

## Return to Neverland

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20391859) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20391859>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Categories:	<a href="#">F/M</a> , <a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Marvel Cinematic Universe</a> , <a href="#">The Avengers (Marvel) - All Media Types</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">James "Bucky" Barnes/Tony Stark</a> , <a href="#">Jessica Jones/Steve Rogers</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">James "Bucky" Barnes</a> , <a href="#">Tony Stark</a> , <a href="#">Steve Rogers</a> , <a href="#">Jessica Jones</a> , <a href="#">Danielle Cage</a> , <a href="#">Janet Van Dyne</a> , <a href="#">George Barnes (Marvel)</a> , <a href="#">Natasha Romanov (Marvel)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - No Powers</a> , <a href="#">Developing Relationship</a> , <a href="#">Families of Choice</a> , <a href="#">Horses</a> , <a href="#">Animal Abuse</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Western</a> , <a href="#">Minor Injuries</a> , <a href="#">Adoption</a> , <a href="#">Depression</a> , <a href="#">Marvel Bingo 2019</a> , <a href="#">Gerald The Alpaca - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">Disabled Character</a> , <a href="#">Self-Harm</a> , <a href="#">Dissociation</a> , <a href="#">First Kiss</a> , <a href="#">First Time</a> , <a href="#">Blow Jobs</a> , <a href="#">Shower Sex</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 5 of <a href="#">Marvel Bingo 2019</a> , Part 1 of <a href="#">The Lost Boys</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Marvel Bingo 2019</a>
Stats:	Published: 2019-08-25 Completed: 2019-11-30 Words: 41,156 Chapters: 15/15

# Return to Neverland

by [weethreequarter](#)

## Summary

Bucky Barnes hasn't returned home in five years, the guilt and shame ensuring that he stayed away. But suddenly he finds himself standing on his family's front porch when he rescues an abused horse, hoping that his family can help it like they've helped so many others.

But returning home isn't that simple. Bucky has to face not only his family, but also what kept him from returning home all these years. It's not all bad though: at least there is the hot dickhead who works for his sister with the ass that just won't quit.

## Marvel Bingo 2019 - Western

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

Bucky yanked on the handbrake, then sat back and stared through the windshield at the farmhouse he'd once called home.

It still looked the same. There was a fresh coat of paint on the formerly peeling wooden walls, but it was still the place he'd grown up in and run riot in. The place that, five years ago, he'd sworn he would never come back to. Yet here he was, because he was a colossal idiot who-

The trailer rocked behind the truck, reminding him of why he was here. Right. No time to get sentimental. He could drop off his cargo, then be on his merry way, leaving this place and all the bad (*horrible, painful, devastating*) memories it dredged up behind. Taking a deep breath, he jumped out of the truck and headed towards the porch.

The first step still creaked, he noted. He always used to forget about that when he was sneaking in drunk. His dad caught him every time thanks to that damn step. Because it was the step's fault, obviously. Not his. The fact that he was supposed to be neither out nor drinking had *nothing* to do with it. Steeling himself, Bucky raised his hand and knocked on the door. He saw a shadow through the frosted glass, then the door was yanked open and Jessica was standing there staring at him.

They stared at each other for the first time in five years absence. Bucky opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Jessica turned and yelled, "Steve, your best friend's here."

Ouch.

That hurt.

*Your* best friend. Not *my brother*. As if Bucky wasn't the one who told Jessica, aged nine and seven respectively, that blood didn't matter one shit, and that she was his sister no matter what, forever, amen.

It also hurt the way she disappeared back into the house without a second glance his way and left him standing on the porch like a double glazing salesman. Absently, he wondered if they'd ever actually replaced the windows. He hoped so. His bedroom was fucking freezing in the winter.

"My best friend?" Steve's voice echoed. "What do you-"

Then Steve was in front of him, still as tall and blond as he'd been since his insane growth spurt before joining the army.

"Hey Steve," Bucky offered a lopsided smile.

"Bucky," Steve stared dumbly. "What, uh, what are you doing here?"

Okay, ouch.

Bucky swallowed. This wasn't home anymore, it didn't matter. He was just dropping something off, and then he was gone. There was nothing left for him here.

(Despite the fact that a tiny voice was nasty enough to whisper *You've got Steve and Jess here. And your niece, and all your memories of-* He told the voice to shut the fuck up)

"I've got a horse," he blurted out. "He needs help. I brought him for you guys."

Steve raised his eyebrows. He peered past Bucky, spotting the rental trailer.

"Alright," he nodded. "Let's unload him and then--"

"He's kinda wild," Bucky interrupted. "Pretty much untouchable."

"Right. Uh, hang on." Steve turned back into the house and called, "Tony? Come out here."

"You bellowed, oh great one?" a male voice Bucky didn't recognise replied, followed by a damn good looking man, probably about the same age as Bucky's eldest sister. Even in the worn jeans that were standard fare around here, Bucky caught a glimpse of an ass that was fine. Whoever Tony was, he wasn't originally local. Bucky would've remembered someone with eyes like that. And the aforementioned fine ass.

"We got a horse. Untouchable," Steve explained. He took the lead towards the trailer, Tony falling easily into step with him. "We'll have to put him into Loki's old stall."

"Gotcha, Cap," Tony nodded. He turned to Bucky. "Can you back the trailer up to the barn? We've got a door that goes straight into the first stall."

"I know," Bucky snapped.

"Touchy," Tony muttered.

"Tony, this is Bucky Barnes," Steve explained.

"Barnes?" Tony raised his eyebrows. "As in...?"

"My brother in law," Steve nodded.

"Alright," Tony nodded.

Bucky glowered at them. *Fuck you both*, he thought, climbing back into the truck. He'd grown up here. He knew more about this place than any of them, except maybe Jess. He yanked the truck door closed with more force than necessary, and caught Tony watching him with amusement, as if he knew exactly what was going on in Bucky's head. Well, he could go to hell, Bucky decided, no matter how hot he was, and flipped Tony off. He saw Tony's head fall back in laughter he couldn't hear, and angrily threw the truck into gear.

By the time he'd reversed the truck into place - which took more attempts than he'd like to admit, since he'd had no cause to drive anything with in trailer in, well, in five years - Steve and Tony emerged from the stall, no doubt outfitting it for its new resident. Bucky could vaguely remember his dad building the door in the stall, for Winter's arrival, when Bucky was five. He remembered the determination in his dad's jaw, his refusal to let Winter be put down and determination that he could save him.

Steve double checked the trailer was in place, then slid the bolts out from the side, allowing the trailer to swing open. There was a rattle of hooves, and a squeal, then the horse was out. Tony slid the stall door closed, and all three of them over into the barn so they could see the horse.

"Quarter horse?" Steve asked, watching the horse buck and kick.

"I think so," Bucky nodded.

Noticing he had an audience, the horse whirled around and charged towards them, baring his teeth through the bars at the top of the stall.

"Nice try, buddy," Tony murmured. "What are those scars on his legs?"

"Electric cattle prod," Bucky replied through clenched teeth.

"Fucking wankers," Tony muttered.

"Language," Steve admonished, as if he didn't have the worst mouth on him out of everyone Bucky knew, with the possible exception of Jessica. But neither he nor Tony noticed Bucky's incredulous expression, instead sharing a look that clearly said that it was a shared joke.

"He might actually be worse than Loki was," Steve added.

"Hey, don't put my horse down like that," Tony objected. "He was pretty, damn crazy thank you."

"Still is," Steve pointed out.

"Yeah," Tony grinned.

He was weird, Bucky decided. Like, was Tony *actually* offended at the thought of another horse being treated *worse* than his own? Scrap weird, he was insane.

"Well, good luck," Bucky declared, and turned towards the trailer.

"Wait, that's it?" Steve called. "You're just gonna dump him and go?"

"I've got places to be, Steve," Bucky lied.

"You're not even going to talk to Jess?"

"She clearly doesn't want to talk to me."

“My God, what are you? Four?” Steve exclaimed. “Shit, Bucky. It’s been five years since we’ve heard anything from you. Don’t you care? You haven’t seen Dani since she was three.”

“Sorry Steve,” Bucky shrugged, trying to extinguish the fire of guilt that was growing in his belly. He did not want to be here, this place was nothing but bad (nightmarish, agonising) memories for him. “See you.”

He swung into the truck, closing the door on Steve’s reply, pushing it into gear and driving away before he could change his mind.

X

Bucky glared through the rain-splattered windscreen at the I-65. Reba crooned on the radio about being more than just her last name. He clenched his fists tighter on the wheel.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and yanked the wheel to the right, pulling the truck onto the hard shoulder and ignoring the blare of the horn from the car behind him. Bucky flipped them off, flicking on the hazard lights, before scrambling for the door. He fell out and stumbled round the truck and now-empty trailer onto the grass verge.

“Fuck!” he yelled. He gasped for breath. “I don’t wanna be here,” he yelled. “I don’t wanna... Fuck.”

Bucky dropped to a couch, burying his face in his hands as his shoulders began to shake. Before long, he was sobbing into his hands. He sat there, the drizzle soaking through his t-shirt and plastering his hair to his head. He fell back so he was sitting on the damp grass.

“I’m such a fucking idiot,” he muttered. Did he really think he could just go home, drop off a horse, then carry on his merry way as if the last five years didn’t exist? He thought he’d dealt with this shit. He was supposed to have moved on. At least, that was what he told himself. And it was easy to tell himself that he’d moved on in Chicago, in an apartment he’d never lived in, in a city he’d never seen. Hiding his face in his hand, Bucky cried and cried the way he’d refused to since he packed his bags and walked out of town.

The drizzle turned to rain, and finally Bucky pulled himself to his feet and climbed back into the truck. He eyed his reflection in the rear view mirror.

“You’re a fucking mess, Barnes,” he muttered.

X

The assistant at the desk squawked indignantly when Bucky insisted on returning the rental.

“Mr Barnes, you were supposed to return it to our office in-“

“I don’t care,” Bucky interrupted. “I’m returning it here.”

“There’s a charge.”

“Great,” Bucky grinned, all teeth, and threw his credit card at her.

Once the transaction went through and the assistant had, begrudgingly, taken the truck and trailer back, Bucky shouldered his holdall and left the office. Then he pulled out his phone and brought up directions to the bus station.

X

The door opened and Steve gaped at him. Bucky glared.

“Don’t fucking start,” he muttered. Then he remembered that he actually wanted something from Steve, and forced himself to try and appear civil. “Can I stay?”

“Course you can,” Steve grinned.

Bucky nodded his thanks, but chose not to speak. He wasn’t entirely sure of what would come out if he tried. Instead, he toed off his soggy trainers and dropped his holdall in the mudroom before following Steve through the kitchen to the dining room, where the sounds of voices and dinner made his heart ache with familiarity and longing.

“We have a visitor,” Steve announced, drawing everyone’s attention to Bucky. Jessica and Tony were both sitting at the table, and the girl sitting in Tony’s lap with bunches in her hair must be Dani, Bucky realised, no longer the toddler he remembered but a child that had no business looking so grown up.

Jessica’s face fell from the smile Bucky remembered from their teenage years, to the stony impassivity he’d always hated at the sight of him. Tony looked surprised, but he was weird even if he was hot, so Bucky didn’t care what he thought. But Dani squeaked, wriggling off of Tony’s lap and launching herself at Bucky’s knees. Steve, the asshole, snorted when Bucky grabbed the doorframe to stop the, what was she now, eight year old from knocking him on his ass.

“Uncle Bucky!” Dani cheered, beaming at him with a gap-toothed grin, and Bucky smothered his surprise that she actually recognised him. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to visit, kiddo,” he replied.

Dani gasped.

“For how long?”

“Depends how long your mom lets me stay,” Bucky shrugged. He disentangled her arms from his legs so he could make his way cautiously to the table. He glanced at Jessica, and found her watching him, her face unreadable.

“Dani, wash your hands for dinner,” Jessica said.

“Yes mom!” Dani disappeared down the hall.

Bucky took the empty seat beside Tony, trying to ignore the other man’s smirk. Instead he focused on Jessica, wondering if his sister was going to kick his ass. It wouldn’t be the first time. Hell, he’d seen her take down Steve, with all of his military training.

Jessica walked through to the kitchen, opened the drawer that had always contained the cutlery, and Bucky readied himself to make a quick exit lest a knife come his way. However, Jessica pulled out a knife and a fork before closing the drawer and passed it silently to Bucky.

“Thanks,” he nodded.

Dani raced back into the room, scrambling up into the chair next to her mom.

“Alright, here we go,” Steve announced, placing the pot in the middle of the table.

“Everybody help yourselves.”

“Welcome home, Barnes,” Tony murmured.

Bucky shot him a glare, only to be faced with Tony’s smirk again. He really was unfairly hot.

“Yeah,” Bucky muttered. “Welcome home.”



# Chapter 2

## Chapter Summary

In the morning, Bucky wonders if he made the right decision, but luckily, Jess has a list of chores that will keep him busy.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

His bedroom was still fucking freezing. Bucky groaned, face smashed into the pillow, and burrowed further under the covers in the hope of clinging to the last vestiges of sleep to no avail. He sighed and opened his eyes.

Jessica, because she was a fucking sadist and hated his guts, had stripped his room and turned it into a generic guest bedroom. Steve had explained, looking only mildly apologetic, that all of the stuff he'd left behind was currently in boxes in the attic. Which seemed about right.

“Why am I here?” Bucky grumbled.

There was, of course, no answer (because despite the fact his sisters made him believe in it until he was eleven, there was no ghost in the house, because there was no such thing as ghosts. May and Becca were also sadistic bitches, he decided).

His skin crawled. This was a mistake. He couldn't stay here. What the hell had he been thinking? Coming back home, after everything he did? And, Jesus, what would Jess and Steve say if they knew the worst of it? Which they didn't. Obviously. They couldn't. Even if they could, if they did know, there was no way they would've let him stay if they knew. No, better to leave now, before it was too late.

He could catch a bus to Shelbyville, and then it would be easy to get back to Chicago. He could go home, slip back into the life he'd built for himself, and that would be that. He didn't need to come back here ever again.

Great. He had a plan.

But.

But he remembered the way Dani's face lit up when she saw him, and it couldn't be because she remembered him. Not when she was so young back then, and he hadn't exactly been a gold star uncle back then. Which meant Jess or probably Steve had told her about him, and showed her pictures. He remembered the way she threw herself at him, her skinny arms wrapping around his waist with surprising strength.

If he left, it would break her heart.

Bucky scrubbed his hands across his face, hissing out a breath.

He didn't want to hurt her. He'd never wanted to hurt anyone, but he had.

He'd stay for today at least, he decided. He could always decide to leave again if he had to. He was an adult, his own person. No one could make him stay if he didn't want to.

Bucky managed to find the clock without shifting too much from his blanket burrito and cursed. Why on earth was he awake at eight am? Did the world hate him? Wasn't it enough that he was here and trying, dammit? Did he have to be awake at the crack of dawn too?

Muttering about the unfairness of life, Bucky left the blanket burrito with a hiss and shuffled into his jeans. He pulled on a t-shirt, then realised he needed to put his arm on. So he removed the t-shirt, re-attached his arm, then put the t-shirt back on, all to a soundtrack of complaints. He yanked on a pair of socks to fight off the worst of the chill and stumbled downstairs to a disappointingly empty kitchen and, worse than that, an aroma of coffee but an empty pot.

"Thanks," he grumbled.

Then he spent five minutes trying to find the coffee because he was sleep deprived and Jessica or Steve had rearranged the kitchen at some point in the last five years. While he waited for the coffee machine to splutter into life, he pulled out his phone to text his roommate.

*Staying in Indiana longer than I thought. Can you overnight me some clothes?* he asked T'Challa. Thankfully, T'Challa was as attached to his phone as Bucky was, which meant he received an affirmative almost instantly. Bucky sent him a list of what to send, and Winter's Haven's address, promising to transfer the money over later.

With the coffee in one hand, and a bagel in his mouth, Bucky shoved his feet into his sneakers, wrinkling his nose when he realised they were still damp inside. He abandoned them in favour of one of the many pairs of muck boots that had always just appeared in the mud room, shoving them on and leaving the house in search of someone.

When he reached the barn, Bucky paused at the first stall, watching the horse he'd found. The palomino folded his ears and bared his teeth at him, whinnying a warning to back off. Bucky saluted him with his coffee mug. A kindred spirit. Bucky could sympathise. Clearly the palomino decided that Bucky wasn't worth the trouble; with a flick of his tail he turned towards the hay net and promptly ignored him. Yep. Pretty much summed life up.

"Morning," Bucky called, finally spotting Steve entering the barn with another horse.

"Morning?" Steve echoed. "Morning finished hours ago, buddy."

"Yeah, well, screw you," Bucky scowled, as if he didn't spend his entire life until five years ago getting up at four or five in the morning to help with the horses. He straightened up as

Jessica appeared from the tack room. Her face remained blank when she looked at him. "Mor- Hi," he greeted.

"If you're staying, you have to earn your keep," she declared.

"Alright," Bucky nodded. "What do you want me to do?" he asked, his mind already running through the possibilities: grooming, leading horses out, exercising them. But then Jessica shoved a fork into his hand.

"The north paddock needs cleaning out," she declared.

No. No, no, no. *No*. Of all the jobs on the farm, the one Bucky hated more than anything was cleaning out the paddocks. Except maybe cleaning out the horse box after it'd been used, because then the smell was contained. But still, he hated it with a passion.

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Wheelbarrows are by the back door."

Jessica raised an eyebrow. She was challenging him, Bucky realised, playing scoop the poop chicken apparently.

"Fine," he growled.

"Arrow's in the north paddock," Steve added. "He's kind of an asshole. He might charge at you, but he won't actually hurt you."

"Great," Bucky winced.

Jessica plucked the mug from his hands and took a gulp. For the first time, she smiled at him, with the same smile predators looked at their lunch. Bucky grimaced, and went to find a wheelbarrow.

X

"Oh, for fuck-! Listen," Bucky snapped, rounding on the big chestnut horse after he'd charged at Bucky for the fourth time.

*An asshole*, Steve had called Arrow. Talk about an understatement.

"Listen. I am not afraid of you," Bucky declared. Arrow snorted, and nudged his jeans, searching for treats. "No. No, back off asshole. Back right off. No treats. Even if I had any, I wouldn't give them to you, because you are a fucking dick who likes to gallop at people from the other side of the field. So just fuck right off. Go away. Go away, I said," he groaned, when Arrow started head butting him. "Jesus Christ, horse."

Arrow stopped, blew a raspberry then resumed head butting Bucky, this time with more vigour. Bucky wobbled, but he refused to show weakness.

“Stop it!” he snapped. “I’m not afraid of you. You think you’re so good, huh? Just cause I’m picking up your shit. Yeah, well, you’re wrong. Get lost.”

A snort of laughter from behind him alerted Bucky to the fact he had company. He turned and glared at Tony, who sat astride a big, black horse and was watching Bucky with a wide, shit-eating grin on his face. His very beautiful face.

“How long have you been there?” Bucky asked.

“Longer than you’d like,” Tony replied.

Bucky scowled. He pushed Arrow off again, and tramped across the field towards Tony.

“You know,” Tony said. “If you stopped glaring for five minutes, you’d actually be kinda cute.”

“I’m not cute,” Bucky retorted. And yes, the fact that Tony was looking made him preen, but he wasn’t cute, because he was a grown ass man, dammit.

“Whatever,” Tony laughed.

As Bucky came closer, he noticed that Tony was using a western saddle, rather than the English style Bucky used when he was growing up.

“You ride western?”

Tony nodded.

“I have a busted knee,” he explained. “It doesn’t bend very well, which means the one and only time I tried to ride English, it hurt like a bitch.”

Bucky nodded. Then yelped as Arrow decided to take a chunk out of his shoulder. Tony burst out laughing as Bucky exclaimed, “Son of a bitch. Seriously horse? What the hell? What the actual hell?”

Arrow snorted, blowing grassy gunk across Bucky’s face.

He sighed.

“Yeah, I’m real cute,” he said to Tony.

“I dunno. I think you could make it work,” Tony winked, nudging his horse into a walk.

X

Bucky toed off his boots and shuffled through the house to the living room, where he fell face-first over the arm of the sofa, burying his face in the cushions

“Oh, sweet mother of God,” he groaned. “Everything hurts. Did I pull a muscle in my ass? Is that even possible?”

“You okay, Buck?” Steve’s voice asked, full of amusement.

Without raising his head, Bucky flipped him off. In the past five years, apparently his body had forgotten exactly how physical working in the yard was, and now his whole body felt like it was on fire.

“Hi uncle Bucky!” Dani’s voice chirped by his ear.

Bucky rolled onto his side, peering through his hair to give her a tired smile.

“Hey squirt. How was school?”

“It’s was okay,” Dani shrugged. “Mom said you were working today. Did you meet the horses?”

“I met Arrow,” Bucky grimaced, his shoulder throbbing where the dickhead had decided Bucky would make a tasty snack.

“I like Arrow,” Dani beamed.

“Of course you do,” Bucky muttered.

“Hey Dani, why don’t you take uncle Bucky and introduce him to the rest of the horses?” Steve suggested, poking his head out of the kitchen.

Bucky bit back a suggestion of exactly what Steve could do, reminding himself that his niece was in the room. Speaking of his niece, she was bouncing excitedly at his side.

He sighed.

“Alright, short stuff. Lead on.”

He rolled off the couch, groaning as pain shot up his calves, and followed Dani back towards the mud room for his boots, then out into the yard.

“Tell Tony that dinner’s almost ready,” Steve called after them.

“So, uh, do you help in the yard a lot?” Bucky asked.

“Sometimes,” Dani replied.

“D’you ride?”

“A little bit. Mom and dad and uncle Tony don’t have a lot of time to teach me,” she explained. “Mostly I help with the grooming and mucking out.”

“Okay, so first of all, never listen to your dad when it comes to riding,” Bucky said. “He is terrible. How he’s never fallen off, I will never know.”

Dani giggled.

“This is Vision,” she explained. “He’s a rescue horse that uncle Tony’s working with. He was a racehorse, but then he got injured so his owner abandoned him. He was really scared for a long time, but uncle Tony worked with him for ages and now he’s a lot better.”

“Hey buddy,” Bucky murmured, reaching to let the bay thoroughbred sniff his hand before scratching his nose.

Vision snorted, nudging Bucky’s hand looking for treats.

“This is Rocket,” Dani told him, moving onto the next stall where a small grey pony glowered at them from below a thick forelock as he snatched hay from the net. “He’s a rescue pony. His owner abandoned him cause he has lots of health problems so he used to be really angry. He’s not angry anymore though. I get to ride him sometimes.”

“Uh, that is not a horse,” Bucky declared, blinking at the animal in the next stall.

“That’s Gerald! He’s an alpaca,” Dani giggled. “He’s uncle Tony’s. And this is Goliath. He gets scared when he goes into the horse-box, so his owner sent him here so uncle Tony could help him.”

“Uncle Tony does all the work with the horses, huh?”

“Yeah. He learned how to help them when he came here.”

“Alright, who’s this guy?” Bucky asked, nodding to the black horse in the stall next to the palomino he brought in the day before. He recognised him as the horse Tony was riding that morning when he called Bucky *cute* (And why was he still thinking about it? Maybe the exhaustion had addled his brain).

“That’s Loki,” Dani said. “He’s uncle Tony’s horse. He was *wild* when he arrived. He’s still pretty grumpy but he loves uncle Tony.”

Loki watched them with a seriously impressive impervious look for a horse.

“That is one moody looking horse,” Bucky observed.

“Hey! Don’t diss my horse,” Tony’s voice called. Bucky turned in the direction of hooves; Tony appeared, leading a chestnut warmblood that tossed their head, shaking out its mane as Tony opened the stall door. “He might be a grumpy bastard but he’s my grumpy bastard.”

“And who’s this?” Bucky asked.

“Say hi to Red,” Tony said, unclipping the rope from Red’s halter and letting himself out of the stall. “He’s a show jumper. Local rider. His last owner used to beat him whenever he made a mistake, so he started bucking.”

“Hey,” Bucky murmured. He held out his hand for Red to sniff, then rubbed his neck, moving his hand in small circles. The horse nibbled lightly at Bucky’s sleeve. “You’re gorgeous.”

“Isn’t he?” Tony beamed.

“Uncle Tony, dad said to tell you that dinner’s almost ready,” Dani piped up.

“Okay, better not keep him waiting then,” Tony replied, scooping her up and tickling her sides until her laughter filled the barn.

“Uncle Tony! No! Put me down!” she cried.

“What’s the magic word?”

“Please!”

Tony set Dani back down on her feet, taking her hand instead.

They looked adorable together.

Watching Tony and Dani, Bucky realised just how much he’d missed out on in the past five years. Five years ago, Dani was a toddler. Now, she was a real little person, with her own personality and everything. And he’d not only missed out on that, he’d missed out on building a relationship with her too. And apparently Tony had taken his place.

Which was really irritating, because the way Tony’s eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed did *things* to Bucky.

Clearing his throat, Bucky forced himself to look away, swallowing the nauseating mixture of jealousy and arousal. Then he frowned, cocking his head as he watched the palomino inch closer to the bars that separated his stall from Loki’s. Loki ignored the other horse’s advances.

“Hey, look at that,” Bucky called, nodding towards the two horses.

“Yeah. He seems kinda curious about Loki,” Tony replied.

“No accounting for taste, I guess,” Bucky retorted.

Tony grinned.

“He needs a name,” Dani announced.

“What’s that, little one?” Tony asked.

“The new horse. He needs a name.”

“You should name him, Buckaroo,” Tony suggested.

Bucky looked at him in surprise. But Tony’s face was nothing but sincere.

“Alright,” Bucky agreed. “Why did you name your horse Loki?”

“Because he’s a dick,” Tony replied immediately.

Bucky studied the horse. Then he grinned, “I got it. Thor. Because he’s big, blond and loud.”

“In that case, maybe you should call him Steve,” Tony smirked.

Bucky burst out laughing. And when he looked at Tony again, Tony was grinning, and his eyes were doing that crinkly thing again, and that made Bucky’s stomach do a weird swoopy thing, and Bucky was fairly sure that he was screwed.

## Chapter End Notes

I used to work with horses, and mucking out the fields was the worst, except for mucking out the trailers. And yes, there was a chestnut horse who used to charge me from the other side of the field.

With an English saddle, you ride with your knees bent. With western saddles, you keep your legs straighter. I've only ever used English saddles, but I would love to learn western.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

Bucky faces some familiar faces, and fails to play it cool.

## Chapter Notes

This Jan is MCU Jan, or at least my version of MCU Jan. She is not 616 Jan. But Jan and Tony are best friends in any universe.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Morning,” Steve greeted him, placing a plate of scrambled eggs on the table as Bucky sat down.

Bucky grunted. He wasn’t at his best in the mornings. Then he squinted across the table, frowning at Tony, who was already tucking into his own plate of eggs.

“What’re you doing here so early?” he yawned.

“I live here?” Tony replied, amusement dancing in his eyes.

Bucky’s face twisted in confusion, trying to work out where exactly Tony could be living. It was a three bedroom house; Steve and Jess had the master, Dani was upstairs, and Bucky was in his old room.

“Tony lives out in the studio,” Steve explained.

Oh. Right. Bucky’s dad had converted part of the back barn into a small studio apartment for the kids to use for sleepovers. It wasn’t much, but Bucky had always loved it.

“Morning,” Dani yelled, racing into the room.

Bucky winced.

“She is far too loud for this time in the morning,” he grumbled as Steve greeted his daughter. Across the table, Tony chuckled, apparently overhearing him. Bucky stifled another yawn, then picked up his fork and shovelled eggs into his mouth.

“This is yummy, dad,” Dani announced.

Bucky instantly spat out his mouthful of eggs.

“You cooked this?” he asked Steve, staring at him in horror. “Why would you let him cook?”

“I know how to cook, Bucky,” Steve replied.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. Five years is a long time,” he pointed out, and Bucky felt a painful twinge in his chest. It was the same twinge he got when he opened a cupboard looking for chips and found himself facing rows of pots. He dropped his gaze, picking up his fork again.

“Right,” he muttered, trying the eggs.

They really were good.

He glanced up when Jess entered the room, looking as grumpy as Bucky himself. Neither of them were morning people. But her face softened when she reached up on her tiptoes to kiss Steve good morning, and Bucky felt that twinge again.

He couldn’t remember when Steve and Jess became a thing. It was before he left, but he’d been too busy running around, being a stupid, arrogant little asshole to pay attention to something as trivial as his best friend and his sister falling in love.

“What time is Jan due?” Tony asked, leaving the table to pour himself a fresh mug of coffee.

“About ten,” Jess replied. “Dani, hurry up or you’re gonna miss the bus.”

“Great,” Tony nodded. “I’ll make sure I’m about.”

“Thanks,” Steve smiled.

“Jan’s coming over?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah, we wanted her to take a look at Thor,” Steve explained.

Janet van Dyne had been the local vet for as long as Bucky could remember. She was warm and caring and had a way with animals.

She was also one of his dad’s oldest friends.

Bucky pushed that thought down with the last of his eggs, getting up from the table to dump his plate in the sink. He retrieved his hoodie from his room, then asked Jess, “What d’you want me to do this morning?”

“The stalls need mucking out,” she replied. “Start with Goliath. You can turn him out in the south paddock.”

“Make sure you put his fly mask on,” Steve added. “He gets really bad sweet itch.”

“Come on,” Tony called. “I’ll come out with you. We’ve got some insect repellent. I’ll show you where.”

“Sure,” Bucky nodded, clamping down on the surge of anger that he needed to be *shown* anything about the place where he grew up. And if he shoved his feet into his boots with a bit more gusto than was necessary, well that was just between him and the boots, right?

X

Bucky wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist, leaning on the fork and studying the stall with pride. Everything ached again, but he’d done a damn good job, even if he did say so himself. Letting himself out of Goliath’s stall, Bucky was about to go find Jess, when a familiar voice called, “Bucky Barnes, get over here and give me a hug.”

His head snapped up, and Bucky grinned, even though his stomach had dropped like a stone. Then crossed the barn to give Jan a hug.

Jan looked exactly the same. Or, almost. Her hair was entirely grey now, rather than the streaks of five years ago, tied up in her familiar ponytail, and there were more lines around her eyes. But otherwise, exactly the same. Even her hugs were the same, enveloping him completely and making him feel like he was safe. When he was younger, Bucky used to wonder if this was what it was like to be hugged by your mom. He’d never found out.

“Hi Jan,” he murmured, squeezing her tight before stepping back. “Good to see you.”

“Look at you. You’re just the image of your father,” Jan observed, and guilt bubbled in his stomach. But Bucky forced himself to keep smiling.

“How’ve you been? How’s Hank?” he asked, then immediately regretted it. What if something had happened to Hank? What if he was dying, or had dementia or something?

“Same old Hank,” Jan laughed. “He’s been over at the Dugan’s all night delivering a calf that was breech.”

Bucky nodded.

“And how’s Hope?”

“Oh, she’s doing great,” Jan beamed. She pulled out her phone, handing it to Bucky. On the screen was a picture of Hope, older than Bucky remembered, with her arm around the waist of a woman with blonde hair who looked like she could snap him like a twig. “She’s down in DC now, running her own surgery. That’s her wife, Sharon. She’s a detective.”

“Wow,” Bucky whispered. “All grown up, huh?”

“Yes. And very happily married, in case you were thinking about trying again,” Jan teased, elbowing him gently in the ribs.

Bucky laughed. He’d dated Hope back when they were seniors, before Bucky realised that Hope had a huge crush on his sister, Kimmy, and that he actually found Rick Jones hotter

than the girl he was supposed to be dating.

“What can I say? We were both idiots, so in that way we were perfect for each other,” he grinned. “If you ignore the fact that we were both, you know, completely the wrong gender.”

Jan laughed, patting his shoulder.

“How’s the most beautiful girl in the county?” Tony called, leading Loki into the barn.

“I’ve told you before, Tony, flattery will get you nowhere,” Jan retorted.

“One day,” Tony sighed dramatically. “One day, you’ll come to your senses and run away with me for a life of luxury.”

“No, thank you,” Jan replied. “A life of luxury does not appeal to me at all.”

“Yeah, it’s highly overrated,” Tony agreed, letting himself out of Loki’s stall.

Bucky frowned. Tony lived in the studio apartment in his sister’s barn. What did he know about a life of luxury?

“Come and meet our new arrival,” Tony said, moving towards Thor’s stall. “This is Thor.”

Bucky found himself drifting after Jan, watching Thor as he eyed them suspiciously from the back of the stall.

“Hello, boy,” Jan murmured. “You don’t look very happy, do you? Have you been able to interact with him at all?”

Tony shook his head.

“See those marks? They’re from a cattle prod, according to Bucky,” he explained. “I don’t think he’s going to let us anywhere near him anytime soon.”

“Alright. We’ll sedate him so I can get a good look at him, then,” Jan decided.

Tony nodded in agreement.

“Do you think you could muck out the stall while he’s sedated?” he asked Bucky. “Two birds and one stone and all?”

“Sure,” Bucky nodded.

Jan used a pole syringe to inject Thor with the sedative, giving him two doses, then waiting for it to take effect. Thor squealed angrily at them, glowering and pacing. But as they watched, he slowed down, eventually lying down in the furthest corner of the stall. Only then did Tony slide back the latch, kicking off the kick bolt, and led the way into the stall.

Bucky worked quickly while Jan examined Thor, removing the dirty straw and replacing it with fresh. He refilled the hay-net and gave him a clean water bucket, finishing just before

Jan and Tony stepped back out of the stall.

“Mild malnourishment,” Jan announced, “Although I’m sure you figured that out yourself.”

Tony nodded.

“Otherwise, he’s healthy,” Jan continued. “Those wounds on his legs are healing, there’s no sign of infection which is good. His hooves will need to be done in the not too distant future, but there’s no way that’s going to happen anytime soon.”

“Even then, maybe not without a sedative,” Tony agreed. “He might never be comfortable with someone working with his legs after that.”

“Yes. Poor thing,” Jan nodded. “How’s Rocket’s laminitis?”

“Still clear,” Tony replied. “Restricting his feeds seems to help. Not that he agrees, little shit.”

Jan laughed.

“I can make him healthy, I can’t make him less grumpy,” she shrugged. “Where’s Steve and Jess? I want to say hi before I go.”

“They’re down in the house,” Tony replied. “I’ll walk with you.”

“Bye Bucky,” Jan smiled. “I hope I’ll see you again soon. It was lovely to see you again.”

“Yeah,” Bucky swallowed. “I don’t know how long I’m gonna be here, but, yeah.”

“See you soon,” Jan waved.

“Yeah, see you.”

Bucky listened to Jan and Tony’s voices as they grew faint, walking away from the barn. He exhaled, clenching his fists, and trying not to panic.

He’d missed Jan, he realised, so much. But there was no way she was okay with seeing him again. No chance. She knew, maybe not all of it, but she knew about the accident, knew what he’d done. And if she knew the rest, well, she would never want to see him again.

He didn’t hear the crouch of boots on the gravel, and jumped when Tony called, “Is he okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” Bucky replied, turning back to Thor, who was beginning to stir.

“Good. I’ll keep an eye on him, make sure there’s no lasting effects from the sedative,” Tony nodded. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Bucky lied, his heart pounding and his skin crawling.

“Right. Of course you are,” Tony nodded, his tone clearly saying that he wasn’t buying it.

Bucky felt sick. What would Tony say if he knew? Maybe he did. Maybe Steve or Jess told him about the accident. God, what did he think?

"I'm gonna, uh, go do..." Bucky jerked his thumb over his shoulder, hoping that it signalled... something that Tony would buy, rather than admit that he was hiding.

"Sure," Tony nodded.

Then Bucky walked away as quickly as he could without looking like he was running away.

X

"Where are you going?" Bucky asked, spotting Steve heading towards the truck.

"We need groceries," Steve replied. "I'm heading up to Waldron, then I can pick Dani up too."

"Hey, mind if I tag along?" Bucky asked. "I got a friend to overnight me some stuff, and I need to pick it up from St Paul?"

"Sure," Steve nodded.

"Gimme five minutes," Bucky called sprinting towards the house.

There wasn't much he could do about his dirty clothes, but he ditched the boots for his sneakers - finally dry from the downpour two days ago - and grabbed his wallet before joining Steve in the truck.

"Uh, could we take five twenty instead of seven hundred?" Bucky asked, his throat closing as Steve indicated to turn right onto West Country Road 300 North.

"Why?" Steve frowned.

*Because I didn't almost kill somebody on the five twenty.*

"Just... because," Bucky shrugged, sitting on his hands to wipe his suddenly clammy palms.

"Alright," Steve sighed, switching the blinker to the turn left signal, and Bucky relaxed. He didn't have to see if the remains of the tree were still there, if the trunk was still streaked with red paint from the Chevvy. Maybe the tree was gone. But if Bucky closed his eyes, he could still see the jagged outline of the tree against the moon as he waited for the fire department to arrive.

"So what did you do in Chicago?" Steve asked.

"Uh, I worked in a department store," Bucky shrugged.

"Right," Steve nodded. "And your friend, who sent you the stuff?"

“He’s my roommate,” Bucky explained. “T’Challa. I’m friends with his sister. And his girlfriend. So when I needed a new place, he offered me to sublet his spare room.”

“I see.”

“I thought you were gonna sell the farm,” Bucky blurted out. It had been on his mind ever since he arrived. “I mean, you guys sent me that message saying you were gonna sell, then you don’t. How come?”

“Tony arrived,” Steve shrugged. “He had Loki in a trailer and he was looking for help.”

“Why couldn’t he help him himself?”

“Tony didn’t know anything about horses when he arrived. But he rescued Loki and looked for somewhere that could help him, rather than have him put down. We hadn’t taken the website down, so he drove all the way from California in the hope that we could help Loki. We decided to help, and then, we just decided to stay. It’s home.”

“Oh. I just wondered.”

Steve pulled up outside the post office in St Paul, killing the engine. Bucky jumped out without a word, entering the familiar shop and silently cursing when he recognised Mrs Walters. Her daughter went to school with Bucky, and she definitely remembered him by the way her face lit up.

“Bucky! I was wondering why a parcel arrived with your name on it!” Mrs Walters cried. “How good to see you!”

“Yeah, you too,” Bucky nodded, wondering why she felt the need to show such enthusiasm. She definitely knew about the accident. Jen was friends with-

No.

He wasn’t going there.

“How long are you staying?” Mrs Walters asked, handing him the parcel.

“I dunno.”

“I’ll have to tell Jennifer, she’ll never believe it.”

“Right,” Bucky swallowed. “Uh, I gotta go. Steve’s waiting in the truck so...”

“Oh, tell him I was asking for him!”

“Sure,” Bucky nodded, hefting the box under his arm. “Nice to, uh, see you.”

“Ms Walters get you?” Steve grinned after taking one look at Bucky’s expression, turning the ignition.

“Yup,” Bucky sighed. “Said to say she’s asking for you.”

“You know, Jen’s up in Chicago,” Steve said, pulling away. “She’s a lawyer there. You might’ve bumped into her without knowing it.”

“I’m pretty sure I would’ve recognised her,” Bucky replied.

He was also pretty sure that Jen would’ve confronted him if she saw him. She was there for every session of the trial. Maybe because she wanted to be a lawyer. Probably because she thought Bucky was guilty.

Steve parked the truck in the lot opposite the Waldron General Store, grabbing a pile of reusable carriers from the back seat. Bucky jumped out, following him across the street and into the store. His mouth quirked upwards at the sight of the carved wooden chief, throwing the statue a sloppy salute.

“You need me to get anything?” he asked Steve.

“Uh, I’ve got a list of everything we need,” Steve explained. “If there’s anything you specifically want or need, you should probably pick that up.”

“Sure,” Bucky nodded.

He wandered through the aisles, picking up some toiletries and a pack of razors. On impulse, he decided to grab some Red Vines. As he waited at the checkout, he noticed a row of Cow Chips Jerky, and remembered Jess going crazy over it when she was a kid, newly arrived in Indiana and hating the world. Bucky bought her a packet of Cow Chips, and she fell in love instantly. He smiled. Then picked up a bag and added it to his pile.

Bucky sat on the bonnet of the trunk eating his Red Vines, until Steve reappeared with bags full of groceries.

“Get down from there,” Steve rolled his eyes.

Bucky grinned, jumping down, a Red Vine hanging from his mouth.

“Yes dad,” he teased.

“Idiot,” Steve muttered fondly.

Once they’d loaded up the groceries, Steve drove towards the outskirts of town, where Waldron Elementary sat. He killed the engine and unclipped his belt.

“School’s out in five minutes. I’m going to wait by the gate so Dani doesn’t get on the bus,” he explained.

“Sure,” Bucky nodded, chomping on a Red Vine. “Hey, should I hide these?”

“Probably. Unless you wanna lose them all.”



“Good call.”

Bucky pocketed the Red Vines, and pulled out his phone, sending a message to T’Challa to thank him for the clothes. He found a new meme to send to Shuri, then deleted some of the junk from his inbox until Steve returned with Dani in tow.

“Hi uncle Bucky!”

“Hey kiddo,” Bucky replied, twisting in his seat to face Dani. “How was school?”

“It was fun. We had gym and played dodgeball.”

“Wow. Dodgeball, huh? Did you get anybody?”

“I nailed Parker Robbins right in the face,” Dani reported gleefully.

“Oh, she is definitely your kid,” Bucky informed Steve.

“Buckle up, sweetheart,” Steve called. “Did you apologise to Parker?”

“No, because he was being mean to Billy. So I said I wouldn’t apologise ’til he did, and he wouldn’t apologise, so I said I wouldn’t cause he shouldn’t be mean to Billy cause Billy’s nice.”

“Billy is nice,” Steve agreed, “And you shouldn’t be mean. But that doesn’t make it okay to hit Parker in the face with a ball.”

Bucky stared at Steve incredulously, wondering if he’d conveniently forgotten all of the times he threw himself into a fight to defend someone who couldn’t stand up for themselves, and received a smack to the bicep in reply.

“I guess,” Dani admitted. “But he didn’t apologise!”

“Did you tell the teacher?”

“Of course,” Dani replied, and Bucky could hear the unspoken *duh* at the end of the sentence and bit his lip. “He’s got lines. And he’s not allowed in the playground for the rest of the week.”

“Alright. I want you to apologise tomorrow, okay?” Steve said.

“I guess so,” she sighed, slumping dramatically, and a snort escaped before Bucky could clamp down on his laughter. Biological daughter or not, that attitude was all Steve Rogers.

He loved it.

“Good girl,” Steve smiled. “What else did you do at school today?”

“We got to write stories for English!” Dani cried. She launched in a detailed but meandering description of the story she’d written, about a dragon and a unicorn and, weirdly, Gerald the

alpaca going on an adventure to save a knight. Steve nodded and said all the right things at the right points and genuinely seemed to be following the story, and Bucky was entranced by this new version of his friend.

As soon as they pulled into the driveway, Dani unclipped her belt, the truck barely stopped by the time her feet touched the gravel and raced inside shouting for Jess.

“You’re a really good dad,” Bucky told Steve as they climbed out of the truck.

“Thanks,” Steve smiled. “I had a good role model.”

Bucky frowned. Joseph Rogers was a piece of shit who walked out on his wife and son, taking everything and never looked back.

“What are you talking about?”

“George,” Steve replied as though it was obvious, and Bucky forgot to breathe. “Your dad is amazing. And he never treated me any differently than the rest of you. And to do everything he did alone? He’s the best father I know.”

A lump edged itself in Bucky’s throat.

“Yeah,” he nodded hoarsely. “Guess so.”

Picking up his parcel and bag of purchases, he turned away, walking inside to dump them in his room. Sticking his head into the kitchen, Bucky tossed the bag of Cow Chips to Jess, interrupting her conversation with Tony.

“Got you something,” he called, before heading back out towards the yard.

He was knee deep in Vision’s stall when Tony found him.

“Cow Chips? You’re sucking up to her,” Tony smirked.

Bucky paused, leaning on the fork.

“Believe me, it’s in our best interests for all of us to suck up to Jess,” he joked.

Tony giggled, his nose scrunching up and, shit, that was adorable.

“You’re not wrong,” he agreed, and threw Bucky a wink before walking away.

## Chapter End Notes

Total disclaimer: I'm not a vet, and I'm not a horse trainer. I've tried to research any vet/medical stuff, but bear with me if there are any glaring errors. As for the methods Tony will use/mention, I've always been interested in natural horsemanship - and yes,

I'm aware of the arguments for and against natural horsemanship - which is where the inspiration for this story came from in the first place. Again, I'm not trained in any of the techniques - although I would love to learn more - but I've tried my best to be accurate.

Because I work visually, whenever I'm writing a fic, I search for houses/apartments in the area where the characters live. I like to make things as close to real places as possible when I'm thousands of miles away and relying on the internet. Winter's Haven is based on a real farm that was for sale near Shelbyville (Bucky Barnes' home town in the comics) and I've done my best to find out the information about the places mentioned (also, it felt right when I noticed there was somewhere called Downeyville nearby) but I've never been to any of them. So I'm sorry if there are any glaring mistakes.

Cow Chips Jerky is made in Indiana. I wanted something Indiana-specific rather than generic American. I'm not sure if it's sold in supermarkets, or if you can only buy it from them direct. For the sake of the story, let's say it's available elsewhere. Apparently it's almost perfect beef jerky. I can't comment on this, since I've never tried it, and nor will I ever. Beef jerky does not sound appealing to me at all.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

Tony helps Bucky find an escape from the punishment chores. Bucky puts himself out there.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*“Say Tony, you are the best and I pledge my eternal allegiance to you.”*

“No,” Bucky replied, leading Rocket towards his stall. Tony opened the stall door for him, leaning against it once they were inside and watching Bucky with a smirk.

“I think you should,” he sing-singed.

“I’m not gonna,” Bucky sang back at him. “Not without a damn good reason.”

“Oh, you want a good reason? Right,” Tony nodded. “So, does getting you out of Jess’ punishment chores count?” he smirked.

“What?”

“Told her I needed an extra pair of hands. I’m going to work with the god of thunder over there, so it would be a big help if you could exercise Goliath.”

“Doesn’t Steve usually help you with that?” Bucky frowned.

“Goliath doesn’t like Steve,” Tony replied diplomatically.

Bucky let himself out of the stall, raising an eyebrow as he bolted the door.

“Steve rides weird. Goliath hates it. He bucked him off the last time he tried.”

Bucky snorted.

“Sure,” he replied. “I can take him out. What’re you going to do with Thor?”

“Just some quiet time,” Tony explained. “Being around him and near him so he starts getting used to humans again. Or at least, humans who don’t want to hurt him.”

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded. “Alright, anything I should know about Goliath?”

“Not really. His problems are with trailers. He’s fine riding out. You can work with him in the school, or take him out on the trail. Whatever you like. His tack is marked. He’s a good horse. Comfortable canter.”

“Alright,” Bucky nodded.

“Enjoy,” Tony called after him.

“Oh, Tony?” Bucky added, pausing in the door to the tack room.

“Hmm?”

“You’re the best and I pledge my eternal allegiance to you,” Bucky grinned.

X

There was a special kind of freedom that came from being on the back of a horse.

His muscles seemed to remember what to do, although Bucky had no doubt that he would feel like he’d gone ten rounds with a heavyweight champion tomorrow.

He really didn’t care.

Bucky and Goliath crossed the road, then Bucky turned the big grey horse onto the bridlepath, his hooves muffled by the grass underfoot. As they moved away further away from the road, the trees grew up on either side, and a smile spread across Bucky’s face.

“I’m home,” he murmured, scritching Goliath’s neck.

Bucky nudged Goliath up into a trot, then into a canter. Tony was right; Goliath’s canter was smooth like a rocking horse. With the air rushing past his ears, and Goliath’s hooves thudding against the ground, Bucky grinned. He couldn’t resist letting out a cheer and Goliath snorted.

Bucky laughed.

“Atta boy,” he grinned, pulling Goliath back to a walk.

Goliath snorted again.

Bucky pulled him to a halt at the edge of the road, glancing in either direction for cars, before urging him on, across the road and heading down towards Clifty Creek for old times sake.

Back when they were kids, Bucky and Steve would ride down to the creek almost every day. There, they would play pretend, as cowboys or knights in shining armour. When they were eleven, they built a den. Looking back, Bucky realised he’d probably spent half of his life down by Clifty Creek on Winter’s back.

When they reached the creek, Bucky pulled Goliath to a halt, letting the reins fall loose to give him a break. He thought of Winter with a pang of regret. He remembered getting the voicemail from Steve, his voice thick as he explained that Winter was dying, telling Bucky if

he wanted to say goodbye, now was the time to come home. Back then, Bucky justified ignoring the message to himself by claiming that Steve was just saying it to guilt Bucky into going home. He'd ignored the voice in his head that pointed out that Steve sounded genuinely upset.

And of course Steve was upset at the thought of losing Winter. He'd loved that horse just as much as Bucky did. They both learned to ride on Winter, the horse that everyone claimed could never be cured. Everyone had given up on him.

Everyone but George Barnes.

Bucky swallowed the lump in his throat.

There was no point in looking back. He'd made his mistakes, now he had to live with them.

Shortening his reins, he nudged Goliath on, making their way along by the edge of the creek, until the warmth of the sun, the creak of leather, and the clop of Goliath's hooves banished the dark thoughts and brought the smile back to his face.

X

"Have fun?" Tony asked, emerging from the barn with Loki in tow as Bucky and Goliath trotted into the yard.

"That was amazing," Bucky grinned. He pulled Goliath to a halt, kicking his feet out of the stirrups and dismounting. "Good boy," he murmured, scratching Goliath's neck. "D'you want him in or out?" he asked Tony.

"In," Tony replied. "Can you give him a brush down too?"

"No problem," Bucky nodded.

He led Goliath into the barn, swapping out his bridle for a halter and tying the big grey horse up outside his stall. With the bridle over his shoulder, Bucky unbuckled the saddle, heaving it off of Goliath's back and returning it to the tack room. Goliath nibbled at a hay net while Bucky brushed him down, turning his head occasionally to watch Bucky.

"Checking up on me, huh?" Bucky teased.

Goliath snorted and turned his attention back to the hay net. Bucky smiled. He'd miss Goliath when he went back to his owner.

Then he realised what that meant: he was planning on being here long enough to see Goliath leave.

"You okay?" Tony called, re-entering the barn.

"Yeah," Bucky shook himself.

He untied Goliath, leading him into the stall and unclipping the rope. He checked the water bucket and the hay net, before stepping out of the stall and found Tony waiting for him.

“Thanks,” Bucky said. “I mean it. That was... I had fun.”

“No problem,” Tony smiled.

He really needed to stop smiling. It was doing uncomfortable things to Bucky. Stirring things. Things like feelings.

“So, uh, Steve said you didn’t know about horses before you came here?” Bucky said, searching desperately for a distraction from Tony and his damn smile.

“That’s right,” Tony nodded.

“But you rescued Loki?”

“Yeah. My company was expanding,” Tony explained, “And we needed land for a new facility. So I went to check out this place that was for sale and I heard something. Found Loki tied up in this rotten old shed. No food, no water, barely any shelter. He was wild. Animal control wanted to put him down, but...”

“But?”

“I couldn’t let them do it,” Tony shrugged. “Even skinny as a rake and mad as hell I could see he was a beautiful animal. He didn’t deserve to die just because humans are assholes.”

“Humans are assholes,” Bucky agreed.

“So I bought a trailer. And a truck. Got a vet to sedate him so we could get him onboard. Then I googled for rescue horse rehabilitation and I found the website for this place. Drove out from California immediately and turned up on Jess and Steve’s doorstep, begging for help. And, well, none of us knew how to help him. But I didn’t want to just give up on him. So Jess and Steve agreed to keep Loki, and we decided to learn how to help him together. Looked through your dad’s old journals and notes, spoke to Jan, and we learned. It was a long road, but we helped him.”

“And he’s good now?” Bucky asked.

“Well,” Tony smiled. “He likes me. And Jess. He likes messing with Steve. I’m not kidding, you ever need a laugh, ask Steve to catch Loki from the paddock. He will be there for hours. We learned that the hard way.”

Bucky chuckled.

“The mountain meets the immovable object?”

Steve was notoriously stubborn.

“Then we got a call from Jan about another horse, and I just decided to stay,” Tony shrugged. “I like it here. I like my life here. Can’t say I did before. Not really. I got my second chance.”

A second chance. That sounded nice. Bucky wasn’t sure he deserved a second chance, not like Tony.

But it couldn’t hurt to try, right?

“D’you wanna get a drink sometime?” he asked.

Tony smiled, but Bucky knew that smile. It was a *time to let you down gently* smile. Shit, he was an idiot.

“I don’t date people who don’t respect me anymore,” Tony replied.

“I respect you,” Bucky frowned, because what the hell? “I don’t know why you think that-“

“Bucky,” Tony interrupted. “How can you respect me, when you don’t even respect yourself?”

That was just, just... insane. Where the hell was Tony getting this bullshit from? And he was just standing there, looking at Bucky with eyes filled with compassion. Didn’t he realise that Bucky didn’t *deserve* compassion?

(*Want* was a different kettle of fish altogether, but since when did he get what he wanted?)

“I’m sorry,” Tony shrugged.

“Whatever,” Bucky snapped.

“Hey.” Tony caught his wrist before Bucky could storm off. His grip was surprisingly strong. Or maybe not, considering he worked with twelve hundred pound animals on a daily basis. “Listen. If you ever decide that you’re worth more than this, then you can buy me a drink? For what’s it’s worth, I think you deserve to cut yourself a break.”

There was a lump in his throat, pushing on his vocal cords and making it near impossible to speak, and certainly not with dignity. So Bucky just nodded, before pulling his arm free and walking away and trying not to feel like the nerdy kid turned down by the coolest kid in school.

X

“What are you doing in here?” Dani’s voice called out, filled with disdain that only an eight year old could muster.

Bucky stuck his head around the pile of boxes, spotting his niece standing in the door to the loft. He gave her a quick smile.

“Hey squirt,” he greeted. “I’m looking for my stuff.”



“Why?”

“Cause I need it,” Bucky replied.

“Oh,” Dani said. She wandered into the loft, dodging her own crib and a pile of old newspapers to join Bucky in-between columns of cardboard boxes, all labelled with permanent marker in Steve’s familiar handwriting. “What kind of stuff?”

“Clothes, mostly,” Bucky replied, absently. T’Challa had sent the stuff he asked for, and it was great, but Bucky knew all his old riding gear had to be around here somewhere. After all, it wasn’t like he’d taken it with him when he left. He didn’t know he wouldn’t be coming home again.

“Ah ha!” he beamed triumphantly, finding the box marked *Bucky’s room: Riding stuff*.

Yanking the box open, Bucky folded down the flaps, before digging into the contents. Right on top was the worn red hoodie he used to wear in the yard. Then the immaculate white breeches he wore when he used to compete, folded neatly, one pair on top of the other. His tall black riding boots lay along the bottom of the box, clean and polished. Bucky picked up one, feeling the familiar supple leather under his fingers.

Even after five years, the smell of horses still clung to them.

“Here, gimme a hand, would ya?” Bucky said, holding out the pile of breeches and his hoodie for Dani to take. “Thanks kid. Holy shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “Nothing, I just- Wow.”

Reaching back into the box, Bucky pulled out one of the medals piled up in the other end of the box. The gold disc swung back and forth as Bucky held it up by the red and blue ribbon.

He swallowed.

“What’s that?” Dani piped up, reminding him that she was still at his side.

“It’s, uh, it’s one of my medals,” Bucky explained. “I used to compete. Dressage mostly.”

“Can I see?” Dani asked, reaching up on her tip toes.

“Sure,” he replied. He shifted the pile of clothes from her arms onto another box before passing her the medal. Dani gazed at it, her mouth curving into an O.

He had to turn away.

In the bottom of the box, Bucky found more of his medals, some bronze and silvers, but mostly golds. Once upon a time, he’d dreamed of joining the Paralympic dressage team, imagining himself taking part in competitions around the world. That was before his teenage rebellion, three years too late, when riding was no longer cool.

‘Wow. You’ve got a lot of medals,” Dani gasped, peering into the box.

“Yeah,” Bucky smiled. “I was kinda good, y’know.”

“That’s cool.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Why did you stop?”

“Because I was an idiot,” Bucky shrugged. “There’ll come a time when you think you’re too cool for stuff like riding, when you’ll care more about what you’re friends think than about what you love, and you’ll act like an idiot too. Everyone does it. Well, almost everyone. I don’t think your dad did. But I definitely did. I thought I was too cool. Wanna know a secret?”

“What?”

“I was so not cool,” Bucky grinned. “I was a huge dork. Still am.”

Dani giggled.

“Can I play with this?” she asked, holding up the medal in his hand.

“Sure thing,” he nodded.

“Awesome,” Dani declared, dropping the medal around her neck. “I think you’re cool, uncle Bucky.”

“You do, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks honey,” Bucky smiled, ruffling her hair.

Maybe Tony didn’t like him, didn’t like who he was, thought he needed to change. In the end, that didn’t really matter. Not when his niece thought he was cool.

“You’re pretty cool too, kiddo,” Bucky replied.

## Chapter End Notes

If you take a break from riding, it hurts like a bitch when you start again. I know this from experience. Totally worth it though.

Some horses do have a really comfortable canter (Horses have four gaits: walk, trot, canter, gallop). The last horse I rode regularly had the best canter, it was so comfortable.

Usually comfortable canters are described as being like a rocking horse. Other horses have really uncomfortable canters where you feel like a sack of potatoes.

The smell of horses (I don't know what it is, it's just a smell of horses) clings to everything. My hat and boots still smell of them, even after a couple of years.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat, or complain about how Bucky is his own worst enemy (bless him, he's an idiot).

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

Bucky and Jess mend some fences, literally and figuratively, and Bucky joins Steve and Tony for their monthly boys' night out. There may be flirting involved.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky woke to the wind howling and rain slapping against his widow. He groaned, rolling over and burying his face in his pillow in the hope that it would smother him, and he wouldn't have to go outside and deal with shitty weather. He lay there for a few more minutes, before flinging off the covers and searching for his arm.

Once he was dressed and smuggled up in the freshly-washed red hoodie, Bucky shuffled through into the kitchen where Steve, bless his heart, immediately handed him a fresh mug of coffee.

"I love you," Bucky declared emphatically, staring Steve in the eye.

Steve rolled his eyes.

"Sit down and eat your bacon," he shook his head.

"Pledge your love to him, and he just rolls his eyes," Bucky grumbled, sitting down opposite Tony.

"He just doesn't appreciate you," Tony agreed, his eyes twinkling. The bottom ends of his hair were wet and plastered to his scalp, no doubt where his hat failed to protect him from the driving rain, which Bucky could now see in all its grey glory through the front window. He shivered, huddling further into his hoodie.

Chores that were bad at the best of times became nigh on unbearable in this weather. Every trip to the muck heap was a race against time, battling to keep as much straw in the wheelbarrow as possible.

"It fucking sucks out there," Bucky informed Goliath as he filled up his water bottle. "You're much better off in here."

Because the only thing that Bucky loved about shitty weather was being in the barn. The barn was warm, the smell of straw and horses comforting. While the wind screamed outside, inside felt like another world. Bucky was quite happy to spend the day there and just not

leave. He considered hiking himself up into the rafters to nestle in the straw, away from the world. It was teenage Bucky's sulking venue of choice for years.

"It's times like these that I regret leaving California," Tony called from Loki's stall.

"Why did you?"

"I developed this thing called a conscience," Tony replied, dropping a lightening fast kiss onto Loki's nose. Loki's head reared back and he glared down at Tony, affronted, as though he couldn't fathom why Tony would dare do something as banal as kiss him. Bucky snorted, shaking his head.

"That's a real prima donna, you've got there," he said.

"Yeah, but he's my prima donna," Tony grinned. "Besides, some might say he's perfectly suited for me. Like attracts like and all that. Isn't that right boy? Uh huh?"

He scratched Loki's neck one last time before letting himself out of the stall.

Once Tony was out of the stall, Thor moved closer to the divide between his and Loki's stall, nosing at the bars that separated them, and whickering softly. Bucky and Tony watched Loki's ears prick. He turned towards Thor, blinking at him. Thor whined again, louder this time.

Loki decided his hay net was much more interesting, and turned his back on Thor.

Bucky grinned at the look of confusion on Thor's face, as though the big horse couldn't understand why Loki wouldn't want to instantly be friends with him.

"Sorry buddy," he called.

Thor's head snapped towards them. His ears flattened and he bared his teeth. Bucky stared back nonplussed.

"It'll take more'n that to scare me off," he pointed out.

"Poor Thor," Tony shook his head. "You should've known better than to choose Loki as your bestie," he said. "He doesn't like anybody."

"Likes you."

"Yes, but only because I out-stubborned him," Tony shrugged, picking up his grooming kit and heading towards the tack room.

The storm started to die as the morning went on. By the time they returned to the house for lunch, the sky was blue once more, although the wind still whipped around them, pulling several strands of Bucky's hair loose from his ponytail.

"I noticed the wind took out the fence at the far end of the north paddock," Steve said as Jess handed out the plates of burritos.

“I’ll take a look after lunch,” Jess replied. “Bucky, can you give me a hand?”

Bucky looked up sharply. He was pretty sure that was the first time she’d referred to him by name since his arrival, rather than just *you*.

“Sure,” he nodded. “Long as you don’t expect me to, you know, actually build anything unless you’re looking to take a trip to the ER.”

Jess rolled her eyes, and Bucky could’ve sworn he saw the faintest hint of a smile twitching at the edge of her mouth.

“Relax, MacGyver,” she teased. “I just need you to hold it in place. I’ll do all the heavy lifting.”

“Good call,” Bucky nodded, and he risked sending Jess a grin.

After a moment of hesitation, she gave him the smallest of smiles back, and Bucky only just resisted the urge to fist pump the air.

X

Bucky picked up the fallen fence post, jamming in back into the hole in the ground and holding it still.

“Straight?” he asked Jess.

“The pole might be, but it’s the only one,” she joked.

Bucky snorted with laughter.

“Yeah. Definitely in the minority around here.”

He held the post in place while Jess hammered it into the ground. Dusting off his hands against his jeans, Bucky move to the second fallen post, doing the same thing. Then Jess picked up a plank and held it out to him. Bucky held it in place against the fence post, lining it up as much as possible with the holes from the previous nails. Balancing the rest of the plank against his knee.

“Hold still,” Jess ordered.

“Yes ma’am.”

Bucky watched Jess hammer the new nails into the fence, a frown taking over her face as she concentrated. It was an expression Bucky recognised from exams and Jess’ first riding lessons when she first came to stay with them. It made him ache for the days when he could safely call her his sister without fear of rebuke.

“Y’know, I’m glad you’re talking to me again,” he ventured, fully aware that he was taking his life into his hands.

Jess glanced at him, her face becoming the impassive mask she wore whenever she didn't want anyone to know how much she was hurting. Bucky hated that mask.

"You hurt me, Bucky," she said frankly.

Bucky winced.

"I deserved that," he admitted.

"Yeah. You did. You were a real asshole when I got back from New York. I barely saw you, and then you were gone."

"Yeah, I was a little shit. You should've kicked some sense into me."

"I was too busy trying to look after my baby on my own," she retorted. "*You* should've seen that. Steve did."

"Yeah, that's on me," Bucky agreed. He shuffled along, holding the other end of the plank in place. "I had my head so far up my own ass, that I couldn't see you needed help. I mean, you came home. That shoulda been a red flag for me. You hate asking for help. Or you did."

"Still do," she shrugged. "Except when it's Steve."

Bucky nodded slowly.

He'd lost the right to be the first one Jess turned to with her problems, and that was his fault. He wasn't going to get angry at her, or blame Steve for that.

"But I wasn't the only one who needed you," Jess continued. "Everything fell apart, and you were just... gone. You wouldn't answer my calls, or Steve's. Dad was in hospital, and we didn't even know if he was going to wake up, and we *needed* you. You knew this place better than anyone but you wouldn't even talk to us. You didn't even come to my wedding."

A lump lodged itself in Bucky's throat. He ducked his head, under the guise of picking up the next plank. He swallowed furiously once, then twice.

"I'm sorry," he apologised. "That was really shitty of me. I know that. Whatever else was going on, I should've been there."

"Yes, you should've," Jess nodded, fixing him with an unwavering gaze. "Why didn't you just come home?"

Bucky didn't answer. He couldn't.

"Was it the accident?" she pressed.

*Yes.*

"No," he shook his head. "Kinda."

That guilt was still so fresh, and then to have more guilt, the guilt of what he did to his dad, piled on top. It was just too much. He couldn't face it.

"Why couldn't you talk to me?" Jess whispered.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky forced himself to look up, meet her gaze head on.

"It was stupid," he lied. "Not important. But Jess, you were important. And I hurt you. And I was so wrong. I'm sorry."

"Thanks," she replied, picking up two fresh nails. "I'll work on forgiving you."

"Take as long as you need."

They finished the fence in silence, before trekking back across the paddock, where Jess headed back towards the house with a wave, and Bucky returned to the barn. He stopped outside Thor's stall, moving closer until he was leaning on the door. The horse eyed him suspiciously from the back of the stall.

"You know," Bucky murmured, "I probably never would've come back here if it wasn't for you. Don't know if I should thank you or curse you for that."

Thor gave a warning nicker. Bucky raised his eyebrow.

"You got a problem with me? Come say it to my face," he challenged.

Thor glared at him, before deciding he wasn't worth it, reaching out to snatch a mouthful of hay from the net, keeping one eye on Bucky at all times.

Bucky looked up at the sound of hooves echoing in the yard, giving Steve a lopsided smile when Steve appeared with Vision.

"They don't actually let you ride, do they?" Bucky teased, nodding to Steve's helmet. "You poor horse," he said to Vision, rubbing the horse's pink nose with one finger as he nudged Bucky's pockets for treats.

"I'm not that bad," Steve protested.

Bucky handed him Vision's halter, watching him expertly switch the bridle out for the halter, swinging the bridle onto his shoulder as he tied Vision to a ring. Only then did Steve unclip his helmet, hanging it on a spare hook before he lifting the flap to unbuckle the girth.

"I've seen riders weep when they watch you," Bucky smirked, only half joking. Steve's form was terrible. If he'd ever had any urge to follow Bucky into the competition ring as a kid, the judges would've laughed him straight out of the ring.

Steve flipped him off, before heaving the saddle off of Vision's back.

"Make yourself useful and put this back?"



“I’m plenty useful,” Bucky retorted in mock offence, but he took the saddle and bridle, returning them to the tack room so Steve could brush Vision down.

“Did you two get the fence fixed?” Steve asked.

“Yup,” Bucky nodded. “Well, Jess fixed it. I just stood there and looked pretty.”

“I’m not sure you’re qualified for that, Bucky,” Steve replied with a straight face.

“Thank you very much, Rogers. You really know how to make a guy feel special.”

Steve shot him a shit-eating grin, tossing the body brush back into the grooming kit and untying Vision to lead him into his stall. Bucky picked up a brush and began sweeping up the loose hay and dirt from the aisle.

“Hey beautiful,” Steve called, latching Vision’s stall, and Bucky was about to ask him what the hell he was playing at, until he realised Jess was walking up towards the barn. The Jess Bucky knew would’ve scowled at being called beautiful, but this Jess just smiled, coming up to Steve and rising onto her toes to kiss him.

“No kissing in my barn,” Tony called, appearing from the indoor arena with Red.

Steve and Jess both simultaneously flipped him off, without breaking apart.

“Soulmates,” Tony joked, grinning at Bucky.

“Obviously,” he agreed.

“What does a guy have to do to get a date with a girl like you?” Steve teased, holding Jess with an arm around her waist. As much as Bucky didn’t want to watch his best friend and his sister, there was something special in the way Steve held Jess, his hand pressed into her back to hold her close, but she could still get away if she wanted to - something that Bucky knew was important to her after her ex turned out to be an abusive asshole. And the way Steve looked at her, it was like Jess was the most precious thing on the planet, with the possible exception of Dani.

Bucky was struck by a pang of longing.

Not for Steve, because no, and certainly not for Jess, because ew, but for someone to look at him that way. To think that Bucky was the most important person in the universe. To look at with that much love, even five years after their marriage. His eyes flickered towards Tony unbidden, but Bucky quickly looked away and slammed shut the wave of attraction that flared.

Tony turned him down. Tony didn’t want him.

“A babysitter would be a good start,” Jess replied, pecking him on the cheek.

“How many times?” Tony said, spreading his arms. “Live in babysitter right here. Go on a date. I’ll watch the squirt.”

“Jesus, a date? I can’t remember what that is,” Steve sighed, wrapping both arms around Jess as she leaned into his chest.

Jess hummed in agreement.

“A date would be nice,” she agreed.

“I’d like to hope I can better than nice,” Steve pointed out.

“Please shut up, that’s my sister,” Bucky grimaced, swiping the dustpan from the corner, brushing the pile of dirt into the shovel and dumping it into a wheelbarrow.

Steve and Jess wore matching smirks.

Bucky turned to Thor.

“Hey buddy, if I came into your stall, would you, I don’t know, trample me to death so I don’t have to think about this?”

Thor snorted.

“Thank you. You’re my only friend.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” Steve rolled his eyes, kissing Jess on the cheek before letting her go.

“Steve Rogers just told someone to stop being melodramatic?” Tony’s voice floated out of Red’s stall.

“I know. He’s a lousy hypocrite,” Bucky replied.

“I’m not lousy,” Steve objected. “I’m very good at being a hypocrite.”

“If you two wanna go on a date so much, why don’t you go out tonight?” Bucky suggested. “If Tony’s busy, I can watch Dani.”

“Tony is busy, but so is Steve,” Tony called.

Bucky frowned.

“We have a boys’ night out once a month,” Steve explained, “And Jess and Dani have a girls’ night without us there. We’re going out tonight. You should come.”

“I don’t know.”

“If you stay at home, you’re watching Barbie movies and getting your nails painted,” Jess warned.

“That actually sounds fun.”

Bucky tried to duck, but Jess’ palm collided with his shoulder.

“Go. Be sociable for once in your life.”

“I’m sociable,” Bucky frowned. “I have, like, four whole friends.”

“You’re coming,” Steve declared.

“What do you even do?” Bucky asked. There wasn’t exactly a lot of nightlife around here.

“Oh don’t worry,” Steve replied. “It’s very cool.”

X

“This is not cool, Rogers,” Bucky glared. “This is where I had my eighth birthday party.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Steve grinned, holding open the door for Bucky and Tony.

Bucky glowered at him, because the alternative was looking at Tony, who was ahead of him, and wearing a good pair of jeans. And if Bucky thought Tony’s ass looked good in his work jeans, that was nothing compared to these. He’d seriously considered bailing on them to watch *Barbie and the Diamond Castle* with Dani and Jess instead.

At least he could guarantee he wouldn’t get turned on by Barbie.

“Cheer up Buck, it’ll be fun,” Steve grinned, clapping him on the shoulder before walking into Parkside Lanes.

Jesus, it was like stepping back in time. It wasn’t just his eighth birthday Bucky spent at Parkside Lanes. There were numerous birthday parties over the years, not just his and his sisters, but classmates and friends, and family days out with his sisters and his dad, usually with Steve tagging along. Even part of their senior year class trip had taken place at Parkside.

(In the days after the accident, as the true impact of what he’d done began to come to light, Bucky had taken a photo from that trip and ripped it into tiny pieces, because he couldn’t bear to look at their smiling faces in one picture)

“You and I have different definitions of fun,” Bucky grumbled.

“Is he always this grumpy on a night out?” Tony asked. “Or is he just scared he’s gonna lose?”

“You think I’m gonna lose?” Bucky interrupted before Steve could reply. “I’ve been coming here since before I could walk. I know this place better than the back of my hand. If anyone’s going to lose, Stark, it’s gonna be you.”

“Oh you think?” Tony smirked. “You think you’re going to beat a certified genius who can calculate speed and angles on the spot?”

“You think you’ve got better aim than someone who learned how to use a shotgun when he was ten?”

“Down, boys,” Steve rolled his eyes. “We don’t even have a lane yet.”

Bucky exchanged his sneakers for a pair of red, white and blue bowling shoes, tying the laces in a neat knot, before following Steve down to their lane. Bucky took control of the keypad, typing in their names and setting up the game.

“What do you eat on your pizza, and if you say pineapple, I’m throwing a bowling ball at you?” Tony warned, pointing at Bucky.

“Gross. No. I have actual taste,” Bucky grimaced. “Pepperoni, extra mushrooms, extra garlic.”

“Rogers?”

“Italian sausage, peppers, onion, garlic, and sriracha sauce.”

“Coming up.”

Tony disappeared to order the pizza, while Steve stepped up to bowl first. With his first ball, he managed to clear out the centre pins, leaving a near-impossible shot with two pins on either side. Bucky crowed, grinning in the face of Steve’s disapproving look, and hooted when Steve sent his second ball sailing through the centre.

“What did I miss?” Tony asked, returning with a tray of beers.

“Steve tanking it,” Bucky replied, standing up and searching for the right weight of ball. He tested a few, before settling on number nine. “Watch and learn, boys.”

“All I’m hearing is a lot of talk,” Steve called, clinking his beer against Tony’s.

“Yeah, come on Barnes. Or are you all talk and no action,” Tony grinned.

“I offered you some action,” Bucky muttered, stepping up and eyeing the pins, “But you said no.”

He swung the ball back, taking three steps forward and released it, watching with pride as the ball arced across the lane and took out all the pins on the left.

“See, Steve? That’s how you do it,” Bucky called. He picked another ball, took a swing and managed to knock down all the remaining pins. “Your turn,” he smiled sweetly at Tony. “If you’re up to it.”

Tony put down his beer, wiping moisture from his lips with his thumb and forefinger, his tongue darting out to lick his bottom lip. Bucky was absolutely not watching it. Then Bucky glanced at Steve, who was attempting to smother his grin with his beer bottle. Bucky wasn’t worried.

He threw himself down into a chair, kicking one leg up onto the empty seats and enjoyed the view as Tony picked up a ball and walked forward. Tony eyed the lane, his eyes narrowed. Those tight jeans were a gift, Bucky decided.

Then he swung the ball back and released it so fast Bucky almost missed it.

The ball shot down the centre of the lane, smacking directly into the centre of the pins and sending them all scattering. Above their heads, the animated pins on the screen cheered *Strike!* but Bucky was too busy gaping at Tony to notice.

Tony smiled smugly.

“Certified genius,” he repeated. “Ooh, pizza.”

“Son of a bitch,” Bucky breathed.

He stopped underestimating Tony after that, and stepped up his game. Even Steve brought it; the next time he split his pins, he somehow managed to pull off some fancy move that pinball the ball across the lane, taking out all the remaining pins.

“Show off!” Bucky called around a mouthful of pizza. He wiped his hands on a napkin, jumping up to find the ball he’d claimed as his, lifting it up and feeling its weight in his wrist. “You’re going down, Stark,” he called.

“You wish!” Tony replied.

Bucky managed to knock down all the pins bar one.

“I think you’ll find that you are the one going down,” Tony said as they passed each other.

“That’s okay,” Bucky replied. He waited until Tony was ready to take his shot, before adding, “I’m *really* good at going down.”

Beside him, Steve choked on a slice of pizza, and Bucky was pleased to note that Tony’s aim was decidedly off-centre. He slapped Steve on the back.

“You okay there buddy?”

“Talk about an image I didn’t need,” Steve replied hoarsely, taking a swig of beer. “Fucking hell.”

Bucky chuckled.

“You’re a dick,” Tony declared as Steve went to take his shot.

“I’m just being honest,” Bucky shrugged. “You had your chance to find out for yourself, but I guess you’ll never know. Your loss.”

“Honey.” Tony clapped him on the shoulder. “You have idea what *you’re* missing out on.”

Bucky would never admit it, but he might have gone a little dry mouthed at that, especially the way Tony was looking at him, his eyes flickering between Bucky's own eyes and his mouth. Then the bastard pulled his lower lip in-between his teeth, and Bucky had to take a deep breath and remind himself *public place, public place, you can't jump Tony, there are families here.*

"Wow, what an amazing shot, Steve, Well done Steve," Steve called out, his voice jerking Tony and Bucky out of their moment (was it a moment? It felt like a moment). Steve stared at them deadpan. "You two suck."

They both opened their mouths, but Steve cut them off with a raised finger and a quiet, "Don't."

Tony laughed.

"I'm gonna get more beer," he called over his shoulder.

"So," Steve said, sitting down while Bucky picked up his ball. "Tony, huh?"

"What're you talking about?" Bucky frowned. He threw the ball, taking out two thirds of the pins.

"You like Tony."

"What? No, I don't," Bucky lied. "Fuck," he swore, only hitting two pins with his second shot.

"Oh come on! You're telling me that all that flirting you two are doing means nothing? This is Rick Jones all over again," Steve exclaimed.

"I'm not flirting," Bucky replied, except, shit, he was, wasn't he? "Fine. I like him," he snapped. "Not that it matters. He's not interested."

"On what planet?"

"I already asked him out," Bucky revealed. "And he said no. Wanted me to change myself before he'd even consider going out with me. I'm not doing that."

"That doesn't sound like Tony," Steve replied, a dubious expression written across his face.

"Well, he did," Bucky said, picking up his final slice of pizza. "I asked, he said no, end of."

Steve hummed.

"I don't know about that."

"I do. And you're wrong."

"Why's Steve wrong?" Tony asked, returning with more beer.

“Because he thinks he can win the next game,” Bucky covered smoothly.

Tony snorted.

“No chance, Rogers.”

Steve’s eyes narrowed dangerously. Bucky bit back a grin. Steve’s stubborn streak had just come into play. Things were about to get interesting.

“Bring it on,” Steve declared.

## Chapter End Notes

Parkside Lanes in Greenburg is real. Thank you internet. When I was going up in a similar small town (albeit a couple thousand miles away) we spent a lot of time at the bowling alley, because it was the only form of entertainment we had. This does not mean I'm any good at bowling however.

If you spot any typos, feel free to let me know. I don't have a beta, and I suck at proof reading - I do it, I just don't always spot stuff - so if you spot anything, let me know and I'll fix it.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Summary

Join up proves to have great effects not only for Thor, but also for Bucky. Even if it does lead to a terrifying realisation.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You like Tony?” Jess asked without preamble, throwing herself into an empty chair at the dining table.

“You told her?” Bucky yelled through to the kitchen, glancing around as if Tony might pop out of the couch cushions at any moment.

“She’s my wife,” Steve yelled back. “It’s in my best interests to tell her everything. Plus, I want to so...”

“Yes, I like Tony,” Bucky sighed. “But Tony doesn’t like me. So can we drop it please?”

“This is like Rick Jones all over again, isn’t it?” Jess frowned.

“I said that!” Steve called.

“Fucking hell,” Bucky exclaimed. “You two are like creepy twins in a horror movie, you know that? If you start talking in unison, I’m locking you in the attic. Why is everyone so interested in the fact I like Tony anyway?”

“We live in the middle of nowhere. We don’t get gossip,” Jess pointed out. “Did you ask him out?”

“You already know I did,” Bucky replied, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl. “Thanks to Mr TMZ in there.”

Steve shrugged unrepentantly as Bucky glared at him on his way through the kitchen.

“Hey! Where are you going? I’m making pancakes,” Steve called after him. “I promise we won’t tease you about Tony anymore. Well. Not much.”

“Can’t hear you,” Bucky replied, shoving his feet into the nearest pair of boots and hurrying out the door.

He munched on the apple as he wandered across the drive towards the barn. As he approached, Tony appeared out of the barn, his expression brightening when he spotted



Bucky (and that shouldn't make him feel as good as it did, when Tony clearly didn't want him that way).

"You'll do," Tony declared, before turning and disappearing back into the barn.

"Alright," Bucky frowned around a mouthful of apple. He swallowed, tossing the apple core into the trash can and following Tony inside. "I'll do for what?" he called.

"I'm going to try join up with Thor," Tony explained. "I'd like an extra pair of hands around, incase he freaks out."

"Sure," Bucky nodded. "How's he doing?"

"He lets me in the stall now, and just about tolerates me giving him a just brush down," Tony shrugged.

Bucky stood back, giving Thor space, while Tony let himself into the stall. He moved slowly towards Thor, ignoring his warning whicker, and clipped the coiled lunge line onto his halter.

"Good boy," Tony murmured. "Can you get the door?"

Bucky nodded.

"Gimme a minute."

He left the barn, rounding to the other side, where a second door led from Thor's stall into a fenced path to the ring, preventing any breaks for freedom. Bucky opened the stall, then climbed back over the fence, walking alongside as Tony led Thor down into the ring. Bucky closed the gate behind them, then leaned his forearms against the fence to watch.

Tony led Thor around the edge of the ring, letting him explore, pausing when Thor eyed Bucky warily.

"It's just Bucky. You know him," Tony murmured. "Yeah? We good? You need another minute? Okay. Good boy."

Tony unclipped the lunge line. Thor's head jerked up and he danced backwards, instantly trying to put some space between Tony and himself. Bucky watched Tony square his shoulders, looking Thor in the eye, then smack the coiled lunge line against his jeans.

Thor snorted and lunged forward, breaking into a canter around the edge of the ring, his head held high and keeping one eye fixed on Tony. Tony flicked out the lunge line towards Thor's back feet; Thor squealed and picked up the pace. Bucky felt himself leaning forward in fascination.

This would never stop being magical.

He remembered the first time he saw his dad try join up with Winter, thinking there was no way it would allow him to get anywhere near Winter, then watching with wide eyes as Winter accepted George's touch calmly for the first time ever.

Then, when he was a teenager, Bucky himself learned how to join up with Winter, with Jess watching from the sidelines as Bucky was now. It built a connection between them, a level of trust unlike anything Bucky had ever experienced before.

Thor had settled somewhat, still watching Tony carefully, but he'd fallen into a steady canter. Until Tony stepped forward, flicking the lunge line against his jeans again, and Thor spun on his back feet and began to canter in the other direction. Tony let Thor circle in that direction for a few more minutes, giving him a chance to study Tony with the other eye and assess the threat or lack of.

This time, when Tony stepped forward to change his direction, Thor moved smoothly and dropped into a trot.

Bucky grinned.

Tony drove Thor on, raising his right arm and spreading his fingers to urge Thor back up to a canter. Thor snorted indignantly, speeding up until Tony dropped his hand again and he returned to a trot.

*Come on*, Bucky thought, staying silent to avoid distracting Thor. *Come on*.

He watched carefully for the signs that Thor was ready to join up with Tony; sure enough, his right ear turned in towards Tony. Moments later, Thor began to lick and chew. Bucky grasped his forearms.

Thor lowered his head until his nose was all but brushing the ground, the third sign that he wanted to join up. But he stuck to the outside of the ring, refusing to move in, and Bucky knew that until he started making smaller circles, Thor wasn't truly ready to join up, and Tony wouldn't let him.

Tony flicked the lunge line again, raising his palm and Thor lunged forward, raising his head once more. He cantered three more full circuits of the ring, before Bucky noticed Thor start to drift inwards. His ear turned towards Tony again, he began to chew, and his head dropped.

Instantly Tony dropped his hand, curling it into a fist and wrapping his arm across the front of his body. Thor slowed to a walk, his circles gradually becoming smaller, and when Thor reached the head of the ring, Tony dropped his shoulders and turned away, walking down the centre of the ring.

Bucky held his breath.

Thor turned inwards, hesitating only for a second, before following Tony down the centre of the ring. Tony slowed to a stop, but Thor kept moving, reaching out his neck until his nose nudged Tony's shoulder. But only when he stepped closer and nudged him again, did Tony turn and slowly rub between his eyes.

"Good boy," Bucky heard Tony murmur. "Hi. That's it. Good boy. Good boy. Aren't you clever, huh?"

He rubbed his hands over Thor's forehead and neck, and Bucky watched the tension leave Thor's neck as he took another step closer to Tony.

"Fucking brilliant," he whispered.

When Tony walked away, Thor followed at his shoulder, huffing out a breath, his desire to be near Tony overriding his fear and Bucky bit back the urge to dance for joy. Thor followed Tony's every step, until Tony finally stopped, turning to rub his forehead once more before clipping the lunge line back onto his halter.

"Can you get the gate?" Tony called, keeping his voice low.

Instead of answering, Bucky left his perch, sliding the gate open and standing back while Tony led Thor back into the stall. Bucky closed the outer door of the stall behind them, rounding the building to meet Tony in the barn.

"That was fucking awesome," he grinned.

"I'm never going to get tired of that," Tony agreed. He leaned into the stall, offering Thor a horse treat. Instead of rearing back at the invasion of his space, Thor stretched out his neck, picking the treat from Tony's hands delicately and watching them as he crunched on it. "You know join up?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, I learned with Winter."

Tony nodded.

"Once I've worked with him a little more, I might get you to join up with him too. When he's ready to start working with other people."

"Sure," Bucky replied in surprise. "I would love to," he realised.

"Well, technically he's your horse," Tony pointed out, clapping Bucky on the shoulder before walking away.

Bucky stared at Thor, who was watching him with no suspicion for once.

"I guess you are mine," he murmured. "How 'bout that?"

X

"Hey," Bucky called to Jess as he walked into the kitchen, "D'you remember watching dad teach me how to do join up?"

Jess broke into a grin.

"Yeah," she replied. "With Winter, right? It was amazing."

"Join up always is," Steve agreed.

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded. “I was so scared. I kept thinking *what if I’m shit? What if I fuck this up? What if it doesn’t happen?* Then next thing I know, Winter’s nudging my shoulder.”

“You looked like you were gonna faint,” Jess remembered.

“I felt like I was gonna faint!”

Steve and Jess chuckled, and the sound melted something in Bucky’s heart.

“I remember when dad fostered me,” Jess recalled, “And you told me that he could talk to horses. I thought you were crazy.”

“He is crazy,” Steve grinned, ducking Bucky’s punch to the shoulder. “But he was right about that.”

“The first time I saw him do join up, I thought dad was a wizard,” Jess smiled. “It was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen. That’s when I knew I wanted to stay here forever.”

“Damn, you mean we could’ve gotten rid of you until then?” Bucky teased, grinning when Jess rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him. “I’m kidding! You’re my favourite sister. Just don’t tell the others, because they’re bigger and scarier than me, and they’ll probably kick my ass.”

“Who’s going to kick Bucky’s ass?” Tony asked as he entered the kitchen.

“May, Becca, and Kimmy,” Bucky replied.

Tony snorted.

“They’re all tiny,” he pointed out.

“And terrifying,” Bucky insisted. “Clearly you’ve never seen Kimmy throw a punch. She might be five foot four, but she can really pack a punch.”

“She really can,” Steve agreed, rubbing his jaw.

“Holy shit, I forgot about that!” Bucky gasped.

“What?” Tony frowned.

“Kimmy punched Steve!”

“Wait. Why have I never heard this story?” Tony demanded.

“We were, what? Thirteen?” Bucky frowned. Steve nodded. “Right, we were thirteen, and we were in McDonalds and we saw Kimmy and Becca, and we decided to say hi. And, you know, we were maybe kinda hoping we could jump the line with them a bit. So we walk up behind her, Steve’s closest, so he reaches out to tap her on the shoulder.” He broke off to laugh, much to Steve’s consternation. “And then Kimmy, Kimmy spins round, hand drawn back and socks him right in the mouth!”

“What? Why?”

“Apparently there was this guy who’d been harassing them before we arrived, and Kimmy told him that if he talked to her again, she’d punch him in the face,” Steve grumbled. “And in the Barnes family, they punch first, ask questions later.”

“Yeah,” Jess nodded.

“That’s fair,” Bucky agreed.

“This is unbelievable,” Tony declared, whipping out his phone. “I can’t believe Becca never told me this story.”

“Wait, you know Becca?” Bucky frowned.

“We have a longstanding meme contest,” Tony shrugged without looking up. “How dare she keep this story from me? Unacceptable!” He pocketed his phone. “Hey Jess, can I borrow you this afternoon to work with Red?”

“Sure,” Jess nodded.

As Steve, Jess and Tony began discussing the horses, Bucky drifted into his own head, leaning back against the kitchen counter and watching the three of them interact. From the first night he’d arrived, it was painfully obvious how close the three of them were, but for the first time, Bucky felt part of it rather than excluded.

He couldn’t remember the last time he was able to reminisce about his childhood without a wave of guilt and anger and self-incrimination overcoming him. For five years, the past held painful memories of his own doing, and he’d never been able to see past that.

Until now.

Bucky realised Tony was watching him, even as he chatted with Steve. Bucky offered him a tentative smile.

Tony grinned back.

And he really needed to stop doing things like grinning, because Bucky couldn’t start trying to get over him when his grin made him feel like this. But right now, in the warmth of the kitchen where he’d spent most of his life, Bucky couldn’t bring himself to care too much.

X

Bucky leaned against the fence of the ring, shoulder to shoulder with Steve, and watching Jess canter Red around the edge of the ring while Tony finished setting up two simple jumps. Bucky was hit by an urge to saddle up and take a horse over a couple of jumps himself. He always hoped as a teenager that the USEF would introduce para-show jumping or even eventing so he could compete in more disciplines than simply dressage.

Maybe one day.

“Alright. All yours,” Tony called, moving to the edge of the ring.

Jess nodded, turning Red towards the first jump. The bright chestnut horse leaped over the jump easily, snorting as he landed.

“Is he a thoroughbred?” Bucky asked.

“Thoroughbred cross,” Steve nodded. “Part Arabian.”

“Temperamental,” Bucky hummed.

“Only on his good days,” Steve grinned.

“Dunno who that reminds me of,” Bucky teased. “Hey, is that why Jess rides him?”

“Fuck off,” Steve laughed, poking him in the side.

They watched Jess take Red over the jumps a few more times, before Tony instructed her to take a break while he raised the jumps. Jess pulled Red up to a walk, slackening his reins so Red could dip his head.

“He’s beautiful,” Bucky murmured.

“I know,” Steve agreed. “I’ll never understand how people can hurt such beautiful animals.”

“Because people are garbage.”

Steve hummed in agreement.

In the ring, Tony finished securing the final jump cup, setting the pole in place and stepping back. Jess gathered her reins and nudged Red back up to a canter. She circled the ring once to allow him to find his rhythm, before turning him towards the jump. They cleared the first jump, but Bucky could tell even before they took off that Red was going to clip a pole on the second jump. The pole wobbled, before landing in the ring with a thump.

It was like flicking a switch.

Red’s head went down and his rear legs snapped upwards in a buck. Jess flew off of his back, landing on the ground and instantly rolling out of the way. Bucky’s grip on the fence tightened, his heart jumping into his throat.

To his relief, Jess was on her feet immediately, ducking through the fence, while Tony caught Red.

“Easy. Easy boy. That’s it,” Bucky heard him murmur.

“You okay?” Bucky called as Jess joined them.

Steve reached out and squeezed her shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Jess assured him. “We thought this might happen.”

Bucky nodded, but it wasn't as reassuring to him as Jess and Steve seemed to find it. He'd wondered why Jess was wearing a body protector; in the past, they usually only wore them for cross country, confident in their abilities and the horses that they didn't need them otherwise. Now it made sense.

"Red's a professional competition horse. His last owner used to beat him whenever he made a mistake," Jess explained unclipping her helmet as she leaned on the fence next to Steve.  
"Now he bucks if he make a 'mistake'."

"Trying to hurt his rider before they can hurt him," Steve added.

Jess nodded in agreement.

"When he was sold, his new owner found out and sent him to us to see if Tony can help."

"To blame a horse for anything is like blaming the night for being dark," Bucky said, recalling his dad's favourite expression.

He watched as Tony caught Red, soothing him while he tied up his reins and slid the stirrups up out of the way. Then Tony sent Red away, around the edge of the ring for join up.

"Never gets old," Steve murmured.

Bucky nodded in agreement, but he couldn't tear his eyes from Tony as he worked.

The focus Tony had on the horse and the task at hand was incredible. To all the world, it appeared like Tony was fixed entirely on Red and unaware of the rest of the world, but Bucky knew from his own experiences in the ring that Tony was intimately aware of everything in the immediate area. Every muscle, every fibre of his body was focused on helping Red, helping him understand that in a world of garbage humans, there were a few who didn't want to hurt him.

It was magical.

Like he was hypnotised, Bucky couldn't look away, even if he wanted to.

It didn't take long for Red to show the signs of wanting to join up. Once he'd followed Tony around the ring several times, Tony called Jess back into the ring, and had her repeat the process with Red. Only then did she re-mount and take him back over the jumps.

They cleared both jumps perfectly, then Jess pulled Red to a halt.

Better to stop on a good note, Bucky knew.

Jess dismounted, pulling the reins over Red's head and leading him out of the ring, while Tony turned to dismantle the jumps. He flashed a grin towards Bucky and Steve, and Bucky was hit with a terrifying realisation.

"Shit," he whispered.

“What?” Steve frowned.

“Nothing,” Bucky lied, shaking his head. “Hey, wanna hand?” he called to Tony.

“Sure,” Tony replied.

Bucky ducked into the ring to dismantle the second jump, willing his heart to stop pounding. Because when Tony smiled, he’d been struck with the realisation that this wasn’t just a combination attraction, a great ass, and a case of blue balls.

He actually cared about Tony.

And that was terrifying.

X

Bucky scrolled through instagram, catching up on everything he’d missed with Shuri, Nakia and Okoye since he’d been gone. He was watching a video Shuri posted of her latest prank on T’Challa, when Dani appeared in his periphery, throwing herself onto the couch with an overdramatic sigh that could only come from one Steven Grant Rogers, because Bucky knew for a fact that Jess would never be caught dead making such a sound.

“What’s up short round?” he asked.

“I’m *bored*,” Dani sighed, flopping onto her back.

“Really?” Bucky deadpanned. “I never would’ve guessed. You’re doing *such* a good job of hiding it.”

A snort came from the dining table, where Tony was hunched over a file of paperwork and a laptop, working on monthly invoices.

“Will you play with me?” Dani pleaded, with wide eyes and sticking out her lower lip.

“Jesus kid, you really picked up all your dad’s tricks, huh?” Bucky sighed.

Dani continued to blink up at him like a particularly pathetic-looking slow loris.

“Alright. Come on,” Bucky acquiesced.

“Yes!”

Dani bounced onto her feet, dancing towards the back door.

“Hang on. I gotta get my sneakers!” Bucky yelled. “That kid is pure Steve Rogers,” he muttered.

“Hear hear,” Tony agreed, without looking up. “Wait? What? No, that’s, urgh.”

“Having fun?” Bucky teased.



“I hate this,” Tony whined.

“Enjoy!” Bucky yelled over his shoulder, following Dani out into the backyard.

Bucky jogged across the lawn to catch up with Dani.

“What d’you wanna play, kiddo?”

It turned out Dani wanted to play *everything*. First it was basketball, which quickly turned from one-on-one to Bucky helping Dani shoot the ball into the basket, eventually lifting her up so she could just drop it through the basket. Then it was baseball, which she usually played with Steve.

“You pitch and I’ll bat,” she decreed, already picking up the bat and walking away.

“Yes ma’am,” Bucky nodded. He threw the ball in the air once, testing its weight, before winding up and pitching - slowly, because he didn’t want to knock her teeth out, and he was pretty sure Jess would skin him alive if he did. Baseball brought back memories of cheering Steve on at his little league games, his face scrunched in concentration, determined to prove he deserved a place on the team. Bucky used to help him practise, but he never tried out himself. Even then, his heart belonged to horse riding.

Before long, Dani bored of baseball too, and threw herself onto the trampoline while Bucky watched. Noticing an abandoned water pistol by the swing set, Bucky picked it up and fired it above Dani’s head. She squealed and ducked, rolling onto the trampoline as she cackled with laughter. Bucky laughed, squirting her again.

“Uncle Bucky!” she yelled.

“What?” he replied, with a grin that belied his innocent tone.

The water pistol was empty, but Dani tossed him a Nerf gun, and before he knew it, Bucky was breathless and chasing his niece around the garden, shooting her with foam bullets, and he couldn’t remember the last time he laughed so much.

“Time!” he called, leaning his hands against his knees, panting. “Holy shit, I’m unfit.”

“Come on!” Dani giggled, dancing around him.

“Nah. I’m too tired. No more,” Bucky shook his head. He glanced at his watch. “Hey, it’s nearly dinner time. Let’s clear this up, yeah?”

Dani whined, frowning at him as she swayed from foot to foot.

“Uncle Bucky, have you ever climbed a tree?” she asked, eyeing the huge oak tree in the corner of the yard.

“Sure. Ages ago. Me and your dad used to hang out down by the creek and climb the trees on the island down there,” he replied, searching the lawn for all the Nerf bullets. “Gimme a hand here squirt.”

“I wanna climb a tree. Uncle Bucky, will you help me?”

“No,” Bucky shook his head. There was one more missing bullet, somewhere... Ah ha! There it was! “It’s too late. And you have to ask your mom and dad first.”

“Dani, get the baseball,” he called.

“In a minute!”

“Now!”

Bucky dumped the Nerf guns and the bullets back in the plastic toy chest, scooping up the empty water pistol on his way past. He tossed the basketball into the box, bending to retrieve a brightly coloured plastic figurine, figuring he should shift it before it ended up in the lawnmower.

“Dani,” he called.

But as he started to turn, a high-pitched scream pierced the air.

Bucky whipped around, just in time to see Dani fall from the oak tree and hit the ground with a sickening crunch.

## Chapter End Notes

Join up is a technique first developed by Monty Roberts. If you're interested in learning more, and seeing it in action, [this video](#) is a great demonstration.

Currently dressage is the only para-equestrian event, but there is a move to introduce show jumping particularly in the UK.

Thoroughbreds (traditionally racehorses) and Arabians are both notoriously highly strung horses.

Body protectors are what it says on the tin: a padded vest to protect your ribs and stuff if you get thrown. When you're learning to ride, you might wear one all the time, but professionally, they are used mostly for cross country events.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

Bucky should've known it was too good to be true.

## Chapter Notes

You see that depression tag up there? This is where it really comes into play. Bucky is not having a great time in the next couple of chapters. There's a brief moment of self harm in the form of skin picking - I've updated the tags to reflect this - but if you want to skip it stop reading at 'He was just so tired' and start again when Tony says "It's not your fault." Bucky's also dissociating in the first part of the chapter. If you're unsure about reading, feel free to message me over on tumblr or on discord (I'm usually on the winteriron server) for a summary.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He should've known it was all too good to be true. God, he was such an idiot. Why did he think, even for a second, that he deserved to be a part of this family again? He destroyed everything he touched, so why would he even entertain the idea of returning to his family, never mind staying with them, putting them all at risk?

He should've stayed away.

Bucky stared at the black mark on the linoleum. A line, about four inches long, curving slightly to the right. A scruff from someone's shoe, no doubt, or maybe a chair leg. Eventually someone would come along to polish the floor, and the black mark would vanish, as though it was never even there.

A imperfection, a blemish, erased for good.

Maybe they should erase him too, Bucky thought absently. Forget he ever existed. At least then he wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else.

Bucky could hear the chatter of the other people in the waiting room, the noise of the doctors and nurses spilling out from further in the ER, but none registered with him. It was too much. There was too much noise, and the fluorescent lights were so bright, too bright, they were giving him a headache.

Too much. It was too much.

Bucky closed his eyes, slipping further away, the noise of the hospital growing dull, fuzzy. Like his head was stuffed with cotton wool.

God, he was just so *tired*. He was tired of the constant guilt, crushing on him at all times. He was tired of, of being exhausted. Everything was such hard work, and he was tired of the effort it took to do even the simplest of tasks. He'd started to feel like he could breathe easier, in the weeks since he'd come home, but now it was back. Because it always came back. No matter what.

He was just so tired.

He didn't even realise he'd started scratching at his arm with his prosthetic until the pain began to filter through to his brain. Oddly enough, it helped. The woolly feeling faded, the more he focused on the pain, and slowly, Bucky could feel himself coming back.

"Hey," Tony murmured. "Bucky. Buck."

Then there were gentle hands on his, lifting it away from his arm, and Bucky glowered at Tony.

"You don't wanna do that, honey," Tony said. "Trust me."

Didn't Tony understand? The pain helped. Without it, he would drift away into himself once more, and Bucky didn't want that. Because as terrible as he felt right now, he would rather feel that than feel nothing.

"It's okay. It's not your fault," Tony assured him.

Bucky laughed bitterly inside his head. What the hell did Tony know? He wasn't there. Bucky was the one who wasn't paying attention. Bucky was the one who turned his back on Dani. Bucky was the one who let her fall.

It was his fault.

The responsibility lay at his feet, and as such, he was the one who would pay the price.

As soon as Steve and Jess emerged, they would tell him to leave, and Bucky would go.

He didn't want to go, but he would. Because it was what he deserved. Everyone he touched always, always got hurt.

Maybe it was a good thing Tony turned him down. This way, he was safe. Bucky couldn't hurt him too.

Bucky closed his eyes again. It was why he'd stayed away for so long, after all. Because his family was better off without him here. In his head, Jess' voice echoed, her message from six years ago playing on repeat even though he'd long since deleted it.

*Bucky, it's me. It's Jess. I... Shit. Bucky, dad's in hospital. He had a stroke, and he fell, and... And I don't know, I don't know if he's going to wake up. I need you to come home. Please.*

*Please come home.*

He still felt sick to his stomach whenever he thought about it, and he never thought about it unless he had to, the knowledge that *those* were his last words to his dad.

“Bucky? Talk to me, honey. Come on,” Tony murmured, squeezing Bucky’s shoulder.

“Let go,” Bucky said, and his voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears.

“It’s not your fault, honey.”

“Yes, it is,” Bucky said, turning towards Tony. “It is my fault.”

Shrugging Tony’s hand off, Bucky stood and walked away, pulling his phone from his pocket and hoping they had Uber here. If he had to leave, might as well get a head start. And... And he wanted a chance to say goodbye, to the horses and to his home. Everything he didn’t have a chance to do last time.

The night air slapped him in the face when the ER doors slid open, his breath billowing in faint white clouds. Bucky rubbed his hands together to stave off the autumnal chill.

“Hey. Hey, where are you going?” Tony asked, catching up with him.

“Home,” Bucky replied automatically. He ducked his head. “I mean, back to the house.”

“What? Why?”

“Can’t be here,” Bucky shook his head. He looked up, giving Tony a bitter smile. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“Hey. Hey, come on. Talk to me,” Tony urged, and his voice was calm and soothing, and Bucky wanted nothing more than to step forward and bury his face in Tony’s chest, to feel those strong arms wrap around his shoulders. He was willing to bet he would feel safe in Tony’s arms.

Except, except Tony didn’t want him.

Because Tony could see Bucky was no good, and he’d asked him to change. But he couldn’t see that Bucky couldn’t change. He was dangerous. All the evidence was there. Dani was just the latest in a line of innocents hurt because of him. Before her, was his dad, and before that, the accident where-

Bucky’s phone buzzed in his hand.

“My Uber’s here,” he said, dodging Tony and walking towards the parking lot.

When he climbed into the silver Corolla, Bucky risked a glance backwards, only to regret it. Because Tony was staring after him, with an expression of disappointed realisation written across his face. Bucky swallowed.

He'd miss Tony when he left.

X

The gravel crunched under his feet as Bucky walked up the driveway towards the barn. The horses stuck their heads out of their stalls when he pulled open the door and flicked on the overhead lights, before disappearing back inside when they saw it was only Bucky.

Bucky walked into the barn, stopping in the middle of the aisle and closed his eyes, breathing in the smell of hay and leather and something uniquely horsey. Tipping his head back, Bucky stared up into the rafters.

A soft nicker drew him out of his head. Bucky turned and, to his surprise, found Thor watching him.

"Hi," Bucky said.

Thor snorted, nodding his head and watching Bucky expectantly. Bucky stepped closer, pulling one hand from his pocket and holding it out for Thor to sniff. Thor's whiskers tickled his skin as he snuffled at Bucky's palm, before looking at him with something akin to disapproval.

Despite everything, Bucky found himself smiling.

"Alright, alright," he murmured, and pulled a horse treat from his jeans and offered it to Thor.

Thor stretched out his neck, snatching the treat from Bucky's palm. If it was possible for a horse to look smug, then Thor was it, tossing his mane imperiously and staring down at Bucky.

"I'm gonna miss you," Bucky whispered. He glanced around the barn. "All of you. Except you," he pointed to Arrow. "You're a dick."

Thor snorted, drawing Bucky's attention, and he noticed that Thor had moved right up to the stall door, reaching his neck towards Bucky.

"I ain't got no more treats, boy," Bucky shook his head.

But Thor just looked at him.

Bucky hesitated.

Then stepped forward, lifting one hand to cup Thor's chin, while he scratched his nose. Thor eyed him for a moment, almost as though he was searching Bucky for some sign, some clue that he intended harm, before lowering his head and leaning into Bucky's hands.

"Hi," Bucky said in surprise.

Was it really only six weeks ago that the very same horse had to be tranquillised just to get him into the trailer? Only six weeks since Thor bared his teeth at everyone who came near?

Six weeks, since Bucky came home.

“I don’t belong here,” Bucky admitted quietly. “I wish I did. But I messed up. And now I’ve gotta go.”

Thor let out a low whicker.

“Tony was supposed to work with you tonight, wasn’t he?” Bucky realised.

Thor snorted.

“Don’t do that. Makes me think you understand me, and that’s freaky. Alright, gimme a minute,” Bucky decided.

He left the barn, turning on the floodlights in the ring, cutting through the dusk darkness. Bucky fished a hair tie from his pocket, pulling his hair back into a sloppy ponytail, and zipped his jacket up under his chin. He collected a lunge line from the tack room, before returning to Thor’s stall.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Bucky murmured, clipping the lunge line onto his halter.

Once he closed the gate behind them, Bucky unclipped the lunge line and slapped it against his thigh. Thor snorted, his breath spiralling up in a white plume as he took off around the edge of the ring. Bucky breathed deep, focusing on his body language and the horse before him to block out the nerves he felt at attempting join up for the first time in over five years.

He drove Thor on for a few more circuits, before stepping forward to make him change direction. A few more laps, and Bucky reversed his direction again. It didn’t take long for Thor to lower his head and start chewing, his circles becoming gradually smaller.

A lump bloomed in Bucky’s throat, and his vision blurred with tears. He turned, lowering his head and his shoulders and waiting for Thor to approach. Warm breath blew against his ear and Bucky began to cry. He turned, pressing his face into Thor’s forehead.

He couldn’t be all bad if Thor still chose to join up with him, right?

“Good boy,” he whispered.

Gathering himself together, Bucky led Thor back inside, getting a nudge for his troubles as Thor searched for more treats.

“You’re gonna get fat,” Bucky told him, feeding him a treat. “You know, maybe, if Tony doesn’t want to keep you, I could find somewhere up in Chicago for you? Huh? What d’you think? You could come live with me? I know it’s not the same, but it, it would be nice to have some part of this place to hang onto. I’m gonna miss it.”

Thor gently head-butted Bucky’s forehead. He smiled sadly.

“You’re probably better off here,” he sighed.

Giving Thor's nose one final scratch, Bucky turned and walked away.

X

It didn't take long for Bucky to pack everything up. He hesitated over his riding boots and helmet, before swallowing the lump in his throat at setting them aside. He didn't need them in Chicago. And maybe, if he did decide to start riding again, he would be better off buying new ones. Ones that didn't have memories associated with them.

Going riding there could be nice. Shuri would probably enjoy it, maybe Nakia and Okoye too. It would be fun to introduce his friends to his old world.

Then he pictured the girls standing in the kitchen, laughing with Steve and Tony and Jess, sharing embarrassing stories about Bucky and listening to Dani, and Bucky inhaled sharply at the wall of *want* that slammed into him.

Maybe not.

Bucky picked up his red hoodie, burying his face into the soft fabric and breathing in. It smelled like home. He should leave it, he knew. He had no use for it back in Chicago. It belonged here. But even so, Bucky stuffed it into his overflowing backpack, telling himself that he would deal with it later. Just because he was taking it didn't mean he would keep it.

Once he'd finished, Bucky sat on the edge of the bed and just stared. When they moved in here, Bucky remembered thinking that the room was so huge, especially after all those months spent in hospital. Now, it seemed small. Or maybe it was just he was bigger.

He didn't want to leave before the rest of the family arrived home. While it might've been easier, Bucky knew he couldn't do that to Jess again. And maybe, maybe it would be easier if he said goodbye.

(He doubted it. Part of him knew there was no way Jess was going to be okay with him leaving again)

Taking his backpack with him, Bucky left his room, relocating to the kitchen where he began clearing up their uneaten dinner. At least Steve and Jess wouldn't have to worry about doing it when they got back, he reasoned.

It was after eleven thirty, and Bucky was halfway through emptying the dishwasher when headlights arced across the driveway. Bucky's pulse jumped, and he exhaled slowly.

It was time.

The back door burst open and Dani raced in.

"Uncle Bucky! Uncle Bucky, look!" she cried, holding out her arm, which was encased in a bright purple cast. Bucky could taste bile in his mouth as he looked at it. He did this. "I got to pick which colour my cast is, and I picked purple because..." Dani trailed off as she spotted Bucky's backpack.



“Hi Buck,” Steve greeted as he stepped into the kitchen. “Hey, you okay?” he frowned at Dani, spotting her trembling lip.

“Are you leaving?” Dani asked Bucky.

“What?” Steve looked up sharply.

Bucky couldn’t meet their eyes. He glanced towards the door as Jess appeared, kicking off her shoes in the mud room and squeezing Steve’s shoulder as she passed.

“Alright young lady,” she said, “Time for bed. Hey, what’s going on?”

“Uncle Bucky’s going away,” Dani muttered, glaring at him.

Jess looked between Bucky and his bag, then glared at him.

“Come on honey,” she said, guiding Dani away. “Time for bed.” Then she paused in the doorway, and told Bucky, “I won’t fight for you again.”

“Probably a good thing,” he agreed.

“Buck,” Steve said once they were alone. “Bucky, come one. What’s going on? Why are you running again?”

“I’m not running,” Bucky muttered. “I’m just... I can’t do this anymore. It’s my fault. What happened, it’s my fault. You know that.”

“No, I don’t. It was an accident,” Steve argued. “Kids get hurt. God knows I spent enough time in the hospital when I was Dani’s age.”

“That’s because you had no immune system,” Bucky pointed out.

“Yeah, because my immune system broke my leg. And gave me a concussion.”

“That was your lack of self preservation.”

“Have you met Dani? She might have less self preservation than I did, and that’s saying something. Bucky, it wasn’t your fault. We don’t blame you.”

“Maybe you should. It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve hurt someone,” he snapped.

Steve reeled back.

“You believe that?”

“Yes.”

Steve stared at him, his face closed off, and Bucky longed for the days when he could read Steve no matter what.

“At least wait until morning?” Steve asked quietly. “Please.”

“Fine,” Bucky nodded.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Summary

Tony clears up some misunderstandings, and gives Bucky hope. If only Steve and Jess weren't keeping secrets.

## Chapter Notes

Warnings for more discussion of depression, and past self-harm. Feel free to message me if you have questions before reading.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He was dithering. Bucky knew he was dithering, and he knew that he shouldn't be dithering, but he could stop himself from dithering. Because if he stopped dithering, then he would have to leave. And he really didn't want to leave.

He'd re-packed his bag twice since he gave up on sleep at five thirty this morning. He'd avoided breakfast with the family, choosing sneak out and microwave a breakfast burrito before they appeared, and was now considering re-packing for a third time.

A soft knock on the door startled him out of his head.

"Come in," Bucky called automatically.

It was probably Steve. Or Jess. Telling him to leave.

It was Tony.

He offered Bucky a small smile, closing the door behind him.

"Hi."

"Hi," Bucky echoed dumbly.

"I think we need to talk," Tony said, moving further into the room. "I think there's been misunderstandings that need clearing up, and I think I can explain a few things."

"Okay," Bucky nodded. "Is it going to take long? I'm supposed to be getting a train."

“Not long,” Tony promised. He nodded for Bucky to sit on the bed, while he leaned against the desk. “So, Steve tells me that you think I want you to change. I don’t want you to change. At all. I like you. I like you a lot. The only thing I want to change, I want you to take care of yourself.”

“I take care of myself,” Bucky frowned. “No one else is gonna do it,” he added before he could help himself.

“Because you don’t let us,” Tony argued gently. “You push us away before we can help you.” He sighed. “Believe it or not, I understand. I have some experience with what you’re going through. Depression’s not a bad word, Bucky. It doesn’t make you weak. Unless you think I’m weak?”

Bucky stared, dumbstruck.

“You’re...?” he stuttered.

Tony smiled sadly.

“Yeah. Not so much these days. I have a support system, and medication, and I take care of myself. But there was a while... Yeah. It was bad.”

Tony unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt, then rolled them up to above the elbow, one at a time. He held out his arms for Bucky to see the mess of scar tissue on the inside of his elbows.

“I used to scratch my skin raw,” Tony admitted. “Scratch it until it bled. Because the pain cancelled out the darkness in my head.”

Bucky’s head snapped up, and he forgot how to breath. That was how he felt the night before, at the hospital, when he started picked at his arm. A motion that Tony had instantly noticed and put a stop to.

“Why?”

“Because my parents died. Because suddenly I had... so much pressure on me. Not that I didn’t have before, but this was even more pressure, and more expectations and I was scared and alone, and all I wanted was for the world to go away. I got help. Took me a long time, but I’m better now. If I’m honest, I don’t think I really, truly healed until I came here. This place... It’s special. It could heal you too.”

And God, Bucky wanted that so badly. He wanted so badly to stay and feel better, like Tony was insisting he could even if Bucky didn’t really believe it was possible. But he couldn’t. Even if he wanted to try, he couldn’t. It wasn’t safe.

“I can’t stay.”

“Why?”

And Bucky was so grateful that Tony’s tone held no judgement, only simple curiosity.

“Because I hurt people,” he admitted, his voice growing thick. “Dani-“

“Is fine,” Tony interrupted. “Seriously, Bucky, she’s fine. Once she got over the shock, she was disappointed that her bone wasn’t sticking out of her arm,” he grimaced. “Oh, that kid. She’s so excited about getting her class to draw on her cast. And Steve and Jess already told her off for ignoring you and climbing that tree. It’s not your fault.”

Bucky wished he could believe that.

“I’ve hurt people before,” he said. “I don’t wanna do that anymore.”

“I don’t believe you’ve hurt anyone.”

Bucky laughed bitterly.

“I have. Look it up. It was in all the papers.”

Tony shifted off the desk, rolling down his sleeves as he moved to sit beside Bucky.

“The papers said a lot of things about me over the years,” he said. “Doesn’t make them true.”

“This is true.”

“Even if it does, that doesn’t mean you can’t change. You’re not defined by your past, Bucky. We’ve all done bad things or stupid things or things we regret. Doesn’t make us bad people.”

Bucky exhaled slowly. He was shaking, he realised, and balled his hand into a fist in a vain attempt to hide it from Tony. Too late. Tony put his hand on Bucky’s shoulders, squeezing gently.

“You’ve known Steve and Jess a lot longer than I have,” he said. “But even I know that neither of them are the kind of person to lie to someone they don’t like. If they really wanted you to leave, if they *really* blamed you, they would tell you. They wouldn’t care about protecting your feelings.”

And that, that was a good point, Bucky realised. Steve was a terrible liar, especially around someone he actively disliked. And Jess would just plain say she hated someone to their face.

“See?” Tony smiled. “I have to go. Red’s owner’s coming over to do some work with him.” He stood up, then hesitated. “I hope I’ll see you later, Bucky.”

Bucky looked up, forcing himself to meet Tony’s gaze head on.

“Maybe.”

X

It was like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, knowing that Tony had experienced the exact same things Bucky himself was feeling. And while he wouldn’t wish it on anyone, least of all Tony who he cared for, Bucky was so relieved that it wasn’t just him, he wasn’t

crazy. The thought of saying *I have depression* terrified him, but knowing there was a reason, knowing that he could get better, it was unbelievable.

Almost too good to be true.

Bucky pushed that thought away.

He stood up, and stared at his backpack. Then taking a deep breath, Bucky picked it up and began to unpack. If Steve and Jess wanted him to leave, then they would say so. He trusted Tony.

(He couldn't trust himself, couldn't believe his own mind, but he believed in Tony)

Then he changed into a pair of work jeans, pulling his red hoodie on over his t-shirt, and headed out, shoving on a pair of boots in the mud room, and heading for the yard.

An unfamiliar truck sat in the driveway, belonging to Red's owner no doubt. A show-jumper, he recalled. Local rider. Maybe he'd recognise them. Maybe they'd competed against each other as kids.

Sure enough, Red was cantering round the edge of the school with a rider on his back, while Tony set up a short course of jumps. Steve and Jess were leaning against the fence, talking quietly as they watched. Gathering his courage, Bucky walked up to join them.

"Hi," he said.

Steve and Jess looked up sharply.

"Bucky," Steve said.

He looked worried, which didn't make sense. Unless they really *did* want him gone-  
No.

Tony said they wanted him to stay, and he trusted Tony.

"How's he doing?" Bucky asked, nodding towards Red.

"He's okay, so far," Jess replied carefully.

"That's his owner?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bucky saw Steve and Jess exchange a nervous glance, before Steve answered, "Uh, yeah. That's her."

"You're being weird," Bucky informed them.

"You're weird," Steve retorted, sounding more like himself.

"I'm not weird, I'm just as asshole," Bucky replied.

Bucky folded his arms on the gate, resting his chin on his wrists, watching Tony talk to Red's owner, before crossing the arena to lean against the gate. His face lit up when he spotted Bucky. Bucky offered him a tentative smile. At least someone seemed happy to see him.

They watched Red and his owner make their way around the course of jumps, clearing each one easily until it came to the last jump. Red's hoof clipped the pole; it wobbled, but didn't fall. But Red's head swivelled round, and he snorted nervously. His owner rubbed a soothing hand against his neck, until he returned to his usual smooth gait. His owner turned him towards the first jump again, and Red cleared it with ease.

"Atta boy," Tony grinned.

"Good job," Bucky smiled.

Red's owner slowed him to a walk, lengthening his reins as they approached. Bucky was too busy watching Tony to pay much attention, which was why he didn't recognise Red's owner, until a voice said, "Hello Bucky."

He froze.

Then slowly raised his head, until he was staring into Natasha Romanoff's face.

And then it all made sense, why Steve and Jess looked so worried when he appeared.

He couldn't breathe. Bucky stumbled backwards, turning and racing towards the barn, ignoring Steve shouting his name. Thor whined to him, and Bucky crossed to his stall, reaching out a trembling hand for Thor to sniff before stroking his neck.

"Bucky!" Steve called, running into the barn.

"Don't you fucking dare, Rogers. Don't you fucking dare!" Bucky yelled.

"Buck, it's okay--"

"No, it not!" he snapped. "You shoulda told me. Somebody shoulda told me. You know I'm fucked up, you've seen I'm fucked up. You should've told me it was her!"

"We didn't know how you'd take it," Steve argued. "We didn't want you to run away."

"I'm not running away!"

"Last night you were."

"Get out of here," Bucky snapped. "I mean it. Leave me the fuck alone."

"Bucky--"

"Go!"

"Fine," Steve shook his head and marched away.

“Fuck you,” Bucky hissed to the empty barn. “Fuck you.”

He clenched his fists and tried to breathe. His heart pounded in his ears and he was angry, he was so fucking angry. How dare they? How dare they keep that information from him? How dare they treat him like a child who can't handle the truth? In case they hadn't noticed, Bucky had been living with the truth for the past five years!

“But I haven't,” he realised. “I haven't lived with it. I've been hiding. Shit.”

He wasn't freaking out, he realised. After the initial shock of seeing Natasha's face again, he wasn't freaking out. He was angry.

A nose butted the side of his head.

“Ow!” Bucky complained, glaring at Thor. Thor butted him again. “Alright, alright,” he muttered, stepping closer and scratching Thor's neck. “You're becoming a real asshole now.”

Thor sighed happily, reaching out and nibbling at Bucky's shoulder. He was grooming him, Bucky realised. This was mutual grooming.

He ducked his head, hiding his grin.

“Okay. Maybe you're not so bad,” he admitted.

They stood there for a while, grooming each other, until Bucky heard footsteps approaching. With one last pat for Thor, he turned and disappeared out the back door to avoid whoever was coming.

He wasn't ready to face anyone yet.

X

It was Tony who found him.

Bucky jerked when he felt something heavy on his shoulders, but relaxed when he spotted Tony, and realised it was a jacket.

“Thanks.”

Bucky shrugged the jacket on, zipping it up to fight the growing cold wind.

“You okay?” Tony asked.

Bucky stared at the tree in front of him, the tree he'd been staring at since he left Thor and the barn, the one with the plaque reading *In memory of Winter 1987-2013*.

“Dad used to pick me up and just drop me onto Winter's back,” he explained. “No saddle, no bridle. Nothing. I didn't even have a prosthetic in those days. You gotta have a certain amount of time after an amputation before you're allowed to use one. Gotta give it time to heal.”



“Everyone said that Winter was dangerous. That he couldn’t be saved. Dad refused to listen, just said no. Ignored everyone who said Winter should be put down. And you know what? He was right. Winter was gentlest horse in the world, and I loved that horse. He was everything to me when I was recovering. I thought... I thought when I lost my arm that I’d never be normal. Winter, riding Winter, he showed me I was normal. Just a different normal. I really fucking loved that horse, and I abandoned him.”

“You didn’t abandon him,” Tony murmured.

“Didn’t I? He was dying of a broken heart cause dad was gone, and I wasn’t there for him. He died, and I didn’t help him.” Bucky shook his head. “Did he suffer?”

“No,” Tony replied. “We kept him comfortable, and when he was in pain, we called Jan.”

“That’s something,” Bucky muttered.

“You know,” Tony began, “Natasha, she’s made an incredible life for herself, never lets it hold her back. She’s a Paralympic dressage champion, and a certainty for Tokyo. She’s married. To one of my best friends. She’s one hell of a woman. Loosing a leg didn’t change that. You know firsthand loosing a limb doesn’t stop you from riding. Hell, I’ve got a bum knee, but I don’t let it stop me. So I have to ride western instead of English? Big deal. Western saddles are more comfortable anyway.”

“It was my fault,” Bucky whispered.

“No, it wasn’t,” Tony shook his head. “I read those articles. You were cleared of all blame. It was an accident, Bucky. A horrible, nightmare of an accident, but an accident nonetheless.”

Bucky huffed a laugh.

“That just proves I hurt people whether I want to or not.”

“No, it doesn’t. It doesn’t prove anything of the kind. I don’t believe any of that.”

“It’s not even the worst thing I did,” Bucky admitted.

Tony sighed.

“What do you want to do? I’ll drive you to the train station if that’s really what you want. But I think, and not just for purely selfish reasons, I think you should stick around. But it’s up to you. So. What do you want to do?”

Bucky frowned. What did he want? He couldn’t remember the last time he stopped and actually considered what he wanted, rather than what he needed to, or felt he had to do. And now, he wanted, he wanted....

“I want to see my dad.”

## Chapter End Notes

There's a lot of talk about how you should get better for yourself, but sometimes your illness drags you too deep into its bullshit for you to see it. Sometimes, getting better for someone else is a good thing, is it helps you get onto the road to recovery. It's taken me the better part of a decade to see that I deserve to be well for myself, but I got help because I didn't like hurting the other people in my life.

Horses groom each other as a sign of affection. Sometimes they'll groom you too.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Summary

Bucky faces his father and his past. But he returns home to terrifying news.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Bucky was nine, his elementary school decided to do a Christmas concert at a nearby nursing home. Quite apart from the fact that Bucky sang like a dying duck, he'd hated it. It made him uncomfortable to see people, people who were once full of life and stories, just sit there and stare at him. When he arrived home that night, he'd promptly flung himself into his dad's arms and burst into tears, believing that he was a horrible person for thinking that.

(In hindsight, it probably should've been a hint of what was to come, the years of self recrimination and mental flagellation he put himself through)

Now he was thirty, and Bucky didn't like nursing homes any more than he did when he was nine. They smelled funny, a combination of industrial cleaner and something old people, and the too bright lights made his head hurt.

Bucky stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets, playing with Tony's truck keys, which he'd borrowed to drive into Greensburg, as he moved through the corridors. He stopped outside the room in question, taking a deep breath, before knocking once and opening the door.

It was warm, almost stuffy inside. The walls were generic mint green, but Bucky recognised his own face and his sisters' in the photos that lined the dresser, interspersed with several of the horses his dad had helped over the years. Of course Winter was there, in all his glory, his head held high as the blue ribbon on his bridle fluttered in the wind, Bucky's thirteen year old grinning face by his side.

A lump formed in his throat.

Bucky turned and finally focused on the man sitting in the corner of the room, looking impossibly small against the high-backed chair. He swallowed.

"Hi dad."

George Barnes barely acknowledged his son. His eyes flickered up to him, but there was no recognition in them, in the moments before they returned to stare into space.

This was going to be harder than he thought.

Bucky unzipped his jacket, removing it and his hoodie to combat the heat of the room. He placed them carefully on the bed, then sat down in the empty chair next to his dad.

“Hi. Dad, it’s me. It’s Bucky,” he tried. “God, I hope you’re in there.”

Logically, he’d known that after the stroke, his dad wasn’t the same. He knew that George had been reduced to, well, to this. But there was a difference between knowing it and seeing it first hand, and now that Bucky was face to face with his dad, it was like listening to Jess’ message all over again.

*Bucky. I’m not expecting you to call me back, because why would you? You haven’t bothered so far. Dad’s not going to recover. The best we can do is make him comfortable. We can’t take him home, so we’re looking into homes for him. If you decide you actually give a shit about us, then give me a call. I won’t hold my breath.*

Bucky pressed his knuckles to his mouth, drawing a ragged breath in through his nose. His dad was gone. George was still alive, but the man Bucky knew, the man who raised five children single-handed, he was gone.

“I am so sorry dad,” Bucky gasped. “I’m so sorry. I fucked up. I really, really fucked up, and I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for being such a little shit, I’m sorry for acting like I was too cool to pull my weight. You shoulda kicked my ass. God knows I deserved it.

“And I’m sorry, I’m so sorry about the accident. I know you said it wasn’t my fault, but you, you went grey overnight after that. I’m sorry I scared you. I’m sorry you thought you were gonna lose me again.

“But most of all, I am so sorry for saying that I hated you. I am so sorry for blaming you, for mom, for what she did. I was wrong. I know that. I know that it wasn’t because of you. I know she left cause of me. Cause she didn’t want a son without an arm.”

Bucky buried his face in his hands. He could still feel the burn of the shame and the humiliation when his mother slammed the door in his face, could still remember her full body shudder when she saw his prosthetic, could still hear her saying *I can’t do this*. And then, sitting in his hire car, trying to calm down enough to drive away and realising he had a voicemail from Jess, and knowing that he would have to go home and face his dad, hear his dad say *I told you so*. And the burst of anger that came with it.

He could still remember stabbing at his phone angrily, the automated voice informing him that he had one new voicemail and two saved voicemails. He could still remember the moment his stomach dropped when Jess said his name and instantly he knew something was wrong.

*Bucky, it’s me. It’s Jess. I... Shit. Bucky, dad’s in hospital. He had a stroke, and he fell, and... And I don’t know, I don’t know if he’s going to wake up. I need you to come home. Please. Please come home.*

Bucky brushed away the tears from his face in vain; they were quickly replaced by fresh ones.

“I was wrong,” he choked. “I was so wrong. I don’t hate you. I’ve never hated you. I love you dad. You are the best parent anyone could ever wish for. You put up with all my shit, you raised us when mom, when she left. You took in Jess and gave her a family. You’re amazing. The most amazing man I’ve ever met. And I’m so sorry it took me so long to get here. Dad? Can you hear me?”

But George didn’t respond. He just sat there, staring into space, and Bucky wanted to throw up.

“Maybe I deserve this,” he whispered. “Karma. I was a, a complete asshole, so I don’t get to apologise.” He swallowed. “Guess all I can do is, is try and be better, huh? I’m gonna try and be better dad, I promise. I swear, I swear on Winter’s grave. I swear on Thor’s life. I’m gonna be better. I’m gonna get help, and I’m gonna do everything I can to fix what I messed up. I’m gonna try and make you proud.”

George lifted his head, staring blankly into Bucky’s face. But even so, Bucky’s heart leaped.

“Dad? I love you dad. I’m sorry.”

George’s head drifted down again, but Bucky could’ve sworn he seemed to nod every so slightly. He pursed his lips. Tentatively he reached out, covering George’s hand with his own. Gone were the callouses from years of working with his hands, years of spending all day every day with horses, and in their place was soft gossamer-thin skin. Bucky felt like if he squeezed too hard, he would break a bone.

It was terrifying, to see his dad, who’d always seemed so solid and strong, reduced to this.

With one hand still covering his dad’s, Bucky pulled out his phone with the other, unlocking it awkwardly with only one hand and searching for therapists locally. There was one, right here in Greensburg. He stared at the number.

Bucky looked up at a gentle rap on the door. A smiling nurse stood in the doorway, leaning on the handle.

“I’m afraid it’s dinner time soon,” she explained. “Would you like to stay or-“

“No. Thank you,” Bucky shook his head.

He didn’t think he could stand watching someone feed his dad by hand. Even just the thought made him want to throw up. He could stand to maintain a little more ignorance.

“I’ll be back soon, dad,” he promised. “I’m not running away again. Anybody wants me gone, they’re gonna have to fight me.”

Dropping a kiss onto the top of his dad’s head, Bucky slipped his phone back into his pocket, picking up his jacket and his hoodie and folding them over his arm.

“D’you think he knows? What we’re saying to him?” he asked the nurse awkwardly.

“I believe so,” she smiled.

Bucky threw his dad one final look.

“I hope you’re right.”

He walked back towards the entrance, where the frosty air provided a blessed relief from the stuffy interior.

Unlocking the truck, Bucky climbed inside, tossing his jacket and hoodie into the empty passenger seat. Then he folded his arms across the wheel, put his head against his forearms and cried.

X

Crying was a relief. Okay, it was embarrassing, and he didn’t want to admit to *anybody* - except maybe Tony - that he’d bawled like a baby for a good half hour, but now that he’d done it, Bucky actually felt better. Not great, but closer to good than he had in a long time. Maybe ever.

Once he pulled himself together, Bucky found himself at Dernier's Diner, ordering a bacon cheeseburger like he used to when he and Steve hung out there as teenagers. He’d licked barbecue sauce from his fingers and devoured a plate of fresh fries, and Bucky started to feel human again.

Maybe this was what Tony meant when he talked about taking care of himself. Maybe it was just about doing things that made him feel good, until he felt strong enough to call the number of the therapist, whose website still sat open on his phone.

After he finished, Bucky drove back home slowly, turning up the radio and singing along to *Sixteen*. And there was no one around to tell him he sounded like a screaming goat, nor was there anyone to see when he tried to hit that high note and sent a flock of crows flying into the air.

Bucky drew into the driveway, pulling on the handbrake, before grabbing his jacket and jumping out of the truck.

“He’s back,” he heard Steve yell.

“What the hell?” Bucky muttered.

Steve ran out of the house, running straight up to him, and Bucky’s heart seized because he knew that expression. Steve was terrified.

“Is Dani with you?” Steve demanded.

“What? No,” Bucky shook his head. “I’d never take her anywhere without asking you. Why? What’s going on?”

“Is she there?” Jess called, leaning out of the back door.

Steve turned and shook his head, and Jess buried her face in her hands.

“Steve, what’s going on?” Bucky demanded.

“We don’t know where Dani is,” Steve said, and each word was like a knife. “She got the bus after school, but she never came home.”

“Holy shit,” Bucky breathed.

“Tony’s out on Loki looking, and we called the police, but she could be anywhere. We were hoping you picked her up or something.”

“No, I went to see dad. Alright. Alright, I’m gonna help,” Bucky said. “Let me grab my boots, and we’re gonna find her. Steve, we’re gonna find her. I promise. You stay here with Jess, you stay on the phone, just in case she comes back, and we will find her. Which way did Tony go?”

“He followed the road, following the bus route,” Steve said, and his voice was shaking like Bucky had never heard before. Even when his mom or his grandparents died, Bucky’d never seen Steve fall apart like this. If he’d ever needed any confirmation how much Steve loved that little girl, this was it.

Bucky wished he’d never had this confirmation.

“Go on. Go inside,” he instructed, keeping his voice firm but gentle, the way Tony did when he was talking to Bucky, the way his dad used to when they were upset or hurt.

Bucky guided Steve back inside, pausing for one heartbreaking moment to watch Steve wrap his arms around Jess, for her to fall apart in his arms. Then he kicked off his sneakers, and grabbed the nearest pair of riding boots, praying they would fit. It was only once they were on that Bucky realised they were his dad’s.

He swallowed.

Then grabbed his helmet from the shelf and ran out of the house.

Dani was like him at that age, he realised. She’d grown up here, and she loved it. She couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. Bucky knew this, because he was exactly the same when he was eight. And when he was a kid, there were only two places he went when he didn’t want to be found.

One was the hay loft.

He prayed she was there, because that was an easy solve.

“Dani?” he yelled, running into the barn.

No reply.

Bucky scrambled up the ladder into the hay loft and began his search, rummaging through the loose straw and ducking behind the bales just in case she was there and refusing to talk.

“Come on kid, *please*,” he whispered.

She wasn’t there.

Which left one other place Bucky could think of.

Jumping out of the hay loft, Bucky scanned the barn and swore. The horses were all out in the field, except for Rocket who was tiny. Then there was a snort behind him.

Bucky turned.

Thor was staring at him from his stall with big brown eyes.

They stared into each other’s eyes.

Then Bucky bolted towards the tack room. He found Winter’s saddle, the worn leather polished clean but covered with a layer of dust Bucky wiped away with his sleeve. Sliding Winter’s bitless bridle onto his shoulder and picking up the saddle, Bucky returned to the barn, hefting the saddle onto Thor’s stall door.

“Take a good sniff,” Bucky said, letting himself into the stall, before urging Thor to investigate the saddle. “I need your help,” he murmured. “Dani’s missing, and I think I know where she is. But I can get there a lot quicker with your help. So, what do you say? Do you trust me?”

Thor lifted his head from the saddle and head-butted Bucky’s shoulder gently.

“I hope that’s a yes.”

Bucky saddled Thor quickly, tightening the girth, before easing the bitless bridle onto his head and buckling it. Snapping the latch on his helmet, Bucky opened the door and led Thor outside, checking the girth once more, and tightening it a couple of holes. Then he climbed onto the mounting block, putting his left foot in the stirrup and swinging his leg over Thor’s back.

It brought a lump to his throat when he realised that the stirrups were still on the same holes he used with Winter.

“Come on boy,” Bucky said, nudging Thor into a walk.

He walked him down to the road, pausing to check for traffic, before crossing onto the bridlepath.

“Let’s go,” Bucky said, and with a nudge of his heels, Thor shot forward into a gallop.



My grandad went grey overnight after losing his sister in a car crash. It's possible.

Bucky sings along to Sixteen by Thomas Rhett.

Bitless bridles are what they say on the tin: a bridle without a bit. For those who don't know, the bit is the metal part that goes in the horse's mouth. Some people argue that bitless bridles are kinder on horses. For a horse like Thor, who's been abused, there are advantages to using a bitless bridle. I personally have never used one.

Marvel Trumps Hate just started bidding and I am FREAKING OUT because it's my first year taking part!

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

Thor is a hero, and Bucky faces his biggest demon.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nothing compared to the exhilaration of galloping on a horse. Thor reacted instantly to any little nudges or corrections Bucky made, listening to him and making sure to avoid potholes even in the dark. Bucky was grateful he had the foresight to pick up an LED headlamp from the tack room on his way out, illuminating the path ahead in the growing dark.

As they approached the road, Bucky eased Thor up, walking the last few feet to the road. He glanced in either direction for traffic, then nudged Thor across the road, then up into the canter towards Clifty Creek.

Bucky heard the running water before he saw the creek, pulling Thor to a halt and yelling, “Dani? Dani! Dani, where are you?”

Left or right?

Bucky knew the wrong decision would lead to wasted time. And he really didn’t want to waste any more time.

He could feel himself starting to panic. Rubbing Thor’s neck, he focus on the motion until he calmed down.

Dani was on foot. And she didn’t know the creek as well as Bucky did. And she was only eight. Bucky studied the ground, turning his head to illuminate the undergrowth, and decided to go right, sending up a quick prayer that he was making the right choice. He nudged Thor on to a walk, keeping his pace slow so he could search for Dani.

“Dani? Dani!” he shouted. “Dani, it’s Bucky. Sweetheart, where are you?”

He trusted Thor to pick his way through the undergrowth, lengthening his reins a little so he could investigate the path easily, allowing Bucky to focus on the search. With each passing minute, Bucky began to worry he was wrong. Maybe Dani wasn’t here. Maybe she wasn’t like him.

Or maybe she wasn’t missing by choice.

Maybe she’d been taken.

Silently, he swore to kill anyone who laid a hand on her. He wouldn't let Steve do it, because Steve needed to be around for his family. But Bucky would happily kill anyone who touched his niece and go to jail without a murmur if it meant she was safe.

*"Uncle Bucky, have you ever climbed a tree?"*

*"Sure. Ages ago. Me and your dad used to hang out down by the creek and climb the trees on the island down there," he replied. "Gimme a hand here squirt."*

*"I wanna climb a tree. Uncle Bucky, will you help me?"*

"The island," he muttered. "Shit."

He nudged Thor into picking up his pace. Slowly, the island in the middle of the creek became visible through the trees, in the shadow of his headlamp. Bucky pulled Thor to a halt.

"Dani?" he yelled as he dismounted. "Dani, you there?"

Pulling Thor's reins over his head, Bucky tied them to a high tree branch, patting Thor's neck once before moving to the shore line.

The creek wasn't deep. Even as a kid, it only came to his thighs. But it would reach over his boots, and it would be like ice at this time of year.

"Holy shit," Bucky muttered.

He bent down, rolling up his jeans to above the knee, then pulling off his boots, dumping his socks inside them. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the creek.

"Fuck a duck!" he swore.

It felt like a thousand tiny needles were stabbing his foot. With another breath, Bucky plunged his second foot into the water. He moved steadily through the water, wobbling when the stones shifted underfoot, hissing through his teeth when the water reached his knees. Thankfully it went no deeper, and the water level began to fall, the bank moving closer with every step. By the time he stepped onto the island, his feet were numb, but Bucky didn't care.

"Dani?" he called. "Dani, sweetheart? Please be here. Please," he muttered.

The island wasn't very big, it wouldn't take long to search. With every empty gully, Bucky's heart sank, until his headlamp flashed on something purple. Bucky swung his head back, his heart hammering in his throat.

"Dani," he exclaimed, jumping over a fallen log and dropping to his knees in front of her.

Dani was curled up at the foot of a tree, her school bag abandoned to one side. She blinked up at him sleepily.

"Uncle Bucky," she whispered. "Thought you left."

“Nope. Never,” he shook his head.

“Thought it was my fault,” her lip wobbled.

“No. No, honey.”

“I climbed the tree. You’re mad.”

“I’m not mad,” he assured her. “I was just scared. You scared me so much, honey. And when your dad said you were missing, I was so scared. So, so scared. You can’t ever scare me like that again, d’you hear?”

Dani nodded slowly.

“Come on honey, let’s get you outta here,” Bucky murmured

He swung her backpack onto his back, adjusting the straps when they threatened to cut off the circulation to his arm - he was already missing one, he couldn’t stand to lose another - before pulling her into his arms. Bucky stuck one hand under her jacket, relieved to find her body still warm. She probably didn’t have hypothermia then.

“Let’s go,” he murmured, kissing the top of her head.

The creek wasn’t quite as cold the second time around, or maybe it was just because he’d done it once. Either way, Bucky made it to the bank, sitting Dani down carefully. He rubbed his feet against the legs of his jeans to get rid of the worst of the water, before hauling on his socks and boots and untying Thor’s reins.

“Good boy,” he murmured.

Bucky lifted Dani onto the saddle first, keeping a hand on her waist to keep her balanced. Then, using strength he didn’t know he still had, he hopped twice and sprung up into the saddle, hauling his leg over Thor’s back in a way that would get him zero points for elegance, but it did the trick.

“Time to go home,” Bucky told Thor, turning him back in the direction they came.

Keeping one arm around Dani and holding the reins, Bucky pulled out his phone with his other hand, forgoing any attempt to scroll through his contacts while riding in the dark, instead holding down the home screen and telling the phone, “Call Steve.”

It rang twice before Steve voice said, “Bucky?”

“I’ve got her,” Bucky replied.

“You’ve got her?” Steve echoed. “Bucky? You’ve got her?”

“I’ve got her,” he repeated.

“Jess. Jess, Bucky’s got her. She’s okay. Is she okay?”

“She’s okay,” Bucky assured him. “I found her down by the creek. She’s tired and she’s cold, so she should probably go to the ER just incase. But otherwise she’s fine.”

“Oh thank God,” Steve exclaimed.

“Meet me at the junction of the seven hundred and Vandalia,” Bucky instructed. “I’ll see you there.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay,” Steve agreed reluctantly.

“Steve’s she’s okay,” Bucky said gently. “I’ll see you in fifteen minutes.”

“Right,” Steve sighed. “Right. Thank you Bucky.”

“Go call an ambulance,” Bucky instructed, before hanging up. He nudged Dani as he slipped his phone back into his pocket. “Hey. Hey you, wake up. Don’t go to sleep.”

“‘m not,” Dani slurred.

“If you’re gonna go to sleep, then I’m gonna have to start singing,” Bucky warned. “And trust me, nobody wants that. I scared a group of crows today cause I was singing. Crows. I mean, if crows think you sound bad, that must mean you’re terrible, right?”

Dani managed a small chuckle.

“We’re nearly there,” Bucky said, shaking her a little. “Just hang on. Hang on.”

X

The red and blue lights of the ambulance lit up the night sky as they approached. Thor started a little, but Bucky stroked his neck and murmured assurances to him, and he calmed down. As they drew closer, Bucky was able to pick out Steve.

Steve was the first to notice them, breaking away from the group and sprinting towards them. Bucky pulled Thor to a halt and gathered Dani into his arms, ready to pas her straight to Steve.

“Dani,” Steve breathed, burying his face into her hair. “Oh baby.”

“Dad...”

“Buck,” Steve began, looking up, his eyes full of tears.

“Go,” Bucky shook his head. “Take your kid to hospital. I’ll be here when you get back. I’ll always be here.”

Steve flashed his a brief smile, and nodded, before carrying Dani towards the ambulance. Bucky watched Jess run over to them. Steve wrapped his free arm around his wife, before handing Dani over to the paramedics. Dani was loaded into the ambulance, then Jess climbed in after them, while Steve returned to his truck. Bucky and Thor waited, watching the

ambulance roar off into the night, Steve following behind, until they were left in silence and darkness, the only light coming from his headlamp.

The last time he was on this road was a night like this. Dark, still, frosty. He could still remember the stars sparkling as he began to panic, realising that he couldn't open the car door, realising that there was blood, so much blood, smeared on the windscreen of the other car.

Bucky swallowed.

This was the road where he crashed into Natasha Romanoff's car. This was the road where she'd lost a leg as a result of the accident. This was the road where a farmer had driven his old tractor, just hours before the crash, not realising or not caring that it was leaking oil all the way along the road. This was where the fox ran out onto the road at the wrong moment, and Bucky ignored all his driver's ed training and slammed on the brakes, only for the tyres to slip on the oil and send him and Natasha careering into an old oak tree.

This was where everything changed.

He'd allowed this road to become a symbol of everything, of all the fear and anger and panic he'd held onto for so long. He'd actively avoided coming along it, the mere thought sending him into a panic attack. But now that he was here, Bucky felt... nothing.

It was just a road.

"Good boy," Bucky said, rubbing Thor's neck. "I'm so proud of you. I couldn't have found her without you."

Thor snorted and tossed his head, his blond mane glinting in the lamplight. Bucky smiled. Then, biting his lip, he pulled out his phone again, opening the webpage from this afternoon and hitting call.

*"Thank you for calling Carol Danvers. We're not in the office right now, but please leave a message and we'll get back to you as soon as possible."*

"Hi," Bucky said after the beep. "My name is Bucky Barnes. I'd like to talk to someone about setting up an appointment."

He reeled off his number, before hanging up. Just the thought of actively trying to combat his depression made him feel ten pounds lighter. Because what did it matter, if he had depression? If Tony wasn't ashamed, then Bucky wasn't either. What did matter was Dani, and he couldn't act like that if it was going to hurt her.

Time to make a change.

X

Bucky and Thor made their way back along the road slowly. They could see the farmhouse in the distance, every light blazing so Dani could find her way back home. Bucky smiled. It looked like the warmth was cutting through the night air, calling them home.

Tony emerged from the barn as they made their way up the driveway.

“Steve said you found her?” he called, his face twisted with worry.

“Yeah, she’s fine. She was by the creek,” Bucky assured him. He pulled Thor to a halt and dismounted, landing with a wince.

“What? Are you hurt?”

“I think I have splinters in my feet.”

Tony blinked at him.

“Okay. D’you want me to untack Thor or...?”

“Nah,” Bucky smiled, rubbing Thor’s nose. “I’ll do it. He’s been amazing.”

Tony grinned.

“Okay. You untack the demon horse, I’ll get his feed.”

“Don’t diss my horse,” Bucky teased.

“Only if you don’t diss mine,” Tony shot back.

Bucky laughed, leading Thor into the barn. He worked quickly, untacking him and brushing him down, before pulling on a light rug. It was cold out, and Thor worked up a sweat. The last thing he wanted was for him to catch a chill.

“You are such a good boy,” he murmured, rubbing Thor’s nose. “Yes, you are. You’re a hero. You saved Dani tonight. Yes, you did. Clever boy.”

Thor snorted, nodding his head and dragging his nose over Bucky’s jacket, leaving a trail of hay-tinged slobber.

“Gee, thanks,” Bucky deadpanned, tugging Thor’s ear. “Demon horse, indeed.”

Tony returned with a bucket of feed, pouring it into Thor’s trough. He stepped out of the stall, holding the door open as Bucky led Thor inside. Unclipping the lead rope, Bucky gave Thor one final pat, then Tony let him out of the stall.

“Hey Tony?”

“Hmm?”

“You know that offer you made me? About getting a drink?”

“You mean the one where you thought I was telling you to change everything about yourself?”

“Yeah. That’s the one,” Bucky grinned. “Well, does that offer still stand?”

Tony stared at him, biting his lip in a vain attempt to hold back his smile. Bucky felt a rush of excitement. He knew Tony would understand what he was saying.

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “Definitely.”

“Good,” Bucky grinned. “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

“All I ever wanted was for you to see yourself the way I see you.”

“Yeah? How’s that?”

“Incredible. Strong. With *amazing* thighs.”

“You’ve been watching my thighs?” Bucky smirked.

“Do you know how sexy it is watching you do a rising trot?”

“Probably about as sexy as your ass looked in those jeans when we went bowling.” Bucky ducked his head. “I’m not there yet,” he admitted. “But I’m trying. I called a therapist, I’m gonna set up an appointment, and I’m gonna try and heal. Like you said. And I’ve got one hell of an incentive to try.”

Tony reached out, taking Bucky’s hand and entwining their fingers.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get those splinters out of your feet.”

## Chapter End Notes

Mounting from the ground without help is *hard*. Some people can do it easily. I am not one of those people.

When I went back to the place that had become the symbol of my anxiety, the place where it all started, it was scary how little I felt. I felt like I should feel something, but I just felt nothing.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

Tony and Bucky have a heart to heart, and Bucky steps up.

## Chapter Notes

You made it through the angst? Here's your reward. The fluff begins here.

(Okay, there's still some minor angst, but it's me, so what do you expect?)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You know that phase teenagers go through, where they think they’re too cool for everything that they love? And they’re angry, cause they wanna do those things, but someone somewhere decided it wasn’t cool, so they can’t do them, so they’re just generally assholes?” Bucky said, leaning against his knees. Tony knelt in front of him, a pair of tweezers in hand, carefully removing the splinters from running across the island barefoot.

“I am familiar with it, yes,” Tony nodded. “Considering I went to high school when I was ten.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yes. Certified genius, remember?”

“Huh. Right, anyway. Well, for me, I wasn’t a teenager. I was in my twenties and couldn’t figure out what I wanted to do. My sisters were all off doing things that weren’t here, and Steve was in the army, so I became a bit of a dick. Dad should’ve given me a good kick up the ass to knock some sense into me. Then, uh, then there was the accident. Natasha, she, we went to school together. We weren’t close, but we knew each other. We both competed; she was a show jumper, I did dressage. We did Pony Club together when we were kids. I blamed myself.”

“You shouldn’t,” Tony reminded him.

“Yeah. I’m working on that,” Bucky shrugged. “Anyway, I wasn’t, I was, I was in a bad place. I was mad at myself, but didn’t know what to do about it, so I got mad at my dad. Said I hated him. I blamed him for my mom leaving. He’d always kind of implied something happened between them, and that’s why she left. I told him I wanted to find her. He tried to stop me, so I said I hated him. Said a lot of horrible stuff I, I didn’t mean it.

“My mom, she, uh, she left when I was four,” he explained. “I had meningitis. And I developed sepsis, only it went undiagnosed, and by the time they caught it, I had a, a blood clot. In my arm. They couldn’t save it. That’s when she left.” He tried to swallow around the lump in his throat. “That’s why she left.”

Tony paused, looking up at Bucky through his eyelashes.

“Dad tried to protect me, protect all of us, from the truth. That she couldn’t, she couldn’t handle the idea of, of living with a son without an arm. But I didn’t know that. So I went to see her and, well. Yeah.”

“Wasn’t exactly the family reunion you were hoping for?” Tony said, setting aside the tweezers. He picked up the antiseptic fluid, pouring a little onto some cotton wool and swiping the soles of Bucky’s feet. Bucky hissed.

“Oh, shit, that stings.”

“Almost done,” Tony promised.

“She opened the door,” Bucky continued, “Took one look at my arm, and she winced. Shuddered. That’s when I knew. She was disgusted by me.”

Tony hummed.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“What do you mean?” Bucky frowned.

Tony sat back on his haunches, looking up at Bucky. His eyes were brown, Bucky noticed. Golden brown, flecked with chestnut. They were warm, Tony’s eyes, and full of secrets. Tony wore his emotions on his face, and his secrets in his eyes.

“Maybe it wasn’t you she was disgusted by,” Tony suggested. “Your arm is a visual reminder of her biggest failure. Maybe even her biggest regret. It symbolises a life she never thought you could have, a life you live very single day. She ran because she was scared, because she only saw the worst.”

“Dad saw the best,” Bucky murmured. “He always fought for me to get the best doctors, best physical therapists. Signed me up for trials of new prosthetics so I always had to top of the range.”

“She wasn’t disgusted by you. She was disgusted by herself.”

Bucky considered this. His first reaction was to reject Tony’s suggestion outright, to take the blame upon himself. But he forced himself to stop, to take a step back and mull over Tony’s words.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said, and Tony’s face lit up with pride. “Anyway, then I got the call from Jess, about my dad, and, and I broke. Couldn’t come back. Blamed myself. For everything.”

“Bucky, you made mistakes, sure. But you didn’t cause a stroke.”

“Yeah. I know,” he sighed. “Still hard to believe though sometimes. But it was me, my illness, the amputation, I’m the reason why my sisters never had a mom, why my dad was alone for all those years.”

“If that’s the kind of person she is, maybe you were better off without her,” Tony replied. “And maybe you didn’t have a mom, but you had a pretty amazing dad. Not everyone is so lucky.”

“Were you?”

“No.”

Tony gathered the tweezers and the antiseptic, returning them to the First Aid kit under Bucky’s watchful eye, and throwing the cotton wool into the trash. Bucky pulled on a clean pair of socks, tucking his feet under him. When Tony returned, he carried two mugs of hot chocolate, handing one to Bucky before joining him on the couch.

“My relationship with my dad wasn’t like yours,” Tony said slowly, considering the mug in his hand. “In that, I didn’t have one. He was cold, he was calculating. He never told me he loved me, he never even told me he liked me. His happiest day was when he shipped me off to boarding school. And then... Then he died. And... that sucked. I took over his company, ran it with my dad’s old business partner. The man who was more like a father to me than my actual father. And the man who, when I found out he was selling weapons under the table to terrorists, kneecapped me. Probably would’ve killed me too, if I didn’t shoot him first. He’s living out his days in the California Correctional Institute now.”

“Holy shit,” Bucky breathed.

“Yeah,” Tony laughed. “My life was mess. Before.”

“I mean, what kind of person does that?” Bucky exclaimed. “Kneecapping? Terrorists? What the hell?”

“You have no idea who I am, do you?”

“Should I?”

“I’m Tony Stark. Stark Industries. Or I was.”

And that, that was one of the biggest companies in America. When Stark Industries announced it was no longer going to manufacture weapons, the stock exchange dived, and the press worried that America was headed for another recession to rival the Wall Street Crash.

Stark Industries was that big.

The market only stabilised when they released their first, instantly successful cell phone, with a battery that lasted five times longer than anything else on the market. Since then, they’d gone on to become the biggest name in green energy.

“Holy fuck.”

Tony chuckled.

“You really didn’t know?”

“No.”

“I think that’s a first.”

Tony was Tony Stark. Tony, who Bucky had seen in ancient jeans that were worn through at the knee, and usually had straw in his hair, was Tony Stark.

“Huh.”

“Does that... change anything?” Tony asked carefully.

“Yeah,” Bucky replied. Tony’s face fell. “It means you should be buying me a drink instead,” Bucky finished.

Relief flooded Tony’s face, his nose scrunching up as he giggled. He leaned forward, until his forehead rested against Bucky’s shoulder, his own shoulders shaking with laughter. Bucky grinned, raising his hand to pat Tony on the back.

X

Bucky jerked awake, his neck protesting at being twisted into a pretzel from falling asleep on the couch. Tony’s feet were in his lap, and he was snoring quietly at the other end of the couch, but Bucky didn’t think it was loud enough to wake him. He frowned into the darkness, until he heard the faint jangle of keys.

His heart jumped.

Steve.

Carefully lifting Tony’s feet just enough to slip out, Bucky placed them back down carefully and padded into the kitchen, wincing slightly at the cold tile beneath his socks.

“Hey,” Bucky called softly, wary of scaring Steve, as he entered the house.

“Hi,” Steve replied, and the exhaustion was seeping out of him.

“Tony’s asleep on the couch,” Bucky explained. “How is she?”

“Okay,” Steve replied, hanging up his keys and toeing off his shoes. “They decided to keep her in overnight for observation, just in case. Jess stayed with her..”

“Good,” Bucky nodded. “You hungry? You want something to eat?”

“No. Nah, I’m good,” he shook his head.

“You okay?”

Steve swallowed, and even in the darkness, Bucky could see his throat work, his lip tremble.

“I was so scared,” Steve whispered. “I thought... Oh, God, I thought...”

“Hey, come here.”

Bucky moved instinctively, stepping forward and wrapping Steve up in his arms. Steve burrowed his face into Bucky’s neck and his shoulders began to shake, and Bucky just held him, rubbing his hand up and down Steve’s back and murmuring reassurances as he broke down.

“I’ve got you,” Bucky promised. “It’s okay, Steve. I’ve got you.”

Once he poured Steve into bed, half-undressing him because he was at the point of passing out, Bucky returned to the living room, a blanket in hand. Carefully, he laid the blanket over Tony’s sleeping form, tucking it in before hesitating. Before he could think too much about it, Bucky leaned down and dropped a feather-light kiss against Tony’s temple, then returned to his room, where he set his alarm for an early start the next morning.

X

For once in his life, when Bucky’s alarm went off at five thirty, he didn’t swear, didn’t complain, didn’t even groan and hide under his pillow. He kicked off the blankets, pulling on a t-shirt and grabbing his arm, heading out to the kitchen with a yawn and flicked on the coffee machine.

He was halfway through making a batch of pancakes, the eggs keeping warm on one side, when Tony stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing the back of his neck.

“You’re cooking,” Tony blinked.

“I am,” Bucky agreed.

“Huh,” Tony smiled.

He sidled up to Bucky, sliding an arm around his waist and kissed his cheek. Bucky prayed he wasn’t blushing, as his lips twitched, valiantly attempting to fight the urge to smile. From the twinkle in Tony’s eyes, he was failing on both counts.

“Go set the table,” Bucky grumbled in embarrassment.

Tony chuckled, but he detached himself from Bucky’s side, retrieving cutlery from the drawer and disappearing into the living room again. Bucky exhaled, trying to collect himself before he burned his one remaining hand. Like an idiot.

He roused Steve once breakfast was ready, encouraging him to eat “just a few bites more” even though Steve was clearly pre-occupied with his worries about Dani. But distraction and Bucky’s own stubbornness meant Steve made it most of the way through a plate of pancakes

and bacon before he gave up, determined to head out for the hospital. When Steve returned to the kitchen after getting dressed, Bucky handed over a still-warm, foil wrapped parcel.

“For Dani. Cause you and I both know hospital food sucks balls.”

“It does,” Steve agreed.

“And for Jess,” Bucky added, handing over a piping hot travel mug. “Coffee. Black. Like her soul.”

Steve chuckled.

“Thanks Bucky,” he nodded. But he hesitated, even as he grabbed his keys.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Bucky promised and Steve visibly relaxed. “Told you. I’m not going anywhere. You want rid of me, you gotta throw me out yourself.”

Steve’s lips twitched.

“That’s more Jess’ department.”

“Go!” Bucky ordered. “Before I kick you out.”

“Yes sir,” Steve replied, snapping to attention before heading out the door.

Bucky forgot Steve was in the army. It was easy to forget, because he never seemed like the soldier type. But he’d done his duty and been discharged with honours. At least, Bucky thought he’d been discharged with honours. He hadn’t exactly been the best friend when Steve returned. That was during his asshole period before he left, when he was pretending he liked being friends with the losers who’d never made anything of themselves and stuck in town after high school, because all his sisters and his friends were away, making lives for themselves. He’d have to make up for that, Bucky realised guiltily.

“Okay,” Tony said, drawing Bucky out of his thoughts, carrying a pile of dirty dishes into the kitchen. “I am going to have a shower, then horses.”

“I’ll get dressed and I’ll meet you over there,” Bucky nodded.

“Square deal,” Tony smiled. “See you soon.”

“You bet.”

The frosty air nipped at Bucky’s face as soon as he stepped out the door. He yanked his zipper up as far as it would go, tucking his chin into his collar to fight off the cold as long as possible. The ground had a light covering of frost already, and Bucky found himself wondering when the first snowfall of the season would arrive. There was something magical about seeing the horses in their brightly coloured rugs, standing in snowy fields, looking like a Christmas card come to life.

As soon as Bucky stepped into the barn, Thor stuck his head out of his stall and whinnied loudly.

“Hi buddy,” Bucky grinned. “Miss me?”

Thor snorted, nodding his head, before nudging Bucky’s pockets hopefully.

“Yeah, you smell that, huh?” Bucky laughed. He pulled a handful of carrot sticks from his pocket and Thor’s eyes lit up. Bucky let himself into the stall to feed them to Thor one at a time, Thor’s whiskers tickling his palm as he snuffled up each and every piece of carrot. “You earned this,” Bucky murmured, reaching up to gently tug Thor’s ears. “You were amazing yesterday. Yeah. You were. Good boy.”

Thor raised his head, munching on the last carrot stick, watching Bucky carefully. Slowly, he pressed his head forward, until his forehead nudged Bucky’s nose. Bucky’s heart jumped. He rubbed Thor’s chin, and thought to himself that this, this moment right here, this was what he’d been missing.

Until Thor decided to ruin it by wiping carrot-slobber all over his jacket.

Bucky threw back his head and laughed.

“Demon horse,” he shook his head affectionately.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

Bucky works on fixing things with his family, which is easier with Tony on his side.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What’re you doing?” Tony murmured, running his hand through Bucky’s hair.

“Hmm, that’s nice,” Bucky replied. “I’m plotting.”

“Plotting, huh?”

“Yeah. What do you think?” he asked, showing Tony the laptop screen and the purchase he was halfway through processing.

He watched Tony’s face as he read the details of the webpage, so he could see the moment when Tony realised what he was planning, when his eyes softened, before he turned to smile at Bucky.

“I think this is a good idea.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “You want some lunch? I’m gonna make some sandwiches.”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Bucky agreed. “Make plenty. You know what Steve’s like. Bottomless pit.”

“Was he always like that?” Tony called from the kitchen.”Even when he-“

“Looked like a stiff breeze would knock him over? Yeah. I’ve never seen anyone eat so much. Guess his body was storing up all the energy for that growth spurt.”

Tony’s laughter floated through the house, and Bucky was reminded of his childhood, when the house was always filled with laughter and noise, clothes and books and boots scattered everywhere. The farmhouse was always a beacon of light in the darkness when they arrived, in those days after his mother’s departure, when neither Bucky nor his siblings knew what was going to happen now.

Bucky’s memories of that time was hazy at best, he was only five after all, but he remembered the emptiness, the confusion. First he lost his arm, then he lost his mom, with no explanation a five year old could understand for either.



Then, this place. This place his father made into a home. A home he brought Jess into, a home where they were happy, all of them.

Until Bucky ruined it.

“No,” he whispered. “It wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t my fault,” he told himself.

Bucky caught a glimpse of red through the window, the faint sound of tyres crunching on gravel audible from outside.

“They’re back,” he called to Tony, pushing his chair back from the table. Bucky moved to the kitchen door, leaning against the doorjamb as he waited for the Rogers family to appear.

Dani appeared first, bouncing into the kitchen, looking none the worse for wear for her adventure, beaming up at Tony.

“Uncle Tony!”

“Hey short stuff,” Tony grinned, ruffling her hair. “Missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Dani declared, then she turned, her eyes falling on Bucky, and she froze.

“Hey kiddo,” he smiled. “Don’t go scaring me like that again, you hear, little miss?”

“Okay,” Dani nodded.

“Can I get a hug?”

Dani nodded, crossing the kitchen and wrapping her arms round Bucky’s waist. He leaned down, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Are you leaving?” she whispered.

“No,” he replied, patting her shoulder as he pulled back. “Definitely not.”

“Dani, go put some clean clothes on,” Steve said, nudging her further into the house. Bucky squeezed Steve’s shoulder as he passed; he flashed Bucky a grateful smile.

“When you’re done, I made lunch,” Tony added, following Steve and Dani through into the living room, with a plate piled high with sandwiches, leaving Bucky and Jess alone in the kitchen.

Jess looked exhausted. Bucky was fairly certain she hadn’t slept a wink last night. He stepped forward, opening his arms.

“C’mere.”

And Jess fell forward into his arms, burying her face in his chest as her shoulders trembled.

“It’s okay, she’s okay,” Bucky whispered, running his hand up and down her spine slowly.

“It’s okay. I got you. I got you, Jess. I got you.”

“Until you run away again,” Jess mumbled into his chest.

“No. No more running,” Bucky promised. “I’m staying. And I’m gonna be better.” He kissed the top of her head, like he did with Dani, like he’d seen his dad do a million times to Jess when she was a kid, freshly arrived and orphaned, and furious at the world. “I’m gonna be here for you from now on. Whatever you need.”

“For real?” Jess asked, pulling back just enough to look up at Bucky with narrowed eyes.

“Pinky swear?” Bucky offered, keeping his face straight as he held up one pinky.

Jess snorted, but she linked her pinky with his own.

“Pinky swear,” she agreed.

“Go. Get some sleep. Tony and I’ve got this today,” Bucky said.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Alright,” Jess sighed. “I’m gonna try and get a few hours then. I was too wired to sleep last night.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell.”

“You’re a fucking dick,” she informed him.

“It’s taken you twenty one years to realise this?” Bucky called after her, grinning as he swiped a sandwich from the pile.

Without looking back, Jess flipped him off.

X

Bucky gave Steve and Jess a few days to recover before sitting them down so he could talk to them. Tony had taken Dani out into the barn to help him groom Rocket, so Bucky didn’t have to worry about Dani overhearing anything she was too young to understand.

“I owe you guys an apology,” Bucky began, twisting his hands together, watching the glint of his prosthetic against his skin. “I haven’t been taking care of myself, and it’s hurt everybody here. And that’s not okay.” He took a deep breath, preparing himself for his next words. “I’ve got depression.”

“We figured,” Steve shrugged.

“Well, you knew more than I did,” Bucky admitted. “I’ve been pretty fucked up for a while, and not doing anything about it, just made me more fucked up. But that ends now. I’ve, uh, I’ve made an appointment. With a therapist. Got my first appointment next week. I’m gonna sort my shit out. For you guys.”

Steve and Jess exchanged a glance.

“We just want you to be okay,” Steve said.

“I’m not, not yet,” Bucky said. “But I’m gonna be. And I think to do that, I need to tell you the truth. About why I left. I went to find my mom.”

“Really?” Jess frowned.

“Yeah. It was stupid. I was angry at myself, but I took it out on dad and told him I hated him,” Bucky explained. “Told him it was his fault mom left. So I went to find her. It was my fault,” he said, his voice breaking. “She left because of me. Because of my arm. I mean, I think. She didn’t even talk to me, just said *I can’t do this* and shut the door in my face.”

“Jesus,” Steve breathed.

Bucky swiped his fingers under his eyes, dashing the moisture gathered there.

“And then, straight after, I got your message,” he nodded to Jess. “About dad. The last thing I said to him was that I hated him. And, and if I’d been at home, he wouldn’t have been lying there for so long. Maybe he’d still be okay. Maybe he’d still be him. I blamed myself. For all these years, I blamed myself for his stroke.”

Steve turned to Jess. Bucky understood. As much as Steve might want to offer comfort, they all knew that for this, if there was anything it had to come from Jess. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but she wasn’t crying. Which was good. Bucky could never stand it if one of his sisters cried.

“The stroke wasn’t your fault, Buck,” Jess said slowly. “And the other stuff, I want to forgive you - and I know you say you’re gonna stick around - but I don’t know if I trust you right now.”

“That’s okay,” Bucky replied quickly, before Steve could object. “I deserve that. And I’m gonna prove to you that you can trust me. I actually got you guys something.” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, passing it across the table to them. “It’s night at The Sherman, just the two of you. You said you couldn’t remember the last time you two had a date, so, here you go. I’ll look after Dani, and Tony’ll be in his place for backup.”

“Date night sounds nice,” Steve smiled at Jess.

“Sounds real nice,” she agreed. “Alright. Deal.”

Bucky relaxed. Part of him wondered if Jess would refuse to leave Dani in his care, the self-blame for her accident still lingering in his mind.

“Good. Thanks,” he grinned.

“Pretty sure we should be thanking you,” Steve said, lifting the booking confirmation.

“No,” Bucky shook his head. “You two go have fun. I got the squirt.”

X

Dani eyed Bucky dubiously once the door closed behind Steve and Jess, clearly uncertain about being left alone with him all night.

“Hey squirt, let’s sit down for a minute,” Bucky suggested, nodding towards the couch.

Dani climbed up onto the couch, crossing her legs and staring up at him.

“So. I wanna say sorry,” he began. “I think I scared you the other day, right? When you thought I was going to leave?”

Dani nodded.

“I don’t want you to go,” she whispered.

“I know. And I’m not going,” Bucky promised. “I thought about it.”

“Because of me,” Dani hung her head.

Bucky’s heart broke. He reached out, nudging her chin up until she was looking at him, and offering her a crooked smile.

“No, honey. Not cause of you.”

“But I climbed the tree and you said no. Then I got hurt and you were mad.”

“Honey, I’m sorry I made you think I was mad. I wasn’t mad, I was scared,” Bucky admitted. “I was scared that I’d hurt you, and I thought your mom and dad wouldn’t want me around anymore.”

“Why?” Dani scrunched up her face.

“Because my brain is sick,” he explained, “And sometimes it makes me think bad things about myself that aren’t true. But that’s not excuse for making you scared.”

“Is your brain gonna get better?”

“I hope so,” he smiled. “I’m gonna see a doctor about it this week, and she’s gonna help me fix my brain so I don’t get scared so much.”

“That’s good,” Dani decided. “I don’t want your brain to be sick. That sounds bad. And I’m sorry I scared you. And that I didn’t listen.”

“I can’t be mad at you for not listening. I woulda done the exact same thing,” Bucky grinned. “Hell, I did a lot worse to your grandpa. Why he didn’t ground me until I was eighteen, I’ll never know.”

Dani giggled.

“Mom says dad was a troublemaker.”

“That’s a polite way of putting it,” Bucky replied. “Me and him were a couple of little hell raisers. We were always getting into trouble. Or ending up at the ER. Especially your dad. He never met a fight he couldn’t lose.”

Dani laughed, leaning against the back of the couch.

“He was really skinny back then,” she said.

“Yeah? You seen the pictures?”

“Um, some of them.”

“Hang on,” Bucky said, climbing off of the couch. He crossed to the bookshelves, pulling out one of the oldest photo albums, from when he was a kid, back when he met Steve after he moved to Indiana from Brooklyn. “Here we go. This was our class photo,” he explained. “Can you find me and your dad?”

“Umm...” Dani shifted onto her knees, peering at the picture. “There’s you!”

“That’s right.”

“Where’s dad?”

Bucky pointed to the small blond boy in the first row with the gap-toothed grin. Dani gasped.

“No *way*.”

“That’s him,” Bucky nodded.

“He’s so small!” Dani laughed.

“See, that’s us both riding Winter. You remember him?”

“Kinda. Where’s mom?”

“This is before your mom came to live with us,” Bucky explained. “This is when grandpa was still setting up the farm.”

Dani frowned up at him. Bucky sat back, pulling her into his side, and flicked to the front of the album. It started when they moved to the farm after Bucky’s discharge from hospital, when his dad decided to save Winter. The first photo was one of George standing in front of the house with all four of his kids.

“That’s your aunt Becca and aunt Kimmy on the left,” Bucky explained, “And that’s me and aunt May on the right.”

“You don’t have an arm,” Dani observed.

“No, that was before my first prosthetic,” Bucky replied. “I was five. We moved here so grandpa could help Winter. That’s the first picture we have of Winter,” he added, turning the

page.

Winter glared out at them, the evidence of his abuse written across his skeletal frame.

“He looks really sick,” Dani whispered.

“He was. Bad men really hurt him, and nobody thought he could be saved,” Bucky explained. “Except your grandpa. He decided that he wasn't gonna give up on Winter. He was gonna fight for him.”

“Like uncle Tony does.”

“Like uncle Tony does,” Bucky confirmed. “It took him a long time, but he cured Winter. That’s why this place is called Winter’s Haven. Because it was the first place Winter felt safe. And then grandpa decided to help other horses the same way.”

“Wow.”

“And...” Bucky flicked through the album, watching himself and his older sisters grow with every page. “Here. This is your mom when she came to live with us.”

“She still looks grumpy!” Dani laughed.

“She does,” Bucky nodded, although he knew Jess’ scowl wasn’t because she was grumpy, but because she was grieving her parents and her brother, furious at the world for leaving her alive when they were all dead. “You’ve got a trophy!” Dani pointed at the picture on the next page. “Is that from your competitions? Like the medals you showed me?”

“That’s right.”

“Cool.”

“You’ve never seen these before?”

Dani shook her head.

It made sense he realised. Although Jess knew the story about George’s decision to rescue Winter, she wasn’t there. It was a story to her, not memories. She didn’t see the many, many failures before the breakthroughs. Bucky was only five, but any memories of that time were of his dad and Winter.

“You know, we’ve probably got videos from when me and your parents were your age,” Bucky realised. “They must be up in the attic somewhere. Wanna help me find them?”

“Yes!” Dani cried.

Bucky grinned.

“Alright, let’s go.”

X

“Uncle Tony! Uncle Bucky made waffles,” Dani announced, her face sticky with syrup when Tony joined them for breakfast.

“Did he?” Tony grinned.

“Yeah. He’s the best!”

“I think you just usurped me as favourite uncle,” Tony teased.

“Oops?” Bucky smiled unrepentantly.

“Hand over the waffles and I might forgive you,” Tony said, bumping Bucky’s knee with his own as he sat down.

Bucky passed over the plate of waffles, before leaning in to whisper in Tony’s ear, “Or I could make it up to you in other ways?”

“I’m open to suggestions,” Tony murmured, his lips twitching upwards.

“What are you two talking about?” Dani frowned.

“Taxes,” Tony replied smoothly.

“Oh,” Dani scrunched up her nose, turning her attention back to her waffles.

Tony and Bucky bit back their laughter. Tony nudged Bucky’s leg under the table and winked.

Bucky was loading the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher when the backdoor opened, Steve and Jess stepping into the kitchen.

“Hey, welcome home,” Bucky greeted, straightening up.

“Mom! Dad! You’re back!” Dani squealed, wriggling out of her chair and sprinting into Steve’s arms.

“Bucky, we’re forgotten,” Tony joked. “Unloved. Unwanted.”

“You give a girl waffles, and this is how she treats you,” Bucky sighed, playing along with him.

“Don’t worry honey, I’ll look after you,” Tony said, slinging his arm round Bucky’s neck and kissing his cheek, a hair’s breadth above the corner of his mouth, before heading out to the yard.

Bucky fought to control his blush as Steve and Jess raised their eyebrows and smirked at him over Dani’s head.

“Told you it was creepy when you two did that,” he muttered, nudging the dishwasher closed with his hips.

“So,” Steve drawled.

“Nope!” Bucky called, all but running into the mud room, grabbing the first pair of boots and tugging them on, and rushing out of the door before Steve or Jess could say anything.

Making his way up the drive, Bucky saw Tony leading Thor out towards the south paddock. He found himself smiling automatically, at the sight of his horse, walking calmly by Tony’s side, waiting patiently while he unclipped the lead rope before trotting into the paddock. Tony glanced up as he approached, smiling at Bucky.

“Hey you.”

“Hey,” Bucky echoed, leaning against the fence next to Tony.

Thor trotted up to Loki, neighing a greeting to the black horse. Loki raised his head, regarding Thor with an expression that screamed indifference. As they watched, Thor tried dancing around Loki, only to be ignored. So Thor attempted a different tactic, dropping his neck and whickering quietly, nudging Loki gently.

Loki raised his head again, before sighing. If a horse could roll their eyes, Bucky was sure it would be Loki. But he sipped forward and grudgingly allowed Thor to begin mutual grooming.

“He’s a determined little shit, isn’t he?” Tony grinned.

“Think he’s gonna have to be if he’s determined to be friends with Loki,” Bucky replied.

“Well, he’s got time. I don’t think he’s going anywhere soon.”

“No,” Bucky agreed. “I mean, Thor is great, but I don’t think it would take much to send him backwards.”

Tony nodded.

“Guess you're stuck with him.”

“Worse horses to be stuck with. Besides,” he grinned, “We’ve bonded.”

“I know the feeling,” Tony nodded, watching Loki with affection.

He turned to smile at Bucky.

“I’m going to kiss you now unless you say stop,” Tony informed him, already leaning in.

“Definitely do not stop,” Bucky replied.



Tony chuckled. Then they were kissing, and Bucky had to cling to the fence, because it felt like the ground had been pulled from underneath his feet. His breath caught, and Tony's hand tangled in his hair, cradling Bucky's head so gently, as though he could break.

Which was ridiculous.

He'd never felt stronger.

"So. You're sticking around?" Tony murmured.

"Yeah," Bucky nodded. "Reckon I might. It's good to be home."

## Chapter End Notes

The Sherman is a hotel near Greensburg, Indiana.

The rating is going to increase from the next chapter, but if smut's not your thing, don't panic! I will tell you in the notes where to skip if you don't want to read the smut, and put a summary in the notes at the end.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

Bucky and Tony are over taking things slow, and Bucky and Natasha have a long overdue conversation.

## Chapter Notes

Please heed updated rating and tags!

So, this is one of my first attempts at smut. Please bear that in mind. If smut isn't your thing, stop read when Tony and Bucky go upstairs, of when the flirting becomes too much. Rejoin the story after the next break.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Who knew talking could be so exhausting?

Bucky climbed out of Tony's truck, his knees felt shaky as he walked towards the house. He'd just had his first therapy appointment, but he felt like he'd gone several rounds with Thor when he first arrived in Winter's Haven.

The house was empty when Bucky let himself in. Steve and Jess were at Dani's parents' night, and wouldn't be back until later. Toeing off his shoes, he padded through to his room, peeling off his clothes like he was shedding his skin. After that, after hashing out everything with his therapist, he needed comfort. And comfort came in the form of his softest pair of work jeans and an old flannel shirt underneath his red hoodie. Leaving his room, Bucky pulled on his paddock boots and headed towards the yard, following the sound of hoof beats until he found Tony and Arrow in the indoor school.

Bucky leaned against the gate and watched Tony ride Arrow around the ring. But he wasn't really watching; in his head he was reliving his appointment with Carol where he had to relive all the horrible things he'd done, while trying to remind himself they were not his fault.

A snort brought him back to the here and now; when Bucky looked up, Tony had pulled Arrow to a stop in front of him, and was watching Bucky with concern.

"Hey," Tony greeted. "Welcome back."

"Hey," Bucky nodded.

“You okay?”

Bucky opened his mouth, the *yes* already on the tip of his tongue, the taste of the lie there and so familiar, but then he deflated and admitted, “Not really. Tired.”

Tony hummed, commiserating, then suggested, “Why don’t you go lie down at my place? I’ll be in in a bit, just need to get this maniac settled first.”

“Okay,” Bucky nodded, peeling off and heading towards the studio.

He let himself in, toeing off his boots, and climbed straight up the ladder to the loft, crawling into bed and curling up under the blankets. Burrowing into the pillow, Bucky drifted off with the smell of Tony surrounding him, and for once, he felt safe.

X

When he woke, Bucky felt disorientated, unsure where he was or why he was in bed fully dressed. Then he came back to himself, the quiet sounds of someone in the kitchen below and the smell of something from the kitchen making his belly rumble. Shuffling to the edge of the mattress, Bucky swung his feet out onto the ladder and descended to join Tony in the kitchen.

“You’re cooking,” Bucky observed, surprise colouring his voice.

“I am,” Tony agreed. He turned away from the cooker to slide an arm around Bucky’s waist, leaning in to press a soft kiss against his cheek. Warmth spread through Bucky from that point right down to the tips of his toes, and he fought the blush heating up his neck. “How’d ‘you feel?” Tony asked.

“Better,” Bucky admitted.

“So, uh, call your sister. Ask if you can spend the night,” Tony suggested. “We’ll have a slumber party. Braid each other’s hair. Well, braid your hair.”

Bucky chuckled, leaning into Tony’s side.

“I’m a grown man,” he replied. “I don’t need my baby sister’s permission to stay the night.”

“Does that mean you’re staying?” Tony grinned.

Bucky hummed.

“Guess I could be persuaded,” he murmured, leaning in to capture Tony’s lips.

“Go, sit down,” Tony whispered. “Let me spoil you.”

And everything in Bucky railed against the idea of doing nothing, of allowing Tony to take care of him. But he let the moment pass, and nodded, pulling out one of the two chairs at the narrow table, allowing Tony to get back to work.

Bucky took the opportunity to glance around the room, taking in the changes in the studio. The last time he was in this room, he was eighteen, spending Steve's last night in town together, before Steve went off to college in New York, and Bucky became an asshole. Back then, the walls were still littered with a variety of posters, stuck up by Bucky and his sisters over the years, the *Backstreet Boys* competing with Jennifer Anniston and Leonardo DiCaprio for space. Muddled in between were photos of them all, and the horses, and the furniture consisted of his dad's old couch and a pair of beanbags, spilling beans all over the floor, and an inflatable chair with duck tape covering the hole from Kimmy's braces.

Now, the magazine posters were gone, as was the couch, the beanbags and the inflatable chair, replaced by a new couch that matched the kitchen cupboards and looked invitingly comfortable. On the walls, Bucky saw a number of photo frames. Some contained Steve and Jess, either with or without Tony, a number were photos of Dani, Loki featured in several, and the rest saw Tony with a two men and a woman Bucky didn't know, looking younger than Bucky had ever seen him.

Clearly they were his friends from before his arrival in Indiana.

"What're you making?" Bucky asked.

"Lamb goulash," Tony explained. "Old Hungarian recipe."

"Are you Hungarian?" Bucky frowned.

"No," Tony chuckled. "Technically, I'm one quarter Italian. No, our - okay, this is going to make me sound very rich - our housekeeper was Hungarian, and she taught me how to cook."

"Cool," Bucky nodded. "Do you still keep in touch?"

Tony nodded.

"She lives back in California," he explained. "I keep trying to convince her to move out here, but I haven't succeeded yet. Ana's pretty stubborn."

Bucky couldn't help the snort that escaped.

"You implying something, Barnes?" Tony teased.

"Nope," Bucky replied. "I saying you're stubborn as hell. You must be, to not give up on me 'til I got my head outta my ass."

Tony's face softened.

"Worth the wait," he insisted softly, but with a weight that brokered no argument. "Anyway, Ana, she's... Okay. I had a mom, and I loved her, but we weren't close close, you know? Ana was... She was always there. And she never hid her emotions. So, for a long time, I thought she cared more. Which wasn't true, but when you're a kid, you... you tell how much someone loves you but how affectionate they are. Mom, mom wasn't affectionate. Not outwardly. Not the way Ana was."

“She sounds kinda awesome,” Bucky offered.

Tony grinned.

“She is. I fly back a few times a year to visit her, make sure she’s doing okay.”

“Maybe one day I’ll meet her,” Bucky suggested tentatively.

“I hope so,” Tony replied, his words filling Bucky with relief.

Maybe, just maybe, they were in the same page at last. Now, they could start looking towards the future, towards building an actual relationship together. Bucky’s brain baulked at the idea of letting someone in, the thought of giving them the chance to hurt him, but he instantly shut it down.

Tony wouldn’t do that. Tony wanted him to be happy. Tony wanted him to look after himself. And Bucky decided he trusted Tony’s judgement much more than his shaky brain for the moment.

After dinner - of which Bucky had seconds and maybe even thirds, because Tony really was that good of a cook - Bucky helped Tony with the dishes. He washed, while Tony dried, and the scene was so wonderfully domestic, it warmed Bucky from head to toe.

He wanted this, he realised. He wanted this with Tony.

“Here,” he said, holding out a soapy pot for Tony.

But instead of taking the pot from him, Tony stepped forward, cupping Bucky’s cheek with his hand before leaning in to kiss him.

Bucky’s breath caught, his mouth falling open in surprise, and Tony took advantage and deepened the kiss. When they broke apart, Bucky stared into Tony’s eyes, gulping for air, wracking his brains for something to say.

“I’m dripping on your floor,” he blurted out, then cringed.

Tony giggled, leaning in to press a kiss to Bucky’s cheek, before relieving him of the pot. Bucky turned back to the sink, shaking his head at his own ridiculousness. He jumped when Tony’s hands settled on his hips.

“You’re adorable,” Tony murmured, kissing his way up the column of Bucky’s neck.

“Glad you find my embarrassment so amusing,” Bucky retorted, fighting his own smile.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” Tony assured him.

He slipped his arms around Bucky’s waist, squeezing him gently, before placing one final kiss below his ear before letting go to finish drying the dishes.

Bucky pulled the plug out of the sink, letting the water drain away, and picked up a towel to dry off his hands.

Then Tony was right there, pulling the towel out of his hands, and stepping right into his space to press his lips to Bucky's. This time, Bucky opened his mouth with a moan, letting Tony lick his way inside.

Bucky grappled at Tony's shirt, fisting his hands in the solar and hauling him in, until they were pressed together from chest to thigh. Tony hummed appreciatively, pulling back a little to capture Bucky's lower lip, pulling it between his own lips.

"Tony," Bucky groaned.

They'd been taking it slow, since their first kiss. Even when they finally made it for that drink, they'd stopped at making out for twenty minutes in Tony's truck, leaving Bucky so tightly wound, he had to sneak into the bathroom and jerk off before he could get to sleep.

"So, uh," Tony asked, pausing to steal one more kiss, "How are you feeling about the whole, uh, taking it slow thing?"

"Totally over it," Bucky replied.

"Oh thank God," Tony exclaimed, grabbing Bucky wrist and dragging him towards the ladder to the loft.

Bucky threw his head back as he laughed, allowing Tony to pull him along, only letting go to climb the ladder. Bucky scampered up behind him, taking advantage of the situation to ogle Tony's ass which, as ever, looked amazing in his jeans. And now, he realised with a thrill, he was going to see what that ass looked like *out* of those jeans.

Bucky said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever deity was listening for making this happen, and stopping him from completely screwing up this thing with Tony.

Tony reached the top of the ladder, rolling across the mattress and yanking his shirt out from his jeans and fumbling with the buttons. Bucky paused at the head of the ladder, admiring the view, until Tony raised an eyebrow and asked, "You just gonna watch? Or are you gonna get over here and give me a hand?"

Balancing on the ladder, Bucky pulled off his t-shirt, letting it fall to the floor, before crawling onto the mattress and leaning over to kiss Tony.

"Nice of you to join me," Tony murmured, finally unbuttoning his shirt and pushing it off of his shoulders, revealing a set of abs and biceps developed from hard labour that made Bucky want to drool. Bucky's brain stuttered to a halt, and before it could reboot, Tony wound his hand into Bucky's hair, pulling him down to press soft, teasing kisses to his lips.

Then, to his surprise, he felt Tony push his onto his back with the hitherto hidden muscles, and that was just the hottest thing ever. Bucky'd never been turned on by strength before,

muscly guys like Steve were never his thing, but when Tony manhandled him with such ease, but went limp, his head falling back with a moan, his hips twitching upwards.

“Bucky,” Tony murmured, sucking on his neck. “Oh, honey...”

“Tony,” he gasped. “God, Tony, I want, want...”

“What?” Tony stole another kiss. “What d’you want, honey?”

God, that was the question, wasn’t it? What did he want? From Tony?

*Everything.*

But everything would have to wait, right now Bucky just needed Tony.

“Hmm?” Tony hummed, tugging Bucky’s earlobe with his teeth. “What do you want?” he whispered.

Bucky tangled his hand in Tony’s hair, pulling him up so he could stare straight into Tony’s face.

“I want you to blow me,” he declared.

A smile spread across Tony’s face. He beamed down at Bucky, before swooping in for another kiss.

“My pleasure, baby,” Tony murmured.

Then Tony was kissing his way down Bucky’s chest, pausing to pay attention to Bucky’s nipples, while simultaneously unbuttoning Bucky’s jeans and pulling down the zipper. Which was, yeah, multitasking was good, Bucky decided. He lifted his hips so Tony could pull down his jeans. Tony sat back, enabling Bucky to kick off his jeans, using the opportunity to unbutton his own jeans before leaning down and kissing Bucky thoroughly, until he was panting for breath.

“Fuck,” Bucky groaned.

He pushed his hands down the back of Tony’s jeans, pushing them out of the way, before grabbing hold of Tony’s ass and pulling their groins together. They broke apart, groaning into each other’s mouths. Tony pressed his forehead to Bucky’s, gulping for air.

“We are still wearing, like, way too much clothes,” Bucky pointed out.

“Agreed,” Tony nodded.

He rolled off of Bucky, giving them both the space to push off their boxers. Then Bucky lay back, while Tony crawled into the v of his hips, grabbing a condom from the drawer by the bed and ripping open the packet. He rolled the condom over Bucky’s dick, then leaned down and kissed the tip.

“Holy shit!” Bucky exclaimed, fighting to stop his hips from twitching upwards. His hands spasmed in the air, before finally settling on Tony’s shoulders.

Until Tony raised one hand from Bucky’s thighs to shift his hands into Tony’s hair, and yeah, that was better.

Bucky grabbed a handful of Tony’s hair and lost himself to the sensations of Tony’s mouth licking and sucking at his dick. And it was amazing, the best sex he’d ever had, and it wasn’t because of the sex - which was amazing, it was, no lie - it was because it was Tony.

It was Tony.

Bucky looked down, caught Tony’s eye as he looked up at him through his eyelashes, and it was that - it was Tony - that made him come with a shout, his vision blurring until he came back to himself.

Bucky gulped for breath. He blinked at Tony, watching as he crawled up Bucky’s body, leaning in eagerly when Tony pulled him in for a hungry kiss.

“Bucky,” Tony groaned. “Oh, God, fuck...”

Tony spun around, rummaging in the same drawer and pulling out a tube of lube. Bucky watched him snap it open, drizzling the lube over his hand and grabbing his cock.

“Holy shit, that’s hot,” Bucky breathed, watching Tony jerk himself off. He curled his hand around the back of Tony’s head, pulling him in so he could suck a mark onto Tony’s neck, a rush of possessive pride filling him at the sight of the purpling bruise on Tony’s skin. “Baby,” he groaned.

“Yes. Yes, honey, yeah,” Tony gasped and came, right across Bucky’s stomach.

They collapsed into a sweaty, sticky heap. Bucky pressed his nose into Tony’s forehead, breathing him in.

“Okay, yeah. That was, uh, good,” Tony panted. “Ten out of ten, would do again.”

Bucky chuckled.

“Yeah. Definitely,” he agreed.

“Alright. Alright,” Tony groaned, levering himself out of bed. “Gimme a second.”

He disappeared down the ladder, out of the loft. Bucky heard the sound of water running, then Tony reappeared with a washcloth. He crawled over the mattress, wiping them both down, before tossing the cloth aside. Bucky watched him the entire time, a small smile on his face.

When Tony lay down again, he raised his chin, indicating for Bucky to move closer, murmuring, “C’mere.”



Bucky pulled off his arm, laying it aside, before he snuggled into Tony's side, tucking his head under his chin.

"You good?" Tony whispered.

"Yeah. Pretty damn good," Bucky grinned, nuzzling Tony's collarbone.

He could feel himself drifting off, and buried his face into Tony's neck.

The last thing he felt before he dropping off was a pair of lips pressing a final kiss to his forehead and Bucky thought *Home*.

X

Bucky woke to someone squeezing his shoulder gently, drawing him out of sleep. He whined, burrowing further into the warmth of the pillow.

A low chuckle rumbled in his ear.

"Come on honey, time to wake up," Tony's voice said softly, punctuated by another squeeze on his shoulder.

Right. Tony. Because last night they slept together and Bucky stayed over.

But right now, it was early and it was warm and Bucky wanted to sleep.

Preferably with Tony curled up beside him.

"Rise and shine, grumpy pumps," Tony teased. He pressed a kiss into Bucky's hair. "I'll make breakfast."

And then he was gone.

Bucky could hear him making his way down the ladder, then pattering about in the kitchen below. As much as he wanted to fall asleep again, Bucky pushed himself upright, until he was blinking blearily at the loft. He yawned, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with his hand, before reaching for his prosthetic.

Someone - Tony - had piled Bucky's boxers and his jeans by the mattress. He wriggled into them, before descending from the loft, where he found his t-shirt, still lying on the floor where he dropped it the night before. After pulling on his shirt, Bucky wandered across to Tony's side, reaching above his head, stretching out the kinks in his back. Tony took advantage of the movement to slide his hand on the sliver of skin revealed above his waistband.

"Ah!" Bucky squealed dancing away. He scowled. "Your hands are cold."

Tony snorted, rolling his eyes, before handing Bucky a mug of coffee - bless him - and a freshly toasted bagel."

“Thank you,” Bucky mumbled around a mouthful of bagel.

Tony smiled, leaning forward to kiss his cheek, before directing them to the table.

“You know, I could get used to this,” Tony commented, picking up his own bagel. “Waking up with you in my bed.”

“I could get used to waking up in your bed,” Bucky agreed.

Tony grinned at him again, and Bucky realised how easy it would be to fall in love with this man.

X

When Bucky led Arrow into the barn, he realised he wasn’t alone. There was someone standing outside Red’s stall, rubbing his nose affectionately.

Natasha.

Bucky swallowed, his steps faltering, but he forced himself to keep walking.

“Hey,” he called, relieved to hear his voice didn’t waver.

“Hi Bucky,” Natasha greeted.

“You looking for somebody?” he asked, leading Arrow into his stall.

“No, Tony’s just coming. I saw him on my way in,” she replied. “Red’s coming home with me today.”

“That’s good,” Bucky nodded, bolting Arrow’s stall, double checking the kick bolt, because Arrow was a little shit who would try to escape at the first available opportunity. Then, steeling himself, he turned to face her. “Think I owe you an apology,” he said.

Natasha blinked at him. All these years, and he still couldn’t read her.

“For what?”

“You know what for. For... For the accident.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” she replied. “And even if it was, so what? It’s never stopped me from doing what I love. You of all people should know that.”

“Guess I should’ve,” Bucky realised. “Didn’t. My brain’s a little, uh, messed up. I’m working on it.”

“Good,” she nodded. “I’m glad. Bucky, if I wasn’t okay with what happened, do you really think I would’ve come here? Tony’s a friend, he could easily have worked with Red at my yard,” she pointed out. “I made my peace with it a long time ago.”

And that... was a good point, Bucky realised.

“Huh,” he frowned. “Wow. Yeah, I, I guess so. Huh.”

Natasha smiled at him.

“Any tips on how to do that whole making your peace with it thing?” he asked, only half joking.

“We’ll have a beer together, talk it over,” she suggested.

“Okay, yeah,” Bucky agreed in surprise.

“You should come by my yard sometime,” Natasha continued. “We’ll hang out.”

“Yeah. I... I think I’d like that,” Bucky admitted.

Natasha smiled, before stepping forward and drawing him into a hug. It took a moment for Bucky to get over his surprise and hug her back, but when he did, he felt something in him start to heal.

## Chapter End Notes

For those skipping the smut: Tony and Bucky have sex for the first time. When Tony asks Bucky what he wants, Bucky realises he wants everything from Tony. As they fall asleep after, Bucky feels at home.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](https://www.tumblr.com/weethreequarter) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

Tony teaches Bucky how to love mornings, and Bucky visits Natasha's yard.

## Chapter Notes

There's smut in the first section, so if you want to skip it, stop reading when the flirting gets too much, or when they go into the shower. It's safe to rejoin after the first break.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bucky woke to Tony leaning over him, watching him with a soft smile.

“Ngghh,” Bucky grumbled. “No.”

But he fisted his hand in Tony’s tank top, pulling him down for a kiss, morning breath and all.

“Wha’ time ’s it?” Bucky mumbled.

“Five am,” Tony replied.

“What? Why?” Bucky groaned. “Too early.”

“We gotta shower,” Tony explained, kissing Bucky’s shoulder, which was nice, except for the fact it was *five in the freaking morning*.

“You shower. I’m gonna sleep,” Bucky mumbled, already curling up into a ball, tugging the duvet up over his shoulder again.

Behind him, Tony sighed, and even without opening his eyes, Bucky could tell he was rolling his eyes.

“*Or*,” Tony said. “We could shower together.”

Bucky opened an eye, peering up at him.

“I’m listening.”

Tony beamed, leaning down and kissing his way from Bucky's shoulder, up his neck, pausing to suck a hickey below his ear, before continuing up his jaw until he reached Bucky's lips. Bucky shifted onto his back to give Tony better access, his jaw falling open so Tony could lick his way into his mouth.

"You make a compelling argument," Bucky said when they broke apart. He patted Tony on the ass. "Lead the way."

It took a good five minutes for the water in the studio shower to heat up, but they took advantage of that time to make out, Tony pressing Bucky into the sink until they were breathless and hard against each other's hips. Tony pulled back first, dropping a quick kiss onto Bucky's jaw, before tugging him towards the shower.

"This was not made for two people," Bucky declared as he backed into the tiny shower stall.

Tony hummed in agreement, latching his mouth onto Bucky's neck and, oh yeah, that was *great*, why wasn't Tony doing that all the time?

"Well, the alternative," Tony murmured, "Is down in the house, with your sister, best friend, and niece in the next room."

"Please don't mention my family during sex again," Bucky grimaced.

Tony giggled pressing their foreheads together, gripping Bucky's hips with strong hands, calloused from working with the horses.

"That's not doing it for you?" he teased.

"Steve stopped doing it for me when he married my sister," Bucky retorted, before grabbing Tony's chin to kiss him, muffling Tony's laughter with his mouth, the shower spray pelting him right in the eye.

Bucky shook his head, wiping the water from his eye.

"That went well," he muttered.

Then Tony's hands were in his hair, brushing it from his face, the water sticking it to his scalp, and all Bucky could see was Tony, his face bright and happy, chocolate brown eyes dancing, and he thought *I could fall in love with this man*.

The truth was, he was probably already half-way there.

"Why don't you sit back and let me do all the work, huh?" Tony grinned. "Don't want you to hurt yourself, honey."

"You're gonna do the work, huh? Alright, go ahead," Bucky nodded, spreading his arm, forgetting they were in the tiny shower stall, and smacking his hand off of the walls. "Ow!"

Tony burst out laughing, burying his face in Bucky's collarbone, and Bucky couldn't find it in him to be embarrassed, not when he had Tony, soaking wet and hard, in his arm. He

wrapped his arm around Tony, holding him like he was the most precious thing in the world, even as Tony's shoulders trembled with laughter.

"So it's like that, huh?" Bucky joked. "My pain's funny to you."

"Aw, baby," Tony said, pulling back with a pout completely belied by the laughter in his eyes. "Want me to make it better?" he asked, lifting Bucky's hand to his mouth, kissing each knuckle slowly, while looking up at Bucky through his eye lashes.

Bucky's mouth turned into the Sahara.

"Now there's an offer I can't refuse" he murmured. "Do not quite the Godfather during sex!" he added swiftly when Tony opened his mouth.

Tony laughed again, and Bucky'd never had sex like this, but he loved it.

Then Tony reached behind him, picking up the lube and squirting it into his hand, before taking them both in hand.

Bucky's hand flew to the back of Tony's neck, pressing their foreheads together and watching Tony's hand as he stroked them both. Bucky's breath caught, his grip tightening on Tony's neck involuntarily, and Tony groaned, his pace picking up. Tony nudged Bucky's head up, stealing a kiss that left him breathless and panting.

"God, Tony, yeah," he gasped.

"Yeah?" Tony panted.

"Yeah. Yeah, 'm close."

"Come on, baby, come for me," Tony said, and there was just a hint of an order to his words, enough to send a shiver rolling down Bucky's spine.

He dropped his forehead into Tony's shoulder, caught between the desire to watch Tony's hand on their dicks, and the need to close his eyes. A few more strokes and he was coming over Tony's hand with a choked off cry, his hand slipping to Tony's waist.

His knees wobbled, threatening to give out, until Tony backed him into the wall, pinning him in place with his own body.

"Your turn," Bucky mumbled, kissing the corner of Tony's mouth while scrabbling for the lube. Then he batted Tony's hand away from his dick, replacing it with his own.

Bucky loved sex with Tony. He loved making him come, loved seeing the usually strong and composed man fall apart in his hands. Tony clung to Bucky's shoulders, a whine emitted from his throat, Tony's nails pinpricks in against his skin. Bucky nipped at Tony's ear, picking up the pace, and then Tony came too, slumping against Bucky's chest with his arms around his neck.

Bucky released his dick so he could wrap his arm around Tony's waist again, holding him up and peppering his face with kisses until Tony lifted his head to capture Bucky's mouth with his own.

"I take it back," Bucky murmured as they kissed lazily. "Early mornings are the best."

X

"Hey," Tony called, sticking his head into the tack room. "I'm heading over to Nat's to see Rhodey, her other half. You wanna come?"

"Uh, sure," Bucky nodded, as he finished polishing his saddle. "That sounds great."

"Awesome. I'm leaving in ten," Tony grinned.

Bucky left the tack room, detouring to the house to swap out his muck boots for sneakers, and pulling on a clean jacket. He stuck his head into the kitchen to tell Jess where they were going, then jogged out to Tony's truck, pulling his beanie hat from his pocket and jamming it onto his head, his breath billowing in the frosty air.

Luckily, Tony had fired up the truck's heater; Bucky climbed into the passenger seat, rubbing his hands together to fight off the chill in his fingers.

"How far is it to Natasha's place?" Bucky asked as Tony turned onto the highway.

"Bout an hour and a half, give or take traffic," Tony replied. "She's up in Hamilton County. You wanna stop for lunch on the way? I'm buying."

"Sure," Bucky smiled.

Tony grinned, reaching across the centre console to squeeze Bucky's knee, before releasing him to change gear. Bucky leaned back in his seat, shifting so he had a better view of Tony as they drove.

"You watching me, Barnes?" Tony smirked.

"Maybe. Got a problem with that, Stark?"

"Oh, I'm sure I could learn to live with it."

They stopped at a Greek restaurant just off of the I-465, and Bucky took advantage of the opportunity to show off his, albeit rusty, Greek to order from the owner, who was so delighted at Bucky's language skills, he gave them a twenty percent discount.

"You speak Greek?" Tony grinned.

"I am Greek," Bucky retorted, dunking a chunk of cucumber into the tzatziki. "Well, one quarter Greek. Also one quarter Scottish. Hey, don't hog the hummus."

Tony turned off onto a long white gravelled driveway, the fields on either side scattered with grazing horses, until they reached a yard dominated by a white-washed barn and an immaculate outdoor school.

“Holy shit,” Bucky breathed.

“Yeah, she’s done pretty good for herself, hasn’t she?” Tony said, shifting the truck into park.

“I’ll say.”

Bucky climbed out of the truck, pulling on his beanie hat once more and taking in Natasha’s yard. It was one hell of a competition yard, nothing like Winter’s Haven. It was the kind of place Bucky once imagined himself in one day, back when he thought his career path would take him to a life on horseback.

“Platypus!” Tony called, and Bucky turned to spot a man in a wheelchair rolling across the yard towards them.

“Tony,” the man rolled his eyes, while accepting Tony’s hug. “Good to see you man.”

“You too,” Tony nodded. “Hey, uh, this is Bucky,” he added, holding out an arm. “Bucky, this is Rhodey.”

“James Rhodes,” Rhodey introduced himself.

“James Barnes,” Bucky grinned to cover the surge of butterflies erupting in his gut at the realisation that Rhodey was Natasha’s husband. Surely he had to know who Bucky was, and his role in Natasha’s accident. Bucky searched Rhodey’s face for some sign he disapproved of Bucky’s presence here, but to his relief, all he found was welcoming.

“Nat said you might be coming by,” Rhodey continued. “She’s over in the ring training if you wanna head over.”

“You coming?” Bucky asked Tony.

“In a bit,” Tony promised. “I’m gonna catch up with Rhodey first, but I’ll come see Red before we go.”

“Okay. Sounds good,” Bucky nodded.

Following Rhodey’s directions, Bucky made his way through the barn until he reached the Olympic-sized indoor ring. Natasha was riding a dark grey horse, running through a dressage routine. Folding his arms against the gate, Bucky watched in fascination. He hadn’t seen any dressage since his last competition more than five years ago, and he’d never seen Natasha compete in dressage. She was always a show jumper, while Bucky focused on dressage, because it was the Paralympic sport.

“Looking good,” Bucky called when she finished.



“Bucky. Hi,” Natasha smiled, nudging her mount into a walk. She halted by the gate, swinging her leg over to dismount. “Rhodey said Tony was coming over this afternoon.”

“Yeah, thought I’d tag along,” Bucky said, opening the gate for her. “Who’s this?”

“This is Pearl. She’s my main dressage horse,” Natasha explained, leading Pearl into the barn.

“Tony said something about you looking good for Tokyo,” Bucky said, leaning on the door to Pearl’s stall, watching Natasha as she untacked.

“Fingers crossed, I’m gonna make it.”

“It’s kinda weird, thinking about you doing dressage. You were always the show jumper,” Bucky mused.

“I still love jumping. But it’s not a Paralympic sport,” she shrugged. “Yet. I’m working on it.”

“They better watch out then. I don’t think the student council ever recovered from your campaign against the dress code,” Bucky teased.

“Quite right too,” Natasha smirked. “There’s more progress being made over in Britain. Rhodey offered to move over there if I wanted to compete more, but I’m too stubborn to give up on America like that.”

“Sounds like you,” Bucky agreed. “I remember when Jim Moritia said you couldn’t be on the wrestling team cause you were a girl. You sure as shit showed him.”

Natasha preened, letting herself out of Pearl’s stall and hoisting the saddle against her hip.

“You want to tour?” she offered.

“Lead the way.”

Natasha gave Bucky a full tour of the yard, introducing him proudly to all her competition horses, including Red whose ears pricked up and he whinnied excitedly when he spotted Bucky, kicking his stall door until Bucky crossed and rubbed his ears obligingly. Red nudged at his jacket pocket.

“You smell that, huh?” Bucky grinned, pulling out the horse treat.

Red gobbled the treat before looking hopefully for more.

“Nope, you’re outta luck, buddy,” Bucky chuckled, giving Red’s ear one last tug. “How’s he doing?” he asked Natasha as they made their way through the barn.

“He’s doing really well,” Natasha smiled. “Tony’s amazing. I’m so glad he was able to get through to Red. He has a lot of potential.”

“Tokyo potential?”

“You never know.”

An excited squeal drew Bucky’s attention; turning, he spotted an appaloosa yearling sticking his head out from a stall at the end of the barn, watching them eagerly.

“Hi boy,” Bucky murmured, stepping forward with his hand held out for the yearling to sniff. “Who’s this guy?”

“This is what happens when one of my stallions escapes into the neighbour’s field,” Natasha rolled her eyes.

The yearling butted Bucky’s shoulder, nibbling on his jacket and snorting indignantly when Bucky pushed him off.

“You need to learn some manners, huh? Are you going to train him up?” he asked Natasha.

“No, he’s blind in one eye,” she explained. “Sometimes horses with one eye compete, but he has trouble with his depth perception sometimes. We could probably work on it, but I’m sure he has the temperament for competing. I think he’d be happier somewhere else.”

She eyed Bucky with a shrewd expression.

“You should have him,” Natasha said suddenly.

“Me?” Bucky echoed, his head snapping round. “What? I, what?”

“You should have him,” she repeated. “You and Tony could train him. Bucky Barnes should have a horse of his own.”

“I have a horse,” Bucky insisted. “Kinda. Thor’s kinda mine.”

“Kinda’s not good enough,” Natasha declared. “He’s yours.”

“I don’t even have a trailer with me,” Bucky pointed out.

“Well then,” Natasha smirked, “That just means you’ll have to come back and visit me again, doesn’t it?”

Bucky rubbed the horse - his horse - on the nose.

“Guess it does,” he murmured. “What’s his name?”

“He doesn’t have one yet. So it’s up to you.”

Bucky reached up, scratching the appaloosa’s neck until his head drooped, his eyelids falling shut as he snorted in contentment.

“Thunderbolt,” Bucky decided. “He’s Thunderbolt.”

## Chapter End Notes

I've started working on the Jess/Steve prequel. I've also added this to a new series, The Lost Boys, if you want to subscribe.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

Jess give Bucky a gift, and Bucky plans for the future.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky looked up at the knock on his bedroom door, smiling when he spotted Jess leaning in the doorway. They'd been making slow but steady progress over the past few weeks. She'd stopped watching him like she expected him to leave at any second, and since Bucky helped decorate the Christmas tree the other night, something had settled in his sister. Personally, Bucky couldn't wait to spend Christmas with his family again.

He'd missed them.

"Hey you," he grinned.

"Hey," Jess replied. "I, uh, I've got something. For you."

"Christmas is two weeks away," Bucky pointed out.

"It's not a Christmas present," Jess explained. "It's just... It's something, and I think you should have it. If anyone should have it, it should be you."

"That's very cryptic," Bucky teased. "Should I be scared? It's not a spider, is it?"

Jess rolled her eyes, fighting in vain to stop her mouth from twitching up into a smile. Bucky grinned.

"No. Dumbass," she sighed. "It's just... Here."

And then she held out a hat, a very familiar hat, and Bucky felt his mouth go dry.

He stepped forward, dodging the yet to be unpacked boxes of stuff T'Challa had sent down to him last month, reaching out until his hand met the leather of the outback hat.

Bucky swallowed.

"Dad's hat," he whispered.

"Yeah," Jess nodded.

"Didn't know you still had it."

“Couldn’t throw it out. It’s dad’s hat,” Jess replied, as if that explained everything.

It did.

One of his earliest memories was of standing in the saddlers with Becca and Kimmy, running his fingers across the edge of the hats until they chose this one.

This very hat.

The hat they gave to their dad for their first Christmas at the farm as a joke, after they’d teased him for months about becoming a cowboy, and George took one look at the hat, and wore it unironically every day for as long as Bucky could remember. It was beaten and battered, but still kept its shape. It had been trampled on, spit on, chewed, and still George insisted on wearing it, because it was from his kids, because it was a symbol, the symbol of the life he’d chosen.

“You want me to have it?” Bucky asked, feeling the need to check.

“I think dad would want that,” Jess nodded. “And if you’re sticking around-“

“I am,” Bucky promised.

“You should have it,” she said. “It’ll be good, to see somebody else wearing it. Feels, feels like maybe he’s still around. Part of him.”

“Yeah,” Bucky whispered, running his fingers around the brim like he was five again.

He visited his dad every week, as much as it broke his heart, and told him all about the horses in the yard, about Thor’s progress, about training Bolt, about Jess and Steve and Dani and Tony. And he prayed his dad knew what he was saying.

There was no way to know.

Drawing in a ragged breath, Bucky pulled Jess into a hug, pressing a kiss into her hair.

“I love you,” he mumbled.

Jess’ arms slipped around his waist, squeezing him once.

“I love you too, dummy,” she whispered.

Bucky smiled into her hair.

“I gotta go finish the, uh, paperwork before Dani gets home,” Jess said as she stepped back, trying desperately to look like she wasn’t on the verge of tears.

“Sure,” Bucky nodded, avoiding looking too closely.

He hated seeing his sisters cry.

“I gotta go get Rocket ready for Dani’s lesson anyway,” he added.

“Sounds good,” Jess agreed, all but running out of the room.

Leaving Bucky alone with the hat. He stared at it for another couple of minutes, swallowing around the lump in his throat, then left his room. Pulling on his boots in the mud room, then zipping up his padded coat against the December chill, Bucky stepped out of the back door and paused.

Then, taking a deep breath, he raised the hat onto his head.

It was a little tight, but it would give with wear.

It just needed wearing in.

Bucky caught sight of his reflection in the side of Tony’s truck. Everyone always used to say he looked like his dad. But for the first time, Bucky could see it himself. He straightened his spine and raised his chin.

“I’m home,” he whispered.

X

“Ignore the peanut gallery, and focus on your horse,” Bucky instructed, adjusting Dani’s stirrups as she glanced nervously at the side of the ring, where Steve and Jess were watching her with matching expressions of pride. “You’re gonna do great,” he added. “I helped teach your mom how to ride. Just remember: never copy your dad. His riding is horrifying to riders and horses alike.”

Dani giggled, her breath appearing in a puff of white, even in the inside ring. Rocket snorted, clearly impatient to get going, and Bucky scritchd his neck before stepping back.

“Alright, now squeeze with your calves, don’t grip too tight on the reins, and there you go,” Bucky grinned as Dani nudged Rocket into a walk. “Atta girl.”

“I’m doing it,” Dani beamed.

“Yeah, you are,” Bucky agreed. “Now, keep your weight in your heels, that’s it. And keep your hands steady. Don’t pull on his mouth. Yeah, that’s it. Well done.”

Dani beamed from ear to ear, and out of the corner of his eye, he could see Steve slide his arm around Jess’ waist and press a kiss into his hair, and Bucky was filled with warmth from head to toe, despite the biting cold. This was his family. Everything he’d been missing, it was here, in this barn.

“Alright, when I say stop, we’re gonna practise getting Rocket to come to a halt, okay?” Bucky called. “So when I say stop, you tighten your grip, and pull your hands back just a little bit. Don’t wanna go yanking on his mouth or nothing, cause he ain’t gonna like that.”

The more time he spent back home, the more Bucky found himself slipping into the accent he’d had as a child, the mishmash of dialects that came from his patchwork family. Every

time he did, he caught Steve smiling proudly, as though Bucky'd done something special or significant.

Bucky didn't quite know how to react to that.

Whenever he did it around Tony, Tony's eyes turned dark, his gaze sweeping suggestively over Bucky's body.

Bucky knew *exactly* how to react to that.

"Alright, you ready?"

"Ready," Dani confirmed.

"Good girl. And... Stop."

He watched proudly as Dani's face screwed up in concentration, her fists squeezing the reins until Rocket stopped with a snort.

"That's it. Give him a pat, tell him well done, and when you're ready you're gonna go again, yeah?"

"Yeah!" Dani grinned.

"Okay, now remember to click your tongue when you wanna go, that's it, you got it. You're natural," Bucky declared. "Way more natural than your dad is."

Steve waited until Dani's back was turned before flipping Bucky off, while Jess smothered her giggles into his shoulder.

Bucky had Dani repeat the action a few more times, until she had Rocket listening to her commands, before working on steering by setting up three cones for her to ride a figure of eight around it. It took a few attempts - Rocket wasn't exactly the ideal beginner's pony, because he was a stubborn little shit - but by the end of the lesson, Dani had him following her every direction, and Bucky could almost swear Rocket seemed fond of her.

"Well done," Bucky said, holding Rocket steady while Dani dismounted. "You're gonna be great."

"Good as you?" Dani asks slyly.

"Even better," Bucky smiled, handing her the reins. "Pretty soon it's gonna be your medals and trophies on the walls."

"Thanks uncle Bucky," Dani grinned, hugging him. "You're a really good teacher."

"She's right," Steve agreed as they reached the end of the ring

"Thanks," Bucky nodded.

He caught Jess' eye, and she offered him a small smile, her eyes flickering up to the hat on his head, before she opened the gate into the barn

"Not bad," she murmured, following Dani and Rocket back towards his stall.

Bucky's heart melted, watching Dani lead Rocket down the aisle with Steve on one side and Jess on the other.

If anyone told him that one day he'd be watching his sister, his best friend, and their daughter, he would've laughed in their face. But now he'd seen them together, as a family, he couldn't imagine Jess with anyone other than Steve. He looked at her like she was moon, and Dani was the stars; lighting up the darkness and bringing beauty back into his life.

With what little Bucky knew about Steve's life when he returned to Indiana, that analogy probably wasn't too far off.

And Jess, his tough, strong, angry little sister turned into the gentlest person in the world with her daughter. She not only allowed Steve to see her at her weakest, but to hold her and help her when she needed it.

Once upon a time, Bucky would've been the person she turned to, but he'd messed that up. Instead of being jealous, he was simply relieved Steve was there for her when Bucky wasn't.

They deserved a happy ending together.

Bucky's hand drifted to his head, running his fingers along the soft leather brim of the outback hat. Jess was right; it felt like part of his dad was with him.

"Gonna try and make you proud, dad," Bucky whispered.

But even as he said it, he knew his dad would be proud of him no matter what. George was always proud of his children, even if they didn't live up to his hopes for them, which made Bucky's betrayal so much worse in his own mind. It was something he was working on with Carol.

Leaving Steve and Jess to help Dani untack Rocket, Bucky left the barn, crossing to the outdoor ring where Tony was working with Goliath one last time before his owner came to collect him the following day. Bucky paused, watching Tony and drinking him in. He still loved the focus and concentration Tony possessed when working with the horses. It was intoxicating.

Tony glanced over, and winked at Bucky, before returning his focus to Goliath.

Bucky chuckled, shaking his head.

Figures. Tony always knew when Bucky was watching him.

Taking one last look, Bucky thought to himself *I love him*. Maybe one day soon he'd have the courage to tell Tony himself. And then, if Bucky was very, very lucky, maybe they could start planning their own happy ending together.



Then Bucky wandered down towards the south paddock. The grass crunched with frost underfoot as he let himself into the paddock, whistling to catch Bolt's attention. Across the field, the appaloosa's head snapped up, his ears twitching in Bucky's direction. Then he trotted across the field, leaving Gerald, and nudging Bucky's shoulder hopefully.

"Hey boy," Bucky murmured, rubbing Bolt's pink muzzle with one hand while clipping the lead rope onto his halter.

In the weeks since they brought Bolt home, both Bucky and Tony had worked with him, eschewing the traditional methods of breaking a horse in favour of all the methods George Barnes taught them both, either directly or indirectly. Bucky was pleased to report to Natasha that Bolt was making quick progress.

"You're smart, aren't you?" Bucky murmured, leading Bolt towards the gate. "Clever boy. You like learning."

Bolt snorted in agreement, waiting patiently for Bucky to close the gate, already a different horse from the cheeky youngster he met at Natasha's yard. Not to say he wasn't still cheeky; he'd just learned some manners to go with it.

Bucky led Bolt around to the back barn. The stalls of the main barn were full with Tony's horses at the moment, so they'd moved Bolt into the back barn for the moment. As they passed the north paddock, Bucky caught sight of Thor and Loki mutual grooming each other. He smiled.

"Looks like Loki's had to give up," he told Bolt. "Thor's too damn stubborn for his own good."

Leading Bolt into the barn, Bucky paused in the aisle, glancing around the empty stalls, just waiting to be filled.

*"You're a really good teacher."*

*"She's right."*

*"Not bad."*

"Now there's an idea," Bucky murmured, remembering learning to ride with his older sisters. He turned to Bolt. "What do you think? Think I could be a teacher?"

Bolt snorted.

"Yeah," Bucky agreed. "It's got potential."



## Chapter End Notes

Wow. I can't believe I'm writing this, the final note. The response to this story has *blown me away*. The winteriron fandom is just the best. You guys never fail to make me smile with all your love and comments. Thank you. I love every single one of you! Special thanks has to go to tisan and gideongrace for commenting on *every single chapter*. Thank you both!

And how AMAZING is that moodboard from [Eirlyssa](#)??? Thanks to some sneaky conspiring between Lys and Gideon, Lys used pictures of the actual house I based Winter's Haven on. Go over to her tumblr and tell her how awesome this moodboard is.

Next week, the first of two prequels starts called Peter & Wendy, telling the story of Jess and Steve and their relationship. Subscribe to the series, The Lost Boys, if you don't want to miss out.

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so you're welcome to come and chat at any time.

Ree x

## End Notes

I'm on Tumblr as [weethreequarter](#) so feel free to come and chat.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!