmares during those first few nights here. You’re not sure if he even recognizes you right now.

The fear gripping your heart is colder than the elements.

“Hey,” you begin quietly, holding your hands out in front of you but not touching him even though you ache to do so. “Hey, five things.”

His despondent stare connects with your eyes, but then he looks away.

Five heartbeats, then ten, pass as he remains motionless.

Finally, finally, his empty gaze reconnects with yours.

“Come back to me, Love, please. Tell me five things you can see.” You try to make your voice as steady as possible, and you realize that you sound considerably calmer than you actually feel.

“You’re fucking terrified for him.

Bucky breathes heavily for a full minute, then two. Finally, he whispers brokenly, “You. I see you.”

You exhale a shaky breath. “Good, four more.”

You guide Bucky through the grounding exercise, sighing with relief when, halfway through, he
steps forward and takes your still raised hands in his and holds them to his chest.

“Tell me one thing you can taste.”

“The cold air,” he finishes, and he’s back to himself. Bucky gathers you into a bone crushing hug; you really don’t care if he breaks all your ribs as long as it keeps him from shattering. You can feel his sobs and his shaking as he holds you close for what feels like both forever and not long enough. You softly hum his lullaby as you run your hand over the back of his head, smoothing the hair now wet from the falling snow.

“God, Doll, I’m so sorry, I –” he begins, but you cut him off firmly.

“Don’t.” You push back so you can look him in the eye as you speak. “Bucky, you have nothing to be sorry for.” He starts to look away, but you lightly grab his face in your hands and direct his gaze back to yours. “This is what we do, you and I. We made a deal.”

Bucky slowly nods as he lowers his forehead to yours. “Okay,” he murmurs. “Okay.”

“Okay,” you repeat back, exhaling in relief. He pulls you into another hug, and you feel his body relax just a bit…at least until he realizes that you’re standing outside in the wet, snowy cold without shoes or a coat.

“Are you trying to catch pneumonia??” he almost yells, scooping you up into his arms. “Why aren’t you wearing any shoes? And no coat?? What were you thinking?!”

Ouch. Bucky’s using his angry voice. And…uh oh. He’s got his Angry Face on.

“You aren’t wearing shoes, either,” you point out. Great comeback. Seriously, that’s all you can come up with? You suppose it’s better than telling him that he was more important than looking for appropriate winter weather wear; you already know he’ll try to take responsibility for your current condition, and you don’t want him to feel any worse than he already does. He shouldn’t feel bad at all – this was your choice, but good luck getting that through his thick head.

Bucky levels a glare at you and starts toward the house before speaking your name in a much softer tone, “I’m a supersoldier – I tolerate extreme temperatures much better than you can. You shouldn’t have done this for me, you could get sick!”

“I’d do anything for you,” you mutter through chattering teeth; now that the fear and worry-fueled adrenaline has worn off, you can definitely feel the cold. “I can walk, you don’t need to carry me.”

He doesn’t even look at you when he replies, because he will not be swayed. “It’s my turn to take care of you.” After a few steps, Bucky finally looks down at you with a soft smile. “We have a deal, remember?” Damn, he used your own words against you.

As he walks up the steps, the door into the kitchen opens. Clint is standing there, holding the door as Bucky carries you through. You’ve curled up and buried your head into his neck in an attempt to gain back some feeling in your face; it isn’t working yet.

Everyone is silent as you enter, and you can feel four sets of eyes staring. Damn that’s uncomfortable – you hate being the center of attention.

“Can someone please make her some cocoa or tea? We’ll be back down shortly,” he brusquely asks as he carries you up the stairs and into your bedroom.

Pausing only to close the door behind him, Bucky goes straight into the bathroom, gently setting
you on the edge of the bathtub before stepping into the shower to start the water. Coming back to you immediately, he makes quick work of peeling off your soaked clothing before swiftly removing his own, and you’re so cold that you don’t bother to argue; it’s not like you could do it yourself anyway – your fingers are numb. You start to wonder exactly how long you were outside.

As soon as you’re both undressed, Bucky leads you into the shower and guides you under the warm spray. He begins to briskly rub first one arm and then the other, paying special attention to your hands, before moving to your lower legs in the effort to warm you quicker.

“Can you feel your fingers and toes?” he asks gently, back to rubbing your upper arms.

“Yeah, I’m good,” you mumble as you nod. “No frostbite here.”

Bucky presses a long kiss to your forehead before moving behind you. He deftly undoes your already wet braid before pumping some shampoo in his hand. As he starts washing your hair, which feels absolutely amazing, you hear him whisper, “Don’t ever do anything like that again. I’m not worth you getting sick.”

“You don’t get to decide what you’re worth to me, Buck,” you mutter as you rub your hands up and down your arms.

His hands still in your hair for a moment, so you know he heard you, but he doesn’t say anything. At least he’s not arguing the point.

After he rinses your hair and smooths in some conditioner, he grabs your body wash and gently washes you before quickly doing the same for himself; you wanted to do it, but you’re still chilled and your body isn’t responding as fast as you’d like.

“At least let me get your hair,” you insist, pulling him away from his shampoo.

It’s funny, you think to yourself as you start massaging the shampoo onto his scalp, that the two of you only acted on your feelings just last night; his stuff has been in your shower for over a week. Then again, you were just too damn chicken to make the first move…it’s kind of heartwarming to think that he was, too.

After you finish rinsing his hair, he turns around and brings you into his warm embrace. “Thank you,” he murmurs into your ear.

You know he’s not talking about washing his hair.

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After you finish rinsing his hair, he turns around and brings you into his warm embrace. “Thank you,” he murmurs into your ear. You know he’s not talking about washing his hair.

“Always,” you murmur back, holding him tightly.

Suddenly sighing dramatically, he releases and turns you so he can start rinsing the conditioner from your hair. “You know, this isn’t how I envisioned our first shower together,” he hums into your ear before he plants a kiss on your shoulder.

You laugh softly at that. “So…how long exactly have you been envisioning this?” Turning to face him, you see the blush creep up his cheeks through his scruff. “Busted,” you say through your smile.

Bucky huffs out a laugh as he shakes his head. “A while,” he confesses. Despite the blush, he actually doesn’t look at all embarrassed.

“I’ll make it up to you, Love,” you promise.

“We have all the time in the world, Doll,” he murmurs before kissing your lips and pressing his forehead against yours. “Are you warmed up?”
You nod, “Warm enough.”

He shuts off the water and grabs towels, wrapping you in one and helping you get your hair into another before drying himself.

After quickly going through your usual after-shower routine, you walk into the closet to find some comfy, warm clothes, and emerge in a long sleeved shirt and bright blue flannel pajama pants while gently toweling your hair. Bucky is already dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, and meets you at the door with a thick pair of socks and one of his hooded sweatshirts.

“These are non-negotiable, Doll.”

You shrug, “Okay. I’ve been eyeballing this hoodie for a few days now,” you admit as you worm your way into it. It’s huge on you, but it just seems all the more cozy because of it.

“I know you have.” He sends a smirk your way as he rolls up the sleeves so your hands are free. “It looks good on you.”

You quickly pull your hair back into a ponytail to keep it out of the way. “You just like it on me because it’s yours.”

“Maybe.” Another smirk.

“Hey,” you gently rest your hand on his forearm. “Are you okay?”

Bucky studies your face for a few moments before nodding. “Yeah, I think so. It…hearing that name just caught me off guard and triggered me. I…uh…I wasn’t expecting to hear it, you know?”

Why would he? It’s a horrible and awful coincidence; you wonder what the hell Zola’s nephew is doing, and if he’s following in his uncle’s footsteps.

He tucks a stray damp curlique behind your ear before opening the door. “Shall we go see what else Nat has to say?”
By the time you get downstairs, the boys are up and are being entertained by Clint and Tony in the living room. You hate to admit it, but Tony’s fort building skills have officially put yours to shame. You’re going to have to up your game. Significantly.

Unfortunately, Nat doesn’t have any more information regarding either Krakken or Metzger.

“We’re shipping the guy we caught to the tower so Wanda can take a turn with him, but I don’t know if there’s really much else to be gained,” Nat says before she hands you a steaming mug of hot cocoa. “It’s an old Russian recipe,” she smiles as she winks.

“Thank you.” You take a sip, and God, it burns as it goes down. And not just from the temperature. Despite your best efforts at keeping your dignity intact, you can’t help but cough a little, which of course causes Nat to smirk. “Nat… did you put booze in this?”

“Did you miss the part about it being an old Russian recipe?” Tony asks drily.

“It’s just a little vanilla vodka – it’ll help warm you up.” Nat replies with a shrug - she looks like she’s trying not to laugh.

Prepared this time for the kick, you take another sip. “It’s, uh, it’s smooth…” you mutter, unable to completely hide your sarcasm. Bucky ducks his head and snorts out a laugh while Nat gives you a full, almost unguarded smile. Damn, she’s gorgeous. You kind of feel like a potato next to her.

“Buck, I brought you some more…” Steve pauses as he glances over to the kids still occupied with Tony and Clint, “implements. Where do you want them?”

You glance at Bucky incredulously. “Good God, how many weapons do you need? You already have enough stashed here for a small army.”

“As many as I can get, Doll.” He smiles at you, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. Today’s news has him shaken and on high alert, and even though he’s back to himself, the situation from earlier still has him on edge. “Finish drinking that; Nat’s right, it’ll help warm you up,” Bucky orders with raised eyebrows before walking with Steve to further expand his arsenal.

You roll your eyes but take another sip as you sit down at the kitchen table.

Nat sits across from you, holding her own steaming mug. You can feel her staring at you, and it’s unnerving. “What? Do I have something on my face?” you finally ask self-consciously.

“What? God, no. Sorry,” she begins with a self-deprecating laugh as she waves a hand. “Sometimes it’s a little hard for me to, uh, take off my ‘business hat.’ I don’t mean to stare, I’m just trying to make sense of you.”

“If you have a question, you can just ask,” you gently prompt. “I won’t take offence. Well, I might take offence if you tell me that I look like a pig’s butt, but other than that…” the statement trails off as you grin, and she grins back at you. Her smile is a little warmer this time.

Nat shakes her head gently. “I don’t know that you’d be able to answer my questions, because I don’t think the answers are something you can explain. I don’t know that you’re even aware of what you’re doing.” She shifts in her chair before continuing. “The last time Barnes was triggered like that, it took almost two weeks to get him back to normal. Well, his version of normal, anyway.
You got him back in less than thirty minutes.” She takes a slow sip of her drink, still watching you over the rim. “Everyone who’s been here to either check in or drop something off comments on how Barnes’ seems to be doing better than ever, and God knows they won’t shut up about your food. Even I’m more relaxed than usual right now, and that’s saying something.”

You feel a hand on your shoulder, and look up to see Tony standing behind you.

“Compassion and empathy,” he states.

“What?” Nat looks confused.

“You’re trying to figure her out, but you’re overthinking it. It’s compassion and empathy - she practically oozes it. It’s what puts everyone around her at ease, and what drives her to take care of the people around her, even if she doesn’t know them. Those qualities are why even you are dropping your guard.”

“Huh.” She regards you with a thoughtful expression for a bit before nodding.

You spend some time with Nat, just chatting at the table. Once you got used to the burn, her hot cocoa is actually pretty good; you decline a second cup, though, as you generally don’t drink alcohol in any quantity in front of your kids.

As the two of you talk, she slowly starts to open up to you and you find that she has an amazingly subtle, yet hilarious, sense of humor.

“I get it,” she suddenly declares.

“Huh?” Nat completely caught you off guard.

“It’s compassion and empathy - she practically oozes it. It’s what puts everyone around her at ease, and what drives her to take care of the people around her, even if she doesn’t know them. Those qualities are why even you are dropping your guard.”

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“Told you so,” comes Tony’s taunt; you can’t see him since he’s behind you but you can clearly hear the smirk in his tone. “Barton, you owe me fifty dollars. Nat caved already.”

“Damnit Nat, you’re going soft in your old age,” Clint grumbles from the living room. The boys have given up on making forts and are taking turns using Clint as their personal indoor jungle gym.

“Wanna come over and say that to my face?” she asks tauntingly.

“Nope,” come the reply from underneath a squirming pile of arms, legs, and giggles.

You feel a gentle hand on your shoulder. “You doing okay, Doll?”

You hadn’t heard him come in. “Don’t you ever make noise when you enter a room?” you wonder aloud as you lean back to smile up at Bucky. “Yeah, I’m good. You?”

He nods slowly. “I’m okay.” Taking the seat next to you, he rests his hand on your knee while Steve and Tony join the table as well.

“Alright, so here’s the plan,” Steve begins. He’s wearing his Captain America hat again. “Clint and Sam will stay with you for the next week – they’ll alternate shifts so someone is monitoring the property grounds at all times; speaking of which, Sam should be just about done installing the rest of the cameras and motion sensors. The formal dining room is going to be converted into a
surveillance control center — Tony, you’ve got the equipment here to make that work, right?” At Tony’s nod, he continues, “Bucky’s responsibility is the inside of the house. Nat, you’re going on assignment – I need you to keep trying to infiltrate Krakken’s team – we need to make some headway on this situation. Tony, you already know what you’re doing for the next week; make some appearances and get those facial prostheses made and distributed to the agents you trust so there are some random sightings of us around the world, and see what you can dig up on Metzger. You know what, you should probably talk to Banner about that, too, see if he’s heard of this guy. I’ll be stationed within 25 miles of here so I’m close enough to offer back up if needed; we can’t wait for Tony to come in from New York or Nat to come back from wherever she may find herself if something happens. We’ll reevaluate every week, and rotate out to keep everyone as fresh as possible. We’re kinda tight on manpower, so we’ll need to make do.”

Everyone nods as you exhale deeply. You see Bucky watching you out of the corner of your eye, so you turn to offer him a small smile as he gently squeezes your knee.

“Hey,” Steve catches your attention, “we’re going to keep you safe.” Tony and Nat nod their agreement, and although you appreciate the gesture it doesn’t stop the fear from creeping up into your throat. It’s really hard to pretend everything’s okay when you’re basically sitting in on a war council.

You don’t trust yourself to speak, so you just nod your acknowledgement.

Steve turns his attention to the other room. “Hey, Clint?”

“Yeah?” he calls from the couch – at some point he managed to wrangle the twins into some semblance of moderate rest; they’re playing quietly with some toys on the floor. You’ve got to hand it to him – he’s great with kids.

“You’re on in a few hours, so if you’re tired you should probably get some rest. Take one of the open bedrooms upstairs,” Steve says as he stands. “Tony, you and I should get started on setting up the surveillance monitors; Sam can help when he’s finished outside. Nat, you should head out and see what you can do about infiltrating Krakken’s team.”

Everyone nods, and with five minutes it’s just Bucky, the kids, and you left in the common living space. It’s surreal.

“Momma?” pipes up a tiny voice.

“What’s up, Jimmy?” He walks over to you, holding a small toy horse in his chubby little hand.

“Hi,” he says as he smiles up at you with his sparkling blue eyes.

You can’t help but giggle at his innocent, dimpled grin. “Hi, baby.”

“We go outside?” The little guy sounds so hopeful, but the weather still isn’t cooperating. And honestly, you’re still a little cold.

“How about a movie instead?” Time to use your master bargaining skills; sometimes dealing with your twins feels more like a hostage negotiation with drunk pirates than actual parenting. You need to play this very carefully.

He thinks about it for a while, looking as if he’s weighing his pros and cons; sometimes he’s so serious for such a young boy.
“Okay!” Jimmy suddenly agrees brightly. Whew…you dodged a bullet there. “Bucky watch, too!” he suddenly declares as he walks over to take Bucky’s hand in his own, and starts dragging him toward the TV.

“Alright buddy, let’s go pick something out,” chuckle Bucky as he follows dutifully; a smile is plastered to his face and things suddenly don’t seem quite so bad.

Lost in your thoughts, you stay at the table for a few more minutes before getting up to take your mug to the sink. You’re about to busy yourself in the kitchen when you hear Bucky’s voice softly call your name from the couch. “Will you come over here, please? I need to hold you for a while.”

You walk over to him with a gentle smile; that sounds way better than anything else right now. “What are you watching?” you ask, settling yourself between his legs and into his embrace. He wraps his arms around you, holding you tightly with your back pressed snugly against his chest.

“I have no clue,” he mumbles into your hair. “Just need to hold you.”

“Momma, it’s Tangled!” Jimmy begins excitedly.

“For you!” Artie finishes. They giggle at each other and plop down onto their beanbag chairs. They really are such sweet little boys.

Bucky has (understandably) been really tightly wound since the earlier debriefing, but as you sit here together you can feel him start to relax. Eventually he even gets into the movie, chuckling softly at some of the funny parts. About midway through, you get up to grab blankets for everyone since you’re still a bit chilly – it’s still snowing, and the dim, gloomy afternoon light makes it seem colder than it is. You cover the boys first, and then head back to Bucky.

He doesn’t moved, and he keeps his eyes on you the entire time you’re up. You drape the blanket over your shoulders and crawl back to your spot, covering up the both of you with the soft material. You settle on your side with your hips still between his thighs, but twisting your top half a bit so you’re able to put your arms around his waist and rest your head on his massive chest. He softly strokes your upper back and presses a tender kiss to the top of your head as you listen to his steady heartbeat.

“I’m so scared that if I blink, you’re gonna disappear,” he confesses in a whisper.

Your heart clenches at his admission. Craning your neck so you can look up at him, you watch his face for a moment before speaking. “I’m not going anywhere, Love. At least, not without you.”

You mean it, too. They’d have to drag you away, kicking and screaming.

He smiles gently down at you, kissing your forehead as he pulls the blanket higher onto your shoulders and continues to hold you close, still absentmindedly running his fingers up and down your back.

The lanterns on the lake scene comes up, and you find yourself humming along to I See the Light (you can’t help it…you try not to but it just happens) as you watch Rapunzel and Flynn with a stupid ass smile on your face. This part gets you every damn time.

Bucky has been getting a bit twitchy for the last ten minutes, and you wonder if he needs to get up. Still watching the adorably dense couple singing to each other on the screen, you’re about to ask when you hear it whispered softly.

“I love you.”
You can’t stop the smile from creeping across your face.

A moment or two passes before you respond; you seem to have forgotten how to breathe. “That’s good,” you finally whisper back, just as softly. “I’d really hate to think that this was one-sided.”

You feel more than hear the rumbly chuckle escaping him.

“I love you too, Bucky,” you murmur as you shift yourself so you can look up at him. God, he’s looking at you the way Flynn looks at Rapunzel in that damn boat, and it’s everything you’ve ever wanted.

Bucky’s clear eyes hold a tempest of emotion, but he just repeats his simple phrase as his smile continues to curve his lips. “I love you.”

“I love you,” you echo back. It’s easily one the most natural things you’ve ever said in your life; honestly, saying it to Bucky comes just as easily as saying it to Artie or Jimmy.

He softly murmurs your name before chastely kissing your lips. “You’re my everything,” he whispers fiercely, holding your eyes hostage with the storm now raging in his, “you’re my whole goddamn world. And if I had to go through everything I went through – every beating I took, every experiment they subjected me to, every goddamn second they tortured me – just so I could be alive at this very moment in time so I could find you, then it was all worth it. Every single damn second.”

You can’t help it; your breath hitches as your eyes fill with tears, and you slowly shake your head. “Bucky…you went through 70 years of hell…” you begin, unable to comprehend how someone could love you so much. You know his history; you hardly think you’re worth it.

“And I’d willingly go through hell again if that’s what it takes.”

“But…but Buck, they took so much…”

“And look what they unwittingly gave me in return. I’m here. Now. With you. I should be old or dead, but I’m not. I’m sitting here, holding you. Watching over them.” He briefly steals a glance at the twins before looking back at you. “I win. Hands down. As far as I’m concerned, Hydra has no hold over me anymore. I…I know I don’t deserve it – to be happy – I’ve done some awful, unforgiveable things. But if it’s going to be offered, I’m gonna take it. I’m finally gonna fucking take it. I’ll always bear the responsibility for the innocents I hurt or killed,” he pauses for a moment at the look on your face, “you can say all you want that it wasn’t my fault, that I wasn’t in control, but I did it; their blood is still on my hands. I’ll carry that guilt for the rest of my life, but even that feels a little lighter now. Doll, with you by my side, I…I can work to atone for what I did, because the darkness can’t consume me anymore.”

“Bucky…” you murmur, rendered completely speechless of anything but his name.

“And Sweetheart, you need to know. I needed to tell you this, because I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, next week, or next month. I’ll die before I let anything happen to you or the boys, but I need you to know how I feel.”

“Bucky, I –“

“SSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!” Twin sets of incensed eyes have turned your way.

“We’re watchin’ a movie!” Artie states indignantly.
“Don’t be rude,” demands Jimmy.

Bucky bits his lip and ducks his head, trying not to laugh.

“Sorry, guys,” you say with a giggle. You can really only blame yourself for teaching them that kind of reaction.

They turn back to the movie with matching huffs, and you can see the laughter dancing in Bucky’s eyes. “We can talk more later, for now I think we’d better listen to them,” he whispers in your ear. “I think they meant business.”

You nod and he kisses your forehead as you both settle in for the rest of the movie. You certainly don’t want to be rude.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Sorry, it's kind of a filler part. I'm not overly thrilled about it, but it had to happen.

Despite the recent changes, including the new measures put in place for your protection, it doesn’t take long for the household to settle into the new routine. The days are similar to before, except now there are always more people in the house to the obvious delight of Artie and Jimmy. Everyone is fully dedicated to making sure the boys are completely oblivious to the current situation, so extra effort is always given to make them laugh or smile. They love their new extended family, and since the day that Sam showed up wearing his Fourth of July hat and insisted they call him Uncle Sam (Steve rolled his eyes so hard they almost went flying across the room), it’s been Uncle Sam, Uncle Steve, Uncle Tony, Uncle Clint, and Auntie Nat (when she can make an appearance) ever since.

Your relationship with Bucky has deepened and intensified from the previous closeness of before, and now he sporadically (and often) pulls you away around a corner or into another room for a private moment of intimacy and whispered words. Bucky’s not much for excessive PDA (which is fine by you - some things aren’t meant to be shared with the world) but anyone with eyes would be able to see the nature of your relationship; if not by the way you look at one another, then by the way he’s always somehow casually touching you, either with an arm around your waist, a hand on your knee or the small of your back, or just tenderly tucking a stray curl into place.

It’s the few hours after putting the boys to bed that’s changed the most. You and Bucky spend that precious time alone, usually opting to retire to your bedroom together to spend those moments learning and memorizing the other’s body, whispering feelings that need to be said once again, reading quietly together, and watching the stars or snowflakes dance over the lake through the large windows. Just living, laughing, and loving.

Unfortunately, Bucky’s nightmares made a brief comeback after the mention of Zola’s name. They were bad – even worse than before – but together you were eventually able to get him through the rough patch. Like before, Bucky craved your closeness and his lullaby after waking in the choking grip of terror, and you would bring him back to himself and give him what he needed in those dark moments. However, unlike before, neither of you felt the need to hold back due to things left unspoken so oftentimes your holding his trembling, tense body turned into something more; the simple act of making love not only grounded him, but also reassured him, chased away his demons, and brought back sleep.

***

Before you know it, Thanksgiving Day has arrived. You groan as you wake up much earlier than necessary thanks to the familiar, ugly pain in your head. Fuck. You’d been doing so well.

You disentangle yourself from Bucky so you can roll over, curl yourself into a ball, and grab a pillow to hold over your face. It’s dark in here but it’s still too bright, and the quiet sound of Bucky’s even breathing is so loud that you momentarily wonder why he doesn’t wake himself up before reminding yourself that you’re just super sensitive right now. And God, the nausea…
“Um…Doll, what are you doing?” You feel a gentle hand on your hip a few moments later; of course he’d woken up when you’d pulled away from him. “Are you okay?”

“Sssshhhhhhhhh…” you respond, although he probably can’t hear you since you’re still holding a pillow over your face. Well, no, he can probably hear you just fine thanks to that serum.

You feel the bed shift slightly as Bucky gets out of bed, and a few moments later shift again as he kneels in front of you. He says your name quietly before attempting to gently lift the pillow.

“Leave it there,” you mutter. You’re trying your hardest not to let your tone get snarky. This isn’t his fault, it just hurts so badly.

“What’s going on, Sweetheart? Talk to me.” He sounds worried, so you suck it up and move the pillow up so it’s just covering your eyes.

You cringe at the volume of your own voice when you finally speak up. “Migraine.”

Bucky reaches across you to slowly rub your back before responding in a hushed whisper, “Can I get you anything?”

“Four Advil, two Tylenol, two Benadryl, something high in sugar or carbs, and something with caffeine to chase it down.” Your own special cocktail, prescribed to you by an ER physician during a late-night visit after you’d refused to take your prescription to treat a particularly nasty migraine. You tell him as much when you can feel his questioning stare through your pillow.

He leaves, returning just a few minutes later. “Here you go, Doll.”

He helps you sit up, and you squint into the gently lit room to take the small handful of pills Bucky offers, along with a soda and some cookies. He also brought up a dampened hand towel, and settles it carefully over your eyes after you lie back down. You roll over onto your side, mindful of the wonderfully cool cloth, and press the heels of your hands against your eye sockets to try to relieve some of the pressure.

“Why don’t you take your medication, Sweetheart?” He’s lucky that he’s back to rubbing your tense shoulders, or you’d likely have bit his head off for speaking. No matter how quiet he is, each and every sound feels like it’s drilling holes into your brain.

He still sounds concerned, though, so you answer. “The side effects. The meds work, but the side effects are almost as bad as the migraine. I used to just take them for the worst ones but quit taking them altogether when the boys were born. Not only do the side effects really suck, but the meds tend to leave me really out of it. I don’t feel like the boys are safe when I’m like that.”

“Well, that’s no good. Can I try something?”

“Be my guest,” you mumble. As long as it doesn’t involve sound or light, it isn’t like anything he’ll do would make it any worse than it already is. This is bad one.

“Roll over onto your stomach,” he directs, and you feel him shifting himself on the bed.

You do as he instructs, resting your head face down in the crook of your arm to try to keep some pressure against your eyes.

A small sigh of relief escapes your lips as his cool metal hand rests against the base of your neck, and his other hand ghosts over your upper back, softly prodding for knots. Once he finds whatever it is he’s looking for, he starts massaging away some of the tension you’ve been carrying. “I should
have done this a long time ago; you’re ridiculously tight, Doll.” It’s different than what he’s done after training; this is deeper, and the intent now isn’t to prevent injury but rather to heal.

You try to focus your attention on the feeling of his large hands against your back; some of what he’s doing hurts, but it’s a welcome distraction from the excruciating throbbing behind your eyes. You eventually lose all track of time, and it isn’t until you hear him softly whisper your name that you lift your head.

“How’s that, Doll? Any better?” he softly asks after pressing a kiss to your temple.

You nod. “Yeah. Thanks, Buck.”

Bucky smiles softly in the dim light, and you smile back at him. “I didn’t know you got these, you didn’t say anything,” he murmurs as he plays with a lock of your hair.

“I haven’t had one in quite a while – sometimes I can go months without one, and then sometimes I’ll get three or four a week, every week.” You shrug as best you can from your current position. “It’s probably because finals are next week. I’ll be alright.” You shift to your side, and raise your hand to softly run your fingers along his jaw before pulling him down for a kiss. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” he replies as he moves to lie down, pulling you over so your head rests against his chest. As you listen to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, you’re able to fall back to sleep.

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Waking up for the second time on Thanksgiving is much better. You still have a headache, but it isn’t nearly as bad as the migraine earlier. Opening your eyes as you stretch, you see that Bucky isn’t there; you also see that it’s almost nine o’clock. Damn. You can’t remember the last time you slept this late. God, that man is fucking amazing.

You get up and get yourself ready for the day, knowing that you’re going to have a full house. The team decided that since you can’t go home for Thanksgiving, they would all come here for the day so at least you’d be surrounded by people that care about you and the kids. You can’t help the feeling of melancholy that comes over you; you miss your family. You miss a lot of things, actually, like going for a long drive with the radio blasting, going shopping (fuck, you used to hate grocery shopping and now it sounds like a luxury), and especially bringing the boys out to visit your mom and dad on the weekends.

A tear rolls down your cheek unchecked as you stare at yourself in the mirror.

My family is downstairs waiting for me, you tell yourself. You might not have your whole family here, but it’s not like you’re alone. Your kids are here, safe.

And Bucky.

Taking a deep breath, you wipe away your tear and begin applying your makeup. If you need to break down you can do it later, either alone or with Bucky. For now, though, you need to pull yourself together and put on a happy front for your boys.

***

If you thought you’d be working hard today, you’d be sorely mistaken. The entire team is in the kitchen preparing dinner, working under your supervision, and that’s really the only thing you’re allowed to do. It’s pretty awesome, actually. You kind of feel like Gru with a handful of faithful minions. Or the Wicked Witch of the West with a small band of flying monkeys…just kind of
depends on the moment.

Tony, who’d been in the living room playing with the boys to keep them out of everyone’s hair, walks up to stand next to you. “I can hear the hamster running on the wheel from way over there. Whatcha thinking, Kiddo?”

You watch them as they work furiously at their tasks; the only two not completely serious are Bucky and Clint, and that’s because they’re competing to see who can cut the potatoes the fastest. Bucky would be winning if the potatoes wouldn’t keep slipping out of his metal hand. “I’m just wondering when, exactly, I became the Avengers’ den mother.”

Tony snorts out a laugh. “Let me explain something to you. We’re family. Even Bucky, although I sometimes hate admitting it. Dysfunctional, yes, but still a family. God, I’ve been spending so much time here I think I just quoted Lilo & Stitch.”

You laugh as you shake your head. “Not quite, but you have the general concept down.” You pause before speaking again, wondering if you should say anything at all. “Your mom would be proud of you. It really speaks to what kind of man you are that you’re moving past what happened.”

Tony stiffens for just a moment before letting out a rueful sigh. “I’m getting there.” He huffs out a short laugh, “You know, whether you realize it or not, you’re now part of our dysfunctional little family, too. My condolences on that, by the way. You’re stuck with us. Not only because of Bucky, although that would be reason enough – anyone who can bring him out of his constant state of being Mr. Broody McManPain is automatically our favorite person – but because you’re you. And as for Bucky, he might be the ugly cousin from out of town that smells like moth balls, but he’s still family.” Tony pauses and sighs, “You know, we always just assumed he needed saving, and in hindsight that was really unfair to him. It never occurred to us, to any of us, that what he really needed was someone that needed him as much as he needed them. He needed an actual give and take relationship with trust and respect. We all failed him in that, because we wanted to play the hero, I guess. Trying to save him without trusting him to do the same for us is why we failed. What he needed was you; you save each other.”

“That we do,” you murmur, snorting out a laugh as another potato shoots out of Bucky’s hand and hits the floor.

“God, at this rate it’ll be next Thanksgiving before we have enough potatoes to eat,” Tony observes dryly.

“Nah,” you reply, “Clint’s got us covered. And even if the mashed potatoes are a bust, we’ve still got enough food going to feed an army.” Seriously, there’s a ton of food. A turkey (of course) and a ham are already going in the oven, and there’s a prime rib is in the roaster. Then there are the sides; mashed potatoes (you have faith), green bean casserole, your family’s version of corn, stuffing (2 different kinds), cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, and the rolls you’d baked off last night along with the 3 pies that had taken you all day to make. And it wasn’t like anyone could even be hungry to begin with – there were enough appetizers and finger foods to keep you full all day.

Tony gives you some serious side eye. “Do you mentally check out when we eat?” he asks incredulously. “You’ve seen the damage – Rogers and Barnes alone could probably pack away this entire meal.”

You simply stand there and blink for a moment. “No.” That’s not possible. Is it?

“Is that a challenge, Doll?” Bucky calls from the table with a raised eyebrow and a smirk; you keep forgetting about that damn supersoldier hearing.
“No!” you repeat quickly. You’re actually a little worried that Tony might be right.

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Not only did you not have to make dinner by yourself, no one would let you do any cleanup, either. You didn’t even bother putting up a fight; it isn’t as if you enjoy doing the dishes.

Bucky suddenly plops down next to you on the couch. “Hi,” he says simply, with the goofiest grin on his face. Uh oh. He’s up to something.

You eyeball him suspiciously. “Hi?” you say slowly, unsure of where this is going.

His grin just gets wider. “Dinner’s done.”

“Yeah?”

“Dishes are done.” He’s wagging his eyebrows now.

“Okay…thanks?” Where the hell is he going with this?

He suddenly stands and pulls you up with him. “That means Thanksgiving is officially over, and Christmas has begun!” he declares grandly as he pulls a Santa hat out from nowhere and puts it his head.

Just as he finishes speaking, you hear Sam from the front door, “Uh, little help here?”

It’s a Christmas tree. They’re bringing in a freshly cut Christmas tree. You’re floored.

“I told you we’re gonna do this right,” Bucky whispers in your ear as puts his arm around your waist and pulls you close, “and we are. All the bells and whistles.”

You can only smile at him.

***

If anyone had ever asked you how many Avengers it takes to set up a Christmas tree, you’d now have the answer.

Six.

It takes six Avengers to figure out how to properly put up a tree, and at least two hours. It’s quite comical, actually, although they don’t necessarily see it that way.

But the tree is finally up, and as everyone congratulates themselves on a job well done Tony suddenly sprints out the front door.

“What the hell?” you mutter to yourself, but Bucky just winks at you.

Tony comes back in just a few moments later, “Helllllooooo?” he calls out impatiently from the door. “I can’t be expected to carry in everything.” God, he’s such a drama queen.
Chapter 24

You don’t think twice as they haul in box after box; it’s Tony Stark, and he takes pretty much everything to excess. It would be silly for you to expect any less for trimming the tree.

Clint rubs his hands together maniacally, “This is gonna be fun!” He seems to be on the same mental level as your kids, who are just chomping at the bit to start digging through the packages.

“Wait wait wait! There are two special boxes I’d like to draw your attention to!” Tony announces as he walks in from his final trip. Yes, he’s carrying two more boxes, but it’s the clear tote that catches your attention. You feel your eyes unexpectedly fill with tears.

“Um, is that…” you’re having trouble forming the words, so you just point at the box. Next to you, Bucky is bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

Tony looks at you with a gentle smile as he hands you the tote. “Yes, Kiddo, it is.”

Your family ornaments. You actually have a lot of Christmas decorations at your old house (is that what you’re calling it now? Your old house?), but there’s just one tote that carries all the sentimental ornaments, and it’s in your hands. You didn’t think you’d see these this year, or maybe ever.

You’re silent as you sink to the floor in front of the couch and open the plastic box, allowing your fingers to ghost over what you see. The Pooh and the porcelain number block ornament you’d gotten for the boys for their very first Christmas. The Disney and Rudolph ornaments you’ve had since high school, and the silk ball ornaments that your grandma got for you every year since you were a baby. Underneath those are the wooden ornaments that your mom used to hang on her tree when you were just a little girl, and the crystal angel praying over the cradle.

“You…these…I…” you shake your head and swallow hard, trying to find the words. “Thank you.” You’re so damn sentimental – this really does mean the world to you.

“It was Barnes’ idea, I just stopped over and picked them up. Gave me a good excuse to tweak the cameras I’ve got installed there,” Tony says with a shrug.

Looking over at Bucky, who’s now sitting next to you on the floor, you see him watching you with sparkling blue eyes. You slowly shake your head as you lean over to hug him tightly, and you hear him whisper in your ear, “I promised you that we’re gonna have a great Christmas, and I keep my promises. I love you, Doll.”

Sometimes you just cannot believe this man.

“I love you, too Buck,” you whisper back; some things are intended for just the two of you. He releases you with a quick kiss against your forehead, and you can’t wipe the stupid smile off your face. You doubt you can really tell him what this did for you.

“Oh, but that’s not all!” Tony exclaims in his best showman’s voice, once again claiming everyone’s attention. “You get your personal touch on your tree, but we get to leave our mark, too.” He opens the box, and starts handing out small packages wrapped in brown paper to each of his teammates.

As everyone rips off the wrapping, you see that they all got ornaments of themselves as their superhero alter egos. Damn, they can really market everything these days, can’t they?
Everyone laughs and rolls their eyes at Tony as they remove the small figures from the boxes and start passing them around – except, of course, for Bucky.

You can see the emotions play across his face as he stares at the wrapped box in his hand. You have to stop and wonder what Tony did – from what you can remember, the media really villainized the Winter Soldier. Was he able to find an ornament for Bucky? If so, would his have HERO! written across the top of the box in bright red letters like the others’, or would it say something else? Or did he get something entirely different?

“Come on, Barnes, you’re holding up the party!” Tony loudly quips, and everyone suddenly gets quiet as they finally realize what you’d already figured out.

Bucky bites his lip as he looks down at the package, and he slowly starts to open it. You can see the trepidation written clearly across his face, and you decide right then and there that you’ll have to kill Tony if he chose this of all times to be a douche.

You shift closer to Bucky when he pauses, and put your hand on his back; you can feel that his muscles are incredibly tense. To anyone else it looks like you’re leaning in to see what he’s unwrapping, but you know your true intent, and you know Bucky knows that you’re doing it to comfort him.

He takes a deep breath, and removes the last flap of paper hiding the front of the box.

You let out a breath you didn’t even know you were holding when you see the red HERO! on the top of the box, and an ornament that carries an incredible likeness of the man sitting next to you. In fact…

You’re distracted from your train of thought when Bucky’s thumb glides over the embossed name on the bottom: you’d expected to see The Winter Soldier, since that’s how he’d been known, but that’s not what’s written.

Sergeant Barnes. It says Sergeant Barnes.

Bucky’s mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

“Trying to catch flies, Barnes?” Tony needles. When Bucky doesn’t answer, Tony continues, “The words you’re looking for are ‘thank you.’”

It’s just the right amount of snark that you’d expect from Tony, but there’s something about his expression that seems off to you.

“Thank you,” Bucky murmurs, staring at the box in his hand before carefully removing the ornament. He hands it to you with a hopeful expression, and you smile broadly at him as you take it.

You examine it closely, and then you look at Steve’s before handing Bucky’s ornament back to him. “I think you should put this on the tree, Buck,” you gently encourage, “and officially kick off the decorating.”

“I…I will, Doll.” He stops and looks at you, eyes shining, as his tone suddenly changes. “But you’re getting ahead of yourself. We have to put the lights on first. Steve!” he calls out dramatically as he rises. “Help me get this sucker lit!”

You hate stringing the lights on the tree, so you’re more than happy to hang back and let Bucky and Steve strategize. Nat, Clint, and Sam start going through the boxes with the boys, working to
unpack all the colorful bulbs so they’re ready to be put on the tree once Bucky and Steve are done. Tony says something about wanting a glass of wine, so he heads off to the small wine cellar in the corner of the walk-in pantry.

While everyone else is busy, you take a closer look at everyone’s superhero ornaments. Satisfied with what you’d found, you grabbed the boxes for both Bucky and Steve’s ornaments and compared those as well. Bucky’s box was like his ornament. Suspicions all but confirmed, you wander off to find Tony.

He’s just turning around to exit the pantry when you walk in and all but attack him with a hug. “Thank you, Tony.”

“Not that I’m complaining, Kiddo, but what’s this for?” Tony sounds breathless; probably because you’re squeezing so hard.

“I know what you did.”

“What?” He doesn’t sound so much confused as he does surprised.

You finally release him. “You had that ornament for Bucky custom made.”

“I… I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Now that you’ve gotten to know him fairly well, you can honestly say that he’s a pretty shitty liar. He can bullshit, bluff, and deflect with the best of them, but he can’t outright lie to save his life.

You narrow your eyes at him. “Anthony Edward Stark.” Oh yeah, you used your mom voice.

Tony visibly cringes and you can see the moment he caves. “Don’t tell him.”

“Oh, I won’t,” you assure Tony, “I wouldn’t ruin this… for either of you. Doing that for him… Tony, that’s incredible. Thank you,” you say again.

If only the world really knew Tony Stark.

He nods before speaking softly. “I couldn’t just leave him out, and at the end of the day, he’s one of us. He deserves his own hero ornament.” He sighs before snapping back to his classic Stark persona. “Besides, it wasn’t that hard. I know people.”

You roll your eyes at him and shake your head.

“I’m curious, though. How did you figure it out?” He’s staring at you intently, like he’s expecting you to suddenly confess to some sort of mind-reading superpower.

You decide to roll with it. “I’m a mom. I see all, hear all, and know ALL that goes on in this house,” you utter with a straight face.

His eyes get wide and he draws back just a bit; for a moment, you’re pretty sure he believes you.

“Tony, I’m joking! Relax!” You laugh at the look on his face before explaining, “Bucky’s ornament is better quality than the others – his actually looks like him. The others,” you shrug, “not so much. Theirs are more… vague representations.” That’s putting it mildly. “Also, the box his came in is made of slightly thicker cardboard and has brighter colors than the others.” Your voice fills with emotion when you speak again, “Having it say Sergeant Barnes instead of The Winter Soldier was a really nice touch.”
Tony stares at you for a long moment. “I didn’t realize you had such an eye for detail.”

“Hey…” a thought suddenly occurs to you, “you said you know people. Do you think you could help me out with a Christmas gift for Bucky?”

He looks taken aback by your sudden change of topic – how’s it feel to be on the other end of conversational whiplash, Mr. Stark?

“Well, sure, but you can just order anything you want, just like you do groceries -”

You shake your head. “What I’m thinking of needs to be custom made…”

Tony’s eyes grow wide as you describe what you want. He throws in an idea that adds another layer to the dynamic, which you absolutely love.

“Tony, that would be absolutely amazing…can you do that?”

He laughs softly, “Kiddo, for you, I’ll find a way. And I’ll talk to Rogers about the other details, so don’t worry about that.”

“Thank you!” you laugh as you surprise him with another attack hug.

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Decorating the tree is a blast.

It’s the first year that the twins are old enough to help (not that their attention span keeps them there for long), and everyone else really gets into it. SUNDAY starts playing Christmas music, Nat makes some of her Russian hot cocoa, snacks are brought out even though you can’t understand how anyone can possibly be hungry, and there’s a Christmas movie playing for the boys when they get tired of the tree. It’s festive and joyful, and your heart is at peace.

They might not be your blood relatives, but you finally understand that everyone here is family; you just had to let go of your sadness a little to see it.

There was a brief rivalry as to who’s superhero ornament should get the highest spot on the tree, until Sam cheats and uses Red Wing to get his ornament the highest up. The fact that he cheated does NOT stop Sam from gloating. “I win!!!” he declares, doing some sort of ridiculous victory shimmy. Bucky was about to protest until Jimmy tugs on his shirt.

“Bucky goes here.” Jimmy points to a spot, just a few feet off the ground.

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that, buddy?” Bucky asks as he kneels down to Jimmy’s level.

“I see it,” is his simple answer. Flawless logic for a three-year-old, really.

A smile grows on Bucky’s face as Sam’s face falls. “You want it down here so you can see it?”

Jimmy nods. “Every day,” and then he points up to where Sam’s is. “Too high,” he says, sounding almost indignant. You stifle a laugh, but Bucky doesn’t bother. Sam just stares at the exchange wide eyed.

“Alright, how’s this?” Bucky places the figurine at Jimmy’s eye level.

Very seriously, Jimmy replies, “Good,” before marching away to see what Artie is doing.
Bucky rises, and before he can say anything Sam is already speaking, “Oh no, I don’t want to hear it. I get it, okay, you win. No need to rub it in my face.”

Bucky smirks, but keeps silent because everyone else is already laughing at Sam.

“Hey, Buck, you know what we should do?” Steve suddenly asks, sounding very excited while holding the star for the top of the tree.

“No Steve, no,” Bucky says without a trace of humor, taking a step or two back.

“It’ll be like when we were kids! Come on, it’ll be fun,” he presses, taking a step towards the tree.

“Steve, no,” Bucky repeats. He’s starting to look slightly mortified.

Everyone else is suddenly silent, staring with rapt attention at the exchange between the two men.

“Oh my God.” Bucky hangs his head in resignation.

“Buck would boost me up onto his shoulders and carry me.”

Tony bursts out laughing, and you suddenly realize where this conversation is headed. Oh hell. You head into the kitchen to get a chair.

“I don’t get it,” Nat begins, sounding slightly confused. “That sounds really sweet, actually.”

Tony stops laughing just long enough to get out, “Cap wants to reenact it now!”

Her mouth drops open slightly at the realization, and you drag the chair over to the tree.

“C’mon, Buck!” Steve wheedles, giving his friend his best smile.

“Yeah, c’mon Buck!” Tony parrots, still laughing.

“Do you want to be on top?” Steve asks with the best of intentions, unwittingly setting everyone off in another round of hysterical laughter which is the perfect opportunity for you to grab the star.
“Oh my God…” Bucky mutters as he squeezes his eyes shut.

You move the chair closer to the tree before stepping up, and carefully reach to place the star at the top; you’re just a little too far away...

Suddenly feeling a pair of strong hands at your hips, you look down to see Bucky smiling up at you. Feeling more confident now with the reach with him steadying you, you secure the star and plug it into the other strand of lights so it shines just as brightly as the rest of the tree.

He helps you down from the chair and pulls you into his side. “Thanks, Doll,” he murmurs into your hair after pressing a kiss to your temple.

You giggle a little before replying, “Someone had to put you out of your misery.”

“Hey,” Sam suddenly speaks, sounding incredibly sober considering how hard he’d been laughing just a second ago. “What gives?”

Everyone follows his gaze to see the star at the top of the tree. Steve instantly looks crestfallen, but Tony looks absolutely devastated.

Looking at you, he says in an almost dejected voice, “Why’d you take that away from me? You just sat on my bubble.”

“Because,” you begin firmly, “the idea of 500 pounds of beef,” you pause as you dramatically gesture towards Bucky and Steve, “tripping and falling and breaking everything and everyone in this room is slightly terrifying to me.”

“She has a point,” Sam says after a moment.

“You guys never let me have any fun,” Tony mutters, looking utterly depressed until his phone rings. “Yeah…” Tony’s face lights up after just a few moments; in fact, he looks positively giddy. “Perfect, have FRIDAY put everything together for me and I’ll work my magic. Wanda, you’re incredible…A couple of hours? That’s fine, we’ve waited this long…Okay, have a great night and a great Thanksgiving, Wanda, say hi to the Hulkmaster5000 and Red for me, will ya? ’kay, bye.”

Tony puts his phone back in his pocket as he casually takes a drink of wine, looking around. “What? Oh, would you like me to share the good news with you? Cause Wanda just called, she got something from our reluctant guest! We finally have a small window into their intel!”

Bucky whoops as he picks you up and spins you around, both of you laughing as everyone else in the room cheers loudly. Steve and Clint each pick up a boy and start gently tossing them in the air; their giggles add to the joyous atmosphere in your living room.

Progress. Finally.

And with that, the Christmas season is officially underway; who knows, maybe you’ll even get a Christmas miracle.
You wake up with a migraine *every damn day* during finals week. Every. Damn. Day. Even though you finish early and are technically done by Wednesday, they *still* come every day.

Or maybe the more correct way to think of it is that it just never really goes away, it just varies in intensity. You’ve been popping Advil like candy, and your stomach has no problem letting you know that you are, at best, three days away from an ulcer if you keep it up.

Bucky is practically beside himself, wanting to help so badly but unable to take your pain away. “Dr. Banner, are there any home remedies that you can recommend since she reacts so badly to triptans?” He’s on the phone again, pacing the floor and searching for answers.

The week drags by.

It’s Sam and Clint’s week to be at the house, so they take turns helping with the boys so Bucky can take care of you.

In all your years of marriage to Christopher not once did he take care of you when you were sick or hurt, instead usually opting to either work late or go out with his friends.

Bucky never left your side.

During one particularly rough hour on Saturday evening while fighting back tears of pain, you ask Bucky why he’s so good to you, and so patient. He’s quiet for a moment before answering, simply sitting with you in the darkness of your bedroom. “Sweetheart, I know exactly what it feels like to lose *everything*; to live in hopelessness and despair, thinking it’s never going to get better. And then, for some reason that I can’t explain but I don’t dare question, I got a second chance at life… and then I got you. I’m not gonna fuck this up. I’m not ever gonna take you or this life for granted.”

Then he pulls you close and slowly rocks you back and forth, hoping the rhythm will soothe the pounding behind your eyes. It does, a little.

He’s so damn incredible, and he really brings out the best in you. Somehow, even though you would have sworn that it could never be done, he’d broken through all the walls you’d built up around yourself over the years. He’s probably the first person you’ve ever *really* let in, and you’ve found yourself unlearning some of your bad habits and defense mechanisms and replacing them with healthy reactions and behaviors. It feels really good, and for the first time in your life you feel *stable* with the person you’re with.

Now if only your brain would feel as good as your mental state.

“Sweetheart, I’m going to get up for a few minutes, but I’ll be back shortly,” he whispers.

You nod as you lie down on the bed, and he covers you with a blanket before heading out of the bedroom.

He returns quickly, as promised.

“I’ve got a little bit of a surprise for you, Sweetheart. Can you sit up for me?” he murmurs into the darkness.

You do as he asks and sit at the edge of the bed as he kneels before you to slip on your shoes.
“What are you doing?” you ask, thoroughly confused.

“I told you, it’s a surprise.” You can hear the gentle smile in his tone, so you just go with it. “Here, Doll, put this on.”

Your jacket?

Shrugging, you do as he requests before he gently pulls you to your feet. Only now do you realize that he’s dressed to go outside. Bucky hands you your hat and mittens before taking your hand and leading you downstairs to the door.

“Jimmy and Artie are already in bed,” he whispers as he leads you down the stairs, “so Clint will watch them since he’s up doing surveillance. Sam’s resting upstairs since he’s on surveillance later tonight, so he’s even closer if the boys need anything. I cleared it with them and with Steve; thanks to our little break last week we were able to confirm that Krakken and his men are currently out of the state and shouldn’t be back until tomorrow at the earliest. We don’t know enough to know exactly where he is – Nat’s working on that – but we know he’s not here. I’m taking advantage of that and getting you out of this house for a few hours.”

“Really?” you breathe…this sounds too good to be true.

“Yes.” Bucky pauses at the front door to make sure your hat and mittens are on before ushering you outside into the chilled winter night. “You’re going to be stuck in a car since they’re still running facial recognition everywhere, but it’s dark and the car has tinted windows. As long as we stay out of any big towns or cities it won’t be a problem.”

He opens the passenger door for you, and you slide in. The car is already warming up, and even this slight change of scenery is doing you some good. You haven’t seen the inside of a car in well over a month.

He takes his place in the driver’s seat, and puts the car into drive. You ride in silence until you hit the paved road, and you shake your head at the ridiculous feeling of freedom.

Bucky smiles over at you. “What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?” he asks as he takes your hand in his.

“I just…I was just thinking about how liberating this feels. God, I’ve been at that house since… fuck, since the end of October. If it wasn’t for you, I don’t think I’d be able to handle it,” you confess.

“I love you,” he says simply as he squeezes your hand.

“I love you, too, Buck.” For the first time in days, you can feel the pressure in your head start to let up a bit. “So where are we going?”

“We’re going to just drive around for a while and look at Christmas lights. How’s that sound?”

“That sounds amazing,” you admit. This has always been one of your favorite things to do during the holiday season, and you’re actually pretty excited about it.

You feel your tension and stress dissipate as Bucky drives, and you both look at homes decorated to varying degrees in lights. After the first thirty minutes, your migraine has lessened considerably. After an hour it’s gone completely.

“Oh my God, Buck, you’re a genius…” you say happily, turning to him and allowing your head to
lean against the headrest.

He chuckles softly. “I don’t think I’d go that far, Doll.”

“No, seriously, I feel the best I’ve felt all week. It’s gone – there’s no pressure, no pain, nothing.”

“Really?!” He takes his eyes off the road to look at you, as it to make sure you’re telling the truth.

“Yeah,” you confirm, watching him. He’s so beautiful.

“Perfect,” he says as he smiles and pulls his lower lip in his teeth. Huh. He’s up to something.

The two of you continue talking about everything and nothing, just enjoying the other’s company and the fact that you’re out of the house.

You’ve been driving along quiet country roads for quite a while, and although you aren’t really sure where you are, you feel like he’s taking you farther into the countryside; houses are few and far between now.

“Where are we going, Buck?” you ask as he turns down an unplowed road. There are only a few sets of tire tracks in the snow to indicate that the road is in use.

“You’ll see,” he winks over at you; yep, he’s up to something.

Five minutes later he pulls to a stop in front of an old, abandoned barn. Bucky flashes a smile at you before shutting off the ignition, getting out of the car, and crossing to the other side to open your door for you.

“Such a gentleman,” you murmur, pressing a soft kiss to his lips when you stand.

He takes your hand and gives you a lopsided smile before whispering your name. “Would you do the honor of allowing me to take you out on a date?”

“What?” you ask with a small laugh while smiling up at him. It’s dark save for the car’s interior light, but the lack of light does nothing to hide the sparkle in Bucky’s eyes.

He repeats his question, drawing his lower lip between his teeth again.

“Absolutely,” and you no more than have the word out before he’s leading you by the hand to the sliding door of the barn.

Looking down, you suddenly realize that a path has been shoveled so you aren’t walking in ankle deep snow.

Bucky lets go of your hand so he can pull the door open, and you gasp in disbelief at what you see inside.

Candles. At least fifty candles are gently lighting the interior of the barn, and as he guides you through the door with a soft, “Ladies first,” you can hear soft music playing. As he shuts the door behind you, your jaw drops as you take in what you see. There’s a portable space heater taking the chill out of the air, and not too far from it there’s a folding table with two chairs. There’s a bottle of your favorite wine (how did he remember? You’ve only mentioned it once), a small, sweetly simple bouquet of lavender and white roses, paper cups and plates, and…is that a bag from McDonald’s?

After securing the door, Bucky takes you by the hand and leads you to the small table while you look around with wide eyes. “Bucky,” you breathe, “I can’t believe you did this.”
“I’ve wanted to do this for a while, Doll. It’s not right that I haven’t taken my best girl out on a date yet.” He smiles brilliantly at you as he continues holding your hand, “But until we were able to crack at least a small portion of Krakken’s intel, it just wasn’t safe. Thanks to Wanda’s Thanksgiving miracle, I was able to plan this. I actually wanted to do it on Wednesday after your last exam, but you weren’t feeling well.” He rubs his thumb across your cheek and kisses you softly before continuing, “But I also didn’t want to miss what might be my only opportunity. So here we are.”

“But…but how did you do this?” Almost speechless and practically sputtering the few words you can find, you continue looking around the interior of the barn. It’s absolutely lovely in here; a perfectly romantic setting, but how did he pull this off? He’s been with you all day today…right?

“Well, technically Steve did this. He’s about seventy-five yards away, keeping watch, and he’s the one that set everything up for me.”

You shake your head in wonder at the man standing before you. “You’re incredible…this…this is incredible.” You know you have a stupefied smile on your face, and you don’t care. You just cannot believe anyone would do something like this for you, and you feel your eyes fill with tears.

“Don’t cry, Sweetheart,” he murmurs, stepping closer to you when a tear escapes. “If I could, I’d do this for you every day until the end of forever,” he says as he gently wipes the tear away with his thumb.

You reach up to cradle his face in your hands, and, as always, he leans into your touch. You pull him down for a kiss, savoring the moment as his lips move against yours.

“I love you,” you murmur against his lips. You mean it, but these three words do so little to convey how you truly feel.

“I love you,” he replies as he pulls away and steps behind you, planting a kiss on your neck as he moves.

“May I take your coat?” he asks with his lips close to your ear; you don’t trust your voice, so you just nod. He gently slides it off your shoulders and places it over another folding chair off to the side before removing his own. Bucky pulls your chair out for you, and makes sure you’re comfortably seated before taking his own seat across from you.

“I, uh, I know McDonald’s isn’t exactly fine dining, but Steve can’t cook for shit and I wanted it to be a surprise. And edible. We still have to fly under the radar, so a drive thru was our only option. And I know these aren’t your favorite flowers, but right now lilacs aren’t in season anywhere in the world.”

You cannot wipe this stupid smile off your face, and you hope your sincerity shows in your eyes because you mean every last word you’re about to say, “Buck, these flowers are gorgeous, and honestly, you could have brought Lunchables and a fistful of dried grass and I still would have thought this is the best thing anyone’s ever done for me. This is amazing, Love. You’re amazing. Thank you so, so much.”

Oh, the smile on his face when you said that – it could make the sun jealous.

“Well…let’s eat, then,” he announces grandly as he begins unbagging the food and pouring the wine.

The lukewarm food and chilled wine are, hands down, the best meal you’ve had in ages simply
because of what Bucky had done for you.

He stands when you're finished eating and extends a hand to you. “Would you give me the pleasure of dancing with me?”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” you reply as you take his hand and step into his waiting embrace.

You and Bucky dance the night away in the middle of a candlelit barn, and it is quite easily one of the best nights of your life.

***

The next couple of weeks are fantastic. You’re finally feeling better (you credit the date, but Bucky insists it’s coincidence – you know better) and since you no longer have the burden of homework and studying, you take full advantage and throw your Christmas baking into full swing. Frosted sugar cookies, molasses cookies, peanut butter stars, sea salted caramels, gingerbread men, Russian teacakes…you do it all. This is how your grandma does Christmas, and this is how you do Christmas; quite a few of the recipes you use come from her. The entire house smells like a confectionary, and you unintentionally have pretty much every single Avenger eating out of the palm of your hand – something by which Bucky is alternately amused and annoyed.

“Barton, don’t you have somewhere else to be?” Bucky growls one late afternoon.

“What? No, Sam’s running surveillance now, why?” Clint replies innocently enough before turning his attention back to you with a smile.

You laugh a little under your breath as you shake your head – Clint has been seated at the kitchen table for the last hour and a half, surreptitiously eating Bucky’s favorite cookies that are cooling on the table. He’s in a really good mood, and has been chatting with you while you bake; you know it’s innocent, but you can see how Clint's joviality could be mistaken for flirting.

“Because I’m tired of watching you give googly eyes to my girl.”

“What? No! I’m just enjoying the good company,” Clint says while throwing a wink in your direction.

“Don’t poke the bear, Clint,” you gently chastise as you deftly move hot cookies from the pan to a cooling rack. “I’m pretty sure Buck has at least 30 ways to kill you with a toothpick.” You put the pan down before taking Bucky’s face in your hands, “I promise I’ll make you your own batch, okay?” you soothe before pressing a kiss to his forehead. You don’t miss how he turns to Clint to stick out his tongue as you turn back towards the oven; you giggle and shake your head as you scoop more dough onto the waiting pan.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Hello! This chapter contains explicit/adult material. For a PG-13 version, please visit my Tumblr page:


Tony is absent this week; it's the anniversary of his parents' death, and it's really better for all involved if he and Bucky are not around one another. You do your best to distract Bucky, and you're mostly successful. This, however, is the week that he decides that you'd benefit from training with others.

"Doll, you're great at falling and taking hits from me, but I think it will round things out if you train with someone else, too. You'll have to think more on your feet since our attack styles are all different."

You nod and go along with it – you know that this is his way of coping with what happened; since the Starks' death is on his mind, it's only natural that he's more protective of you. In this, he's got more in common with Tony than he'd care to admit.

You train first with Clint, then Sam. As it turns out, Bucky is absolutely right – you'd gotten used to his tells, and so it was getting almost easy to absorb, deflect, or even avoid his hits altogether (not that he was using anywhere near his full strength, but still…you'd made significant progress). On the other hand, Sam and Clint were completely different, not only in fighting styles but also body language. You left the training area with a few more bruises than usual after working with the other guys, but it was validating to see how far you'd come. You can safely fall like a champ, at least.

"You alright, Doll?" Bucky asks as you slowly climb the stairs.

"Yeah, I think so," you nod as you stretch your arms. "I should still have an hour or so before the boys wake, so I'm going to go soak in the bathtub for a while."

Bucky misses the last step up and almost trips, and you turn to him with an amused look; he gets like this almost every time you mention taking a bath.

"Did you get distracted there, Sergeant?" you ask with a smirk, knowing damn well why he tripped. "Care to join me?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Doll."

* * *

The days pass quickly and before you know it Christmas Eve has arrived, and you're at the kitchen table trying to get the boys' presents from Santa wrapped so you can get ready for bed. You've been busy all day today getting things ready for tomorrow, and you can feel the start of a headache coming on.
“Hey, Doll,” Bucky exclaims as he walks in from outside; he’d been making tracks in the snow to look like Santa’s sleigh and reindeer had landed in the yard. He stops short when he sees your handiwork, “Oh my God, you are terrible at that.”

“I know,” you agree with a nod and a giggle as you add another piece of scotch tape to the corner to mask a tear in the paper. It’s completely true – you’ve NEVER been good at wrapping presents.

You hear a set of footsteps coming from the front door. “Hey Kiddo, I’m baaaa-” Tony cuts off mid word when he sees you at the table. “Oh my God, you are failing miserably in the Santa’s-little-elf department.”

“Yeah, Bucky just informed me of that very obvious fact,” you reply drily as you roll your eyes. “Welcome back, by the way.”

“Thanks Kiddo. Hey, where are the cookies?” he asks, looking around. “I know there’ve got to be some around here somewhere.”

“Hidden in the pantry,” you reply as you reach for another roll of wrapping paper.

Bucky shakes his head as he gently takes your wrist in his hand, “No, you need to find something else to do. It’s only gonna take the boys a year or two to figure out that the presents from Santa are wrapped just as horribly as the ones from their mom…and then they’ll put two and two together. Don’t steal the magic from their Christmas. From now on, wrapping presents is my job. Go.” He waves you away before staring disdainfully at the gifts you’ve wrapped, and starts unwrapping the ones that say they’re from Santa.

You’d normally be slightly offended (okay, probably not because you know it’s true), but you’re actually pretty happy to not have to deal with it anymore.

“Hey, Sweetheart,” Bucky says softly, turning away from his task and watching you carefully. “Why don’t you take some Advil and lie down on the couch for a while, and just enjoy the Christmas tree or a movie. I’ll come sit with you when I get these wrapped and under the tree.”

You tilt your head and look at him quizzically; you haven’t mentioned anything, so how does he know you have the start of a headache? It’s really not that bad. Yet.

He turns toward you, cradling your face in his hands before he answers your unspoken question, “I can see it in your eyes.”

“Oh God, Barnes, you’re so soft around her. See what you did?” he asks you pointedly as he shoves a molasses cookie into his mouth. His haughty demeanor suddenly drops and his entire face changes as he stops for a second before resuming his chewing. “Kiddo…where did you get this recipe?”

“For the molasses cookies?” you ask while turning towards him, not entirely sure how many different cookies he’s already eaten and possibly talking about.

Tony nods. “This is my mom’s recipe; how did you get it?” He almost looks like he’s going to cry.

“It’s my grandma’s recipe. Which I think, technically speaking, comes from the original Betty Crocker cookbook from the early 1950s – so it’s very possible that it’s your mom’s.” You follow it to the letter, but somehow yours never taste as good as Grandma’s do.

Tony just nods, lost in his thoughts and maybe his memories.
“GodDAMN it, Clint,” Bucky growls from the cupboard by the sink.

“What’s wrong, Buck?” you ask as you turn toward the agitated man.

“That idiot took the last of the Advil, and just left the empty bottle up here! Doll, I’m so sorry, but we don’t have anything here for you to take. I’ll order some now, but we won’t get it until tomorrow morning.” He shakes his head, “I’d send Steve to get some for you, but Krakken’s men are back in the area. We can’t risk anyone being seen.”

Tony turns to you with a sharp look in his eye; he is very aware of your headaches since he also has been trying to find something to bring you comfort. “Do you have one now, Kiddo?”

You can feel Bucky watch you, as if daring you to lie and say that you’re fine, which happens to match the expression on Tony’s face. Heaving a heavy sigh, you nod, “Yeah, I have the start of one.”

“Alright, I’ll take care of it. Listen to your metal armed lover boy and go lie down on the couch,” Tony instructs as he takes out his phone (can you even call that gadget a phone? It’s a serious multitasker) and makes a call.

Bucky shoots you a look and makes it quite clear that you’re outnumbered, so you do as you’re told.

“Hi, Evelyn? How are you, sweetie? This is Tony,” he begins in a honeyed voice. “I apologize for the short notice, but it’s urgent…I was wondering if you could run to the store and grab some Advil for me…Can you have it at the drop site within the hour? Perfect…Thanks Evelyn…Merry Christmas to you, too.”

“Tony, how close are these people?” Bucky sounds concerned. “Was it really a good idea to call?”

“Evelyn is four towns to the north – she is, well, she was one of my mom’s friends from grade school. She’s been in my employ for the purpose of discreetly purchasing goods on my behalf for years - she can be trusted. And as such, the drone should drop off the Advil in no more than an hour and fifteen minutes. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be in my workshop.”

Tony sounds a little raw, and understandably so. This must be a really tough time of year for him, and being under the same roof as Bucky can’t be easy. You’re glad he’s here, though; you know he still misses Pepper, and spending the holiday in New York without her would be extremely painful and lonely for him.

You can hear his footsteps get closer, and then you feel a blanket being carefully draped over you. “Feel better, Kiddo. Let me know if it gets worse.”

“I will, thanks Tony,” you say as you smile up at him.

You must have drifted off to sleep, because the next thing you’re aware of is Bucky kneeling next to you with a bottle of water and some Advil.

“Here, Doll, take these,” he whispers as your eyes slowly open.

You do as he says, and grab his hand as he turns to go back to the kitchen. “Where are you going? I thought you were gonna come cuddle with me?”

He chuckles a little at your sleepy voice, “Doll, I have one more present to wrap, and then I’ll be over. I promise.”
You look up at him with a raised eyebrow. “It took you this long to wrap those presents? You know, I might not have the best presentation, but at least I’m quick.”

He doesn’t reply, he just smiles and raises your hand to his lips before walking back to the table.

Five minutes later you’re curled up against Bucky’s chest in your normal spots, watching Christmas movies. It’s the best Christmas Eve ever.

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The boys show no mercy; they’re up at the buttcrack of dawn, as usual. They’re still a bit on the little side to fully grasp the whole Santa concept, so at least they weren’t up a whole lot earlier than usual…but still. You and Bucky were up a little later than you should have been last night. Again. Totally worth it, though.

Christmas Day is a bit quieter than Thanksgiving was; Clint and Nat are with his family so there are less people in the house.

Much to your surprise, Tony, Sam, and Steve were all awake and waiting for you when you came downstairs with the boys. And the presents under the tree seem to have multiplied overnight…seriously, these boys have no idea how loved they are. It’s a thought that brings you comfort when they ask if everyone is going to Grandma’s today.

Thankfully, Tony was ready for a distraction at that particular moment. “Hey guys, take a look at this! I can see where Santa landed!!”

As the boys run over to the window to see where Tony is pointing, Bucky turns to you with a wink. You smile up at him as he pulls you into a hug, offering you the solace you need to keep the tears at bay.

“You okay?” he whispers in your ear.

You nod before pressing a kiss to his cheek. “I’ve got all of my favorite boys here. I’m good,” you promise.

When you get closer to the living area, Sam, Steve, and Tony all walk up to you to give you a “Merry Christmas,” along with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, Merry Christmas to you, too,” you smile at each of them. Yes, you’re going to be just fine today.

Tony turns to you with wagging eyebrows. “Presents now?” he asks, and the look on his face is so ridiculously childish and hopeful that you couldn’t have denied him if you wanted to.

“Let me throw the caramel pull-aparts in the oven, get some coffee, and then we can get started,” you promise as you laugh, but then Steve hands you a steaming cup of coffee as Sam heads to the kitchen.

“Alright, what am I doing?” he asks, ready and waiting for commands with exaggerated movements.

“Okay, well first of all I think you can switch to decaf,” you advise as you snort out a laugh, “and then you can set the oven for 350 degrees and put the pans in; leave the tin foil on.”

He snaps a salute before announcing, “Consider it done!”
You shake your head at the grown men that are acting positively giddy. It’s going to be an amazing day, you can tell.

***

Yep, it was an amazing day, and now things are starting to wind down. The boys have been in bed for about an hour, you’ve all enjoyed each other’s company and some wine, and everyone is starting to get quiet.

Tony suddenly takes it upon himself to push everyone else out.

“Ya know, Barnes…the kids are in bed, there’s a nice fire going in the fireplace, the lights on the Christmas tree are quite lovely although not nearly as lovely as your girl; it’d be a shame to waste such a romantic setting…” Tony drones drily as he pours himself another glass of wine. “Cap, you’re on surveillance duty, right?” He continues at Steve’s nod, “And Sam’s already at the outpost 25 miles away…I think I’m gonna retire to my workshop for the evening. Merry Christmas, everyone.” He takes a few cookies and disappears up the stairs.

Steve smiles at his longtime friend and stands, “I’m…uh…I’ll be working surveillance in the formal dining room.” He blushes as he adds, “With the door shut and the radio on.”

“Oh my God,” you mutter, burying your head in your hands.

“Aw, Doll, you’re so cute when you’re slightly mortified,” Bucky chuckles.

“Slightly?” you squeak, “Buck, they just…” you can’t even finish the sentence. You appreciate the gesture, but did they have to be so damn obvious about it?

“Steve probably won’t be able to look you in the eye for the rest of the week,” he snickers.

“It’s probably mutual,” you admit, leaning in to Bucky’s embrace.

“Hey…I…um…I have something for you,” he whispers in your ear.

You pull away to look at him because there’s something in his voice…

“I…I didn’t want to give this to you in front of everyone else,” Bucky admits as he pulls a small, flat box from his pocket. “Open it,” he encourages softly; he sounds like his heart is in his throat; it’s certainly in his eyes.

You unwrap the small package and remove the top of the box. Nestled in black velvet is the most beautiful necklace you’ve ever seen. It’s stunning in its simplicity; two rings and one disk fitting inside one another to create a solid circle that’s a little less than an inch across. Each piece is a different texture and carries a sparkling stone, save for the center disk that has two.

He pulls you closer, pointing to each element of the charm as he describes its meaning. “The middle piece,” he points to the brightly polished silver disk with two stones, “represent the boys.”

Realization suddenly washes over you. “These are birthstones…”

Bucky nods. “The inner ring represents you,” he points to the textured, yet still shiny silver piece containing your birthstone, “and the outer ring represents me, surrounding the three of you.” You recognize the aquamarine set in the frosted silver ring as the stone for March. “And,” he swallows before continuing; he almost looks nervous, “it’s made from an old plate from my arm, so no matter what, you’ll always have something of me with you.”
You sit for a moment, completely stunned, before you’re able to speak. “Bucky…this…this is amazing,” you breathe, “I absolutely love it, thank you.”

“Yeah?” The smile on his face, God, you live for this smile.

You nod, “Yeah.”

“Turn around, Sweetheart, and I’ll put it on you.”

You turn your back to him as he delicately brushes your hair out of the way. He fastens the chain around your neck, pressing a kiss where your neck meets your shoulder after he does so, and you immediately reach up to touch the charm. It’s perfect.

You turn to him and he captures your lips with a kiss, but you reluctantly pull back after a moment.

“I have something for you, too.” You’re almost breathless, and it’s not just from the kiss.

“You got me a present?” he asks, sounding absolutely shocked. Sometimes you forget that simple gestures such as this can still catch him off guard.

“Of course I did, silly. I…it’s actually…you’ll see,” you stutter as your heart moves to into your throat.

He opens the box with a goofy grin on his face, but the smile falls from his face and his eyes grow wide when he sees what’s inside.

He gently takes the chain, holding it up in front of him to better see the set of identification tags.

You start to fiddle with your hands as you begin to explain, “They, um, they’re replicas of your tags from the war. Steve gave me the info.”

Bucky just stares at them, but you don’t even spare them a glance. You know them by heart.

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“Well, they’re kind of replicas,” you continue, “one of the tags is, but the other isn’t a duplicate, like a set of standard issue tags would be. The second tag –“

“My initials, your initials, and the boys’…with our birthdates…” he finishes for you as he rubs his thumb over the debossed letters and numbers.

You take a deep breath, “Buck, I just…I know who you are. I think I know you better than I know myself, actually. But I, um, just in case something happens to me and I’m not around to tell you on your bad days, I wanted you to always have a physical reminder of who you are, and that I love you. All of you. So your tag, of course, is you, from before. The tag with our initials represents now; it stands for us, your family, and your home. And,” you pause for a moment to shake your head at the synchronicity of you and Bucky, “I had the tags and chain made out of the same type of metal as your arm.” His eyes flash to yours, and you can’t quite place the emotion in them.

“Because, Buck, it’s part of you, part of who you are. And I love and accept that part of you, too.”

“Put them on me?” he suddenly asks in a gravelly voice.

You nod slowly as you take them from his hands and settle the chain gently over his head. He
holds the tags tightly in his right hand for a moment before tucking them into his shirt and pulling you close.

“Thank you,” he murmurs into your hair, and his voice breaks when he says your name. “I love you so damn much.”

You pull away just a bit so you can meet his eyes, “I love you, too, Buck.” You might have said more, but his lips were suddenly moving against yours, and being kissed by him is so much better than talking.

He pulls back, softly brushing a lock of hair behind your ear as he gazes at you with eyes that are both hungry and thirsty and so, so full of love.

“SUNDAY,” Bucky begins without looking away, “will you please turn off the AV feeds to the main living areas?”

“Tony already gave the order, dear. Have a good evening.”

You shake your head a bit in disbelief, “Who knew Tony would make such a good wingman?”

Bucky snickers before he leans in to kiss your lips once, twice, and then gently pulls you over to straddle his lap. He deepens the kiss as he momentarily holds you by the waist before gliding his hands up, touching everything in their path until he’s got your face bracketed in his hands. Your hands are running through his hair, and after a few moments you both need to break away from the kiss to catch your breath.

“I love you so much,” he murmurs, resting his forehead against yours.

“I love you more,” you reply, moving to press a kiss to his nose.

“I love you most,” he counters, and before you can utter another word his lips are on yours again before he moves his mouth along your jaw to that spot on your neck that turns you into a moaning puddle.

“Bucky,” you sigh as your hips move of their own volition, pressing into Bucky’s lap and then against his growing erection.

He groans at your movement, and moves his hands down until he’s gripping the backs of your thighs to pull you even closer to him while you recapture his mouth with yours. Bucky touches you everywhere as you begin to grind against him, giving you both the friction you equally crave. He moves his hands along the waist of your jeans until he’s under your shirt, running his palms up and down your back before moving to the front to cup your breasts while you gently nip at his ear.

Reaching down, you grab the hem of his shirt and gently tug up, softly running your fingertips along his side as you remove his top; he shivers at your touch and lifts his arms so you can pull the material over his head. He pauses for a moment to look at you with those beautiful bedroom eyes before he follows suit and begins to take off your shirt just as slowly.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he mutters before burying his face in your cleavage; you’re wearing the lacy black bra that you know he loves. Bucky kisses the tops of your breasts as he simultaneously unhooks your bra strap, removing the garment so he has better access.

You can’t help the breathy sigh that escapes you or the twitch of your hips as he takes a nipple into his mouth and sucks while his hand caresses your other breast. He abruptly stops his movements before pulling you close for another passionate kiss before growling “Mine…you’re mine,” in your
ear, and then moving once again to your neck.

Gently tugging on his hair, you whisper in his ear, “Yes, I’m yours, all yours,” while continuing to move against him.

Bucky suddenly rises, taking you with him. You move your arms to encircle his neck while he holds you up by your thighs, and moves to the floor in front of the fireplace where the boys had a few blankets spread for watching movies. He gently lays you on top of the soft material, cradling himself between your thighs as he begins moving against you and kissing your neck, cheek, jaw, lips; anything he can get his mouth on while you run your hands over the corded muscles in his back. All thoughts not related to him are completely removed from your mind, and you let out a breathy sigh when you feel his mouth move lower as he begins to suck kisses at your collarbone, leaving a few marks that will be easily hidden by your shirts. He shifts himself lower as he moves to your breasts, then your stomach until his stops to unbutton your jeans, removing them and then his own.

“I love you, Buck,” you murmur, watching him.

He choking out your name before kneeling again between your thighs while he runs his hands up your stomach and over your breasts, finally resting his hands at each side of your head. “I love you so damn much, Sweetheart.”

You briefly bite your lip as you grab the glinting silver tags hanging between the two of you and gently pull him down so that you can reach his mouth with your own. Hooking your legs around his, you kiss him fiercely as you hold him as tightly to you as you possibly can, using the leverage to press your core against his straining erection.

Bucky groans at the feeling as he presses right back, the only thing separating the two of you are the thin layers of your panties and his boxers.

He pushes back, returning to a kneeling position as he removes your underwear, and then settles on his stomach. He rests his weight on his forearms, gazing at you for a long moment before moving his head down and pressing a kiss to your clit.

You immediately gasp and buck your hips up at the contact; he always has this effect on you. He licks from your entrance to your clit once, twice, three times before dipping his tongue inside you. Your hands grab the blankets at your side, and you know without looking that your knuckles are turning white. You can hear him moan in pleasure, sucking and kissing at every bit of you and it makes you writhe with desire; he knows exactly what he’s doing to you. You release a groan of your own when you feel his fingers playing at the edges while his tongue laves against your clit, and you inhale sharply when two of his fingers press in and curl up. As he pumps in and out of you, your hands to go to his hair to gently tug at his strands while his mouth puts more and more pressure on your most sensitive area.

You fall apart unexpectedly, your orgasm taking you completely by surprise as you gasp out his name while he holds you steady. When you finally come back to yourself, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as he crawls back up to you, removing his boxers as he does so. You reach down to take him in your hand, but he takes hold of your wrist in a gentle grasp before your searching fingers can wrap around his length.

“Nuh-uh. Tonight’s all about you, Sweetheart,” he whispers in your ear, sending a shiver up your spine as he positions himself above you. “Are you ready for me?” he asks with a gravelly voice.

You can only nod and swallow thickly before he moves his tip to your waiting entrance, teasing for
a moment before he finally presses in. You both release a moan of pleasure at the feeling, and he buries his face in your neck while he waits for you to adjust. You begin moving under him, and he presses kisses to your soft, warm skin before moving back to your lips.

He sets a leisurely pace, keeping himself low and dragging his firm body against your clit with every single slow thrust. You hold him close and wrap your legs around his thighs, content to let him set the rhythm. He knows how to play your body; he’s set everything to memory and he never wastes an opportunity to make you feel his love.

Your second orgasm is a slow build; you gaze into each other’s eyes while Bucky steadily brings you closer and closer to the edge. He’s still keeping a controlled pace and he never falters, even when you reach your release and tumble over the edge.

He watches your face the entire time, biting his lip as his pupils are blown wide with lust, and stills when the sensitivity makes his movement momentarily too much for you to handle. As you come down from your high, he simply lays on top of you, covering your with his body as he supports most of his weight with his elbows. He brushes a stray curl from your face and drops sweet kisses to your face, a gentle smile playing at his lips the entire time.

“Ready for number three?” he asks in a rough whisper.

You grin up at him and nod with your lower lip caught in your teeth; you know what’s coming, so you allow him shift and pull you on top of him while maintaining your intimate connection.

You lean down to press a kiss against his lips as you slowly start moving against him; you know without looking that he’s curling his toes. Bucky sighs in contentment and closes his eyes for a long, blissful moment as you ride him, gliding your hands up and down his chest and leaning over periodically to kiss whatever your mouth can reach.

By now you know how to play his body just as well as he does yours, so you slowly start moving your hips in the rhythmic circular motion that you know drives him absolutely crazy. As expected, he momentarily throws his head back as he firmly grips your hips before looking back up to you. Watching him like this – it’s one of the best views in the entire world.

He’s moving his hands all over your body, squeezing and kneading your breasts and your ass, gripping your hips, and sliding his hands up and down your thighs. “Sweetheart,” he begins roughly and breathlessly, “you’re so fucking…fuck!…amazing at this.”

You look down at him, knowing you’ve got a hungry look in your eyes that matches his own. “So you’ve said,” you reply throatily; despite your best effort, your own voice is not unaffected and you know he hears it when he gives you a feral grin.

Bucky firmly grabs your ass and pulls you forward, thrusting even deeper into you as he urges you to move faster. You’re more than happy to comply; the pressure has been building and coiling at your core, and you want to give him his release as much as he wants to give you yours. You don’t even recognize the moment that you both lose control, you only know that yours and Bucky’s staccato rhythms complement the other’s flawlessly by giving and taking in perfect measure.

The sounds he makes as you bring him to his release set you off as well, and your movements become beautifully chaotic as you lose yourselves in one another and chant the other’s name like a prayer while you both soar.

When you’re both finished with the aftershocks of your highs, you slowly pull off, mindful of his current state of sensitivity. Before you can move too far, he tugs you down into his embrace before
grabbing at a blanket to cover you both. You lie with your arm around him and your ear against his racing heartbeat as you each catch your breath, and he runs his fingers up and down your back in a soothing motion.

Bucky is the first to break the silence. “You know I’ll be by your side every step of the way, right? No matter what happens, I’ll be right here with you. If we can stay here, I’m staying with you. If we have to run, I’m running with you.”

You nod against his warm skin.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you and the boys safe, whatever it takes. As far as I’m concerned, nothing is off limits.”

You move so you can look him in the eyes. “I really hope it doesn’t come to that,” you murmur as you delicately trace the lines of his face. “I don’t want you to lose yourself in the process of trying to save me.”

“Sweetheart,” he begins as he tenderly brushes some hair out of your eyes, “losing you would be losing myself. If it spared your life, I don’t think there’s anything I could do that I’d regret; you being alive is the only justification I’d need.”

You quietly gaze at one another in the flickering light of the low fire still burning in the fireplace.

“Well, keep in mind that I can’t lose you either, Love. I,” your breath catches in your throat and you have to swallow without continuing, “I can’t do this without you.”

Bucky sits up at the sight of your unshed tears and pulls you into a rough embrace. “Hey, hey,” he soothes, “you won’t have to, I promise. I’ll be right here. Just like the necklace you’re wearing – I’ll always be with you, around you. Protecting you. I promise.”

You sit together, giving and taking the comfort offered by your shared closeness and murmured I love yous.

“We should probably go upstairs,” he eventually whispers in your ear, “Stevie had a lot of soda tonight, and he can’t leave that room as long as we’re out here.”

You break out in sudden laughter at the thought of Captain America doing the potty dance. “Yeah, you’re probably right,” you agree, as you both rise from the floor to gather your scattered clothes to dress for the trip to the bedroom.

You’re halfway up the stairs when you hear Steve opening the door to the formal dining room with a muttered, “Thank God,” and the sound of hurried footsteps.

Bucky snickers as he continues guiding you up the stairs and into your bedroom.

Once the door is closed, he pulls you close and whispers, “One more time?”

Your only response takes the form of your lips against his.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Things are going to start getting dark - if you have any triggers, PLEASE make sure you check over the tags for anything that might trigger you.

The cold settles deep into your bones while the thick snow swirls all around you, but no matter how hard you try you just can’t find Bucky. He’d bolted at the mention of Zola’s name, and you don’t blame him at all. The things that monster put Bucky through…it would be enough to make any man run. But where did he run to? It feels like you been looking forever. You need to find him, but it’s so cold.

So incredibly cold.

You keep searching, but the snow blinds you to everything; you don’t even know where the house is anymore. It’s behind you, right? But it’s not…or if it is, you can’t see it. You think you can see two, maybe three feet in front of you. Unable to get your bearings, you start yelling out Bucky’s name again, hoping and praying he’ll answer you. When you don’t hear a reply, you feel the panic start to set in. “Bucky!” Your voice sounds muffled – insulated by the white blanket falling around you. Can he hear you? “BUCKY!”

No answer.

Turning around yet again, you notice that you’ve started shivering, and you’re not sure if it’s from the cold or from fear. Hugging your arms tightly around yourself, you keep walking. Eventually you will either run into the woods, the lake, or the house. Right?

It feels like you’ve been walking for hours, and your feet have long since gone numb from the freezing temperatures. Looking down, you realize that you aren’t wearing shoes. Why aren’t you wearing shoes? You aren’t wearing much of anything, actually. A tank top and pajama pants are your only insulation from the freezing wind, and they do nothing to protect you from the elements. You won’t turn back, though; the man you love is out here somewhere. He needs you, so you need to get to him. That’s all there is to it.

Where is Bucky?

Are those trees ahead of you? Yes. The moment you step into the woods, the snow stops and you can finally see. You think you hear…something… Arms still wrapped around yourself to try to keep some tiny bit of warmth in your body, you start walking towards the noise.

The farther you walk the more you think you recognize the sound of Bucky’s grunts, but it’s hard to tell because there haven’t been any actual vocalizations. It also doesn’t help that the sound of your chattering teeth is filling your ears.

You trip over something, and God, it hurts when you hit the ground because you’re so damn cold. It feels like your hands shattered on impact, but when you look down you can see that they are still intact. Slowly getting up, you turn. What did you trip over?
Oh God.

No. No. No no no no no no no.

Nat’s lifeless body lies on the ground, twisted into impossible angles. Staring with disbelieving eyes, you swallow hard and back away until you feel something cold and hard against your back. Turning around, you scream upon seeing Clint’s body hanging from a tree. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you register that his body is in the same position as the superhero Christmas ornament he’d received from Tony when you were all trimming the tree. You see his bow on the ground and lunge for it; you grew up in a family of hunters, you know how to use a bow. Maybe you can protect yourself from whatever is out here…

But you can’t use this one. Of course you can’t; Clint is left-handed. Even if he wasn’t, you can’t pull it back; the draw weight is much higher than what you can handle. Even if this was your own bow, your fingers are frozen and you aren’t wearing your wrist release. You’d be fucked no matter what.

You’re numb to everything but the cold. You know can’t allow this to affect you; you need to find Bucky.

Squeezing your eyes shut at the sight of your friends’ bodies, you continue towards the noises. You think you see a flash of silver…Bucky? You take off at a run, paying little attention to the branches in your path; you’re probably getting pretty cut up by the things you’re running into, but you can’t feel it.

The only thing you feel is the cold.

Then you see it – the abandoned barn that Bucky took you to during that horrible week of migraines. The place where you danced with him by candlelight. But how did you get here? You couldn’t have run this far, could you? Wasn’t it at least twenty miles away? Have you been out in the cold that long?

Your musings are cut short when you see them – Sam, Tony, and Steve. All three of them dead by a single bullet hole through the forehead.

“No,” you breathe, unwilling to admit to yourself what you’re seeing but simultaneously unable to deny it.

There’s noise coming from inside the barn, and now that you’re close you can say with one hundred percent surety that those grunts are Bucky’s.

You pry open the door with frozen fingers, and find Bucky fighting with someone inside the barn. His adversary’s face is mostly hidden in shadows, but you still recognize him from the brief glance you’d gotten of him the night your entire life was turned upside down.

Nicolai Krakken.

Bucky turns at the sound of the barn door opening, and screams your name as Krakken takes advantage of the opening in his guard. He punches Bucky in the side of the face with what looks like a set of brass knuckles, sending him to his knees while Krakken unholsters his gun.

“Such bad luck for you,” he growls, repeating his words from that night, and pulls the trigger when Bucky looks back to him.

Bucky’s head snaps back before his body collapses onto the dirt floor, blood pooling around his
now lifeless form. Ignoring Krakken completely, you run to Bucky and fall to your knees beside him.

“NO! NO NO NO!!!” You think it’s you that’s screaming, but you suppose it could be somebody else. Clutching at him, you know without a doubt that he’s gone – like the three bodies outside, there’s a perfectly round bullet hole in the center of Bucky’s forehead.

There’s a hard hand at your shoulder, shaking you, but you ignore it completely.

“Bucky, no,” you sob, “Please, no! Bucky, I’m so sorry. I love you, please don’t leave me, I need you...”

“Sweetheart.” Wishful thinking; you’ll never hear him call you that again when he’s being extra tender, extra loving, extra gentle.

Krakken takes you by the shoulder roughly shakes you again.

“Sweetheart.” You’re sobbing over his dead body, why does Bucky’s voice sound like he’s worried about you?

It’s suddenly dark, and the barn has disappeared. You’re…lying down?

Another shake, but this isn’t Krakken’s hand. You’d know Bucky’s touch even if you knew nothing else, and suddenly you’re grounded; relief floods through you and you can breathe again when you realize that it was all just a nightmare.

Thank God.

But why are you still so cold if it was just a dream?

“God, you’re burning up...wake up, Sweetheart,” he says into the darkness.

You try – you do, you really try – to answer him, but your mouth won’t form any words. You’re cold. Why are you so cold? Did the heat go out? And oh, God, you ache.

A light flips on, and his tone changes when you still don’t respond. It isn’t that you don’t want to, you just can’t. Everything hurts; you can’t even open your eyes.

Bucky’s voice breaks when he says your name again. “Please, wake up!” The desperation in his voice is palpable, and he sounds scared. Why does Bucky sound scared? Bucky doesn’t get scared. He’s a hero. He’s your hero. Bucky is invincible. Bucky is… Bucky…

Why are you so cold? Why can’t you talk?

The bed shifts, and he’s gone. You have no idea how much time has passed when Bucky comes back – it could be ten seconds, it could be ten hours.

Panic has replaced fear as he chokes out your name again, and you want so badly to acknowledge him, to tell him that you’re fine, that you just hurt and you’re cold.

But you can’t.

You suddenly feel a cold hand on your forehead. Goddamn it, you’re cold enough, and now you’re shivering from whoever touched you with their icicle fingers.

“You’re right - I’ll get Banner on the phone while you take her temp.” Tony? Oh, that’s right, it’s
Tony’s week to stay here. Why is he in your bedroom?

Suddenly there’s another voice filling the area. Is someone else here? It takes a few moments for you to piece together that it’s someone on speakerphone; your mind isn’t working as quickly as you’d like. Something glides over your forehead. The thermometer? Why is it so damn cold in here?

“Banner, she’s got a really high fever, she’s flushed and shaking, and we can’t wake her up. Barnes is taking her temp right now.” Tony’s voice is shaking. He isn’t scared, too…is he?

“God, that can’t be right,” Bucky mutters, and you feel another swipe across your forehead.

“FUCK! Banner, her temp is 106.7, what the fuck do I do?” Bucky almost yells. He sounds so scared, and you want so badly to comfort him but you can’t make your body do anything. Why?

“That’s not just a fever, that’s hyperpyrexia – you need to cool her down, now! I’m on my way, but you need to lower her body temperature as quickly as possible.” You almost want to laugh because Bruce’s voice sounds so tinny and small over the phone; you’ve heard he’s big (what was it that Tony had called him? Big Green Rage Monster?), but right now he sounds itty bitty. You can’t laugh, though. You can’t do anything. And…106.7…that’s a really high fever…

“Barnes, bring her into the bathroom!” Tony sounds so far away.

What? Why? It hurts…

You feel like you’re floating, and it takes a moment for you to realize that Bucky’s carrying you somewhere. You still haven’t managed to open your eyes.

The sound of running water registers in your brain, but it only confuses you further.

There’s shifting, and you’re suddenly being supported from another angle…

“I’ve got her…hold on, Kiddo…get in so you can cradle her from behind and keep her head up.”

You hear…sloshing water? More shifting…those are Bucky’s hands on you, you’d know the feel of his hands anywhere…

The frigid chill that suddenly overtakes you takes your breath away, but only for a moment. The very next second you finally find your voice and let out an earsplitting scream that startles even you. It hurts, God, it fucking hurts because it’s so goddamn cold – you’re suffocating in ice and it’s starting to tear your limbs from your body.

“You’re okay, Sweetheart, you’re gonna be okay…I’ve got you…” His voice is nearby, coming from right behind you, so is Bucky swimming in this frozen hell along with you? Why is he here? Did he follow you?

Distantly, you hear the sounds of fearful crying.

“Momma?” Two tiny, terrified voices in tandem.

Please, God, no. Not them. They can’t be here with you.

Artie.

Jimmy.
You’ll willingly sell off every last piece of your soul to keep them from this.

Tony’s voice…you think…is mumbling something. And now…is that Steve’s voice you hear?

*What is going on?!!*

You’re terrified, you’re in agony, and you’re so, so incredibly cold.

Everything finally, blessedly, goes black.
Chapter 28

It’s an odd place to be – that state of lucid dreaming where you’re conscious of the fact that you are dreaming, but are still within it. You dream that you’re swimming…but it clearly isn’t summer because the water is freezing cold.

It’s cold because it’s winter? Yes, that’s right. Yesterday was Christmas…was it yesterday?…So it’s December. It’s way too cold to swim; if anything, you should be ice skating if the ice is thick enough.

Were you ice skating? Did you fall through the ice? How did you get here?

You feel something cool move against your forehead, followed by a mechanical beep. That doesn’t feel like it’s part of the dream. Are you closer to awake, now?

Someone exhales…in relief? You’re missing something here…

“104.2 – she’s come down quite a bit.” That sounds like Tony.

“But why won’t she wake up?” Bucky.

“I just…I don’t know,” you can hear the resignation in Tony’s voice, and then footsteps.

You’re finally wide awake, and it suddenly becomes very important to you to open your eyes.

You have to concentrate, but if you can just focus…

Your eyelids flutter open and you see that you’re in your bathtub, still wearing the tank and pajama pants you’d pulled on last night before crawling onto the bed and into Bucky’s waiting arms. There’s a set of legs stretched out on either side of yours, and you’re lying against someone…against Bucky…in cold water that comes up to your shoulders. Over to the side you see Tony, hands resting against the vanity counter as he hangs his head. He looks utterly defeated.

You open your mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Swallowing hard, you try again.

“Bucky?” It comes out in a barely audible rasp, but you know he hears you when he starts slightly at the sound and murmurs your name.

Tony immediately stands and rushes over with his eyes locked on your face.

“Is she…” The hope in Bucky’s voice hits your heart, hard.

Tony looks up briefly, you suppose to meet Bucky’s eyes. “Yes, she’s waking,” he confirms before kneeling at the side of the tub. “Kiddo, can you hear me?” he asks as he gently turns your head toward his.

It hurts to nod, but you manage.

Both men let out a giant exhale before Bucky speaks. “Should I keep her in here?”

Tony thinks for a moment before answering, “Let’s get her out of the tub and dried off – she’ll be more comfortable that way, and Banner will likely want to run some tests when he gets here. In fact, I have some medical equipment in my workshop that Banner might need, so we should probably bring her in there – there’s a couch in there that she can rest on – don’t look at me like
that, Barnes, it’s a comfortable couch. It’s where I sleep when I’m here…well…when I sleep. Since her temp is down a bit, I think we can try to manage it with ice packs and fever reducers.”

“Okay,” Bucky pauses before asking, “Why do you have medical equipment in your workshop?”

Tony taps his chest. “Arc reactor maintenance…and I like having stuff,” he admits with a shrug.

You feel Bucky nod an acknowledgement behind you. “Sweetheart, can you sit up?”

“I don’t know,” you mumble. You feel really weak, and the ache that seemed to have made its home in your joints has turned into an excruciating throbbing that bites every time you move. You slowly lean forward, putting your hands on Bucky’s thighs for balance. You manage to sit up, but your head drops forward; it’s too much effort and too painful to keep everything upright. Tony grabs several towels and puts them beside the tub before he moves his hand to your back, supporting you in case you should tip while Bucky carefully climbs out of the tub.

“Barnes, I know you want to help her right away, but you need to dry off first,” Tony instructs as Bucky leans towards you. “We can’t get the floor too wet because it’ll make walking and keeping her balance harder for her, or you if you have to carry her.”

It’s too difficult to move your head, but you see Bucky nod in your peripheral vision as he strips down to his boxers and quickly towels himself off. He disappears momentarily, and you feel a surge of panic as you remember your nightmare.

“Bucky…” you try to lift your head to look for him, but you only see Tony.

“It’s okay, Kiddo, it’s okay. He just went to get you some dry clothes,” Tony murmurs in a soothing tone – he clearly heard the fear in your voice. “Bucky will be right back for you, I promise.”

You give an approximation of a nod, but you can’t stop the tear from sliding down your cheek.

Bucky reenters the room, still dressed in wet boxers and carrying clothes for both of you. “Alright, Doll,” you appreciate the effort, but you can hear the false bravado and cheer in his voice as he speaks, “Let’s get you out of there and into some dry clothes, okay?”

“’kay…” you mutter as you try to brace yourself to sit up. Every move hurts. You have a fairly high tolerance for pain, but this is unlike anything you’ve ever experienced before.

Tony must see you wince. “Kiddo, are you weak or are you in pain?”

“Both,” you manage to get out after a moment. Bucky’s hand replaces Tony’s at your back, and Tony moves to where you can better see him.

“So it isn’t just that it’s hard to move, but it hurts, too?” He’s gently tilting your head up to get a better look at your face.

You bob your head in what you hope they take as a nod. “And I’m so cold.”

Tony nods, “That’s the fever.” He brushes some hair out of your eyes and turns your head slowly and gently toward the light. “Pupils are completely dilated…” he mutters to himself, “and what the hell is causing the pain? The flu wouldn’t hurt this much…”

“I’m not gonna let you try to walk, Doll, I’m just going to carry you,” Bucky suddenly announces. “I don’t want you to hurt.”
You don’t have the heart to tell him that it doesn’t really matter; you’ll hurt anyway.

Bucky carefully lifts you out of the bathtub; it’s a good thing he decided to go this route, because you realize that you wouldn’t have been able to get up yourself if you’d tried. You try not to let it out, God, you try to keep it in, but you can’t stop the cry of pain that comes out as he moves you.

“Oh, Sweetheart,” he murmurs, sounding absolutely brokenhearted at the sound of your pain. “Stark,” Bucky begins, “can you please throw some towels down on one of the chairs in the sitting area? I’d like to keep the bed dry and ready for her if she needs it, and I don’t think she’ll be able to sit at the edge of the tub while I dry her off.”

Tony nods and grabs the towels as well as the stack of clothes Bucky had gathered and brings them into the other room. By the time Bucky gets you there, Tony has blankets laid out on the couch.

“I thought this would be easier for both of you,” Tony explains as he takes his phone out of his pocket. “I’m going to leave now so she can have some privacy, but I’ll be close if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Stark,” Bucky acknowledges with a nod as he gently sets you down on the waiting surface in a seated position with your legs up on the couch. You’re shivering in the cold air; your wet clothes are sticking to you and they feel like ice against your already chilled skin. Bucky first dries your hair as best he can before twisting it into a sloppy bun; he’s trying to keep it from touching you and making you feel even colder. He then peels off your top, drying you quickly with a towel before helping you get into a dry bra and tank, followed by one of his t-shirts. He works as quickly and gently as he can, whispering soothing words of comfort into your ear when the pain is too much for you to hold in.

Neither of you understands why you hurt so fucking much.

Bucky pauses for a moment before continuing on to your bottom half. You both recognize that this is going to require much more movement, resulting in even more pain. “Sweetheart,” he chokes out, sounding like he’s on the verge of tears, “I don’t know how to do this without hurting you.”

“It’s not you that’s hurting me, Love,” you manage to get out, “I just hurt. It’s not your fault. And I’d rather be dry than marinate in old bathwater.”

Your pallid attempt at humor earns the tiniest of smiles; you suppose because it encourages him that you’re still with him. You know that Bucky was terrified when you weren’t able to respond earlier.

“Alright, are you ready for this?”

You nod. “Just ignore me if I decide to be a drama queen.”

Bucky levels a look at you, but keeps whatever is on his mind to yourself. You’re willing to bet that he was going to tell you not to hide behind humor, but what else is there to do?

“You know what?” he suddenly asks brightly, “I’m going to sing to you while I do this. Maybe it’ll help to keep your mind off the pain.” He makes a big production of clearing his throat, causing you to crack a smile. Bucky seems to take that as the only encouragement he needs, as he starts crooning

_Do I want to be with you as the years come and go?_

_Only forever, if you care to know_
Would I grant all your wishes and be proud of the task?

Only forever, if someone should ask

He serenades you for a few lines before he begins moving you, and you close your eyes and try to focus on the sound of his voice. The pain starts cutting like a dull serrated knife inside your body, but you bite your lip and force yourself to listen to him.

How long would it take me to be near if you beckon?

Off-hand I would figure less than a second

Do you think I’ll remember how you looked when you smiled?

Only forever, that’s putting it mild

Five times. He goes through the song five times before he’s finished, and by that time you’re both in tears. He kept singing for you, though, through the entire ordeal. The worst part was when he had to lift your hips to first remove and then replace your panties and bottoms; you couldn’t help the muffled screams that came out, because it felt like you were being ripped in half. Searing pain shot up your spine and down your legs, taking your breath away, and you can honestly say that you’ve never felt anything so excruciating. Those were the moments that he stopped all other movement to cradle your face in his hands. Bucky would be nose to nose and forehead to forehead with you, singing softly as he wiped away your tears.

“Alright Sweetheart, I’m going to move you to the bed now so you can stay dry while I change.”

“Okay,” you whisper as your brace for another onslaught of agony. “Tell me about that song?”

“It’s called Only Forever,” he begins as he slowly slides his arms under your shoulders and knees. “It’s by Bing Crosby, and I think it came out in 1940? Maybe 1939, I can’t remember for sure.” He lifts you slowly and gracefully as he continues talking, “It was before I left for the war. I remember hearing it and thinking that someday I’d like to sing it to the girl I love.” He walks slowly towards the bed while you focus on his voice, using it to keep yourself grounded through the pain. “You’re the first to hear it.” He lays you down gently, wincing when your sharp inhale tells him how much it hurts. “And if I have anything to say about it,” he finishes as he runs gentle fingers over your face, “you’ll be also be the last.”

Your heart skips a beat, and it has nothing to do with your current condition.

Bucky’s eyes grow wide as he stares at you for a long moment. “Did I just say too much?” he asks, sounding unsure.

“What?” How could he say too much?

“I mean, I know we love each other, but I also know that everything’s happened really fast and we haven’t really talked about our future, not that I expect –“ he’s started to babble. It’s adorable, really, the few times you’ve seen it.

“Buck,” you cut him off to save him from himself, “you’re fine.”

He’s quiet, and looks like he doesn’t know what to say as he bites his lip.

“You didn’t say too much, I promise. For the record, it’s not the first time you’ve said something like that, it’s just the first time you caught yourself,” you tell him with a smirk, and you see his eyes
grow even wider. “Bucky, I love you, and that, to me, is a miracle. When I met you, I didn’t believe in love anymore – at least, not this kind of love. I hadn’t for years, actually. I thought the only love I’d have was for my sons, and that any other kind was just a lie. And then you came running into my life, tackling me so I’d be out of the range of gunfire,” you smile gently at the memory. “You quite literally knocked me off my feet.”

A smile starts to grow on Bucky’s face. “I guess I did, didn’t I?”

“You did. Now go get some dry clothes on before you get sick, too.” He leans down to press a kiss to your forehead, and moves to get dressed. “And also for the record,” you murmur softly as you watch him pull on dry underwear, black sweatpants, and a dark red t-shirt, “I wouldn’t mind being the first and last girl to hear you sing that song.”

The look on his face, God, the look on his face when you said that – it is quite simply one of the most beautiful things you’ve ever seen. You are actually able to forget about the pain for a long moment as you gaze at one another with silly, matching smiles.

The moment is interrupted when Tony knocks on the doorframe. “Everyone decent?” he calls quietly.

“Yeah,” Bucky answers as he walks toward you. “Buck,” you murmur softly, “can you please grab a sweatshirt for me? I’m freezing.”

“No can do, Kiddo,” Tony answers from the door before Bucky gets a chance to respond, “You’re still running a very high temperature. We need to keep you cool to prevent you from spiking higher, and unfortunately that means no sweatshirts.” He walks up to you, holding something in his hand. “If we can get your temp below 103, you can have a light blanket. Here’s some Tylenol to help with the fever, and some ice packs to keep you cool; place them at your pulse points.”

You cringe at the thought of ice packs, but you know it can’t be helped.

Tony makes another quick call to Bruce while Bucky helps you take the Tylenol and drink some water.

“Alright, Banner should be here within the next two hours – Clint and Nat just got to the tower to pick him up.” Tony turns to you again, “I, uh, I have something for you if you want it,” he offers hesitantly.

You look at him questioningly as Bucky looks impatient.

“Morphine,” he says as he holds up a syringe. “I brought it for you to try for your migraines, if you got one bad enough to take it. I’m glad I did, because maybe it will help with your pain. If you want to try it – Banner said it should be okay.”

Bucky’s eyebrows almost go up to his hairline, but he just looks to you for an answer. He doesn’t say anything, but you can feel him silently urging you to try it. “I’m game for anything at this point,” you say quietly.

Tony nods and moves towards you as Bucky sighs quietly with relief.

“Wait!” God, how could you have forgotten? “Artie and Jimmy, are they okay? They –“

Bucky interrupts you quickly when he hears the panic creeping into your voice, “They’re fine, Sweetheart, perfectly fine. They were scared for a little bit, but Stevie got them calmed down. He
brought them downstairs to watch a movie to help them fall back asleep.”

“I helped him bring them back to their beds about ten minutes ago,” Tony adds. “They’re sleeping peacefully now.”

You release a breath you didn’t know you were holding. “Alright then, I’m ready for the morphine. Buck, will you hold my hand, please? Needles don’t bother me, but the rush is going to make me feel even crappier for a few minutes.”

“Of course.” Bucky kneels down next to you as Tony wipes your arm with an alcohol wipe to prepare the injection site. Right as the needle goes into your arm, Bucky starts singing Only Forever again, giving you something else to focus on rather than the sensation of nausea and spinning.

Five minutes later, the pain has started to ebb. After receiving the okay from you, Bucky picks you up once again to carry you to Tony’s workshop. He gently lays you down on the couch after Tony places the pillow he’d brought from your room at one of the armrests. Tony strategically plants the icepacks, and after a kiss on the forehead from Bucky, you allow your eyes to close and surrender to the sleep offered by the morphine.
Chapter 29

You know you slept but you can tell that you weren’t sleeping for long. Twenty minutes maybe, half hour tops. Unfortunately for you, narcotics don’t usually knock you out for too long; they actually tend to get you a bit keyed up after a short nap. You’d rather be sleeping, but at least you aren’t groggy.

You look around, noticing that you’re alone. You also notice that you aren’t freezing; you’re chilled, but not unbearably so. Lying motionless is relatively pain free at the moment, so you tentatively flex your ankle. When that doesn’t hurt too badly, you start moving other things.

You certainly don’t feel good, but at least you can move without feeling like you’re being ripped apart by an angry and vindictive dinosaur. It’s an improvement.

The next thing you’re aware of is a pair of arguing voices coming from outside Tony’s workshop. Moving extremely slowly and with an abundance of caution, you get up and walk toward the door; the voices becoming clearer as you get closer.

“I won’t lie to her, Stark.” Bucky sounds like he’s struggling to keep his voice calm.

“It’s not a lie, it’s an omission. This news will only upset her, and she doesn’t need that right now. Besides, you promised that you would protect –“

Bucky cuts Tony off before he can finish the statement, “Yes, and I will protect her – I’ll die fifty times over if that’s what’s required, but withholding information from her is not protecting her! She’s not a child, Stark, and not telling her what we now know is only going to piss her off – you should really know this by now.”

“But he’s –“

“I KNOW what he is, Stark! But goddamn it, why the fuck didn’t we know this earlier? Why didn’t the US government know this earlier?!? Krakken didn’t just rise through the ranks overnight! FUCK, STARK! This is SO GODDAMN BAD!”

“Barnes, I just need some time-“

“Time? You need some time? To do what, exactly? Find a way to tell her that she’s never going to be able to settle down and live a normal life? That she-“

You finally get to the door and open it, startling both men. Looking back and forth between the two of them, you see rage and fear etched on Bucky’s face, and sorrow and resignation on Tony’s.

“What is going on?”

“Sweetheart, you’re up!” Relief floods his eyes and he cracks a smile while Tony walks past you and into his workshop.

You smile back at him and answer his unasked question. “I feel a little better. Not good, but better.”

Bucky wraps you in a tight hug before guiding you back to the couch. “We need to talk, Sweetheart. Nat will be here shortly with Banner and Barton, but she called ahead anyway – she finally got some intel but it’s not good news.”
Tony turns around and shoots a glare at Bucky, but he ignores it. He sits next to you, draping his metal over your shoulder as it to protect you from whatever Tony is about to say. You take advantage of the position and curl yourself into Bucky’s side, trying to absorb whatever body heat you can get from him.

Tony huffs and drags a chair over to the couch so he can sit across from you. “We got some intel.”

“Bucky said as much,” you retort. It annoys you immensely that he had to convince Tony to be honest with you, especially since it probably wouldn’t have worked if you hadn’t walked out when you did.

“Krakken is…he’s not exactly who we originally thought. We knew he ran some organized crime, we knew he did bad things, but we didn’t know until now that he’s actually a Bratva Pakhan,” Tony explains as he rubs his forehead with one hand, “which makes your situation, uh, trickier than previously thought.”

“Bratva…” you repeat as you think – you’ve heard that word before. “Isn’t that basically the Russian mafia?”

Bucky nods, “You can think of it like that, and a Pakhan is essentially the Godfather.”

“Oh, well, shit…” you breathe as the implications suddenly come crashing in and the puzzle pieces come together. “He’s a lot more powerful and influential that you originally thought, isn’t he?”

Both men nod.

“So he could have people anywhere, and you wouldn’t know it because you had no idea his reach stretched so far.”

Again, matching nods.

“It also explains the connection to a higher up at Hydra, doesn’t it?” You don’t bother to look because know they’re nodding, and you close your eyes before speaking again. “And I suppose the only way this will end in my favor is if you manage to kill him and his underlings – but without pissing off any of the other Bratva organizations since they probably work as a network – so you’d actually have to make it lucrative for them business-wise and pray that there aren’t any familial connections. Which means that you’d have to get involved in organized crime in Russia on top of everything else…as if getting to Krakken was easy in the first place.”

You cover your face with your hands, feeling utterly defeated as Bucky lets out a low whistle. “Damn, Doll, you’re good.”

“I used to really be into the Godfather books, and then I ended up doing a 25 page term paper on the mafia for one of my college courses,” you mutter into your hands. “It was so much cooler when it didn’t actively involve me.”

“I’m so sorry, Kiddo,” Tony begins, “this really is my fault. If my intel hadn’t been wrong, we would have been able to stop the murder you walked in on, or, at the very least, prevented you from witnessing it.”

“Speaking of that,” you begin slowly as you lift your head, “something doesn’t make sense to me…why was Krakken even there? Why would he pull the trigger? If he’s that high up, wouldn’t he be directing others? Why would he do the dirty work? I mean, if he’s Vito Corleone, he’s calling the shots from a dark, luxuriously appointed office; he’s not executing the plans.”
“Because,” Tony begins, “we had the wrong Krakken. We thought it was Nicolai, but it wasn’t; it was his younger brother, Anatoliy. Again, bad intel, and they, uh, they look strikingly similar – tall, dark, sinister ugly men. Nicolai has been in Russia the entire time, securing his place as a Pakhan. Anatoliy acts as his Brigadier, or captain, and directs the daily operations. For missions that are high priority, he’d be the one pulling the trigger.”

You give yourself a moment to wrap your brain around the information. Two Krakkens are not better than one. “Alright, not that it matters now, but why’d they murder that guy in the first place?” You might as well know since ignorance is no longer bliss.

“The guy that was assassinated in front of you was a higher up in the US Armed Forces that had considerable influence, and there was another dead guy in the room that we didn’t know about – also high ranking. They framed it as a messy murder-suicide and managed to put two of their own men in power,” Tony explains, “which is why they wanted to…uh…neutralize you, since of course you know that isn’t what happened. That’s still probably part of their motivation now that their objective is to take you alive, but there’s got to be more to it.”

“So basically it’s your standard Take-Over-the-World bullshit,” you state with a heavy sigh, “with a powerful supervillain that might actually be able to accomplish his goal.” Stupid greedy ass people and their stupid goals of world domination.

“More or less,” Tony agrees before adding sardonically, “and don’t forget the icing on the cake; he’s got his very own mad scientist at his beck and call.”

“Awesome,” you mutter. God, this sucks. “Other than the whole inconvenient witness thing, what does he want me for? Did Nat get any intel on that?”

Tony’s eyes flit to Bucky before he answers, “Our best guess is that he plans to use you against us somehow, to either make us or keep us from doing something. We just don’t know for sure.”

You not slowly as you close your eyes and let go of the hope you’d been holding in your heart. You’re never going to see your mom again, or your grandma, or anyone else that mattered to you before this all started. Your boys won’t get to grow up going to Grandma and Grandpa’s house on the weekends, spending holidays with family, or getting together at the park with their cousins. If they get to grow up. Even if they do, will you be around to see it?

Bucky must feel the change in you because he suddenly shifts sideways, pulls you into his lap, and cradles your head against his chest as Tony rises and walks out, guilt practically radiating from him with every step.

And you cry.

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You’re not sure how long Bucky comforts you, rocking you back and forth as you grieve for the future your kids won’t get to have, but he doesn’t let go until your sobs stop and your breathing evens out. Even then he just pulls back a bit to gently wipe the tears from your face.

“I’m so sorry, Sweetheart,” he murmurs into your hair as he pulls you close once again. “I’m so sorry, but I’ll be here with you every step of the way. You know that, right?”

“I know,” you mumble, holding the pendant Bucky gave you tightly in your fist to remind yourself that you still have a family. You exhale as you squeeze your eyes shut. The pain is coming back.
Bucky doesn’t miss anything; he’s ridiculously observant. “Is it getting worse again?”

You nod, and he holds you tighter. There’s really nothing else he can do; it’s too soon for more morphine.

A few moments later you feel Bucky tense, and you become aware of voices in the hall. The door opens, and Tony, Clint, Nat, and a man you haven’t met enter the room.

He steps right up to you, kneeling so he’s closer to your level. “I’m Bruce, it’s nice to finally meet the woman I’ve heard so many good things about. I’m sorry it’s under such horrible circumstances.” His voice is soft, and somewhat soothing. He kind of looks like one of your uncles, and it both hurts and comforts you at the same time.

“Me, too,” you offer with a small smile as Bucky helps you to sit up.

“Tony filled me in on what’s going on, do you mind if I examine you?”

You nod your consent, “Do you need me to move?”

“This should be fine for now,” Bruce says with a smile. You decide you like him; he’s got a gentle spirit that is definitely at odds with what you’ve heard of his alter ego. He turns to the others, “Do you mind giving us a few minutes?” He’s considerate. Yep, you definitely like him.

He waits for everyone but Bucky to shuffle out before he checks your temp; still high at 104 but still an improvement over earlier. Your pupils are still dilated and your heartbeat is still irregular and weak, but at least your lungs sound good. Your blood pressure is low; almost dangerously so. Bruce starts checking your reflexes, and his brows draw together after he taps your leg twice.

“Would you mind helping her to that table?” Bruce asks Bucky as he points to one of Tony’s workbenches. Concern washes over Bucky’s face, but he nods and assists you as you gingerly walk over to the new spot. He lifts you onto the table, and holds your hand as Bruce checks your reflexes again.

You know what’s supposed to happen when that little rubber hammer hits the spot beneath your kneecap; it’s not like this is the first time you’ve had this done. It is, however, the first time nothing happens. Sure, you can feel it, it actually hurts when he does it, but your leg doesn’t move. Neither does the other leg, or your arms when he tests the spots in your elbows.

He doesn’t say anything about it, he just calmly asks you to lie down on the table so he can check your abdomen. That fucking hurt.

“No you mind if I take some blood?” Bruce asks as he and Bucky help you to set up.

“Go ahead,” you nod.

After the blood is drawn, Bucky helps you back to the couch while Bruce gets Tony to help with the analysis. Everyone but Steve files in, as if what they find in the sample is going to somehow solve the mysteries of the universe. You’re considerably less optimistic.

“FRIDAY…pull that up please?” you hear Tony say in the background, and you glance over to see Tony and Bruce staring intently at an image in front of them. His technology is so incredible – it’s amazing, really. They’re talking quietly between the two of them, pointing to things they see while shaking or nodding their heads.
Your attention is captured by the visual, which has suddenly grown in size. Is that your blood? Wow. You rise with a little help from Bucky and slowly make your way over to them; you’ve always found biology fascinating…and hopefully this will help to keep your mind off feeling chilled since no one will allow you to have a damn blanket. Stupid fever. At least you were able to ditch the ice packs; you know Bucky knows, but he’s not pushing the issue.

Bruce and Tony aren’t aware that you’ve moved to stand behind them, which is why you hear the next, hushed statement.

“I don’t know what we’re looking at, Tony, but this isn’t good.”

Bucky stiffens beside you, but before he can form his question the words are already out of your mouth. “What’s not good?”

Tony whips around and opens his mouth to say something, but Bruce speaks first as he turns to you. “Tony, let me try to explain this – you need to get your tech to work on cross-referencing natural and synthetic organisms to see if you can find any possible similarities.” Bruce faces you directly before speaking again, “I’m not sure exactly what we’re looking at, because whatever this is,” he pauses to point at a few dark, misshapen blobs floating in the visual in front of you, “it isn’t a recognized substance in any medical database, and it’s unlike anything we’ve ever seen. It’s too soon to know exactly what these things are doing – we’ll need to observe them a little more – but it looks like they’re systematically destroying certain components of your blood.” He pauses to point at a blob attaching itself to what you assume is a blood cell. “They seem to be particularly drawn to the proteins that make up the membranes of your red blood cells; the loss of the targeted proteins result in the cell being unable to do its job, which is to transport oxygen throughout your body, among other things.” He’s quiet for a long moment, as if unsure of what to say next.

“What else?” Bucky prompts impatiently.

Bruce pulls up a set of numbers, “Your hematocrit counts came back a little low, which supports our hypothesis that whatever it is, it’s also attacking your tissues and organs, including your bone marrow. Because of this, you aren’t producing RBCs fast enough to replace the ones that are no longer functional.” Bruce slowly continues, “In essence, it’s working to either send you into renal failure or suffocate you from the inside out.”

“So whatever it is, it’s killing her?” Bucky asks in a subdued voice as he holds you close to his side. It’s a good thing he’s holding you so tightly; it feels as though the ground has opened up beneath you and you’re not sure if you’d be able to stand on your own. You hear more whispered comments; you’d forgotten that Nat and Clint were here.

“Preliminary predictive algorithms show that that’s exactly what’s happening,” Tony mutters from the center of four floating transparent screens. “It almost behaves like an auto-immune disorder, but it’s a foreign substance attacking you, not your immune system. And, uh, it’s working much faster. FRIDAY, any luck on identifying the test subject yet?”

“No sir, I haven’t been able to find anything even remotely similar to the test subject, but there’s something else you need to know,” the voice advises.

“I told you to allocate all of your resources to figuring out this substance, FRIDAY, there is nothing else I need to know,” Tony speaks in a clipped voice as he drags another screen in front of him.

“I beg to differ, sir, this is important.”
“Not as important as this!” Tony toggles between two images before turning his attention to something Bruce is pointing to. “Clearly I need to reconfigure you to do as you’re told.”

“Sir, it’s Evelyn Sharpe.”

“Goddamn it, FRIDAY, what about her?” he snaps.

“She’s been found dead, sir, about 75 yards away from the drop site.” Without any further prompting, FRIDAY brings up a grisly image of a decapitated woman lying in a frozen pool of blood.

Thankfully that’s all you saw before Bucky roughly turns you and pulls your face to his chest, hiding the view from you. “Jesus Christ, did you really have to show that without a goddamn warning?” he barks before whispering in your ear, “Are you okay, Sweetheart?”

You take a deep breath, deliberately inhaling Bucky’s scent to calm yourself, and release a shaky exhale as you nod. That image will haunt you for the rest of your life.

“The authorities investigating the situation believe she’s been there between 24 and 48 hours,” FRIDAY advises, “which correlates with the timing of the last drop.”

Oh, God. This is your fault. She was there because of you.

“Barnes, get her out of here,” Clint whispers; you feel his hand on your shoulder in an attempt to comfort you, “she doesn’t need to see or hear this.”

“FRIDAY,” Tony begins hesitantly, breathlessly, “please enlarge and enhance the image, focusing on her left hand.” It’s quiet for a moment; you don’t know what he’s looking at because you’ve still got your face against Bucky’s chest. You have no intention of looking, either.

Bucky is turning to guide you away when you hear it.

“Oh my God.” The sound of Tony’s voice lets you know immediately that something is really, really wrong. “FRIDAY, when was this picture taken?”

“Roughly 20 minutes ago, sir.”

You notice that Bucky looks behind you to see what Tony’s looking at, and you even though you can’t see it, you can see the expression on Bucky’s face. Fear. Complete, unadulterated fear.

“What?” Nat’s concerned voice breaks in, asking the question ricocheting through your mind. “What are you seeing that I’m not? All I see is her holding a bottle of Advil.”

Oh God.

“That’s it,” Tony says after a long moment, sounding as if the air has been punched out of him. “But how does she still have it if we received it?”
Chapter 30

Tony suddenly jumps into action, almost running into you and Bucky in his haste.

*Krakken.*

Bucky ushers you to a chair, careful to keep you facing away from the image of the murdered woman until FRIDAY finally closes it at his terse command. There’s still a hand at your shoulder; Clint is following to offer whatever assistance he can.

Tony returns just as quickly as he left, unscrewing the lid from the bottle of Advil you’d received the night before last with shaking hands. He takes out a tablet and sloppily cuts it open with a screwdriver before putting the broken pieces into a small machine. “FRIDAY! Do an analysis on this, now! I need a detailed list of everything you find that *isn’t* a standard ingredient for a drug in tablet form.”

“It’s going to be okay, I promise, we’ll find a way to make it okay,” Bucky murmurs over and over as he holds you close. You aren’t sure if he’s saying it for your benefit or his own. You suppose it doesn’t matter.

Are you really just waiting to die at this point?

“Sir, it’s the same unidentifiable substance you already have me looking into.” The inevitability of FRIDAY’s statement feels like a physical blow.

“*FUCK FUCK FUCK!*” Tony slams his fists onto the work surface before running his hands through his hair.

“They got to her, they fucking got to her,” Clint mutters from behind you; he sounds like he’s in denial.

“Sam?” you hear Nat quietly speaking into her phone, “We need all available hands here.”

“We need to figure out what this is. TONY! We don’t have time to panic.” Bruce sounds relatively calm, all things considered.

“Dear, the twins are waking,” SUNDAY announces into the chaos.

Your babies. *Thank God it’s you and not them.*

Everyone is suddenly silent and still at the mention of Artie and Jimmy, but it’s the catalyst that pushes Bucky into action. He squeezes you tightly for just a moment and kisses your forehead before he starts giving orders. “Alright, Barton – I need you to watch the kids. They can stay in their pajamas, just get them downstairs and make sure they eat breakfast. Keep them occupied and away from here; I do NOT want them exposed to this. Make sure you have weapons within easy access.” Bucky turns to Nat as Clint nods at his instructions and leaves. “I need you get Steve and Wilson up to speed. Run surveillance with him until Wilson gets here, and then send Steve up to sleep. He’s been awake for 24 hours and we’re going to need him rested. This might be the last chance he gets.”

“Two on surveillance at all times?” Nat confirms as she walks toward the door.

“Yes. I’ll set up sniper positioning shortly. They clearly know where at least one of the drop
locations is, and they might have followed the drone here; our position could be compromised.” He
turns toward Bruce and Tony, “You two need to keep working on this, so what do you need from
me?”

“We need you to oversee everything until Cap is ready to take charge – you’re right to make him
take a nap. He level of pigheaded stupidity goes up exponentially when he’s overtired,” Tony
mutters as he eyeballs the blobby visuals in front of him.

“Yes,” Bucky replies flatly. “I know.”

“We also need you to keep her as calm and as comfortable as possible,” Bruce directs as he nods
toward you, “Make sure she eats, keep her hydrated, and keep time for the morphine. We need to
stay on top of her pain, and I think the best way to do that is to set up an IV port. She’s
uncomfortable enough; we don’t need to turn her into a pincushion. We’ll give her another full
dose now, and then give her smaller, hourly boosts. I’ll show you the dosing so you can administer
it.”

Bucky nods. “Anything else?”

“Keep her close,” Tony breaks in as he rapidly switches between screens, “she needs to be either
with you or with us; we need eyes on her at all times. We don’t fully know the extent of what
this…substance… is doing to her yet, we can only guess, so we need to know right away if
anything changes. Oh, and there’s a crawlspace with a window above the front-facing bedrooms –
will that work for the sniper positioning?”

“I’ll check it out, but it should. I’ll go do that now if –“ he cuts himself off and looks to you.

You swallow your terror and put on a brave front; he’s got better things to do then babysit you, and
as far as you’re concerned, the safety of your kids takes priority over you. Besides, there’s no need
to panic yet, right? You’ve got some of the smartest men in the world in the same room working on
a fix. “I’ll be okay, Buck. Tony and Bruce can play mother hen for a while so you can take care of
what you need to do,” you say softly as Bruce walks toward you with a prepared syringe and the
supplies necessary for inserting an IV. “I’m probably going to try to take a nap anyway. Oh, Bruce,
put the IV in my hand, please.”

Bruce nods and focuses on his task as Bucky kneels in front of you. “You sure, Doll?” he asks
softly, eyes focused solely on you.

You nod before continuing, “It’s either sleep or I’m gonna get a massive case of the munchies. So
bring me some breakfast when you come back, pretty please.” You give him the brightest smile
you can muster.

“Anything for my best girl,” he murmurs as he tucks a renegade curl behind your ear.

“Are you ready for the morphine?” Bruce asks softly.

You glance down to see the IV port already in the back of your right hand. “Holy shit, Bruce, I
didn’t even feel you put that in! You’re good.” He smiles just a little at your praise.

Seriously, this guy is fantastic; it brings you a small measure of comfort..and just the tiniest bit of
hope.

Bucky watches closely as Bruce administers the morphine, holding your hand like before to get
you through the rush while he carefully listens to Bruce’s instructions. You close your eyes and
exhale when it hits you. “Tell me a story, Buck?” you ask through the nausea; suddenly breakfast
doesn't sound so good.

He laughs softly, “I've got the perfect one; it’s about the girl Stevie loved.”

“Peggy?” Bucky had told you about Peggy Carter; he spoke very highly of her.

“Yeah. Pegs had the dirtiest mouth of any of the Howlies. Doll, she was one of the most graceful women to ever walk the planet; you’d never guess that she could out-cuss a battalion of marines. We were all on leave in some town in the middle of nowhere, and we all got well and truly drunk at one of the local bars; Pegs included. Some idiot from the Navy grabbed her, so she spun around like a ballerina, rattled off the filthiest insult any of us had ever heard, and laid him out flat with a gorgeous haymaker. It was fantastic,” he chuckles, “Half the bar fell in love on the spot. The other half was not so enamored. Hands down the best barfight I’ve ever been in.”

You laugh a little at his words. “I wish I could have met her; she sounds amazing.”

“Almost as amazing as you,” he hums softly. You almost roll your eyes at his cheesiness, but the room is already spinning from the morphine. It’s impeccable restraint on your end, really. “You would have liked her,” he adds as he turns his head towards Steve, who had just entered the area.

“Peggy would have loved you,” Steve nods to you as he walks up, and then turns to Bucky. “Nat went over everything with me.”

“Good,” Bucky nods, “then you know you need to get some sleep.”

“Buck, I –“

“Steve, I need you at your best for this. You need at least a few hours of sleep to give me that. Please.”

There’s a pretty intense stare down between the two men before Steve finally gives in. “Fine. Come and get me if you need anything.”

Bucky nods, and turns to you as Steve leaves. “You good here, Doll? Do you need anything before I go? I won’t be gone long…”

“Actually, I think I’d like to go downstairs.” The need to be close to Artie and Jimmy has suddenly overwhelmed you.

“Kiddo, you should probably stay up here – I’d like for you to be with us or with Barnes,” Tony calls from his nest of visuals.

“I really want to be with my boys right now,” your voice starts to crack, and you have to swallow before speaking again. “Clint’s down there, so he can babysit me while Bucky is busy.” You try to sound nonchalant, but it’s getting hard.

Bucky nods and starts helping you up even as Tony continues to protest, “But it would really be better –“

“Stark, it’ll only take me 20 minutes, 30 tops to do what I need to do. I’ll be with her after that.” Once you’re standing, he turns towards Tony and softly adds, “She needs to be with them.” There’s a sadness in his voice that he isn’t quite able to conceal.

“Make sure Barton knows to have SUNDAY get us if anything changes.” He sounds reluctant, but Tony finally concedes.
True to his word, it only took Bucky about 20 minutes before he was back by your side. Despite the circumstances, it’s a nice morning. The boys noticed your IV port immediately, and upon explaining to them that it was a way for you to get medicine since you were sick, they went automatically into cuddle mode.

“Momma feel better,” Jimmy says in a serious voice as he climbs into your lap.

“Snuggles help?” Artie asks innocently as he curls up next to you.

“Yes, my little loves, snuggles definitely make me feel better,” you murmur as you kiss the tops of their heads. It’s hard to keep the tears out of your voice, but you manage. You’re battling an inner war; struggling to not give up hope yet so, so incredibly scared. Bucky knows it – you see the same feelings written on his face when he doesn’t know you’re looking – but you’re trying your hardest not to let your kids see it.

They’d insisted on putting in a movie, since it’s what you do for them when they’re sick, but it’s impossible to focus on what’s on the screen. You have eyes only for the kids cuddled up with you and the man that’s watching you intently for any changes in your condition.

Two Disney movies later, Bucky leans over the edge of the couch and puts his lips near your ear, “Sweetheart, Banner wants to check up on you.

You nod as you glance at the clock, thankful that they’ve given you this much time. “Clint, would you mind putting lunch together for Artie and Jimmy in about a half hour if I’m not back down by then?”

“Sure thing,” he winks at you, taking your seat after Bucky helps you up. The kids aren’t having it, though – Momma might need their cuddles today, but Clint is still a mobile playground. The sounds of their giggles accompany you up the stairs, and it does wonders to bolster your courage.

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“Alright,” Bruce gives the newest blood sample to Tony for analysis, “that should do it for now. Any changes that you can feel?”

You swing your legs listlessly from your spot on the workbench-turned-exam-table. “Not really, the morphine helps to keep the pain down. I don’t feel cold anymore, so that’s good, right?” Just trying to find the silver lining…

“Well,” he begins slowly, “you’re still running a high temp at 104.0, so technically I would expect that you would feel either hot or cold. The fact that you don’t is actually a little unusual.”

Your legs stop swinging and Bucky immediately looks concerned.

Bruce continues at the unasked question, “It’s…it’s possible that whatever is infecting you is starting to attack your central nervous system. I was thinking that earlier when your reflexes weren’t responding, but there weren’t any other indications at the time.”

Well, fuck.

Bucky runs his hands through his hair before looking at you with red-rimmed eyes. “We’re going to figure this out, Sweetheart,” he murmurs as he takes your face in his hands and brings his forehead to yours. “We’re going to figure this out.”
“Uh,” you can hear Tony approaching hesitantly, “Hematocrit levels have decreased significantly.”

Everyone nods; no one expected anything different.

“It’s a risk, but should we bring her to the tower?” Bucky offers. “Are there additional tools there that might help? Anything in your lab?”

“Possibly, but I don’t know that it’s worth the risk of moving her. We’d be extremely vulnerable while traveling.” Tony rubs a hand over his tired eyes, “All the tools in the world won’t help us if we can’t safely get her there.”

Bucky doesn’t say anything, he just nods.

Tony and Bruce silently retreat to their makeshift workstations, leaving you seated on the workbench with Bucky still standing in front of you.

“You’re doing great, Sweetheart,” he murmurs as he brushes his lips over yours, “You’re being so damn brave. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” You pull him close for a hug, and he immediately wraps his arms around you.

You hear the door to the workshop open and close, but you don’t bother looking up until you hear Steve speak.

“Alright, I’m as rested as I’m gonna get. Let’s start strategizing, Buck.”

He doesn’t argue, but you can almost hear Bucky roll his eyes.

“This place is fairly secure, but I was thinking –“ Steve is interrupted by his chirping phone. As he pulls it out and checks the display, his eyebrows draw together before he puts the phone to his ear. “Rogers.”

As he listens to the caller, his countenance darkens. After a few more moments, he speaks tightly, “SUNDAY, please enable video conferencing for this call.”

You don’t have to be able to read minds to know that whatever this is about, it isn’t good.

A virtual screen materializes in front of you, Bucky, and Steve, showing two men sitting in a dimly lit room. Your first observation is that the man on the left is rather unfortunate looking; after taking a second look, you amend your assessment. This guy fell out of the ugly tree and hit every damn branch on the way down. Then he rolled downhill and fell into the neighboring swamp. Yikes. He’s maybe in his mid 30s and balding, with a pinched face, a thin, cruel mouth, and he’s sporting thick glasses that make his eyes look like pinpricks.

The other man, however, automatically terrifies you. You can see that he’s tall and powerfully built, even from his seated position. He’s probably in his late 40s or early 50s; he’s got a neatly trimmed beard, dark hair that is swept back from his forehead, and high cheekbones. The man would actually be quite handsome if it weren’t for his eyes – you can’t tell what color they are, and you pray that you’re never close enough to find out, because these eyes radiate malice and brutality. There isn’t a shred of kindness to be found in this man.

“Visuals have been enabled. Speak,” Steve barks.

“You must be struggling to figure out what is wrong with your darling girl, yes?” The man on the left is doing the talking in a thick German accent, and you hate his seedy voice immediately.
“Who the fuck are you?” Bucky demands, completely ignoring the look Steve shoots him in warning.

“Oh, please excuse my rudeness; allow me to introduce myself. My name is Alric Metzger, and this is my benefactor, Nicolai Krakken.”

Your blood runs cold when you comprehend the names, and upon hearing them Tony and Bruce both rush over to take part in the call.

“Tsk tsk Mr. Stark, I really would have expected you to be more careful,” Metzger taunts when Tony comes into his view. “How does it feel to have another soul added to your already heavy responsibility?”

“What –“

“Evelyn Sharpe. It was really quite careless of you to ask her to purchase the Advil on your behalf, considering that she is – well, was – allergic to it. Or perhaps it was careless of her to purchase the drug at her pharmacy, where they are aware of her allergy?” Metzger shrugs. “We were already watching her due to her previous association with your mother, but you made it fairly obvious.”

“You have an in at her pharmacy,” Tony intones emotionlessly, staring at the face in front of him. He looks as if he’s seen a ghost.

“We have ins everywhere,” Metzger sneers. “How long did you really think you could hide her from us?”

Krakken abruptly clears his throat and shifts in his seat, causing Metzger to flinch. Looking slightly chastised, he steals a glance at Krakken before continuing, “I’m sure you’ve already started to investigate my little creation, but let me save us both some time and explain to you what is currently happening within her body. The sooner you know, the sooner you’ll realize you can’t help her…the sooner we get what we want.” Metzger begins. “Her red blood cells are systematically being destroyed, and her bone marrow, organs, tissues, and brain are being attacked. By now I would expect her to have fatigue, a high fever, and significant amounts of pain. Within the next day or so she will be vomiting and unable to keep anything down. Following that is confusion and delirium. She has roughly four days from the time of ingestion until the damage is irreversible and permanent, and another four to six days after that until death.”

“Are you offering to help us? Why are you telling us this?” Steve breaks in.

“Because I want you to fully understand what you’re dealing with. You will not be able to create a cure for her in time; of that I have no doubt. But,” he allows a threatening smile, “as it so happens, I have a little something that will take care of her not so little problem.”

“You have a cure?” The breathless desperation in Bucky’s voice is so thick you can almost see it.

Krakken has remained silent throughout the entire conversation, but you see his merciless eyes narrow a bit when Bucky speaks.

Metzger speaks in a condescending tone when he answers, “Yes, Soldat, I have a cure.” Bucky visibly flinches at the name. “But it comes at a price.”

“How much do you want?” Tony asks simply. “It’s yours – I’ll have it wired immediately.” You swallow hard – you just know it’s not going to be that easy.

Krakken laughs, and it is the creepiest sound you’ve ever heard, before he finally speaks, “I don’t
want your money. The price is her; I want *her*.”

“You can’t have her,” Bucky growls.

He laughs again. “Soldat, it appears you have developed a soft spot for her. I am very pleased to see it.” His ominous tone chills your heart. “It is a better outcome than I had planned.” Even through video feed you can feel it when he turns his icy gaze your way. “Hello there, milaya moya.”

*Milaya moya* – my sweet

Bucky’s jaw clenches before he speaks. “Do not call her that.”

“I am sorry, have you already claimed that endearment, Soldat? My apologies; perhaps I will think of a different nickname for her when she is with me,” Krakken’s smile is edged with poisoned honey.

“You can’t have her,” Bucky repeats, speaking every bit as menacingly as Krakken.

“You can’t have her. She will be dead in six to eight days; you should start saying your goodbyes while she is still coherent enough to understand them. You have my number; call me if you change your mind. Just keep in mind that you only have until this afternoon if you want her to get help before she is permanently damaged. Her cure is in Russia, at my estate, and it will take at least sixteen hours to transport her here, and roughly 24 hours for the cure to take full effect and reverse course after administration. The times are, of course, estimations – she may have more time. Or significantly less. You need to make your decision quickly if you want her to recover.” You feel his predatory gaze on you once again, “I have a feeling I’ll have the pleasure of seeing you soon, *milaya moya.*” And with that, the call is disconnected.
Chapter 31

The room erupts into a flurry of activity.

Except for you; you remain perfectly still.

If you stay here, you’ll die. You have to leave your boys, possibly forever, to get the cure.

Both options are going to kill you.

Bucky’s got murder in his eyes as he continues to stare at the now empty space where the images of Krakken and Mezger had been projected, Steve is on the phone, probably with Nat or Sam, and you’re vaguely aware of Bruce and Tony speaking rapidly in the background.

You woodenly lower your head to stare at the floor while you think of the day the boys were born, remembering exactly where you were when your water broke, and what time it was. You remember that it was a warm day, and fuck, your feet were so incredibly swollen. You remember the sheer relief you felt when you could finally take a full breath after months of having their heads pressed against your diaphragm; they’d come a month early but were ridiculously big and healthy for twins. Artie first, then Jimmy – three minutes apart. You remember the sounds of their first cries, the way it felt when they were placed in your arms, and how their tiny, scrunched up little faces looked. Even then it was obvious to you that they weren’t identical. You remember the endless sleepless nights, the countless hours spent in the rocking chair when they were teething or colicky, and bathing them in the kitchen sink. You remember first steps and first words, and oh, God, you remember their first ‘I love yous.’

You’ll remember. Even Krakken can’t take this away from you.

If it comes down to it – if Tony and Bruce can’t come up with a cure – you’ll go. You’ll go with Krakken, receive the treatment, and do your best to survive until Bucky comes for you; there’s no doubt in your mind that he will. You’ll fight your hardest to survive because even though it would be easier to give up than to be away from them, your kids deserve a mom that will do whatever it takes to return home. Even if you never make it back, at least you’ll know you did everything you could. Yes, you’ll fight for them.

And Bucky…Bucky deserves someone who will fight for him, too.

Even if the cure doesn’t work, even if Bucky’s attempt to save you fails, even if Krakken kills you anyway – you’re going to fight. For Artie and Jimmy, and for Bucky.

You’d have thought that finding your resolve would make the idea of leaving easier, but nope. It doesn’t. At all.

You nod to yourself as you take a deep breath and slowly lift your head; your unfocused gaze meets a set of grief-stricken, stormy blue-grey eyes, and time stops. You remember your initial meeting with Bucky, how he promised they’d keep you safe before slinging his arm over your shoulders as he walked you out of that building, and then how terrified he was that first night to have anything to do with the boys. You remember the first time he smiled at you, in the kitchen, when he came in for dinner after the first day at the safe house. You remember the first time you found him awake in the middle of the night, and how you each slowly broke through each other’s walls, brick by brick, night by night. You remember the first time you sang to him to chase away his nightmares, the first time he called you ‘Doll,’ the first time you danced together. You
remember breathless kisses and endless loving late into the night, and how it felt to truly be yourself around someone else for the first time in your life; how it felt to really let someone in, to really trust.

Krakken can’t take this either.

Bucky blinks, and time begins again even though he remains frozen in place.

Taking a deep breath to quell your own panic, you slowly push yourself off the table and take the step that closes the short distance to him; he needs you.

You need each other.

With the exception of his heaving chest, Bucky doesn’t move as he watches you approach. You wrap your arms around him and pull him close; only then does he move as he melts into your embrace. With his face buried in your hair, yours pressed to his chest, and arms wrapped tightly around one another, the two of you simply breathe each other in while the shitstorm rages on around you.

Unfortunately, it can only be ignored for so long. “Sweetheart, you should sit down,” he whispers in your ear.

You nod against his chest, wanting just one more second before he guides you gently to that stupid couch.

This goddamn couch has started to serve as a blatant reminder to you of how sick and weak you really are, and you fucking hate it. It’s ugly, too, you think spitefully as you settle into Bucky’s side. He kisses the top of your head as you both watch Bruce and Tony work; there’s really nothing else either of you can do.

Please, please let them find a cure.

“Okay,” Bruce thinks aloud as he scratches his head, “we need to approach this differently, because Metzger is right – we don’t have much time. Everything he said about her symptoms matches what we’ve found, so I don’t think he’s bluffing. In fact,” he pauses as he reviews something on one of his screens, “I think it’s advancing faster than they expected – I, uh, I don’t think we’re gonna have the full four days before permanent damage in inflicted...”

“Well,” Tony begins slowly, eyebrows drawn together over exhausted and haunted eyes, “What if we stop trying to look at it in its entirety and instead try to find remedies based on individual components?” Bruce shoots him a doubtful look that Tony ignores before continuing, “To create something new, you have to have something to build with. What he’s created is some sort of new monstrosity, but he had to have built it with something that already exists; he’s a mad scientist, not a god. I know that for a fact because no god could possibly be that ugly. Metzger didn’t create something from nothing. We need to take this apart piece by piece – which will be difficult, because once you have the end product it isn’t always easy to separate – but it’s not impossible. FRIDAY, what do you see when you look at it that way?”

“Tony, it can take years to create a drug, and that’s assuming we already know exactly what it is we’re dealing with!” Bruce interjects. “Even if we had a detailed list of everything this thing is made of, the probability of creating a successful drug therapy in time is almost nil.”

Tony doesn’t reply, he just levels a frustrated glare in Bruce’s direction as he taps his fingers against the table he’s leaning on.

It takes a few minutes, but FRIDAY finally answers. “It appears that the compounds are primarily
comprised of viruses and mutated or chemically enhanced proteins, sir.”

“Tony, this isn’t going to work. We need to think of something else.” It’s clear that Bruce didn’t want to say it, but at least now you know you’re not the only one thinking it.

“Just keep working. FRIDAY, you’re helping?” Tony’s desperation is starting to come through in his voice.

“Yes sir, target identification underway; also searching for possible chemicals or natural compounds that might inhibit the target’s activity once the individual particles are identified.”

It’s quiet for a few moments save for the sounds of Bucky’s uneven breathing in your ear and Steve’s footsteps as he paces like a caged animal.

“FRIDAY, come on!!” Tony suddenly yells, and the sound causes you to jump. Bucky shoots Tony a dirty look before pulling you closer.

“I’ve identified three separate mutated proteins and two molecules so far, sir.”

“Okay – so how do we fix them?” Tony asks impatiently.

“Based on the current complexity…it will take an estimated 32 days for successful drug therapy creation assuming that the compounds necessary to inhibit target activity are identified within the next 2 hours.”

“What? FRIDAY, we don’t have that kind of time!”

“Another chemically modified protein has been detected sir, drug therapy creation time increased to an estimated 35 days.” You’re really starting to hate the sound of FRIDAY’s voice.

“Tony, we don’t have the time to create a drug!” Banner shouts, finally fed up. “We need to think of something else!”

Tony grabs at his hair, “FRIDAY, what if we treated with penicillin?”

“Predictive results are fatal, sir.”

“Steroids?”

“Fatal.”


“All existing therapies, including use of a bariatric chamber or more primitive treatments such as herbal remedies, are predicted to fail. Another protein and two more molecules have been detected. Estimated time for drug therapy creation increased to 48 days.”

Your world is slowly slipping away from you, and you feel a tear run down your cheek. You’re not sure what’s worse – the helplessness or the inevitability.

“What about drugs in clinical testing?” Tony suddenly offers.

“Fatal, sir.”

“FRIDAY – what’s the outcome if we –“
“Fatal, sir,” FRIDAY interrupts. “All therapies are predicted to fail unless a treatment can be tailored specifically to this target.”

“It’s too complex, Tony,” Bruce stands in front of the frantic man, “Metzger did too thorough of a job creating his monster.” The finality of it all can no longer be denied.

Tony looks to you with tears in his haunted eyes before he nods and bows his head in defeat.

Bucky looks between you and Tony as he reluctantly releases his hold on you so he can stand, “No, we are not giving up!”

Tony walks up to Bucky, shaking his head slowly. “I’m sorry, but Banner’s right.” He takes a deep breath before he puts both hands on Bucky’s shoulders. “We…we have to let her go, or we’re gonna lose her for good.” Tony’s voice doesn’t break, but it’s close.

Your heart, on the other hand, does.

And whatever was holding Bucky together completely shatters.

“ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE!?” he screams as he pulls away, raising his metal fist and grabbing Tony’s shirt at the collar. Tony doesn’t move to defend himself, he simply stands there waiting for the impact; he seems to welcome Bucky’s rage. “I’m not allowing them to take her! I’m not –“

“Buck,” Steve separates them and stands in front of Bucky, effectively putting a physical barrier between the two men. “He’s right – LOOK AT ME, BUCK! – He’s right. We have a chance to get her back from Krakken, but we can’t bring her back if she’s dead.”

Bucky stands there, breathing heavily and unevenly as he stares at Steve while you fight to swallow back your tears. If you start crying you’ll never stop, so you can’t cry – at least not now. You…you have to say goodbye to Artie and Jimmy first. You can’t fall apart just yet. You can’t.

“We’re not going to let this go,” Steve says into the silence, “We’re not giving up on you,” he directs at you, “I’m sorry that we can’t reverse what they did to you, but I promise that we will come for you.”

Bucky sharply shakes his head, as if waking himself from a dream at Steve’s words. “This is your fault,” his words are sharper than shards of glass as he points to Tony, who just nods his lowered head in acknowledgement. His hard countenance drops the second he turns to you.

He breathes out your name as he approaches. “I’m so sorry, Sweetheart,” his eyes are filled with unshed tears as he pulls you to him tightly; he holds you as though he thinks if he tried hard enough, somehow his arms alone would be enough to protect you from what’s killing you from the inside. “I – I don’t –“

“There isn’t any other way, Buck,” you whisper into his shirt; if you speak any louder, the sobs will escape. “Just – just come for me, okay?”

“You know I will,” he whispers roughly.

You jump at the sound of shattering glass – you and Bucky both look to see that Tony has completely destroyed one of his work areas. Steve approaches you while Bruce attempts to calm Tony.
“I’ll make the call,” Steve’s voice is thick and reluctant. “When -?”

“Please arrange for it to coincide with the boys’ naptime – I don’t want them to see me leave.” You have to say it with your eyes squeezed shut; you’re not sure if you do it to keep the tears in or to avoid seeing Bucky’s expression.

Steve swallows hard, and pulls up the number on his phone to make the call. “You win,” he begins tightly. “But I need assurance that you’re going to actually heal her and that she’ll be safe.” His already glowering countenance darkens even more at whatever the response it. “No, she needs a little more time. Be here in an hour.”

“What kind of assurance did they give you?” Bucky asks sharply, still holding you tightly with one arm but softly stroking your back with the other, attempting to keep you calm so you can get through the next 90 minutes. You have a feeling that the only thing keeping him from exploding into a blind rage is his need to comfort you; it scares you a little to think of will happen after you leave.

Steve clenches his jaw and pinches the bridge of his nose before answering. “He said the only assurance we’ll get is that she isn’t any good to him dead. I had to accept it – we, uh, we aren’t in the position to make demands.”

“And they know where we are? You didn’t give them directions.”

Steve sighs before answering. “Tracker in the bottle of pills. They’ve known our position for a day and a half.”

“Of course,” Bucky mutters.

You take a deep breath and pull back slightly. ‘I, um,” it takes a few tries before you can get the sentence out because your throat is so tight, “I should check on the boys. It’s probably almost their naptime.” Your heart twists painfully in your chest as you disengage completely from Bucky’s hold and go to your boys. It’s time to say goodbye.

Artie and Jimmy are just finishing lunch when you and Bucky get downstairs; he’s not leaving your side until he absolutely has to. Clint watches you both carefully as you approach.

“Hey guys, how’s lunch?” You know it sounds tight, so you clear your throat. You don’t want them to see you sad or scared.

“Good!” they both chirp. It looks like Clint made them one of their favorite lunches – peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with apple slices and a glass of milk. They’re pretty easy to please.

“Are you ready for a story and then naptime?” you ask with careful and measured breaths.

They both pull a face at the mention of naptime, but they know better than to pitch a fit. “Two stories, Momma?” Artie asks, hoping to hold off the inevitable for just a little more time.

Thank God.

“Yeah, I think we can do two today. Why don’t you each pick out a story?” They run off to their little bookshelf while you look up to see Bucky watching you – there are so many emotions in his beautiful eyes.

Rage, terror, anguish.
Adoration, pride, love. So, so much love.

You hold your boys close as you read through their favorite books one more time.

*The last time?*

It takes much longer than it usually does; you’re dragging it out, trying to squeeze in every last second with them that you can while you bury your nose in their hair and plant soft kisses at the crown of their heads.

“Alright my little loves, time to go upstairs.” It feels like your lungs are collapsing.

They race ahead of you, thankfully clueless about your turmoil. They don’t need to know.

Bucky takes your hand in a hard grip, walking with you and giving you all the courage he can summon. You shake your head slightly – you can read him like a damn book now, you can clearly see how much it’s costing him to keep himself in one piece. He’s doing it for you.

The trip the boys’ bedroom is much too short. You hesitate at the door, and Bucky squeezes your hand.

He’s got so little left to give, but he keeps giving anyway.

You let go of your anchor and walk into the room.

“Alright babies, give Momma big hugs!” You mean for it to sound cheerful, but it comes across as breathless. Considering the fact that you feel like you can’t breathe, you shouldn’t be surprised.

They run to you, and you do your very best to memorize the sight.

You hug both boys tightly, so tightly they both squeak.

“Momma!” chastises Artie through his giggles, “Too tight!”

“SQUISHING ME!” Jimmy yells, but his indignant tone is betrayed by his dimples. They both love hugs.

“Alright babies, take good naps okay?” you say bravely.

*Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…*

Artie has a concerned look on his face and Jimmy’s eyebrows draw down as he points to your watery eyes. “You sad, Momma?” Oh, your sweet, sensitive boys. You should have known better than to think they wouldn’t notice.

*Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…*

“I, uh, I’m just gonna miss you, baby. Even while you nap, I’ll miss you,” you manage to choke out with a shaky smile. If these are your last words to them, they will not be lies. “Um,” you swallow hard to keep the tears at bay, “one of your uncles is going to take you someplace special after you wake up, so it might be a while before I see you again. You’ll like where you’re going – it’s a special treat! But you have to take good naps, okay? You’ll want to be rested.”

The distraction works – they haven’t been *anywhere* in so long that the prospect of going somewhere is automatically exciting to them. Both sets of eyes grow wide.

“Where?” Artie asks, automatically intrigued.
“Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…”

“You’re going to Grandma and Grandpa’s house!” you announce, putting far more bravado into your words than strictly necessary.

Their faces light up like matching Christmas trees, just like you knew they would.

“You coming, too?” Jimmy asks innocently.

“Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…”

Bucky’s steadying hand on your shoulder is the only thing keeping you going at this point, and you have to clear your throat before you can answer, “No baby, Momma has to go to the doctor. I’ll be sad that I won’t be with you two and Grandma and Grandpa, but you’re going to have so much fun! But don’t get too excited yet, you still have to nap. And they have to be good naps, no cheating!! But when you get up, you get to go. Okay?”

“Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…”

“Okay, Momma!” they both squeal as they jump into their beds, holding their stuffies close as they squeeze their eyes shut.

You try your hardest not to think that this is the last time you’ll see this unless Bucky and his team can pull together a few miracles.

“Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…”

You stare at them for a moment, tracing each memorized line of their faces just one more time before taking a deep breath, smoothing the hair back from each forehead and planting one more kiss on each perfect little face.

“Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…”

“I love you both so much,” you whisper.

“Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…”

“We love you, Momma! We love you, Bucky!” they reply emphatically with eyes still squeezed shut.

You nod, unable to speak without letting a sob escape as your heart shatters into millions of jagged, transparent pieces. Unable to move in the wake of overwhelming despair, Bucky scoops you up and quickly carries you out of the room, closing the door behind him and rushing across and into your room, where they won’t be able to hear you. They don’t need to hear you cry; it will only scare them. Thank God the walls in this house are thick.

Bucky doesn’t even make it to the bed; he collapses just on the other side of the door with you still in his arms, and holds your trembling body as you both shake with uncontrollable, desolate, heartbroken sobs.
There’s a soft knock at the door.

“Yeah,” Bucky’s voice is harsh and ragged as he calls out an answer. He’s leaning against the wall next to the door, with you still in his arms. Although you’re quiet now, you’ve still got your face buried in his neck, still consciously matching your breathing to his the way he’d asked you to do when your anguish nearly suffocated you.

The door slowly opens, and Steve begins quietly speaking. “We’re roughly 20 minutes out. You, uh, you might want to say your goodbyes in here. We don’t want to give Krakken any more insight than he already has into your relationship. And Buck, it’s cold outside. Make sure she’s dressed warmly.” And with that, he respectfully withdraws.

It’s quiet for a long moment as both of you relish the other’s closeness, breathing in tandem.

“I won’t say goodbye,” he suddenly whispers fiercely. “I won’t. I’m coming for you, Sweetheart, I just need you to hold on until I can get to you, okay?”

You close your eyes and focus on breathing as you nod. In. Out.

“Hey,” he moves so he can cradle your face in his hands; the cool metal is soothing against your tearstained cheek, “Hey, listen to me. I will come for you. I promise. I’ll do whatever it takes, you know that, right?”

You do, but you start to wonder if the cost will be too high. He’s already been through so much, lost so much. What else will he have to sacrifice in order to get you back?

“Bucky,” you murmur as you place your hand over where his dog tags rest against his chest, “just don’t forget who you are in the process.”

He places his hand over yours as he whispers your name, “I won’t, I promise, and don’t you forget that I’m coming to get you. I don’t know how long it’ll take – we can’t do anything until we know you’ve received the treatment, but I am coming for you. Don’t give up on me, okay?”

You huff out a rough laugh that sounds suspiciously like a sob, “Buck, I’d never give up on you. Never.”

One moment you’re both fighting back tears, and then the heartbeat after that you’re kissing. It’s desperate and messy, but you both have so much to say and no time at all to say it.

“I love you, Buck,” you say unevenly after you reluctantly break away.

“I love you,” his voice is gravely as he presses a kiss to your forehead. “Come on, Sweetheart, let’s get you into some warmer clothes.”

Yeah…the t-shirt and shorts you’d been wearing to try to keep your fever down aren’t really appropriate for the late December weather, although you’re not sure you’d feel the cold. Between the pain of leaving the three people you love most in this world and the pain in your body, the cold seems completely inconsequential.

He helps you to your feet and leads you to the bed before disappearing into the closet. He’s gone for what seems like forever; it probably just feels that way because you know that soon it might be
Bucky finally returns with your favorite jeans and one of his warm hoodies – blue with the tiniest hint of green – the one that matches his eyes when he’s happy. You smile to yourself as you realize you’d mentally catalogued how his eye color changes based on his mood. You have a feeling that the stormy bluish grey will stick around for a while. He helps you put it on; you can tell that he hasn’t washed it since the last time he wore it because it still smells like him, and you know he did that on purpose to bring you whatever comfort he can.

“You have your necklace on, right?” he asks as he rolls up the sleeves on the hoodie; he needs them big because of his massive shoulders, so the sleeves reach well past your fingertips.

Nodding, you briefly finger the chain.

“Good.” He takes a deep breath as he pulls you close. Neither of you speak; you just hold each other as tightly as you can until there’s another knock at the door.

“I’m sorry, but it’s time,” Steve reluctantly says as he opens the door. He’s got tears in his eyes; he’s a good friend. This isn’t easy for him, either, and it’s not just because of who you are to Bucky – it’s because of who you are to everyone.

Bucky nods but doesn’t release you yet. “Stay brave, Sweetheart,” he says as he takes your face in his hands one last time. “Stay brave, and remember that I’m coming. You’re my everything, and I’m not gonna let you go. Just hold on until I get there, okay?”

You can only nod as he presses one more kiss to your lips before wiping away the tear that you couldn’t hold back.

After trading I love yous one more time, he takes you by the hand and leads you out into the hall and down the stairs.

Steve and Tony are waiting for you by the front door. You avoid their eyes, knowing that you’ll lose what little composure you have if you meet anyone’s gaze.

“Kiddo,” Tony begins, but you cut him off with a sharp shake of your head.

“Please don’t…Tony…I can’t.” you manage to get out in a breathless whisper. The only thing you can handle right now is straightforward information – any emotion from anyone will send you straight over the edge.

Steve quietly says your name as he steps forward. “Here’s what you need to know. Bruce and Nat are covering the boys – we don’t expect that it’s necessary, but we’re doing it anyway. We’re going to bring them to your mom and dad’s when they wake from their naps – I promise we’ll keep everything as calm as possible so they don’t get scared. Wanda and Vision are en route – they’ll be responsible for keeping your boys and parents safe while we’re working on getting you back. Hey,” Steve waits until you meet his eyes, “we will get you back.”

Bucky squeezes your hand at Steve’s words, and you can see him nod in your peripheral. “Barton and Wilson on overwatch?” he asks.

Steve nods, “Clint’s in a nest and Sam’s in the sky.”

“Good.”

You suddenly wish that someone, anyone will say something else, but no one does. It’s just time
and there’s no pushing it back. Bucky helps you with your coat after you pull on your shoes.

It’s time to go.

Tony opens the door, and you walk out of the house that was the stage for some of the happiest memories of your life. This fucking sucks.

Flanked by both Steve and Bucky with Tony right behind, you walk out into the cold December afternoon. It’s overcast, but you wouldn’t want the sun to shine today; at least not now. Maybe later, for Artie and Jimmy when they’re on their way to their grandparent’s house, but not now.

Looking up, you see a man leaning against an idling car. It’s the man from that night...the one that killed those men. Even from this distance you’d recognize him anywhere. As you get closer, you begin to see the striking resemblance between him and Nicolai Krakken – this must be Anatoliy. He’s clean shaven, unlike his brother, and maybe just a year or two younger, but there’s no mistaking who he is. He has the same cruel eyes, and you’re close enough now to see that they’re green.

You take a deep breath as your steps falter, and feel a steadying hand at your back. Bucky. You want so badly to reach out and take his hand but you know better; you don’t want to give Anatoliy any information that he might not already have.

“Captain,” he greets with a smirk, “Soldat. Mr. Stark.”

Bucky stiffens beside you but it’s Steve that speaks. “Anatoliy.” You’ve never before heard such hostility in Steve’s voice.

“Are you ready to go get your cure? I’m sure you’re feeling just awful right about now.” His tone is both condescending and mocking. Fuck, does he really need to be such an ass?

You glare at him and choose not to answer; it will do you no good to lose your temper.

“Soldat,” he barks as he tosses something to Bucky, “put this on her.”

Bucky looks at the flat, black velvet box for a moment before opening it. Inside is…a necklace? What the fuck? It’s a choker-style woven chain, roughly one half inch thick and made of some sort of black metal, with a single iridescent stone set in the center.

“Put it on her, but do not touch the ends together until it is around her neck. They will fuse automatically and it cannot be undone. She doesn’t have time to have another made, so do it correctly the first time.”

What. The. Fuck.

“What do you mean it fuses automatically and can’t be undone? What is this?” Tony demands from behind you as Bucky stares at the necklace.

“I’m not putting this on her,” Bucky mutters as he holds the box away from you.

“She doesn’t get in the car until it’s around her neck,” Anatoliy says nonchalantly as he inspects his fingernails. “She doesn’t get in the car, she doesn’t get on the jet, she doesn’t get to the cure.”

“Will it hurt her?” Bucky’s voice is strained; it’s not like there’s a choice in the matter, but he still doesn’t want to put it on you.
“No, it will not hurt her.”

“Go ahead, Buck, just do it,” you whisper after taking a deep breath. You don’t want to see his worry or hesitation, so you close your eyes as he removes it from the box and fastens it around your neck. You hear a small click, and feel as he tries gently to pull it back apart; it’s on for good, you suppose. It’s a little hard not to feel claustrophobic with the heavy metal resting against your throat – it feels more like a collar than a necklace. Steve’s eyes are apprehensive, to say the least; you can only imagine Tony’s. Something feels very wrong to you, but it isn’t like you have a choice – you need that cure.

You remind yourself that you’re doing this for your kids and for Bucky.

Anatoliy smiles with satisfaction as he pulls out a small box from his pocket, roughly the size of an Altoids tin. “There are four of these little boxes,” he holds up the box, “Inside each box is a button. You’ve just collared her with an explosive; one push of any of the four buttons, and…” he mimes out an explosion with his hands.

Oh God.

“YOU SAID IT WOULDN’T FUCKING HURT HER!!” Bucky explodes, and it takes both Steve and Tony to hold him back as he surges forward.

“I did say that, because I doubt very much that she will feel any pain if it is detonated.” He lifts one shoulder in a careless shrug. “You did not ask if it would kill her, Soldat, I did not lie to you,” Anatoliy purrs with another sinister smirk. God, you just itch to slap that expression from his face. “Come along,” he motions to you. “The jet is waiting.”

“This isn’t over, Krakken. You have to know that we will come for her,” Tony says matter-of-factly as he continues to restrain Bucky.

Anatoliy raises an eyebrow and watches Bucky as he answers, “Yes, I expect you will. That’s kind of the idea, Mr. Stark.” He motions you forward. “Get in the car, we are leaving now.” He turns back to everyone else as you circle around to the passenger seat, “We’ll be in contact after her treatment is administered; I’d strongly recommend that you not try anything stupid until then. You will receive further instructions at that time.”

Getting into that car is one of the hardest things you’ve ever had to do; not looking back at Bucky as Anatoliy pulled the car out was nearly impossible.
Chapter 33

You feel numbness start to take over; it’s something of a survival mechanism that you’d picked up during your time with Christopher. The old habit comes back as if it never left, slipping you easily into that space where nothing really seems to matter.

Stare out the window. Focus on nothing. Feel nothing.

“Lisichka, what exactly is the nature of your relationship with the Winter Soldier?”

| Lisichka – little fox

“I don’t know what you just called me, but I already have a name,” you mumble as you keep your eyes on the wintry landscape, purposely evading his question.

“No,” he scoffs, “people have names.”

You turn slowly to look at him. His English, although accented, has been perfect so far, so is this a mistake in translation? What the hell does he mean by that?

He chuckles darkly after a moment, “I see you are confused, lisichka. Allow me to make something abundantly clear. You are property; a possession. At best you are a pet, and therefore deserving only of a title indicating such. The collar around your neck may be pretty, but it is a collar nonetheless.”

You swallow hard and turn back toward the window as you work on keeping your breathing steady. Unbelievable. You really don’t want to ask, but the sooner you know the sooner you can try to adapt to your new situation, or at least prepare yourself. “Whose…property?” It’s hard to get yourself to say the word, but you know you would have choked on possession or pet.

“That all depends upon your friends. For now, you belong to my brother. Depending on how things play out, you will either be given to one person or you will belong to us all.” His feral grin leaves no room for misinterpretation. “Most of my men don’t like to share, but you will be incentive to learn. Where we are going, you will be the only woman, and it is cold in Siberia.

Bile rises to the back of your throat as you close your eyes. “I’d rather just die, if that’s the case.”

“Ah, but what you would rather do, or not, as it may be, no longer matters. My brother will decide your future, not you. Look at the bright side – your being alive and in our custody ensures that we have no need to go after those adorable little boys of yours. Now be quiet, lisichka.”

You feel a flash of rage at the thinly veiled threat but swallow your words; they’ll do you no good here.

At least he doesn’t ask about Bucky again.

***

“Wake up, lisichka, it is time to move to the jet.”

You weren’t sleeping, but you don’t bother to correct him. Your eyes slowly open; you don’t want to face your reality so you aren’t exactly in a hurry. Taking a deep breath around the pain, you slowly straighten up in your seat. It’s been while since your last dose of morphine, and it has
clearly worn off.

Anatoliy exits the car and walks around to your side, swinging the door open and quickly pulling you from the car by your arm. The sudden rough movement combined with the exploding pain causes you to unexpectedly vomit. You have a tiny moment of satisfaction when you realize you just threw up on his expensive looking shoes, but it’s short lived as the back of his hand makes contact with your face.

You didn’t see it coming, and so you weren’t prepared to move with or absorb the hit like Bucky had taught you. You find yourself on your hands and knees on the icy asphalt; the impact is jarring to your already pained body and it takes your breath away. You force back your nausea and your tears – you do NOT want this asshat to have the satisfaction of seeing you cry. Breathing deeply through your nose to push down the pain and calm yourself, you catch whiffs of Bucky’s scent from his hoodie. It makes your heart clench once again, and you have to remind yourself to focus on your breathing.

**Bucky’s coming for you.**

“Let’s check our new pet for fleas, shall we?” Anatoliy taunts as he approaches you with some sort of small machine.

What? Is he fucking kidding?? You glare up at him, and your mouth is running before your brain can stop it, “I don’t have fleas you jackass, I look like shit because I feel like shit, courtesy of your Dr. Frankenstein’s little pills. Excuse me if I didn’t get all made up today – it really wasn’t worth the effort. It’s not exactly like I wanted to be poisoned by a maniac and have to leave my family to -”

He hits you again, but this time you saw it coming. Muscle memory kicks in and you move with the impact, softening the blow considerably. He doesn’t know that, though. It’s a small victory.

“Stand up.”

You briefly weigh your options and contemplate defiance. After being given a glimpse into your rather ugly future, you have come down with a serious case of the fuck-its. You’re going to be someone’s property. Or everyone’s property – you know with a nauseating surety that you’ll be beaten at best and more than likely raped. So what if he kills you? But…he won’t, and there are plenty of ways to inflict pain without killing. And you already hurt so, so badly.

Besides, Bucky will come for you. You need to get through this for him, and for your boys. You need to be alive when he gets there so he can bring you home. You repeat these thoughts like a mantra as you gather yourself.

Slowly, you try to pull yourself up but fall to your knees again before you’re halfway there. Feeling his glare on you, you try again but get no further; the pain is too great and your body too weak.

“I can’t.” you mutter in frustration as you stare at the ground in front of you, hot tears pricking at your eyes, hating that you have to admit it. “I need help.”

He sighs but roughly brings you to your feet, allowing you to lean against the car once you’re up before waving his machine over you; you jump when it suddenly starts beeping.

“Ah, lisichka, you see? You do have fleas.”

Your heart jumps into your throat as he pulls a knife and yanks your wrist toward him, shoving the sleeve of your coat back in the process – what the fuck is he going to do, cut your fucking hand
Closing your eyes in anticipation of the blade piercing your skin, you’re surprised by the sound of ripping fabric. You open your eyes to see him slicing open the rolled cuff of your hoodie before running his fingers through the material to remove a small silver...something.

After examining it, he puts it close to his mouth before speaking, “Don’t worry, we are at the jet and will be boarding soon. I hope for her sake that you don’t have anything else like this planned.” With that, he throws it down and steps on it, grinding it into the icy ground.

“Any other bugs you’d like to tell me about, lisichka?” His voice is dangerous; now is not the time to lie.

“I –” you swallow hard at his threatening glare, “I didn’t even know about that one.” Bucky obviously slipped it in at some point, but you honestly don’t know when. Hell, you didn’t even know he could sew.

Anatoliy runs the machine over you once more, finding nothing else to set it off. “Alright, get on the jet,” he commands.

That was an ordeal. You weren’t willing to ask him for help again, so you slowly and painstakingly made your way up the steps and into the cabin. It feels like it took forever, and fuck your entire body hurts, but you make it and fall immediately into the first chair you see. Anatoliy eyeballs you disdainfully as he takes the seat next to you. Really? Couldn’t the fucker sit somewhere else? There are other seats.

You rest your elbow on the armrest and support your head with your hand. In a minute or two you’ll move to another seat, or maybe one of the couches that are set into the side of the jet, but first you need to let some of the pain subside.

Anatoliy pulls out his phone, and you notice that there’s a screen built into the wall in front of you when his call connects and the area lights up. Another video chat with Dr. Evil and his ugly stooge. Great.

“I have her, Nicolai,” Anatoliy says in lieu of greeting. Well, duh, they can see us, numbnut.

“Did the exchange go as planned?”

“Better, actually. You were right – I think it’s safe to say that the Soldat harbors romantic feelings for our new pet. The display of emotion that I saw in the rearview as we pulled out...well...it was quite impressive. I haven’t yet figured out of she reciprocates,” he steals a sidelong look at you while you keep your face carefully neutral, “but we have time. Either way, I think we can move forward with our alternate plans. I’m increasingly confident that he will show up.”

So you’re not just leverage, you’re bait, too? You make a mental note that you’ll need to be very careful about what you say so you don’t inadvertently give them something they can use against the people you care about. You’ll have to pretend you don’t love Bucky, and that he doesn’t love you...although they probably won’t believe you anyway. They’ve already seen too much.

If you’d thought you couldn’t hate these men more, you’d have been wrong.

Nicolai nods. “I think, for her, he will. What about the others?”

“They seemed sufficiently attached; the entire world knows the lengths that the good Captain will go to for his friends – the Soldat himself is a shining example – and Mr. Stark is likely being eaten
alive by his guilt as we speak. Also, the house they were staying at belongs to Mr. Stark, so I would say that he is very invested in her well-being; somewhere along the line her safety became a personal interest instead of a professional obligation. They will be easily manipulated as long as we have her.”

Nicolai’s predatory gaze turns to you. “You know, lisichka, I was quite upset when I learned that you had witnessed the execution – I thought you were just a messy problem that needed to be cleaned up – but now I see that you are a gift from God. It took me a while to put the pieces together, but once I realized that the core of the Avengers team was no longer showing up during times of crisis…well, where else could they be but protecting you personally? Please rest assured that your life is no longer in danger, as long as your friends cooperate.” He pauses bestow upon you the most patronizing smile you’ve ever seen, and it makes your blood boil.

*Keep your mouth shut keep your mouth shut keep your mouth shut.*

You need to make sure that you don’t allow them to bait you into losing your temper…but if you push down your rage entirely, the panic and anguish will consume you. You’re going to have to walk a very fine line.

“How do you like your gift? It is quite lovely, yes?” Nicolai gestures to his neck.

Is he fucking kidding? He wants you to think that the fucking collar he had put on you is pretty? He wants you to be grateful?

You lift your head and straighten in your seat, but successfully stay quiet. You’ll only make things worse if you speak.

His eyes narrow as he looks at you. “Anatoliy, why is her cheek so red?” Nicolai asks sharply.

“The bitch threw up on my shoes.”

Yep, and it was worth the hit, you rancid twatwaffle.

“Brother, that is not how we treat our guests! Besides, she cannot help it. That is Metzger’s monster working within her. Lisichka, please accept my apologies on behalf of my brother; he can be a little hotheaded but he means no harm.”

Means no harm?? Are you fucking kidding?!? You have an incendiary device sitting under your chin because of this man. You’re pretty sure that qualifies as intent to harm.

There’s no point in saying anything, though, so you keep quiet until his eyes shift back to his brother.

“Dr. Metzger will explain how to complete the injections. Administer the morphine and the Valium, and be kind enough to keep her under for the duration of the flight. There is no reason for her to be uncomfortable.”

Out of the corner of your eye, you can see Anatoliy’s jaw clench before he dips his head in a deferential nod. “Of course, Nicolai.”

“And Anatoliy?” His voice grows hard and threatening, “Do not lay another hand on her – she is not yours to hurt. Or touch.” He pauses before he narrows his eyes. “That goes for your pilot, as well.”

“Of course, Nicolai,” he grits out between clenched teeth.
You fight back the urge to vomit again as you realize that Anatoliy’s reaction likely means that this was originally going to be an extraordinarily unpleasant flight for you. It bothers you to no end that you can’t help but be at least a little thankful for Nicolai’s ‘protection.’

Metzger explains how to complete the injections – you won’t need to take your sweatshirt off because it’s to be administered into your thigh, much like an EpiPen, and can be given through your jeans. Thank God.

Shooting a baleful glare in Anatoliy’s direction, you gather yourself and slowly move to one of the couches to wait for the medication while he finishes with the call. You welcome the prospect of sedation; maybe then your heart won’t hurt so much.
Your memories of the following days are extremely sketchy – and you’re thankful for that. You remember being roughly shaken awake as you arrived, the bitter cold as you were moved from the jet and into a car and then again from the car and into a wheelchair, and then the warmth as you were brought inside what appeared to be a large estate.

After that you remember waking briefly on some sort of table with bright lights shining above you, and the feel of cold, ungentle hands on your skin before and after several sharp needle pokes.

You remember him – the doctor as he laughed at you – and the hot, sticky sting of tears drying on your face. You remember brief moments of waking in a bed that was not yours, either drenched with sweat or freezing with chattering teeth.

Even during those fleeting moments of lucidity, you remember the searing ache of being away from those you love, and you yearned for unconsciousness. And as much as you want to be blissfully unaware right now, it will not happen because you are finally emerging from the fevered, drug induced haze that has been your companion for what feels like years.

Goddamn it.

Alright, first things first – you need to compartmentalize. As hard as it is, and God, it is so hard, you cannot allow yourself to think of Artie and Jimmy. You can’t. At least not right now. You need to mentally tuck them away into a safe, warm place in your heart and lock the door. If you focus on them, on the intense and desperate pain of your separation, then you won’t be able to focus on surviving your new environment. Grieving for and missing them will not bring you home to them – but surviving will.

I love you, babies…I’m so sorry…I’ll think of you later, when Momma’s safer, okay? I promise I won’t forget you, you’re both always in my heart…

As for Bucky…he’s coming. You know this as surely as you know that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, so you need to be ready and you need to be as healthy as possible.

Survive.

Several deep and deliberate breaths later, you open your eyes to take in your surroundings. You’re in a bed that’s much too soft for your liking and covered in a soft, white duvet. It’s a large room but it doesn’t feel that way due to the dark colors. You struggle sit up to get a better look.

Damn, this room is ugly…it looks like an antique shop threw up in here. For fuck’s sake, even Emily Gilmore would say this is too much. All the furniture is incredibly ornate with delicate, spindly legs, dark wood, and dark, hideous upholstery. You don’t even need to sit in it to know it’s uncomfortable. There’s a vanity with a mirror and chair on the wall opposite the bed, a few dressers, an armoire, a table with two chairs in front of the windows, and you see two separate doors. There are heavy tapestries on the walls (seriously? Tapestries?!) and one of those eerie paintings that has eyes that follow you everywhere. The windows are covered with heavy, embroidered drapes that have tassels on the ends that are either from the 1800s or the 1960s. Glancing up in the corner, you see the camera. Of course.

This room gives you the creeps.

“Good morning, lisichka, how do you feel?” a quiet, thickly accented voice gently asks.
You start violently; you hadn’t noticed the man sitting in the chair next to the bed. He’s someone you haven’t yet seen; not that you’d remember if you had. He’s maybe five or six years younger than you, with blond hair, brown eyes, and a wide face; he’s probably a little shorter than you. All in all he doesn’t seem all that threatening – he actually looks kind of friendly. Not that that matters here.

“My apologies, I did not mean to frighten you. My name is Mikhail Davydov; I’ve been assisting you since you arrived, but I forgot that you might not remember any of it once your illness has been reversed and the medications wear off. Do you need to use the bathroom?” His voice is kind enough but your eyes narrow in suspicion as you nod. “It is right through there,” he points to one of the two doors. “Do you need help?”

Choosing not to answer, you slowly slide to the edge of the bed and test your legs. You’re weak, but not immobile. Good. Standing slowly, you stumble a bit on the first step and he lunges forward to catch you.

He notices immediately how you stiffen in his arms, so he attempts to put you at ease. “I am not here to hurt you, lisichka, I promise.”

“Don’t call me that,” you mumble as you pull yourself upright; your voice is scratchy from disuse.

“How would you like to be addressed?” He looks genuinely confused.

You shoot him a sidelong look as you take a tentative step. “By my name.”

“Oh, they did not…? I am very sorry, but that is forbidden,” he informs you regretfully; he almost looks sad about it. “Is there another way you’d like to be addressed?”

“Forbidden?” What the hell is going on here?

Mikhail bites his lip and looks down. “I will explain it to you after you’ve made yourself more comfortable. Please, allow me to help you into the bathroom – as before I will leave you to your privacy, but please allow me to help you get there.”

You don’t really have a choice since your legs aren’t cooperating as much as you’d like. He walks you a few steps inside, and turns to leave.

“Oh, would you perhaps like me to run a warm bath?”

“What?” This is becoming more and more surreal with every passing second.

“It might make you feel better,” he looks down as if disappointed with your reaction.

You do feel pretty gross. These clothes could almost walk by themse… Your hand shoots to your neck…where’s the necklace that Bucky gave you? And your hoodie? Looking down, you see that you are dressed in the t-shirt you’d been wearing before you came here but your jeans have been replaced with a pair of sleep shorts. “Oh God…” The only word you can think of is violated as you recall Anatoliy telling you that there were no other women here.

“I was careful to protect your modesty!” he suddenly blurts out, red faced, clearly seeing where your train of though is leading. “You were having problems with the button on your jeans when you first got here due to the effects of the treatments, so I helped you put these on.”

Better Mikhail than Anatoliy, you suppose. Or the mad scientist.
“Okay,” you mutter, still upset, but if he was only helping then that must mean you were doing most of it yourself, even if you don’t remember.

“Also, your necklace and sweatshirt are on top of the dresser – I thought the necklace might be sentimental so I removed it to prevent it from being damaged while you went through the treatment, and the sweatshirt is so oversized that I thought it might…um…be a gesture of comfort from your lover.” His choice of words trips you up for a moment, but you keep your face as blank as you can. He’s unexpectedly insightful, and you don’t want to give him anything that he could report to your captors. “Do you want a bath? There are fresh clothes for you here,” he gestures to an antique shelf next to the tub before deciding to just start the bathwater. You notice as you look around that it’s quite an extravagant bathroom.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” you mutter as you look up at the camera in one of the corners.

“I’m so sorry lisich – I’m so sorry. There are cameras everywhere as you are to be under constant video and audio surveillance. You will be shielded from the video portion when you are behind the curtain of the bathtub or behind the shower doors, and there…” he points to what is basically a shortened bathroom stall, “but they can see you everywhere else.”

You just nod. What else can you do? You’re actually surprised they’re allowing you the privacy for showering or bathing.

“I will leave you now, but will be just outside if you need anything. Please do not hesitate to ask,” he murmurs as he backs out and closes the door behind him.

After relieving yourself, you look around to assess your options. A bath would feel good, you reluctantly concede. The glass surrounding the shower is frosted, so you can change in there and wrap a towel around yourself before going to the bathtub. There’s no fucking way that you’re going to give some asshole a deposit for his spank bank. The tub is ginormous (although not nearly as nice as the one at home, you think spitefully), and there’s a ledge for you to keep a dry towel or anything else you might need. Looking into a cabinet next to the shower, you find a variety of toiletries, all of which look to be high end.

This is so fucking strange.

You’re a prisoner with a goddamn explosive around your neck, but they think you need to bathe with super expensive body wash? What’s the point? You won’t turn it down, though; if you feel clean and more like yourself, then maybe you’ll be better equipped to handle whatever they throw at you.

You remove the lid from the closest bottle and sniff; cucumber melon. Gross. The next few almost make your throat close with the thick, heavy perfume. You finally settle on a wash that smells subtly of roses and spiced vanilla, and pick out some shampoo and conditioner that don’t smell too terribly awful.

You place the bottles at the edge of the bathtub, along with a few extra towels and washcloths, before shutting off the water and making your way into the shower with another towel. You glance up into the corners to make sure there aren’t any cameras before you undress.

God, how long have you been here? Your clothes are both dirty and smelly, and so are you. Looking down to find bandages wrapped around both your arms by your elbows and one on your hand, you carefully peel back the tape. Fuck, they turned you into a goddamn pincushion; you’ve got huge bruises on the insides of both arms and the back of your hand is completely black and blue. You finish undressing, and then wrap the ginormous towel around yourself and step out
before finally gathering the courage necessary to look into the mirror.

Holy hell, you look like *shit*.

Your hair is matted from sweat, your eyes have huge, dark circles under them, your skin is ashen and dull, and your lips are chapped and peeling.

Alright…first things first. It tastes like something crawled into your mouth and died, so you brush your teeth and apply some lip balm – it’s probably too late to keep your lips from cracking and bleeding, but maybe this will keep it from getting too much worse.

Already feeling a little better, you carefully get into the tub, overly mindful and thankful for the curtain keeping you out of view of whatever pervert is watching. It’s only when you’re submerged in the warm water that you realize you don’t hurt anymore. You’re weak and stiff and definitely achy, but it’s the kind of ache that comes from lying in bed too long; it’s nothing like the excruciating pain from before. The cure must have worked. That’s something, at least.

You soak until you can’t stand the sounds of your racing thoughts any longer without physically being in motion, and by then you feel *much* better. Wrapping a towel around your freshly washed hair and another around your body before you step out, you grab the clothes Mikhail left out and make your way into the shower to dress.

How…how the fuck do they know your sizes? Everything fits; the jeans, the sweater, the tank (how do they know you like to wear a tank under your sweaters??), the panties, the bra. *Everything* fits, and it gives you the heebie jeebies. How much do they know about you?

You suddenly remember Mikhail’s observation about your hoodie; it must have been him checking your sizes. It’s still creepy, but you have to admit that it is considerably preferable to any of the other people you know here. Still…

Oh, that’s right. Krakken’s men were in your house at some point; you can’t put it past them to rummage through your belongings. Fuckers probably went on a panty raid while they were there. Sick bastards.

You finish up in the bathroom, trying to follow your normal habits as closely possible in order to keep yourself calm; there’s a measure of comfort in following a familiar routine. There’s no point in trying to impress anyone, and given your current circumstances you don’t want to, so you skip makeup (even though there’s plenty available) and pull your damp hair into a simple ponytail.

By the time you go back into the bedroom, the bed has been made with what looks to be fresh linens, the drapes are opened to admit the pale winter sunlight, and there’s a tray of food with a bottle of water sitting on the table in the corner.

Mikhail stands as you walk past, striding toward the dresser so you can put your necklace on; it makes you feel like Bucky’s somehow with you. “Please, lisich… um… miss… Mr. Krakken would like for you to eat and drink.”

“Why?” You don’t bother hiding the resentment leaking from your voice. What’s the point?

“It’s been days! You’ve been supplemented by IV, but you need to eat. Please!” He almost sounds panicked.

You’re almost afraid to ask, but you have to know. “What’s the date?”

“It is the third of January.”
Oh God. You’ve been gone for a full week.
You take a deep breath to quell your panic at the loss of days, but you can’t help the way your eyes dart around the room, looking for something, anything, to make you feel sane and safe. It’s only then that you notice the dull glint of another black metal choker; it’s mostly hidden behind the collar of his button-down shirt, but from what you can see, it’s identical to the one around your neck. “Mikhail…” you murmur as you gesture to your throat, all hostility now gone from your voice, “you’re not here by choice either, are you?”

He looks down for a long moment before meeting your eyes. “No. My father is a Bratva Pakhan, and made some unwise business decisions that negatively impacted Mr. Krakken. As recompense, Mr. Krakken told my father that either his life was forfeit, or that of one of his sons. My father decided that I would be the sacrificial lamb, as it were.”

Mikhail’s confession takes you by surprise.

“I thought I was going to die; I really was not expecting that this would be the outcome. I suppose it turned out this way because Mr. Krakken realized that my father wouldn’t be all that upset over my death; he would actually be much more distressed about the thought of one of his sons working for Mr. Krakken. So here I am.” He pauses for a moment before fixing his eyes on something behind you. “It is my greatest privilege and pleasure to serve the Krakken brothers.” There’s nothing at all convincing about his declaration. There’s no inflection in his voice at all – in fact, it sounds rehearsed. Did he just say that for the benefit of those watching through the camera?

“I’m so sorry,” you murmur after a long moment.

He lifts his shoulders in a halfhearted shrug. “It is not so bad.”

You feel an unexpected surge of compassion for Mikhail. How could it be ‘not so bad?’ What has he been through that makes it seem like this is okay?

“Please,” he gestures again to the food and effectively changes the subject, “eat.”

You plop down on the chair with a heavy sigh. “You’ll be hurt if I don’t, won’t you.” You don’t bother framing it as a question; it doesn’t take much imagination to know it’s possible with these men.

He avoids your eyes as he almost imperceptibly nods. “I, uh, I have been assigned as your personal attendant. It is my responsibility to make sure you are well.”

“Okay. I’ll eat,” you softly concede. Despite how long it’s been, you have no appetite but there’s no need for anyone to be hurt on your behalf, especially if it’s something you can control. Lifting the lids, you find thin oatmeal and buttered toast. There are small containers of peanut butter, jelly, milk, raisins, and brown sugar as well.

“I know it does not seem like much, but it has been a while since you last ate, so you should start slowly.”

With another sigh, you begin mixing the peanut butter and brown sugar into the oatmeal.

“So, um, how would you like to be addressed?” he asks softly, almost as if he’s afraid to disturb you. It’s right then that you make the decision to treat him with as much kindness as you can muster; based on his extremely submissive behavior, it’s quite clear to you that he hasn’t been
treated well. At all. Besides, he’s just as much a prisoner as you are, and absolutely none of this is his fault.

“Why can’t you just call me by my name?” you gently ask in return.

Mikhail swallows hard before answering, “Mr. Krakken wishes for you to be reminded that you are his pet, and that who you were before no longer matters.”

“So the purpose is to dehumanize me.” Anatoliy wasn’t bluffing in the car – he’d meant every word of what he said. Un. Fucking. Believable.

“More or less, yes, I am sorry,” he whispers as he looks down at his shoes.

“What an ass.” God, you’re just pissed. Who does this??

“SHHHHH!! Please, do not say such things! They can hear you!!” He’s thoroughly panicked, but the only think you can think of is Nicolai telling Anatoliy that he wasn’t allowed to hurt you. Well okay then, let’s see how far that goes.


Mikhail’s eyes grow wide with disbelief.

You lift one shoulder in a shrug and begin to slowly eat your oatmeal. Apparently the cure took care of Metzger’s infection but didn’t touch the case of the fuck-its you’d developed on the way here.

“Address me however you’d like, I guess. Just don’t call me whatever it is that they call me.”

You pensively stare out the window as you slowly eat. Anatoliy had mentioned that it’s cold in Siberia, so you assume that you’re in Siberia now. It’s…surprisingly pretty. It looks like Krakken’s estate is in the middle of nowhere because all you can see are trees and maybe some mountains in the distance – it’s hard to tell for sure with the hazy clouds – but you’re also well aware that looks can be deceiving. For all you know, there’s a road less than fifty yards away – not that it would do you any good. This goddamn collar will keep you right here.

The next spoonful of oatmeal goes down hard due to the surge of hopelessness that hits you. Even if – no, when – even when Bucky comes for you, because he will, what is he going to do about the collar? You can only assume that it will detonate if tampered with, and if they can blow you up at the press of a button it isn’t as if Bucky can just whisk you away.

Tony. Tony can figure something out, right? But how? He’s good, but he probably needs to know what he’s dealing with before he can create a fix. So how the hell is that going to happen? Is he going to sneak in to inspect it and then hide in your closet while he builds a miracle? Fuck, you don’t even have a closet, just a few dressers and an armoire…

Your mind keeps finding all the impossibilities in your situation and it’s making it difficult to breathe.

Mikhail suddenly breaks into your brooding. “How about solnishko? It is what I used to call my sister.” He smiles sadly. You don’t have the heart to smile back.

Solnishko – little sun

***
The rest of the day slowly passes, as do the next three. Anxiety has become your constant companion, and you’ve had more panic attacks than you can count; Mikhail does his best to help you, but it really does no good.

You need Bucky.

You stiffen every time you hear someone in the hallway, but no one enters your room except for Mikhail, who tends to come and go throughout the day. He brings your meals, makes sure you’re comfortable, and closely monitors your recovery. He even brings you some books and puzzles, but they don’t capture your attention. How could they? You’re a prisoner for fuck’s sake. This isn’t a goddamn vacation.

The days are awful, of course, but the nights? The nights are absolute hell.

If you really think about it, you can probably estimate the total amount of sleep you've gotten since you woke up after the treatment at roughly six hours, and most of this is obtained during the day in the form of naps when Mikhail is in the room. You can't sleep at night – you’re terrified that someone will come in while you’re unaware. Not that they can’t do that during the day, but at least then the room will be brightly lit by the natural light streaming in through the windows; at least then you’d see them coming.

And then, of course, there’s the fact that not thinking about Artie and Jimmy is almost impossible as you lie alone in the dark. There’s nothing else to take your mind off them, especially when Mikhail retires to his own room for the night, but you do your best not to cry. Crying almost always leads to migraines, and you’re fairly certain that Nicolai and Company don’t give a shit, so you try to focus on happy memories instead of the ache of separation.

Plus, you yearn for Bucky – desperately. Without his warmth or the weight of his arm draped over your body, sleep just won't come. You miss him every minute of every day, but it's sharper at night.

Nicolai is doing this on purpose. You know he’s doing this on purpose – making you wait in this creepy room for something to happen. Making you wait while you miss your kids, imagine worst case scenarios, wonder what he’s got planned for you, wonder why the hell he cares if you’re eating or clean (seriously, what’s up with the department store selection of beauty products?) Making you wait so you have nothing to do but think of Bucky while you fear the worst. It’s a power play – you know this – and you hate the fact that it’s working. You grow more restless and anxious with every passing second, and your only comforts are your necklace and the hoodie that is slowly losing Bucky’s scent.

It’s late afternoon and you are ready to combust when Mikhail enters your room again, looking thoroughly stressed and carrying several large bags.

“I am so sorry solnishko, but you need to begin to get ready. We do not have much time.” He heaves the bags down onto the bed and starts rummaging through them.

“Ready for what?” Sitting around some more?

“Dinner with Mr. Krakken, Kapitan...Anatoliy,” he clarifies at your look of confusion, “and Dr. Metzger.”

Your eyebrows shoot up to your hairline. “Dinner? With those fucks? You’re kidding, right?”

Mikhail regards you sadly for a long moment. “I wish I were,” he murmurs quietly. He removes a
plastic covering from one of the bundles and reveals a small collection of emerald green cocktail dresses, then turns to hang them in the armoire.

The look of confusion on your face must be clear, because he goes on to explain, “Mr. Krakken insists on formality for dinner, and he wants to present you to the rest of the household. I have been instructed to make sure you look your absolute best.”

Present you to…What. The. Fuck.

“We should start with your hair; it would be best if we straightened it.”

You want to scream with frustration – what the fuck is going on?? Why do they want to present you to anyone and what’s with the dresses? And you have to do your fucking hair?! Why? What is the fucking point?? You’re a goddamn hostage, what does it matter what you look like?

He motions for you to come over to the seated vanity; you shake your head in disbelief but comply with his request. He turns the chair at the last moment, making you walk around both him and it before you can take a seat. He removes your ponytail elastic, and runs his fingers through your hair. “Good, still damp from your shower this morning,” he mutters.

Did you fall down the fucking rabbit hole? You give up on trying to make anything make sense.

He retrieves a blow dryer from the bathroom; he looks…nervous? He plugs it in and takes his position behind you as he begins the process of blow drying your hair. Good luck, Buddy, we’re gonna be here for a while. Your hair does NOT dry quickly.

“Solnishko, can you hear me?” He’s barely audible over the sound of the small appliance in his hand. Not entirely sure if you really heard him speak or if you were just imagining it, you just nod your head slightly. “Good. If we keep quiet, they shouldn’t be able to hear us speaking; the white noise should drown out our words.”

It’s just now that you realize he’s positioned you both so that your backs are to the camera.

“I…overheard some things today. You are to be presented because Mr. Krakken and Kapitan want their men to get a good look at you – they say they want to show off their new pet but really it is to frighten you and to let you know that your fate rests with those men should things go wrong. Please watch what you say; they are very unpredictable.” He speaks in a hushed tone, and if you weren’t intently focusing on his words you wouldn’t be able to make them out. “I…I do not know what this means, exactly, but they say they are going to activate the Soldier. Do you know what this means?”

Damn right you do, but you’re not about to admit it. Besides, Bucky told you that the triggers had been removed, but these men do not need to know that, so you’re better off playing dumb.

He continues when you shake your head slightly; you don’t feel bad about the lie. “Well, they are going to activate him, whatever that means, and as long as he does as they say, you should be safe. I think. But the Doctor said something about the triggers eventually wearing off, and that is when you will need to worry, solnishko, because if he begins to resist, they will use you to ensure his compliance.”

“How?” You don’t really want to know, but you’ll probably be better off if you know what to expect.

“Mr. Krakken will release his Hounds on you.” The horror in Mikhail’s voice is palpable. The Krakkens are going to sic their dogs on you?
“What?” You hope to God that you misheard him.

“The Hounds. Mr. Krakken and Kapitan like to call their men their Hounds; it amuses them. It is also why they call you ‘lisichka.’ It means little fox.”

Oh God.

You’d prefer to be mauled by dogs.

“If the Soldier resists orders, they will make him watch what the Hounds do to you. There will be nothing he can do for you with that collar around your neck.”

“Oh, God…” If you’d had any doubt you were being held by sadists, it would be long gone.

Your heart is pounding in your ears as your mind begins to race. This can’t happen…this can’t happen to Bucky. He’ll never forgive himself; not for whatever happens to you, even though it’s not his fault, and not for whatever atrocities they make him do to keep you away from harm. But what can you do? If you remove yourself from the equation by killing yourself, then they will go after your kids – and you know that there’s no way you’ll be able to convince Bucky to refuse their orders.

How are you going to get out of this shit show!!?

Mikhail begins softly speaking once more. “Your friends want proof that you are alive; he will use you to control them, as well. They are also planning another video conference with the Avengers, which will happen tonight. Mr. Krakken and his men will be watching you closely for any reaction – anything you give them will be used against you.”

Your heart starts beating violently at the thought of seeing Bucky, even if it’s just by video chat; you miss him so, so much. You’re going to need to be extremely careful.

“Why are you telling me all of this?” Does he have some sort of motive? Is Mikhail playing mind games with you? He’d seemed so kind to you over the past few days, but collar or no, you don’t trust him. You don’t trust anyone here.

You aren’t sure if he hears you because it takes a while for him to answer.

“What they do is not right. It is not right that they play with human lives as if they are nothing but inconsequential pawns in their game of power. It is not right that they enjoy watching others suffer the consequences of their actions. It is not right that they enjoy what they do. I cannot do anything for myself, but if I can prepare you by telling you what to expect, then perhaps you can avoid unnecessary pain. Solnishko, please, please do not underestimate the Krakken brothers’ penchant for cruelty. They will hurt you just because they can; do not give them any additional incentive.”

Despite the hot air of the dryer blowing on your hair, his comments freeze you from the inside out.

Mikhail abruptly turns off the hair dryer and turns your chair to face the mirror. “I think we will need to put some of your hair up; it will not dry fast enough.”

Apparently the informational segment of your little conversation is over.

He deftly begins twisting small sections of your hair up into a partial updo; it seems like he knows what he’s doing. Catching your questioning expression in the mirror, he begins to explain, “My sister used to run a beauty salon of sorts; I worked for her. We were very close.” Again, the sad smile. “Even from a young age I did not like the violence of the Bratva, so I went into what we
used to call the ‘other’ family business. It is likely why my father chose to forfeit my life over those of my brothers.”

It is completely unfathomable to you, as a parent, to not automatically choose to give your own life for that of your child…and your heart breaks for him. It seems like he was close to his sister, so you try to steer the conversation to something that might be a little less painful for Mikhail. “You must miss her terribly. Do they ever let you visit her?” You’re sure the answer is no, but for Mikhail’s sake you hope they surprise you.

He shakes his head sadly, and speaks quietly. “No, she is not there to visit. Kapitan used her and then executed her for my father’s crimes after he collared me.”

You meet his eyes in the mirror. *Fuck.* “I’m so sorry, Mikhail.”

He nods in acknowledgement and turns his focus to your hair. Several long minutes go by before he speaks again. “I know you have lost a lot, solnishko, and I know that you may feel like you have nothing left to lose since you will never see your children again or be with the one you love, but you do. You do. You need to show them the respect they demand. Do not allow your grief and anxiety make you even more reckless with your words than you already have been. They can and will take things from you that you never considered. Your dignity, your humanity, your virtue, your spirit; if you defy them, they will take it as a challenge and you will become something to conquer, and they will cheerfully do so with any means necessary until you are nothing but a broken and empty shell.”

You swallow hard and bite your lip; you know with an incapacitating surety that he’s not wrong. You also know why he feels free to speak openly about this – both Krakkens would be more than happy to know that Mikhail is doing his best to ensure your compliance.

“Please do not test them, solnishko. It will not end well for you.” He briefly leaves to retrieve the makeup products that are still sitting in the bathroom, unopened.

Fear clenches once again around your heart, and you have to close your eyes and take a deep breath to fight off the panic now fighting its way up your throat.

Mikhail places the makeup on the vanity in front of you, and you stare it as he begins using a flatiron on the loose portion of your hair.

“I don’t want to do this, Mikhail.” Trying to hide the terror in your voice is pointless, but you attempt it anyway.

You also fail.

“I am so sorry, but you do not have a choice in the matter. These are direct orders from Mr. Krakken. You can resist, but one way or another, he will get what he wants. It is better, solnishko, to bend so you do not break.”

You swallow your fear and begin to sort through the makeup. Instead of focusing on how you will be shown off in front of a bunch of men that are waiting for their chance to hurt you, you try to keep in mind that you’ll see Bucky when the Krakkens have their video call. You can get made up for Bucky, even if he’s not really here. Right? Right. He’s more than worth the effort. Yes, you will try to look at it this way – it’s the only way you’ll get through the prep.

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An hour later you’re finally finished. You ended up trying on a few different dresses, and
thankfully found one that fit and wasn’t too revealing. It’s a deep but vibrant shade of green, and under other circumstances you would probably think that it’s a gorgeous dress. It’s a satin wrap with a moderately full skirt that hits just above your knees, and it has a delicate lace overlay. The satin part of the dress is sleeveless, but the lace extends to an elbow length sleeve. The sash is long enough to wrap around your waist twice, and it is the only part of the satin that isn’t covered with lace.

Mikhail also brought a few pairs of black heels; you choose the most comfortable shoes…just in case.

“Solnishko…you may want to remove your necklace. Mr. Krakken may not like the way it competes with the collar.” He sounds regretful, and you appreciate that.

“I suppose that wearing it would be incentive for them to take it, wouldn’t it?” You take his silence as affirmation, and remove Bucky’s gift, placing it in a drawer on the vanity.

“The final touch,” he murmurs as he presents a bottle of perfume, “A gift from the Kapitan.” He says it with a fair amount of disgust, and you’re surprised that he allowed that emotion to leak through considering how paranoid he’s been about the cameras.

“Oh…oh no,” you push the offending bottle away after just one small sniff, “No no no. That – that is a powerful smell. I can’t wear that, it gave me an immediate headache! I’m sorry, Mikhail, but I can’t…”

“But solnishko –“

“It is fine, Mikhail, if lisichka is sensitive to smells, we will not make her wear it. My brother and I are not unreasonable.” Nicolai sweeps into the room – you hadn’t even heard the door open.
You’d swear that the temperature just dropped by fifteen degrees.

Mikhail stops what he’s doing and immediately goes to the nearest wall, pressing his back against it and lowering his gaze to the ground while Nicolai slowly and deliberately steps up to you.

Without warning, Nicolai pulls back his hand and strikes you across the face. It’s an open-handed slap, but it fucking hurts. Before you can react, he takes your jaw in between his forefinger and thumb and forcibly turns your head until you’re facing him directly. It takes you completely by surprise how fast he can move.

“Whether or not we are in the room with you, you will show Anatoliy and me the proper respect. Do you understand?” Nicolai’s intonation is almost kind even though his hold is painful; the jarring contrast between his actions and voice is terrifying, and you’re pretty sure you’re going to have bruising from his grasp tomorrow.

You slowly nod as best you can while still in his grip, and he finally lets go. Despite your best efforts, a shuddering exhale escapes, and you hate that he can see how shaken you are.

Nicolai takes a step back and sweeps his eyes over you. “You look positively lovely, lisichka! I had no idea you had such potential for beauty.” He sounds joyful as he smiles, but nothing of the smile comes close to reaching those heartless and cruel green eyes.

You’re careful to keep your expression neutral at the obviously backhanded compliment, but that doesn’t stop your thoughts: Fuck you, asshole. Nice suit and bowtie. Oh, and by the way, you look surprisingly dapper for a soulless megalomaniac psychopath.

“Are you ready?” he holds out his arm.

Even though the thought of touching him is revolting, you have no choice but to take it.

You don’t say a word as he leads you through the manor with Mikhail following close behind, and you pay close attention to where you’re going, just in case it proves useful at a later time.

“You know, lisichka, you do not need to remain confined to your room. Just ask Mikhail to escort you so you are not alone – I would not want you to be caught alone and unaware by one of Anatoliy’s men. They can be a bit…uncouth.” He laughs, he actually laughs.

It doesn’t seem as though he requires a reply, so you don’t give one.

He brings you into a large formal dining room. Like everywhere else in this godforsaken place, it is decorated with an appalling amount of gaudy or antique furnishings. They really need to fire their decorator. The table is front of a large fireplace, and mounted above the mantle is a curved… sword? It looks lethal; it certainly doesn’t fit the décor. What the hell…

“Ah, I see you are admiring my father’s shashka.” Nicolai’s voice breaks into your thoughts. He puts his head close to yours as he murmurs, “It is just as sharp as it looks, lisichka. And yes, I know how to use it.”
The words send a chill up your spine, but you manage, just barely, to not give him the satisfaction of reacting. There’s a trace of disappointment in his gaze; it’s a small victory.

Murmuring catches your attention, and you look over to see a group of men standing off to the side; Anatoliy is among them. He points you out to his comrades, and they begin to catcall as you walk over to the table while Nicolai calmly chuckles. Unbelievable. You’d never been catcalled in your life, and now there are several men whistling at you and saying only God knows what amongst each other.

Pricks.

Mikhail pushes in your chair as you take your seat just to the right of the head of the table before walking to what is presumably his station against the wall. There’s a place set on your right and another directly across from you, so you’ll be completely surrounded when Anatoliy and Metzger take their seats.

The pounding of your heart echoes in your ears and you do your best to be invisible but you know that you’re failing miserably. Placing your hands in your lap, you stare at your empty dinner plate and try to think of something – anything – other than your current situation.

The men suddenly quiet as Nicolai takes his seat at the head of the table, and you look up to see Anatoliy saunter toward you; as he does so, he eyeballs you like you’re nothing more than a premium steak in a butcher shop. You don’t turn around as he walks behind you, which hopefully means that he’ll be taking the seat across instead of next to you…but you hear him pause.

Oh God, please keep walking…

It’s incredibly hard to breathe with that shark lurking about.

“Allright, as you can see, lisichka is alive and well,” Nicolai announces grandly.

What? Who is he talking to? You look up for the first time to see that the wall across from you contains a screen holding the images of Steve, Tony, and Nat. Their mouths are moving, but the audio must be muted because you can’t hear anything.

Wait…where’s Bucky?

You recoil sharply when Anatoliy’s fingertip touches your shoulder, lightly running up and over to your neck before bringing his hand forward to rest around the collar; it probably looks as though he’s choking you. Fixated on Bucky’s absence, you don’t notice Anatoliy bending over until his face is buried into the crook of your neck. A strangled cry escapes your throat as he inhales deeply and then moves his lips to your ear.

“Lisichka, I was going to be angry at you for not wearing the perfume I provided, but even without it you smell delightful.”

You lock eyes with Tony on the screen, desperately needing to focus on someone safe as you try to ignore Anatoliy’s nauseating touch. Tony is saying something but you still can’t hear him, so you try to read his lips instead. No luck; you’re entirely too unsettled to properly concentrate.

“Anatoliy, do not smother our pet. No matter how this plays out, I am sure there will be time enough later for you to get your fill of her.” Anatoliy laughs lightly at Nicolai’s comment and pulls away to take his seat. Unfortunately, that seat is next to you.

Metzger suddenly appears out of nowhere and takes the seat across from you, but turns his back to
you so he can face the screen. Ugly little troll.

“Grigory,” Nicolai looks over at one of the men standing against the wall, “please turn up the incoming audio, so that we may hear our friends on the other line.”

A tall man with sharp cheekbones and cropped black hair walks closer, and even from across the room you can see that he’s got one pale eye and one dark eye. He stares at you unflinchingly as he reaches the equipment control panel that is set into the wall next to the video screen. His calculating, mismatched gaze makes you extremely uncomfortable, and you’re almost afraid to look away in case he pounces. There’s something about this man that is extremely predatory.

“Are you afraid of him, lisichka?” Anatoliy leans close and puts his arm possessively around your shoulders. “Do not worry, I will protect you.” The snicker that follows makes your skin crawl and your breath stutter.

“Stop tormenting her! You have what you want, and we are complying with your orders!” Steve’s voice suddenly echoes across the room, and you can finally take a deep breath at hearing something familiar.

“Ah, but I don’t have everything I want, not yet,” Nicolai coolly demurs. “And surely you can see she is well, yes? Lisichka walked in here of her own volition; she is clothed, fed, and clean. She has been pampered like the special and valuable pet she is; I hardly think that is tormenting her. Now, if you do not mind, I would like to proceed with business.”

“We’re ready when you are,” Tony’s voice is tight as he reaches over to quiet Steve with a hand to his shoulder, and you can clearly see their concern for you mixed with the anger written on their faces, but they compose themselves enough to continue.

“I told you that I wanted all of you on the call. Where is the Soldat?” Nicolai sounds incredibly annoyed, and you yourself are impatient for the answer. Where is Bucky? You thought for sure that you’d see him, and the overwhelming disappointment weighs heavily on your heart. Why isn’t he there? Your eyes dart over the screen, looking for any sign of him in the room your friends are calling from, and it’s only then that you notice the large window behind Tony, Steve, and Nat showcasing a dramatic skyline. Are they in New York, at the tower? They are, aren’t they… The realization that they’re still so far away is soul crushing.

“He’s not with us,” Steve answers evenly. His answer feels like a punch to your stomach.

“What do you mean, he is not with you?” Anatoliy asks skeptically. “From what I observed, I doubt very much that he would allow you to leave him behind. Besides, his cooperation is part of what we require.”

“Yeah, well, technically speaking he left us behind. The Love Machine let his emotions get the best of him, and he took off,” Tony begins; his tone drips annoyed exasperation as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “We don’t know where he is and we haven’t been able to make contact or trace him for the past three days; we can only assume that he’s on his way to you.”

You watch Tony attentively. You don’t doubt for a moment that Bucky wanted immediate action, but it seems unlikely that he would be reckless; he’s too well trained for that. Besides, from what you’ve been told, he’s a brilliant tactician. He of all people would know that the stakes are too high to act on impulse. Right?

And…they’d told you to keep the nature of your relationship with Bucky quiet…but Tony just broadcast it. Something’s up. Well, duh, something’s up – they are planning to rescue you. So this
is part of their plan? Or are they winging it because Bucky really did leave them behind?

“I find that hard to believe. He is your teammate, I am sure you are in contact with him,” Nicolai counters drily.

“We’re not; he took off without us and either shut off or destroyed his comms. He’s not thinking straight since you took her. She’s his reason for living, did you really think he would just calmly sit by while we ponder the impossibilities of the situation?” Tony speaks as though he’s talking to a couple of five year olds. “We had to tranq him, *multiple times*, but the serum has enhanced his metabolism so much that they weren’t very effective.”

Anatoliy sighs heavily, but Nicolai simply shrugs as he looks over. “It makes no difference in the end, brother, he is on his way here. We can use her to control him until we find out about the efficacy of the triggers.”

“Yes…speaking of the triggers…I heard rumors they are no longer effective. Is that true?” Metzger speaks up for the first time; his voice still grates at your ears, and you have sudden flashes of him laughing at you as he administered the cure.

It’s clear that the question catches Steve, Tony, and Nat off guard; this isn’t widely known information. It certainly begs the question - how do these men know?

“I will take that as a yes, then,” Anatoliy smirks; no one bothers to correct him.

“Do you know anything about this, lisichka? They have already confirmed that he loves you; I am sure he confided in you. Do you know about the removal of the triggers? Any extra details? For your sake, do not lie to me.” Nicolai’s voice is cold, calculating.

Everyone, including your friends on the screen, are watching you.

“It’s okay to tell them what you know, Kiddo.” Tony speaks gently as Steve nods in encouragement.

You open your mouth to speak for the first time; your voice is weaker than you’d like. “Um, he just said that the triggers were removed.”

Metzger is watching you intently with squinted eyes while Nicolai drums his fingers on the table.

Anatoliy grabs your jaw and forcibly turns you to face him, much like Nicolai did earlier; this is a fucking *obnoxious* commonality between them, and with his other arm still over your shoulder, you are completely caged in by him.

You distantly hear the protests of your friends, but Anatoliy ignores them.

“Do you care to change your response, lisichka?”

He stares at you for a long moment as he holds your face close to his; the smell of his breath is sickening but you have no choice but to breathe it in.

He finally releases his hold on you, and you stare at him wide-eyed for a second or two before answering, “I don’t know anything else – that’s all he ever said about the triggers.” It’s the truth – the two of you had talked about pretty much everything, but he didn’t go into great detail about the triggers or the process by which they were rendered ineffective.

“You expect me to believe that? The man loves you, do you honestly expect us to believe that he
would not tell you about this?"

“He did tell me about them, I already told you that! But that’s all he said on the matter.” You try to keep your voice even but your fear is starting to give way to indignation and anger, and a fierce protectiveness for the man you love makes you bolder than you should be. “He’s trying to rebuild his life. Yes, he told me about what happened to him, what he was forced to do, and about the horrid things that were done to him courtesy of Dr. Frankenstein’s uncle,” you shoot a withering glare at Metzger, and gain a small amount of satisfaction when he shrinks back just a bit. Fucking coward. “But those weren’t the things he enjoyed talking about, so he didn’t necessarily give me every single detail. He liked to talk about other things, like his interests and hobbies; he has those, you know. And he still has goals and dreams. I realize that you look at Bucky and just see some kind of weapon, but he's not – he’s a person.”

You see the smile growing across Anatoliy’s face…fuck. You got too emotional – you just gave away your feelings for Bucky. Hopefully this works with whatever they’re planning…

“Aw, this is so sweet, is it not, Nicolai? She loves him,” Anatoliy coos as he brushes his fingers over the collar. God, you wish he would stop fucking touching you.

“Yes…it appears that she does.” Nicolai sounds so fucking smug, you want nothing more in that moment than to turn around and punch him, but you know that even if you land the hit, ultimately it will do no good and will probably just result in a lot of suffering for you. You clench your jaw and remain still. “Too bad it is such a tragic love story, yes?”

You glance up at the screen apologetically – all three of them are telling you it’s okay, that you didn’t do anything wrong.

“Well, tell the Soldat that we have a surprise for him when he gets here. He is not as impervious as he believes himself to be. As for you – you are to continue to ignore the weapons trading I told you about; if you or anyone steps in to hinder the deals over the next week, I will see to it that lisichka bears the punishment for your disobedience.” Nicolai motions and Grigory steps forward. “I will be in contact when I have further need of you.” He nods, and Grigory pushes a button that disconnects the call, and you have to fight back tears when the familiar faces disappear.

So he’s using you to keep them from interfering with his business; how many people will die because of this? On top of everything else, guilt starts to set in.

Anatoliy fixes his gaze on the group of men standing off to the side. “You may go – you know your assignments.”

They file out, but you hear a set of approaching footsteps and look up to see Grigory walking toward the table. Now that he’s closer, you can see that he has one pale blue eye and one dark brown eye; the effect of his contrasting gaze is even more disconcerting up close. He doesn’t say anything, but he takes the seat next to Metzger.

“Lisichka, this is Grigory Smetanin. He is my second in command,” Anatoliy purrs, enjoying every single second of your obvious discomfort. “You will treat him with the proper amount of respect, yes?”

You don’t trust your voice, so you simply nod. Grigory continues to stare at you, a smug leer growing across his face.

“Good, that is settled. I, for one, am hungry,” Nicolai announces.
“So am I,” Grigory doesn’t take his eyes off you as he utters his comment, leaving no room for misinterpretation. This man clearly sees you as nothing more than prey.

Nicolai smiles; he *smiles* as if this is just a normal dinner party. “Mikhail, we are ready for our dinner.”

Anatoliy *finally* removes his arm from your shoulders, for the first time in what feels like hours you can take a deep breath.

They begin to discuss strategy for their weapons dealing, and for the most part you zone out, consumed by your internal struggle. Where was Bucky? Why wasn’t he there? Logically you know that he must have had a good reason, but your heart doesn’t understand that. It *hurts*. You really needed to see him. Did he actually take off, like Tony said?

Where are you, Bucky?

You’re so deep in your thoughts that you don’t notice the presence behind you until an arm is reaching over your shoulder. You flinch sharply, causing all four men at the table to start laughing.

“It is just me, solnishko – I am so sorry, I did not mean to startle you.” A reassuring hand on your other shoulder and Mikhail’s gentle whisper breaks through your panic, and you see that he is placing a dish of food in front of you.

It’s too much. It’s just getting to be too damn much.

You take deep breaths, doing your best to stay calm while the vultures surrounding you watch with amusement. You fucking *hate* them.

Mikhail serves the three men and resumes his position against the wall, and his warnings echo in your head. Unsure of the protocol, you don’t move to eat until they do; it isn’t worth risking their anger. You eat for the same reason, even though you’ve no appetite whatsoever. These men are obviously cracked, and you don’t know what will set them off.

Occupied with pushing around the stewed meat and potatoes on your plate, you don’t realize that the conversation has stopped until someone clears his throat. Your fork pauses as you raise your eyes.

“Dr. Metzger asked you a question, lisichka. Do not be rude.” Nicolai is looking at you with a raised eyebrow – he looks more amused than angry.

“I’m sorry, what was the question?” You hardly recognize your own voice, meek and small as it sounds – you haven’t sounded like this since before Christopher died. Part of you hates yourself for reverting to this behavior, but the other part recognizes it for what it is; a survival mechanism.

“Did the Soldat tell you what his trigger words are? Or how many?” Well, that’s an odd question. Don’t they already know? They seem to know everything else.

You bite your lip as you think; something is vaguely jogging your memory. But do you tell them? One glance around the room tells you that you dare not lie – they’ll know if you do. Fuck. “There are ten words, but Bucky never told me what they are, he just told me that he still gets really anxious when he hears them in passing conversation – I don’t remember exactly what he said, but it was something about how hearing just one of those ten words will throw his entire day off.”

Metzger suddenly gets a huge grin as he triumphantly slams something onto the table, causing you to jump and everyone else to look at him in annoyance.
What the fuck…a Trapper Keeper? Is this dillhole secretly an eleven-year-old? What self-respecting doctor has a goddamn Trapper Keeper?!

Biting down on your lip to keep your comments to yourself, you watch as Metzger opens the binder almost gleefully. “These are my uncle’s personal notes – they were kept in the family, fortunately for me; not even HYDRA has seen these! I have information here that no one else has!”

You almost expect a maniacal laugh, but it doesn’t come.

“Dr. Zola was not only brilliant, he was also very careful. It does not matter if those triggers were erased from his mind. The Soldat can still be activated.”

What?

He smiles, and the room seems just a little dimmer. “My uncle built in a contingency plan, just in case things with HYDRA went wrong. You see, my dear, there is a second set of trigger words.”

Chapter End Notes

The next part will be in the companion piece I Don't Want the World to See Me (Cause I Don't Think that They'd Understand) - it will be #9.

***EDIT*** I'm an idiot that can't count. This is part 8 of IDWtWtSM, not 9.
Metzger’s words sink in, and for the first time since you woke up in this horrid, ugly, miserable hellhole, you hope Bucky doesn’t come for you. You’re currently a prisoner of the cruelest group of men you’ve ever known, and you know, you just know that if they activate him, they’ll make him hurt you. For their amusement. For fun. This…this has the potential to destroy Bucky.

You look at the four men sitting at the table with you. They all look incredibly smug, and are wearing satisfied smirks on their faces; clearly they’re very proud of themselves. Sadistic fucks.

“I thought you would look happier, lisichka, you will see your beloved soon.” Nicolai’s voice intrudes into your thoughts; you don’t want to speak, but a glance at the monster to your left tells you that he expects a reply. He’s enjoying this.

“You’re going to break him. Forgive me for not wanting to see him destroyed.” You whisper the words – partially to mask the sarcasm in your tone, but also because you can’t muster much more than that.

“But he will be here, with you. Surely that brings you some joy?” His voice is kindly, and it makes you sick because you know he’s trying to mess with your emotions, to make you crack.

“No, Nicolai. It doesn’t.” Oh, and by the way, fuck you.

He narrows his eyes at you in displeasure – did he really think you would say yes? Is he really that perverse, that out of touch with human decency?

Or is he just upset that you won’t play along with his stupid little game?

“Well, that is unfortunate for you, but it changes nothing.”

What? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

Metzger scoffs. “Honestly, Mr. Krakken, I doubt it makes a difference either way; as long as we give him permission, he’ll overpower her if he so wishes.” He turns his coke-bottle glassed gaze to you. “You will help to keep the Soldat complaint. He will be activated, but he has a record of eventually breaking through his programming. My uncle used to control the Asset by means that we do not currently have access to; I have not yet been able to successfully replicate the machine used to wipe the Soldat’s mind, and we do not wish to place him into cryostasis as we have tasks for him to complete that are time-sensitive. Now, when Dr. Zola was in charge, he made sure the Asset was cut off from any type of affection or physical contact, thinking that perhaps that would keep his personality from resurfacing. I, however, have a theory that having access to a release for his physical cravings will suppress his aggression and thereby significantly slow down his ability to break through. Whether or not he actually takes the opportunity remains to be seen. Of course, if he does, he will not recognize or care for you, and I doubt very much that it will be a pleasant experience. Well, for you, anyway.”

The implication sets in immediately, and although it’s incredibly disturbing, it bothers you less than it probably should – perhaps it’s because you miss him so goddamn much that you’ll take whatever you can get, or maybe it’s that your emotions are starting to fade. Either way, you love every aspect of Bucky, even the part of him that is the Winter Soldier, so you decide in that moment that if it happens, you’ll do your best to consent if for no other reason than to soften the blow when Bucky breaks through and remembers. As horrifying as the experience may be, it won’t
have been of his choosing; you’ll forgive him. Bucky, on the other hand…

_Bucky will never forgive himself._

It’s absolutely nauseating how incredibly satisfied everyone looks; except Grigory. It takes a full minute before he gets it – fucking moronic twit.

“Oh!” he begins roaring with laughter. “You are to become the Winter Soldier’s whore!”

“Better his whore than yours,” you reply coolly. You’ve had enough – they can go ahead and beat you, it won’t hurt nearly as much as what they’re planning.

_Bucky…stay away from here…_

Grigory sober immediately, Metzger snorts out a laugh, and Anatoliy looks pissed.

“Lisichka, what did I say about treating Grigory with respect?” His tone is low, dangerous.

You choose your words carefully. “I meant no disrespect, Anatoliy, I was just stating an opinion. Clearly it would make sense that if this is going to happen, I prefer that it will at least be with the one I love, right?” Go ahead, asshole, try to reject that statement…make yourself look like a fucking idiot.

“She has you there, brother,” Nicolai chuckles after Anatoliy offers no response. “You cannot fault her logic; although she may change her mind by the time he is through with her.”

You’ve been trying to keep Mikhail’s warning in mind, but the hold on your restraint is starting to fray, and the way they keep insinuating that Bucky will hurt you finally causes something inside you to snap. You turn to Anatoliy with the fakest smile you can muster.

“If I’d meant to disrespect your creepy little minion, I would have mentioned something about how he’s _clearly_ compensating for something, considering his overly aggressive nature and,” you pause briefly make air quotes, “‘manly’ posturing. Or I would have commented on how he’s so repugnant, he has to assault a woman take what no one in her right mind would willingly give.” You narrow your eyes as you continue, “Everyone here keeps implying rape, but I’m starting to doubt that any of you actually have the necessary equipment to follow through with your threats.” Speaking like this is, of course, a _terrible_ idea, but you just can’t bring yourself to give a shit.

For a long, satisfying moment, everyone is too dumbstruck to respond.

The scraping of a chair being violently pushed back suddenly echoes through the room, and a strong, cold, and clammy hand grasps the back of your neck and pulls you roughly from your seat. You stumble as Nicolai releases his grip and forcibly turns you before backhanding you hard enough to send you to the floor.

Fucking hell.

Nicolai grabs your upper arm and yanks you back to your feet before pushing you against the wall in between Mikhail’s spot and the fireplace, hand again around your neck but this time he’s placing pressure against your windpipe in the soft space just under your jaw. It doesn’t really matter to you; you know your defiance is shining clearly in your eyes, and God, it’s _pissing him off._

It’s difficult, but you just barely manage to get the words out. “Go ahead you fucking asshole, kill me.” That bit takes all your oxygen since you can no longer inhale, but doesn’t stop your thoughts: Then you won’t have any hold over Bucky, and he’ll be free to end you all before you get the chance use the triggers. There’ll be no one left to hurt my babies; he’ll see to that.
And Bucky’s mind will be safe.

Nicolai doesn’t say anything until your vision starts prickling with little white lights. “I think not, milaya moya. You will not escape your fate that easily – I still have use for you.”

His hand releases its grip on your throat, and you lean heavily against the wall; you’re not going to give these fuckers the satisfaction of seeing you fall.

Nicolai regards you with narrowed eyes. “Do you want to know why you have not yet been visited by any of our men? There is a specific reason, and it has nothing to do with their ‘equipment,’ as you so cruelly stated.”

You remain silent as he leans forward.

“The Soldat will leave his mark on you; of that I am sure. It does not matter how much he loves you now, he will follow his Komandir’s orders once he is activated. If he breaks through his programming – no, when he breaks through his programming – I want him to look at you and see the damage he caused. He will look at you, and he will know that every bruise, every scrape, every broken bone came from his hand. It will shatter him; of this we are certain. Any time he refuses orders, fails, or does not comply exactly as instructed, you will be given to my Hounds and he will be forced to watch, knowing that he is the reason you suffer. We expect that it will make him extremely obedient.”

He tilts his head as you absorb the information. “We will allow you to be together when he is not completing a mission, as long as you both behave. I think that is very generous, yes?”

He smiles as he cups the side of your face. “You have a very important job to do, so you may wish for it. You will only be broken.”

None of this information should really surprise you, but it still somehow manages to shock you that anyone could be so incredibly cruel.

“Mikhail, take her back to her room. She is looking quite unwell.”

Mikhail steps up to you to gently take your arm and begins leading you out of the dining room.

Grigory glares at you as you walk by. “I will not get the pleasure of breaking you myself, but make no mistake, lisichka, you will be broken. It is a shame that the privilege will go to a man that will not appreciate it.”

Mikhail’s grip on your arm tightens slightly as he picks up the pace. Once you’re through the door and in the hall, he slows and exhales deeply but doesn’t say anything. The walk back to your room is quiet, which is fine by you since you really don’t feel like talking.

You’d never thought that the room they keep you in would feel safe; it just goes to show that everything is relative.

Mikhail leads you to the chair at the vanity and begins removing the bobby pins holding your hair in place.

“Are you waiting for the perfect moment to say ‘I told you so?’” You don’t mean to sound bitter, but you do. Oh, you do.

He meets your eyes in the mirror. “Of course not, solnishko. They were going to poke and needle at you until they got a reaction. I was hoping, for your sake, that you would be able to hold your tongue, but I knew they would not make it easy. I warned you because I did not want you to get hurt, not because I wanted to prove you wrong.” He shrugs, “As much as I hate to say it, it went
much better than I thought it would. I fully expected to have to use a first aid kit tonight. As it is, I think you will just need some ice for your neck.”

His words are sobering. This was better than expected? Oh, right…he watched Anatoliy rape and murder his sister. Fucking monsters.

Neither of you says another word as he finishes taking your hair down. He moves to grab a brush, but you shake your head.

“Don’t bother, Mikhail, I’m going to jump in the shower. I need to try to wash away the feel of Anatoliy’s fingers.” You probably shouldn’t say that out loud – God knows you’ll probably be slapped for disrespecting him – but you feel dirty and violated from the way he kept touching your shoulders and neck, and the knowledge that it could have been, and may very well be in the future, much worse is enough to make you want to vomit up the little bit of food you ate.

He nods his understanding, offering a small smile before he leaves the room.

Alone but not alone, you make your way into the bathroom with a fresh set of clothes and place them in the shower where they will not get wet. You had to improvise, but you were able to find a way to keep the clothes up off the floor and out of the way of the spray so you can strip, bathe, and dress without having to leave the privacy of the shower. You stand under the spray for what feels like an hour, allowing the hot water to wash over you, rinsing away the unwanted touches and soothing your tense muscles. You remain there until you’re good and ready to get out, and by the time you’re finished, you’re actually sleepy. Who knows, maybe you’ll finally be able to sleep tonight; you’d do almost anything at this point to be unconscious.

There’s an icepack and a plate of khvorost waiting for you on the table when you get out of the shower. You smile a little to yourself; Mikhail must have noticed that you didn’t eat much at dinner. He’d found over the last couple of days that even if you ate nothing else, you’d at least nibble at these little fried strips of pastry dough dusted with powdered sugar. Tonight, though, even these hold no appeal. Neither does the icepack – after the hot shower, it will do little good anyway. You twist your damp hair into a braid and crawl into bed, hoping and praying for sleep.

You are, of course, disappointed.
Chapter 38

The fading light of the winter dusk begins to bathe the room in shadows, but you can’t be bothered to get up to turn on any lights. After last night’s events, nothing really seems to matter. You sit cross legged on the floor with your back to the bed, a book forgotten in your lap as you slowly rock your head back and forth to gently hit the mattress. You aren’t thinking of anything or anyone, just staring at some point beyond the walls of your prison. Blinking periodically. Comfortably numb.

The door flies open after a quick knock, but you don’t bother to look up.

“Solniskho!” Mikhail’s voice echoes in the room; he sounds dismayed and breathless, but you can’t bring yourself to care. Maybe if he doesn’t look down he won’t see you – you just want to be left alone. “Solnishko?” Now he sounds concerned; he turns on a lamp and in your peripheral you notice him kneeling down next to you. “Solnishko?” Quiet now, almost scared.

You can’t help the sigh that escapes. “What’s up, Mikhail?” Eyes still unfocused, head still rocking.

He no doubt has a look of consternation on his face, but still, you don’t care. You just don’t fucking care.

“What’s up, Mikhail?” Eyes still unfocused, head still rocking.

He no doubt has a look of consternation on his face, but still, you don’t care. You just don’t fucking care.

“Are…are you okay?”

You don’t answer; there’s nothing that you can say at the moment that won’t be mean or rude, and it’s Mikhail, for fuck’s sake. He’s the only one in this entire godforsaken place that hasn’t shown any interest or intent to hurt you; he doesn’t deserve your venom.

“Of course you are not okay,” he mutters to himself as he rubs a hand over his face. “Solnishko, I am very sorry, but Mr. Krakken and Kapitan require your presence in the dining room. Immediately.”

“Immediately, huh? So I guess that means I don’t have to get all dolled up for the meat market tonight?” That’s something. You’re quite comfortable in your jeans and Bucky’s sweatshirt, thank you very much.

“Solnishko…” He’s quiet for a long moment before continuing in a hesitant tone, “He is here.”

You still for just a moment as your eyes focus, then slowly turn your head to look at the man still kneeling next to you. Mikhail didn’t just say that. No.

No.

“No.”

“Your…your Soldier. He is here.” His brown eyes hold an overwhelming amount of sorrow for you.

Defeated tears fill your eyes as you nod, just once, before looking away again. They’re going to destroy him. Tonight. And there’s not a goddamn thing you can do about it.

There was never any doubt in your mind that he would come for you, but after last night you’d hoped he wouldn’t. A waste of hope, really, and you knew it the moment the thought came to you. But still – God, you don’t want this to happen. Not to Bucky. Not again.

An unwelcome voice suddenly echoes in your head. Well, what do you know? Christopher was
right. You really do ruin the lives of everyone that loves you.

“Solnishko?”

“I, um, I just need a second, Mikhail,” you whisper brokenly.

He nods sadly before rising. “I will wait for you in the hall.”

Alone once again, you bring your hands up to your mouth to stifle the sob; it all ends tonight. You know that Bucky won’t do anything to jeopardize your life; he’ll willingly submit to those monsters to keep you as safe as possible.

Rubbing at your eyes, you take a few deep breaths and pull yourself up off the floor. You walk to the door, but end up pausing with your hand stretched out to reach the doorknob. You can’t do it. You can’t open the door and walk out of this room. Logically you know that defying their orders and staying here won’t change the outcome, but there’s a childish part of you that thinks maybe, just maybe, if you don’t see it happen, then it won’t.

You don’t know how long you stand there, staring at the door with your fingers just inches away from the knob, but it must be long enough because Mikhail eventually pokes his head in.

“Solnishko, I am really sorry, but…” You can tell that he means it, but it doesn’t lessen the blow.

Slowly, you step out into the hall and follow him to the dining room. It feels like a death march.

Your feet speed up, though, when you hear his voice. They can’t help it. You can’t help it.

“I thought you said she’d be here?” He’s angry, and paying no attention whatsoever to the three people pointing guns at him, one of which is Grigory. Nicolai and Anatoliy sit at the table calmly, completely unperturbed by the situation. Bucky’s back is to the door, so you see him before he sees you, but it makes little difference since he senses your presence and turns almost immediately.

It takes less than a split second to realize that he’s barely a shadow of himself. It’s easy to see that he hasn’t been sleeping or eating; his skin is pale and waxy, there are dark circles under his red rimmed eyes, and his hair is almost as wild as the expression on his face. You know what’s about to happen, but you need to hold him. Just one more time, you need to hold him and be held by him. One more time.

“Bucky,” you murmur as you step forward, both of you ignoring the barks from the other men to stop. He’s saying your name, too, and then with an almost violent collision you’re finally in each other’s arms, wrapped around the other as if that would be enough to shield you both from the oncoming storm.

You vaguely register the threats Nicolai’s men are shouting, telling the two of you to separate or they’ll start shooting, but you don’t give a solitary fuck. If you die now it will be in Bucky’s arms, and as far as you’re concerned, that’s a hell of a way to go.

“Are you okay, Sweetheart?” he asks roughly against your ear, unwilling to pull away even a little bit.

Holding him just as fiercely, you can’t hide the tears in your voice when you reply, “Bucky, you shouldn’t have come. They’re going to –“

He mumbles your name in a gentle admonition. “I love you, and I’d never leave you, no matter what. I’ll do whatever is necessary to get you home safe, and I’ll take whatever they throw at me.
Do you understand that?"

“But Bucky –“

“Do you understand?” There’s an urgency in his tone that makes you think that he knows what’s going to happen. He knows, and he still came for you.

He’s willing to relive his nightmare. For you.

You nod into his chest. “I love you, Bucky.”

There’s so much more you want to say, so much more you need to tell him, but you’re cut short when your head is viciously pulled back by your braided hair; your body can’t help but follow, despite being in Bucky’s arms. His eyes grow wide with fear and rage as he processes what’s happening at the exact moment you do.

“You know, lisichka, you do not listen very well.” Anatoliy’s voice invades the sudden silence as he tugs sharply again at the hair still in his hand. Suddenly there’s something cool against your neck; the look in Bucky’s eyes tell you that you don’t need to bother looking above the fireplace. Anatoliy has his father’s shashka at your throat.

Bucky stands completely motionless, starting at the blade resting just above the collar; you can feel it against your skin, and you can’t tell if the slight sting is real or your imagination. Until you feel the slow trickle.

The fucker cut you; even if you hadn’t felt the small drop of blood rolling down your skin, you’d know it by the murder in Bucky’s eyes.

“Oh, I guess the blade is sharper than I thought it was. My mistake.” Anatoliy sounds amused.

“Yes. Your mistake,” Bucky growls. He’s practically vibrating with the need to move, but he holds still as his eyes suddenly narrow. “Why is her neck bruised?” He speaks calmly and quietly, but the threat is perfectly clear.

“Milaya moya was a bit defiant last night. She needed to be reminded of her place.” Nicolai has a smug look on his face as he approaches, with Metzger following behind excitedly like an ugly little lapdog.

He’s got that goddamn Trapper Keeper with him. Fuck.

“Don’t call her that.” The malice in Bucky’s voice is tangible, and you honestly don’t know how Nicolai isn’t at least slightly alarmed; if that voice was used toward you, you’re pretty sure you’d faint on the spot. Metzger, on the other hand, shrinks back considerably.

“Or what?” The challenge hangs in the air. “You will do absolutely nothing? Not exactly a frightening prospect, Soldat.” Nicolai shakes his head in disgust. “With the reputation you carry I was expecting a bold and fearsome warrior, but I must admit that I am more than a little disappointed. You are weak; your emotions have made you spineless and easy to manipulate. It is pathetic.”

“Are you sure you want to do this, Krakken? Last chance to back out.” You take comfort in Bucky’s confident tone; he’s got this. He’s got to have a plan, right? Is the team here? They need to hurry their asses up and get in here…
“Last chance to back out?” Nicolai chuckles. “I ask again…or what? What will you do to me, to anyone here?” He gestures broadly around the room, and you hear quiet laughter coming from Grigory. “The answer is nothing. As long as we hold her fragile little life in our hands, you will do nothing, because you are a coward. You will sacrifice your own mind to save her. Weakness.”

Bucky regards him calmly before speaking, but you can see the rage simmering just below his placid exterior. “You’re a fucking idiot if you think that my loving her gives you an advantage, because it isn’t a weakness. Loving her gives me purpose and resolve; it makes me stronger. I know some people in my shoes might be able to be selfless and give her up to keep her safe, but not me. I’m a selfish son of a bitch. I can’t live without her – I won’t. Using her to get to me will be your biggest mistake. Every mark, every injury, every pain, every minor fucking discomfort brought to her will be returned to you - with interest - before I kill you. And I will fucking kill you.”

“Awww, that is very sweet, is it not?” Nicolai’s voice drips with a poisoned sweetness that matches his saccharine smile. “He believes in the power of love.” The smile drops and his cruel green eyes narrow. “Too bad it will do nothing to protect either of you from the Soldat.”

Bucky’s spine straightens at the last comment, but his face is unreadable.

“I heard rumors you had the triggers removed – you may be disappointed to know that my great uncle built in a failsafe. Kind of a control/alt/delete.” Metzger is clearly enjoying this, and he chuckles a bit at the expression that comes over Bucky’s face. “You cannot have something removed if you did not know it was there.”

“That’s enough gloating, Doctor, we have work to do. Activate the asset.”

Mezger giggles, the fucking ugly little troll actually giggles, as he opens up to the page that presumably contains the trigger words.

“On second thought,” Nicolai snatches the binder as Grigory steps forward to restrain Mezger, “you will not make a good Komandir. I will activate him myself.”

“What? You cannot do this! This is my right! This is my –” His indignant rant is cut short with Grigory’s solid right hook to his temple. Well what do you know, the creepy fucker is good for something.

Nicolai pays him no mind as he crumples to the ground other than to step over Metzger’s arm as he walks closer.

“Look at me, Sweetheart.” Bucky’s softly commanding voice draws your attention from Nicolai. “I love you. Okay? I love you.”

“I love you, Bucky.” You focus on him and only him; you’ve almost forgotten about the blade at your throat.

Nicolai takes his place next to Anatoliy and begins speaking; you don’t need an interpreter to know he’s begun the triggering process. “Berserk.” Berserker.

Bucky puts his hand to his head, as if there was an invisible impact. He swallows hard as he squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his fists. “No…no no no…NO! FUCK!” Panic starts leaking into his voice as he opens his eyes again to look at you; the intensity of his stare feels like he’s trying to etch your face indelibly into his memory. “I am so, so sorry! Please…forgive me for what I’ll do.”
“Malinovyy.” Crimson.

“There will be nothing to forgive, Bucky. Anything that’s done is on them and not you.” Your heart is in your throat and God, you want to comfort him so badly. You move to take a step forward, but are stopped with a sharp tug to your hair. Fuck.

“Sumerki.” Gloaming.

“I need to hear you say that you’ll forgive me. I need to know!” His hand is at his chest now; he’s clutching his dog tags so hard his knuckles are white.

“Pokinutyy.” Forsaken.

“Bucky…” Your mind races; how can you make him understand in such a short time? No matter what happens, you’re his – nothing will ever change that. Nothing could.

“I need to know!! Will you forgive me?” The desperation in his voice would break your heart in two if there were any pieces left that were big enough to break.

“Kosa.” Scythe.

“It’s going to be okay, Love. Yes! I’ll forgive you, Bucky, I’ll always forgive you. Just find your way back to me, okay?” It suddenly becomes painfully obvious that there isn’t a plan – this is really going to happen. The team isn’t here. There’s no one to save Bucky from this.

“Predvestnik.” Harbinger.

Bucky falls to his knees. “They’re going to make me do bad things, Sweetheart,” he sobs, “they’re going to make me hurt you.”

“I know, Love, I know. It’s okay.” You keep your voice as calm as you can, but you can’t stop the tears from falling.

“Dozhd’ so snegom.” Sleet.

He presses his hands to the sides of his head, as if he could somehow manage to keep the words from entering his brain. “Remember what I taught you, okay? God, I’m so sorry…”

“I will. I’ll be fine, I promise, just don’t give up, okay?” Please…please come back to me…

”Naduvat.” Cozen.

“I promise I’ll come back to you.” There’s a sudden calm in his tormented eyes, even though he’s breathing heavily.

“Vernost’ vassala feodalu.” Fealty.

“I know you will, Bucky. It’s going to be okay. I love you. Always will.” You’re out of time. There’s nothing else you can say; he knows this, too.

“I love you.” He’s resolute. You nod.

“Neispravimyy.” Irredeemable.

Bucky releases your name in a primal scream as the last word is spoken, and just like that he stills, but not for long.
He slowly rises to his feet. Gone is the raging man, fighting the planted impulses within his own mind. Gone is the protective lover, desperately trying to find a way to save you. Gone is the tortured soul, pleading with his beloved.

His cold, dispassionate eyes show nothing as they pass over you and focus on the one holding his mind hostage.

“Dobroe utro, Soldat.” Good morning, Soldier.

It takes a moment or two, but the flat, emotionless response eventually passes Bucky’s lips. “Ya gatov otvechat.” Ready to comply.

You try to find one little piece of Bucky, seek out any tiny vestige of the man you love, but see nothing to bring you even the smallest amount of hope.

It’s not there.

This isn’t your Bucky. This is the Winter Soldier.
Chapter 39

The man standing in front of you is so familiar, but so different; it’s uncomfortably disconcerting. His eyes are the same shade of blue, his hair the same dark brunette, his build the same huge, solid mass…but the Soldier’s eyes are flat and his face is fixed in an expression that you’ve never seen before; at least, not on Bucky. Even the way he carries himself is different – measured, disciplined, and deliberate. It’s similar to what you saw when he’d train with one of his visiting teammates, but without any trace of humanity and much more intense. Disconnected and dangerous.

He’s fucking terrifying.

He would be, anyway, your sense of self-preservation would kick in, but nope. Your heart can’t bring itself to be afraid of him. Bucky’s still in there. Somewhere.

_I love all of you, Bucky…_

You know he can’t hear your thoughts, but it doesn’t stop you from thinking it.

You also know they’re going to use the Soldier to hurt you – you aren’t stupid. What pisses you off the most, though, is what it will do to Bucky when he remembers. Because he will come back to you. You have to believe that he will…so you need to do as much damage control as possible.

“Soldat,” Anatoliy begins as he finally lowers the shashka from your throat, but the Soldier’s eyes only flick toward him momentarily before returning to Nicolai. “Soldat! You will look at me when I speak to you!” You can’t help but roll your eyes at his petulant tone.

Nicolai gets a satisfied smirk on his face. “Soldat.”

“Yes, Komandir?” God, you hate how he sounds so obedient while speaking to this smiling sack of shit.

“My brother Anatoliy is my second in command, and your Kapitan. You will obey his orders as you would obey my own.”

“Yes, Komandir.”

“Soldat.” This time when he speaks, the Soldier’s eyes go to Anatoliy and stay there. “Do you know this woman? Does she mean anything to you?” You can see him gesture toward you in your peripheral.

Bucky’s – no, the Soldier’s – eyes turn to you momentarily, cataloguing you like someone taking inventory of office supplies before looking back to Anatoliy. “No, Kapitan, I do not know her.”

Well, that hurt to hear.

Nicolai, of course, sees your shoulders drop. “You look disappointed, milaya moya.” He steps over to you and puts his hand on your cheek; you’d back away, but Anatoliy is still right behind you. Nicolai gives you a kindly smile before backhanding you across the cheek, and the impact sends you to your knees after colliding briefly with Anatoliy.

The Soldier doesn’t bat an eye during any point of the exchange; he looks attentively bored.

“Soldat.” Nicolai speaks sharply as he grabs your upper arm and roughly hauls you to your feet.
“Yes, Komandir?”

“You are not to kill or inflict permanent injury upon this woman. Is that clear?”

The Soldier doesn’t even glance at you before answering. “Yes, Komandir.”

“Good. Now hurt her. I want her unconscious before you’ve finished.” Nicolai releases the grip on your arm and forcefully pushes you away.

His brief nod to acknowledge the command is the only head start you get before the Soldier starts walking toward you. Well, no, walking isn’t the right word – stalking is more accurate. You step back to give yourself some room, but he closes the gap with a single stride while lifting his hand for the first hit.

“It’s okay, Love. Do what you have to do, it’s not your fault.” It’s mumbled under your breath and elicits no reaction whatsoever, but you aren’t saying it for the Soldier, you’re saying it for Bucky.

His right fist comes up, so you present your left shoulder and take a step back with your right foot to absorb the hit. Fuck, that hurt. Avoid eye contact. His left hand comes up, and you focus on the glinting metal to try to predict where the next hit will land. Tense your stomach muscles and step back to absorb the hit. Avoid eye contact. His right hand is lifted, and his fist is open; a back-handed slap, then. Keep your jaw shut to avoid dislocation, move your head with the impact and shift back to the left.

Pretend this is training…and avoid eye contact.

He drives you relentlessly toward the wall, not letting you circle around at all to avoid it. You can hear the men laughing, but can’t see them because of the moving mountain of muscle pushing you steadily back.

Pretend this is training…and avoid eye contact.

Every move by the Soldier is calm, deliberate, and measured; he doesn’t waste any unnecessary energy. You’re breathing hard now; he’s moving much faster than he ever did when you trained with him and it’s getting really fucking hard to remember what he’d taught you. If you hadn’t become somewhat familiar with his movements and rhythm during training, you’d be knocked out already.

Who are you kidding? You aren’t a trained fighter. Nicolai’s warnings about not killing you or hurting you enough to cause permanent damage are probably the only reasons why he hasn’t already knocked you flat on your ass.

Pretend this is training…and avoid eye contact.

Your distracted thoughts and lack of focus causes you to completely miss a tell on his next move and you take a hit all wrong – the wind is completely knocked out of you and the edges of your vision go black as your back hits the wall.

Shit.

You don’t even see him move before his left hand is closed around your throat, just above the collar.

Avoid eye contact…Bucky doesn’t need to see anything in your eyes…his nightmares will be bad enough as it is.
The roaring of blood echoes in your ears and your vision darkens further as you stare at the
detailing on Bucky’s uniform.

The cold, unforgiving metal of his fingers tighten slightly, and your world goes black.

But not for long. At least, you don’t think it is. Mikhail is kneeling next to you, frantic, when you
regain awareness of your surroundings an open your eyes. As he helps you sit up and lean against
the wall, you struggle to focus your eyes to find the Soldier standing with Nicolai and Anatoliy.
His back is to you, so you can’t see his face, but the Krakkens look fucking thrilled. Grigory just
smirks at you. Assholes.

“I thought he killed you, solnishko, the way you just crumpled to the ground…”

“Nope, still alive,” you mutter, squeezing your eyes shut against the headache and nausea that
suddenly assaults you from being rendered unconscious, no matter how briefly. “Oh, God, this
fucking sucks.”

“We should get you back to your room.” Mikhail keeps his voice low but it doesn’t mask the
urgency as he pulls you to your feet. He glances over his shoulder, and you can’t help but wonder
if he’s trying to sneak you out without the others noticing.

You nod, glancing once more toward the group of men…toward the Soldier. You can’t help it.

Anatoliy’s sudden shout startles you and Mikhail both, and you come to a stop. “Vladislov!”

One of his Hounds comes forward – you don’t recognize him, but that doesn’t mean much. The
man is big, although not quite as big as the Soldier, and he looks mean.

“Kapitan?”

“Vladislov, you are one of my best fighters, yes?”

He smiles a self-assured smile. “You know I am.” He’s a cocky bastard.

“My brother and I, we want to see a demonstration of the Asset’s fighting skills. He is of no
particular use to us if he is no better than you, so your task is to kill him. If you do,” Anatoliy
pauses to nod in your direction, “she is yours for the night.”

The fighter turns to you with a lecherous smirk before turning back to his Kapitan. “It is a good
thing I took a nap today.” He thinks he’s funny; so does Anatoliy.

“Yeah, okay asshole,” you mutter under your breath, “too bad you’ll be too dead to enjoy it.”

Bucky told you of what he did when he was under HYDRA control; he was pretty evenly matched
with Steve, and he shot Nick Fury through a goddamn wall – without any direct visuals of the
target – by using Steve’s line of sight to gauge the hit. He’s fast, strong, well trained, and smart.
You’re not even slightly worried about the outcome of this fight; no matter the circumstances,
whether Vladislov is fighting Bucky or the Soldier, he’s a dead man.


The Soldier doesn’t wait for any further commands; face expressionless, he turns toward his
mission without a word and advances as he draws one of the knives sheathed at his back. Vladislav
licks his lips, either from nervousness or excitement, and draws his own knife. He’s the first to
attack, bringing his knife up to slash at his opponent’s throat, but the Soldier neatly blocks the
thrust with his forearm while simultaneously throwing his knife into his other hand. Before
Vladislav has a chance to realize that he needs to block from the other side, the Soldier’s knife has already stabbed into his rib cage before withdrawing and disengaging.

“He is ambidextrous,” someone murmurs in surprise. Well, no shit, Sherlock. Did they really expect any less?

Vladislav coughs, and a trickle of blood drips from the corner of his mouth - he's probably got a punctured lung. He blinks before he unexpectedly takes an uppercut to the lower jaw, and you're pretty sure he didn't even see the attack coming.

You've never seen Bucky move this fast, even when training with his teammates; he's ruthlessly efficient in battle. You want to look away – you do not want to see this – but you can’t.

As the Soldier circles, he moves with a violent and deadly grace. Vladislav suddenly has the common sense to look afraid, but it’s too late; he’s a dead man walking. He lunges, but before his fist makes contact the Soldier lifts his leg and delivers a brutal kick to Vladislav’s left hip; you hear something snap as he crumples to the ground. He growls as the Soldier steps on his forearm, grabbing his knife from his weakened grasp.

The man wearing Bucky's body sheathes his own weapon before flipping his victim’s blade and throwing it into Vladislav’s neck, pinning him to the floor and severing the carotid artery all at once.

You close your eyes against the carnage, and desperately wish you could close your ears against the dying man’s noises. Next to you, Mikhail stares in motionless horror.

“I thought Vladislav was one of our best?” Nicolai hisses. “The Soldat took him out in less than a minute!”

“He was among the best, but he was also very cocky,” Anatoliy shrugs. “While I am sure that contributed to his defeat, it seems that perhaps we did not fully grasp the Soldat’s potential. We knew he would be fast, but the notes the Doctor has did not do him justice. As well trained as our men are, the Soldat is biologically enhanced - his brute strength and inhuman speed give him a distinct advantage that no amount of training will compensate for.”

The brothers stare at each other for a moment, sinister and malicious smiles slowly growing over their faces.

“Come, Soldat, we have things to discuss,” Nicolai motions him over.

You swallow hard as you feel a hand at your elbow - you hadn't realized that your eyes had opened and you were staring at the grisly sight until Mikhail’s touch brought you out of your trance.

“You do not need to see any more of this, solnishko, I will bring you back to your room.” You numbly follow as he leads you out.

***

The man’s death – you can’t remember his name – keeps replaying in your mind as you get ready for bed. If only you could scrub your mind as easily as you can scrub your face. It’s early, but it isn’t like you have anything else to do. You know Mikhail will be back soon to bring you dinner; he knows you don’t want it, but he has orders. And you’ll eat some of it, at least, to keep them from punishing him.

You really just need to keep yourself busy, to try not to think.
The door opens just as you exit the bathroom, but where you expect to see Mikhail you instead see Nicolai, and then Anatoliy.

Fuck.

The Soldier follows a moment later, and you freeze. So this is it. There’s only one reason you can think of for them to all be here. Are the fuckers going to watch it?

“Come here, milaya moya.” Nicolai gestures for you to come toward him as you wrap your arms around yourself. It’s hard to breathe, but you don’t want to give them the satisfaction of showing your trepidation so you lift your chin and take the steps forward. “Soldat, this is the woman I told you about. You may recognize her from earlier.”

The Soldier’s eyes glance to you before turning back to his Komandir with a brief nod.

“She is yours; she belongs to you so do what you wish with her. If she receives any injuries during your…activities,” he pauses briefly to chuckle, “send for Doctor Metzger; you know where his labs and rooms are. I do not care if you harm her, but as I said before, do not kill or permanently injure her. Do I make myself clear?”

You clench your jaw and ball your fists, digging your nails into your palms, but you manage to stay both quiet and outwardly calm.

“Yes, Komandir.”

You can’t help but glance up at the man wearing Bucky’s face; his eyes are still emotionless and empty. If you’d foolishly hoped to see a glimpse of anger on your behalf, which you had, you’d be completely disappointed. There’s nothing; his normally bright, beautiful eyes are dull and almost lifeless. It hurts to see him like this.

“Soldat, we are nearly done for tonight so we will show you your room now, but after you receive your final orders you may come back and visit her, if you like. Your room is right next door.”

If you squeeze your fists any harder, your nails are going to draw blood. Nicolai sounds so fucking condescending and it takes all your self-control not to slap him; he speaks like he thinks he’s doing someone a goddamn favor.

The Soldier simply nods, and allows himself to be led out of the room. After the door closes, you let out a breath you hadn’t been aware you were holding as you slowly sit down on the bed.

Fuck.

There’s a lock on the door – should you lock it? Would it matter? Probably not, not against the Soldier’s strength. It might just piss him off. Does he even get pissed off?

What the fuck should you do?

Your mind races as you try to think of a way to spare both Bucky and yourself from what feels like an inevitability.

The door opens after a quick knock, and you just about jump out of your own skin before you realize it’s Mikhail bringing you dinner.

“You should eat something, solnishko.”
“Right. I suppose they want me to keep my strength up for later.” His winces at the sarcasm in your voice; he doesn’t say anything but you do see him glance up at the camera. You doubt that anyone really cares what you say at this point – they got what they wanted.

Mikhail sets the tray on the table, but doesn’t turn back right away. “I am so sorry.” The words are whispered, but you hear them anyway. “He must really love you to have come all this way for you. The two of you do not deserve this.”

It’s hard to speak past the lump in your throat, but you manage. “Thanks, Mikhail. You didn’t deserve what happened to your family, either.”

He finally turns, and you’re pretty sure you see tears in his soft brown eyes. “We live in a world where monsters rule; the only thing the rest of us can do is try to survive.” He hesitates, seemingly unsure about what he’s going to say next. “Do not be afraid to take what little happiness you can find, and do not be so proud as to deny it just because it appears to be permitted by their grace. The love you share with your soldier is yours and yours alone; it is not theirs to take, nor is it theirs to allow. It belongs only to you and him.”

You nod slowly, and he offers a small smile as he leaves.

Alone again, you force yourself to eat a few bites of dinner before crawling into bed. There’s nothing else you can do at this point except wait.

And wait.

And although the waiting is tortuous, he mercifully doesn’t come.

***

The screaming would have woken you, had you been able to sleep.

Bucky.

It somehow doesn’t surprise you that he still has nightmares even while activated; the mind is a complex thing, and just because they can control his consciousness doesn’t mean they can control his unconsciousness. It’s got to be much worse, though, because when he wakes he probably won’t understand what he’s seeing in his dreams, or why it affects him so much. And your heart hurts that he has no one to comfort him.

At least he thinks he doesn’t.

You only lay there for a moment longer as you contemplate the terrible irony of him being free of their control only while he’s in his nightmares.

Fuck it. It’s not like you really have anything to lose, right?

Swinging your legs over the side of the bed, you grab Bucky’s sweatshirt and pull it on before opening the door and stepping out into the hall. It’s the first time you’ve exited on your own, and you half expect an alarm to sound. It’s quiet, though, save for the sounds coming from the room next to yours.

Should you knock? Just walk in? Indecision hits you as you stare at the doorknob. He screams again, ending in a half-choked sob, and you try the door. It’s unlocked, so you take a deep breath and step inside.
It’s chilly in here; he’s got the blinds open, and despite the Siberian winter cold, he’s got the window cracked. In the pale moonlight you can see him breathing heavily and thrashing a bit; still sleeping, then. Now that you know what you’re working with, you know exactly what to do. Sometimes, if you were able to calm him while he was still in the nightmare, he was able to sleep through it.

You quietly approach, not entirely sure if this is the safest thing to do to an active assassin, but somehow you trust that Bucky’s instincts won’t allow him to harm you. Probably wishful thinking, but you hold onto it anyway.

“Shhhhh…” you quietly soothe as you carefully sit on the edge of the bed, careful to avoid touching him until you can see how he reacts; you don’t want to startle him. The fact that he remains sleeping speaks to how exhausted he must be.

It’s all you can do to keep yourself from crawling into bed and wrapping yourself around him – he’s so agonizingly familiar that you have to choke back a sob. He jerks and moans at the small motion before turning toward you, but remains asleep.

As softly as you can manage, you begin humming his lullaby.

A few moments go by, and nothing bad has happened. You can’t help yourself – your hand goes to smooth back his hair – and when he sighs, you repeat the gesture.

His mind doesn’t remember you, but his body does. He relaxes under your touch as you continue to croon the slow melody. You stay until his breathing is deep and even; only when you’re sure that he’s sleeping peacefully are you able to make yourself go back to your room.
Chapter 40

The dawn of the crystal winter morning finds you seated at the table in front of window. You stare without seeing the Siberian landscape, offhandedly recognizing that your mind has started to exhibit dangerous behaviors but simultaneously unable to give a single shit. Who cares if your mind snaps? Or if you sink into a depression so deep you'll never be able to claw your way out of it?

A deep sigh finds its way out of your exhausted body. Goddammit. You have to care. You don't want to, but you have to. It's getting harder to remember why...so you briefly allow yourself to break the compartmentalization you'd set up, and give yourself the precious luxury of thinking of Artie and Jimmy.

They're why you need to care, why you need to survive.

And Bucky. Deep down you know that to some extent, at least, his survival depends on your own. You'll both need the other to get through this when it's over because there’s going to be lasting damage, but you will, right? Get through this? Intact? Together?

Another sigh.

The lack of sleep isn't helping; you still haven't been able to sleep for more than an hour or so each night, and the naps you manage during the day when you feel just marginally safer with Mikhail watching over you aren't enough. God, you'd kill for some fucking coffee right now, but you don't dare leave your room alone to look for it and Mikhail won't be in for at least another hour. Mikhail has been so nice to you. You'd meant what you said - he doesn't deserve what happened to his family. His dad, on the other hand, sounds like a cowardly douchcanoe that deserves a pine tree enema.

Your disjointed train of thought shifts once again, and you start thinking about last night. Bucky hit you. He hit you. No, he didn't. The Soldier did. Minor technicality, really, as neither of them were in control. The only people to blame are the fucking Krakkens. It could have been - should have been - much worse. Truth be told, it wasn't nearly as bad as the night Christopher assaulted you; he'd completely lost his shit in a fit of rage. They're not the same thing, you tell yourself, not even close.

You wonder about Bucky's nightmare. What did he see? Was it a memory from earlier, or was he already reliving his attack on you? The more you think about it, the more it makes sense that his subconscious is free from the effects of the triggers. You try to focus, try to remember what you’d learned about how the conscious and subconscious are separate and how they work together yet independently of the other, but your brain just won’t cooperate. Figures. But there’s something still nagging at you...is it possible to reach Bucky - even just in his subconscious - so early after being triggered? Would it even matter if you could? Well, it fucking matters to you. God, it hurt so much to leave Bucky's side...but then, it isn't really Bucky, is it? At this point, however, you're fully willing to settle for a facade. You miss him so fucking much.

What are the odds that the Winter Soldier is a cuddler?

At the thought, a small laugh comes out and it sounds crazy even to your ears. A tear rolls down your cheek, but instead of wiping it away you rub at your gritty eyes; it feels like your eyelids are lined with sandpaper.
A few minutes later the still quiet is broken by the soft clicks of a door opening and closing; the Soldier is up. Your breath hitches as you hear his measured footsteps in the hall - almost the same as Bucky's but not quite. The threats that have been constantly vocalized start echoing in your head. Is he coming to you? It's still Bucky's face, you could just pretend…

But no. He doesn't pause as he passes the door to your room. You tell yourself it's for the best.  

***

The morning passes agonizingly slowly; you listen carefully, but as far as you can tell the Soldier doesn't return. Where is he?

It's mostly concern with a dash of curiosity until Mikhail comes in with your lunch.

Something's wrong.

Mikhail avoids your eyes and is extremely quiet. Not his normally reflective and respectful quiet, but subdued.

“Mikhail, what's wrong?” The question hangs in the air for a long minute as he focuses on arranging your lunch on the table. When he finally turns toward you, the look on his face is enough to make you regret asking the question. You hesitate before speaking again. “Mikhail? Is everything okay?”

“I am fine, you do not need to worry about me.” The statement is accompanied by a falsely bright smile.

He's hedging; you don't get the feeling he's lying, but rather withholding. In fact, your intuition is screaming that there's something you should know. You narrow your eyes. “What's going on?” Your heartbeat increases as an unwelcome thought occurs to you, lacing your next questions with panic. “Is Bucky okay? Where is he?”

He's quick to reassure you, “As far as I am aware, he is fine.”

You wait for more, but nothing comes. “But?” There's more to this.

He sighs heavily. “I will tell you if you really wish to know, but sometimes, solnisko, ignorance is bliss.”

“Tell me, Mikhail.” Your impatience is starting to make you snappy.

He glances up at the camera, and you wonder if it’s from habit or if he’s weighing how much he can safely say.

“They have already begun using him.” Mikhail avoids your eyes again, “Your Bucky - they have already given him orders, and he has complied.”

“What does that mean, Mikhail? What’s happened?” What the fuck is going on?! Why does he look so unsettled?

Mikhail takes a deep breath before continuing, “Kapitan heard some rumors that some of his men were selling information to other Bratva families. The Soldier was given the task of...uh...encouraging the guilty to confess.”

You think for a moment; the implications are nauseating. “Bucky was told to torture them.” You
wish you could phrase it as a question, but you know better.

He nods hesitantly. “They made us watch, told us that it would deter any future disloyalty.” He closes his eyes at whatever awful images came to mind. “Eight men were brought in for questioning. All but one confessed. All but one are dead.”

“Oh, God…” More blood on Bucky’s unwilling hands.

Mikhail nods with haunted eyes. “They were not good men, solnishko, and they deserved to die, but this went far beyond typical torture techniques and execution. This...this was horrific.”

You can’t imagine what the Soldier is capable of - you don’t want to - but the idea that excessive cruelty could come from Bucky, even while activated, is almost incomprehensible. Bucky didn’t always go into great detail when he spoke with you about his time under HYDRA’s control, but everything you could recall was about efficiency and effectively completing a job. Even when he’d needed to ‘persuade’ someone, it wasn’t cruelty for the sake of being cruel; it was a tool, a means to an end.

Mikhail must intuit your thoughts, because he quickly continues, “The most heinous and perverse acts were not of the Soldier’s design; those were ordered by Mr. Krakken and Kapitan.”

Of course the worst of it would be their design. Evil fuckers. The Soldier was just following orders. Despite the fact that Bucky will still hold himself accountable, a measure of relief floods through you. “Where is he now?”

“I do not know. They were giving him instructions when we were dismissed.”

You nod, more to yourself than anything. Clearly they’ve begun using him, but what exactly are they using him for?

***

Dinnertime finds you at the Krakkens’ table. Again. You’re still seated between Nicolai and Anatoliy, but instead of sitting across from you, a subdued and bruised Metzger is seated across from Anatoliy. There is a place setting laid out, though, and you wonder who it’s for. Ugh, please don’t be Grigory. All the men here seem to be dangerous, malicious, and scary, but that guy is fucking creepy and you really don’t want him sitting right in front of you.

So here you are, in an uncomfortable dress and pair of heels, and sporting enough makeup and hairspray to supply Captain America’s backup dancers for an entire tour. On one hand, you’re irritated beyond belief that you had to go through the ridiculous process of getting ready to be ‘presentable’ to these jackasses. On the other hand, you find yourself hoping desperately that you’ll get to see the Soldier, if for no other reason than to know that he is alive; at the very least you might hear about the Soldier’s whereabouts. You haven’t seen him all day. It shouldn’t surprise you since you don’t leave your room, but still…

Mikhail’s hand reaching over your shoulder to place a plate in front of you breaks you out of your thoughts, and you groan inwardly. More stewed meat with potatoes and the ever-present sour cream…and are those mushrooms? Gross.

You pick at your food as you listen intently to the conversation happening around you, although it does you no good. For the first time since you were brought here they’re speaking Russian instead of English; Metzger looks like he’s barely keeping up. It’s incredibly annoying (why the fuck did they want you here?!?) but the men are, thankfully, ignoring you for the most part.
“Mr. Krakken, Kapitan,” Grigory interrupts the brothers’ laughter as he sweeps into the room, “the Asset has returned.”

“Oh yes, good, he’s right on time! Send him in Grigory,” Nicolai turns to you with a smirk as he speaks.

Oh. *This* is why they want you here. They want to see your reaction to whatever is coming next.

Despite knowing this, you can’t help keeping your eyes trained on the door.

“If I were you, lisichka, I do not think I would be so excited to see the Soldat. I think you will strongly disapprove of his activities today.” Nicolai and Metzger chuckle at Anatoliy’s comment, but you pointedly ignore him.

Your heart stutters as he walks in. Well, *strut* is probably more accurate. The Soldier strides with competent purpose, his booted footsteps echoing a confident promise of quick and unremorseful violence should anyone get in his way.

A quick onceover tells you that he’s dirty, but it doesn’t seem as though he’s injured.

He approaches the table, and stands by the chair across from you. “Komandir,” he dips his head in respect to Nicolai before repeating the gesture to Anatoliy, “Kapitan.” His emotionless blue eyes pass over you without a moment’s hesitation, and he ignores Metzger completely; Little Frankenstein is clearly pouting.

“Target status, Soldat?” Nicolai’s eyes narrow as he speaks.

“All targets have been eliminated, Komandir.” The Soldier’s words are respectful, but his voice is flat and his eyes remain fixed on a spot slightly above Nicolai’s head.

“All of them?” Anatoliy’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. “There were 14. You had until sundown tomorrow to complete the assignment.”

“Yes, Kapitan, all of them. It was more efficient to do complete the tasks today as the targets were all centrally located.”

You’ve been taking advantage of the moment and drinking him in; it’s Bucky standing in front of you, but it’s *not*. The same sculpted physique, the same sharp jaw, the same mahogany hair. Not the same expression or carriage, though, and definitely not the same eyes; they seem to have lost their color and have faded to a flat, muddy gray. It’s as if he lost his soul.

It’s only then that you realize that the Soldier’s gear has a tacky, stained look to it, and there’s something matting his hair.

A sickening realization hits you, and the dots connect; it’s blood. He’s covered in *blood*.

He was out killing people on the Krakkens’ command.

*Oh God, Bucky…*

Your skin is suddenly crawling, and you turn to see Nicolai smirking at you; the fucker’s eyes are practically sparkling with glee. “He slaughtered 14 people for me today; Bratva members that were getting in my way…and their families.” He turns toward the Soldier with a sickening grin. “You made it look as though they were fighting among each other and retaliating, yes?”
“Yes, Komandir. I moved the body of the first target to the final target’s location, as you directed, and the executions were completed to your specifications. Nothing will be traced back to you.” You can’t help but stare as the Soldier speaks - he talks blandly, as though he’s discussing a grocery list and not killing and death.

“Wonderful! Please, Soldat, have a seat and eat with us. You have certainly earned your dinner tonight.” Nicolai gestures grandly to the spot across from you as the Soldier moves to comply, and you turn to glare at the hideously cruel, green-eyed demon sitting to your left. His malice knows no bounds. “Milaya moya, do not look at me like that. This is the man you love, sitting across from you, is it not? Are you not happy to dine with him, to see that he is alive and well?” He pauses, eyebrows raised and lips tilted in an amused smile, “Or do you no longer care for him, knowing what he has done today?”

You swallow thickly, willing yourself to keep quiet and not speak any words that would bring punishment to either you or Bucky, and turn your attention back to your mostly untouched food. After an uncomfortable moment, you glance back up to see both Nicolai and Anatoliy glaring at you, and malicious glee in Metzger’s eyes.

“I believe my brother asked you a question. Do not be rude, lisichka.” You barely mange to repress your sigh; Anatoliy is such a condescending ass.

Lifting your chin, you turn toward Nicolai. Without blinking or hesitation, you state what should be blatantly obvious, “Yes, Nicolai, I still love him.”

He appears to be mildly amused. “But he is a murderer, a monster.”

It takes effort, but a sweet smile accompanies your reply. “No Nicolai, he isn’t a monster. You are.”

“Stupid bitch,” Anatoliy mutters as he grabs you roughly by your upper arm and drags you out of your chair. You can’t help but steal a glimpse at the Soldier; he doesn’t so much as spare a glance your way as he begins to eat.

“Brother, do not bother - I think she is suffering enough knowing that her love has executed a total of 21 people today. Besides, you still need to discipline our servant.” Your blood runs cold as Anatoliy’s eyes light up and focus on someone behind you. Mikhail is the only other one in here right now.

“Right…” Anatoliy’s fingers slip from your arm as he pushes you aside to walk up to Mikhail, who is obediently standing at his station with his back to the wall. He trembles but lifts his chin, patiently and almost defiantly waiting for the first strike. There’s nothing you can do to help him.

***

Mikhail’s screams follow you to bed; he’s alive, thank God, but you’re pretty sure he’s got a broken arm, two black eyes, broken ribs, and maybe some missing teeth.

Someone had been paying attention when Mikhail had told you about the torture earlier this morning, and that the men that had been executed weren’t good men and deserved to die. Apparently, even though those men were accused of betraying their Kapitan, it was an unforgivable sin to speak badly of them. Mikhail paid for his words with a beating that left him quivering and bleeding in front of the dining room fireplace before Anatoliy called in Grigory and had him drag Mikhail to his room. You weren’t allowed to follow although you wanted to make sure he was okay; instead they made you sit at the table while they had the Soldier give a full, detailed report of the tasks he’d completed.
His mission included families…and three children. He'd been tasked with killing *children*, for fucks sake, and he'd...completed...his mission. It was nothing short of petrifying, and you’d kept your gaze locked on your plate to keep Bucky from seeing the horror on your face and the tears in your eyes.

He’d remember this eventually, and you didn’t want to add to his misery.

***

Even though you were awake and waiting for it, the tortured screams still startle you and, as before, the pull to go to him is strong. Despite what he’s done today - or is it yesterday? What time is it? - despite the lives taken by his hands, despite the blood that covers him both figuratively and literally, you can’t seem to help yourself. Bucky’s still in there, somewhere, you’re sure of it. Besides, you repeat to yourself for the thousandth time, you love him. *All* of him. Even this version of him. What he did today - it's not his fault. *It's not.*

Logically, you can’t help but think that you’re incredibly fucked up. Your heart doesn’t care, though. How could it? It's *Bucky*.

Going to him is easier tonight - probably because your courage is bolstered by your previous success. You didn't get hurt last night, and what if there's a way to help his subconscious break through the programming? Not that it would do either of you any good in this particular situation - you'll actually be less safe when he breaks though because they'll use you to guarantee his willing compliance.

The door is unlocked, and as you step closer you can see that he's curled up on his side, almost like a child trying to make himself as small as possible to avoid being seen by the boogeyman. The twitching of his bare shoulder above the covers, softly bathed in the pale moonlight, tells you that he's still asleep.

You're able to calm him without him waking, and he's just so familiar, so *Bucky* in this moment, that you decide to do one of the stupidest things imaginable. Maybe it’s the sleep deprivation or the way your mind is teetering on the fine edge of stability, maybe it was the horrors you'd heard, maybe it was seeing Mikhail being viciously attacked - you're not sure. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

You know you're playing with fire, but you're willing to get burned for the sake of keeping warm.

So you lie down next to him.

You carefully arrange yourself so you're mirroring his position behind him, not quite brave enough to risk waking him by putting your arms around him but still close enough to feel the warmth radiating from his body and to feel the slight shifts as he breathes.

You're just going to lie here for a minute or five, not long. Just long enough to pretend, long enough to maybe fool your mind into sleeping when you get back to your room. Just long enough for your heart to stop its ever-present ache, even if just for a minute.

A gentle sigh escapes as your body reacts to Bucky's proximity, and you feel yourself relax into the mattress.

You'll just close your eyes and lie here for a minute.

...only

...a
...minute...
Chapter 41

Rough hands grab your shoulders, hauling you violently from your warm, safe cocoon. You were in such a deep sleep that it’s difficult for you to comprehend what’s going on, or even where you are, and the shouting in your ears does nothing to lessen your confusion. Finally able to force your eyes open in the blindingly bright lights, you see Bucky.

Wait.

No.

You see the Soldier.

The arm around your neck that’s holding you upright tightens slightly, and for the briefest of moments you think you see a flash of something – was it rage? was it Bucky?? – in the cloudy eyes of the man still half lying in the bed, but whatever it was is gone a heartbeat later and his face resumes a neutral expression as he comes fully awake.

“GET UP!” You flinch harshly when Anatoliy bellows, still trying to figure out what the actual fuck is going on. He reaches over to grab a fistful of the Soldier’s hair and yanks him bodily out of the bed, causing him to crash to his knees on the floor before delivering a powerful backhanded hit to the side of his face.

“Just kill him, Kapitan, his skillset is not worth the lives of our men.” The words are spoken by the man holding you, and you realize with disgust that it’s Grigory. Your skin starts crawling immediately, and you want to vomit as he puts his nose into the crook of your neck and inhales. “I think you will be mine tonight, lisichka,” he murmurs in your ear, and you try to pry his forearm from your throat but find that you can’t even budge him; you’re firmly stuck against his chest because of his vicelike grip unless you want to break your own neck. The fucker’s strong.

Anatoliy delivers a kick to the Soldier’s stomach, and although he folds over for a moment as he gasps for air, he doesn’t speak or move to defend himself.

“No! What are you doing? Leave him alone!” It’s hard to get the words out from behind the headlock you’re in, but you manage. Barely.

Anatoliy pauses to look at you in mild amusement, as if your outburst was cute, before turning back to the Soldier and cocking a gun at his temple.

No. No. No no no no…. You can’t lose him before you get him back…you can’t…

“That would be a bit merciful, yes?” Someone enters the room and walks leisurely to the bed, completely unaffected and utterly at odds with the tension in the room. Nicolai. For some reason, his serene calm is more frightening to you than Anatoliy’s explosive anger. “He still has some suffering to endure, I think.” He pauses for a moment, regarding the scene before him with a detached and analytical air. “Hold out your right arm, Soldat.” The quietly spoken command raises the hair on the back of your neck.

He lifts his arm without question or expression. Nicolai reaches the kneeling man, grabs hold of his elbow and forearm, and twists.
You stare in disbelief as he dislocates the Soldier’s shoulder.

A harsh grunt of pain is the only reaction, and Nicolai looks supremely satisfied until the sound of running footsteps in the hall draws his attention.

“Mr. Krakken, Kapitan!” The breathless crony pauses in the doorway to catch his breath. “I reviewed the camera feed as you asked,” he gasps in a thick accent that you can’t identify, “It was not him.”

The shocked expressions on Nicolai and Anatoliy’s faces would be comical if the situation didn’t have Bucky’s life hanging in the balance.

“What?” Anatoliy barks sharply, “What do you mean?”

“It was not him, Kapitan. He arrived at 9:37 PM and then did not leave his room. She entered at 12:08 AM, and that is the only movement to or from his quarters.”

Wasn’t him? Wasn’t him what? What the hell is going on?

Anatoliy regards his minion for a moment before speaking again. “So then who did it?”

The man has finally caught his breath sufficiently to speak without breaking for air, “The footage shows nothing. Whomever killed our men had to have broken in from outside, because the hallway cameras show no activity outside their bedrooms, but the video feed of the property does not show anything either. We do not have cameras in the personal quarters of that wing, so we cannot see what happened in the rooms…we only know that it was not the Asset, because he was in here with her the entire time. It is…it is as if a ghost was here.”

Nicolai narrows his eyes at you as if just noticing your presence before he turns to the man still standing in the doorway. “Return to the security team and review the footage again to find what you can learn about the assassination of our men. Report to me immediately when you have information.”

What? Assassination of his men? Maybe that means…

Anatoliy turns toward his brother. “Is it possible that another Bratva family knows of our acquisition? Is this perhaps retaliation for the executions yesterday?”

Nicolai shares a look with his brother, but does not answer. Instead, he turns to you. “So, milaya moya, you decided to come to him instead of waiting for him to come to you? I had no idea you were so eager.”

You say nothing, not bothering to try to explain to these asshats what’s in your head, or your heart. It’s none of their goddamn business.

“Grigory, let her go; it is not as if she is a physical threat to any of us. Bring her back to her room, and then go wake the Doctor. Tell him he is needed immediately in the Asset’s quarters to reset his shoulder.” Nicolai regards you for a moment longer before walking out of the room, followed by his brother and the rest of the men you hadn’t even been aware were there.

You know you don’t have the option to stay, so you allow yourself to be brought to your neighboring room. Thank God Grigory has a task, because he leaves as soon as he shoves you through the door.

Glancing out the window as you take a seat at the table, you see the sun just beginning to rise
above the horizon. So…early morning then. Now that you’re fully awake, your mind feels sharper – you certainly hadn’t meant to fall asleep beside him, but you did and you actually slept last night.

Shaking your head at your stupidity – because face it, despite what your heart may tell you, falling asleep next to the Soldier is NOT the smartest thing you could do – you try to focus and figure out what’s going on.

Okay. So some of Krakken’s men are dead. Good riddance…but how? They clearly thought it was Bucky…the Soldier…but that’s not possible and there’s video footage to prove it. Could it have been the team? Clint’s a crack shot…but he’s best with a bow and no one mentioned arrows. Nat, maybe?

Are they here? Do they have a plan? They’ve had long enough, right? How long have you been here? You were sick and unconscious when you arrived so the first week was a blur, and you aren’t exactly sure what the date is today, but if you’re piecing things together correctly you’ve been here for around…13 days…they’ve planned more in less time, right?

You feel a rush of homesickness as you realize you’ve missed your dad’s birthday.

Your shoulders drop a bit as you reach up to run your fingers over the collar. It’s a bit looser now than when it was first secured around your neck, courtesy of Metzger’s concoction and your poor appetite, so it rests slightly lower but no less secure. The newfound hope deflates a bit; it doesn’t matter if they’re here if they don’t know how to deal with this. And do they know about Bucky?

Are they even here? It was just three nights ago on the video chat that you could see they were still in New York. Your shoulders drop a bit more. Maybe Anatoliy was right and it’s retaliation.

The light tap at the door causes you to lose your train of thought, and when you see that it’s Mikhail you jump up to help him.

He’s juggling your breakfast but still practically sprints to the window to close the godawful drapes after shoving the tray onto the vanity.

“Mikhail…what-“

“I have to go into Krasnoyarsk today to run some errands for Doctor Metzger,” he says somewhat thickly around his swollen face and split lip. “It is a 140 kilometer drive, so I will be gone for the rest of the morning and part of the early afternoon.”

You’re momentarily distracted from his odd behavior by his comment. “They’re making you run errands? As busted up as you are?” Assholes. But did you really expect any less from those pricks?

Your eyes quickly pass over him to take stock of his injuries. You were right – a broken arm and two black eyes. The way he holds himself suggests damage to his ribs, and you wonder if they’re bruised or broken…not that it really makes a difference.

“It is my greatest privilege and pleasure to serve the Krakken brothers.” He sounds sincere enough, but you catch the defiant glint in his eyes that you know the cameras won’t be able to record. You have to fight back a smile; they tried, but the fuckers still didn’t break him.

He takes a deep breath, and the look on his face lets you know something’s up.

“Solnishko, do you know anything about what happened last night?” He looks like he feels bad asking the question, but you’ve no doubt that he has no choice in the matter. Of course they’d send him in here to question you.

“No, I don’t. I was with Bucky…um…the Soldier.”
His eyes shoot to you in surprise. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you? Did –“

“Mikhail, I’m fine. Nothing happened, I just heard him having a nightmare, so I went to calm him. He never woke up; I don’t think he even knew I was there until Anatoliy came in.” You shrug before you continue, weighing how much to say out loud when you catch Mikhail’s quizzical look. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep, it was a complete accident. I just…I…” It’s hard to say, because you don’t want to admit it to yourself - mostly because saying the words feels an awful lot like admitting that Bucky’s really gone - but you finally do, “If he’s asleep, he’s my Bucky. Or at least I can pretend.” Your cheeks grow red, and you don’t know why. “I miss him, Mikhail.”

You didn’t know that tears were gathering in your eyes until one rolls down your cheek.

He sighs sadly. “I am sorry, solnishko.”

You can only nod in response; your admission put you on the edge of breaking, and opening your mouth to reply might cause a chain reaction that you won’t be able to stop.

Mikhail gently passes his good hand over his swollen eyes. “So you did not hear anything? Last night? Did you see anyone in the hallway as you went to the…as you went to him?”

You smile softly at Mikhail’s correction – you appreciate his effort to refer to Bucky as a person rather than a belonging…rather than an Asset.

“No, I didn’t see or hear anyone. What happened?”

He takes a moment to respond – you don’t blame him. He’s probably being monitored quite closely and doesn’t want to risk another beating.

“Twelve men were found dead in their quarters this morning. There were no signs of entry – in four of the rooms the only evidence of anything amiss is a dead man and a bullet hole through the wall. No glass was broken, so no alarms went off. In the other eight rooms, there is only a dead man and a lot of blood from having his throat slit.”

Holy shit. That’s fucking terrifying.

“Solnishko,” he begins quietly, “please be cautious. Please keep the curtains drawn and stay away from the windows. It is more dangerous for you now than before; I know it is hard to believe but it is true. Not only is there an unknown threat, but also Kapitan’s men are on edge, so it is best if you say out of their sight.”

You nod your understanding, wide-eyed at the information you’ve just been given.

“I leave in ten minutes- is there anything you need before I go?”

Wordlessly, you shake your head.

Mikhail nods once in acknowledgment and leaves, closing the door behind him.

***

Over the course of the next few hours you hear a lot of footsteps outside your door and voices beneath your window. Despite Mikhail’s warning, curiosity gets the better of you and you open the drapes to watch the commotion outside. There are a lot of men - many more than you’d seen so far - and they’re traipsing through the snow, walking in and out of the bordering trees; you figure they’re looking for any signs of last night’s assassin. They’re all huge and armed to the teeth. Yeah,
you won’t be leaving this room any time soon. You watch for a while, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Soldier, but no dice.

What did they do to him after you were brought back here? Did they set his shoulder? Or hurt him more?? You have no idea, and haven’t heard a thing from the other side of the wall. You take a deep breath to calm your anxious thoughts – it won’t do you any good to get all wound up again – and refocus your attention outside.

It must be really cold out, because they're all bundled up, and you can clearly see their breath when they speak. You can’t help but hope that at least one of those fucknuts gets frostbite.

***

Silence. The bustle and commotion of the morning is gone, and it’s completely silent.

It’s eerie if you think on it too long.

You left the drapes open. Fuck it. The patch of sunlight you’re currently lying in is worth it. If you close your eyes and pretend, it’s almost as if everything is normal.

You can pretend that Bucky is downstairs with the boys, and their squealing laughter would tell you that he’s giving them piggy back rides again. You can pretend that you’ve got cupcakes in the oven, and that Bucky is down in the gym area, working out while the boys nap. Or...you can pretend that he’s in the shower, just moments away from stepping out and allowing the steam to carry the scent of his body wash and shampoo to you as you wait for him join you on the bed.

Pretending is still lonely, though.

Soft footsteps in the hall make their way into your consciousness, and you recognize them as Mikhail’s. You sit up just as there’s a knock at the door, and he comes in carrying a stack of fresh towels.

“Solnisko, you are required to attend dinner tonight.” His tired, swollen eyes convey his apologies, and he looks...nervous?

“Okay,” you quietly acquiesce. Something’s off with him, and you don’t want to distress him any more than he already is. Besides, it’s not like he doesn’t already know that you don’t want to eat with those assholes.

Mikhail disappears into the bathroom and returns a few moments later with the used towels. “I’ll be back to help you get ready in about an hour – please shower now so you are ready when I arrive.” He’s staring at you intently, and it’s making you really uncomfortable. Does he expect you to fight him on this?

“Mikhail, I already showered –“

“Shower again.” The abrupt command takes you by surprise. “I...uh...it will be easier to do your hair if it’s freshly washed. And it may help you relax. It would be best for you to destroy the evidence of your stress.” He fixes you with a hard look, turns on his heel, and leaves.

Well, that was fucking weird. Maybe he’s reacting strangely to some pain meds?

There’s no reason to make his life more difficult, though, so even though your hair is still thoroughly damp from its earlier washing, you move to do as he requests. It’s not like you have anything better to do.
Closing the frosted glass door behind you, you hang a robe over the top and begin to undress in the only private area you have. Your attention is caught by the folded towel on the tile floor; that’s… strange. You know you didn’t leave that there.

Something flutters to the ground when you pick up the towel.

What the hell…

You lower yourself slowly to retrieve it, heart pounding in your ears.

It’s a cheap single-ply napkin, with letters scrawled in black ink.

You read and reread the cryptic poem, committing it to memory before turning on the water. Suddenly Mikhail’s last comment makes a lot more sense…yes…you’ll destroy the evidence.

With your heart pounding violently in your ears, you hold the napkin under the spray, rubbing it together firmly after it is fully saturated. It starts breaking apart almost immediately, and you carefully make sure it’s nothing but a thin pulp before allowing it to fall from your hands and flow down the drain.

"I went into town today and what did I hear

But a story about a billionaire and Paul Revere

The spiders and red coats are coming for you

Hold on for dear life, they’ll get your love, too"
You go over the poem again and again as you stand under the spray. Mikhail must have written it that way so if anyone else were to find it, it wouldn’t make sense or would seem harmless. That’s good, but it also leaves room for misinterpretation. It’s not like you can just ask him what he meant.

Still, it seems fairly straightforward…

The billionaire and spider are easy to guess – Tony and Nat. Paul Revere? He was a patriot, so that must be Steve. Red coats…what could…Redwing! Sam, then. They’re coming for you and Bucky. That’s really all you need to know – they’re coming. A sob of relief finds its way out, but you put both hands on the tile in front of you and fight down the next one. If you start you might not be able to stop, and there’s no time for you to break down.

Mikhail clearly saw or heard something when he ran his errands today. But what? You want to know, God, you want to find Mikhail and beg him for details, but you know you can’t risk it – the Krakkens having this knowledge would not only interfere with Bucky’s and your rescue, but could be fatal to either of you…or Mikhail, because you know he isn’t going to tell them what he knows, and the Krakkens would consider this a betrayal worthy of a penalty of death. He put his life on the line to give you this message, so you need to make sure no one else finds out about it.

A heavy sigh escapes as you shrug your tight shoulders, trying to release some of the tension. You need to play this very, very carefully.

***

Dinner is hell. Well, it’s always hell, but this is a special kind of hell.

There’s no sign of the Soldier.

You haven’t seen him since you were ripped out of his bed this morning. Did they decide to kill him anyway, or did they send him out on another mission? Are they hurting him? Or did the creepy-ass doctor take him to another room to tend to his injuries? Not knowing is slowly suffocating you.

You take a deep breath to calm your nerves, and remind yourself of Mikhail’s note. Yes. Your friends are coming. Think of that. But don’t think of it so much that it shows. And the Soldier is probably fine.

He must be. He has to be. They see him as a valuable belonging – they wouldn’t kill him with the surveillance video showing he’d never left his room, right? He couldn’t have killed those men, so there’s no need to execute him.

Right?

“Lisichka, you are shaking the table.” Anatoliy’s amused voice breaks into your thoughts, and as you process his words you realize that your right leg has been bobbing up and down with nervous energy.

“What? Sorry,” you mumble as you cross your ankles to try to keep still.

Nicolai regards you with falsely kind eyes. “You seem a bit…lighter…tonight. Less depressing.”
Gee, thanks asshole.

“I take it you are happy that your dear Bucky is here?” The tone in Grigory’s voice raises the hair at the back of your neck; he somehow manages to include malice, jealousy, entitlement, and pettiness in a statement that would generally be considered fairly harmless if uttered by anyone else. He’s dining here tonight, and the creepy prick keeps throwing snarky comments your way.

“You know, lisichka, if you need someone to keep you warm at night, I’d be more than happy to help. Your Bucky doesn’t seem to know what to do to satisfy a woman since he didn’t do anything to you other than hold you. Perhaps you need Kapitan to give Bucky the direct order to be a man?” You want nothing more than to punch the sound of Bucky’s name of this fucker’s lips. That won’t go over well, though.

Anatoliy breaks in before you can form a reply, “Ah yes, that is right, we found the two of you all curled up together this morning. You looked so sweet.” His derisive snort causes the other men to start chuckling. “And yet he did nothing at all to protect you when you were ripped from his arms.”

You feel multiple sets of eyes on you, but refuse to meet any of them.

“He does not know you, lisichka, and you will continue to be a stranger to him until he begins to break through his programming. You are nothing more to him than a body to warm his bed, if he so wishes, and even that is allowed by our grace alone. Remember that.”

At this point you literally bite your tongue, and the sharp pain helps to keep you from focusing too much on Anatoly’s words – if you do, you’ll crumble. It’s not like he’s lying; Bucky doesn’t know you right now.

“Doctor,” Nicolai’s quiet voice silences all the others, “why hasn’t the Asset…claimed…lisichka? It has been two nights. He is not acting the way you predicted he would.”

Mezger is silent for a moment as he pouts; he’s still salty about not being the one to activate Bucky. “I did not actually know how it would react to the availability of a woman; I could only speculate. It was never tried, so there is nothing in my uncle’s notes. It could be that it does not have the need to release any aggression yet, as it is still fully triggered.” He shrugs and wipes the corners of his mouth with his napkin as he pauses for a moment to think. “According to its last communication it is finishing up with today’s mission, so her proximity to it certainly does not seem to be causing any harm.”

Your blood pressure rises noticeably when Metzger continually refers to Bucky as ‘it.’ You’d really like to stab him with your fork right now, and you find yourself gripping it tightly enough to turn your knuckles white.

“Actually,” Metzger’s eyes light up as he warms to the topic, “she did us a favor by going to it after the nightmare. My uncle has records of the Asset choking its handlers in similar situations, yet for some reason it did not harm her. It is very possible that some part of it recognizes that she is only a weak woman, and therefore is no threat.”

Nicolai only nods at the information as he takes another bite of his meal.

“I might know more if I could do a brain scan? And a few…tests?” Metzger looks hopeful, and you feel nauseated by his request. He acts as if Bucky is nothing more than a lab rat.

Nicolai doesn’t deign to answer, and you slowly let out a breath as you realize that Metzger recognizes Nicolai’s lack of response as a denial. Good.
“We will see what happens over the next few weeks,” Anatoliy breaks in. “It is not as if we do not have the time. Shall we start up a bet for how long it takes?”

His comments earn another round of laughter from your captors. You briefly wonder if they can feel the hate rolling off you as you close your eyes and focus on breathing. You don’t know when you’ll see them, but your friends are coming for you and Bucky.

It’s…it’s going to be okay.

Eventually.

Right?

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The third night Bucky is in the room next to begins much the same as the previous two. You go to him when he screams, no longer hesitating in the slightest. Stupid move showcasing some spectacularly terrible life preservation instincts? Yeah, probably. You know this, but you just don’t give a shit. You need to be with him. Besides, other than when he was directly ordered to, he hasn’t hurt you. He’s been asleep, but still. It counts for something.

Slipping from your room and into his only takes a moment or two, but when you turn toward him after closing the door you almost jump out of your skin.

He’s awake.

The Soldier sits at the edge of the bed, slouched over with his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees.

“Why are you here?” He doesn’t raise his head to look at you as he speaks, but of course he knows you’re there.

You take a moment to allow yourself to appreciate the sound of his voice; it’s still comforting to you and soothes your anxiety somewhat. “I just…I heard you scream. I, uh, I know you don’t remember, right now, but I used to soothe you after your nightmares.” The silence hangs in the room after you speak; he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t even move. “Do you want me to leave?” You ask the question hesitantly, wondering which way you want him to answer. This situation could easily end badly; you really weren’t expecting him to be awake.

He takes a moment before replying, “If I wanted you, I would have gone to you.”

His quietly spoken words hit you hard, and you have to swallow down the lump in your throat before you can respond. “Okay. I’m…I’m sorry. I’ll leave.” What else can you do? Your voice breaks as you speak, but not as badly as your heart. It’s not Bucky speaking, you remind yourself, it’s not Bucky. Bucky isn’t rejecting you. And this is for the best. Really. The Soldier might look like Bucky, he might be part of Bucky, but the man sitting in front of you is not your Bucky and you can’t afford to make the mistake of interchanging the two.

As you make the brief trip back to your room, you chastise yourself for your stupidity. That was a stupid move that easily could have gotten you hurt or even killed, and that would have ruined Bucky when he came back. And what had you expected, anyway? That someone who doesn’t know you – not in his current state, anyway – would just magically feel something and know, just know who you are to him? That he would somehow feel something beneath the multiple layers of torture-induced obedience and cognitive reconditioning, and break through because of true love?? This isn’t a Disney movie or a goddamn romance novel, for fuck’s sake, and reality doesn’t work
You rest your head against the door after closing it, willing back the tears. Don’t cry; it won’t do anyone any good and will just give you a headache.

“I cannot wait for him to start breaking through his programming – that is when I really get to have my fun.”

You startle violently and whip around at the unwelcome sound of Grigory’s voice in the dark room. What the fuck is he doing in here?

“I am sure your Bucky will comply with every single order, no matter how against his morals, to keep you safe.” Grigory pauses for an eternal moment, and it’s quiet save for the sounds of your pounding heart and blood rushing in your ears. “But Kapitan will order a demonstration regardless, so he will know what he is risking if he chooses to disobey.”

You scramble to turn on the lamp on the nightstand so you can see where he is. Oh God, he’s right in front of you in the soft yellow glow, and moves closer. For every step he takes you take one step back, until your back hits the wall.

Shit.

“I do not have to hurt you to have you. I know how to get what I want without leaving any marks. Unless, of course, you want me to leave marks?”

“Get the FUCK away from me!” It comes out as a sort of breathless scream; the searing panic is making it hard to breathe. There’s no one to help; even if Mikhail came in right now, he wouldn’t be able to stop this.

He smiles at the terror in your voice, and his mismatched eyes light up with malicious glee. “I see the way you stare. I know you want to kiss me, lisichka.”

What? Is he fucking kidding? Indignation and disgust flood through your veins, and it tempers the panic considerably. “Grigory, the only way I would have any interest in kissing you is if it was with the business end of a baseball bat.” It comes out sounding stronger than you’d expected; good. The sound of your own voice bolsters your courage, and you stand just a bit straighter. If this is happening, you aren’t going to make it easy; you’ll go down fighting.

His jaw clenches as he glares at you before speaking. “I will enjoy breaking you, moya malen’kaya shlyukha.” Grigory looks you up and down with a lecherous sneer, lingering on your chest. You roll your eyes at the predictability of it, until he forces his mouth down on yours.

Oh, hell no. Gross.

He only laughs and begins to paw at you as you struggle to push him away, but he’s much stronger than you, so you viciously bite down on his lip as you simultaneously bring your knee up sharply into his crotch.

You almost lose consciousness when he hits you; you didn’t see it coming so you didn’t have a chance to prepare for the impact. Not only did he strike you square across the cheekbone, but your head also smashes into the wall behind you.

Crumbling to the floor in a daze, you’re surprised when you see the Soldier grab Grigory and
punch him in the face, much like he’d hit you. Only when the Soldier hits him, you hear the sound of crunching bone before he swiftly takes the man by the throat with his metal hand and savagely pins him to the wall.

You blink, and then blink again to make sure you’re seeing what you think you’re seeing; your head hurts fiercely and your face is already swelling from the Grigory’s assault, making it difficult to see through your left eye.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he yowls through his pain as he blinks through a splatter of blood. “Stand down Soldat!”

“You have no orders to harm her.” There’s no trace of Bucky in the flat, emotionless voice, but at this point you don’t really care whether it’s Bucky or the Winter Soldier that saves you from this creep. “And you are not my Komandir.”

“I am Kapitan’s second in command!” You see the Soldier tighten his grip, and there’s a loud wheeze as Grigory inhales. “I am entitled to do with her what I wish! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The Soldier slams Grigory’s head against the wall. Hard. “You have no orders to harm her,” he repeats before he tosses Grigory carelessly to the floor. “Or touch her. She was given to me, not you.”

Grigory glares at the Soldier as he slowly picks himself up off the floor. “Retribution is a bitch. Just remember that,” he growls around a mangled lip and a mouthful of loose teeth as he exits the room, presumably headed for medical attention.

“Thanks, Bucky,” you whisper. He doesn’t acknowledge you, but you hadn’t really expected that he would. The Soldier is still for a moment before walking to the door and locking it.

Uh oh.

He turns and slowly approaches you, casting an analytical eye over your face before lightly taking hold of your upper arm and pulling you to your feet. You allow yourself to be led to the bed, where he wordlessly directs you to sit. The Soldier doesn’t make eye contact with you, not even once, as he carefully inspects your face and the back of your head where you’d hit the wall. Seemingly satisfied, he rises and lets himself out of the room. There’s the sound of him opening the door to his room, a few moments of silence, and then the sound of his door closing. A few seconds later, you hear a series of clicks and realize that he must have gone to his room to retrieve a key, because he’s just locked you in. That’s…perfectly okay with you, actually, as long as Grigory doesn’t have a key.

Hearing nothing but the sound of your own breathing after that, you lie down as the last 10 minutes catch up to you. That was fucking terrifying, and you can’t hold the tears back any longer. Soon you’re sobbing and shaking, and holding on to one of the pillows like it’s the only thing keeping you tethered to this world. Then again, maybe it is.

The sounds of your crying make you oblivious to the door unlocking and opening, and you jump when you hear him speak.

“You’re gonna have a black eye.” It’s Bucky’s voice, but there’s no hint of Bucky in it. It’s disconcerting.

Scrambling to sit up as you wipe away your tears, you see that he’s holding something out to you.
It takes you a second to focus before you realize that it’s a zip top bag filled with crushed ice.

“Thank you.” It comes out as a cross between a hiccup and a mumble; he doesn’t react as you take the bag and press it to your throbbing cheek.

You certainly hadn’t anticipated that he was leaving to get you an icepack. You also didn’t anticipate his next moves; the Soldier turns to lock the door before grabbing the chair from the vanity and pulling it next to the door. He sits down, crosses his arms and extends his legs. Seemingly comfortable, he closes his empty eyes. Apparently he’s staying awhile.
Chapter 43

You reluctantly wake to the sound of men barking orders in the hallway; it felt really fucking good to sleep, and you know it’s because Bucky watched over you last night. Except it was the Soldier that was guarding the door - in your not quite awake state, you’d almost forgotten. Almost.

The voices in the hall get louder; they aren’t quite close enough for you to make out what they’re saying, but you can hear the urgency. You slowly push the covers back and sit up, pressing gentle fingers against the bruising on your face when it begins to throb.

“Owie.” The soft whine causes the man in the chair to stir – a man, you realize belatedly as you take a doubletake, that is not the Soldier. “Mikhail?”

He yawns and stretches as he straightens, opening his sleepy brown eyes as he grins your way. “Good morning, solnishko.”

There’s more shouting in the hallway, and you throw a questioning look Mikhail’s way.

“Six more of Kapitan’s men were killed last night in their rooms. They were found the same as the men yesterday morning. Horrible. Tragic.” He doesn’t look at all like he thinks it’s horrible or tragic; in fact, his face clearly reads ‘sorry, not sorry.’ You school your features carefully to hide your smirk. “It is as if a vengeful ghost is among us.” He stops just short of a grin, and you know he’s thinking that it must be one of your friends that is doing the work.

Lifting one shoulder in a shrug, you simply reply, “Must be.”

Mikhail gets up and walks to the window, standing in the corner of the room where the draws to the blinds are, which happens to be right beneath the camera. As he gestures to the window, you see his mouth move, but no sound comes out. At your questioning look, he licks his lips and tries again. You aren’t the greatest lipreader in the world, but now that you’re paying attention you know what he’s asking. Take me with you?

“Of course!” You wait a beat before continuing, to make sure he gets your answer. “Please, yes, open the drapes! The Krakkens and their men scare me much more than any ‘vengeful ghost’ could, and God knows I could use the sunlight to cheer myself up.” You don’t know what Tony and the team have planned, but you know damn well that they will find a way to get Mikhail out if you ask them to.

The atmosphere in the room is considerably lighter than usual, and you know why.

Hope.

Mikhail’s eyes light up and he smiles, careful to keep his back to the camera and his expression hidden as he pulls the ugly drapes open. “So, you are probably wondering why I am here, and not your Soldier, yes?” He continues at your nod. “Well, I would have been here regardless as I received word from Mr. Krakken that from now on you were to be either accompanied or locked in your room at all times, but then I awoke to pounding on my door at 4:45 this morning. A ginormous, terrifying man was waiting on the other side. He told me, in flawless Russian, might I add, that he was a skilled assassin with 104 ways to kill me with a paperclip.” Mikhail doesn’t sound at all scared, only amused, and your mouth drops open as he continues, “He told me that he needed to report for his mission, and that I was to stay with you - only leaving if you were safely locked in your room - or he would invent a 105th way to die by stationary.”
“Wow,” you murmur, honestly surprised and almost feeling the urge to laugh. That…sort of sounds like something you could imagine Bucky saying. Does this mean he’s starting to break through?

“Yes, wow.” His eyes glance to your swollen check. “The Soldier told me that Grigory tried to take what did not belong to him.” After acknowledging your nod, he continues, “I’m afraid you may have passed hands from one possessor to another. He spoke of you as if you were a belonging. A precious belonging, but a belonging nonetheless.”

“Oh.” Well, that’s disappointing. And definitely not Bucky.

Mikhail reads your expression before softly adding, “Your Bucky will find his way back to you, solniskho.” And for what it is worth, word has spread of what the Soldier did to Grigory. I doubt very much that anyone else will try to harm you without the direct order from Mr. Krakken or Kapitan. Grigory has found himself on the end of a very short leash; if he held a lower rank, he probably would have been executed for defying orders.”

You smile and nod at his attempt to comfort, but you both know what is left unsaid: if the team hasn’t yet found a way to free you by the time Bucky breaks through his programming, you’re going to have a few really, really bad days, courtesy of the Krakken brothers.

Mikhail breaks the silence before it becomes too heavy to handle, “Your love is rather, uh, intimidating. I gather he is not like this when he is not triggered?”

A laugh bubbles out before you can stop it. “Oh, goodness no. He might not show it to everybody, but Bucky’s a ginormous teddy bear with an equally ginormous heart – and, if possible, an even bigger sweet tooth.”

“Really?” Mikhail sounds incredulous, as if something this simple is completely irreconcilable with the Soldier that had visited him this morning. “I – I really cannot imagine him eating anything not nutritionally necessary. He is so…um…” Mikhail struggles to find the word he’s looking for, so he mimics a weightlifter’s pose.

Thinking about the first couple of nights you’d known Bucky, you laugh again. “I’ve known him to eat two dozen cupcakes in less than 24 hours.” You pull a face before your next comment, “His metabolism is disgustingly efficient.”

Mikhail blinks in astonishment. “Two dozen…that…that is nauseating.”

“Yes. Yeah it is,” you agree with a smirk. “He really is amazing, though. He’s funny, smart, incredibly sweet and thoughtful, and he’s wonderful with my boys.”

“He would have to be, to win a heart like yours. I had always hoped for a love like this for my sister.” Mikhail smiles softly at you as he walks to the door. “Perhaps she found it, now that she is at peace and can no longer be hurt.”

“I hope so, Mikhail.”

The two of you share a look that is loaded with camaraderie and hope before he nods sharply, schooling his features into his usual sober gravity. “Would you like some coffee, solniskho?”

“God, yes, please.” Like you’d ever say no to coffee.

“Kapitan’s men are searching for evidence regarding this morning’s murders, so they will be passing by quite frequently. I will lock the door from the other side using the Soldier’s key, but
secure the inside lock as well.” His pointed look screams we’re so close! it’s almost over! don’t get careless! and you agree. Completely. If anything, now is the time to be more careful.

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The day passes much like the other days you’ve spent here, only the atmosphere isn’t quite as suffocating. Knowing that your friends are near comforts you considerably, even if you don’t know when they will make their move. Mikhail seems more relaxed, too; when he does your hair for dinner, he speaks at length about his sister. The way his eyes light up when he speaks about her makes it clear that she was really special to him, and you feel honored that he would trust you enough to share his best memories of her with you.

As you leave for the Whackadoo Dinner, party of four, you can’t help but pull Mikhail into an impromptu hug. You’d been reluctant to believe that anyone here could be on your side, but he is. Sometime between yesterday and today you decided that he’s your friend, and that you trust him. One hundred percent.

The unexpected affection takes him by surprise, but he only hesitates for a moment before returning the embrace. “It is going to be okay, solnishko. I really think it is going to be okay.”

Nodding, your reply is quiet but resolute. “I think so, too.”

Neither of you bothers to rush – what would be the point, these dinners suck – but when you enter the dining room, it’s clear you’ve walked in on something.

“Well, what did you expect, Grigory? He has probably never been given anything, and so became extremely overprotective of what is his. He does have a history of aggression while activated – something of which you were very thoroughly warned.” Nicolai sounds both condescending and annoyed, and you (unfortunately) know Nicolai well enough to know that annoyed can transition to dangerous. Quickly.

“But –“

“No, Grigory. You were warned. The Asset will not be reprimanded for his actions.” Nicolai cocks his head to the side as he regards the other man. “You were also told not to touch lisichka, as she is not yet yours.”

“But I–“

Nicolai slams his fist onto the table, toppling over two glasses of wine and causing everyone except the Soldier to jump. “DO NOT INTERRUPT ME AGAIN!”

A flicker of fear sparks in Grigory’s eyes, but he keeps quiet.

“You have a fractured eye socket, a concussion, a badly mangled lip, and you lost, what, four teeth? I will consider that fair punishment for attempting to take lisichka without my permission.” Nicolai’s cold green gaze locks on Grigory. “Do not violate my trust again. There is no doubt in my mind that the Asset can drag out an execution for days, if so ordered.”

Grigory opens his red and swollen mouth, but then shuts it again without saying anything as Nicolai turns his attention to the Soldier. “Your mission for today is complete?”

“Yes, Komandir,” answers the blank intonation that cruelly mimics Bucky’s voice. “The last two families on your list were executed today. It was necessary to eliminate three of the second target’s staff in order to complete the assignment within the required timeframe, but other than that all went
as expected.”

You sigh inwardly. *Families.* More blood. More guilt for something he had no control over. Will Bucky be able to recover from this?

“Soldat, I would like you to take a few of Anatoliy’s men and show them what to look for from the point of view of a would-be assassin, and make sure the property is clear. I do not want to find more dead men in the morning.”

“Yes, Komandir.” The Soldier turns on his heel and leaves, clearly expecting Anatoliy’s men to follow without further instruction.

They do.

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It didn’t work.

Four more men are dead in the morning; you can’t say you’re too terribly sorry, although you wonder if they will punish the Soldier for not preventing the deaths.

He came to your room again last night; you’d been tossing and turning when you heard the familiar-but-not-quite-right booted footsteps of the Soldier. There wasn’t even enough time to wonder whether he was going to your room or his when you heard the key slide into the lock. He ghosted silently in, turned to lock the door, and took his place in the chair.

Sleep came easily then – even though you know that the Soldier will hurt you if ordered to do so, you feel safe with him. Your intuition tells you that he won’t harm you by choice, but you can’t really tell if that’s how you honestly feel or if it’s wishful thinking.

Deep in thought about the various forms of the man you love, you jump a bit when Mikhail reenters your room. He’d said he was going to get your breakfast, but he’s empty handed.

“I am sorry, solnishko, but Mr. Krakken wishes for you to go to the dining hall.” He looks concerned, and you can’t help the feeling of trepidation that washes over you.

“Really? Why? Are the creepy dinner parties moving to breakfast now?” The words don’t sound nearly as strong as you’d like; there’s something dangerous in the air that’s quickly suffocating yesterday’s hope.

“I…I am not sure, solnishko. They are agitated from this morning’s events, so there is no telling what they will do.”

You can only nod at the simmering fear in his voice, unsure of what to say. He’s not wrong; these men are unpredictable on a good day. Moving quickly, you rise and follow Mikhail.

Grigory’s voice carries down the hall; you can hear his argument well before you enter the room. “The Asset has now eliminated all of the nearby Pakhan, as well as their families, so there is no one left to retaliate. It must be the Asset that has murdered our men! Who else could it be?”

Walking through the door you find sudden silence, and several of the Hounds standing along the walls. The Soldier stands at attention, and the red blotch on his face tells you that he’s been hit. Everyone else is still standing, though, so he clearly didn’t hit anyone back.

“Grigory must be right, there’s –“
Nicolai cuts off his brother with a dismissive wave. “All evidence points to the Asset remaining fully triggered; he cannot help but be compliant to our orders. Besides, brother, the video feed offers nothing to support this ridiculous idea.”

“Nicolai, he is an accomplished and seasoned assassin! Some of those kills could have been completed by none other than him. I cannot explain the lack of video proof, but it had to have been the Asset – who else could it have been? Our closest living enemies are at least 500 kilometers away, and they have no reason to retaliate for the families that were executed.” Anatoliy almost sounds desperate. Is he scared? He should be.

“That is why we must test it; to be sure it is still under the control of the trigger words.” As Metzger speaks, you can feel his eyes on you. “These trigger words have not been used before, so there may be different signs, or symptoms, if you will, when it begins to break through.”

Anatoliy’s eyes are on you now as well. “What do you recommend, Doctor?”

“You are here for a reason, is she not?”

Oh fuck.

Mikhail stiffens beside you, but when you steal a glance at the Soldier you find no reaction at all.

“Yes,” Nicolai murmurs, “yes, our pet is here for a reason.”

“If you will allow it, Mr. Krakken, I will suggest that you utilize her for her purpose.” Metzger sounds very satisfied with himself right now. Prick.

“The Doctor brings up a good point,” Anatoliy interjects. “The Asset knows that lisichka was given to him but that she ultimately belongs to you. If he is still triggered, there should be little to no reaction to seeing her hurt so long as the command comes from you or me.”

Your blood begins to boil at the way they keep speaking of you as if you were nothing but a belonging. But then again, to them that’s all you are. And the way they’re trying to manipulate Bucky – well, the Soldier – is really pissing you off.

Nicolai turns to address his men, but that isn’t the conversation that captures your attention.

Anatoliy speaks quietly; not so loud that his brother will overhear while speaking his own orders, but loud enough for Mikhail and you to hear clearly. “You know, Mikhail, my brother thinks it is enough just to have her beaten today. I think, however, that a little more may be in store for lisichka. You have spent more time with her than anyone else here; do you think she will enjoy the experience I gave to your sister? Will she scream as Izolda screamed? Will she fight as Izolda fought, begging for you to intervene as you stand by and watch, helpless with that collar around your neck?”

Sick fuck.

What little color Mikhail has drains from his face as he avoids meeting Anatoliy’s eyes and seems to struggle to breathe.

“Oh yes, I remember your sister’s name,” Anatoliy croons, “and her hair, and her eyes – so much like your own. Did you know I had asked for her hand?”

By Mikhail’s sharp intake of breath, you guess that the answer is no. He remains silent, though, and does not answer.
“I did. Such a sweet, pretty girl; I would have married her. Your father declined, however, stating that I was not fit for his precious daughter. That was his biggest mistake.” He flashes Mikhail a predatory smile. “I got her in the end anyway, and your father lost you both.”

So *that* was why Mikhail was taken? *That* was his family’s crime against the Krakken brothers??

Anatoliy pauses just long enough for you to think he’s done taunting Mikhail. “Not that your father considers you to be much of a loss; you are too weak for the Bratva life. He did not want you anyway.”

“Anatoliy,” Nicolai turns from the men he was speaking with to face his brother, sounding like an awkward combination of annoyed and amused, “quit teasing the boy; I would like to get this done so we can get on with our day.”

Seriously? Like this is just an *inconvenience* for him?

“Right,” Anatoliy nods sharply as he roughly grabs your arm to pull toward the wall where Krakken’s men are waiting, almost making you trip and fall to your knees in the process. “Grigory, would you like the honor? Just make sure she is alive when you are finished.”

Grigory’s contrasting eyes light up in malicious glee as he steps toward you.

Oh shit.

This is going to suck. Immensely. You’re sure he’s going to want retaliation for what the Soldier did to him, and they’ve just unleashed him on you with no restrictions other than to not kill you. Now would be a really, *really* good time for Nat, Steve, or Tony to make an appearance.

“No!! Stop! It was not the Soldier!” Mikhail’s voice rings out clearly even as you struggle to find words.

Everyone’s eyes go to Mikhail. Realization of what he’s about to say puts you into an immediate full blown panic. “No, Mikhail, don’t!”

He ignores you completely. “There is no need to harm her! It will not serve your purpose, as the Soldier did not kill your men. And if he is still triggered, hurting her will not make him comply any more than he already does.” He breathes heavily for a moment as Nicolai stalks toward him.

“Mikhail, DON’T!” Oh God, no…

Sad but resolute brown eyes meet your own. “I am sorry, solnishko,” he whispers; you can barely make out the words. “but I cannot stand by and allow them to hurt you when I –“

The sharp sound of Nicolai’s fist hitting Mikhail’s face cuts him off. Anatoliy walks behind Mikhail, pulling his arms back to hold him still as Nicolai hits him again.

“How have you been withholding information? You had better tell me why you think the Soldat is innocent of the murder of our men, *immediately*, or I will have your head.” Nicolai’s sinister growl echoes through the otherwise completely silent room.

“The Avengers –“

“Mikhail, SHUT UP!” You desperately try to run to him, you don’t know why, maybe to drag him out of the room before he gets himself killed. Unfortunately, Grigory’s hand reaches out and snatches your arm before you take more than two steps. You know what Krakken’s men will do to
you, and the truth of it is that you’ll survive it. Well, your body will, anyway, because they don’t want you dead. You can eventually recover and you can heal, given enough time and support, but nothing can bring someone back from the dead. “I know what you’re trying to do, Mikhail, but it’s not worth it!” Pleading with him with your eyes, you try to tell him without speaking - because you don’t want to make anything worse - that it’s not worth his life.

“Yes it is,” he murmurs with his eyes on you.

“The Avengers…what?” Nicolai asks coldly, grasping Mikhail by the throat just above his collar.

“Please don’t,” you ask one more time, knowing it’s useless but not knowing whether it’s Mikhail or Nicolai that you’re pleading with at this point.

“The Avengers are here. I heard rumors in town when I ran errands for Dr. Metzger yesterday. They are going to save their friends, as well as avenge the families you’ve had murdered by the Soldier.” Mikhail’s eyes never leave yours. “I saw him.” He nods as best he can with Nicolai’s hand still at his throat.

“Saw who?” Nicolai shakes Mikhail roughly as he asks the question.

“Captain America. His hat and hood blew back in the wind for a moment, but I recognized him. I followed them into the store to make sure. He and a woman were purchasing bullets.”

Nicolai’s fist hit Mikhail’s face with such force, you thought for a moment that his neck must be broken. Slowly, Mikhail pulls himself back up from the blow.

“Why am I just hearing of this now?” Nicolai roars, and you can feel even Grigory jump at the sound. You take the opportunity to break free of his grasp and start striding toward Mikhail.

Mikhail’s eyes finally meet Nicolai’s. “Because I am hoping those bullets are for you.”

Anatoliy punches Mikhail in the spine, causing him to crumble to his knees; the only reason he stays upright is because Anatoliy is holding him by the back of his shirt.

Nicolai walks away, and you pay him no heed as you kneel in front of Mikhail as Anatoliy barks orders behind him. “What the hell are you doing, Mikhail?” you hiss as you frantically try to think of a way to get him out of this situation. “They’re going to –“

“This is my choice, solnishko,” he whispers through bubbling blood, “They will be too distracted now to focus on hurting you.” He coughs, and a tooth lands on the floor in front of you. “Survive, solishko. For me. For your Bucky. For your little ones. For Izolda. Survive.”

“Mikhail,” you choke out before you’re roughly pulled aside by a harsh grasp – Grigory again. Your heart plummets when you see why, and you start hyperventilating as your blood turns to ice. “No! Nicolai! NO!”

“You are a traitor.” Nicolai has reverted to his eerie calm, and Grigory pulls you back another step, dragging you along the floor as he goes.

“No! No, please, Nicolai, don’t do this! PLEASE!” Your own voice sounds foreign to your ears, the terror and panic rendering it unrecognizable.

“Yes, I suppose I am,” Mikhail grins as he looks up at Nicolai before twisting to look at Anatoliy. “Vy skoro umrete. Naslazhdaysya sosat’ chlen svoego brata, poka mozhesh’, ublyudok.”
You will soon die. Enjoy sucking on your brother's cock while you can, you bastard

Anatoliy stares for a moment, seemingly dumbfounded, before his eyes narrow. You don’t know what he said, but judging by Anatoliy’s reaction it must have been bad. Still holding Mikhail by the back of his shirt, Anatoly pulls back his arm and delivers a powerful blow to Mikhail’s temple. By the way his body slumps he’s probably already dead, but that doesn’t stop you from screaming, “NO! NICOLAI! DON’T!” as Nicolai brings the shashka down on Mikhail’s neck. His once blonde head drops with a sickening and bloody plop as Anatoliy releases his hold on the blood-soaked shirt.

You stare at the scene in front of you, unable to comprehend or accept what you’ve just seen but simultaneously unable to deny it.

Mikhail…

Mikhail.
Chapter 44

It doesn’t go away. No matter how many times you blink, it stays the same.

Mikhail is dead.

It’s so quiet. Why is it so quiet? No, wait, you do hear something, you just have to pay attention. Voices – you finally tear your eyes away from your decapitated friend and raise them to the monsters surrounding you. Everything seems like it’s moving in slow motion, and you look down at yourself to make sure you aren’t drenched, because it feels like someone dropped a bucket of ice water over you. It’s a good thing you were already on your knees, because you find yourself to be incredibly unsteady and need to put your hands on the floor in front of you to support yourself.

You’re distantly aware of Anatoliy yelling instructions to his men, but it’s Nicolai’s command that finally fully captures your attention. “Soldat!”

The Soldier approaches Nicolai, seemingly unperturbed by the scene around him. “Yes, Komandir?”

“You have a new mission, one that supersedes the others and is to be completed at all costs. Do you understand?” He speaks calmly, completely uncaring that he’s standing in a pool of Mikhail’s blood.

Mikhail.

You have to drag your focus back to the conversation; something tells you it’s important.

“Captain America and his team are in the area; their profiles are in the briefing room, including pictures.” Nicolai watches the Soldier’s reaction carefully. When there isn’t one, he continues, “I want them all dead, and I want you to check in with a status update every three hours until your mission is complete; make sure you take fresh comms and extra batteries. I do not care what the reason is, if you miss a check in, milaya moya will no longer belong to you. If you miss two check ins, she will belong to everyone else. If you fail…well…let us just say that it is in her best interest that you do not fail. Her being taken away from you will be the least of your concerns when it comes to her. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Komandir,” The Soldier nods and turns as if to leave.

“Soldat.”

He turns back to stand at attention once more.

“You will bring back proof. I want Captain America’s shield.”

“Yes, Komandir.” He remains motionless, awaiting further instruction as Nicolai regards him with narrowed eyes.

A sadistic grin suddenly spreads over Nicolai’s face. “You will also bring me his head.”

There’s no reaction from the Soldier other than a curt nod and another bland “Yes, Komandir.”

This time it’s Nicolai that turns to leave, striding toward his brother and leaving a trail of crimson footsteps. The fucker doesn’t care, he doesn’t even notice.
Mikhail.

“Oh God,” you mutter to no one in particular; it’s becoming hard to breathe and even harder to focus, and your already tenuous grip on sanity feels nearly nonexistent. You can’t help but notice, though, even in your mentally fragile state, that with the sole exception of Nicolai using you in his threats, no one is paying attention to you in the explosion of chaos – Mikhail’s plan worked. You could probably walk out of this god-forsaken place and no one would be the wiser until things calmed down. Except, well, you can’t because you still have this motherfucking collar around your neck and they could press a button at any moment and end you.

Oh God, Mikhail…it wasn’t worth it…

You close your eyes to stop the spinning and to quell the fresh wave of nausea that crops up, and you’re so distracted and detached that you don’t react at all when a warm hand gently grasps your upper arm. In fact, you don’t move at all until you hear his voice.

“You should go back to your room.” Not quite an order, but more than a suggestion. Emotionless. Empty.

Blinking your eyes back open, you straighten slightly as you turn your head and nod slightly, not bothering to look up at the Soldier’s face. When you make no other move, he releases your arm and moves to kneel in front of you.

“Look at me.” There’s still no trace of Bucky in the tone, but there’s enough force in it to make you obey. So you do. He studies your face for a moment; his gaze holds no warmth but rather is analytical, much like the other night after Grigory hit you. “You can’t stay here. You’re in shock - you need to go back to your room.”

Nodding again, you offer no resistance when he all but lifts you to your feet. For the briefest of moments you think you see a flash of desperate concern, a flash of Bucky, but then you blink and whatever was there is gone. Then again, it probably wasn’t there in the first place. You slowly shake your head at the ridiculousness of your wishful thinking, but it doesn’t stop you from staring at him, searching for the tiniest sign of hope.

A slight shake captures your attention, and you belatedly realize that his lips are moving; he must have been speaking.

It takes a tremendous effort to form your words. “Sorry, what?” you blink at him, searching for, willing a little of Bucky to come out. You again see a little bit of concern etched in his face, but before you get too excited he speaks, and it takes all your concentration to understand what he’s saying.

“You’re slurring your words – we need to get you back to your room, where it’ll be safer.”

The words are heard, but they don’t really make sense right away. It’s so fucking hard to pay attention right now. “What? I can’t – I’m sorry, what?” Shit. You can barely understand yourself. Right. That’s what he was saying. No wonder he looks concerned - he doesn’t have to love you or even know you to know that you’re pretty fucked up right now.

“Goddammit,” he mutters under his breath as he glances furtively around the room. “Hey,” he speaks quietly but intensely as he grabs your chin, forcing your unfocused gaze to meet his, “I know this is a lot to handle. I know this is hard, but you need to cooperate with me. I have an important mission to complete – if I fail they’ll take you away from me – but I can’t leave until I get you somewhere safe. I can’t pick you up and carry you, because it might attract attention and
right now that’s the last thing you need, so you have to walk with me.”

Fuck. You’re in really bad shape. You recognize this, but can’t seem to snap out of it. It’s interesting, though – the Winter Soldier is clearly capable of some level of empathy. Huh. Even though he can be compelled to do anything as the Soldier, they obviously didn’t manage to wipe out all his humanity with the triggers. A small smile creeps across your face when you realize this means they never fully conquered Bucky. Ever.

“Hey.” Another slight shake brings you back to the bloodstained room. “Can you do that for me?”

“Huh?” Oh, right. Walk back to the room. “Yeah…yeah,” you murmur weakly, stumbling just a little when he slowly pulls you forward after your quiet confirmation.

With a solid, chilled metal hand on your arm, the Soldier leads you gently but firmly to your room. He guides you to the bed and makes sure you’re safely seated at the edge before kneeling once more in front of you.

“Stay here.” There’s no mistaking his tone – this is a direct command from the Soldier. The ice already flowing through your veins since seeing Mikhail’s murder freezes even more, and you couldn’t disobey even if you wanted too. Eyes wide, you just nod.

He watches you for a long moment before he leaves, and except for blinking and breathing you don’t move a goddamn muscle. He may have been gone for 10 minutes or 10 hours by the time he gets back; it’s impossible to tell in your current state. Not that you really care, anyway. The Soldier’s primary motivation for doing any of this is likely to protect what’s his, nothing more. His property. If it weren’t for the sharp pain of Mikhail’s death, you’d probably be willing to accept it, greedy for any little bit you could get of the man you love. Now, it just doesn’t matter. It hurts too much to hope and another crushing disappointment might send you flying over the edge.

You don’t move when the door opens; you don’t even look to see who walks in; you’re too preoccupied with Mikhail’s execution that’s playing like a YouTube video on a loop in your brain.

“I brought you some food and water.”

Oh. Okay, so he wasn’t gone that long. You hear the Soldier placing things on the table behind you, but don’t bother to turn around. What’s the point? This isn’t your Bucky; there’s no true comfort to be had here.

“I have to go now to report for my mission – I’ll probably be back in a few days. Do not leave this room while I’m gone.” Another direct order. You nod blankly as the words slowly sink in.


A surge of panic rushes through you as your mind clears somewhat, and you clumsily rise to grab his arm. “Wait! Bucky, no, you can’t! You can’t kill Steve! He’s your best friend!” This will destroy him. It’ll be irrevocable damage; he’ll never come back from it, not from killing Steve.

Blank eyes glance down to your hand on his arm before meeting your gaze. “He’s nothing to me but a mission I need to complete,” he tones as he sharply pulls his arm from your grasp and leaves. He doesn’t look back before closing and locking the door.

***

The days pass. Quicker than you’d like, the numbness begins to fade and the fog in your mind lifts.
You cry.

You cry for Bucky. You cry for Mikhail. You cry for your family. Finally, you cry for yourself.

You cry yourself to sleep and you cry yourself awake.

When the tears run out, you rage.


The room is destroyed. You don’t care. It was fucking ugly anyway.

At least it tires you out.

You’re left alone. No one bothers you, not even to check on you. It’s both a blessing and a curse; if they leave you alone, you’re technically safe. Being alone, though, just highlights Mikhail’s absence. It becomes a constant ache.

Lonelier than ever before, you sleep.

***

On the fourth morning after the Soldier’s departure (at least you think it’s the fourth morning, hell, is it even morning? Early afternoon?) you awake from exhausted sleep to find that the sky is an unfair shade of bright blue with a distantly cold, uncaring sun. The way it reflects off the snow is blinding, and you can tell just by looking that it’s bitterly cold outside. It wants you to think that it’s warm out – the sun shines and tries to lull you into a false sense of security – but your nose would freeze shut the second you inhale. You know. It’s January, for fuck’s sake, and you’re no stranger to frigid winters.

Are the boys warm? Grandma and grandpa will make sure they don’t play outside in this kind of weather, right? Right. Your mom is unreasonably overprotective, especially of her grandsons. They’re fine. Probably better than fine. Great, even.

The trees dance and shed some of their crystalline snow, sending sparkling diamond drops into the air; it’s windy, too, which of course makes it even colder. Colder than a witch’s titty, your uncle would say.

Is Bucky keeping warm? Would he even know if he isn’t? Does the Soldier? He’ll come back to you, right? Wait, which one? Bucky or the Soldier? Or both?

Your eyes drift listlessly between the scene outside your window and the prison disguising itself as a bedroom as you nibble on one of the protein bars left for you by Bucky. Goddamn it. No. The Soldier. The line between the two gets blurrier; they’re two parts of the same person, so can you technically differentiate anyway? You suppose so, you have been to protect your heart, but it’s starting to take way too much effort.

A heavy sigh heaves its way out and you absentmindedly scratch at your scalp. You really need a fucking shower and a change of clothes.

Rising stiffly and slowly, you go to the dresser and pull out fresh jeans, underwear, a tank, a tee shirt, and Bucky’s sweatshirt.
A sharp stab hits your heart, like it does every time you wear the hoodie. Usually it’s because it reminds you of Bucky, which is why you wear it, but now it also reminds you of Mikhail. It’s here because he made sure to save it for you. It’s clean because he always made sure to throw it in the wash if it got dirty and got it back to you right away, so you were never without it for more than a couple of hours; he’d washed it for you the night before he was killed. The spot on the cuff that had been ripped open on the day you were taken was mended, because Mikhail wanted you to think of Bucky when you wore this shirt, and not of Anatoliy and how harsh he’d been when he removed the tracking device.

You momentarily lose all ambition as you clutch the soft blue bundle to your chest; you can feel the tears trying to gather in your eyes, but there just aren’t any left.

Your head itches again. Might as well shower, maybe you’ll feel better.

At least it passes the time.

***

The sun is quickly approaching the horizon when you hear voices in the hall, alternately speaking and laughing. You can’t make out what they’re saying, so you tune it out and focus again on the trees outside your window until the sound of a key turning a lock captures your attention. The Soldier is the only one with a key, right? Is he back? Is Steve dead?!

“Milaya moya, I have not seen you in days! I did not realize you were locked in, it is a good thing I have copy of the key, yes?” Nicolai’s jovial voice grates on your nerves, but you don’t move; your shoulders droop mentally but not physically as you realize that you aren’t as safe in here as you’d hoped. Like anywhere around here is actually safe. “You must be famished, my dear. You should join us for an early dinner.”

Whoever is with him snickers. Whatever.

“We prepared something special, just for you.” The snickers erupt into loud laughter as Nicolai speaks. “Come, my little fox! The Hounds would love your company tonight! We have ordered special entertainment as well.”

You know that he won’t leave you alone until you acknowledge him, so you slowly turn to face him. Oh great. Grigory’s here, too. Asswipe.

Grigory chuckles mockingly when he gets a glimpse of your face. “God, this is what you look like before Mikhail put make-up on you? I did not realize he was so good at his job.”

Nicolai barks out a laugh as you glare at Grigory.

“You know what, Grigory? Fuck you.” Uh oh. Your case of the fuck-its has returned, and Mikhail isn’t here to temper your rage. Grigory abruptly sobers at your tone as you continue but Nicolai doesn’t even try to suppress his grin. “You don’t like how I look? Tough. This is what I look like when my face is swollen and bruised from when you hit me. This is what I look like when my face is blotchy and my eyes are puffy from grieving. And guess what?” You turn your glare to Nicolai as your voice rises, getting closer and closer to shrieking as you continue. “This is your fucking fault!! You, and your megalomaniac desire to rule the fucking world! You, the self-appointed super-villain, employed a mad scientist, had me poisoned, and basically kidnapped me. You’re trying to kill my friends, you used me as bait, and now you’re keeping me as insurance to guarantee the Soldier’s compliance. Then, when Bucky breaks through, you’ll keep using me to manipulate him into doing whatever you want him to do, because apparently your goddamn superpower is
exploiting the love people have for one another. AND YOU FUCKING KILLED MIKHAIL!!"
You didn’t realize you were holding a bottle of water in your hand until you chuck it at Nicolai’s head, which he neatly sidesteps. “It’s a pretty shitty situation for me and those I love, so please, PLEASE excuse the shit out of me if I don’t give a flying piss-soaked fuck how I look!”

Nicolai bursts into loud, uneven laughter as Grigory stares at you. “Have you lost your mind, you crazy bitch?”

You stare at him for a moment before you let out a sardonic giggle. “Yes. Yes, Grigory, I think I have. I’ve lost my goddamn mind.” At this point, even you can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic or serious. “Congratulations. You win.”

Nicolai is laughing so hard that he’s bent at the waist, and it takes a full minute to regain his composure. “Oh, oh milaya moya, you do not disappoint.

It suddenly occurs to you that you’re the special entertainment he mentioned earlier.

Well shit.

“Well, come along, milaya moya. We do not want to keep the others waiting.” Nicolai smirks and extends an arm. Yep. A real gentleman.

You stand hesitantly, not wanting to go but knowing you don’t have a choice. The rooms spins for a moment – the result of not eating or drinking enough over the past few days. After pausing briefly to steady yourself, you pull your head up and your shoulders back before crossing the room with all the dignity you can muster and walk straight into the hallway, ignoring Nicolai’s proffered arm.

Grigory starts to protest, but Nicolai shushes him. “Leave it, Grigory. She is amusing me.”

You don’t look back as you walk, choosing instead to pretend they aren’t there. Anatoliy raises an eyebrow when you walk into the dining room first, but you ignore him as your eyes settle on the table. Good – there are only five place settings, and Anatoliy and Metzger are already seated. That means the others are for you, Nicolai, and Grigory; the Soldier must not be back yet. Relief floods through you as you take your seat.

He must not have missed a check in since you’d been left alone until now, and if he’s not back yet there’s the possibility that Steve is alive and well, right? You can only hope.

Something tells you that you’re being extremely naïve.

Nicolai and Grigory take their seats and begin discussing some sort of new concoction that Metzger cooked up. The conversation eventually turns to guns, who’s who on the ally and enemy fronts, and possible uses for the Soldier. They talk around you the entire time, and you drift in and out of the conversation as your mind periodically wanders.

There’s a roaring fire in the fireplace, and it’s making you hot and uncomfortable. Nausea sets in, so you sip at your glass of ice water to try to calm your stomach. Dinner has yet to be served; not that you have an appetite or would eat much anyway, but the longer it takes for dinner to come, the longer you’ll have to deal with these creeps.

A bead of sweat runs down your temple and you’re tempted to rest your head on the table when the food finally arrives. Apparently Nicolai had meant it when he said he’d made something special; these dinners are usually ridiculously formal, but this is the first time plates have come out with silver domes covering the food. If you felt better you’d be rolling your eyes at the gaudiness of it
A huge dish is set before you – with the cover reaching almost 18 inches at its apex, it’s big enough to be a serving tray. What the fuck is Nicolai playing at now? Is he running out of ideas for ways to torment you? Is he going to force you to eat an entire roast? What the fuck?

You stare at the polished surface as you feel all eyes on you. A quick glance at the entrance shows a few men filing in, whispering as they move to stand along the wall.

Yep. You’re the ‘special entertainment.’

Your heart starts racing, and the combined heat and nausea make it nearly impossible to remain seated. God, you just want to lie down somewhere cool.

“You are looking a little pale, milaya moya. Perhaps you should eat something?” Nicolai’s comments start a titter of badly suppressed laughter around the table.

“I’m really not hungry,” you mumble, increasingly desperate to find a way out of this, but not seeing any alternatives other than to go through it.

Anatoliy leans over to drape his arm around your shoulders. “Perhaps you would like me to feed you, lisichka? Like lovers in a romance novel?”

There’s another round of laughter as you shake your head. “No,” you murmur quietly as you swallow hard against the painful churning in your empty stomach.

“No what, milaya moya? Do not forget your manners,” Nicolai mockingly interjects.

“No thank you, Anatoliy.” They smirk at your polite whisper.

Everyone snickers as they remove the covers from their plates; a quick glance around the table shows you that it’s chicken with roasted potatoes. Ugh, more fucking potatoes, but otherwise harmless. You’ve always been given the same thing as the others, so you probably just have a whole chicken, right? The tray is the right size for that.

Okay. You can do this – it’s just dinner. It’s not like they’d ruin their own meal just to play a joke on you, so it can’t be too terrible, right? You just have to go through with it and then you can go back to your room and lie down. Preferably with the window open. Yes, just eat and get it over with.

The room suddenly quiets when you raise your hand to lift the lid. It makes you even more nervous, but you don’t really have a choice. You raise the cover slowly, first seeing the green garnish at the bottom of the plate. When nothing jumps out at you or looks overtly suspicious, you raise the lid the rest of the way.

The world stops turning.

Your eyes don’t blink.

Your lungs don’t draw in air.

Your heart, unfortunately, keeps beating.

Glassy eyes that were once a clean blue stare at you. Sandy blond hair, stained and matted with blood, stands up every which way. It’s…
It’s…

It’s fucking hard to think with that screaming echoing in your ears.

The lid slips from numb fingers, crashing to the table and knocking Steve’s head off the plate and onto the floor next to your feet. Your body reacts, jumping out of the chair and unintentionally into Anatoliy’s lap.

He’s saying something – laughing – into your ear, but you can’t hear anything over the screams. Your screams.

Anatoliy wraps his arms around you, nuzzling into your neck and speaking something that you can’t understand.

The next shriek coincides with the heaving in your stomach as you violently vomit bile, which causes Anatoliy to release you. You grab onto the chair you’d vacated to stop your forward momentum, and as you get another glimpse of the head you feel a tug around your waist to pull you back up. Standing and turning at once, you push away from him and scramble backwards until your back hits the wall.

Your head shakes violently back and forth as your entire body trembles. You see smiles and laughing, and mouths moving as they talk. Some point at you, some double over in mirth. Someone approaches you from the side.

Both sides.

You scream.

You fight when someone grabs your arms, but it doesn’t do any good, not really, although it takes two to restrain you as a third approaches. Somehow you manage to get an arm loose and you throw all of your weight behind a punch that lands solidly against someone’s face. His screams join yours as a fourth person calmly walks up to you. His hand arcs down, and a sharp jab hits your thigh, and then another.

The screams die down to hysterical cries, then to pathetic whimpers. Finally, you’re quiet. And motionless.

They’re still laughing at you. Laughing at your reaction to your dead friend’s head. Laughing. You’re surrounded by demons and you’ve no idea how to escape this hellish nightmare.

The tranquilizer they dosed you with has you physically sedated, but although your mind grows cloudy it does nothing to quench the hurt in your soul. You’d do just about anything in this moment not to feel.

Someone – Nicolai – briefly kneels in front of you as he places a hand to your feverish cheek. “Oh, milaya moya, you do not disappoint,” he chuckles before rising and returning to the table. They continue eating. The fuckers continue eating, with no regard at all to you lying on the floor, helpless, or the severed head at their feet.

They’re finishing dessert when footsteps sound in the hall, and just a few seconds later the approaching sound of the Soldier’s voice breaks through the fog in your brain. “I’ve cleaned and polished the shield as you asked, Komandir. Where would you like it?”
“Just set it down for now, Soldat. I’m afraid you have missed the entertainment; milaya moya reacted stronger than expected to her gift, and needed sedation. Get her out of here and report back to me. Then you may eat.”

“Yes, Komandir.” A few moments later you’re in familiar arms, but you feel no joy. None at all.

Steve’s dead, by Bucky’s hand.

He’s not coming back from this. You’d seen the guilt he still carries over trying to kill Steve; he’s incredibly resilient, but successfully killing his best friend? No. Once he realizes what he’s done, he’ll self-destruct.

You’ve lost Bucky forever.

You think of nothing else as he carries you back to your room and gently lays you on the unmade bed, pausing only to pull the covers up to your shoulders before leaving. Hot, stinging tears leak from your closed eyes, but you don’t bother to wipe them away. Not that you could, anyway.

You’re not sure what they gave you – most likely a cocktail of powerful tranquilizers – but it’s left your body useless and has almost completely frozen your mind.

You lie alone for a few more minutes, or maybe hours, until everything shrinks and goes dark and silent.

***

The Winter Soldier comes to you later that night.

You don’t know how long it’s been, but the drugs have mostly worn off. Bummer. You’re lying on the bed, facing away from the door, but you know it’s him because you recognize the deliberate and measured footsteps made audible by the heavy boots he wears; so foreign and yet at the same time so achingly familiar.

He walks in and turns to lock the door, as is his habit.

You lose the ability to breathe when you hear him walk toward the bed – the cadence is slightly and unexpectedly different; more grace and less menace.

These are Bucky’s footsteps.

Your breath hitches in your chest because God, you’re so afraid to hope, but when he sits on the edge of the bed and sings your name in a broken whisper, you know.

You slowly lift yourself to sit up, and see him sitting, head down and shoulders slouched with his forearms resting on his thighs. “Bucky?” You’re afraid to move; you don’t know what’s going on and you’re terrified that he’s going to disappear if you blink.

He wipes his hand over his face. “Sweetheart, I’m so sorry,” he whispers before taking a deep breath. “I, uh, I disabled the camera feed before coming in here and put it on a loop of you sleeping; they can’t see or hear us right now. It’s safe to talk, and Stark’s monitoring the hall. He’ll let me know if someone -”

You release the breath you were holding and throw yourself at him.

Bucky catches you and holds you tightly - so tightly you can barely breathe - but you don’t care.
“I love you so much, I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, but I had to do it. I had to, I *had* to be the Winter Soldier,” he mumbles into your hair repeatedly as his left arm wraps around your back to hold you close while his right hand cradles the back of your head.

“You came back to me,” you whisper against his neck, and you feel him stiffen before he gently pushes you back so he can meet your eyes. He stays quiet as he caresses your cheek and smooths back your hair, the small, broken smile on his face at odds with the heavy sorrow and remorse in his eyes.

When he finally breaks the silence, his voice cracks as he utters your name. It takes another long moment before he speaks again. “I never left.”
Chapter 45

It takes you a minute to comprehend what he said. “..Wh….what?”

“I never left.” He runs his hands through his hair and takes a shallow breath before continuing. “The trigger words don’t work anymore.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “Wanda was thorough. She found the backup triggers and disabled those, too. I guess I didn’t think to tell you about them because they were never used on me. Didn’t seem important.”

It feels like the bed has fallen from underneath you, almost like reality has shifted. “Wait…but…but I saw…but…you hit me.”

Bucky moves as though he’s going to reach out to touch you, but stops himself. “I know, Sweetheart, I know. I was faking it. The whole time, I was faking it. When I did that…I did it. I am so sorry. I just…I couldn’t find another way. We couldn’t find a way around that goddamn collar. It was the only thing I could come up with to get me close enough to you to protect you, and to eventually get you out.” The sincerity in his eyes twists at your heart; he looks so broken.

You don’t know what you’re feeling right now. It’s too much, it’s just too goddamn much. Have you finally lost it? Is this even real? You want it to be real, right? But how. How? How could someone go to such lengths and pay such a price?

A price.

Oh God.

“You killed Steve.” You say it quietly, and suddenly you can’t breathe. “Oh, God, you killed Steve!” The enormity of what’s been done overwhelms you and throws you into a full-blown panic attack. How could he? How?!

“Oh shit, no,” Bucky surges forward, softly cupping your face with his hands; the cool metal on your right cheek is soothing on your bruised skin but the temperature contrast shocks you enough to focus on his words. “I need you to breathe, Sweetheart. Breathe for me,” he croons before taking you through a grounding exercise; the same one that you’d used to help him. “Give me five things you can see, Sweetheart, five things.”

You hold onto his voice – and his forearms – like a lifeline.

“Um, you. I see you.” Focus on him right now and nothing else. Breathe.

“Good, what else?” His voice is so soothing; soft and sure like it used to be when you were at the safehouse with him. You pay close attention to the timbre of his voice, to the traces of the Brooklyn accent that shapes his words, and to the clarity and warmth in his eyes. This is your Bucky, the man sitting in front of you. He’s here, finally. The pressure eases somewhat.

You’re able to take deep, even breaths when the exercise is completed; you wouldn’t go as far as to say you’re good, but you’re definitely better.

“Okay?” he asks softly; it’s an inadequate word for the situation, but you know what he means.

“Okay,” you confirm with a small nod.

“Good. I gotta tell you something, but it’s gonna sound crazy so I need you to hear me out, okay?”
At your slow, careful nod, Bucky licks his lips and brushes his thumbs lightly over your cheeks before speaking again. “Steve’s alive. He’s fine, he –“

Umm. No. Your brain isn’t having this. “What? No. Bucky, he’s not fine.” You sit up straighter and pull out of Bucky’s gentle hold. “They served his head, literally, on a fucking silver platter! He’s the opposite of fine!” You can feel your chest constricting again as your body fights another wave of hysteria.

“No, Sweetheart, no!” His hands grip your upper arms, holding you still and grounding you into the moment so he can capture your attention. “What you saw was basically a movie prop made with animal…parts. Remnants from a slaughterhouse, I think.” He continues quickly when your eyes grow wide, “It wasn’t really Steve. He’s alive, pissed off but alive, in a cottage in the middle of the woods about 20 miles south of here with the rest of the team.” Bucky pauses to watch your reaction carefully, and when you remain still he continues, “Before we left, Stark called in a few favors to some of the people he always mentions he knows, said he wanted to be prepared for anything. I guess he’s good friends with the prop designer for some apocalyptic zombie horror show, so he called his buddy and asked him to design and create decomposable replicas of the entire team. That’s why I was gone so long; we had to wait for it to get shipped here, and then to, uh, thaw. It was…it’s a disgusting process.” He pulls a face and you feel the tiniest of smiles form in response. “It even fooled me when Stark opened the box - creepiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I’m so sorry to scare you like that, but it wasn’t really Steve, I promise.”

You sit back on your heels, dumbfounded and relieved. And thoroughly grossed out.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers again as he reluctantly removes his hands from your arms. You can only stare at him. “Sweetheart, I swear, the only people I’ve killed since coming to Siberia are Krakken’s men. That...that feels really fucking bizarre to say, but it’s true. Those are the only deaths that weren’t staged.”

It’s almost dizzying how fast your brain is trying to work in order to process all of the information. It’s fucking surreal, and you have so many questions, and even though he’s sitting in front of you it still feels like it’s a dream and he’s going to disappear if you blink.

“So...your missions? Those families?”

“They’re fine. Most of them are on vacation, actually. The few that stayed in the country went to their vacation homes.”

What you’d been told and what you’re hearing now are violently colliding in your mind; one brought untold grief, but the other promises healing. The echoing contradictions make it hard to keep up with what he’s saying, and you’re so scared that he isn’t really here, that you finally just fell off the cliff into a raging sea of insanity and are imagining him, whole, in front of you. Despite this, you hear the spark of hope in your voice. “How in...What?”

He nods. “We got here the day after you did. Stark’s been negotiating almost non-stop with the other nearby Pakhan since we arrived. Turns out the Krakkens aren’t all that popular around here; apparently they don’t follow the rules and play nice, and they haven’t been upholding the code of honor that ties the Pakhan brotherhood together. There’s so much betrayal and bad blood between most families and the Krakkens that when Stark offered to take care of the problem, and then added stock options and patents to the deal, they were all fairly eager to accept.”

The wave of relief that washes over you actually manages to clear your mind somewhat. “Really? No kids died?”
He shakes his head. “No, Sweetheart, no kids died. Those deaths were all staged. And if I’m not mistaken, Stark sent all of the families with young kids to Disney theme parks.”

The intricacy of their plan is astounding, to say the least. “Holy shit,” you mutter under your breath, as you finally, finally allow yourself to truly feel hopeful about getting the hell out of this pit. “So you’ve all been here almost the entire time? They were the ones taking out Krakken’s men?”

“Yes, we’ve been here almost as long as you have; Sweetheart, we’ve been working on getting you back since the second Anatoliy drove away with you. And no, they weren’t taking out Krakken’s men – I didn’t want to risk them getting too close and getting caught, and losing the element of surprise. That was me.”

That’s…woah. “That was you? How? You were with me at least one of those nights, right? Or was it two?” You struggle to remember; anxiety certainly doesn’t do your memory any favors.

Bucky gazes at you with soft eyes. “Sweetheart, it would take me until the end of forever to forget all the little details of you that I memorized, and although it feels that long, it’s only been a few weeks. I know all your little tells - I know when I can kiss your shoulder and you’ll wake, and when I can shift your entire body to bring you closer to me without you so much as twitching a muscle - so I just waited until you were in a deep sleep. You were so exhausted that I knew I wouldn’t wake you.”

“But…how?”

Bucky shrugs. “They wanted the Winter Soldier. They got him. What can I say, for better or worse I’m a damn good assassin. And since Stark compromised their security system the day after we got here, it was easy to pick them off while they slept.” Bucky’s expression darkens. “Metzger’s reaping what his uncle sowed. I’m not at all sorry about those men, and there’s gonna be more before this is over.”

“Wait.” You hold up a hand as another emotion starts bubbling up; anger. “You’ve had control of the cameras? You said when you came in that it was safe to talk, right? That’s because their system is hacked?”

He nods, seeming to brace himself for what’s coming.

Good.

“So we could’ve had this talk days ago.” At his slight nod, you continue, “What the fuck, Bucky?! You could have told me what was going on! I didn’t have to believe that you killed kids, or that you fucking killed Steve! Do you know what that did to me?? I was so fucking worried about you, and what would happen to your mind when you realized what you’d done!!” Your voice grows thick as tears threaten to fall. “God, I thought I fucking lost you!”

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t tell you; it was too big a risk.” You open your mouth to disagree when he speaks again, “They have three separate psychologists monitoring you. Three. It’s part of his sick game; they watch you and basically tell him how far he can go – how much you can handle – before you break. It’s how he knew to have tranquilizers ready for tonight; that wasn’t a coincidence, or even for worst case scenario. He knew how you’d react – his doctors told him. If I’d told you everything earlier, they would have known your distress wasn’t genuine. They would have known if you faked the reaction to the head. They would have known, and it would have put your safety at risk. I wanted to tell you - and I almost did, more than once - but Sweetheart, even when you’re guarded and not open about sharing how you feel, you’re still terrible at hiding your
emotions. It’s not a bad thing – it’s actually just one of the countless reasons why I fell for you so fast – but in this situation it could have gotten you killed. I couldn’t take the risk.”

Well…goddamn it, he has a point there. Shit.

He could read you like an open book, whether or not you thought your cover was closed. From the very beginning, Bucky saw through your “I’m fine” and moments of uneasy quiet every goddamn time, even if he didn’t call you out on it. Hell, trying to hide your emotions was something you’d done for years with Christopher, but even after all that practice, even Christopher knew when something was up; he just didn’t give a shit unless your mood bothered him. You feel your anger begin to deflate. Bucky’s right – you would have blown it.

He looks over to you before looking down at his hands. “God, I promise, I didn’t want to hurt you, or terrify you, or leave you alone. Can I explain my reasoning? Or do you just want to hear the plan to get you out?”

You look down and stare at the bedspread bunched between you and him while you attempt to gather your thoughts. You know without a doubt that he loves you more than he loves himself, and you know he would never want to hurt you, mentally, physically, or emotionally. He had to have had a damn good reason to do what he did - it wasn’t exactly like any of this could have been easy for him - and suddenly some of the pieces start to fall together.

You’d had no broken bones, just some bruising and a few cuts from when he was ordered to attack you. Sure, you were sore, but not ‘holy shit I was attacked by the Winter Soldier’ kind of sore, but more of an ‘I’ve been training with Bucky’ kind of sore. Well, maybe a little worse than that, but definitely not as bad as having your ass handed to you a trained, cybernetically enhanced assassin. You weren’t taking the hits extraordinarily well – he’d been pulling his punches. So much so, now that you think about it, you wonder how no one noticed. Thinking back on it, you realize that every time he ‘attacked’ you, he kept himself between you and the others, effectively blocking their view so they couldn’t see everything. You also wonder how it hadn’t been blatantly obvious to you, especially with the split second he’d hold his hand before striking you – that was deliberate, to let you know how to absorb the hit. And then he made you pass out, to end it all as quickly as possible while doing minimal damage.

He hit you, yes, because if he didn’t, someone else would have. And it would have been far, far worse. It would have been Grigory. Or Anatoliy. Or both. Maybe even all of the Hounds, if Bucky had refused.

And he willingly kept you in the dark; he let you think he’d killed Steve, for fuck’s sake. But he’s right – you wouldn’t have been able to fake it – you probably would’ve accidentally compromised the team and gotten everyone killed.

Fuck. It’s too much to take in, but you can’t fall apart; you don’t have that luxury. You need to take what you know – that Bucky and the others have been working non-stop to get you back and that they’re doing what they need to do in order to accomplish this – and you need to fix your mind on that. If you get back to Artie and Jimmy, and back to Bucky, the end justifies the means. It’s easier to understand if you look at it from that point of view.

Fuck, you’re going to need a shit-ton of therapy after this. Still, for the moment, you know what’s real.

Looking back up at Bucky, you take a moment to drink him in; he must have taken your lack of a reply to his questions as a silent demand to be left alone. Studying the dejected curve of his shoulders and downturned head, you say the only thing you can think to say; the only thing that
really matters at this point. “Bucky, I trust you.” It’s the truth. You don’t have to like his methods, but at the end of the day, you trust him; there really weren’t any other options.

He looks to you, surprised.

“I mean, I’m not thrilled about it…we’ll, uh, we’ll have to talk about some more it later, I think, but the alternative was much worse.”

Bucky stares at you with the teeniest, tiniest bit of hope in his eyes, but says nothing.

“You didn’t have a choice. Well, technically you did, but I know what that choice was – Bucky, those men weren’t going to pull their punches if they beat me, and they sure as hell weren’t going to be gentle if they raped me. I don’t have to like it, but you being the Winter Soldier me kept me much safer in the long run.”

He flinches at your words, but nods. “I’m so incredibly sorry. Please know that it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.” He looks miserable yet resolute when he speaks again, “I’d do it all over again, though, to keep Krakken’s men off you. Even if I end up losing you – at least you’ll be alive. That’ll be enough for me.”

More pieces click together. “This is why you kept asking me to forgive you when Nicolai was saying the trigger words…isn’t it…”

Bucky nods. “I don’t expect you to-“

“But…”

“But nothing, goddamn it. But nothing! They gave you impossible choices, Buck. I don’t blame you for choosing the way you did. Hey, you pause and gently cradle your hands to his face to lift his head when he ducks to avoid your eyes. “If you need to hear the words, I’ll say them. I’m thankful you made the choice you did. I’m thankful, because it means that I get to go home to you and our boys. I forgive you, Bucky. I’ll say it as many times as you need me to, but just know that I’m also going to tell you that there’s nothing to forgive because I don’t blame you. This is on the Krakkens, not you. You’ve fought them too hard for too long – don’t give them the consolation prize of tearing us apart.”

He quickly pulls you into a bone cracking embrace, holding you close and tight until you’re convinced that he actually listened to you.

“You’re comin’ home? With me?” he asks in a rough whisper with his face buried in your neck.

“You’re goddamn right I am.” Like you’d ever answer any differently.

He pulls away to stare at you a moment before kissing you fiercely. In the instant that his lips capture yours, everything wrong in the world ceases to exist and it’s just you and Bucky. It’s in this moment, this very second, that you finally accept that you’re not imagining this; he’s real and he’s here. And he’s taking you home.
“I’m sorry,” he mumbles when he reluctantly breaks the kiss, pressing his forehead to yours. “I know this isn’t the time or place, I just needed to feel you, to convince myself that I’m really here with you.”

You huff a quiet laugh in response as your fingers caress his scruff. “Don’t be, I was just thinking the exact same thing.”

You each hold the other, taking the opportunity to breathe each other in. Like all good things, it can’t last nearly long enough.

Bucky pulls away, but remains close enough to maintain bodily contact. “I need to check in with Stark, Sweetheart. We’re getting you out of here tonight.”
Chapter 46

You watch Bucky as he talks to Tony, and he stares at you as if you’ll disappear if he blinks.

“We don’t have a big window – we need to get her out of here tonight while the Krakkens and their men are distracted with their celebrating.” He glances down at his watch. “Yeah, yeah I can definitely work with that. Two minutes? Alright. And then…yeah, that’s a good idea. The drunker they are the better.”

Bucky gives you a ginormous smile, and you know without asking that his next words will be for you. “Ready to get rid of that ugly thing around your neck?”

“God, yes,” you breathe. It doesn’t even occur to you to ask how he’ll go about doing it – you simply trust that he has a way.

Bucky rises and circles around the bed to stand at the window, opening it when a dark shadow blocks out some of the stars. You almost laugh when you recognize it – Red Wing – so you smile and wave. A small light appears and winks at you as Bucky reaches for something, and when you blink the shadow is gone.

His smile is even wider than before as he walks back to you. “Alright,” he begins as he again sits next to you before unboxing the well-wrapped package, “Stark made this to cut through the metal. It takes about 5 minutes and it’s gonna vibrate and get really warm, but it shouldn’t hurt.”

“Oh God, what if this doesn’t work??” Bucky no more than finishes speaking when you hear a small beep and feel the device start to pulsate slightly.

You exhale to steady yourself – you’re almost dizzy with relief, even though the tiniest bit of doubt starts to creep into your mind. “Tony’s sure this will work?”

Bucky nods. “Yeah. I, uh,” he scratches his neck a little sheepishly, “I made him test it multiple times to make sure it wouldn’t hurt you; that’s how we know it should take exactly four minutes and fifty-four seconds to cut through the metal.”

Well that’s oddly specific, not that you’re complaining. “What did you test it on? Were you able to figure out what this thing is made of?”

The look on Bucky’s face makes you regret asking the question. “We tested on a collar just like the one you’re wearing,” he begins evenly.

The implication sinks in. No. He couldn’t possibly mean…

“I took the collar that they’d put on Mikhail.”

It makes sense, but hearing it somehow still hurts.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save him.” The anguish in Bucky’s whispered words tells you more than he probably intended to say.

You think back to the note Mikhail had left you, the one you’d destroyed in the shower to protect you both. Hindsight is 20/20, right? “He was in on this. Mikhail knew. He was working with you.”
Bucky nods. “He didn’t know the whole time, but ever since he found out, yes, he’d been working with us.”

Emotion swells up and starts to choke you, but you don’t even know what you’re feeling anymore. Grief? Anger? Pain? Betrayal? Gratitude? Might as well write a bunch of feelings on a dartboard and start throwing darts, it’d probably be more accurate than trying to just pick one.

The room gets fuzzy, and it isn’t until you’re safely wrapped in Bucky’s arms that you realize it’s because your eyes are full of tears.

_Goddamn it, Mikhail, I promised that we’d take you with us. Why the hell did you do what you did?_”

You want to sob, you want to scream…but you don’t have the energy for either. So you just breathe Bucky in as he does the same; he’s grieving, too, and all either of you can do at the moment is take comfort in each other.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmurs into your hair, and now you’re not sure if he’s speaking to you or the memory of Mikhail.

“It’s not your fault, Buck. You weren’t the one holding the sword. None of this is your fault,” you whisper back, confident that you’re speaking for both you and Mikhail. He wouldn’t hold Bucky liable for his death any more than you do. As much as you’d like to go back in time and slap the stupid off of Mikhail for making such a reckless choice, it was still his choice. You don’t fucking understand it and you sure as hell don’t think you’re worth it but you’re doing your best to respect it.

It’s not easy.

A small click and the feeling of freedom captures your attention as that fucking collar falls from your neck.

“Oh, thank God,” you mumble as you sit back and put your hand to your throat. You can see that it is no longer around your neck, but you need to feel to make sure; the only thing your fingers find is the smooth chain of the necklace Bucky gave to you. It suddenly feels like you can breathe again.

“It’s gone, Sweetheart, that thing is off your neck,” Bucky confirms as he picks it up, relief evident in his eyes before a concerned look comes across his face. “Wait, say that again, Stark?” He clenches his jaw as he listens. “Fuck. Alright, we’re moving now.”

You stand when he does, and when he takes your hand you lace your fingers with his. The feeling of the cool metal against your palm soothes you; Bucky makes you feel safe. Even in the middle of this horrid nightmare, he can make you feel safe. It’s unexplainable.

“Okay Sweetheart, we need to run to the next room to grab a few things, and then we gotta go. Stark says that Nicolai is starting to cut the celebration short to organize – he wants to be ready in case the team tries to launch a retaliatory attack tonight.”

You nod as he leads you to the door, stopping only to put on your shoes, and then leads you into the hallway before glancing both ways even though you both know that Tony’s monitoring the Krakksens and their men. Bucky quickly opens the door to his room and ushers you inside, leaving the lights off as he closes the door behind you. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

You nod, although you aren’t sure if he notices. The curtains are drawn, so it’s almost completely dark in here save for the small sliver of light coming from under the door. You can’t see a damn thing, but Bucky has ridiculously good vision. There’s a bit of rustling, and then nothing. The
sudden unexpected weight of something across your shoulders makes you jump and it takes you a moment to realize what’s going on. “Goddamn it, Bucky. You’re in assassin mode; I can’t hear you.” You can barely hear your whispered words over your pounding heartbeat.

His soft, almost repentant chuckle in your ear warms you from the inside out as you stuff your arms into the sleeves of what you assume is a coat. “Sorry, Sweetheart. I forget that it takes your eyes longer to adjust to the dark.” He moves to stand in front of you, and this time he’s sure to let you know where he is before closing the zipper. “It’s fucking cold outside, so put these on.” Something is placed in your hands; gloves.

You smile as you feel him pull a hat on your head, much like he did on the night the two of you met. “This feels familiar,” you murmur as you slide the gloves on your hands. “Is this our thing? You putting a coat and hat on me before leading me to safety?”

His hands pause before his thumbs glide lightly over your cheeks. “I put that hat on you and I promised you wouldn’t get hurt. And then I was the one to hurt you.”

“Buck –” There’s so much to say, and no time at all to say it. What was said in the other room not too long ago – it’s just the tip of the iceberg and you’re each going to need a lot of reassurance, but for now you both have to be content with the knowledge that you’re going home together.

“I know what you said, Sweetheart, it’s just gonna take me some time…”

Sometimes you wonder if he can read your mind.

He reaches around you to open the door. “Ready?”

With your heart in your throat, you nod. Here goes everything.

Bucky takes your hand and leads you into the hallway, past the room that’s been your prison for – how long has it been – three weeks? It feels like for-fucking-ever. You don’t spare the door a second glance.

“Buck?” You whisper, not sure if you’re supposed to talk, but you have a question that seems kind of important considering how you’re dressed.

He scans the hall and pulls you into his side before quietly asking, “You okay?”

Nodding, you point to his chest, still covered in his tactical gear. “Where’s your coat?” He’s got a hat and gloves, but that’s it. “You said it was cold.”

He nods and gently pulls you along to keep walking. “It is.”

“Bucky, we need to get you a coat.” It’s Siberia. In January. He needs a goddamn coat.

“No, Sweetheart, we don’t have time and I need you to have a coat. I’ll be fine.” You open your mouth to object, but he speaks before you can get the words out, “I’ll be okay, I promise.” He softens his tone somewhat when he glances back to see the look on your face. “Hey, if the cold could kill me, my age wouldn’t be in the triple digits.”

Well, he’s got you there.

“You, on the other hand, need as much warmth as you can get. It’s almost twenty below with clear skies, and we’ve got nothing but a motorcycle to get us to where we need to go.” He stops when you reach the end of the hall. “Stark? Which way are we going?” It’s eerily quiet for a moment
before he carefully opens a door to a set of stairs. “Alright,” he focuses his intense gaze on you, “we’re going down as far as we can go. When we get to the main floor, there’s going to be a hall leading to the right. We’re taking that, and that’s gonna lead us to a side door. The tree line is about twenty-five feet away – run straight to it when I tell you to and DO NOT stop until you’re in the woods. I’ll be right behind you. It’s been too cold to snow lately, so there’s only a couple of inches on the ground; it shouldn’t be enough to give you any problems. The motorcycle is about twenty yards into the woods.”

You nod your understanding as he leads you through the door and silently closes it behind you. Bucky draws a firearm and takes your hand before he heads down the stairs, taking the steps swiftly but not so fast that you can’t keep up. You follow as quietly as you can, holding your breath momentarily when you hear a loud round of laughter echoing down one of the hallways. Bucky shoots you a reassuring look as he motions for you to keep walking.

Despite the fact that Tony is in his ear and would alert you to any danger, this is fucking terrifying. It feels like forever, but it’s probably only five minutes or so before you reach the door to the outside.

Outside.

You weren’t sure if you’d ever have the chance to be outside again.

“Ready?” Bucky whispers in your ear. After you nod, he points straight ahead out the window. “That’s where you’re going. I’ll be right behind you.”

Mouth suddenly dry, you nod as you stare at the trees. It’s not so far away, right? You can do this, your clumsiness isn’t going to rear its ugly head and make you trip. Right??

“Stark, are we clear?” He slowly opens the door, and the brisk air immediately sends a chill through your body. “What? Shit. Alright, tell me when…”

You swallow hard, almost launching into a coughing fit because your throat feels like sandpaper and the frozen breeze has stolen your breath.

“Go!” The whispered word leaves his lips and you’re running – running as fast as you can through the snow. The subzero air cuts into your lungs, making it hard to breathe, but you keep running. Somehow the trees are in front of you before you know it, and by some miracle you’ve managed not to trip.

A moment of panic seizes you when you don’t hear Bucky behind you, but you don’t stop or turn around until you’re a good ten feet into the woods. There’s sudden yelling, followed by the harsh sound of a gunshot, then two, three, four...

It’s dark, but your eyes have begun to adjust, and the snow reflects just enough light from the stars that you can make out vague outlines. You stare into the darkness. Alone.

“Bucky…” The breathless whisper barely leaves your lips before you hear the sound of crunching snow, and he’s suddenly in front of you.

“I’m here, Sweetheart, but we gotta go.” The urgency in his tone isn’t hidden by his hushed voice as he directs you where to go. “You need to stay in front of me. Walk as straight as you can, as fast as you can – don’t run, I don’t want you to trip.”

Not wasting the time to nod, you set out with him close behind. There’s more yelling, and although it doesn’t sound any closer, it sounds like there are more voices.
“Okay, the motorcycle is in the clearing ahead of you, just to your left.”

Just like he said it would be, the motorcycle appears as you step into a small clearing. Bucky quickly follows you, stepping around you to pull a bag off the seat. “Here, put this on.” He hands you a helmet before removing a length of rope from the bag. “I can’t safely drive with you sitting in front of me, so you need protection from the back. I’m gonna tie Steve’s shield to you to give you some extra cover.”

You look down in surprise to see the shield leaning against a tire. “O-okay.” You’ll have to ask him later about how he got that here.

Now that you’re not moving, you can feel the frigid winter air begin to seep into your bones. You don’t have boots, just shoes, and your jeans are doing nothing to protect you from the bitter cold. You already can’t feel your toes, and your body shakes uncontrollably.

Fuck, it’s cold!

Bucky deftly fashions a harness for the shield and slips it over your shoulders before helping you onto the back of the motorcycle. The yelling is getting louder, and you think you hear the sounds of engines firing up.

“Allright, Sweetheart,” he checks the buckle on your helmet, tightening it a bit, “I know you’re cold and that you might start losing feeling in your extremities, but I need you to hold on to me, okay? Hold on tight, and don’t let go.”

There’s no way you’ll be able to talk with how violently your teeth are chattering, so you just nod as best you can. Bucky climbs on in front of you, settling himself before grabbing your thighs to shift you forward so you’re sitting snugly against his back. You wind your arms around him as he starts the engine and pulls forward.

It’s even colder now that you’re in motion, but you’re so excited to be with Bucky and out of that goddamn hellhole that you can almost ignore the way the wind finds its way into the gaps in your clothes. The cold weight of the shield on your back does no favors for your body heat, but the fact that your and Bucky’s backs are so thoroughly protected makes it totally worth it.

Time passes as the miles do. The cold eventually loses its sharpness, and you begin to grow sleepy as you allow your mind to wander to your boys; a luxury that you have denied yourself so vehemently for the sake of survival. A soft smile crosses your face as you think of Jimmy’s sparkling blue eyes and Artie’s infectious giggle. It won’t be long now – a day or two, maybe – and you’ll have them in your arms. You feel light, and happy, and –

A sharp slap to your thigh breaks you out of your reverie. Bucky’s shouting something, but between the engine, the helmet, and the wind, you can’t understand a damn thing he’s saying. It isn’t until you nearly fall off that you realize you’ve almost completely let go of Bucky, and that his left hand gripping your leg and his right arm awkwardly clamping your arm to his torso as he steers is what’s keeping you in your seat.

Oh, shit. You shake your head to clear your thoughts, and tighten your arms around his waist. Fuck, are you in the early stages of hypothermia? How much farther do you have to go? Bucky moves his hand from your thigh to squeeze one of your hands before retaking his grip on the handle.

The bike slows, and you realize there’s a paved road ahead of you. He pauses before cautiously turning onto the road, constantly checking his mirrors as he goes. You can feel him relax the tiniest bit after another minute goes by, but then he tenses right back up as a bright light suddenly appears
on your right. There are a few loud cracks before you realize that a car is the source of the light, and then a quick, sharp pain in your right thigh causes you to flinch as headlights flood behind you.

Bucky speeds up and guides the bike back into the woods, turning sharply to avoid a tree before you see his head turn and do a double take as he increases his speed once again. Following the direction of whatever had captured his attention, you see a dark spot growing on your leg. You can barely feel it, but you can see it well enough with the headlights still following you.

You’ve been shot.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about the wait! But I'm back!!

“Oh, come on. Give us a fucking break,” you mutter as you pull your right hand from Bucky’s waist to try to put pressure on the wound. It’s so cold that you can’t really feel it, so you suppose that’s good. It’s gonna hurt like a bitch when you warm up, though.

If you make it that long. It seems like there’s already an impossible amount of blood.

Bucky guides the motorcycle as best as he can through the woods but it’s dark, the ground is covered in snow and ice, and the woods are unpredictable. When he suddenly has to sharply turn to avoid a fallen tree that had been hidden behind a low hill, things go sideways. Literally.

If he had been able to turn right instead of left, it might have turned out differently. As luck would have it, left was his only option; with your right hand putting pressure on the wound, and your right leg unable to provide any additional support or balance, you knew as he began the turn that there was no way in hell you would be able to manage to stay on the back of the bike. That split-second realization gave you the tiniest window to prepare yourself for the fall. Prepared or not, it still hurts like a bitch when you land – it feels like your flesh is glass and it shattered on impact.

You don’t know how Bucky gets to you so quickly, but it’s only a few seconds later when frigid air kisses your face as the helmet is removed.

Wide, terror-stricken eyes meet yours, and God, you’d do anything to take his fear away. “M’okay, Buck,” you hurry to reassure him, pressing your free hand to his cheek.

He leans into your touch for only a moment before he starts examining your extremities. “Do you feel anything broken?”

“I…no, I don’t think so. The fall knocked the wind out of me but I think everything is okay other than my thigh.” The adrenaline rush from the fall is bringing back feeling in your extremities, but the line between pain and cold is incredibly blurry.

Bucky quickly but carefully lifts you from the snow as the sound of shouting in the distance catches your attention. “We gotta get some cover…over there.” He nods to a tree that has several bushes in front of it. They’re bare of their leaves, but it’s something. Bucky wastes no placing you against its base as he scans the area for threats. “Steve, where are you? She’s been shot!” You can hear only one side of the conversation as he frantically unties the shield from your back, and it surprises you somewhat when he speaks to you, “I need you to watch my back, Sweetheart, while I get a tourniquet on your leg to stop the bleeding.” He quickly takes the rope that held the shield to you and loops it under your leg. “Can you do that for me?” Bucky doesn’t wait for your answer - he removes one of his firearms from its holster and presses it into your hands before he makes another loop with the rope.

The only gun you’ve ever fired was…wait. Have you ever fired a gun? Maybe a pellet gun with the neighbor boys when you were a kid? You honestly can’t remember, but the weight feels unfamiliar.
and scary in your hands.

He doesn’t look up as he speaks, “The safety is already off. If you see someone, just aim the best you can and shoot. There’ll be a recoil when you fire, so lock your elbows to help absorb the kickback.”

You nod as you hold the terrifying object in your shaking hands. You can’t really feel your fingers – how are you supposed to pull the trigger?

“Ow! Fuck!” you whisper as Bucky tightens the rope around your thigh. Now you can feel it. The yelling has gotten closer so you keep your lengthy string of profanities as quiet as you can while he continues to secure the tourniquet.

Bucky grins despite the circumstances. “That’s my girl,” he murmurs under his breath before standing. “You keep that, okay?” He nods to the gun before firmly planting Steve’s shield in the ground in front of you. “If shots are fired, make yourself as small as possible behind this. The team is on their way, but if anything happens to me before they get here, you stay behind this shield and shoot anyone that tries to get around it. Got it?”

“Buck, you should take the shield! I can -“

“No!” He kneels once more beside you, “No. I need you to have this, Sweetheart, I need to know you’re as protected as possible. They won’t be able to take me down right away. With the tree behind you and the shield in front of you, you’ll have decent cover.”

“But –“

“No.” He’s about to say something else, but the sound of a snapping twig tells you both that someone is getting close. He quickly plants a kiss on your forehead before turning and standing.

Bucky takes his stance in front of you, gun drawn, and waits.

It’s hard to say whether or not it’s as quiet as you think it is – your chattering teeth and the sound of your heart pounding in your ears is drowning out all other noises. Your eyes strain as you struggle to focus your gaze in the murky starlight until five bobbing lights come into view. Moments later, Krakken’s men start slinking out of the trees like wolves. There are at least twenty of them in a semi-circle in front of you; there might be more, but you can’t be certain because they’re pointing flashlights at you and the light is blinding.

A figure steps forward. “Soldat. Clearly we should have put a higher priority on building a new chair for you, yes?” Anatoliy’s voice sends a chill through your already frozen body. “I am both disappointed and impressed at the depth of your deception. You even killed your best friend in order to continue your farce. I have to admit, I did not think you had it in you to do such a thing.”

Bucky aims his gun at Anatoliy’s head, but several more are aimed at him. Even if you were a crack shot, which you are definitely not, the two of you will likely not survive this without help. Although since they haven’t fired yet, you can only guess that they have orders to take him alive.

“Lower your weapon, Soldat.”

Bucky doesn’t reply; he doesn’t even move.

If you squint you can kind of see the people behind the flashlights. You can’t be sure, but it seems like they’re growing uncomfortable with this exchange. Apparently Bucky as himself, protecting you, is a lot scarier to them than their Kapitan’s Soldat.
“I said lower your weapon!”

A long moment passes before Bucky replies. “No.” Even with just that one word, his voice is unmistakably deadly.

“We outnumber you, and as good as you are, there is no way you can defeat all of us. Your fall is inevitable, so lower your weapon. Now. Her punishment gets worse with every act of defiance, Soldat. That has not changed. You alone can keep it from getting even worse.” His words are as threatening as always, but it seems like there might be a little desperation hiding behind the slimy cockiness.

“You’re never gonna touch her again, you sick son of a bitch,” Bucky growls.

“You are delusional if you think touching is all we will do.” You peer into the darkness behind the ring of flashlights to find the speaker…there he is. Grigory. “I lost six teeth when you punched me in order to defend that worthless bitch; I think I should return the favor, yes? Will you still find her attractive when she has no teeth?”

It’s hard to know for sure from where you’re seated, but you think you see the tiniest smirk on Bucky’s lips. “You’ll be dead before the night is over, Grigory.”

Anatoliy opens his mouth to say something, but the unexpected sound of crunching snow captures everyone’s attention; whoever it is, they aren’t bothering to quiet their steps. Bucky remains focused on the men in front of him, but you grow more and more concerned. Is it the team, or is it more of Krakken’s men?

Your fears are alleviated when, just to your left, a familiar man in dark blue tactical gear steps into the light provided by the flashlights.

Steve.

“It...it is a ghost…” You’re not sure who said it, but his voice quivered.

Two men turn and run, but they don’t get very far. Clint steps out on the other side of you, and two quiet thwicks later the retreating men fall face first into the snow.

“It is not possible,” Anatoliy whispers as he stares.

“How do you fight a ghost? We are haunted!”

“Your brother should not have killed the brown-eyed boy!”

Two more men take off, and Grigory shouts “Get back here, you cowards!” before raising his gun, and all hell breaks loose.

The shield suddenly disappears as the sound of gunfire explodes around you – Steve has taken it and is jumping into the fray beside Bucky who has switched out his gun for his knives. You close your eyes as if that would somehow protect you from a bullet but open them again at the sound of shots ricocheting off something in front of you.

You look up, shocked, to see Tony in his Iron Man suit. “You didn’t really think Sparkle Boy would leave you unprotected, did you?”

You blink up at him, speechless.
“Hold on a sec, Kiddo.” Tony lifts his arm as he turns, and an impressive blast leaves his palm. “Alright, you ready to blow this popsicle stand?” he asks as he kneels, scooping you up into his metal sheathed arms.

“Holy fuck, Tony, I didn’t think I could get any colder,” you chatter through clenched teeth. You were already at the point where you weren’t feeling much, but the metal of his suit brings cold to another level and it’s painful where he holds you under your legs. The jeans you’re wearing are absolutely useless in this weather. Thank god you can’t feel anything through your coat.

“Sam, I’ve got her! Let’s go!” is the last thing you hear before you feel yourself vaulting up into the air.

You look down and your eyes grow wide. Men are practically pouring out of the trees from behind where Steve walked out, and they’re fighting Krakken’s men. Who are they? You’re going to have to think about it later. It’s cold. So, so incredibly cold. Without Bucky in front of you to take the brunt of the wind, it steals your breath as you fly over the trees.

By the time you get to the wherever you’re going the adrenaline is wearing off and you’re all but completely out of it. There’s a lot of activity happening all at once, and it’s hard to understand what’s going on with the yelling and sudden bright lights. It feels like your brain is frozen.

When an unexpected and commanding feminine voice suddenly takes over the space, all else quiets. “Tony, put her on the couch on top of the blankets. Sam, the medical kit will be set out for you by the time you get ready.”

The cold, armored arms holding you are suddenly gone as you sink into a soft warmth. A moment later you feel something draped over you – blankets, maybe, or heated towels? Whatever it is, it isn’t nearly enough to stop your violent shivering, especially since your right leg is left uncovered.

“Tony, go back to the others. Sam and I will take care of her.” That voice again. Who is it? You don’t catch whatever Tony said, but you hear her again, “I understand your concern Tony, but I am a highly respected nurse and Sam is a pararescue; I promise, she is in good hands.”

There’s a woman with brown eyes and sandy blonde hair shot through with silver that you’ve never met; clearly she’s the owner of the voice you’ve been hearing. She’s…wait. Have you met her? She looks kind of familiar. No. No, she looks really familiar. You know you’re staring, but you can’t help it.

The woman smiles gently at you and begins to take your vitals. “Sam is going to cut the material from your leg and then he will remove the tourniquet; it is going to hurt but you are going to be alright.”

You try to nod but Sam moves your leg just right and you flinch sharply.

“I cannot give you anything for pain because your blood pressure is already too low from blood loss and cold, so just squeeze my hand as tightly as you need to when it hurts.”

You nod your understanding; you can’t find words because your mind is growing even blurrier. Instead of frustrating yourself by focusing on your inability to think straight, you focus instead on her voice. Unlike Nikolai’s or Anatoliy’s harsh accent, her Russian accent is a soft, almost welcoming lilt to your ears; like her appearance, the way she speaks is familiar. But where the hell would you know her from?

Her eyes are really beautiful and kind. You just know this woman is a good person, you can tell
from her eyes. But she tries to hide them with harsh, pointed black eyeliner. Why would she do that? Why is she trying to look mean? Doesn’t she know that it doesn’t work?

She chuckles at you after handing Sam a towel and a scissors. “I do not want people to know that I am nice. I hold a great deal of power in this town, and I cannot afford to be seen as weak. It seems that my little illusion has not fooled you, however. My Izolda used to tell me the same thing, but I always told her that it works for the idiots.”

You blink in confusion. Can she read your mind?

Another musical chuckle. “You are speaking aloud, dear one.” You blink, trying to make sense of it all as the woman briefly turns her attention away from you. “Sam, she needs at least three pints of blood, probably four. It is remarkable she is conscious at all.”

“I need to stop the bleeding first, or it won’t matter how much we give her. Galina, I’m gonna need –” Sam doesn’t bother finishing his sentence because she passes something his way.

“Sam, if you remove that fragment of the bullet she’ll bleed out. See how it entered the artery here? It is acting as a plug for the hole it created because of its shape. You’re going to have to work around it for now; we will need surgical facilities for an extraction.”

There’s a long moment of silence, and you wonder if you’ve lost the ability to hear.

“You’re right, good eyes. I was so worried about the one over here that I almost – what a goddamn mess this is. With the size of the bullets they used it’s amazing it didn’t shatter her femur.”

“Mmm. If they had been closer when they shot her, it might have. Okay dear one, you’re going to feel a small poke in your arm for the IV.”

You nod as best you can, but you don’t feel it at all and you’re really not sure if it’s because she’s that good or if it’s because you’re still stupidly cold.

“Maybe we just leave it in there. Her artery should eventually heal around it,” Sam muses as he does God knows what.

“No…they coat their bullets in lead. If they cannot cause death they are usually more than happy to cause suffering.”

“Bastards. Well, we’ll have to worry about that after we get her home.”

Home.

You try to focus on that word, on home, instead of their talk of clamps, needles, potential avascular necrosis, and blood transfusions.

The word echoes as consciousness fades.
You awake with a start, noticing immediately that Bucky isn’t there. You hear talking outside and tense up before you recognize Steve’s voice, then Nat’s.

Right. You’re safe now.

Their voices calm you somewhat as you look around to get your bearings.

You’re lying on your back and covered in heaps of blankets, and there’s throbbing ache in your right thigh. You remember your escape with Bucky and your subsequent air rescue with Tony. You remember Sam…and a woman you’ve never met? Her details are hazy and you can’t pull anything specific other than a soft voice and light hair, so you wonder if maybe it was actually really Nat. You haven’t seen her since that day in the Krakkens’ manor when they’d had that video conference, so it’s possible she dyed her hair blonde. You remember cold mixed with pain, shivering violently as your body acclimated to the warmer temperature of the room you’re in, and then just pain as the cold finally faded. Someone – Nat? It doesn’t seem like Nat but you distinctly remember that it was someone with a feminine voice – helped you remove your coat and snow-damp jeans and into a pair of loose sweatpants. If it wasn’t Nat, then was the woman a dream? You suppose it’s possible – between the cold and shock it’s no wonder your brain wasn’t working at full capacity. Hallucinations wouldn’t exactly be impossible.

Right now, though, your still sleepy mind feels clearer than it has in ages and it feels good. Not being under a constant threat of violence and a cloud of fear feels great.

Blinking, you turn your gaze to the side. There’s a fire burning in the fireplace across from you, a window to the left of it, and a door with a window to the right. Against the adjacent wall there are a couple of chairs with a little wooden table between them. It could pass for a cozy living room if it weren’t for the massive amount of weaponry, gear, and electrical equipment lining the walls of the small space. If you twist your head a bit to look behind you it looks like the living room flows into the kitchen, and there are some darker spaces that you can only guess are halls or doorways to other rooms.

As you struggle to leverage yourself on the couch to move to a seated position, you end up knocking a glass of water off the table that you didn’t know was behind the armrest; the voices outside go quiet at the noise.

“You’re awake,” Nat says as she comes through the door, bringing the chill air of Siberian winter with her. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Sore,” you mumble. You intentionally focus on the physical to ignore the emotional; you’re not ready to deal with that shitshow. Not yet. “Fucking leg hurts. Where’s Bucky?”

Steve and Nat share a look, and you’re suddenly wide awake.

“Where’s Bucky? How long have I been out? Where is he?”

“He’d been radioing in and checking in on you regularly; wouldn’t stop until Sam told him that you were stable.” Nat is attempting to use some of her spy superpowers to pacify you with her voice.

It isn’t working.

“That wasn’t my question, Nat. Where is he?”
Neither of them answers you.

You fight against the rising panic; why won’t they tell you where he is?

Steve avoids your eyes as he helps you get to a seated position, and then sits at the end of the couch. “Steve…” you’re ready to beg for information at this point. “Where’s Bucky? Why isn’t he here?”

“He went to make good on a promise. He’ll be back –“

“When?” The panic threatens to swallow you whole – Bucky is strong - so strong - but he’s still human. There’s a limit to his incredible strength and the past few weeks have been just as bad for him, if not worse in some ways, than for you. He’s tired and worn, both emotionally and physically, and you simply cannot believe that Steve is here instead of with Bucky.

Steve sighs in resignation. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?!” You lean forward in an attempt to make him meet your gaze.

He trades a look with Nat before answering. “Once he got word that you were stable, he went silent.”

You wait for more explanation, but when none comes, you explode, “Oh my God! Steve! Why are you making me drag this out of you piece by piece? Tell me what the fuck is going on!”

Steve raises his hands in a gesture meant to placate. “I understand that you’re upset, but you’ve been through a lot, physically and mentally, so we need you to –“

You stop him with an upraised palm. “Steve, if you’re about to tell me to calm down, I’m afraid I’m going to have to tell you that I’m about to shove your shield up your ass. I’m not a child, so don’t treat me like one.”

“Hey now,” Sam comes into the room from a side hallway, motioning for you to sit back. “You should be resting, and for the love of God don’t move that leg unnecessarily. We patched you up as best we could but it’s just a temporary fix.”

“Sam,” you plead, now on the verge of tears, “where’s Bucky?”

He shoots a look to Steve and Nat, who have the decency to look at least a little ashamed. “Really? You haven’t told her? Because with all the shit she’s been through in the past few weeks, you think this is what would break her? Seriously?” He shakes his head and clenches his jaw as he kneels in front of you. “Ignore them – they mean well, they’re just being overprotective because we just got you back. As far as we know, Bucky’s fine. He’s got both Tony and Clint with him, and we’re still in intermittent contact with them.”

“But not Bucky?” You still struggle to make sense of the few details you’ve been given, but you’re grateful that Sam’s telling you something.

Sam shakes his head. “Once he knew you were okay he turned his radio off. He’s kicking some ass and didn’t want any distractions. And before you yell at me for not being there, you should know that I’m here because as a former pararescue I’m medically qualified to handle your wound. Bucky asked Steve and Nat to come back here to make sure you were safe - he didn’t want to take any chances with the Krakkens’ men slipping past him and following you here. And he’s not alone – along with Tony and Clint we have some allies here that we’ve been working with, so there are at
least 20 more people with him eliminating the remaining threats. He asked me to tell you that he loves you and will be back as soon as he can.”

You finally exhale and allow yourself to sit back into the cushions. “Oh.” You let the information sink in. You don’t like it – you’ve been away from him long enough and you want him here - but now you know.

Breathe.

“Was that really so hard?” Sam glares at his teammates as he takes your blood pressure. “Seriously. She wasn’t a damsel in distress before, she sure as hell isn’t now.” Sam turns back to face you with a completely serious look you rarely see in his eyes, “You do need to take it easy though, they are right about that. You’ve still got a bullet fragment in your leg that’s plugging an artery, and it won’t take much to do more damage.”

Well that’s…not great, but you suppose you got off pretty lucky, all things considered.

“So, uh, what’s the plan?” The last thing you want to do is sit in silence; silence means you have time to think. And you really want to know when you can go home.

Steve glances at Sam as if he’s looking for some sort of confirmation. “Well, the timing of everything is up in the air, because we have to make sure you’re okay to fly; we might have to wait a day or two just to make sure you stay stable. It’s probably gonna take that long to line up transportation anyway; the quinjet we took to get here isn’t exactly ideal for taking you back to the tower – yes, the Avengers’ tower,” he clarifies at your questioning look, “because although we could technically make it work, you’ll be much more comfortable in a private jet.”

It occurs to you to argue the point that you’d be fine in whatever they have here just for the sake of moving, but it’s pretty obvious that it’s a battle you’ll lose – especially when Bucky gets back. So you save your breath and move on to the next question: “Why the tower?” You just want to go home.

“You still have to have surgery on that leg to remove the bullet,” Sam at least looks apologetic as he speaks. “I’m a pararescue, not a surgeon. My job is to get you patched up until you can get to someone that can fix you permanently.”

“And we have access to some of the best doctors and equipment – not that the doctors in your area aren’t competent, but they aren’t the best.” Then Nat does what she does best and makes your mind up for you, “If we take you to the tower for your medical care, we can pretty much guarantee that you’ll heal better and faster, which means you’ll be up and running with Artie and Jimmy in no time. You can do a week’s stay at the tower and be at 80% when you get home with another two or three weeks to get to 100%, or we can take you home for local treatment and you’ll still have a hospital stay, your total recovery time can extend to 12 weeks, and you might have to live with permanent nerve damage. It’s your decision, of course.”

You weigh her words and come to the conclusion that she’s right. Going home right away doesn’t guarantee that you’ll get to return to your boys any sooner – it hurts to wait but another week won’t kill you if the last three haven’t already. Plus, you really don’t want your boys seeing you like this, or in a hospital bed. And you haven’t looked in a mirror, but you’re pretty sure you still have visible bruises on your face and neck. “Fine.” You narrow your eyes at Nat suspiciously. “I can’t tell if I really made that decision myself or if you just manipulated me.”

“No one ever can,” Steve mutters under his breath. Nat just smirks. “Are you hungry? We have –“ Steve stops himself as he tilts his head; a second later his lips turn up in a smile. “Copy that.
They’re on their way back – Tony figures they’re about 10 minutes out.”

You heave a sigh of relief as Sam presses something cold into your hands; you take one look at it and try to give it back. “What the everloving fuck is this?”

Nat barks out a laugh as Steve tries to hide his with a snort while you stare disdainfully at the glass in your hand.

“It’s a smoothie.” Sam sounds positively offended.

“It’s green.”

“It’s good for you.”

“I don’t care. And are these chunks?” No. Nope, no way. Nuh uh. “Isn’t being smooth one of the defining characteristics of a smoothie?”

“You need to get something in your stomach so we can give you something to keep your pain under control.” At your look of disgust, Sam continues, “Look, you can either drink this or you can deal with Barnes when he gets back, and you know damn well that he can be a little extra when it comes to you. If it’s him, you’re gonna end up with twice the amount of smoothie.”

“...Sam.” You know he’s not wrong. Bucky would never force you to do anything, including eat, but he would damn well give you the big baby blue puppy dog eyes that you could never really say no to.

He regards you with crossed arms and raised eyebrows. “It’s up to you, but I should warn you - Barnes’ smoothies usually need to be chewed.”

Oh gross.

“I’d start drinking if I were you, they’re gonna be back soon.”

“Now, actually,” Nat says, as she looks through the window.

Steve joints her, pulling back the curtain on the other side and you realize you have no choice.

“I hate you,” you mutter as you lift the nauseating concoction to your lips and begin to chug.

Sam smirks when he takes the emptied glass back. “You and Barnes are made for each other.”

There’s the sound of booted footsteps and then the door finally opens; although there are two people standing there, you only see one.

Bucky pauses in the doorway as his eyes dart around the room, frantically searching for you. In that split second you see that he is covered in blood and your heart plummets to the floor under your feet; it’s a good thing you’re sitting, because the sight of him as he is would have made you fall to your knees had you been standing.

You’re about to get up to go to him when he finally finds you, and his empty blue eyes fill with emotion before he crosses the room, stumbling in his haste. Bucky collapses to his knees at your feet, arms encircling your waist almost uncomfortably tight while he buries his face in your stomach.

Holding him close and tangling your fingers in his hair, you look up to see the other silhouette still standing in the doorway and recognize it as that of Iron Man. His already red suit is a darker
crimson than usual, and it takes you a moment to realize that the deeper shade is not from the dim light, but rather from something splattered irregularly all over the metal. Blood.

Tony heaves a sigh as he removes his faceplate - he looks tired but resolute. He meets your eyes and, seemingly satisfied with what he sees, steps back to remove his suit before coming in through the door.

Steve opens his mouth to say something, but Nat cuts him off as she listens to something in her earpiece, “Clint will be here in a minute – he wants to do one last perimeter check.”

No one says another word until Clint walks through the door and breaks the silence as he whispers to Steve, “It’s done.”

“Is he hurt?” you ask no one in particular. Bucky has yet to pull away from you, and you can’t tell if any of this blood belongs to him.

Tony shakes his head. “I don’t think so, Kiddo, maybe a scratch here and there, a few bruises, but nothing serious.” he gently reassures you. “Clint and I kept an eye on him when we could.”

“So this…” you hold out your hand – It’s sticky and red from being in Bucky’s hair.

“Hard to tell for sure exactly whose that was,” Clint drawls with a distinct note of satisfaction, “but it isn’t Bucky’s.”

“He’s extremely efficient…when he wants to be…but very messy,” Tony interjects dryly. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Steve looked back and forth between the three men. “So if he was so ‘efficient,’ what took so long? You should have been back over an hour ago!”

“I said he was efficient when he wanted to be…he didn’t always want to be,” Tony explains with a shrug. “Said he had some promises to keep,” he adds with a glance your way. You’re pretty sure that last comment was intentionally vague for your benefit, although you now have a pretty good idea about what happened while you slept. “Oh, by the way I took the opportunity to mess with their intelligence,” he makes air quotes and makes a disgusted face, “system while I was there. I can’t say with one hundred percent accuracy that Krakken’s associates will never come after you – he had a lot of power, a lot of people, and a lot of business contacts – but we left a pretty clear message. I’m pretty confident that they’ll just cut their losses and move on at this point. It’ll look like Bratva infighting to the rest of the world, but the ones that need to know better, do.”

Nat nods as she thinks. “What about the HYDRA connection?”

Tony shakes his head. “Providing the extra people to track her down when this all started was just a personal favor from one of the higher-ups – HYDRA itself had no stake in this. From the looks of it he didn’t really know what Krakken’s end game was, otherwise he likely would have gotten HYDRA involved and become a very big problem.”

Nat nods again and looks around the tiny room at all the tired people. “Did you send Yakov and his men home?”

“Yeah. They did what they came to do; there were minimal losses on our side. I think they’re probably celebrating right about now.” Tony pulls the curtain back and looks out into the darkness. “There’s still a couple hours until daylight – we should get some sleep. And give them some space,” he nods towards you and Bucky. “FRIDAY, expand the perimeter to two miles and let me know if anything crosses.”
“Sure thing, Mr. Stark.” Tony and his ever-present, omniscient technology.

Everyone files out of the room in an exhausted haze, and it’s just you and Bucky.

_Bucky._

You don’t say anything, you just keep stroking his hair. It’s pretty obvious that he isn’t ready to let go yet, and you’re okay with that. He’s here with you, in one piece. It’s enough just to hold him. Humming his lullaby is second nature by now, so it doesn’t surprise you in the slightest when you catch yourself doing it. His tense shoulders slowly begin to relax under your gentle touch.

Reluctantly, he pulls away from you after a few minutes. “I gotta take a shower, Sweetheart. I…I don’t want their blood touching you any more than it already is.” His haunted eyes are so exhausted that you don’t bother to argue that he needs sleep more than anything. “Have, uh, have you eaten? You should eat.”

Thinking of the nasty sludge you can still taste, you nod. “Sam made me something. I’m good. What about you?”

“Not hungry,” he mutters. Bucky rises with his customary grace, even if his shoulders are slumped, and helps you to stand so you can use the bathroom first and wash the dried blood from your hands.

“But he whispers hoarsely, “Just…please let me do this.” So you do; you couldn’t deny him if you wanted to. He slowly carries you back, covers you with a blanket, and presses a kiss to your forehead before returning to the bathroom.

He makes quick work of the shower as you stare at the fire still burning in the fireplace; it’s died down quite a bit, but it’s still enough to keep the room warm and dimly lit. His familiar footsteps – God, you’re so incredibly happy to hear them again – approach slowly.

It stays silent for a moment or two, so you turn toward the hall to see him watching you. The shower must have helped to ground him because although his eyes are somewhat reserved, even cautious, they no longer look haunted.

“Hey.” Your soft murmur is a quiet invitation.

“Hey.” He pads over to you, dressed now in a simple tee shirt and sweatpants. Bucky reaches for your hands and you immediately oblige him; he helps you to stand before pulling you into a tight hug and resting his forehead against yours.

“How’s your leg?”


Bucky smiles and releases you to start rearranging the pillows on the couch. He stops before doing the same for the blankets. “Um, would you prefer that I sleep on the floor? I, uh, I don’t want to make any assumptions.”
“Bucky,” you softly chide, taking his hand into yours, “I already told you that I’m coming home with you. We’re going to get through this. Together.”

He nods silently, eyes filled with unshed tears.

“You didn’t lose me, and I refuse to lose you. I’ll tell you that every hour of every day if that’s what you need, and I know you’ll do the same for me. We save each other, Love. That’s always been our thing, even from the first week we met. We’ll take it day by day, okay? Just like we always have.”

“I love you,” he exhales shakily as he nods.

“I love you. Always.” You gently pull his head down to press a kiss against his forehead. “Now, there’s absolutely no point to you sleeping on the floor when there’s a perfectly good couch that can hold us both.” You stop and eyeball the piece of furniture since this is the first time you’ve actually looked at it; it’s a bit on the narrow side but it’s long enough, and it is fairly comfortable, but it doesn’t exactly scream ‘sturdy’ with its spindly legs. “Well, maybe it can hold us both…I’m really not sure this couch was built to hold a Bucky much less a Bucky and another person…”

A soft laugh huffs out of Bucky, and it’s the best goddamn thing you’ve heard all day. “We’ll make it work, Sweetheart. How’s that sound? I plan to hold you the entire time anyway, so if something breaks I’ll take the brunt of it.”

“Always my hero,” you grin as he goes to make himself comfortable. Once he’s settled, he opens his arms for you. You use your good leg to kneel on one knee between his legs, carefully lowering yourself so that you’re lying against his chest with your ear pressed above his heart and your arms to either side of him. Slowly, you twist your bottom half so that your injured leg is facing up and resting over his thigh.

“Mmmmm…I’ve missed this,” he mumbles into your hair, arms already around you as he softly strokes your back with his fingertips.

You’re about to agree when a loud crack snaps though the room, causing you both to violently start. You stare up at him, completely afraid to move. “Was…was that the couch?”

Bucky stares back at you, eyes comically wide. “Well, my butt is now about two inches lower than it was a couple seconds ago, so I’m gonna say yes.”

Bucky’s chest twitches, and you abruptly dissolve into helpless giggles as his laughter begins to echo through the room.

“Are you alright, Love?” you somehow manage to get out.

“Yeah, believe it or not, I’m actually more comfortable now.” At least you think that’s what he says – it’s kind of hard to be sure with his sputtering laughter.

“Oh my God, we broke the couch!” Your mortified stage whisper only makes him laugh harder. “No one’s going to believe that we weren’t doing anything but lying here!”

It takes a full minute for Bucky to compose himself enough to reply. “Nah, you don’t have to worry about that. They all know I wouldn’t take a chance with moving that bullet in your thigh and having you bleed out.”

Bucky’s comment sobers you immediately. “It’s really that delicate, huh?”
“Well, yes and no. Wilson said that nothing should happen as long as you’re careful and don’t exert yourself. A big enough increase in blood pressure could potentially cause it to shift, or if you hit your leg, but as long as you move slowly and carefully you’ll be fine.” He smiles softly at you before continuing. “I trust Wilson – he’s good at what he does.”

“Okay.” That’s actually really reassuring. But… “Okay wait, did you actually talk to Sam about us…um…”

Your comment, of course, kicks off another round of chuckles. “You are aware that they already know about us, right?”

“Well, I know, but –“

“You’re blushing.” Something in the room shifts with the way he’s looking at you with his soft smile and warm eyes. Bucky shakes his head slowly as he watches you with something close to wonder. “With everything you’ve been through, you still have that sweet, sort of shy innocence.”

“Innocence?” you all but snort. “Yeah okay, if you say so.”

“I do say so. There’s more than one kind of innocence, you know. What I’m talking about is how you can still blush at the idea of someone else knowing about us being intimate. How you saw the best in me when we met, even when I told you about all of the worst in me. How you were so quick to get over your anger when you found out how I’d been lying to you because you saw the intentions behind my actions, even though some of those actions hurt you. How you can still love me, without reservation, after what we just went through.”

“Buck –“

“That’s not me getting down on myself, Sweetheart, that’s just me saying how it is. There’s lots of people in this world that wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me if they’d been in your shoes. But you…when you said before that you’d tell me every hour of every day that I didn’t lose you, I could see in your eyes that you were telling the truth, that it wasn’t just lip service to get me to shut up. I guess that my point is that you’re still you. I,” Bucky pauses for a moment as he searches for the right words, “I wasn’t sure if I was gonna come back to you tonight. What you went through is enough to break most people, and I wasn’t sure if the woman I came back to tonight would be the same woman that loved me on Christmas day. But you are.” His smile is so bright that you can’t help but smile back. “You just went through hell, but you welcomed me with open arms and held me when I came back. You comforted me. There’s no doubt in my mind that you need comfort too, but you put that aside to make sure I was okay.”

“Of course I did, Love,” you manage to choke out. “I’m just so happy –“ your throat is thick from the tears you’re trying to hold back, and it’s making it hard to talk, “I’m just so happy to have you back.”

Bucky smiles softly as he tucks a renegade lock of hair behind your ear. “And that’s what I mean by innocence. Even though you’ve now witnessed some of the horrible things I’m capable of doing, you still don’t see those things when you look at me. You know they’re there, and you accept them, but they don’t change how you see me. You don’t see me as a monster.”

“Because you’re not.” Your tone dares him to argue with you. He doesn’t.

“Since we’re kinda on the topic…is there anything you want to talk about? Is there anything you need from me?” He strokes your back comfortingly, and you feel safe – as safe as you ever have with him.
You allow yourself to sink further into him as you exhale. “You’re doing exactly what I need right now by just holding me. I’m not,” damn it, there’s that thickness in your throat again, “I’m not ready to talk about it yet.”

You know damn well that you can open up to him, and you will, but right now you’re just too fragile. There’s no doubt in your mind that he’ll put you back together when you break, but you’re just not quite ready to do it yet. You’ve been free for less than 12 hours – everything is too fresh, too close.

As he presses a kiss into your hair, you know that he knows what you can’t say, and you know that his tender kiss is a silent promise to be there for you when you’re ready.

With his strong heartbeat for a lullaby, you allow yourself to drift off to sleep.
Chapter 49

The human spirit is a funny thing. Sometimes the smallest thing can go wrong and it feels like the end of the world; at times like these, it feels like the only option is giving up. Other times, someone can walk through hell and not even notice they’re being burned. They keep walking because they have to, because eventually they will reach the other side and come out stronger for it.

It really just depends on the day.

Today is a good day. Of course, you’re only a few hours into it, but you’re with Bucky. The only thing that would make this better would be if the two of you were home with the boys. He grins over his shoulder at you from his place at the stove; you’d offered to help, but he won’t let you stand any longer than strictly necessary because you were shot, you’re recovering from massive blood loss, blah blah blah, so you sit at the table with your chin in your hand as you watch him. He’s so familiar, and it’s been so long, and dammit, you’d missed him. It also doesn’t hurt that he’s in those grey sweatpants.

Bucky’s grin turns into a cocky smirk as he winks at you, “See something you like, Doll?”

It’s only after he speaks that you realize you had a stupid smile on your face, maybe even drooling a little at the view of his butt. But you also realize what he said, what he just called you, and it sends a rush of peace through you. “You just called me ‘Doll.’”

“Yeah, I tend to do that,” he raises an eyebrow as he places a plate of pancakes and sausage in front of you.

“I…well yes, I know, but what I mean is that you didn’t call me ‘Sweetheart.’”

He finishes making his plate and sits down across from you. “Do you have a preference?” He looks a little unsure or confused; he must not realize what he does.

“You use the endearments at different times – they mean different things. To me, at least.” You reach over and rest your right hand on top of his left, slowly and softly tracing the plates on the top of his hand. “When you call me ‘Sweetheart,’ it’s usually when you’re more serious. At night, when we’re together, it’s ‘Sweetheart.’ When one of us is worried, sad, in pain, or scared, it’s ‘Sweetheart.’ When you call me ‘Doll,’ it’s more…it’s lighter, I guess. Less serious. Playful. It means everything’s okay.” You shrug and look down to watch your fingers play against his metal. “I love both names, Buck. It’s just that right now, hearing you call me ‘Doll,’ it tells me you’re more relaxed.” Your eyes look up to meet his. “It’s reassuring.” You look around the small kitchen, trying to say what you need to say without saying too much and causing yourself to tip into territory you aren’t ready to handle yet. “Considering…everything.”

Bucky shifts his hand so his fingers entwine with yours as his lips slowly turn up in a smile. “I didn’t realize I did that.” His eyes suddenly shift from yours to a point behind you. “Dobroye utro, Galina.”

|Good morning |

A woman’s reply sends your head whipping around; you find yourself staring at her while she and Bucky continue to converse in Russian. She’s…

“Good morning, dear one. How is your leg feeling?” She switches effortlessly to English as she
takes the seat next to you.

Her question is completely ignored as you continue to stare. “I thought I dreamed you,” you breathe.

A soft smile crosses her lovely face. “No, I am quite real.” She chuckles softly, and the sound is just as musical as it was yesterday. “Given everything you were dealing with, I am surprised you remember me at all. My name is Galina Davydova.”

Your mouth goes dry as you piece together what you couldn’t manage before because of blood loss and cold – although looking at her now, it’s almost embarrassing that you didn’t immediately know her. His eyes, his hair, the shape of his face, his gentle countenance – it’s all from her. “You’re Mikhail’s mom.”

Galina nods. “Yes.”

“And – and Izolda’s.”

She nods again. “Yes.”

Never in a million years would you have guessed that you might sit next the woman whose son died to help save you. Everything goes blurry as your eyes fill with tears. “I’m so sorry.” Words are pathetically inadequate. “I’m so –”

Galina leans over, wrapping you in a hug like only a mother can. “Do not be sorry, dear one.” When the first sob comes, she pulls you closer and strokes your hair. “You, my beautiful Izolda, and my brave, sweet Mikhail – you are all victims of the same evil. His death is not your doing.”

You can only assume she’s addressing Bucky when she adds, “Or yours. Neither of you are at fault. Do you hear me? His death is not your fault.”

You pull back a bit, feeling completely unworthy of her comfort. She’s comforting you, and she lost her son, for fuck’s sake – and she lost him because of you. “But –”

“No. It is not your fault. I can see that he was important to you,” she pauses to gently wipe away some of your tears, “so grieve with me, but do not shoulder the guilt. Mikhail made his choice – it is our duty to respect and honor that choice.”

It’s pretty clear that she isn’t going to accept anything less; you feel like you should beg forgiveness, but she won’t give it because she doesn’t believe there is anything to forgive. Your heart still bears the responsibility – nothing she can say will change that – but maybe it doesn’t feel quite as heavy after hearing her words. “How are you so strong?” you whisper, not even realizing you’re speaking. You can’t fathom surviving the loss of even one of your children, and she’s lost two.

Her sad smile grows a bit wider. “I could ask the same thing of you, dear one.” She tilts her head and watches you with eyes that seem to hold several lifetimes worth of wisdom, grief, and experience. “I think we end up surprising ourselves with what we can survive.”

There’s truth to her words, so you nod. You survived, although the damage sustained has yet to be fully measured.

“Now, you need to finish your breakfast.” She nods down at your plate and gives you one of those ‘do as I say’ looks that your mom used to give you. “You still have a lot of healing to do, and surgery to undergo for your leg.” Galina doesn’t wait for you to reply, she simply rises to go make
herself a cup of coffee.

You do as she says even as Bucky swallows a smirk.

“Good morning, everyone,” Tony announces his presence with a loud yawn as he joins Galina at the coffeemaker. “I have some good news – our jet will be here later this afternoon. We will be flying to New York in style and comfort. Galina, are you ready?”

The forkful of pancakes that is lifted halfway to your mouth stops midair. Did you just hear what you hope you just heard? “We’re going home today?”

“Sounds like it,” Bucky smiles softly, seemingly unable to take his eyes away from you. “You haven’t had any obvious complications so far, so you should be safe to fly.”

As you try to process your emotions, Tony’s last sentence suddenly registers. “Galina…are you coming with us?”

She smiles as she again takes the seat next to you at the table, coffee in hand. “Yes, I think it is time for a fresh start.

“Really, Bucko, you couldn’t have made pancakes for everyone?”

Bucky twists to address Tony, “I haven’t been able to have breakfast with my girl in quite some time, so no. There’s enough batter there for everyone, so just turn the stove back on and make them yourself.”

Tony opens his mouth to reply, closes it, and then finally speaks after looking for and finding the batter. “Okay fine, fair enough.”

Well, that ended quicker than expected. Turning back to Galina, you ask, “What will you do?”

“Tony has offered me a position on the medical team at his facility.” She sends an amused smirk Tony’s way. “I expect that is not all I will be doing, however.”

Tony shrugs as he makes his pancakes. “You have an interesting skillset, Galina. You’re an incredibly competent nurse and you’ve been a key player in this area’s Bratva without the other Pakhan even realizing it.”

She shrugs elegantly. “Perhaps, but I never wished to be involved with the Bratva. That was out of necessity, not ambition.” She shakes her head in what can only be disgust or irritation. “That idiotic coward I married – he would have run our family into the ground years ago had I not been doing what I was doing. We’d either all be long dead or out on the street.”

“Well,” Tony finally takes his place at the table, “You can do whatever you’d like. The offer stands, no matter what.” You can feel his eyes on you when he adds, “I owe you for your part in saving her. Big time.”

She nods, eyes somewhat distant. “Thank you. We will see where New York takes me.” She takes one more sip of coffee before rising. “Please excuse me, I need to wrap up just a few more things before I leave.”

Bucky hurries to finish his mouthful of food before asking, “Galina, vam nuzhna pomoshch’?”

|Do you need help with anything?|
No, thank you. You stay here with your beloved, you deserve it. Besides, you’ve already done enough for me.

There’s something about Galina’s tone that’s ominous, and you don’t have to understand the language to know that she isn’t off to say some tearful goodbyes. Tony must agree, because after she closes the front door he shudders. “Is it just me, or did she just give off the very distinct impression that she’s going to kill someone?”

“She already did,” Bucky replies into his coffee. Tony and you both stare at Bucky until he explains, “Her husband. She staged an ‘accident’ for him yesterday morning; I walked her through how to do it. Yakov is going to help her get rid of the body. I think. That, or they’re bringing it into the coroner to get a death certificate so she can collect on the life insurance.” He shrugs, “She didn’t sound too sure which way she wanted to go.”

You shove another forkful of pancakes into your mouth. “Well, I don’t blame her; Mikhail told me about him and the guy sounded like a complete douche bag. If either of my kids were killed because of Christopher’s actions, I’d have wanted to do the same thing.” Bucky and Tony both slowly nod their heads in agreement.

It’s quiet for a while as everyone finishes breakfast. You intentionally keep your mind occupied with safe thoughts; thoughts about the weather, the pain in your leg, and the man sitting across from you. You shouldn’t have allowed yourself to cry with Galina – you shouldn’t have allowed yourself that emotion – your grip on yourself is tenuous as it is.

“Hey,” Bucky’s foot lightly nudges yours, “what’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?”

“Huh? Oh, um, just random stuff.” Goddamn it.

You know that answer isn’t going to suffice, not with Bucky or Tony, but you’re just not ready to feel everything yet and the way they’re both looking at you gives you the impression that they’re both going to try to get you to open up.

“Like what?” Tony watches you out of the corner of his eye as he loudly slurps his coffee.

“Like how hot it is that Bucky speaks multiple languages,” you smirk, watching Tony roll his eyes.

“Damn, Doll, I didn’t know that was a thing with you.” He flashes a lopsided grin before winking at you.

“Oh, it’s definitely a thing.”

“How did I not know that? I feel like I’ve wasted so many opportunities.”

“Oh gross, it’s like watching my favorite niece flirt with the pizza delivery boy that always shows up after the food is already cold.” Tony gets up and brings his dishes to the sink with a dramatic sigh. “Kiddo, I get that you might not be ready to talk yet.” He turns serious eyes your way and you meet them defiantly. “I get it, I do. I’m not telling you that you have to talk now, or that we have to have some big kumbaya moment, but this isn’t something you can keep inside. Just something to keep in mind.”

You bite back the sarcastic reply that’s ready to roll off your tongue. He’s right, you know he’s right, and you know he just wants to help, but that doesn’t stop you from wanting to dip a piece of sausage in your syrup and flinging it at Tony’s forehead. Bucky’s hand grabs yours in a silent show
of support, but for the first time ever you feel the need to pull away. It’s not exactly that you don’t want Bucky touching you, it’s that you don’t want anyone touching you. With their attention so focused on you, you’re uncomfortable and twitchy in your own skin. It’s a source of pride that instead of withdrawing like you want to, you just nod. It isn’t going to do anyone any good to lash out – especially not at them – and besides, you’d done so much healing at the safehouse that you aren’t willing to fuck it all up and go back to where you were before Bucky. And if the Krakkens think they can still get a small victory by messing you up from beyond the grave, well, they can get fucked.

Yay personal growth.

Both men watch you carefully as you deal with your internal battle. Finally, the tenseness drops from your shoulders as you sigh. “I know,” you begin evenly, “and I will, but I’m not ready yet.”

“Okay,” Bucky nods, and when Tony opens his mouth Bucky just glares at him and repeats himself, only louder, “Okay.”

“I…okay, fine. Fine.” Tony looks at you, then Bucky. “Hey go-go gadget arm, why don’t you take her upstairs – the first bedroom is open. A truck should show up shortly for us to haul our stuff to the jet. I need to pack up the tech down here, and it’ll add a few years to my life if I don’t have to worry about someone bumping into her leg while we’re doing that.”

“I can help pack from the couch, you know. Or here,” you pat the table and flash him a cheesy smile that you hope hides your instant panic at Tony’s suggestion.

Please don’t make me sit by myself to think my thoughts…please don’t lock me up in another room…

Tony shakes his head. “Look, out of all the cargo, you’re the most precious. Yeah, I know that’s corny, but just go with it, okay? Do it as a personal favor to me. Go…take a nap or make out with your boyfriend or something.” He means to be funny, but you can’t find your laugh. You can feel Bucky staring at you intently as Tony takes a double take. “You, uh, suddenly look like you’re going to puke.”

Bucky is up and next to you in an instant. Kneeling beside you, he gently takes your shoulders in his hands and twists you to face him. “Breathe, Sweetheart. I need you to breathe.”

Nodding, you do as he says. Or, at least you try to. Your tight throat strangles your whispers, “Don’t…please don’t shut me away in another bedroom. I don’t want…I can’t…”

“How about we go for a drive,” Bucky interjects softly. “In a truck this time, not a motorcycle.” His thumb runs soothing circles on your knee. “I’ll take you around town, show you a few things. I know this trip wasn’t exactly how you’d want to travel, but Russia does have its redeeming qualities. If nothing else, just being in a moving vehicle might help to cut down on that claustrophobic feeling. What do you say?”

You feel an almost embarrassing amount of relief as you nod, silently thanking him for calling it claustrophobia and not what it really was: the start of a panic attack. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why…"
“Do not apologize,” Tony shakes his head. “That’s on me, I wasn’t thinking. I know I can be kinda pushy with things, but I promise I wasn’t trying to push you into talking. That was just me being an insensitive ass.” He looks down, then back up at you. “I, uh, I do that. Sometimes. Work in progress.”

“Sweetheart,” Bucky whispers, “it’s okay. Everything’s gonna be okay. You’re gonna be okay.”

You nod again, hoping he’s right.

Both men rise to busy themselves with their tasks – Tony to pack and Bucky to grab the coats and shoes you’ll need for your little road trip.

“Hey, before you get everything packed up, can I call my family? I really miss my boys.”

Tony’s eyes soften at the hope in your voice. “Kiddo, you can if you really want to, but they’re 12 hours behind us.”

Glancing at the clock you see it’s almost noon, which means it’s well after the boys’ bedtime. Damn it. You want to hear their voices so badly, but your wants are secondary to their needs and waking them for a phone call in the middle of the night will only disrupt them and their routine. Besides, you have a feeling that one or both of them are going to be pretty upset with you for leaving for so long, and it isn’t fair to make your mom deal with that, especially in the middle of the night. Soon, you tell yourself, you’ll talk to them soon.

Bucky kneels in front of you again, this time to help you with your boots. “We did contact your mom and dad to let them know you’re safe.”

“Thank you,” you murmur as Bucky helps you into a thick, quilted coat. Other than being shot in the leg, you didn’t sustain any physical injuries from yesterday’s escape, but goddamn you’re sore and stiff from the fall off the motorcycle. “Is this the coat from yesterday?” You don’t remember it fitting this well. And boots? Where did the boots come from?

“No,” Bucky chuckles, “Nat went on a little shopping spree a few days ago to get you some winter gear – said she needed some retail therapy while we waited. I couldn’t sneak it into the Krakkens manor with me to have when we left, but she insisted that you should have it ready here. We weren’t sure of any timelines, so we wanted to make sure you’d have everything you need, just in case we didn’t leave right after we got you back.”

“Or just in case things didn’t go as smoothly as planned?”

“Something like that.” Bucky shrugs as he wraps a scarf around your neck. “There were about a million different ways yesterday could have gone. What ended up happening actually was one of the best-case scenarios. Well,” he gestures to your thigh, “other than you being shot.”

Even that could have been worse, but you don’t need to tell him that. You force a smile and are surprised when it comes easier than expected. “I have a bullet wound. I think I can officially call myself a badass.”

Bucky plants a kiss to the crown of your head before pulling on a hat that covers your ears. “I think you can.” He finishes getting himself ready and scoops you up before taking you to the truck.

* * *

Bucky was right. Being in a truck made you feel freer than you had since coming here, because
you didn’t feel caged or cloistered. It didn’t matter that he drove past the same places two or three times, it didn’t matter that you never left the vehicle. You were free, you were with him, and the sun was shining. He knew this, so he drove all afternoon until he got a call telling him to go to the jet.

“Are you ready to go home, Sweetheart?”

You can’t answer without crying, so you just nod.

“Then let’s go.”
Chapter 50

The late afternoon sun begins bathing everything in a red glow as it languidly makes its way to the horizon; the winter days here are just as short as they are at home. The reds and oranges in the clouds reflect in the snow and create the deception of it being warmer than it actually is.

Your leg aches – no scratch that, it’s fucking agony – but you don’t say anything. You tell yourself that it’s because you missed Bucky and don’t want to fog up your first days back together, but deep down you know the truth. The idea of taking anything, pill or shot, scares the living shit out of you.

Bucky grins at you as he pulls the truck into what looks like a makeshift airfield and up to a waiting jet. “What, were you expecting an actual airport, Doll?”

“I…maybe?” you laugh as you look around. It looks like someone just decided to plow a field and then landed a jet in the middle of it. “Is this even legal?”

“We’re nothing if not resourceful.” Bucky parks in the shadow of the jet and winks at you as he gets out of the truck, circling to your side to help you out. Not one to waste an opportunity, he gathers you close and breathes you in as you do the same – these past few weeks were stolen from you and you don’t plan on letting any chances to love go to waste.

God, you can’t wait to love on your boys.

The sound of crunching snow grabs your attention and a new instinctive fear makes you try to pull away to look around. Logic tells you that it’s likely one of your friends, but what if it’s not? What if…

Bucky doesn’t let go, but rather pulls you closer and rubs his hands up and down your back. “It’s just Steve and Barton checking over the gear,” Bucky murmurs in your ear, “it’s okay, Sweetheart. I’m here, you’re safe.”

Yes, right. You’re safe now. He’s here. You’re here. You’re safe. Breathing deeply, you focus on what you can sense; the security of his arms tight around you, the smell of snow in the air, the feeling of his hair tickling your nose, the sound of his even breathing in your ear.

More or less settled, you pull back slightly to look around. Your eyes go to Clint, who smiles widely and waves when he sees you. “Ready to go home?”

“Hell yes,” you mutter, and you’re about to add something else when Steve steps around the front of the jet and into the deepening sunlight, and the words fly out of your mind.

The red light from the setting sun bathes Steve in a coppery glow and has turned his hair almost crimson. You blink and stare – it’s just a trick of the light, you know this – but you could swear you just saw blood matting his hair.

Oh for fuck’s sake, get a grip on yourself…there’s no way…no…way…

You blink again, and the air in your lungs thickens into cement as the world reverses its customary course around the sun and flings you violently back into that hated dining room. The frigid winter air is traded for the suffocating heat radiating from the fireplace as the cruel sound of the Krakkens’ laughter echoes hollowly and endlessly in your ears.
You stare at Steve’s head - first on his shoulders, then on the silver plate in front of you, now on the floor. You can vaguely hear your name spoken by concerned voices from a distance, but how are you supposed to tear your gaze away from the vivid nightmare etched into your memories? It doesn’t matter if you close your eyes – the view is still the same.

Until, mercifully, it’s not.

Maybe it’s the sound of Tony’s voice yelling as he runs across the makeshift airfield to you, “Get out of the sun, Rogers! Move your ass out of the sun!”

Maybe it’s the sorrowful understanding in Bucky’s wide eyes as he steps in front of you, eclipsing the view that triggered a horror and grief so deep you can still taste its bitterness at the back of your throat.

Maybe it’s the sudden movements from people you are only just now aware of – Clint, Nat, Sam, and even Galina – their actions defensive and alert against a threat they can’t see because it’s only in your mind.

Either way, the vision finally fades and gives way to reality; when he steps into the shadow of the jet to approach you, he’s just Steve again, alive and whole and looking worried as hell.

You can’t keep your eyes from darting back to his neck. “You were dead.” The thick voice doesn’t sound like yours, but no one else had his head fall to the ground at their feet, so it must have been you that spoke. Reality solidifies itself further when his head stays firmly attached to the rest of him, and suddenly you’re very aware of all the eyes on you. Intensely uncomfortable with the scrutiny, the heat rushes to your face. “Oh my God. Um. I’m sorry. I didn’t…I didn’t mean to…”

Steve watches with a guilty expression as Tony finally reaches you and puts a comforting arm around your shoulders; the twitchiness you felt during breakfast returns immediately. “Kiddo, you’re the last one that should be apologizing. Besides, it isn’t like all of us haven’t had the same thing happen at some point.”

A strained smile graces your features as you try to subtly shrug out from under his arm while simultaneously and not entirely successfully holding back your sudden tears. Words won’t come out because your throat insists that any sound will be accompanied by a sob, so you merely nod. “Let’s get you on the jet,” Bucky murmurs, reaching to pick you up.

Shaking your head, you take an awkward step back and try to form words that won’t sound like you’re choking or crying. “No. I can walk,” you finally manage. The idea of being carried and it being so obvious to everyone how helpless you are absolutely mortifies you. You know you’re being ridiculous – you’re surrounded by the last people on earth that would judge you – but you can’t help it. So you turn, pulling your arm from Bucky’s light touch when he attempts to steady you. He does a good job of hiding the hurt in his eyes, but you still see it. It makes you hate yourself for being the one to put it there, for being so goddamn irrational.

It’s only a few paces to the metal steps to the plane, and the handrails on either side of you make for relatively steady if not slow progress. Bucky walks behind you, careful not to touch you but close enough to catch you should you stumble. It takes a lot out of you physically by the time you finally reach the top, and even more out of you mentally when you realize how much this mirrors your trip here. You could barely climb the steps then but did it out of some deep-seated stubbornness and spite that the poison in your veins hadn’t managed to subdue. And now here you are, except this time the poison is in your mind. The irony isn’t lost on you, not one bit.
“Oh thank God,” you mumble as you step through the threshold. Yes, it’s a jet, but the inside looks nothing like the one you’d been forced to take here. That’s something, at least. It mirrors Tony’s tastes impeccably – stylish and modern in appearance, but also comfortable and user friendly despite the extravagant luxury. And good grief, it even smells expensive.

It only takes a second or two for you to assess your surroundings and to awkwardly begin limping your way to the very back of the jet. It looks like there are lots of little coves and nooks set up within the cabin, and you’re extraordinarily grateful for that. Right now, you crave solitude and privacy.

The small area you choose would be enough to hold two, maybe three people comfortably. The partitions separating the seating areas aren’t thick and there are no doors, so there’s nothing to stop sound from carrying, but at least you feel protected from everyone’s concerned gazes. There’s what would pass as a chair and a half – not quite as big as a loveseat but more than big enough to accommodate your form if you curl up – and a smaller but equally plush chair placed opposite and slightly to the left. Choosing the bigger of the two, you remove your coat and use it as a makeshift blanket as you arrange yourself to lie curled up on your side with your injured thigh facing up. You face the back of the chair, hoping that anyone that happens to walk by will take the hint and leave you the fuck alone.

Your plan works, at least for now. Unfortunately, you can’t figure out if this makes you happy or sad. What the hell do you feel? You feel guilt at your last moments with Bucky – who you happen to know is just on the other side of the partition from you, listening carefully for any indication that you need or want him – but what do you say to him? Gee, Buck, I’m sorry I’m such a fucking train wreck right now. I’d love to talk about my feelings but I have no fucking idea how to explain them, hell, I can’t even put words to them in my own brain.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuckity fuck. What do you want? Figure that out first. You want Bucky. Full stop. It’s why you said what you said when you first found out that he was himself and not the Soldier, and your words of reassurance last night. That hasn’t changed, not one bit. So why isn’t he here right now? Because you more or less pushed him away. Still, he’s just inches away, patiently waiting for you. So what’s the problem?

Shame. Twitchiness. Pain. Loneliness. Anxiety. An overwhelming sense of unworthiness at what he had to do for you, sacrifice for you, in order to save you. Anger. Loathing for those monsters that hurt Bucky and took you away from your children. Hopelessness. A paralyzing fear that you’ll never be yourself again, even though you’re sure you were pretty close to normal less than an hour ago when you were driving around with Bucky.

And then there’s the suffocating yet disconnected understanding of just how utterly broken you are.

The tears are hot on your cheeks but you just wipe them away with your sleeve and try to keep quiet. You can hear and feel Bucky shifting restlessly because of course he can hear you with that damned supersoldier hearing, but he respects your unspoken request for space.

But it isn’t space that you crave, not really. What you really want is to be okay.

Footsteps head your way until you hear a hushed conversation. If you tried you could probably make out what they’re saying, but you can’t bring yourself to care. At least, not until a dark head pokes around the edge of the partition.
“Hey, Kiddo.” Tony waits patiently until you dejectedly turn your head look at him. “I’ll leave you alone in a minute, but I wanted to let you know that we’re taking off soon.”

“Okay. Thank you.” No point in being rude.

Tony sighs quietly – surprisingly, there’s no trace of exasperation, just a sort of sad acceptance. “You’re gonna have to sit up and buckle yourself in for the takeoff, Kiddo.”

Oh. Right.

As you slowly pull yourself up, Tony removes your coat and tosses it on the seat across from you. It occurs to you to be indignant, but then he makes a big show out of unfolding a thick, dark blue blanket.

“This will keep you warmer than that jacket. The seatbelts are tucked into the seats – you just have to dig a little for them.” He’s uncharacteristically subdued, and your shoulders slump a little with the weight of knowing that it’s probably your fault he’s acting like this.

He watches to make sure you get buckled in properly but doesn’t reach to do it for you. You appreciate that. Then the ache in your heart eases slightly when he bends to drop an almost fatherly kiss to the top of your head before resting his steady hand on your shoulder. “Do you want something for the pain?”

“No! No…no thank you.” If you answer too quickly, he doesn’t let on that he notices - but of course he probably does. Tony is more observant and has way more empathy than people give him credit for.

He nods. “Let me know if you need anything.”

You don’t speak until he’s almost blocked from view by the partition, and then the words are out of your mouth before you realize you were even thinking them. “How did you know what I was seeing?”

Tony takes a step back, swallowing hard before his watery eyes meet your own, and you realize that maybe it isn’t your current behavior that has him acting so…not Tony Stark. “The look on your face - I’ve seen that look before. I was, uh, watching through their security cameras when those bastards pulled that bullshit stunt on you.” He swallows hard again. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget it. So when I looked around to find out what triggered you, I put the pieces together when I saw how red Steve looked in the light.”

Shame comes crashing down on you like a piano in an old Looney Toons cartoon. You’d been so wrapped up in your own battling emotions that you hadn’t taken the time to see how you and Bucky aren’t the only ones permanently scarred from your ordeal; some of the others are dealing with the things they had to do to get you back. You’d noticed the heavy, haunted guilt in Bucky’s eyes when he thinks you aren’t looking, but that same look was in Steve’s eyes after you had your episode outside the jet. And now Tony – now that you’re looking for it, it’s impossible to miss. You mentally run through the laundry list of what Tony has possibly felt over these past few weeks; helpless, frustrated, powerless, inadequate. A sense of failure because he considered himself responsible for your safety. “Well, um, thank you.” What else can you say? You already know from your own current experience that words don’t really help.

Tony shakes his head with a fair amount of self-disgust. “Don’t thank me, Kiddo. It’s my fault you were there in the first place.” He leaves before you have a chance to respond, to tell him that it isn’t his fault and that you don’t blame him for anything.
You cover your face with your hands as you shake your head. One would think that this moment should feel like a victory – you and your friends made it out alive and you’re going home – but it just doesn’t. It almost feels hollow. Or maybe it’s just you that’s hollow.

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Footsteps and a quiet conversation pulls you out of yourself. Steve is saying something about eating and cruising altitude or something like that, but there isn’t an ounce of you that cares. You’ve been numbly staring at a point on the wall in front of you for – how long, maybe 20 minutes? – and you just now realize you’ve been staring at a tv screen. It’s been…fuck, it’s been weeks since you’ve watched tv. They didn’t see fit to give you one in that prison disguised as a fucking ugly bedroom; they wouldn’t even give you a radio because they preferred for you to spend your days in silence. The sudden desire to watch a movie makes you feel so normal for a second that you start to cry.

“Sweetheart?” Bucky’s voice, soft and hesitant, makes you wipe your tears and look to him. He’s standing on your side of the partition but seems reluctant to come closer.

It hurts, fuck it hurts to see how you’re impacting him, and your face crumples. “Bucky, I…I’m so sorry, Bucky.”

He knows you, knows you inside and out, and he takes your words for the implicit invitation they are. Bucky puts down whatever he was holding and squeezes himself into the chair with you. “Hey, hey, no Sweetheart, no,” he murmurs as he holds you close and strokes your hair. “You don’t have to be sorry, you haven’t done anything wrong.”

It feels like a superhuman effort, but you manage to reign in your tears after just a few moments; you’re not quite ready to fully let go. “But I –“

“Sweetheart, listen to me. You just went through a major trauma.” He cradles your face in his hands, grazing his thumbs over your tearstained cheeks, and like always the contrasting touches of warm and cool grounds you. “What you’re feeling right now – all those overwhelming and conflicting emotions and thoughts, the mood swings, wanting to push people away but then craving contact, the incredible want to lash out at anyone and anything, even what you saw outside – those are all perfectly normal reactions.”

Unsteady breath in, shaky breath out. “I know.” Of course you know, you were – are, dammit, not were, are – a psychology student, for fuck’s sake. You recognize what’s going on but that makes it even worse because it feels like you should be able to stop it.

“I know you know, Sweetheart.” And of course he does; he’d occasionally helped you study back at the safehouse. Besides, Tony was right – like everyone else on the jet, he’s been through it. Bucky gives you a sad smile as he tucks a lock of hair behind your ear. “I hate to break it to you, but that isn’t going to be much help right now.”

A tearful laugh bubbles out of you. “Yeah, I kind of picked up on that.”

“Hey,” Bucky waits to speak again until your eyes meet his, “It’s gonna be okay – you’re gonna be okay. We’re gonna get to New York, we’re gonna get your leg fixed, and then we’re gonna get you some help to deal with this. You’re not going through this alone, okay? I’ll be with you every step of the way.” He stares at you intently before speaking again, “And no matter what, you need to know that there’s nothing you can do or say that will scare me away. You might have some rough days ahead – the first few therapy sessions are a real bitch, let me tell you – but no matter what happens, I’m not goin’ anywhere.”
You can’t help but look away in shame when you hoarsely whisper, “But I’m so broken.”

“Sweetheart,” he admonishes softly, “we’ve both been at least a little broken since the day we met. Our pieces have always fit together just fine.”

You nod at the truth of his words as you snuffle, and then reluctantly pull out of his grasp to blow your nose. “How are you so steady right now?”

Bucky practically snorts as he shakes his head. “I’m not, not really. I’m constantly fighting every instinct I have to protect you to the point of smothering you, and I start to have a panic attack if I can’t see, feel, or hear you for more than a minute or two. I, uh, I have to do breathing exercises when one of us goes to the bathroom. Showering yesterday just about killed me.”

“Seriously?”

He nods sheepishly. “The only differences between us are that I had years of forced training on controlling my emotions and actions, and that I have already gone through intensive therapy for severe PTSD. I’ve already started working my program again and that’s what’s holding me over until I can get to my therapist.”

You allow his words to sink in as you take a deep breath. He’s been through this – he’s been through far worse and survived traumas that lasted much, much longer – and he came out the other side as the man you fell completely, totally in love with. The flare of hope that makes its way into your heart adds itself to your already impossibly confusing maelstrom of emotions.

“You know it’s hard, I do, but where you’re at is where you’re at. I’ll always find you, and I’ll meet you there.” He waits for your nod, and continues, “It doesn’t scare me. You don’t scare me. I know it might not feel like it, but the worst is over. You’re strong, Sweetheart, so incredibly strong. You’re gonna find your way out of this.”

You nod again, more sure this time. “I trust you, Bucky.”

His lips turn up into the graceful, easy smile you’d missed so much. He doesn’t bother hiding the thread of pride when he rests his forehead against yours and murmurs, “I know you do.”

When Bucky presses his lips to yours, the world shifts a little and things suddenly don’t seem quite so bleak. It somehow feels like everything is going to be okay, even if it takes some time to get there. You aren’t naïve enough to believe that things will stay this way; now that some of the anguish has cleared it’s easier for you to apply your learning to your own situation and recognize that this shift, although welcome, is likely temporary. The pendulum will swing the other way again, but if you can start a program with a competent therapist the swings will become less drastic. Eventually you’ll reach a balance. You can come back from this. Eventually.

Optimism, no matter how fragile, for the win.

“There she is.” A smile somehow finds its way to your face as he continues, “I told you I’d find you.”

“You’re such a putz,” you huff, knowing he hears the affection in your voice, and as his gentle laughter joins yours he reaches across to the other seat.

“Steve brought us something to eat.” Bucky presses one of the two dishes covered with plastic wrap into your hands. “We only have a microwave so it’s just Easy Mac and –“

“Chicken nuggets!” You all but tear the wrap off. Not only has your conversation with Bucky
revived your appetite, but you sorely missed this kind of food. Too much of what you’d been served during your imprisonment either wasn’t to your liking or was almost nauseatingly repetitive. As such, soggy microwaved chicken nuggets are a luxury, one you promise yourself to never again take for granted.

“I’m glad I don’t have to persuade you to eat.” He looks genuinely relieved as he shifts his ginormous frame in the chair to start digging into his own food. It’s a tight fit, but neither of you are willing to move.

“Bucky,” you pick up a nugget and take a slow bite, not minding the slight rubbery texture in the least. “I haven’t had a chicken nugget in weeks. It was mostly stewed meat with a fifty percent chance of being ruined with mushrooms, some form of potato, and sour cream. I probably would have gone hungry if it wasn’t for Mikhail bringing me pastries almost every night.”

Mikhail.

Back swings the pendulum.

“Um, speaking of Mikhail…” Bucky pauses as he takes your hand in his, “I have something for you, a letter he wrote when he started working with us. I promised to give to you if he didn’t make it.” The pain is evident on his face, and you can’t help but wonder if Mikhail somehow managed to burrow into Bucky’s heart just like he did yours. “It’s in my bag with the rest of our cargo so I can’t get it right now, but as soon as we land I can pull it out.”

Your head is shaking and your eyes fill with tears before he finishes speaking. “I can’t…I’m not…I…”

“When you’re ready,” he murmurs. “I’ll hold onto it until you’re ready.”

“Thank you.” Desperate for a distraction to keep you from losing the progress you’ve made in the department of not being a complete wreck, your eyes dart around until they land on the tv. “Can we watch a movie or something?”

“Absolutely. FRIDAY, please show any Disney animated movie except Snow White and Pinocchio.”

Honestly, this man is too good to be true.

“Yes, Sargent Barnes.” The tv lights up and just a few moments later the opening for the Emperor’s New Groove starts playing. “I hope you don’t mind – I took the liberty of downloading your preferences from SUNDAY.”

“That’s perfect FRIDAY, thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

“I never thought I’d get used to and actually miss an AI presence, but here we are,” you mutter.

Bucky puts his arm around your shoulders as he snickers. “I’m right there with you, Sweetheart.”

He waits until you finish eating before he cocoons you both into the blanket, content to watch your favorite movies until the jet lands safely in New York.
You begin to wake, but you fight it with everything you have because this dream is so much better than your current reality. The strong arm around your waist holding you snug against a warm, solid chest is a memory you don’t want to lose to consciousness. The smell of Bucky surrounding you as his slow and even breaths cause your hair to gently tickle your ear is such a welcome and familiar comfort, but you can’t help but notice that something is off. Has your memory already begun to fray?

His scent is mixed with something…an unfamiliar detergent, maybe? Not at all unpleasant, just different.

You’re lying on your left side. Bucky is behind you, and the arm around you is his natural arm.

Wait.

That’s not right…

Bucky has a thing when he sleeps - he needs to be between you and the door. If you’re lying on your left side, you’re facing the door. He should be in front of you, not behind you...he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep like this. You know this, even in your dreams. Yet, with all this thinking bringing you further into the realm of wakefulness, you still feel him. You finally concede defeat and crack open an eye.

A window? Or a door to a balcony, maybe? Certainly not the window of your prison, and not a window at home – well, the safehouse – either. There’s a sharp ache in your right thigh as you move, causing you to finally shake completely free of slumber’s hold and realize that this isn’t a dream. This is real, you’re really in Bucky’s arms.

Fully awake and mind now crystal clear, you remember the hours on the jet and watching out the window as you flew into New York. You remember being swarmed by medical personnel almost immediately upon landing, and having a panic attack when someone with good intentions injected morphine into the port still in the back of your hand without letting you know beforehand. That guy now has an accidentally broken hand, courtesy of Steve, and a completely intentionally broken nose, courtesy of Nat.

Bruce was there, and he explained the plan they had in place to fix your leg: First, surgery to remove the lead coated bullet from your thigh, then they were going to apply some sort of self-regenerating tissue patch that would allow your leg to almost fully heal within 96 hours…
apparently it had been shipped in from a Dr. Cho as a special favor. You consented to the treatment, but you’d wanted local anesthetic instead of general. Bruce, Bucky, and Tony teamed up to persuade you to accept the general anesthesia because it would be safer for you and better for the tissue patch, which you were told would cause significant pain for the first hour or so. They also wanted you under because they wanted to transport you – preferably unconscious to avoid any unnecessary discomfort – to another facility for safety and privacy almost immediately after the surgery. When you’d finally consented, Tony thrust a clipboard full of papers into your hand; he said that he needed your formal, signed consent to treat since you’d be cared for under his policies. You looked for the bright pink signature flags and signed them all as quickly as you could while Bucky rubbed your shoulders; he knew you were afraid you’d chicken out and change your mind about the anesthesia.

You didn’t. Somehow, your trust in these people overcame your anxiety. Bucky was holding your hand when you succumbed to unconsciousness.

Your memories after that are quite a bit shiftier, thanks to the anesthesia. Still, there are bits and pieces for you to put together. After you started coming out of the anesthesia, they cleared you to leave the infirmary. The patch you’d been given sped the healing process up so significantly that just a few hours post-surgery was more like a day. There’s a choppy recollection being transported to another area, a helicopter ride, and hearing voices – even more intangible is the vague memory of hearing good-natured laughter after you told someone to kindly fuck off and leave you the hell alone because you were tired and wanted to go back to sleep, and oh, where was your unicorn – the sparkly one with purple hair? Maybe that was a dream?

That’s the last you can remember, and now you’re here. The gaps in your memory scare you a bit, but you remind yourself that you’re no longer in the hands of people that wish to do you harm; you’re here, curled up with Bucky. Safe. Barely containing the laugh that tries to bubble out of you, you shift to look around in the dim light. What time is it? It’s dark, but it’s also late January so considering how short the days are that doesn’t tell you much. Well, you think it’s still January, but you’ll have to ask someone to make sure February didn’t come around while you were still stuck in hell.

There’s a gentle, pale blue glow coming through the window from the almost full moon and the plethora of stars twinkling in the clear velvet sky. If you crane your neck just a little more, you can see the snow blanketing surrounding area and reflecting the starlight. It’s extraordinarily peaceful, and you’re grateful that Bucky left the blinds open. You’re pretty sure he did it for your benefit, so you wouldn’t wake up in the pitch-black darkness of an unfamiliar room.

There’s a nightstand next to your side of the bed with a lamp and pile of books. Directly across from the bed there’s a dresser with another pile of books stacked on top, and there are doors on either side. Given the placement of the doors, you can only assume that one leads to a bathroom and the other to a closet. At least, you hope so.

Moving slowly, you carefully disengage from Bucky’s embrace. It’s not that you want to move, but damn you have to pee. Testing the range of motion in your leg, you find that the ache feels less like an injury and more like the stiff disuse of waking up the second day after a car accident or really intense workout. It easily holds your weight as you stand and even seems to loosen slightly as you carefully stretch. There aren’t any crutches or a cane nearby, and you think you remember someone telling you that by the time you awoke you’d be sore but healed enough to get around. There are bandages on your arm and hand from the IVs, but those seems to be the only other lasting reminders of the fact that you went through actual surgery.

You take a step, but then turn back to watch Bucky for a few heartbeats. God, you fucking missed
him. You can clearly see the toll these past few weeks have taken from him – even in the semi-darkness you can see the dark bags of exhaustion under his eyes, the longer than usual facial hair, the way his cheeks almost seem gaunt. The lines on his forehead seem just a bit deeper, and his lips are chapped. It might just be a trick of the moonlight, but you could swear that you see some sparse spots of silver in his scruff. It’s obvious that he hasn’t been taking care of himself, and you feel a now familiar stab of guilt because you know damn well that it’s because of you.

Holding back a sigh, you turn and walk to the door to the left of the dresser. When you step through the threshold you are delighted to find that you have, in fact, found the bathroom. At least now you won’t have to wake up Bucky to find out where it is. Before turning on the light, you close the door with a quiet click, thinking to spare Bucky the sudden brightness, and are pleasantly surprised to find that the bathroom light must be on both a sensor and a dimmer because the room is now gently lit but not so much so that your eyes have to struggle to adjust.

Glancing in the mirror gives you a start – for all your concern for Bucky, you’re not exactly looking like a prize yourself, not that you ever really do. A good washing will fix your hair, but your complexion has an unhealthy waxiness to it, your eyes are sunken and dull, and although they are slowly beginning to fade, the bruises from your assaults are still on your face and body.

You’re either going to have to get someone to pick up some makeup for you or you’ll have to forgo FaceTiming the boys tomorrow and call instead. They shouldn’t see you like this.

After relieving yourself and washing your hands, you start pulling off your bandages. The IV sites on your hand and in the crook of your arm look exactly as you would expect – you rinse off the little bit of dried blood that’s left behind and double check to make sure the tiny wounds don’t start bleeding. You do the same for the bandage on your leg except, when you wipe away the blood, the skin underneath isn’t a stitched incision like you’d expected but rather a shiny red scar.

Holy shit, it looks like you’ve already been healing for over a week. There isn’t even a scab.

“Well color me impressed,” you mutter in surprise. This is incredible, so why the hell isn’t this type of technology mainstream? It’s something you’ll have to ask about later.

But for now, it’s time to get back to Bucky. You don’t fight the smile that comes to your face – back to Bucky, because he’s just on the other side of the door, sleeping peacefully. When you turn to leave, you find a plastic bag hanging from the door handle of what you assume is the linen closet. It’s hanging by just one side, so as you walk by you can clearly see into the bag. It’s…your bodywash? You find yourself almost beaming as you start sifting through the bag. There’s the bodywash you’d used for years, the only shampoo and conditioner that have ever truly come close to managing your curls, your favorite body lotion, and even your preferred skin care. Tears fill your eyes at the simple gesture; you’d have been perfectly fine using whatever Bucky had on hand, but he’d wanted you to feel like yourself again.

“I don’t deserve you, Buck. You sweet, sweet man,” you hum as you snap open the bodywash cap and lift it to your nose. The smell is…it smells like you. Like you. It smells like early mornings before you went to work. It smells like the middle of the night right after the boys were born, washing off the endless spit up during the only 10 minutes a day you could get to yourself. It smells like showering before bed because it was the only time you could fit it in, and then bringing one of the boys to bed with you because he’s sick and can’t sleep without your cuddles. It smells like lazy mornings at the safehouse when everyone was awake and tangled together under the comforter as cartoons played in the background. It smells like Bucky nuzzling into your neck from behind, then leaving a soft kiss before telling you that you smell amazing.

Then the memory of Jimmy trying to use your bodywash instead of the tear free formula you buy for them comes to mind – he told you he wanted to smell like Momma. Like you.
And with that, you finally break from the weight of what you went through.

For the first few moments it’s a little hard to breathe. Five and a half jagged breaths later the sobs start, and you somehow end up on your knees desperately clawing at the floor to feel something, anything, other than the suffocating torment that’s been waiting for the right moment to descend upon you. Then your hands are in your hair, clutching fistfuls near your scalp because it’s the only thing your fingers can find, and because the dull pain from pulling your hair offers just the slightest distraction from the debilitating agony in your psyche.

The sound you make when you feel something warm on one wrist and cool on the other is almost inhuman; a mix of a wail and a howl, the very essence of devastating grief marrying incomprehensible suffering. The gentle but insistent tugs finally succeed in getting you to straighten up enough for Bucky to pull you into his arms. Your hands go from your hair to around his neck, holding on in a frantic attempt to keep from being swept away by this brutal tsunami.

“I’ve got you, Sweetheart. Go ahead, it’s okay. I’ve got you.” Bucky repeats these words like a favorite song on a loop as he holds you close and rubs your back. Your entire body shakes with your bawling sobs, but he somehow manages to keep you from breaking apart completely despite the pain, anger, humiliation, guilt, shame, and fear trying to pull you in different directions.

There’s no sense of time in this abyss – it would be inconsequential even if it did exist – but even the fiercest, most destructive storms don’t last forever. Eventually, it will sap the atmosphere of fuel and die down. When your wracking sobs finally subside to gasping shudders, your head is pounding, your lungs ache, and your face has grown hot and itchy from the tears.

But despite your physical discomfort, you feel considerably lighter. Exhausted but relieved. It feels like you lanced a festering wound – it was an ugly process and it still hurts, but it’s a different kind of hurt. It’s a hurt that feels like it might finally begin to give way to healing because the poison has been let out.

Bucky’s gentle humming gives you something else to focus on as you close your swollen eyes and allow him to shift you slightly. He’s sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, and you’re sitting between his legs and leaning against him, more or less cradled in his arms with your legs draped over one of his thighs. He’s so solid and steady; the immoveable rock in the unreliable landscape of your shifting emotions.

Without loosening his grip on you, he reaches for something – the bottle of bodywash – and clicks open the top to smell it before setting it to the side. “I get it, Sweetheart. I get it, the significance of this smell. When I was first free, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I didn’t know who I was after everything I’d done, and everything that was done to me – I didn’t feel the same, I sure as hell didn’t look the same, and the whole damn world had changed – and I just wanted something comfortable. Familiar. So I thought,” he twirls a lock of your hair around his finger, “that if I could maybe just smell like myself, that it might be enough to hold on to, to remind myself that I wasn’t HYDRA’s puppet anymore.” Bucky chuckles, “It was a good idea, in theory. Not so much in practice. Most men, myself included, just smelled like armpit and cigarette smoke a few hours after bathing. While I definitely appreciate cologne and deodorant now, it really wasn’t a thing for men back in the 30s and 40s – that stuff was considered to be for women only.”

Bucky presses a kiss to your forehead. “It got to the point where I couldn’t stand myself, and it didn’t exactly help me blend in or get jobs for cash, especially since I couldn’t always afford to wash my clothes regularly. Then one day I stopped by a drugstore to pick up some razorblades. There was an open jar on the counter for people to try, and I caught a whiff of it as I walked by. It…it smelled just like my ma. It surprised me so much that I started crying in the middle of the
store, which of course really, really concerned some of the other customers. It was only a few months after I got free, so I was still pretty rough and crusty looking. Some lady approached me and I panicked – I swiped the jar and ran out. I spent the next two days just intermittently sniffing the stuff. Turned out to be cold cream – I don’t know if it was the same brand my ma used, but I didn’t care. It smelled just like her.”

A warmth blossoms in your chest – that’s probably one of the sweetest things you’ve ever heard. “Did it help?”

“Mmm hmm. Gave me something good to remember, instead of all the bad. It reminded me of who I was before – before HYDRA, hell, who I was before the war. My ma was…she was my safe place. I got along with my dad just fine, but deep down I was always a mama’s boy.”

“Do you still have it?” You don’t remember seeing it, but that doesn’t mean anything.

“Yeah, but I don’t need it anymore.” Bucky tightens his hold on you. “You’re my safe place now.” The two of you sit in silence for a while, just holding each other. Just before you begin to drift off, he murmurs, “Do you want to take a shower? Smell like you again?”

You nod wordlessly as you untangle yourself and clumsily rise. Because yes. Yes, you do.

He swiftly puts your toiletries where they belong as you stare at yourself in the mirror. Yikes.

“You’re still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on.” He steps past you and into the shower to start the water while you begin to get out of your…what the hell are these things, anyway? Hospital issue shorts that snap at the waist and a top that ties at the neck and sides. Not exactly the pinnacle of comfort, but much better than one of those drafty ass-baring gowns.

There’s no mistaking his hesitation when he speaks, “Alright, Sweetheart. You should be good to go. I’ll be nearby, so just call if you need anything.”

It hadn’t occurred to you that he would leave. Panic tries to rise but you grab his hand as he walks by and the contact immediately soothes you; and if the relief in his eyes is anything to go by, the simple touch does the same for him. “Stay with me.” Your mouth is dry as you swallow against the lump in your throat, and you wonder if you’re crossing a line. Is it too familiar? Too soon after what you’ve been through? You just know that you don’t want to be alone. “Please.”

Will anything ever be the same?

His eyes seem just a bit bluer when he looks to you in surprise. “Really? Are – are you sure?” Bucky stares as you slowly nod. “I thought…I didn’t want to assume –“

There’s a comfort in knowing that you both seem to be on the same page. “I’m sure. Please…stay.”

Bucky nods and begins to undress as you finish slowly. He keeps his eyes averted as he steps into the shower.

Suddenly feeling inexplicably shy, you follow him through the frosted door. The shower is huge - more than big enough for two and is actually quite lovely. Two of the walls are made of glass, and oversized beige tiles line the other two walls up to the ceiling, with coves intermittently placed for holding whatever would be needed for bathing. Along the far wall is a built-in seat, also tiled – it makes sense, considering who this shower was built for. Even an Avenger might not have the
Bucky takes your hand and leads you under the generous spray, letting the hot water rinse over you both. His hands lightly trail up and down your arms as you both stand, silently facing the other. After the space has become thoroughly steamy and you’ve begun to relax, he pulls you out just enough so he can start shampooing your hair, and good lord you’d forgotten how wonderful his hands feel massaging your scalp. He doesn’t stop, even when rinsing.

“Mmm…Buck, you missed your calling as a hair washer.”

“Yes, I think you might have mentioned that before,” he chuckles as he smooths in the conditioner, then twists your hair to rest atop your head to give the conditioner a chance to do its thing. He squeezes some bodywash onto a poof and begins washing your shoulders and back, arms, and legs as you remain still, taking in the familiar scent and touch.

You take his hands in yours when he circles around to your front. “I missed you so much, Bucky.”

“My god, Sweetheart,” his voice is so tight you almost can’t understand him, “I missed you so fucking much, and I was so scared, I couldn’t breathe without you.”

You brush the wet hair out of his eyes, and before you can overthink it you pull him into a kiss, attempting to say everything you can’t manage to express with words into it. You keep your arms around his neck, breaking the kiss only to whisper, “I love you so much, Bucky. I love you so, so much. I…Thank you. Thank you for going back into hell to get me.”

Bucky whispers your name, just as lost for words as you. “I…always,” he finally manages. “I’ll always come for you.”

Then he kisses you deeply, thoroughly. This kiss is emotion, but it’s also fire. You tighten your arms in the impossible effort of getting closer to him, as though the immeasurably thin sheet of water separating you two was too much.

There’s nothing to hide it when Bucky hardens against you, and a tension you didn’t realize you were carrying fades away.

*He still wants you.*

When he pulls back to look at you there’s a desperate, hungry glint in his eyes that you’re sure mirrors your own. He kisses you again, slower this time, pushing you back slightly so the back of your head is under the spray. Bucky continues kissing you as he rinses the conditioner from your hair, turning what was just moments ago a comforting, soothing gesture into something completely different.

Even with the hot water streaming over your skin, goosebumps rise at his needy touches.

Bucky’s hands are everywhere as he again guides you backwards; when the back of your legs hit the shower seat you lose your balance, but of course he doesn’t let you fall. Two hands grip your hips, steadying you before pushing you down gently until you’re perched on the bench and he’s kneeling in front of you. You wrap your legs around his torso, trying to pull him closer as he kisses your neck, your shoulders, your breasts, your lips. For the briefest of moments you can feel his cock nudging at your entrance, but then Bucky grips your thighs, loosening himself from their grip and sits back on his heels before lifting your injured leg over his shoulder.

He scooches you forward to the edge of the bench and dives in. There’s no teasing, no waiting. He begins licking and sucking like a starving man, periodically growling quietly, pausing only to
gently but firmly push your thighs further apart. Your left hand goes back to support you, while your right hand goes into his hair. You don’t need to guide him – he knows damn well what he’s doing and he’s fucking good at it – but you need as much contact with him as possible.

Staring at the sight of the man before you, you watch, mesmerized, at the powerful muscles in his shoulder and back pull and stretch under smooth and scarred skin as he feasts. Bucky chases you mercilessly into an orgasm, not giving you a chance to come down from one before he’s working on another.

“Bucky…fuck…Buck please…I can’t…oh my fuck please stop…” You’re just about cross-eyed from bliss, but if he doesn’t stop there’s a good chance your brain will short-circuit if you come for a fourth time without a break.

At first you’re not sure if he hears you, but finally, reluctantly, he pulls himself away, gently guiding your right leg off his shoulder as he straightens from a position that would have been uncomfortable had he cared. Kisses are planted on your thighs and belly as his hands roam, giving you some time to catch your breath before his mouth is on yours once again.

“I love you so much, Sweetheart, so fucking much,” he mumbles against your mouth, as if pulling away any farther would cause you to disappear on him again. A wickedly satisfied grin graces his lips, “And I fucking missed that. Now hold on.”

You throw your arms around his neck as he grabs you by the ass to pull you to him, standing while he does so.

“Show off.”

Your breathless smirk just makes him chuckle darkly. “Oh Doll, I happen to know you like this.” His irises have almost completely disappeared, and it seems impossible but your heart beats even faster in anticipation. He’s not wrong.

Secure in his hold on you, you pull him in for another searing kiss as he carefully exits the shower and brings you back into the bedroom. Not caring that both of you are still dripping wet, he tenderly lays you on the bed.

The mood shifts with his gentle actions. Bucky cradles himself within your thighs, nuzzling your neck and planting soft kisses as he goes. The next time his lips meet yours it’s sweet and unhurried. His right hand takes yours, holding it firmly just above your head as your need for him explodes. There are tears in his eyes when he slowly pushes in; he fills you, and for the first time in weeks you feel complete. His strokes are slow and languorous, deep and deeply satisfying, allowing you to feel every inch of his movements while he feels every inch of you.

Bucky’s eyes meet yours, and neither of you can look away. He’s giving you everything he is, everything he has been or will be, and trusting you to do with him what you will. You do the same; offering anything less would be an insult to the way you feel about him. You surrender completely, knowing and accepting that you’re safe and that he can and will handle whatever your future holds; he’s not going to give up on you any more than you’d give up on him.

You’ve never felt so secure.

“I love you.” The words are spoken at the same time, and you can feel his pieces filling the cracks left by your ordeal. In this moment you feel whole, almost as if you’d never been broken. Bucky stares into your eyes with an expression of wonder, and you know damn well that your own face reflects the awe you feel at the enormity of the bond you share.
It almost seems against his volition when he begins to thrust faster. Your body betrays you, too, movements matching Bucky’s and encouraging him to move even faster, harder, deeper. He obliges, rolling his hips into yours as your free hand roams at his back and shoulder and ass, desperate to touch as much of him as you can. He tightens his grip on your hand and presses it more firmly into the mattress to keep you from sliding back and hitting the headboard.

Bucky’s getting close – you can hear it in his uneven breathing and feel it in the way his rhythm occasionally falters. You are, too, and of course he knows this. He hasn’t forgotten how to play your body, how to get you to respond in any way he pleases. And right now he wants you to come. With his eyes, he demands it.

You couldn’t deny him if you tried. Stars explode and you clutch him to you as tightly as possible; he keeps going as long as he can, but your release soon sets off his own. Hand in hand you ride the violent waves of bliss and pleasure, knowing nothing but each other in this timeless moment.

When the aftershocks subside, you pull your hand from his and begin to softly run your hands up and down his back as Bucky trembles in your arms. Neither of you pulls away – this is where you want to be – and a smile grows as you catch your breath.

This man.

“What’s goin’ through that pretty head of yours?” Bucky’s voice is quiet but rough.

“What?”

He kisses the tip of your nose. “You’ve got a goofy grin on your face. Just wondering what you’re thinking.”

You huff a laugh as you come clean. “Just thinking about how lucky I am.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Yeah? How’s that?”

“I got the trifecta. Didn’t think it even existed, but it does.”

“The trifecta,” he repeats, waiting for your explanation.

“Mmm hmm. I found a man that loves me.” You begin tracing the lines of his face with your fingertips.

He turns his head to press a quick kiss to your palm. “You’re damn right you did.”

“He’s hot.”

Bucky smirks.

You run your finger along his lower lip. “And… he knows how to fuck.”

Bucky ducks his head as he lets out a gentle laugh. His lips meet your neck, then your ear. He takes his time, but between kisses and nibbles he whispers, “Then I guess we both got the trifecta. And don’t you dare roll your eyes, cause it’s true – you love me, hell, you trust me which is so fucking incredible to me, you’re gorgeous, and I will freely admit that I can’t get enough of this…”

“I’m insatiable for you and what you do.”

The hot whispers at your ear send a chill through your body, defeating any chance you’d have of successfully rolling your eyes, especially considering that they’re currently busy rolling back into
your head with bliss. His hands start to wander again, and your breath begins to quicken when you feel his softened length still inside you begin to twitch.

Supersoldier, indeed.

“How is your thigh feeling,” Bucky murmurs between dropping hot, open mouthed kisses on your neck and shoulders.

“My what? Oh…yeah…it’s good. I’m good.” He’s doing a fine job of distracting you from any lingering discomfort…or rational thinking. Not that you’re complaining. “Everything’s, uh, everything’s good.”

“Mmm…” is the only acknowledgement you get as he continues moving his mouth against you, tasting whatever his lips and tongue can find.

It’s clear where this is going…until your stomach growls. Loudly.

Traitor.

Bucky pulls away slightly, obviously biting back his laughter. “So… I guess it’s time for a break.”

“What? No,” you plead, pulling his lips to yours. You’re pretty sure you have him convinced, until another rumble comes from your tummy. “Dammit.”

“Sweetheart, you need to eat.” Suddenly he’s all business, pressing one last kiss to your forehead before gingerly pulling out of you, causing you both to wince at the sticky feeling. “And get dried off. The last thing you need is to catch a cold.”

Well, he’s not wrong. Now that he isn’t covering you with his body, your damp skin is definitely feeling the chill, especially where the comforter is wet. In hindsight, maybe the thirty seconds it would’ve taken to dry off wouldn’t have been too much.

Then again…nope. Totally worth it.

“I think I need another shower,” you mutter while you shift to sit at the side of the bed.

“Sweetheart.” There’s no mistaking his tone as he drapes a dry blanket over your shoulders; Protective Bucky has been activated.

“Yeah, yeah, I know I need to eat,” you grumble, “and I am hungry. But I’m also unmoisturized and frizzy. I need lotion, leave in conditioner, and my face cream, or I’m going to uncomfortable and itchy until my next shower. And I’ll look like I just stuck my finger in an electric socket.”

Bucky barks out a laugh as he helps you to your feet. “You’re not that frizzy.”

“Yet,” you counter. “Friction is not a curly-haired girl’s best friend. You remember what happened the first time we did this, right?”

Bucky’s eyes drift and his lips curl into a ridiculous smile as he thinks back to the day you’re referencing. It was the second time you’d showered together – he insisted he needed a do-over and you sure as hell weren’t going to complain – and you hadn’t had time to finish your routine afterward because the boys woke up from their nap. Bucky would have covered you, but he got a call from Steve. All you could do was toss your hair into a bun and go with it.

It took Bucky over an hour that night to detangle your hair before bed.
“Okay fine.” He starts stripping the wet bedding from the bed and smirks. “You’ve got 5 minutes, and then it’s off to the kitchen to eat.”

“No,” you scoff, and immediately counter, “20 minutes. I need to rinse off, too. You’re messy.”

Bucky straightens indignantly, but you see the teasing light in his eyes. “I’m messy? I might be the cause, but you’re the reason. It takes two to tango, Doll.”

Your laughter echoes through the room; the normalcy you’re feeling right now is almost making you giddy, and the lightness is clearly reflected in Bucky’s entire being. “Yeah, I guess it does. I wasn’t complaining, by the way. Just stating a fact.”

He rolls his eyes before disappearing into the bathroom, returning a moment later with fresh blankets and a grin. “Ten minutes.”

Shaking your head, you watch his still naked form begin to make the bed while you head to the bathroom. God, he is a thing of beauty. “Fifteen,” you call through the open door. He doesn’t reply, he just laughs.

Bucky joins you in the bathroom a few minutes later with a pile of clothes for you both. “Take as long as you need, Sweetheart,” he presses a kiss to the back of your neck as he wraps his arms around you. “Just keep in mind that every time your stomach growls, I’m gonna think you’re ready to pass out. You’ve had IV fluids but haven’t eaten since we were on the jet.”

You smile at his reflection in the mirror as you lean into him, intensely grateful for how much he cares for you and for getting back these little moments with him. “I won’t take too long, I promise. I just want to get comfortable.”

Eyes soft, he nods.

You both exhale.
Chapter 52

Fingers entwined, Bucky leads you out of the bedroom exactly 18 minutes later. The gently lit hall leads to an elevator and one other door.

“There are two of us to a floor,” Bucky murmurs into the quiet as he gestures with a nod, “That’s Steve’s room.” He pushes a button and the doors silently slide open. “The kitchen and common area are a few floors down.”

You follow him into the elevator, doing your best to ignore the feeling of claustrophobia that sneaks up on you. This is new; tight spaces were never a problem for you before. Goddamn it. You suppose you should get used to it, at least for now. “Where are we exactly?” They’d mentioned it earlier, but you can’t remember all the details.

His gaze cuts to you but he doesn’t say anything about the sudden tightness in your voice. “Upstate New York, just off the Hudson.” When you nod without replying, Bucky pulls you into a tight hug and firmly rubs your back. “You’re safe here, Sweetheart. I promise. We moved you here because it’s quieter than the tower and there are a lot less people. No one here can or will hurt you.”

You nod into his soft t-shirt and breathe. Of course you’re safe here. Goddamn PTSD. The elevator door opens and the ominous feeling disappears. Mostly. “Whew, that sucked,” you mutter as you pull away.

Bucky nods with a half-hearted smile. He understands. “It’ll get better, Sweetheart.” He wraps his arm around your waist and leads you forward into another hall. “The kitchen is just around the corner. If you want I can make you something while you rest on one of the chairs,” he gestures to the breakfast bar as you enter the area.

“Um,” your eyes dart around the room, taking in the generous space, “would it be okay if I did the cooking? I just, I kinda –”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course. Just make sure you take a break if your leg starts to bother you.”

It was the answer you’d expected, but now you feel like you don’t know what to do or even where to start. Oh for fuck’s sake, you know how to cook, you chastise yourself. “Can…are there certain things I can use? Or –”

“You are free to use whatever you’d like, Miss Kiddo,” FRIDAY suddenly offers. “The pantries were freshly stocked in anticipation of your arrival, and Mr. Stark has asked me to inform you that you are to make yourself at home. In fact, the kitchen has been rearranged to match your home as closely as possible, so you should be able to find what you need without too much hassle.”

The gently accented voice startles you and you struggle to digest the unexpected information. “Miss Kiddo?” you blurt as Bucky ducks his head to hide a smile.

“Isn’t that your name?” It’s almost comical how the AI sounds confused.

“Kiddo - it’s what Stark calls you,” Bucky gently reminds you with a soft chuckle. “You’re free to correct her, if you’d like.”

Your mouth opens, closes, and opens again before you finally answer. “Well, yes. Yes he does.” It’s strangely comforting to hear, and after what you just went through it’s exhilarating that you
have a choice in the matter. “Yeah, FRIDAY, that’s fine.”

It’s silent again as Bucky waits on you to start moving…and then your stomach growls again. Right. Food.

Finally stepping into action, you open the fridge to see what’s available and then quickly assess the pantry. Damn – it’s like an entire grocery store is at your fingertips. Okay, so you can make pretty much whatever you want, but you haven’t had chance to make such a simple decision in so long that it’s a little overwhelming; you have to make a conscious effort to slow your racing thoughts. It’s just food, you remind yourself, and you can have whatever you want. So, what do you want? Something simple and quick. Absolutely no potatoes. Your stomach growls again, protesting at still being empty. You definitely want something satisfying.

Mind finally made up, you set some water to boil in a large, deep frying pan as you pull out some pasta, butter, cream, garlic, a few seasonings, and a package of chicken breasts that looks like it’s already been grilled.

“You can thank Barton for that,” Bucky chuckles from the breakfast bar as he watches you, chin in hand. “He offered to make supper for the team after a mission, and everyone got food poisoning because he was in a hurry and undercooked the chicken. Stark has made a point of having ready to eat protein available since then. If you want, there’s usually fresh stuff on the shelf below, toward the back.”

“No,” you murmur, “this is fine.” It’s more than fine – grilled chicken would be ideal for your pan alfredo, and as happy as you are to be in a kitchen again, you’re also grateful for the shortcut.

Your mind quiets as you settle into a rhythm. Salt the boiling water and add the pasta. Cut the chicken into strips, set aside to mince the garlic. Grate the cheese. Drain the pasta into a strainer and return the pan to the stove. Throw in some butter and sauté the garlic, then toss in the chicken and pasta. Add a few generous splashes of cream followed by the parmesan. Just a few turns with the pepper grinder, a few sprinkles of parsley, toss everything together until the cheese is melted and…done.

Damn that felt good.

When you turn around you see that Bucky has set out two plates at the breakfast bar, a loaf of crusty French bread, and olive oil along with a jar of dried spices for the oil. “You’re perfect, you know that?” you smile as you dish out the alfredo. You feel relaxed. Peaceful.

He shakes his head with a soft smile as you finally take the seat next to him. “Nah, but I love that you think so.”

Sitting as close as possible, the two of you eat in silence. The familiarity wraps you in warmth and although it takes a few minutes, you recognize the feeling as contentment. Yes. This is good.

A yawn creeps up on you. “Hey, what time is it, Love?”

He finishes chewing before answering. “A little after one a.m.”

Ugh. It feels later…or maybe earlier? You don’t know. Jetlag, surgery, and a massively fucked up sleep schedule before that is making you feel like time is just an illusion. Then again, maybe that’s the exhaustion. “So dishes and back to bed?”

Bucky plants a kiss on your forehead as he stands. “I’ll get the dishes later, Doll. But first, dessert if you have room.”
“Bucky, I feel like a bottomless pit right now,” you admit as you ruefully eyeball your empty plate. You thought you’d made more than enough pasta, but Bucky clearly has his appetite back and you feel like your body is trying to make up for lost time.

He doesn’t bother with plates as he slides a pie onto the counter and cuts into it with his fork. Not wasting any time, you do the same. “God, I love you.”

His fork pauses midair as he watches you from across the counter. “Are you talking to me or the pie?”

“Yes,” you manage around a mouthful of flakey, buttery crust and perfectly baked apples. When he nods and chuckles, you take another bite with an appreciative hum. It’s not just that it tastes good – it’s delicious and is clearly from a bakery that knows what they’re doing – it also brings an immeasurable amount of comfort. The filling tastes like your mom’s; if you had to guess you’d say that these are probably Haralson apples like the ones she grows in her back yard. The best pie apples in your humble opinion. The sweet-tart bite that hits the back of your cheeks brings you back to the crisp October days of your childhood and you can almost feel the golden autumn sun and smell the fallen leaves. That’s where the resemblance ends, though. She can’t make a decent homemade pie crust to save her life.

You can’t believe how much you miss her, but you’ll get to talk with her in a few hours. And your babies. Finally.

“Hey, I have a question for you.” Bucky has stopped eating and is watching you intently.

“Okay.” You nod for him to continue as you take another bite – just because he stopped doesn’t mean you want to.

He looks down, hooks his hair behind his ears, then stands up straight. If you didn’t know any better, you’d say he was nervous.

“Well…”

Scratch that. He is nervous. That makes you nervous and sets you on edge, so you put down your fork and hold your breath. “Buck, what is it?”

Bucky takes a deep breath, but can’t shake the hesitancy in his voice, “Well, I know we have a lot going on, and I know that our relationship hasn’t exactly been conventional.”

“Okay…” The food you just ate starts to feel like a lead ball in the pit of your stomach as contentment gives way to concern and your insecurities rear their ugly heads.

He’s quiet for what feels like forever before he blurting out, “Can…can I start courting you? Take you out on real dates, like a normal guy would do for a girl he’s sweet on? I know it’s kinda backwards and all but I really wanna do right by you.”

Well, that wasn’t at all what you were expecting. Taken by surprise, you blink before you answer, “Yeah. I’d like that.” You both give each other dopy smiles as you continue, “I’d like that a lot.”

He takes both of your hands in his as his grin fades to earnestness. “I want you to know I’m serious about you. About us. That I meant everything I said at the safehouse, and since I got you back – every damn word. But I also know that we’ve been through a lot and things might get tough, so I thought that dating – real dates – might help with the transition.”

Nodding, you continue what you now understand to be his train of thought. “You and I – we are
incredibly fucked up right now. Like, massively, absurdly, almost can’t believe our brains even function levels of fucked up. And it would be incredibly naïve for us to just assume that we could fly back home in a week or two and just go back to the way things were. It’s not going to be that simple.” You hesitate as an uneasy thought occurs to you. “You are coming home with me, right? You don’t have any, um, avenging to do?”

His nod immediately puts you at ease. “Yeah, Sweetheart – as long as you’ll have me, my place is with you. You are – we are – my priority. I’m taking an extended leave of absence from work so I can put my entire focus on us and getting better.”

You had hoped you would have some time with him, but you also realize that he does have a job, even if that job is nothing short of extraordinary. “Really?”

“Really. And Sweetheart, it might not be simple, but it’s not gonna be impossible, either. Maybe just a little complicated for a while till we get our heads sorted out. Being with you has been the easiest thing I’ve done in my life.”

You can’t help but nod along with his words – it’s the truth. And in realizing that, a small piece of your broken psyche glues itself back together.

“So…” Bucky is almost bashful as he releases one of your hands to take another forkful of pie, “I know it doesn’t give you much time, but what do you say to dinner and a show tomorrow night?”

It makes no sense at all that you have butterflies in your stomach, but you do. “I’d really like that.”

Bucky exhales as if he’s relieved. “Great! Great.” He flashes an almost impossibly bright smile. “I’ll pick you up at 5:00.”

Did you miss something? Aren’t you sharing a room with him? “You’ll what?”

He winks at you, causing those butterflies to take flight yet again. “It’s a date, Doll. I’m gonna give you the space to get ready – I’ll get ready in Steve’s room – and then I’ll pick you up at 5:00.”

“I…okay,” you laugh as you squeeze his hand, loving how light you feel.

“Speaking of getting ready, it it’s alright with you, Nat will come by tomorrow morning and pick you up to take you shopping.”

“Shopping?”

Bucky smiles so broadly his face could split in two, “I’m taking you out on a date tomorrow night. Finally. This is something I’ve wanted to do for months, and all I could manage was that night at the barn. But now? Doll, we’re on my turf, and you’re both safe and free. I’m going to take you on the first date you deserve, the one I would have taken you on if I had met you under different circumstances. So,” Bucky lifts your hand to his lips, “you’re gonna need a dress,” he kisses your knuckles, “and whatever else you would want to get ready that you don’t already have here. I want my girl to have everything she needs or wants to be comfortable. Besides, if things go the way I expect they will, the way I pray they will, you’re gonna need a drawer of your stuff here anyway so you don’t have to pack as much when we spend time in New York.”

You’d be lying if you said that last sentence didn’t make your heart skip a beat. “Okay.” You don’t bother elaborating – he knows that you’re agreeing to more than just a date or shopping.

“Yeah?” The happiness in his eyes is enough to make your breath catch.
“Yeah.” You take another bite of pie as you smirk. “You know, it’s going to be hard to top our first date. That was pretty fantastic.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Nope, just a fact. That was seriously the sweetest, most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me.”

He smirks, eyes smoldering. “Doll, you’re gonna get the full Bucky Barnes treatment – the barn date was me with one hand tied behind my back. I’m gonna knock your socks off tomorrow.”

Anticipation spikes your blood – somehow, you believe him, but you can’t miss the chance to gently tease, “We’ll see.”

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