

Rescue Me

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Rescue Me

by [The_Magpie_Knight](#)

Summary

Prince Clinton of Barton House is young and in love with Buchanan, a young ambassador from another country, and keeps it a secret from his father out of fear. When his father tries to force Clint into an arranged marriage with a princess, he runs away. But Buchanan has a secret of his own--he isn't just an ambassador, and his real identity might just be the key to saving Clint.

Notes

This is my first fic for Winterhawk Week, the prompts are: Search and Rescue, "It's lonely here without you.", Forbidden Love, with one chapter for each prompt. Many thanks to Dottie as always for betaing!

Forbidden Love

Clint sighed, sprawled across his wooden “throne”, listening to his parents and brother discussing some issue or other that Clint had no interest in. The subtle clearing of a throat nearby had him lifting his head instead of letting it hang over the side of his torture chair. Ambassador Buchanan stood to Clint’s left, straight and tall and gorgeous in his blue robes. His hands were tucked behind his back, left fingers curled around his right wrist, and everything about him exuded patience. He was watching the door at the far end of the hall, but Clint still felt his attention on him.

“Prince Clinton,” he murmured, low enough his voice wouldn’t carry beyond Clint. “Best sit up now; the visitors are nearly here.”

Clint took the warning for what it was and sat up, sitting in the chair properly even though it always made his back stiff to do so. Presenting himself in a slouch to the visiting royalty from the neighboring kingdom of Zvezda to the west would only get him in trouble with his parents later. Clint tapped his fingers in a short sequence on the arm of his chair. Ambassador Buchanan smiled and ducked his head, shuffling his feet before he straightened and faced the door again. Clint copied him, and his family’s bickering cut off as the doors opened and the visiting royals were announced.

Clint dutifully memorized names, faces, and status with the help of his sign language interpreter, standing out of sight behind the visitors, but his real focus was on the man standing next to him. Ambassador Buchanan was a few years older than Clint, handsome and kind and patient and everything Clint wasn’t. He’d been stationed with the House of Barton by his own kingdom, Stea, almost a year ago. He’d spent that time diligently studying their culture and languages, doing his best to make friends with everyone from the King to the maids who cleaned the fireplaces, and had gained several admirers and broken several hearts in the process.

He was everything Clint wanted and everything he wasn’t allowed to have.

Of course, Clint never let something like *not allowed* to stop him.

Clint glanced up and caught Ambassador Buchanan watching him from the corner of his eye. They both smiled for a moment as they made eye contact and then the ambassador looked forward again.

Clint’s heart was the only one Ambassador Buchanan *hadn’t* broken. No one knew that, though. They were careful to keep their private meetings secret. The King was extremely disdainful of same sex relationships and Clint would be in big trouble if it was discovered too soon that he was attracted to men. Ambassador Buchanan would also be in trouble for seducing the prince, even though Clint wasn’t the heir. So it was better for everyone if no one else knew.

He sighed as the formalities finally ended and he was allowed to get up and leave. Ambassador Buchanan and the visiting family’s younger prince and princess, Pietro and

Wanda, followed him out. Clint had been assigned to keep the younger royals company until dinner, along with the ambassador. Clint led them outside to the gardens and gave serious consideration to losing them in the maze-like hedges, but Ambassador Buchanan—and out of the sight of his father Clint felt comfortable referring to him with his other name—*Bucky* gave him a look like he was reading his mind and shook his head slightly. Clint gave him a rueful smile and led them to the stables instead. Clint loved the horses. He'd been practicing shooting from the saddle and was getting really good at it, and his own horse, a mare named Starlight, was calm enough he'd started riding without a saddle, gradually getting her used to him standing on her back like horses he'd seen in the circus did.

Clint introduced Pietro and Wanda to the horsemaster and then made a beeline to Starlight's stall. She greeted him with a nudge to his shoulder as he let himself into the stall. Curled up at her feet was a scruffy yellow dog, who stood with a wag of his tail and pushed into Clint's space for his own greeting. The dog had been the runt of his litter, and an early infection had cost him one of his eyes. Clint had been allowed to care for and raise the dog, and had named him Lucky when he lived despite all expectations. He greeted both the animals and then led Starlight out of the stall to get her tack on.

The horsemaster was helping Wanda and Pietro select horses for their own use, while Bucky was three stalls down with his gentle gray gelding, Winter. It didn't take too long to have all four of them ready, and Starlight pranced out at the head of the line, eager to get out and run.

"How fast can she go?" Pietro asked, coming up beside him.

"Fast enough," Clint replied, raising an eyebrow as Pietro grinned in challenge.

"Want to race?" he asked.

Clint frowned in thought, eyeing the path in front of them, and then kicked Starlight into a gallop. She leaped forward and Clint laughed as Pietro shouted in outrage behind him. He kept the race short, ending it at the large pond in the back of the property, still in view of the castle. He dropped Starlight to a canter and Pietro flew by on his borrowed horse, hunched low in the saddle like an experienced racer. Pietro circled back when he realized Clint wasn't following. , both horses slowing to a stop.

"She's fast," Pietro said, admiring. "I'd like to see her against my Quicksilver; he's the fastest horse I've ever seen."

"Maybe we can race them sometime," Clint said. "If he's as fast as you say, I'd like to see about mixing the bloodlines."

Pietro sat up straighter with pride. "He is very fast. My father wanted to geld him but I wouldn't let him. Not if there's a chance we can breed on his speed."

"It's hard to find good horses for breeding," Clint agreed. He twisted in the saddle to see if Bucky and Wanda were nearby and saw them trotting closer. He nudged Starlight into a walk and waited for them to catch up and match his pace. Pietro fell back to talk to his sister and Bucky caught up with Clint.

“Have fun?” Bucky asked. Clint just grinned back at him.

“Come on. If you aren’t afraid to get your feet wet, there’s a good spot for swimming on the other side of the pond,” Clint called to the twins. The horses trotted around the edge of the pond and then slowed to wind their way through the trees at the far end. The grove gave some privacy to swimmers and Clint and Bucky had taken advantage of it several times. When Clint stopped and dismounted, the others followed suit. Bucky took his time tying his horse to a tree and Clint eyed him. Bucky just gave him a smile and glanced pointedly at the twins. Clint dipped his chin in a nod and waited for the visitors to go to the water, out of earshot and direct sightlines. Bucky stepped closer and backed Clint against a tree, leaning in to kiss him slow and sweet. Clint closed his eyes and set his hands lightly on Bucky’s waist, careful not to rumple his clothes.

“I’ll come see you in your room tonight after dinner,” Bucky murmured against his lips. Clint breathed out shakily and nodded. Bucky smiled, kissed him again, and went to join the twins at the pond. Clint took a moment and made a show of checking Starlight’s hooves until he felt he had calmed down enough to join the others. Clint just had to make it through dinner and he would get what he wanted.

~~

“What do you mean, I’m betrothed?” Clint demanded at dinner.

His mother shot him a look, but Clint didn’t care that he was making a scene in front of the visiting family. “Clinton, we’ve discussed betrothals before—”

“Yeah, in relation to Barney! You never said it would apply to me!”

The King scowled at him. “Charles’s betrothal is an important matter because whoever he marries will someday be the queen and mother of the future king. It’s a delicate choice. But yours is simply for the purpose of an alliance.”

“Who am I betrothed to? Her?” He gestured at Wanda. “Is that why they’re here? She’s like ten!”

“I’m fourteen,” Wanda retorted before her parents shushed her.

“We were hopeful, but no,” King Harold said. “She is already betrothed to one of those...visionaries in the east. Your betrothal is to Barbara of the Morse family.”

“Bobbi?” Clint asked incredulously. “I can’t marry her, she’s my friend! It would be too weird!”

“It’s been decided, Clinton,” Edith said firmly after a glance at the rage building on her husband’s face. “Don’t argue anymore.”

Clint glared at both of them and then shoved back from the table, storming out of the hall, past Ambassador Buchanan who had been quiet the whole time. Clint didn’t look at him,

instead shooting a glare at Barney too for good measure before he slammed the door open on his way out.

Sometimes Clint really hated being a prince.

~~

Bucky made good on his promise to come to Clint's room that night, but Clint was in no mood for company. When Bucky knocked, Clint stayed on his bed, lying on his stomach, clutching a pillow, and glaring out the window. Bucky let himself in and closed the door behind himself.

"Clint—"

"Go away," Clint said petulantly. "I'm going to be *married*, I can't have...flings." He didn't look away from the window, but he could see the reflection of Bucky's flinch in the glass and felt bad for it.

"...I am going away," Bucky said.

"What?" Clint turned at the solemn note in his voice. Bucky leaned back against the door and crossed his arms.

"Your father dismissed me. I'm going home in the morning."

"What? Why?" Clint sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed.

"I tried to argue for you," Bucky said with a small shrug. "I proposed a betrothal to the Barnes family instead. I think you would like it in my home kingdom. Princess Rebecca isn't available as the heir, but there are five other sisters...and also the prince."

Clint's jaw dropped. "Did you actually say that to them?"

Bucky nodded and grimaced.

"You know how my father feels about men being together, no wonder he's sending you home!" Clint dragged a hand through his hair.

"Prince James is a valid option, though. Along with Princess Alice and Princess Ruth Beatrice. The others are under ten years old so I wouldn't suggest them as a match for you ___"

"But I don't want any of them," Clint protested. "I don't want anyone but you."

Bucky's eyes softened and he pushed off the door, crossing the room to Clint, who stood to meet him. "I know." Bucky cupped Clint's face in his hands. "But at least if you married into the Barnes family I could still see you sometimes. We could still be friends maybe."

"Why can't I just marry you? I could run away and we could be together," Clint said.

“Let’s save that as a last resort,” Bucky said. “I don’t want you to be in danger.”

“I’d face dragons and armies and my father if it meant I could be with you,” Clint said earnestly.

Bucky smiled and stroked Clint’s cheekbones with his thumbs. “You’re sweet.” Bucky kissed him and Clint leaned into it, and then the door creaked the way it only did when it was pushed all the way open and they froze for a moment.

“What is going on here?” the king demanded. They turned to see his face was red with rage.

“Father—”

“King Harold—”

The king stormed up to them and grabbed Bucky’s upper arm tightly. “So this is the reason he’s refused the betrothal? You have been corrupting my son! Rest assured you will never see each other again!” He began dragging Bucky towards the door.

“Father, please! It wasn’t his fault, it was me, I—” Clint tried to grab his father and King Harold swung, backhanding him hard enough to send him to the floor. By the time the room stopped spinning and Clint sat up, they were gone.

It's So Lonely Here Without You

Chapter Notes

Barney is sometimes referred to with his given name of Charles in this fic

Dear Clinton-

Do not blame yourself for my departure. It is due to my own acts that I have been dismissed and am thus returning home. Do not fear for me; the King and Queen of Stea have loving and understanding hearts.

I had already received a request to return home if I was able; Princess Rebecca and Prince James's 18th birthday is in three weeks, and it wouldn't do for me to miss it if I could be there. It is going to be quite a celebration, and many of the ambassadors will be there before returning to their duties.

However, as I pack my things this morning, I have to pause a moment to look out the window at this beautiful country. It brings me sorrow that I must depart so soon, for I have greatly enjoyed my time here. Know that I will miss you dearly, and I treasure the time we spent together. Give my regards to your family and our friends, and please tell Miss Starlight and Lucky goodbye for me. If King Harold permits it, I should like to visit you sometime soon.

I pray we meet again.

As always, Your Friend,
Ambassador Buchanan of Stea

Clint -

If you want, you can write to me. I'll be stationed at the palace until my next assignment. Here's my address:

Ambassador Buchanan
Care of the Barnes Royal Family
Carei, Stea

-Bucky

To: Ambassador Buchanan
Care of the Barnes Royal Family
Carei, Stea

February 17th

Ambassador Buchanan,

I don't understand why you asked my father to tell me to tell Starlight goodbye for you. Surely you would have had time yourself this morning when you went into the stables to get Winter? But perhaps you were rushed out and didn't have time. Mostly I don't understand why, of all things, that was the message you chose to pass along. Although, having received your note from the horsemaster, I do have to wonder if there was more to your message that my father simply didn't pass on.

Whatever the case, know that I do intend to write to you as often as I am able. This letter and the next few may very well reach you on the road. You have said before it takes two to three weeks to travel from our home to yours. I wish you fair weather and safe roads, but our couriers are fast and ride faster horses. I understand if you may not be able to write back while on the road. I will therefore expect a response from you in no more than six weeks.

Please wish the prince and princess a happy birthday from me, and I hope you all enjoy the festivities.

Your Friend

Prince Clinton of Barton House

February 18th

Ambassador Buchanan

The family from Zvezda were quite surprised by your sudden departure. I believe they had wished to speak with you in an attempt to make connections between your two kingdoms. Something about Pietro not yet being betrothed. But as the land reflects, my father stands in the way. I believe you can expect a visit or a letter from them in the next month.

My mother won't look at me, and my father seems angry whenever I am in his presence. I have begun to avoid him. Charles has been too busy to speak with me, though I know he is curious about what happened. Father hasn't told anyone about what he saw or why you left so suddenly. I suppose he doesn't want anyone to know for fear it will shame our House and ruin my betrothal to Barbara. ~~I couldn't care~~

Pietro spoke to his parents about a breeding program for our herds. They want the two of us to figure out the details and then present it to them for approval. I think they just want to give him a chance at using his authority in a good way. I'm looking forward to getting foals out of Starlight, even though that means I won't be able to ride her whenever I want. Perhaps I will raise up one of her sons to be my other horse for when she is unavailable.

~~I miss~~

Safe travels.
Your Friend
Prince Clinton of Barton House

February 19th

Buchanan-

Father struck me today. I made him angry at breakfast. I have spent the day in my room so that no one will see the bruise. It is difficult to see out of my right eye, as it is swollen almost shut. It hurts.

~~I have~~

I suppose it would be a bad idea to send this letter, so instead I will write what I really want to say and then put it away.

I love you. I miss you. It hurts more than anything my father could ever do to me. I ache with every fiber of my being just to be in your arms again. You have only been gone for three days and yet it feels like an eternity. I long to saddle up Starlight and ride away. She is fast, and if I travel light, I could be with you again in maybe five days. But father has new guards around the castle, and some of them are posted outside my room. It is the only place I am allowed to be alone anymore. Father has commanded guards to follow me through the castle and the grounds, even on my rides with Starlight, which has never happened before. I feel as though my home has become my prison. I wish you could be my knight in shining armor, come to save me. Instead I will long for you from afar and hope I will see you soon.

I love you, my darling. I feel cold without you. Write to me soon.

Forever yours, now and always,

Clint

February 20th

Ambassador Buchanan,

I tried to run away last night. I now have guards with me at all hours of the day. I tried to refuse the betrothal again, so father has people watching me all the time. Mother doesn't understand why I'm refusing. She said arrangements like these are for alliances, not for love, and that we have a duty. I never thought to wonder if my parents love each other, but now I am starting to.

February 21st

I had an argument with Barney. He said Bobbi would be a good match for me, that at least we get along, but he doesn't understand. He's never been in love like this. No, I can't send this—

February 22nd

Ambassador Buchanan,

I hope the road is treating you well. I trust that you and Winter are in good health and making good time, and that my letters have been reaching you. I have reached an agreement with Pietro; in a month or so, Starlight and a few of our other faster mares will be sent to his kingdom to breed with Quicksilver and a few other stallions. We are hoping it takes quickly. I'm a little anxious that I won't be able to go see Starlight every day, but with luck, by this time next year I'll have a healthy foal out of her.

Father spoke of increasing my duties, so I may not be able to write again for a while.

February 28th

Dear Bucky,

I have no intention of sending this letter, because it's too honest.

I feel as though everyone here hates me. I have no friends since you have left and Pietro and Wanda returned home. My father spends as little time in my presence as possible. When he does, he glares. Sometimes he pulls me into his office to threaten me to keep quiet. He's been better about leaving the bruises in places people won't see.

Barney and the staff around the castle are suspicious. I see them whispering together and I know they're talking about me even though I can't hear them because they stop whenever I get near. Even the horsemaster barely speaks to me anymore, though I think he's been ordered not to. I heard him say to one of the grooms that he's worried for his job because you slipped him that note for me.

Mother looks sad every time she looks at me and I'm starting to hate it. I don't want her to be sad for me, ~~I want her to help me.~~

I know you told me that wishes on stars really don't do anything, that the little magic here is found mostly in life, in wilderness, but it's the only hope left to me. I wish on the stars every night just to be free and with you. I wish that you still feel the same way about me as I do about you. I love you more than anything.

As soon as the ink is dry I'll hide this letter behind my bed, with all the others I haven't sent. It's becoming quite a collection. I can't keep myself from being too honest on paper so I have to hide them. I fear for what Father would do if he found them.

Forever yours,

Clint

March 5th

It's so lonely here without you—

March 11th

Dear Clinton,

I hope this letter finds you well. My journey home was uneventful, slower than I would like due to a storm we encountered halfway through. We took shelter at an inn near the border. I do believe the weather reflected my own emotions at being so close to leaving your lovely country. Had I any sense of weather magic I might have blamed myself, but we both know I do not.

I am glad to be home, to see my parents and my sisters again, and yet I find myself missing you every day. My heart aches with it, and my family has caught me staring out the window in the direction of your kingdom more than once. I have told them that I miss your country and your friendship but they know me well, and I suspect I cannot hide the truth from them for long. My oldest sister has given me several pointed looks. She is fresh in love herself and so perhaps knows what I am feeling.

Ah, well. All melancholy aside, the birthday party yesterday for the Princess and Prince was stupendous as always. The cake looked large enough they both could have sat comfortably inside it. The younger princesses would likely have made themselves sick on all the sweets if they were allowed to. The festivities were great fun; only, I found myself wishing you could have been there to participate in them with me. Here I find myself again writing about how much I miss you. I apologize. Even when my mind turns to happy things it seems I cannot forget you, nor do I wish to. You have made a mark on my life that can never be erased.

Hoping that we will soon be reunited,

Yours Always,

Buchanan

March 15th

Dear Clinton,

I have told my sister the truth about us. I had no choice; she confronted me, demanded to know who I had left behind that so occupied my thoughts. In all honesty, I do not wish for you to be a secret, my love. I have sworn my sister to secrecy, but for your sake rather than my own. I do not wish to make your father any angrier with you. My sister is now determined to find some way to rescue you, though I tried to discourage her.

These last few days after the birthday celebration I have been thinking much of your last birthday, and your secret birthday wish you told me after the party, when we were alone. How brave you were, my love, asking me to celebrate you turning 16 by giving you your first kiss. I could see how you trembled with fear. I began to love you before that moment, but that is when I knew we would be something special, the two of us. Should we be together again for your 17th birthday, I hope we can celebrate it together in a similar way. My only regret is that we could not spend my 18th birthday together, as at this point it has already passed. I had such plans for us. Perhaps I will be able to use those same plans on a later date. I don't want to wait a whole year for my next birthday to enact them.

I am being called to dinner, and I will post this letter straight after. May it find you in good health.

Yours Always,
Buchanan

March 23rd

Dear Clinton,

I would have thought I would receive a letter from you by now. It has been over a month since I was forced to leave, since I last saw you, since I last held you. As I lie awake at night and think of you, I wonder if your father has been keeping you from writing to me. I tell myself surely that isn't so. Perhaps it only took you awhile to get your thoughts together in a way to write them down. If it took you a week or more, the letter wouldn't even have had time to reach me. Still I wonder.

My bed is cold, my darling. I am writing this letter by candlelight in the middle of the night because I cannot sleep. We didn't share a bed often and you have never seen this one and yet I can so easily see the shape of you in the sheets. My body misses yours. I long to be held by you again. The spaces between my fingers are where yours fit perfectly, and I ache to touch your face again.

You may think I am being too honest in these letters, but I know no other way to be with you. All the secrets of my heart and soul are yours to keep, should you want them. There are no truths I could keep from you if you ask to know them. Everything I am I would give to you, my love.

The candle burns low, and I should attempt to get some sleep. Know that you will be in my dreams, beloved, when I do.

Yours Always,
Buchanan

March 23rd

Ambassador Buchanan,

Starlight was sent away a few days ago. The mares that have been selected for the breeding program were gathered and taken to Zvezda, where Pietro has assured me they will be in good hands. Lucky has been missing his friend, and so have I. Starlight's stall feels big and empty and cold without her in it. It doesn't help that I can no longer see Winter's friendly face a few doors down.

~~I miss you~~

March 30th

Ambassador Buchanan,

My brave and dashing handsome brother Cha Barney is writing this letter on my behalf, as both of my arms are currently broken. I went out riding on a horse that wasn't Starlight, and I

got distracted and the horse got spooked and bucked me off into a tree. I'm quite a mess right now with the ~~serapes an~~ bruises. (Clint is telling me what to write and he is very bossy. He tried to fight me for the pen, hence the scribbles.) I won't be able to ride until both of my arms are healed. On the left, it's just the wrist, but the right is worse. It will be at least a month before they heal.

(According to Father, he was out riding alone like an idiot so no one knew he was hurt for several hours. The bruises are bad. He'll be lucky if anyone wants to marry him now that he's ruined his face.)

Unfortunately, Barney is leaving tomorrow to go study in another kingdom so he can become even more amazing. I won't be able to send you any more letters until at least one arm has healed.

~~Pleas~~....

(Clint wants to wish your family well and end the letter, but it doesn't seem right to me. I know you two are friends and he very clearly misses you. Clint is fighting to get the letter back so I'll keep this brief. I don't know what happened for Father to send you away, but it seems you took all the fun and joy in our family with you when you left. I hope you can return soon, maybe Clint won't be so boring and gloomy then.

Clint wants me to apologize but I'm not sorry and he will just have to accept that. But I will end the letter as he's asking.

Should the invitation still stand, I plan to bring Clint to your kingdom's Midsummer Celebration in June. You will see each other in less than three months' time even if I have to kidnap Clint myself.)

I apologize on behalf of Barney even if he won't do it himself. I didn't want him to write any of that but I should have expected that from him. (I am offended.) I do wish you and your family well, and I hope you will give Winter an apple from me.

~~Your Fr~~ (Do you really talk to each other like this?)

Your dearest friend, Clint

And his Spectacular Brother, Barney

April 4th

Dear Clinton

I fear I have become simply dreadful to be around with how miserable I am for missing you. By now my whole family knows I found love in your country, though so far only my sister knows your identity, and I will try to keep it that way for as long as possible.

My mother worries. She missed me while I was away during my travels but she says now that she would rather I still be gone than be home and heartbroken. I feel the same way. I have become quite desolate at the continued lack of letters from you. I think of you every day, and

I worry, and I hope if I have done something to anger or offend you that I can beg your forgiveness.

I hope it is only that, and that nothing has happened to keep you from writing. I sent an inquiring letter to your father and received only an angry order to stop writing in return. I'm afraid I can't stop myself, my darling; my heart must express itself in some manner, from the sweetest affection to the sharpest ache.

I wait continually with hope for a letter from you.
Yours Always,
Buchanan

April 20th
Dear Clinton

I admit to being quite frantic after having received your letter this morning. It is so casual in manner and it makes me wonder why. The tale of your injuries has me extremely worried, and I would send medical help for you though I know by the time they would arrive, you will be all but healed. Instead I will send this letter out and hope it reaches you swiftly. I wish I could be by your side in this time to help you. I would put myself entirely at your bidding.

I fully intend to follow this letter as soon as I can. I will keep it short so I can post it soon, and then I will go to pack and ask for permission to go to you. Weather permitting, I will be with you again by May 12th.

Yours Always,
Buchanan

May 11th
Ambassador Buchanan

This morning before breakfast the doctor declared me healed and gave me permission to write and ride again. I was excited to begin writing to you again, but at breakfast my father gave me bad news. I'm being sent to Morse House today before lunch. Apparently Father has been planning it without my knowledge and was just waiting for the doctor to approve me traveling first. I only have one hour to pack my things and say my goodbyes, and I'm using the time to write this letter instead. As long as I can take my bow, my horse, and my dog, I don't much care for things. I don't really have friends here other than the swordmaster and the horsemaster, both of whom are going with me.

Someone is at my door now to see if I am ready or need help, so I will end my letter here. The next time you see me, I shall likely be a married man.

~~I hate~~

I'm so sorry,
Clint

May 12th

Dear Clint,

I suppose you never had a chance to receive my last letter. I just arrived at the palace and your father has informed me that you were sent away to the north a week ago. I questioned the wisdom of putting you on a horse barely over a month after your injury, but he insisted you were well enough.

My darling, I admit to being utterly heartbroken all over again. Without realizing, I had gotten my hopes up that I would see you again soon, and now to find that I was too late leaves me desolate.

No one here will talk to me, I'm sure under your father's orders. The only people I could have trusted to tell me any of the truth are gone, the horsemaster off with you and your brother apparently still off studying. Even your mother will not speak to me, and I had respect for Queen Edith, though I understand she fears her husband.

I pray that this letter finds you safe and well in the Morse house. I will address my letter to you in that house in hopes this one will reach you.

Yours Always,

Buchanan

May 28th

Dear Buchanan,

I feel a little freer to say that in my writing now that I'm no longer worried about my father looking over my shoulder. I tried to hide that I was writing to you at all, but Bobbi and her family have assured me I can write to anyone I want, especially an old friend. Apparently my father hasn't told them about the two of us.

Speaking of my father, I believe he has been lying to the both of us. I have just received your letter dated May 12th, but Bucky, it is the only letter I have received from you since the note you left with the horsemaster over two months ago. More than that, I only left home for the Morse House on May 11th. You missed seeing me, true, but only by a day. We were so close and we had no idea. I only arrived at the Morse House earlier this morning. The courier must have been trailing us the entire time. If I had only known, I would have turned around and made the whole company go back so I could see you.

The pain in your letter hurts and scares me. On one hand, I have missed you so much, and knowing you were missing me too brings me relief, but I know what marks tears leave on paper, even wiped away, and I hate to know that you were crying while writing to me. On the other hand, if I have not been receiving your letters, then who has?

I am not surprised no one at home would talk to you. None of them would talk to me anymore either. It has made it much harder to be without you, as I lost not only your companionship, but everyone's.

I miss you so much, but I have been promised to marry Bobbi, though I would give anything to marry you instead. Seeing you speak to me of your heart makes me doubt the wisdom of writing. Once I am married to Bobbi, it would not be fair to her to carry on an affair, no matter what my own heart tells me. Bobbi has decided to set the wedding for autumn, so we have time to decide what we are going to do.

My hand is aching. My father hustled me onto my horse nearly as soon as the doctor declared me well enough to travel. The six weeks without riding has resulted in my hands being stiff and sore, along with other parts of me. But I could not regret it, since I was with Starlight again. Still, I will not add more to this letter lest I risk hurting myself more.

Your Friend,
Clint

June 13th,
Dear Clint,

I am glad to hear you have been reunited with Starlight, though I do wish you wouldn't push yourself. Be sure to take your time and rest so you don't aggravate your injuries. I trust the Morse family is treating you well as a guest in their house, I have always known them to be courteous.

I agree with you, my love, that it is suspicious we have not been receiving each others' letters. I have only the one that your brother wrote for you. I do believe your father has been reading my letters and keeping them from you, and I do hope they have not caused you trouble, as I have expressed my love for you in them several times. I could not help myself. I admit to being angry that your father would go to such lengths simply to keep us apart. What is so wrong with our love?

Your suggestion that we become merely friends pains me... Ah, there I've gone and smudged the ink again. I'm sorry, I cannot keep from crying. As I was saying, your suggestion pains me, though it is honorable. I would not wish to damage your reputation and make you break your word. You are a noble man, and I would not have grown such affection for you if you weren't. If you still wish it, once you have married Barbara, I will step back and be your faithful friend for the rest of my days.

I will wait for your next letter regarding your decision.

Yours, Always,
Buchanan

June 13th

My dearest Bucky,

I am running away from Morse House. I can't bring myself to marry Bobbi. She is a dear friend, but after two weeks in her company, I know I will never love her the way that I love you. I know what I said in my last letter regarding being only your friend, but I can't give up the connection and joy I have found with you.

I will be traveling slowly, to avoid being caught and taken back, but in four weeks or so, you can expect to see a sad, lonely prince with a lovely gray horse and a one eyed dog on your doorstep. I only hope that we will be welcome despite turning traitor and breaking my marriage contract.

Eagerly waiting to see you,
Forever and only Yours,
Clint

June 13th
Dear Bobbi

I'm sorry, but I can't marry you. You are a good friend but I don't love you. I hope you get the chance to find love for yourself, the way that I have found love for myself. I won't tell you where I have gone, so you can't follow me. I will do my best to be safe. Goodbye, my friend, and good luck.
Clint

To: Ambassador Buchanan
Care of the Barnes Royal Family
Carei, Stea

June 15th
Dear Ambassador Buchanan,

I am reaching out to you in hopes of receiving your assistance. My father King Harold does not know I am writing to you and would not approve of it, but my mother and I do not know who else to turn to. My brother, Clint, is missing...

Search and Rescue

Chapter Notes

It took me a while but it's finally done! Now I can move on to other things. All the thanks to Dottie for slogging through it with me

"...and we were hoping you could help us find him. Everything else aside, you were his friend, and I know he confided in and relied on you. You would probably know better than the rest of us where he might have gone."

Bucky put down the letter and paced over to stare out the window. Becca picked it up, frowning thoughtfully.

"He's run away? Why?" she asked, though she was already reading on, looking for the answer.

"To escape his betrothal, *and* his family," Bucky replied, tapping his fingers on the windowsill agitatedly.

"You did offer a betrothal to our family, didn't you?" she asked.

"Of course I did."

Bucky braced himself and approached the king after the dinner had finished in awkward silence following Clint's tantrum and subsequent storming out.

"Your Highness, if I may," he said with a bow as he approached. "Prince Clinton seems very opposed to the betrothal to Princess Barbara. I know he has no desire to inherit a throne. I would like to propose a betrothal to the Barnes family instead."

"Your own royal family? Do you have the authority to do that?" King Harold asked.

"I would of course have to clear it with the King and Queen first, but part of my duties is searching for suitable matches among other royal families. Crown Princess Rebecca has already promised her hand to a son of the Proctor house." Bucky paused and licked his lips. "I believe Clinton would be a good match to either Princess Alice, who is 14, or Princess Ruth Beatrice, who is 12, or even Prince James, who is 17."

King Harold's face turned red with rage. "No son of mine will ever marry a man. Get out of my sight."

"You should have seen how angry he was." Bucky leaned his head against the window. "And then he caught me with Clint that night and he dismissed me almost immediately. He didn't

even give Clint the letter I wrote for him the next morning.”

“King Harold, would you give this to Clint?” Bucky asked. He’d written a short letter that morning while packing his things, and now Winter was saddled and loaded and ready to go. All that remained was the letter, but Bucky hadn’t been allowed to see Clint or go near his room. “I want to say goodbye and let him know why I had to leave so suddenly.”

“I’ll give him your message,” King Harold said coldly, taking the letter. Seeing that he wouldn’t get any other concessions, Bucky mounted Winter and rode off. He turned for a last look at the castle and saw Clint watching him from his window. Bucky wanted to wave, but King Harold was also watching, and he didn’t want to get Clint in trouble. With a heavy heart, Bucky faced forward again and rode away.

“I only know that because of that first letter from Barney to you.” Bucky turned to face his sister, who was watching him over the letter. “I did suspect he would throw it away, which is why I left a note with the horsemaster, but when I didn’t hear from Clint for months, I just thought he didn’t want to talk to me again for getting him in trouble and then leaving.” He crossed back to the couch and sat next to Becca, putting his face in his hands. She rubbed a hand down his back.

“Do you think he was feeling the same way?” Bucky asked dejectedly, muffled by his hands.

“Now, Bucky—”

“I know my letters never got to him either, and I know him. He must have thought I was angry with him.”

Becca sighed. “Bucky, whatever he did or didn’t think, you know he cared. He kept writing to you all those months even though he never got a reply. And then as soon as he was away from his father and did start getting your letters, he knew you cared, too. I’m not surprised he ran away, especially if he already mentioned it as a possibility. Didn’t you tell him to leave that as a last resort?”

“I suppose I did.”

“He must have been desperate to set out with only his horse and dog. He must love you that much,” Becca said.

Bucky glanced up at her. “What are we going to do, Becca?”

Becca sighed, sat up straight, and stared hard at the door, and Bucky could see the future queen in her bearing. “We’re going to find him, of course. Barney is right, you would know best where he might be. You come up with some ideas and we’ll round up a search party and go.”

“But Becca, you need to be preparing for the wedding,” Bucky protested.

“If Robert can’t understand that I need to delay our wedding to bring my future brother-in-law home safely, then he’s not the right man for me to marry.” She softened and smiled at

him. "We'll find him, don't worry."

"I believe you," Bucky said. "There never was anything that could stop you when you made up your mind."

"Your disbelief certainly never stopped me." She grinned. "Now, you know him best. Where would he go?"

"If my guess is right, I know exactly where he's going." Bucky turned and looked out the window, in the direction of the Morse kingdom in the north. "He's coming here."

~~

Becca assembled three search parties, one to go northwest, one northeast, and one straight north. Bucky was part of the third party. Becca traveled a little slower than the parties, coordinating the search from a central point. She sent out fast runners to contact local towns in the area and see if anyone had seen a blond young man with a gray mare and a yellow one-eyed dog. It took five days, and the north party had joined with Becca's entourage, before they got a report back. A young man with a one-eyed dog had been seen buying horse feed, but the boy and dog were both mud-brown rather than blond. He had headed south out of the town, meaning the runner had somehow already passed by Clint twice, coming and going.

Bucky sat in Winter's saddle and frowned, thinking. He scanned the land around them. The road to the town passed through valleys with mountains on each side. There was no other road branching off before it reached them. Clint had to be traveling through the trees, probably to avoid being recognized and taken back to his father. Bucky turned Winter so he was facing south and looked around again.

"James?" Becca asked, looking at him where she was standing over a map with the runner and a local guide.

"I have a hunch," Bucky said. "Don't wait up for me." He steered Winter into the woods to the left, dropping the sound of voices behind him. A horse cantered up to catch up to him.

"I'm coming with you," Alice said. She had begged to join the search parties, and their parents had agreed she could go as long as she stayed with Becca's party. "You shouldn't be alone, what if you get lost?" Alice's horse, a red roan named Strawberry, snorted as if she too thought that was silly.

"Just don't slow me down or I'll send you back," Bucky warned.

"I won't, I promise," Alice said earnestly. "What are we looking for?"

"I don't know yet," Bucky admitted. "Just look for signs that someone's been through here. Keep your ears open."

Alice nodded seriously and studied the trees around them for broken branches. Bucky kept an eye on the ground for footprints and horse droppings. They spent a few hours searching the rocky terrain, and Bucky called a halt as the sun started to set. They set up a camp between

two boulders that would block the wind, and ate dinner quietly. Bucky leaned back against one of the boulders and stared up at the stars afterward. Alice scooted closer until she could wedge herself under his arm.

“Do you love him, Bucky?” she asked softly.

Bucky sighed. “Yeah, I do, Pigeon.”

“Do you love him the way Becca loves Robert?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Are you going to get married when we find him?”

“I hope so. I have to ask him first.”

Alice nodded in understanding and cuddled closer to his side. “I hope we find him soon so you can be happy again.”

“So do I, Pidge. So do I.” A star shot across the sky, and Bucky tucked a blanket around his sister as she fell asleep.

In the morning, they had started on breakfast when they heard barking. Bucky froze, crouched next to the fire where he had removed the roasting meat, and looked in the direction of the barking. “What is it?” Alice asked.

“Clint has a dog with him,” Bucky murmured. A minute later, a muddy brown dog came bounding into their camp and practically fell into Bucky’s lap. “Lucky? Is that you?” he asked, trying to catch the dog’s face to get a look at him. The dog was squirming with so much excitement Bucky couldn’t get a grip. Alice offered him a piece of meat and the dog took it eagerly and yet delicately from her fingers. He was missing his left eye.

“Is it him?” Alice asked.

“It is,” Bucky said, rubbing some of the dried mud off his muzzle to see the yellow fur.

“I’ll take care of breakfast. You go,” Alice said. Bucky leaned over and kissed his sister on the cheek in thanks.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he promised. “Lucky, take me to Clint! Take me to Clint!” Lucky eyed the food mournfully and then turned and ran back into the trees. Bucky ran after him, doing his best to keep up. After a few minutes, Bucky heard a voice.

“Lucky!” It was faint but oh so familiar. “Lucky, come back, boy! Where did you go?” Lucky barked in answer and darted ahead. Bucky jumped a tree root and ran faster. “Lucky, there you are!”

“Clint!” Bucky called, breathless.

“Bucky?” he called back in confusion.

“Clint, I’m coming!”

“What!?”

Bucky burst through a bush and past some low-hanging branches and found Clint in a small clearing, one hand on Starlight’s reins and the other on Lucky’s collar. He and Starlight were both covered in the same mud as Lucky.

“Clint, finally!” Bucky ran to him and Clint dropped both collar and reins, catching him as Bucky ran into his arms. They stumbled back a few steps and Starlight shied away. “I’ve missed you so much!” Bucky said, squeezing him.

“What are you doing out here?” Clint asked, hugging him back just as tightly.

“Looking for you, of course. Barney sent me a letter to tell me you’d run away.”

“He did? Why?”

“He was worried about you. Him and your mother.” Bucky leaned back and cupped Clint’s face in his hands. “But not as much as me. I was so worried, Clint. I thought you hated me when you didn’t write to me.”

“Of course not, I could never hate you. I love you,” Clint said earnestly.

“I love you too,” Bucky said, starting to tear up. He leaned in and Clint flinched back.

“Don’t, I’m all dirty.”

“I don’t care.” Bucky tugged him close and kissed him. Clint tasted like mud and smelled like horse and dog and dirt, but he was soft and warm and Bucky didn’t care what state he was in as long as he had Clint back in his arms. Clint kissed him back as Lucky danced around them, eventually knocking into their legs hard enough they had to separate or fall over. Bucky dragged him in for another kiss before letting go. He brushed tears from his cheeks, grinning so widely it hurt. He reached for Clint’s hand and laced their fingers together.

“Come on, we have to tell everyone we found you,” Bucky said, waiting as Clint caught Starlight’s reins. They started making their way back, Lucky still dancing around them.

“Everyone? Who’s everyone?” Clint asked.

“The search parties, of course.”

“Search parties?”

“We’ve been looking ever since we found out you were missing. The whole kingdom has been keeping an eye out,” Bucky said.

“Why?” Clint asked, honestly baffled.

“You’re important to me,” Bucky said, stopping and cupping his face again. “I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing.” Clint shuffled his feet and leaned in for another kiss.

“But, the whole kingdom? How did you get permission for that? Did you ask the queen?”

“Bucky, did you find him?” Alice called through the trees ahead of them.

“Who’s that?” Clint asked.

“My sister, Alice. Come on, you can come meet her.” Bucky waved as soon as the trees thinned enough to see Alice.

“The whole kingdom, Bucky?” Clint repeated.

“I suppose I should tell you now before you find out from someone else,” Bucky said, pausing in the trees while Lucky ran on ahead to get attention and food from Alice. Clint looked up at him curiously. “I’m not just an ambassador. I’m also a prince. My given name is James Buchanan.”

“James...as in Prince James, twin brother to Crown Princess Rebecca?” Clint asked slowly.

“Yes,” Bucky said, biting his lip as he watched Clint think that over.

“So when you told my father that a betrothal to Prince James would be acceptable for me, you were...offering yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to marry you.” Bucky glanced at Alice, who wasn’t watching them, distracted by Lucky. “You said before I was dismissed that you wanted to marry me. Is that still true?” he asked hopefully.

Clint bit his lip, glanced around, shuffled his feet. “You lied to me all this time. You’re second in line for the throne.”

“Clint, no, I’m not. My family is matriarchal. All of my sisters are set to inherit before me. I’m never going to be king. My parents don’t care who I marry as long as it’s for love.” Bucky reached for Clint’s other hand, holding their hands between them. “I’ll ask properly if you want me to.”

Clint glanced up at him shyly, and Bucky took that as his cue. Still holding Clint’s hands, along with Starlight’s reins, he got down on one knee. He heard Alice squeal in excitement over at the camp.

“Clinton Francis,” Bucky started.

“Oh, don’t, not that,” Clint protested.

“Clinton,” Bucky amended, “of the House of Barton, I, Prince James Buchanan, love you with my whole heart and soul. Will you do me the incredible honor of marrying me and being my companion in joy and sadness for all of our days?”

“You and your way with words,” Clint sniffled, freeing one of his hands to rub at his eyes. “Yes, yes I’ll marry you.”

Bucky grinned and got to his feet, kissing Clint soundly. Alice shrieked with joy and Lucky barked loudly. Starlight tossed her head and stamped a foot. Bucky chuckled and hugged Clint.

“Come on. You must be hungry. We’ll have breakfast and then we can go back down the mountain to meet Becca and the search party.”

“Do you think your sisters will like me?” Clint asked quietly as they finally left the treeline.

“Of course. I’ve told them all about you. They may not love you as much as I do, but they come close,” Bucky answered.

“Hi!” Alice said as they got closer. “I’m Alice, I’m gonna be your new sister! You can call me Pigeon if you want! What’s your dog’s name? Why is he missing an eye? Do you like sausage as much as he does? Or porridge? What’s your horse’s name? Why are you so dirty?”

“Slow down, Pidge,” Bucky cautioned, looking at Clint’s wide eyes.

“I’m just so excited!” Alice said, throwing her arms around both of them.

Bucky settled an arm around her shoulders and looked at Clint. “Are you sure you don’t want to change your mind?”

Clint shook himself and looked up. “You asked. You can’t back out on me now. For all our days, remember?”

Bucky grinned and kissed him.

“Mom and Dad and everyone are going to be so excited! Now we’re going to have two weddings!” Alice said, letting them go.

Clint edged closer to Bucky. “Do you think it’s too late to run away and get married?” he whispered.

Bucky chuckled. “Don’t worry; I have an idea,” he murmured.

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The wedding of Crown Princess Rebecca to Robert of the Proctor House was a large, lavish affair. People were invited from all around, and as many royal families as could make it were there. The two families were seated pride of place in the front rows in the church, Queen Winifred with her husband King George and their youngest daughters on one side, and the Proctor family on the other side. Other royal families were ranged behind them, and beyond

them, everyone else. People even stood in the side aisles just to be there. The Barton family was in the last row of royalty and recognized it as the snub that it was.

“We are gathered here today to join these two souls in holy matrimony,” the priest said once everyone was in place. “Prince Robert has accepted the suit of Princess Rebecca and has agreed to be her husband, to rule at her side and to be her companion in all things. If anyone objects to the union of these two people, let them speak now or forever hold their peace.”

There were no objections.

Princess Rebecca was radiant, with her brother Prince James and sisters Princesses Alice, Ruth Beatrice, and Elizabeth in attendance. Prince Robert was attended by his three brothers and one friend, the blond head at the end of the line standing out amongst all the brown. The happy couple only had eyes for each other throughout the ceremony. They only turned away when it was time to take the rings from their brothers. They exchanged rings, said their vows, and kissed as they were proclaimed married. The audience cheered and more than a few tears were shed.

The strangest thing happened next. Instead of the couple joining hands to walk the aisle together, they turned away. Princess Rebecca hugged her brother, took the ring pillow he was holding, and then switched places with him. The crowd started murmuring as Prince Robert and his brothers each stepped back and his blond friend hurried forward to take his place in front of Prince James. The priest held out his hands for silence, smiling.

“We are also gathered here today,” he began again, “to join these two souls in holy matrimony. Prince Clinton has accepted the suit of Prince James, and has agreed to be his husband, to stand by his side and to be his companion in all things. If anyone has any objections to the union of these two people, let them speak now or forever hold their peace.”

A wave of excited twitters swept through the audience and several eyes turned towards the Barton family. After a moment, King Harold stood up, scowling fiercely.

“I object,” he said loudly.

“On what grounds?” The priest asked.

“On the grounds that Prince Clinton is already betrothed to Princess Barbara of the Morse family,” King Harold said.

A few rows ahead of him, Princess Barbara and her father stood from their seats. “We have no objections,” they said together.

“If Clinton is happy in this arrangement, then I am happy for him,” Barbara continued.

King Harold’s face turned red with rage. “No son of mine is going to marry a man!” he exclaimed.

“Do you wish to disown him, then?” Prince James asked.

“What?”

“You said no son of yours is going to marry a man. And yet you are the only one here who has expressed any objections! There are a dozen royal families here who have no problem with this wedding. I’m sure any one of them would like another son, especially one married into such an influential family,” Prince James said.

“We’ll adopt him!” Princess Barbara exclaimed. “I’ve always wanted a brother.”

Queen Edith looked quite agitated, hidden in her husband’s shadow. King Harold glared and then shoved his way to the aisle. “He’s not my son!” he said before storming down the aisle and slamming out the doors. After a moment, Queen Edith followed him. Crown Prince Charles watched his parents go and then turned and nodded to his brother.

“Are there any other objections?” the priest asked. He waited a moment, and when no one else spoke, he smiled and continued the ceremony. When he reached the vows, he paused. “Prince James, I believe you had something to say?”

“Yes, thank you,” Prince James said. He paused himself, and in that moment, standing on the stage, staring into Clint’s eyes, he was only Bucky. He smiled and Clint grinned back.

“A few weeks ago,” Bucky said, “Prince Clinton was lost in the woods. Search and rescue parties were gathered and sent out, myself and my dear sisters among them. We successfully found him, and though I was the one searching, I found that I was also the one rescued. I have seen many sorrows in my life that have made my heart heavy, but Clinton has made it light again with joy and love. Clint, you rescue me.”

Clint, tears in his eyes, reached out, and Bucky met him in a hug, tucking his face down into his shoulder. “You rescue me too,” Clint murmured in his ear.

“Do we have the rings?” the priest asked. The two of them separated long enough to take the rings from Becca and Robert then turned back, both of them grinning through the tears. They took turns repeating the vows after the priest and sliding the rings on each other’s fingers, silver to be secondary to Becca and Robert’s gold. They were loose, having been found in short order for the wedding, and would be resized and engraved afterwards with words and symbols of their choosing.

“Then by the power vested in me, I hereby bind these two souls together, that they may never be parted, in this life or the next, world without end, amen. You may kiss the groom.”

Bucky leaned in excitedly and kissed his husband, full to bursting with joy. His sisters behind him whistled and cheered, louder than the whole rest of the church together. He wrapped Clint in his arms and grinned at his family. Becca leaned up to kiss his cheek, and then took Robert’s hand and began the march back down the aisle as the music started and the crowd stood. Bucky and Clint gave them a moment and then followed. Barney reached out and caught Clint’s elbow as they passed.

“You’re still my brother,” Barney said. Clint smiled and gave him a quick hug before taking Bucky’s hand again and walking down the aisle to the doors. The families of the newlyweds poured into the aisle and followed. As soon as they could, Bucky and Clint stepped aside into

a shadowed nook, letting Becca and Robert resume their place in the spotlight. They wrapped themselves around each other, watching people mill around the other couple.

“What do you think about having children?” Bucky asked suddenly. Clint looked up in surprise and found Bucky smiling so sweetly at him that he couldn’t breathe for a moment.

“I think we should wait a few years,” Clint replied.

“You think so?” Bucky asked. “It *is* our wedding night,” he murmured, his grin turning wicked.

“Maybe if we have time to do anything before we fall asleep tonight...we can try,” Clint said shyly.

“I’ll try to get us excused from the party early if you want,” Bucky promised.

Clint looped his arms around Bucky’s neck and leaned up into him. “You’ve rescued me,” he murmured, “and I’ve rescued you,” he whispered, moving in until their lips were brushing and he could feel Bucky’s breath catch, “now let’s go rescue your sister.” He stepped back and tugged on Bucky’s hand, grinning mischievously. Bucky groaned.

“My new husband is a tease,” he complained with a grin. “Alright, my love. It seems we have lots of rescuing yet to do.”

Clint smiled and stepped backwards, pulling Bucky with him. “And there is no one else I’d rather rescue me.”

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