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## the equilibrists

by [Bob5](#), [workerbee73](#)

### Summary

The hard part is what comes next.

A post-movie follow-up to *Teenage Makeout* and *Off the Grid*.

### Notes

Disclaimer: We own nothing. Title taken from the poem [The Equilibrists](#) by John Crowe Ransom. The song referenced at the beginning of this chapter is [Things Have Changed](#) by Bob Dylan.

This work was inspired by [Five Times\\* Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff Made Out Like Teenagers because REASONS](#). by [Bob5](#), [workerbee73](#)

## Chapter 1

*Lot of water under the bridge, lot of other stuff too  
Don't get up gentlemen, I'm only passing through*

"I don't recognize this one."

"Who?" Clint said.

She gestured towards the radio. "It's Dylan, isn't it?"

He looked over at her. She could feel the shift and slant of his eyes. "Yeah," he said.

She smiled, hands lightly tracing the steering wheel. She couldn't help it if she felt pleased. It didn't trigger any further conversation and there was no nod of approval; she was getting used to that. Were they in Oklahoma or still in Missouri? The road was long and the scenery lost in her periphery, her thoughts fixated on the man by her side. Ever since New York, he had been uncharacteristically quiet and she missed the sound of his voice when he sang. She missed being made to laugh. It was so boring out here and to think where they were going caused an ache to bubble in her chest.

She thought back to the previous morning, to waiting outside Fury's office, Clint emerging silent and brimming, with what she did not know. He had held her gaze and scanned her face like he was reminding himself of something. He never revealed what was said but she knew that he was angry and she knew that he had long channeled that anger into an exit. Clint held Fury with a grudging respect and a whole lot of distrust and he had been planning this day, probably before he even met her. But he had needed her reassurance then. He needed to remind himself. When they were safely secreted outside, she had held his hand and kissed his cheek to tell him it was his, the muscle in his jaw tensing beneath her lips.

With what few belongings they had left packed up and thrown into the back of a SHIELD issue car, they waved goodbye to Loki.

You smiled then, she thought. You liked my joke. Why won't you tell me what's going on? I know you will when you're ready but I'm so impatient. I can't do this on my own.

The song changed and she returned her focus to the road. Two hundred miles from Oklahoma City. She didn't recognize anything anymore.

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She awoke to the break of dawn, the ocean to her left and a eerie orange glow stretching out across the sky. Clint glanced over at her; she couldn't help but smile.

"Hey," she said.

"Morning." His expression softened. "We're nearly there. You remember the way?"

She nodded, sitting up and observing the road as it curved and arched higher towards their destination.

She had only been here twice before, Tony Stark demanding far more wrangling than expected. The house appeared just as she remembered it, perched on the hillside, sunny and bright and surrounded by a symphony of color.

Clint pulled the car to a stop and turned off the ignition. They both got out and Natasha stopped to survey the long walkway, a warm hand wrapping around her own.

"It'll be okay," he said. His thumb pressed against her palm. "We can do this."

Silence stretched between them but it wouldn't last forever. She looked down at the way their hands fit, at the way their fingers intertwined, simple as breathing.

This will last, she thought. It will hold me steady. She squeezed his fingers back, taking the first of many slow steps forward.

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"My darling girl," Betty said, wrapping Natasha in a warm embrace before ushering them inside.

She took Clint's arm as she led them down the hallway, patting his bicep in what seemed a lingering way. "You did so well, you know," she was saying, taking them through to the living room. "Aliens! We used to joke about Roswell back when I was at Langley. Who knew?"

She gestured for them to sit down, rubbing her hands together gleefully. "I didn't have time to bake anything, you'll be glad to know. Now what can I get you? And please, tell me all about Phil. He must be so busy..."

"Betty." Clint placed a gentle hand on her arm, guiding her to the couch. "Will you sit down with me?"

Betty fell silent. Natasha swallowed. Give me my courage, please. She wouldn't have to do this alone.

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*One week later*

"She eat anything?"

Natasha placed the tray onto the counter. "She liked your soup." She leaned back, watching as he methodically washed the dishes. "She asked me if you were still single."

He smiled slightly. "And what did you say?"

"I said ask him yourself."

She laughed as he flicked her with soap suds and it felt like their first unguarded moment since arriving. As soon as Betty was informed of her nephew's death, she took to her bed, asking for nothing but to be left alone. Natasha refused, ensuring that she was comfortable and encouraging her to eat, even calling the doctor out to prescribe something that might offer some respite. "I want to feel this," Betty had said and Natasha respectfully had to ask the doctor to leave.

It was a gradual process. Betty cried on the third day and Natasha cried too, not through her own grief but with the weight of the world on her shoulders. This process was tiring and she wondered how Betty had survived for over ten years as a widow, let alone this brief period without her favorite boy. On the fourth day, she managed tea and a grilled cheese sandwich. By the end of the week, she was a convert to Clint Barton's cooking.

Clint had insisted, the kitchen becoming strictly male territory. He cooked and he cleaned and he repaired the leak in the downstairs bathroom, swept the garden and removed the rotting leaves and detritus that clogged up the storm drains. He had found a dead possum and buried it on the beach, going through half a pack of Marlboros in the aftermath as the sun sank beneath the sea.

Natasha had found him there, silent and stoic and holding all the secrets that she wished were her own. She knew better than to ask him and he would tell her when he was ready so she stood before him and placed her hands on his shoulders, leaning up and kissing him instead. Tobacco and American beer lingered on his lips but that was all that he would give her. She accepted it and he rewarded her with the circle of his arms. When he kissed her on the top of her head, she decided that it was enough for now.

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Clint was somewhat shocked to discover that Elizabeth MacIntosh had the world's greatest classic bike collection. He had wandered with awe through the dark and dusty garage at this mausoleum of his favorite things. They need love, he thought. They need attention. They need restoring. He had wanted to call out to Natasha and make her see. This is art; not your cubists or your postimpressionists. This is art to me.

He didn't call for her. She was focused on Mrs. M and, well, he was focused on other things. It was hard to say and so he didn't say a word. He hoped that she would understand.

He found himself alone in the house more often than in company and had become fascinated by the many photographs that lined Betty's walls. They were mostly of a young woman—attractive; he would have to tell her that—and a man, older and rougher. Lucky guy, Clint thought. You had the bikes and you got the girl.

Betty found him one day, staring at Dr. M with a pipe and a fishing rod.

"Did he read a lot of Hemingway?" Clint said, glancing over as she came to stand beside him.

"Chandler," she said. "But he did like to fish."

"How are you feeling?"

She looked up at him with kind, knowing eyes. "How are you?"

"Bored," he said. "Don't be offended. I just feel at a loss."

"She needs you," Betty said. "Just like you need her."

Clint smiled, laughing softly to himself. "You were a kick-ass spy, weren't you?"

"Still am," she said.

"I can see where Coulson got it from."

Her eyes saddened. “That was all his daddy, I’m afraid.”

“Bullshit, Betty. You know how many times he used to kick my ass? Only handler that I couldn’t shake.”

“You sound like trouble.”

He grinned. Betty laughed.

“Not only my handler,” he said. “He recruited me, you know?”

“I hadn’t heard that story.”

“I don’t mention it much. It was in a sheriff’s office.”

“Should I ask?”

“No; probably not.” He looked over at Betty then turned his gaze back to Bob. “He ever get into brawls?”

“No,” she said. “He preferred to get me out of them.”

He studied Bob with something close to recognition. “I was on leave; ten months in Iraq. Put four men in the hospital when one of them raised his hand to a woman. I thought Coulson was my god damn lawyer.”

Betty let out a soft chuckle. “He did always have that look about him.”

“He made me an offer that I couldn’t refuse. So here I am.”

“And where are you?”

They stared at each other for a long while. Betty patted his arm. “Drink?”

“Allow me.” He walked over to where she kept the whiskey and poured two glasses, handing one over.

“He called you two the headache,” she said, staring into the brown liquid.

Clint laughed. “I bet he did.”

“I won’t say what he called you after Budapest.” She looked as fragile as the crystal between her hands. “He’d met someone, not too long before that—a nice girl, a musician. Brought her by the house one time. I liked her.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“He was angry with himself for letting you go on that mission. But I told him, risks are the only thing worth taking.”

“Trust me,” he said bitterly, “I wasn’t worth it.”

"If you say so," Betty said but her expression told him otherwise. "So what are we drinking to?" She raised her glass.

Clint reluctantly followed suit. "Think he'd hate it if we drank to him?"

She was smiling now. "I think he'd be mortified."

"To Phil," he said and they both drank in silence.

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Stop trying to pretend, he thought. I can tell when you're dreaming.

The room contained a double bed and a well loved sofa. The sofa was barely the length of Clint but it was learning the contours of his body and he liked to rest his head back on the curved and torn armrest that gave him the greatest view of the bed. He watched her most nights and he knew the rhythm of her breathing, the settled restfulness of her body when sleep would finally come and the unbidden twitching when she was lost to a dream.

She was still now, breath soft and shallow, one arm under her pillow and the other tucked along her side. The sheet was half thrown off and he could see the outline of one bare leg, the curve of her breasts under the worn cotton of her t-shirt. Her lips were parted and her eyes were closed but she was watching him just as he was watching her.

Shit Red, he thought, do you know what you do to me? Do you have any idea? Distance was called for but that didn't make it easy. His vigil towed the line between penance and self-indulgence. He shouldn't be here but he couldn't stay away.

Clint pulled off his shirt and lay back on the couch. She opened her eyes.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

She sat up, the sheet pooling around her waist as she held out her hand. "Let me see you."

He could never refuse her; it was both a gift and a curse. He dragged himself back to standing and went to sit on the edge of the bed.

She leaned forward, soft fingertips tracing the outline of his brow, his cheeks. They found themselves tangling in his hair and smoothing down to the base of his neck, just the lightest pressure; a release. She held his face between her hands and he made no move to stop her when she leaned in and kissed his forehead. "She doesn't blame you, you know," she said. He closed his eyes as her head rested against his, thumb brushing across his cheek.

"Stay," she said and kissed him again.

She moved over as he laid his body atop the mattress, covers and all. She curled up next to him and he wrapped one arm around her side. Her hand came to rest over his heart.

"Thank you." Her voice was quiet and content; she would ask no more of him tonight.

He wasn't sure who fell asleep first.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Isis](#) by Bob Dylan.

*We set out that night for the cold in the North  
I gave him my blanket, he gave me his word*

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#### DAY 1

"It's time I kicked you out."

Clint glanced up from the palette of eggs on the stove as Natasha set down the coffee pot.

"You heard me," Betty said. "No more freeloading. You have better things to do."

It was the first time Betty had joined them for breakfast since their arrival, the first day of the third week. It was a Thursday. There was little significance in any of these things.

"Betty," Natasha said. "Don't you think—"

She was interrupted by the sound of the front door slamming.

"Who's that?" she said.

Betty only smiled.

"Well isn't this quaint." Nell set her bag by the table and helped herself to some coffee. "Congrats on saving the world, kids," she said, raising her mug in a toast. "Now scram."

Thirty minutes later they were bundled into their SHIELD issue car, complete with all their possessions and a box lunch packed by two women who should never be in charge of packing a box lunch. After a round of hugs and constant assurances, Betty waved them off with Nell by her side.

They made their way down the driveway and Clint pulled the car to a stop right before they hit the main road.

"Where to, Red?"

Natasha studied him for a moment; she couldn't read his eyes. "Somewhere they'll never find us," she said.

They headed north, up the coast and along the highway, always keeping the ocean in view. Clint drove and she took charge of the radio, which he was uncharacteristically quiet about, even when



she left on some Manilow. The road became familiar; they passed the turn to Budapest just as the sun climbed bright overhead but still he said nothing. Thirty miles north of that it began to feel like another road trip in another car that wasn't their own and she couldn't help but ask: "Are we going back? To the cabin?"

Clint never took his eyes off the road. "I sold it," was all he said.

The sun was long gone in the sky before he spoke again. Natasha had been drifting in and out of consciousness, Clint still at the wheel.

"Tired?" he said.

"I can go a bit longer."

They got a motel room. A hot shower felt like a godsend; she didn't realize how exhausted she was. Her t-shirt still sticking to damp skin, she paused, trying to figure out which of the two beds she should occupy. Before she could decide, Clint reached out and pulled her onto his, arranging their limbs until she was halfway sprawled on his chest and tucked tightly against his side. They stayed that way for the rest of the night.

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## DAY 2

"I swear to god, Nat, you know this one."

Natasha pressed bare feet to the dashboard, looking over at Clint with a sly smile. "The Beatles?" she said.

Clint slapped the steering wheel. "Fuck you. You're doing this on purpose." There was light in his eyes. "Can't tell the Beatles from the Stones; I'm wasting my time here."

They pulled over at the first road stop diner they came to, hungry for breakfast and the chance to stretch their legs. They chased the tail-end of dawn as they continued up the coastal highway but neither had the tolerance for empty stomachs and no caffeine for long.

There was an ease to Clint's posture now, a relaxation to his shoulders. He sang *Wild Horses* and Natasha pretended to forget the words.

She took a seat in a booth by the window, watching as Clint headed straight for the counter to investigate the pie stand. "You always judge a diner by the makeup of its pies," he explained. She had no inclination to question his philosophy just yet.

He smiled at the waitress before eyeing up the merchandise. She looked sixteen, bright eyed and with too much make up, her youth shining through all her efforts to appear older. She smiled back at Clint and let out a surprisingly low laugh. Natasha didn't hear what was said.

He walked back and took the seat opposite, placing a mug of coffee before her. "You okay?"

Natasha shrugged. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You have a look," he said, lifting his own coffee to his lips. Black and steaming hot, he took a long sip. She often wondered whether he could drink molten lava. "Shit, this is good."

“Did she make it?” Natasha said.

“Who?”

“Hey, you guys ready to order?”

Natasha turned to find their teenage waitress staring at Clint, the end of her pen resting between bright pink lips.

“Pancakes,” Clint said. “And don’t go stingy on the syrup.”

“I thought you wanted pie,” she said, smiling conspiratorially as if sharing some private joke.

“That comes later,” he said. And then he winked.

There were seventeen ways that Natasha could take them both out. Five other patrons in the place. That was doable. There would be no witnesses. No one to live to tell the tale of the day Natasha Romanoff let a child make a play for her man. *Her man?* Fuck. Where had that come from?

You think he’s single? she asked herself. You think you want him to be? He’s been yours since before you knew what that meant. He told you as much. He’s not allowed to do things like wink.

That was that; she opened her mouth to speak.

“She’ll take the pancakes too,” Clint said, smiling until the waitress took her cue to leave.

He turned to look at her, innocent eyes and still blank smile morphing into the biggest shit-eating grin she had ever seen.

“Jealous?” he said.

Natasha held onto her mug, the handle snapping off in her grip.

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They received their food in silence; there were no more winks. Natasha frowned.

“What is it?” Clint said.

“I didn't even want pancakes.”

He reached for her plate. “More for me, I guess.” She watched as he took heaping mouthfuls, lips sticky with syrup, his Adam’s apple moving up and down as he swallowed. She was fascinated; she was also hungry.

“Here,” he said and held a forkful out to her, syrup dripping off the end. She leaned forward, her mouth closing around the tines and down to the base. A new kind of hunger seemed to take over Clint and he studied her silently, pupils blown wide.

Natasha sat back, chewed then swallowed, wiping the excess syrup from her mouth with the pad of her thumb. She stared back at Clint and sucked on the tip.

For a brief moment at least, they weren't in the diner anymore. There was fire in him still. It was time to stoke the flames.

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Having endured the ominous red glow of the low fuel gauge for the last two hours, they finally stopped for gas. Leaving Clint tired and relieved by the pump, Natasha entered the store, drawn immediately to a display stand offering a garish yet varied selection of cheap and ineffectual sunglasses. Selecting the perfect pair, she moved on to the sweets counter, paying for her purchases then heading for the restroom.

The room was a health hazard but plans had been made and required being put into action. She took a knife to her jeans and the edges of her top, tied up her hair and put her sunglasses on. Slipping her boots off as she exited the stall, she smiled to herself and stepped out onto the forecourt.

With the eyes of every man in the vicinity on her, Natasha made a beeline for the only one not to gawp. Her feet were bare and her legs exposed, jeans reduced to shorts that failed to cover most of her ass. Her shirt wasn't fairing much better, stomach and cleavage vying for attention; they could fight all they liked, she thought, red lips pursing around a red lollipop. Eyes hidden behind a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses and hair twisted into pigtails, she felt young and carefree in a way that she had never been allowed to.

Her smile widened as he looked up from where he stood, leaning against the hood of the car, arms crossed and eyes drinking her in like she was an oasis in the desert. A trucker might have whistled; some frat boys yelled. Natasha only heard her heart beating, beating, beating.

"Need a ride?" he said.

She tossed the lollipop to the side and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body flush along the length of him. Mouth sweet and wet, it opened against his and her tongue slipped inside, tasting him, syrup and coffee and cigarettes and all that she had missed. The kiss was long and filthy and everything that she wanted it to be, his hands gripping her ass filled with more flesh than denim.

He didn't let go as she broke off the kiss, lowering her sunglasses and whispering in his ear.

"Take me home, daddy."

The roar of Clint's laughter reverberated through her. Mission accomplished; she grinned.

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There had been no orgasms since before New York. Natasha and her right hand had embarked on a torrid affair after Clint left for New Mexico but under his constant gaze at Mrs M's, she felt denied even that simple pleasure. Horny and now increasingly bored, she stretched out across the back seat, insisting she was tired as she had turned her ass to him and climbed over from the passenger's side.

She studied his reflection in the rearview mirror, his eyes seemingly meeting hers not as often as she wanted. She arched her back and sighed, fingers drifting across her stomach, the inside of her thighs. She bent one knee and let the other loll against the back of the driver's seat, leaning her

head against one arm, her eyes sliding halfway closed. She watched as he readjusted the mirror then undid the top button of her shorts.

Can you see my cunt? she thought. Do you want to? What would happen if I got myself off right now? Would we crash and burn, baby? Please.

Less than ten miles later and with the sun still visible, Clint pulled over.

She watched as he got out the driver's seat and walked to the other side of the car, flinging open the back door and crawling in to join her.

"Sleepy?" she said.

"Fuck no." And then his mouth was upon her, hands traveling the length of her legs and ass, stomach and breasts, rediscovering and reclaiming a forgotten country's worth of territory that had been desperately waiting for him. She had forgotten the rhythm of his kisses, the weight of his body, his hands, his hands, his hands over everything. Fingers slipping down the front of her shorts, he pulled back and smiled.

"Knew you weren't wearing any." Two fingers inside her, three; pressure and heat and tension building and building until she unraveled beneath him, moaning her pleasure as his eyes soaked up the sight.

He removed his hand and stroked her cheek and she took hold of his fingers, licked herself off each one like a kid with a lollipop, like it was his dick; she would take his hand if this was all that he would give her, slick with her heat, a three-fingered salute to her unmaking.

"Fuck, Tash."

Clint disappeared for longer than it took to take a piss. She didn't ask why. Reclining the passenger seat, he leaned back and she curled up on top of him, cloaked in Betty's crocheted blanket as they settled down for the night.

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## DAY 3

The following morning Clint took Natasha shopping.

They left the coast and headed inland, crossing the border until they came to Vancouver, Clint making a stop outside a sporting goods store.

"This wasn't what I had in mind," Natasha said.

"Woman, I am taking you shoe shopping. You should be ecstatic."

Shoes turned out to be boots and not the four-inch stacked heels that now resided in the backseat after the previous day's wardrobe change. "Real boots," was all Clint would say.

When Natasha asked if they were heading for the North Pole, Clint merely smiled.

They drove further north and the terrain became more rugged. They spent the night in an open field; Clint built a fire and cooked for her and they settled into a shared sleeping bag. The air was

cool but his body was warm and she had been trying so hard to hold back but when he leaned in to kiss her goodnight, she could help herself no longer. She climbed on top of him, mouth fused to his as she worked the buttons on her shirt. His hands captured hers and he held them still.

"No."

She pulled her hands free and sat up. Slowly, she reached for the buckle of his belt. Clint tensed.

"Just let me do this," she said. "Nothing else. Please."

She unbuttoned his pants and wrapped her hands around him and god—she was so tempted to use her mouth; just one taste— she had learnt her own self control by now. She stroked him to release, watched as his lips parted and his eyes closed and he groaned beneath her, the tension ebbing out of his body until he lay quiet and sated. She cleaned him up, climbed back into the sleeping bag, pressed a kiss to his lips and fell asleep beneath the stars.

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## DAY 4

There was silence between them the following day but also contentment. Clint exuded a calmness, a kind of serenity that had been missing for so long and Natasha was at a loss to do anything but drift in its fog. She was lost in the mystery of him and this trip and where they were going; of what now existed between them. It didn't seem possible to feel so scared and exhilarated at the same time.

They travelled out of Canada and into Alaska and Natasha suddenly understood why all her other shoes would be inadequate. Real boots for real terrain. The land was alive, green and raw and ragged all around them. Clint seemed to come alive too; she couldn't explain it. His eyes were bright as if the last dull blue of Loki's spell was fading out of him. There were few stops and little conversation. She was overwhelmed. What was there to say?

They drove north of Anchorage and pulled up at a small airstrip. Clint opened her door for her and held out his hand.

Where are you taking me?

He smiled. She put her hand in his and followed him from the car.

Inside one of the hangars was a small single engine aircraft with one propeller and barely room enough two. It looked archaic, like something out of an old movie.

"Do you know how to fly this thing?"

"Yes," he said.

Give me all your secrets, she thought. Tell me everything.

There was a separate storage hangar where Clint had amassed their supplies. He handed over some cash and the keys of the car to an unnamed man at the doorway. There was no explanation given and none that she wanted right now. They loaded the plane without fuss or banter. They worked together as they always did, without anything needing to be said.

They pulled out onto the runway. Natasha got in and watched as Clint readied the controls. There was so little space, nothing between them in the tiny shell of the cockpit. Lost to the world, she had no idea where she was going; she had never been in a plane so small before. She felt panicked, focusing on the assuredness of Clint's movements. This was somewhere that she wanted to be. Eyes on Clint, she strapped herself in.

"Ready?" he said.

She nodded.

They took off, unsteady, loud and uncertain and she gripped her seat and held her breath as the ground pulled away from beneath them. The plane groaned as it struggled to climb and she thought that they would never make it. It wasn't possible for something so old and fragile to fly like this. They broke through the clouds. She looked out the window. They soared.

Alaska was nothing like it had looked from the car. It was everything. It was the body of the earth, fleshy with trees and scarred by mountains, riverbeds twisting like tears through its skin. There was life and there was history and there was so much fucking beauty, she struggled to take it in. Her eyes stung and her breath caught; she looked over at the man sitting next to her.

It was hard to look away but it was harder not to see him, to see the control and the concentration and the calmness of certainty spread across the familiar lines and terrain of Clint Barton's face.

There is so much to see, she thought. There is so much to see.

The sun in her eyes and the land down below, she reached out for him, hand grabbing blindly as she gazed out the window. She felt warm fingers as he caught her in his grip and she held on tightly.

Thank you, she thought. Thank you for sharing this with me.

Forty-five minutes later, they began their descent.

The clouds dispersed and the forests appeared wilder, the mountains more dangerous and the rivers a bottomless blue. Through the trees and along the edge of a lake, a small black strip came into being. Clint guided the plane and eased it to landing, Natasha holding her hands together as she made silent prayers.

The plane stuttered along the gravel and came to a stop, engine whirring and fading into nothing. There was no more noise but the whisper of everything. There was only them.

Clint released the controls and removed his headphones, turning to face her.

"Think they'll find us here?" His smile was as bright as morning.

Natasha smiled too.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Shelter from the Storm](#) by Bob Dylan.

*'Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood  
When blackness was a virtue and the road was full of mud  
I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form  
"Come in," she said, "I'll give you shelter from the storm"*

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On Clint's first night in Alaska, the temperature outside was minus three. It was minus two inside the pile of sticks that SHIELD called a cabin, and he tried to convince himself that a single degree made the slightest bit of difference as he struggled to light a fire. This was his punishment and he would learn to endure. There was nothing here but the emptiness and the cold. Or so he had thought.

"How did you find this place?"

Natasha stood at the edge of the lake, her gaze fixed on the water and the trees and the view of the mountains in the distance. She couldn't take her eyes off the scenery and Clint had to work hard to hide his elation.

"Supply run," he said. "Plane got blown off course, nearly ran into a mountain. Ended up here instead."

"Supply run? I thought you'd been sentenced to freeze your ass off huddled by a fire somewhere."

He smiled.

What started out as punishment became something else. The survival training came easily to him, like discovering a language forgotten since birth. He learned how to adapt to the terrain, how to track and avoid being tracked, how to live. The cabin in California was nothing compared to this. That had been child's play; this was survival. But as it turned out, it was something that he was good at, excelling to the point that he was asked to stay on and train some of the new recruits.

He became familiar with the lay of the land, its secrets and its beauty. There was so much danger in the heart of this place, a heady darkness that you could get lost in, but that heart was a living, beating thing. Life existed; it endured. And Clint endured too. More than that, he thrived.

Landing on a frozen lake in the middle of a blizzard, he emerged from the cockpit and took one look around and knew he had finally found his place in the world.

(His time would come later.)

"Did you build this too?"

A tiny cabin sat on the edge of the forest, a few hundred yards from the lake. To say it was simple was an understatement—it contained two bunks, a stove for heating and cooking, a sink, and a bathroom the size of a closet. Clint shook his head.

“No. But I know the guy who owns it. We can stay as long as we like.”

Natasha studied him for a moment, analyzing him in that way she had, like she was figuring out the best approach to a particularly complicated puzzle. She didn’t ask and he was glad; there was so much to be said, so much bursting at the seams and he didn’t want it to come out wrong. Her attention was quickly captured by another structure.

“A barn? Are you kidding me?” She ran to the old building, an ancient shell of wood that some settler had built long ago before deciding that this land wasn’t for him. She approached its large door with a kind of awe; he had never seen her look so excited. “Are there horses?” she said.

“Uh ... no.” Clint’s brow furrowed. “It’s just for storage.”

“Oh.” Her face fell and, for a moment, she looked ten years old. She shook it off and turned back towards him.

“So,” she prompted. “Show me.”

“Show you what?”

Her smile returned. “Everything.”

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Clint could only offer her a glimpse in the hours that they had until sundown. He took her along a trail that ran close to the lake, watching as she picked through the undergrowth and over rocks, saying nothing as she struggled to break her new boots in. There would be time enough, he hoped.

She wore tight jeans and one of his sweaters and he may have dwelled longer on the way that her clothes fitted her body than all the scenery that surrounded them. Did she understand? Did she see what he saw?

She was drawn to the stream that flowed down from the mountains and when she sought his approval, he nodded and she knelt, raised eager handfuls to her lips and let the clear liquid run down her face as she startled at the cold and the taste. She laughed, turning to him, face wet and eyes so alive and he felt each heartbeat in his chest squeeze out his blood with a painful recognition.

She looked free, he thought. Natasha in the wild.

There was no one to control them here. It still felt hard to believe. There was only himself and her and this.

What do you do when the controls are no longer there? Who watches the watchmen?

Clint smiled back at her.



"It tastes good," she said.

He let her take his hand and pull him down beside her.

---

Natasha struggled with a comb through her hair. "What time is it?"

"22:14," Clint said.

The comb caught on a knot and she tossed it to the ground in annoyance. "How is it still light?"

"Long days in the summer." Was it going to be a problem? "I can help you with that," he said and led her to the edge of the lake.

A few minutes later and she was sighing contentedly beneath his hands, fingers massaging the shampoo into her scalp with a practiced ease. He hummed to himself then began singing softly, studying the pale perfection of her face as her head tilted back, lips parted and eyes closed. Picking up a pail of water, he rinsed the last of the shampoo away and she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"What song were you singing?" she said.

He stroked her cheek and she held onto his hand. "I don't know." He couldn't remember.

Why did you cut your hair? Why is everything so different? I could kiss you right now. Do you know how much I want to?

She smiled up at him and he pulled away.

They spoke little up to dinner, Clint making a small fire and laying out blankets for Natasha to sit on while they ate. He kept his distance, choosing a spot where the flames flickered between them. Natasha put down her plate and looked straight at him, her gaze cutting through all that was in the way.

"Are we ever going to talk about this?" she said.

"Talk about what?" He swallowed down a mouthful of food.

"You're still holding back. You bring me here to this beautiful place and you don't tell me anything. You won't touch me. You won't talk about what happened. What's going on?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth, Clint! Please. It's important to me. I need to understand this, to understand you."

He closed his eyes. "Nat—"

"You can't keep this locked inside. It's like you're afraid to be around me, of what you'll do. I beat this out of you once already. You think I can't do it again?"

He smiled to himself. "I know you can." He turned away, towards the darkness of the lake; the smoke from the fire was stinging his eyes. "You shouldn't have to," he said. "You shouldn't have

to be afraid of what might happen if I lose control again.”

“What do you mean?”

He stood up and walked to the edge of the water. The brief window of night had descended; the lake appeared like an abyss. He nudged a pebble with his boot and watched as the ripples spread like velvet oil. He could not see his reflection.

“I liked it,” he said and he wondered whether Natasha could hear him. “To have nothing there, nothing to hold me back. I killed because I wanted to. I did everything that Loki told me just because I could. I fought you and... I could’ve...”

“You didn’t kill me.”

He spun around. “I wanted to! Don’t you get that? And I have to live with it. I just, I don’t know how to. And I am so fucking scared of what I’m capable of just by being around you.”

“So you brought me to a secluded location?” He could hear the amusement in her voice as she walked towards him, hair glowing red like the flames from the fire. “You’re no threat to me, Clint Barton. Not in the way you think.” She joined him at that watery precipice, light and dark cutting lines across her face. “I just need you to touch me.” Her voice sounded so small. “Do you know how long I’ve waited? All I can think about is when you don’t hold back.”

“You like that?” It made no sense.

“Best of all. You think I was kidding at the cabin?”

“I hold back all the time,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve ever stopped fully.” His eyes ran the length of her.

She smiled. “That I’d like to see.”

Clint had seen it in men less dangerous than him. It’s a poison, he thought. Some have drink or drugs. You can slip under with so many vices. You can fuck the world and it’ll never be enough. Do you know what you do to me?

He turned and walked away.

“Where are you going?” He could hear her footsteps behind him. “Is that all you have to say?”

“You said you were compromised,” he said.

“Yes.”

He stopped and looked at her from over his shoulder. “What did he do?”

A flicker of uncertainty passed across her face. So she was holding back too. How many secrets were left between them?

“Tell me,” he said, facing her fully.

Head down, she wrapped her arms around herself. “He told me what you’d do,” she said.

“What I’d do?” He took a slow and steadying breath. “What do you mean?”

“He knew things about me that no one else did.”

You must hate me, he thought. See how I’ve ruined everything? Your secrets were always my secrets too.

“It doesn’t matter, Clint.” She was looking at him now. “It never changed how I feel.”

“What did he say, Natasha? I need to hear you say it.”

Her next words would haunt him until his dying day.

---

Do you know what the Black Widow fears? Nothing; or so the legend goes.

“He said that he’d make you kill me.”

She does not fear death for death is her only tool. It is all that she knows. How do you kill a killer?

“But first you’d hurt me.”

Did you know that she was just a girl? That girl had a name.

“Hurt me in ways only you’d know how.”

Natalia Alianova Romanova. There is so much more you do not know.

"Slowly, he said. Intimately. In every way I'd fear."

All they know is the killer but you’re a woman too. That’s all I know you as. That is all I know. What do you think it means? How do you think I’m supposed to betray you?

He clenched his fists, nails tearing into skin. He could see it all.

Your heart, Natasha; it’s a bloody wound; it runs so deep. I could plunge my hand in; I could bathe in its warmth. Your blood runs through you and I could taste it. How much have you already given me? How much more could I take? I could take all the things that you try to hide. I could take them all. I could destroy every last thing that’s good about you.

What would be left, Natasha? What would be left when I’m done?

He saw himself through a veil of blue with her body beneath him, her blood on his hands and a smile on his face. He looked down at his hands but they belonged to another, caked with dirt and stained with tobacco and reaching for another drink. Do you remember how it felt? Do you think you’re any different?

There was only the forest now and the darkness that he craved. There was only Natasha behind him as she called out his name but it was a different voice that he heard.

He didn't look back.

---

She let him go because he would've done - always did - the same for her.

He would come back, she knew. He would come back but what he would do and what he would say were beyond her comprehension. She sat down in his spot and stared into the fire and let her skin absorb the heat. She picked up his half eaten plate of food and wrapped her mouth around his fork.

I can taste you, she thought, eyes closed, and then she smiled. I'm an idiot; don't you see? I can barely function on my own.

The cabin felt cold and empty inside. She was reluctant to use the wood burning stove. Once bitten; twice shy. There were still scars on her fingertips somewhere.

She pulled on his sweater and wrapped herself in Betty's blanket and lay down beneath a mosquito net like a fly waiting for the spider's bite.

I'm not trapped, she thought. I'm waiting. I know you'll be okay. You're stronger than this. You're stronger than any other person I've known. You've never given up on me. That takes all the strength in the world.

She did not sleep. In the morning, she cleared up the fire outside and washed the plates and folded up the blankets. She unpacked their supplies and made the cabin look like it was lived in. She thought about swimming in the lake but was it safe and what would Clint say? Warming up and performing a kata, she aimed her knives at the trees in the direction that he had taken.

Come back, she thought. Come back; do I make a sound? This world is so empty. I feel like I'm the last person in it.

At the back of the plane, she left his quiver and his bow. Come back for what is yours, she thought. Come back and claim it.

---

She was standing where he had left her, by the water's edge, as if she had been keeping vigil by the spot. He knew it not to be true because her clothes were different. She was wearing a different sweater but it was his. Her feet were bare, her toes wet. She called to him like a totem.

His steps were silent, his intent unclear. She turned and said nothing when she saw him. His pace quickened as his heart raced. The sun felt warm on his skin.

"I knew you would," she said. "I knew you would."

He fell at her feet, arms holding her waist and face pressed to her stomach. He felt her fingers in his hair and the sound of her laughter around him. Sing to me, Natasha. Sing, sing, sing.

"Where did you go?"

Four hours of night. He had never been afraid of the dark but to walk into the light?

"Forgive me," he said. "Forgive me, please. I'm so sorry."

“My darling.” She whispered the words in Russian. “My darling, you have me. There is nothing to forgive.” Her hands reached for his face and raised it up towards her. “Look at me, Clint. I trust you,” she said. “I trust you with my life and there is nothing that Loki could have said that would change that. Nothing.”

She lowered herself to the ground until their eyes met. “Do you choose me, Clint Barton? Because I still choose you.”

*I waited all my life for you.*

“What did you say?”

“I waited all my life,” he said.

“Why did you wait?”

“Because—how could you want me? It doesn’t make sense.” What was there worth wanting?

She smiled, wiping away his tears as she kissed him on his forehead. “My beautiful man,” she said. “My beautiful man.” She kissed along his brow and his temple, his jaw and his cheek, the edge of his mouth. She looked at him like she didn’t see a monster and Clint Barton felt hope.

“I want you,” she said, face pressed to his.

He closed his eyes. “You have me,” he said. “You always did.”

“It’s too much.”

“No.” He reached into his pocket. “It’s not enough.”

“Clint?”

“I’ve held onto this for too long.” He took hold of her hand and pressed something into it. “It was never mine to keep. It’s yours, Natasha. It belongs to you so please just take it. I don’t care what you do but I can’t keep this anymore.”

She looked down at her palm and the ring that rested in it then back up at him.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he said.

Eyes wide, Natasha said nothing. She stayed frozen for an endless, agonizing moment before she abandoned words altogether and pressed her mouth to his. She tore his shirt open as she forced him against the damp earth, tongue drawing across his chest and hands working the buttons of his pants until she held him in her grip. She sat up and he watched as she stripped off her own clothes and lowered herself onto him; the ring in her hand pressed over his heart as she rode him into the ground. There was no coherent thought as she clenched hot and tight around him, her orgasm sudden and overwhelming, diamond cutting into his flesh, her cries like a siren.

“Come for me,” she said and her hips rolled like water. “Come for me, Clint. I want to feel you come inside me.”

Body arching from the earth, there was nothing left that was not hers.

She collapsed against him and they lay by the lake, her face pressed along his neck and one hand touching the water. They stayed that way until the sun had faded in the sky.

“I could stay here,” she said, caressing the ring where it rested between them. “I could stay in this place forever.”

Clint closed his eyes, one hand in her hair, the other reaching out towards the water. “You can,” he said. “As long as you want.” He smiled as her fingers found his, voice dropping to a whisper. “It’s ours.”

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from New Morning by Bob Dylan.

*The night passed away so quickly  
It always does when you're with me*

---

"Again, Nat?"

"What?"

He swung the axe, leaving it embedded in a tree trunk as he stalked towards her. "You shouldn't distract me while I'm holding dangerous tools."

"Dangerous tools?" she said, her eyes glancing down towards his crotch.

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "And what do you call those things?"

"My shorts."

"They barely count as the remnants of shorts."

She was laughing as she backed away, Clint edging ever closer. "What're you going to do about it?" she said.

He grabbed her around the waist and threw her over his shoulder, hand gripping her ass as he carried her. "Make sure there's nothing left." And he slapped it once for good measure.

---

The first thing that Clint built for Natasha was a bed.

She spent the days watching as he worked the white oak. He claimed that it was imported from Russia but she suspected that he had amassed it himself. His skill with an axe appeared testament to the fact and the first time that she had witnessed him chop up firewood, it created enough heat between them that the stove was never lit.

She explored as he planed, swam naked in the lake as he sanded, and distracted him as much as possible while he wielded a mallet. She insisted that he teach her all the things that he knew and, as he applied the last coat of finish, she set to work on making him something too.

The first thing that Natasha built for Clint was a target.

It was an uneven square of wood, hammered together from the discarded parts of their bed and propped up against a tree. Uninspired by the concentric circles that he had come to expect, she instead drew the naked torso of a woman using red paint. Clint was enamored. "You want me to aim at your tits?" He called her Picasso for a week.

There was little time for talking once the bed was finished.

It was too big for the cabin and so was housed in the barn, a mattress already waiting in storage, along with sheets and Mrs. M's blanket, the four posts draped with a large mosquito net, which made Natasha feel like a princess. Princesses didn't get fucked like this, Clint pointed out. She laughed and said that she had no interest in being fucked by a prince.

In the sanctuary of their bed, Clint revealed all his secrets. There was a notebook with plans and sketches. "I'm going to build us a house," he said, a statement so honest and certain, Natasha felt no instinctive need to argue. Instead she found ways to add to his work, mostly with dirty limericks and inappropriate drawings. The poems in Russian were always the most explicit.

The morning after the bed was christened, Natasha hung Clint's ring by a ribbon from the right corner post. Clint said nothing when he saw it, taking her left hand in his and kissing the place where it one day might go.

---

Clint wrapped an arm around her waist as she attempted to make them breakfast. "This reads like Dutch," he said, holding the notebook out in front of them.

"It is Dutch!" she laughed. The porridge was too thick to stir. "It's ready," she said and removed the pan from the flames.

They sat at the forest edge, with an uninterrupted view of the lake and the mountains beyond. Clint tossed her the notebook.

"Here," he said. "This is the spot."

"You think?"

He looked over at her. "And wake up with that view every morning?"

Natasha looked away and picked up the book, opening it up to the appropriate page. "Er was eens een jonge non van Mars..."

"Nat!" Clint snatched it from her hands. "Much as I admire your literary talents," he showed her the rough blueprints, "think your skills could stretch to construction work?"

"We're seriously going to do this?" she said. "A house?"

He picked up his bowl of porridge and held it upside down. "Well, we've already got the mortar sorted." He laughed as not a single drop fell out, including the spoon.

---

Natasha could not cook but she was extremely effective with an axe. (Clint once called her



Lumber-Nat, to which she retorted, “Lumber-jackass.”) He showed her how to use a chainsaw, how to fell a tree safely, and what the Russian word for *Timber!* was. (It turned out to be *Timber!* but exclaimed in an exaggerated Russian accent.) She was also adept at stripping the bark and Clint discovered that watching her do precisely that was one of the most erotic things he had ever seen.

They cleared their chosen spot in just under two weeks. It was backbreaking work and they would go to bed too tired to fuck and with little energy to talk. They found other ways to amuse themselves, although they were constantly distracted. Naked swimming under the midday sun had become a particularly favored activity, as had lying by the edge of the lake and sleeping until three. A entire day was lost after Natasha woke up to find her chest horribly sunburnt. Clint dedicated the following twenty-four hours to lavishing her breasts with all the attention that they needed.

Clint was tan and toned and Natasha was pale and deadly. He loved the contrast of their bodies together, beneath the water, gathering rocks by the lakeside, in bed and under the stars. He sang to her whether she knew the song or not. Sometimes she made up the words and he laughed and they made up songs together. The Ballad of Natasha and the Canned Tomato Soup became the stuff of legend.

---

Natasha dropped the handles of the wheelbarrow in frustration.

“Hey! Barton!”

“What is it?” he said. He was no longer wearing a shirt, having draped it around his neck after using it to wipe the sweat away. She was convinced that he was doing these things on purpose.

“It’s too heavy. You move it.”

The wheelbarrow was overloaded with rocks and a fair distance from where they had begun to lay the foundations of the house. He grinned at her, his eyes running up and down the length of her body. She was wearing nothing but an oversized white t shirt--his t shirt--the neck stretched and hanging off one shoulder, her bright pink bra strap visible underneath.

“You asking for my help?” he said.

She folded her arms. “I’m telling you that it needs moving.”

He picked up the handles of the wheelbarrow and maneuvered it easily across the terrain. Natasha blew the hair from her face and huffed in irritation.

“You going to watch me do everything?” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

She smiled devilishly at him and lifted the t shirt slowly over her head.

---

Their first flight back to civilization to pick up supplies came dangerously close to being their last. Clint switched the controls to Natasha’s side and told her that this was her first flying lesson. She shrieked and cursed in at least five different languages, threatening to kill him unless he landed

that instant and earning herself an infuriatingly amused grin. It only took forty hours of flight time with a qualified instructor to get your license, he explained, calmly taking over the controls. "And you just gave up after less than five minutes with one."

---

"You need a hand?"

Natasha turned to find a store clerk standing behind her.

"I need carpentry tools," she said.

His eyes widened slightly before he smiled at her condescendingly. "Pretty little thing like you? What're you making?"

"A kitchen," she said.

"Never heard of a woman making her own kitchen before." He was grinning now. It made her skin crawl. "I guess you got to start somewhere."

"It's not for me." She felt him stay close by as she walked down the aisle. "Do you have any books at least? I'm something of a beginner."

"Sure you are; sure." They stopped by a wall of hammers and other instruments as he came to stand in front of her. "See anything you like?" He leaned against the shelving unit, looking at her like she was dumb as well as pretty. "You know," he drawled edging closer, "If you're looking for —"

He stopped mid-sentence and pulled back.

"Hey."

She turned to find Clint moving towards them. He smiled as he approached her but there was something cold and dangerous in his eyes as he glanced over at the other man. "You find what you were looking for?"

"I'm good," she said. "This gentleman was just helping me."

"You need any more help?" He rested a hand on the shelf above her head.

"No." She smiled and watched as the clerk put even more distance between them.

Clint looked directly at him. "That'll be all," he said and the man nodded wordlessly, practically sprinting away.

"Was that really necessary?" she said, turning to face him.

He gave a look that sent a surge of heat between her legs. "Yeah; I think it was."

Natasha smiled to herself and shook her head. On impulse, she reached for his hand, threading their fingers together as they made their way to the front of the store. Clint stopped.

He looked at her with eyebrows raised. They had never interacted in public in this way before.

Staring at his mouth, she leaned up and kissed him--open mouthed, hands in his hair as she arched against him. It elicited a sharp gasp from a customer down the aisle; she couldn't care less. She kissed him again, growing breathless and lightheaded before breaking away.

His expression was one of pure wonder, quickly shifting to one of lust. Suddenly his tongue was inside her mouth and her feet were off the floor, body crushed to his. There was no air and no space and no place else that she would rather be.

Clint pulled back and gave her a wicked smile, stopping long enough to pay for their purchases before taking her by the hand and dragging her outside to the plane.

Her second flying lesson was much more enjoyable than the first.

---

Hours later they lay in bed, nearby candles fending off shadows as night began to descend.

"I wonder if they're missing us," Natasha said.

"Who?" Clint said, fingers tangled in her hair.

She sat up and rested at elbow on his chest. "SHIELD."

"Hey!" He rolled her underneath him. "Your elbows are lethal weapons."

"That's not what my file says."

"Forget about SHIELD," he said, hands pinning hers above her head. "They have nothing on you anymore."

"What did you say to Fury?" It was a question she had been wanting to ask since they left New York.

"I gave him a choice. Let us go or I make life difficult. I know one or two things that go beyond my usual clearance. He reluctantly agreed."

"What are you saying, Clint?" She pulled out of his grasp and moved from under him.

"I promised you an exit strategy," he said. "This is it. You can go back if you want, but on your terms. Otherwise you're free."

He sat up until they were both facing each other underneath the fine white canopy of mosquito net.

"You did that for me?"

His expression was soft yet serious. "I don't break my promises, Tasha."

She threw her arms around him.

---

The next few months passed in a haze of work and sex and laughter. She studied the books she had bought religiously; taught herself the finer points of cabinetry, beginning with a perfect dovetailed drawer. She built them a kitchen table and moved on to a pair of chairs, tossing one into the fire for kindling when she couldn't get the legs level. She made three others until she was happy with a pair. The rejects were used for target practice while Clint completed the initial planking that would form the first floor.

They stayed up late scribbling in his notebook, Clint agonizing over the placement of every wall and window, and Natasha completing a volume's worth of limericks written entirely in Portuguese. He took her flying—sometimes on trips back to town for supplies, sometimes just to take in the view. She was starting to get better at it, starting to get what Clint called a feel for it, less panic and more exhilaration. It was like nothing else.

The days grew shorter and the nights grew colder. The second floor was framed and laid down, and then they started on the roof. The house was far from complete, but the shell was all there, waiting. She finished her first set of kitchen cabinets just as the leaves began to turn orange and gold and red.

---

"Clint?"

"Yeah?"

Natasha reached for his hand as they lay on the floor of their unfinished home. She was wearing gloves in late September. She squeezed his fingers through the soft wool.

"I need to go," she said. He stayed silent. "For a while. Before it gets too cold. I don't think I can stay here for the winter."

She turned her head to look at him. He was staring up at the ceiling. "Are you mad?"

He shook his head. "No," he said, looking back at her. "Of course not. You don't know what you've given me."

"I'll come back," she said. "You know I will."

He reached out and touched her face. "This house and me, we're not going anywhere. You do what you need to do."

She rolled over until she was halfway on top of him and kissed him, long and slow, hoping that he would understand all the words that she could not say. Pulling back, she laid her head against his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart.

"Thank you," she said and closed her eyes, secure in the circle of his arms.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go](#) by Bob Dylan.

*I've seen love go by my door  
It's never been this close before  
Never been so easy or so slow  
Been shooting in the dark too long  
When somethin's not right it's wrong  
Yer gonna make me lonesome when you go*

---

"What was it this time?"

Natasha looked impassively as the slender, balding man sat on the other side of the large desk. "Side effects," she said.

"There are always side effects. Anything out of the ordinary?"

She shrugged. "Not really."

The man sighed; this was an old argument. "We might be able to find a better match if I could do a complete workup. Just a few blood tests, gather some baselines—"

Natasha silenced him with a look. "Just write the prescription."

Having an ex-mob doctor as one's primary physician had its benefits. What it lacked in whitewashed credibility it more than made up for in control. No more testing, no more evaluations. After Helsinki, she had vowed never to be anyone's lab rat again.

He scribbled down the information and handed her the familiar slip of white paper. "You cut it close this time; I'm giving you a year's worth. Don't want you to be stranded wherever the hell they send you without an adequate supply of birth control. And I want you to call me if you have any more problems."

Natasha nodded and took the paper from him. "Thanks," she said. She brushed off suggestions to return in the spring for a physical, smiling serenely as she walked out the door. At least she had one thing checked off her list.

She walked by the riverside, surrounded by the noise and bustle of Brooklyn as she stopped to survey the changing skyline in the distance. The skeletons of scaffolding and cranes were visible scattered throughout the surviving buildings. The city had taken a marked hit; there were homemade memorials and missing persons' signs still lingering on street corners and lampposts. Things had changed but people carried on. There were so many people; it felt almost

claustrophobic after spending so long with only trees and mountains for company.

(Well, not just trees and mountains.)

There was an ache in her chest but she shoved it aside. There were things to be done; it was time to get back to the business of living in the real world. She entered a nearby coffee shop and ordered something tall with an extra shot and a lot of foam. She had missed the creature comforts that she had long been accustomed to, having indulged in takeout from her favorite restaurants every night for the past week. It was trivial but the little things could be everything as well.

"Natasha?"

Coffee in hand, she turned to find Steve Rogers standing behind her, in all his Leave-It-to-Beaver golden boy glory.

She blinked. "Cap?"

He quickly maneuvered them to a table in the back and before she knew it, she was having breakfast with Captain fucking America.

"I didn't expect to see a familiar face," he said, polishing off a plate of hash browns and eggs. "I couldn't believe it when you walked in."

"You come here a lot?"

"It's close to my apartment. Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world..." He grinned.

She laughed. "How's the twenty-first century treating you?"

"I'm ... adjusting," he said with a sigh. "God, it's good to see you. What are you in town for? I heard you left SHIELD."

"I—I took a leave of absence."

"And now?"

"I'm a consultant."

"Consultant, huh?" He raised an eyebrow.

She nodded. "We'll see how it goes. I was just killing time. I have a meeting with Fury in an hour."

"Well, consultant or not, it'll be nice to have a familiar face around." Steve smiled. "Who knows? We might even end up working together."

Natasha found herself smiling back. "That'd be nice."

---

Fury seemed almost relieved to have her back. She was given her pick of assignments with the understanding that if a major crisis occurred, it would be all hands on deck. She agreed on the strict premise that there was to be minimal SHIELD oversight of her personally—and absolutely

no monitoring during her downtime. For the first time in her life, she felt truly free.

Her first job back was a routine surveillance op. Solo mission, very simple. It also gave her time to stop via her apartment in Paris and sort through five months' worth of mail, and pay a visit to her banker in Geneva. Clint wasn't the only one who had made plans; from the moment she had walked away from the Red Room, she'd begun to amass as much as she could in order to live on her own terms. It had been a long road to independence, hard-won and fiercely protected.

The job went well—for the most part. On a plane out of Prague, she typed a quick message:

*I can't aim for shit these days.*

When she touched down in New York, her phone buzzed.

*They should see you with an axe.*

Off mission, she spent long hours in the gym, working her way back to peak performance. Steve became a regular sparring partner, and her aim did get better; she even practiced with a sniper's rifle on occasion just for fun. Her life settled into a rhythm of work and more work and keeping busy, which was fine. Sleep came less easily; she had gotten so used to having another person beside her that she often found herself lying awake counting backwards in Hungarian or reading bad spy novels and muttering to no one at their errors.

She tried not to contact him too often if she could help it (unless there was a particularly laughable error that deserved his attention). Mostly she would wait for the moments when her phone would light up and try not to think about why her heart was beating so fast.

*Saw the brown bear again. I think he misses your cooking.*

*At least someone does.*

Her second op was Mexico City, accompanied by Steve and a pair of junior agents who apparently slept in Captain America pajamas. It nearly all went to hell in the second act, before she reorganized the exits and came up with a particularly creative (though admittedly accidental) evac strategy. Fury was impressed; Steve was too. She began running more ops with Cap on point; Banner would occasionally surface and even Stark made an appearance on a couple of occasions but this was mostly just to host the after parties. For reasons unknown, he had taken a shine to Clint from their only meeting and demanded that she tell him when he might show up again. Natasha sipped nonchalantly from her scotch and told him that, last she'd heard, Barton was holed up with some Tibetan monks in Nepal.

October became November and Natasha kept herself occupied with a flurry of work. She would regularly meet with Steve over burgers and malt shakes (at his insistence) to go over mission reports. Conversation often turned to the foreign country of modern American popular culture, of which they both remained unapologetic tourists. Natasha could at least help him understand email and the internet; when she set him up his first email account, he couldn't stop grinning.

He asked her what she planned to do over Thanksgiving weekend; Natasha explained that she had somewhere that she needed to be.

The following morning, as she boarded the plane, she sent a quick message.

*Going to see your other girl.*

---

She arrived at sunset with a tray of candied sweet potatoes, a green bean casserole, and a fully cooked turkey—none of which had been prepared by her. The house remained bright and warm, as did its occupant, albeit a little more frail than the last time she had seen her.

They sat on the sofa, Natasha taking the other woman's hands in her own.

“How are you feeling?” she said.

“Old.” Betty laughed. “But better now that I’ve seen you. And you, my darling girl? How are you?”

Natasha thought of all that had happened since she had last sat in this room. She smiled. “Happy,” she said.

Betty squeezed her hands tight. “So I see. It looks good on you.”

Before Natasha could reply, her phone buzzed. She looked at the message. “It's for you,” she said and handed it over to Betty.

Putting on her reading glasses, she studied the email in silence before letting out something close to a giggle. “Wicked man,” she said, shaking her head and grinning like a schoolgirl. Natasha felt young too, like she was experiencing a different time in her life, something that she had always been missing.

---

“At least some things stay the same,” Steve said, leaning against the railing as they watched the ice skaters scream and tumble. He turned to look at her. “It’s magical, don’t you think?”

Natasha sipped from her gingerbread latte, surrounded by lights and sounds and the huge tree that dominated Rockefeller Plaza. It was Christmas Eve; they had just gotten back from an op in Brazil, the warm summer sun a sharp contrast to the brisk chill of New York.

She felt restless and unsettled. It was cold with the threat of snow and her breath came out in small white puffs of air. Her wrists felt cold where her gloves had slipped and her coat sleeves had gathered. It was cold but could you feel it to the marrow of your bones? Where was the magic in a tree that had to be shipped in and draped in enough artificial things to make you forget that it was living? What was she doing here?

She turned to Steve and placed her cup of coffee—the glorified, over-sweetened milk that it was—in his hands. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve got to go.”

---

There was a knock at the door.

Did bears understand the basics of social etiquette or had he just been on his own for too long? Either way, it didn't bode well. He'd submerged himself so completely in the construction of this



place; it had to be perfect. It had to be worthy of the person it was for.

He built and he trained and he swam in the freezing lake until his body could no longer take it. He pushed himself as much as possible, going on a four day trek just to see if he could find his way back again. His trips into town became fewer and fewer and driven by pure necessity. His one casual drink in a bar had nearly ended in violence; he wasn't fit company, at least not for anyone but her.

He pressed his shoulder to the wall, hunting knife in hand and handgun tucked into the back of his waistband.

"Who is it?" he said.

The wood shook with a violent thump. "Barton!"

Holy fuck.

He opened the door and there was the abominable snow-woman.

Holy fuck.

She was padded out and fully kitted, face obscured by a large hood and mask and a shit ton of snow. She dropped her walking stick and stepped over the threshold, falling to her hands and knees. Clint stumbled backwards, the knife slipping from his grip and clattering on the floor.

She rolled onto her back and pulled off her mask, staring up at him with a giddy smile. "Hey," she said.

"Hey." His mouth felt dry. He was not prepared for this.

"You have a beard." She was looking as pleased as she could be.

He slammed the door shut and dragged her inside. Her lips and skin were pale and she could barely move. He unhitched the bag strapped to her back and pulled off her coat. Her boots were a painful struggle and by the time he got to her outer pants and the rest of her clothes, he gave up trying to be gentle and reclaimed his knife instead, eventually reaching a thick layer of thermals.

"You actually wore these?" he said.

She was watching him all the while. "I learned from the best."

Down to just her underwear, she somehow managed to reach for his hand. "All of it," she said.

Clint made three quick cuts through her bra and panties then lifted her, cold and naked, into his arms.

She curled around him as he carried her over to the fire. We have a proper fire now; and a generator that works. There's hot water. You'll want a shower, won't you? Do you know how much I have to tell you? He stripped off his shirt then pulled her against him, her back pressed to his chest and her limbs encircled by his arms as he placed a blanket over her.

"You fucking idiot." This wasn't how he expected this conversation to go.

He stared into the fire, her hair catching beneath his chin; she smelled like the wild. She smelled like Natasha. Oh god, he had missed this.

“You fucking idiot,” was all he could say.

It didn’t seem real. He closed his eyes and breathed her in all over again.

“Show me,” she said. Her skin felt somewhat warmer and her body less rigid against him.

“What?”

“Our house.”

“Idiot.” Climbing to his feet, he held her like a swaddled child.

“We gonna christen this place?” she said.

“You came all this way for sex?”

She tried to kiss him. “Makes me warm.”

“Me too.” He carried her over to the kitchen. “What d’you think?”

She turned to look at it and was silent for a moment. Her cabinets lined the walls and there was a wood stove and a small refrigerator, her table and two chairs placed in the center of the space. She smiled up at him. “Here first.”

“No.” He headed for the stairs.

“Why not?”

“Because first place I’m going to fuck you is on our bed, in our bedroom. You got a problem with that?”

She hugged him closer and kissed along his throat.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

The bedroom took up nearly two thirds of the upper floor. Their bed took pride of place, the mosquito net gone, lined by cotton sheets, a thick duvet and draped with Betty’s blanket. There was a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, and one of Natasha’s rejected chairs, which Clint had painted a familiar orange-red and used as a bedside table. (A tattered copy of *Little Women* was wedged beneath the wonky leg.) There was also a large mirror propped against the main wall. Clint moved to the edge of the bed and stared at their reflections.

“You’re still cold, Tash.”

“M fine,” she mumbled.

He placed her on the bed and removed the rest of his clothing, taking her in his arms again as he rested against the headboard, the sheets and duvet tucked in all around them. He rubbed his hands along her arms and back and over her legs, keeping her body flush with his. She still struggled to move as she tried to reach for him and he took hold of her hands, kissing each finger slowly.

“Sex,” she said.

He laughed. “Woman, you are incorrigible.”

Her breathing evened out and he looked down to find her asleep against him. He pressed his cheek against the top of her head. Jesus, Nat, what the hell were you thinking? You could’ve died out there. Was it really worth it? He tightened his grip. Thank you. Thank you for coming back to me, you insane woman. You absolute lunatic. He pressed a kiss against her hair. You don’t know how happy I am. I could fucking kill you for being so stupid. Do you like the house? I can barely make sense anymore. I want to show you everything. I want to know what you think. Please don’t destroy the kitchen.

Clint closed his eyes. “Welcome home, Tasha.”

He kept vigil over her for the rest of the night.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from Nobody 'Cept You by Bob Dylan. Excerpt from *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

*There's nothing 'round here I believe in  
'Cept you, yeah you  
And there's nothing to me that's sacred  
'Cept you, yeah you*

---

Natasha opened her eyes to be met by blinding sunlight.

It flooded through a single window, illuminating the wooden walls and casting swaths across the bed. She stretched out and smiled as she watched it catch in the gold and diamond of a ring—her ring—hanging from where it waited for her on the right bedpost.

A solid arm snaked around her waist and pulled her flush against an even more solid body, hot breath against her skin and lips in her hair. Words eased their way to her in a heady exhalation.

“Morning, Red.”

Her smile grew wider.

She rolled onto her back, tilting her head to face him. “Merry Christmas,” she said and stroked his beard.

He nipped along the edge of her thumb. “Christmas was yesterday.”

“It was?”

He grinned. “Still want your present?”

She was going to say yes but he would not wait for an answer. Body pinned to the bed, he crushed his mouth against hers, his hands on her ass and in her hair. His mouth worked its way down, sucking on her tits until she was ready to come beneath him. He rubbed his palm against her cunt, his fingers dripping wet as they entered her.

“Miss me?” he said, caressing her throat with his other hand as he kissed her.

She moaned as he worked her closer to release. She could feel the tension building; she was almost there—

He stopped.

“What are you doing?”

“I need you on top,” he said and flipped their bodies over. “Let me see you.”

Straddling his abdomen, she sat up, palms spread over his chest as he tasted the ends of his fingers.

“Fuck,” he said. “What have you been doing without me?”

Her brow wrinkled. “Training. Working. What do you mean?”

“Your breasts, Tash. You’ve gained weight.” He rolled his eyes as she arched an eyebrow, gripping her hips and grinding them down against him. “You look fucking beautiful. Your tits have never looked this good.”

She smiled and he smiled too. “I said get on top of me.”

Laughing, she eased herself down over his length and then the laughter stopped. How had she gone so long without this? He filled her whole. There was nothing left between them.

“Do you know how you look right now?” he said, gazing up at her intently as she built up a rhythm between them. “You’re a goddess. A fucking shrine. I want to be your disciple. I’d build monuments to your cunt and tits and your thighs. Fuck. Hold me tighter. I’m still breathing here. I want to come til all of me’s inside you.”

She closed her eyes and he sat up suddenly. “Don’t believe me?” He slid their bodies to the edge of the bed. “Turn around.”

She did as she was told, her back to his front, and rode him as they both stared at their reflections. His hands began to move, fingers pushing her towards the precipice as his eyes met hers in the mirror.

“You ever seen anything more beautiful?”

She shook her head; she couldn’t look away. One hand clutching the hair at the back of his neck, the other held onto his leg, fingernails digging into his thigh to increase the friction. A quirk of his fingers and she found her voice. It echoed off the walls.

---

Having eaten her out at the top of the stairs, his woman was hungry for breakfast.

He sat her on the counter, putting on a pot of coffee and making her pancakes from a readymade mix because that appeared to be their aphrodisiac of choice and there was no fresh meat or eggs or all the very many delights that he wanted to provide for her.

He set the plate beside her; she didn’t take her eyes off him, just pushed it to the side and lowered herself onto her knees. “In the mood for something else?” He felt her smile as she took him all the way to the back of her throat. “Fuck, Tash,” he groaned. “You could have been in the circus.”

The kitchen was christened in what was their own inimitable style; there would be nothing left if things carried on like this. Strawberry jam smeared across his face (he could not recall when she had opened the jar and started eating with her fingers), he slammed her against the counter and she pulled a cabinet door from its hinges. The kitchen had survived an entire twenty-four hours; not bad for her first visit.

She looked like she blamed him. Clint licked the jam from his mouth and her hands and her tits.

“You’re forgiven,” he said and set her down on her feet.

He stepped back and looked at her, hair long and wild and body sticky with jam and her wetness and his cum smeared and glistening down the inside of her thighs.

“You look a fucking picture,” he said.

“Don’t you dare go get a camera.”

She wiped the mess that they had made across her stomach and breasts. Clint said nothing as he reached for her and led her down the hall.

The bathroom was located on the ground floor and consisted of a sink, a toilet and a tiny shower. Clint spent his time washing Natasha beneath the hot water (she kissed him lingeringly for this revelation alone), leaving no part of her untouched by his hands or his lips.

Leaning back in his arms, she turned to face him and let her hands drift over his shoulders. “You’ve put on weight too,” she said.

“Too much for you?”

“Not enough.” She kissed him at the corner of his mouth, along his beard and neck. “Do you know what you look like to me?” Her nails scratched down his chest as she licked up the length of his sternum.

“Aroused?” he said but all humor was leaving him. It was too much, whatever she believed.

“My mountain man.” His stomach clenched as he felt her thumbs draw up over his abs and obliques. “My work of art.”

“I thought you claimed to be cultured,” he said, gaze aimed at the tile on the wall.

She smiled as she tilted his head back towards her, kissing him softly. “Don’t go shy on me, Barton.” She pulled back to look at him. “Your face.” Her thumb drew along his lower lip. “Your eyes and your hair; it’s ten thousand shades of gold and I count all the grey. I like your beard pressed against me, tasting me.” She rubbed her cheek against his. “I hate when you shave. Your throat.” She sucked at the skin over his adam’s apple. “Your shoulders and arms. How strong they are. How they feel around me. When you fight and you fuck; they’re my favorite things.”

Clint pressed his hands to the walls as she worked her way lower, letting out a low moan.

“Your secrets,” she said, pressing a kiss over his chest, sucking on his nipples. “I know how big your heart is. I could get myself off just by looking at you.” She moved lower. “Your dick. I want to suck on it until I can’t breathe.” Clint’s knees nearly buckled. “I want to taste all of you.” She stroked his ass. “There’s no part of you I wouldn’t eat.”

“I need to, Tash.”

“Need to what?”

“Take you,” he said, breath coming fast.

“But you won’t until I say so. Do you know how powerful that is?” She pressed her cheek to his thigh, nuzzling the place where leg met hip. “All that self-control. All that waiting.” She stood up and wrapped her arms around him.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” she said, her lips brushing his ear. “It’s when you don’t hold back; when you let go. That’s when you’re at your most beautiful.”

Clint grabbed onto the curtain rail.

“Take me,” she whispered.

It snapped and clattered at their feet.

---

*“What do you like?”*

*“To live in Italy, and to enjoy myself in my own way.”*

*Jo wanted very much to ask what his own way was; but his black brows looked rather threatening as he knit them; so she changed the subject by saying, as her foot kept time, “That’s a splendid polka! Why don’t you go and try it?”*

*“If you will come too,” he answered, with a gallant little bow.*

*“I can’t; for I told Meg I wouldn’t because—” There Jo stopped and looked undecided whether to tell or to laugh.*

Natasha sneezed. Clint handed her a tissue. “Hang in there, Beth.”

“Beth? What? Beth gets sick?”

“Oops.” He smiled, nudging the bowl of soup across the tray that sat in her lap. “Eat before it gets cold.”

“You fail at distraction,” she said, sniffing, then sneezed again.

“Feel any better?”

She looked at him with watery eyes, her nose a bright shade of pink. “I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck,” she said, sinking back into her cocoon of pillows and blankets. “Although sadly I can say for a fact that this is worse.”

“That’s what you get for hiking through Alaska in the middle of December.”

She glared at him. “You fail at everything.” She tucked into the soup all the same.

“The broken kitchen cupboard and curtain rod in the shower tell me otherwise,” he said, innocently returning his eyes to the page. “I think you’ll find this next bit particularly edifying.” He began again.

*“Because what?” asked Laurie curiously.*

*"You won't tell?"*

*"Never!"*

*"Well, I have a bad trick of standing before the fire, and so I burn my frocks, and I scorched this one..."*

He continued to read until she fell asleep, returning the tray of soup to the kitchen before carrying her backpack upstairs and unpacking her things. The wardrobe had been reserved solely for her, as had half the drawer space. And she had not packed lightly; the lingerie alone took up a third of the bag.

Working his way through the various pockets, he stopped at the low buzzing sound of something vibrating. He grinned to himself; he would have to ask her how often she used it.

Digging around further, he was both surprised and disappointed to uncover what looked like an old-school pager bearing a small screen. Funny how it was able to work in one of the most isolated spots on the planet.

Clint studied the message.

*All hands on deck. Return to headquarters ASAP – Fury*

Seconds later, it buzzed again.

*Tell Barton that includes him.*

Yeah, it was really fucking funny.

---

Natasha opened her eyes to find Clint watching her.

This was no bedside vigil, the chair pulled out to the edge of the room and *Little Women* returned to its rightful place below the dodgy leg. He leaned forward, arms resting on his knees, his face unreadable.

She smiled. "Hey," she said.

His expression didn't change. He held up a familiar black pager.

"Fury requests our presence." His voice lacked intonation; flat yet deadly.

"Our presence?" She tried to sit up. "Wait, did something happen?"

"We're supposed to save the world again," he said, tossing the pager onto the bed. It landed perfectly in her lap (of course). "Was that part of the deal?"

She picked it up and read the message. "I agreed to help if there was an emergency," she said. What was going on? It had to be desperate for SHIELD to need Clint as well.

"So why is Fury demanding that both of us drop everything?" He seemed unperturbed by the imminent global crisis. "Is that how far your help extends?"



She rubbed the side of her forehead; her headache was coming back. "What? No. It's not like that, Clint. You know I'd never speak for you." Was he mad at her? "I guess he just figured that, wherever I was..."

"You can't go," he said. There was no room for argument. "And I won't go. I'm not going to leave you here alone. What's between you and me has nothing to do with Fury or SHIELD or anyone else. He doesn't get to use you to get to me. Understand?"

Natasha was fully upright now. She knew that voice, had heard it a dozen times before but it had never been directed at her. And she knew what it meant; his mind was set in stone. It was a revelation that she was not prepared for.

"I," she began, "I don't know what you want me to say." She scrambled for a response. "I work for them. And I made it clear, what I do on my own time is none of their business. But it's not like Fury doesn't know about us." She looked him square in the eye. "Isn't this what we're supposed to do? Answer the call when we're needed? You can't stay locked up here forever."

Clint laughed bitterly, rubbing his chin as he looked the other way. "You think I'm locked up? Shit, Natasha." He shook his head. "This is the first choice I ever made for myself - for both of us - that Fury can do fuck all about. There is no 'supposed to' about it." He looked at her again, gaze intense. "We are obligated to no one. Why is that so hard for you to see?"

"I do see it," she said. "But that doesn't mean there aren't still things worth doing." She found her hands smoothing out wrinkles from the sheets; she wouldn't look away. "Things that I've made a commitment to do. And you said it yourself - I'm in no shape to leave."

"So what are you saying?" Clint looked like he knew what her answer was going to be.

"Someone needs to go, and I can't." Her voice softened; she looked at him pleadingly. "Do this, Clint. For me. Please?"

---

"You sure you're gonna be okay?"

He was freshly showered and cleanly shaven (she would miss the beard but he looked a different kind of dangerous this way), dressed in black fatigues and his old tac vest. His bow and quiver were loosely slung over one shoulder, body tensed. She had forgotten what he looked like; it had been so long.

"I'll be fine, Hawkeye." She sank back against the pillows, smiling to herself as he tried to hide his grin. "Be careful, all right?"

He dropped what he was holding and came to sit on the edge of the bed. "You think there's anything that can keep me from coming back to this?" And then he kissed her, red nosed and feverish and about as unattractive as she had ever felt. None of it seemed to matter as he held her face and his mouth opened against hers. "Don't cook anything," he said, kissing her forehead.

Rough fingers grazed her chin and then he was gone.

---

One thing Clint had to give Tony Stark credit for was his impeccable taste in scotch.

The debrief with Fury had gone about as well as could be expected. Clint said his piece, which basically amounted to *I did what you asked of me and I'm leaving now*, then exited the room. Rogers had questioned his behavior later and his commitment to the team. Clint had calmly stated that he had no recollection of ever making such a commitment, at which point he walked away for the second time that day. Outside, he had been accosted by Stark and corralled into drinks, reluctantly agreeing for as long as was required (that being as soon as his reservation was confirmed on the next transcontinental flight).

Over a third of a bottle of the good stuff later, he was trying to remember why he had agreed at all.

The choice of venue had to constitute some form of punishment. Secluded in a private booth in the VIP area (because that was Clinton Francis Barton alright), people tended to avoid their table, mostly because nothing in Clint's body language suggested that they should approach. This seemed to both please and amuse Stark greatly.

"This not your scene?" he said.

Clint smiled humorlessly. "This isn't my world."

"So what's your deal? Mr cool, collected, I don't need the rest of the world. Still waters run deep. You're like a spaghetti western."

"You don't like westerns?" Clint said.

Tony looked at him like he was a problem to be solved. "I don't understand them," he said.

Clint took another long drink before Tony refilled their glasses.

"You like to pick things apart," Clint said, staring into the crowd. The music pounded like a telltale heart inside his head, the people strange and foreign to him. He looked over at Stark. "Down to the smallest component, right? Until you understand what makes them tick."

"It's something I'm good at," Tony said.

Clint smiled and said nothing.

"So do you buy any of that bull Fury was trying to sell?"

"I'd never buy any shit Fury's selling," Clint said, an edge of hardness slipping into his voice.

"So I gathered." Tony eyes lit up as if he had just been told some great secret. "That was definitely my kind of debrief, I must say. Does SHIELD have an online feedback system? I think Director Fury'd appreciate my thoughts. I have a top reviewer ranking on Amazon."

"There was a suggestion box once," Clint said, deadpan. "It didn't work out so well."

"How so?"

Glass held close to his lips, he hid a genuine smile. "Turned out he needed a bigger box."

"Was it all you?" Tony said.

Clint stared at him impassively. “Was what all me?”

Stark’s grin was sharp and dangerous. “You, sir, are an enigma. I am enchanted and enthralled.” He reached for his glass. “What can I say? It’s why I can’t leave you two alone.”

“You seeing double now?”

“Crystal clear.”

They looked at each other as they both drank their whiskey, gazes steady and inscrutable.

## Chapter 7

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [She Belongs To Me](#) by Bob Dylan.

*She wears an Egyptian ring  
That sparkles before she speaks  
She's a hypnotist collector  
You are a walking antique*

---

"Natasha?"

"Hmm?" She was staring out the window. It had snowed last night in New York; a light dusting for a cold January morning. Had it snowed in Anchorage too?

"You okay there?" Steve said.

She pulled her attention back to the briefing materials in front of her. "Yeah. Fine."

"I know that post-global crisis cleanup isn't exactly thrilling. We missed you last week."

"I heard it went well," she said.

"As well as could be expected. The third act went to hell—"

"As usual."

"As usual," he said, smiling. "And Stark went off script—"

"—as usual." Natasha was grinning now. Steve just shook his head.

"Banner saved the day though. I was worried about not having Thor around but it turned out fine. And Barton was..." His voice trailed off, as if he was searching for the right word.

She kept her face impassive. "He was?"

"...efficient," Steve said with a frown. He looked apologetic. "Sorry. I know he's a friend of yours."

Natasha shrugged. "He takes a while to warm up to."

"Yeah. If you say so."

---

“What’s so funny?”

Natasha was still smiling as she began typing at her laptop. “Captain America has just discovered emoticons,” she said.

She heard Clint make a noise that might have been a laugh. “He’s catching up fast.”

“He is.” She watched him as he moved about the kitchen. “Smells good,” she said. “Think you can make enough for me to take back to New York?”

“You wouldn’t rather eat it here?”

“You know I would. But I’m shipping out to the Congo next week and there’s so much to do. Steve’s laid most of the groundwork but...”

She stopped as she heard the slam of the stove door. “Come here,” he said.

She closed the laptop and got up from her seat. Clint held out a spoon for her to taste.

“You like it?”

He studied her intently as she licked the sauce from her lips. “Yes, it’s...” He dragged the spoon across her chest, leaving a trail of red down her cleavage and over the front of her pressed white shirt.

“Clint?! What the hell? I’m supposed to leave in an hour.”

He pulled her to him, his mouth already tasting between her breasts. “You’re not going anywhere.”

All shock and anger dissipated as soon as he began to work the buttons of her ruined shirt. She emailed Steve later to say that she would meet him in Kinshasha instead.

---

After the Congo came an unplanned stopover in Beirut to help lead a rescue mission. There then followed a long week of debriefing back in New York so that by the time she returned to Alaska, she all but collapsed into Clint’s waiting arms.

He had worked so hard on the house in the time that she had been away. There were plans for a full-sized bathroom with a free standing bathtub, a proper study for them both, and a shooting range out back. (The bare breasted target that she had made for him in those early days was kept for special occasions only.)

She was treated like a princess in these moments of isolation, lavished with food and attention and all the sexual favors that her heart so desired. Her hunger for his touch and his body could never be sated. When he left for what turned out to be one of many private consulting jobs, her right hand became her reluctant bit on the side.

Winter turned to spring and still the world needed saving. She rejoined the Avengers for the first time since New York; Clint had already committed to a job somewhere in West Africa. He wouldn’t give any further details, other than to point out that he wasn’t required.

There was so little time to keep up with anything. Her life felt split into two uneven halves, the only constant being her correspondence with Betty. *You need a stiff drink and a good lay, my dear.* That seemed to be her answer to most problems.

Their series of text messages served almost like a diary. Not a day would go by without at least one missive of snark or humor or some stray bit of kindness passing between them—they discussed everything. Sometimes it felt like Betty was the only reason she was able to maintain her sanity. Her summer was composed of a long series of missions and flights, and an even longer string of notes:

*N - Do you know anything about two-way detonation switches?*

*B - Only that they will cause a colossal mess if you don't know what you're doing.*

*N - So I discovered.*

---

*B - You sound happier than when I last heard from you.*

*N - Clint just got back from a long trip.*

*B - Well that explains it.*

---

*N - Sometimes I hate being Stateside. Give me a third world dictatorship to topple any day of the week.*

*B - You still running interference for Captain America's fanclub?*

*N - Everyone thinks I'm his publicist.*

*B - Not his girlfriend? That's called progress, sweetie.*

---

*N - I miss California. I miss riding bikes on the coast.*

*B - Bob used to take me all over on his Vincent.*

*N - That sounds like an American euphemism.*

*B - Naughty girl. We only fucked on the Harley.*

---

*B - Come on. You know you want to share. Craziest place ever.*

*N - Dan Watkins' car.*

*B - ROTFLMAO.*

*N - You and Nell need to stay off the internet.*

---

*B - Saw the Getalong Gang on TV again. Thought I caught a glimpse of you ducking out the exit. Didn't see Clint.*

*N - He was working.*

*B - Nell says Stark needs to rethink having the armor-piercing missiles so close to the pulse jets. And tell Banner she thinks he's cute.*

---

*N - Clint called out your name in bed today.*

*B - I'm sure you did, Clint. Now give Nat back her phone.*

---

*N - I'm asking for two weeks off.*

*B - You could use more like two years. Headed back to the arctic?*

*N - The beach.*

*B - You're welcome to come to mine.*

*N - Thanks, but I've already got a place. Time I went back.*

---

The first snow of the season arrived by mid Fall, and Natasha knew that she wasn't ready to face another Alaskan winter. Jamaica was warm and quiet and special; here was the first place she had bought that was truly her own.

It was dark when she arrived; she fumbled for the light switch as she entered the tiny flat. The moonlight shone through the sole window and she could just make out its reflection across the water in the distance. She felt instantly calmed; she had forgotten how much she had missed the humid salty air.

Clint had turned down her offer of a winter vacation. He worked so much now and when he was around, he was loathe to leave Alaska. She missed the time they spent working together. It felt like another lifetime, him having her six as they slogged through most of the world's hellholes, a trail of death, destruction and incomplete mission reports always left in their wake. (Steve liked to finish his on the plane.)

Sitting on the beach with a drink in her hand and a giant straw hat hiding her face, she was determined not to move for a week. But by day four, the temptation to check her emails was too great, the sun too bright and the sea air a constant irritation. And why was it so fucking warm all the time?

She missed the wild and the cold. She missed him. She just needed a way to make the pieces fit.

Her inbox was full, mostly work stuff that she chose to ignore. She clicked on a message from Steve, complete with its own dire red exclamation mark. Attached was an invitation.

*I know you've gone radio silent, and no one deserves it more. But I don't think I can get out of going. You need a date?*

She opened the invite, noting the time and the place, then smiled to herself.

*Thanks, but I already have one.*

The following morning her flat was on the market and she was booked on the first available flight back to Anchorage via New York.

---

"I think you should take me out to dinner sometime."

Natasha leaned over the back of Clint's favorite chair, her face close to his. Hair now past her shoulders, it hung down like a curtain around them.

"Oh yeah?" he said, looking up with a grin. "Where?"

"The Waldorf."

"Seems a bit far just for dinner." His tone remained playful. "Is the food really that good?"

She traced the lines of his shoulders. "There's a thing I have to go to for work," she said, pressing her cheek against his. "Big deal; fancy dinner."

"Work?" he said and tugged on a lock of her hair.

"Some awards ceremony for Stark and Cap and Banner. Ribbon cutting on the rebuilt section of Manhattan." She kissed along the side of his neck. "I made sure to keep us out of it. I do need a date though."

"Why do we even need to make an appearance?"

"Because I want to go. It'll be fun." She nipped at his earlobe with the edge of her teeth. "I even bought a dress."

He stilled the movement of her hands with his own, leading her around to face him before pulling her into his lap. "I think we might have different ideas about what constitutes fun," he said.

"Oh, I dunno." She grinned. "You in a tux, me in a dress? Food, wine, and dancing? I don't see a down side. Plus," she said, mouth close to his ear, "it's a great fucking dress."



"A tux?" He tilted his head to look at her. "Don't feel much like parading myself around in a room full of people I have no interest in seeing. Why don't you show me the dress right now?" His hand snaked up the length of her thigh. "Let it be for my eyes only."

"Uh uh." She shook her head. "The dress is in New York. You have to go there to see it."

He rested his head against the back of the chair. "I don't need to see it, Tash."

She sat up. "It's a two-day trip, Clint. You won't even be gone long enough to miss this place."

"You think that's what this is about?"

"I don't know because you won't tell me."

He reached for her face, holding her still as he stared at her intently. "I don't need the rest of the world to see us." His thumb grazed along her cheek. "I don't want them to. You want to know what I'm thinking? I don't give a fuck about the Avengers or some stupid award. I just want peace. I want to be left alone. Nobody needs to know about us for it to mean something."

She pulled away; it felt as if the breath had been knocked out of her. "But I want to," she said quietly. "I want to share this. With you. There's a whole other side of my life that you're not a part of and I want you to be. I don't understand why we have to hide this. Hide us."

His face turned dark. "Who do you want to share it with? Stark? Fury? Captain fucking America?" Voice low and angry, it sliced through her like a knife. "What the fuck has it got to do with anyone else?"

She removed herself from the cage of his arms, putting enough distance between them until she was on the other side of the room. "You know what? Forget I asked."

He watched her with deadly precision. There was no intimacy in his expression, only a hard, analytical gaze.

"Do you talk about us?"

She looked at him with cool green eyes. "Talk about what?" she said. "My lover is a ghost." She headed for the stairs. "I should get packed. I need to get out of here before it snows again."

---

There was no further conversation. Natasha gathered her things and followed Clint silently onto the runway, her previous anxiety during takeoff replaced with an unwelcome relief at getting away. What was she running from? Why wasn't she enough for Clint to come too?

She studied his profile as he piloted the plane, eyes closed off like the haze of Loki's spell had reclaimed him. She had never felt this length of distance before, this barrier between them that made no sense. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing someone else. You are as familiar to me as my own reflection, she thought. There was still so much of him that she did not know.

He landed at an airstrip in Anchorage, remaining strapped in his seat as she moved to get out.

"Natasha, wait."

She turned to look at him; she recognized this man. “You’re it for me,” he said, voice steady and eyes on her. “You know that, right? But if this isn’t what you want then let me know.”

He restarted the plane, gaze turned back to the horizon. “You know where to find me.”

---

"Natasha?"

She was staring out the window again. There was no snow this time, only the endless grey of a rainy October afternoon. Steve handed her a cup of coffee and sat down on the other side of her desk.

"Late night?" His smile was bright and playful; there was a lightness there that she had never seen before.

She tried to smile in return. "Something like that."

She had worn the dress. She'd sipped champagne and danced and flirted with every man in sight. And she had spent a good portion of the evening on Captain America's arm, determined to enjoy herself.

She was so convincing, she almost believed that she did.

Steve's face turned serious for a moment. "I'm sorry your date cancelled on you. Really. But I think we muddled through pretty well together."

She nodded. He'd been such a good friend; she didn't deserve him. "Yeah, we did," she said.

He smiled again, warm and open; a hint of pink creeping onto his cheeks. "Truth is, I had a great time. You were amazing—you *are* amazing."

Natasha's stomach dropped. Oh god, no. What on earth was he thinking? Steve ran a hand through his hair; he looked nervous. Of course he was. She had been so charming. For what? Who was she trying to convince? You knew what you were doing. A wave of nausea washed over her; she felt like she was watching everything in slow motion.

"I don't think it's a secret I like working with you," he said. "But it's so much more than that. And God, I've been wanting to ask you this forever but it never seemed to be the right time—"

"Ask me what, Steve?" Please just get this over with. She could barely look him in the eye.

"Just... if you wanted to maybe go for coffee or a movie. Or dinner? Whatever you prefer." He let out a breath as if he had been holding it in for a long time. "As more than just friends," he said with a smile.

Natasha wanted to die.

"Hey. Are you okay?"

Her heart was beating rapidly; there wasn't enough air in the room. If she moved too quickly, she was certain that she was going to be sick.

"I can't, Steve. I'm sorry. I can't." She stood up, knocking her coffee over. Steve got up to help her.

"Here..."

The door opened and Tony Stark walked in. "Romanoff... Captain? How very unexpected." He smirked as he looked between them. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No," Natasha said, sounding more relieved than she intended. "I..."

"Was hoping I'd stop by? I know."

He perched on the edge of her desk, glancing bemusedly at the pool of spilt coffee. "Okay. So. The reason I'm here. The good news is that the Tower is rebuilt, complete with the stupid name. What with all the world-saving mileage, there's that whole band of brothers all-for-one bullshit ethos people seem to dig. Which is beside the point." (Please get to it soon, Natasha thought.) "The truth is, you're my people. And I always take care of my people. So here." He held out what appeared to be a hotel keycard. "The sixty-seventh floor; it's yours. Use it, don't use it, lease it to the mob for all I care. I already gave Rogers the key to his."

"Uh, thanks," Natasha said, trying to gather her things. "But I've got to go. Thank you. Really." She grabbed her coat and bag, taking the card from Tony's hand and avoiding Steve's crestfallen face.

"Hey, wait," Tony said. "You forgot Barton's."

She turned from the doorway and unthinkingly snatched the card from midair as Tony tossed it towards her. She watched as his face lit up like all his Christmases had come at once.

"Called it!" he said to no one in particular.

Natasha all but ran from the room, ignoring Stark's demonic grin, ignoring Steve's horrified "*Barton?*", all of it. She wasn't meant to be here. There was only one place that she was meant to be.

---

"Hello? Tasha? Is that you?"

She smiled as soon as she heard his voice, which was stupid. He couldn't see her; it was a miracle that he had even switched on that blasted satellite phone. If he could, he'd find her stranded in some single terminal airport, still in yesterday's clothes. Other than two keycards and her purse, she had brought nothing else.

"You okay? Shit, Tash; speak to me, please. Stop fucking around and let me hear you."

"It's okay, Clint. I'm okay." Voice and heart catching unsteadily, she couldn't decide whether she wanted to laugh or cry. "I'm more than okay. I just--I want to come home."

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Just Like a Woman](#) by Bob Dylan (link to the Nina Simone version).

*She takes just like a woman, yes, she does  
And she makes love just like a woman  
And she aches just like a woman  
But she breaks like a little girl*

---

“One month.”

“Two.”

Clint took a breast in each hand as if to make his point. Natasha laughed.

“One,” she said, leaning into his touch as he stood behind her, “and I’ll cut back on the long term ops.”

“Two,” he said, thumbs drawing across her nipples, “and I’ll build you your own goddamn bathroom.”

“Just how long do you think SHIELD can get along without me?”

He kissed along her neck. “I say we find out.”

She moaned as he nipped at her earlobe and his tongue did something that she wasn’t sure she could even repeat. “I’m trying to type here.” Sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop in front of her, it was taking all of her concentration to keep her eyes on the screen.

“Multitask,” he said.

“Do you want me to send in this leave of absence or what?”

His hand found its way under her shirt. “I want you naked and in bed.”

“Mmm... that can be arranged.”

“Now.”

“Patience.” She finished the request—two months, she decided at the last minute (and screw all the typos)—then clicked send. She took a moment to scan the rest of her email. “Oh what now?” she muttered to no one.

Clint’s mouth was focused on the base of her neck while another hand wandered lower still.

“Hmm?”

“It's Stark. He keeps forwarding me these stupid attachments. Last time it was tiger cubs and kittens. Before that it was...” The words died in her throat.

It was a Page Six photograph of a beautiful couple dancing. The man was tall, handsome and looking as though he was having the time of his life; the woman smiled up at him adoringly, red hair piled high on her head, neck and shoulders framed in a stunning strapless gown. They looked like they belonged in a classic Disney movie.

Natasha read the caption and Tony's comment below it:

*Captain Steve Rogers and date.*

*Thought you'd appreciate the Barbie and Ken money shot. — T xx*

Clint must have seen it too. She felt the shift as his body went perfectly still, hands unmoving over her breasts and stomach. Natasha held her breath. She had no idea how much time had passed before he finally spoke.

“You were right,” he said. “It is one hell of a dress.”

She felt his thumb brush over the lace of her bra. “Anything I should know about?” The chair shifted slightly as she hesitated, her weight being forced onto the back legs.

“We both went alone. It was so stupid.” His other hand drifted down, fingers catching the waistband of her pants and slipping inside. “We danced just that once and so many people were there and I don't know what I was thinking. I wanted it to be you.” The chair leaned back further, his hands increasing their rhythm as he held her weight against him. “And then... god, yes... Steve...” He went completely still again. Natasha closed her eyes as he held her, feet off the floor, unsure which way she would fall. “He asked me out,” she said. “He asked me out and I came back to you.”

The chair dropped forward with an audible thud and Clint walked out of the room.

Natasha opened her eyes. Her shirt was ruffled, untucked at the bottom and unbuttoned at the top; her breathing was coming too quickly. She was afraid and aroused and she had no idea what had just happened. She quickly deleted Tony's email and moved to close her laptop, stopping when she saw an urgent message from Betty.

*This is Nell. Call me ASAP.*

She turned on the satellite phone and dialed Nell's number. The older woman picked up on the first ring.

“Natasha? Look, Betty would kill me if she knew I was calling you, but there's something you need to know...”

Time slowed down; the room spun. She didn't remember much else, only the sound of the phone as it clattered to the floor.

---

He wasn't sure how long he had been standing in their bedroom when he heard her call out his

name. It sounded like a cry for help and he did not hesitate, he may have even ran, until he was by her side again.

“What is it?” he said.

She was still sitting at the kitchen table, the phone lying on the floor by her feet, and all he wanted was to know that she was okay.

“Betty’s sick,” she said.

He knelt down and picked up the phone receiver, putting it back in place. “Hey.” One hand reached out and cupped the side of her face, waiting for her to look at him. “When do we leave?”

She turned towards him, cheek pressed to his palm and eyes clear with determination. “Right now,” she said.

---

When Betty finally opened her front door, Clint watched as Natasha’s world dropped out from under her. It was a visceral sensation; she had not been prepared for what she would find.

Betty smiled when she saw them but her face was drawn. Clint couldn’t be sure how much weight she had lost but the impact was stark. Her hair looked thinned, eyes sunken and the whites reduced to a pale, sickly yellow. There was a slight tremor to her hand as she held open the door and she walked with a stick. She clucked her tongue as she surveyed Natasha.

“Is it that bad?” she said.

“I’ve seen worse,” Clint said and picked up their bags as they followed her inside.

Natasha still said nothing.

Betty hadn’t been feeling much like herself for some time. She had ignored the symptoms because they had felt so vague and didn’t amount to a pile of beans as far as she was concerned. It was only when her skin turned yellow and she struggled to finish a single meal—and not just the ones cooked by her own fair hand—that she dragged herself off to the hospital.

“I have advanced stage adenocarcinoma of the pancreas,” she explained. Cancer was what she didn’t say but the meaning was all the same.

Natasha demanded a cure. She demanded to speak with Betty’s doctors.

“I’m just working on keeping the symptoms under control,” Betty said. “I want to keep doing what I’m doing for as long as possible.”

Natasha excused herself and disappeared from the house. Clint made Betty tea and sat with her on the veranda.

“How long have you got?” he said.

Betty shrugged as she lifted her cup to her lips. “Not long, I think. But I was never a fan of the holidays so I’ll probably give Christmas a miss.”

---

Natasha returned in the evening and took over as Betty's caregiver, effective immediately. Clint slipped into the background, taking care of the house and cooking and cleaning; much the same as he'd done on their last visit. They never seem to come with good tidings, he mused.

Natasha said nothing as they retired to their room that night. They shared the same bed this time but there was a distance between them. When she couldn't sleep, she turned and pressed her body against his. Clint held her and she asked for no more of him than this. It would be their ritual for some time to come.

There were few visitors to the house (only Nell was regularly permitted) and this only got less over time. There was little of Betty's family left and what few remained were either too old or too far away to come. Natasha dismissed Betty's nurses as soon as her course of chemotherapy was completed; she made sure to have a clear grasp of all the other medication doses and when they were to be administered. The doctor made an occasional house call but Natasha was just as strict in overseeing them.

One of the neighbors would sometimes drop off a casserole. Clint would meet them at the gate and say how grateful they were for their concern and that he would make sure to pass on their good wishes to Betty. Natasha kept to the house more and more.

It was a revelation to watch her. No one knew that this side of her existed but him; from his first glimpse of her emerging out of that burning building like a blood soaked madonna, he knew that she possessed a heart that could hold the world. She was patient and gentle and her compassion was more powerful than the strongest drink. He had never loved her more; he had never felt less needed.

He did all he could and he asked for nothing in return. This was about Betty and it was about Natasha taking care of Betty and he would take care of all of them as best he could, even if he wasn't really sure what that was meant to entail.

No visitors. No distractions. No one crossed the doorway without speaking to him first.

If Natasha refused to eat, he would sit her down and make her. Betty would laugh at the arguments that passed between them, petty and laced with deadly looks and few words. "You're like an old married couple," she would say and Natasha would relinquish and finish her meal after that.

She never cried and Clint wondered where that ocean resided. He could survive the flood. He would swim its lengths and depths to reach her. He would wait for as long as was necessary. I am here for you. It was in his arms as he held her. It was in how he would never get in her way. She smiled at him when she found him singing in the kitchen one evening and that was enough. I am here for you whenever you need me.

---

"This was at a hospital fundraiser. I think we managed to clear the floor when we attempted to do the jive."

On her good days, Betty would regale Natasha with stories. They would sit together on the sofa, Betty wrapped in a colorful afghan, half a dozen photo albums spread across her lap and a smile on her face. Her beloved past and her darling girl.

Clint would eavesdrop whenever he could. Betty was a master storyteller and Natasha her willing

audience. He looked at the two women together—the older one so content, the younger so enraptured. Clint wished that he could capture it in a painting. What stories did Natasha have to tell? What memories had he helped her to make? Whatever they were, he wished that he could give her more.

She would ask Betty about Bob and the life that they had shared. He wondered what she was thinking about, what future she envisioned for herself as she delved into Betty's history. He always watched from a distance, pictures of a familiar man and a happy woman surrounding him on every wall.

It was on one of the last good days when Betty sat Natasha on the edge of her bed and took hold of her hands. Clint found himself standing silently in the hallway. This conversation was not for him; he listened anyway.

"Now don't say anything," Betty said. "Just hear me out. I might not get another chance to tell you this."

"You know that's not true," Natasha said.

"Hush and listen for once. I'm not afraid, okay? You don't have to worry for me. I'm ready. I've been ready to see my Bob and my boy for longer than you can imagine. When the time comes, you let me go. I just need to know that you'll be okay."

Clint closed his eyes as if he were praying. He knew that Natasha was crying, even if he couldn't see her face.

"Look at me, Natasha. My beautiful girl. My brave, beautiful girl. I'm so proud of you. Be strong for me; I know you can. And take care of that man of yours. He loves you so much. He loves you so much I think he forgets that he needs someone to take care of him. Promise me you'll do that. Promise me that you'll take care of each other."

Clint opened his eyes to find himself outside with a glass of bourbon and a cigarette. It was Halloween but there were no Trick-or-Treaters, just the ghosts and the dying and a lone silhouette keeping watch by the door.

---

After those first six weeks, Betty began to deteriorate rapidly. The doctor was called and a nurse was often in attendance. There was a whole new paraphernalia of medical equipment, syringe drivers and oxygen tanks, which needed to be learnt; things that Clint recognized from his own near brushes with death. He always got better. This was a means to be able to fade peacefully away.

The painkillers made Betty nauseous and disorientated and Clint would tend to her as often as Natasha did, the nights beginning to blur into the days. They were taught how to set up the various drugs and amend the doses as required. It would be so easy just to give her everything at once, he thought. Who would want to go out slowly? Who needed to have it drawn out in this terrible way?

He kept such thoughts to himself. Natasha didn't want to say goodbye yet and Betty was too stubborn to die before she was ready. He loved his strong women. He would miss Betty more than he could say.

He refused to remember her as he saw her now. He sat with her when he could and held her hand



when she reached for his. There were rare moments of lucidity but even these began to make less sense. She called out for Bob like he was in the room next to her. Clint found it unnerving but he pushed the sensation away.

“Where’ve you been, you handsome devil?”

The sun was fading; it was late afternoon. Betty was looking at him with startling recognition. “I was just dreaming about you,” she said.

Clint held her hand like he always did. “I’m here.” he said. Her skin with thin and yellowed like old tissue paper. There was so little left of Elizabeth MacIntosh. “You look beautiful, Betty.” He smiled as he raised her hand to his lips.

“You mean that?”

“From the first day I saw you.”

“I miss you,” she said and her eyes filled with tears. “I’m so tired and it hurts so much. Stay with me please. You’ll stay awhile, won’t you?”

“I’ll stay,” he said.

Clint gently squeezed her hand, remaining by her side until she drifted off into another drug-induced sleep.

Outside he found Natasha waiting for him in the hallway. There was little light but there were tears in her eyes. He wanted to reach out and touch them, to taste them. He wasn’t sure what he should say.

She wrapped her arms around him tightly. “I love you,” she said, voice so soft he was certain that he must have imagined it.

He held her to him and they remained that way for some time. I can’t let you go, he thought. I love you so much. I’ll always take care of you; please take care of me.

---

Nell visited for the last time three days before Betty’s death. She said her goodbyes alone in Betty’s bedroom. Natasha hovered by the door. She could never be too far from her, now sleeping on a camp bed at the foot of Betty’s own.

Nell excused herself to the bathroom and emerged several minutes later. She stopped via the kitchen and accepted Clint’s offer of a drink.

“You know how to make an Irish coffee?”

Clint smiled at her. “That’s the only one I know how to make.”

They sat in silence as Natasha tended to Betty upstairs. They could hear the muffled sounds of retching through the ceiling. Nell let the coffee burn her lips.

“Her husband went out like this,” she said. “I don’t know how she did it.”

“Bob had cancer too?”

“Lung. He was a smoker.” Nell coughed as she choked on the hot liquid. “Give me a bullet between the eyes. Just make it fucking quick.”

“It can be arranged,” Clint said.

She laughed. He could feel her eyes following him as he carried on with preparing Natasha’s dinner.

“You’re okay, kid,” she said. “Betty was right about you.”

---

Betty died on a bright November morning with Natasha by her side.

Her breathing slowed and waned with increasingly drawn out periods of stopping. This was the death rattle, the doctor had warned. Each moment that Natasha thought Betty had passed, she would suddenly breathe again.

Stubborn woman, Clint thought. I’m surrounded by stubborn women.

This time was Natasha’s and so Clint remained on the outside, making a pot of coffee and watching it go cold on the kitchen table.

When the moment did come, Natasha said nothing. She got up from her seat and took a damp cloth to Betty’s face. She brushed her hair and straightened the sheets that surrounded her. Sliding her eyelids closed, she placed a kiss to her forehead, whispering a mournful prayer in Russian.

She turned to find Clint standing in the doorway.

He waited until she came to him. He would always wait. She walked towards him, slowly at first, her steps quickening until his arms were around her, until she was crushed against him and the dam could finally break.

The flood came but Clint held fast. He would not be washed away.

## Chapter 9

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [You're A Big Girl Now](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Time is a jet plane, it moves too fast  
Oh, but what a shame if all we've shared can't last*

---

Betty's funeral turned out to be a much bigger event than expected.

There was no formal ceremony; just a private cremation to be followed by a small gathering at her home. "A few songs and a hell of a lot of booze—those were her instructions," Nell had said. Natasha, along with Clint, made all the necessary preparations then stood back, ready to fade into the background as friends and neighbors began to arrive. The house quickly filled; it had been so long since either of them had been surrounded by so many people.

And people knew who they were.

Phil's friends from work was the official story, although the amount it appeared Betty had talked about them made it seem somewhat dubious. People introduced themselves as if they had met already and always with such affection. Natasha was floored. She rubbed at fresh tears that refused to stop. The ocean was bottomless, her grief like a tide always bringing new waves.

Children laughed at her feet, weaving through the older generations, decades worth of people who had grown up with Betty and Bob. Natasha sought out their stories as if she were collecting intel. She wanted to learn so much, to be part of that history.

She could sense Clint watching her. It was like it had always been; she took point and he stood guard. She felt steadier just having him near.

Their eyes met often. It was a secret comfort and a wordless language. When she found herself with a neighbor's infant grandchild in her arms, it was the only time that she was unable to read his expression.

Clint was perfect; he couldn't have been better. They ran out of food after barely an hour and he returned twenty minutes later with enough to last them into next week. He otherwise kept to the sidelines, becoming instant friends with Nell's husband, Arthur, a Woody Allen lookalike with a wicked sense of humor who had made a fine art out of winding Nell up like it was primetime entertainment.

It was late when the last guest left and Arthur dragged Nell to the car still shouting instructions about where to store the crystal and the china. Natasha sagged against the doorframe, Clint's arm around her waist the only thing keeping her upright.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get some sleep."

She slept through the night for the first time in weeks. It was late in the morning when she finally woke up, the sun high overhead and the house tidied and cleaned. Clint gave her a mug of coffee and told her to go sit outside. She was too exhausted to argue.

The sea air was cool but the sun was warm. She felt like the weather, a strange mass of contradictions. Half shut down, dormant and unused, there was another part of her that was bursting to escape. She kept that part tightly controlled; she was afraid of what would emerge if she let it. Most times she didn't know whether to scream or cry. Betty's gone. The thought echoed inside her head. Betty's gone and you watched her die. You watched her fade away before your eyes. Death still had the power to surprise her.

Clint joined her some time later to reveal that he had been offered a job in Kabul. "The client's a total asshole so the pay's good." His eyes met hers pleadingly.

"You should take it," she said.

He would leave in the morning.

They were quiet together for the rest of the day. Natasha insisted on making dinner, somehow managing to put together an edible feast from the funeral leftovers. They ate in silence, polishing off a bottle of red wine between them; so much went unsaid. Clint washed the dishes and Natasha helped put them away. His hands resting either side of her as she leaned back against the counter, he kissed her goodnight and she opened her mouth to him, their chaste ritual of the past few weeks suddenly forgotten. The restless parts of her were warring to get out. Something had ignited inside her.

She pulled him closer.

Please, she thought, deepening the kiss; please. Make me feel whole again. Clint moaned against her as her arms wrapped around his neck; he nearly lifted her off the floor. Their lips would not be parted, even as they stumbled to reach the bedroom. His shirt discarded, she began to work on his jeans but he stilled her hands. "Not tonight," he said and kissed each palm, guiding her over to lie back on the bed before undressing her slowly. He kissed every part, his hands following where lips had been. He touched her everywhere, using his fingers to bring her to the edge until she shattered beneath him. Tears staining her cheeks, she kissed him again, falling asleep with her arms wrapped tightly around him.

---

Clint offered to drive himself to the airport.

Natasha insisted, sitting quietly behind the wheel and nodding in response to all his questions. "I'm fine; you should go. It's okay. I'll be okay."

All Clint wanted was for her to ask him to stay.

The job had been offered several months ago but only confirmed in the last forty-eight hours. And the money was good. Seriously good. He needed this. Just a few more of these asshole gigs and he could complete the house and provide for her in the way that he intended. The ring on the bedpost swung like a pendulum. He wanted to be enough for her one day; soon.

Her scent resided on his fingers and the heat of her body from the previous night still lingered on his skin. He would need that memory to get him through the next week. He hated Afghanistan.

There was too much beauty and devastation to exist in a single place.

She bypassed the drop-off point and parked the car in the short stay lot. Clint said nothing, getting out and hitching his bag over his shoulder. A trolley was cumbersome; pedestrian. She didn't object when he reached out and held her hand.

In the terminal, he stopped and checked his flight on the screen. The world surrounded them, loud and uninterested and never stopping, even for an instant.

"You sure you'll be okay?" he said.

She nodded once. He lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. "You change your mind, you let me know."

She nodded again.

"Okay," he said and let go of her hand, taking a step back. "I'll see you in..."

Suddenly her arms were around him, clutched fiercely about his chest, her body pressed to his. "I love you," she said. "I love you so much." She pulled back to look at him. "I should have told you before." She held his face between her hands like it was something precious, eyes boring into his as if he might hear her thoughts as well. "Please be safe. Please come back to me."

Clint dropped his bag. It landed with a loud thump at his feet. There was a lot of valuable equipment in there. How was he going to clear security? What time did the gate close? *Do not leave baggage unattended.*

"You love me."

Statement of fact. Where was the question?

He had never dared ask. Maybe it was true. The odds were in his favor but who would take that chance? The only certainty was that he could not live with her rejection. Clint had always done well at poker; he would never overplay his hand.

"Yes, you idiot." She kissed across his face; mouth, cheeks, and even nose. "I love you."

Say it again.

"I love you."

"I love *you*," he said.

"I know."

"I don't understand what's happening."

She threw her arms around his neck and he instinctively held her against him. "You're getting on that plane."

"Ask me to stay."

"I'll be okay."

“Please, Natasha.”

“No.”

He crushed her to him, her feet leaving the floor, legs latching around his waist. “People are staring,” he whispered.

She smiled. “Better give them something to talk about.”

Natasha tasted different after she had told you that she loved you. She tasted like morning rain, dew on a cobweb or any other poetic nature-inspired bullshit that you could think of. That new taste of clear water. The stream that flowed beside the house where they lived.

Clint’s tongue delved her mouth and there was salt and coffee and those three words, over and over again. He would not leave her.

“I’ll kill all the Taliban,” he said. “Anyone who gets in my way.” He cupped the side of her face with one hand, the other cradling her ass through her jeans. “Nothing will stop me coming back to you.”

“Promise?”

He kissed her again. “Say it.”

“I love you,” she said.

“Okay.” He set her down on her feet. “I promise.”

---

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Natasha slumped back in the imposing leather chair. The LA lawyers’ office was sleek and impersonal, down to the lonely conference room that she found herself in. She had not been prepared for this.

“But she’d been sick,” Natasha said. “She was delirious. She couldn’t have known what she was doing.”

Betty’s lawyer was a short, dark-haired woman with a kind face. “Ms. Romanoff,” she said, “this will was made over a year ago. A year and a half, to be precise. Right after she learned of her nephew’s death.”

“But there must be other family members—”

“Just one brother, 83, with plenty of money of his own. She had no children and no other close living relatives. She chose to give it all to you.”

“All to me? But that’s insane. Why would she do such a thing?”

“I really can’t say, other than that she thought very highly of you. And that’s not quite all,” she added. “There are a few charitable gifts, and her late husband’s collection of motorbikes has been

devised to a Mr. Clinton Barton, but other than that, the rest belongs to you.”

“The rest?”

“The house in Malibu, some property in Sonoma. An extensive portfolio of bonds and marketable securities. After taxes and depending on market fluctuations, I’d estimate that you stand to inherit around twelve million dollars.”

Natasha nearly fell out of her chair.

The lawyer pressed a cool glass of water in her hand and asked if she needed a moment; Natasha just asked if it was okay to leave. She had processed too much today; she couldn’t take it all in. The other woman nodded, handing her a plain white envelope on her way out the door.

“Mrs MacIntosh wanted you to read this,” she said. “After she was gone.”

Natasha took the letter and walked out into the blinding California sun.

She went back to Betty’s house—her house now, she thought dazedly—and sat down in the living room. With trembling hands, she opened the envelope. Inside was a handwritten letter:

*My darling girl,*

*Right now you are probably in shock and thinking that I must be crazy and delusional and out of my goddamn mind. Well, I have just one thing to say to that: suck it up, buttercup. I know exactly what I’m doing. And there is no one who deserves it more, so just stop with the denial.*

*You do deserve it, Natasha. You deserve so many good things. Never tell yourself otherwise, and never settle. I know the amount must come as a shock to you and I wish I could have told you earlier, but you would have tried to talk me out of it and well, my mind is set in stone (stubbornness runs in the family, you see). The truth is, I come from some money on my mother’s side and Bob had some as well and we never had any kids, so there you are.*

*And now it’s yours—with the exception of the bikes, of course (and you might want to get Clint to sit down with a glass of whiskey before you tell him; trust me on this.)*

*Go, live life, and be happy. Take risks and don’t be trapped by fear. Be no one else but yourself. You deserve all good things. Bob and I were so happy here. I hope that you and Clint will be too.*

*All my love,*

*Betty*

She folded up the letter and put it away. Her cheeks were wet; she didn’t remember crying. It was too much, it was all too much—this wasn’t meant for her.

"Goddamnit, Betty."

She poured herself a drink. Downing the scotch in one gulp, she moved to pour another, but something stayed her hand. It was a photograph of a beautiful young woman with a clever smile. It was almost as if she could read her mind.

Empty glass still in hand, she wandered aimlessly about the living room. That girl and her clever

smile followed her everywhere, revealing a lifetime of memories. And for the very first time, Natasha saw it all.

We are the same.

She nearly staggered backwards, but it wasn't fear or shock that made her steps falter. It was certainty, a bone-deep certainty that she had never known before.

She grabbed her keys and headed for the door, pausing only to let her fingers brush the photograph on the table in the hall.

"Thank you," she said and then she was gone.

---

*I never feel so alive as when you are near.*

Could a sound be captured in the space of a word? Could music? Could the beat of a heart, strong and steady beneath the palm of your hand?

If it could, Natasha feared the word would be unintelligible, not meant for human ears. Angels speak in darker tongues than these. They carry swords of fire; their lips are wreathed in flame.

She had been alone too long. Alone and waiting; she had no idea how he had made a life out of this. She had only been at it for ten days.

Ten days. Plans sometimes went wrong; there were always unforeseen complications. Natasha knew this, had been through it hundreds of times, as had he. She stared at the fire, curled up in his favorite chair and clutching the ribbon she wore around her neck. He would always come back to her, had always done before; but still.

He was late. Ten fucking days.

A rumble of thunder shook the ground. No, not thunder—a plane.

Natasha leapt to her feet. Her hands were shaking, her heart threatening to beat out of her chest. She couldn't move.

The door opened and there he was, sun-bronzed and with dust catching light in his hair.

"Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She didn't have time to react before she was dragged into a full body hug. He kissed her, swift and sudden and oh god, she had missed this so much she almost couldn't breathe.

Clint pulled back with a weary smile. "Sorry. I know I need a toothbrush and a shave and a week-long shower, but I had to do that. I've been waiting ten fucking days to do that." He kissed her again. "Just give me a chance to get cleaned up and I'm all yours."

He turned away and picked up his bag, heading for the stairs, completely oblivious as he continued to talk.

"Mission went straight to hell by day two. Bunch of trigger happy amateurs; damn near got themselves killed. I'm gonna push for hazard pay if they don't want me to hunt them all down



first. Fuck; I'm so glad to be home."

He was out of sight now and she could count the steps: two to put down his bag, four to the dresser to grab a change of clothes, two more to turn around and check the bedpost—

The footsteps halted; the silence was deafening.

A pause, an endless pause, and then he moved again. Eight steps to the door, three more to the top of the stairs. She could see him now.

Was there anything ever so beautiful? Beautiful and stunned and completely fucking speechless. She wanted to laugh; she wanted cry. He was such an idiot. He took the stairs one at a time, still not able to see what he was looking for.

He ran out of stairs; they were only a few feet apart. She smiled now; she couldn't stop smiling.

"I'm ready," she said.

He approached her carefully, like she might vanish at any moment, as if she were a mirage or a dream. He was close enough now where he could see her neck, see what she was wearing. The sight of her stopped him in his tracks. She beckoned him forward with her eyes and pulled back her long hair, holding it up and away from her face, offering back to him what had been given so long ago.

He was shaking—those strong, steady hands, hands that could line up a shot from a mile away—they trembled now, fingers struggling to untie the ribbon. Successful at last, he took the favor she wore and knelt before her.

He took a deep breath; there didn't seem to be enough air in the room. "I had a speech—do you want the speech? I think I can still remember it."

She shook her head. The laughter mixed with tears; humans didn't deserve such happiness. He took her hand in his and for the first time he smiled too, bright like the morning sun.

"You better fucking say yes," he said, laughing; he was crying too. He slipped the ring onto her finger.

"Natashka; my Natashka. Will you marry me?"

She took his face in her hands and brought him up to eye level.

"Yes."

There were no words, only sounds, only laughter and happiness and pure blissful joy. He picked her up and twirled her around; kissed her lips, kissed the ring where it rested on her finger—kissed it over and over again.

There were no words, only sounds. Only angels could discern their meaning.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Emotionally Yours](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Come baby, shake me, come baby, take me, I would be satisfied  
Come baby, hold me, come baby, help me, my arms are open wide  
I could be unraveling wherever I'm traveling, even to foreign shores  
But I will always be emotionally yours*

---

Christmas morning.

There were no presents under the tree. There was no tree from what he could remember. Clint used to hate waking up.

It was cold in Iowa. His blanket was thin and Barney used to steal it. In the heart of Alaska, Clint had never felt such warmth.

He opened his eyes. Was it December? Who cared what day it was?

An expanse of pale skin stretched out beside him, soft flesh and round buttocks; and her hair, red like rust or the ochre of a polluted stream. Was that the same thing? You have iron oxide hair. He pulled his unwrapped present towards him.

There you are.

He took her hand, kissed the spot over and over again. My precious.

Hey. Look at that bedpost. Doesn't it look better that way? Totally naked. Undressed and exposed. You see what I'm getting at, Tasha?

She stirred as he kissed her, along her brow, her cheeks, down her neck and chest. Hello breasts. Hello my darlings. He sucked on them longingly. I missed you girls. I missed you the most.

"Clint?"

No talking.

He looked up at her. My love. My Natasha. What should I call you now?

My wife to be.

"Did I wake you?"

She smacked him across the head. "Don't stop," she said.

He grinned, tickling along her sides before sliding his tongue around one nipple.

This is real, he thought. Can I wish you a Merry Christmas? Let's pretend it's my birthday. Let's pretend that we're already married. Don't make me wait. I can't endure this amount of happiness.

"Deranged man."

His face slid down and pressed kisses to the dip of her pelvis. Her stomach went rigid beneath his chin.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Is that what you plan to call me?"

When we're married, she didn't say. Natasha never said these things out loud but that's what she meant. She had told him that she was ready.

"Ball and chain. My lesser half. The biggest mistake I ever made." He lifted her thighs to rest on his shoulders. "Mrs. Barton has a certain ring to it."

"You and rings. You're obsessed."

He laughed as he tasted her.

---

Natasha woke up to an empty bed and the smell of pancakes; she must have fallen asleep after Clint's very thorough good morning. She stretched out across the mattress, her hands spread wide overhead, and smiled as she studied her engagement ring. A perfect fit; how could any of this be real?

Dragging herself out of bed, she slipped on a pair of tall shearling boots then padded across the rough wooden floor in search of something to wear. December in Alaska was cold as fuck, no matter how picturesque it looked outside.

Her footsteps creaking on the stairs, she could hear Clint's voice before she saw him.

"So I'm thinking Vegas, Elvis chapel, high noon tomorrow." His back was to her as he stood by the stove. "Me in a sequined jumpsuit is an optional extra, but don't underestimate the heirloom quality of the pictures. I can have us there by sundown."

Halfway down the stairs, she spoke. "I was thinking something else."

Clint turned around and proceeded to drop both plates of pancakes.

The babydoll was white, cotton, trimmed with lace, low cut and new. It was also very, very short. She grinned. "That bad?"

He still couldn't seem to form a coherent sentence. She had seen that look only once before.

"You gonna let me win at darts too?" she said, her fingers curling around the folded pieces of paper held behind her back.

“That was a long time ago.” Pancakes forgotten, he closed the distance between them, standing two steps below her. He traced his hands up the length of her legs, over her thighs and under the skirt, until he found what he was looking for. Natasha squirmed to his touch. He grinned up at her, pulling her to him and placing a kiss where her panties should have been.

“What were you thinking?” he said.

She handed him one piece of paper, chewing on her bottom lip as she watched him read her list of instructions. “Look, I know it’s a lot to ask, and I understand if you don’t want to—”

He looked back up at her. “Done.” He didn’t even blink. Her heart felt fit to burst; she loved him so much.

“What else?” he said.

She handed him the other bit of paper, stroking the side of his face as she gazed at him with a warm smile. “Just the time and the place.”

“Three weeks?” One palm still splayed over her ass, he pulled her closer towards him. “You planning on keeping me locked up here until you can marry me?”

Natasha shook her head. “I leave in the morning. I’ve got things to do.” She pinched his cheek before patting it gently. “As do you.”

She felt his arm slide around her and lift her from the stairs. “Day after tomorrow,” he said, his lips pressing kisses to her stomach as he turned and carried her back towards the living room. “I’m not finished with you yet.” He let her body slowly slide down the length of his until her legs wrapped around his waist.

“There’s something else,” she said, clinging to him tightly. She wasn’t sure that she would ever be able to let him go.

“If you’ve been married before, I’ll learn to live with it.” He unzipped his pants, positioning her on his lap as he sat down in his favorite chair. “Your ex-husband?” One sudden movement and he was all the way inside her; she gasped. “Not so much.”

“That’s ... not it.” She found herself building an increasingly erratic rhythm, Clint pushing the babydoll out of the way so he could touch her. Her concentration was starting to slip. “Never been ... married before. But I’m really fucking rich.”

“Don’t care,” he mumbled against her skin. He shifted her hips to increase the friction between them.

“Betty left me everything,” she finally managed.

His mouth fastened on the base of her neck and he bit down lightly. “Good for you.”

“Twelve million.” He didn’t stop. “But she wanted you—to—have,” she was bouncing up and down now, “Bob’s bike collection.”

Her walls began to clench around him. Clint stilled beneath her. “The Vincent?” His hands gripped her hips. “You’re serious?”

“Yes,” she said, fighting to get back the rhythm that she had before. “Yes—oh god yes—all of it.”

“*Fuck.*”

They came together; it wasn’t for the first time. As Natasha limped out the door a full forty-eight hours later, she was certain that it wouldn’t be the last.

---

Clint entered the small store. It was just as he remembered it, as was the formidable owner who dozed behind the counter.

“Marina.”

She opened her eyes and looked up, recognizing him immediately. “I said no refunds.”

He smiled. “That’s not why I’m here.” Her expression softened as soon as he slipped into Russian, much as it had during his last visit.

“I am a married woman,” she said. “You had your chance.”

“I had a chance?”

She smiled. “So what is it?”

“I need a favor.” He placed a plain gold band on the counter, the metal scuffed and marked. “Think you can polish this and have it engraved by tomorrow?”

She picked it up and eyed it critically. “This isn’t fast food,” she said. “These things take time.”

“I appreciate your work ethic.” He pulled out a small wad of cash. “How much?”

“You insult me. It will be ready in the morning.” She held out her hand as he placed a crisp Benjamin against her palm. “What do you want the engraving to read?”

“You know the Russian for ‘once’?” His midwestern drawl came thick and steady as he winked at her.

Marina folded the note and slipped it into one of many hidden panels beneath her shawl. She pursed her lips, halfway between a smile and a frown, as she looked at him. “Just as long as you remember the American for ‘good tip’.”

---

Clint readjusted his baseball cap as he waited for the elevator to arrive. The keycard Natasha had given him granted him access through the front doors of Stark Tower without a single question asked or eyebrow raised. Dressed in black and an array of dark grays, he was determined to keep a low profile.

The doors opened and he stepped on, lugging his bag over one shoulder and turning to hit the button.

“Hold up!”

He paused as another man entered. Not just any mere mortal. It was Captain fucking America in the overdeveloped flesh, complete with a pressed checkered shirt and enough wholesomeness to make the Waltons ill.

Clint removed his cap. “What floor?”

He could hear Rogers' sharp intake of breath before he responded. “Seventy-third,” he said, adding a muttered, “Barton,” as if the word was being wrenched out of him.

Clint hit the button for seventy-three then very carefully selected the one for sixty-seven. “Captain.”

They stood side by side and said nothing more until Clint stepped off. He might have been grinning as he watched the doors close behind him.

---

“So what brings you to town? And where’s Romanoff? No, wait; don’t tell me.”

Clint puffed on his cigar, letting two perfect rings of smoke exit his mouth as he rested both feet on Stark’s coffee table. He had agreed to one drink. They were both already on their second.

“Puerto Rican?” he said, glancing over at Tony.

Tony sat up and studied his own cigar. “My spanish isn’t so good. You’ll have to translate for me.”

“I need a suit,” Clint said. He reached for his glass of scotch. “Know any good tailors?”

“In Manhattan?”

“In the world.”

Stark was on the edge of his seat. “What’s the occasion?”

“Prom,” Clint said.

“You need a limo?”

“Transportation isn’t going to be a problem.”

Tony pulled out his cellphone and began scrolling through his contacts. “Milan,” he said. “I know a guy who knows a guy. I know that guy as well.”

Milan was on the way to Russia. Clint took down the details.

“Is this because you missed the awards ceremony?” Tony said.

Clint looked at him and smiled. “I heard Rogers bagged himself a hot date. Think he got lucky?”

Tony inhaled too hard on his cigar, setting off a coughing fit. Clint sat back, taking a long sip of scotch as he watched him.

“Warn me in future,” Tony said as he drank from his own glass.

“No more emails,” Clint said. “There’s your warning.”

---

*57° 34' 41" N, 154° 21' 45" W. Day before. 1100.*

He was fucking late.

The boat ride across the strait was just one in a series of recent events determined to ensure that he would never live to see his wedding day; the backwoods plane that he had chartered was delayed by bad weather and flown by a teenager who had got his license only the week before (Clint had to take over mid-flight on no sleep and almost zero visibility); and he still hadn't thawed out from hiking across half of Siberia.

But none of that mattered. All he could think about was the slip of paper in his pocket and how it changed everything.

She would have to say no. It was too insane to contemplate. Twenty-two when it all began. Twenty-two when he had brought her back to his fucking cabin and—fuck. He should be arrested. His ass should be in jail. This was insane. It was over. It had been the best two years of his life. Twenty-fucking-two. He had never been so aroused.

He was terrified.

“You made it!” she said, jumping out of her pickup truck and leaping into his arms. She kissed him soundly, their mouths pressed between thick layers of scarves.

One last hug, he thought. One last kiss and then—

“Come here.” She pulled him into a nearby hangar; it was so fucking cold. They were both wrapped up like arctic explorers, her gloved hand impalpable against his as she lead the way. “There’s something I need to show you.”

“Nat, stop.” He pushed her scarf out of the way so that he could see her face properly. One last look, one last, one last, one last—he pulled the piece of paper out of his pocket and shoved it into her hands. “I know who you are.”

Her brow wrinkled; she didn’t understand. Of course she didn’t. She looked down, unfolding it carefully. She held it close, the paper partially obscuring her face, her eyes registering a hundred different expressions, most of which he couldn’t read at all.

“Is this...?” Her voice stammered. “But how did you...?” There were tears in her eyes; she covered her mouth with one hand.

"It was supposed to be a wedding present," he said. That much was true.

She was looking at her parents’ names; she still hadn’t figured it out. She glanced over at him. Was she going to hug him? Hit him? He took hold of her before she could move and shook her

gently.

“Tash, look.”

She studied the paper again. “My birthday’s different,” she said. “Huh. June 19.”

It felt like the world was coming to a screeching halt. Maybe it was. He closed his eyes. “Check the year too.”

He felt her still in his grip. “Oh,” she said. He forced himself to watch as her eyes widened. “*Oh.*”

“Yeah.”

*Fuck.*

He could see her doing the math. She had thought that she would be 30 in the spring; turns out, she wasn’t yet 25. He would be 42 next month. Clint took a deep breath. His chest felt like it was ripping at the seams. Best to get this over with. A swift, clean cut; let him bleed out in peace.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he said. “I understand. I’ll go and we can call everything off and—”

She looked up suddenly, shaking her head. She would hear him out.

“Natasha.” His voice was hoarse; he would finish this speech if it fucking killed him. Twelve years between them was one thing but nearly eighteen was fast approaching a felony. “Listen to me. You don’t have to go through with this, okay? You don’t have to—”

Words were blocked by lips. Her lips. She was kissing him. He was dead and this was death and it was okay; he was ready to go. She pulled back briefly and did it again.

Somehow he was still breathing.

“Idiot,” she said. “I’m not going anywhere.” She dragged him over to the far end of the hangar; he could do nothing but follow. “Look.” She pointed to a brand-new turboprop that stood gleaming in the corner. “I bought you a plane.”

What the fuck was happening?

She leaned up and kissed him for a final time. “See you at the church.”

Birth certificate in hand, she waved him goodbye and vanished into the snow. Clint stared at his plane.

Christmas morning.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Wedding Song](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Ever since you walked right in, the circle's been complete  
I've said goodbye to haunted rooms and faces in the street  
To the courtyard of the jester which is hidden from the sun  
I love you more than ever and I haven't yet begun*

---

The sun is setting. The world is covered in snow. An icy wind cuts through every layer of her gown.

The church is dark inside. Candles for light and a lone voice singing the troparion. A box rests in the alcove; it arrived from Malibu this morning. A bouquet of roses, orange-red and smelling of the sea. She takes them out.

Removing her wrap, she pauses to light a candle, to cross herself, to kiss the icons. Ritual and belief aren't the same thing but they are both ways to pay homage. To give thanks. Her heart has never felt so full.

There's a mirror by the door; she studies her reflection. All in white. A new day, a new start, a new life. *I choose you.*

She pulls the veil over her face. The chill from the outside has seeped within; she can see her breath on the air. She smiles. And to think, she used to hate the cold.

The lone voice stops, then begins again. The processional hymn. She opens the door and steps through. The church is empty except for two men. The priest and one other.

He waits for her. She can see it on his face. He has always waited.

I waited for you too.

My beautiful man. He is clean shaven, hair trimmed and tie straight. She sees the suit that he has bought for her. The rose he wears matches the ones she carries, unplanned and unrehearsed. He has never looked so handsome. Except that he always has. He always was. You were always the most beautiful thing I ever saw.

Each step she is closer. I am yours. You are mine. My own free will. I choose you, Clint Barton. Let me be your wife.

---

*"They're trying to kill each other again."*

She hears the hushed conversations of the other agents; a few brave souls line up to place bets while the tired many flee the room. She dodges a feint and kick that was aimed at her head. She throws a punch, he ducks, she counters; he's a tenth of a second too late. Her fist connects and she feels the satisfying crunch of bone beneath her fingers.

Murmurs ripple across the room. There may have even been a whispered *oh shit*.

He wipes the blood from his face and smiles like a warning.

Later she watches as he exits a bar, nose bruised and splinted with tape, his arm around the shoulders of a woman she does not recognize. Blonde tonight.

She wraps her coat more snugly around herself and walks back alone.

---

"What the hell was that? I told you to wait."

She climbs into the chopper, ramming her duffel into his injured shoulder as she passes. She sees the pain momentarily register before his usual indifference returns.

"You always give orders to your superiors?" he says. "There's a word for that."

"You could have blown the whole mission."

He looks in her general direction. "It was a tactical decision."

"What about the part where you left no one alive for questioning?"

"It was that or a dead agent."

"I had it under control." She drops her bag. "And you got blood on my dress."

He settles back against the bulkhead and closes his eyes. "Maybe next time I'll miss."

---

Her lip is split. Her jaw is aching. She is almost beginning to enjoy herself.

They allow this dance to play out for one more song and then all bets are off. A knee to his groin. A fist to her ribs. Arms like steel vices wrap around her chest, trapping her arms to her sides and lifting her bodily from the floor in a bone-crushing hug. Her legs struggle and somehow contort until she has his head between her thighs, until she is squeezing the life out of him, until he has turned bruised ribs into cracked bones and she finds herself thrown outside the ring.

She twists and turns, eyes on the ropes, the mat, the floor. If she can just time her landing—

Her eyes meet his as she feels her ankle give out from underneath her.

Crap.

It's fine. She straightens up. Her leg gives way again.

Crap, crap, crap.

Either she won or it's a draw or the end but there is no reason to continue. Her point has been made.

She nods then turns, hobbles, stumbles; she will not give up. Her room is only a three minute walk away. This is nothing. It's—

She spins as she feels a hand on her shoulder, aims a punch, blocks his parry. Her balance is off and the battle is over quickly as he picks her up without a word and carries her back to her room.

They never speak of it again.

---

She likes the look of Cohen. He is tall and dark and smart too, recruited straight out of Yale Law, varsity wrestler, all round athlete. Target scores that are more than respectable. She has read his file. Two hundred pounds of solid muscle. He must look good under that suit. He could show a girl a good time. She wonders what he looks like when he smiles.

She is so bored.

"Could you just..." She leans in close, reaching for the coffee pot in what is fondly referred to as the 'wreck' room.

"Uh, sure." He hands it over.

"Cohen, isn't it?" she says, pouring herself a tepid mug. She tilts her head, looks up at him with wide eyes and bites down lightly on her bottom lip.

"Yeah..." He almost looks nervous.

"Romanoff." She puts down the coffee pot and offers him her hand. "Sorry. Natasha Romanoff."

There is the hint of a smile. He's cute, even if his joyful expression makes him seem somewhat younger. He reaches for her hand.

"We done here?"

*Barton.*

Cohen's hand drops. He steps back. "Yeah. We're good," he says.

Cohen moves out of the way as Barton pours himself a cup of coffee. He tastes it then pulls a face like thunder. "This shit sure isn't."

Natasha pours her own mug down the sink and stalks out of the room. What a fucking waste of lip gloss.

---

There is blood on his hands.

He surveys her body, his handprints on her neck and chest, down her arms and along her thighs. She is tilted towards him, manipulated into the recovery position with one arm tucked beneath her head and her leg bent, dress hitched close to her hip. There is nothing to it; nothing to her. He counts her respirations and checks her pulse again.

She lives.

There is blood on his hands and face and soaked through his clothes. There is red in his vision. His heart thrums in his chest on a wave of adrenaline that refuses to break. Fifty-four. Her pulse is weak but steady. They are out of sync and out of time. Why won't she wake up?

He has no idea what they gave her and there is no one left to ask. Twelve hours until evac in a darkened room and an unheated safe house. No bed. No blanket. He needs to see her chest move, the fall and rise of her breasts, to feel the slow throb of her blood beneath his fingers.

Wake up, Tash.

He never calls her that. He never asks for anything. Just give him this; just this once.

Please.

Light is cast by the rising sun. The blood has dried to rust on his skin but her hair glows red and her body is warm. A hand twitches. He gathers her to him, selfish and wrong.

Eyelids flutter and eyes open. Green and alive.

Welcome back, he thinks, hand pressed to her cheek.

Her eyes find his. They focus and she smiles.

She remembers nothing the next day. He tells himself that it's for the best.

---

The mission was a clusterfuck; good people died and the wrong ones got away and if her so-called partner says one word, she thinks she might cry. She is covered in dirt and splattered with blood, uniform torn and head pounding. She can feel his eyes on her as she stumbles into the room.

"Don't," she says.

She goes to the dresser without looking his way and stands in front of the mirror. With shaking hands, she moves to untangle her hair but the adrenaline is wearing off and her fingers won't obey.

She closes her eyes and takes a steadying breath. When she opens them again, he is standing directly behind her.

"Let me."

He takes her hands in his and turns her around, guiding her forward until she sits on the edge of the bed. She's too tired to fight. She doesn't understand what's happening.

He tilts her head towards him.

His hands cradle her face as if he is holding something precious. She cannot breathe.

"You're hurt," he says, knee brushing her own. His body is so close.

She exhales on a sigh. She can't look anywhere else.

His eyes are a thousand shades of green and blue, and that's not counting the flecks of gold. How had she never noticed before? She can see every line of his face, every inconsistency, every angle. He's a work of art. Sewn together and carved from the earth. His hands are gentle. They clean the cut on her cheek then carefully remove the pins from her hair, unraveling it without tugging.

He spreads the curls apart with his fingers until they rest on her shoulders and down her back. Taking the brush from the nightstand, one hand holds the side of her head as he runs it through her hair.

She closes her eyes, his thumb rubbing circles into the tired muscles at the base of her neck. It's hypnotic; she never wants it to end.

"Hey, Red."

Her eyes flutter open. She turns and there's the hint of a smile there, a look she can't read. His palm now rests against the side of her face. He's so close. Her eyes fixate on his mouth. She leans slowly forward.

"Shower," he says and gets up from the bed.

Wordlessly, she goes.

Sinking to the cold tiles beneath the scalding water, her heart is racing, breath coming too fast. She can't stop touching her face.

She closes her eyes. Blue and green and gold.

---

"Romanoff, I'm dying out here."

"Fix a drink."

She hears the fridge open and close.

"Water wasn't what I had in mind."

"Check the cabinet above."

The rustling of bottles. A pause. "Bourbon?"

"You were thinking vodka?"

"I was thinking chocolate milk."

"Fuck you."

His laughter echoes down the hall.

Another successful mission and another stupid bet. She lost and he got to choose. Grease and alcohol. She's buying.

Towel still wrapped around her, she grabs the nearest thing on a hanger; a white cotton dress—sleeveless, plain and simple. Who cares if she looks unremarkable?

She stops in front of the mirror. The cut on her cheek has healed but she can still trace his touch. Get over it, she thinks. He has never mentioned it in the six months' since. Never looked at her that way again. She wonders if maybe she imagined it.

She can hear him down the hallway again; no time for make up. She towel dries her hair. It is a mess of dark red, streaming in every direction. Fuck it. She doesn't have the inclination to put it into any semblance of order. For once, she decides to leave it down.

He's still talking when she enters the kitchen; she doesn't even know about what.

He turns and stops mid sentence, the glass almost slipping from his hand.

"You were saying?"

"Nothing," he says. He can only stare. Somehow she holds back her grin as she follows him out the door.

He lets her win at darts that night. She wears his jacket home.

---

"That was crap, Barton."

Three hours in his arms and she's wound so tight she's about to snap. Two months, one week and five days since she rendered him speechless in her apartment and all she can think about is how much she wants to see that look again. It's stupid; she knows it's stupid. She'd only be another notch on his bedpost.

She is so tired of being on the outside; she wonders what it feels like.

Stripping off her gown, she watches his eyes widen. She plants herself in his lap and watches them widen even more.

"Nat? What the hell are you doing?"

She gives him her best game face. "Training session."

*You have to make it real*, she tells him. What excellent advice. She leans in close and opens her mouth to taste him. Just once. Coffee and tobacco and a hint of honey.

Once will never be enough.

---

He shouldn't even be here.

Two weeks leave on a beach south of the equator and instead he finds himself standing outside a holding cell in the middle of the night, staring at a woman who should be dead.

He opens the door and takes a seat.

She's more beautiful than in the photographs. Younger too with a lost little girl look that belies the weapon that she is. He's got a tranq gun and a P-30 and two marines outside the door. She's barefoot and cuffed and bound to the chair. He still feels underprepared.

"What happens now?" Her voice is quiet, focused. She's sizing him up just as much as he is her.

"Since you passed the initial screening?"

She nods.

"Well," he says, "assuming you don't try to kill any of us, it's three months deconditioning to see if you can be trusted."

"You think I can?"

"I have no idea. I'll leave that to the experts."

"And if they say yes?"

"As a probationary measure, you'll be placed with an experienced field agent."

Suddenly the killer is gone, replaced by something else entirely.

"Who?" Her face lights up. "Agent Barton?" she says.

His fingers tense as they lace together.

*Fuck.*

---

The cell next door is identical except for the occupant. He stands perfectly still, almost meditative, except for his eyes. They're a bank of fire brought to the surface. His breathing is too controlled. Everything is. He's been compromised, but this looks more like madness. No one's dared to approach; no one wants to risk it. No wonder they called him, Phil thinks.

He looks up as the door opens. There is no room for small talk.

"Where is she?"

"Contained."

"She came in willingly."

"She should be dead. Care to explain?"

He slumps down in a chair. "I went with my gut."

"You went against orders."

Their eyes meet and the insinuation is clear. This isn't the first time. Tell me when my gut's been wrong.

"You're suspended from active duty until the Director's convinced you haven't lost your goddamn mind."

"That all?"

Phil goes with his gut. "She's on a plane to Helsinki tonight."

The chair clatters over. There are two armed men outside the door.

"You sure that's necessary?" His voice is terrifyingly calm.

"It's procedure."

"It's bullshit."

"It's done."

He is silent for a moment. "Five minutes," he says.

"You're lucky I'm even letting you leave this room."

"You want her to cooperate?"

"Whose side are you on?"

The mask slips. "Have I ever asked for anything?"

Phil pinches the bridge of his nose. He's starting to get a headache. "You have two."

He stops Barton on the way out the door. "When she comes back," he says, "*if* she comes back, your job is to make her an asset—nothing more. You got that?"

A momentary pause as the other man exits the room is the only acknowledgement he gets.

---

"Are you okay?"

It's all he cares about. A terrifying thought but there it is. He accepts it until he knows for sure. Answer me. We have less than two minutes here.



“Are you?” she says.

Sweetheart, you are barefoot and bound to a chair. You are about to be sent away and broken down and I don’t know what’ll come back to me. There it is. I’ll be waiting. I’ll wait for you. I’ll swim to Helsinki if I have to.

“Look at me.” She does. “Do you understand what they’re going to do?”

“Three months,” she says.

She looks so young. Three months must be a year to you. A lifetime. What have you seen? How are you so beautiful?

He steadies his breathing. He cannot move. To move would be to her and to her would be to touch her and to touch her would be to never stop. He accepts it and swallows it down.

She smiles. “Three months and then they partner me with you.”

Don’t look at me like that. Don’t look at me like you see something good.

“Don’t count on it.”

Her face falls. He locks it down.

“Three months. Forget about me.”

Green eyes crack like glass then harden like steel. There you are. I see you now.

“What if I don’t want to?”

“I’m not asking.”

He turns to leave.

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

Her voice has an edge that wasn’t there before. He smiles. She cannot see.

He smiles because she cannot see him. He smiles because he cannot kill her.

“Prove me right, Red.”

He doesn’t look back. The door locks behind him with thirty seconds to spare.

---

She has been running for so long now.

Jobs come and lives are gone and still she survives. She breathes. Her heart beats.

Is that living?

These streets are paved with broken stone, pieces not fitting, barely touching; they are uneven beneath her feet. She knows that she is being followed.

You live but for how long? Your heart beats. Count it.

The nights were long in the Red Room. Dark and silent. She had her thoughts. The steady rhythm of her heart.

One, two, three.

You are alone. There is only you.

Remember the movies? Moving pictures of people more vivid than living color. Words and voices and ways of being that she had never seen before. This is America. The people are strange and bold and brave. The bravest are the quiet ones.

Take me with you. I can be quiet too.

The rain is drizzle. It sticks to her hair. People pass. Couples steady each other over the fractured cobbles.

You are alone.

She hurries down an empty street then turns. There is no light but a click and the glow of an ember. She smells the tobacco before she sees the smoke. A cigarette in the rain. Who would bother? Who would follow her here?

Her heart beats. She counts it. She is afraid.

She sees a man step out of the shadows and straight from the screen. There is too much life and color to be real. Hadn't she always dreamed him? How could he possibly exist?

Where is your hat? she thinks. Where is your horse?

He looks at her and smiles.

One, two, three. One, two, three.

He is not armed. Only a cigarette. He lifts it to his lips.

"I'm beginning to think you're leading me on, Red."

Her heart beats.

It beats and beats and beats.

She lives.

---

The last prayers have been spoken; all is quiet now.

The priest congratulates them and walks back to the altar, extinguishing candles until only a few

remain. They hear the doors close but they do not see. They can't look anywhere else.

She feels the pressure of his hands clasped to hers. There is a band of gold on her finger. There is a band of gold on his. She cannot stop staring at their hands, at their rings, at him.

His hands reach up and cradle her face as if he is holding something precious. He kisses her like he was always meant to, a kiss two lifetimes in the making, the silent visages of the saints surrounding them.

Bear witness to this.

Natalia Alianovna Romanova has a husband. Clinton Francis Barton has a wife.

## Chapter 12

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from Shelter from the Storm by Bob Dylan.

*Suddenly I turned around and she was standin' there  
With silver bracelets on her wrists and flowers in her hair  
She walked up to me so gracefully and took my crown of thorns  
"Come in," she said, "I'll give you shelter from the storm"*

---

His mother wore a rented dress and a forced smile.

Clint could remember her picture. You weren't a beautiful woman but I loved you. You did your best. It was the only photograph that still remained in his mind, his father and his mother and Barney already a growing bump beneath her skirt. Was there ever a picture that included him?

You didn't exist before this moment. You didn't exist before her. You had a father and a mother and a brother too but where is your family? Where is your heart?

She walked towards you in a fog of incense and prayer.

I don't believe in god or an afterlife. I don't believe in souls. But you are something else. I don't know how to describe you. There is something greater than this, something bigger than me and you hold it. You are not of this earth.

She came to you of another time.

Her skirt was full, a cloud of white and cinched at the waist to so narrow a point, he knew that he could fit his hands around it. I could hold you in the span of these hands, hands that are rough and can kill. I can build and destroy. I can make you unravel beneath me. I will do what you ask me to. I am yours to command.

She was fully covered, white lace stretching the length of her arms and up to her chin. There was no hint of flesh but the porcelain of her face and hands, the contrast of rose red lips and orange-red roses and all that blood red hair piled atop her head like the center of a target. He could see through her veil. He could always see. She burned brighter than the candles that flickered in her wake.

The words were spoken over them. Of my own free will I come. Let me marry you, Natasha. Let me make you mine.

He waited until the priest had gone, her veil already lifted (his hands had shaken at the time), no one else to witness this sacred moment. God had left the building. This was not for His eyes. Their hands clasped together, he stared at their rings then up at her face. There were no words, no prayers or incantations to convey what he felt.

His hands still shook as they took hold of that face. Her beautiful face. How she looked at him. What did she see?

Hear me when I speak to you.

He pressed his lips to hers.

I love you. For all time. I am yours. I am yours.

He had confessed his sins and made absolution. But God could not have his soul.

His bride kissed him back. She had listened too.

---

Hand in hand, she led him back down the aisle, through the outer doors and into the vestibule. The candles were almost burnt out; they were cast in a dull orange glow.

Natasha removed her veil and took her bouquet, placing them in a box.

"Someone will collect them in the morning," she said.

She had planned everything so carefully. Clint had done what she had asked of him.

He watched as she put on gloves and a wrap, emerald green and lined with fur. She wore a matching hat, like something out of a Russian fairytale; a snow queen. She handed him his coat.

"Where to next?"

Outside was a narrow lane leading away from the church, deserted except for a single house.

"Follow me," she said and reached for her boots.

"Not a chance, Red."

She laughed as he picked her up, as if the heavy yards of satin and lace were of no consequence. He walked out the door and into the cold.

"Clint, stop! You don't even have your boots on."

"Don't care."

"It's a three minute walk."

He looked down at her. "Done that before."

She was quiet for a moment. "Thank you," she said. "For that. I never told you. I'm sorry."

He returned his eyes to the light up ahead. "I shouldn't have been so hard on you."

"It was just a sprain."

"That wasn't what I meant."

She shifted slightly. "I thought you couldn't stand me."

He stopped in the middle of the snow; his feet refused to move. There was nothing left to say but the truth.

"I'd never been in love before."

He heard her breath catch, could see the shocked expression on her face, her mind trying to make the calculations, to count back to—

"It's cold out," he said. "I should get you inside."

She was silent for the rest of the way.

The cabin was unlocked and unlit. He carried her over the threshold, kissing her with an unexpected restraint. She moved to pull him close.

"Fire," he said, his thumb grazing her cheek. It was not long until it blazed from within the wood-burning stove.

He surveyed the rough interior; two rooms, a bathroom and an ample-sized bed. "This looks familiar," he said.

Natasha smiled as she shrugged out of her furs, an ancient princess in a forgotten place.

It was perfect.

"There's food in the kitchen if you're hungry," she said.

He looked her over until she stopped, a fixed gaze on a fixed point; there was nothing else. Caught in his stare, her breath went shallow and her lips parted. He could see the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat, the rise and fall of her breasts.

"Not for that," he said. He watched as her pupils dilated from across the room, arms reaching for her gown.

"Let me."

She turned her back to him; he closed the distance in two strides. Before him lay a hundred pearl buttons, spanning from neck to waist.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

She laughed. "I thought you were the patient one."

"Not tonight."

She leaned back. "Put your hands on me, Clint."

He could never say no.

He began the slow, arduous task, rewarding himself by pressing a kiss to every bit of newly exposed skin. He ran his lips down the length of her back, tasting every scar; the memory of shrapnel from their second mission together, the slice of a knife on their third; the first time he had ever sewn her up. His mouth lingered over the spot, the prints of his fingers embedded in her skin. Natasha arched against him.

“Did you love me then?” she asked.

“I didn’t have a word for it.” There had never been a word.

He spread the two halves of her dress open, revealing a kind of slip underneath. It was held together by a tie about her waist; he pulled it loose and watched as layers of fabric pooled on the floor. She was left bare, clad in nothing but a corset, stockings and a strip of lace between her thighs. She was a china doll in the firelight, alabaster white and pure as untouched snow. Young and innocent and all his.

“Turn around,” he said and she did. She stepped out of the gown and he laid it aside. He reached up to touch her hair, removing its many pins, one by one. Natasha closed her eyes and sighed, lips opening up to him. He was drawn to her mouth.

“This was when I knew,” she said.

“Knew what?”

“That you weren't indifferent.”

“I was so far from indifferent.”

“I couldn't believe you were touching me. I wanted to kiss you so much. I wanted you to kiss me.”

“I know.”

“Why didn't you?”

“I wouldn't have been able to stop.”

She opened her eyes. “In the shower, I touched myself. I thought about your hands on me and I couldn't stop.”

“Tash...”

“My lips and my breasts; then lower. I got myself off to the image of your face. I'd never done that before.”

He could feel her warm breath; his mouth was so close to hers. “Over me?”

“Never at all.”

His hand dropped, the last pin falling from her hair, a wild mass of curls descending to the middle of her back.

She brushed her mouth against his, licked along his lower lip. He couldn’t move.

“My turn,” she said.

She removed the rose from his lapel and kissed it, placing it on top of her dress.

“I like the suit.”

He smiled. “Thought you might.” He had followed her instructions. A suit, a wedding band, a list of things to pack, and a request: to be married in the religion of her childhood. To commit to a faith in which he did not believe. But I believe in you. He did not hesitate.

I would do it again. A thousand times over.

She slid the jacket from his shoulders and kissed the line of his jaw. “You don’t know how many times I wanted to touch you,” she said. “To taste you.”

She pressed her lips against his throat. “How many nights...”

“*Natasha*—”

“Shhhhhh,” she whispered. “Stay.”

He could do nothing but obey.

She untucked his shirt and began working on the buttons from the bottom up. She kissed his stomach and up his chest. She kissed her way across his shoulders as the tailored cotton floated to the floor. His legs felt unsteady beneath him; his body trembled.

She stopped. “You did that for me.”

Transfixed—they both were—her fingers reached for the gold cross around his neck, the symbol of his promise and confession. I told your god all my secrets. Am I worthy of you now?

She kissed the space where his clavicles met, the small cross of metal caught between them.

“Thank you,” she said.

What wouldn’t I do for you?

He held her to him, kissed along the top of her head, let his fingers drift through her hair. My wife. *My wife*. He had yet to test the word. You are here and this is real. I have you in my arms. You will always be safe here.

He guided her to the edge of the bed, sitting down and letting her stretch across his lap. She held his face. He held her hand. My ring. He kissed it. He kissed her palm. “It was my mother’s,” he said. He watched as her eyes stilled and shined like glass.

“You never told me...”

“About what?” He looked at her with every moment of his forty-one years etched upon his face. “She died. This is what I have left.”

“How?”



Don't cry, he thought. Don't cry for me. I have you now.

"My father."

She held him tight.

He had told the priest his sins. He told Natasha the sins of his father. These were his secrets, his genes. Stories he had never shared with another living soul. The beatings, the violence. He had tried to protect his mother, never thinking; never with a plan. Do you know that I'm deaf in one ear? You never listen, his father had said. He would never make that mistake again. He tried to protect them all, even Barney, even in the children's home, in the circus. His feckless older brother. I could withstand it all but he sold our mother's ring. For a scam, a bet, a stupid high. I put him in the hospital but he was dead to me. You are my family now.

He told her these things and she listened in silence. She held him and she cried. Her tears washed over his skin.

They never broke me, he thought. I waited for you. Do you know how strong you are?

"I loved you," she said. He held her face so their foreheads were touching. "From the moment I laid eyes on you." Clint felt like he was disintegrating. "My cowboy."

She smiled as she studied him, girl and woman then, young and centuries old. "They made us watch all these old American films. I can't remember which one but there was a man. I thought he was so brave and strong. I used to comfort myself at night with dreams of him coming to save me. It was stupid but I was alone. My dreams were all I had." She stroked his face. "And then I met you, Clint Barton, and I knew that he was real."

"Don't cry," she whispered and kissed away his tears. "My beautiful man. My husband." She kissed his lips. Clint fell into a dream. "I always loved you."

He lifted her into his arms and laid her down across the bed.

"I kept them all away," he said, kissing her neck, her chest, unable to look her in the eye. "I kept them from you."

"Who?" she said, arms clutching at his back, her legs hitched around him.

"All of them. I wouldn't let any other man near you. You were always mine. I would always protect you. Fuck, Natasha." He collapsed against her. "I nearly lost you. Do you know how close I came? I held you in my arms for a whole fucking night and all I could do was watch you breathe. It was all I could do. I prayed for you to live. For me. I would burn down the world for you. I loved you always. I was just too afraid to let you know."

She pulled his face up and kissed him roughly, sobbed against his mouth, her body clinging to his.

"Don't be afraid." She kissed his face, again and again. "I'm not scared anymore. Did you kill them?" She held him back and stared at him with the revelation. "That time? I couldn't remember. It never made any sense. You said it was me but it was you, wasn't it? You killed all those men for me."

"Yes," Clint said. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you.

She reached for his pants. He stroked between her legs. Husband and wife. In blessed union.

---

Clint held his wife in his arms.

She slept against him, her hair cascading down over his arm and across the bed, red against white. Blood and bone. They were flesh and alive, an exercise in stark contrasts.

I am your husband.

He tested out the word.

I am your husband now.

What had there ever been? What had come before? What is the purpose of your existence now?

This was all I was meant to be.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [If Not for You](#) by Bob Dylan.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*If not for you  
Babe, I couldn't find the door  
Couldn't even see the floor  
I'd be sad and blue  
If not for you*

---

There was a song in her head that she didn't recognize. Clint had been singing it; muffled notes that reached her from the bathroom, followed by the light patter of his footsteps across the landing. She fixed an earring in place, humming to herself as he entered their room.

"Remind me why we're going out again," he said, roughly dragging a towel over his hair, the rest of him unapologetically naked.

She smiled as she watched him in the dresser mirror. "Because I want to," she said. "And you live to please me."

"I suppose I do." He came to stand behind her, damp fingers pressed to the back of her neck as his thumb tangled in her hair. "You planning on leaving it up?"

"If you want." She placed her hand over his. "What are you wearing?"

"Clothes," he said, massaging her neck teasingly.

She tilted her head to look up at him. "Did you like that blazer I bought? There's a shirt that matches perfectly."

"If you say so." He kissed the top of her head and moved away. "I already resent the need for clothing in this place. No wonder I hate LA."

"Ever the neanderthal."

He grunted.

"My neanderthal," she laughed.

They dressed in mostly silence, Clint saying nothing as Natasha removed her robe to slide a dress over her naked body, her back towards him so he could pull the zipper up. It involved a long trail of kisses down her exposed back and along her throat as she turned to appraise the blazer and shirt.

It continued down the stairs and along the hallway, Natasha yelping as she was pushed against a small table by the door, Clint claiming that he was looking for the car keys.

“Found them yet?”

His hand was on her ass. “Not sure.”

“God—” She felt Betty’s picture topple over. “Careful.”

“Sorry.”

He picked up the keys, pulling back to look at her, one hand against her cheek.

“What is it?” she said.

He grinned. “Don’t think I’ve seen you wear this much since you walked into the church.”

---

His hand never left the small of her back as they entered the restaurant.

There was only skin to touch, her dress deceptively modest up front but plunging dangerously low behind. The slight friction of his fingers was creating a familiar heat somewhere else entirely. She wasn’t sure how she was meant to get through dinner. Maybe that was his plan all along.

He guided her to the bar as they waited for their table. She registered the eyes of men and, in some cases, women upon her, an occupational hazard as much as a biological consequence. She was not ashamed of her body but she had only been detachedly aware of it before. Clint had given her a new perspective. You are a beautiful woman. See how the world desires you.

He ordered a scotch for himself and a vodka martini for her, leaning against the bar as she gracefully mounted the adjacent stool. She pivoted her body towards him and he sheltered her with his own. There was no one to witness the idle hand that travelled under her skirt, two fingers casually slipping inside of her.

She swallowed down a gasp along with a small sip of her drink. “Too much vermouth,” she said, still catching her breath.

Clint surveyed the room as if he were scoping out the number of targets. This wouldn’t be apparent to the untrained eye but Natasha could see the variables being calculated in his mind.

He finished his scotch, removing his hand and letting those same fingers steal the olive from the bottom of her glass.

He popped it in his mouth as he studied her intently. “If you say so,” he said. He took the drink from her hand and downed the rest, before pulling her from the stool. “Tastes like water to me.”

“You’ve had enough already?”

The look he gave her made her cling to his arm for balance. “No; not yet.”

He handed the maitre’d money for their tab as he dragged her back outside. It was raining now, an unexpected and torrential downpour that left them soaked through before they were even halfway across the lot. She reached for him and he wrapped her up in a kiss, skin wet and hands grasping,

her feet barely touching the ground as he backed her up towards their car.

Betty's car. It was a classic and with it came a classically cramped backseat.

Clint opened the door and forced her inside, his mouth still on hers as he tore her dress apart. The light from the parking lot cast shadows across her rain-slicked breasts. The rear windshield was stretched yet narrow and just a foot overhead. There was scarcely room for one, let alone two people.

Natasha could feel the wet breeze through the door that rested half open, Clint's feet still pushed against it. He pulled her up and closed it behind him, casting off his blazer like a beast returned to the wild. She liberated his dick, stealing a desperate taste, before he gripped her hips and thrust inside, so hard that she had to brace her arms against the roof to avoid banging her head.

The remnants of her dress pooled around her hips, she felt Clint angle her and tease his rhythm until he was hitting exactly the right spot. She was already unraveling as the suspension strained. She could feel the chassis rock and she moved in time, legs over his shoulders, hands gripping onto headrests, her view through the rear window now obscured by the fog of condensation.

She would unravel first and he would not stop, not until he had reclaimed her, not until he had made her relinquish the mores of this world, until there was only them; only this.

*I just want you.*

---

"Can we at least stay for the appetizer next time?"

Curled up on his lap in nothing but his blazer, she felt his laughter rumble against her as he pressed a kiss to her hair.

"My menu not up to scratch?"

He had cooked her steak and crepes as she selected random records from Betty and Bob's collection. She'd danced and Clint had sang and the world could never see them like this. She accepted that now. There was so little of him that was for sharing.

She turned her head, mouth trailing along the edge of his jaw. "I wanted to pass my compliments to the chef," she said, tongue scratching across stubble. "Tell him he's got a great ass."

Clint's blazer slid to the floor as his hands moved against her.

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

---

She would never get tired of this.

One month, two weeks, six days. Less than forty-eight hours under the California sun, the rest of their time spent in the heady shadows of Alaska. Morning light streamed through the windows, glinting off a collection of porcelain figurines on the mantelpiece, the bed littered with crocheted blankets in every color of the rainbow and a half-naked man sleeping peacefully beside her.

The kid's room, Betty had called it, christening the spare bedroom during their first visit. It

remained their room now.

The old sofa stood guard in the corner but it was empty, it's one-time occupant stretched out next to her. She couldn't remember leaving her contented position on the living room floor last night, candlelight and music and his touch still vivid in her mind.

She studied him. What shall I call you now? My mountain man, my love, my work of art?

My husband.

How she loved that word. She loved him. My husband. My own. They were not cautious with their thoughts. There was nothing censored, nothing left to hold back.

She pressed a soft kiss to his brow and slipped out of bed.

---

"Nice shirt." She heard Clint's voice from the doorway.

"Yeah well," she shrugged. "I know a guy."

He grinned.

She looked down at the jeans he was wearing. "Nice pants."

"I was going downstairs to work on the bikes. Didn't want to give the neighbors too much of a show."

"In that case definitely put on a t-shirt."

"Slavedriver."

"Brute."

"Mmm..." His eyes fixed on her chest.

"Coffee," she said, pressing a cup into his hand and a kiss to his cheek. "Go."

He slipped a hand under her shirt and kissed along her neck. "Need breakfast," he murmured.

She grabbed a piece of toast from a nearby plate and popped it into his mouth. "And now you have it."

He laughed and went downstairs; she took a bite of her own slice then put it back down.

The house soon echoed with Clint's voice, an enthusiastic lecture on the long and storied history of the Vincent Black Shadow (*"oh fuck me, it's a Series C!"*) and trips running back upstairs to tell her all the best bits (*"narrow-angle V-twins have aluminum pistons, forged connecting rods, a unique rocker arm design, twin Amal carburetors and a dry sump oiling system—it's a goddamn work of art"*) as well as to impart vitally important information:

"Did you know this was the world's fastest production bike from 1948 to 1970?"

As a matter of fact, Natasha did. She just nodded and smiled.

---

*But if you had the chance, what would you tell him?*

She paused to study the rings on her left hand.

This is all your fault anyway.

She hadn't been up here since Betty had died, never quite ready; until today.

She was feeling nostalgic, images of that girl with the clever smile imprinted in her mind. She edged open the closet door, discovering a virtual mausoleum encased in plastic: Mainbochers and Schiaparellis and vintage Balengicas, as perfect and pristine as the day they were bought.

Of course you had flawless taste, she thought. Of course you did. She missed her so much it hurt.

---

"Nat, I was wrong about the brakes. They're pre 1952 which means..."

She turned around. "You were saying?"

"Don't remember."

He took a moment to take her in. A white eyelet sundress, fitted, with a full skirt and a ridiculous lace and chiffon excuse for an apron. With a triple strand of pearls around her neck and her hair pinned up, she looked like a sexpot version of Donna Reed.

She smiled serenely. "You need something?"

His intent was clear in his expression. "I do now."

"No way, Barton. This dress stays intact until after lunch."

"What for?"

"We have company."

His face remained neutral.

"I invited Steve over." She ignored the predicted darkening of his features and stuck to the script. "I don't like how I left things with him and I need to make amends. And since we're a package deal now, that means I need you there too. Think you can handle it?"

She could see him swallow down whatever he was thinking, remaining cautiously quiet.

"You're lucky that I love you so much," he finally said.

"I am."

"I can't promise I won't drag you off afterwards and get you out of that dress."

"I can't promise I'll resist."

The familiar look in his eye was back. "Uh uh." She shook her head and reached for the nearest kitchen knife. "Absolutely no grease smudges. You got that?"

The smile he gave her made her heart skip a beat. "We'll see."

---

She readjusted her apron, the dull ache in her lower abdomen that she'd been ignoring since early morning catching her, sharp and sudden. She took a deep breath and looked over Betty's cookbooks once more before returning to the stove. She lifted a spoon to her lips, grip tight and hand shaking, allowing herself a small taste. More salt? Not enough?

The pain increased. She nearly doubled over. Deep breaths. She focused on the sound of the record player, a scratch as the song changed. A smooth voice. She knew this one. She had heard it before.

She cried out, biting her lower lip to suppress the sound. Why did it hurt so much? The steak was good and the crepes were perfect; she'd hardly drank.

It hurt.

You've been shot and stabbed and beaten and left for dead. Buck up, little soldier. There's lunch to make. You can do this.

No.

She reached for a chair, holding onto the back as she slumped down awkwardly. It hurt to move, to breathe; her apron felt too tight. She reached for the ties, struggling and snatching desperately until they came loose in her hands, pulling back the fabric and looking down.

*"No."*

Red against white. Her dress was ruined.

She grasped for the table, knocking a plate to the floor. She watched it smash before her, red splotches at her feet, the world slowing down around her as she cried out.

---

He could smell what she was cooking. It didn't smell half bad.

He adored her for making the effort, even if his feelings were less than amicable towards the person it was for. This was important to her and that was important to him. It meant nothing more than that.

He lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face. He was making some progress with the Vincent. He'd changed the oil and checked the engine and gears. The tires were looking a little worse for wear but maybe one spin round the block after this ordeal was over couldn't hurt.

Could he persuade her to hop on the back in that gorgeous dress of hers?

He smiled to himself, the sound of a familiar song drifting down from upstairs. He'd had the lyrics



in his head since they had arrived.

There was a distant smash. He laughed softly. There goes Nat destroying another kitchen.

She tried so hard and he loved her for it. He loved her so much that he couldn't see straight.

*"CLINT!"*

He couldn't see.

Baby girl, I've pulled out bullets from you. I've stitched you up and held your hand and you bite your lip; you make a face.

Never have you yelled my name.

Baby girl. Baby girl.

Music filled the house as he ran up the stairs, out into the hall, her shoes by the door, Betty's picture still knocked over. It was an accident; he remembered. Her pictures on the wall, her and Bob and even Coulson; they watched him go. He could feel their eyes, all their history and words; their voices echoed around him.

His jacket on the living room floor, still creased by the movements of her body, a murder scene, a chalk outline; her glass on the coffee table. Go back and look closely and you could still see her lipstick. Pink? It's coral, she had laughed. Was she laughing? Was it a joke? When would this marathon fucking end?

He ran through the kitchen doorway and came to a stop.

Pots steamed on the stove, the aroma still pleasing. The counters were cluttered with utensils and jars. She was not a tidy cook, books piled on the side and on the table, a broken plate on the floor.

Blood on the floor and blood at her feet and down her legs and her skirt. That gorgeous dress.

Her hand gripped her apron.

She was sitting down. Knees together and apron in her lap and one hand against the table edge like the chair was about to fall. Her skin was pale and damp with sweat, eyes wide and breath coming too fast and her eyes—

My baby girl. You never get scared. Bullets and knives fail against you.

Why are you afraid?

The record scratched and skipped and the song still played.

I'm afraid too.

*'Cause I've got you under my skin.*

A/N: The song Clint has been singing and Nat only half recognises and is playing at the end is [I've Got You Under My Skin](#), lyrics by Cole Porter and performed by Frank Sinatra.

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [All Along the Watchtower](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl  
Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl*

---

12:37

“It’s an existential question.”

“It’s lunch.”

“You need to treat this with the respect it deserves.”

“Now you’re just stalling.”

“It’s an age-old debate.”

“So choose onion rings.”

“Wrong. You always go with fries. Much harder to screw up a potato.”

“Fries are boring.”

“Fries are reliable. With fries, I know what I’m getting into. Onion rings come with a host of issues I’m not prepared to deal with, not to mention the emotional baggage depending on whether you’re a fan of—”

“Would you just order the goddamn cheeseburger?”

Happy’s plea was interrupted by the sound of a phone. Tony’s phone. He didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?”

“Stark?”

“Steve?”

A pause. “Tony, I need your help. Something’s wrong. Something’s terribly wrong.”

---

12:54

The house wasn't big but it was well-made, sitting on a bluff that looked down on the sea. Stylish too, if you liked that whole midcentury modern I'm-just-going-to-pretend-like-I'm-still-living-in-1962 thing. A quick check of the property records revealed that the title had been transferred into her name last year. Tony had no idea she even visited the west coast, let alone lived here. Frakking spies.

Nice work, Romanoff, he thought as they pulled into the drive. The dirt alone was worth a fortune.

He was two steps out of the car before Rogers was running out to meet him. Steve didn't stop for pleasantries.

"No sign of a struggle or forced entry but the door was standing wide open when I got here," he said. "Pots still cooking on the stove and the kitchen..."

"You said there was blood—"

His face was grim. "Too much. What do we know?"

"No hospital in the area has a record of a Natasha Romanoff being checked in," Tony said.

"Nothing on SHIELD's radar either. No missions gone wrong or bad guys gone missing."

"I think I got it," Happy yelled from the car. "Woman matching her description was brought into the ER a few minutes ago. The hospital is five miles away."

The Bentley screeched out of the driveway and tore back down the road. For a guy genetically engineered to withstand pain, Steve didn't look too good. He glanced at the traffic; the anxiety was palpable. "Can we get there any faster?" he said.

"Happy could win the Iditarod with a tricycle," Tony replied. "We'll get there."

Rogers kept his eyes on the road.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Tony said, although he already had his suspicions.

"Natasha invited me. Said if I was in the neighborhood..."

Tony said nothing. He knew from the security reports that yesterday afternoon Rogers had been at Stark Tower in New York.

Steve looked at him. "Did she say anything about being out here? About what she was doing?"

He almost laughed. "Dude, I get a random email every few weeks on whatever project she's working on. The last one was security coding. That was maybe ten days ago. I couldn't even tell you what continent she was on."

Rogers knew this. He had taken every opportunity over the past four months to grill Tony for any details on Natasha's whereabouts. After she'd taken off following the gala, the most they'd heard was something about a leave of absence for reasons unexplained. Then eight weeks ago she'd resurfaced, taking on random freelance projects for SHIELD; mostly computer stuff.

The details on Romanoff's personal life had always been scarce, and she seemed to like it that way. All he knew about was Barton, and that was more because of the time invested on the other side of the equation. He'd had his suspicions after Shawarma-gate, but the tailor recommendation had cinched it. Clint Barton going to that much trouble for a woman had to be tantamount to a declaration of love. Tony hoped for his sake that the feelings were reciprocated but he couldn't be sure; Natasha was incredibly hard to read.

At last they pulled up to the hospital. Steve was out of the car and running before Happy had even skidded to a stop. Sans pulse jets, Tony did his best to keep up.

---

*13:17*

"Romanoff, Natasha Romanoff."

"I'm sorry, sir, but there's no one here under that name. Now if you have no medical emergency, I'm going to have to ask you to—"

Tony stalked off before the nurse could finish his speech. He checked his phone; Pepper hadn't texted back. The one person who could get to the bottom of this in no time at all and she was in Tokyo. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to decide whether to call his lawyer or start hunting down hospital board members and threaten the lawsuits himself.

Steve had reverted to full-on super soldier mode, scanning the place like he was trying to work out the best way to storm the gates. Tony figured he had about five minutes before Captain America managed to grab the headlines for an entirely new reason.

Turned out he had a lot less than that.

He was on the phone with the hospital's general counsel when the pacing beside him stopped. He looked up to see Steve's face darken in a way he had never seen before.

"No fucking way," he growled.

Tony followed his gaze.

At the other end of the room sat Barton. He was staring at the floor, his hands and shirt covered in blood. Steve took off before Tony could blink.

"What did you do?" he roared, charging towards the other man. "What did you do to her?"

He had one hand on Barton's shoulder by the time Tony managed to pull him off. Barton looked up but his gaze was blank, disconnected; he wasn't even on the same planet right now. Tony forcibly dragged Steve around the corner and into the nearest supply closet.

"What the hell was that?" he said, putting himself between Rogers and the door.

"Did you see him?" Steve said. "Did you see?"

Rogers' eyes were wild; he looked unhinged. Tony didn't make a habit of misjudging people or miscalculating situations, but damned if he hadn't failed spectacularly on both counts. He'd assumed that this was a crush, complicated slightly by a bit of jealousy and a healthy dose of mutual dislike. One look at Steve's face and he knew that it was so much more.

*Fuck.*

“All I saw was a man in shock,” Tony said, pinning him back with a look. “Now you listen to me. Do not leave this room until I find out what is going on.”

He thought for a second that Steve might take a swing at him but suddenly the fight was gone, vanishing as quickly as it had flared.

“Just find out if she’s okay,” he said, breathing ragged and voice nearly broken. What had first looked like anger Tony now recognized as fear.

He put a steadying hand on his shoulder. “I will.”

---

*12:15*

I don’t know where the hospital is.

He does. He knows. He knows the way. The car is a weapon beneath his hands, an extension, a bow and arrow of oil and blood. He can stretch it out, push it to its limits, aim it where he needs it to be, through traffic and streets and red lights and people, police and laws and rules and regulations that mean nothing to him. He is above it all. He is above himself, outside of the car; he sees it as it passes. Like Bullitt or The French Connection. Have you seen those movies? I’ve shown them to you, haven’t I?

Talk to me. Talk to me, talk to me, talk to me.

“Natasha!”

She moans.

Stay with me. Please.

“It’ll be okay. You hear me, baby? I’ve got you. We’ll be okay.”

We’ll be okay. We’ll be okay.

I know where I’m going. I won’t let anything happen to you. I won’t allow it.

He glances in the mirror.

You were beautiful; did I tell you that? In your dress and in its remnants and when I came inside you and when you came beneath me and I love you. I can see you. I close my eyes and you are all I see. I remember our date and how I ruined it and how I made it up to you. And I know you like my cooking. I love to feed you. To fuck you. To take care of you. You looked beautiful today. You look beautiful.

I can’t see you.

“Natasha!”

Talk to me.

---

12:34

The car stops. You get out. You hold her in your arms. Insubstantial. Pale and red and quiet. She's still breathing. Your wife still breathes.

You step inside the hospital. Your voice calls out. A cry for help. You are not sure if you can form the words. The sounds are all the same. The meaning is clear. You are in a hospital and your wife lies bleeding in your arms.

Help me. Please.

She is transferred onto a gurney. You reach for her hand; her left hand. It is an accident but you kiss her ring. You cannot speak. Questions fall around you.

Why are you here?

Her hand drops. She disappears.

What is her name?

Natasha. Natalia. Natalia Barton.

Date of birth? Is she injured?

No. She was fine. She was okay. She called for me and she was bleeding and now we are here.

Any medical conditions? Medications?

No.

I don't know.

(Not anymore.)

And you're her husband?

Yes.

Could she be pregnant?

How could I know?

They say something about an ultrasound. They leave and then they're back.

"We're transferring her to the OR now."

There is a form. The risks are laid bare. Your options amount to life or death. Your wife dies or she comes back alive but she might not come back the same. She comes back. You sign the form. She comes back to me. That is all you need to hear.

An interstitial pregnancy. A baby grew but in the wrong place. At the wrong time. In the wrong

way. You got this wrong. You did this, you know. How? I did it. I let her choose.

*"I'm so sick of the side effects. I'm tired, Clint. And I think... I don't know; the chances are so small. I've never been normal, not in that way. My cycle... it's so strange and irregular. But I... I need to know, just in case. How would you feel if we...?"*

How would you feel?

We made a baby. You did so good. I'm sorry, Tasha. I'm so sorry. I should have never let this happen to you. I should have found a way. How can I protect you when it's me that put you at risk?

Protection. What was I protecting you from?

*How would you feel?*

Our baby; it grew but in the wrong place, in the worst place and now you bleed and I bleed too. You look at your hands and your shirt. Is that our baby? Our baby's blood on my hands?

*How would you feel?*

You held her in your arms, scared and afraid of what your answer might be. Scared and afraid and now bleeding, dying.

*"How would you feel if we...?"*

There was no fear when you had answered her.

*"I'd build us a bigger house."*

You did not understand fear until today.

---

13:06

I am Clint Barton. I became an orphan aged seven and joined the circus aged ten; army at eighteen. I fought for my country and killed because I wanted to. I was recruited as an agent of SHIELD two months before turning twenty-nine.

I met Natasha Romanoff at the age of thirty-six. Five years later, she became my wife.

Six weeks later and here I am.

I don't think you are dead yet because in my gut, in my heart, in the marrow of my bones and the tiniest spaces of my lungs, I would know if you were gone. It makes no sense. I don't believe in god and I may not understand all the intricacies of science but I believe in what is fact, in what is in front of me, in what I can see. I analyze the world by probability and risk, by the trajectory of a shot, the windspeed and the variables that surround me. I do not believe in magic or fate or any kind of mystical bullshit, in spite of aliens who call themselves deities. Their technology is just that. I know what is real. I feel it in my gut. I know you.

I know you are alive.



I am alone. Before I met you and after the fact and in a room full of people, some of whom may know who I am but they do not know me. There is only you. You are the only one and I would let that person die with you. I will not exist anymore.

I am Clint Barton and you are my wife.

I am your husband.

This is all I know.

---

*“Just find out if she’s okay.”*

Tony stepped into the waiting room.

The approach was cautious, measured. He had learned from an early age that deadly things should be handled with care and treated with respect, whether they were made of metal or of sinew and bone.

We are such fragile creatures, he thought. Even the most dangerous predator succumbs eventually. And nothing’s ever certain, nothing’s ever set in stone. It can all change in the blink of an eye. He had the feeling that he was witnessing such a moment.

He sat down in a nearby chair.

“Clint.”

It was the first time he had ever used his given name, the first time he had ever thought of him as anything other than Barton.

Clint raised his head slightly, as if he had heard an echo in the distance, but he didn’t look up.

“Clint, it’s Stark,” he said. “It’s Tony.” Barton blinked once and turned his head. His eyes were vacant. Tony took a deep breath. “Look, I don’t want to interfere but we were at the house. We saw. Rogers said the room was red.”

His eyes snapped into focus with frightening clarity. Tony had his full attention now.

“Clint, what happened?”

Barton looked at him—measuring, deciding. At last he spoke, eyes fixed on the ground once more.

“She was pregnant,” he said. “Something went wrong.”

Tony rocked back in his chair and the world flipped sideways. He barely registered Steve walking into view, a cup of coffee in hand.

A nurse approached them.

“Mr. Barton,” she said, “your wife is in surgery now. You can move to a different waiting room if you like.”

Tony watched as the coffee fell to the floor. Black liquid spreading over white tile.

An existential question.

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Like a Rolling Stone](#) by Bob Dylan.

*You used to be so amused  
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used  
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse  
When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose  
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal*

*How does it feel*

---

*Breathe, Natashenka. Just breathe.*

I'm falling.

I hear your voice but I can't see you. I cannot feel—there you are. Your arms about me; the safest place on earth. My feet don't touch the ground.

Did I ever tell you that? There was so much that I meant to do.

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, we wept when we remembered—*

Remembered what? It's not possible—couldn't be—can't be. How big would the house have been, Clint? How big?

Oh god, it hurts; it hurts so much. A metal blade beneath my skin.

*Why are you frightened, Miss Muffet? Why do you run away? I was never afraid of spiders.*

There's too much light. Sunlight and white lights; white walls and faces and voices behind masks. They speak in whispers, in languages I don't know.

I am falling.

A ring on a bedpost; what took me so long? I thought, I thought—

I thought we had time.

*A blade, Natashenka; look how it becomes you! Shiny metal for your hands. Your eyes shine like the stars; see what those hands can do.*

I can't see you, Clint. I can't hear you. Come back, please. I don't want to go.

I love you.

(come back)

I love you.

(just breathe)

I love you. I'm scared. I love you so much.

100 ... 99 ... 98 ...

*Why does it feel like falling?*

---

"Mr. Barton?"

Clint had no idea how long he had been waiting. That's what you do; you wait. He had always been waiting for her.

There was Stark and Rogers, the latter standing to attention as if the mere presence of the surgeon required a militaristic salute. But it's not that simple, is it?, he thought. Are you me? What is your name? Tell me what you are to her.

Clint lifted his head and looked at the doctor. A man pushing sixty with a rotund frame and a grey flecked beard. The surgical gown stretched around him, pale blue and without a speck of blood. Clint had changed into the green of a surgical scrubs top at the behest of one of the nurses. His skin was scrubbed clean except for the dark red rims beneath his fingernails. There you are. He had watched the water lather and turn a murky brown, disappearing down the sink. Is this a betrayal? Shouldn't I keep you there, always with me?

"Is she—?"

It was Rogers who spoke. Clint looked at Stark. His message was clear. This does not concern you. No one discusses my wife's condition but me. Stark nodded in understanding. Clint stood up and waited until Stark led Steve away.

He turned to the doctor. "How is she?" he said.

"She's in recovery now; I'd say she's through the worst of it."

There was a whoosh of something inside of him, a breath held too long; he felt his body deflating with the unexpected rush of relief.

"The pregnancy ruptured at the site where the right fallopian tube inserts into the uterus; it involved a major artery, which is why she lost so much blood, but we were eventually able to stop the bleeding. It's a miracle you got here when you did. She wouldn't have survived for much longer."

Clint swallowed, throat heavy and dry. "Were you able to—?"

"I'm sorry; it wasn't possible to repair the damage. We had to remove her uterus and cervix, along

with both fallopian tubes and the right ovary. The left ovary we managed to preserve so she shouldn't require hormone replacement therapy for the foreseeable future."

I'm so sorry, baby girl. But I have you; you live.

"Was this a planned pregnancy? Had you been trying—?"

"No." Words felt strange on his tongue, like they belonged to somebody else. "She didn't think it was possible."

"Mr. Barton," the doctor took off his glasses, "your wife's reproductive organs were chronically damaged; extensively so. I've been doing this for over thirty years and I've never seen scarring that severe." He studied Clint with an honest sympathy. "There was no way she could have ever had a normal pregnancy; no way an egg could have found a safe place to implant. It was only a matter of time."

Look at what I did.

"Are you aware of any childhood trauma?" he added. "Some kind of illness or injury? Something that would explain all of this?"

*Rogers said the room was red.*

Look at what they did to you.

---

He stepped out of the waiting room and headed towards the bank of elevators, ready to plunge his fist through the nearest wall.

"Barton!" There was a more familiar obstacle; a familiar voice. He stopped as the voice continued. "What's going on? How is she? You've got to give us something."

He turned and stared at the other man for an uncomfortably long time.

"She's stable."

Happy now, Cap? Seen enough of the show? Don't you fucking dare keep me away from her any longer.

Clint started to move, Stark's hand coming to rest on Rogers's shoulder.

"That's great news," Tony said. "We'll catch up in the morning." Clint was aware of a brief struggle behind him. "Come on, Steve."

He kept on walking. Room 4317.

---

She was a splash of red against a white sheet, the visage of her ruined dress; the thrum of her heart reduced to a steady bleeping, the whirl of her breathing; tubes into her arms and about her nose, feeding fluid and oxygen, keeping her alive; the red bag of another's blood slowly flowing into

her.

Red, red, red.

My Natashka.

He watched from the doorway, his back pressed to it. Red flowed through him and before him and surrounded him. It surrounded her.

My Natashka, my love, my wife.

Forgive me.

She lived. He could see her now. Pale and beautiful and he would never love anything more; he would never love anything else. He moved to her side, lowering himself to his knees as he reached for her hand, his head coming to rest against it. I don't believe in God, he thought, but he prayed for this.

Forgive me, please.

---

The noise of a machine; a fixed rhythm. Something pressed against your left hand.

You open your eyes.

White walls and white light and movement beside you. Something moves and you turn your head to see.

There you are.

You cannot speak; there are too many things to say. Your eyes fill up and the tears spill out. Once it starts, it cannot be stopped; a deluge with no end. You are made of water, a creature of the sea.

I don't know what's lost, you want to tell him, I don't know the damage but it's okay. It's okay; I came back.

Don't cry, my love. Please don't cry.

You move to wipe his tears but he catches your hand first. Catches it and kisses it just as he catches you.

There are no words. I'll stare at you as long as I've got eyes. As long as there's breath in my body. My lodestone. My anchor.

My love, I came back.

Please don't cry.

---

"Mrs. Barton."

The doctor pulled up a chair. Clint felt Natasha squeeze his fingers, her gaze turning towards the surgeon. She made no effort to correct him over her name.

"Do you understand what happened?"

Her eyes searched out his once more.

(It's gone, she had said. The baby's gone. Clint had only nodded. He wanted to ask her, did you know? How long had you known? When were you going to tell me?)

The doctor went through the terms again. Interstitial pregnancy. Ectopic. Implantation site. Uterus. Hysterectomy. *Your husband saved your life.* No, I didn't. I did what I had to do. That was all I could. It wasn't enough. Somehow I'll make it up to you.

Her grip was strong and her gaze unwavering. He studied her face. Tears threatened and he knew that flood, the deep ocean of grief that existed inside of her. Would he ever reach the bottom? Would he learn how deep it went?

"The damage to your reproductive organs; are you aware of anything that might have caused it? Any previous injuries or infections? Any exposure to radiation even?"

The light faded; her hand went slack.

"Mrs. Barton?"

I can't see you now. Clint squeezed her fingers. "That's enough," he said.

The doctor nodded. "I understand." He got up to leave, walking around to the end of the bed. "Right now, just stay focused on getting better. If you need any more pain relief..."

"We'll let you know," Clint said. He stared at Natasha as she stared blankly ahead.

There are no drugs for this.

---

Clint straightened up from the water fountain, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth as he glanced at the poster on the wall. A smiling baby looked back at him.

*Delivering Dreams ... One Miracle at a Time - Ask About Our IVF Services*

He turned and headed back towards Natasha's room. He had only gotten as far as the nurses's station when an alarm sounded. A nurse rushed past him. "Room 4317," she yelled at a colleague. Clint sprinted ahead, halting their progress with an arm across the door.

"What happened?"

"The panic button," the nurse said, breathless. "Jonah was just checking medication..."

"What was he carrying?" Clint said. "Needles? Tubing? Any glass?"

"Um... all of the above, I guess."

Fuck. He already had one hand on the door handle. "Look, you need to stay back until—"

"Sir." A security guard appeared, stepping between them. "If you'll just let us do our job."

Clint stared the man down. He could hear raised voices from behind the door; he had about thirty seconds, maybe thirty-five. "Do you have any idea what you're dealing with..." He glanced at his ID badge. "Adam?"

Adam said nothing.

"In that room is a highly trained, highly dangerous military operative. Now unless you can say the same, your job is to stay here. Nobody enters until I give the all-clear. You got that?"

Adam opened his mouth then thought better of it, closing it again with a curt nod. All other arguments about hospital protocol fell silent as the gathered staff fell back.

Clint turned and carefully opened the door.

He silently stepped inside, noiselessly closing it behind him. Discarded drip lines twisted across the floor, their tentacles leaving a bloody trail; she was out of bed. How? She could barely stay awake. The doctor had left and he had stayed, her hand held in his and her eyes on the wall; she was so quiet. She had closed her eyes and he had waited and eventually she'd slept; he just needed a drink and she needed to rest and how could he have been so stupid?

She held a terrified nurse in her grip, one arm twisted behind his back, forcing him to his knees, the other about his neck, a syringe poised over his carotid.

*"I won't accept this!"* She was shouting in Russian, eyes wide and blank, hands trembling. *"Where is the director? Bring him! I did not agree!"*

He had no idea how she was even standing.

"Natasha."

He gestured to the nurse to stay silent; she couldn't see him.

*"Natashka. Look at me."*

She turned her head towards him as if following the sound but her eyes remained unfocused. *"No more,"* she said, voice breaking on the words. *"Please, no more."* Her whole body was shaking.

*"No more,"* he repeated. *"I promise you that."* He edged slowly forwards. *"You're safe, Natashka. You're safe; I'm here. Do you understand? I won't let anything happen to you."*

She blinked twice, shook her head slightly. Eyes coming back to life, she scanned the room until she found him.

"Clint?"

She dropped her arms, staggering backwards against the wall as the nurse scrambled to his feet and ran from the room.



“Natasha?”

She blinked again and looked down, horrified to find the syringe in her hand. Fingers fumbling, it slipped to the floor.

There was blood on her gown, a thin red line seeping through the fabric to mark what was lost. Red on white. It always looked so good on you. That beautiful dress. He wanted to close his eyes; *my Natashka*.

She made a strangled noise, a cry and a sob, her legs giving way as she reached out for him.

He had her in his arms before she ever hit the floor.

---

I fell and I woke up.

This is what she knows.

For six weeks, she was happy. For six weeks, she lived inside a dream, in another woman's clothes and in another woman's house; another woman's life.

This is not the life for you.

Inside her, life is incompatible. Her baby died. She made a life; she tried to take care of it but she wasn't enough. Something is lost. She is losing too much.

She looks at the tired man by her side.

“I'm sorry, Tasha. I'm so sorry.”

He lowers his head and kisses her hand. He cannot raise it. Her hands are tied. Hands and feet. She is fated to this bed.

“Tell me what you need.” He looks back up. “Tell me. I'll do anything.”

I know, she thinks. I know you would.

She smiles back sadly.

(I fell for you.)

“Take me home, Clint.”

*Just breathe.*

## Chapter 16

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Tell Me That It Isn't True](#) by Bob Dylan

*All of those awful things that I have heard  
I don't want to believe them, all I want is your word  
So darlin', you better come through  
Tell me that it isn't true*

---

Hospital visiting hours begin at 0800. He arrives at 0801.

Cleanliness is next to Godliness and punctuality is—he can't remember, but there's a saying for that too. He hasn't slept all night, hasn't been able to, even though the guest room at Tony's is more comfortable than his Brooklyn apartment (the bathroom alone is bigger).

There is no sleep to be had. He's kept vigil before. Given comfort to friends, visited the cancer ward at the children's hospital, sat at the bedsides of fellow soldiers and teammates—even her bedside once; a dislocated shoulder and a laceration to the left thigh, a souvenir from Bolivia. (*This isn't tea, Cap. I want a good strong cup; the sugar should be at least a centimeter thick.* She'd held up her thumb and forefinger; he'd tried three times. She'd laughed so hard. He'd laughed too.)

Natasha, what happened? You run away and you don't come back and you won't say why or where but we already know, don't we? He lingers like a shadow over everything; there are worry lines on your face that he's carved and claimed for himself. I'd never make you sad—you know that, right? Is it too obvious to say out loud?

His mind won't stop, his head filled with noise, and he wishes he could turn down the volume. Endurance has never been a problem but there are different kinds of fatigue. He knows that he shouldn't be here, the words *holy matrimony* repeating like a curse. But maybe that's why; maybe that's just what this is. Why couldn't you tell me? You were my partner; my friend. What was wrong? Why couldn't you trust me with this?

He tells himself that his motives are pure. He needs to make sure that she'll be okay and then he'll leave her in peace. Leave them both in peace. Maybe then he can find some too.

He imagines Bucky with a disbelieving shake of his head; *Steve, this is the dumbest thing that you've ever done.*

"Romanoff," he says. "Natasha Roman—" he stops, nearly chokes on the words. "Natasha ... Barton."

"Oh, you mean *Natalia* Barton?"

Natalia? It had never come up. He nods. "Yes."

The nurse studies him for a moment; he's not in the suit so it takes her longer to realize. "Are you...?"

He nods again. He'll never get used to this part, no matter how old he gets.

She gives him a blinding smile. "I thought so. It's such an honor to meet you."

He tries to extricate himself as politely as he can. "Thank you, ma'am. Now what room were you saying?"

She looks momentarily confused. "Huh? Oh—4317. The elevators are down the hall. I was just going that way. I'll walk you there."

Steve tries to remain courteous but the last thing he wants is company. She remains undeterred and by the third floor he knows how long she's lived in L.A. (six months), how she likes it here (it's nice but she misses Kansas), how many times she's seen him on TV (four; five if you count the New York incident a few years back). As they step off the elevator, she finally tells him something interesting.

"I think there's something going on with your friend."

He looks up.

"Barton?" she says. "Room 4317?"

"What do you mean?"

She gives him a conspiratorial smile and pulls him into an alcove. Tells him a story he wishes he had never heard. Pregnancy. Miscarriage. Almost fatal. The words rip through him like bullets. Tony had been uncharacteristically quiet and now he knows why. Delirium. Psychotic episode. Assault. Each one a swift punch to the gut.

Natasha, what happened? You hurt and you suffer and I suffer too. Tell me how to fix this. Tell me what to do.

He's trying hard to focus and really hard not to throw up and really, really hard to resist the urge to tear the place apart. Then she hits him with the coda:

"And now her husband's trying to take her home. Can you believe it? Not 24 hours and he wants to drag her out of here. Word is that the board's gotten involved and they've called in all the lawyers. No one'll go near him. And the wife's clearly a danger right now; she has no business going anywhere." The nurse—*Jennifer*—places a hand on his arm. "I just wanted to let you know." She leans in close and looks at him with big brown eyes, "If there's anything I can do..."

He pulls back, mumbles something close to a *thank you* and all but runs down the hall. The world is spinning but he knows which way is north; he turns a corner just in time to see Barton emerge from a room at the far end. Watches as he has a tense few words with someone Steve presumes is a doctor then stalks off.

A direction and a heading. Steve doesn't waste time.

The room is dim and quiet. Blinds drawn, lights out. IV lines and the constant bleep of the heart

monitor. It takes several moments to muster the courage to go inside; a few more to get close enough to see her.

So pale and still. All that energy and stubbornness and strength, all that kindness and humor—it's gone. This woman looks like a stranger and he can feel his heart breaking, feel it breaking in a new and different way; a cup of coffee was just the beginning.

He sits in the single chair beside the bed. She's sleeping but her expression is far from serene. Steve studies her restraints, gray padded cuffs that hold her in place and he didn't think it was possible to hurt like this. He slumps forward and watches her breathe.

"Why couldn't you tell me?" he whispers. I could've helped; I would have done anything you asked. Did you feel like you had no choice? There's still so much that he doesn't understand. At least she's safe now; it's small comfort but comfort all the same. At least now she can heal. Steve places a hand on top of the padding that anchors her wrist to the bed.

*What has he done to you?*

He couldn't say how long he stays that way but he knows the exact moment that it changes. The air in the room shifts, a dark cloud across the sun. He could have his back to the door and still know exactly who is standing there.

"Barton." It's less a greeting and more an accusation.

Barton grips the door in one hand, his frame casting a large shadow across Natasha's bed. "Outside," he says. "*Now.*" His face appears almost expressionless, eyes focused and intense; Steve imagines this is how he must look when lining up a shot.

He waits for Steve to exit the room first, closing the door behind him before heading down the corridor with a brusque, "Come with me." Steve follows in silence because there is nothing else to say; this fight has been a long time coming and he's not going to waste any more time playing nice.

Barton steps into an unoccupied room and turns to face him. He doesn't waste any time either.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Steve's fists clench. "She invited me," he says.

Barton's lips twist in nothing close to amusement. "Try harder, Cap. Why are you here?"

"I needed to see her." He's always been an honest man. "To make sure that she was okay."

His eyes are locked with Barton's, who surveys him with a calculated silence. Steve feels almost transparent. Barton's planning his next move, always seems like he's twelve steps ahead and Steve's the one trying to catch up.

"Got what you came for?" he says, arching his brow. His voice is low and quiet.

"What are you implying?"

"Visiting hours are over." He edges slowly forwards. "You need to leave."

“You can't be serious about this.”

“Right now.”

Steve edges forward too. “You can't take her out of here.”

Barton stops, arms tensing, veins bulging beneath leathered skin. His hands are clenched just as tightly as Steve's. “That's not your concern.”

“Would you listen to yourself?” Steve yells; he doesn't care. “She's hurt; she's traumatized.” He holds his arm in front of the doorway. “I won't let you do this. You're only going to make her worse.”

The distance between them seems to vanish; Steve can barely register Barton move. They're less than a foot apart now and he's vaguely aware that the door is open and an audience has gathered outside but Steve doesn't give a shit—he's ready to burn the place down.

But maybe not as much as Barton.

“Tell me how to take care of my wife again,” he says, and his eyes are fire, voice colder than ice, “and I will end you.”

Try it, Steve thinks. He takes another step forward.

*“What the hell is going on?”*

---

“I want to be exceptionally clear on one point... this is all your fault.”

Nothing good comes of getting up before 9:00 A.M. Tony's got a cup of coffee to his lips, a phone to his ear, and the sneaking suspicion that he's about to walk into a shitstorm of epic proportions.

“No—*no*—this is not me assigning blame,” he says into the phone. “I'm just trying to be honest. It's a best practices thing. If you just—if you would hang on for one second—”

“—No, I don't dispute that. All I'm saying is that Cap's disappeared and Barton's apparently on the verge of going all Apocalypse Now and I'm not well-equipped to deal with these types of situations. Global catastrophes, sure. Talking to people, not so much.”

“—I know and I owe you. Like always and forever. Like a week in Majorca. Just start with the board and work your way down and—yeah—try to get everyone to stop freaking out. Yeah, I'm here—I love you too. *Come home.*”

He pockets his phone and looks around for who's in charge. He finds them, the attending and the hospital administrator, and gets the rest of the story. Her competency has been brought into question due to the nurse incident, and they won't let her make any decisions until she gets cleared by psych. Barton won't allow it and he's demanding to leave, but even with a medical power of attorney there's a legitimate question whether he can discharge her against doctor's orders. It's got the makings for a fabulous lawsuit on both sides and the powers that be are understandably flipping out. By the time he gets to the fourth floor, there's a Superbowl-sized crowd filling the corridor and he can already hear the stage whispers.

“I think Captain America’s gonna kill somebody!”

“My money’s on the other guy.”

“What are they even fighting about?”

Happy’s caught up to him now; Tony gives him a knowing look. “I’m on it,” he says.

Happy does his scary bouncer impression and the hall begins to clear. Tony steps up to the doorway of the room in question and sees exactly what he hoped he wouldn’t.

Cap and Barton are seconds away from declaring nuclear war, and at that moment two thoughts override everything else: *I am so not prepared for this shit* followed closely by *Damn you, Pepper Potts. You are never allowed to go to Tokyo ever again.*

An intervention is clearly needed; it’s time to go loud.

“*What the hell is going on?*”

It’s enough to get their attention. Rogers launches into the book report rendition of *How Everyone’s Morning Got Shot To Hell*, complete with enough editorial flourishes to make the AMA’s patient care guidelines proud. Barton says nothing, but his eyes are spitting fire, and Tony can tell he’s plotting all the ways he can kill them both (and maybe everyone who isn’t Natasha Romanoff)—slowly and with the maximum amount of pain.

“He can’t take her out of here,” Rogers finishes, shaking his head. “He just can’t.”

Tony looks thoughtful. “Steve, can we have a minute?”

Relief breaks over Cap’s face; he’s not in this alone. He nods. “Okay.”

Steve exits; the door closes. Barton eyes him warily but he still won’t say a goddamn word. Funny how a moment of suspense can tell you everything you need to know about pretty much anyone, and Tony is a better observer than most. His mind’s been made up since he first caught wind of what was happening, but this cinches it; he’s done his homework. He knows there are some things that you can’t explain and they wouldn’t make sense even if you tried, but he knows a bit about devotion and trust and he knows that between Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff, it exists in spades.

This isn’t one person against the world; it’s most definitely two.

Tony looks at Barton.

“Tell me what you need.”

---

He gets them to the airport, even offers up his plane, but Clint’s got his own (and a really fucking nice one too—the mercenary business must pay well). With some long-distance help from Pepper, he gets all the equipment lined up, all the meds and medical support that they’ll need. Clint doesn’t say where he’s going and Tony knows better than to ask. He watches as two EMTs carry Natasha’s stretcher from the ambulance and transfer her onto the plane, watches as Clint follows, slipping on those ubiquitous sunglasses of his.

"You gonna be okay?" Tony says.

Barton nods and it seems like the end of the conversation until Tony looks down to find him holding out his hand.

"Thank you," he says and gives him an expectedly bone-crushing handshake. "I won't forget this."

Tony mumbles something incoherent; he feels almost dazed, like he just won the lottery—or, better yet, like he just got a glimpse into the immense dark puzzle that is Clint Barton's soul.

He watches the plane take off; Happy is waiting by the car.

So much sadness, he thinks, but the day is far from over. Two out of three ain't bad, but it's not enough. There's someone else he needs to find, someone who right now won't want to see him but is going to see him all the same. This isn't about taking sides; it's about being there. And having one hell of a *What were you thinking?* conversation. But mostly just sticking around to pick up the pieces. He knows what that's like.

Happy breaks the silence. "What next, boss?"

Tony rubs a tired hand over his face. "Damage control," he says. "And I'm gonna need a copy of *Wuthering Heights*."

---

Alaska is a lifeless body of white. Black lines run through it, the exposed flesh of mountains, dark winding rivers spreading out like veins; trees cower and twist, their branches weighed down by the burden of the sky.

The world appears barren. Conditions are poor. Clint steadies the controls and maneuvers the plane higher; he will take no chances with a cargo such as this.

The descent is a blind fall through cloud thick as cotton candy. A lake comes into view, a clearing dusted with snow and with a single dark line marking the endpoint. *Home*.

The plane stutters along gravel, catching ice with a momentum that threatens to build. Not today. Not right now. The pilot is determined, arms pulling back as if the hull is an extension of him, as if he carries the plane and all it holds in his hands. It comes to a stop, engine whirring and fading into nothing.

There is no more noise but the whisper of everything. There is only them.

Clint carries Natasha over the threshold and up to their room. The house is cold. He lights a fire and unloads the rest of the plane, taking the medical equipment upstairs to join her.

Her face is turned away from him, body curled to the right. He sits on the edge of the bed and pulls off his boots then stretches out behind her.

"Tasha?"

She has not spoken since she asked him to take her home. She does not speak now. His hand fills with her hair and brushes her cheek; his fingers pull back slick with tears. The thaw has come early this year.

Not the thaw but the flood.

She reaches for his hand and he holds on tight. Her cries wash over him like a tidal wave.

*Here is where we drown.*



## Chapter 17

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Time Passes Slowly](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Time passes slowly up here in the mountains  
We sit beside bridges and walk beside fountains  
Catch the wild fishes that float through the stream  
Time passes slowly when you're lost in a dream*

---

Bright lights, white walls, cold floor.

The snow is heavy in Murmansk. All she knows is the smell of the sea and the warmth of the sun on her face. There is very little sunshine here.

She calls out in the night. Mama. Papa. Where are you? I can't see you.

They are gone. Dead. There was a fire, Natashenka. Don't you remember? Can't you still smell the smoke?

She tries. Deep lungfuls of air. Gasping breaths until she feels dizzy. There is only this.

If she is obedient, she gets a blanket. If she does well, a pallet stuffed with straw. She sees the other girls at mealtimes but mostly she is alone. You must learn, they tell her. It builds character, they say. Be a good little soldier.

A nurse, Greta, takes care of them. Her hands are rough and her smile unkind but her voice is what hurts. A sweet voice; a soothing voice. There is no comfort to be found.

Come, Natashenka, eat your supper. Come Natashenka, take your medicine. Every last drop. It makes you strong. Don't you want to be strong? You will be the strongest of them all.

She does not want to be strong. She wants to go home.

They line up for inspection. She does not know how long she has been here; they so rarely go outside. Next to her is a girl named Helena. Small and slight, with pale blue eyes and white-blond hair, she is a few years older. She smiles at Natashenka.

Stand tall, she says. Eyes straight ahead.

Natashenka obeys.

A man enters the room. He is not old but wears round spectacles and a long white coat, which brushes the floor as he moves. He squints when he talks and peers intently at the eldest girl.

She is ready, he says.

They take the girl away. She is crying. Her screams echo down the hall.

Natashenka eats her supper. She takes her medicine. She obeys. She knows that she will not be going home. She will never be warm again.

They line up for inspection every week. The man with the white coat returns. He looks at each of them. Not ready, not ready, not ready, he says.

He stops before Helena. Keep her, he says, stroking her cheek. Just like this. Helena holds so still.

He looks at Natashenka. He touches her hair. Natashenka tries not to move but she is not as good as Helena. She jerks away. The man is not angry; instead, he smiles.

So beautiful, he says. She will grow up well.

They tell her of her birthdays, of Christmases and summers too. It is her birthday again. There have been so many. She is a head taller than Helena, with wide hips and round breasts. Helena is unchanged.

When was your birthday? Did you not have one, Helena? I had another one last week. I am thirteen now. They say that I am good with a blade. They gave me a pistol, shiny like licorice. They say that I am almost ready. They say that there is much for me to learn.

She wakes up in the night with blood between her legs. Alone and afraid, she cries out because she must be hurt. Greta comes. She smiles a smile that is not kind.

You are a woman now, Natashenka. She looks so proud.

They line up for inspection. The man comes; he walks down the line. Natashenka stands much further along now; many of the other girls are gone. The man looks at Greta. Greta nods.

It is time.

Rough hands wrap around her arms. She is dragged down the hall. Bright lights, white walls. Please don't make me. I've been so good. She can't stop crying. Please. Please, no. A cloth over her face, a sickly sweet smell.

*Breathe, Natashenka. Just breathe.*

Why does it feel like falling?

The world goes black; she wakes up in her cell. There is a pain between her legs—a ripping, burning pain. Why does it hurt? Why is there blood? She bleeds and she bleeds, so much more than before. Her gown is soaked in red. She hears the sound of screams and realizes they are her own. She cannot make it stop.

There is a treatment every week. She remembers nothing but the smell of ether. The pain is less. It is her birthday again. She receives a gun of her very own.

Her lips and breasts are full and her waist is small. There is hair between her legs and under her arms. You must take care now, they say and give her a blade. She is good with a blade. You must

shave it all.

She is placed before a mirror. The man with the white coat stands behind her. She can see the reflection of his smile.

So beautiful, he says. You are ready. It is time.

She has a blade and a gun and special bracelets for her wrists. Show them what you can do, Natashenka. You are the strongest one of all.

She goes to see Helena. She is sick, they say. She is sick and yet she looks unchanged. Natashenka is a woman now. Something went wrong.

Helena coughs and Natashenka holds her hand. You were my friend, she thinks. You were my only friend. The next day, Helena is gone.

The years pass. She kisses men and steals their secrets and spills their blood upon the floor. It is the only life that she knows.

There must be more, she thinks. There must be more than this. She makes her plans. She runs away and leaves no trace.

Always running; always grasping for freedom, she is chased and hunted and cursed. A soldier with no war, Natashenka makes her own.

Footsteps in the rain, she is lost down an alley. A voice in the dark. A voice and a face and she can almost see him. She turns and she—

She wakes up. Bright lights, white walls, cold floor. She is five years old.

The snow is heavy in Murmansk.

---

Carl was the longest serving clown in the circus. Tall and skinny, he had perfected the face of the saddest man alive yet he could still make you smile. He would look the other way when Clint and Barney stole his cigarettes and find other means of revenge (Clint thought he would die laughing when the bucket of cold water had landed on Barney's head); but Carl slowly changed. A jacket on inside out. A shirt buttoned up wrong. He talked of days and people no one else could remember and acted like the present was a strange and foreign land. Alzheimer's, the doctor said and Carl was shipped off to wherever it was that you sent damaged clowns with no memory. It shouldn't have been funny but Clint was twelve years old.

Natasha could still make him smile. He could remember. I used to love your sense of humor. Not many people could make me laugh. Old Carl. And Coulson. All these people that are dead and I don't smile anymore. I don't want the world to laugh at you. I don't want them to know.

In the mornings, he would clean her wound. After the nightmares and the screams and her tales in whispered Russian. You never told me these things. I don't want you to remember. There was a girl who had suffered and there was a woman now. There was his wife.

Her wound healed well and so there was one thing that healed; Clint took great care in the effort. I will do what I can.

So he dressed her wound and then he dressed her. He would take her to the bathroom on the days she didn't wet the bed. He would bathe her and wash her hair. We lost a child. You lost a childhood. There was just a broken girl to take care of.

Wash her and dress her and feed her. It was all he could do. She would talk to him only in Russian, this girl who he had never met. Natashenka. Be brave, Natashenka. You are a woman now. What did they do to you? Most days, he wished that he never knew.

You hurt, he thought. She hurt herself. Her hair thinned and her skin faded. She lost so much weight. Clumps of red filled her hairbrush and he was tempted to keep it. This is all I have left. What if there's nothing else? I miss you, Red. I don't sleep. I can't breathe. Just tell me what you're going through. Talk to me. She looked at him and sometimes she would smile but she wasn't looking at her husband anymore.

She never attacked him. He wished she would. Where is the fire? I collect the firewood, I burn the kindling but nothing sticks; it never stays. I can't look away. I cannot leave you.

There was the day he stepped outside for too long. The day he grew foolish. He turned and there she was, barefoot in the snow, less than two feet from the frozen lake. This is where we drown. I get that now. He would not leave her. He carried her inside and held her by the fire, rubbed her feet and kissed her hands. I miss you. Tell me where you are.

One night she picked up a knife and locked the door to their room. He had to break through the window to reach her. Kill me, he thought. Just plunge it all the way in. It cannot hurt me anymore. There was a single cut on her wrist, a superficial slice. A tentative wound. That's what they call it. Don't leave me yet. He locked all the knives away, all the weapons. He forced sleep upon her with the few sedatives they had left.

I keep my rage in the barn. All the things that could hurt you, I keep here. He no longer knew what he was angry at but there was so much. It could stoke a fire. It could keep you warm. Why won't you come back to me?

I won't give up. This was his only thought. I cannot. My beautiful wife. Do you know how much I love you? You cannot hurt yourself more than you hurt me. You cannot bleed and expect me not to bleed too. Give up if you want. Give up and die but you take me with you.

If you go, I go too.

He knelt by the side of the bath and poured the water over her hair, watching as it cascaded down her back, over the prominent slats of her ribs. She hummed a song and he filled his hands with shampoo, massaging her scalp, watching as her eyes drifted closed and she smiled under his touch.

*"It doesn't sting," she said. "With Greta, it gets in my eyes."*

He rinsed the shampoo away. He rinsed her body, gentle caresses with an overused cloth. Her breasts were shrunken and her stomach concave; her wound was healed but the scar remained.

He helped her to standing and wrapped her up in a towel, lifting her from the bathtub into his arms. She weighed so little. Small and weak like a child, he could only hold her.

"Time for bed."

Slender arms reached out and clung to his shoulders. “*Will you stay?*” Do you know who I am? Do you remember my name?

“*Always,*” he said and placed a kiss to the top of her head.

Days faded into weeks, which teetered into months. There was no change.

He kept a list in a drawer, the names of clinics and doctors and specialists already etched into his brain. The cost of a healthy mind. There was no price he wouldn't pay.

But you hate doctors. You have always been afraid. I could not do that to you. I could not send you away.

This was his life now. It was the ring on his finger and the cross around his neck, a vow made in silence, frail hands clasped in his.

What do you see?

---

“*Clint?*”

He felt a hand on his face. He reached for it. This was his favorite dream; the one where she came back to him. How he had missed her. Fingers twined with his own. It felt so real.

“Clint.”

He opened his eyes. She hovered above him. An apparition. A memory.

“Hey,” he said. He had forgotten what she looked like, the way she would look at him, with the light of recognition in her eyes.

He touched her face, a single tear along her cheek. A second tear. Then another. It struck him like the first drops of rain. Here comes the flood. Here is where you wake.

She leaned down and kissed him, mouth dry; a broken sob. He would not forget this, the ghost of her lips; where was the pressure? More, he thought. I need more than this. He crushed her to him, tasted her with his tongue, swallowed down her moans. Is this real? I don't care. He would never let her go. She clung to him so tightly. You feel so small, so insubstantial. His hands drifted over her back and legs, under the cotton of her nightgown. There you are. Her skin, her taste, the heat from her cunt. Where did you go? Do you know how much I missed you? My wife.

“Clint,” she cried. “Oh Clint.” She pulled back, taking his face between her hands. “Help me; please.”

This is all I want, Natasha. “Tell me how.”

She reached for his hands and kissed each one, guiding them until they wrapped around her throat. Her eyes were pleading.

“I can't go back, Clint; it's hurts too much. Please make it stop.” She squeezed his fingers until he could feel the give of her trachea. Tears spilled down her face. “Just kill me. Please.”

Clint woke up.

Don't speak; stop talking. Shut up. *Shut up*. He snatched back his hands and struck at a pressure point, her body slumping forward, unconscious, on top of his.

He couldn't breathe.

Gasping, he sat up and rolled her body over, turning away from her, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Head in his hands, he closed his eyes. The floor shifted beneath his feet. The ground did not exist. He was falling and he was screaming; an echo in a vacuum; a black hole lost in space. Fuck you, Nat. His fist struck the wall. Fuck you. How could you? Do you know what I would do for you? Ask me anything; ask me anything but that.

Red chair in the corner, imperfect and built with her two hands. He felt it shatter in his grip. It is broken. I cannot fix it. The room was soaked in red.

He turned and looked down at her, at her frail, broken body; her nightgown in disarray. He gathered her up and laid her back down, straightened her nightgown and brushed back her hair. He tucked in the sheet around her. Sleep now, Natasha. He kissed her on the forehead. I hope you have sweet dreams.

He walked downstairs. He walked outside. Barefoot in the snow. To the edge of the lake. Here is where we drown. Here is where we died. The world is red; I will burn it down. I will make them pay.

On his knees, empty hands clawed at the earth. He made a silent vow.

I will kill them all.

## Chapter 18

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [It's All Over Now, Baby Blue](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Leave your stepping stones behind, something calls for you  
Forget the dead you've left, they will not follow you  
The vagabond who's rapping at your door  
Is standing in the clothes that you once wore  
Strike another match, go start anew  
And it's all over now, Baby Blue*

---

The first thing Clint did on reentering the house was shave for what was the first time in weeks. He had performed this ritual once before, all for her. She had sent him on a mission he had wanted no part in when she was too sick to do it herself. For me, she had said. Those two words were all that it took.

Clean shaven and hair trimmed, Clint stared at his reflection. He rinsed his face and patted it dry with a towel. There was a man he knew staring back at him, the face that he showed the world. He looked unfamiliar. It had been a while. Time to get reacquainted.

He went back outside, guided by moonlight and a familiarity with the terrain that came like a sixth sense. Finding the old target that Natasha had made, he set it up by the edge of the lake and positioned himself two hundred yards away. He nocked his bow and took aim, body creaking back to life.

Arrows and hours later, not until the target was felled by too many hits, until he had not missed a shot, until his legs ached from running, his arms strained from the pull ups and push ups, body pushed to the limits by the katas it had not forgotten, did he allow himself to stop. He showered and returned to their bed. She was still sleeping. Unconscious but her breathing had evened out. When had she ever slept for this long? He lay down beside her and listened. *For me*. When she stirred in the morning, she did not object to the possessive arms wrapped around her.

He helped her wash and dress like he always did, guiding her downstairs and sitting her at the table before preparing her breakfast. He placed the plate in front of her and watched as she ate it all. She put down her fork and looked up at him. Her eyes met his and she was looking at him, in this room, in their home, even if she still could not fully remember. He moved to the table, reaching for her plate but instead taking her face between his hands. She did not resist him as he kissed her on the forehead.

“Do you want to go outside?” he said.

She looked at him and nodded.

There was a bench that she had made, another of her earlier efforts. Wrapped in blankets, she

huddled upon it with her knees drawn up, and watched as he trained by the lake. He could see her at all times and she could always see him. These were the rules now. This was their new routine.

He could feel his strength returning, muscle mass slowly being regained as it had faded in this faded world in which they now lived. His reflexes were not quick enough, his eye not as sharp. There was much work to be done. But Natasha was eating more now. There was color to her cheeks. She would sleep more often than not and talk to him in Russian without retelling stories. Are you returned to the present? Do I have you now? He lived by futile questions. He lost himself to planning.

Two weeks after she had wished for death, he knelt before her crooked bench of a throne and she looked at him and spoke in English.

“I can’t stay here, Clint.”

He nodded. His heart was breaking. For me, she had said. Please? You did so good, he thought. Do you know how proud I am? He helped her back inside and began to make the calls. Forty-eight hours later, he packed her bags and put her back on the plane.

She was so quiet now. That inner strength was returning. Not returning; reemerging. I know you. You like to keep it hidden but I know where it resides. I could never kill you. You’re too strong for that. Your heart could break blades and snap arrows.

He drove her to the private hospital, a specialist rehabilitation center that resembled a five star hotel. Pulling up outside, he held open her door but she refused his hand. She would make this journey alone. His fingers twitched at the rejection but he had never admired her more.

She was checked in and shown to her room, a large and light space with a view out onto the gardens. You missed the sun, he thought. Was I not enough to keep you warm?

She sat on the bed as he unpacked her things. He turned to face her as soon as he was done.

“You okay?”

She nodded once.

“Look at me.” She did. He handed her a cellphone. “You need anything, anything at all, you call me. You don’t like what they’re doing here, I bring you home the same day.”

“It’s just three months,” she said.

“Yeah. Just three months.”

“Clint.” She so rarely called him by name, he had forgotten what it sounded like. Who was there to call for him? Who am I unless you tell me? “Why didn’t you kill me?” she said.

Clint pulled her to her feet. She looked so young, dressed in his sweatshirt and pants that were too big, the legs rolled up; she was lost inside her clothes. Beautiful and broken but you aren’t beaten yet. You don’t get to ask me that. It’s a rhetorical question. It’s bullshit is what it is. He tucked her hair behind an ear, held her cheek in his palm. She watched him and her lips parted. This is why. This is the reason. Everything right here, right now. He leaned down and kissed her. Her body responded like it always did, like he always remembered. He crushed her to him, lifted her clean off the floor, poured every last bit of himself into her because he wouldn’t be taking it with him.



This, my darling. This.

He set her back down and he let her go.

“Prove me right, Red.”

He didn’t look back. There was only one direction now. He left for the airport and caught the next flight to Japan.

*For me.*

---

### ***3 months later***

Her hands shook.

The pills sometimes made her jittery. Not anxious, just a faint thrumming beneath her skin. She had often expected to find them trembling like an old woman’s, unable to hold a hairbrush or raise a cup of water to her lips; but there was barely a tremor. Hands and arms and skin and bones; everything inside, locked within, upended and rearranged and under New Management. It was a funny thought but she didn’t laugh. Not today. Today was a day for concentration. The nerves were all her own.

She studied her reflection. There was so much to see, but the pieces didn’t fit. Her face felt different, body unused. Walking and talking and eating and living—it had to be relearned. She had been a good student; she had worked so hard.

There was a knock at the door. “I found it.”

Martine was the daytime nurse. Sent to stay with Natasha while she was still deemed a suicide risk, they had bonded over the most unusual things: the love of bitter chocolate, a strong cup of chicory, Martine’s unwavering devotion to the soap opera *General Hospital*. Today she entered Natasha’s room for the last time and placed a roll of medical tape on the counter by the sink.

“This should work,” she said, studying the the room’s bare walls and empty closet. “You have everything?”

Natasha nodded.

“And your medications? The prescriptions—you have those?” Natasha nodded again and Martine seemed satisfied. “Make sure you take them.” She held up her index finger as if to emphasize the point. “No deviations; you understand?”

Natasha gave her a mischievous smile and Martine laughed.

“I will miss you, Natalia. You have done well. I..” She reached out to lay a hand on her arm. “Find peace, my friend.”

Natasha looked down and covered the other woman’s hand with her own. “Thank you,” she said. Her voice sounded strange these days; rusty and out of practice. Thoughts filtered into language, images reduced to sound. It never seemed enough. “It is ... kind.” She frowned; the words did not

add up. Don't panic, Dr. Morris had said, just take a breath and try again.

"You have been very kind," she said at last.

Martine smiled and looked at the large leather-bound book on the bed. "Should I pack this?"

Natasha shook her head. "I'll take it."

She nodded. "See you downstairs."

Left alone in her room, Natasha sat down on the bed and opened the book, flipping through the pages.

The phone that Clint had given her contained a camera and that camera had become a window. She took pictures of everything; she couldn't stop. The sea. The sky. The rocks on the shore. Daniel, who worked the night shifts—he had a beautiful smile. Artless, she had thought, without fear. Martine's hands, delicate and strong. Hundreds of photographs of flowers; twelve weeks, twelve kinds, a new bouquet arriving each Friday like clockwork. Up close and far away, dissected and reconstructed, a language of light and shape, intonation in shades of green and white, purple and yellow. It didn't work like music; this was something better.

And the book—it wasn't much but it was all she had, a way to try and explain, to show him without the words that had become so difficult. It will get easier, Dr. Morris had said. With time, it will get easier, but she felt so disconnected. Words were like masks; language became subterfuge. And yet she knew them, could slip into each one like a new identity, but she couldn't find the truth, couldn't untangle her thoughts enough to be able to get them out.

No, she decided, the image is better. The image does not lie. I don't need to speak when I have eyes to see.

She looked at the clock in her room; a quarter past ten, nearly time. She stood once more before the mirror. The eyes looked familiar and the hair was still red; her dress fitted without revealing that she was still too thin and the cardigan concealing the skinniness of her arms. It was better than it had been, though she had hoped to be more.

Remembering the tape, she untied the ribbon around her neck. Two rings slid off; one, an intricate circle containing a diamond and the other a plain gold band. She threaded the tape through them and wrapped it around like a boxer might a glove, until there was enough that they would fit without fear of falling off. Two sizes too big but she wouldn't be deterred; today of all days, she was going to wear them.

She took one last look around her room. The boxes had been packed, her suitcase already removed. Just one thing left.

Natasha closed the door behind her and looked down at her rings.

Deep breath. Try again.

---

She walked down the stairs carefully; three months of living in rubber flip flops and she wasn't about to trip on her first time back in proper shoes. She focused on her breathing, on counting, on anything. Just enough to get her to solid ground.

The lobby was empty. Martine stood near the front desk and angled her head in the direction of the waiting room. “*In there*,” she mouthed. Natasha gripped the book in her arms. Deep breath, one foot in front of the other.

The journey felt endless; the room was large and contained a table but the chairs were all unoccupied. She began to worry that she had gotten the date wrong.

“Hello, Red.”

A voice behind her; the most familiar voice in the world. She turned around.

It was like a dream, one imagined so many times that the edges were worn and frayed. It was like a dream but the blank spots were filled in, here and real and, oh god, she couldn’t breathe. She could only process bits and pieces—the breadth of his shoulders, the line of his jaw. Black shirt and black pants, always black; eyes so blue. He held still and she found herself thankful; she couldn’t handle movement yet. He was overwhelming and beautiful and she wasn’t enough, she wasn’t nearly enough. Tears stung her eyes; she felt dizzy at the intensity of it. It wasn’t pain but it was close and she struggled to place it.

This is emotion, something inside her said. Remember it. It’s okay. It’s okay; just feel it.

She took cautious steps forward until they were a few feet apart, holding out her hand and willing it not to tremble.

“Hey,” she said.

He took it. “Hey.”

His hand was warm and rough and it swallowed hers whole. His expression was full of too many things; she couldn’t hope to read them. He was quiet and she was grateful. I could paint you with color, she thought, I could shade your edges in black and white but I don’t have the words. She was jealous for them; she wanted them back.

Very slowly, telegraphing every move, he leaned down and kissed her hand. A tear slipped down her cheek. Is this happiness? I can’t remember.

Just hold on, she thought. Don’t let me go.

I came back.

---

Alaska was alive again. Mountains and rivers traversed the wealth of green, a faint web of old scars. Summer was in full bloom, defiant, even as autumn was approaching. The plane rolled to a stop and she could see the old barn at the edge of the woods. She could see the lake and the two-story cabin that rested beside it.

Home, she thought. I am home.

He led her up the porch stairs and through the front door. It was pristine and perfect; everything gleamed, every surface covered with plants or flowers.

Clint looked almost shy. “I wasn’t sure what you’d like.”

She soon found herself settled in the new rocking chair by the fire (Clint’s work—she could tell from the way the stiles had been turned), with one of Betty’s blankets settled across her lap. She watched as he cooked enough food to feed an army. She didn’t have the heart to tell him she wasn’t hungry and instead sat down at the table, determined to eat every bite. She did not miss his look of relief and near pride when she did.

There was silence between them but it wasn’t uncomfortable. If anything, it felt safe. His hand rested on the table close to hers but they did not touch. This is enough, she thought. Just to be near you. Clint didn’t say anything but he seemed to understand.

It was a long time before he spoke. “You’re probably tired,” he said. The sun had long set and the night air was cold.

He did not help her from her seat but followed behind her up the stairs, at her back, at a distance, ready to catch her should she fall.

---

“Nat? You okay?”

She had been in the bathroom longer than expected. He tried to quell the anxiety building, the urge to kick down the door becoming increasingly strong. He didn’t want to scare her but he couldn’t help but feel scared too.

“Just a minute,” she said.

He returned to their room, waiting by the bed for this, their first night together. He was nervous and unsure. What should he do? Would she sleep? Had the nightmares gone away? He heard the bathroom door open and watched as she crossed the hallway.

She was wrapped in Betty’s blanket, her hair down and brushed and shining like a beacon. It was the first thing he ever saw of her; how could he forget? She came to stand at the other side of the bed and he pulled back the covers. Should he get in first? What would she prefer? He slipped off his shirt and heard a sharp intake of breath. Her arms dropped by her sides as the blanket fell from her shoulders.

They stared at each other. Lips parted, arms bare, he could see the shadow of her breasts beneath the long white cotton of her nightgown. She was his darkest fantasy come to life, always had been. He could feel his body already betray him as the blood left his head. Did she have any idea how beautiful she was?

He must have scared her because she all but leapt onto the bed and pulled the sheet up to her chin. He understood. It was too soon. He didn’t even know if he was ready. Proximity between them was like their own brand of kryptonite.

He got in next to her, keeping a conscious amount of space between them, and switched off the light. He would get no sleep but it didn’t matter as long as she was okay. Just to know she was there; it would be enough.

He listened and waited for her breathing to change, until he was certain that she had fallen asleep. Minutes passed but nothing happened.

“Clint?”

“What’s wrong?”

He felt the bed shift and the heat of her body, a small hand against his chest.

“Can you...?” The words trailed off. He knew what was coming, readying himself to go and sleep on the sofa, when she spoke again. “Hold me?” she said, her voice barely audible.

There was a noise inside him, a shattering sound, something fracturing and falling apart. A shuddering breath passed his lips as he somehow held the pieces together.

For you, he thought and turned towards her with open arms.

Her body slotted against his but it felt so different. Had she always been this small? He could crush her into dust, smother her to nothing. Her hands were light and her hair so soft. He remembered its smell. He pressed his face against it, stole a kiss along her brow.

The tape around her rings scratched against his skin. She was sleeping now. You have my heart. Let me guard the rest.

He closed his eyes.

This is who I am.

## Chapter 19

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Lay Lady Lay](#) by Bob Dylan. There is also a paraphrased quote used as dialogue given to us by the lovely **alwayslera** (see endnote for reference).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Why wait any longer for the world to begin  
You can have your cake and eat it too  
Why wait any longer for the one you love  
When he's standing in front of you*

---

She would wake up in the night to find him not always there.

She only had to cry out and he would come running. She never asked him where he had been.

The nightmares came less now. The memories felt less real; not less true or less painful but she could watch them from a distance. This is the past. It is the past but it has not passed; not yet.

He would always hold her. Sometimes it was the only way she could sleep. Can I live without you? There were tasks she had relearned, things she had determined to do for herself and the burdens that she wished to lift from him. She admired the breadth of his shoulders and their untold strength, her world resting upon them.

---

She was still too skinny.

Her appetite was good but she wasn't gaining the weight that she wanted. Sometimes it felt like her body was eating itself from within. It didn't matter how much she ate or how hard she tried; that unnamed emptiness inside could never be sated. She felt ashamed when she thought about it, of how she must look and what she had done, of what he had seen and still saw. Her body was her weapon. It was her shield and a disguise and an instrument to be played for her pleasure. But what was it now? How could it function when the mechanics were rusted? She could hear them creak and strain; there was no oil in the machine.

Alone in their room, she took off her robe, studying her reflection in the full length mirror. There stood the ghost of a girl. She blinked and willed her eyes to adjust. Red hair, long and damp from the shower. Green eyes. Pale smooth skin and cheekbones that were too pronounced. She sucked in her cheeks and exaggerated their hollows. No. It was not that bad. She pouted, lips full and pink, and tilted her head to the side. What do you see? The stark struts of her clavicles, the tracks of her ribs. Her breasts were sunken dough in her hands, nipples numb under her thumbs. She smoothed palms over the flat expanse of her stomach—no muscle definition anymore—and

stopped as she reached a thin white line. Do not cross. She pinched it instead and pulled at the flesh. Rings still bound by tape on her fingers, she could feel an itch that would not go.

“Tasha.”

She startled. Had he seen her? Crouching down, she clumsily reached for her robe and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“It’s okay,” he said and she could hear the resignation in his voice, his body turning like a sigh. She could see and hear it all.

“No,” she said. It’s not okay. “You can come in.”

She heard no movement as she slowly stood up. He was still by the door; she could see his reflection behind her.

“You don’t have to hide,” she said and saw the hint of a smile.

Deep breath, Tasha. (She turned to face him.) It’s just your body, your flesh and bones. You’ve done this before. Your clothes are all here. (She wanted to laugh out loud.) You can do this.

She let go of the robe. (Tell me what you see.)

Face, tits, scar. An untamed forest between her thighs. A girl raised by wolves who couldn’t survive in the wild. I should be more. I wish I was better. He looked at her and she looked away. Eyes like warm hands, she felt them caress her skin. She picked up her nightgown and pulled it over her head, eyes closed, breath holding, waiting until she could surface again.

The fabric fell around her, curtaining her secrets. She met his gaze once more. She had never felt more exposed.

“You don’t have to hide either,” he said, voice so soft she had to strain to hear him. “No matter what, Natasha; it’s still going to be you underneath.”

---

There was a therapist in Anchorage that her treatment center had recommended. Clint flew her to her first session, walking beside her more like a sentry than her husband. She hated to feel so weak but there had been no training, only a struggle for survival. One foot in front of the other. Put a weapon in her hands and what would she do? She was more a risk to herself than to others. How depressing. Where was the urge to kill?

Clint, by comparison, looked like the angel of death, a demon of violence. Whatever had occurred in the three months they were apart had altered him physically to the point that his whole body moved differently. It was distracting. She had never felt so intimidated yet she couldn’t keep her eyes off him.

You could beat me now. You could win hands down. There would be no contest between us. There was a part of her that relished the thought of being pinned by strong hands, his weight upon her, dominating her completely.

It was hard to be strong all the time. It was hard to feel weak. Where was the balance? That is the journey, Dr. Morris had said. The world is ever changing.

They stopped outside the building.

“You need anything?” Clint said. He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. He was uncomfortable. She struggled to read him these days.

She shook her head.

“Okay. I’ll see you in two hours.”

He turned to leave.

“Clint.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her face to his back. “Thank you,” she said. His hand stretched over both her own. She couldn’t see him but his touch was enough, the solid mass of his body. You steady me, she thought.

Maybe some things stay the same.

---

The days grew shorter. Fall came and everything fell. Leaves, rain, temperatures, darkness. I understand. The words we use; they have so many meanings.

Her new therapist had suggested that she might be prone to seasonal affective disorder. She was reluctant to give it a name. She missed the warmth of the sun and the comfort of daylight. Winter was nothing but a withdrawal and it felt too soon to hibernate.

Life went on. She continued to record the evidence. Her cellphone was insufficient so Clint bought her a camera. He offered to build her a dark room. A dark room to process the light. Not in the barn. *A new room, Natasha.* She had smiled at her gifts. You are so good to me.

He became her favorite subject, her favorite sight to behold. He worked so hard. There was so much training. She had forgotten what he looked like with a bow.

When he was done, he would bring her tea and sit beside her. They could sit together for hours in silence. It was a strange and special gift.

“It’s that ginseng crap you like,” he said, handing her today’s offering. There was a tiredness to his eyes but he smiled for her and she smiled too. “So you agree? It’s no good?”

She shook her head, smile stretching out further. It had not traveled this far for so long, her muscles were out of practice. But you remember, she thought. You remember how it feels.

Clint laughed softly.

“Drink up, Nat. It’ll do you good.”

---

She had been exploring the forest around the lake when the rain came down unexpectedly.



Natasha turned her face to the sky, blinking as the drops splashed in her eyes. She switched off her camera and quickly tucked it under her shirt; it was cool against her skin, nestled awkwardly between her breasts.

There had been little wildlife to see but the walk had been revealing, quiet enough that she could acknowledge the silence in her head.

She ran the rest of the way, testing the memory of her body and if it could recall its hard learned grace. She stumbled only once. Her heart thudded and it was thrilling. Nearly there. Nearly home. She ran across the clearing, past the barn and the winding pathway that led to the planes, refusing to slow down until she reached the house. Finally. She laughed and shook her head. There was so much water, she couldn't see straight.

She fell back against the door as she closed it behind her, shrugging off her coat and peeling off her shirt before reaching for her camera. It was caught in her bra. She laughed again. She could see her nipples pushing through the sheer lace. How was she already soaked through?

"Hey."

She looked up. Clint was at the top of the stairs, in sweatpants and a t-shirt, one hand rubbing a towel over still damp hair.

"Hey," she said. She felt her mouth stretch wide. When had it last done that? When had she smiled like this? It didn't matter. Her mind was empty. It had rained. Her camera was stuck! She giggled as she finally untangled it and lifted the strap over her head. Clint continued to stare. He dropped the towel.

"Can I borrow that?" she said, tilting her head towards it. She put the camera on the kitchen table and moved to untie her boots.

She heard him approach, soft cautious pads of his feet. When she straightened up, he was less than a foot away, the towel in his hands.

"Let me."

She recognized this expression. There were uncatalogued records in her mind, images and memories that still felt out of place. You used to look at me this way. I know you did. This is what I was to you. She opened her mouth to speak and then the towel was upon her.

Her eyelids fluttered closed. His touch. His fingers. Small currents ran from her scalp to her toes, a spark reignited; a circuit breaker flicked. Her lips parted and she might have sighed; she might have melted and leaned forward and her breasts and the wet fabric of her bra might have brushed against the hard contours of his chest. Sensation spread out everywhere and it was hard to place. She came alive. The creature lived.

All he did was dry her hair.

---

In the days that followed, all she could do was stare; at his mouth, his hands, the curve of his lips. It became a waking obsession, stealing glances when he wasn't looking; openly gazing when his back was turned. One morning she looked out the window to find him training—shirtless—by the lake. It was a sight she had witnessed many times before but today she stood transfixed through

wind sprints, push ups, sit ups, and a series of exercises with what looked like a short staff. By the time he picked up his bow and took aim, she had to turn away. She ended up on their bed, face buried in one of his shirts, hands working over aching tits and exploring between her legs.

Remember, she thought. This is how you dissolve. She pictured the smooth lines of his body, all that power and control, and came hard and fast in a breathless rush—shocked and exhilarated and so, so alive. Panting, she lay there for a long time, playing with her wetness, with the slickness that coated her thighs and dampened the sheets, licking it off her fingers like the sticky remnants of a sweet.

This is how you taste, she thought; this is who you are. Natasha closed her eyes and saw his face and all she wanted was to do it again.

So she did. Twice.

---

"And...?" She bit her lip as she watched him.

"It's good."

"Be serious."

"I am."

"Really?"

He replied by eating another forkful of spaghetti, grin spreading wide. "It's perfect."

The timbre of his voice made her stomach flip. She took another gulp of wine.

There was a dress she had bought in Anchorage; soft and green, it draped over her body in a way that made her almost feel attractive. There was a bag of provisions: fresh pasta and herbs and tomatoes ripened on the vine somewhere south of the equator. There was a pilot's license, the requirements for which she had completed in the early weeks of their marriage, and a flight made in Clint's old plane, which was now her own. She had made her first solo trip that morning, attending her therapy session and returning late with extra supplies.

Necessary supplies. There was a plan and a hope and a need that coursed through her veins. For the past week she had survived alone with her fantasies—now she was ready for a partner.

*Her* partner.

Clint had come back from his workout that evening greeted with the smell of basil and the sight of his wife standing over the stove, feet bare, hair unbound, a large white tea towel about her waist.

He stopped and blinked; he looked bewildered. She could remember a similar expression from sparring matches long ago whenever she had landed a particularly effective blow to the head.

"You bought a new dress," he said.

Natasha stirred the pot in front of her and gave him a sidelong glance. "Go get cleaned up."

A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, and she had watched as he lifted the hem of his shirt to wipe his face, the sculpted muscles of his abdomen flexing with the movement. She nearly dropped her spoon.

Fifteen minutes later he returned, hair damp and dressed in a fresh change of clothes, trading his usual black t-shirt for something with a collar. He pulled out her chair and poured her a glass of wine and she watched as he ate every last bite of her culinary efforts. Finally, he put down his fork.

"I still can't believe you learned how to cook."

He had listened, transfixed, for the duration of dinner as she recounted in animated detail her various classes at the treatment center. What had started as a means to stave off boredom gradually evolved into something else.

"I wouldn't call it cooking exactly," she said. "I only know how to make one thing."

"Well, you did one helluva job." His gaze seemed to suck all the oxygen from the room; she felt lightheaded, a blush creeping its way up to her hairline. He reached for his beer and took a long sip, and she found herself resisting the urge to lick the condensation off the glass.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," he said, eyes steady. "There's a job; not long. It shouldn't take more than week but I didn't want to leave unless—"

"I'll be fine," she said. The words came unbidden. "You should go." She could do this. "When do you leave?"

He looked apologetic. "Day after tomorrow."

Natasha nodded and downed the last of her wine. There was no time to waste.

"Dessert?"

---

Dessert was a disaster. Lava cake had been reduced to ash, complete with an oven fire. Clint lovingly but very firmly kicked her out of the kitchen, dousing all the flames and cracking open all the windows to let out the smoke. Crisis averted, he joined her by the fireplace and handed her a cup of hot chocolate.

"Probably should have tried a different recipe," she muttered.

"Something like that," he said, expression neutral.

She took a sip and frowned. "No bourbon?"

"Maybe when you're older."

She snorted, coming close to spraying them both with scalding liquid. Laughter welled up from inside; once it started, she couldn't stop. She barely noticed as Clint extricated the mug from her hands, her body convulsing with uncontrollable giggles. It was relief and joy and even Clint wasn't immune. His smile grew wide and he chuckled as he caught her, her body slumping against his. She could feel his chest vibrate, feel his warmth and strength, and how she ended up cradled

in his arms she would never be sure.

They were inches apart, him staring down at her; there was nothing that she wanted more. She reached up and touched his face, taking it between her hands as she pulled him towards her. She brushed her lips with his once, twice, testing the sensation, leaning up until she could join them together. She kissed him again and again, repeating until the pattern became a rhythm. Clint held still, held her in impossibly strong arms, and slowly—very tentatively—began to kiss her back.

It was like striking a match.

Natasha wrapped her arms around him, pulling herself up to find a better angle. She increased the pressure, sucking on his lower lip. He shuddered in response and his mouth opened against hers; it was all the invitation that she needed.

A desperate sound emitted from the back of her throat as she buried her fingers in his hair, seeking out the gentle friction of his tongue. He tasted better than she remembered, a memory made real; she needed more. Climbing into his lap, her fingers made short work of the buttons on his shirt. She pushed it off his shoulders and let her hands feast on warm flesh. Every inch was chiseled and hard; he had never looked like this before. She had never wanted him so much.

He was holding her but he was holding back. All that power and control; she longed to set him free. She moved against him but it wasn't enough.

"Clint." She whimpered and moaned and begged his name. "Clint," she pleaded, nails digging into his biceps. His body tensed beneath her. "Please."

She was on her back in a heartbeat.

His weight crushed her, the sheer breadth of him pressing her into the rug until he was all she could see. One hand braced beside her head, the other wrapped around her throat, thumb stroking her jawline and forcing her mouth to open wider to his kiss. She complied and was rewarded with his tongue licking deep inside. She sucked on it greedily and opened even more.

Take me, she thought. Take what you want.

His knees settled between her legs, spreading them apart, hands soon coming to join them as he roughly pushed up her skirt. He swallowed down her moans of pleasure; she could barely catch her breath. Her legs hitched around him and she felt his hardness against her, causing her hips to buck off the ground. He pushed her down, trapping her with the weight of his body, and when she moved to wrap her arms around his neck, he pinned them against the hardwood. He was so much stronger, her body was no match for this finely honed machine. The imbalance should have scared her but this was Clint, her Clint, and fuck—she'd never been so wet.

Take me. Claim me. Do what you will.

He pulled her wrists above her head and held them in place with one hand while the other grabbed the loose neckline of her dress. One sharp tug and her breasts were exposed. Teeth and tongue dragged across hard nipples. He sucked on one peak and a surge of moisture pooled between her legs.

His hand ventured lower, shoving her panties aside and burying two fingers inside her. She cried out; he thrust in again, beginning a rhythm that carried enough force to push her hips across the floor. Pleasure and pain mingled as he held her down, fingers fucking her in long sure strokes as

his mouth consumed her tits.

He worked a third finger inside and her walls clenched. She was too tight; it had been too long, and for a second she panicked. A helpless noise escaped her lips and suddenly he pulled back. His eyes, clouded with lust, struggled to focus but once he did, his body froze. He looked down at her and the desire that had been there moments before gave way to something else. A heartbeat later, she was free, his body scrambling backwards until his back hit the sofa.

“Fuck.” He was staring at his hands. “I can’t, Tasha. I’m sorry.”

Natasha could only watch as he got up and disappeared out the front door. It slammed behind him, the walls reverberating in time with the labored pitch of her breathing and the dying embers of the fire.

## Chapter End Notes

*“He leaned down and whispered to me: No matter how thin you get, no matter how short you cut your hair, it's still going to be you underneath. And he let go of my arm and walked back down the hall.”*

— Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [It Ain't Me, Babe](#) by Bob Dylan (link to a gorgeous version by Joan Baez).

*Go melt back into the night, babe  
Everything inside is made of stone  
There's nothing in here moving  
An' anyway I'm not alone  
You say you're lookin' for someone  
Who'll pick you up each time you fall  
To gather flowers constantly  
An' to come each time you call  
A lover for your life an' nothing more  
But it ain't me, babe  
No, no, no, it ain't me, babe  
It ain't me you're lookin' for, babe*

---

The blue fades. The voices die down.

Given enough time and enough patience, you can outlast anything. The abyss stares back and there's a part that can't be reclaimed; he gets that now. The cost of doing business.

The house is quiet. The fire is banked but still hits him like a furnace; he has always preferred the cold.

Her cup sits on the hearth; the scorched scent of cake lingers in the air. Her scent lingers too.

Slipping off his boots, he treads noiselessly up the stairs. Three nights spent in a matsu tree instructed not to make a sound—now the silence follows like an old friend. Three steps from the top and he can hear her breathing: soft and rhythmic, the sleep is steady but not yet deep.

She lies in the middle of their bed, curled into a tiny ball. Like a girl, a lost child. He covers her with Betty's blanket. She hates the cold.

She still wears that beautiful dress. Dark green like the first night she took him into her bed. The only thing missing is the rain.

I can't, Tasha. Not now; it's not safe. I can't stay.

There's an ache inside him. It's a physical pain; a hole carved into his chest. He watches her. He sits by the bed and looks at her until the sun begins to break across the horizon, until light begins to flood the room.

He prays. He doesn't believe in god but he prays just the same. He kisses the cross around his neck. He's stayed too long; it's time to go.

He made a vow.

---

She awoke to an empty bed and the smell of coffee. Clint was sitting downstairs fully dressed, two cups waiting on the table. She sat down across from him.

He was still staring at his hands. "I'm so sorry about last night. I—" He looked up. "I think we should take things slow." His eyes asked a question she wasn't sure how to answer.

She told him sure, of course; she was sorry that she'd pushed too far—anything she could think of to say. He told her that he needed to leave early, that the job had been moved up, and stood to grab his bag. She followed him to the door, feeling awkward and unsure what to do. Before she could decide, Clint pulled her into a hug, his arms nearly squeezing the breath out of her, and he kissed her, long and deep. He whispered something in Russian, soft and almost inaudible; it wasn't until he was out the door that the words finally registered.

*I love you.*

---

I never forgot what you said to me but I could really use your advice right now.

I don't know how to take care of him.

Do they have books on these things? How did you learn? I've had to relearn how to take care of myself. So much has happened that I never got to tell you. I'm sorry and I miss you. I miss you every day. I know you'd have the exact words that I need to hear, even if it's not about a job or a mission; especially so. That's what you taught me, I think. Not how to be a better agent but how to be. I'm learning, Betty. I'm trying so hard.

After you died, we got married. I still sometimes lose sleep trying to understand why I waited so long. It's the only thing that's ever made sense to me. Being with him; being his wife. I don't even know what it means. The rings on my fingers still won't fit but eventually they will. Every day I'm a little bit stronger. I eat more. I gain weight. I look in the mirror and I see someone I only half recognize but they're becoming more familiar too.

They said in recovery about knowing yourself and loving yourself and giving yourself the time you need. They said write it all down and your thoughts will become clearer. I don't know about any of those things but I feel so desperate. I'm losing him. Or I'm doing something wrong. Or something changed; I changed and it got too much. He won't tell me. I'm afraid to ask, if I'm honest. That's another failure. I'm no good at this. I don't know what he needs. I just want it to be me.

I've already lost so much. It's hard to say or write the words. But I lost something and it won't come back. I wonder if the part of me that's missing is what he's missing too. Or is it something more?

---

I miss your clothes. The stores are so limited in Anchorage. I won't comment on the styles. I want to feel classic and timeless like those old movies you used to show me. I want to feel beautiful.

It's wrong but I need him to tell me. I can't do it on my own. If I'm not beautiful to him then it's like I'm worth nothing. It's backwards. My therapist here says I need to focus on my own self worth. What does he know? I'll never be worth anything on my own.

Tell me about Bob. What did he used to say? How did he make you feel? You were so much stronger than me, Betty. I know that's what he fell in love with. I bet he wasn't afraid to touch you.

What was it you always used to tell me? *You need a stiff drink and a good lay.* Well, I have a stiff drink. I have a lot of stiff drinks. It loosens my tongue. I say things that I don't always mean.

I told him there was something wrong with him. I've never been so ashamed. I'm the broken one. I said, "What kind of man are you?" You should see him now. But that's not what I mean. He's my man. He's a good man. He's the best man I've ever known.

No one will love me the way that he does. No one will fuck me like that. Can I be crude? You were always asking me these questions. You never asked outright but I know you wanted to. He fucks me like I'm his bow and arrow. It sounds so stupid but you saw him with them in his hands. It's more though. And it's terrifying. I can see parts of him that he doesn't want me to see. I want everything.

There's a language between us when we touch and we don't speak it anymore. I can dress differently. I can pamper myself and spend hours on my hair. He still doesn't hear me.

I need a stiff drink and a good lay, Betty. I need my husband to come back to me.

---

I like music. It gets so quiet on my own. I clean the house and I take all my anger out on the firewood. I still spend two hours in the bathroom every morning. Everything feels futile but I try to laugh and sing because isn't that what a good wife does? How else do I make a home?

Still can't cook. One dish. It was tried. Three fingers inside me and so much panic. Three fucking fingers. I only have the memory of half his hand during the long Alaskan nights. There are so many missions and each time he comes back a little darker, a little more beautiful, a little further away from me. I have one finger for him too. It isn't fair but he gives nothing away. He won't sleep near me. I touch myself and he leaves.

Am I a monster? A freak? What does he want from me?

It's getting harder now. More and more. I can't stop loving him. I can't stop wanting to be near him. I can't stop wanting every piece of him. I can't stop.

Tell me how, Betty. Please.

---



I was going to write you a resignation letter. I'm hanging up my guns. Resheathing my blades. I'm not a girl who was made to kill. I'm made for so much more. I was made for him and if not, what am I for?

You don't have to answer that. I already know.

---

Natasha stopped in front of the mirror to check her lipstick. Rich carmine, a fire engine shade of fuck you with nails painted to match. The pearls were demure, the dress an understated classic in navy blue. The tree was perfect; she had made the ornaments herself. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care and Perry Como purred in the background. Even the bird was cooked to perfection—she had found an ancient cookbook on her last trip to town, full of all the tips an aspiring hostess could need (*"Park dinner in the oven to look after itself while you greet guests, catch up on your mending, or just relax a little"*) and a full-blown color illustration on how to construct a pâté pineapple. She'd opted instead for a less elaborate appetizer: a vodka martini for one.

At two minutes to six (*"A good hostess always starts her affairs on time"*), she slipped on her coat and stepped out onto the porch. She picked up her shotgun with one hand (*"It's important to welcome your guests in with charm and graciousness"*), pumped it, and fired two rounds into the air. She had only to turn long enough to set it back down before he appeared at the bottom step. Dressed in black like part of the night, he stood there; body tense, eyes nearly glowing in the dark.

"Dinner's ready." She walked back into the house; she didn't wait for him to follow.

They ate in silence, Perry making conversation for them both.

Clint finished his plate while Natasha focused on the wine. By dessert (cake for him; scotch for her), her tongue was loose enough to speak her mind.

"I was thinking of going back to work," she said. "There's only so much I can do around here before crochet becomes inevitable."

He studied her carefully; she refused to look away. "So soon?"

It had been ten months since she'd been dissected on an operating room table; seven since she'd checked herself into a mental institution, four since she'd come back and three since she had begun her career as Clint Barton's widow. She took another drink but she didn't take the bait.

"Just contract work for now." Like before.

"Whatever you want," he said.

What I want? Don't you fucking dare. Her nails bit into the flesh of her palms as she forced her expression to remain neutral.

"I bought you something," he said, pushing a thin, flat box across the table towards her. "For tonight," he glanced in the direction of the tree, "and tomorrow."

Tomorrow. The day after Christmas. One year since they met in a church lit by the setting sun and

---

She willed her fingers not to tremble. She hadn't bought him anything; she had tried to give him everything she could think of long before. He had made it clear that he wasn't interested.

The box was covered in a shade of velvet that nearly matched her dress. Inside was a rope of gold and diamonds, a collar of precious jewels. Beautiful, expensive and cold.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to tear the place apart.

Her Clint would have made her something; he would have taken her for a hike in the woods to see a waterfall that was only for them. He would have built her a bed. A dark room. A house.

He would not have done this.

Tears burned her eyes but she held onto the anger instead. Fixed on it until there was nothing left.

"Is this supposed to make it okay?" Her voice broke. He said nothing.

This was it then. She knew that now. The truth she'd been running from was staring her in the face and her cheeks stung as if she'd been slapped.

She picked up her glass and drained it, smile vicious and brittle.

"Why don't I try it on?"

---

She appears at the top of the stairs, wearing his necklace.

These are the things he sees:

Her feet are bare. There is a slit in the silk of her full length nightgown, running ankle to hip. One leg is exposed. The shadow of another. A shadow between her thighs. Her cunt. Her ass. Stomach. Breasts. His eyes salivate on the image. There is a hunger. Dinner for two was not enough.

Eyes are like hands. They can touch. They can communicate. They are powerful weapons. She has cut him with her hate-filled gaze tonight.

He follows her movements down the stairs and to the fire. She drinks scotch as she plays with a poker. Stoking the flames, he feels the heat as she glows in silhouette. The gown hides nothing. Says nothing. There is nothing to hear.

A plate smashes. She clears the table, dropping each item in the base of the sink. "Don't get up," she says and casts the remains of dinner to the floor. "Allow me."

Clint picks up his drink. Wine. He drinks it. Pours himself the rest. Wine. Dinner. A toast.

His prey stalks the room.

"Tired?"

She refills her glass with scotch. "I can't sleep." He hears cupboards open and draws slam until she reappears with a bottle of pills. "How many?" she says.

He knows the doses, knows them so fucking intimately, knows how to make her sleep and wake, how to wash her and dress her and feed her. He knows it all. "One," he says. One was all it took.

She takes one, then another, then another, then more scotch. She stares at him as she swallows the last of the liquid, throwing her glass into the fire.

"Enough?"

No. He is not sated. He is never sated. There will never be enough. Ask him about the blood. The bodies. The diamond necklace that weighed heavy in his bag. He does not create. He does not build or make or renew. Not anymore. There is the hunger and there is only the hunger.

His prey stalks the room.

Twenty minutes later, through hurled insults and cutlery (always missing their mark), through steps unsteady and a body that sways like fluid beneath pale silk; twenty minutes later, she is stumbling towards the stairs.

"Party's over," she mumbles.

Three steps up and she falls and he catches her. Three steps. One heartbeat. She is limp in his arms.

A moan escapes her as he gathers her up. Blood loses its way. It torrents from brain through heart to the only organ that still feels alive.

*Fuck.*

The flesh of her thighs, the narrow breadth of her back, the edge of her breasts; her body pressed up against him. Hair cascades to the floor. Her throat is a long white line. Throat. Breasts. cunt. He can smell it. He can smell her. Flesh. Soft flesh. She is silent. In his head, there is a roar.

He reaches their room. He sees their reflection in the mirror. We have lived different lifetimes here. Remember when I fucked you? When I held you? When you said you would be mine? Do we begin and end here? Isn't this where you wanted to die?

He lays her down. Leg exposed. Straps loose about her shoulders. He pulls back the sheet and lifts her up to move her. One breast falls free. One breast. One touch. One taste. He drops her to the mattress.

His prey doesn't move.

Her leg is exposed. Leg bent. His hand curls around her knee, slides down to her ankle. Her skin is soft. Light. His hand is dark and heavy and caked in things. She can not wipe it clean. However much he tries, from her ankle to her hip. The curve of her ass. He presses his face to her stomach. Oh god Natasha. He can smell how wet she is. One taste. Oh god. Please.

He towers over her. His prey doesn't move. He straddles her form and leans his body over hers. Hands either side of her face. Her perfect face. Just one touch. One taste. Slowly. Intimately. What do you fear?

I know you, Natasha. You are mine to keep. To protect. To take.

You are mine. I am hungry. It will never be enough.

Can you hear it now? Loud and familiar. A voice. A veil. Not red. It glows blue. You have heart. You have too much. See the thing you were running from? See the monster under the door? Look in the mirror. It comes. It sings for you.

He stares at his reflection.

This is who you are.

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Desolation Row](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Now Ophelia, she's 'neath the window  
For her I feel so afraid  
On her twenty-second birthday  
She already is an old maid  
To her, death is quite romantic  
She wears an iron vest  
Her profession's her religion  
Her sin is her lifelessness  
And though her eyes are fixed upon  
Noah's great rainbow  
She spends her time peeking  
Into Desolation Row*

---

### ***One week later***

"Sitwell said you had a theory."

The young man sitting across the desk opened a file and laid out several clippings. Eastern European newspapers, the headlines all read the same.

Fury looked up. "Are we solving murders now?"

"A friend from INTERPOL asked me to take a look."

"And?"

"This isn't what it seems."

"I suppose you're going to tell me what it is."

"Five homicides in the span of six weeks. Gruesome, bloody, violent. Religious imagery everywhere. An orthodox cross left around each one's neck."

"I watch the news, Morrison. What's your point?"

"It's a cover."

Fury laughed. "Really? Enlighten me."

James Morrison, junior intel analyst, rubbed the back of his neck. "I got to looking and ... something doesn't make sense."

"The kills," he continued, "they're too perfect. Too clean. And two months ago they stopped. Except they didn't. There were others. Belize, Brazil, South Africa." He tossed a series of crime scene photos onto the desk. "Sulim Kakiev, 67. Wealthy businessman, rumored arms dealing connections. Found dead in an alley; femoral artery cut so he bled out fast, but not before his eyes and tongue were removed. Stanislav Kozak, 51. Former military with ties to the KGB and GRU; found in the apartment of his mistress, arms and legs severed from his body. Alexander Baranov, 55. Scientist, retired from the University of Sao Paulo where he served as professor of genetics; stabbed to death in his home, a supposed burglary gone wrong. Stabbed 87 times. There are more murders too, all just as random, all just as violent."

"So?"

At last he slid a photo across the desk. A group of people standing on the steps of a nameless government building. Fury read the caption:

*The People's Intelligence Directorate Research Council, Murmansk. April 11, 1986.*

"They're all there," James said. Fury remained silent.

"Someone's hunting them down, sir. What's left of the Red Room. Someone's taking them out."

"And you're going to tell me who?"

He placed a file on the desk. Fury saw the name on the tab; he didn't bother to open it.

"Motive, means and opportunity," James said. "The three elements of every crime. The motive is obvious, if the rumors are to be believed. The means—"

"There are none," Fury said. "Wrong *m.o.*, wrong choice of weapon. And these kills are up close."

"That's what I thought too. But then I looked up some early mission reports. There was one. A solo job in Belarus. Sex trafficking case; really nasty stuff. The kill was very close and very ... creative. The record was internally sealed by an Agent Phil Coulson, but those seals come up for renewal every ten years and this one wasn't."

"And you think this serial killer, this so-called Angel of Death—"

"It's a ruse. A distraction. And a terrible descriptor too. The Japanese have a much better word—the masterless samurai, the *ronin*."

Fury was silent for a very long time.

"So, Agent Morrison," he finally said, "let me get this straight. You're telling me that we've got a serial killer who's not really a serial killer seeking to make a political statement while executing some elaborately planned revenge? You're telling me that your Oxford and Harvard-educated brain came up with this?" He leaned across the desk. "Would you like to know what I think? I think you don't have enough to do. I think you have an overactive imagination. I think that your time would be better spent focusing on economic destabilization in central Africa than making up stories more suited to comic books. And it would be much, *much* better spent not wasting mine. Drop this. Now. Do I make myself clear?"

The younger man's face visibly fell. "Yes, sir. Crystal, sir."

"Now get the hell out of here and go do some real work."

He gathered up his papers and made to leave. Fury was standing now, looking out at the view of the ocean.

"Morrison," his voice was quiet. "One more thing. Just out of curiosity... the elements of a crime. You got the first two but you missed the third. What about opportunity?"

James paused at the door. "He doesn't work for us anymore, sir."

---

Pepper stopped at the end of the driveway and turned back to glare at Happy.

"I know you're texting him," she said, rolling her eyes as he rolled up the driver's window and pulled away.

She continued the long walk undisturbed. It was a winding incline, the house sitting at the top of a cliff. Tony had told her it was a particularly fantastic piece of real estate. She had to agree, although the garden and terrace looked like they could use a lot of work.

I hope you're satisfied, she thought, her grip on the casserole dish tightening as she finally reached the door.

She pressed the bell and waited. Her mother always said a casserole was how you made folks feel welcome. So here she was. The door opened.

"Oh."

Natasha looked surprised to see her, which was no surprise at all. What was surprising was her appearance. Her hair was tied back with a scarf and she was wearing an old plaid shirt and rolled up jeans. She looked like she had been cleaning. It was a shift from the immaculately dressed professional who had once assisted Pepper at Stark Industries. She looked almost ordinary. It was disconcerting.

Pepper smiled. "I'm sorry. I know you were expecting Tony." She held up the casserole dish. "I thought you might be hungry."

---

The house was chic and of its time. Nothing appeared updated since its original 1960s design. Photographs lined every wall and surface that wasn't stacked to one side and in the process of being dusted. Pepper had yet to see Natasha or anyone else she recognized in a single one.

"Who's that?" she said, pointing to a picture of a dark haired boy paddling naked by the sea.

Natasha tilted her head and seemed to ponder for a moment. "I think it's Coulson."

"Phil?" Pepper followed her through to the kitchen, which was bare. "This is his aunt's house, right?"

"Betty's, yes," Natasha said.

“Aunt Betty. The CIA agent. I remember.”

Natasha turned from the refrigerator, a bottle of wine in one hand. “He talked about her? What did he say?”

Her face lit up right then; her expression was so open and, well, warm. That seemed cruel but this was the first time Pepper had seen her outside of an undercover role. Or was it an act? It must be hard, she thought, remembering who you are at any time. Tony never had that problem. The world knew he was Iron Man and they knew him as Tony Stark first. Who are you? she wondered. She wanted to know more.

“He seemed very fond of her,” Pepper said. “I think he’d even taken Beth to meet her.”

“Beth?”

“You know, the cellist.”

“No,” Natasha said. “I don’t know.” She poured them both a glass of wine, handing one over. “Please tell me everything.”

---

*I need intel. Has Barton been sighted?*

Pepper sighed.

“What is it?” Natasha said.

“Just Tony.” She typed a quick reply. *I’m not a spy. And neither are you.* “He wants to know how you are.”

Natasha smiled softly. An empty bottle of wine and a half finished casserole sat between them. They had eaten straight from the dish, Natasha keen to avoid spending any time in the kitchen.

“He’s sweet.”

“You’re drunk,” Pepper said.

Natasha ducked her head. “A little.”

Who was this strange and quiet girl? Pepper wanted to ask but then her phone buzzed once more.

*You’d make a terrible spy.*

She rubbed at her temple. “He’s an acquired taste. I’ll give you that.”

There was a moment of awkward silence but Pepper wasn’t sure why. She studied Natasha, her hair long and full, cheeks pink, frame slim but curvy. She was a beautiful woman, effortlessly so.

“You look healthy.”

The words slipped from Pepper’s mouth. There was no way to read Natasha’s expression.



"I'm sorry," Pepper said. "It's just, I know you were sick. And you look really good. You look great, actually."

"Thank you," Natasha said. "I know it was you and Tony who..."

"Please. Don't. I mean, it was more Tony; but mostly Clint. He fought so hard. I..."

I shouldn't have said that, she thought. I shouldn't have mentioned his name. What happened to you?

"Where is Tony?" Natasha said, grasping for a change of subject.

Pepper picked up her phone. "Creating work for me." *He's not here.* "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you."

"No, you didn't. I enjoyed the company." Natasha stood up. "More wine? Would Happy like to join us?"

Pepper smiled. "I think he'd like that."

---

"Spill."

"The house is beautiful. And I drank too much."

"That's your debrief?"

"Quit it, Tony! He wasn't there. That's all I know. She seemed off when I mentioned his name so I left it at that. Satisfied?"

"Insatiable. I need to know more."

"You need a hobby."

"What do you think this is?"

"I think what it is is creepy and obsessive."

"You're off the case. Put Happy on. Happy?"

"It was an excellent casserole, boss."

"Happy, you're fired."

---

Natasha invited Pepper round for dinner again, this time takeout pizza and a pitcher of Long Island iced tea. She asked Pepper how she was coping as CEO. Pepper admitted she had enjoyed the challenge of rebuilding most of Manhattan but didn't mention how each time she viewed the altered skyline she was reminded of how close she came to losing Tony. She always checked her phone now, even in company, even in meetings. This was her obsession. She might not be able to protect him but she was going to be there for him whenever he needed her.

Currently it seemed all he needed her for was unearthing the mystery of Mr. and Mrs. Barton.

Pepper couldn't deny that she was curious too but she didn't really know Clint and was mostly fascinated by Natasha. Had she considered working for the private sector? What were her plans? Why did she sleep on the sofa and not in either of the large bedrooms in the house? What was with the obsessive cleaning?

On another visit, Natasha showed her Betty's vintage designer dresses and they made vodka martinis and listened to Sinatra on the veranda.

"We were born in the wrong time," Pepper said, watching as Natasha all but ran to switch off the music. What was wrong with Cole Porter?

"There's never a right time," Natasha said and flipped the record over.

---

Almost a month into their tenuous friendship, Pepper made her first significant discovery.

Natasha had stopped wearing her wedding rings.

It was not Pepper's place to comment and anyway, she was on official Stark Industries business, Tony having begged her to see if Natasha would look over some security and encryption coding. Apparently this could not be done via email or a phone call so Pepper delivered the files in person.

Natasha greeted her with full make up, curled hair and a new dress. She had never made this much effort before. Pepper didn't need to ask why.

As she got up to leave, there was a knock at the door. There had been no other visitors before then. Natasha hurried, briefly stopping to check her appearance in the mirror. You look fucking perfect, Pepper thought. What was she thinking?

"Am I early?" a male voice said.

It was Steve Rogers.

"Right on time."

Pepper smiled up at him as she passed by them in the hallway. "I was just leaving."

He looked as sheepish as a schoolboy, nodding in awkward acknowledgment while barely meeting her eyes. Natasha, on the other hand, looked like she couldn't care less.

"Bye, Pepper. Tell Tony I'll be in touch."

Pepper's phone was in hand before she was halfway out the door.

---

"JARVIS, where's Tony?"

"To quote Mr. Stark, he is in a state of mourning in his workshop and wishes to be left undisturbed."

Pepper entered the override codes to find Mr. Stark instead battling Dummy over a tub of Ben & Jerry's.

"Who said you could share?" Tony said, snatching the tub away from it.

The robot dropped its spoon, Pepper crouching down to pick it up and placing it back on the counter.

She folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Chunky Monkey?"

Tony slumped dejectedly on his stool. "They were out of Cherry Garcia."

"I hardly think that matters."

"Love is dead, Potts. The assassins killed it." He gestured towards her with his spoon. "If you were even remotely romantic, you'd understand why Chunky Monkey doesn't cut it."

"Oh my god. Dramatic, much?"

"Oh I'm sure it was very dramatic. Bronte can't hold a handle to these kids. And Steve! My captain!"

"You're taking this all rather personally."

"And why shouldn't I? How did you feel when... when..." He waved with one hand. "Help me out with a reference here. Who were your romantic idols while you were languishing away in Wisconsin?"

"Wyoming," she said, wresting the spoon from his grasp before reaching for the tub. "And it was Zac and Kelly."

"Who?"

She swallowed down a large mouthful, ignoring the cold headache it induced. "Saved by the Bell. Zac and Kelly broke up. I was devastated."

"Well, there's your answer," Tony said, pressing a fist to the glowing center of his chest. "My heart is broken. Zac and Kelly are no more."

## Chapter 22

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Shelter from the Storm](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Now there's a wall between us, somethin' there's been lost  
I took too much for granted, got my signals crossed  
Just to think that it all began on a long-forgotten morn  
"Come in," she said, "I'll give you shelter from the storm"*

---

There isn't much he can tell you. Mirror smashed, hands bloody, gaze blurred. The cold and the wilderness and his plane and the mission. Three weeks. Six dead. One beheading. He should be more creative. He feels desperate. He grows bored.

Her plane is gone when he lands but he avoids the house and stalks into the woods. He hunts and survives for three nights on his own, the clothes on his back and a knife in his hand. There is no peace but the fight for survival is a reminder. The beat of the wild. The danger and the beauty and the silence. He melts into it all.

Her plane is gone when he returns. The house is untouched. Broken plates in the sink and on the floor. Just as he left it. No struggle. No one else. She left on her own.

Tomorrow, perhaps? She is staying in town. She is shopping. She has an extra session booked. He amasses explanations in his head like a patchwork quilt that fails to hide the truth. He is not blind, though he wishes to be. He goes upstairs. The mirror is broken. Blood on his hands. A diamond necklace on the bedpost. *Fuck you.* I cannot. I tried, Natasha. One taste and I'll swallow you whole.

Downstairs on the table, she has left her laptop. No note. No trace. The house is a mausoleum without her. Clint is but a ghost.

He hacks his way in with little effort. Her email account is unencrypted. The message is clear. The *messages*; there are so many.

Dozens of emails. He reads them all.

\*

*March 1*

Stark read me the riot act and told me to leave it alone and maybe he's right and maybe I'm an idiot but I just need to make sure you're okay. It sounds stupid, doesn't it? But I saw you lying in that hospital bed and I think about what you went through and then suddenly you were gone. Is that what you wanted? Did you even know what was happening?

I'm sorry. You don't need to be burdened with that. I'm just worried. I can't stop thinking about it.

Wherever you are, please take care of yourself. Stay safe. You're probably in no shape for email, but if you see this and you feel like it, drop me a line and let me know you're okay.

And if you need anything--anything at all--you only have to ask.

\*

*June 1*

It's warm in New York. Is it warm where you are? Are you healing? I hope so. I hope you take all the time you need. And if you ever get the itch to come back and save the world, we sure could use you.

There's a whole lot that needs saving.

\*

*November 29*

I should stop this I guess. If this were back in my time I supposed I'd have a whole stack of letters marked 'return to sender.' Email makes it harder to tell. Heck, you probably haven't even gotten any of these. You probably changed your address or they got deleted or lost somewhere in that ether called the Internet. Or maybe you just don't want to hear from me. That's okay. Really. I just wish you'd tell me. I wish you'd say anything. Even to come back and yell at me about how I can't plan recon for shit or make a decent cup of tea. Yell at me about anything. Everything. Just tell me you're okay.

I won't bother you anymore. I promise. Just be happy and be well and know that there's someone out there who still thinks about you and wishes you all good things.

\*

They read like a journal—like the secret diary of Captain America, aged 95 and a half. She doesn't respond. Not until three weeks ago; until after that night.

\*

*December 26*

Steve,

I finally read all your emails; I'm sorry it took me so long to write you back. It's really good to hear from you. I've missed being in touch. It nice to know there's someone who cares.

Anyway, this is horribly late and I understand if you're done trying to talk to me but I just wanted to say thank you.

Okay, well, I'll let you be now.

All the best,  
Natasha

\*

*December 27*

It's not too late at all! My God, it's so good to hear from you. How are you? What's been going on?

\*

*December 28*

I'm surviving? How are you? I want to know everything. Spare no details; fill me in on all the news. I feel like I've missed so much.

\*

The journal becomes a conversation. Steve speaks and Natasha answers; he asks and she replies. She tells him things she did not tell Clint. He misses her voice. He wants her mind.

She tells him everything that he needs to know, all the things she has kept hidden. It ends with an exchange from earlier that day.

\*

*4:19 P.M.*

Steve,

I've been meaning to mention this for a while—I'm back in Malibu ... alone. I've been here a few weeks; it's a long story. I don't know if you ever come out to the West Coast but if you do, I'd love for you to stop by. I kind of owe you a dinner.

If not, no worries. Just thought I'd ask.

Best,  
Nat

\*

*4:21 P.M.*

How does Friday sound?

\*

*4:28 P.M.*

*See you at 7.*

\*

Clint closes the laptop and heads for the door. Today is Wednesday. He better not be late.

---

It's six hours before she emerges from the house. She makes it as far as the end of the driveway and puts the trash out. She's wearing shorts and a long shirt. Whose is it? Is it his? He can't be sure. Her legs are toned and tan and she's been catching at least some sun since she's been here. Did she go out alone? Who with? Her hair's still fucking beautiful.

He keeps his distance that night. There are no visitors and no more excursions. He watches the light from the windows shut off some time after three. She's having trouble sleeping. Is it guilt? Does she miss him? Should he go and wake her and ask her right now?

He needs all the facts. He doesn't understand. He left his wife in their home in Alaska and when he came back, there was the shadow of someone else, a trail of emails typed by a different woman's hands. Was she leading him here or was she leading him on? What the fuck does she want with Steve fucking Rogers?

Day two he gets his answer because her white knight is here. He's shy and he's awkward and he's dressed for a pep rally. Clint used to beat up frat boys on his days off in the circus. He used to drink. He wonders if Rogers has ever let anything stronger than a coke float pass his lips.

She smiles when she meets him and Clint can't feel his fingers as they tighten their grip. There used to be jealousy, he remembers, before they were together. There used to be hope and resignation. There used to be resentment. He has never felt anything like this.

They go inside as Pepper Potts leaves. Natasha invites him in. He saw her lips move. He saw those lips that used to worship his cock invite another man inside her house.

He watches them for the rest of the evening, sitting, talking. Mostly banal crap. Does Steve even know how to get laid? Does he plan to make a fucking move? Of course not. This is Captain fucking America, a hero and a gentleman. Of course she would invite him in. Of course she wants the white knight and not the fucked up archer. She's trapped in a fantasy land and he's drowning in a sea of blood and shit.

I have their blood on my fingers. I saw them piss their pants and cry for their mothers and you don't know a thing about it. You don't know fucking anything and I still don't understand; why are you here?

Steve leaves at eleven; it's his bedtime soon. She cooked him spaghetti and meatballs and he knows that it's the only thing she can't totally fuck up from scratch so if she made that much effort, she wants to suck Captain America's dick. Steve washes the dishes and sees himself out and she watches from the doorway. Is she checking him out? Is she thinking about fucking him?

She wanders about the house, lonely and alone. She stares at the pictures on the wall and he knows that none of them are of him. She moves to Betty's bedroom now and he watches her undress. He watches her slip her dress off and unhook her bra and touch her breasts. She touches them and looks at herself in the mirror. He could come in his pants or send himself through that fucking window right then. She's down to just her panties, plain white cotton panties and they are the sexiest fucking thing he has ever seen. Dear god, Natasha, are you doing this on purpose? Are you trying to destroy me? Why don't you invite me in?

Under the sheets, she touches herself and he watches. He strains his ears as if he can interpret the rhythms of her breathing. Her body arches from the bed and he needs to know who it was who took her there; who guided her hand and urged on her fingers; who knows that cunt better than him?

*Come for me, Natasha.*

She cries out, not in pleasure but with a gut wrenching agony. She cries herself to sleep that night and Clint watches through the window. Let me in.

---

*I was wondering...*

What is it?

It doesn't matter. Let me get you that drink.

She goes out onto the balcony, wearing a loose skirt and old sweater. It clings to her breasts and he's sure he can see the outline of her nipples even though he knows that she's wearing a bra. Is she cold? Turned on? Tell me what you are thinking.

She leans against the railing, staring down at the sea; the breeze catching her hair and skirt and he can see her throat and her thighs and the arch of her feet as she stretches her legs. He can see everything and nothing at all but he knows her eyes like he knows the combination on his quiver and bow. He holds his bow in one hand as he presses his eye to the monocular and he knows that face. He knows every variation of it. His wife; my Natasha. Tell me what you are thinking.

Are you sad, my love? Are you lonely? Do you miss me? Is it me or is it him? Who do you pine for? Who do you think about? Who are you wet for when you cry yourself to sleep?

He reaches for an arrow, the one with the rope, with the means to take him to her. Tell me what you are thinking. I need to know.

She turns and there is Steve, a cup in his hands (my woman drinks bourbon with her cocoa, you fucking adolescent) that he hands to her, fingers brushing, and he leads her inside, a smile on her face (where is the sadness in your eyes? are you just sad without him?) and his hand on her back. His hand on her back and his fingers touching her skin.

Clint drops the arrow and grips his bow until he feels it snap in two.

This is all I have, he thinks. This is all I have and you have broken it.

---

*Would you like to go out for dinner with me some time? I know a place...*

Yes.

You know it too?

Yes, I'd love to.

There were failsafes to the super soldier serum should it have fallen into the wrong hands. There are inherent weaknesses. Clint has done his research. He still has access to SHIELD.

That was an unwanted but necessary detour; he knows the time and he knows the place. Steve was so fucking insistent. Clint wonders if he'll bring a chaperone.



This is some 1950s bullshit right here, Steve parking his cadillac and straightening his tie; he even checks his fucking watch. He waits at the door, a bunch of flowers behind his back and Clint could send an arrow straight through them; he could take out each petal and pierce each stem. Love me or love me not? Let him fucking try.

She answers the door, looking like his own brand of poison.

What have you done, Natasha? Where is your hair? Where are your rings? What have you done to me?

Her hair is short. Her beautiful hair sliced off to her chin. This is his punishment, in her eyes and her smile and her desecrated hair, all for Steve. A new dress with her tits pushed up; does she honestly believe that Steve would know what to do with them? That dress is a fucking work of art. It is a dagger right through him. White with blue stars like a cheerleader to America, tight and dishonest and demanding that she's fucked in it.

Clint takes a knife and cuts into his leg. The blood flows but the pain is dulled. There is too much to feel anything else.

---

Is this a fucking movie? Does it end with a dance and a fumble at Make Out Point? They look like teenagers, not lovers. They look like children playing make believe. They look like the people he has no chance of being. Is that what she was missing? Is that what she wants?

She orders the lobster. She's never been a cheap date. He likes that she's unfussy, even if she can be pretentious. She doesn't get his references. He doesn't get her references either.

She laughs six times. He counts them all. He wants to bottle that laughter and store it up because it has been a cold fucking winter and the laughs are all gone. What changed between them? Why wasn't I enough? I did my best, Natasha, even if you thought I was wrong. I did my best and I will never stop. It was always for you. What the fuck do you want?

Steve? This cardboard prince? This cookie cutter Ken doll? He's brave and strong and he's decent and good. Is that what it takes to please you?

I know you, Natasha. I know your soul. I know your broken parts and your darkest places. I treasure them like precious jewels.

Give Steve your shattered glass heart to hold and it will cut him into pieces.

They leave the restaurant and walk to the car. Steve holds open her door as she stands before him. He touches her shortened hair and brushes her cheek and leans in to kiss her. Natasha stays still.

This is where his heart stops beating. This is where he ceases to exist. If another man can taste her and claim her, then what is the point of him?

Their lips brush. I will take you down with me, Cap. I know all of your weak points, just like you know mine. This is your death kiss. This is the kiss of death for us all.

Their lips brush and Natasha turns her cheek. "I'm sorry," she says.

Clint watches her lips move. *I'm sorry. I can't do this.* He knows everything about this woman.

He watches her and he understands. He lives.

---

He waits in the darkness. He sits and he waits and he needs to know.

What are you thinking, Natasha? Is it me or is it him?

The house is silent and empty but he feels Betty's presence all around him, Bob's gaze from the walls, the weight of history in the bricks and the mortar, a monument to what should have been and where it all went wrong.

He can close his eyes and hear her calling out for him. He can hear her cries echo throughout the room. At her darkest hour, it was his name that she screamed.

The lock turns and the door opens. Clint needs his answer. He needs his wife.

He hears Rogers' voice in the hall, hers falling silent. She stops as she senses him. He turns on the light.

"How was the lobster?"

He grins.

## Chapter 23

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Gonna Change My Way Of Thinking](#) by Bob Dylan.

*I'll tell you something, things you never had you'll never miss  
A brave man will kill you with a sword, a coward with a kiss*

---

It has been a good day, she thinks; she hasn't had one of those in a while. She laughed and could breathe and there was no suffocating need to hold herself together, to keep her feelings hidden.

The kiss was expected. A normal kiss in a normal place. By a car, on a date, on her mouth, under the moon. This was the escape and what her world had been missing. It was possible to function like this.

She looks at Steve; kind, handsome, wonderful Steve. A gentleman and a boy as well, he was understanding and apologetic and desperate to please. It was endearing but uninspiring. Is this what her life would always be?

They are both quiet on the ride home. Steve walks her to her door. She unlocks it and invites him in.

"That was something of a disaster," he says. He looks bashful; it makes her laugh.

Thank you, she thinks, for making me laugh. I forgot what smiling felt like.

She's still smiling as she hangs up her coat. "Your definition of disaster might need some reworking." He follows her down the hallway and into the living room. "I think—"

She stops; the air shifts. They are not alone.

She can feel him before she can see him, a dark silhouette and a flash of white teeth. A lamp flickers to life.

"How was the lobster?"

She drops her keys.

---

*This is her favorite dream. The one where he comes back. He touches her. His hands, his voice.  
The warmth of his body. It feels so real—*

She opens her eyes and sits up, nightgown in disarray, her head throbbing. Fingers trace the

necklace about her neck. The bed is empty beside her.

It was real, she thinks. It was all real.

She calls out his name.

She is alone. Gown pushed up, the strap has fallen from one shoulder. She feels her exposed nipple harden to the cool air. She touches herself, touches between her legs. She is wet for him but there is no ache.

Sliding out of bed, she turns to the mirror. Broken and bloody, she sees no reflection. Does she even exist? She strips off the nightgown and surveys every inch of skin. No marks. He did not touch her. He wouldn't even come near.

The waves crash in; she slides to the ground. The dam is breached, water screaming; a flood without end. She pulls a sheet from the bed and lets it drift over her, wails echoing throughout the house.

This is when you shatter. This is when your heart breaks.

“Natasha? You okay?”

She is staring at the sea. She blinks once and turns around. Wrong face, wrong house, wrong life. You're awake now. Try to remember.

She smiles; she can do this.

Steve looks nervous. “I was wondering...”

“What is it?”

He shakes his head. “It doesn't matter. Let me get you that drink.”

The sky is dark, the sun long set. The sea is black and turbulent. She stares into it.

She is awake.

---

There is a legend of the priestesses of Thessaly—she's certain that she read this—of girls taken from birth, trained, and given over to the gods. Virginal and unspoiled, they were trapped inside the temple walls, wedded to the divine.

But youth and beauty would fade, and the favor that each one knew would eventually grow cold. They had outlived their purpose; the gods spoke to them no more.

And so they were cast out.

Three weeks and he had not come. The old Clint—her Clint—wouldn't have waited five minutes; he would have moved heaven and earth to get her back. He did once. But she doesn't know this man; this man whose name she has all but taken, this man to whom she has given her ring. He was a stranger now. There was a darkness in him but he wouldn't let her hold it. She wasn't deemed worthy of keeping his secrets.

Elysium was gone. It was a myth, a fever dream. She had fled to the wilderness and gone mad in exile. Time to close the book.

So she did. With the clothes on her back, she boarded her plane and headed south, followed the sun and warmth until it led her to the sea. She was so tired of winter, had had enough to last a lifetime. Give me water and sunlight and air. Give me space and time and maybe something will grow. Maybe there's life here after all.

Natasha moved into Betty's house on a Thursday, leaving behind her painkillers and sedatives for a crocheted blanket and a familiar old sofa. It was two days before she dared enter the kitchen and when she did, she cleared out every shelf and cupboard, and stripped it all bare. It had been cleaned months ago but it wasn't enough; she scrubbed the floor until her hands were raw, until her lungs hurt from breathing in the bleach.

She was still cleaning when Pepper Potts stopped by, offering a casserole and her company. Natasha gratefully accepted both. It felt good to have a friend. She and Tony were kind, checking in when they could and encouraging her to get out more. They didn't ask too many questions or pry and for that she was grateful.

She spent a lot of time trying to make sense of it all, trying to sort herself out. She needed work and a purpose—but what? She knew how to kill and to steal but it was never her choice. She wanted to choose for herself. I don't feel like a killer; I don't want the violence. To go backwards was to be trapped; she had worked so hard to break free.

I am more than this, she thought. I know I am. I just don't know yet what I'm meant to be.

The nightmares still came but she was resigned to them now. She could tell the difference, between waking and dreaming, but they took so many forms; worst were the ones with calloused hands and a familiar voice. Can I ever forget your touch?

The days were punctuated by sunlight and sea and so many emails. Dr. Morris was right; the words did come back. It helped to have someone to talk to and someone who wanted to talk to her.

Steve Rogers was kind and steady and stirred nothing in her heart but the rhythm of warm friendship. He was a gentleman. His words weren't crude and his hands weren't rough and she had no urge to take him between her thighs; but there were other things. Security. Honesty. Showing up when she called. Natasha had stared at the framed pictures on the walls and wondered. Is this what Betty and Bob had? Maybe it was all she needed too.

It was this or grief and the grief was too much (two nights ago and she'd actually considered throwing herself from the balcony). There had to be more than survival; she had to learn how to live.

So when Steve shyly asked her to dinner, she found herself saying yes. She knew it was more than friendship, always had been for him, and maybe it was time that she gave it a try. She bought a dress that was short and tight and meant to catch his eye, she took off her rings and cut off her hair because there no one left to keep them for, and she stepped out on the arm of a modern-day paragon.

This was what normal people did. She could do it too.

---

She unlocks the door and invites him in.

“That was something of a disaster,” Steve says. He looks bashful; it makes her laugh.

Thank you, she thinks, for making me laugh. I forgot what smiling felt like.

She's still smiling as she hangs up her coat. “Your definition of disaster might need some reworking.” He follows her down the hallway and into the living room. “I think—”

She stops; the air shifts. They are not alone.

She can feel him before she can see him, a dark silhouette and a flash of white teeth. A lamp flickers to life.

“How was the lobster?”

She drops her keys.

He is sitting on the couch, reclining against it, legs spread wide and dressed all in black, from the matte leather of his boots (he cleans them by the fire and on the back porch when the weather's good and she likes to watch the ritual, always watches; there is something lyrical about his routines) to his combat fatigues; a soldier returned from the war. One arm stretches out across the back of the sofa, open and strong, the other draped over one leg; those arms that would carry her and hold her and mark her as he fucked her, a long-forgotten dream. His t-shirt shifts across his chest as he breathes, thick with muscle; he works so hard; he works for everything. His eyes are all for her, flaying the flesh from her bones, burning to her core as his smile cuts like a knife.

It hurts to see him, to be reminded of what she has been denied. It hurts so much but nothing in her being will let her look anywhere else.

She is afraid of him right now. She has seen him in the heat of battle, at his most deadly; she has never seen anything like this. This is a new animal, an undiscovered species. She doesn't know what he is capable of. She doesn't know what he's seen. *How was the lobster?* How was Steve's kiss? She is afraid for Steve yet she is terrified for him to leave.

Why should that turn her on? Why is she wet through? She has never felt desire so acute, to be torn apart by this perfect monster. Why now? Why the fuck did he have to choose now? On a fucking good day. When was the last time that she had one of those?

“Natasha.”

She feels herself stumble, Steve's arm at her side as he stops her from falling.

“Don't.”

That voice. He is standing. They pull apart; Steve's arm drops from her waist. Clint's movements are controlled and unpredictable. Even Captain America is taken aback.

“What the hell do you think you're doing here?” Steve says. He sounds so angry. Natasha wishes he would stop. He doesn't understand what he is dealing with; neither of them do.

Clint watches only her. Her body aches. She wants to feel him inside her. She wants to look away.

“Hey!” Steve steps between them. “Answer me when I’m talking to you.”

His gaze shifts and he looks at Steve, appraising him with a silent and deadly fascination.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Steve says. “Why are you here?”

His face is unreadable; unrecognizable. His eyes slide back to hers. “I’m still waiting to hear about the lobster.”

“You were watching?” Steve says, horrified. Natasha can’t breathe.

“Did you enjoy it?” he says. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

She wants to say yes. She wants to scream it in his face until it crumples up in pain. She wants to lie with all her heart but she doesn’t know how. He wouldn’t believe her anyway.

“Sonofabitch! You have no right!” Steve’s pose is confrontational, hands clenched into fists at his sides. Clint is fluid, like mercury. There’s no way of knowing which way that he will flow.

“I like what you did with your hair. Is that a new dress?”

She wants to tear it from her body and burn the remains.

“What about the flowers? Are roses not your favorite anymore?” She closes her eyes. “Look. At. Me.” She does. “I want to hear all about that kiss.”

“Stop it!” Steve yells, edging closer towards her. “Stop doing this to her! Don’t you think you’ve put her through enough?”

“Touch her again and I’ll kill you.” Natasha believes him; the fear turns into terror. Clint doesn’t make idle threats, only statements he sees through.

Steve is unperturbed. “You arrogant, controlling piece of shit. I’ve watched for nearly two years now. I’ve watched you do what you want, take what you want, and leave her to pick up the pieces.” She can feel Steve gesture towards her but she won’t look away. “She was bleeding and delirious and you dragged her out of that hospital. She was traumatized and hurting and you pushed her away. And where have you been? What the hell have you been up to? Don’t you dare try to act like you’re the victim.”

“Tell me, Captain, why are you here?” His voice is too calm, the control starting to slip. “Are you in love with my wife?”

Steve says nothing. Clint looks only at her.

“Do you love him too? Is that it? Were you wet when he kissed you? When he touched you? Was it his face you saw when your fingers were buried in your cunt?”

“You need to leave right now, Barton.” Steve’s voice is cold and hard and he’s a moment away from violence.

Clint's body tenses. "I'll leave when she tells me to; it's her goddamn house."

"No." It's the first word she's spoken; she can barely hear her own voice. "No," she says again, stronger this time. Her eyes never leave his face. "It's ours."

"Natasha—"

She turns to Steve. "You should go. Please. Go."

He stares between them, disbelief at first but soon the resignation takes over. "If that's what you want. Call me if you need me."

They stare at each other as Steve leaves. The click of the front door and Natasha feels her heart rate quicken. His presence draws the air from the room; his expression burns like fire. He has never looked more angry than this.

Talk, she thinks. Tell me what you are thinking.

She is so afraid. He would not hurt her. He would never harm her. But this man appears like a stranger before her, a book written in a language that she does not understand.

"I'm confused," he says, quiet and barely controlled. "I thought we were married."

"We are, Clint. I..."

"Where are your rings?!" His voice shakes the walls. It shakes her to her core. He has never raised his voice before, never to her. The Clint she knew never yelled.

He reaches around his neck and pulls out his cross, his left hand held up like a slap to the face. "I made a vow; I kept my promise. Did it mean nothing?"

"How can you ask me that?" Her hands clutch at her dress and cling to her sides. She isn't sure how she is still standing, why she hasn't unravelled to the floor.

"You made a choice. What did you choose?"

The dam breaks with an unexpected violence. "*I chose you!*"

Words pour forth, a torrent raging from within. "It was always you! It will always be you! But how can I have you when you won't have me? When you won't touch me? You won't talk to me. I live with your shadow; it's like I'm married to a ghost. I can't wear your rings when I only get a part of you. I can't do this anymore, Clint. I can't."

"Do you want me to leave?" Something in his expression changes, an untold sadness in his eyes.

"I want you to come back," she says, voice breaking on a sob.

She looks away; the tears won't stop. She reaches for something, anything. Lost and stumbling, she is blind; she cannot see.

Strong arms wrap around her, hold her up and keep her steady. Her fists pound at his chest; she wants to fight him off but she's so weak and tired and oh god it's been so long. His fingers brush her face and he whispers words in Russian, vague words, unfamiliar words.



*Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.*

Forgive me, she thinks. She opens her eyes.

His hands hold her face like he holds something precious, hands that could break her, could kill her if they tried. He wipes away her tears and strokes back her hair and his touch is so gentle; it should never be this way.

“My Natashka, don’t cry.”

I only cry for you.

He looks at her and the world fades to nothing. He leans in to kiss her and she prays to the saints.

Lips meet in blessed union. Show me. Remind me.

Here is where we live.

## Chapter 24

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Wedding Song](#) by Bob Dylan.

*The tune that is yours and mine to play upon this earth  
We'll play it out the best we know, whatever it is worth  
What's lost is lost, we can't regain what went down in the flood  
But happiness to me is you and I love you more than blood*

---

His mouth parts from hers, moving along her jawline and throat as his hands hold her in place. He reaches where neck meets shoulder and chest and tastes the swell of her breasts as they push against her dress.

“I thought you didn’t want me,” she says.

Clint is blind. He is dumb. He is mute and deaf and paraplegic. He is broken down into nothing. How could he function if that were true?

“I want you,” he says. I want you so badly. I have never wanted anything as much from the day I saw you. Do you know how much I crave you, Natasha? How much I want to possess you? I can’t erase Steve’s touch and his mouth desecrating my temple (that’s what you are); an infidel within the place that I worship. I don’t know how to explain it to you. I don’t know how to function. I am so fucking broken and so fucking lost and there is only the killing and there is only you and you think that I don’t want you.

“Then why won’t you touch me?”

Fuck me, Natasha. Do you know what I would do to you? What I nearly did? I am a monster and yet you married me. I would touch every part of you. I would lay my hands beneath your skin. I would feast on your heart if I could.

Let me touch you. Let me show you what I mean.

He kneels at her feet. She doesn’t move. He takes off her shoes and kisses each ankle, each calf and knee and thigh as he pushes her dress up. The abomination; what a perfect fuck you.

Looking up, eyes lock on her face. “You have no idea,” he says. That face. Her fucking hair. You better grow that for me. You better let it grow until it touches your feet. Do you know how much I love your hair? Don’t cut it off and say that I don’t want you.

Dress hitched above her hips, he presses his face to her cunt. She gasps; she is so wet. He can smell her; her scent; her taste. It has been too fucking long. He kisses over her panties up to her scar, running his lips and tongue along it. Her body trembles to his touch and he breathes her in once more, the hunger he has ignored too long beginning to overtake him.

She cries out above him, her hands bracing against his shoulders; his body and the wall are the only things holding her upright. He slowly stands back up, holding her face, tracing around her eyes and cheeks and the edge of her mouth. His thumb brushes roughly along her bottom lip. I will wipe every last trace of that bastard from you. Let me cleanse you. Let me make you forget. Remind me, Natasha. Show me how it used to be.

His hands move to her shoulders and the straps of her dress. "You have no idea," he says again. Do you understand? I want you until there's nothing left; until there's nothing left of me. "I want every last piece." He rips the dress in two, a single violent tug until it is stripped from her body, the shredded halves cast from his hands. "But not in that dress."

She wears a pale lace bra that matches her underwear. The virgin bride. The all American girl. Was this for Steve? Who did she wear it for?

"Is this new too?" he says.

She looks up at him, pupils wide and heart pounding. He can feel her heartbeat; he can hear her blood. "Yes," she says.

He rips off her panties first. The bra can stay. Her tits come later.

He lifts her up until he can taste her, cunt pressed to his open mouth and her legs wrapped around him. She could kill him, he thinks. Why doesn't she? Do you like this? He presses her up against the wall and oh god, he has missed her, the feel of his tongue plunging inside of her. A warm cave. A second home. Her thighs clench tighter and this is how he wants to go. Take me out, Natasha. Let this be my last meal.

She comes against his mouth and calls out his name and he holds her there against that wall until the tremors fade and her body goes slack. He guides her down along the length of him, mouth opening against hers and holding her in place, lacing her tongue with her own taste. She moans into him. You won't forget this. You won't forget me. You think that you don't have me? If you go, I have nothing left.

He takes her bottom lip between his teeth and sucks on it violently. Was this where it was? Was that the spot? I want to draw blood.

He kisses her neck, the hollow of her throat. "Where did he touch you?" he says, lips moving against her skin. "Was it here?" He kisses her shoulder.

She shakes her head.

He kisses her collarbone, the soft spot just her above breasts. "Here?"

"No."

He wants to go further but not yet. He flips her around to face the wall. "Here?" He bites the base of her neck. "Here?" He sinks his teeth into her shoulder. His voice is rough and he doesn't care. She moans and she writhes and he pins her against the wall with one hand while the other snakes between her legs. She's dripping and she's shaking as he works to stretch her open, sliding in two fingers then three then four. It's been so long and she's so goddamn tight. "Here?"

"No." She's nearly crying now. "Nowhere. It was you; only you."

She repeats the words as his hand works its rhythm.

“Did he make you wet? Did he make you come? Tell me who you think about when you touch yourself.”

“You,” she says. “Only you.”

Why did you cry, Natashka? Why were you sad?

“Is this what you want? Is this what you were missing?” He removes his hand then licks his fingers before unfastening his pants. “Tell me, Natashka. What do you want me to do?”

“Take me.” She gasps as his dick strokes her entrance. He holds her hands above her head, spread beneath the callous skin of one palm. “All of me. Don’t stop. Never stop.”

His free arm wraps around her waist and he enters her in a single thrust, balls pressed to her ass as she cries out in pain. “How does it feel?” he says, unmoving as she whimpers. “Am I enough for you?”

“I can never get enough,” she says and Clint thinks that he sees stars.

“My Natashka; my Natashka.” His rhythm is slow and unforgiving and she’s so deep, she could swallow him whole. He could disappear inside her. I fit there, he thinks. This is where I belong. He is going to come before he can ever have enough, all self restraint gone. It always dragged on painfully when it was beneath his hand.

“Let me come on you.” He spins her around. The bra is off and he licks her breasts, sucks on her nipples; he strokes his length as he keeps her hands pinned. “Let me come on you.” It is his mantra now. Let me wash you. Let me make you clean. He feels the pressure; the moment is soon. He cries out and he kisses her and her skin is wet and sticky against him. It covers her tits. Pressed face to face, he releases her hands and she wraps her arms around him. “Did he touch you like that?” he says, her legs latching around his waist as she holds him close.

“Never,” she says and smiles then laughs, his arms cradling her ass as he carries her to the bathroom.

He sets her down on the toilet seat. Water running, he can feel her eyes upon him as he removes his clothes.

He places her in the bath and gets in behind her, touching every part of her and washing it slowly. He lingers on her tits and cunt and stomach. He runs his fingers along her scar and her tears flow freely.

“Why are you crying?”

“I missed this,” she says. “I missed you.”

He kisses her softly, tilting her chin towards him, his free hand splaying over the spot. You are whole. You are whole to me. You are perfect. You are alive.

He washes her hair last, the fuck you, the castration. Let it grow for me, he thinks. Let it come back. I have missed your body, Natasha. I have missed you. I have missed your giving flesh beneath my hands.

She cries and cries but there is no sadness. He thinks it is relief. You are mine, Natasha. I will never leave you. You are mine.

---

He takes a towel and wipes away the water from her body like he has with her tears. It's a ritual and a baptism and he's kneeling at her feet, always kneeling.

Why are you there? she thinks. I need you here. I need you with me. She bends down and kisses him, gently drawing him to standing. She takes the towel from him.

"Let me," she says. She's waited for so long.

She dries him off, soon forgetting the towel in favor of her hands. She reacquaints herself with every part of him, warm and solid and unbreakable; scarred and imperfect and somehow flawless too. Forget your Michelangelo, she thinks, forget your fucking S-curve; this is beauty to me. She touches him and remembers. The shrapnel scars on his chest, the sprinkling of grey hair. She finds the places she has sewn him up—her terrible stitches marring his skin; he had never sought to change them, carrying her marks like favors. What else do you carry? This creature at once familiar and mysterious, she will not rest until she knows all of him.

She remembers that night he had held her, kept her out of cold, dark water, never thinking of himself. What else have you done for me? What more will you do? She's not ready yet. It was then she knew that he loved her for certain, his eyes revealing the truth even as his body shook and his lips turned blue. It's all she needs to know right now. It's enough, she thinks. Just tell me we're okay.

*Let me love you, Clint Barton. Let me be your wife.*

She doesn't realize she's spoken the words out loud until she feels him tense beneath her touch.

"Forgive me," she whispers against his lips. "I never should have left. I'm sorry."

She kisses him before he can answer. One kiss leads to another, and she wraps herself around him because she can't ever get enough. He picks her up and takes her—not to Betty's old bedroom, which is now hers—but to the guest room, to their old room. She didn't have the courage to go near it before; now he carries her over the threshold and lays her on the bed.

"Please, Clint." He kneels beside her. "Please."

Her voice is desperate; her hand wraps around his dick. It's been no time but she needs him again. She strokes along the shaft then leans down to take him in her mouth and oh god—she's so hungry. She licks his length, tries to kneel between his legs and swallow him whole but he won't let her; he pulls her up and flips them over until she's spread on her back.

He positions his cock at her entrance and works his way in. She bites back a moan; she's still tight and sore, but it's an exquisite pain; she never wants it to end. He pushes in further and pins her legs apart.

"That's it," he says, kissing her brow, his thumb working between her teeth so she can bite down on it. Her body works to adjust as he strokes her thighs apart; her nails bear down on his shoulders.

Her body sheathing his dick, he doesn't move. She is stretched to breaking. She is ready to come apart. This is what she was missing, an emptiness that could only be filled by him. She waits but he just stares, face leaning down, his lips pressed close to her ear.

"You asked me once," he says, "what I was afraid of." She feels him kiss along her neck. "It's you, Natasha. It was always you." Her teeth tear into the flesh of his thumb; her walls clench at his words. "I can't hold back anymore."

"Don't," she begs. "Please don't hold back." Her lips pressed to his, soft and deep, she pours every bit of longing into him. *Don't leave me.*

She kisses him again. "Please," she whispers, "Please." It's a prayer and a plea and her only conscious thought. He still doesn't move. She takes his face between her hands, eyes locking with his.

"I need you, Clint; all of you. You never have to hold back with me."

One more kiss. *I am yours.*

His body shudders, a groan tearing free from his mouth even as his tongue plunges inside her own. And then he moves; slowly at first, but building in intensity, until she is shaking—he increases the rhythm. He shifts the angle of his hips and suddenly she sings.

His hand wraps around her throat as he kisses her. She's starting to unravel, his cock dragging against her walls as he fucks her into oblivion. He drives her into the mattress; she cries out on each thrust.

He bites down on her lip and she comes beneath him—a symphony of pleasure and pain. It's like falling, dying, being pulled beneath the waves and she never wants to breathe. He comes inside her with a primal roar that echoes through the house. Her face is streaked with tears and she can't tell whose they are.

There is so much she wants to say but her voice is gone; she has no strength left. He collapses on top of her and she holds him there, holds him inside her, staying that way until sleep finally claims them.

---

Sunlight. Warmth. The sound of the sea.

She blinks awake. Naked and wrapped in a bed sheet, she aches all over. It is a welcome ache, a delicious pain.

She reaches out and there he is, propped up on one elbow, staring down at her. He brushes back the hair from her face.

"Ask me," he says, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. "Anything you want, just ask."

She leans up to kiss him. "Not today."

*Not yet.*

She smiles shyly and he smiles too.

---

Pepper wondered if Natasha could be persuaded to have cocktails this morning. She had kept her mouth shut and didn't voice her concerns when Natasha had revealed that she was going out for dinner with Steve the night before. She hadn't used the word 'date' but, then again, she didn't have to. Whether it was or not seemed irrelevant; what it was was a terrible idea.

No mind. It was none of her business. She was here for brunch and nothing else. If a couple of mimosas happened to trigger a confession then so be it.

Somehow this was Tony's fault, she decided, stalking up the driveway until she reached the front door.

She raised her arm to knock then stopped. There was something on the doorstep. Kneeling down, she discovered her casserole dish, a handwritten note tucked inside with her name scrawled across it.

*Pepper,*

*I'm sorry to cancel but we had to leave. Also sorry for taking so long to return this. Raincheck soon?*

*-N*

*P.S. Tell Tony that Clint says hi.*

Paper clutched in one hand, she fumbled for her phone.

"Hey, it's me. I hope you're sitting down."

## Chapter 25

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [To Be Alone With You](#) by Bob Dylan and [Once in a Lifetime](#) by Talking Heads.

*To be alone with you  
Just you and me  
Now won't you tell me true  
Ain't that the way it oughta be?*

---

Natasha hated rubber gloves.

Hands were for touch but her rings were too precious. She would have to forego the sensation of warm water against her skin and neglect the morbid pleasure she felt in watching her fingers wrinkle (it reminded her of Betty). She didn't want to take any chances today.

The stacks of dirty plates and bowls should have been intimidating. She had grown lazy and overlooked this chore in favor of exploring around the lake and testing out her new camera, subsisting for the last week on nothing but a vat of homemade Russian stew, cookie dough and coffee. And now she had run out of dishes. At least the rest of the house was tidy.

Later she would need to change the bedding, then she had vowed to finish Clint's laundry, including ironing his socks, for no other reason than it seemed like something she should do. Wife work, she called it. She had a job; she had a life to live. She had failed to take care of the kitchen. She hoped he wouldn't mind.

A low rumble outside and she dropped what she was holding. She listened again. It grew louder until the walls shook, her heart shuddering in time.

She ran for the door, a trail of suds in her wake, clumsily pulling on her boots and stumbling out onto the porch. She could see the back of the plane in the distance, dust settling along the landing strip, the sound of the engine purring to a halt.

The side door flipped open and a dark figure emerged. She kept running, past the lake and the barn and the plot she had set out for a greenhouse (she was determined that her design would work), meeting him halfway at the spot where their campfires used to be. She leapt into his arms and he laughed, catching her, soapy hands and sloppy kisses, rubber gloves and all.

Legs wrapped tightly around his waist, she kissed all over his face as he carried her back to the house.

"Miss me?" he said.

"Of course, my love." She grinned, running her fingers through his hair. "There's a pile of dirty



dishes with your name on it.”

Once inside, he set her on her feet, kicking the door shut behind them. Forcing down the zipper of his jacket, she trailed her lips along his jaw and neck, Clint playing with her hair as he let out a low whistle.

“Sweetheart, that ain’t a pile; it’s a fucking mountain.”

“I was busy.”

“I can see.”

He drew her up until their mouths could meet. “Lemme take a shower first.”

She shook her head.

“Nat.”

“Don’t you dare make me wait.” She tugged the jacket from his shoulders and locked her arms around his neck, Clint guiding her towards the bathroom, both of them smiling like idiots.

“How often?” he said.

She ducked slightly to hide her blush. “Twice a day. I’m getting better.”

“I was hoping for more.”

“What about you?”

“When I could.”

“Same for me.”

“So you were busy?”

“I was...”

Clint stopped suddenly. “What the hell is that?”

She followed his gaze to the large beam above the fireplace, her smile widening. There rested her cherished find, a ceramic clown from the local antiques store, with a clock for a belly and a stern expression on his face. “That’s Pierre.” It had reminded her of Clint.

“That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I like it,” she said, stroking his cheek as they entered the bathroom. “Appearances can be deceptive.”

She reached behind her and turned on the shower, Clint laughing as she pulled them both under, clothes and all.

---

Watching Natasha go shopping was like watching a general prepare for battle. Divide and conquer was the mandate. He looked at his list.

"It's got to be flat-leaf parsley," she said. "None of that curly bullshit."

"It's a good thing I don't know my way around a kitchen—" She rolled her eyes. "Starch?" he said.

"For your t-shirts."

"I wish you'd reconsider that."

"It goes with the iron."

"I wish you'd reconsider that too."

She smiled sweetly.

"Where're you headed?" he said.

"More film, a bigger tripod, extra developer, and I need a new masonry drill bit." She frowned. "I'm hoping they've got something in carbide."

"Only you can make that sound hot."

She laughed. "I was also hoping to stop by..." Her voice trailed off. "But it can wait if you want to get back—"

Clint shook his head. "It's fine. How long do you need? An hour?"

"Perfect."

"Tasha?"

She turned around and he pulled her into an indecent open-mouthed kiss. "See you later, Red."

Her smile would sustain him for the next sixty minutes.

Waiting in the shadows, Clint watched as she descended the steps of the small orthodox church. Her head was still covered, an otherworldly look on her face; it was something she was intensely private about, a side of her that he rarely got to see. Who do you think of? he wondered. Do you waste your prayers on me? It felt like blasphemy to ask for mercy on his soul—maybe she demanded it; she had always been stubborn.

She smiled as she saw him from across the street, removing the ornate shawl. "Hey."

"Hey." Clint smiled back, beatific. "Did you get everything?"

"Just one more stop."

He followed her down the aisles of the hardware store, keeping a respectful distance as a throng of sales assistants jostled to find what she needed. His wife was a beautiful woman; he had known this since before she had known him, but to see her in this current state of bliss was enough to stop

traffic (it had happened on occasion).

“*Tungsten carbide*,” she repeated slowly, as if to a child. “I don’t want any alloys.”

She wasn’t happy and the gathered—exclusively male—staff were crowding her in.

“What’s the problem?”

Her eyes danced with amusement as he walked towards her, the other men dispersing like startled birds.

“Am I not speaking English?” she said, letting him slide a possessive arm about her waist.

His fingers drifted under the hem of her shirt. “I don’t know; let’s see.”

Five minutes later and Natasha was the owner of not one but two commercial grade drill bits. She gave him a sidelong glance.

“You’re handy in a pinch,” she said.

“I’m handy in a lot of places.”

She bit back a grin, teeth tugging on the flesh of her bottom lip. Clint traced it with his thumb.

“Take me home?”

He pulled her against him. “I thought you’d never ask.”

---

She studied their reflections.

The broken mirror was gone, replaced by something large and gilded. Natasha was certain that it was 18th century French; she had no idea how he had gotten it up to their room.

Clint slipped off his shirt and crouched by the bed. She was sprawled on her stomach; three glasses of wine with dinner and she was pleasantly buzzed and increasingly sleepy. She watched as he pressed a kiss to her left instep.

“You’ve been hiking,” he said.

“How can you tell?”

“Callouses.” He rubbed the arch of each foot and she sighed.

“S’been getting warmer,” she murmured. “Couldn’t help but explore.” She felt his hands slide up her ankles and calves.

“What’s this?” He traced a bruise on the back of her thigh.

She laughed. “Ran into a table in the dark room.”

“You should be more careful.”

“You weren’t there to remind me.”

She felt a nip just above the spot. “I’m reminding you now.”

She smiled as she watched him push up her nightgown until the curve of her ass was exposed (panties had long become a waste of time). He leaned down and kissed the crease where leg met backside.

“What are you thinking about?” she said.

“How much I love you.”

“What else?”

“How much I want to fuck you.”

She grinned. “What else?”

“How much I love your ass.”

“Be serious.”

“I am. It’s a fucking working of art.” She felt the roughness of his stubble then hands as he began kneading the soft flesh; she closed her eyes.

“I mean it,” he said, kissing his way across both cheeks. He gripped her hips, fingers tantalizingly close to her center. “You have the perfect ass; the perfect body.” He rolled her over, slowly easing up the front of her slip. “The perfect cunt.” He kissed it once, hands exploring the round softness of her belly up to the fullness of her breasts.

“I’m out of shape.”

“You’re the perfect shape.” Natasha moaned as his thumbs teased her nipples into tight buds.

“What are you thinking about?”

“How much I want you to fuck me.”

“What else?” He draped a leg over his shoulder, arranging her until she was opened up for him.

“How much I love you.”

He licked at her folds. “What else?”

She was hovering at the edge between waking and dreaming now. “How happy I am.”

“Good.” She couldn’t see his smile, but she could hear it.

Words were abandoned in favor of his mouth licking and biting and sucking, never stopping, until she came against him. She melted to the bed, boneless and sated, lulled by the beat of her heart and his gentle kisses to her core.

“*Sleep, my love,*” he whispered in Russian.

She did.

---

"I was right." She smiled triumphantly as he looked up. "Nine symphonies—not eight."

"And the other?"

She frowned. "Six," she said, closing her laptop. "But honestly, who thinks of cartoons in terms of seasons?"

There was a hint of a smile as he returned to his book. He looked tired today and he'd been so quiet. Despite her efforts, she had to ask.

"How long, Clint?"

He held her gaze. "Two days."

Silence hung between them; there never seemed to be enough time. Setting down her computer, she crawled across the sofa. "Then *Ulysses* can wait."

She settled into his lap and ran her fingers through his hair, moving down his neck to rub small circles at the base. He closed his eyes and she took the opportunity to explore—his brow, the weathered lines around his eyes and the faint shadows underneath. Cheekbones, nose, the quirk of his lips; she committed them all to memory.

His eyes opened and he watched as she began to unbutton her shirt; as she unclasped her bra. Clad only in jeans and straddling his thighs, one hand cradled her breast while the other cupped his jaw, her thumb sliding between his lips in invitation.

Forehead pressed to his, she rocked her hips until she felt him respond. She sighed at the friction; still he made no move.

She reached for his hand and brought his fingers to her mouth, teeth sinking into warm flesh, watching his pupils flare. *Wake up*, she thought. *I know you're hungry*.

Tilting back her chin, he came to life beneath her, one hand wrapping around her throat as he took what he needed.

*Let me set you free.*

---

Dawn came too soon, cold and empty. She watched as he loaded his plane and ran through the pre-flight checks. It was nearly April but the ground was still covered in snow; spring was here but the thaw was yet to come.

He came to stand before her, kitted out all in black, as if a spell had been cast.

"Ask me," he said.

There was a room she would not enter, a door she would not unlock. The key hung in the kitchen; there was nothing he kept from her. It did not mean that she chose to look.

This was their ritual. She shook her head. "I don't need to know. Just come back to me."

He kissed her goodbye and then he was gone; she watched until his plane disappeared from view. The lake was dark and still, grey skies above and with no hint of green to surround it. Fierce winds cut through the many layers she wore. Natasha shivered.

A storm was coming.

---

*You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?*

"Agent Morrison?"

James snatched back his hand as the hot tea spilled from his mug, scalding his skin. He had been reduced to a constant supply of contraband British teabags, courtesy of his parents, from the local store back home. He could cope with the coffee over here but people failed to realize that making tea was an art form. There was ceremony and ritual involved, like the cleaning and loading of a weapon; the firing of a gun.

He cringed as the spilt tea soaked into his latest application for promotion. There was a whole file of rejection letters shoved to the bottom of a drawer somewhere, tucked beneath munitions journals and the series of Russian language crime novels he'd been reading—a welcome distraction from running election model forecasts in Kazhakstan.

He slid the headphones from his ears, letting them rest around his neck, and swiveled around in his chair.

*Oh God.*

"I'm sorry to disturb you."

This couldn't be good.

"It's okay," James said, knees hitting his desk as he jumped awkwardly to attention. His too long limbs barely folded into the small confines of his cubicle; he struggled to fit there (he struggled more to get out). He saluted on impulse. "Captain."

Captain America smiled. "At ease, soldier." Dressed in civvies, he was barely recognizable but James had studied the hours of footage from New York; he knew those faces like the cast of a classic TV show.

"It's not necessary, by the way," Captain America said, gesturing at James's half raised right hand. James dropped it immediately, feeling like an inept boy scout. "I'm here in an unofficial capacity."

"To see *me*?" James said.

"I'm trying to locate some files."

"I can help with that." It seemed like the only thing he was good for.

“They’re archived but for some reason I can’t get clearance. You were the last person to access them.”

“What files, sir?”

“Former personnel files. It’s just a bit of research; helping out an old friend.”

"An old friend, sir?"

"Agent Barton." The Captain's smile was warm and sincere and completely full of shit.

James rubbed the burn on his hand. “There’s probably a good reason you don’t have clearance. I can’t access them either. It was the Director’s call, sir; you best take it up with him.”

Rogers' posture turned rigid. “Director Fury’s a busy man.” The smile remained but there was nothing pleasant about it. “I was hoping you could help me.”

James straightened up to his full height; he had a couple of inches on Cap, even if he was shy of a good hundred pounds.

“That’s beyond my abilities, I’m afraid.”

He held the Captain’s gaze, the other man’s smile rapidly fading.

“Can you at least tell me why the special interest in Agent Barton?”

James shrugged. “I’m a fan of his work.”

Rogers studied him carefully, like a puzzle he couldn’t quite figure out. It was a strange and unexpected impasse—to find himself staring down a national hero in his sad little analyst’s booth.

Dissatisfied, Captain America turned and stormed out and James slumped down in his seat. What the hell had just happened?

He stared blankly at the tea-stained paper on his desk.

## **FIELD OPERATIVES DIVISION: REQUEST FOR TRANSFER**

*Same as it ever was.*

## Chapter 26

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Ballad of Hollis Brown](#) by Bob Dylan. Link to an awesome version by Nina Simone.

*Way out in the wilderness  
A cold coyote calls  
Your eyes fix on the shotgun  
That's hangin' on the wall*

---

Clint parked his plane next to Natasha's; she was home.

No therapy sessions or shopping trips or church visits. She was waiting for him. He needed to see her. He had missed her so much.

He left his bag of equipment on board; he could deal with that later. Right now he needed the weight of her in his arms, the feel of her lips. He stepped outside. The world was quiet.

It was a slow walk from his plane past the barn (still locked) and the lake (so still). The axe rested unused in the chopping block; the pile of firewood looked undiminished.

"Natasha?" Where was she?

There was no reply, no sound of her footsteps running towards him, no flash of red hair and bright smile appearing on the porch. Was she out walking? Lost? Had she tried to fell the old maple tree? It was a two-man job, he'd told her that; what if she ignored the advice? How could she be so reckless?

Heart thudding in his chest, he could not bring himself to quicken his pace. What would be waiting? What would he find?

The door was intact and unlocked. He opened it and stepped inside.

He looked by the fire. There she sat, cross-legged, his katana unsheathed and laid out before her, the key from the kitchen now hanging about her neck.

He stayed where he was, unable to move. She was staring into the distance; he could not read her expression.

"Natasha?"

Her hand wrapped around the key. "I'm ready."

---



## *Two days earlier*

She was right--it was quite literally the worst coffee in the world.

Natasha had warned him off the SHIELD house brew long ago, saying it should only be for a bet or if one was feeling particularly suicidal.

There was no bet. There was only another sleepless night, another 12 hours in the archives room spent looking for God knows what.

He normally didn't come down to the 'wreck' room; it was too distracting, and there were always one or two junior agents eager for a conversation or even an autograph. Today he found that he just didn't care. Armed with a copy of the New York Times and a well-placed scowl, no one approached him anyway.

Two months. Two months and he'd heard nothing, just an apologetic email, something about leaving, and then poof; gone. Steve was starting to hate email. What happened to the days when you'd just pick up a phone or sit down to talk?

He was ready to ditch every last scrap of technology at this point.

She had made her choice; he knew that now. But how could you choose without all the facts? When he'd stacked the deck from the very beginning? Swooping in at the eleventh hour didn't change anything. Where have you been, you sonofabitch? What did you do?

He returned his attention to the sports section, the mindless chatter of a couple of agents registering in the background.

"Did you hear about d'Acosta? Strike team posting. Can you believe it?"

"I heard Friedman got field ops as well. Was she in your class?"

Damn. He closed the paper. The Cyclones lost again.

"Nope. Year before. You know Morrison's going to flip his shit."

"Two years right?"

The other agent just shook her head. "It's his own damn fault." They shared a conspiratorial laugh. Steve put the paper to one side. He waited until there was only one left then got up.

"Can I pour you a cup?"

He had never considered himself a good-looking guy; weighing 90 pounds and barely hitting five-five for the first 24 years of one's life would tend to quash any illusions you might have about being a sex symbol. And even now, it was hard not to feel like that kid sometimes, though the mirror told a different story. But there was no mistaking his effect on the opposite sex. It was more of an annoyance than anything--an occupational hazard--something he'd never consciously tried to use.

Until today.

He gave her a warm smile and reached for the pot. "Coffee?"

The young woman blinked, jaw closing slowly. "Um, sure. I mean great--that ... that'd be great." She looked a bit unsteady. Either her blood sugar had taken a sudden nosedive or this was working. He handed her a fresh cup and leaned a bit closer.

"I'm Steve. And you are ...?"

She blinked again. "Kelly. Kelly Turner." She accepted his proffered hand, her own swallowed in his grip.

"You been a here long, Kelly?"

"With SHIELD? Oh no. Just since last May."

Steve smiled again. "Well I'm sure you'll make a great agent."

"Thank you." She was blushing. "It's such an honor to meet you. You've been such an inspiration. Well, all the Avengers really."

"You're very kind," he said, studying his shoes for a moment. "And I don't mean to bother you, but I couldn't help but overhear--were you discussing Agent Morrison?"

Her brow wrinkled. "James?"

"That's the one. It's just ... the Director wanted me to look into something. Do you know him?"

She laughed. "Everyone knows James. Smartest guy you'll ever meet, but he's always full of these wild ideas. He's nice though. And really British. Also a total gun nut, which is sort of weird. Anyway, he's just an analyst, though he's absolutely dying to be put in the field."

Steve took a sip of coffee. "Does he know Agent Barton?"

"Oh my god," she said, eyes wide. "He wishes! He's obsessed with Hawkeye." Kelly thought for a moment. "You know, there was a rumor a while back; some crazy theory he'd come up with, something to do with him. Word is he pissed off Fury so much, he'll be doing data analysis until the end of time."

"That sounds... interesting." Steve gestured towards an unoccupied corner of the room. "Why don't you tell me more?"

---

"Pepper?"

She looked up from her laptop. "What?"

"When are they coming back?"

"Who?"

"You know who."

"Are we back to this?"

"I need Zac and Kelly. My life feels empty without them."

"I'll be sure to mention it in my next email."

"What did she say again?"

"She didn't. Only that they're not planning on coming back to California anytime soon."

"We should double date sometime."

"What are you, sixteen?"

"It'd be awesome. Like going on safari--except the lions ride with you."

"That's it. No more tequila."

"We should do it. For science."

"Don't you have things to do? Maybe save the world or something?"

"Nah. World's gone quiet. My talents are needed here."

Pepper was about to tell him that they really, really weren't when her phone started ringing. *Unknown number*. That was odd. Tony had designed this phone himself. It was capable of tracing anything--or so she had thought. She picked it up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

Tony raised his head from where it rested on the sofa, quirked an eyebrow in question. Pepper held out the phone.

"It's for you. Someone called Morrison?"

---

Natasha checked her inbox to discover a message marked as urgent from Pepper. The email actually consisted of a photo of two kittens with paws outstretched towards each other and the caption *High five for friends!*

She typed a quick reply.

*Tony, what do you want?*

Her answer came two minutes later.

*Do you Skype?*

*What?*

*It's about Clint.*

She picked up the satellite phone.

"Romanoff? Barton? What do I call you now? How about Mrs. Hawkeye?"

"Tell me what you know."

"No small talk? How long has it been? Two months and no word. I said it was fine but Pepper, she can't leave these things alone and..."

"Right now."

"Are you running a trace on my phone?"

"Are you running one on mine?"

"I asked first."

"You won't find me."

"Did you just hack one of my satellites?"

"I will hack your whole goddamn system if you don't get to the point."

"I thought you were retired."

"You think I'm bluffing?"

"Okay, okay; it's just... how to put this? Do you know anything about what your husband has been doing in his spare time?"

Natasha reached out with one hand and gripped the edge of the table, dropping onto the nearest chair.

"What about it?"

"He hasn't told you?"

"I know enough."

"So does SHIELD." She heard Tony let out a soft sigh. "So does Steve."

"What do you mean?"

"Your husband's spent the last six months out Black Widow-ing you. Hell, we should just call him the Black Widower. And now," another pause, "people are starting to take notice."

Natasha hung up and slowly got to her feet.

---

*How fast can you run, Natashenka?*

In the barn there is a room, a door that until today she has never unlocked. The key hangs on the

kitchen wall; there is nothing that he keeps from her. Not anymore.

It slides in easily. The lock is well oiled and maintained. It is well used.

In a different lifetime, there had been only silence in this place. He had taken their weapons and brought them here, locked them away when he feared she might use them on herself. She had wanted to. She had wanted it to be over.

(Is it over yet?)

In a different lifetime, there was laughter; through the walls and from the rafters, they made love under a mosquito net cloud on a bed he had built for her. A princess and her not-prince; dreaming of the life they would lead and the home they would make.

(You were always the most beautiful thing I ever saw.)

What was there now?

With shaking hands, she opens the door, lets in the light of the setting sun. The room shimmers; it moves. She steps inside.

A thousand blades line the walls in every size and shape. It is a sculpture of metal, a sepulchre, beautiful and unforgiving. Tachis and nodachis and wakizashis. Kamas and tantōs; they are at home here. Lovingly cared for, reverently placed. They do not belong to her.

In the center of the far wall is the largest sword. A katana, traditionally made and finished; a work of art. This must be your favorite, she thinks. It'd be my favorite too. She touches the polished ebony casing. A memory flickers to life.

*Blood streaked across her face, she is fresh from the kill. She loves this moment, lives for it.*

*She turns to him, grinning, bullets raining down around them.*

*"You should work on your knife skills, Barton."*

*He gives her a cryptic half-smile and pulls out another arrow. "I'm much more polite from a distance."*

She takes the sword in her hands. She looks down.

There is another door in this room. Reinforced steel with a hermetic seal, it sits in the floor, a bunker standing where a root cellar should be. There is a lock on this door too. She knows without looking that the same key will unlock it, knows it the way she knows how to make a dove-tailed drawer, in the way she knows how to make a man bleed out, quick and painful.

Her hands shake; she can't do this alone.

She walks out of the room and closes the door. Closes the barn and locks it. Walks back to the house; sits in the middle of the floor, his sword still in her hands.

How fast can you run, Natashenka? How far?

Not far enough.

---

Night descends. She does not move.

Vigils are kept by knights. Somber, holy affairs; those are the ones you read about. Swords in hand, praying for courage and wisdom. For the favor of the divine.

There are other vigils too. Kept by women, silent observers of history. No blade in their hands and no heroic deeds to bring them glory. Nothing that would cause you to remember their names. Lives spent creating and living. No songs are sung for them.

We don't remember the ones who live in the shadows, she thinks. The ones who embrace an ordinary life.

I never wanted this. It was never my choice. I have a killer's hands and a killer's mind but this is not who I am. They took my freedom but not my soul (there are some things they do not get to keep).

She stares at the sword.

You don't believe in the same things that I do. But you believe in me.

Do you know the Book of Ruth? A world was lost; famine and drought and death. The past was forgotten. Everything was stripped away. Like the daughter of Moab, I followed you. A stranger in a strange land. A new land. I gleaned the grain in your field and you saw me. You took me as your own.

You shouldn't have. You did. (I could kill you I could kiss you I love you so much.) You sat vigil for me and I would sleep at your feet. I would sleep at your feet and wait until dawn.

Dawn breaks and she stays. The ground moves beneath her. She hears his voice call out her name.

I waited for you. I waited all night.

"Natasha?"

Eyes wide open, she holds the key about her neck. *Whither thou goest.*

"I'm ready."

## Chapter 27

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Covenant Woman](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Covenant woman, intimate little girl  
Who knows those most secret things of me that are hidden from the world  
You know we are strangers in a land we're passing through  
I'll always be right by your side, I've got a covenant too*

---

*"I'm ready."*

They walked to the barn in silence, the sun high overhead. It was dim inside and Natasha's eyes strained to adjust. She removed the key from her neck and handed it to Clint. He opened the outer door first, the one to the weapons room, then crouched down to unlock the bunker.

He looked up at her. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

He opened the door, and flipped a switch, cool blue light illuminating a narrow set of stairs. He offered her his hand and she took it; eight steps down until she felt the ground beneath her feet. Clint was behind her, moving to flip another switch on the wall. A series of fluorescent lights slowly flickered to life.

Welcome home, Natashenka.

The room was small. Four walls, no windows, no other way in. The far wall contained a collage of photographs; all of them faces, all of them in black and white. Some of them she recognized. There was a large photograph in the center; a group of people standing on the steps outside of a building, each figure with a black cross drawn through it—every face but one. Next was a wall made up of maps, pins and notes scattered across every continent, intersecting and overlapping; a complex web of the earth. The third wall contained a series of tall black file cabinets and a desk with three different computers.

Natasha steadied her breathing, controlling her responses in the way she had been taught; strange how the old training never really left you. She could do this. Three walls down. She turned around.

She couldn't breathe.

It was a wall of photographs—her photographs. There was a book she had given him when she came back from the treatment center. She couldn't find the words back then so had filled its pages with pictures, images she had taken with just the camera on her phone. She had given him that book and had never seen it since. She tried not to be upset about it; he couldn't understand, had

probably set it aside in a closet or a drawer, packed away and forgotten like a child's first drawing. But instead here they were; she counted them all.

She felt herself stagger backwards slightly, felt Clint reaching out, then saw as he checked himself.

"You okay?" he said.

She didn't answer, just turned and studied each wall again, studied them until she had memorized their contents; she couldn't tell you for how long. When she was ready, she walked over to the nearest file cabinet. Her hand hesitated over the top drawer.

"May I?"

Clint nodded.

The first drawer was full, most likely the same as all the rest. She removed the first file and sat down at the desk, studying the label.

*Murmansk, 1986.*

She began to read.

---

Clint was used to waiting. He had watched her from a distance since that very first meeting. He had learned to read and understand her. He could see everything.

Three feet away and silence. The sound of a page turning. The hum of a light. She moved only to reach for the next file; she did not acknowledge him. He could not see her face but he knew her body. It was tired and full of tension but there was a new energy too. He tried to place it, to measure its currents; he did not know what the end result would be.

He brought her a flask of coffee, which she accepted, a blanket, which she allowed him to drape around her, a plate of sandwiches, which were pushed to one side and left untouched.

Eat, Natasha; you need your strength.

He looked away. He could not read these runes. He looked to the past, to the wall of her photos. It was hard to understand her gift at first but after hours spent staring at the images, he began to see the world as she had seen it; the petals of a flower spreading slowly open and begging for light.

At the same time, he was succumbing to darkness. A canyon stretched between them and he could not cross it; he was drowning. He had clung to her book like a life raft. It had kept him afloat. He would keep this part of her, even if he had nothing left. It would sustain him. Like the ring on his finger and the cross about his neck, he would not let go; he would do this for her.

Eight hours later, she closed the last file and stood up from the desk. He wanted to go to her, to take her in his arms and remove this burden, to carry her, to carry this weight; to let her rest and be safe and forget all she had seen. What would she say to him?

Instead, he followed at a distance. Her steps were slow and unsteady in the near pitch black of night but she was determined. She remained the strongest person he had ever known. Once back inside the house, she returned to her spot beside his blade.



“Tell me everything, Clint.”

He knelt down opposite her like he had been instructed at the dojo. A gesture of respect to one's master, to one's opponent. Hands braced on his knees, he bowed his head and began.

---

Eleven men. Three less than he left for dead the first time he had killed in her name. Up close, he had taken a blade and a gun and his body and so much rage and there was no control, no finesse, no purpose, other than revenge for the crime of causing her harm. He had tortured one, the very last, the perpetrator who had slipped the drug into her drink. Their sixth mission together. You'd slept through that time. I wanted you to sleep through this. You did not need to know, to see, to understand the depths I would go to.

When she had wanted to die, there was nothing left.

He was known as a marksman but what he was was a killer. He could only offer the world death. He could only make them pay. Three months in Japan transforming his skill into an art. Up close. He needed to see their faces. He needed to smell their fear. He needed no one to suspect that it could be him. There was a mission in Belarus before I knew you. That was their only glimpse; it was enough. SHIELD had designated him a sniper from thereon in.

I am a ronin, the sensei had said; without a master. But they do not know you. They do not understand why I must kill.

He returned to the place where he had found her birth certificate. There was a photograph, a visual kill list. It was easy to find their names.

I found them all. I got creative. I gave no warning and showed no mercy. I made them fear for a god that they had thought was make-believe. This cross I wear, it is for you. A cross for every kill; a message. Let them never rest in peace. Let the ones who remain fear me.

Eleven men. Only one remains. A doctor. This is what I did for you.

---

“I knew I was pregnant.”

Clint looked up. It had been several minutes of silence following his confession. He was scared before, to see her reaction, but he also needed her permission. He was her servant and nothing else. Tell me what to do.

He had never asked her. In all that time, from the moment she woke up in the hospital to the beginnings of her recovery. It was not his place. It was not his pain. He did not wish to reopen her wounds.

“I knew,” she said. “A week before. My body felt so different. And it shouldn't have been possible, but I just knew. I was terrified,” she struggled for breath and clutched at her shirt, “I wanted it so much. And I should have told you. I was nervous; I didn't know how you would react.” She rubbed at her eyes, her nose; her voice shook as tears began to fall. “You said you'd build us a bigger house, Clint, and I didn't think it could happen. But it did. We made a baby. Our

baby. And I lost it. I couldn't keep it safe. I'm so sorry."

She covered her face with her hands and wept openly. Clint could not move. How he wanted to, but his sword lay between them, a line he could not cross. There was so much left unsaid. How long have you carried this for? Why didn't you tell me? I could have carried it for us both.

"It wasn't your fault. Do you hear me?" He gripped his knees, nails digging through the thick canvas of his fatigues. "I should have known. I should have protected you. All those side effects you had and I did nothing. I let you take that risk and you nearly died and you don't know how much guilt I carry for that. All the time. All the fucking time. I was meant to take care of you." He looked down at his ring. "What else am I for?"

Her voice was a whisper. "I wanted it so much."

"I did too."

"There won't ever be another. I can't give you that, Clint."

"Tasha—"

"They took it away from me. They took everything."

He was crying. The tears burned his skin. Her pain would always be his and she was flaying herself before him.

"You will never be any less," he said, looking up at her. "I will never love you any less. Fuck, Tash, I couldn't save you. You were slipping away and I couldn't make it stop. I thought I'd lost you. That night you kissed me and begged for death—do you even remember?"

Eyes wide, she shook her head.

"Don't you see? I had to kill them. It was all I could do. You were gone and I didn't know if you'd ever come back to me. It was all I had left. I couldn't save you."

"But you did," she said.

His brow furrowed; he could only stare. She spoke again. "I came back for you."

"Tasha." He reached for her hands, kissing her palms, her fingers, her wrists. "Tasha; my Tasha. You saved me too. You saved me."

She was studying their joined hands. "There was never anyone else?" She looked up at him, so vulnerable. "All that time, when you were pulling away—it doesn't matter now. I made my peace with it. But I couldn't bring myself to ask."

He leaned forward and held her face between his hands, forcing her to meet his eyes, piercing her with the most intense stare she had seen. "What does your ring say, Natasha? What does it say?"

"*Once*," she breathed.

"There will never be anyone else."

"It's just—I thought you didn't want me." She blinked back tears. "Christmas night you gave me

that necklace and I woke up the next morning and you hadn't fucked me and I knew our marriage was over."

Clint felt as if he were unraveling before her. "I wanted to." He pressed his forehead to hers, eyes scrunched shut. "I almost did. You were there for the taking and I looked at you like all those other men I tried to protect you from. I was one of them that night. I was everything Loki said I was. I looked into the mirror and all I saw was a monster."

"You're not a monster."

"You know who I am."

"I should never have left you." Her hands clung to his. "I was stupid and cruel and afraid. And I picked Steve; I did it on purpose just to hurt you. Can you forgive me?" Her tears struck his face. "I know I don't deserve it; I've never been more ashamed. But I pray to God everyday that one day you'll be able to. I pray that I'll be a better person, a better wife."

"It was my fault, Tasha. I failed *you*. I wasn't the man you needed." He wiped away her tears, pressed his fingers to her lips. "And I have to live with myself, knowing how close I came to losing you. But I want to be that man again. I never want you to doubt what I feel or how much I love you. I never want you to ever think yourself unworthy when the opposite is true. It's my burden to carry and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you." His mouth hovered over hers. "I forgive you, Natasha. But only if you'll forgive me."

There was no distance left. Her mouth opened to him and he swallowed her cries; he swallowed her whole. Arms clinging to each other, he helped her onto unsteady feet then lifted her into his arms. She was so tired; he could feel her fading, arms wrapped around his neck and her face pressed to his shoulder.

He carried her up the stairs and laid her down on the bed, removing her shoes and jeans then helping her underneath the covers. She curled up on her side then turned and reached out for him.

"Please."

He slipped off his boots and lay down beside her, atop the covers, her body pressed to his. She placed her hand over his heart.

"I counted them all," she said. "My photos; I know there was one missing."

He reached into his back pocket and pressed something into her palm. It was a crushed square of paper, the very first image she had ever taken, a blur of green and a flash of white, her subject too close and the sun too high and she had kept it anyway. She turned it over and studied her clumsy scrawl on the back.

*Light.*

"I kept it," he said.

She looked up and stroked the side of his face, her thumb touching his lips. "I spoke to Tony. People know. Let me help you, Clint. I can do this. Let me protect you for a change."

His hand closed over hers. "I don't want to put you in danger."

“You already are so I am too. That’s how it works now.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want in. There’s only one left, right?”

“Yes. The doctor.” He saw her face pale as he held her tighter against him. “Tasha--are you sure?”

She nodded. “We’ll finish this together.” She reached for his left hand and kissed his ring, then his lips.

He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her head beneath his chin. Outside dawn was beginning to break.

He wasn’t sure who fell asleep first.

## Chapter 28

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Ain't No Man Righteous, No Not One](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Someday you'll account for all the deeds that you done  
Well, there ain't no man righteous, no not one*

---

In a corner of the barn—past the room of swords and the bunker beneath, past the place where their bed with its mosquito net canopy used to be—is a space all her own. Her tools live here: saws and drills, planes and levels, hammers and nails and scraps of stray wood. A half-finished chair for the kitchen, sketches for the greenhouse, a bench for the garden; her things.

In that corner is a box. A primitive wooden box the size of a suitcase. Clint had made it for her when they first came to Alaska, soldered an hourglass on the hinged lid the same day she had given him her Picasso-esque target. For over a year, it had remained, covered in dust and a smattering of cobwebs, unopened and untouched.

Until today.

She takes out the black felt bag and unrolls it; nine blades stare back at her. She takes out her bracelets, her bite and her sting, takes out her holster and the weapon inside.

A Heckler & Koch P-30 with a modified double trigger action and signature grip. Metal in her hands, black and shiny like licorice. Disassembling it, she spreads the pieces across the table. She places her watch down and sets the timer.

Scarf tied securely over her eyes, she presses the button. No peeking, Natashenka.

Time to remember.

---

"Fuck!"

Natasha stared up at the trees, letting out a string of Russian curses. Less snow today, she thought distractedly, Clint's head suddenly blocking her view.

"Maybe we should go back to tai chi."

"Fuck tai chi! Stop going easy on me."

He offered her his hand, pulling her effortlessly to her feet. She still felt winded, hair bedraggled and clothes smeared with dirt; Clint looked like he'd not even broken a sweat.

“Again,” she said.

“You sure about that?”

They both resumed a fighting stance and she charged right in.

I know this dance, she thought. I remember the steps. But Clint was bringing new choreography. It was maddening and electrifying and she could barely keep up; oh god, how she wanted to. How she wanted to bring him to his knees and on his back and sink down onto him like a flesh-made sheath. Are you comparing his dick to a sword? They’re both lethal weapons. She barely dodged a high kick, swinging back; blocking and parrying. How would this one end?

Deciding to improvise, Natasha stripped off her shirt.

“Bad move, Red.” Clint grinned.

---

"I'm too old for this."

She was sprawled out on the sofa, one ice pack to her shoulder and the other on her knee. Everything hurt—breathing, blinking, staring for too long; she had never felt so out of shape.

Clint continued to read his book, unmoved. "You're twenty-five."

“Thirty-one,” she said. “At least, that’s what my pilot’s license says.”

He licked his finger then turned the page. “You don’t look thirty-one.”

“You don’t look forty-two.”

“Forty-three.”

“I hate you.”

He closed the book and came to sit down beside her, removing the ice pack from her knee as he lifted her legs onto his lap. “I don’t think you mean that,” he said, taking one foot between his hands and massaging gently.

“How do you do it?” she sighed.

“Do what?”

“Look so good.”

He smiled and she could see the edge of his eye crinkle, the lines about his mouth, the faint hint of silver hair at his temple that sometimes caught the light. “Lucky, I guess.”

“Not lucky. It’s you.”

“It’s me?”

“I think you get better with age.”

“And you get younger,” he said; Natasha laughed. “You think that’s funny?”

“I think it’s hot.” She squirmed as he tickled her foot. “I mean it!”

He stilled his movements. “It doesn’t bother you at all?”

She sat up to look at him and they studied each other closely. Nearly eighteen years between them seemed so insignificant now.

“I like that you’re older,” she said.

“Why?”

“I can’t explain it; it just makes me feel—” she shrugged, “aroused.”

Clint continued to stare.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” he said. “Not at all.”

“So you feel the same way?”

Clint gifted her with the rarest of smiles, wide and uncensored; she might have been the only person to ever see it. “Baby girl, let me show you.”

She would never get too old for this.

---

Finding her focus turned out to be harder than Natasha had imagined. While being attracted to her partner wasn't anything new (the denial of which she'd perfected over years of working together), being free to act on her desires posed a distinct threat to self-discipline. It occurred to her that they had never actually worked together since they'd been married, or even since they'd been in a relationship (unless you counted New York). The rules were different now and the challenges unique. She was searching for a balance; she was searching for restraint.

She wasn't always successful. Especially the first time she saw him wield a sword.

(Or any time thereafter.)

She was still ridiculously out of shape. A year away from the field had taken its toll. She spent hours on target practice, ran for miles through the forest, and sweated and strained through pull-ups and push-ups until her arms felt like they might fall off. She worked so hard and so much those first few weeks that she would nod off everywhere—at her desk, on the porch, attempting to wash the dishes, even once during breakfast (Clint had saved her from a very ungraceful nosedive into her Cheerios).

It was nearly a month in when Clint got a call. A contact in Belgrade had come through and so he left the next morning, returning three days later with a name, a dossier, a date and a time.

They had two weeks to prepare.

Though aim and agility improved quickly, her strength was slow to return. Killing from a distance wasn't a problem, but close range with someone who knew what they were doing would be another matter entirely. There wasn't enough time and she knew Clint was worried; she was worried too. But there was nothing else to be done. She would be as ready as she could.

She hoped it would be enough.

---

“You need to rest.”

She was sitting in the bunker, surrounded by files and working off of two different computers, her dinner seemingly untouched from when he'd brought it down.

He took a seat beside her, following her gaze towards the screens. “Something grab your attention?”

“Your intel,” she said. “I’ve been going back over it.”

“Was I found wanting?”

She smiled. “Stop fishing for compliments.” She leaned into his touch as he brushed the hair from her face. “You could’ve been an analyst if you weren’t so good at killing people.”

“Compliment?”

Natasha rolled her eyes, expression shifting to something more serious. “The Red Room; I think it was active for a lot longer than anyone thought. Half the men on your list were still linked to Russian Intelligence until about four years ago. And there’s an address in Vladivostok that keeps showing up.”

“Your birth certificate.” He heard her sharp intake of breath at the mention, thumb tracing the arch of her cheekbone to somehow keep her anchored to him. “That’s where I tracked it down to. It was a convent.”

“It was a cover.”

“I know. Tasha...” He turned her towards him, hand sliding round the back of her neck as he pressed his head to hers. “I keep thinking, if the heat gets too much... I will never forgive myself if anything were to happen to you. If they come for me, I don’t want you involved.”

“What are you saying, Clint?”

“We don’t have to do this.”

She pulled away from him, shaking her head. “We do. Don’t you see? There are more out there; kids just like me. God knows what they did to them. I can’t let that stand.”

There was fire in her eyes, the reflection of flames from a burning building; he had seen that look before.



He reached for her hands, bringing them up to his lips. "Tell me what to do," he said.

She leaned forward and kissed him. "Thank you," she murmured against his mouth then pulled back to study the photos on the wall. "He kept files on all of us. I know he did."

Eleven crosses and one unmarked face; he felt the determined grip of her fingers as she faced him once more.

*I am your servant.*

"It ends with him."

*You have loosed my bonds.*

---

Steve knew he wasn't alone as soon as he stepped off the elevator.

There was training and there was the serum but there were also his instincts; call it soul or heart or a conscience, the parts of his brain that operated like a sixth sense and could see patterns and make plans and inherently know what was right or wrong. Did the serum enhance that? He could never be sure. All he knew was his gut and his gut had never failed him.

The apartment flickered to life and JARVIS could be heard welcoming him home but Steve was only aware of Tony.

Tony Stark sitting on his couch as if he owned the place. "Hope you don't mind," he said, raising a drink to his lips. "I helped myself to a root beer."

"I'm amazed you lasted this long," Steve said, heading to the kitchen and pulling a bottle of water from the fridge. He paused to stare at a picture pinned to door by a novelty Iron Man magnet.

"I like what you've done with the place."

Steve had done nothing. He owned nothing. This was as far removed from all he knew as aliens from another planet (except that they existed now and walked amongst them). He couldn't match his tastes and he couldn't feel at home. But Tony was unflinchingly generous as much as he was unflinching; Steve had found himself unable to refuse.

He turned around to face Tony. "What do you want?" he said.

"It's been a while. Thought maybe we could catch up."

"A friendly chat?"

Tony looked serious, which was about unnerving as it got. "Something like that."

Silence. Steve was still aware of the photo on the refrigerator door. Is that what you want to talk about, Tony? Just say it.

"I never got a chance to see you while you were in Malibu."

"I wasn't there to see you."

“I know.” Tony glanced at the label on his drink and smiled. “So how did that work out for you?”

“It didn’t.”

“Not what you were expecting?”

“Will you get to the point?!”

The water bottle was crushed in his fist; he could feel the water dripping from his hand, hear his voice echoing off the floor to ceiling windows. There was so little sound in this place. He had never raised his voice before; Steve rarely spoke at all.

“You’ve got to back off Barton.”

“Finally.” He followed Tony’s movements as he got up from the sofa and walked towards him.

“Do you even know what you’re doing?” Tony said.

“Do you?”

Tony shook his head. “No. But I have my suspicions.”

“Enlighten me.”

“You’re in love with a married woman. And you’re about to make the biggest mistake of your life.”

Seven feet apart, maybe less, Captain America and Tony Stark stared each other down.

“Barton’s dangerous,” Steve said. “He needs to be stopped.”

“This isn’t about Barton.”

“It’s always about him! You all protect him; why? Do you even know what he’s done?”

“Please, Steve. Don’t do something that you can’t take back.”

“I will do what is necessary.”

Tony closed the gap; there was only a foot between them now. “So will I,” he said and kept on walking, the distance growing indefinitely as he entered the elevator and the doors slid closed.

Steve returned to the kitchen and stared at the picture on the fridge. *Captain Steve Rogers and date.*

His gut was never wrong.

---

The message said 1700. He wasn’t late but there was no one in sight.

He checked his watch again. 1715. Maybe the intel was bad. He was about to get up when a large

man in a dark suit sat down next to him.

"Follow me," he said.

He was ushered into the back of a large grey sedan. There was a woman inside. She raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not used to being summoned," she said. "Even by one such as you. You have two minutes."

He didn't waste time. "I think SHIELD needs to work on policing its former agents."

"You've spoken to the Director?"

"No point. He doesn't think it's a problem. I do."

"Is this really the best use of our time?"

"When it interferes with security protocols, when law and order become vendetta, when people are dropping like flies and it starts to attract attention, then yes, I'd say it's a really good use of your time."

"These are serious accusations."

"What are you prepared to do about it?"

She leaned back in her seat. "If true, the council would have no choice but to issue an order. Immediate termination on sight." She studied him carefully. "Can you prove it?"

"I can but—" The Lord owed him this one small favor. "I'm going to need full security clearance."

## Chapter 29

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [I Believe In You](#) by Bob Dylan. Link to a gorgeous live version by Alison Krauss.

*Don't let me change my heart  
Keep me set apart  
From all the plans they do pursue  
And I, I don't mind the pain  
Don't mind the driving rain  
I know I will sustain  
'Cause I believe in you*

---

There is a room in the bowels of SHIELD headquarters, little more than a glorified basement. Cement block walls, dim lights, and hundreds of bookshelves. The Restricted Archives Section. There is a card worn about his neck. Unfettered access to anything in the vaults or in the files or on the computers. Steve had moved out of the Tower the day that Stark had shown up on his sofa. This is his home now. This is his puzzle and his purpose and he will not rest until it is solved.

Two stacks of personnel files to sort through; two tables full of Red Room intel. Two pots of coffee to make it until dawn and two eyes with which to see.

All he needs is a heading.

He searches night after night; an endless sea of reports and photographs, so many. He stares at them all. The faces blur together, the stories, the bios; none of it makes sense.

His fourth day there and he sets up camp. A sleeping bag in the corner and a case of MREs; this is his cause now, this is his war. All is too quiet on the western front.

Too little sleep and too much caffeine, he stumbles one night carrying a box of records—*Soviet Intelligence Research Council, 1986*. The lid flies off and the contents spill out. Amidst a string of muttered curses he spies a photograph. A group of men outside a building. He recognizes a few of the faces. He stops.

There is something special about this picture; he knows it deep down even though he doesn't know why. He searches each face and finds a name to match.

Eleven dead. One remains.

Tell me where you are.

---

“The doctor will see you now.”

She sits, poised and graceful on the edge of her chair; long blonde hair and deep red lips and a white linen suit. Legs crossed at the ankle and knees to the side; head high and eyes cast down. She's a Botticelli goddess, a little girl princess with the body of a siren, serene and stunning and looking nothing like herself.

Natasha stands up.

There are no white walls and no bright lights; all is soft and muted, lush and sparse in a way that only true opulence can be. It's less of a clinic and more of a palace, a sprawling complex in the middle of Zurich. She counts the doors that they pass on the way down the hall, counts the exits and the number of security cameras. This place is a fortress; well-guarded but not impenetrable. Without the light of an infrared scope and the rotating laser grid bouncing off the walls, it looks so different from how it did last night.

The nurse opens the door at the end of the hall. "If you will just wait here," she says. "It won't be long now."

No, Natasha thinks. It won't.

\*\*\*

"How can I help you Ms. ..."

"Baker."

Caroline. American ex-pat, born in Kansas. Three times married and three times divorced. Apartment in Paris, villa in Portofino. Model turned gold-digger turned new money posing as old. She gave him a blinding smile.

"I've heard great things about your work."

"Is that so?" A lilting German accent. Fake but very well done. Almost good enough to disguise the lingering traces of Pomor dialect. He squinted behind his glasses. Gone was the long white lab coat, replaced by a twelve thousand dollar suit (Milan or Savile Row, she couldn't be sure).

"You seemed to have discovered the fountain of youth," she said.

He studied her carefully. "I have ... devoted myself to research."

*Every week they line up for inspection.*

She looked around the room and gave him a conspiratorial grin. "It must have paid off."

"Ms. Baker—"

"Caroline," she said, studying her handbag, her cheeks turning a lovely shade of pink. "Please."

"Caroline. I am confused. I do not see how you could need my services."

Ingénue switched to strategist in a heartbeat. "I think there's always room for improvement." Her gaze was hungry and ambitious. "Don't you?"

He studied her a moment longer, then at last, he smiled. "I think you understand me very well."

"I was hoping you might do a consult. Make any recommendations..."

He got up from behind his desk and came to stand before her. "May I?"

*Don't make me. I've been so good.*

"Please."

He lifted her chin until her eyes met his.

*Rough hands wrap around her arms.*

Fingers traced the lines of her face.

*Her cries echo down the hallway.*

Head tilted to the side, he examined the line of her neck.

*Strong hands hold her down.*

His eyes lingered on her mouth as his thumb brushed across her lower lip. "Beautiful," he murmured. "Just beautiful. I can add nothing to this." His hands skimmed down to her shoulders. "And the rest?"

*The sweet smell of ether; a mask over her face.*

She stood up too quickly; her head was spinning. "There is one thing." She reached around and unzipped her skirt, pushing it past her hips until the top of her panties were visible. She traced a thin white line. "This scar." She frowned. "I hate it. Do you think you could help?"

He knelt down before her, head level with her cunt; his hands on her skin. "An accident?"

*Blood. Pain. So much pain. As if she were being torn in two.*

"A complication." She kept her voice steady. "Can you make it go away?"

His thumb stroked the spot. His gaze was predatory. "I think something can be arranged."

*No. Please, no.*

She smiled. "I was hoping you'd say that."

*Breathe, Natashenka. Just breathe.*

---

He watched her turn the corner at the end of the street and slowly walk towards him.

His fingers tightened around the wheel of the car. How was he still here? Every ounce of self control he possessed had been tested to its limit and continued to be. How could he let her do this? How could he leave her to face that alone?

She stumbled, arm reaching for the wall. He could wait no more. He got out and walked towards her. The street was narrow and there was no one else around but he couldn't draw attention to them; he didn't want to draw attention to her.

Her gait was unsteady, her whole body shaking. One arm around her waist and she collapsed against him, slumped forward and retched. It hit his shoe and the curb, bile and coffee and croissant and god damn Natasha, is that all you ate?

An empty stomach. An empty head. Empty mind and empty heart and he had to get her out of here.

(He had heard everything that was said.)

He bundled her into the front seat of the car and pulled out with an unthinking screech. It was a five mile journey, over ten minutes in traffic, and a lifetime of silence, of her breathing, of her clammy palm against his.

Her face was pressed to the window and there was glass in her eyes; a blank stare. Where are you? Come back to me. Tell me what he did to you. His hand was pulled taut and white around the wheel; her hand in his. Tell me. *I will kill them all.*

I was wrong. The thought was always there. I am wrong and this is wrong and I should've never put you through this. Let me finish this myself. Let me feast on the remains. Look at me and talk to me and don't let me think about what was said, what was done, what was touched and tainted and how did he hurt you?

"Natasha."

She did not respond as he opened the passenger door, only to accept his hand and let him lead up the four flights of stairs to the nameless apartment he had rented. This was their safe house. He unlocked the door and she followed him inside.

He closed the door and twisted the lock behind them, the click sounding like a trigger.

She sobbed then cursed, wrenching the wig from her head; fighting with the zipper of her skirt and the buttons of her shirt, tearing her clothes away until only her underwear remained. She stepped out of one shoe and kicked off another. She scratched at her skin and clutched at her arms and he could hear her babbled Russian, the echo of words by a forgotten child.

No, he thought. I will not lose you again.

He moved towards her and reached out to touch her and she spun around to face him. She screamed and lashed out. She unsheathed the dagger on her leg.

"*Natashka.*"

A slice to his arm, through his jacket and his shirt, into his flesh but still he felt no pain. You cannot hurt me. He gripped her wrists and twisted her arms and held her body to him. You cannot hurt me more than you hurt yourself. The knife fell away.

"*Natashka, look at me.*"

They slumped to the floor and she struggled in his grasp. He held her beneath him, thighs

straddling her legs, arms pinned above her head, his other hand forcing her chin to look up at him. She screamed and spat and hissed.

*“Look at me,” he said, “Look at me; you are safe. Do you hear me? You are safe. You are safe; I have you.”*

Something faded. Glass melted to life. Was this what he had looked like? I don’t remember other than blue. The mist is clear. I can see you now. Look at me, Natashka; look at me and come back.

“No.” She shook her head. “No.”

“It’s okay,” he said. No, he thought. It is not.

He released his hold and gathered her up, leaning against the wall as she sobbed in his arms. These were the cries that he remembered; the darkest days and the longest nights. I cannot stand to hear you cry. I cannot stand it.

He held her close.

“Just say the word,” he whispered over and over again. “Just say the word and it’s done.” He kissed her hair, her head cradled in his palm. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

*I will kill them all.*

---

“I’m sorry I never fixed it.”

She smiled as she studied her reflection in the mirror, applying a final coat of lipstick. “It’s okay; it works fine.”

“I love your photos,” he said.

“I know.”

She could hear the sound of his breathing over her earpiece, a soft exhale that was almost a sigh.

“You deserve a better dark room.”

She got up from the vanity table and picked up her dress. “Everything I deserve, I already have,” she said.

“You deserve everything.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

Silence. She slipped on her dress and pulled up the zipper.

“Talk me through the plan again,” he said.

She did.

Oh god, how she needed the distraction. The clinic was clean. They had accessed his office safe and files and hacked into his computer the night before. Nothing incriminating was there. What



they needed, he kept out of sight, in the heart of his private residence, with a security system to rival Fort Knox.

She had made an appointment. Her cover had to be airtight. He background checked every patient, running his operation like the Red Room did. But she didn't need his services; she needed an invite. "Call it a date," she had said, the bile already rising in her throat. He had pressed his card into the palm of her hand, his thumb drawing circles over her wrist. It was lucky they had trained her so well that she was able to steady her pulse.

*"My car will pick you up at eight."*

She looked at the clock on the wall. 1938. Twenty-two minutes and counting.

She had checked into the hotel room the previous day but had only returned at 1830. She was barely recovered from the morning's ordeal but Clint had sat her down and forced her to eat and they had studied the blueprints of the house until she could close her eyes and see them. She would only have herself to rely on. Intel had suggested that there would be a security check, including metal detector, before she was even allowed in.

"Talk to me, Natasha."

She stood before the full length mirror and surveyed her creation. Long blond hair and pale skin, full lips and wide eyes, round breasts and a tiny waist, a light pink dress with a flowing skirt that landed just above the knee. Like Princess Grace; timeless and forever young.

"What do you want me to say?" she said.

"Tell me what you see."

She gasped as she felt his eyes on her. From where, she did not know but she knew that he was close. He was always there, always waiting, always watching; her dark knight; her husband.

She ran her hands over her dress, through her hair. She rechecked her earrings. "Am I ready?"

"You tell me."

She took a deep breath. "I can do this," she said. "I can do this."

"You can," he said. "I know you can. But you won't have to do this alone."

There was a noise somewhere behind her, a soft tap; she turned and there he was. Sliding open the doors to the balcony, she stepped out to meet him. He was dressed all in black, at one with the shadows, hair short and clean shaven, eyes bright and burning with all the intensity he tried to hold back. Across his chest ran the strap of his katana where his quiver had once been. She reached out to touch it, to touch him, to drink in every inch. Her hands spread from his chest to his shoulders and down his arms, stopping as she reached the bandage over his left bicep. I did that, she thought. She had stitched him up. Once more, for old time's sake. I hurt you, caused you so much pain, and look at what you did for me.

"I love you so much," she said.

He tilted her face up to look at him. "I love you too." He kissed her once then pulled away. Not goodbye, she thought. Please not goodbye. "Just say the word, Natasha."

She nodded; she understood.

She stepped back inside as he disappeared back into the night. Shadow and light. These were their domains, stark contrasts but complementary; necessary. One could not exist without the other. There could be no other way.

She looked at the clock for a final time. 1949. (Eleven men.) Eleven minutes.

She picked up her purse and headed for the door; she was ready.

(Only one remained.)

## Chapter 30

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [The Times They Are A-Changin'](#) by Bob Dylan.

*The line it is drawn  
The curse it is cast  
The slow one now  
Will later be fast  
As the present now  
Will later be past  
The order is rapidly fadin'  
And the first one now will later be last  
For the times they are a-changin'*

---

"How was the veal?"

Gone is the terror and the nausea and the feeling that she's five years old. Gone is the anxiety. There is only this. She's in a room in a house on the outskirts of Zurich; a sprawling compound designed like a maze to cater to its owner's paranoia. Fifteen guards within and without; an unbreakable security system, an impenetrable fortress.

It's not time, not yet. Right now she's just along for the ride.

She's Caroline Baker—model turned gold-digger turned opportunist—and this is one evening she can't afford to miss. She's buried so far inside the persona that she feels bulletproof; nothing can touch her. It calms her nerves and allows her to focus; soothes her even more than the glass of Cabernet she's pretending to drink.

"It was lovely," she says with a soft purr, voice an affected British-by-way-of-Topeka drawl.

*Twelve.*

She looks around. This woman's mannerisms feel like a second skin: the way she walks, the way she breathes. She slips them on with ease; it's like coming home. She gives him a look designed to seduce.

"You have such a beautiful house. I'd love to see more."

His smile is calculated, eyes lingering on her mouth a little too long. "Of course," he says. "Let me show you."

He holds out his arm. She takes it.

*Ten.*

They walk through the labyrinth together, the Minotaur and the virgin. Which is which? The thought makes her laugh and she does—at his jokes, at his words—she oooohs and ahhhs at all the appropriate times. She knows the exact hallway they're in, knows its position and dimensions. Knows that there is an unmarked spot on the blueprints with no entrances or exits, and knows that it is two doors down.

It is here that she stops.

“Oh.”

She stumbles delicately; predictably. He slides an arm around her. She's had too much wine (disposed of in a nearby plant), her cheeks are rosy, her smile too bright. She peers inside and stares up at the walls.

“It's amazing,” she breathes. “May I?”

He gestures for her to enter. “Please.”

Dark wooden panels surround her, but this is not what draws her attention. It is not the shelves of books or the large desk in the corner or the roaring fire beneath the mantel. It's the eyes. Hundreds of eyes that seem to follow her steps. Dark and lifeless, the firelight gleams off their glass. Bear, bison, moose and elk. Gazelle, cheetah, lion; even a Siberian tiger. Every manner of creature that can be collected; all but one. This is the trophy room, a monument to death. Taken and transformed and hung on the wall.

This is what you are.

*Eight.*

“Did you kill all of these?” she says.

He nods with an ambiguous smile. “I have a love for beautiful things. Taxidermy has become a hobby.”

She looks on, transfixed. She does not shudder when he comes to stand behind her, does not flinch when his hand rests on her shoulder.

It is not time; not yet.

*Seven*

“What do you think?” His voice is whisper.

“I think it's extraordinary.”

He leans forward. “So do I.”

His fingers trace idle patterns on the exposed skin of her back. One arm rests around her waist and she leans into him, pushing down panic, tuning out the voices that protest as he brushes her hair to fall over one shoulder.

*Six.*

His lips are by her ear. "Tell me, my dear. Do you miss the snow?"

A frisson of fear works up her spine. Careful, she thinks. Not much longer now. She gives a breathless laugh as his grip tightens about her waist.

"In Kansas?" she says.

*Five.*

"In Murmansk."

She goes still. It's only for a second, a fleeting moment, but it lasts too long. A sharp sting on her neck. Suddenly she's thrashing and throwing him off; a syringe falls from hand. She turns but he has a gun held in the other and it's aimed at her heart.

"Come, Natashenka," he says. "We must have no secrets between us."

*Fuck.*

"What did you give me?"

He shrugs. "Something to relax you. A special recipe."

*Fuck fuck fuck fuck.*

She feels nothing; not yet. The syringe lies on the floor, mostly full.

"When did you know?" she says.

"In my office. When I examined you. There's a scar just below your left ear. Have you never noticed?" He smiles. "I think every great artist should sign his work."

"You marked me?"

"I marked each of you. Part vanity, part self-preservation." His expression is thoughtful. "You were so well trained. I had to be able to tell should one of you decide to pay a visit."

*Hold on—you can do this. Just hold on.*

He makes a mocking noise of disapproval. "You've been a very bad girl."

The room begins to feel unsteady. "You noticed."

"I've been watching my colleagues—one by one, they die—in horrible and gruesome ways. Very creative."

"So why not kill me?"

He laughs. "And burn down the Sistine Chapel? I think not." He looks at the syringe. "Why should I kill you when there's so much I can learn?"

*Hold on.*

She watches him walk over to the desk, watches as he leans against it. Her breathing is labored now, sleep is starting to claim her. She can't wait; there's not enough time.

"You will have no doubt discovered, in your meticulous study of this house, that there is a room with no discernible entrance. A panic room." He presses something and a panel slides open to reveal a reinforced steel door.

"But it's so much more, Natashenka." His voice is soothing. "There's a table and so many instruments; a full surgical suite." His smile is inhuman, something out of her nightmares. "Sometimes I like to take my work home."

She swallows down the bile. There is no fear left, only rage.

"Too bad then," she says.

"What's too bad?"

"This."

She kicks the coffee table, sending it across the floor until it crashes into him; she launches herself right after. They struggle for the gun. Two shots ring out. Three.

*No—*

They fall to the ground. The pistol flies out of his hand and out of her reach. Her dress rips; his fingers claw at her face but she pins him to the floor, slamming his head against it for good measure. He yells and curses in Russian. He calls out for his guards but no one comes.

Her hands are wrapped around his throat and she's searching for a pressure point but her vision is spotty and her arms feel weak. She pauses and he takes advantage, leveraging his weight to throw her off. He crawls towards the gun and she lunges for him. He kicks her and her lip splits open, pain searing through her jaw, but she manages to hang on. She yanks him backwards and fumbles for the syringe.

She has it but it's too late; he has the gun. He cocks the hammer and takes aim.

He screams.

The gun is gone, his hand now pinned to the wall—an arrow embedded through his wrist. She watches as another sinks into the flesh of his upper arm. He screams again.

She drags herself to standing and punches him once, feels the satisfying crunch of bone before his body goes slack. She empties what remains in the syringe into his neck and then she is stumbling backwards, falling.

"Hey!" She is caught by strong arms; rough hands cradle her face. "Tasha? Look at me! Fuck—what did he do to you?"

He sounds so afraid. She looks up and smiles. "I'm glad you brought the bow."

The world fades to black.

---

You open your eyes.

White walls, bright lights. The children line up before you. Young and unformed. Malleable. Ready. You could have been a sculptor; you always did love clay.

From dust they come and to dust they will return but there is a moment—in your hands and yours alone, they become something else. Give it breath, give it life. Flesh of my flesh; a helpmate. A tool. You turn dirt into a deadly weapon.

The plain ones and the tall ones and the ones too weak to survive—they leave you uninspired. An aesthete. A perfectionist. Creator. You wait and you wait and eventually you find her.

Bright lights, dark room. A shadow passes in your vision. Red and black and white; I know this. The colors blur into focus. Can colors do that? Look at a Monet up close. Look at a human being opened up and dissected and reduced to cells under a microscope. Take a step back. Look closer. Look at what you have made.

“Natashenka.”

Red hair, white skin, doll-like features to be ushered into womanhood. She will bleed and she will scream and she will be the strongest one of all.

The Black Widow emerges from the darkness.

“I’d prefer if you didn’t call me that.”

She finds you.

---

Dr. Henrich Engel, formerly Dr. Nikolai Dublev, sits tied to a chair.

Engel. The sign of an angel. Was it a conscious decision? To pick that name? To pick this path? To pick me? Why? It must be a heavy burden, to be labored with such choice.

He gazes upon her with a look of wonder and delight. “It’s been a long time, truly. The years have been kind to you.”

Years taken and lost and added and time with no meaning.

“Don’t speak to me of kindness.”

She holds a blade in her hands.

I remember when they gave this to me. Do you know what it can do? Do you know the many ways that I learned how to hurt people, to take their lives away, to leave behind such scars? You think you can fix this line across my stomach. You think you can take and play and do what you like but the world is not a vacuum. Butterflies and tidal waves. If a snowflake falls in Siberia, where will the avalanche be?

“You impress me, Natashenka. You always did. To be so beautiful and strong.”

Why was he stalling? Your guards are all dead. There is no one to save you.

“To see what you were capable of. You have surpassed—” His head snaps to the side. Natasha unfurls her fist.

“There were others,” she says. “For years after me.”

His smile is painted red. “There were others,” he agrees. “But none such as you.”

“You have a safe.”

“I have a fortress.”

“Yet here we are.”

He licks his lips. “My arm is broken. Possibly you severed a nerve. It will make my surgical practice quite difficult.”

“You assume you’ll live?”

“You have not killed me yet.”

A knife through his right hand. He cries out in pain. She twists the blade; his screams sound like music.

“Will you be able to practice now?”

She watches the sweat drip down his face. “Is this revenge?”

“I need your records.” She leans down until their eyes meet. “All of them. Every single child whose life you destroyed. I know you kept them. Meticulous files of your little experiments. I want their names and to know their faces. I’m going to find them all.”

“How noble,” he says. The idea has just come to her. The thought. The reason. Her mind is her own. His lips twist in a sneer. “To pretend you are anything other than what you are.”

“And what is that?”

“You torture me. You kill my colleagues. You murder for money and for sport. You do as you are told. That is how you were created. My precious plaything. My Natashenka.”

“That is not my name!”

His smile is vicious. “Does it bother you? To remember? The scar on your stomach—tell me, what went wrong?”

She sees red. Red hair, red eyes, red heart, red room. She strikes until he sees only red too. Blade held to his throat, she tilts back his head.

“There you are,” he says; his voice is triumphant.

“Where are the files?” He closes his eyes. She plunges the knife through his hand again. “Where



are they?!”

“A safe!” he cries. He weeps and pleads; this is her dream. “In the wall—behind the desk!”

She removes the knife and wipes it off against her sleeve, shiny like patent leather.

“Will you kill me now?” he says.

She stares at the blade. Where is the pleasure? Do you torture for fun? Remember the words. Sadist. Killer. Freak.

“How do I open it?”

“My fingerprints.” His bloody hand. She could slice it off. She could take it. He sees her intent. “Kill me first,” he says. It is not a request.

She looks at him. Monster. Creator. Can the roles be reversed?

“You disappoint me, Natashenka.”

The red fades; the knife slips from her fingers. This is not who I am.

He grows angry. “Kill me! What else are you for?”

I have my own dark room because I take so many photographs. I can cook spaghetti and meatballs in a kitchen that I made. I pray to God everyday and go to confession when I can. I love Alaska. I love the wilderness and the sea. I love milk in my coffee but I’ll drink it black when we’re at home.

How many lives have you taken? My organs may be scarred but there is no cure for the spirit, even that of a little girl. I will find them and I will help them and I will make them forget you. I will erase your name. I will wipe your memory from the face of the earth.

She looks at him and leans in close. “I’m not going to kill you,” she says and smiles as she sees his eyes stretch in fear.

“No.” Another voice from behind her; a familiar presence. “But I am.”

Natasha stands; the doctor pales. “Who are you?” he says.

Her smile widens. “My husband.”

---

A monster emerges from the shadows. You know this face. You have dreamed about it. In your wildest fantasies, in your unsolved theorems. Take the rib and carve the child and a killer is made. Woman born of man, born of your hands; you manufacture death.

What of those that exist in the wild?

“You might be familiar with my work.” A predator’s face. Such a beautiful creature. “I like to experiment too.”

Talons grip your throat; the chair drags beneath you across the floor. You are destined for the panic room. You kick and you scream and you want to laugh at the name. This is not what it is for.

You look at Natashenka. A child made woman made killer, made from Adam's rib. She smiles until the light is blinding you.

*I understand now.*

You created Eve but the devil made Adam. And you have threatened his mate.

---

On a rooftop, she waits. The files are secure. The building is primed. Together they will finish this. She will wait for him. He has always waited for her.

She had listened to the screams, audible through the thick walls of metal. I know you. I know what you can do. Show me and don't hold back. I am not afraid.

An alleyway in Prague. A rooftop in Zurich. She has seen every side of him. She has never loved him more.

She hears a sound behind her. The click of a hammer being pulled back. She is not alone.

"I know you're there," a voice says, cold and barely recognizable. "It's over, Barton."

It is never over. She knew this day would come. She will die at the hands of friends and enemies alike before she lets him come to harm.

She turns and steps out of the shadows. "Hello, Steve."

This is what I am for.

# Chapter 31

## Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [With God On Our Side](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Through many dark hour  
I've been thinkin' about this  
That Jesus Christ  
Was betrayed by a kiss  
But I can't think for you  
You'll have to decide  
Whether Judas Iscariot  
Had God on his side*

---

She hums and he does not know this one. You hum off key. I love your song.

Blood coats the floor and the walls and his hands and he can taste it. If he listens very carefully, he can hear her breathing. I'm coming; it's over. I'm coming and then maybe we can move on, we can forget, we can have each other back. I'll come back to you, I promise.

Blood marks his footsteps but the building is primed. No one leaves and no one enters. Sixteen bodies. Two lost souls. I would kill again. I would kill whoever you asked me to. I'll come back to you every time, my love. Just tell me who.

Something changes. Static on the line. A heartbeat. A hurried breath.

*Hello, Steve.*

I'll come back to you.

---

He's waited all day; he's been so patient. From the airport to the office to this labyrinth of a house. The man in the picture. This is where it will happen. He's secreted half a mile away, up high and out of sight. He might hate Barton but he knows what he's capable of. He knows how good he is. Loathing aside, you give credit where it is due. Only a dead man fails to pay respect. Only a fool underestimates his enemy.

Half-past two in the morning, he watches a shadow emerge. He follows, through alleyways and down side streets, through a nearby patch of woods and up to the roof of a building that sits on a hill. The perfect vantage point.

There are no stars and stripes tonight. No red and white and blue. Nothing but the dark and he is part of it. Black fatigues and a gun in his hand. This mission is stealth and patience and subterfuge. All the things he was never trained for, all the things he was never supposed to be.

He hears a movement; he cocks the hammer and prepares to fire. *We end this tonight. We end this tonight.*

“I know you’re there,” he says. He’s barely able to contain the rage. How long has it been now?  
“It’s over Barton.”

The figure steps out of the shadows.

“Hello, Steve.”

This is when your heart stops beating.

---

“Natasha...”

She’s so beautiful. He had forgotten; how he does not know, but the memories, his haunted thoughts, they never do her justice. It’s like standing in front of the sun and he always blinks. She’s too much to take in. Too much and too soon and oh God not this. Anything but this.

Maybe it’s just a dream, he thinks, but then the dream speaks.

“Did you call it in?”

The dream moves; she takes a step towards him. He lowers his hand. He nods.

“How long?”

“Fifteen.” Maybe ten. He tries to regain his composure. He tries to regain his footing but the ground is crumbling beneath him and he can feel himself falling. “Where is he?”

“Fifteen minutes?” She steps further into the light. The Black Widow. His partner of more than a year. His friend. The only woman who— “You’re too late.”

“Don’t do this, Natasha.”

She walks over to the edge of the building and studies the view. “Strike team or extraction?” she says.

“Strike.” He isn’t taking any chances.

“Do you remember Paraguay? The rain was so bad that night.”

Don’t do this. “Nat—”

“Practically a flood.”

“Nat, please.”

“I never thanked you for keeping watch.”

He closes his eyes. “You never had to.”

“I should have,” she says and, when he looks at her again, her smile is sad. “I should have done a

lot of things differently.”

Ten minutes left.

“You can’t be here.”

Her eyes are still fixed on the city skyline. “You should have been partnered with someone else; someone who could keep up. Someone better.”

“I never wanted anyone else.”

“We had a good run though, didn’t we?” He watches as she steps away from the ledge and walks towards him. “Won some battles. Managed to do some good in the world.”

Eight minutes; the walls are closing in. “Natasha, you have to go.”

She’s so close now, only inches away. “I never thought it would end like this.”

“Just go,” he says. “Now.” Please save yourself; save me too. “Leave now and it’ll all be—”

She silences him with a look. “I’m not going anywhere.” Deep green eyes and he can still see their variations, even in the dark. How are you so beautiful? You were always the most dangerous. Such skill with a weapon; such skill with a word. Give her a blade and watch her soar.

Her voice is soft, like the first drops of rain. “Whatever you think he’s done, I will confess to it all.”

The cut is deep and swift and he can feel himself begin to bleed out. He grabs her roughly by the arms. “You can’t do this.”

“It’s done.”

He can’t breathe. “No. *No.*” He shakes her. He wants to silence her lips and carry her away until he can pretend that none of this ever happened. Until there isn’t her blood on his hands. What are you thinking? What have I done?

His grip is punishing and his eyes are pleading. “I won’t let you take the fall for him. You deserve so much better. I love you, Natasha.” He can feel himself start to slip away; there is nothing left, only this. “I love you. I know it’s wrong but I don’t care. I tried not to for so long; I tried not to feel this way. I had someone else once but I lost them and I couldn’t risk it again but—” Like the grains of an hourglass, time is running out. Five minutes; he is disintegrating. “But it’s too late and I love you and I just want you to be safe.” He holds her face in his hands now. “All I ever wanted was to protect you.”

Her fingers wrap around his. “I love him.” Say it; say his name. You don’t even talk about him and you expect me to believe you. It makes no sense. What is he to you? Like a dirty secret or a terrible dream you won’t share. Say it. “I love Clint. I love him and I always will and it doesn’t matter what you say or if you threaten him or if I have to lay down my life; nothing will change that. He saved me. He saved me before I even knew what he did, when I was lost and nothing and he saw something and he’s kept it safe. He’s protected me. He always has.” She’s crying now. For me? For him? “I’m so sorry, Steve. I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you. You deserve so much better. You deserve so much more. But my heart is taken. And my life is his. If you threaten him, then you threaten me. I will die for him. I will do whatever it takes to protect him.”

Something breaks inside him; a carefully repaired fissure splits in two and suddenly he is on his knees before her. What have I done?

Slender arms hold him up; small hands caress his face. "It's okay, Steve. I'm not angry. I'm not scared anymore. Don't you see? He did that for me. I wouldn't be here without him. The woman you love wouldn't exist. I will always be your friend." She places a soft kiss to his forehead. "But my husband comes first."

---

*Fifteen minutes?*

What have you done, Rogers? What have you done? What have you done?

There is blood on his tongue and in his nostrils and coating every last part of him. There is red in his eyes and in his mind, red hair that cascades down to the small of her back, the curve of her spine, right above where her body dips and bends to form the perfect hills of her ass. Her body. Her body and Steve and fifteen minutes to what? *To what?* They are coming for him. They have come for him and they will find Natasha and he will only leave a faint mark in the dirt where Captain America should be.

What do you want, Natasha? Tell me. Tell me who to kill and who to be and can I be the monster? Is that okay now? Do you want this? Because I will come for you. I am coming. I will turn stars and stripes into dust.

The world is dark; he fades back into the night. He runs through the grounds and over walls and into a forest. He runs. He is wild.

*I'm not going anywhere.*

Run, Natasha. Run with me. Run, my darling. Run.

*I will confess to it all.*

No.

A noise rips through him. A howl. My love, this is madness. This is suicide. This is death. We die together. Is that what you crave? To suffer because of my weakness. You aren't a killer. You are good. You are light. You aren't like me. I don't want you to die. I don't want you to go. I don't want you to do this. I don't want you to. Please, Natasha. Oh god, please.

*I love you, Natasha.*

The howls grow louder.

*I love you.*

I will kill you. I will kill you. I will drink your blood, Captain America. I will sink my fangs into your throat and feast on the flesh. I know how to kill you. How I have waited. I know how to kill us all.

*I love him.*

Can you hear me? Can you hear this? In my chest, in my heart. Cut it out. Cut it out and it beats; it beats for you. Cut my heart out of my body because I have no use for it. It is yours, Natasha. It belongs to you.

*I will die for him.*

I will die for you.

He scales a wall, bare hands and desperate need; he scales the side of a building, the place they are supposed to meet. He scales three stories and sees her in the arms of another man.

She kisses him.

*My husband comes first.*

---

There's a movement in the shadows. The glint of an arrow and you know without looking that it's aimed at your heart. You freeze. Natasha feels it too and turns. A noise escapes her but you can't tell what it means. Is she scared? Relieved? There is nothing left of your brain but still you hold tighter, unwilling to let her go. You sense the threat and the instinct remains—to protect, to shield, to put your body between her and whatever waits in the darkness. To keep her safe. It's a hard habit to break.

Three minutes.

Her arms release you and she takes a step back. She walks towards the darkness and she holds out her hand. You want to scream at her to stop, to run, to get away; your fingers itch with the urge to pull her back but you know that it would be a death wish. You are helpless to do anything but watch.

She holds out her hand and beckons him forward. The monster emerges, dressed in black and covered in blood and you knew it was bad, you've studied the photos and done the research but—*oh holy shit*—you are not prepared for this. You calculate the distance between you and your gun and how quickly you could get off a shot and could you get to her in time?

She approaches the beast and smiles. You cannot fucking breathe. If you hurt her, I will end you. I will tear you limb from limb. Remember that, Hawkeye. Never forget that I can kill too.

"It's okay," she says and he lowers the bow. "It's okay. I'm not afraid." She takes his head between her hands and whispers something in his ear.

You watch his face as she speaks to him; you watch it twist in pain and longing and something that doesn't even have a name but you know it; you recognize it. Your heart breaks along with his.

You watch as she kisses him; softly at first, the pale outline of her face against his—blood painted black in the moonlight. It's a symphony of contrasts, like something out of a fairytale. Not the whitewashed stories that children read; the real ones, the ones they fear. This kind of magic is dark and powerful and not meant for human hands.

She kisses him and breaks the spell. The beast becomes a man and this man is laid bare before you; they both are. One minute left and it all comes down to this. He kisses her back and holds her like she's the most precious thing on earth. It hurts to watch but you can't look away. You don't belong here; you never did. There are things at work that you don't understand. She didn't want

your heart and she doesn't want your love but there's still one thing left. Let me give you this. Let me keep you safe.

Somehow you manage to find your voice.

"Go," you say. "Leave now and don't look back. I'll take care of this." You can hear the choppers in the distance; there are only seconds left. "*Go!*"

Barton's eyes lock with yours and something passes between you. Gratitude, respect, understanding? Fuck if you know. Silent still, he nods.

"Thank you," Natasha says.

Barton takes aim and fires an arrow into the wall of the stairway; it lands right by your head. A rope attached and another arrow fired off into darkness, the zip line pulls taut. She holds onto him, their bodies locked together, and with one last look, she is gone.

They are gone. You are still right here.

You turn on your comm link. "Abort," you say. "Pull back." An explosion sounds in the distance and you watch as the doctor's house disappears. "I was wrong."

The rope now slack, you pull the arrow from the wall and crush it in your hands. There can be no evidence, no trace that they were here.

*I was wrong.*

You look up at the night sky—black streaked with the red of flames. You close your eyes. You breathe.



## Chapter 32

### Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Lyrics from [Changing Of The Guards](#) by Bob Dylan.

*Gentlemen, he said  
I don't need your organization, I've shined your shoes  
I've moved your mountains and marked your cards  
But Eden is burning, either brace yourself for elimination  
Or else your hearts must have the courage for the changing of the guards*

---

"You were *what*?"

"Wrong. Incorrect. Mistaken." Steve leaned back in his chair and fixed the screens with a steady gaze. "Repeating the question isn't going to change my answer."

"And this man you were tracking, this Dr. Engel. He was killed, yes?"

"Gas leak. Set off by a spark in the wiring. Reduced the house to ash within minutes. At least, that's what I gathered from the Swiss authorities. Very unfortunate."

"So you demand full access to the archives, reassign a strike team and two Black Hawk helicopters, call it in in the middle of the night—and it turns out to be nothing more than a house fire?"

"Yes, ma'am. My apologies for the inconvenience."

The first voice spoke again. "Apologies aren't going to cut it, Captain. We've been concerned about SHIELD's internal affairs for quite some time. We've been wanting someone to take a closer look. We were hoping that you would be that man."

Steve crossed his arms. Every trace of evidence in Zurich had been destroyed. Two boxes of restricted archives files incinerated in an abandoned Brooklyn warehouse (there were no electronic copies), three people on earth who knew the whole story, two others who had a pretty good idea, and none of them were ever going to talk. And the surprise twist?

Captain America was one helluva liar.

He clenched his jaw and gave them a look that was nothing but truth, justice and apple pie. "SHIELD's house is in order, sir. If it's a witch hunt you want, you've got the wrong guy."

The screens went silent for a long time. "Then perhaps you should take some time off, Captain. We wouldn't want your judgment to be clouded by any more ... mistakes in the future."

He gave the barest hint of a smile. "My thoughts exactly."

---

“You haven’t signed any of the contracts I left you.”

Tony balanced the phone between ear and shoulder as he added more ice to his scotch; wasn’t there supposed to be a hands-free option? Or at least an app that knew how to prepare drinks?

“You’ve got to stop bringing your work home with you, Potts. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“My work is my home. My home is you—I mean work. My work is you, Tony.”

He smiled, picturing her exact expression. He could bring it up on the surveillance system in Malibu if he really wanted to prove he was right. “You really mean that?” he said.

“I mean...”

“Because that means you take your work into the bedroom. Are you sure that’s what you mean?”

“If you make even one working girl joke, I swear to god—”

“Sir?”

“JARVIS?”

“Captain Rogers has arrived on the premises. May I permit him access to his old quarters?”

“Yes, JARVIS. You may.”

“As you wish, Ms. Potts.”

“Ms. Potts? Since when has he been listening to you?”

“Since I started bringing my work home with me. Now go tend to Steve.”

Tony did. He caught the elevator down to what still technically remained Steve’s floor. He hoped that maybe it could always remain that way but there had been no contact since Tony stole his root beer. And accused him of adultery. And of breaking one or two other commandments he was sure Rogers took pretty seriously. But that wasn’t important. His captain was here and, as far as Tony knew, Barton was still alive. So there was that. Everything had worked itself out. Sort of. He hoped.

“Tony.”

Steve was dressed in civvies, standing in the empty space where he had once lived, with half of Manhattan visible behind him; all that was missing was the Star Spangled Banner, a bald eagle, and an endorsement by the NRA, and he’d be ready for the White House.

“Long time no see.” Hands in his pockets, Tony made his way across the room. “You forget something?”

“I did,” Steve said, smiling bashfully. There’s my captain. “Just came by to pick up this.”

There was a book in his hands. It was the copy of *Wuthering Heights* Tony had given him ... how

long ago now?

“You still haven’t read it?”

“I’ve been meaning to.”

“I meant to call.”

“It’s okay.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. Look.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, I should be apologizing to you. I want to apologize.”

“For what?” Tony said.

“You were right.”

Tony held up one hand. “Wait. JARVIS?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Replay Captain Rogers’ last statement.”

*“You were right.”*

“Now send a copy to Ms. Potts.”

Steve laughed, shaking his head. “Do I get a copy?”

“Move back in and I’ll make it your alarm clock.”

“I can’t.”

Tony frowned. “Why not?”

“I’m heading out of town.”

“Oh?”

“Out of country.”

“Oh.”

“Figure it’s time I see the world as it really is and not just how I remember it.”

“Sounds ... depressing.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

“And when you come back?”

Steve held up the book. "I'll give you the full report." He headed for the elevator.

"Travel safe, Captain," Tony said, saluting as Steve passed him. "And remember—don't drink the water or accept gifts from strangers."

"I'll remember," Steve said, turning as he stepped inside, the elevator doors sliding closed.

Tony strolled about what was definitely (unofficially) still Steve's floor and stopped in the kitchen. Only one thing remained; a photograph stuck to the fridge.

*Captain Steve Rogers and date.*

Where were those kids now, anyway?

---

"First line. Four across. O."

"Too easy."

"Just do it."

The dart sailed through the air.

"Bullseye."

"Bullshit."

"Check it."

James smiled knowingly as Marvin, a fellow analyst from the adjoining cubicle, walked over to inspect the beleaguered document. Sure enough, the lowercase "o" in the word 'inform' was pierced through.

"How the fuck do you do that?"

James shrugged. "Talent." It was about all he had. Clearly not administrative favor and certainly not a promotion. Five darts pinned his most recent field ops rejection letter to the wall. His mum was right; he should have gone to medical school.

A quarter past six on Friday afternoon and there was absolutely no one left in the building. Well, no one except for the cleaning staff and the Analysts that Time Forgot. Or, in his case, those subjected to eternal punishment. Had Sisyphus ever been handed a stack of financial disclosures to review? At this point, the stone might be preferable. Hell, he even missed his old friends, the third world election models.

He picked up the last dart. "One left. Make it good."

"The slant of the 'y' in Fury's signature."

"Now you're talking."

James focused on his breathing the way he had been taught, his hand and the projectile becoming one.

"James?"

"Shh."

"Uh, James..."

He released the dart and watched as it hit its mark. Standing up, he grabbed his mug of tea and gave a mock bow. "And that, my friend, is how it's done."

There was no response. Marvin was staring—no, gaping—at something just over his left shoulder.

"Agent Morrison?"

A female voice. James turned around to find himself face to face with the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Five foot four, with red hair and green eyes and curves that went on for miles and a mouth—

The pieces fell into place. *Holy shit*. He was staring at the Black Widow.

He dropped his tea.

"Oh—god—sorry!" He scrambled to pick up the broken pieces, nearly cutting his hand in the process, silently thanking any nearby deities that the hot liquid had somehow missed her. She raised a single eyebrow, her expression bemused.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she said. Her voice was like velvet, smoky and dark. "Is there somewhere private we could talk?"

"Huh?"

Come on, Morrison, he thought. More than one syllable at a time. You can do this. "I mean, yeah. Yes. There's a ... ah... a conference room, down the hall."

"Perfect. After you."

Marvin's eyes were the size of saucers as he watched them walk away.

James entered first, turning in time to see her pull the door shut behind them. Was he hallucinating? What the hell was going on?

"I wanted to say thank you." She stared down at her hands; she looked almost nervous. "About your... theory. Your research, the call to Stark..." She pinned him with a gaze that took his breath away. "It made all the difference. Your work saved lives. Much more than you know."

Standing before him now, she seemed so small and much younger than he had expected. She was an accomplished assassin and a master spy, he knew that much, but everything about this woman felt like a mystery. He was enthralled.

"Clint wanted to stop by too, but he's in a meeting right now and—"

The room started to spin. "Clint? As in—"

"Hawkeye?" She smiled. "The very same. He's quite a fan."

Okay now he was definitely hallucinating.

She held out her hand and took his in a surprisingly firm grip. "It was a pleasure to finally meet you, Agent Morrison. If there's anything we can ever do..."

He found himself nodding. "Thank you, Agent Romanoff."

She paused at the door and smiled. A real smile, he was sure of it, and probably very rare. "Actually," she said, blushing slightly, "it's Agent Barton now."

James managed to find a chair as soon as she had disappeared, his legs promptly buckling from under him.

---

"You impressed me."

There was nothing particularly revealing in Barton's body language, although physically he was altered. He stretched a thickly corded arm over the back of his seat, lips twisting into a sardonic grin. "Was it my punctuality? My winning people skills?"

Fury threaded his fingers together, elbows resting on his desk. "You never did know how to take a compliment."

"I'm just trying to work out what your angle is. It seems you've tied your fate to mine."

"Maybe I have. But I'm not the only one."

That was the first tell; Barton sizing him up like he was his next target.

Fury smiled. "Agent Romanoff looks well. You both do." The Black Widow was a changed woman; Barton was a different beast entirely.

He straightened up, leaning forward an infinitesimal amount. "Are you threatening me, Director?"

"I'm asking you to consider my offer."

"I thought I'd made my position clear."

"Things have changed." Fury lowered his hands, spreading them out like a croupier. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Things always change," Barton said. There was cold hard calculation in his eyes but something else too, something wholly unpredictable that hadn't been there before.

"I've been trying to set up a viable black ops unit for years but no one on our payroll has the skills required. This wouldn't even be under my jurisdiction—or the council's; officially it wouldn't even exist. I give you the intel, you handpick your team, you run the operations any way that you want. Everything else is strictly need to know."

"Let me get this straight." His voice was quiet, expression near impossible to read. "I do your dirty work and you what? Keep your mouth shut? Sounds like blackmail to me."

“There’s no one else I trust with this.”

“Things that bad?” He looked like he already knew the answer.

“Let me put it another way. The things you’ve done and seen? That’s only the tip of the iceberg. The world’s still a dangerous place and it’s getting more so; I’m growing more desperate. You don’t want to protect the interests of SHIELD? Fine. But there are other things worth protecting.” Fury’s gaze settled on the ring on Barton’s left hand.

There was a protracted moment of silence, their gazes locked, both all in before the final hand was played.

Barton showed first. “I don’t want her near any of this,” he said, something close to resignation seeping into his demeanor.

Fury was no longer bluffing, all of his cards on the table. “So you’re in?”

---

She waited in the corridor outside of Fury’s office, taking his hand and saying nothing as she followed him outside. They walked several blocks before he stopped and turned to face her.

“What is it?” she said.

“You first.” He pulled her to him, arms loose about her waist as she rested her hands on his chest. “How did your meeting go?”

“Productive.” She smiled at his expression. “I mean it. I got what I wanted.”

“I’m glad,” he said, laughing as she looked back at him, equally unconvinced. “Truly, Red. It’s just...” He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his hand cradling the side of her face. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“Clint, what did Fury say?”

“Not now.” He kissed her, finally. “I promise, as soon as we get home, I’ll tell you everything.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close. “I met Morrison,” she whispered.

“Yeah?” Clint said.

“He’s cute.” He pinched along her side; she squirmed in his arms. “Were you able to put in a good word with Fury?” she managed between giggles.

“You presume my word is good.” He kissed her again. “I may have casually reminded him of the ballistics class he made me teach—as one of many punishments for falling helplessly in love with you—involving some lanky British kid with a good eye.”

“You’re going soft, Barton,” Natasha said.

He pressed her body against the full length of his. “Mrs. Barton, I must respectfully disagree.”

---

## *Six months later*

It's warm today; the blue of the sky and the red and gold of the leaves align with startling clarity. There won't be many more in October like this. She sits down on the park bench; seven days out of ten—not bad. She sits and waits and hopes to make it eight. Just one more, Natasha thinks.

Sure enough, there's a rustling in the bushes behind her. A girl emerges, no more than thirteen—tiny, with caramel-colored skin, a mop of short black hair and a precocious smile. She sits down on the other end of the bench.

"You're early," Natasha says.

"Climbed out the window during math class." The girl kicks off one shoe and watches the other dangle from her foot. "I fucking hate Algebra."

"You shouldn't say that word."

A single defiant eyebrow is raised. "Algebra?"

Natasha laughs and the girl laughs too, a smile teasing the corner of her lips before it breaks wide open. Natasha wishes she could bottle that sound and take it home.

"Is it getting better?" she says.

The girl shrugs. "I don't know. I guess. The woman who teaches history is nice. I got a new roommate."

"And?"

Another shrug. "She's not a complete cunt."

"You shouldn't say that word either."

She looks apologetic this time. "Sorry." She digs around in her pocket. "I got you something." Small fingers press a figurine into her hand.

Natasha smiles—she can't help it—then follows it with a stern look. "Did you pay for this?"

Her silence is answer enough.

"I know!" the girl exclaims. "I know. I try, but sometimes... and anyway, it reminded me of you."

"You need to return it."

A clock begins to strike in the distance. "I should go. Can you take it back for me? I'm sorry—honest. Will I still see you tomorrow?"

Natasha shakes her head.

The girl's face falls. "Oh."

"My business is done here. I can't stay."



The girl nods stoically; her voice becomes quiet. "Will I ever see you again?"

There is a room in their home in Malibu, and in that room there is a wall. A wall of pictures. Of faces. She knows each and every one; she knows their stories, their triumphs and their tragedies and the little mundane pieces of their lives. The youngest of all is a Kazakh girl of thirteen with short black hair and a precocious smile, who turned a three day checkup into a two week visit.

There is a charitable foundation established in the name of Robert and Elizabeth MacIntosh. It contains the sum of twelve million dollars, some property in Sonoma and the deed to her apartment in Paris. They will never want for anything. Not food or clothing or education or a fresh start. They have no idea who she is and they never will; that's not the point.

The point is that they will have a chance. To choose; to be more. To decide for themselves.

But sometimes it's hard to stay in the shadows. The girl sitting next to her looks at her with big brown eyes, hope and resignation mixing together; she's trying so hard not to care but Natasha knows this look; she knows it well. *Will I ever see you again?* She shouldn't say yes, but her heart is breaking.

The decision is made. "I think you might. Be good, Ivana."

The girl grins and scampers back into the bushes. Natasha opens her palm to see her stolen gift. A woodcarving of an angel. She should take it back, she knows.

She slips it into her pocket instead and walks to the car waiting just around the corner.

"How was it?"

She closes the passenger door and looks over at the man sitting in the driver's seat.

"Less cursing this time," she says and she can see rather than hear his laughter in the lines on his face.

"I guess that's an improvement."

"I think so."

He starts the ignition. The radio comes to life with the noise of the engine; a weathered voice rises up, singing a story of loss and redemption.

"I know this one," she says.

"You do?"

"It's Dylan, isn't it?"

Clint pulls out the car, nodding in agreement as he softly sings along.

# Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

A/N: This is the end. Thank you to everyone who has read and commented at various stages throughout this story. It has meant more than you know. <3

She tugs at the hem of her dress.

It's not that it's too short—she doesn't care about that; she'd prefer it shorter, if she thought she could get away with it—but she's not used to being exposed like this, without a weapon or a cover. Here she is just herself in a room full of people who know who she is, even if they have nothing to say to her.

She hovers alone in the corner, sips from a glass of champagne she managed to sweet talk out of one of the waiters, watches the guests in the ballroom below in their designer suits and dresses. This dress was a gift, one of many gifts she treasures; fairy godmothers do exist. She knows that now.

She watches the guests and pretends not to listen to the conversations that go on behind her.

*Too young. Teacher's pet. Experiment.*

*Freak.*

Most of the Avengers are here; a charity gala to mark the anniversary of the attack on New York. There's Captain America and Tony Stark and Bruce Banner, a small unassuming man when he isn't in his green seven foot Hulk form. And secluded in the rafters is the SHIELD graduating class of 2019.

She is top of her class. Youngest recruit. Exemplary feedback, other than the oft repeated *no respect for authority*.

She smiles around the rim of her glass.

The voices hush. She does not turn around. Someone approaches, joining her at the balcony's edge.

"Ivana?"

She looks up. "It's Van," she says.

"Van?" He smiles. "Like Van Morrison?"

"Who?"

His smile widens. It should bother her but it doesn't. He shakes his head. "Forget I said anything. You okay?"

Only one other person ever asks her that. She shrugs. "I guess."

"You should be ecstatic."

"I am." She bears her teeth in an exaggerated grin, turning to stare at the people behind her. "I'm over the fucking moon." She holds up her drink. "Spasibo!"

People look away. She turns back towards the balcony, her gaze landing on Agent Barton—Tasha or Nat; it still feels too informal to think of her that way—as she stands deep in conversation with the girlfriend of Tony Stark.

"Have you seen the field postings yet?"

"No," she says.

"So you don't know who you've been partnered with?"

"No."

"I think it's me."

She cranes her neck to look up at him. He really is very tall. "You?" she says.

He shrugs. "Looks that way. That okay with you?"

She smiles knowingly. "They think I need supervision?"

He smiles back. "They think you might be able to keep up."

Maybe it is unusual for her to be placed with an experienced field agent so soon. She'll have to ask Agent Barton about it.

"Agent Morrison?"

"James."

"James." She tests the word, eyes scanning the crowd again. Agent Barton has been joined by Tony Stark, who is gesticulating wildly; Captain America offers a brief greeting before excusing himself. "Who's that?" she says, attention caught by a new presence entirely.

She feels James go very still beside her. "No way."

A man has entered the ballroom, dressed all in black, moving through the crowd with an understated grace. People almost don't notice him and yet Van can't take her eyes off him. There is something dangerous lurking beneath the surface, a killer in their midst; they are trained to kill but this feels different.

"That's Hawkeye," James says.

She has heard the name. The stories and rumors. She does as Agent Barton tells her and pays them little heed.

He is closing in on his target, on ... Agent Barton. She wants to call out, to say something, shout a warning. Where is her gun? What are his intentions?

Agent Barton turns around and it is as if time stands still.

“You mean?”

“That’s her husband.”

Now she understands.

He steps forward and takes her face between his hands, kisses her like nobody else is watching, like no one else matters, like Van has always imagined a real kiss should be. She has been kissed, knows the pressure of lips against her own, but there has never been any meaning, any want or need. She has urges and desires. She seeks out temptation. This is something else, too intimate and real.

“Wow,” James says. She wants to agree. She wants to hold his hand and squeeze his fingers and say, do you feel this too? Is this why Agent Barton wears a ring and changed her name and looks sad in the moments when she thinks no one else is looking? Is this Clint? Is this him? Can I have one too?

They dance. It is perfect. They are a pulse of life and color moving in a sea of grey.

The music fades and Agent Barton takes Agent Barton’s hand. He kisses her wrist and holds her to him, guiding her through the crowd, a sudden urgency to their steps.

“Where are they going?” Van says.

James is staring wide eyed. “Where d’you think?” She elbows him in the side. “Ow!” He looks down at her. “Sorry,” he says. “It’s just... I’ve never seen them together before. It’s like seeing a unicorn or a... a Colt LT Commander.”

“Will you dance with me?” she says.

They stare at each other for a long, silent moment. James has pale blue eyes and short dark hair and beautiful cheekbones. She would touch them if she was tall enough. Instead, she holds out her hand.

“Partner?”

He smiles. A kind and clever smile. He’s always smiling, she’s noticed, even when he was supposed to be teaching her how to improve her aim.

“Partner,” he says and takes her hand in his.

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