Baghdad Waltz

by Dreadnought

Summary

Lieutenant Steve Rogers has done all the right things. Graduated West Point at the top of his class. Earned a coveted spot as an infantry officer. Found the woman of his dreams. Everything is going exactly as planned. That is, until he accepts a platoon leader position for a unit deploying to Iraq, where he’s reunited with the ex-boyfriend he’d rather forget but never could.

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Sergeant First Class Barnes thinks he knows war. He lives in a wild cycle of military training, deployments, sex, drinking, and pining for his former best friend and ex-boyfriend, Steve Rogers. But when Lieutenant Rogers is assigned as his platoon leader during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Sergeant Barnes realizes that he doesn't know the first thing about what it means to truly fight for something.

———

An Iraq War love story in three movements.

Or:

The story of two men who go to war and don’t quite come back home. Please read the tags and warnings carefully and proceed with caution.

Notes

In the spirit of transparency, I want to make a few important points about this story up front:

1. The primary romantic relationship in this fic is between Steve and Bucky. However, there are also some other relationships in this fic, and some of these relationships will be
conflicting. Sharon Carter in particular is portrayed as a real human being who has a real, enthusiastically sexual and romantic relationship with Steve. She is not a shrewish plot device who is treated with disrespect or treated as a mere obstacle to Steve and Bucky's relationship. She is very important to this story, she is highly valued by me and other characters, and she is not going anywhere. I want to make that abundantly clear up front.

2. This story will feature HIGHLY realistic depictions of war, combat, alcoholism, sexuality, relationships, physical injury, mental illness, sexual dysfunction, recovery, references to childhood sexual abuse, and minority stress (especially internalized homophobia). PLEASE read the tags carefully. I will provide trigger warnings for some of the more sensitive subjects at the end of each respective chapter.

3. I’ve tried to make the military experiences depicted within realistic, based both on extensive research and personal experiences. However, I’ve also taken my share of liberties for the ease of storytelling and blended reality with fiction at my own discretion. The core events are all roughly based on first person accounts I’ve come across in my research, with details altered to fit this story and the characters.

4. I do not use graphic violence for shock value. All violence depicted here is done so in order to further character development and help explore themes related to coping with the grim realities of war.

This is a tough read. Please heed the tags and exercise self-care, if it's becoming too difficult to read. Those in early recovery from substance use disorders and those with extreme sensitivity to any of the issues above may want to be especially cautious about this fic.

With all that said, this story is really about healing from trauma and addiction, and it will include plenty of love, friendship, family, joy, camaraderie, and other beautiful things, too.

If I have not scared you away, I hope you enjoy!
Prologue: 9/11

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
BAGHDAD WALTZ
AN IRAQ WAR LOVE STORY IN THREE MOVEMENTS
BY DREADNOUGHT
Steve awakens abruptly to the harsh, jaunty tones of a cell phone. Next to him, Bucky burrows his head deeper under the covers with a mumble.

“‘S yours,” Steve thinks he hears. Bucky’s arm slides around his waist, and Steve feels his hand fall softly against his side.

No, it most certainly is not his, because his is in his pocket, and his pants are far away. Steve reaches against the counterforce of his boyfriend’s pull and snags the cell off the nightstand with the tips of his fingers. He checks the caller ID.

SGT McConnell

“It’s your squad leader.” Steve throws down the comforter and taps the phone against Bucky’s head.

Bucky recoils from the light and the blaring sound, pressing his face into Steve’s bare chest. “What’s he want?”

“I don’t know, Buck. I didn’t ask him.” The smile on Steve's lips is fond as he taps again.

With a growl, Bucky reaches up, grabs the phone from Steve’s hand, presses the receive button, and holds it to his ear. “Hello?”

Steve can’t make out the words on the other end, but he can make out that they’re frantic. Bucky’s body goes rigid against him, and Bucky pushes himself away in order to sit up. McConnell’s voice, loud and legato, fills the space between them.

“What do we do?” Bucky asks, his own words measured and even by comparison.

More unintelligible panic seeps into the room. Steve sits up next to Bucky and tries to read the situation from his face. His lips are parted, brows drawn together the way they do when he’s engineering through a problem - though Steve would sure like to know what kind of problem has McConnell calling in hysterics when Bucky isn't even supposed to be drilling for another four days.

“Are we officially on orders?” Bucky motions to Steve then, pointing to the remote on the nightstand. When Steve hands it to him, he turns the TV on to ABC, to live news coverage of both towers of the World Trade Center belching smoke and flame.

It takes several moments for his sleep-addled brain to register what’s happening, but once it sinks in, Steve covers his mouth with his hand and mutters “Oh my God” against it. He looks over at Bucky, who’s flung down the rest of the covers and is crawling out of bed.

“Zuccotti Park?” Bucky asks. He’s pacing now, naked, alternating between glancing at the TV and the floor. His body is a lean line of wiry muscle, sculpted and groomed with the fastidiosity of a man who lives as if he’s still beholden to the rigid statues of the New York City gay scene, his old habits holding fast despite Steve’s insistence that he doesn’t have to be that way for him.

Now Steve’s phone actually is ringing. He scrambles out of bed and uses the sound to locate his
jeans, which are crumpled in the corner next to the book shelf.

Bucky’s voice dimly registers in the background. “I dunno. Depends on traffic in the Brooklyn-Battery. I can be ready — ”

Steve presses the receive button on his phone. “Ma.”

“Where are you?”

“Bucky’s.”

“Oh, thank the Lord. Just stay there, okay? Did you see what happened? Are you watching?”

“Yeah.”

His ma draws in a shaking breath. “All those people…”

Steve knows what she’s thinking, and if she weren’t sleeping off her latest round of chemo, he’s sure she’d be trying to hitch a ride to Manhattan right now to go help treat the wounded. He feels a sudden pang of guilt that he’s not with her. He should be with her. He should be taking care of her, despite her firm insistence that she’s fine. That she's out of the woods now. At the very least, he shouldn’t have stayed over at Bucky’s. Again.

Bucky’s pacing abruptly stops, catching Steve's attention. Steve doesn’t make out what his ma says next, because all he can hear is —

“Roger that. See you soon.”

The breath rips out Steve’s chest as the pieces slam into place. He stumbled distractedly through repeated confirmations that he’s safe and that his ma is safe and that they’ll call each other later. By the time he hangs up, Bucky’s in the bathroom, filling the sink with water.

“Sergeant Z’s gonna kill me,” Bucky says, running his fingers through his dark hair, now wild with sleep and day-old product. Woefully and deliberately out of regs until the last possible second. Very Bucky. He touches the sideburns that shouldn't be there, the scruff along his jaw - that sharp, handsome jawline that Steve kissed last night.

Steve leans rigidly against the door jamb. “Where are you going?”

“Zuccotti Park.”

“Who’s going?”

“As many as we can get. At least me, McConnell, Z, Alvarez, and Kwon.”

Steve crosses his arms tight over his chest. “What’re you gonna do?”

“Help, I guess.” Bucky shrugs, but the movement is tense and forced. “I dunno. Whatever we can do. We haven’t been formally activated yet, but we can’t just sit around and do nothing.” He turns off the sink, bracing himself heavily over it, and looks down into the water. The faucet continues dripping until he fiddles with the hot knob, finessing it the way it must be finessed in order to stop leaking. Bucky glances into the mirror and catches Steve’s reflection. “Let’s go to the roof.”

Bucky brushes past Steve as he exits the bathroom, leaving him staring dumbly at his own serious face. From the bedroom, Steve hears the loud scraping sound of the dresser opening, and he follows it, snagging the pair of sweatpants and sweatshirt Bucky throws at him. They're his own, part
of the growing collection of clothes and personal items he keeps here now after being forbidden from keeping anything more than a toothbrush for a whole goddamn year.

They dress in silence, slip on Bucky's two pairs of flip-flops, and make their way up the flights of stairs that lead to the roof. There, they join the small crowd of residents who greet Bucky by the name most know him by.

“Jamie,” Mrs. Griffith says, laying her wizened hand on his arm. “Oh, Jamie.” It’s all she can say to him as her eyes glimmer and spill over.

Bucky pats her hand with a sorrowful smile, and they all watch the horror unfolding across the river. The horror that Bucky is about to be swallowed up by. From Bucky’s Red Hook apartment, it all seems frighteningly close, so close that you could almost reach out and touch the smoke.

Steve feels two of Bucky’s fingers reaching for his own, brushing cautiously as Bucky gnaws on his lower lip and stares out at the blackening skyline. Steve takes hold of those fingers and squeezes them tightly, with every bit of himself that he can, because he knows it's all Bucky will give him with other people around. And Steve swallows down a lump of nausea as Bucky predictably yanks his hand back, nausea that blooms as they take the steps back down to the apartment. Bucky closes the door behind them and pauses, hand pressing hard against its surface, fingernails going white. And Bucky's mouth opens like he wants to say something, and Steve waits for it, wants desperately to hear it, because Bucky's inner life is always so shrouded, so guarded, and he's scared now, he's....

But then Bucky's in motion again, blowing past Steve, stripping off his sweatshirt and heading back to the bathroom to shave.

While Bucky readies for God knows what (does anybody know what the fuck is actually going on over there?), Steve does what he does when he's stressed out: he tidies. He starts obvious. Two shiny condom wrappers on the floor. Pieces of clothing. He finds his underwear tossed atop the dresser, which look to have precariously close to knocking down at least one of the three framed photos there. Bucky’s dad posed in front of the Blackhawk helicopter he would die in eight months after the photo was taken. The two of them at age 13, arms draped over each other’s shoulders, grinning with braced teeth at the Nirvana concert Steve’s ma escorted them to. The two of them, arms similarly draped, Steve kissing Bucky on the cheek as Bucky holds out the shot of vodka that commemorated the start of his 21st birthday bar crawl. One year after the drunken proposition and kiss that changed everything between them.

Steve heaves a deep, shaking breath. Okay. Break down the steps. Get dressed. Don’t want the last thing Bucky sees you in to be—

Steve kills the thought fast and hard, but puts on his clothes from yesterday all the same. He then strides over to Bucky’s closet and pulls out the nicest battle dress uniform he can find. Warm weather fabric. The one with the sharpest creases along the arms and legs. He lays it out on the bed and takes stock of his boyfriend’s part-time career. Specialist Barnes, U.S. Army. Airborne patch. Air Assault patch. Unit patch. He then pulls out the jungle boots he knows are the most comfortable, even though there’s still dirt on them from his last field training exercise. He goes to the kitchen and comes back with a wet paper towel to clean them off, then pulls a brown t-shirt, Bucky’s favorite underwear, and a pair of black socks from his dresser. He lays everything on the edge of the bed he just made, where Bucky won’t be able to miss it.

Steve hears Bucky start the shower then, and he starts to panic. He’s running out of time. Time for what, he won’t dare say, but he picks up the pace anyway. He pulls some of Bucky’s TA-50 gear from the closet — belt and suspenders rigged with canteens and ammo pouches — and takes it to the kitchen. He fills the two canteens with water and rummages around the cupboards, grabbing fistfuls
of granola bars and beef jerky and whatever compact, shelf-stable foods he can find. He doesn’t know what’s Bucky’s and what’s his roommate’s, but she’s not here to ask, so he takes whatever he finds. He pauses periodically to tune in to the voices of the ABC news commentators, who stutter and haw as they try to narrate the pandemonium. Each additional detail seems to ratchet up his dread tenfold.

Bucky’s phone rings again. Caller ID: Ma. Steve holds the phone in his hand as his reeling brain vacillates between two possible responses. His thumb cuts a path through the muck of his waffling and presses the receive button.

“This is Steve.”

“Steve, honey. How are you?”

He doesn’t even know how to characterize his current mood. It’s tumbling somewhere between terrified and numb. He must sound brittle, because Winnie modulates her tone to exude maternal calm.

“It’s okay,” she says, inferring his terror. “You’re fine. Is Jamie there?”

“He’s in the shower.” His voice grits like gravel.

“Did he get activated?”

Steve shakes his head until he remembers that she can’t see him. “No, but a bunch of them are going there anyway.”

There’s the briefest hitch in Winnie’s breath, which she exhales out like a slow wave. “Do you know where he’s going?”

Steve tells her everything he knows, which he quickly realizes is pathetically little.

“Have him call me before he leaves, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey.” Her tone is one she might use with scared dog. “What are you doing right now?”

Steve looks at his piles on the counter. “Packing food. For him.”

“Did you call your ma?”

“Yeah.”

“You gonna go see her when Jamie leaves?”

“Yeah.” Did he just whimper?

“Okay. You’re okay. It’s okay. Jamie will be okay. This is his job.”

Steve bites down on his molars. “I hate it.”

Winnie Buchanan, former soldier and current Army widow extraordinaire, relates. She shares a story about George deploying during Desert Storm that has a hypnotic effect on Steve, most certainly from the lulling inflection and cadence of her words. Her nurse voice, Bucky calls it. One of her nurse voices, anyway. The good cop to her jarring, curse-filled repertoire saved specially for idiot doctors,
which has occasional applications to her spawn and their associates when behaving like idiots.

After a discordantly curt reminder that he tell Bucky to call her, Winnie says farewell with the sun-kissed affection of his own mother. Steve seizes enough foresight to plug Bucky’s phone into its charger on the kitchen counter, then he begins stuffing the empty TA-50 ammo pouches with the junk food he forged. He thinks to make something more substantial and collects ingredients to make PB&J, turning and stalling once, then twice, as if he’s lost in the kitchen he’s been in half a thousand times.

His mind’s chaos gives way to white noise, his sandwich-making motions automatic, and through the murky silence he hears himself praying underneath his breath. Christ, he hasn’t prayed in so long that he’s surprised his mouth even remembers how to do it.

Time falls away like ash. Steve slips two sandwiches into ziplocks and turns to set them on the small table in the center of the kitchen. He startles when he sees Bucky standing there in full uniform, shaved and clean, handsome as the devil and, of course, smiling. Steve wants to scream and shake that smile off his face. It’s not even real, anyway. Just Bucky’s typical worn out production of cavalierness.

Bucky looks down at the sandwiches and at his stuffed TA-50. “You did that for me?” he says, his smile curving. The softness of his baby face clashes violently with the grim adultness of his battle dress. “Thank you.”

“Your ma called. Call her back.”

Bucky’s expression falls slack. He opens the large cargo pockets on his right and left thighs and slides one sandwich into each. “C’mon, Steve…”

Steve tightens his hands into fists. “Why do you have to go?” It’s a stupid question, and one he knows the answer to. It’s more of a question to the universe, to the galactic sadist who orchestrates the smashing of planes into buildings and who sends his boyfriend into the jaws of hell to chase their flames.

“This is literally why the National Guard was created.” Bucky points in the general direction of Manhattan Island. “That over there.”

“I should be going with you.”

“After your ma’s been in remission six months. That’s what you agreed, remember?” Bucky circles around the table and stops a few feet short of Steve. In his boots, they’re just barely the same height. “When that day comes, I’ll walk you to the recruiter’s myself.” He grabs his gear off the tabletop, slides the suspenders over his shoulders, and buckles the pistol belt in the front.

Bucky pauses and regards Steve, offering another smile, this one warm and stripped of pretense. For a second, Steve’s certain Bucky’s going to reach out for him, but instead he turns on his heel and walks to the hook by the door. His body draws a different line in uniform, one sharp and infused with purpose. He lifts his motorcycle keys from the hook and drops them on the floor. He retrieves them with trembling fingers and shoves them into his pocket.

The imaginary tar that held Steve back gives way, and he rushes to Bucky, throwing his arms around him from behind and pulling him in as tightly as he can. His blue eyes quiver back and forth as he scrambles for reasons why he has to go with him, or why Bucky has to stay here. He entertains the insane thought of lifting Bucky’s Gerber from his pocket, flipping it open, and jamming it into his thigh, because at least he wouldn’t be going to Manhattan. It’d be well worth the possible assault
charge and the dissolution of their whole relationship, because at least Bucky would be alive and not burned to a crisp inside 1 World Trade Center.

“I’m coming with you,” Steve says. Bucky stiffens in his arms.

“Like hell.” Bucky grabs Steve’s forearms, breaking his hold, and turns to face him. “Like hell you are. Not riding with me, anyway.” Bucky digs his fingers into the thick muscle of Steve’s shoulders. “No.” He shakes his head, already anticipating the course of Steve’s arrogant logic. “No. You’re staying here. I don’t care if you did rustle up some wack job cabbie who’d take you. You’re staying.”

*Fuck you* is Steve’s first thought. *I love you* is his second. That’s the one he says aloud.

Bucky slides his hands up to the place where the curve of Steve’s neck begins. “I love you, too.”

They hug properly this time, and Steve’s hold is just as desperate as before. He breathes a shaking sigh of both relief and anguish when Bucky returns that desperation. Steve pulls in the lingering scent of Bucky’s shampoo from his still-damp hair, and he wonders how an infantryman could smell so sweet.

Bucky’s the one to draw back first. He glances over at his phone on the counter, and Steve turns to retrieve it. Bucky dials his mom, frowns, and slides the phone into his left pocket.

“Network’s down.” Bucky’s face bears its first signs of real fear now, eyes wide, chin working back and forth as he tries to judo himself around a problem with no viable solution. “Shit,” he breathes, then steels his yawing jaw. “I gotta go.”

“Well.”

Bucky grabs his motorcycle helmet, and Steve follows him down the stairs.

“Check on Mrs. G before you leave, will ya? She wasn’t looking so good.” Bucky says, glancing back at Steve for confirmation.

Steve nods and trails him down more and more stairs to the ground floor, his body stiff and resisting, as if he’s gone spontaneously arthritic. They stop just short of the door that leads outside, the threshold passing into the land where someone who knows someone could see Bucky in uniform, kissing and touching another man, and kill his Army career with one gleeful stroke.

Bucky peers out the window, down the street to his bike, the black 1978 Triumph Bonneville he and his dad rebuilt from a rusted pile of neglect. Steve can see the ticking of Bucky’s jaw, and he wonders what he’s thinking. He wants to ask but doesn’t, because he doesn’t want Bucky to tell him what he already knows. That he’s scared. That he’s worried he might get hurt or worse. That someone might die because he wasn’t fast enough or strong enough to help them. He also doesn’t ask because he knows Bucky needs to be brave right now, and Steve needs to be brave right now, too.

Bucky turns around and takes a deep breath, his shoulders rising and falling. “Here we go.”

You. Here you go, Steve thinks.

Steve reaches forward and lays his hand on Bucky’s chest, over the words telling everyone who owns him right now. But who’s Steve really kidding? Bucky loves the Army. He lives for this. This is who he chooses to be, who he’s wanted to be for as long as Steve has known him.
“Don’t be a hero. Don’t do anything stupid.”

Bucky’s mouth cocks into a half-smirk. “I’ll try not to.”

“That’s not good enough.” Steve fists the lapels of Bucky’s uniform, his metal rank insignia digging into his palms.

Bucky lifts his hands and lays them on Steve’s cheeks. They’re warm and damp with sweat. “I’m gonna be okay.”

Steve kisses him. He doesn’t know how to convey everything in that kiss. His love. His fear. He doesn’t know if it’s enough, if Bucky knows just how much he loves him.

And then the kiss is over, and Bucky’s hands are leaving his face. And he’s backing toward the door, sliding his helmet over his head. He smiles once more, brilliant, all teeth, and then he’s gone.

Steve stands in the foyer for God knows how long. Long after he hears the rumble of Bucky’s engine die down to nothing. Long enough to think through half a thousand tragic scenarios and the devastation he would face in the wake of any of them.

Eventually, a flow of kinetic energy drags him up the stairs, back toward Bucky’s apartment. He keeps his promise to check in on Mrs. Griffith along the way, who pulls him into her apartment and sits him down on the couch with a cup of weak coffee. He holds her hand as she cries. Together, they watch in horror when the south tower collapses in on itself. It’s breathtaking and harrowing, and Steve feels a shadow of shameful relief as well, because he knows Bucky can’t have made it to Manhattan by then.

But when the north tower collapses at 10:28, Steve knows there’s a chance that Bucky was there, that he was inside or just outside. He knows that Bucky might now be crushed under 110 stories of rubble. Shaking and sick to his stomach, Steve leaves Mrs. Griffith with her own sorrow and climbs the remaining stairs to Bucky’s apartment. There, he collapses on the bed, on Bucky’s side, and curls his large body into a ball. He tries to call him. He tries five, ten, fifteen times, each met with the infuriating blare of his cell carrier’s network error message.

Somehow through the chaos, a call eventually comes through to him, and Steve nearly bursts into angry, bitter tears when he sees that it’s his ma. He answers, choking back his emotions, because the last thing she needs is to worry about him. So he pretends he’s fine, even though his voice is so thick and unsteady that she must know he’s lying. He does find some comfort in her words. In the way she calls him ‘darling.’ The way her assurances that Bucky is okay seem like they might even be true, through some feat of maternal manipulation.

With her blessing, Steve stays at Bucky’s, just in case he comes home. He stays and worries and forces himself to stay still, because if something horrible did happen to Bucky, Steve wants to preserve the evidence that he lived here. The razor he left on the counter. The sweat pants he dropped on the floor of the bathroom. The flip-flops kicked off at the door.

Steve stays and he wallows in his helplessness, tuning in and out of the continuous live coverage. He sees survivors on TV, a lot of them, covered in dust, and he dares to hope that Bucky might be with them. As he waits, something brews inside of him, something like resolve, borne out of the terror of not knowing whether the man he loves is alive or dead.

And he promises himself that, somehow, he is never going to feel this way ever again.
Military Stuff

TA-50: Standard issue gear given to a soldier by the unit. In 2001, this would likely include the suspender/belt combo mentioned here, a ruck sack, rain gear, and other accessories to be used in the field.

National Guard: The Army is split into three components: Active Duty, Army Reserve, and National Guard. Active Duty and Army Reserves are managed by the federal government and the National Guard is funded and managed by individual states. The National Guard is intended (though certainly not exclusively used) to help out stateside during natural or manmade disasters and in-country attacks. The National Guard meets to drill one weekend a month and two weeks a year.

Specialist (E-4): The final enlisted rank before a soldier becomes a noncommissioned officer. Unless they screw up, soldiers earn the rank of E-4 after two years on active duty. Education may also be substituted for active duty experience. For example, someone with a college degree may enter the Army as an E-4.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bucky faces a setback and cooks up a plan.

Chapter Notes

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January 9, 2008

The quiet before a breach is pure electricity, one of the purest moments on any modern urban battlefield — at least, far as Bucky’s concerned. Even today, when everyone’s tired and their motivation is waning, Bucky can feel the charge running through almost every man. And even though this must be the two or three hundredth breach for both Sergeant Rhodes and Sergeant Dugan, both of them are alert and on-point, passing their energy and confidence onto the men in their squads. The synchronicity of second platoon is a beautiful, beautiful thing, and Bucky quietly beams with both pride and lingering joy from the lemon pound cake he found in his MRE at lunch today.

Lieutenant Shen, on the other hand, doesn’t quite seem to be feeling it today. Not as much as he usually does, anyway, which Bucky notes with concern. Shen has been a true blessing to the unit, and Bucky’s been waiting for the other shoe to drop with him since the first day they met. He’s racked his brain trying to find Shen’s fatal flaw, figuring that all lieutenants must have one, but the man has proven himself almost uncannily functional.

Bucky exchanges glances with him, lifting his eyebrows. Shen blinks sharply and shakes his head, as if he’s trying to rattle something loose in his head, then nods to Bucky. Bucky then makes eye contact with Rhodes, who nods to Trip, who pops a smoke grenade and throws it down the road they’re about to cross.
Dugan’s squad provides cover while Trip leads Rhodes’ squad across the road to their target, a two-story cement block building reportedly housing a cache of bomb-making supplies. Bucky watches them stack up on the door, Trip first, then Rhodes, Ward, and Reyes, and finally Foggy as the breach man. On Rhodes’ signal, Foggy kicks down the door, and the squad files into the building to start clearing rooms.

Bucky looks over his shoulder toward the approaching footfalls of Sam and his platoon, who have come to pull security so that the rest of Bucky’s platoon can approach the target. Sam smiles covertly, so as not to provoke Lieutenant Sitwell. Bucky gives a brash wink back, Sitwell be damned. Bucky then turns his attention back to Shen, who signals to Dugan to lead the rest of them across the road. They move fast and low, and as they pass through the smoke, Bucky breathes in the spent firecracker smell with a feral smile.

Once in the building, Bucky, Parker, and Shen stay near the entrance, surveying the platoon and keeping their eyes peeled for unexpected insurgent activity. Bucky also watches Sam’s platoon file into the street, silently critiquing everything he doesn’t like about the way they move and communicate and blaming it all on the toxic idiocy of their platoon leader. He doesn’t notice that Shen is down until he hears Parker squawk out a loud “Oh shit,” followed in rapid succession by a sickening thud of body against concrete.

Bucky unleashes a curse of his own when he sees Shen on the floor, his body waving and arching in an awful chorea. Parker’s already fast at work, God he’s fast, kneeling beside Shen and laying his hands on his shoulders. He looks up at Bucky.

“Help me roll him, Sergeant.”

Bucky lays his rifle on the floor and drops down to one side of Shen, then helps Parker roll him off his face. Parker stops them once Shen’s on his side, steadying him there while his body dances, his eyes rolled back into his head, his breath coming sharp in draws that time with the rhythm of his movements. Parker checks his watch.

Bucky catches Foggy and Reyes staring. “Eyes on the room,” he snaps, partly for tactical reasons, yeah, yeah, but mostly because he doesn’t want them to see their platoon leader like this. He doesn’t want them to feel the fear and helplessness he feels as Shen writhes under his hands.

“What do you need, Doc?” Bucky asks.

“Have someone call in a nine-line to the CP and get an ambulance,” Parker replies.

“Need us to do something, Sergeant?” Foggy asks.

“Yeah, track down Ward and have him call the CP and tell them we need medical.”

“Tell them Lieutenant Shen’s having a seizure,” Parker says. He checks his watch again. “At least a minute long.”

Foggy nods and bounds off — as fast as Foggy Nelson can bound — to find Ward and his radio.

“Anything you can do?” Bucky asks.

Parker shakes his head. “Just have to wait it out. He should stop soon.”

As if on cue, Shen’s body slows, his breath dropping into a less terrifying rhythm. The whites of his eyes disappear as his lids close. It feels like a relief for all of them, even as Shen lolls on the cusp of consciousness.
“You’re all right, Sir,” Parker murmurs. Bucky’s not sure if Shen can hear him, but he likes that Parker says it anyway.

The calming of Shen’s body sets off a cascade of worries in Bucky’s mind, because there’s almost no doubt about what this means for the platoon. Parker makes eye contact with Bucky, the very deliberate kind, and he conveys the exact bleakness that’s settling heavier upon Bucky with every passing second. He can practically hear that long-awaited other shoe finally drop.

Shen groans, smacks his lips a few times, and looks up at both of them.

“What do you know where you are, Sir?” Parker asks.

Shen blinks a few times. “Umm, California?”

“That’s right,” Bucky says, squeezing his shoulder. He smiles and hopes it appears genuine.

“You ever had a seizure before?” Parker asks.

Shen doesn’t say yes. Not verbally, anyway. But the expression on his face, the sudden aversions of his eyes, tells his truth clearly.

“How many?” Parker’s voice is low.

“One,” Shen murmurs. “Two months ago. Thought it was a one-off.”

Parker looks at Bucky again, his mouth pressed into a troubled line. He shakes his head so slightly that if Bucky weren’t expecting it, he might have missed it entirely.

“We’ll get you taken care of, Sir. Your evac is on the way,” Bucky tells him.

“Bird?” Shen sounds hopeful.

“Sorry, Sir. No bird today,” Bucky says. It’s almost sad to watch Shen’s face fall when he realizes he won’t even get a free helicopter ride out of all this.

“Sergeant Barnes.”

Bucky turns his head toward Foggy.

“They stopped the exercise.”

“God damn it,” Bucky mutters.

The heavy, lumbering steps of Dugan announce him before he can even open his mouth. “Hey, everything okay in here?”

“Lieutenant Shen had a seizure.”

“Oh, shit.” Dugan comprehends the significance of this immediately, his ginger brows falling precipitously as he approaches Shen. “Hey, Sir. Hang in there.” He points to the doorway. “Docs ’re here.”

Shen gets loaded onto a litter and carried out to a modified Humvee by the National Training Center medics. When word gets around that the exercise has been stopped, the entire platoon gathers in the front room where Shen went down. Bucky explains the situation while Parker briefs the other medics on Shen’s condition. The three NCOs attempt to quell the grumbles and expletives, as well as
unsolicited interpretations of the situation from the more seasoned and cynical among them. Dugan and Rhodes clamp it down with blunt assurances that Captain Barton will work it out, though all three of them know it’s a line of unadulterated bullshit.

They all file out into the street of the mock-up urban training environment, which bears such a resemblance to the streets of Mosul or Fallujah that Bucky sometimes forgets that they’re stateside. They watch Shen get loaded into the back of the ambulance, and Bucky thinks to comment that this is definitely not how things will be when someone needs an evac downrange. But surely they must all know that. He decides not to be an asshole about it, because they already have enough to worry about now.

Since they’re all lollygagging around anyway, Bucky walks to where his two squad leaders have gathered two buildings down from their target, and he holds out his hand to bum a smoke from Dugan.

“Though you only smoked downrange,” Dugan says, handing Bucky a Camel and a lighter.

“Or when we lose our platoon leader five weeks before deployment,” Bucky says around his cigarette, then lights it.

Rhodes scratches underneath the chinstrap of his helmet. “Guess that makes us kinda screwed, huh?”

“Kinda really fucked, yeah,” Bucky replies.

“Oh, man, what happened to Shen?”

Bucky smiles at Sam as he approaches and opens up a space for him in their three-man NCO circle. Sam waves away Dugan’s offer of a cigarette and claps Bucky lightly on the back in greeting.

“Seizure,” Rhodes says.

“Wow.” Sam cranes his head to get a look at the Humvee as it rolls off toward the Fort Irwin medical center. “Awful timing.”

“Better now than in six weeks,” Bucky says. It’s the only bright spot he can manage to pick out of all this.

“I liked that guy,” Sam says, slinging his M-16 over his back. “He actually seemed competent.”

“I’d even say highly competent. For a lieutenant,” Bucky qualifies. “Nice guy, easy to get along with. Much better than—”

Dugan shushes him loudly as Sitwell passes their group with one of the squad leaders from first platoon. Sam’s posture slinks and his expression goes dull, like maybe he’ll blend into the scenery if he acts inconspicuous.

“Good afternoon, Sir!” Bucky calls, which is followed by the snort of a suppressed laugh from Dugan.

Sitwell makes an unconvincing show of being unbothered by Bucky’s enthusiastic and highly sarcastic greeting of the day. “Sergeant Wilson, don’t forget to help me brief the platoon on tomorrow’s exercise. 1700 sharp.”

“Yes, Sir,” Sam replies crisply.
They all watch Sitwell as he slinks off down the road, probably to go cram his nose up Barton’s ass.

“Does he need you to wipe his ass, too?” Dugan says when Sitwell’s out of earshot.

“And is it just me, or does it sound like he really has to stop himself from saying ‘boy’ every time he talks to you?” Rhodes adds.

Sam’s expression is grim. “He’s gonna get us killed.”

Bucky exhales a frustrated cloud of smoke from his nose. “He’s the rare type of semi-moron who also happens to think he’s Audie Murphy.”

“But he went to Duke,” Rhodes says, capturing precisely the imperious intonation Sitwell adopts when bragging about his alma mater.

“Who says we need a PL anyway?” Dugan looks at Bucky. “Or maybe we could commission you up with one of those old timey battlefield promotions.”

“Yeah, right.” Bucky laughs. “Kill me now.” He elbows Rhodes. “You wanna put a butter bar on someone, this is your man. You and Foggy, couple of the most overpowered, overeducated knuckle draggers I ever worked with.”

“Seriously though, fellas, this is a problem.” Dugan catches sight of Parker and waves one of his giant hands at him. “Hey, Doc! C’mere!”

Parker breaks from his conversation with Mack and jogs over to the circle of NCOs. They draw him into their perimeter, where he stands at a loose parade rest.

“Rest, Doc,” Bucky says, and Parker drops his hands to his side. “What’s your honest opinion on Shen’s status?”

“Yeah, Sergeant, he’s out. Like out-out-out. If it’s not something temporary like meningitis, he’ll probably also go to med board. And he didn’t look that sick to me since we’ve been here.”

“Me neither,” Dugan says, followed by a hearty “Fuck.”

Bucky nods and takes a long drag on his cigarette. He runs through a list of potential candidates to fill Shen’s spot, and his options are so sorry that he wishes he hadn’t gone through the exercise at all. Everyone he can think of is under-qualified, elsewhere assigned, or either mean or dumb as shit.

But in a dark corner of Bucky’s mind, an idea starts to percolate. The logical part of his brain dismisses the idea out of hand as glaringly idiotic at best and unconscionable at worst. The self-preserving part of himself, atrophied from years of abuse, stays noticeably quiet while his reckless side spins a colorful rationale for why it’s a fantastic idea.

Sam points at Bucky. “Oh, no. I know that look. You’ve got an idea. Parker, remember this look in the future.”

Parker smiles awkwardly, looking as if he’s been snared in a trap with no escape.

“Oh, shit,” Dugan says, crushing his cigarette under his clomping foot. “Here we go.”

“No, no, it’s a good one, Doc. Don’t worry.” Bucky’s smoke wags between his lips as he speaks. “There’s a solution to this.”

“You got an extra lieutenant in your pocket or something?” Rhodes asks.
Bucky tilts his head to one side, then the other. “You could say that.”

———

January 14, 2008

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Bucky sits in the waiting area outside the battalion commander’s office, his legs bouncing with the restless energy that assails him every time he’s not doing something. Six years on active duty have accustomed him to an operations tempo that’s not compatible with long periods of sitting. Unless, of course, it’s in an up-armored death mobile bursting at the rivets with testosterone and firepower. Or on overwatch, staring through a scope, waiting for—

Bucky crosses his arms tight and gives his head a rough shake. No use thinking about that shit. Some of the bouncing is also nerves. His men’s anxious energy has become his own, especially since their ship is still skipper-less and Iraq is T-minus four weeks away. Despite the setback with Shen, who was diagnosed with adult onset epilepsy and is being unceremoniously fast-tracked out of the Army, the men still appear to have faith that everything is going to work out. The majority of them are first-time deployers, and they’re just glad to be getting sand in their boots regardless of who’s going to be leading them through it. Most tell him they’re excited. A couple confide in him that they’re scared. He thinks the scared ones might have it right, but maybe that’s just his last deployment talking. God, he hopes so.

Lieutenant Colonel Fury’s secretary glances over at him, her mouth pinched into a sour pucker. Mrs. Llewellyn has been in that desk so long that she’s probably seen a half a dozen commanders sitting where Fury sits now. She’s practically an institution in the 107th, grandmotherly in appearance but not at all in demeanor. Some previous commander’s wife who got sick of him boning around with her friends and decided to stake a permanent claim in his territory. Unlike some of the other civilians employed by the 107th, she’s not a woman who responds to the charms or flattery of dashing young infantrymen. Hell, she barely even responds to basic politeness. Maybe because she’s a northerner, though not one to be lured into chumminess by others of her kind. Bucky knows, because he’s tried to play New Yorker with her, even though he’s not really one himself. He’s tried and failed from every other angle he can think of, too, and the purpose of charming her in the first place has been long forgotten in the midst of his dogged efforts.

But when she looks over at him, he smiles at her anyway, and he knows he’s easy on the eyes when he does it. It’s the smile that gets him free drinks and expedited paperwork and hook-ups and other unearned bonuses that pretty people get. And today is no exception, because Mrs. Llewellyn’s lips soften by the very faintest of measures and, hell, he will take it. About time something good happened this week.

Her phone rings, and she answers it with the affected congeniality she reserves only for the commander himself. When she hangs up, she dries into a husk again.

“The colonel is ready for you,” she says.

Bucky rises, grabs his patrol cap from the small table beside him, and shoves it in his cargo pocket. He nods and coos his thanks to her as he passes, crossing the threshold into the spacious expanse of Fury’s office. The place is immaculately organized, not a loose paper in sight. Fury’s waiting for him, his hands folded on his desk, his expression both wary and curious. He eases Bucky out of attention as soon as he enters the position and tells him to sit down.
“Sergeant Barnes. What brings you here?”

Bucky crosses his ankle over his knee. “Well, Sir, I’m a bit concerned about this situation with our platoon leader, and I thought I’d offer a possible solution.”

It took him the entire drive to work to be able to squeak out these words without sounding too eager or too desperate. Without sounding as absolutely pathetic as he feels about this entire scheme.

“We already have a solution,” Fury says.

Bucky’s heart races with the falling of his face. “Oh. Captain Barton didn’t mention anything.”

“We’re going to pull Lieutenant Murray out of the S3 shop,” Fury says.

The way he says it, though, it’s almost like bait, and Bucky’s not one to leave perfectly good bait just sitting there, especially not when it can get him what he wants.

“Is there a problem, Sergeant?”

Oh yes, he’s sure of it now. He sees the glimmer in Fury’s eye, the one that’s not made of glass, just daring him to try to shoot this terrible plan out of the sky. But Bucky will be damned if he’s not going to make Fury work for it a little.

“Well, that all depends,” Bucky says.

“On what?”

“On how badly you want this platoon to come back from deployment intact.”

“I know about the FTX,” Fury tells him. “If that’s what you’re gonna try to use to dissuade me.”

“It’s not that Murray got his platoon lost for seven hours or that they made it all the way to the fence, though I truly have no idea how he did that.” Bucky edges forward in his chair. “It’s that Sergeant Washington was telling him the whole time that they were off-track, and Murray wouldn’t hear it. He insisted he was right. Said over and over that he aced the landnav course at OCS, which anyone with a working brainstem could do. Now, I know you’ve never been a platoon sergeant before, but I get real nervous around lieutenants like him, because that shit gets people killed real fast.”

“Sergeant Barnes, I’m running very low on options here. Finding the platoon leader of your dreams isn’t really practical right now.” Despite the gruff frankness of his words, Fury sounds genuinely apologetic.

“With respect, Sir, I’m not looking for the PL of my dreams. Just one who’s gonna show me some basic respect. That’s all.”

Fury shrugs. “I don’t know what to tell you, Sergeant.”

This, of course, is exactly where Bucky wants him.

Bucky relaxes his posture and sinks back into his chair. “Well, like I said, I do have an idea.”

Fury turns up his hands. “I’m all ears.”

“I know a guy.”

Fury snorts. “Of course you do.”
“First lieutenant, graduated first in his class from West Point — no shit, first in his class. That’s not a figure of speech. He’s Airborne qualified, Ranger qualified, and, get this, a Middle Eastern area specialist. Speaks Arabic, even. Got snatched up by CENTCOM right after graduation, for some God-awful reason, and he’s been rotting away at the Pentagon ever since. Some aide de camp for some general.”

The pace of Bucky’s words is giddy, and he can’t help but draw an unflattering comparison to a middle schooler gushing about the cute boy who sits in front of him in English class. A lifetime ago, that cute boy actually was Steve Rogers, and Bucky actually would have been that gushing middle schooler, if he wasn’t determined to never utter a word to anyone about finding anyone with a penis attractive.

“So you want some PowerPoint Ranger with chair ass to lead your platoon in Iraq in four weeks?”

“To be fair, Lieutenant Murray is also a PowerPoint Ranger with chair ass, with none of the other bells and whistles.” Without any more good intel from his Pentagon spy, Master Sergeant Nguyen, the only other selling point Bucky can make is a reiteration of, “He’s good.”

Fury’s look is penetrating and painfully incisive. “Friend of yours?”

Bucky feels intense heat in his ears. “Kind of.” He brings his hands together and pulls them apart slowly as he speaks. “We floated apart over the years. All my deployments, him going to the Academy, shit happens. But he’s good. And a genius. Like a Mensa-level genius. Also not an exaggeration.”

Fury leans back in his fancy chair and appraises Bucky’s falsely confident posture and his tense expression. “Would you be able to work with him?”

“Absolutely,” Bucky says. He spits the words with the force required to overshadow the obvious doubt he has about this possibility, which he prays Fury doesn’t pick up on. “Like peanut butter and jelly.”

Okay, now he’s just being arrogant — and lying like a whore, to boot.

“Did you bring this up with Captain Barton?” Fury asks.

“Not yet.”

“I take it you’re familiar with the chain of command.”

“Yes, Sir. I am.” Bucky is plaintive, and very sincerely so, because this is an obvious foul on his part. “I’m also trying to manage a lot of anxiety with my men around this, and if we have a shot of making this work, I knew I’d need to go straight to you.”

“I can’t just make a by-name request,” Fury says.

“Here’s the brilliant part, Sir.” Bucky’s back on the edge of his chair, gesturing to explain the intricacies of backdoor administrative work-arounds. “He’s got so many unique qualifiers that you could send up a tasker to branch requesting an individual augmentee with his specific qualifications. First lieutenant, Airborne, Ranger qualified, foreign area specialist, language proficiency in Arabic, you know. There can’t be too many O-2s with those qualifications out there.”

Fury swivels in his chair. “And you think this guy’s worth the heartburn I’m considering putting myself through to make this happen.”
“Sir, you won’t regret it.”

After Fury dismisses him, Bucky throws a final smile and a wave to Mrs. Llewellyn, joking with her that she’ll miss him while he’s downrange. She replies with a firm “Unlikely,” though he swears to God there’s a faint quirk at the corner of her shriveled mouth.

He joins Rhodes outside, who’s staring across the street at a gaggle of privates being smoked within an inch of their lives.

“I do not miss that,” Rhodes says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Y’know, I kinda do sometimes. Everything was much simpler then.”

“That’s the truth.” Rhodes looks at Bucky. “How’d it go?”

“I’m cautiously hopeful that Lieutenant Murray will not be our platoon leader on this deployment.”

Rhodes’ eyes go wide. “Holy shit, I didn’t even know that was a possibility.”

“Neither did I, until now. But this other guy I told you about might work out, if his unit lets him go. Fury seems onboard.”

“Hopefully they’ll have a little compassion in their hearts. It’s cruel to chain an infantryman to a desk so young.”

Bucky smirks. “I know. Poor guy.”

Bucky bites back an unbidden follow up, which would have gone roughly like, ‘But that fucker completely deserves every minute of it.’ He’s done a lot of work over the years to calm the bile that would surge in his gut every time he thought about Steve Rogers, but he supposes a betrayal which cuts that deep never does heal completely.

But still, he’s excited. He’s so goddamn excited about the possibility of seeing Steve again that he’s sure his shame must truly be dead.

“Hey, wanna go to Jack’s?” Bucky asks.

“Little soon to celebrate, isn’t it? No, wait.” Rhodes smiles. “Megan, right?”

Bucky raises an eyebrow.

“The bartender.” Rhodes’ smile gets even bigger. “The one who’s always sliding you free drinks.”

“Oh, yeah.” Bucky pumps some energy into his tone. “Yeah, she’s cute.”

“I’m sure if you tell her you’re deploying, she’d—”

“Yeah, thanks, Jim.” God, he wishes he had a cigarette. “I don’t need a lesson on how to hook up with a bartender. It’s not that fucking hard.”

Rhodes holds up his hands, palms out. “All right, don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

Bucky frowns and digs deep to muster something emulating interest. In the background, he hears some lucky NCO screaming his lungs out at those poor privates, and he would give anything to be that guy right now.
“Maybe I’ll ask her out,” Bucky says.

“You’d be crazy not to. But you’d also be crazy to do anything more.”

“Don’t worry, the last thing you need to worry about is me settling down with a lady bartender from Fayetteville.” Bucky smiles now, because at least it’s honest.

“Well, of course not.” Rhodes holds up his index finger. “First you’d have to marry and divorce a stripper. That’s the proper sequence. Stripper, then bartender.”

Bucky touches his hand to his chin in mock thoughtfulness. “Now, is that before or after I buy my new Camaro at 17% interest?”

Rhodes laughs. “After, man. After. That’s how you trade up to the bartender. With your sweet ride.”

“Well, I’m glad I have you here to set me straight.” Bucky chuckles at his turn of phrase and wishes Sam was here to appreciate it.

“Wanna grab Tim, too?” Rhodes asks.

“Sure. Don’t want him to get butt-hurt and think daddy’s playing favorites.”

Later that night, when Bucky is fantastically wasted on vodka, he flirts excessively with Megan the bartender and makes out with her very publicly while she’s on her break. She’s nice enough but boring, and she tastes like cigarettes and has none of Natasha’s intelligence or beauty or charm and, God, he misses her sometimes, because at least she also smelled good and tasted good and kissed well and knew that he doesn’t like to have his junk groped like he’s a fucking piece of meat. So when this chick goes for his dick, he swats her hand away, and when she asks him what his problem is, he calls her a fucking slut, which seems to hit her squarely in the self-esteem — or lack thereof. It gets her to fuck off with the added bonus of Bucky coming off like a misogynistic piece of shit, and he sneaks past Dugan and Rhodes and beats a hasty retreat to the darkness of the parking lot, where he stumbles around until he finds his truck and crawls inside to sober up a little before trying to drive home. He’s so fucking drunk that it’s something of a feat to get in the cab with his lift kit, but he makes it up after a couple embarrassing tries.

He turns on the truck, cranks up the heat, and tries to get serious. His usual routine. He tries to plan for the next day, because, fuck, he has to work. *Fuck.* But all he can think about is Steve. Steve, Steve, Steven Grant Rogers. Steve in middle school, quiet and brilliant and mysterious. Steve in high school, tall and bold and athletic. Steve after high school, the man who touched him and held him and loved him. Who kissed him. Kissed him on the cheek. Kissed him on the lips. Kissed him everywhere else. Who kissed his stomach and his hipbones and, Jesus. Fuck Megan the bartender. Fuck her cigarette mouth. He thinks about Steve’s mouth. His incredible mouth. Those lips. He imagines what it would be like if the lips he was kissing tonight were Steve’s lips and not hers, like he has imagined with so many women before. So many men. He imagines if it was Steve’s hands on him and not hers. He shouldn’t think about them, because their time has come and long, *long* gone. But he has so many memories, so many that swim to him now, and the vodka makes everything pulse with life, just like his groin is pulsing, and Bucky slouches back in the driver’s seat and unzips his pants, because he’s remembering so viscerally, so overwhelmingly, what it’s like to have Steve’s mouth on his cock, hot and wet, Christ, that man could suck it… Bucky glances out all his windows, bleary and hurried, then pulls out his dick and jerks himself with crude haste. It doesn’t take much to make himself come, which he does with a rough shout that fills the small space of the cab.

It’s so loud that he scares himself, certain that he was heard by a passing group of young soldiers he recognizes from his own company. They look vaguely in his direction and keep going, but the mood
has already been thoroughly soured. Some mood, anyway — an about-to-be-deployed platoon sergeant sitting in his truck, drunkenly masturbating over his ex-boyfriend — that fucker, that fucking selfish asshole — in some shitty Fayetteville bar parking lot on a work night…. And all he really has anyway are a bunch of crappy memories, a body that's sobering up way too quickly, still no platoon leader, and now a handful of come.

Pathetic.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Brief homophobic and misogynistic language. References to racism

Military Stuff:

Nine-line: A template to call in a casualty and request medical evacuation

CP: Command post

Downrange: Generally refers to being deployed to a Middle Eastern or South Asian combat zone (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan).

National Training Center: Located at Fort Irwin in southern California, this is where military units conduct realistic war games/training in preparation for deployment. Fort Irwin is an ideal location to train for operations in the Middle East due to its location in the Mojave Desert.

S3: the S3 is the officer responsible for battalion training and operations. Other staff officers working with the S3 would likely be captains or lieutenants.

Landnav: land navigation

OCS: Officer candidate school, one of several pathways to becoming a commissioned officer

FTX: field training exercise

West Point: The United States Military Academy, one of the most elite universities in the country. After four years, graduates are commissioned into the Army as second lieutenants (O-1), the lowest commissioned officer rank.

CENTCOM: Central Command, the Department of Defense joint service command responsible for the Middle Eastern/South Asian theaters of war, including operations in Iraq and Afghanistan

Airborne: A qualification allowing a soldier to jump out of an airplane into a combat zone (vs. Air Assault, where one jumps out of a helicopter)

Ranger: An elite, specially trained infantryman, considered part of the U.S. military’s special operations forces. Someone can go to Ranger school and earn their Ranger tab (a uniform designation) without being assigned to a Ranger unit. Ranger school is notoriously brutal and has a high attrition rate.
To smoke (not a cigarette): To administer highly unpleasant corrective physical training, often involving large quantities of push-ups and other activities
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Steve gets an offer and plans for his future.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
January 30, 2008

Steve Rogers very deliberately stopped believing in the Christian God when he was 21, when the cancer his ma had been battling on and off since he was 10 cut a fatal path into her brain. Atheism always felt unbearably cold to him, so he’s settled on the vague, purgatorial expanse of agnosticism. But even though he’s long since left behind the various incarnations of God supplied by the Catholic church, Steve still has a clear idea of what Hell is. He knows, because he’s in it right now. And both the road to Hell and every cobbled street within it is paved with PowerPoint.

“Just make it look better,” Captain Long told him. “Better, Lieutenant Rogers.” Steve’s very reasonable response of “Better how?” was met with no answer other than ”You’re the genius. Figure it out.” Opaque as a hunk of coal and just about as helpful in the context of this task. Steve has checked over the content half a dozen times. He’s seen enough junior officers in positions like his get reamed for missing or misrepresenting crucial details in front of very high-ranking men (always, always men). He vowed after witnessing his first professional evisceration that he would never be responsible for anything that would bring discredit upon General Phillips and their colleagues at Defense Intelligence and CENTCOM. He only wishes that the other personnel on the task force shared his commitment.

With a huff of defiance, Steve decides not to change a single thing before sending the slides back for
Long’s approval. When the email comes back five minutes later saying “See? I knew you knew what was wrong. Don’t play stupid, Rogers,” Steve can’t help but laugh. He doesn’t have much occasion to laugh at work, and the small laughter he does enjoy is typically of the ironic or sarcastic sort.

Steve threads his fingers behind his head, stretching the sore muscles of his chest. The tiny buttons of his class B uniform shirt strain threateningly, and he eases up. He went up a size after the first time he sent a button flying across his cubicle, which earned a slew of half-bitter comments from others about how wish they had the problem of being so jacked that their uniform didn’t fit. Steve has never told them the flip side of this problem — how, at eight percent body fat, he never makes weight and has to be tape-measured biannually to ensure that he’s not too obese to be in the military.

Practically right on the hour, Steve has to piss. He’s taken to drinking massive quantities of water to force himself to leave his office regularly throughout the day. It’s one of the only acceptable excuses to stop working in this department, which has been rather accurately compared to geopolitical analysis sweatshop. On the way to the latrine, he hears Master Sergeant Nguyen announce him with a loud “Piss break!” to which Steve replies with a hearty “Yep!” It’s this exact sh*tick every day, and Nguyen seems to have an endless appetite for the exchange. They all do what they can to disrupt the tension in the office, even if it’s childish and uncreative. Steve takes his time on his way to the latrine, slowing in front of his favorite pictures mounted in the hallway. MacArthur standing at ease with his corncob pipe. Eisenhower at the helm of a jeep. Chesty Puller with his flattened, crooked smile.

First Lieutenant Steve Rogers quietly kindles a fantasy of climbing through the ranks, earning a long and dignified career through hard work and intelligence, leading men with proficiency and inspiring them to be better. He has a fair sense of his skill in the work and intelligence departments, but he’s utterly clueless about his ability to lead or shape men in any real capacity. Training doesn’t count for shit, General Phillips is very fond of telling him. Being First Captain during his senior year at the Academy doesn’t count for shit. Getting passes on all his leadership tasks at Ranger School doesn’t count for shit. Steve has to fight very hard against the looming possibility that nothing he’s done in his entire career to date has counted for shit.

On his way back from the bathroom, he makes a quick swing by the civil affairs team, where’s he’s greeted by the unfriendly grimace of Captain Adams.

“How was the meeting?” Steve asks.

“She turns in her chair to face him, her mouth curving into that very particular smile of hers. Small but knowing. Warm but guarded. “Excruciatingly boring. The usual.”
“I’m gonna be late tonight,” he tells her. “I can take the train.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll come pick you up. How late you think you’ll be?”

Steve shrugs. “General Phillips is preparing for his teleconference with General Petraeus, and I think he wants to bounce some ideas off me.”

“Very nice.”

“I know, right?”

“Just call me when you’re done, and I’ll swing by.”

“Sounds good.” Steve sighs and looks over his shoulder to where Adams is eyeballing him. “I’d better get back.”

Steve almost moves to close the space between them, because he just wants to feel her hand in his for a few moments. It’s hard sometimes to modulate his behavior at work when their lives are so different at home. No touching in uniform. No kissing in uniform. He even tries to keep the first name use down to a minimum, even though he’s not explicitly required to do so. At the Pentagon, appearances are everything, and as an officer and Academy graduate, any rule that applies to the average soldier applies to him at least tenfold.

Sharon wishes him luck with Phillips. Her smile warms further with pride, and Steve returns it with gladness.

As the day wears on, the team runs low on energy and even lower on patience as they spool down their furious preparations for next week’s briefing of General Petraeus and his command team downrange. Steve reviews three additional sets of PowerPoints, scowling at the glaring inaccuracies and typos, willing himself not to rip his cuticles out with his teeth. It’s 19:30 by the time everyone has cleared out, and only then does Steve feel confident enough to send the slides to Phillips’ secretary for an additional review.

It’s nearly 20:00 when he goes into his meeting with Phillips, toting along all the essentials - his best pen, green federal notebook, one coffee. Phillips looks so relieved to have caffeine hand-delivered to him that Steve is concerned he may do something so brazen as to thank him for it.

“Sit down,” Phillips says, gesturing to the small table in the corner of his office.

Steve sits, his posture ramrod straight, then gets out his notebook and readies his pen. Phillips turns his old, veiny hand over in a gesture that tells Steve clearly that this is off-record time. Steve closes his notebook, and Phillips stares at him for long enough that Steve starts to feel heat in his ears.

“Do you like being here, Rogers?” Phillips finally asks.

In this job, Steve has gotten pretty good at avoiding this kind of lieutenant bait, but this particular morsel might be unavoidable. “I find the work satisfying and challenging.”

“That wasn’t the question. Do you like it?”

Steve sets his mouth into a firm line. “This isn’t what I signed up for.”

“No, I imagine it’s not,” Phillips says over the rim of his cup.

“I’d rather be in the infantry, Sir—“
“You are in the infantry, Rogers.”

“I know, but… I mean…” Steve reddens further under Phillips’ withering scrutiny. “Don’t get me wrong, it feels good to know we’re helping soldiers in the field, but—”

“But you’d rather actually be in the field.” Phillips raises one of his eyebrows, and below it, his iris glimmers. “And where would you rather be right now?”

“Benning. Bragg. Downrange. Put some of this knowledge to work on the ground.”

There’s a heavy beat of silence before Phillips speaks. “I got a tasker from branch looking for someone with such specific qualifications that it practically said ‘send us Lieutenant Steve Rogers, ASAP.’”

“From where?” Steve works to contain the excitement in his voice, but it still pitches up tellingly.

“82nd Airborne, 107th Infantry Battalion’s looking for a platoon leader. I don’t know what happened to the old one, but I’m guessing it’s not good. They’re leaving for Baghdad in 12 days.”

Steve swallows the saliva that’s pooled in his mouth. “Twelve days.”

“Short fuse, I know.”

Steve rubs the fabric of his black tie, frowning. “I don’t know if I’m ready to be a PL…”

“Lemme let you in on a secret, Steve.” The rare use of Steve’s name is enough to imbue Phillips’ next words with exponentially more significance. “No platoon leader is ready for war. Not a single one. That’s why you have your NCOs to square you away. They actually know what they’re doing.”

Steve’s frown deepens. He knows that every single worry he has right now has been the worry of every honest lieutenant who ever led an infantry platoon in combat. But still, something childish in him rages against being thrown in a position where he won’t know what to do, and where he’ll have to rely on the benevolence of men who will probably look upon him as an idiot and a nuisance.

“Is this a choice or an order?” Steve asks.

“Your choice, but you have to make it fast. I need to know within 24 hours, if you want a shot at it. If you say yes, you’ll have to be out of here in three days so you have time to in-process at Bragg.”

Steve sits frozen, save for the tapping of his finger against his green notebook. As much as he fears it, he’s fantasized about this scenario countless times, like when he used to chronically imagine that his dad was really Harrison Ford or Nolan Ryan and not the man who left his ma and him when he was thirteen months old. Steve opens his mouth to ask Phillips what he would do, but —

“Your choice,” Phillips says, heading him off with a hard emphasis on “your.”

Steve nods. “Did you want to talk about the meeting with General Petraeus? Is there anything more I can help you with?”

Phillips stands, signaling the end of their time together. “You’ve done enough for General Petraeus. Go home and think about this.”

Steve nods again and excuses himself back to his little cubicle. He settles into numbness as he changes out of his uniform and into his civilian clothes, and that numbness stays with him while he
waits for Sharon in the south parking lot, his breath making thick plumes in the sharp winter air. When Sharon pulls up in her Civic a few minutes later, he barely feels the warmth when he gets in the car.

“How was the meeting?” she asks as he buckles in.

“I got an offer from General Phillips. To deploy.” Steve spits it out fast and blunt, then tries to shrink back into his seat, as if he could hide, as if hiding could resolve this decision without any heartbreak. He looks at his hands.

“Where?”

“Iraq.”

She’s staring at him now, her eyebrows arched high. “When?”

“It’s an emergency fill. Some PL went out of commission and they need an Airborne-qualified lieutenant. Somehow, my name came up.” Steve pauses, and his hands fidget. “They’re leaving Bragg in 12 days.”

Sharon’s face falls. “Wow. That’s really soon.”

“I know. It’s not ideal.” Steve lifts his head and finally musters the guts to look at her. “But it’s an incredible opportunity,” he adds, biting back his enthusiasm when her lips press tightly together.

“No, of course.” She shifts the car into park and takes her foot off the break. “You’ve been screwed out of a leadership position long enough.”

“I’m sorry the timing is so bad.”

“No, Steve, this…” Sharon stops and touches her hand to his. “This is a good thing for you. You’ve earned it. Probably several times over.”

“Thank you.” He rolls his wrist, threads their fingers together, and squeezes his gratitude.

Sharon squeezes back. “Is it unsupportive of me to have mixed feelings about it?”

“No. Not at all.”

In fact, Steve thinks it would be odd if neither of them had mixed feelings about it. After a year together, their relationship seems to have just hit its stride. They’ve blown past the opening blitz of lust, onward to the pure harmony of two people with the same drives, the same priorities, and the same goals. This deployment, despite its obvious necessity for Steve to have any clout as an infantry officer, is a definite setback for them.

Sharon smiles, her eyes bright and watery in the dimness of the overhead light. “I’m very happy for you. This will be so good for your career. About damn time, too.” She hesitates. “And I’m also scared.” Another pause. “And I’m also kind of pissed that it’s so last minute.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Sharon shifts in her seat, facing him as openly as she can. Her tone is firm and strong. “Don’t be sorry. You’re going to be such an asset to them. They’re so lucky to have you.” She lifts her hand to his cheek. “You were born for this.”

Steve lays his hand over hers. “I love you.”
“I love you, too, and I think there’s a celebration in order. Where to?”

“Ethiopic?” Steve looks and sounds hopeful, even though he knows Sharon loves their food just as much as he does.

Sharon smiles and puts the car in gear. “You got it.”

The next day, Steve is restless. Sitting at his desk, he can barely concentrate on anything except the racing of his thoughts. So much to prepare. So much to study up on. So much to dig out of his mental West Point vault, things he hasn’t used since those long weeks spent training in the muggy southern wilderness and the desert landscape of the Mojave, trying to lead a platoon of strangers to simulated victory against people playing at insurgency. It’s so preposterously detached from the reality he’s about to walk into that Steve wonders if the training will be valuable at all.

He hasn’t told Phillips yet, not even when he trolled through Steve’s bullpen, wordlessly peering at him from under those heavy, solemn eyebrows as he made rounds with the other team members. Steve’s chosen to run the clock out all the way until 16:00, when most of his colleagues will be bullshitting and clearing out for the day. He’s set on absorbing these last tedious hours of office drudgery, knowing well that it may be one of the last times he’ll be in a proper building for nearly a year.

At 16:30, Steve takes a heaving breath and pushes back from his desk. He takes his time on the way to Phillips’ office, straightening the few things atop his desk, triple checking to make sure he has his CAC, stopping by the drinking fountain to wet his parched mouth.

“Well?” Phillips says when Steve steps through the doorway.

Steve stands in front of Phillips’ desk at parade rest, a formality long abandoned since becoming his aide. “I accept.”

Phillips smiles. Actually smiles. If Steve didn’t think it was because he was truly happy for him, he’d be offended. “Good.”

The rest of Phillips words are a blur, but the gist is clear: Steve’s gonna be busting his ass like a madman for the next three days, throwing away his cushy DC life so he can pick up his filthy, crude infantry life. Say farewell to craft beer, to privacy, to reliable public transportation, and to female companionship. Say adieu to sanitation and clean water and a life free from malaria risk.

Before he goes home, Steve slowly packs his personal belongings into a couple of reusable Whole Foods bags. Books on the history of the Middle East. Fiasco. The Handbook of International Foreign Policy. Two Arabic dictionaries and a book of grammar. Several back editions of Foreign Affairs Magazine. A stress ball. Five notebooks he’ll need to gut and shred the contents of. His two favorite pens. A picture he keeps in his desk of Sharon and him at a Nationals game, Steve’s third and Sharon’s twelfth. Until he was stationed here, he couldn’t name a single woman who liked baseball. He almost didn’t know what to make of it when Sharon suggested it for one of their dates. Now he’s pretty sure it was a sign.

The next two days are a frenzied blur of running around to offices and regions of the Pentagon he forgot existed. Travel. Finance. Personnel. Records. The team is shaken by the suddenness of his departure, and Master Sergeant Nguyen arranges a last minute going-away party for him the night before his scheduled departure from Dulles. Steve’s initial impulse was to turn him down, though actually doing so would have been wholly impossible, given Nguyen’s impassioned insistence that
they give him a proper sendoff. Steve wanted his last night to be with Sharon, and he’s certain that she wanted the same, but he compromises by telling Nguyen that he’s only staying till 21:00, because —

“Oh, don’t worry, Sir. I get it,” Nguyen said. Then winked.

When Steve and Sharon arrive at O’Malley’s on his last night, he’s patently shocked by the turnout. In addition to the entire task force, there are people here that he only recalls meeting once or twice, as well as most of the folks from Sharon’s team. Captain Adams looks damn near gleeful to see him leaving, but Steve’s not worried. Sharon would openly despise Adams if she weren’t the consummate professional, and Steve trusts her. He’s always trusted her, and in turn, she’s become one of the very few certainties in his life.

General Phillips shows up toward the end of the night with a telltale green plastic certificate holder and a small box. Steve eyes it and wonders what’s in it as Phillips threads through the crowd, which is growing rowdier with each additional round. Phillips pulls in everyone’s attention with his booming voice, gruff from age and from hard decades of deployments all over God’s green Earth and beyond, missions upon missions, some so classified that they’ll probably never see the light of the public eye. He calls Steve up to stand next to him and gestures at him with his beer mug while he addresses the crowd.

“It’s not very often we get a ring knocker fresh out of the Academy. When Lieutenant Rogers came to us, I was sure he was gonna be a prissy, privileged prima donna who was about to be a colossal pain in my ass for the next three years. I also wondered who he pissed off to get this assignment, because this is grunt Hell if there ever was one.”

There are whoops from the other infantrymen among them, along with a loudly belted “hooah!” from Nguyen. Phillips pivots toward Steve to address him directly.

“But not only are you not a sniveling shit head, you’re actually kinda pleasant to be around. You brought that giant brain of yours here and put it to good use without making the rest of us feel like complete idiots in the process. You have a gift for analysis, a mighty work ethic, and you lead by example every single day. I’ve never seen you turn down an offer to help someone, no matter how goddamn stupid the request was. I gotta say, Lieutenant Rogers, I’m gonna miss you.

“Colonel Fury’s a fortunate man, because he’s got the task of taking all the raw material you have and making you into a platoon leader. And if what you brought to this task force is any indication of what you’re gonna bring to the 107th, I say your new CO and those apes you’re gonna lead are some lucky sons of bitches. And one day, you’ll probably be back here, sitting in my office, turning the tides of war.”

Phillips puts down his beer and nods to Nguyen, who pulls a piece of paper out of the green certificate holder. Everyone preemptively places their drinks on the tables in front of them and rises to their feet.

“Attention to orders!” Nguyen calls. In a mass Pavlovian response, all military personnel in the room snap to the position of attention, even those who weren’t invited to the party. Nguyen reads from his award citation:

“We hereby grant First Lieutenant Steven Grant Rogers, United States Army, the Joint Service Commendation Medal for his exceptional service as aide de camp and Middle East subject matter expert for Joint Task Force Polaris from August 2006 to January 2008. During this period, Lieutenant Rogers demonstrated exceptional skill, proactivity, courage, and diplomacy in bringing attention to crucial flaws in previous approaches to earning goodwill with local leaders on the ground.
in during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Lieutenant Rogers also served as the task force liaison to the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, facilitating the infusion of crucial cultural context into the strategic vision of General David Petraeus and other leaders of the Multi-National Force in Iraq. His selflessness, intelligence, dedication, leadership, and can-do attitude reflect highly upon himself, Joint Task Force Polaris, the United States Army, and the Department of Defense.”

Steve keeps a stoic face as Phillips clips the medal to the pocket of his dress shirt, but inside, his stomach is floating. This isn’t some mundane token of service given to anyone who departs the Pentagon for their next duty station. This means something. After all of his doubts and all of his fretting, Steve now holds some small proof that his work has meant something. He glances over at Sharon, who’s beaming at him, her hand pressed over her heart, beautiful and proud.

There are some toasts and good-natured ribbings that follow, and the rest of the evening is nice enough. But Steve is ready to go long before everyone else seems to be ready for him to leave, and at 20:40, he tracks down Sharon, because all he wants to do now is take her home. In the cab back to their apartment, he holds her hand and kisses the back of it, and she slides in close and lets him enfold her, resting against him as the cityscape slips by outside the window.

Their apartment is a complete mess. It’s been difficult for Steve to pack, having scarcely a clue what to bring to Iraq. Captain Barton sent him a welcome packet and a packing list, but Steve doesn’t know what to really bring with him. What the rest of the guys are bringing. The ones who’ve been downrange already and know what really needs to be brought. So he’s bringing what’s on the packing list, plus whatever he’s been able to rustle up from online message boards. Extra baby wipes. Head lamp. Sock, socks, and more socks. Bore snake. Baby powder. Chapstick. Sunscreen. His duffle bags lie against the wall of their bedroom, stuffed and straining like big green sausages.

He stands in their room, the room that used to be just Sharon’s. The day she invited him into her home was one of the best days of his life, a message to him that this is something real. This is love. This could go somewhere. With Sharon, he can have the life he wants and the career he wants. No sneaking, no codes, no constant worrying. Nothing like before, when all he could be was someone’s dirty secret.

His face sours, because Bucky Barnes is not welcome in the home he shares with Sharon. Indeed, he’s not welcome anywhere at all in Steve’s mind. Fortunately, the sensation of Sharon’s arms sliding around him pulls him from the vacuum of his swiftly mounting bitterness and resentment. She presses her body against his back and rests her chin on his shoulder.

“It’s gonna be so strange to not have you here.” She squeezes him tighter.

Steve hugs his arms over hers. His throat feels thick and tight. “I’m gonna miss you.”

“Me too.”

Steve sighs as Sharon’s hands travel over his chest. God, how is he going to go nine months without being touched? He supposes he’ll have mid-tour leave, but five months is half a lifetime in deployment years. He wonders what he’ll be like then and fervently hopes that he’s the same man on the other side of this.

“She’s gonna be so strange to not have you here.” She squeezes him tighter. She undresses him slowly, tenderly, touching and kissing every bit of flesh she exposes, like she’s trying to memorize every rise and fall, every hair, every curve and corner of him. When he’s naked, he does the same but with less patience. She doesn’t seem to mind, though. Not when he’s licking
her nipples. Not when he’s dragging his mouth down the soft valley of her stomach. Not when he’s eating her pussy and fingering her until she comes. He, too, wants to remember her. Her taste. The sound of her voice as he pleasures her. The feel of her warmth as he slides inside of her. The pressure of her legs around him, her fingertips digging into the muscle of his back as he fucks her. He takes it all in, senses wide open, his eidetic memory copying down every detail. And then he comes inside her, as deep as he can push himself, lust-drunk and moaning, and it’s still not nearly enough.

Sleep typically comes easily to Steve after sex, but not tonight. His mind buzzes with whatever he might label his thoughts and feelings about leaving Sharon. His emotions sway unsteadily between sadness and joy. Concern and relief. Excitement and regret. Deploying is as much a sacrifice as it is a boon, and Sharon’s staunch support of him makes the wavering and confusion much easier to tolerate. He could only imagine the pain of having a partner who doesn’t understand the selflessness and responsibility inherent in soldiering—

Something grinds and screeches loudly inside of Steve, so visceral and wrenching that his entire body tenses against its force.

No. No, no, no. Fuck you, Bucky Barnes. That was different. That was something else entirely. Wasn’t it?

Steve wrestles briefly with the fierce grip of their history, twisting it and crushing it into nothing with relative ease. He’s very good at this now. The man that he is now can abolish the past and every regrettable moment in it with deadly proficiency, a product of the six years he spent deconstructing and renovating himself into what he needed to become. The process has been painstaking. Deliberate. Brutal and meticulous. He’s created the perfect scaffold over which to lay his future, one impermeable to everything that has ever wounded him before.

And somehow, he’s found a companion who’s built the same for herself, his philosophical and intellectual counterpart, a partner who’s predictable and solid. He can build a future with her. He wants to build a future with her. In this moment, he wants it badly, like he wants to breathe his next breath, with a feverish desperation driven by the imminence of his departure.

“Sharon.” Steve squeezes her shoulder. He can tell from the rate and depth of her breath against his chest that she’s still awake.

“Hmm?”

Steve wets his lips, which are dry and stiff. “Will you marry me?”

Sharon lifts her head from his chest, propping herself up on her forearm. The surprise in her face quickly gives way to delight. “Really?”

Steve nods and swallows.

“Yes.” Her smile brightens, spreading wide until it crinkles the corners of her brown eyes. “Yes.”

“I’ll get you a ring when I get back.” Steve pushes her long, blonde hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry. I know I didn’t do any of this the right way.” He feels heat climb into his cheeks.

Sharon gives his chest a reassuring pat. “It’s okay. You know I’m not much for jewelry and big productions anyway.”

“You’ll really marry me?”
“Of course I will. I’ve wanted to marry you since the day we met.”

Steve is grinning now. “Really?”

She nods seriously. “I knew you were the one. From that very first conversation, I knew.”

He lifts his head to kiss her. It’s soft and measured, everything their relationship is. Just right. Just as it should be. Everything in its place, dress-right-dress. The closest thing to perfection he has ever touched.

Chapter End Notes

Military Stuff:

Too obese to be in the military: Someone who puts a lot of time and energy into building his physique, such as Steve, may have trouble meeting Army weight standards. If he doesn’t “make weight” during his biannual PT test weigh-in, he would need to have his waist and neck tape measured to calculate his approximate body fat percentage so that he could get a waiver for his weight in pounds.

First Captain: The highest ranking senior at the US Military Academy (West Point)

Civil Affairs: The Army branch that liaises with local national leaders and non-leaders in an occupied nation (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan) to maintain civil operations during a time of war. In essence, they try to ensure that the nationals have their basic needs taken care of while the Army is conducting combat operations.

Benning, Bragg: Large Army infantry installations in Georgia and North Carolina, respectively

Ethiopic: A delightful Ethiopian restaurant in DC. If you live anywhere nearby, I highly recommend it.

CAC: Common Access Card — a military photo ID with a chip and magnetic strip that also gives its holder access to computers and other devices

Ring knocker: a slang term for a West Point graduate

Hooah: An Army-specific expression that can mean many things, such as “yes,” “understood,” “congratulations,” “fuck yeah,” or “nice job.” It typically has a positive connotation and can also be used to describe the general Army spirit. Example in a sentence: “That was a really hooah thing to do.”

Dress-right-dress: A drill and ceremony command given when lining up a platoon of soldiers in a formation. It signifies evenness and straightness and can also be used to refer to things outside of a formation. Example: “He lined up his shoes by the door dress-right-dress.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Bucky enjoys one last weekend before deployment.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
February 10, 2008

Bucky already knows it’s going to be a rough day when a strip of light streaming through the window hits him squarely in the face. He lifts his hand to block it, because it’s overwhelmingly bright even from behind his closed eyelids. Slowly, millimeter by millimeter, he opens his eyes and squints up at an unfamiliar ceiling. His senses slowly begin re-connecting to his brain, wire by wire, a process muddled by the alcohol still circulating in his body.

He looks down at the weight he registers on his chest — an arm, thick and muscular, draped over him possessively. Bucky turns his head toward the owner of that arm, Mr. Tall, Blond, and Beefy from the club last night. The guy’s on his stomach, still asleep, breathing quietly, the covers pushed down to where the small of his back slopes up to the rounded rise of his rear. Bucky slips his hand under the covers, down his own body, where he feels the band of his underwear, his ridiculously expensive, black, Calvin Klein fuck-me briefs that make his package and ass look incredible. Well, apparently not too incredible, considering that they’re still on.

Bucky tries to piece together the events of last night. He got to the club around 10:00 and had a shot. Then another. Then got cruised a few times, which he entertained but ultimately turned down. Then he danced in a sea of beautiful Southern boys. Then drank more. Then finally locked down on this guy, who sauntered up to him like a golden beach god, chiseled and sexy with his chin-length blond
hair, looking like the stunning love child of Kurt Cobain and a Baywatch extra. Then Bucky’s pretty sure he slammed down another few shots and moved to the dance floor with the guy, where everything got real hot and real nasty. Then they went to the parking lot… he thinks. That’s where things start to get spotty. He must have gotten into a vehicle — fuck, did he drive? — and somehow ended up in this apartment on a platform bed so low to the ground that he could probably fall out of it and not wake up.

He shifts his hips. Nope, doesn’t feel like he got fucked.

“‘Good morning,’” the guy says, his words shaped with an accent Bucky can’t quite place. A lazy smile spreads across his face.

Bucky returns the smile half way while he continues processing his scrambled trajectory into this guy’s bed.

The guy folds his arms atop his pillow and rests his chin on them. “Did you sleep all right?”

“I guess.” Bucky frowns. “I think?”

“You don’t remember, do you?”

“‘Gets a bit fuzzy after the dancing.’” Bucky drags his knuckles back and forth across his eyes, as if he could rub away the lingering haze of drunkness if he scrubs hard enough.

“You asked to come home with me, so I brought you here.”

“Thank God,” Bucky says under his breath. He’s usually pretty good about not driving drunk, but once he gets past seven drinks or so, all bets are off.

The guy continues. “Then you took off your clothes and my clothes and tried to blow me.”

Bucky raises his left brow. “Tried?”

The guy’s lazy smile dims into something resembling, of all things, concern. “I didn’t think it was right to let you do it. You were very drunk. I stopped you, and you argued with me about it, and then you passed out.”

Bucky presses his hands against his face and speaks his halting words into his palms.

“Great. Yeah. Wow.” He shakes his head. “Sorry. You were probably expecting a lot more than that.”

Bucky sure as hell was expecting more, anyway. What an idiot, getting so wasted on his last weekend stateside that he didn’t even get in one last good fuck before going to the sandbox.

“I had no expectations.” The guy reaches over and brushes Bucky’s chin with his thumb. The gesture seems incongruently intimate, considering Bucky doesn’t even know his name. “If you want to, I’m still up for it.” He rolls over onto his side to face Bucky, bearing the broad range of his chest.

It’s tempting. It’s really, really tempting. And if Bucky was a little drunker, he might say yes. Last weekend was a total bust, getting brought home by some other guy who insisted that Bucky top him, when all Bucky wanted was to get fucked into oblivion. Jesus, what a waste of a night. He didn’t bother sticking around for the hand job the guy spontaneously tried to give him, shoving him away and pointing out that he can give himself a perfectly good hand job any time he wants.
At least if he was a little drunker, Bucky could maybe dismiss his own embarrassing behavior last night. But he can’t. And all he can think about is what a fool he must have looked, near-naked and drunkenly arguing about his capacity to suck dick before losing consciousness in God knows what condition. Not letting this beautiful man give him the thing he wants most seems a fitting punishment for making a complete ass of himself.


“Maybe I could give you something before you leave?”

Oh, he knows he shouldn’t say yes. If he doesn’t deserve to get fucked, he doesn’t deserve any other parting gifts, either. Still, the guy’s hand travels the space between them, edging down to where Bucky’s morning wood is tenting the sheets, and it stops just short of where Bucky’s leg begins. The guy’s got manners, that’s for sure.

Bucky looks at the guy’s face, which is open and warm and seems caught somewhere between hopefulness and restraint. And before he can undermine himself with more half-hearted punishments for being a flagrant lush, Bucky nods his assent.

The guy takes his time, and in doing so, Bucky can see why he insisted on coming home with him. He moves with grace and ease of self, like he’s never been ashamed or uncertain of anything in his entire life. He draws the sheets down with care. Kisses his way down Bucky’s chest, stopping to flick his tongue and graze his teeth over his nipple. He hooks his fingers beneath the band of Bucky’s fuck-me briefs and slides them down gently, setting them to the side rather than tossing them. Odd, and strikingly familiar. It’s enough for Bucky to suddenly remember that this isn’t the first time he’s been with him, though it may be the first time they’ve done anything in the light of day.

Bucky’s mouth falls open when the guy goes down on him, the wet heat hitting him with the intensity of a bucket of ice. God, it feels good, especially mixed with the wooziness and the awakening of that deep, raw drive that drags him up to Chapel Hill over and over again. Bucky lifts his head to watch, and he isn’t quite prepared for how hot the guy looks bobbing up and down on his dick, the full spread of his naked, six-foot-who-cares body lying across the width of the bed. Christ, he’s hung. And hard. And even though he has clear talent in the blowjob department, Bucky stops him, touching his finger to the light scruff on the guy’s cheek.

“I changed my mind. About the other thing.”

The guy sucks him from hilt to tip, slow and obscene, then pulls off of him. “Really?”

Bucky nods.

“Are you sure?”

Bucky sighs. “Listen, you wanna fuck me or what?”

The guy beams, his eyes crinkling with the intensity of his smile. “You’re grumpy in the morning.”

Grumpy doesn’t even begin to describe it. Ever since Nguyen told him that Steve got slotted as their new PL, Bucky’s been a quietly flaming wreck. When he was cooking up this harebrained plan, he never actually thought it would work out. And now that it has, he’s had to fight minute-by-minute not to crack apart with anxiety and regret.

“Sorry,” Bucky says.
He means it, too. This guy’s nice and considerate, not like most of the assholes Bucky follows home, and the last thing he deserves after last night is more unearned hostility.

The guy reaches his long, heavy arm over to the nightstand, where he pulls a bottle of Gun Oil and hands it to Bucky.

“You don’t wanna do it?” Bucky asks.

“I know you’d rather do it yourself,” the guy says as he tears off a condom from the roll he grabs from the drawer.

He’s right, but Bucky snorts anyway. “Yeah, you know me so well.”

“You do realize that this is the fifth time you’ve come home with me in the last four months, don’t you?”

Bucky freezes. “No way.” There’s no way he’s been with the same person five times in the past four years, let alone the past four months.

“Good to know it was so memorable.” The guy gives a friendly chuckle.

“Fifth? Are you sure?”

The guy nods.

“Huh. Okay.”

Bucky rolls over onto his side, ass facing the guy he’s apparently been with five times and whose name he doesn’t even know the first letter of. He draws up his right leg, lubes up his finger, and starts to fuck himself open. He takes his time, letting a rash of intentionally dirty sounds escape him, because it's all just for show. He's a pro at taking dick, even without all the exhibitionistic prep shit he's doing now. All he needs is a little lube on the cock and a few deep breaths, but some guys like to watch, and so Bucky gives them something to watch. And this guy watches intently, blue eyes blown dark, lips parted, while he rolls the condom down over his monster cock.

After he’s ready enough, Bucky slides off the bed and pads to the en suite bathroom to wash his hands. Yeah, he’s definitely been here a few times. He remembers the towels, steel gray laid atop dark blue. He carefully avoids looking in the mirror, not wanting to spoil his fragile hope that he doesn’t look like a complete mess.

The look on the guy’s face when he walks back into the bedroom also helps keep some of that hope afloat. His eyes track Bucky across the room as he makes his way to the bed, predatory in a very flattering sort of way. Bucky crawls on the bed and braces himself on his hands and knees, spreading himself wide. He takes a deep breath to try to clear out the continuous stream of worry that’s been scrolling nonstop through his mind for the past week.

“So if you know me so well,” Bucky says, glancing over his shoulder, “you know how I like it.”

“I do.”

Bucky can feel the bed shift as the guy comes up behind him, settling between his legs. The guy caresses him, runs his hands along his ass and up his back.

Bucky clenches his jaw and pushes back against the guy as he starts to slide in, taking him with well-practiced ease. God, he loves it. The feeling of fullness. The thrill of being desired. This small,
priceless window of time during which he can stop controlling. Stop containing. Stop lying.

“Make it good,” Bucky tells the guy when he finally sinks in all the way.

The guy wraps a strong arm around Bucky’s torso and pulls him up until his back is flush against his chest. Both arms encircle him then, and Bucky releases a shaking breath, eyes wide, reeling from the sensation of being impaled so deep and held so close.

“I always make it good,” the guy murmurs, breath hot against Bucky’s ear.

“And I want it hard.” Bucky lets his head loll to the side while the guy nuzzles and kisses his neck. “I want you to fuck me like I’m not gonna get fucked again for a long time.”

“Going somewhere?”

“Shhh. Just…” He doesn’t want to think about any of it. Not Iraq, not the Army, not Steve Rogers. “Just fuck me.”

The guy releases Bucky and guides him back down until he’s on his hands again. Bucky exhales a long breath as the guy moves into a deep rhythm, slow at first but escalating into just the kind of pounding he wants. His eyes roll back and his head drops as he fully relaxes into it, eased along by the warm touch of the guy’s hands, one grabbing Bucky’s shoulder tight to pull him back against his thrusts, the other traveling his spine, his chest, his stomach, finally coming down to pump his dripping cock. Somehow, this guy knows just how to touch him. Just how to fuck him. He seems to knows just how bad Bucky needs it, how he needs something to carry with him, something to remind him of who he really is when he feels foreign to himself.

Bucky lets himself be loud. He lets himself groan and grunt and swear with abandon, as if this is the last time he’ll ever get to be honest again. And when he finally comes, he doesn’t try to catch his load, allowing himself to shoot off all over the guy’s sheets. It feels wonderful to not hold back, just like it feels wonderful when the guy finally shudders against him with a sharp gasp, pushing in, pulling close.

They stay like that for several long moments, the guy still inside Bucky, his hips pressed against his ass, his big hands holding him. If Bucky could stay like this forever, he would. Just like this. Full. Close. Secure.

But it can’t last forever, and it doesn’t. The guy goes soft and slides out of him, and while he takes care of the condom, Bucky sits on his knees and adjusts to the stark feeling of emptiness. His brain starts to spool up again, churning out a stream of nervous bullshit, when he feels warm pressure on his back.

“Are you okay?” the guy asks, rubbing his palm across Bucky’s shoulders.

“Yeah. Thanks.” He forces himself to smile. “That was really good.”

The guy smiles back “It was really good. Would you like breakfast?”

Nope. No way.

“Sure,” Bucky says, betrayed by his own childish yearning for companionship, he supposes.

Bucky watches the guy dress in a pair of jeans and a maroon ribbed sweater that hugs him in all the right places — as if there are any wrong places on the guy’s entire body. He throws Bucky a wink, then heads to the kitchen to start breakfast. Bucky sits for a few more minutes, his eyes glazed and
unseeing as he wonders what the hell his problem is for feeling so miserable after such a good lay. He’s pulled from his thoughts by the aching of his legs, and he stiffly works his way to his feet. He hunts around the bedroom for his clothes, putting on each article as he goes. He’s sure as hell threw them, probably in a wild frenzy of vodka-driven lust. He manages to find everything except one sock, and for the life of him, he can’t figure out how he could lose it in a room so neat and sparsely decorated.

“What shall I do if I find it?” the guy asks after Bucky joins him in the kitchen.


Bucky sits on one of the stools at the island in the center of the kitchen and watches the guy prepare breakfast. The kitchen is bigger than his, and Bucky lives in an actual house. In fact, he can’t remember ever seeing an apartment this big in his life, and he figures it’d fetch for at least $15 million in New York money.

He nurses a cup of coffee in silence and swivels around in his stool to scan the apartment, familiarizing himself with this place he’s allegedly been to so many times already. Modern furniture. Select abstract paintings in gray and blue. Something about that palette stabs him in the chest, maybe because it reminds him of the way Steve used to paint when he was feeling low. He averts his gaze to the rectangular coffee table, upon which rests, of all horrifying things, textbooks on advanced anatomy and physiology. Bucky swallows his coffee hard.

“You’re not an undergrad, are you?” he asks.

The guy laughs. “No. Graduate.”

Thank God. No need to add “cradle robber” to his list of dubious accolades. Not that the guy could pass for anything younger than 25.

The guy looks up from the thin strips of salmon he’s laying on a plate. “Can I call you some time?”

“Oh, no.” Bucky shakes his head. “No.” He moves in for a swift correction. “That wasn’t a personal no. It’s just that I’m gonna be out of the country for a while.”

“Deploying?”

Of course it must be completely obvious, between his haircut and the tattooed string of M118 sniper rounds trailing down the back of his upper right arm. “Yeah.”

The guy gives him a small smirk. “Excited?”

Bucky tilts his head to the side, a perplexed look settling on his face. “That’s not a word people usually use.”

“No, but are you?”

“Of course.”

Bucky’s been itching to go back. No, scratch that — he’s been dying to go back. He misses war like he misses all his other addictions when parted from them. He misses the excitement. The shifting, asymmetrical battlefield. The camaraderie. The way the rest of the world seems so trivial once a few bullets scream by.

The guy carries two plates over to the small dining table in the living room. “I was in Afghanistan for
almost a year.”
“Really? When?” Bucky gets up then and starts helping the guy bring dishware and food to the table.
“2002.”
“What?” Bucky’s voice climbs with excitement. “Where were you?”
“Here and there. I was FSK. That's Norwegian special forces.”
Bucky stops and grips the back of one of the dining chairs, heart launching into a frenzied clip. “I know what it is. Were you Task Force K-Bar?”
The guy hums his confirmation with the jut of his chin.
“We were there at the exact same time.” Bucky can barely contain himself now, bounding after the guy as he heads back to the kitchen to grab more breakfast items. “I was with the 101st. Wait, were you part of Operation Anaconda?”
"I was around. On the edge of the valley looking for— what do you call them? 'Squirters?'"
"Fuck, you could probably see me! I was with the Rakkasans, clearing that shit out."
The guy turns, his hands full of butter and two different kinds of jam. He looks at Bucky with such fondness that it’s almost embarrassing. “I would definitely remember seeing you.”
Bucky feels his face warm, and he smiles.
Together they lay out a spread of cheeses, butter, jam, bread, and smoked salmon on the table, along with more coffee. They dig in, and the guy gives him a short biographical sketch. Son of the CEO of Bank Norwegian, which explains the nice apartment. Currently getting his masters in exercise and sports science, which explains the books. Aspiring to be a personal trainer and gym owner, which explains the hot body.
“Why’d you get out?” Bucky asks, airing not a little of his own insecurity about ever leaving the Army.
“I want to plant roots,” the guy replies, then takes a large bite of bread topped with a thick slice of brown cheese.
Bucky sputters. “In North Carolina?”
“This is just for school.”
“But why UNC? Seems like you could afford something better. Harvard, Yale, those types.”
The guy gives a self-effacing smile. “I’m not really Ivy League material. I’ve been told that I have more heart than brains. My brother is the smart one.”
Bucky waves him off. “Brains are overrated, anyway.” He thinks immediately of Steve, how all his brains couldn’t stop him from being a selfish prick, in the end. “Plus, it’s not like UNC’s a bad school.”
“I’m moving to New York when I graduate this spring to open my gym.”
“You’ll have some stiff competition,” Bucky warns.
The guy gestures firmly at him with the butter knife. “Yes, but my gym will be the best.”

“You should check out Brooklyn. Way better than Manhattan, any day of the week. That’s home for me.”

“So you are not at all biased.”

“Of course I’m biased.” Bucky drains the last of his coffee from his cup and pours more from the carafe. “I’m also right.”

“Have you thought of getting out?” the guy asks. “Going back home?”

Bucky’s answer is sharp and decisive. “No way. The only way I’m ever getting out is in a body bag. Plus, the way I’m going, I’ll make sergeant major by 35, so…” He shrugs, as if the rest of the answer is self-evident.

“Too bad,” the guys says quietly.

Bucky lets his words hang between them, not certain how to respond. He settles for checking his watch, an act which nearly gives him a small heart attack.

“Shit, I really gotta go now, for real,” Bucky says, thinking of the pre-deployment briefing he has due to Morita at 14:00 that he hasn’t even touched yet. He chugs down the coffee he just poured, wipes his mouth with his napkin, and stands. “Thanks for breakfast. Thanks for everything.” He smiles. “It was nice.”

“Of course.” The guy stands with him. “Would you like a ride to your car?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” Bucky follows the guy back through the kitchen, toward the door.

“Are you okay to drive?” the guy asks.

“Yeah,” Bucky lies, because from how loopy he still feels, he absolutely cannot be sober yet. “Can I grab a bottle of water for the road?”

“Only if you let me give you my number.”

Bucky stares at the guy for a few moments, searching his face, which is earnest and handsome and confident. There are a hundred reasons not to take his number, all of which are very good, but he still pulls out his phone from his jeans pocket and hands it to the guy.

The guy’s smile is triumphant, and when he hands the phone back, Bucky bursts out laughing.

“Thor? Your name is Thor?” Bucky looks up at him. “Are you kidding?”

Thor seems to have been through this routine at least a dozen times before, handling Bucky’s skepticism with good humor. “It’s actually pronounced ‘tore.’ Thor Odinson.”

“Thor,” Bucky pronounces correctly. “Well, all right, Thor Odinson. I was gonna say I’ve never slept with anyone named Thor before, but we both know that’s a lie.”

“And your name?”

“Sam Wilson.”

Thor holds out his hand. “Very pleased to meet you, Sam Wilson.”
Thor takes him back to his truck, which is still parked at the club. They kiss goodbye, a real kiss, and Thor tells him to be safe on deployment. Bucky waves as Thor drives away in his Land Rover, then stands outside his truck for a good few minutes, running his hand up and down the back of his head and wishing he had a smoke.

When he finally starts to feel the nip of the cold, he gets in his truck, turns on the engine to get the heat going, and pulls his breathalyzer from the glove compartment. He breathes into it and waits, swearing under his breath when he pops a BAC of .11. He pounds the bottle of water, reclines his seat, and starts running through his platoon roster. He reviews names on first pass, then names and hometowns on second pass, then names, hometowns, and birth months.


Bucky runs through the expanded list two dozen times, until he has the information down even colder than he did before. By that time, he finally blows low enough that he probably wouldn’t get charged with a DUI if he got pulled over for the speeding he plans to do. The 75 mile ride back to Fayetteville is scored to alternating tracks of Metallica and Rage Against the Machine, a necessary soundtrack for someone who’s struggling to keep his eyes open. It’s a little after 11:40 when he shuffles through the front door, straight into a wall of breakfast smell. Looks like he didn’t miss Sunday brunch at the Wilson-Barnes residence.

“Hey, you,” he hears Natasha say from inside.

Bucky sets his keys on the table at the living room entrance and smiles when he sees her seated on the couch, her legs folded underneath her. “How was your weekend?” he asks.

“Good, when Sam wasn’t being harassed by Lieutenant Shitwell.”

“That asshole called me three times yesterday,” Sam says from the adjoining kitchen. He pokes his head in the entryway and beckons Bucky with the wave of his hand. “C’mere.”

Bucky goes to the kitchen and whistles when he sees everything Sam’s prepared. Cooked veggies, sausage links, cheese, a bowl of beaten eggs, cut fruit, the whole works. If he’d known Sam was making frittata, he might have eased up on all the bread and cheese at Thor’s place.

“Here,” Sam says, wagging a small sausage link in Bucky’s direction.

Bucky grins and bites off half of it. Sam pops the remainder in his mouth.

“Oh, wow,” Bucky mumbles through his chewing. “What’s that?”

“Apple sage.” Sam smiles. “Good, huh?”

Bucky makes a loud sound of approval. “Too bad I already ate.” He lifts and lowers his eyebrows suggestively.

Sam turns back to his preparations, pouring the veg, sausage, cheese, and eggs into a large cast iron skillet on the stove. “In a metaphorical way or a literal way?”

“Both. I stayed for breakfast.”

“You *what*?” Natasha yells from the living room.
“I’m old and needy,” Bucky says. “Though, to be fair, he was very charming.”

Sam shakes his head. “Most Southern guys are, until they’re dragging you behind a pickup truck or hanging you from a tree.”

Bucky sides up to Sam at the stove. “Oh, he’s not Southern. He’s from Europe.”

“Oh, really?” Sam intones with curiosity, raising his pinky. “Lah-dee-dah. I bet he—”

There’s a sudden weight on Bucky’s shoulder, and he startles, whipping around, heart galloping, fists tense and ready. Natasha’s right there, right there, closer than she knows better than to be, hand already retracting from him.

“So, spill it,” she says, stepping back and exchanging a look with Sam that Bucky doesn’t miss. “What’s his name?”

Bucky takes a deep breath to calm his surging blood and attempts to mirror her effortful nonchalance. “Thor,” he pronounces incorrectly, “though he says it’s really ‘tore.’ And yes, that’s his real name,” he adds.

Natasha regards him for a few moments with an unreadable expression, the one that makes her among the best interrogators in the standing Army. Her face softens, and she takes him by the wrist, her movements slow and deliberate. “Come tell me about him.”

“Hey, I wanna hear, too,” Sam says. “Lemme just throw this in the oven.”

Bucky follows Natasha out to the living room, where he flops down on the couch and rests his head in her lap. His body sinks heavily into the cushions as a wave of exhaustion crashes into him, a wave that’s been chasing him for... Jesus... years, probably. He closes his eyes while she plays with his hair. It feels so good — the soft scrape of her short fingernails against his scalp, the gentleness she gives to him, the permission to be cared for, just for a few minutes.

“All right, out with it,” Sam says, stationing himself in the doorway.

Bucky cracks his eyes open and tells them everything he can about Thor. It isn’t a whole lot, but what he does describe is embarrassingly impressionistic and giddy.

Natasha lays her palm on his forehead. “Maybe you can bring him to the Army Ball next year. I think we’ll be back just in time for it.”

She’s joking, of course, but it doesn’t mean Bucky doesn’t entertain a brief fantasy of him in his green service uniform with the gorgeous Thor Odinson on his arm. His fantasy also includes a very jealous Steve Rogers glaring over at him from across the room. It then concludes with him reeling and disintegrating with humiliation as everyone in the room realizes what he is, as their faces twist in disgust and horror—

“I wouldn’t have to find another date if you didn’t dump me.” Bucky gives her a scowl of feigned outrage.

"Now, why would I do that?" Natasha strokes her thumb across his eyebrow, pressing a little too hard.

Bucky’s mouth flattens, and he swallows heavily as he averts his gaze from hers. Sam is watching them closely, relaxed in the shoulders but tense in the face. Bucky's not sure what he knows, and he hopes it's not much. Bucky's never dared to ask, because he's hardly proud of the way things went
with her. With what he did to her.

She dips her head, drawing his attention back to her brilliant green eyes. “You smell like a brewery. Go take a shower.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“You’d better start putting the breaks on,” she says seriously. “Or you’ll be in a world of hurt this weekend.”

Bucky rises smoothly to his feet and crosses the living room to the stairwell. “I’m gonna shower, then head to the office.”

“All right, Cinderella,” Natasha says, glancing at his one bare foot. “Did you at least get Prince Charming’s number?”

Bucky gives a sober laugh as he climbs the stairs. “There are no Prince Charmings in this world, Nat. Just a bunch of assholes pretending that they’re not the type to royally fuck you over.”

“Does that include you?” she calls after him.

Of course it must, given their history. And Bucky also thinks about Steve. How abruptly he ended things. How swiftly and completely he extricated himself from Bucky’s life. There had to be a reason, something Bucky did wrong. Whatever it was, it must have been pretty awful — maybe even worse than awful, because he didn’t even realize he did it.

“I guess so,” Bucky replies, then heads to his room to get ready.

Chapter End Notes

Military Terms and Notes:

Sandbox: Slang for Iraq

FSK (Forsvarets Spesialkommando): A Norwegian special forces unit which conducted operations in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom

Operation Anaconda: A mission in early March 2002 to clear Taliban and suspected Al-Qaeda fighters out of the Shahi-Kot Valley

Squirter: An enemy who is escaping from a fight

Rakkasans: (allegedly derived from Japanese for "umbrella for falling" or something): The nickname 187th Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. This unit has a distinguished history dating back to WWII. They also participated in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Bucky was part of.

Gomez: For the life of me, I can’t find the last name of Luis from Ant Man, so I selected one for him
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The battalion goes to Iraq. Steve and Bucky are reunited.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
February 13, 2008

Pope Air Field, Fort Bragg

“I don’t even know what to say anymore, we’ve done this so many times,” Winnie says, running her hand down Bucky’s arm.

“Maybe ‘head on a swivel,’ ‘keep your head down,’ ‘don’t get shot in the head’?” Bucky suggests

Winnie makes a sound as she shudders. “Enough of that. But yes, keep your head on a swivel and be careful and call.”

A shout erupts from across the enormity of the waiting area, over from where many soldiers have already lined up with their things. It’s Luis Gomez, by the sound of it.

“Hi, Mrs. Barnes!”

Despite being neither a missus nor a Barnes, Winnie waves over at Luis and the other members of Bucky’s platoon who’ve taken to yelling greetings at her.

“They’ve got it bad for you, don’t they?” Rikki says, glancing over her shoulder to look at the
shouting, waving throng of men. She’s tense, pulling the long sleeves of her cardigan over her knuckles, her posture slouched in an attempt to hide the solid two inches of height she has on Bucky.

“They’re all idiots,” Bucky says offhandedly to his sister.

Bucky doesn’t blame her for being uncomfortable. Hell, he feels uncomfortable for her. Extra vigilant and fit to fight, he’s ready to glare down any ass wipe who looks even mildly disturbed by her presence. So far, people have been so consumed by their distress over their separation from their own loved ones that they don’t seem to have noticed Rikki at all.

He continues to scan the room. Not just for her but for himself, too. He’s been fighting a steady pulse of anxiety since last night over his inevitable reunion with the ex he hasn’t seen in six years. That Steve still hasn’t shown up is more than a little disconcerting.

“If you see Steve Rogers, don’t freak out,” Bucky says, quickly and blandly, like maybe they’ll miss it completely if he just says it casually enough.

“Excuse me?” Winnie says. She looks as if he just told her that he’s pregnant, her face drawn in an uneasy combination of shock and, God, why does she sound excited?

“Are you fucking serious?” comes Rikki’s much more reasonable response. Her mouth sets into a snarl. “Why?”

“Because he’s my platoon leader,” Bucky mumbles, his gaze drifting to anything and anyone in the room besides his mother and sister.

“What?!” Rikki’s eyes go wide as her voice accidentally drops into a distinctly un-womanly register. She looks around frantically, fearfully, then drops a dainty f-bomb. Winnie puts a reassuring hand on her forearm.

Bucky sighs. “Look, it’s a long story, and it’s fine, and… it’s fine. It is what it is.”

“Oh, honey,” Winnie says, “no wonder you look so nervous.”

"No but, seriously, how the fuck did that even happen?" Rikki asks. "Who did you piss off? Like, cosmically?"

"Are you even gonna be able to work with him?" Winnie asks.

“I told you, it’s fine,” Bucky snaps. If he had a time machine, he’d jump in it, take it to NTC, and punch himself in the fucking mouth for even thinking Steve Rogers’ name again.

“Well, if I see him, I’ll be sure to kick him in the balls for you, since you probably have to be professional and all,” Rikki says.

“Yeah, that won’t draw any attention to you,” Bucky replies, then immediately regrets it. He looks at her with the most apologetic expression he can manage. “Sorry, Rik.” He nearly keels over with relief when she lets out a quiet laugh.

“It’d totally be worth it,” she says with a wry smirk.

“Just be sure to get it on video, will ya?” Bucky tries to joke. He tries, but the words still try to stick in his mouth, and the image that enters his mind strikes him as cruel and sad.

He holds out his arms to Rikki. “I better get going.”
Rikki closes the distance between them and hugs him tight. Her body feels thin and delicate in his arms.

“Stay safe, keep your head down, and don’t do any stupid shit.”

“I won’t.”

“I mean it.” She squeezes him for emphasis. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He pulls back a little and kisses her on the cheek. “Love you.”

“Love you too, Jammers. See you on leave.” She lets go of him and steps back, her expression as solid and firm as her conspicuous jaw and cleft chin.

Bucky turns to his ma, who long ago stopped being a wreck at these things. He imagines she’s hardened herself to it after four times. The first time, she was a complete mess, barely letting him get on the plane to Afghanistan. Steve had to practically drag her away — Christ, she made a scene. In his mind’s eye, he can see them with sharp clarity, his ma in Steve’s arms, crying against his chest, Steve looking at him like he’d just had his heart ripped out but still hadn’t fully realized it yet…

Now, Winnie enfolds him into her arms with the composure of a bear. He hugs her back tightly, bending to accommodate her height. They exchange “I love yous” in hushed tones, somber but secure.

Bucky’s never gotten overly emotional at these things, and today is no exception. He stoops to grab his bags, flashes the women of his life a bright smile, and heads toward the area where the other soldiers are waiting — the ones whose families were too poor to fly in to see them off, the ones with no families at all, or the ones who’ve already said goodbye.

Bucky throws his bags against the wall with the others, his duffle standing out by how worn it is compared to most of the others. He searches the room once more, making out the turquoise of Rikki’s sweater as she and his ma head toward the exit. In a sea of Army Combat Uniforms, it might be difficult to make out one lost lieutenant, if it were anyone but Steve. His height and breadth alone make him stick out in any room, and Bucky can’t imagine that’s changed much with the passage of time.

With a huff of frustration, Bucky turns to his men and starts making rounds down the line. The energy is tense but excited, especially among the first-timers. Even through the nervousness, Bucky can still feel a swell of pride as he passes them by, a sensation that floats him for a few moments until he picks up the acidic sound of Brock fucking Rumlow’s voice.

As a rule, every unit has at least one shitbag in it, the type of guy who would steal your uniform out of the dryer even if it had your name on it, and second platoon is no exception. So when he picks up the foul words “…with that tranny…,” Bucky’s hardly surprised.

But he still stops in his tracks and sucks in a breath to quell the rush of anger that tightens his shoulders. He was waiting for something like this, of course, but that doesn’t make his wrath any less pointed. He makes a quick calculation about how to address it, his general choices being ‘scream like a drill sergeant’ or ‘go quiet and scary.’ Bucky turns on his heel and takes three strong steps up to Rumlow, who looks suddenly on the verge of shitting himself.

“Push.” Bucky’s words are glazed ice.

Rumlow waivers. “H-how many, Sergeant?”
“Shut your fucking mouth and push.”

Rumlow drops into the front leaning rest position and begins doing pushups. Bucky sinks down into a crouch next to him.

“Keep your shit attitudes to yourself.” Bucky glares at Rumlow so hard that he’s sure he must feel it against his temple. “Got it?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Push until I tell you to stop.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

Bucky stands. “Sergeant Rhodes,” he calls down the line.

Rhodes turns and makes eye contact. “Sergeant Barnes.”

“Make sure your soldier continues pushing until I come back.” Bucky speaks loudly, so even soldiers in first platoon can hear him and see Rumlow pushing at his feet. “He’s having problems regulating his speech.”

“Roger that, Sergeant.”

Bucky continues moving down the line, nodding as he passes Rhodes. He makes contact with each man in his platoon, asking how he is, whether he’s anxious, whether he said goodbye to his family and, if he has no family, paying particular attention to his integration with the other soldiers. They all put on a good front for Bucky, smiling, joking, though he can see the way their trepidation mismatches their mouths and eyes. He stops in front of Parker and calls down to where first platoon is gathered.

“Hey, Sergeant Wilson,” Bucky calls. Sam cranes his head back and Bucky waves him over.

“Hey, Doc,” Sam says.

“Morning, Sergeant Wilson,” Parker greets


Parker’s cheeks flush under Sam’s scrutiny, even though it does’t take him more than a few seconds to see the badge on the left side of Parker’s chest, just above his U.S. Army tape.

“Hey, expert field medic,” Sam says, holding out his hand to Parker. “Congrats.”

Parker shakes Sam’s hand. “Thanks, Sergeant. It was a really hard course. I barely finished.”

“Bullshit,” Bucky says, laying his arm over Parker’s shoulder and giving him a quick pull in toward him. “I saw your scores. You destroyed it. Just snuck it in right before deployment like it wasn’t anything.”

Parker, of course, would never admit to such a thing, giving one of his macaroni and cheese smiles instead.

“So soon you’ll have your combat medical badge,” Bucky says. “That’s a big deal.”

“Honestly, Sergeant, I hope I never get one of those.”
Bucky lets go of Parker’s shoulder and steps in front of him to ensure a solid line of eye contact. He speaks in a low voice. “Someone’s gonna need you on this deployment, Doc. Probably for something serious. You need to be prepared for that.”

Bucky doesn’t want to be the old man who tells stories, but sometimes he has to be. He’s told Parker about his other deployments — a few stories, anyway. Scenarios they don't teach you in Whiskey training. And Parker’s the kind of guy who wants to know. Thank God.

“Hooah, Sergeant,” Parker says, nodding once.

“We’re gonna have a party for you when we get back.” Bucky points to his badge. “This is a big deal.”

“Hooah, Sergeant.” Parker looks around and down the line. “So, also, some of the guys were wondering, is our new PL here, or…?” He shrugs hesitantly.

Bucky exchanges an uneasy look with Sam. “He should be along soon,” he tries to assure Parker.

“Not a good sign,” Sam mumbles in Bucky’s direction. “Maybe Lieutenant Murray wouldn’t have been so bad after all.”

“Shhh,” Bucky says, casting another glance around the waiting area. “He’ll be here.” He almost says ‘I hope,’ but at this point, Bucky’s not sure if he would mean it if he said it.

— — —

Steve is flushed with embarrassment when a staff duty NCO drops him off at the air field with only 30 minutes to spare before boarding time. The look on the guy’s face doesn’t help, either. It’s a look that speaks to every stereotype about lieutenants, how they can’t find their way, how they’re always eight up, how they have to rely constantly on the competence of enlisted men to even arrive in the right place at the right time in the right uniform. How was he supposed to know that the cab company he called isn’t allowed on base? Was it in the welcome packet? Did he completely miss it? Surely he would have remembered it, if it was there. But maybe he missed it. God, he must have.

He rushes toward the sliding glass doors of the holding area where they’re supposed to gather, swearing under his breath. His enormous bags bounce and sway inelegantly as he runs.

“What?”

It takes a few steps for him to thread together the disjointed pieces of person, place, and time, but when he finally assembles them, his racing heart catapults itself into his throat. He turns toward the sound of his name, and there at the entrance of the building stands Winnie Buchanan and next to her

Erik’s name comes to mind. However, the person standing next to Winnie bears only a passing resemblance to the all-state wide receiver whisked off to Ohio State on scholarship at the tender age of 17. Short hair is now long, broad stature now lithe, classically formed face now contoured and highlighted with skillful application of makeup. The boulder of confusion that rolled over Steve when he heard Winnie’s voice rolls over him a few more times, but his legs still carry him forward to where they’re both standing.

“What?” Winnie says again, his name uttered like a breath of relief.

“Holy shit. Steve Rogers.” Erik’s voice is high and dripping with spite. “And put your eyeballs back in your head.”
“Rikki’s transitioned. She’s a woman now,” Winnie says with no further ado, nodding at her own statements like she’s confirming them for herself as well.

*Rikki gives her* thanks to Winnie and crosses her arms over her chest which, Steve now notices, has two new additions.

Steve blinks a few times, his brain pathetically slow to catch up to the reality of what he sees before him. He works his jaw to the side as he formulates an appropriate response. He’s not inherently bothered by this stuff. He’s holds the same live-and-let-live attitude most native New Yorkers adopt when raised in a city where practically anything goes. But what Steve can’t reconcile is how he never saw any sign that Erik wasn’t profoundly male. In fact, he was always a specimen of masculinity, rugged and handsome and consumed by traditionally male pursuits, which makes the leap from the past to the present a very far one.

“Congratulations,” Steve says.

Rikki appears gobsmacked, then pleasantly surprised, and the venom is absent from her voice when she replies with a curt “Thanks.”

Steve slowly shakes his head in a futile attempt to bring clarity to the cesspool of nonsense he’s waded into. A larger question then settles on him, dragging along with it the proto-realization of what their presence signifies.

“We’re just seeing Jamie off,” Winnie says.

Steve feels his face contort into something that he’d probably never want to see in the mirror. Shock, he supposes it must be. Maybe even horror.

Rikki is clearly enjoying his discomfort. “You’re even in the same platoon. Oh, and he’s also your platoon sergeant.”

“That’s…” Steve falters.

That’s what? Unbelievable? Inhumane? So statistically improbable that it might as well be impossible? Another sick joke from the universe?

“You better not fuck him up again,” Rikki says. “Or I swear to God, I will get on a plane myself and hunt you down and—”

“Rikki,” Winnie interrupts, not even daring to let her finish her thought. “Enough.” She glances over her shoulder, through the sliding glass doors behind her, then looks up at Steve. “You’d better get going, honey.”

Steve is still utterly bogged in absurdity of this seemingly handcrafted nightmare scenario. Winnie Buchanan is here. Erik Barnes is a woman now. Bucky Barnes, a man he banked on never having to see again for the rest of his life, is going to be his second in command for nine fucking months.

Sure. Why the hell not?

“Yeah, I’m going,” Steve says, hitching his bags back up his shoulders from where they’ve slid down his arms.

He looks at Winnie, and despite how abysmally fucked this entire morning has been, he can’t help but feel a surge of fondness for her. His face, still drawn in a look of confusion, softens. This is the woman who was his mother when his own was too sick to care for him. This is the woman who
comforted him, fed him, and completely sustained him after his ma died, when nobody else was there. When everyone else had abandoned him.

Winnie takes a few steps forward and wraps him in an awkward hug that he can’t return because of the weight he’s hefting. The hug is brief, but her maternal warmth permeates him to the core.

“Take care of yourself. And Jamie.” The last part is clearly a request for civility just as much as it is a request for her son’s safe return. It also speaks to the gravity of Steve’s role as a leader, where his decisions determine who lives and who dies.

Steve nods in return. He’s not a monster. He’ll take care of Bucky just like he’ll take care of his other men, not that it means he has to like one single moment of it. He takes one last look at Rikki, whose expression has taken on the veil of coldness he always hated seeing on Bucky’s face. God, they look alike.

Steve rushes into the building and scans the field of digital camouflage. For what or whom, he’s not even sure. He supposes he’s looking for Bucky, the only person he would even recognize, and he can almost hear the universe cackle. He stands in the middle of the waiting area, frozen stupidly, until he’s accosted by a Specialist named Triplett.

“Scuse me, Sir, are you looking for alpha company, second platoon, 107th?” Triplett says.

Steve straightens his posture. “Yes, Specialist. I am.”

Triplett smiles. “Glad to hear it, Sir. We were getting worried.” For a second, it almost looks like he’s going to give him a friendly clap on the shoulder, because he seems like a friendly-clap-on-the-shoulder type of guy. But he doesn’t. “This way, Sir.” He jerks his head toward the west wall and leads him over to where the company is lined up.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Triplett calls as they approach a clump of soldiers.

Even though Steve obviously knew to expect it, the sound of that name violently stirs up the oatmeal he had for breakfast. He can feel himself start to drag, like suddenly his bags are too heavy and his body is too weak to carry him forward.

Sergeant Barnes, as he’s now known, turns around. The concept of time standing still in a moment of great fear or awe always struck Steve as cliched and poorly representative of reality. But now he gets it, because that’s the exact effect seeing Bucky has on him.

As impossible as it would be to not recognize him, Bucky has changed. The baby softness of his face has burned away, leaving behind it hard, serious angles. His gray-blue eyes, so often alight with intensity and amusement, are narrow and wary. He’s smiling, because that’s what Bucky Barnes does, but all the color and brilliance is gone, leaving behind a husk of cool composure. And for a man who’s had to fight for every ounce of muscle ever to grace his body, he seems to have cracked the code, cutting a sharp triangle of masculinity visible even in the looseness of his uniform.

“Sergeant, I found Lieutenant Rogers.”

“Nice work, Trip. I was beginning to think he’d never show up.”

Steve bristles at the slight, but lets it go. “Thank you, Specialist Triplett.”

Triplett reads Steve’s nod of dismissal with ease and leaves him alone with Bucky.

“Sergeant Barnes.”
“Lieutenant Rogers.” Bucky gives him the once-over from toe to head, his gaze evaluative in a way that somehow makes Steve feel small and inadequate. “Lemme go grab Captain Barton.”

Steve watches him walk down toward the front of the line and wonders why he didn’t just take him to Barton in the first place. He understands that he’s been thrown into a fully functioning system of well-established relationships. He knows he’s at a disadvantage on all fronts and will have to fight a constant headwind of doubt and mistrust until he proves himself worthy. He can glean all of this just from the way that Bucky talks to Barton as they approach, informal and conspiratorial, glancing over at Steve as they speak.

Bucky then leaves Barton’s side and goes to talk to some of the other men. Barton greets Steve cordially enough, though from the look on his face, he’s clearly annoyed.

“Lieutenant Rogers.”

Steve snaps to the position of attention. “Sir.”

“Jesus. At ease.” Barton lays his hand on his hip. “Thought you weren’t gonna make it.”

“I apologize, Sir. Transportation issues.”

Steve then notices a mottled, shiny scar that runs up the left side of his neck. Even though he met Barton when he arrived at Bragg, this is the first time he’s noticed it. He wonders how he possibly could have missed it earlier. It seems un-missable.

“IED,” Barton explains in a flat tone. “Now, come with me. We’re gonna talk the whole way over, ’cause I don’t know you from Adam, and I’m about to give you a platoon, for some —”

“Sir!”

Barton halts mid-sentence and turns toward the sound of an approaching first lieutenant, a guy who looks far too young to have decided to abandon his hair completely.

“Is this the new PL?” the lieutenant asks.

“Yeah. Lieutenant Rogers, this is —”

“Jasper Sitwell, Howlie 1-6.”

Steve’s eyebrows draw together.

“That’s my callsign,” Sitwell says with a smug smile.

“I know what it is,” Steve tells him. “I’ve just never heard anyone introduce themselves that way.”

Sitwell’s face falls. “Well, can’t practice too much.”

Steve glances over at Barton, wondering what he makes of the type of man who introduces himself by his radio callsign. From the look of befuddlement that Barton seems to be fighting, Steve feels better about his own.

“We’ll catch you later, Lieutenant. I’m gonna introduce Lieutenant Rogers to First Sergeant.”

“Good to meet you, Lieutenant Rogers.” Sitwell holds out his hand for Steve to shake. “I look forward to working with you.”
“Same,” Steve manages to say without sarcasm.

Steve walks with Barton, who looks relieved to be leaving Sitwell in their wake. They pass by a soldier who appears to be in the middle of a smoking, from the way that a staff sergeant named Rhodes is ordering him to keep pushing. Rhodes nods and greets them as they pass, and Barton introduces him as one of Steve’s two squad leaders.

“I’ll be honest, Rogers,” Barton continues when they resume walking, his voice low but words abundantly clear. “You weren’t my first choice for this position. Hell, you weren’t even my choice at all. Our last PL was very good. Very experienced. The men liked him. And here you are, a guy who’s been sitting at a desk since he got commissioned, and I don’t know a damn thing about your ability to lead or operate in an urban combat environment.”

Steve tells him how he was at NTC just four months ago and how he graduated from Ranger school five months before that, hating how desperate he sounds to impress upon Barton that he’s not a complete idiot.

“Well, that’s nice, we’re not deploying to Appalachia, are we?” Barton says. He purses his lips. “Let’s just say that if Barnes hadn’t forced the situation, you wouldn’t be here.”

Steve stops fast. “What?”

Barton turns, and Steve’ll be damned if he doesn’t look amused. “You didn’t know? When Lieutenant Shen broke, he went over my head, straight to Colonel Fury, and insisted that we bring you in as a replacement.”

There is so much incredulous rage coursing through Steve’s body that he can’t even formulate a reaction that would be anywhere near professional. He momentarily fears that his heart is pounding so loudly that Barton might be able to hear it.

“That’s not gonna be a problem, is it?” Barton asks. His voice is pleading. “There’s not gonna be any shit between you, is there? I already had this talk with Barnes, and he assured me there wouldn’t be any weird shit with you two.”

“No, Sir. Everything will be fine.”

Steve’s reply is completely automatic. He has absolutely no evidence that anything will be fine. He’s functioning on pure instinct, saying whatever Barton needs to hear to move as far away from the subject as quickly as possible, before he says something to make the man resent his presence even more.

He’ll deal with Bucky later. That’s for goddamn sure.

“Remember this moment,” Barton tells him, “because if anything comes up between you two, anything that compromises our mission in any way, I’m gonna go fuckin’ ape shit — ape-fucking-shit — on both of you. And you’ll regret it deeply. Got it?”

Steve repeats his assurances, and Barton seems satisfied. They continue walking down the line, where Barton introduces him to First Sergeant Morita, a compact, gruff man who looks like he’s been scraped along the bad side of Uncle Sam’s shoe one too many times. He also meets Second Lieutenant Sousa, the executive officer, who seems friendly and green and appears wildly out of place in the presence of the surliness of Barton and Morita.

Barton pulls Steve aside again, telling him to throw his bags next to his own.
“Anything I should know about Sergeant Barnes?” Steve asks. Aside from the obvious fact that he’s a selfish, manipulative piece of shit, of course.

“Don’t get between Barnes and the men. Don’t even try. They’ll bayonet you to death before giving up their loyalty to him,” Barton warns.

Of course they would. But that wouldn’t be so bad. Steve might actually welcome a good bayonetting right now.

“If anything,” Barton continues, “Barnes is too risk averse. He had a lot of losses in his previous units, so you might need to push him.”

There’s a gap in his rage, and some echo of some ancient warm feeling for Bucky shines through it. He clamps down on it though, because anger is the only safe emotion right now when it comes to Bucky Barnes.

Barton leans in. “Listen, that look on your face? It was on mine, and every other lieutenant who ever stood here waiting to fly half way around the world to Hajiland.”

Steve bristles at the slur and entertains letting out a hearty laugh at how grossly Barton has misinterpreted whatever face he’s making right now. “Roger that, Sir.”

There’s a small commotion near the door to the ramp where their chartered commercial plane awaits. The battalion sergeant major bellows over the din that they’ll begin loading in five.

“Ready for this?” Barton asks, walking to the wall to collect his bags.

“As I’ll ever be.”

———

Though hellishly long, the flights to Iraq are occupied almost entirely by conversation with Captain Barton and First Sergeant Morita. Wedged between them for all three legs of the flight, Steve barely had time to be nervous or continue kindling his anger toward Bucky. His conclusion by the time they disembark at the Baghdad Airport is that he likes both of them.

The soldiers of the 107th Infantry Battalion deplane, collect their bags, and load them into a truck in with such stunning orderliness that Steve can barely believe it. It feels so good to be on his feet, breathing in fresh air, that he wouldn’t have cared if it took twice as long. The weather is dry but mild, and there is a collective groan when they’re shepherded to a group of waiting Chinooks that will take them the rest of the way to Forward Operating Base Renegade.

“How many more fucking flying metal tubes they gonna shove us in today?” Steve hears one soldier complain. He couldn’t put his own sentiments any better.

“Better than taking the daggone road,” his other squad leader, Sergeant Dugan, replies. “Unless you enjoy the sensation of getting blown to tiny pieces.”

Steve manages to mostly avoid Bucky on the ramp, but he doesn’t strike it lucky enough to avoid getting on the same helicopter as him. When they get buckled into one of the two center-facing rows, Steve looks down the line of men across from him and notices that he’s seated himself in the wrong place. Despite his personal feelings, he should be where Bucky is — the last man in the row, closest to the door, last one in, first one out.

Bucky makes eye contact with him and smiles a few degrees warmer than the ice job he delivered
back at Bragg. Steve carefully keeps his face marble-hard, which isn’t difficult with the low simmer of contempt flowing through him.

They make it to the base and are ordered to unpack their things in their containerized housing units, which are assigned by name and rank. Steve ends up in a two-man trailer with none other than Howlie 1-6 himself, because after a day like today, why wouldn’t he be stuck for nine months with a man who already annoys the hell out of him?

The trailer is fairly large for two men, and he has his own desk, bed, wall locker, foot locker, and nightstand. There are sandbags stacked high and tight along the sides of the trailer, and Steve wonders how often the base gets attacked.

“Isn’t this great?” Stilwell says.

Steve unfolds the sheets and blankets he was issued and starts making his bed. “What?”

“This!” Sitwell annunciates the word with reckless enthusiasm. “Deployment. Leading. Putting all our training to use.”

Steve looks across the trailer to his roommate. “Better than office work, I suppose.”

“You’re from the Pentagon, right?”

“Yep.”

“Man, that’s some luck. I’m jealous.” Sitwell pulls several books from his duffle bag and starts arranging them on top of his desk.

Steve watches him line up his collection of hardcover bestsellers by Colin Powell, John McCain, and Norman Schwartzkopf, followed by such classics as The Art of War and On War. It’s enough to tell him that Sitwell’s not being at all sarcastic in his envy of Steve’s career. Steve looks down at the class ring on his right hand and slides it off discretely.

Sitwell continues talking while they unpack their things. Steve hears all about Sitwell’s illustrious years at Duke, the FTX he led last year, and how he came this close to making it through Benning Phase of the Ranger course, curse his blasted left shoulder. As he speaks, Steve finds himself looking forward to the days and nights his platoon will be spending outside the wire, patrolling all day, sleeping in the dirt underneath some Humvee or on a pile of rocks. By the thirty minute mark, Steve is already building some skill in tuning him out, but he immediately re-orientates to Sitwell’s voice when he hears “Barnes.”

“I feel bad for you,” Sitwell says.

For a moment, Steve wonders if his frustration and anxiety around working with Bucky is somehow coming through in his body language. He’s usually good at maintaining a steady facade of strength or indifference, but he’s tired enough that perhaps his cracks are showing.

“Why’s that?” Steve sets up a framed photo of Sharon on his nightstand.

“He’s insubordinate. Thinks he’s right about everything. He’s never said anything even remotely complimentary to me.”

Steve searches his roommate’s face, which appears entirely serious. Steve fantasizes about vocalizing his response, which would go something like ‘and what would he possibly have to compliment you on?’ After all, any honest lieutenant would admit that an NCO who’s been in the Army for eleven
years knows more than they do about petty much everything.

The insubordination part, however, gives Steve pause.

“Good to know,” Steve replies.

Sitwell points a firm finger at him. “Don’t be afraid to discipline these NCOs. They think they know everything and that they can question you whenever they want, but they can’t. That’s not how the chain of command works. And don’t be stingy with your counseling statements. You need to set the precedent that you’re in charge.”

Steve clenches his jaw, stemming the tide of irritation that’s dangerously close to creeping up his face. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Sitwell crosses the room, veering discomfortingly deep into Steve’s personal space.

“I also heard Barnes is a fag, but nobody has proof.” Sitwell says in a low voice. “Not yet, anyway,” he qualifies.

A manic rash of images bombards Steve’s mind, unbidden and profoundly unwanted. Fucking Bucky. Sucking his cock. The way Bucky looks when he comes. Holding Bucky’s hand, kissing him, being held by him. Christ, meeting him on the first day of seventh grade, the new kid who said that everyone at his previous schools called him Bucky, even though he’d later admit that it was the first time he’d ever used the name, that Steve was the first one who ever called him that, and maybe he’s the last one to ever call him that —

Steve grimaces and makes a low, grumbling sound as he tries to shove the memories away.

“I know, right?” Sitwell shakes his head “Disgusting.”

———

The next day, there’s a long and painful series of in-processing briefings, the first of two days’ worth. Some sorry sack NCO who looks like he’d rather be on shit burning detail lackadaisically runs through the rules of the base and passes out General Order Number 1 on a series of laminated cards. (“An inspectable item,” the NCO warns.)

In short:

No private weapons.
No entering mosques without permission.
No booze.
No booze.
Seriously, no booze.
No drugs.
No porn.
No photographing detainees.
No photographing any access points or guard towers.
No gambling.
No destroying historical or religious artifacts.
No exchanging currency at unofficial rates.
No proselytizing.
No stealing from combatants or local nationals.
No sex with the locals.
No sleepovers with members of the opposite sex.
No elective surgeries.
No getting pregnant.

As Steve’s physics professor would say, these rules are all straight from the New England Journal of
Duh. But somebody must have done each of these things, or else there would be no need for such an
exhaustive list of obviousness.

After the briefing, which his entire platoon survived without anyone falling asleep, they’re all sent to
the armory to pick up their weapons. Steve is issued an M4 rifle and an M9 pistol, as well as a
magazine of ammo for both. He monitors his own movements closely, watching and mimicking
Dugan and Rhodes to make sure he doesn’t look like a tool. He’s not stupid — he knows how to
handle a weapon. But he’s mindful of anything, any nuance, that might call attention to his
greenness. He’s glad when Bucky avoids direct contact with him, reading his animosity loud and
clear.

Back in his trailer, Steve dons the drop-leg holster he bought on Amazon before he left and slides his
pistol into it. He pauses for a few moments, reveling in the feeling that he’s made it, that this is why
he joined the Army. And as quickly as that feeling emerges, a heavy counterweight is thrown on the
scales, one that tells him that this is not at all why he joined, because this is all just show. This is
surface. This is the level at which Steve has been operating for 99.9 percent of his career to date.
Surface. Even his Pentagon work, important as it may have been, was done in abstraction. The real
reason he joined…

Right now, Steve doesn’t even know why he really joined, and that realization is both unexpected
and deeply disquieting. At the Pentagon, he was sure he knew. At the Pentagon, he thought he
joined because he wanted to be a great leader of men. At West Point, he thought he joined to carve
an avenue into an eventual political career, laughable as that now seems. Before that, when he first
applied to West Point, that was just pure spite. And before that, the single reason he wanted to join
the Army was because he wanted to share more of his life with a man he now can’t even stand to
look at.

Steve sighs heavily and looks over at his nightstand, to the photo he took of Sharon when they spent
Christmas together in New Hampshire. It’s his favorite because it’s perpetually fresh and alive, no
matter how many times he looks at it. She’s at the kitchen sink in the cabin they rented, hair mussed,
no makeup, wearing a flannel shirt she’s practically swimming in. She looks surprised, but pleasantly
so, like she just turned and spotted an old friend she adores. It had been so long since someone
looked at him that way, and he thinks this was the exact moment he fell in love with her.

He misses her. He misses her already. And he hopes to God that he keeps missing her for as long as
he’s here.

Bucky needs coffee. Badly. And given the length of the line at the Green Bean kiosk, so does every
other soldier on the base. He plants himself reluctantly next to Foggy and Mack, but only after
stalling and waffling and questioning just how dire his need for caffeine really is. It’s not like his men
are dying to stand in line next to their platoon sergeant for the next 45 minutes, and he’s far from in
the mood for conversation. But oh, does he need coffee, and between this line and the shit show at
the post exchange, this is by far the better of two terrible choices.

“Hey, Sergeant,” Foggy greets.

Bucky knows Foggy is older, probably nearly the same age as he is, but his face has a childlike
patina that always hits Bucky sideways. Especially when he remembers that the guy’s got an Ivy
League law degree. Or maybe it hits him sideways because what kind of fucking idiot with an Ivy
League law degree joins the infantry as an enlisted man? But they’re around, all right. The second
careerers, the old men, the engineers and teachers and other assorted morons who think the Army’s a
good place to get valuable life experience. Or maybe they’ll say it’s patriotism, that they wanna do
their part, but Bucky doesn’t buy that line of tripe for a second. Not anymore. Not this war. Not after
one of the bloodiest years on record. Not when most of the country strains to remember that there are
still two full-blown wars going on.

“How’s it going? Settling in okay?” Bucky asks them.

Foggy points to Mack, then back to himself. “We’re roomies.”

“Good deal.”

Bucky’s words are reflexive, and he tries not to frown when he says them. It makes sense
alphabetically, but even still, his best soldiers tend to clump together when he really needs them
spread throughout the unit to keep the wayward ones in check. But Bucky’s not god of the alphabet
or whatever lazy method was used to room everyone. Must have been alphabetical, because he had
to trade a full carton of smokes to Sergeant Thomas so that he could move in with Sam.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Sergeant, but you don’t look so good,” Mack says, crossing his
massive arms over his chest.

If Bucky looks a fraction as bad as he feels, he must look like steaming bucket of smashed assholes.
He’s been white-knuckling it since day before yesterday, keeping his hands clamped tight to his sides
so nobody can see them shake. Going to the bathroom every hour to wash the sweat off his face.
Regulating his breathing to stave off the nausea.

“One of those vaccines they give us always makes me feel like shit for a week,” Bucky lies, because
it’s easy to blame everything on the toxic concoction of drugs the docs shoot into them before
shipping.

“Yeah, they’re pretty bad,” Foggy says.

Foggy says it casually, but there’s something in that baby face of his that makes Bucky feel
completely transparent. It’s like Foggy can see every drink he ever slammed down in his entire life.
Every reel and stumble. Every shameless, drunken blowjob he’s given. Every random, nameless
fuck. Every miserable hangover. He starts to feel sick again, and he’s not sure if he’s glad or not
when he sees Steve coming at him from the left.

Yes, he’s being a complete prick, but Steve looks remarkable — truly remarkable — in uniform.
Anyone with eyeballs would say the same thing, so Bucky cuts himself a break for the appraisal.
Steve walks with gliding confidence, like he was custom-made for this deployment, like he’s been
here a dozen times already and knows the terrain like his own name.

But a man like that is dangerous, and confidence like that gets people killed fast. Bucky hopes for all
their sake that it’s just a carefully sculpted impression, something they teach at West Point to impart
artificial gravity onto a bunch of college babies who barely know how to tie their own boots the right
way.

Bucky faces Steve as calmly as he can, a glaring contrast to the sharp jerking motions of Mack and
Foggy as they pull into the position of attention. They greet Steve in unison, with such precision and
seriousness that Bucky nearly laughs.
If only they could card through the catalogue of memories Bucky has, like the one of nineteen-year-old Steve Rogers in Central Park, high on acid, down on one knee in front of the statue of Robert Burns, reciting ‘To a Mouse’ at the top of his lungs in the most fantastically terrible Scottish brogue —

He smiles at the memory of the Steve he used to love, but it only lasts a moment. The reality of Steve, this Steve, the Steve who despises him, is a heavy one. As heavy as his voice when it makes out the sound of Bucky’s name.

“Sergeant Barnes.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Rogers?”

“Come with me. I need to speak to you in private.”

Bucky casts a mournful glance at the kiosk he apparently won’t be visiting any time soon and agrees to follow Steve. And follow he does, walking two steps behind him, as if they’ve never met. As if they’ve never hugged or fucked or laughed together.

When they’ve moved to a sufficiently deserted corner of the base, dangerously close to the wire, Steve stops and begins laying into him.

“Captain Barton told me about your scheme to get me here.”

He doesn’t know why, but somehow, some appallingly naive part of Bucky thought that Steve might never learn of his involvement in his assignment here. He hopes this isn’t an indicator of his predictive abilities on this deployment, because if it is, they’re all screwed.

Steve glares at him hard from beneath his tightly drawn brows. “Do you have a network of spies at the Pentagon? Have you been stalking me this whole time?”

Bucky thinks he might be smirking, and not in a friendly way. He’s smirking because he actually does have a spy at the Pentagon and actually has been keeping tabs on his ex for the past six years. From the way Steve’s looking at him right now, with disgust and anger, Bucky feels like he’s been cast in the role of crazy jilted lover, the type who boils rabbits alive.

“Are these actual questions?” Bucky asks. “Or are you just throwing out a bunch of bullshit assumptions and seeing what sticks?”

“Just stop,” Steve says, his voice firm and controlled. “Stop. Stop whatever little fantasy you’ve cooked up about us and what’s going to happen on this deployment. Stop your scheming, stop your manipulating. Just stop. Right now.”

“Not manipulating. Not fantasizing. Just wanna get home alive.”

“You don’t get to control my life,” Steve grits out. “Not anymore. That’s not how things work now.”

Bucky could slap the show of hurt right off that man’s face, because if anyone gets to play damaged after the catastrophic destruction of their relationship, it sure as hell isn’t Steve Rogers.

Bucky tilts his chin up. “Maybe just keep in mind that if I hadn’t recommended you for this job, you’d still be sitting in some cubicle playing secretary to General what’s-his-fuck.”

Steve takes an imposing step forward. “Don’t you think for a second that you know anything about the work I did.”
“All right. All right,” Bucky surrenders. Not because he wants Steve to feel any satisfaction at all, but because if he keeps going like this, he’s liable to lose the small amount of food he’s been able to keep in his stomach today.

The placating seems to go over well, and Steve’s intensity dims a few degrees.

“Here’s how it’s going to go,” Steve says. “I’m going to be nice and professional for this deployment, and you will be, too. And we’re going to get everyone home, and then one of us will change duty stations, and we’ll never have to see each other again. Until then, you wanted me here so bad, I’m here, let’s make this work.”

Bucky nods, even as he currently doubts their capacity to even have a civil conversation, let alone co-lead a platoon. “Yes, Sir.”

Steve nods back, once, then turns and strides away.

———

Sam stares at Bucky when he enters their trailer, hands thrown up in a gesture of exasperation when he sees that he didn’t bring any coffee.

“Line was an hour long.” Bucky explains. “Sorry.”

Sam checks his watch. “You’ve been gone an hour.”

“Yeah, well, I got detained by Rogers.”

More like cornered and flayed. He’s still trying to work out his irritation, even after taking a very long walk around the base to cool down. But the more he thinks about their conversation, the angrier he gets. Who the fuck does Steve think he is, anyway? How can Steve accuse him of being controlling when Steve was the one who summarily called time of death on their relationship without even giving Bucky a chance to figure out what the hell went wrong?

“He seems like an asshole.” Sam sits on the corner of Bucky’s desk. He looks tired but content. All the NCOs do. Deployment is an old hat they slip on easily.

“Pretty much.” Bucky lets himself drop heavily on the edge of his bed. He shouldn’t say it, because Sam will most certainly go ballistic, but he has to tell someone or else he’s going to explode. “Didn’t always used to be.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I know him.”

Sam’s face drops. “From where?”

“Home.” Bucky raises both of his eyebrows in a way that hopefully explains what he doesn’t want to say out loud.

Sam’s a smart guy. He also knows Bucky and a large chunk of his sordid history with a guy named Steve. It doesn’t take him long at all to assemble the pieces of this laughable puzzle.

“No.” Sam shakes his head, as if that will somehow make this lunacy untrue. “That’s the guy? The guy?”

Bucky gives a small smile, an apologetic one, and rises to answer the door for whoever just started
knocking on it.

When he opens it and sees Natasha there, he’s overcome very briefly with relief — until he does the arithmetic and realizes that he’s now going to have to field the dismay of two friends instead of just one.

She starts in on Bucky right away. “Can we talk about Platoon Leader Ken for a minute?”

“Oh, no. Don’t encourage him,” Sam tells her. “Rogers is the guy.”

“Which guy?”

“The guy,” Bucky says under his breath.

Natasha’s face cycles through a range of emotions like Sam’s did, except hers settles heavily on anger. “The guy who dumped you while you were in Afghanistan?”

“Yes, that guy,” Sam says.

“You set all this up, didn’t you?” Natasha’s eyes narrow.

“I — it was — no.” Bucky holds out his index finger. “No. That wasn’t it. He was qualified. I knew him, we needed a guy, that’s it.”

“You’re such a liar,” she replies. “Are you going to frag him or something?”

“No! Of course not. Jesus.”

“Oh, I bet it’s worse than that,” Sam says to Natasha. “He’s gonna try to get him back.”

Bucky feels himself shrinking under their ire while they tag-team him.

Natasha tilts her head sharply. “Why? Why would you even want him here at all? If he couldn’t even support you through one deployment, what does that say about his ability to support this platoon? That’s a character problem.”

“It’s different.” Bucky doesn’t know exactly how, but he knows this is different. “This is professional. That was personal.” He turns to Sam. “And no, I’m not gonna try to get him back. That ship has sailed and crashed and is resting at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.”

“You’re something else,” Natasha says, deathly serious and deeply disappointed. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another. Always chasing something.” She stops there and leaves the rest unsaid.

Bucky flops down on his bed and covers his eyes with his hands with a grumble. “Okay, can we just drop it? Nothing’s gonna happen. We’ll work together, get the job done, get everyone home. It’s gonna be fine.”

“Do you really believe that?” Sam says.

Bucky nods, but only because he can’t bear to force one more lie out of his mouth.
Head on a swivel: An expression meaning roughly “stay alert to your surroundings”

Expert medical field badge: A badge one gets when they complete a course that includes written and practical components testing combat casualty treatment skills and other soldiering tasks. The pass rate is only about 19%. More info here

eight up (sometimes spelled “ate up”): an expression meaning that someone is messed up, often in regards to military functions (e.g., wearing gear improperly, unable to perform military tasks without screwing up)

Haji (various spellings): A derogatory term used by service members for someone from the Middle East, usually someone who is also Muslim

Daggone: Should be “doggone,” but in the Army, it’s typically pronounced with an “a” (dag rhymes with rag)

Benning phase: The first phase of Ranger School where most people are weeded out

M4: Standard issue rifle similar to the M16

M9: Standard issue pistol given to officers and senior NCOs on deployment. May be issued to other ranks, depending on the circumstances

Frag: To kill a fellow service member, often an officer, because they’re perceived to be dangerous (e.g., dangerously incompetent, in a way that may put the unit at risk).

Fun fact: In the United States military, only people in the Army are known as soldiers. The other branches are addressed by other names: Marine Corps: Marines. Air Force: Airmen. Navy: Sailors. Coast Guard: Coast Guardsman.

Also, here’s a link to the Army Combat Uniform that would have been used in this time period. It’s the one on the far left. The one on the middle is a uniform that Soldiers would wear when deployed to Afghanistan in the early 2010s since the original digital camouflage pattern failed especially hard to camouflage people there. The one on the far right is the Operational Camouflage Pattern (OCP), which is the standard issue uniform today.

Note from previous versions: This has been edited to remove Captain Barton's hearing aids not because I don't want to represent a character with significant hearing loss but because he would likely not have been deployable with them. This will be addressed at a later point in the fic.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve try to work together. The platoon goes on its first mission.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
February 17th, 2008

Steve’s pacing, but only because he’s not sure what else to do to discharge the nervous energy tingling in his body. He can’t possibly check over his things again — the notebook, pen, and personnel roster he’s laid out for his meeting with Bucky — because he’s already checked them five times. He’s stacked them, unstacked them, laid them side by side, and shifted their alignment on his desk by millimeters, each adjustment dealing an additional blow to his self-esteem.

Steve spent the morning arranging everything in his room precisely, ensuring that his picture of Sharon is very conspicuously pointed toward the center of the room, where no visitor could possibly miss it. He also already stole Sitwell’s chair and brought it over to his desk, parking it as far away from his own as he reasonably could without making the distance too obvious. After all, Steve said he’d be professional. He said he’d make it work. And he plans to honor those words.

He's been unfair to Bucky since he came to the unit. He knows it. Frankly, it’s been both surprising and embarrassing to witness his own inability to temper his anger, which is a thousand suns more intense than he ever anticipated it would be so many years after their breakup. He thought he’d gotten over it. He thought he’d grown past it, shed himself of such baseness, but for the first three days after reuniting, the only emotion that’s stirred in Bucky’s presence has been pure animosity.
Steve’s working on it, though. He really is. He’s trying to heed his own words, because he’s willing to bet that Bucky is going to fulfill his end of their bargain. He’s been breathing deeply and reminding himself of Bucky’s good qualities. His experience. His intelligence. His dedication to the men. Sometimes his meditations have been interrupted by flashes of rage or, worse, flashes of memories, oftentimes good ones, which make Steve rebound with more anger over everything lost between them.

Needless to say, the process has been exhausting. But Steve’s trying. And he’s working his hardest to ignore the hypothesis generating in his mind, the one that posits that his anger isn’t really about the past. It’s about the present. Because if he doesn’t keep Bucky away, if he doesn’t hold him at bay with hostility or regulations or protocols, then, God, he doesn’t even want to entertain what might really be left between them after the hurt settles. Not because it might be something bad, but because it might be something good.

And that is a terrifying thought.

Steve pauses his pacing, pushes out a long exhale through puffed cheeks, and jumps at the brisk pair of knocks at his door. Steve steels himself, makes his footsteps firm and confident, and lets Bucky in with a well-controlled greeting.

Bucky takes off his patrol cap, stops in the middle of the room, and does an obvious 360 degree survey of the space. Steve notes with some satisfaction that he makes a hard pause at his nightstand before he moves on.

“My fiancee,” Steve tells him. “Sharon.”

Bucky turns to him and smiles. “Congratulations.”

After knowing Bucky for ten years, Steve would like to think he’s pretty good at gauging when the other man’s being sarcastic. He’s always had a streak of it, though it seems to have taken a darker turn since they parted ways. But to Steve’s surprise, he doesn’t hear any indication of scorn in Bucky’s voice.

“Have a seat,” Steve says, gesturing to Sitwell’s chair.

Bucky lays his weapon on the floor and sits, face impassive, knees spread wide, and sets his notebook on the edge of the desk. He has a nice case for it — or one that was probably nice at one point. The digital camouflage fabric is worn and the colors have faded unevenly. The BARNES name tape velcroed across the top is coming up at the edges, and his E-7 rank looks pretty beat, too. Steve imagines he must already be close to making E-8, a true feat for someone so young.

Steve sits and opens his notebook to the first of several notes he made for himself last night. “I think we should take some time to discuss some of the strategies I’d like us to implement while we’re here.”

“Strategy, huh? You do know that the platoon is a tactical unit, right?” Bucky raises one eyebrow.

“Of course I know that.” Even though Steve knows it, he still feels heat in his ears and at the back of his neck. “However, I think we need to be mindful of the strategic developments over the past year when we conduct operations in the field.”

“Like what?”

Steve’s readies himself to jump into a well-planned spiel about winning hearts and minds and whatnot, but he stops himself. Checks himself, really. Reminds himself that the man in front of him
has more boots-on-the-ground experience in this than Steve could ever hope to have. So instead, he
turns the question over to Bucky.

“What’s your assessment of the situation here in Iraq?”

“This place is fucked.” He jerks his head toward the outside. “These people are fucked, too.”

Steve blinks. “Okay. How so?”

Bucky leans forward in his chair. “These people hate us. And they should. We don’t belong here and
we never did. You read the 9/11 report, right?”

Steve nods. “Of course.”

“So they hate us, a lot of them want us dead and gone. And the only incentive they now have to help
us right now is the cash your buddy General Petraeus has decided to dole out, sometimes to the same
assholes who were blowing up our men last year.”

Steve stifles a cringe. It’s a known flaw in General Petraeus’ strategy, one that Steve always
imagined would elicit highly justifiable anger in the troops on the ground who lost brothers and
sisters to the same men now benefiting from the policy. He sees that anger in Bucky’s face, in the
hard line between his brows and the scowl on his lips.

Bucky continues. “And this idea of democratizing the Middle East is arrogant and idiotic.
Completely culture-blind and naive. The second we leave here, the entire region is gonna implode,
and all this, all the deaths, all the dead and maimed soldiers, the civilians, it’s all gonna be for
nothing.”

Steve nods thoughtfully. It’s an incisive analysis, albeit a skewed one. “General Petraeus’ strategy
has reduced casualties significantly.”

Bucky sits back in his chair. His posture stiffens. “I know. I was here.”

“You were here last year?”

“With the Rangers.”

Steve frowns as he tries to work out the trajectory in his mind. “You left the Rangers to come back to
the infantry? Why?”

Bucky shrugs. “Got sick of blowing people’s brains out every day.”

Steve can feel the weight of Bucky’s deployments in the room, in the lines around his eyes, in the
deadness that takes them over for a few moments before passing like a cloud.

“What do you wanna see happen in this platoon?” Bucky asks, fidgeting with the corner of his
notebook. “What’s your command vision?”

“I’d like to see an extension of General Petraeus’ work in this platoon. When we’re out, we’re not
smashing down doors, reigning terror like a pack of monsters.”

“Steve — ” Bucky clamps down and rights himself. “Sir, that’s not realistic. We have to do raids. It’s
part of our job. You can’t do a gentle cordon and search. You can’t do a sensitive snatch-and-grab.
Sometimes we have to be assholes. That’s what the infantry does.”

“Our job is to attempt to stabilize this country,” Steve corrects.
“And how do you think we do that? With candy? A few sacks of flour? A cup of chai?” Bucky snorts softly. “The real work is a little more ugly than that.”

Steve taps his pen against the desk in time with his words. “But I don’t know if it has to be.”

“So what do we do about contraband? What about the bomb makers? The snipers? The guys hoarding a dozen AKs? Do we just knock on the door and ask that they pretty please give us their shit?”

Steve sighs. He looks at Bucky’s face, at the curious combination of irritation and sympathy he sees there. “No, I get it,” he concedes. “Sometimes we need to bang down doors. But we also need to establish community ties. Get to know the locals. Build trust.”

“I agree. That’s just good soldiering. But you’ll see how fast trust gets abused around here.” Bucky takes a bite at his lower lip. “Everyone learns in their own time.”

Steve finds himself leaning in now, as if he could impress his opinions upon Bucky by sheer force. “I want the men to see the local nationals as people whose country we’ve invaded. I want them to feel empathy for these people.”

Bucky crosses his legs at the ankle. “I understand what you’re saying. But just know that there’s a downside to that, too. Too much compassion and these guys won’t be able to do their jobs. They won’t be able to make sense of the things we’re gonna ask them to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“You get these guys all sympathetic to the local cause then ask them to conduct a raid, they’re gonna hesitate. They’re not gonna do the things they need to do to stay safe and keep others safe.”

Steve lets out a small sound of acknowledgment. “Well, at the very least, I don’t want any use of the word haji in this platoon.”

Bucky tilts his head to the side. “Some might say the word is adaptive.”

These words trip Steve up, not just because they don’t make sense at face value, but because they also speak to the level at which Bucky understands this war. It’s a level Steve has never had access to, something that can only be earned through years upon years of hard, experiential learning. It realigns his conceptualization of their dynamic even more, so that his next words are spoken with curiosity rather than disgust.

“How could a racist slur possibly be adaptive?”

“It creates a layer between them and us that lets the men do the things they have to do.” Bucky lines up his hands on the desk between them, demonstrating a partition. “Again, it goes back to empathy. You want enough that they’re not committing war crimes but not so much that they can’t work effectively.”

“Well, I don’t want to hear it. The hajj is a sacred religious obligation. I don’t want it turned into hate speech.”

Bucky nods. “It’s in your purview to shape the language, but they might still say it out of habit.”

“Then they’re going to get a counseling statement each time they use it.” Steve presses the tip of his pen hard onto the paper of his notebook. “That’s all the administrative punishment I can do at my level. Captain Barton uses the term freely, so I doubt he’ll support me much on this.”
“Okay.” Bucky nods again. There’s something about it that’s perfunctory, something that grates Steve the wrong way.

“You don’t agree.”

“Look, I’m not *not* onboard with this stuff. I get it. I agree with most of it. But it’s part of my job to challenge you, isn’t it?”

“As long as we’re on the same side at the end of the day,” Steve says.

“Of course. That’s the way this works.” Bucky smiles then, cautiously. “You’re gonna have to break all this down Barney-style for the guys. Most of the guys are pretty smart, but their education levels are all over the map. And I think they should hear it from you, not me.”

“I agree.” Steve jots ‘Simple language’ in his notebook, underlining it twice. “Speaking of, give me a rundown on everyone.”

Bucky talks animatedly as he gives Steve the scoop on the men in the unit.

“Tim and Jim are both really good, but if anything happens to me, have Jim take my place. You can temporarily promote Mack to squad leader.”

“Trip, Ward, Mack, Parker, and Foggy are all solidly reliable. Reyes is quiet, but very competent. Maximoff’s getting his citizenship, so he sometimes struggles with English and American cultural norms. Luis and Wilson are kinda fuck-ups, but they’re still good soldiers, overall.”

“And I’m pretty sure Rumlow is a for-shit psychopath,” Bucky says, then gestures to his face. “Nothing behind the eyes. I’ve never seen a single glimmer of compassion or kindness in him. I’m looking to peg him for some UCMJ action as soon as I can make a case for it, ‘cause I don’t want him here and neither do a lot of the men. So watch him close.” His mouth flattens into a line. “On the other hand, he’s a very proficient killer. So if you need something done, you need a gunner, he’s not the worst choice. Just watch him.”

The rest of their conversation is remarkably civil. Dazzlingly professional. By the end, Steve is nurturing the hope that they might be able to work together without incident. This lukewarm detachment they seem to have formed with each other seems good. Safe. Steve’s zone of maximum efficiency.

“Hey,” Bucky slaps his hands on top of his thighs. “Let’s go see if we can rustle up a terp. I know you speak Arabic, but you’ve got better things to do than translate for us.”

“Where do we get one?” Steve asks, rising to his feet.

Bucky stands along with him. “Don’t worry. I know where to get all the good stuff downrange.”

Of course he does.

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Bucky wipes his sweaty palms on his pant legs as he descends the three stairs from Steve’s trailer. He takes a deep, quiet breath and lets out a silent ‘thank you’ to whoever’s listening for the fact that he didn’t lose his lunch. Or that he didn’t offer any obvious clue to his disappointment over the
revelation that Steve’s engaged to a very beautiful woman.

He always figured, even when they were dating, that Steve would end up with a woman. Their relationship seemed to be an anomalous blip in a steady stream of heterosexuality for Steve. And why would he want the drama of being a homo when it’s so much easier to just be straight? Why would anyone want that? Bucky sure as hell never wanted it, stuck with it as he seems to be.

Bucky walks on Steve’s left side as they head to Natasha’s shop, because if anyone can rustle up an interpreter for them, it’s her. There’s tension in both their bodies, virtually palpable, and Bucky imagines it creating a repulsive field around them as they carve their way through the base to the human intelligence hub. The quiet isn’t easy. It’s thick and awkward, but at least they’re not screaming at each other, so there’s that.

Natasha’s office is bustling, and he and Steve walk into a hard wall of suspicious looks from the military intelligence geeks. This is just the analysis hub. The real human intelligence collection work goes on in a dark corner of the base, where suspects are held and interrogated by Natasha and her team. This is the front office, which is morally clean and tidy. From the back of the open room, configured as a giant bullpen, Natasha spots them and comes to greet them. She looks so different in uniform, her hair pulled into a perfect red bun, her cosmetics dialed down to the type of modest accent her commander will allow.

“Lieutenant Rogers. Sergeant Barnes.” She nods to Steve and smiles at Bucky. “What can I do for you?”

Bucky makes formal introductions. “Sir, this is Sergeant Romanoff. She’s a 35 Mike who always knows what’s what with detainees and all things HUMINT.”

They shake, and Steve — more irrepresible proof of his straightness, Bucky supposes — is instantly mesmerized by his close proximity to Natasha Romanoff. Not even his little Barbie Doll fiancee can save him from it. Natasha knows it, too, because her hand lingers in his for a few moments longer than it needs to, and he just goddamn lets it.

“Got any terps?” Bucky asks, shooting her a glare that belies his congenial tone.

Natasha ignores it and sucks in a breath between her teeth. “No natives.”

“Nine limas?”

“Nope.”

“What the hell are we supposed to do?” Bucky casts a glance at Steve, not even thinking that he probably doesn’t have a clue.

Natasha jerks her thumb in the direction of a specialist sitting in a chair against the wall, reading a field manual. “I’ve got a Papa.”

Before Bucky can even voice his many, many objections to bringing on an analyst as an interpreter, she calls the soldier over. Bucky still objects, loudly and pointedly.

“No way. Analysts speak shit Arabic. My Arabic’s probably better than his.” He gives the soldier a once-over. He looks solid enough, fit, composed. In short, not your typical junior enlisted intelligence soldier.

“What was your language proficiency score, Jones?” Natasha asks.
“3+, 3+.” Specialist Jones says this to Bucky, in a way that almost dares him to object again.

“Great, you can read and listen to the news. Whole lotta goddamn good that’ll do us,” Bucky grumbles. Next to him, Steve smirks.

“It’s Iraqi dialect,” Jones says. “And I speak at a 3 level.”

Bucky scoffs. “No way. You—”

Bucky’s next slew of protests are interrupted by the barrage of fast Arabic that comes out of Steve’s mouth. At first, all Bucky can do is stare and try to comprehend the bizarre ness of this born and bred Brooklyn boy, the one who’s probably never even traveled out of the country before now, as he wields the language like it’s his first. Bucky strains to pick out a word here and there, which drives home the realization that his own Arabic is actually quite terrible. He can’t tell even what he’s talking about — not even the basic subject. And when Jones replies with similar smooth cadence and ease, Bucky knows that his objections are about to be overruled.

“We should take him,” Steve says to Bucky when the guttural flurry terminates. “It’ll save the risk that we’d take by bringing on a native terp.”

While Bucky appreciates the deference in Steve’s tone, there’s still something fishy about all this. SIGINT doesn’t just leave gifted linguists to rot like this.

“What’re you doing here, Jones?” Bucky asks.

Jones shrugs. “Not much of anything right now, Sergeant.”

Bucky’s eyes narrow. “Why are you here? Don’t you have a TS clearance or something?”

“Yes, Sergeant. But my first sergeant thought I’d be better suited for the field.”

Bucky’s scrutiny deepens. “You have some malfunction or something?”

“Sergeant Barnes, he’s good to go,” Natasha assures him. “No red flags. There’s a reason he’s here and not in the motor pool.”

“The motor—” Bucky stops himself, sparing everyone a vitriolic rant on the Army’s gross incompetence at allocating resources.

“I’d like to be in the field, Sergeant.” Jones seems to swell at this, full of the knowledge that In The Field is the true pinnacle of soldiering.

“Yeah? You wanna get your street cred by roughin’ it with the grunts? You wanna get yourself a shiny combat action badge so you can show it off to all your little MI friends?”

Jones, to his credit, seems only mildly flustered by the accusation. “I just wanna do something that actually matters, Sergeant.”

Bucky stares at him hard. Jones seems earnest enough, though he clearly has a little too much Victory Punch in his veins. Bucky looks over at Steve, who raises his eyebrows at him expectantly.

Bucky looks back over at Jones. “What’s your name?”

Jones looks confused and points to his name tape. “Jones, Sergeant.”

“Yeah, I can read, y’know. What’s your real name?”
“Gabe, Sergeant.”

“All right, Gabe.” Bucky gestures toward the door. “Let’s go find your CO and get you attached to our unit.”

Jones follows Steve out of the building, and Bucky shoots a look over his shoulder to Natasha. Her face is cryptic, completely opaque, and Bucky’s not sure what to do except smile in return.

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February 28, 2008

“All right, everyone, line up with all your shit over here.” Bucky points to his left, to a stretch of dirt beside the row of Humvees parked end-to-end in front of them. “Sergeant Dugan, Sergeant Rhodes, start your PCIs.”

Steve watches the men as they scramble in a line with gear and begin showing their squad leaders everything they’ve packed. Halfway through, Steve decides to walk the line behind them, looking over their shoulders, making small notes to himself about who seems organized, who seems slow, who’s quick to help others. The men greet him nervously as he passes, reminding Steve of just how far he still stands outside of his own platoon.

He’s burbling with nervous energy and hates that he’s so anxious about such a simple mission. He’s supposed to be the bastion of solidity, even if he only has theoretical knowledge of what will be their first mission outside the wire. After sitting down with Bucky and the squad leaders last night, where they rehearsed today’s soft search in excruciating detail, Steve knows all he really has to do is show up. And even if he didn’t do that, this mission would function every bit as well. It makes him question his position entirely. It’s as if every gram of confidence he’s built since they arrived here, paltry as that sum is, has been stripped away by the apparent fact of his own purposelessness. Right now, the men seem to need him like they need an extra 50 pounds of gear on their backs.

Steve walks back to his own pile of gear, and he takes a deep swig from one of the two full canteens he has strapped to himself. He’s glad when Bucky makes his way over to him, as if he senses Steve’s feelings of worthlessness and his need for something of even modest importance to occupy him.

“I have the squad leaders do the checks beforehand, since they have closest eyes-on of everyone,” Bucky says. “They’re usually pretty good about not forgetting stuff.” Bucky jerks his head toward the Humvees. “C’mon. Lemme show you what we pack.”

Steve follows him over to one of the vehicles they’ll be taking today. Bucky pulls open the back hatch and starts pointing to the boxes, containers, and kits stored there.

“First responder kit. Aid and litter kit. Checkpoint kit. Two cases of MREs. Extra water. Extra fuel. Mortuary Affairs Kit.” The mortuary affairs kit lies next to several 25-pound bags of flour and a large box of cookies whipped up by the dining facility staff.

“Who does that?” Steve asks.

Bucky slams the back door shut. “Does what?”

“Pick up bodies. If something happens.”

“We do.” Bucky says this like he can barely comprehend the question. “Who else is gonna do it?”

“Mortuary affairs?” Steve feels like an idiot the moment he says it, once his brain processes the
ridiculousness of such a prospect.

Bucky chuckles. “No. We get the honor of scraping up our buddies’ guts and legs and arms and God knows what else.”

In front of that chuckle is a grim smile, flat and strained. Steve wonders if Bucky’s had to do that for any of his men. It seems like an obscenely cruel thing to do, tantamount to picking up the remains of one’s own family.

“You got all your gear?” Bucky asks

Sir, Steve thinks to add for him. “Yes.” He almost responds automatically by asking if Bucky has his, but he knows the answer must be yes.

In fact, Steve has checked and re-checked his gear half a dozen times, and that’s just today. Because the last thing he needs is to have one of his enlisted soldiers catch him in the field without the proper equipment.

“All right,” Bucky says, clapping his hands together. “Let’s go meet and greet the local nationals.”

When individual checks are done, Bucky yells to everyone to gear up. They load into four Humvees and rendezvous with first platoon to form a convoy into the Rusafa district, with Sergeant Wilson acting as convoy commander. Steve rides in the back seat of the fourth vehicle, which has Mack as driver, Maximoff in the front passenger seat, Ward on the turret, and Rhodes in the seat across from him.

“First day out,” Rhodes says, smiling brightly while he kicks at the back of Mack’s seat. “How we all doing today?”

“Hooah, Sergeant,” Mack says with enthusiasm.

Maximoff gives a thumbs-up.


Steve forces a firm nod, despite the spike in his anxiety as their vehicle passes through the gate and out onto the road. “Good to go, Sergeant Rhodes.”

“Outstanding.”

Maximoff turns in his seat to look at Rhodes as he speaks. “Hey, you know our new intel guy?”

“Jones.”

“He and Trip are cousins.”

Rhodes’ mouth goes crooked with disbelief. “No way.”

“Yes way.” Maximoff cranks his torso around further. “Did you know, Sir?”

Steve can’t help but smile a little in return. It’s the first time one of the junior enlisted soldiers has addressed him without first being prompted.

“No, I didn’t know that. Those are some odds.”

“Maybe this will be lucky deployment.” Maximoff’s demeanor shifts even further into the relaxed,
optimistic territory he seems to perpetually occupy.

Bucky explained Maximoff as being in a constant state of relief that he’s no longer living in whatever former Soviet shit hole he was born into. Steve’s not sure if he buys that all the way, but he wishes he could be as happy to be where he is as Maximoff seems to be.

Steve tries to calm himself by looking out the window. The city is cleaner than he thought. More modern. Less third world than he was expecting. Granted, they’re still well ensconced within the city limits, traveling just outside the green zone. But still, he marvels at how he could know so much information about the region and yet still experience the city with such surprise.

They’re only on the road about 20 minutes, much of which is spent navigating through traffic. By this point in the war, the people of Baghdad are well versed in convoy operations, regarding them as they pass with wariness, indifference, or veiled contempt — and that’s if they’re even regarded at all. There are no children running up alongside the vehicles, smiling and holding out their hands for candy; no joyful men and women waving their thanks to them. Those ready-for-print images may very well just be fabricated war lore percolated through the ranks to foster the false impression that they’re actually wanted here.

The vehicles eventually slow to a stop alongside a strip of apartment buildings, and Steve takes another deep breath. Even though this mission is pretty paint-by-numbers, there are still plenty of opportunities for Steve to make mistakes that will undermine his already shaky role in the platoon.

“Ready?” Rhodes says, mostly to him. His face is kind, and Steve wonders how many lieutenants he’s said that to over the years.

“Let’s do it,” Steve says, injecting a bolus of confidence into his voice.

The platoon dismounts from their vehicles and gathers in front of the apartment building they’re planning to search. This is a technically a “cordon and knock,” a kinder, gentler, un-targeted search. Sitwell’s platoon moves swiftly to cordon off the search area, surrounding the apartment building and stationing men by all the exits and in a wide radius around the site. Sitwell does a lot of yelling, and although Steve’s never been much of a yeller, he still adds it to his list of things not to do if he wants to avoid looking foolish in front of his men.

Bucky approaches him from the vehicle just ahead, looking calmer and fresher than Steve’s seen him all deployment. He offers Steve a smile.

“All right, whenever you’re ready,” Bucky says. The other men around them cast uncertain glances between Steve and Bucky, in a way that makes it abundantly clear that they know who’s really in charge of this unit. And it certainly isn’t Steve.

Steve gathers his NCOs and recapitulates the plan they discussed last night, where first squad will start at the top floor and second at the bottom, working their way toward the middle floors in tandem. First squad will take Jones to interpret, and Steve will go along with second to do the same. All the intel they have suggests that they’re not going to run into much trouble, causing Steve to quietly wonder what the hell they’re doing here in the first place.

Rhodes and Dugan rally their men and head toward their respective targets, flour and cookies in hand.

“Sergeant Barnes, you’re with me,” he reminds Bucky, which is unnecessary given Bucky’s insistence last night that he work the building by Steve’s side. Although leadership would be best split between the two squads, Steve has decided to interpret it as an instructive opportunity, one that
requires him to place his desire to do his job correctly over the balking of his ego.

Bucky nods. “Roger that.”

Steve bristles at yet another ignoring of his rank, but he tables the emotion and walks with Bucky toward the building. The squad assembles in front of the door of the first apartment, with Steve wedged impractically in the middle of the group. Reyes knocks on the door, and Steve makes to move toward the front to greet the homeowner. Bucky’s hand on his shoulder stops him.

“Stay back ’til it’s clear,” Bucky says.

Steve suppresses his desire to shrug Bucky’s hand off and holds fast, eyes locked on the door in front of them. Despite the cordial nature of the search, the team is edgy, gripping their rifles tight. The door opens slightly, enough to reveal a fearful and suspicious strip of a young woman’s face. Steve moves with care to the front of the squad.

“Peace be onto you,” Steve greets in Arabic, keeping his smile steady and relaxed.

“And onto you.” Her voice is barely audible.

Steve introduces himself and finds himself stumbling over explaining their reason for being there. He didn’t think of how difficult it would be to tell a scared woman that a group of American soldiers is demanding to enter her home to search it for contraband.

She calls into the home for her husband, who comes to the door after a tense delay. Steve repeats himself for the man, and he can feel the men begin to shift uneasily.

After a long pause, appraising all of their faces, the man opens the door and lets them in. The men file into the building tactically, telling the woman and her two children to move against the wall. They yell in English and pointing aggressively to the wall. Steve’s stomach twists at the raw, brutish energy the squad gives off when in operational mode, which is reflected in the wide eyes and terrified grips of the woman and her kids.

Steve repeats the instructions politely in Arabic, giving them to the patriarch so he can give them to his family. Taking in the family’s increasing discomfort, he then changes his mind and asks the man to instruct his wife and children to wait outside the apartment so that they don’t have to be left alone in a room with male soldiers while the man escorts them through his home. The relief on the faces of the husband and wife is palpable, and the woman and children move outside quickly.

Starting in the living room, Nelson, Reyes, Ward, and Rumlow begin the search process. They upend furniture. Tear rugs off the walls (“So many fucking rugs,” the men complain repeatedly). They rip clothes out of the closets and food out of the fridge. They throw shelved items onto the floor to search in them and behind them. They move from room to room, trashing the place, while the man looks on in barely contained horror as the contents of his life are spilled and kicked and treated like garbage. Any item that seems suspicious is inquired about by Steve, and every possible threat is determined to be nothing at all. Bucky stands by and watches the search, speaking up every now and again to point out another possible hiding place. He does it with a nonchalance that makes Steve feel sick.

The entire search takes thirty minutes and yields absolutely no contraband at all. The family didn’t even have a single rifle for home defense, which would have been allowed. At the end, they all gather in the wrecked living room, then bring the woman and children back into the home to re-unite with the man. They move to him swiftly, his wife beside him, their children behind him, shielded from the only real threat in their home — the men who’ve just trashed the place.
Steve motions to Trip and Rhodes to bring the 25-pound bag of flour and cookies. They set the flour in the kitchen and offer the cookies to the family. The man and woman refuse but allow their children to creep forward and take two cookies each.

“Not so many,” the man says.

“Please. As many as they like,” Steve says to him. The children bite into them, their enjoyment weighted down by the impinging stress of seeing their home wrecked by a band of uniformed thugs.

The man and woman offer smiles and “goodbyes” in English as the squad clears out, but it’s obvious that both pleasantries entirely forced. The soldiers say goodbye in a way that’s distressingly casual, and they exit the apartment to move next door.

It takes them five hours to clear the entire building, and for all the extraordinary mess they made, the search yielded nothing of import. No explosives. No bomb making equipment. No extra rifles or cell phones. Steve apologized to each family, feeling especially terrible when a couple of heirlooms were broken, knowing that words couldn’t possible repay the damage or stress or feelings of violation. Later, when the platoons regroup to mount their vehicles and head back to base, Bucky offers Steve an assessment of this mission.

“These people have been searched up the yin-yang over the past couple of years. Their shit was seized ages ago, if they had any at all. This was just a warm-up op for the unit. More of a presence mission than anything,” he explains.

The explanation only sours Steve’s mood further, to the point where all he’s left with is a feeling of profound emptiness.

They take the long way back to the base, for the sole purpose of establishing presence in the neighborhoods. They make it back to the base without incident and commence the long post-mission inspection and cleaning process of their equipment and vehicles. It’s almost 18:00 by the time they’re done, which includes an after action review with Barton, Morita, Bucky, Rhodes, and Dugan. Steve schedules an additional meeting with Bucky at 19:30 and makes his way to the dining facility with his two squad leaders while Bucky stays behind to talk with Morita.

After dinner, Steve heads back to his trailer to change into a clean uniform, and he’s forced to hear the sound of Sitwell recapping the entire day for him, as if he wasn’t even there. As if pulling security around a cordoned area in a peaceful neighborhood is anything worth describing. Despite his gradually ratcheting nerves, Steve is grateful when the clock hits 19:25, because the stress of sitting down face-to-face with Bucky is far superior to the frustration of listening to his roommate’s asinine commentaries on the obvious.

The walk to Bucky’s trailer is shorter than expected, so short that Steve is shocked how close their units have been to each other this entire time. He stops in front of the door for a heavy beat of silence, reads19:28 on his watch, and knocks firmly. Sergeant Wilson greets him at the door and lets him in, and Steve praises him for his work on commanding the convoy today, because he’s willing to bet that Sitwell has never given Wilson a word of praise in his life. Wilson takes the compliment with a relaxed smile that a more cynical man might read as pandering, then calls over to Bucky that he’s heading out — but not before giving Bucky a look that Steve can’t quite decipher.

Bucky’s waiting for him at his desk, where he’s set one chair on each end in the same configuration as Steve uses when they meet at his place. Bucky’s uniform coat is draped over the back of his chair, leaving him in a tight-fitting sand colored t-shirt that skims the contours of his chest, shoulders, and arms. Steve feels a sharp clench in his stomach, and his glance drifts to Bucky’s left bicep, to the rounded black line peeking out from under the sleeve of his shirt. He can’t see enough of the tattoo to
“How are you feeling?” Bucky asks. The concern in his voice and the earnest smile on his face makes what Steve’s about to say that much more difficult.

Steve sits in the chair across from Bucky, lays his rifle on the floor beside him, and breathes out a long sigh through his nostrils. “It’s ‘how are you feeling, Sir,’ Sergeant Barnes. I’m your platoon leader.”

Bucky’s face falls. “I know that, Sir.”

“Today you addressed me inappropriately almost the entire mission. In front of the men.” Steve carefully manages the tone of his voice to keep the tension out of it. “You need to address me as ‘Sir.’”

“Understood, Sir.”

“Is it understood?” Steve asks the question honestly. “You’re their role model. What you do, they’ll do. If you don’t treat me with the respect my rank warrants, whether you think I deserve that respect or not, the men are going to follow suit.”

Bucky nods. “It’s tough with you sometimes. I’m not used to talking to you like this.”

“Look, B—” Steve pauses sharply when Bucky’s name almost spills out of his mouth. “You can’t talk to me like I’m your friend. You just can’t.”

“Don’t worry, you made it very clear a long time ago that we aren’t friends.” A sullen line forms between Bucky’s dark eyebrows.

“Don’t. Just don’t.” Steve looks down at his lap. “Please.”

“Yes, Sir.” The resignation in Bucky’s voice is painful.

“We have to make this work. We have to.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Steve swallows the discomfort in his throat. “And I want Jones to teach everyone some Arabic. What happened today, with everyone yelling in English, that won’t fly.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Steve sighs again and presses his hand to his brow. He wants to make a light comment, something — anything — that’ll ease the anger or disappointment whatever emotion is boring into him from the man across the table. But Steve doubts that there’s anything that could possibly lighten the space between them, which seems to be filling by the second with unspoken words and ancient hurt.

Steve grabs his weapon, rises to his feet, and looks down at Bucky.

“You gonna make me stand, too?” Bucky says, referring to the protocol that would require him to.

“No,” Steve says softly. “Good night, Sergeant Barnes.”

Bucky’s eyes go dead. “Good night, Sir.”
Warning: References to racist/Islamophobic language; poor treatment of local Iraqi nationals, homophobic language, internalized homophobia, biphobia

Military Stuff

Bucky's Notebook would look like this, with his last name on the top and his rank on the bottom

Break it down Barney-style: A reference to the children's show “Barney,” it basically means that something will have to be explained in simple terms that a child could understand.

UCMJ: Uniform code of military justice — the legal code of the United States military

Terp: Interpreter

35 Mike (35M): Army occupation code for an interrogator

HUMINT: Human intelligence - intelligence collected from detainees and other human assets

Nine lima (09L): a native interpreter who is also a soldier in the Army

Papa: Reference to the occupation code 35P, a cryptologic linguist/analyst

Language proficiency scores: refers to the Defense Language Proficiency Test, the test linguists take to determine their level of skill. In this case, a 3 or 3+ would be extremely rare and suggests additional education in Arabic than a basic level linguist would have

Native Interpreters: A large number of interpreters who’ve assisted during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are local natives. These individuals provide interpretation services at great risk to themselves and their families, as they are often targeted by terrorist groups for collaborating with the Multi-National Forces. Many service members and veterans try to sponsor their interpreters to America for citizenship before they’re injured or killed, but it’s oftentimes an uphill battle.

SIGINT: Signals intelligence, referring to intelligence collected through communication devices (radio, cell phones, media). Someone like Jones would fall under SIGINT, though SIGNIT linguists may be tasked out to human intelligence units, as is the case here.

TS clearance: Top secret security clearance

Combat Action Badge: If non-infantry soldiers engage directly with enemy forces during their deployment, they can get one of these. Infantrymen get the Combat Infantry Badge medics get the Combat Medical Badge for similar engagement.

MI: Military intelligence

Victory Punch: A gatorade-like drink that is given to soldiers who do basic combat training at Fort Jackson (also known as “Relaxin’ Jackson” for its relative ease
compared to other basic training sites). Victory Punch is rumored to do everything from replenish lost electrolytes to kill boners.

PCI: Pre-combat inspection

Outside the wire: outside the base

Soft search: Where service members might search homes by knocking first, offering gifts, and generally being less rough than a “hard search” (the type you see in the movies that involves kicking down doors, lots of yelling, and typically is done without any warning at all)

Mortuary affairs: The soldiers who identify bodies, prepare bodies to be sent home, arrange services, funerals, etc.

Humvee info: A humvee (which is actually properly written as the acronym HMMWV for “high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle”) typically seats four people, plus one person who serves as gunner on a turret which can rotate 360 degrees. The turret typically has a large .50 caliber machine gun attached and is manned continuously while driving outside the wire. Fun fact: if you gotta pee while you’re on the turret, you get to do it in a bottle that one of your buddies holds for you.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve clash. Steve defends Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
March 21, 2008

“So then Parker spills his drink on a Marine, right? This gargantuan Andre the Giant guy, and Parker’s apologizing, and the guy’s all like ‘you fucking clumsy idiot,’ even though Parker’s the least clumsy guy on the face of the planet, and it was that lug nut’s fault for backing into Parker in the first place. So this guy’s buddies are all closing in, each jarhead dumber than the last, and I know we’re about to get into an epic brawl of the grunts. And here comes Wilson, and he’s all like ‘boo-yah, devil hogs!’ which, I swear, about made all their heads explode. And Parker’s all like ‘easy, easy, guys,’ and they’re all about ready to dog pile Wilson — get it? Dog pile? So I’m all like, ‘shit, better get Doc outta here so he can patch us up when this all goes to shit.’ And then here comes Sergeant Dugan, fucking wasted — and you know how he gets when he’s tanked. So he swaggers up and starts pulling rank, and it turns out Andre the Giant is a fucking E-7, but Dugan didn’t give a shit and was, like, pushing us all back and shit, like he was gonna throw down with this gorilla. But then, this master guns comes in and starts barking at his guys, no shit, barking, knife handing — ”

“He wasn’t actually barking,” Trip clarifies, holding his palm out as if to stop the waves of hyperbole flying off Luis.

“No, but, man, is sounded like it, right? So Sergeant Dugan starts howling, like for real howling, and that gets all us howling, and all those jarheads shuffled off like little bitches.” Luis laughs with a
force that’s wildly disproportional to the humor in the story and turns in his seat to look back at Bucky. “It was awesome, Sergeant. You shoulda been there.”

“The hell were you guys doing in Jacksonville, anyway?” Bucky asks.

Luis exchanges smiles with Private Wilson in the driver’s seat and Trip in the back. “Just wanted to have a look at the competition, that’s all,” he explains, as if the Marines are some bullshit small town rival football team rather than their brothers in arms.

“Well, you better hope you never have to work with any of those Marines in the future. Those fuckers know how to hold a grudge.” Bucky looks at Trip, because he knows he’s the only one in the vehicle who might give him an honest answer to the more pressing question he has. “So, Sergeant Dugan went with you?”

“He went separately, Sergeant. With Sergeant Grims. We weren’t, y’know, together or anything.” Trip’s mouth twitches, but his story jives with most of what Bucky knows about Dugan — the perpetual bachelor and resident old man who lives vicariously through his subordinates in a way that’s well past being cute. The image of Dugan being drunk in front of the men flips Bucky's stomach in on itself, and he grips his M4 tightly on his lap.

He peers over Luis’ shoulder to the clear stretch of road ahead. In his gut, something else rolls — a different kind of sickness. Empty roads, empty marketplaces, empty villages, they all give him the willies. Sometimes it’s nothing, but sometimes it’s a herald of chaos and death. He can’t say for sure why he wanted to ride in the lead vehicle on the way back to the base today, but he’s learned not to ignore the gnawing of his instincts.

As deployments go, this one has been almost forebodingly uneventful so far. Nobody’s gotten hurt. Nobody in the company’s gotten killed. Granted, it’s only been a month since they became operational, but after the carnage from Bucky’s last stint in the sandbox, he’s been growing increasingly discomfited. Worse is the smoothness with which he and Steve have somehow been managing the platoon and their professional relationship. All combined, Bucky finds himself impatiently waiting for the other shoe to drop, not because he craves the fight but because he knows it’s coming and hates the tension of not knowing when it’s going to strike.

As if waiting for that exact thought to pass through Bucky’s mind, Reyes calls out over the radio from his position on the turret.

“Hey, Wilson. There’s something in the road ahead.”

Everyone in the vehicle leans forward, straining to make out the dark dot down the road. They’re approaching the outskirts of the city, at the point where the bareness of the desert starts to show signs of human life. It’s a stretch of road that hasn’t given them any trouble yet, which could mean that it will continue to be safe moving forward. But it could also mean the exact opposite, that they’re somehow due for trouble. The rational calculus is impossible to work out, which is why Bucky’s taken to trusting the vague unease in his body over any other metric short of hard intelligence.

Bucky feels the vehicle start to decelerate.

“Keep pace, Private Wilson,” Steve orders him over the radio from one vehicle back, where he’s acting as convoy commander.

“Sir, there’s something in the road ahead,” Wilson replies.

“Can you ID it?”
They all squint harder, and Bucky assembles the pieces quickly based on the many enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures briefings he’s had over the years.

“It’s a person,” Bucky says.

Wilson relays the information to Steve with hot urgency, his hands gripping tightly onto the steering wheel.

“Keep pace,” Bucky reminds him.

Wilson glances back at Bucky doubtfully. Then, in an unusual show of allegiance, he ignores Bucky and turns to Steve for direction.

“Shit, Sir.” Wilson takes his foot off the accelerator. “Shit, can we slow down?”


Wilson slams his hand down on the horn. The person doesn’t move. Bucky bites his lip at the sudden realization that the person they’re careening toward is not large enough to be an adult. Bucky knows, because there are two adult-sized figures on the left side of the road, pointing and gesturing toward the much smaller person in the road.

“What do I do, Sir?” Wilson calls over the radio, his voice pitched into a yell.

They all hear Steve make a small noise of uncertainty, as if he’s considering violating standard operating procedure of convoy command just because Wilson is upset.

Bucky growls and climbs forward, cramming himself past Reyes’ feet on the turret, and snatches the hand radio from the front consul. “Everyone keep pace,” he orders the convoy.

Wilson lays on the horn, beeping furiously, but does as he’s told. Everyone in the vehicle braces themselves in horror as their Humvee plows over a child who can’t be more than four or five. The thump of her body against the front grill is loud and sickening, but it’s drowned out by the massive explosion that goes off directly behind them, shaking their vehicle.

“IED, IED, IED!” Bucky calls into the radio. “Move, move, move!”

The radio erupts with expletives and more shouts of “IED, IED, IED!” just as they’ve been trained to do, and the convoy surges forward to clear the area. Bucky twists around in his seat to look out the cracked back window, and he breathes a sigh of relief when he sees five fully mobile vehicles behind him. Above them, Reyes does a sweep of the area, confirms that the IED was a miss, and confirms that the convoy is intact. Bucky hears Steve over the radio re-confirming that all vehicles are good to go, and he slumps back into his seat with quiet “fuck” as he tries to calm the jackhammering of his heart.


“Wilson, you okay?” Bucky asks. He leans forward and lays his hand on Wilson’s shoulder.

Wilson swallows. “Yeah.”

“Luis?”

“Yes, Sergeant.” His words spill out forcefully, in a way that suggests the opposite.

He turns to his left. “Trip, you okay?”
“Fine, Sergeant.”

“Hey, Reyes.” Bucky pats Reyes’ calf and looks up into the turret. “You good?”

“Hooah, Sergeant,” he calls down.

Bucky nods longer than he needs to and takes a deep breath. His mind replays the sequence of events, and he analyzes his decisions with each iteration, eyes closing against those last few seconds in particular. The agony of helplessness. The flash of terror on the child’s face as she realized that they weren’t stopping. The crushing impact of frail flesh upon metal. Bucky pushes hard against it, punts it down the road for future Bucky to deal with, and opens his eyes again.

The ride back to base is uneventful and silent, save for routine flat-voiced check-ins between Steve and each vehicle. Bucky feels a hum of anger whenever Steve’s voice comes through the speakers, and he decides with not a little spite that he’ll be the one calling a meeting tonight.

When they pull up into the motor pool, everyone dismounts, the usual chatter dulled down to only the exchanges required to conduct post-mission inspections. Bucky makes a point to check in with the men in the other vehicles, then pulls Wilson, Luis, Reyes, and Trip aside.

“Don’t worry about the vehicle,” Bucky tells them. “I’ll take care of it.”

The four men exchange uneasy looks.

“Are you sure, Sergeant?” Trip asks. “I mean, I’m okay with helping, if you—”

“I don’t need help. I need you all to get out of here, grab some chow, and check in with your squad leaders before lights out.” Bucky makes eye contact with each of them. “Got it?”

“Hooah, Sergeant,” they all reply.

Bucky jerks his thumb to shoo them away and interrupts Steve, Dugan, and Rhodes, who’re clumped together doing their debriefings.

“Make sure you check in with your guys before bed,” he tells Dugan and Rhodes, then points to Steve. “And I need you to meet me here at 19:00 so we can go over what happened back there.”

Steve gives a frown of confusion but nods his agreement. “I’ll brief Captain Barton and First Sergeant in the meantime.”

“You do that.”

Bucky walks away then, fists clenched at his sides, molars grinding together. His mind starts racing through all the things he wants to say to Steve. All the ways he fucked up today. All the implications of his fucking up. He storms back to his trailer, hoping that Sam’s there. When he’s not, Bucky paces the length of their room and rehearses all the ways he’s gonna rip Steve’s ass, feeling his anger redouble when he questions whether he’s really angry at Steve or whether he’s angry with the barbarians who would force a child to stand in the road to be convoy bait.

Bucky grabs his patrol cap and his rifle and stands in front of the mirror that’s installed next to each door of each trailer. The look that’s there now, the one that’s showing all his tiny cracks — the cracks the Army made, the cracks that life made even before he ever raised his right hand to take his oath — that look just won’t do at all. And so he thrusts his chin out and sets his face into a hard scowl, because that’s what hard men look like. Men who kill kids and sleep well at night. Men who don’t get hurt when they hurt others. Men who never feel pressure behind their eyes. Men who never
have to blink and turn away because their hearts are breaking open. Men who don’t have to drink themselves into oblivion because the thought of one more moment spent as Bucky Barnes is too overwhelming to bear.

Maybe one day he’ll finally get the hang of it.

— — —

At 19:00, Steve makes his way along the dark row of vehicles in the motor pool until he comes to the single stall illuminated by a flood light. Bucky’s there with a bucket of water and a few rags, staring at the front of the Humvee parked there. Steve reaches down and picks up Bucky’s uniform coat, which looks to have been tossed in the dirt, and drapes it over his forearm. Steve is careful to make his footfalls heavy so that Bucky can hear him approach, and he stops a good ten feet shy of him. Whatever Bucky called him here to say, Steve knows it’s not good, because he knows a very pissed off Bucky when he sees one.

“You wanted to see me, Sergeant?”

Bucky turns to face him and slides on a pair of latex gloves as he speaks. “I wanted to talk about what happened on the road, Sir.”

“All right.”

“You made a mistake. A bad one.”

“Did I?”

Bucky turns back toward the vehicle, wets one of the rags in the bucket, and freezes for a moment. Steve’s eyes trail over the front grill of the vehicle, which is caked with gore and sprayed with blood. He swallows heavily as nausea creeps up his throat.

With a sour expression, Bucky begins wiping the blood off, carefully avoiding the pieces of child that he’ll have to scrape out somehow. “You know the protocol, Sir. When we’re in a convoy, we don’t stop for anyone. We give warning, they don’t move, we keep going.”

Steve runs his hand over Bucky’s uniform coat, smoothing the fabric down over his arm. His fingers trace absently over his name tape. “I know that’s the protocol. But was that really necessary, in this case?”

Bucky’s voice rises as he responds. “You know why we have standard operating procedures, Lieutenant Rogers?” He glances over at Steve, even though the question is obviously not intended to be answered. “We have them so we can act the way we need to act without having to think.”

“We shouldn’t be running over children,” Steve snaps. ”Period.”

“No shit, but that’s the fucking tactic, Steve — sorry. Sir.” Bucky breathes a heavy sigh as he wets and wrings out the rag over the bucket. “That’s the point. They know we want to stop for kids. Especially for kids.”

“We could have tried to swerve around her.”

“Into the fucking ditch, where there was probably another IED waiting for us?” Bucky pushes his gloved finger between the grill grates and gags as he unsticks a chunk of flesh. “That was a textbook tactic. Textbook. We stop for the kid, BOOM! Everyone in vehicle one looks like this” Bucky holds
out his finger, which is smeared with blood and a clump of human tissue. “Trip, Luis, Reyes, Wilson, me, we’re all fucking pink mist. And this kid, too.” He wipes off his finger on the rag and visibly tries to swallow down another gag. “She was dead no matter what.”

Steve’s own stomach lurches ominously. “You jumped the chain of command when you got on that radio.”

Bucky whips around, eyes blazing. “You were supposed to tell Wilson to push forward. That was your job. And guess what? You froze. You froze, and because you did, you were going to leave the choice in the hands of a fucking private. So yeah, I jumped in, because no junior enlisted soldier should have to live with thinking it was his choice to run over a kid. That choice was made for him by some general somewhere, and it was supposed to be reinforced by you. You froze, I took over. Bam. Now it’s my choice, not Wilson’s.”

Bucky turns back to the grill and starts digging out the gore with angry vigor, coughing, gagging, clearing his throat, grimacing as he dislodges everything and wipes pieces of kid into that filthy rag. When the grate is clear, he gives it a final wipe down with a clean towel and throws the rags and his soiled gloves into a nearby trash barrel. He then turns until he’s canted toward Steve, though he’s careful not to look directly at him.

“We have to protect these men, Steve. They’re our children.” Bucky makes no move to correct himself. “Everything else is bullshit. Fuck your career. Fuck the mission. The only thing that matters is keeping those guys alive. If it’s between running over a kid and keeping our men alive, I’ll hit 50 fucking kids before I let any harm come to them.” Bucky finally makes eye contact then, fierce and cold, serious as the grave. “Those are our men. Your men. Start fucking acting like it. Sir.”

Everything descends on Steve heavily. Bucky’s words. The tone in which he spoke them. The weight of the new context Bucky has introduced to the events of the day. In those moments today, those moments where Steve so utterly failed, all he could see was the rightness and wrongness of killing a child. What he failed to consider was the cost of his indecision on the men. His men. A very serious error, indeed.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Bucky tells him, “I’m gonna go puke.” He throws the bloody bucket water on the ground and tosses the bucket against the wall. He then grabs his rifle from where it’s propped against the tire and yanks his coat from Steve’s extended hand. His footsteps are steady as he walks away, but his shoulders are hunched high, barely able to keep his head up.

Steve stands there for a long time. He’s not sure how long. Long enough for the nausea to pass. Long enough for his error to sink deep into his viscera. Long enough to wonder what it must have taken for Bucky to become the person he is now. Eventually, he finds his footing and turns off the flood light, but not before casting a final glance at the vehicle. It looks like it did this morning, like it never plowed over a little girl. Like it never became a weapon wielded by a war-hardened platoon sergeant. A platoon sergeant who used to be a skinny kid with thick, dark, flopping hair, the kind that had a little wave to it, a gentle curl that faded once he grew it long and then cut it short after enlisting. Sometimes Steve wonders if it was ever there at all, if maybe he remembers it all wrong. If he remembers Bucky all wrong.

Struck by a sudden longing for contact with someone who doesn’t yet view the world with blood-tinted glasses, Steve walks to the phone trailer, where he hits a rare patch of low activity and only has to wait ten minutes to get a phone. He calls the only person he ever calls, the only person in the world who seems to know for a fact that he’s not an incompetent idiot or a heartless bastard. He breathes an audible sigh of relief when Sharon picks up on the other end.

“Hey, babe.” Steve speaks quietly, trying to create privacy where very little actually exists. A private
first class in the next stall looks over at him, and Steve shoves aside some automatic self-scolding about maintaining officer bearing, because, God damn it, he deserves to have a life, too.

“Hey!” Sharon whispers. “Can you call back in an hour?”

Steve swallows. He wants to say “Sure, of course, no problem.” He even tries to say it. He opens his mouth for the words, but they hold fast in his brain.

“Are you okay?” Sharon asks. Then, without waiting for his response, she continues with “Hold on just a sec.”

On the other end, he hears muffled conversation between Sharon and some male voices. After some further muffling, she gets back on the line, her voice clear and worried.

“Okay, I’m here. What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Steve wants to spill every detail of the convoy today. Every second he’s recorded in his memory. Every shout from his men, every tink of raining dirt and rock against metal, every cough and gag from Bucky’s throat. He wants her to know the concussive boom of an IED, the feel of it shaking the earth. He wants her to know the conflict clawing at his heart, where he’s ashamed — ashamed — for not confidently ordering his men to murder a little girl.

Steve wants her to know all of that. But not a single word of it comes out.

“Steve, please. Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing.” He frowns. “I’m okay. You didn’t have to leave your meeting. Who’s it with?”

“That’s not important.”

Which means that it’s with someone very important.

“Colonel Engles? General Holt?”

“I’m here now. I’m listening.”

He bites his lip. “It’s just some stuff with my platoon sergeant.”

Oh, no. No, that is definitely not the direction he wanted the conversation to go, but go there it does, with the determination of a loose cannon.

“I thought you said he was really good.”

“He is.” Steve pinches the bridge of his nose as the layered meaning of those words sinks deep into his chest. “We just don’t see things the same way.”

Sharon makes a small, thoughtful sound. “Isn’t that a good thing sometimes?”

“It’s Bucky Barnes.” Steve blurts out, then prepares for the hard slap of regret that’s about to boomerang back into his face.

There’s an excruciatingly long pause on the other end of the phone, one that throws Steve’s heart rate into a frenzy.

“...The guy from before,” Sharon says, her voice desiccated.
Bucky Barnes is only spoken about vaguely or euphemistically in their relationship, usually referred to as “the guy from before” or “your… friend,” awkward beat between words very much included. It started on that one drunken night last year when Steve decided to be painfully honest, when the weight of Bucky seemed to be the single thing keeping him from entering an authentic relationship with Sharon.

So he spilled it. Some of it, anyway. The friendship part. The sex part. He glossed over the love part, because he never wants Sharon to know how much he loved Bucky. And not just because he’s still devastated by what happened between them, but because he keeps that love in such a deep place within him, such a secret, private place, that he can’t bear for anyone else to look at it. Nobody gets to see that. That’s Steve’s alone. It’s Steve’s to carry and live and die with.

“Yeah. Him.”

“Okay.” Sharon offers a few moments more of thick silence. “Is there anything I should be worried about?”


There’s another long pause. “Okay. I’m concerned about you, though. You don’t sound very good.”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Okay. Well, we can talk about what’s actually going on later, when you’re ready. How’s everything with the roommate?”

Steve skirts over the latest of Sitwell’s exploits before curving the conversation toward her. Something in him has turned sharply, and he’s overcome with the hot, thrumming certainty that if he says one more word about this deployment, he’s gonna flip the table he’s at or throw the phone across the room. It’s an unsettling sensation, if only because he so rarely feels the type of anger that makes him want to wreck something. His anger is usually turned neatly inward, where it can’t hurt anyone but himself.

They talk for a few more minutes before Sharon tells him that she has to get back to her meeting. Steve is disappointed and sad that she has to go, and he hates that he feels that way. He hates that she’s the only person who makes him feel loved, and he adores her for it at the same time. He adores that she would leave a meeting with at least one very high ranking man who probably already doesn’t respect her, just to listen to him stall and lie and talk around the truth and complain about his roommate. He adores that she knows when he’s giving her the run-around and calls him on it. He adores her. And, God, he misses her. He misses the light she brings to his life, because it’s dark as hell over here on the other side of morality, and he could really use something to keep him warm in the cold of it.

When he returns to his trailer, Sitwell isn’t there. It hits Steve that it’s Friday night, which still means something on deployment, even with the six or seven-day work weeks. Steve fills the time alone with things that that are supposed to be pleasant. A luxuriously long six-minute shower where he tries to wash off the awfulness of the day. A few chapters of Starship Troopers. A good jerk, which ends up not being very good at all because his memories of his last night with Sharon are spliced with deeply unsexy things like spilled heirlooms and terrified children. His hand pauses on his softening dick, and he thinks getting off tonight might ultimately be a lost cause.

But then, his mind starts weaving down a dark, dark path, to the deepest vaults of his wank bank, where he finds an old reel of memory featuring a very sultry Bucky Barnes grinding down on his
cock, his head thrown back, eyes closed, his body lean and glistening with sweat in the moonlight, his husky voice murmuring filthy things about how big and hard Steve’s dick is, how good it feels inside him, how he wants to ride it all night, how he wants Steve to stroke him, shove up into him, make him come so hard —

The memory does the trick with stunning efficiency, and Steve climaxes with a mixed rush of ecstasy and shame. He reminds himself in a post-masterbatory flood of panic that this doesn’t mean a single thing about Sharon or Bucky or himself. It’s just a wank and that’s it. And that is it.

But after that hiatus of panic, Steve’s mind does go back to Bucky as he tries to fall asleep. He wonders if Bucky lies awake like this — certainly not jerking off to memories of him, but maybe thinking about the heirlooms and the kids and explosions and the tinks of rock and the oddness of nonchalant abuse. And Steve hopes that Bucky does think about those things. He hopes that Bucky’s bothered by them. Because if he’s not, then he really can’t be the man Steve fell in love with so long ago. Not even a distant shadow of him. That old love of theirs may be buried and gone, but the thought of Bucky’s goodness being consumed by war is almost too awful to imagine.

And in this moment, even though God is long dead to him, Steve still prays that Bucky is awake right now, just like he is. Thinking.

———

To say that Bucky woke up the next morning wouldn’t be exactly factual. He’s been up all night, his mind traipsing through the usual children’s treasury of mayhem he’s witnessed and perpetrated in this country and its neighbors all the times he’s been over here. It always comes out at night, when he’s perched on the edge of sleep, when his defenses are down and his distractions are gone. In the past, he used to get up in the middle of the night and run, back when he was with the Ranger Regiment. Back before he became just a regular Joe again, subjected to the rules and curfews of regular Joes. Returning to the flock from special operations has mostly been a relief, but there are times when he’d give his left nut to roll with his fellow operators again, to return to the smooth simplicity of his work with them, where all he needed was time and patience, good aim, and a reliable spotter.

But all those heads and chests he blasted open are now the stars of his nightmares and his nighttime attempts to reconcile killing with the insistence of his conscience that killing is wrong, wrong, wrong. He can tell himself that they deserved it, that somehow, every person he’s harmed has earned it in some abstract or literal way. It’s enough to get him to the end of each day and to push his men there with him, but its effectiveness has a very short half-life. Being a career aggressor requires far more maintenance than he ever thought it would. Never read that fine print in his first, second, or third Army contract.

Across the room, Sam shifts under the covers and lifts his head.

“You awake?” Sam asks

“Yep.”

“Feeling any better?”

“Yeah.” It was much easier to tell Sam he was sick with food poisoning last night than to tell him he was sick with shame and disgust.

“Someone in the DFAC has a grudge against every damn one of us.”

“What did they think was gonna happen when they hired hajis to cook for us?” Bucky slaps his palm
flat against his forehead. “Oops. Not supposed to call them that.”

“Says who?”

“Rogers.”

“What are you supposed to call them?”

“‘Local nationals.’”

Sam snorts. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

“He’s right, though.” Bucky lets his hand flop to his side. “I mean, Specialist Abbas is Syrian, right?”

“Yeah. I try not to say it around him.”

“Gonna take some serious practice. Been saying it for four years straight.”

“You and everyone else.” Sam sits upright and stretches his arms over his head. “But yeah, maybe he’s not wrong.”

Never — not once — did Bucky ever think not to say it. His platoon sergeants and squad leaders throughout his career used it with abandon, and his platoon leaders never expressed any discomfort at its use. Only Steve Rogers has ever raised the notion that it might be inappropriate to use ethnic slurs to describe the people they’re supposed to be helping.

The moral correctness of Steve hangs in the air for a few minutes before Bucky rolls out of bed and pads to his wall locker for a clean uniform and his shaving kit. It’s Saturday, and given yesterday’s events, Steve granted the platoon a respite from their usual PT this morning. Theirs is the only platoon in the company that PTs on Saturday, but Bucky agreed to the extra exercise with great enthusiasm. If he had to distill combat survival down to one factor, it would be fitness. Strength. Speed. Power. Endurance. A strong, fast man who can carry himself long distances will stand a greater chance at survival than a slower, weaker man, after accounting for the mind boggling randomness of injury and death in the theater of war. Bucky’s seen the fittest operators die within three hours of landing in country, just as he’s seen men like Foggy Nelson come out of war unscathed. But he can’t accept that there’s nothing any of them can do against the roulette wheel of fate, and even the illusion of agency can mean the difference between life and death for some men. He’ll take any bit of control that he can get, imagined or otherwise.

After a shave and a shower, he puts on his uniform, grabs his rifle, holsters his pistol, and heads out the door. With an hour to spare before their monthly command information briefings start, Bucky decides to try his hand at the phones, because Rikki’s birthday is today, and he at least owes her the courtesy of a brotherly 2:00 am phone call.

And, of course, this would be the exact time that his plans are interrupted by the yowling of the sniveling shit stain and village idiot of Alpha Company, Lieutenant Sitwell.

“Sergeant Barnes!”

Bucky slows his steps and grinds to a reluctant halt. He loosens his grip on his rifle and turns neatly on his heels toward the offending voice.

“Lieutenant Sitwell.”
Sitwell closes the distance between them, stopping a few paces short of Bucky. “Come with me, Sergeant,” he says in what Bucky imagines must be his best impression of an authoritative tone.

Sitwell starts to walk away without waiting for any reply, until he realizes Bucky’s not following him.

“What’s up, Sir?” Bucky calls after him, because he’s not about to start taking orders from assholes outside his chain of command without good and clear reason.

Sitwell spins around and turns a brilliant shade of pink while the barrel of his rifle ghosts a few discomforting inches toward Bucky’s body. Not enough to be properly aimed at him, but enough to let Bucky know that he’s considering it. “I gave you an order, that’s ‘what’s up,’ Sergeant. Come with me. Now.”

It takes every ounce of the small reserve of energy Bucky has to keep his eyes from rolling. “Yes, Sir.”

Sitwell marches him halfway across the base, and Bucky blisters with anger when he figures out that he’s being taken to Alpha Company command. He should be on the phone right now, talking to a mumbling, half-awake Rikki. Or, at the very least, he should be weathering Daisy’s cursing at him over his calling at such an inhumane hour. In either case, he should not be here, being ordered around by this cretin and dragged off to the command team for God knows what.

Bucky takes off his patrol cap as they enter the trailer, which Captain Barton shares with First Sergeant Morita, Lieutenant Sousa, and the commander, executive officer, and first sergeant of Bravo Company. Barton and Morita are seated at Barton’s desk, waiting for them with expressions that lay somewhere between annoyed and expectant.

“Sir,” Sitwell says, snapping to the position of attention in front of the desk. “I’m here to address the matter of Sergeant Barnes and —”

“What’s going on here?”

Bucky cranes his head toward the sound of Steve’s voice and the heavy steps that accompany it. Christ, does he look like he has a case of the ass, his blue eyes ablaze, his full lips drawn into a frown.

“I’ve got this handled, Steve,” Sitwell says.

Steve flanks Sitwell, stiffening to his full height. “I heard you talking to Sergeant Barnes earlier. Disrespectfully. So I’ll ask again: what’s going on here?”

“Funny you should mention disrespect,” Sitwell says, tossing a contemptuous glance over to Bucky. “That’s exactly the reason I’ve brought Sergeant Barnes here today.”

“I think you need a refresher course on chain of command, because if you have a problem with my platoon sergeant, you bring that to me.”

“Maybe I question your capacity to take care of this situation.”

“And what ‘situation’ is that?” Steve asks.

Sitwell turns to Barton. “Sir, last night I was in the motor pool, grabbing something I left in our vehicle, and I overheard a conversation between Lieutenant Rogers and Sergeant Barnes that I found very disturbing.”
“So you were eavesdropping,” Bucky says.

“Don’t interrupt me,” Sitwell snaps back.

“Watch your mouth, Sitwell.” Steve barks the order like it’s actually his to give, and Sitwell flinches.

Barton slams his hand on the desk. “All of you, shut up.” He makes hard eye contact with all three men. “Get to the point, Sitwell.”

“Sergeant Barnes yelled at Lieutenant Rogers like some drill sergeant. He was disrespectful and insubordinate. I think he should be reprimanded.”

Bucky snorts, shaking his head. Morita’s mouth twitches.

“Sir,” Steve interjects, “Sergeant Barnes was pointing out a crucial error I made while acting as convoy commander. And yes, his tone was brusque. He was also in the process of removing pieces of a child from the grill of our vehicle with his bare hands so that one of our junior enlisted men didn’t have to do it.” He looks at Sitwell. “If you’d exercise a little empathy, you could imagine how disturbing that would be. Not that I think you would ever do anything so compassionate or self-sacrificing for your soldiers.”

Bucky’s mouth quirks into a small, appreciative smile, one which sharpens when Sitwell starts sputtering inarticulately in response. All that Duke learnin,’ and he can’t ever seem to string three words together when it actually matters. Steve talks over him, addressing Barton directly.

“Sir, Sergeant Barnes and I have had several productive discussions about our command dynamic and have been working very well together. Lieutenant Sitwell’s concerns are unfounded and are based on an incident that’s been taken completely out of context.”

Sitwell points a menacing finger at Bucky. “He’s always like this! He keeps getting away with doing and saying whatever he wants!”

Barton, bless the man, has a chuckle at this while Bucky and Morita exchange amused looks.

“All right.” Captain Barton holds up his hands. “Sitwell, you’re dismissed. Next time, use the proper chain of command.” When Sitwell continues to stand there, Barton raises his voice. “That’s your cue to go away now.”

Like the good little tool he is, Sitwell snaps to the position of attention, performs a smooth turn, and takes his leave.

Barton takes a deep, tired breath and re-orients himself. “Now, is there a problem here? A real one?”

“No, Sir,” Steve and Bucky say together.

“Because you both told me that there wouldn’t be any drama. You promised me you could make this work.”

“Sir, everything’s fine. Sergeant Barnes has conducted himself with professionalism and integrity from day one,” Steve says.

Bucky feels his face warm and wishes he could will it away, if only because ‘blushing damsel’ is not exactly his best look — especially in uniform.

Barton’s eyes travel back and forth between the two of them. “All right. You’re both dismissed.”
Steve looks over at Bucky, his expression warm. Bucky nods his gratitude and tries not to read too much into it.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Morita says. “Stay back a few minutes.”

Bucky presses his lips together. “Yes, First Sergeant.”

Bucky throws one final glance at Steve, who’s making his way to the exit, and he finally lets himself smile fully. He smiles because in this moment, he sees Steve, the old Steve, his Steve, the Steve who can be unrepentantly feisty and uncompromising and won’t let a single speck of bullshit fly without calling it out. The Steve who’s compassionate and fiercely loyal. The Steve who was his best friend for ten years and whom Bucky loved more than any other person alive.

To his immense surprise, Steve returns his smile. It’s small, almost imperceptible, but it’s there.

Morita takes Bucky back to his desk and offers him a seat. “You okay, Jamie?”

“Yes, First Sergeant. Why?”

“You look like smeared dog shit.”

Of course he does, not that he likes hearing it. He’s been averaging three hours of sleep a night since he got here, his old reliable sleeping aid being inconveniently banned from the base several times over. He used to be really good at running on fumes, but he figured it was only a matter of time before he started slipping.

“Just getting old, I guess,” Bucky says.

“You’re 29. You don’t get to say you’re old until you’re at least 30.”

“I feel pretty fuckin’ old, that’s for sure.”

He wishes he could tell Morita that 29 is not only gay-old, it’s practically gay-dead, not that it matters. Not like he’s ever going to settle down, at this point. By the time he does his 20 or 30 years, he’ll be so physically wrecked and psychologically fucked up that he might as well join the goddamn priesthood.

“Yeah, four deployments’ll do that to you.” Morita smiles, as much as Morita ever does smile, which looks thin and painful. “How’s Rogers?”

“Very high speed. The men like him. Soon, they’ll probably even respect him.” This comes out perfunctorily, but after a few moments of reflection, Bucky realizes that he’s actually being honest.

“They’ll follow whatever lead you give them,” Morita reminds him. “You know that.”

“I know.”

“All right. Need anything? Men need anything?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Just need to get back out there, ASAP. The guys are a little shook up from yesterday.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Combat engineers are gonna need a week-long escort, and you’re on deck.”

Bucky nods. “Good. Good. You let ’em sit too long, they start to get scared. Gotta keep ’em moving.”
Morita huffs quietly. “Ain’t that the truth.”

When he finishes with Morita, Bucky smokes the fastest cigarette he’s ever smoked and runs to the base theater to make it in time for the first briefing. Steve’s at the back of the room, carefully making confirmatory eye contact with Sergeants Dugan and Rhodes to ensure that everyone’s seated and accounted for. Bucky stands next to him against the wall.

“Thank you, Sir,” Bucky says, clasping his wrist behind his back.

“For what?”

“Defending me.”

Steve crosses his arms over his chest, and the faintest hint of color graces his cheeks. “Lieutenant Sitwell does not get to fuck with you. Not you, not any of my men.”

Bucky nods and feels his disappointment settling in his smile, which shifts and brightens when Sam joins them a few moments later.

“I don’t know what you did, but Sitwell is going ballistic,” Sam mutters.

Bucky shrugs “I still don’t know why he’s got it out for me. I’ve never actually done anything to him. The only thing I can think is that I don’t spend enough time licking his ball sack and telling him how great he is.”

“Bitched at me for a full twenty minutes straight, not letting me get a word in. Barnes this and Barnes that. Words I haven’t heard since the SAT. ‘Malicious degenerate. Arrogant philistine.’”

Bucky belts out a laugh. “Malicious degenerate.” He turns to Steve. “You hear that, Sir?”

Steve tsks. “And a philistine, to boot. Terrible. Can’t have that in the infantry.”

“Heavens, no.” Bucky grins. “I may be slightly arrogant, though.”

“Oh, just ‘slightly’?” Sam says.

“I think you earn the right to be a little arrogant when you actually know what you’re doing,” Steve says. “Sitwell, on the other hand—”

Steve’s words cut off when Lieutenant Sousa catches his eye and waves him down to the front of the theater where he and Barton are standing.

“Well, I’ll see both of you later,” he says to Bucky and Sam.

“Take it easy, Sir,” Sam says.

“Talk to you later, Sir,” Bucky adds. Steve nods back at him.

When Steve’s out of earshot, Sam makes a small concession in a low voice. “Fine. He’s not awful.”

“Told you.”

“But I’ll never forget what he did to you, no matter how not-awful he is. And I swear to God, you try to get back with him or some crazy shit like—”

“Listen, just drop it, okay?” Bucky clenches his jaw and crosses his arms tight over his chest.
"Stop making googly eyes at him, and maybe I will."

Bucky snaps his head toward Sam and hisses through his clenched teeth. "Will you shut your fucking mouth?"

Sam shakes his head, because he doesn't fucking get it. Because it's not his ass and career and motherfucking life on the line if anyone finds out what kind of person he likes to fuck. And fuck that, because he doesn't even want to fuck Steve. He doesn't want to fuck any guy. Never fucking has. Never one fucking time. Not really. Not deep in his core, that smoldering place where his shame roots and pulses.

"This is me warning you," Sam says softly. "As your friend. That's all. There's no way the two of you end well."

Bucky scoffs. "No fucking shit."

He knows this, of course. And yet...

Nobody has ever accused Bucky of making good life choices.

Chapter End Notes

WARNING: This may be a disturbing chapter for readers who are sensitive to combat, graphic violence, gore, and graphic violence/death involving children (NOT sexual violence). Of the five or so violence-heavy scenes in this story, this may be one of the worst, depending on what you find difficult to read. The violence is important to the plot for this chapter, so I can’t really direct you around it without losing valuable character and plot development. If you really, really wanted, you could skip this chapter and pick it up in the next, though the character/relationship development probably will not flow very well. Racist language.

Military Stuff

boo-yah, devil hogs! — The Marines are nicknamed “Devil Dogs,” supposedly (but not likely) by the Germans during WWI because of their ferocity. It’s said that the Germans called them Teufel Hunden, which isn’t even grammatically correct. It’s probably actually based on US-generated propaganda. Marines also say “Oorah,” like people in the Army say “Hooah,” so saying “boo-yah, devil hogs” would be an insult on both fronts.

Knife hand: A gesture that looks like this, with variations!

Dugan/E-7: Dugan would be an E-6 whereas the other guy was one pay grade higher than him

Master Guns (Master Gunnery Sergeant): Reference to an E-9 in the Marine Corps

Jacksonville, North Carolina: a city near the Marine Corps’ Camp Lejeune

Fraternization: The military has strict policies about who can spend time with whom
outside of work. NCOs should not be spending personal time with junior enlisted soldiers. Officers should not be spending time with NCOs or junior enlisted soldiers. Higher ranking officers shouldn’t be spending time with more junior ranking soldiers. FYI, for Bucky and Steve to spend time together after duty hours, they could get what’s called an “exception to policy,” because they were friends before Steve commissioned as an officer.

Convoy protocol: It was often protocol to not stop for people in the middle of the road because stopping would often lead to an ambush.

Pink mist: the byproduct of a body being blown up

A Joe: An infantry man

Operators: members of special operations (Special Forces, Rangers, SEALS, etc.)

DFAC: Dining facility

PT: physical training

Rank and pay grades — here’s a link to a list of ranks and pay grades!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky grow closer. The men misbehave.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
April 15th, 2008

The room smells like bullshit. The scent of it is so clear that even Steve can detect it, which he marks as a sign of progress. After two months in-country, he’s finally finding his footing as a deployed soldier and leader. With Bucky’s help, he’s learning the hidden nuances and protocols of deployment that nobody ever taught him at the Academy or anywhere else Stateside. He’s getting wise to the bullshit, like the stuff swimming around all of them at this moment. Major Coulson, some MI guy in Sergeant Romanoff’s company, doesn’t seem to notice it. Or if he does notice it, he’s being very careful to not call the old man out on it.

Next to Steve, Bucky’s brow furrows while he listens to Major Coulson’s terp, Faisal, translate for Hamid Nazari. Nazari is of Saddam Hussein’s former officers who’s now tapped into the Sons of Iraq, a Sunni militia group that’s been collaborating with U.S. forces for years. He claims that he has information about someone who might have some connection to the Islamic State of Iraq. He’s being obnoxiously circumspect about it, though, skillfully wriggling around Coulson’s questions while throwing out just enough information to keep Coulson from walking away and taking his money with him.

Technically their presence is a courtesy, something Bucky talked his way into by selling Steve’s expertise in “Middle Eastern affairs” to Coulson’s aide. Steve smiled at Bucky’s vagueness and his
passionate salesmanship, a smile Bucky returned when Steve insisted to the aide that Bucky come with him to act as a tactical subject matter expert, an equally vague description of his platoon sergeant.

Ever since that night in the motor pool, they’ve fallen into a comfortable command rhythm, a civil and highly professional collaboration. Steve’s not exactly sure of the mechanism behind their synchronicity, but they both seem to have shifted some stubborn pieces within themselves to accommodate the other. It’s a movement that feels very… familiar.

Bucky shifts his legs, and his warm knee comes to rest against Steve’s own. They’ve been cramped in the back corner of the room, sitting on the floor on two thin cushions, their chai cups long empty. The two of them had to sit just-so in just the right place, at Bucky’s insistence. In full view of the door and as far away from the others as the little room will allow.

Bucky’s irritability and uneasiness have been radiating off him ever since they sat down. He’s been antsy from the get-go, upset that they weren’t allowed to bring any firearms with them to the meeting, objecting so vociferously that Steve had to pull him aside to help him calm down. The looks Coulson’s team members gave Bucky — like he was some raving, strung-out headcase — made Steve’s blood pound hot in his ears. Coulson was the only one who seemed to have any empathy, even though he held firm on his stance. Nazari’s not the kind of guy you insult like that, because he’s connected. And worse, he’s skittish.

And so both their pistols and rifles are back outside with the rest of the platoon, which has been pulling security for Coulson’s team all day. Steve tries to focus on Nazari and not the squirming man next to him, but Bucky’s sudden interjection pulls him back.

“Hey, Faisal,” Bucky calls out while the terp is in the middle of a sentence. “Ask him if this ‘someone’ is a relative of his.”

Everyone in the room looks back at Bucky, their expressions running the gamut from irate to perplexed. Faisal in particular looks horrified by the wildly out-of-turn comment. Nazari cants his head to the side like a bird of prey.

Bucky might be a skilled salesman, but he’s a pretty terrible diplomat. And Steve wonders how he was ever a sniper, given how impatient he’s proven himself to be on this deployment. But Steve’s not about to leave him flapping in the breeze, so he asks Nazari himself.

“This person you’re speaking about, the one connected to the Islamic State, is he a relative? Brother-in-law? Cousin? Cousin-in-law?”

Nazari’s mouth opens, then closes again.

“What did Rogers say?” Coulson asks Faisal, who translates while Coulson keeps his eyes locked on Steve.

“I knew it,” Bucky murmurs beside him, intuiting the gist of the exchange. “Same shit, different asshole.”

“Who is it?” Steve repeats. Faisal translates.

“Who are you to ask? You’re not military intelligence.”

Steve pushes his chin out. “And how do you know that?”

Nazari smiles over the lip of his chai cup and takes a small sip before this next words. “I’m a career
soldier, Lieutenant. I know.”

“Well, you’re not a soldier anymore, are you? Right now, you’re just an old man. One who seems to be wasting our time.”

“And you are a beggar acting as if he is rich.”

“We just want to know if you’re trying to get us to do your dirty family business for you.” Steve holds up his hand, palm up, in a way he hopes conveys openness. “That’s all.”

“He’s my wife’s cousin,” Nazari says, his expression unperturbed. “But that does not make it any less credible.”

“Is that so?”

Steve’s in a corner now, and he can feel himself tense defensively. Nazari’s argument is perfectly feasible, but Steve can’t shake the feeling that there’s something more, something like fear beneath Nazari’s cool veneer.

“You can either believe me or not.” Nazari's shoulders roll into a shrug. “It makes little difference to me. But it could make a big difference for you, could it not?”

“You know it would.”

Nazari takes a breath so deep that even Steve can hear it in the back of the room. His fingers tighten around the old clay of his teacup. “Giving you this information may put me at risk.”

“But you must be at risk anyway, or else we wouldn’t even be here,” Steve points out, eyebrow cocking. “Let’s not pretend you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart.”

“The Islamic State is growing dangerous.” Nazari speaks the words in a low voice through a tight jaw, a tone that drops down ominously into Steve's gut.

“Yeah, no shit,” Bucky mutters once Faisal gets out his translation.

Steve nods thoughtfully. “Well, good thing we brought lots of money with us. Money that could get you out of here. Of course, we would need a name.”

The air in the room seems to grow thicker and heavier while Nazari contemplates. Steve is very, very far outside of his lane right now, but he’s also riding the thrill of knowing that he might actually be doing a small bit of good in a war where there’s not a whole lot of good to go around.

“Khour. Rami Khouri.”

“Do you have any hard evidence?” Coulson asks Nazari while his aide jots down the name.

Nazari’s sharp, brown eyes pass around the room. Steve can feel Bucky stiffen at his side, like he always does whenever Nazari starts looking around the room or at the door or the window.

“I can get you a few emails.”

The conversation goes on for some time. Steve settles back into his proper role as an observer, but not before exchanging a look with Bucky. Bucky gives him a smile, one that’s been tamped down from something bigger that he might show in private, and Steve gives him the same.

When the meeting finally ends and Nazari gets his cash, Steve and Bucky beeline it out of the
building and back to their men as fast as they can while still maintaining military bearing. Steve watches as Bucky reclaims his weapons with relief that’s almost painful, if only because it speaks to how unsafe he constantly seems to feel. More so than the rest of them. So much more.

Steve sees Coulson approaching, and if he didn’t have to represent his platoon and the entire 107th in this moment, he would outright bolt in the opposite direction. He knows he overstepped his boundaries egregiously, in a way that could most certainly earn him a counseling statement from Barton — or worse.

“Interesting move back there,” Coulson says, his tone light and observational. “I’ve never had infantrymen commandeer one of my meetings before.”

“Sorry, Sir.”

“No, I don’t think you are, though I do think you might be in the wrong branch.”

“I’m quite happy where I am, Sir,” Steve assures him. “And Sergeant Barnes was the one who started that line of questioning, not me.”

Coulson looks over at Bucky, who looks almost tearfully thankful to have a lit cigarette in his mouth. “Well, then maybe he’s in the wrong branch.”

Oh, how Steve wishes that Bucky weren’t in the infantry. It’s the ideal environment to bring out the most destructive parts of him, the ones that make him an excellent grunt but a generally dysfunctional person. At least, that’s been Steve’s very limited experience. He’s still learning who Bucky is now. Slowly. As the trust between them rebuilds from the razed pile of rubble they started this deployment with.

“Is there anything else you need, Sir?” Steve asks Coulson.

Coulson gives him a long look, an evaluative one, but shakes his head. “No. Go to your men, Lieutenant.”

Steve gives him a curt nod and does just that.

———

Walking away from their vehicles after post-mission checks and maintenance feels like a warm salve over Bucky’s cranked up body. Of course, this effect is diminished somewhat by his scheduled meeting with Steve, which Bucky refused to postpone despite Steve’s offer to do so.

He doesn’t have much of an excuse to avoid it, because their meetings are not nearly as bad as they used to be. They’re no longer intensely awkward or sodden with unspoken resentment and pain. Somehow, they’ve managed to pack all that away, though Bucky’s not quite naive enough to believe it’s gone for good. It’s merely been socked away for some rainy day down the road, when the conditions are just right for all their soggy, backlogged garbage to come spilling out. For now, Bucky’s content to keep it locked up, because the space between them has finally become habitable. Maybe even comfortable.

“Fucking Rumlow.” Bucky shakes his head as they review their personnel roster for updates. “He’s toeing the line. Doing a good job, even. Slippery fuck.”

Steve crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. “Remind me what he did back at Bragg.”

“One DUI. Coming to formation late a few times. Nothing we could administratively separate him
for. Maybe back in 2000 we could have cut him loose, but not in the middle of a troop surge. I wouldn’t be surprised if he got a bad conduct waiver to get in the Army in the first place.”

“Well, continue to keep eyes on him. There’s not much we can do until he makes another major mistake.”

“Oh, believe me, I’ll be watching.”

Steve checks off something in his notebook. “How’s the Arabic coming?”

“Jones has been quizzing everyone to death. Including me.”

Steve nods. “Great.”

Steve jots more things in his notebook while Bucky looks around Steve’s room. Steve has populated it with more signs of himself since they first arrived, particularly in the tight row of books lined atop his desk. Books on the Middle East, political philosophy, international relations. Bucky’s not sure where this regional fixation came from. The Steve he knew didn’t give half a shit about the Middle East or Central Asia. The Steve he knew would spend long hours painting to the sound of Robert Plant’s dynamic vocals pitching high up toward the ceiling. He’d read, but it was all fiction and poetry. Flannery O’Conner. James Baldwin. Pablo Neruda. Virginia Woolf. Joseph Conrad. Chinua Achebe. Jorie Graham. They would lie in Bucky’s bed, with Steve on his back holding a book above him while Bucky rested his head on the flat plane of Steve’s stomach. He’d slog through his roommate’s stack of New Yorkers, which she adamantly subscribed to but never actually read, and Steve would absentmindedly play with his hair and trace the shell of his ear with his finger, and sometimes when Bucky wasn’t expecting it, he’d touch the tip of Bucky’s nose and say boop or beep, and it was just... strange and delightful and such an utterly Steve thing to do.

“So, Mack.” Steve flips through the manila folder he brought with him. He stops at a copy of Mack’s enlisted record brief. “Have you sat down with him to prepare for the E-5 board?”

“Yes, Sir. He’s gonna kill it.”

“Of course he is.” Steve smiles, his fondness for their men plain in his blue-green eyes. “Also, we need to talk about Foggy’s—”

Steve’s voice is cut off by the lifting wail of the incoming alarm, and after a couple seconds of frozen terror, Steve drops to the floor so fast that he looks like he’s prestidigitated himself out of the room entirely.

Bucky watches him scramble under the desk they’re sitting at with the speed and adrenaline of a first-timer, all life-and-death and seriousness. Bucky drops to the floor so fast that he looks like he’s prestidigitated himself out of the room entirely.

Bucky watches him scramble under the desk they’re sitting at with the speed and adrenaline of a first-timer, all life-and-death and seriousness. Bucky drops casually to his knees and crawls under the desk after him, where he sits next to Steve with knees up, forearms resting atop them. He looks over at Steve, whose face is taut, his jaw clenched, as if he actually expects a rocket to fall right through the ceiling on top of them. Bucky clamps down hard on the smile that’s threatening to crack his grim expression, but he can’t stop it. The pressure surges, and like the explosion that Steve seems to be expecting, he bursts out laughing.

Steve glares over at him. “This isn’t funny.”

Bucky nods. “Yes, it is.” His laughter rolls unabated. “Your face…”

The last thing on Earth Bucky expects to hear is the compressed puff of air that comes out of Steve’s mouth, which quickly escalates into laughter that’s been absent for so many years of Bucky’s life that he barely recognizes it.
They laugh through the screaming of the alarm, until tears are coming out of both of them. Until Bucky’s cheeks and diaphragm hurt. Until the all-clear alarm sounds and the giddy energy pouring out of both of them subsides with the threat.

Bucky sighs, letting out a last pair of chuckles. “We survived.”

“Oh, shut up.” Steve smiles as he wipes his face with his palms. “That was my first one.”

Bucky glances over at him, breathless not just from the laughter. He’s become acutely aware of all the places where their bodies are touching. Their shoulders. Upper arms. Thighs. He holds tightly onto these few moments before Steve inevitably breaks contact and gets back to business.

“Guess we should get off the floor.” Steve looks over to Bucky, as if he’s looking for permission.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, resigned. “Guess so.”

Neither man moves for several minutes of heavy, fidgeting silence.

“Do you want to lift together some time?” Steve finally asks.

Bucky stops the overexcited agreement that tries to catapult out of his mouth, the one that goes roughly like ‘God, yes, please let me watch your incredible body lift impressively heavy things in skimpy, tight workout clothes.’ Instead, he gives a cool smile, a pair of mellow nods, and self-congratulation for composing himself like an adult rather than a pathetic loser who has pined for Steve Rogers squatting in tiny shorts ever since he first saw him do it at sixteen years old. Christ, if that's not motivation to keep things nice and cordial for a while longer, Bucky's not sure what is.

"Great," Steve says. And he grins and looks down at the floor between his feet, his cheeks pink even in the shadows.

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April 26, 2008

“Man, I’m gonna be sore tomorrow,” Bucky says, pulling his arms behind his back to stretch his chest. He touches his fingertips to the rifle he has slung over his back and runs them over the smoothness of the stock.

“But is it worth the bragging rights?” Steve smiles over at him.

“Oh, hell yeah. Don’t think I won’t rub that in your face for the next week.”

“You enjoy your few days of gloating until I hit my 275.”

“Yeah, right.”

Of course, Steve actually is right. He’s always been stronger. Faster. More coordinated. When they first became friends, they used to sit for hours and make up stories about who Steve’s dad might be. They decided he was athletic, maybe a professional wrestler or a baseball player. They decided that he must be someone with a very important job that he had to do, which is why he left. This interpretation was a kindness to Steve more than anything, because as far as Bucky was privately concerned, Steve’s dad was just a deadbeat piece of shit. But still, he helped Steve look for Joseph Rogers, a name so common that there were at least two dozen of them in the phonebooks at the Brooklyn Public Library. They checked all five boroughs, calling every listing and coming up with a whole lot of nothing. They then concluded that he must be in New Jersey, or maybe Connecticut.
This was the only logical explanation. That would be another search for another day, which never came to pass. Bucky was glad when Steve seemed to give up on the whole thing, even if it was just because his ma got sick again.

Bucky slows to a stop at the smoke pit, where he snags his cigarettes from the black gym bag slung over his shoulder and offers one to Steve, which he declines as usual. The air is cool and crisp, which draws out the goosebumps on Bucky’s sweat-damp skin. It’s quiet, especially for a Saturday night, and Bucky shoves aside the wave of reflexive nervousness that tries to crest in him.

“You think we should get an exception to policy?” Bucky asks, his voice tight.

It’s a hard question to grind out, because if Steve’s not on the same page as he is, their hard-earned, tenuous progress could unravel under the presumption of a closeness that’s not really there.

Steve tilts his head, then nods. “Probably a good idea.”

Bucky can’t help but smirk around his cigarette. An exception to policy will prohibit them from being charged with fraternization for spending time together like this, since they have a pre-established relationship prior to Steve commissioning. Never mind all the years of rage and bitterness, which they’re continuing to ignore quite artfully.

“Sharon got picked up on the O-3 list,” Steve says.

And, of course, Steve turns the conversation toward her. Bucky’s noticed the pattern countless times. Get close, bring up Sharon Carter. Get close, bring up Sharon Carter. He’s trying to see it as a sign that they’re verging on friendship, rather than feeding the misplaced jealousy that stirs in his gut. In high school, they used to talk about stuff like that all the time. Steve’s girlfriends. Bucky’s crushes. Of course, there were more than crushes, but he never told Steve about those. Bucky couldn’t bear for him to know what he actually did behind closed doors. He was far too ashamed and far too scared of being rejected by the best friend he ever had in his life.

“Wow,” Bucky says, trying not to sound as acutely disinterested as he actually is. “Good for her.”

“She’s earned it.” Steve’s smile is warm and deeply fond, and Bucky wonders if Steve ever had that smile for him. That stabbing sensation in Bucky’s gut intensifies.

Bucky exhales a slow stream of smoke from his nose. “You’re a lucky guy.”

Steve nods, and his gaze dulls as it drifts to the ground. “I am.”

Thank the Lord, this swiftly spiraling conversation is interrupted by a loud guffaw, one that neither of them could ever misplace. On the dimly lit gravel walkway, they can make out three figures, swerving, giggling, talking so loudly that other soldiers yell for them to shut the fuck up as they pass by the rows of trailers.

The three clowns finally step under a light, and Bucky can clearly make out an over-the-moon drunk Rumlow, Wade Wilson, and Luis. Bucky curses under his breath, snubs out his smoke in the dirt, and throws the butt in the bin.

“Hey, you three.” Bucky points to them, and the sight of him is enough to stop them dead in their tracks.

“Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit,” Wilson repeats as the reality of what’s happening settles upon him. He snaps to attention, as if that could possibly do anything to curry favor in his very fucked condition.
“What’s goin’ on, fellas?” Bucky asks, looking them up and down, watching for swaying, listening for slurring, smelling for fumes. Senses sharp. Judgment fierce.

“We’re jus goin’ to the PX for some, uh…” Luis pauses and points to Rumlow.

“Doritos,” Rumlow says. He holds up a bag that’s half eaten already. “Want some?”

Bucky ignores Rumlow and gets menacingly close to Wilson, who reeks of nacho cheese and vodka. They say you can’t smell it on someone, but Bucky can detect it from five klicks away. Something inside him goes buoyant, deep in his belly.

“You boys been drinking?”

Bucky’s attention travels from soldier to soldier, from Rumlow’s defiant ‘fuck you’ face, to Luis’ hanging head, to Wilson’s wide eyes and yawning jaw.

“Yes, Sergeant,” Wilson finally says.

Out of the shadow of the smoke pit, Steve emerges, his sneakers landing sternly with every step. When the men catch sight of him, the “oh, shits” begin again in earnest. Luis salutes Steve, a potentially fatal error on a no-salute base and a fine indicator of just how impaired he is.

“Where is it?” Steve asks, his voice low and dangerous.

“In our room,” Luis confesses.

“All right, let’s go,” Bucky says, keeping his voice steady despite the confusing mix of enticement and anger and disappointment brewing in his chest.

The men lead Bucky and Steve back to their trailer in stumbling silence. Bucky glances over at Steve as they walk. His expression is grim, and his jaw looks tight enough to snap. This is the first real disciplinary problem they’ve had in the platoon, and it’s a damn serious one at that. If Steve’s thoughts are anywhere close to where Bucky’s are, he’s probably wondering just where the two of them fucked up.

Back at their trailer, Reyes comes to attention when they step through the door.

“I didn’t drink any of it, Sir,” Reyes says immediately to Steve.

“And yet, you didn’t report it to anyone,” Steve replies with a glare.

Reyes stiffens. “I’m sorry, Sir.”

Bucky watches as Wilson retrieves three large mouthwash bottles filled with blue-tinted alcohol from his footlocker. One of the bottles is over half empty, an amount probably equivalent to a fifth.

“When did you get these?” Bucky asks, taking the bottles from him.

“Yesterday, Sergeant,” Wilson says.

“You drank all this tonight between the three of you?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

Bucky takes a long look at all four soldiers. When he says his next words, he ensures that they’re measured and even.
“Get some sleep tonight, because tomorrow morning, we are going to smoke the everliving fuck out of all of you.” Bucky points at Reyes. “You, too.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” they all say.

Bucky turns to Steve. “Sir, can you stay here while I get the MPs? I want breathalyzers on all of them. I’ll go get rid of these.” Bucky raises the bottles in hand.

“My pleasure, Sergeant.”

When Bucky leaves their trailer, he has every intention of taking the vodka to the MPs. He really does. It's important. It's evidence. The men fucked up, and they need to be disciplined. And as he walks, an idea begins to grow, an urgent one, and it strengthens little by little with each step that he takes. And then, somehow he's not even on his way to the MPs at all. He's going to his own trailer. And the idea is blooming and inevitable, and then he's walking through the door, and Sam is out for the night, and he empties out his footlocker, lines up the bottles along the bottom, and covers them strategically with gear and personal effects. As he does this, his mind doesn’t even attempt to generate a rationale. It’s probably for the best, because there is absolutely no logical or ethical reason to not dump out every single blue ounce into one of the Porta-Johns right this second.

He works automatically, powered by a deep and well-used algorithm that tells him that if he has access to booze, he needs to keep that access. And if he has that booze, he needs to hide it. Just in case. As he’s become accustomed, he banishes away any fledgling thoughts about consequences and carries on with his night as if everything is completely fine. Because if there are two things that Bucky can do better than anyone in the entire 107th, it's lie and avoid, especially when it comes to the truth.

And, indeed, it is completely fine. Great, even. Bucky smiles when he grabs the MPs and tells them that his guys are drunk and that he dumped the booze already, despite how pissed off he is. Despite how much he'd rather not spend his Sunday morning smoking the shit out of his men. He smiles because those blue bottles are his now, and right now, because of that fact, there’s not a single thing that could be wrong anywhere in the entire universe.

———

Steve walks with a practically bouncing Bucky to Captain Barton’s trailer to fill him in on the events of the evening. Steve wonders if he’s happy because Rumlow blew a .13 on the breathalyzer, which may be enough to get him the discharge Bucky so desperately wants.

Barton answers the door in his PTs, which reveal the gruesome extent of the burn scars and other IED damage covering his left arm and leg. Steve has trouble keeping his eyes on Barton's weary face as he leans agains the door frame.

“What happened?” Barton asks.

Steve fills him in on the situation, along with the most-definitely-intoxicated BAC levels of all three men.

“Lemme guess, the ol’ mouthwash care package?” Barton raises an eyebrow at Bucky. For a moment, the two exchange the special look that only NCOs give each other, the one that Steve has trouble describing. He forgets most days that Barton was an NCO before he commissioned as an officer, making him a rarity and a man Steve feels very fortunate to serve under.

“Yes, Sir.”
“Okay, I’ll let First Sergeant know. So what’s the plan?” Barton asks Steve.

“We’re going to smoke them,” Steve says. “Early tomorrow morning. I’d like to have you there, as well as First Sergeant Morita and Lieutenant Sousa.”

Bucky glances over at Steve and gives an approving look.

Steve continues. “And I’d like to do it outside the junior enlisted housing so that the men can understand some of the consequences of putting the entire base at risk by violating the first General Order.”

Demonstration of force is a known and tested deterrent on the battlefield, and the same principle applies to corrective actions within a unit. And, of course, group physical punishment is a tradition as old as the Army itself, and administering it is one of the secret joys of leadership. Steve hasn’t smoked anyone since the academy, and he’s mildly disturbed by how much he’s looking forward to it.

“Good, good. Sounds good to me,” Barton says, nodding.

“This is also Rumlow’s second alcohol-related offense in twelve months,” Bucky says. “I’d like him to be processed for administrative separation.”

The corner of Barton’s eye crinkles. “Barnes, you honestly think I can justify separating anyone right now, given the current climate?”

Bucky frowns and shifts his weight forward. “But Sir, the policy is clear on—”

“I know the policy. We’re also on brigade wide stop-loss, so that ties my hands for any separations short of Chapter 8 and felony-level shit.” Barton shakes his head in defeat. “I’m sorry. I know you don’t like him, but for now, he stays.”

The vein on Bucky’s temple pops, a sharp contrast to the forceful politeness of his words. “Yes, Sir.”

“I’ll be there. So will First Sergeant and Sousa.”

“4:30, outside the shower trailer in section four,” Steve says.

“Whew! Gonna make everyone’s Sunday shitty, huh?” Barton grins, and Steve notes that he seems to have found the one thing that gets the man excited. “Go big or go home, right?”

Steve glances over at Bucky, who has his arms crossed and is gazing off into the darkness, out toward the wire, expression blank. Steve exchanges a few more logistical comments with Barton and then they’re off again, Steve following Bucky’s firm-stepped lead as they head back to the junior enlisted quarters. He can’t quite get a read on what’s going on with Bucky, why he’s not only pissed off but also quiet. After spending this entire deployment twitching and cursing in every stretch of uneasy silence, the change is notable.

“Where are we going now?” Steve asks.

“Need to give Doc a heads up, in case something goes south tomorrow.”

“How hard do we plan on smoking them?”

“Hard, and they’ll be hung over and dehydrated, so I want him to be there just in case.” Bucky stops in front of one of the trailers and looks to the ones on the left and right. “I think this is the one.”
Bucky knocks and Jones answers. He sputters out a formal greeting to both of them.

“Yeah, yeah, thanks, Jones. Is Doc here?”

“Hey Parker,” Jones calls. “Sergeant Barnes and Lieutenant Rogers are here to see you.”

Steve hears a muted “shit,” then some shuffling, then the sound of a jaunty video game tune being muted. Parker comes to the door in civilian clothes, eyes big and curious and darting between them, and his body waffles between the positions of attention and parade rest.

“Hey, Sir. Sergeant. How, uh... how are you?”

"Relax, Doc," Steve says with the loose wave of his hand. "We've got a little mission for you."

They fill him in on the details. Parker looks disappointed and offers to bring banana bags.

Bucky then presses his shoulder against the doorjamb and leans into it, real casual, folding his arms over his muscular chest. There's a space where Bucky's gray Army PT shirt ends and his bicep begins, and the skin there is so, so smooth, a polished, tanned surface that runs down to the tightly chorded muscles of his forearms. Steve clenches his fingers tightly at his sides.

“Oh, and I wanted to ask you about some graffiti that someone reported in the latrines,” Bucky says to Parker. He hitches his thumb over his shoulder, toward said trailers. “Seems we’ve had a rash of dick-and-balls graffiti lately. Really impressive ones, too.”

Parker crosses his own wiry arms in a tense imitation of his platoon sergeant's stance. His voice ratchets up high. “Oh, really? I didn’t notice. It’s probably Wilson. He’s always drawing weird stuff.”

Bucky nods slowly, his mouth curling up. “Okay. All right. I’m just saying, maybe keep an eye out, yeah?”

“Absolutely, Sergeant. Definitely.”

On their way over to brief Rhodes and Dugan, Bucky takes Steve to the latrine to show him the graffiti gracing the door of each stall. As dick-n-balls go, they really are very impressive.

“I told ya,” Bucky says. He points to the hair on the balls and the slit drawn at the head of the dick. “Just look at the detailing.”

“You really think Parker did this?”

“Nah. It’s just fun to tease him. This is definitely Wilson’s handiwork.”

The squad leaders take the news worse than anyone. Dugan’s face goes red and sweaty, and Rhodes makes a baleful promise that they won’t be able to lift their arms for at least two days, once he’s finished with them.

Afterward, they linger outside while Bucky smokes another cigarette. Steve doesn’t like the smell, never has, but Bucky looks like an advertiser’s wet dream every time he takes a puff. Maybe it’s the tall, dark, and handsome part, or the shape of his mouth, or the way it seems to give his voice a gritty edge that’s just—

“So, how do you want me to participate tomorrow?” Steve asks, distracting himself from that very unsettling line of thought.
“I figure I’ll be the loud angry asshole and you can be the creepy quiet one. Good cop, bad cop.” The cherry of his cigarette glows in the dark as he takes a drag on it.

“So, I’m the bad cop?”

Bucky breathes out the smoke over his shoulder, away from Steve’s face. “Oh, hell yeah. It’s always the quiet ones who are the scariest. You know that. The screamers, they’re obvious. They’re just discharging all their pent up energy. But the quiet ones, nobody knows how to read them.”

“I think I can do quiet and scary.”

After a few last hasty drags, Bucky scrubs the tip of his cigarette over the sole of his running shoe and drops it into the canister. “Well, we’d better get back. Almost curfew.”

Steve looks at his watch, baffled at how it went from 9:00 to 11:50 so fast. “Yeah, don’t wanna turn into a pumpkin.”

Bucky laughs, a fantastic sound when it’s genuine. When it’s not tinged with bitterness or sarcasm. “You never did look good in orange,” he says, then winks.

Steve smiles, even though he probably shouldn’t. Their conversations do this sometimes. They take a turn toward the past, not the facts of the past but the dynamic of it. It’s nice. Of course it’s nice. But it also strikes a dissonant chord in Steve, because Bucky and Sharon are two notes in his life that can’t be played together like this without marrow-deep pain.

Back in his trailer, Steve gives Sitwell a heads-up about the smoking, which is now a mere four-and-a-half hours away. He invites him to come, even though Steve knows he probably won’t.

“I bet Sergeant Barnes is great at smoking soldiers,” Sitwell says offhandedly as he draws down his comforter.

That’s all he says. It’s not a particularly damning statement, and it’s not even spoken with scorn. But all Steve can hear is insult. Maybe he’s just hearing the ghosts of all the other insults and slights Sitwell’s lobbed at Bucky over these past months, the ones Steve usually just lets go.

“What is your problem with him?” Steve lays his hands on his hips. “Seriously. What is it?”

Sitwell sits on the edge of his bed. His expression loses every bit of edge, every tinge of sourness. For the first time since Steve’s known him, Sitwell is being very serious.

“My problem with Sergeant Barnes is that he’s a drunk.”

“A drunk, huh? Thought you didn’t like him because you think he’s gay.”

Sitwell shrugs. “I don’t really care about that. At the end of the day, that’s his choice. Long as he doesn’t hit on me.”

Steve rolls his eyes at the very notion that Bucky would ever hit on Jasper Sitwell.

“What bothers me is Barnes’ irresponsibility, and the way he’s never held accountable for anything because he’s got more skill identifiers than anyone in this unit. He could drunk drive his truck through the wall of Captain Barton’s office, and he probably wouldn’t even get an Article 15. It’s just not fair.”

“He can’t be that bad,” Steve replies. “If he were really a drunk, like you say, he would have been
counseled at some point. He would have gotten a DUI. Something. His record is clean.

In fact, Bucky’s record is not just clean of disciplinary action. It’s exemplary. It’s the kind of record you do a double-take at just to make sure you don’t have two incredible soldiers’ files stacked together. Hell, the man has a Silver-fucking-Star, though Steve couldn't rustle up the citation for it and has no idea what it's for. He doesn't know how to ask. He's afraid to ask, though he's not sure why.

“Barnes is very good at managing his impression. He’s a likable guy. People like being around him. Barton likes him. First Sergeant likes him.” Sitwell holds up his index finger, pointing it emphatically. “But he’s had his soldiers call him in the middle of the night, when they really needed him, and he was too annihilated to even talk to them. And it’s not just a few beers on the weekends. We’re talking black-out drunk, multiple times a week.”

Steve frowns. He thinks back to when he and Bucky were together. Yeah, he liked to drink. And yeah, he could drink. God, could he drink. But he was young, and it was all just fun. Wasn’t it? And it wasn’t that often, was it? And Bucky always went to class. He always went to drill. He was always there for his family and for Steve — at least, until he wasn’t. And that certainly wasn’t alcohol’s fault.

“That doesn’t sound like him,” Steve says, his tone flat.

Sitwell sighs. “Look, you probably think I’m just an asshole who’s got some grudge. I get that. But I know men like him. My dad was like him. Good man. I don’t doubt that Barnes is a good man. I’m pretty sure he is. But he has a disease, and one of these days, he’s going to get himself or somebody else killed because of it.”

“Well, if he really has that bad of a problem, maybe you should try supporting him instead of undermining him all the time.”

“He’s not going to ever get help if he doesn’t experience any consequences. As long as he’s the golden goose around here, he’s going to keep destroying himself and putting people at risk.” Sitwell purses his lips. “Something has to change.”

Steve turns away and starts undressing. He doesn’t want to look at Sitwell right now. More than that, he doesn’t want Sitwell to see any of the concern that he feels settling on his face.

“It’s not your job to make Sergeant Barnes experience consequences,” Steve says, pulling off his t-shirt. “Just try being a good leader. Treat him like you’d treat one of your soldiers who was struggling. With understanding and compassion. You’re definitely not doing that.”

“I know.”

“Did you ever go to Barton or Morita?”

“They would never believe me. They adore him.” Sitwell pauses. “And I know I’m not liked. I know I’m a pain. I’m not blind to it.”

Steve wads up his PT shirt, walks to his wall locker, and shoves it in his laundry bag. He then turns and looks over at his roommate, at the man who’s been an obstacle and a nuisance and a barely competent leader ever since they met. And for the first time, Steve feels sympathy for him.

“Try harder,” Steve tells him. “Be better. We have to be better. Both of us.”

Sitwell looks down as his hands and nods.
3:45 comes in the blink of an eye. Steve drags himself to the latrine, noting that the dick-n-balls fairy has even visited the officer/NCO section. He shaves, showers, dresses, and walks to Bucky’s trailer, standing outside until the other man is ready. When Bucky finally comes out, it’s with a lopsided grin and deep, dark bags under his eyes.

They walk the rows of trailers until they come to the dwelling of their victims. Bucky uses his Common Access Card to override the door and flips on all the lights. Steve follows him in and watches Bucky unfold the scene, feeling both unease and awe as Bucky unleashes a side of himself Steve has never seen before.

“Get your asses out of bed! Move it! Move it!” Bucky yells, kicking Luis’, Reyes’, and Wilson’s beds as he passes them. He stalks to Rumlow’s bed next, eyes flashing and predatory. He tears the covers off of him and rips his pillow out from under his head, tossing it across the room. He leans in close and screams in Rumlow’s terrified face.

“Wake up, motherfucker! Get your fucking psychopathic ass out of bed! Now!” Steve’s entire body seizes up painfully as he watches the scene unfold, as the men scramble out of their beds, rattled and scared. The smart ones already dressed in their combat uniforms the night before, but Luis rummages through his wall locker for a clean uniform while Bucky screams at him to hurry the fuck up or he’ll be late for his own smoking. Steve very calmly tells the others to come to the position of attention in front of the door, remembering his role as the quiet, scary one.

Eventually, Luis joins the other three on the imaginary line Steve’s situated them along. The ones who drank look awful, swollen, their faces marked by a rough few hours of sleep on twisted sheets. Bucky marches them single file down toward the showers, where there’s a wide rectangle of dirt perfect for smoking hapless soldiers upon. A few people have already showed up, including Parker — looking young and serious — and First Sergeant, who looks only slightly better than the men they’re about to destroy.

“Front leaning rest position, move!” Bucky calls, and all four soldiers get into the push-up position. “Start pushing!” he yells. “What the fuck are you waiting for?”

Steve recognizes the tactic. Give the order to get into the push-up position, fail to direct them to begin doing pushups, then blame them for not doing something that was never instructed. Create the feeling of incorrectness. Make them question protocols. Increase the probability that they’ll mess up. Punish more. It’s a brilliant and cruel cycle.

Dugan and Rhodes arrive, and Bucky gives him a signal to stand back for the time being. The two men nod and watch over the process with unmasked enjoyment.

“Flutter kicks!” Bucky calls, and the four men flip rapidly onto their backs, legs stretched out in front of them. “Go!”

The men begin moving their legs up and down in a scissor-like movement. Steve walks over to Reyes, who’s clearly attempting to conserve energy by making his movements small.

“Bigger, Reyes,” Steve says to him, his face a mask of hard, unforgiving marble.

Reyes presses his lips together and corrects himself. Steve looks to the small crowd that’s gathered around them. Barton and Sousa. Every soldier in second platoon. Sitwell, Sergeant Wilson, and a couple soldiers from first platoon. Most have arrived in rumpled PTs with yesterday’s scruff still on
their faces.

Bucky starts yelling again, his voice furious and burning with something Steve can’t quite put his finger on.

“Did any of you think of what might have happened if we were called up on QRF last night? What if your brothers needed you outside the wire, and you were too fucking drunk to go help them? What if this base got attacked, and you were too drunk to tell whether you were shooting a combatant or your own fucking family?”

Steve very suddenly remembers his conversation with Sitwell. Bucky continues his brutal assault.

“Stop! Side straddle hop! Move!”

The men roll to their sides and rise to their feet. They’re flagging, sluggish and sickly, except for Reyes, who looks merely tired and inconvenienced. Bucky orders them to start doing jumping jacks, and it’s not long at all before Rumlow bends over and vomits on his boots.

“Keeping moving, Private Rumlow!” Bucky yells after he’s done heaving.

Rumlow closes his eyes, mumbles something, and resumes the exercise. Next to him, Luis must have caught a whiff of the puke, because he’s the next one to blow, turning to the side to spare his boots.

“The squat thrust!”

The men groan and follow his command. Luis stops, dropping flat on his stomach, trying to catch his breath. Steve walks over to him and crouches next to the pile of vomit Luis left earlier.

“I didn’t hear Sergeant Barnes tell you to stop. Did you?”

Luis growls. “No, Sir!”

He pushes up his body and resumes the movements. He’s slow as molasses and twice as sloppy, but he’s still moving. Steve stands and walks slowly along the line of men, giving each a pointed stare as he passes while Bucky continues chewing their asses.

“What you did was a betrayal to everyone here. You betrayed me, Lieutenant Rogers, your squad leaders, First Sergeant, Captain Barton, and everyone who depends on you. Your brothers.” Bucky visibly grits his teeth, and his yelling kicks up so loud that they can probably hear him at the front gate. “If anything happened to them because of your irresponsibility, because you just wanted to have a good time, you would have never forgiven yourselves!”

“You’re all a disappointment,” Captain Barton says plainly. “I expected better of you.”

“We trained you better than this,” Morita adds.

“It’s a privilege to be in this unit, men. Don’t forget that.”

Steve turns toward the sound of Colonel Fury’s voice and catches Bucky doing the same. Fury nods to both of them, then fades back into the crowd.

“Now I’m gonna turn it over to your squad leaders, who are very excited to impart some more wisdom onto you.” Bucky nods to Dugan and Rhodes, who are both chomping at the bit.

“All right, ladies,” Dugan bellows with glee. “The bear crawl! In a circle! Move your asses!”
Bucky and Steve step to the sidelines, where nearly half the company has now assembled. The faces of those watching are mixed with amusement, irritation, and pity.

“Nice work,” Steve tells Bucky.

“You too, Sir. Figure we’ll let them go for another ten minutes, then call it.”

Steve nods. “Good.”

When it’s finally over, there are three piles of vomit, four soldiers covered with sweat and dirt, and a thinned out crowd of spectators. Some have gone to chow, some back to their trailers for more sleep. Steve tunes into the nagging whisper in the back of his mind, the one that wonders if maybe they went too far. But when he reminds himself of the potential consequences, the gross violation of a multiply stated rule, he returns to a feeling of correctness about the whole thing.

Steve looks over at Bucky, who seems to have been stripped of all his energy, like he shouted it clean out of his body. He watches Parker examine the men with heavy eyelids, his mouth turned downward.

“You okay?” Steve asks.

“Fine,” Bucky says. “I think I’m gonna head out.” And with that, Bucky turns and begins to walk away, not even waiting for permission to leave.

Before he registers his own movement, Steve lays his hand on Bucky’s shoulder, stopping him. This isn’t right. Bucky doesn’t just leave like this. He doesn’t just leave his men behind without at least checking on them.

“Hey, hold on.”

Bucky looks back, then down at Steve’s hand. Something in him brightens then, just slightly, and he raises his eyebrows.

“Are you okay?” Steve repeats.

“I’m just tired.” Bucky smiles softly. “I’m okay.”

“All right. Go get some rest.” Steve squeezes his shoulder and drops his hand back to his side.

Bucky nods. “Thank you.”

Steve frowns as he watches Bucky walk off, but he re-orientates quickly and starts making the rounds that Bucky would normally make. He talks with each man quietly, asking if he understands why he was punished, asking if there’s anything the command team can do to support them. The men are all docile and repentant, and Steve feels even better about their decision to discipline them so ruthlessly.

When Parker gives all four men a clean-enough bill of health, Steve thanks him, checks in briefly with his squad leaders, and makes his way to the phone center to call Sharon. Happiness blooms within him at sound of her voice, at the way she tells him she misses him, at the updates she gives about Adams and Nguyen and her promotion ceremony on Friday.

But through their conversation, Steve’s mind wanders. Back to the smoking. Back to Bucky. Back to his conversation with Sitwell. And Sharon’s voice begins to sound very far away.

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Back in his room, Bucky strips down to his underwear and crawls into bed, hiking up the covers over his head with a long sigh. He closes his eyes. He tries to relax. He grumbles and tosses while sleep evades him for over an hour. He blames the room for being too quiet. He blames Sam for having a life and not being here right now. He blames Rumlow for being a psychopathic dirtbag and a bad influence on the others. He blames Barton for not letting Bucky toss that sack of shit to the wind, for not letting him send Rumlow back to whatever meth den in Spokane his parents birthed him into. He blames Steve for caring, for not seeing into the storm of shame that fueled every furious word out of his mouth this morning, blames him for not seeing the way he turned every berating syllable back in on himself tenfold. Because he deserves every word and more, especially given what he’s about to do.

Bucky sits up, eyes locking onto the foot locker just beyond the edge of his mattress. He debates, even though he knows which side has already won. But he still tries to reason it out, if only to say he gave it a shot. He debates himself for so long that the arguments on both sides lose all meaning, becoming merely a smashed up collection of letters, form with no function. So his body takes over, pulling his hand down to the bottom of that footlocker, to the opened bottle of vodka his men were chugging at last night. He pulls off the cap and smells it and, oh, he loves that smell, misses that smell, misses that burn, the way it unfurls the knots of fear and worry and self-loathing within him, if only for a little while.

He takes two large swigs and then a third, just for good measure, then tucks the bottle back into the footlocker that will probably never be inspected. Not his locker. Because Barton and Morita trust him. Because, somehow, their field of vision only extends to the edge of his accomplishments and not a single inch further.

Bucky flops back down on the mattress and pulls the covers back up over his head. The vodka burns warm in his stomach, and he promises himself that this is a one-time deal, just to give him a short respite from his own thoughts. Just a few hours of sleep. That’s all he needs. And tonight, he’ll take it to the john and dump it all out. And Sam and Steve and everyone, they’ll never know it was here. And everything will be fine. Everything will be absolutely, completely fine.

Chapter End Notes

Military Stuff:

The deal with Nazari’s source being a family member: When the U.S. military started offering reward money to local nationals for identifying people who may be part of Al Qaeda, Islamic State, etc., there were sometimes people who would claim that a family member was a terrorist to get the reward money and get the military to arrest their family member. Only later would the military find out that it was just a family grudge that had nothing to do with terrorism.

E-5 Board: To get promoted to an NCO or higher officer rank, a soldier has to sit on a board of senior soldiers and answer questions/face inspection to determine if they’re ready to become an NCO/higher-ranking officer.

O-3 List: When someone is up for promotion as an officer or NCO, they find out they’re promoted based on a list that is published by Army Human Resources Command based on accumulated promotion points and results of a promotion board (see above).
PX: Post exchange, a department store-type place on post

Klick: kilometer

No-salute zone/base: In a combat zone, it’s generally bad practice to salute an officer, because if a sniper or something is watching, they’ll know who’s in charge. Many forward operating bases are no-salute, likely for many reasons to include this one.

MPs: Military police

Smoke: To physically punish

Stop-loss: Where one is forced to stay on active duty beyond what one’s contract requires

Chapter 8: The discharge category for pregnant people who do not wish to stay in the military or who cannot stay because they don’t have an acceptable family care plan

Banana bags: a bag of IV fluids used to correct dehydration and nutrient loss

Skill identifier: An indicator on one’s record of additional skills a soldier has been certified to possess (e.g., sniper, air assault, Ranger)

Article 15: A non-judicial punishment given at the company or battalion level for various offenses

QRF: Quick reaction force — A group of soldiers who are designated as “on call” to rapidly handle combat situations or other types of emergency situations

Mouthwash alcohol: Sending alcohol in mouthwash bottles — usually gin or vodka with green or blue food coloring — is a common way that alcohol makes it to modern war zones. Illegal drinking on deployment is actually pretty common.

Common Access Card: An ID card that has a computer chip in it. Here’s a picture

Side Straddle Hop: Fancy Army name for jumping jacks

Bear Crawl

Squat Thrust

Flutter kicks

PTs: Physical training uniform Here’s the uniform Bucky, Steve, and Clint would be wearing (the shorts/t-shirt combo) the night they find Rumlow, Wilson, and Luis drinking. This uniform would also likely be worn during leisure time off duty and possibly to sleep. The picture also includes some humorous commentary on the uniform. On the base, they’d also be wearing a reflective belt around the waist. Officers would probably wear a blue belt while NCOs would wear orange. All others would wear yellow.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The platoon has a mission. Steve is torn. Bucky has a setback.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content and other things. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic that I still wanted to share with you. More info about the series here.

Thank you to my incredible beta, who is the Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. Seriously. You can find her on Tumblr

And a very special thanks to kissmissangbang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“All right, children, everyone calm down,” Sergeant Rhodes says, pressing his palms toward the floor in a downward motion. The men grumble and shift where they stand, but they still snap their yaps shut on command. Rhodes then motions Vanna White-style to the stack of identical white boxes beside him. “There’s one for each of you.”

“Is it bad I am so excited?” Maximoff asks Ward, grinning.

“Of course not. Need to make up for all those Christmases you never got to have in the shitty Soviet Union,” Ward says, his face as flatly bemused as it ever is.

“In American occupied Iraq, Christmas comes whenever the American public remembers that we’re over here,” Bucky says in the general direction of Maximoff and Ward. “Which is rarely,” he murmurs to Steve, who snorts quietly in reply.

Still, it’s a nice gesture for the men. It makes them feel supported amid the daily boredoms and moral rigors of deployment, an external confirmation of what Bucky and Steve and the entire command team attempt to impart to them as often as possible. You’re doing the right thing, and the things we ask you to do are not on you; they’re on us. Of course, the American public has virtually absolved itself of any responsibility for the incursion into Iraq in the first place, cheerfully forgetting how they blindly trusted Congress to approve the invasion despite no credible evidence linking Saddam
Hussein to 9/11. But that’s neither here nor there, Bucky supposes, because today, the American public is giving them presents.

Rhodes and Dugan arrange the men in a semi-circle around the stack and start passing boxes down the line. Dugan repeatedly growls at them to “just pass the daggone boxes, for Chrissakes” as the men predictably shake them and try to hold onto the ones they perceive to be filled with the most nicotine or caffeine or quasi-pornographic materials.

Bucky stands outside the circle with Steve, watching the excitement on their faces. It’s nice to see them enjoying themselves after such a rough month. Although here hasn’t been much combat excitement to speak of, their patrols have been peppered with more bodies than Bucky would have expected at this phase in the war. The sectarian violence isn’t quite as bad as last year or the year before, but it’s been enough to rattle the men, especially when the bodies have been of women or children or when the feral dogs have gone after the remains of someone’s grandmother or cousin or daughter.

“Sousa said these came from some elementary school in Killeen,” Bucky tells Steve. “Odds are, most of them are complete shit, but there might be one or two that were packed by someone’s dad or mom who’s been downrange before. Meaning there might actually be something good in it.”

“What constitutes good?”

Anything with a stimulating effect.” Bucky ticks his head to the side. “Or baby wipes.”

“Hey, Sir, we got leftovers for you and Sergeant Barnes,” Rhodes calls over to them, holding up the last two boxes.

“Check with the other platoons to see if they want them,” Steve says.

“Everyone’s got ‘em, Sir. These are extras.” Rhodes shakes them and raises his eyebrows at Bucky. “Don’t tell me you don’t wanna know what’s in the mystery box.”

Bucky points back and forth between Rhodes and Dugan. “You two got one?”

“For Chrissakes, just take ‘em already,” Dugan says. “They sent enough for a whole brigade.”

In the background, the men begin bossily insisting that they take one, as they’re inclined to do when they’re in large numbers and can get away with sassing leadership en masse.

“Fine, fine,” Bucky replies, not about to get into an argument about a box filled with 90 percent garbage, anyway. The men pass two boxes to Steve and Bucky.

“Okay, open ‘em up!” Rhodes says.

The room fills with the sounds of tactical knives and multi-tools opening and slicing into tape. Bucky pulls his Gerber and cuts open his and then Steve’s, his heart beating with a level of excitement that’s totally disproportionate to what he finds inside.

As he should have expected, Bucky’s box is a technicolor nightmare of Jolly Ranchers, black licorice, and Smarties. It was as if this kid — no doubt an agent of the Islamic State — had a personalized list of his least favorite candy and sent it for the distinct purpose of torpedoing his morale. Bucky groans his disappointment and shoves the bags aside until he reaches a DVD of Rocky IV and pair of black and gray argyle socks that he is definitely going to wear in uniform at some point.
“Ha!” he says to Steve, brandishing the DVD with a grin. “Check it out.”

Steve looks up from his box, and his puzzled expression dawns into such a show of childlike elation that Bucky hopes none of the other men can see it. It’s not because he thinks it’ll damage Steve’s image — indeed, such a naked show of humanity would only endear him further to the platoon. It’s because Bucky selfishly wants this moment all for himself. These moments, these precious moments where they give each other joy, are more intimate than any physical act that’s ever transpired between them. It’s alway felt that way to Bucky. This has always been the good stuff. The best stuff.

“If he dies, he dies,” Steve says in his finest Dolph Lundgren impression, which is orders of magnitude better than his Robert Burns impression. Looking the part doesn’t exactly hurt, either.

“I must break you,” Bucky replies.

“He’s not a human. He’s like a piece of iron.” Steve pauses and glances up in thought. “I think those are actually all of his lines in the whole movie.”

Bucky smiles again and puts the DVD back. He then pulls out the card, which is drawn in crayon on white construction paper. It’s a picture of a large aircraft dropping bombs on a burning city.

“Thank you, army man! Kill the bad guys!” Bucky reads aloud, then looks over at Steve. “Holy shit.”

“Future grunt?”

“Well, from the looks of it, future Airman.” Bucky makes a sour face and peeks into Steve’s box. “What’d you get?”

“I think someone’s daddy or mommy packed mine.” Steve tilts it toward Bucky, who lets out a gasp at the four cartons of Marlboro Lights and six tins of Copenhagen packed tightly inside.

“Son of a bitch,” Bucky reads under his breath. “You got the mother lode.”

“Want them?”

Bucky snatches all four cartons of smokes, stacks them at his feet, and closes his ankles around them as the other men in his vicinity begin to eye him sharply. There’s no way he’ll smoke all of them before they go home, but they’ll make good trade with the other NCOs. He tells Steve to try to pedal the dip to Barton and Morita, especially if he needs a favor from them.

Steve points to the inside of Bucky’s box. “We should watch that.”

Bucky can’t stop the corners of his mouth for pulling upward over the informality with which Steve just suggested they hang out and watch a movie together.

“Any time,” Bucky says, trying earnestly to sound cool. Containing his emotions around the deepening of his relationship with Steve has become a second occupation for him lately, and he’s almost getting good at it. Almost.

They take a few moments to watch the men react to their gifts. There’s cackling laughter over some of the odder fare. A women’s workout DVD. An earwax cleaning kit. A large bottle of lube, accompanied by a shout of “That should last you about a week, Wilson.” Foggy whoops over the stacks of baby wipes and Five Hour Energy shooters in his box, as well as the sudden clout it’s earned him with the others.
“Hey, Sir.” Bucky pauses, tripping over the question he’s wanted to ask Steve for the past week and a half. He doesn’t know why it’s been so damn hard to choke out every time he tries, like it’s coated in dirt and cotton balls. “I have a question, and feel free to say no, because it’s not really protocol.”

It’s not protocol at all. And if he didn’t have a company commander who’s so painfully averse to the spotlight inherent in his position, Bucky would probably never have the chance to ask it at all.

Steve puts his box under one arm and looks over at Bucky, his blue eyes placid and curious. “Sure.”

Bucky takes a deep breath. “So, I just re-upped, and I was wondering if you’d deliver my oath on Friday during formation.” The words come out like a long breath, monotone and rushed. In the few seconds between the end of his sentence and Steve’s reply, Bucky bites down on the inside of his lower lip.

Steve’s face softens further, to the point where there’s not a trace of soldier, not a whisper of officer or West Point, not a single hint of anything terrible that’s ever happened between them.

“I’d be honored.”

Bucky’s smile is controlled, but the crinkles at the corners of his eyes betray him. “Cool. Great.” He looks down at the toes of his boots, heat rushing to his cheeks. “Thank you.”

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May 14, 2008

It’s quiet today. Even with the chatter and the routine clangs and scrapes of work being done, it’s still quiet. Perhaps being on Quick Reaction Force duty makes the quiet seem more obvious — or more ominous, given how twitchy it’s making his NCOs. But unlike Bucky, Steve has always been good at quiet. It’s like a warm hug, and he wonders if it only still feels that way for him because those warm arms haven’t yet tried to shank him in the kidneys.

Steve is at home in the quiet because quiet is how boys have to be when their mothers are very sick for many years. Quiet is how boys have to be in order to pay attention in class, to remember every word on every blackboard and overhead projection so that they don’t have to study, so they have time at night to make dinner and take out the trash and sort the bills and fill out all the checks. Quiet is how boys bring home perfect grades so that their very sick mothers never have to worry about them getting into college. Quiet is also how these boys create space for the loud boys who balance them, the ones who laugh and joke and charm with enough force to drown out the wailing black holes inside.

Steve now watches one former loud boy in particular, the one whose first words to him at age twelve were “You got any gum?” He said it like it was an emergency, like he needed it to MacGyver some doomsday device the Soviets planted at the Empire State Building. Neither of them realized that the Cold War had ended nine months earlier, because there had always been a Cold War for as long as they’d lived.

Of course, Steve did not have any gum, and that loud boy didn’t seem to think to ask anyone else. Instead, he plopped himself in the next desk over and stated that nobody seems to have any gum in New York, and what’s the deal with that? No Mountain Dew either, so what did they drink, anyway? Coke? He had a weird accent, like Brooklyn overlaid awkwardly with Texas, a street-tough, banjo-tight twang that got him mercilessly teased for about three days before he started whipping out jokes. Good ones, too. Raunchy ones. Ones that scandalized the quiet boys and simultaneously made them envy his easy confidence and wit. It wasn’t a secret that this loud boy was
also very nice. Despite his penchant for blue humor, he never said a disparaging word about anyone except himself, which he did in spades and to great acclaim.

Steve later learned that this loud boy was actually a quiet boy who only played loud, who wore loud like a brightly-colored costume to distract from the grayness he carried in his chest. Even after they became best friends, even after they began joining their bodies together, Bucky only hinted at the grayness, like he was afraid that if Steve ever saw it, he’d wither and die under its bleakness. And no matter how deep Steve would dig, no matter how many assurances he would give of his love, no matter how tightly he would hold the man that boy became, he could never once lay eyes on it. Not fully, anyway.

Right now, that former loud boy is leaning against the back door of his up-armored Humvee with a barely-smoked cigarette burning between his fingers. He’s talking to Jones, his brow furrowed, rubbing his knuckle over the divot of his chin the way he does when he’s deep in thought. He glances up often, like he’s checking in with his brain, and Steve catches enough choked, guttural syllables to piece together that they’re practicing Arabic. He listens closer, casually, still going through the motions of double-checking the gear in the back of his vehicle. Bucky hits his consonants with hesitation, closing his mouth around them self-consciously. Steve tries to douse out a bright flare of hurt because Bucky asked Jones to help him practice and not Steve. But then, he supposes it’s not really his place to want things like that.

The quiet around them electrifies when Ward picks up a call from the command center and hands it over to Steve. Steve straightens his posture as he listens to Sousa relay orders. Their mission is to escort the EOD team to a site between here and Fallujah, where a convoy has an IED-totaled truck and at least one unexploded secondary device at the scene. It sounds like half a dozen other missions they’ve already run while on QRF duty, which have all been woefully — or, Steve would say, blessedly — anticlimactic. By the fifth mission, the men were growing complacent, their energy low, their situational awareness perfunctory. And so Steve started drilling them. And hard.

Steve rallies the platoon, calling out a summary of the mission and tacking on a hearty “Let’s move it!” for good measure. The men jump into action, slamming down the rest of their caffeine, stomping out their half-smoked cigarettes, mounting their vehicles. Dugan, Rhodes, and Bucky gruffly motivate them along, even though it’s not necessary anymore. The men know exactly what to do and at what pace they’re demanded to move. The drills have paid off, despite the initial eye-rolling and puffs of breath that told Steve quite enough of their opinions on the matter. But here they are, falling precisely into place with the professionalism of men several times their rank, and Steve smiles. This is how lives get saved. This is the kind of platoon he will command. These are his men.

Steve sits in the back of his Humvee with Parker, watching him take digital photos of Trip and Jones in the front seat while their small convoy carves through the traffic. Jones grins back at Parker against his protests to just act natural. Ever the documentarian, Parker treats this self-appointed position with as much care as he does his medical duties, though he seems to spend at least half his time dissuading the men from making obscene gestures. To distract from the tension, the known unknowns of this mission, Trip lays in on Jones. There’s a theatricality to it, like he’s posturing a bit for Steve, which is not a little flattering.

“Back in high school, Gabe was always real cool with the ladies,” Trip tells Steve from the driver’s seat, glancing around Rumlow’s legs as he stands on the turret. “He’d plan his whole schedule around whatever girl he liked, just so they could be in the same class.”

“Oh, no.” Jones looks out the passenger window, and pretends to be interested in the dull scenery outside.
“Until he gets his sights set on this one girl, what was her name? Maria?”

“Marie.” Jones groans.

“Marie. Yes. So he starts following Marie, who’s just crazy beautiful. He does the whole schedule thing, sits next to her, uses his many charms. Look at that smile!” Trip points to his cousin in the passenger seat, who gives a demonstration. “How can anyone resist that?”

“Marie could.”

“Yes, she could. She puts up with his, I guess I’d affectionately call it ‘stalking,’ for about three weeks. Tried to be nice about it, humored him a little at first. Then, she gets kinda burnt out on it. But she doesn’t just tell him. She decides to show him.”

Jones covers his eyes with one hand, still smiling. Trip lets the anticipatory silence escalate.

Next to Steve, Parker gives a loud sigh. “And how did she show him?” He fiddles with the camera on his lap and mumbles, “As if we haven’t heard fifteen thousand times.” One corner of his mouth is turned up, though.

Trip glides right over Parker’s mumblings and continues Operation Embarrass Gabe Jones in Front of Command. “Well, one day, she walks right up to Gabe in the hall, arm and arm with her best friend Tonya, who is also very lovely. And Marie dips Tonya down like an old V-Day picture and plants one square on her mouth.” He cranes his head to look back at Steve. “You know the picture, right, Sir?”

“Yeah.”

Steve knows it well. In fact, he pulled the move with Bucky in Prospect Park the summer of 2000, at the Celebrate Brooklyn! music festival. It was nighttime, it was warm, and they were in love. Steve thought he was being romantic, that Bucky would think it was sweet, but instead he was mortified. Bucky laid into him right there in the park, about how everyone saw them, and Steve was confused, because they had been holding hands part of the night, when they were sitting in the grass together, and everyone saw that, so what’s the goddamn difference? Everything, Bucky said. Everything’s fucking different about it. Don’t ever do that again. They dropped it like a hot rock and never spoke of it again.

Steve looks at both Trip and Gabe, trying to gauge their feelings about women who kiss other women in the hallway at school. Their smiles are good-natured, untinged by disgust or revulsion. The joke is clearly on Jones for being cocky and presumptuous.

“Well, that’s one way to get your point across,” Parker says, then snaps a picture of Steve.

Steve looks over at him then, and Parker’s expression tenses. Steve wonders what his face must have looked like to compel Parker to take his picture in that moment. He feels the need to see the picture, then to tell Parker to delete it, and this need perplexes him. He wills himself to smile, if only to ease the crease between Parker’s eyebrows. It seems to work a little, but Parker also puts the camera back in its case.

“You got a girlfriend, Sir?” Trip asks.

Steve brightens at the question, stomach unclenching a little as his thoughts turn to Sharon. “A fiancee, actually.”

He flips his wrist and checks the time. She’s still in bed, probably. Maybe just beginning to stir. She
always wakes up just a few minutes before the alarm goes off, no matter what time she seems to set it for. And so he would often wake up to the feel of her moving, the sound of her sighing, maybe rolling over toward him, sliding in close, her body warm, wrapping her arm around his waist, sliding her thigh across his, pressing her breasts against him. Sometimes she would reach down and play with his wood and... he definitely shouldn't keep thinking about that.

“That’s it? That’s all we get?” Jones says.

“She’s a captain,” Steve says, shifting in his seat. "Works in civil affairs at the Pentagon.”


Steve shrugs. “It doesn’t bother me. She’s an incredible woman. She’s earned it.”

Her incredibleness strikes him hard sometimes. In those moments, Steve wonders what the hell she’s doing with someone like him, why she isn’t already married to someone equally amazing. Most men couldn’t handle being with a woman like her, he supposes. The type of woman who doesn’t need any external confirmation of her worth as a person. The type of woman who is never going to give anything less than her absolute best, even when her talent and competence intimidate the men around her. The type of woman who is strong enough to also feel and love and not see those things as a liability.

He doesn’t deserve her. Not when he’s here like this, the concept of her growing more abstract day by day, their worlds pulling apart mission by mission. Steve doesn’t deserve her when a smile from his platoon sergeant sets him alight, when the flex of his bicep ties a knot in Steve’s stomach. He has to fix it, somehow. Fix all of this. Set things right again. But he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t know if he wants to know how.

Thankfully, they pull up on the convoy just then, sparing Steve from this perilous line of thinking. They dismount from their vehicles, and Bucky nods over at him from the vehicle immediately ahead and begins to take stock of the scene, his weapon gripped tight. Ward pads up to Steve with the radio so that he can call in an update to the base.

After apprising the unit of their status, Steve walks up to Bucky, who’s staring at a thick grove of young palm trees approximately 150 meters away.

“Don’t you think this seems like a real convenient place for us to all be stopped?” Bucky says. His posture spring-loaded, the muscles at his jaw ticking.

Steve looks up and down the line of vehicles, twenty in all, with the two convoys combined. The traffic is light, the kind of light that throttles up the adrenaline and puts a smart man squarely in heebie-jeebie territory.

“Hey, look alive, everyone,” Steve calls out.

His men look plenty alive, but it’s the other soldiers who have him worried. The ones who’ve been stopped here for the past couple hours. They’re lollygagging, lethargic and hot and bored. They’re not grunts. They’re transportation. They’re logistics. Their radars are tuned to an entirely different frequency, the kind of frequency that is going to get their heads blown off.

So when they hear the first tell-tale twang of a bullet strike against metal, there is a span of seconds where most of those soldiers don’t move. Steve and his men catapult into motion, moving for cover behind their vehicles, rotating their turrets, opening fire at that dense grove. Rumlow grins perversely
as he unleashes the violent loudness of the .50 cal machine gun. Bucky and Dugan and Rhodes yell orders down the line, driving their index fingers downward at those stunned soldiers. They finally collect their wits and their training kicks in, but not before someone screams for a medic. Parker sprint past Steve toward a casualty they’re dragging behind one of the trucks. Not one of his, Steve notes with some shameful relief.

“Here, Sir,” Ward says, offering him the radio.

Across the gulf separating their vehicles, Bucky is unloading his magazine. Steve’s never seen him fight before, never seen the way he channels his ambient intensity into lethal force. He’s calm, like he was born to put bullets into people, and it’s enough to make Steve want to puke.

Steve re-orients and picks up the radio to call in a Troops in Contact report. He gets the first couple of lines in when, in a sudden axial tilt, time begins to drag out, like a rubber band stretching. A deafening sound blooms slowly in the air, and Steve’s flying forward, airborne, with only the toes of his boots dragging across the asphalt. His stomach launches into his throat with the velocity of his body, and he hits the ground on his forearms, letting out a grunt as the air slams out of his lungs and pain and the world goes blotchy and

—RPG RPG RPG — voices and voices of his men and others, and a few meters away, there’s the scraping of dirt, and Steve watches Ward push himself up from the ground and crawl forward toward him on his hands and knees, unsteady but then thrusting the radio handset in Steve’s direction when he reaches him. Ward looks down at him, chin scraped and bleeding, expression oddly clear— how the hell is it—?

“Call it in, Sir. I’ll give you the coordinates,” Ward tells him.

Steve blinks up at him, tries to comprehend his composure when his own heart is trying to explode through his ribcage. Everything lurches, and a wave of nausea barrels over him, but he’s gotta call it in. Call it in. Call it in, Steve. Call. It. In. He starts to push himself up, cringing in pain as sharp, tiny rocks dig into his arms and palms, and suddenly, there’s a hand on him, and he’s being wrenched over on his back, and Bucky is there, his eyes wide, teeth gritted, pressing one hand into his shoulder to hold him down while the other feels around his body for injuries. Steve grabs his roving hand and stops him.

“I’m okay. I’m okay.” He squeezes just below Bucky’s watch. Squeezes his hand. “I’m okay....”

Bucky stares at him hard, like he’s not sure whether to believe him. His mouth draws into a frown, but he nods and sits back on his heels. Around them, the chaos is still unfolding, bullets ripping, men yelling, but the two of them are suspended outside of time, where the only real things are Bucky’s hand on his shoulder and the barely veiled terror in his eyes, those eyes that are swiftly clouding over with rage —

And then Bucky is gone, stalking back powerfully to his vehicle like he’s bulletproof. He flings open the door of his Humvee and throws himself into the back of it. Steve works with Ward to call in the coordinates, keeping an anxious eye on Bucky all the while, and the call is over by the time Bucky kneels between their two Humvees with an AT-4 anti-tank grenade launcher on his shoulder. Steve clenches his jaw and motions for Ward to resume cover behind their vehicle, taking it beside him. A fast puff of flame and smoke shoots out the back of the launcher, followed by the sound of an earth-shaking explosion as the rocket hits home.

There is a swell of whooping, as well as a hearty volley of shots from all the turrets. Bucky drops the spent launcher on the ground and walks — walks — back to his vehicle to take cover. Fucking idiot. Bucky exchanges a few high-fives with the other men he’s covering with, his face a mask of solid
contempt. He resumes his fighting position smoothly, lobbing more shots around the back of his vehicle with that same deadly precision through the definitely-not-regulation mounted scope on his standard issue rifle. Through the noise, Steve hears the radio kick to life as his air support is confirmed.

They keep shooting, all of them, slamming in new magazines amid the plinks of returning fire. After a handful of slug-slow minutes, the tasks of battle, the back-and-forth, become routine. Almost boring. Steve’s heart settles into a steady rhythm — thump, bam-bam-bam, thump, bam-bam-bam — until he hears the telltale brrrt! of an incoming A-10 Warthog. There’s some cheering even before the canon unleashes a barrage of firepower on the palm grove, which sends sparks and smoke and flame into the air, ripping the trees and people there to pieces. The shouting crests, and even Bucky is yelling, pumping his fist into the air with a burst of manic laughter while whoever was shooting at them is burnt up and blown apart. The A-10 comes in for another pass, as if there’s actually anyone left to annihilate, and Steve feels a tight smile pull at the corners of his mouth.

Then they wait. Two minutes. Five minutes. Ten. When no additional shots come from the brush, everyone starts letting down their guard, righting themselves, shooting the shit. Steve calls in an update to the base and overheard a nine-line medevac being called for the casualty. Or is it casualties? Steve rises to his feet, his knees shaking, his forearms burning, and he moves his way down the line of vehicles to check in with his men. He goes to Bucky first, scowling, fixing to call him out for his nonchalance back there, for moseying into line of fire like Clint Eastwood with a death wish.

“Sir,” Bucky starts, “we should—”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Steve sees the men turn toward the sound of his voice, which is pitched too loud and aggressive, he knows, and he tries to calm the anger heaving in his chest.

“Sir?”

Steve shakes his head. It’s not even worth it. Whatever he has to say, Bucky will just deny it or dismiss it or excuse it, none of which will lead to any sort of desirable outcome. “Never mind. We should what?”

Bucky jerks his thumb toward the remains of the grove. “We should go check it out and see if there are IDs and anything else we can collect for MI.”

“Fine. Have Dugan take three men and have Rumlow and Reyes provide overwatch.”

“Sir, I was gonna go with—”

“No.”

One corner of Bucky’s upper lip curls, but he concedes.

“Sir,” Ward says lowering the radio from his ear, “dustoff inbound. ETA three minutes.”

Bucky turns down the line and yells. “Mack! Pop colored smoke!” He points to the side of the road, to an expanse of dirt suitable for a Blackhawk to land in.

Steve watches as Mack tosses a canister of purple smoke in the clear stretch of dirt beside them. And when the dustoff comes, Steve watches Bucky turn away and light a cigarette, his expression solemn. It’s not for the soldier. Steve knows that. Bucky’s too hard to care about someone else’s man.

It’s for the pilot. It’s for George Barnes.
Steve sides up to Bucky and slings his rifle over his back. Bucky raises his eyebrows and silently offers him a smoke, and this time Steve takes one. He lights it with his trembling, blood-scabbed hands, and he inhales and coughs and Bucky laughs. It tastes fucking foul, but he smokes it anyway. They take a few steps forward and stare at the side of Steve’s vehicle, the side that took the RPG hit that launched him and Ward into the dirt on the other side. The front door is blown off, hanging by the bottom hinge. The back door is bent inward at a jarring angle. The glass is blown out of every passenger window.

“Shit,” Bucky says.

Steve nods.

"Shit."

———

It’s late by the time Steve gets in a call to Sharon. Their debriefing took nearly an eon, at least half of which was spent with the NCOs and Captain Barton reminiscing about all the times they’ve seen an A-10 obliterate something in front of them. Steve finds himself wishing he could relate, wishing he could find joy in what happened today, but he can’t.

Tonight, he tells Sharon about their mission. He doesn’t know why he chooses tonight to be honest, when he’s lied by omission so many times before. Maybe this is the way he starts fixing things. By being honest.

“Jesus. Are you okay?” she asks after he relays the police report version of events, the who, what, where, when.

“I’m fine,” he assures her. “Definitely not the worst TIC we’ve gotten in.”

In the quiet on the other end, Steve realizes his mistake. He rubs his hand over his forehead and swears to himself.

“You’ve been in TICs before?”

Steve lets his silence answer for him.

“Why didn’t you tell me? You never mentioned anything before. I mean, I thought it was strange that you hadn’t seen any action yet, given how long you’ve been there, but…” Sharon’s voice trails off with a quiet sigh.

“But?”

Steve knows what comes after the ‘but,’ and he wants her to say it. He wants to hear it. He needs to hear her say that she didn’t think he would lie to her. He needs to hear her get angry. He needs to hear himself in her voice, back when he begged Bucky on that scratchy line from Afghanistan to trust him and to let him help.

“I realize that I can’t know what you’re going through. Not really,” she says, her tone kind but also resigned. “I’m not there. I’m not living your life. But please don’t think I’m not strong enough to hear it. I’m your partner, Steve. I’m here for you. I want to support you, if you’ll let me.”

Steve swallows hard against the tightness growing in his throat. He makes a small sound letting her know that he hears her, but that’s all he can manage without giving himself away.
“I know you might feel that there’s a wall between us now, but there doesn’t have to be one. You don’t need to put one up to protect me from your life.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve grits out.

“Babe, you don’t need to be sorry. I just want you to trust me, that’s all. Let me help you. Let me be here for you. Please.”

Steve nods, even though she can’t see him.

“Did you find out when you’re coming home?”

“First through fifteenth of September.”

“I can’t wait to see you.”

Steve drags his knuckle over his eye, wiping away the blurriness. “Me, too. I miss you. So much.”

“I miss you, too. Every day.”

“I’m so sorry.” He feels his face tightening, filling with ominous pressure. He takes a deep breath, one that shakes until he claps his hand over his mouth to silence it.

“Steve, I love you. You don’t have to be sorry. You don’t even have to tell me everything. You deserve privacy, and I imagine you have friends who understand what you’re going through better than I do. But I love you, and you don’t have to hide your life from me to protect me. I’m in this with you for the long haul, remember?”

Steve lays the receiver down on the table and lets out a single muffled sob into his his palm. He ducks his head low so that the soldiers on either side of him can’t see, screwing his eyes shut to prevent any tears from escaping them. He doesn’t even know what he’s crying for, why he feels his heart breaking, why such loving words are so painful for him to hear. He doesn’t understand a goddamn thing that’s happening right now, and admitting confusion, claiming ignorance, has a calming effect.

It takes him a while pick up the phone again, but when he finally does, he tells the God’s most honest truth.

“I love you, too.”

———

May 16, 2008

On Friday, Bucky is called in front of the entire company at their monthly formation, a dog-and-pony show that not even Barton has been able to condense to shorter than an hour. The four platoons of Alpha company, 107th Infantry Battalion, stand at ease while Steve informs them of Bucky’s decision to give the Army four more years of his life. There is a wave of “hooahs!” and shouts from the platoons, as well as a few from the sidelines, including Natasha. Bucky can hear Sam’s voice over the rest of them, yelling “Take it!”

Bucky chuckles to himself. He must be some kind of idiot to serve himself up to Uncle Sam like this again, to ensure that the only dick he’ll be taking on the regular for the next four years will be the big green weenie. But God, he loves the Army, he loves this life, with almost the same ferocity that he loathes it.
Bucky prepares himself to take the oath, pulling in a deep breath, clearing his throat. He’s memorized it, by this point, having said it and observed it more times than he can count. However, Steve asks first for a few moments to address the company, an unexpected move that cranks up Bucky’s anxiety. It’s a new variable, one he wasn’t expecting, and he doesn’t like new, unexpected variables. Especially not during ceremonies that are supposed to be prescribed and orderly. Leave it to Steve to turn everything upside-down, to tear apart the procedure manual and re-craft it as if he knows better than all the very smart men who preceded him. It used to be infuriating, but he does it with such frequency — and often to such successful ends — that Bucky has largely resigned himself to standing back and watching him go.

As he speaks to the company, Bucky watches him. The proud line of his posture. The fine angles of his face. The confidence with which he projects his words into the desert air.

“I don’t think I have to tell you how much of an asset Sergeant First Class Barnes is to this unit. Most of you already know that, even if you’re not in second platoon. But Sergeant Barnes is far more than the sum of his tactical knowledge and proficiency as an infantryman. Since I began serving with this company, I’ve watched him care for his men with toughness, compassion, and respect. I’ve watched him mentor young soldiers, shaping them into tomorrow’s leaders and better men.”

Steve is wearing the finely-tuned veneer he brought with him from the life he’s created since they’ve been apart. It makes sense, given his current position at the company helm. But just below that, maybe perceptible only to him, Bucky finds rawness there, an echo of the Steve he used to know. The one he fell in love with. The one who loved him.

Steve continues.

“I’ve watched Sergeant Barnes sacrifice and assume burdens in ways that most of you will never know to ensure that you come out of this deployment stronger, that you make it home safely, that you can rest your head on your pillow at night and know that you did the right thing. We are all so fortunate to have the opportunity to serve with such an exemplary soldier, such a caring leader, such a good man.”

Steve looks at him then, and he’s not speaking to the company anymore. Not really. “Sergeant Barnes, the Army is so much better for your being in it. And we are so much better for your being with us.”

Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ. Bucky blinks against the fullness behind his eyes.

“Ready?” Steve says, quietly and only to him.

Bucky nods. “Yes, Sir.”

Steve turns to the company, then snaps to the position of attention. “Company!”

The leader of each platoon, with Sergeant Rhodes pinch hitting for Steve, yells: “Platoon!”

“Attention!”

Every service member present snaps to attention at the resonant call of Steve’s voice. Bucky admits with great reluctance that Steve seems to have been made for this. Commanding men. Shifting paradigms. Changing minds.

Steve makes a knife-sharp 90 degree turn in his direction. “Raise your right hand and repeat after me.”
Bucky lifts his right hand, palm toward Steve, who begins administering the oath.

“I, state your name.”

“I, James Buchanan Barnes.”

Steve continues, and Bucky repeats each line.

“Do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic;

“That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same;

“And that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

“So help me God.”

“So help me God.”

Steve’s mouth curves into a small but earnest smile. “Congratulations, Bucky.”

Bucky returns that smile tenfold. In this moment, it’s as if they’re the only two people in the whole Middle East, maybe even the entire universe.

“Thank you.”

———

The platoon engages menial jerk-off duties for the rest of the day, which Bucky treats with as much enthusiasm as he can muster for the task of supervising an all day, base-wide garbage pickup. He’s floating through the tedium on the knowledge that he gets to see Steve tonight. Not just see Steve, but be alone with Steve while they get down to the important business of watching Rocky IV. He already told Sam to make himself scarce for the night, which earned Bucky a weary roll of the eyes that’s less hostile now that Steve is finally starting to grow on Sam.

Bucky has ideas for the night. Tentative ones. Ones that scare the piss out of him and send his brain into a giddy frenzy. Maybe they’ll sit next to each other on Bucky’s bed. Maybe they’ll start kind of far away, like pals, and then Bucky will get up and grab something. Maybe his canteen. And then he’ll sit down again, but a little closer this time. And then maybe they’ll laugh, the rollicking kind of laugh that is expected from terrible Cold War dramas, and someone’s hand will fall between them, and maybe the other person’s will fall close by. Maybe their pinkies will touch. Then maybe they’ll look at each other, like the kind of look they shared this morning, and Steve will say something like “I’ve missed you,” and Bucky will say, “I’ve missed you, too,” and maybe their fingers will thread together, and maybe Steve will touch his leg, or put his arm around him, and then the energy will grow so tense between them that they can only crack through it by kissing, and then touching, and then Bucky’s brain veers into all sorts of territory that gives him a little more of a boner than is appropriate for the middle of the duty day.

Those thoughts all float him until 18:00, when they’re released for the evening. It’s then that Steve finds him, and Bucky can already tell from his face that he’s going to cancel their plans. Something about mandatory fun with some other lieutenants, because surely they didn’t have anything better to do than play ping-pong sober at the rec center. Bucky is absolutely crushed, and he wants to believe it when Steve tells him that he was really looking forward to spending time together. He seems serious. He seems disappointed. Bucky brushes it off, gives him a very chummy clap on the
shoulder, and says they’ll do it next week. Steve frowns and congratulates him again and slinks off to his trailer.

Sam’s a very good sport about it and offers to hang out, as long as Natasha can come over, too. When she arrives, Sam and Bucky are stretched out lazily on their beds, which are pressed into the corners of their rectangular trailer, arranged so that they can lie in them and watch the same equidistant TV. They’re all in their PT shorts and t-shirts, the only uniform comfortable to wear now that it’s getting so hot. Natasha lays her rifle on Sam’s desk and pulls her hair out of the tight bun she typically keeps it in. Her red mane spills down her back, and Bucky smirks from his bed as he watches Sam watch her.

“Congrats, Jamie,” she says, walking toward him. She eyes the empty space next to him on his bed, and Bucky holds out his leg to stop her, pressing his argyle-socked foot into her abdomen.


Natasha grabs onto his calf and lifts his foot to her nose. “No, you don’t.” She doesn’t even seem remotely surprised that he’s wearing unauthorized clothing.

“Your boyfriend looks very sad whenever you flirt with me, Nat.” Bucky nods over to Sam, who plays into the bit and frowns theatrically when Natasha glances back at him.

She redirects her attention to Bucky. “You’ve been awfully evasive lately, Sergeant Barnes.”

He takes a long drink out of his canteen and winks up at her. He extends his foot into the soft flesh of her belly, pushing her back further. “Go see your boyfriend.”

“C’mon, you’re giving me a complex over here,” Sam says.

With a skeptical rise of her left eyebrow, Natasha squeezes his calf, then lets it go and walks to Sam's bunk to lie down next to him. Bucky breathes out a very quiet sigh of relief, because if she’d insisted on lying next to him, she most certainly would have caught a whiff of the watered down vodka he’s drinking. To celebrate, he told himself when he fished the bottle out from between the sandbags outside their trailer, the side of the building kept in perpetual shadow. He’s drinking to celebrate and, very secondarily, to help dull the nagging ache he feels over Steve not being here with him right now.

“So’d you at least get a bonus out of all this?” Sam asks. He links his fingers with Natasha’s in a way that makes Bucky feel acute hatred both of them.

“Oh, yeah. I made them work for it. They settled on 20k.”

“Holy shit,” Natasha says, lifting her head. “For what?”

Bucky chuckles. “Well, Ranger qualification and sniper qualification were probably 10 or 11 thousand of it.”

“You finally gonna get a new bike?” Sam asks.

“Nah.”

He can’t blame Sam for his insensitivity over his bike, because Bucky has never told him that it was his father’s. He’s never told him that he would never, ever give it up for anything, that it’s the only thing Bucky has left of him, that if he hit direst financial straits, Bucky would sell his own body for cash before even thinking of selling that bike.
“What about the rest of the bonus?” Natasha asks.

“For hopping on the trail.”

Sam barks out a rough laugh “Oh, that I would pay to see. I would go to basic training and do it all over again to experience you as my drill sergeant.”

“It was either that or recruiter duty, and after hearing your stories, I think I’d rather eat a bucket of shit than try to convince people that the Army is a good life choice.”

“You’d be terrible at it,” Natasha says. “You’d just rant about Bush and lecture those poor kids on the futility of war.”

“I wouldn’t say that all war is futile.” Bucky gestures around the room with his canteen. “Just this one.”

Natasha shifts, sitting herself upright against the wall, her legs draped over Sam’s. “Speaking of wars, it seems like you’ve got quite the ceasefire with Lieutenant Rogers.”

“Oh yeah?”

There’s a knock on the door that Bucky barely startles at, a welcome side effect of his current beverage selection. He yells aloud for whomever to come in, propping himself up on his elbows.

Of all the motherfuckers he expected to walk through that door, Jasper Sitwell is definitely the last of them. Bucky takes a deep swill from his canteen and stares at him impassively.

“Sergeant Barnes.” Sitwell nods to Bucky, then over to Sam and Natasha. “Sergeant Romanoff. Sergeant Wilson.”

They all offer a cursory scatter of “Sirs,” and Sitwell grips his patrol cap tightly in his hands as he looks back at Bucky.

“I just wanted to congratulate you on your re-enlistment.” Sitwell gives something that Bucky would mistake for a genuine smile, if he thought the man capable of giving one.

“Uh, thanks.” Bucky’s brain glitches and then helps him offer a marginally more appropriate response. “Thank you, Sir.”

“Yes.” Sitwell nods, then does that weird smiling thing at all of them. “Well, I’d better be going. Mando ping-pong going on, apparently.” He shrugs. “Anyway, congrats, and, um, okay.”

With that, Sitwell pulls some composure from somewhere in himself and exits the trailer, leaving behind a trio of gobsmacked NCOs in his wake.

“What the fuck was that?” Bucky says, giving a low chuckle. “Did you two see that?”

“That was…” Sam falters. “I don’t even know what that was.”

“That, my friends, was Lieutenant Sitwell trying,” Natasha offers.

“Trying what?” Bucky mutters under his breath.

Natasha uncrosses her arms and lays her hands on Sam’s leg. “Now, back to Steve Rogers.”

“Are you still holding a candle for that asshole? ‘Cause it sure looked like that this morning.” Sam’s
words spill out like he’s been holding them in all day, and maybe he has.

“He’s not an asshole.”

“Oh, okay. See, because I thought dumping your boyfriend while he’s out hunting Osama bin Ladin would be considered an asshole thing to do.”

Bucky’s eyes pinch into a glare. “Are you gonna keep holding that against him forever? He fucked up.”

“And when did he admit that?” Sam’s body tenses with energy, and he sits up on his elbows to mirror Bucky. “When did he apologize for this so-called fuck-up of his?”

Bucky’s mouth opens reflexively, but no answer comes forth. Steve has never admitted to anything. Never really gave himself the chance. By the time Bucky came back from Afghanistan, Steve was gone, along with all of his things. His clothes. His toothbrush. His razor. His books. His easel and palettes. His record player and albums. No note. No epilogue. Their last words were during that phone call, one Bucky made from a shitty Kandahar hotel room using the phone card Steve bought him before he left. They only made through six months of deployment. Six fucking months.

Sam lowers himself slowly back onto the mattress, frowning deeply. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

With that, Bucky slams down the rest of the contents of his canteen and drops it onto the floor. The hard plastic bounces loudly on the linoleum.

“Hey, you guys wanna watch Rocky IV?”

“Yes, I do,” Natasha says.

Sam stares at him, his eyes filled with disappointment. But Sam must see something in his face, something pathetic, no doubt, because he quickly softens.

“Wanna come over here?” Sam pats his mattress. “We can all hang.”

Even through the steady pulse of agony, Bucky smiles. And he means it. He loves Sam and Nat, and they love him. And for now, for tonight, that’s enough.

“Sure. Just lemme go brush my teeth.”

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Combat, explosions, gunfire, references to casualties, implied internalized homophobia

Military Stuff:

Killeen, TX: Home of U.S. Army’s Fort Hood, the most populous military installation in the world

Re-upped: Re-enlisted, signed a contract to serve for a few more years on active duty

AT-4: the weapon Bucky uses in this chapter. See the anti-tank grenade launcher in
For those of you who don’t know what the inside of a Humvee looks like, here is a cross-sectional picture. There are typically two seats in front and two in back. The big hole in the top of this picture is the turret, where someone SHOULD be standing to man the .50 caliber machine gun.

The A-10 Warthog: I strongly recommend that you watch this video of the beloved A-10 Warthog, which is adored by infantrymen and special operators around the world for its ability to provide close air support during operations like this. Warning: there is footage of long-range combat. No visible casualties, though. The reactions of the bystanders are very real, when it comes to watching stuff getting blown up in general.

A-10 video

Fun A-10 fact: The fart-like “brrt” sound is actually the turbo fans of the engine breaking the sound barrier.

MI: Military Intelligence

Dustoff: A medical evacuation via helicopter, typically a Blackhawk

Pop smoke: use a smoke grenade for any number of purposes (concealment, marking a location).

TIC: Troops in Contact - people sometimes use TIC (pronounced "tick") as a synonym for getting into a battle

Big green weenie: The metaphorical penis with which United States military fucks you over

“On the trail”: To do a stint as a drill sergeant. In order to advance in one’s career, an NCO will often have to do something like be a drill sergeant, be a platoon sergeant, or be a recruiter. People get bonuses for recruiter/drill sergeant duties, because they are awful.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve confront each other. The platoon loses a soldier.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
June 23, 2008

Steve does a final check through his meeting items, each neatly scrawled in his green notebook, each item driven through with a solid line. In the background, he hears Bucky’s footsteps as he paces the length of the trailer. Bucky’s amped up today, restless and distractible. There’s been a knock in their engine for the past few weeks, a retraction from wherever their relationship was steadily going. It’s been confusing, both the fact of it and Steve’s internal reaction to it. Maybe it’s good that Bucky’s pulling away, but Steve didn’t expect to feel so disappointed by it. Disappointed and, frankly, relieved.

It’s all just old patterns playing out again. Different song, same dance. Collide and withdraw, collide and withdraw. It explains the specter of doom looming over every lifting session, every evening spent together outside the purview of their professional duties. It explains the sensation of riding on a comet hurtling toward the Earth in slow motion, where the view is spectacular but the endgame is disaster.

“Foggy,” Bucky says, remembering one final agenda item. His pacing stops, and he sits down on the edge of Sitwell’s bed. “He didn’t pass his run on his diagnostic PT test.”

Steve looks through his folder and finds the scores from Foggy’s last record PT test. “How is that
“even possible?”

Bucky reaches under Sitwell’s comforter and pulls loose the tight hospital corner of the sheet underneath, then resumes his pacing. “Obviously we’re not running enough. And guys like him, they’ve gotta work twice as hard for the same results.”

Steve hears the self-reflection in Bucky’s voice. Bucky’s always had to lift harder, eat more, train more frequently to keep a level of fitness that Steve could maintain with substantially less effort. “How can we help?”

“I’ll run with him. We can do some sprint work at the south wall on Sundays.” He passes the desk where Steve sits and, once again, his pacing stops.

Steve frowns and taps his pen against his thigh. The last thing Bucky needs is to commit himself to more involvement with the men, especially in domains where he should let his squad leaders take charge.

“Maybe Maximoff could help him,” Steve suggests.

“Not his problem,” Bucky says, his words hushed.

Steve turns in his chair to face Bucky. “No, but he would be happy to help, and—” He halts mid-sentence when he sees Bucky standing in front of his nightstand, the framed photograph of Sharon in his hands. Steve swallows. He thinks to tell Bucky to put it down, but he can’t think of a good reason why. Bucky has the right to look at her. He has a right to see who’s replaced him.

“What did I do wrong?” Bucky asks, staring down at Sharon’s face. “What did I do wrong that she never did?”

The questions hit like a sledgehammer, and Steve has to repeat it to himself to ensure that he’s heard correctly. “What do you mean?”

Bucky puts down Sharon’s picture with such care that it could be mistaken for reverence. “Why did you leave me? What did I do wrong?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Steve says, trying to temper his voice make the words sound true. They’re not true. Not at all. But he’d rather betray the truth a thousand times than start this conversation right now.

Bucky spins around. “Bullshit. That’s bullshit. You don’t leave somebody because they didn’t do anything wrong.” His mouth draws into a deep frown. “So what did I do? What did I do that was so horrible?”

Steve slams his notebook shut. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Too bad. You owe me, Steve. You owe me an explanation. You owed me one then, and you owe me one now.”

Steve scowls as irritation spools up in his chest like a jet engine. “I don’t owe you anything.”

“The fuck you don’t.” Bucky’s eyes flash, his words hurling out of his mouth like projectiles. “How could you dump me while I was deployed? What the hell happened to ‘I love you, Bucky,’ ‘I’ll be waiting for you, Bucky,’ ‘I’m proud of you, Bucky?’ Because you said all those things before I left, and then six months later, you tell me it’s over. So what the hell happened?”
Inside Steve’s chest, that spooling engine explodes in a hot burst of incendiary rage. All that old hurt, all that unspoken pain, burns through his body. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad without the indignity on Bucky’s face, the anger there, as if he held no blame for any of it. As if his dysfunction was just a delusion in Steve’s mind. Steve rises powerfully to his feet and closes the distance between them.

“You left me!” Steve says. He hates that he’s yelling. He hates the chaos in it. But it’s the only choice available to him in this moment.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You left for Afghanistan.” Steve drives his index finger into Bucky’s chest, just to the right of the rank insignia at the center of his sternum. “You volunteered to go on active duty. You chose to leave me behind.”

“So you ended ten years of friendship and the best two years of our lives because I wanted to go after the murderer who attacked our city?” Bucky huffs an incredulous burst of air. “What the fuck kind of sense does that make?”

Steve’s jaw clenches hard. “You could have died. For nothing.”

Bucky’s face twists in confusion and what Steve thinks might also be disgust. “For nothing, huh? So, everything we did over there was just for nothing?”

“You catch Osama bin Ladin while you were there? Stomp out Al-Qaeda? Get rid of the Taliban? Make any real difference at all?” Steve cants his head at an arrogant angle. “No?”

Bucky’s fists curl tight. “You have no idea what that deployment was like. You can barely even understand this deployment, let alone the shit I did downrange — the shit I had to do — while you were drinking your fucking Starbucks and voting for America’s Next Top Asshat.”


Steve’s finger is back on Bucky’s chest, this time pressing down on the corner of his name tape that’s curling up from its velcro base. It’s so nonchalant, so automatic, that he doesn’t even realize he’s doing it.

“I do understand one thing, though,” Steve continues. “You chose the Army over us. Point blank.” He looks hard into Bucky’s eyes. “All I wanted was you. More than that, I needed you, and you chose not to be there.”

“You needed me, huh? Jesus Christ, I was only gone for eight months. You couldn’t even wait that long to get laid?”

“Oh, please. Don’t even pretend that’s what I meant, or that I’m that shallow, because you know that’s crap.” Steve pauses, shaking his head, profoundly disappointed that Bucky could even fathom that their breakup was about something as trivial as sex. “You chose the Army, Buck. You became Yankee fucking Doodle out of thin air, chose to deploy, and you decided to stay on active duty. Did you just expect me to be your secret long distance boyfriend while you deployed every five minutes? Until you hit your twenty or thirty years?”

Bucky gets so close that Steve can see the intermixing flecks of blue and gray in his eyes. His voice drops to a harsh chill to match their color.

“I stayed on active duty because you left me. What the hell reason did I have to come back? And,
don’t forget, you chose to apply to West Point, on a fucking whim, apparently. You chose to become an officer. You put up that barrier between us. You didn’t even give us a chance to fix things, because by the time I got back, you were already at the Academy.”

Steve opens his mouth to speak, and he intends to say something cruel, something unforgivable, something that would destroy any chance of any future relationship forever. He tries to think of what something might be, those terrible words, but they never come to him. They’re not inside of him, and they’ve never been inside of him. Instead, he speaks from his heart. He speaks from the core of his hurt and love, the part of himself he’s kept walled off for all these desolate years.

“I applied to the Academy because my mother died, and the man I counted on most, my best friend, decided he’d rather go fight a war he didn’t even care about rather than stay and let me love him.”

Steve lets out a quiet sigh. “I could handle you shutting me out, never opening up. I accepted that about you when we became friends. But when you wouldn’t even let me try, when you chose to run away, when you left me alone with my dying mother, when you made sure we couldn’t talk more than two times a month because you just had to go to war…” Steve bites down on his lip. “How could I trust you after that?”

Bucky takes a few steps back, stricken, as if those words had been a physical jab to the face.

“Steve…”

Steve closes the gap between them, not about to let Bucky escape his next words. “I think you left because you couldn’t handle being in a real relationship. An intimate, loving relationship. You couldn’t handle something real and good and stable, because you thrive in disorder. And you’re so bent on thinking you don’t deserve love that you pushed away the person who loved you more than anyone. I never asked a single goddamn thing of you except to stay. And you wouldn’t. Because you were too scared.”

The pendulum swings, as it always does, bringing with it Bucky’s brutal, defensive counterattack. Steve braces himself for it, squaring his shoulders against it.

“Well, you wanna know my theory, Professor Rogers?” Bucky raises his eyebrows and fits a bitter smile on his lips. “I think you just wanted to play happy little homo for a while. Try it on for size. I think you just wanted to dip your dick in the gay pool. Check that block off, scratch that itch. You didn’t want a ‘real relationship’ with a man. With me.” Bucky pulls his palm flat against his own chest. “See, I don’t get to choose. I don’t get to opt out like you do. I don’t get to ask for the check when shit gets real and go play normal with a woman. This is my fucking life. And when shit got real with us, when I needed you to really love and support me, you decided it just wasn’t worth it.”

Steve feels himself sway a little, staggered by the utterly incomprehensible turn of Bucky’s logic.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he manages to reply.

“And, really, I get it. I mean, why would you want me when you could have your cute little blonde wifey, your little GI Betty Crocker?” Bucky’s smile grows even wider in proportion to the hurt in his voice. “You know, the one you can take to the company Christmas party without having to worry about the boss firing you or puking at the thought of the two of you fucking.”

“How dare you. How fucking dare you.” Steve doesn’t know what’s more offensive, the insult against Sharon or the notion that being male had anything to do with Steve leaving him. “All these fucked up ideas you have about being gay? Don’t you dare pretend that they’re my ideas. Don’t put your shit — whatever this is — on me.”

As if someone suddenly ripped all of the energy out of Bucky, the vitriol drains from his face,
leaving behind a husk of stark resignation.

“Grow up, Steve. Stop pretending that we were gonna move to Vermont and get civilly unified or fake-married or some bullshit like that.”

They talked about it. When the civil union law went into effect in the summer of 2000, they talked about it. They’d only been dating a few months, but they were over the moon in love with each other. They talked about moving to the Green Mountains, buying a few acres of land, building a house. Maybe they’d have a cow or two and some goats. Bucky always insisted on the goats, because they have a lot of personality. They revisited the idea so many times, each time more whimsical than the last. They’d grow big Vermont beards. They’d chop wood. They’d make cheese. They’d sell it at the farmer’s market. They’d have a dog and three cats. They’d have kids. Bucky would always go quiet then, and the dreamy look on his face would crumble into sorrow. And no matter how many times Steve would ask what was wrong, the conversation would always end there.

“Why was that so hard for you to imagine?” Steve asks. “Why would that have been so terrible?”

Bucky looks down at the floor. “As if you wouldn’t leave me anyway. As if you wouldn’t be ashamed of me.”

Steve presses his palms hard against his temples as he strains to understand. “What is this? What is all this, Bucky? Where the fuck is this coming from?”

“I want you to be happy,” Bucky says, looking back up at Steve. He smiles again, mournfully. “I really do. You deserve it. You deserve a real life and a real relationship with Captain Barbie in your little D.C. Dream House. With your little fucking lawn. Your little fucking lawn gnomes.” His voice breaks. “Your little fucking kids.”

Steve wanted all those things with Bucky. He would have given anything to have those things with Bucky. And the thought of Bucky choosing to leave, the thought of him running away, foreclosing on the beautiful life they could have had together, it makes Steve so sad, so angry, that he can’t even stand to look at the man he used to adore.

“Fuck you.” Steve’s tone is low and raw. “Get the fuck out of my room.”

It’s incredible, morbidly awe-inspiring, to watch the play of disbelief and pain on Bucky’s face. Steve doesn’t know why Bucky would have expected anything different, why this conversation would have gone anywhere but where it did. Bucky’s eyes search his, looking for what, Steve’s not sure. Steve stays steady, the only sound in the room his breath as it passes heavily through his nostrils.

Eventually, Bucky takes a halting step. He pauses and opens his mouth as if he’s got one more barb to deliver, maybe one more murmur of disappointment. But nothing comes out. He seems to find his impetus and walks past Steve, his footfalls quiet, his shoulders hunched, his head bent. Just like that night in the motor pool. He leaves in a way that’s entirely unremarkable, and the emptiness he leaves behind is devastating.

———

June 24, 2008

It’s 1:40 in the afternoon and, somehow, Bucky is still hung over. He’s hungover, and the blazing sun is baking him, drawing out the sickly sweet smell of old booze from his pores. They’re all so rank and sweaty from the blistering heat that his stink is mixing with everyone else’s, blessedly —
Right now, they're waiting. They're standing around on the outskirts of yet another shitty town they've been tasked to patrol just to patrol, waiting for Steve to decide how they're going to get home. Bucky stares at him while he looks over his map, gaze indifferent, mouth pulled into a tight line. He can't name the feeling he has right now. It's either rage burning so hot that it feels like pure whiteness or he's completely emotionally shut down. It's probably not the first one, because since leaving Steve's trailer last night, he hasn't really felt anything toward Steve at all. Especially not rage.

But maybe he's got the target wrong. Maybe the rage is toward himself. Maybe that's what this is. Rage over being such an idiot. For being so naïve. For thinking that he and Steve could be anything but colleagues — and distant colleagues at that. He's also angry at himself because he's starting to think Steve was right. For all the ire and insult Steve's words kindled in him, maybe he wasn't entirely off the mark. Maybe going to war wasn't all about justice or revenge. Maybe he also had to go because what he had with Steve was too much. Too much of what, he can't say. He can't dig into it very deeply. Not with a headache like this. Not with a brain of cold mush.

Bucky listens as Steve talks over the return routes with Dugan and Rhodes. Bucky wishes Steve would just make up his fucking mind already, but that might just be the hangover talking.

“Ward said he picked up a warning about IEDs on Route Indigo. EOD’s already been there twice today.” Steve rubs at his sweaty brow.

“Only other option is to go the way we came,” Dugan says, “But that’s rule number three on the list of dumb shit not to do on deployment.”

Bucky wonders what the first two rules are. Surely one must be ‘Don’t fall back in love with your supervisor-slash-ex-boyfriend.’ Another might be ‘Don’t binge drink half a fifth of vodka the night before a mission.’

“I know it’s bad.” Steve looks over at Bucky. “What do you think, Sergeant Barnes?”

Bucky looks down the road. “Your call, Sir.”

Steve sighs, as if it burdens him to speak. “I’m asking for your opinion.”

“Both choices suck. You know there’s danger on Indigo. There could possibly be danger on Baghdad.” Bucky shrugs one shoulder. “You’ll have to pick which one probably sucks less.”

Steve stares at the map for a few more seconds, then folds it up with sharp, decisive movements.

“We’re taking Baghdad. Get everyone back in their vehicles.”

Bucky nods, then yells to the men to finish their smoking and gabbing and mount up. He power smokes his own cigarette while everyone gets into place, then heads to the lead vehicle to take his seat. Steve, moving with furious purpose, glides past him.

“I’m taking lead,” Steve says over his shoulder, not even bothering to stop. “Take my seat in three.”

“You shouldn’t be in the lead vehicle,” Bucky calls after him halfheartedly, pointing out an obvious error in judgment that’s clearly intended to be a ‘fuck you’ more than anything else. It’s not like Bucky doesn’t deserve a little ‘fuck you,’ if only as payback for the borderline insubordination.

Steve ignores him and loads himself into the back seat, slamming the door hard. Bucky stops and glares at that door, past the armor plating, to the man inside. He sucks down a few final drags of his smoke and crushes it in the dirt. From the turret, Trip gives him a smile and a nod, which Bucky
returns perfunctorily. Bucky then walks back to the third Humvee in the four-vehicle patrol and sits in the front passenger seat.

“Hey, Sergeant,” Jones greets from the back. “Where’s L.T.?”

“He wanted to ride in the front.” Bucky works hard to school his voice toward neutrality.

“Oh.”

Even first-timers know it’s a dumb move. Bucky wishes he could enlighten Jones with the full context of why they’ve switched places. Right now, Bucky wishes he could tell everything to everyone — or even just someone — because he’s about goddamn sick of lying every goddamn minute he’s outside his trailer. It’s exhausting. And he sure as hell couldn’t tell Sam, because Bucky couldn’t handle another rejection from another best friend.

“Wait, we’re going back on Baghdad?” Mack says as the convoy starts moving south, shooting Bucky a concerned look from the driver’s seat.

“Indigo’s a hot mess. We decided to come back this way.”

“All right.” Not typically one to hide his feelings, the lack of further comment is undoubtedly a feat of restraint on Mack’s part.

“It’s the right choice, given our options,” Rhodes confirms from the back.

Bucky nods and puts on his radio headset. He looks up the turret at Rumlow and feels himself grimace.

For most of the ride, Bucky stares out the passenger window, tuning out the radio chatter between the vehicles. The landscape is a long, monotonous stretch of brown, so bland that it pushes him deep into his mind. He thinks back to last night, looping through his conversation with Steve, dissecting it, choking it off when it cuts too deep. He squints when the sun blasts him in the face, which shoots a line of hot agony directly into his skull.

He makes a promise to himself that from here on out, he'll only use alcohol to sleep, and only if he can’t get to sleep any other way. There’s little that can compare to the terror of waking up at 5:00 in the morning, still half-drunk, knowing you’ve got to leave for a mission in three hours. Unfortunately, alcohol’s the one thing that quiets his mind enough to let him rest, the only thing that dulls the memories enough, a backlog of horrific things from multiple deployments that he’s never actually processed. Deaths he’s never grieved. Shame he’s never allowed to fully sink in. Awful shit from years before he raised his right hand the first time. All coupled with the fear — the mind-bending terror — that he never let himself feel, because who has time for that downrange?

He’s so lost in his thoughts that when the radio chatter picks up into a frenzy, Bucky takes several seconds to orient to what’s happening. Through the cacophony, he picks out screams of “stop, stop, stop,” “gunner down,” and “wire,” and even though he can’t see up ahead, his mind assembles enough pieces to know that they need to stop, and now.

The convoy slams to a halt just before the second Humvee rolls between those fatal streetlights. Time slows and Bucky’s senses sharpen. He rips off his headset and tears out of the vehicle, already projecting the image in his mind’s eye of what he’s going to see in that first vehicle. The gunner. Shit. Trip. Trip is going to be dead, and very violently so. And everyone in that vehicle — Bucky’s heart lurches in his chest. Steve. Steve is in the back seat. He’s in the back seat of that vehicle because he stubbornly insisted on being there. It should have been Bucky. It should have
been him. And if it were him, maybe he’d have seen the wire. Maybe he would have remembered
this part of the road, where the streetlights first start as they head closer into Baghdad. Fuck, he
should have remembered this part of the road. He should have noticed that the usual traffic had died
down to nothing. Maybe if he hadn’t been staring into space. Maybe if he hadn’t been hungover.
Maybe. Fuck. Fuck. **Fuck.**

Bucky yells to everyone to take defensive positions because, of course, this would be a mighty fine
time for an ambush. He then runs up the parked line of vehicles, slinging his rifle over his back as he
goes. He hears quick footsteps behind him, Parker’s, and Bucky yells to the soldiers to make way.
They part swiftly, then move into fighting position.

They get to the lead vehicle just in time to see Steve crawl out the back. He’s covered — absolutely
covered — in blood. Helmet. Face. Body armor. Legs. He moves slowly, his eyes wide and glossy,
and he wipes at his face repeatedly with the bloody sleeve of his uniform.

Bucky grabs him by the shoulders. “Steve,” he says, leading him away from the vehicle. Bucky
repeats his name until Steve finally looks at him. He blinks, confused.

Bucky’s about to say something more, he’s not sure what. Something comforting, something kind.
But in his periphery, he spots Jones approaching the vehicle, looking both deeply afraid and
intensely curious. Bucky reaches toward Dugan, who’s sweeping the landscape with his rifle. He
keeps his other hand locked on Steve’s shoulder.

“Tim, get Jones.” Bucky points to Jones’ rapidly approaching figure. “Get him.” He tries to snap his
fingers, but they’re wet with blood from Steve’s jacket.

“Aw, shit.” Dugan slings his rifle and runs to intercept Jones. Jones fights him, shoves him in the
chest, his panicked voice rising, asking what’s wrong with Trip, what happened to him, what
happened to him. Dugan holds him back and, with the help of Reyes, gets him steered toward the
back of the convoy.

Bucky’s hand automatically returns to Steve’s shoulder. He passes a glance at Parker, who’s looking
in the back seat and holding his hand lightly over his mouth. Bucky’s never seen him flinch or
hesitate, not once, so he can only imagine how bad it is.

“Close the door, Doc,” Bucky tells him. “Just close it for now. I’ll take care of him.”

Parker drops his hand. It strikes Bucky very suddenly that Parker and Trip were roommates. Parker
does what he’s told, closing the door slowly, not hard enough to latch it but enough to shield the
view.

From the turret, Luis looks down at Bucky, concern etched on his face. Bucky points his index and
middle fingers at his own eyes, signaling to Luis to keep scanning the area. Luis gives a firm nod.

Bucky swears under this breath and brings his attention back to Steve. His mouth is hinged open,
and Bucky can see why. He pulls his canteen and douses the cuff of his own ACU coat, then wipes
away the blood from Steve’s lower lip. “It’s okay,” he says softly. “I got it.” He keeps wiping,
starting with the splatter on his forehead, moving down his nose, over his right eyelid, down each
cheek. Steve’s looking at him now, his eyes still wide, pupils dilated.

Bucky wants to touch him. He wants to lay his hand on Steve’s neck. Caress his face. Pull him in
close. Hold him.

But he doesn’t. He can’t. And he doesn’t even know if Steve would want it. He keeps his hands firm
on his shoulders, though, sensing that it’s grounding him. In fact, it may be the only thing grounding him right now.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asks. It’s an awful question, because the answer is obviously no. But he asks it anyway, because he has to do this awful thing so that he doesn’t do a stupid thing.

Steve’s Adam’s apple bobs when he opens his mouth to speak. Nothing comes out. In the distance, Bucky hears Rhodes yell to everyone to stay sharp. Worry creases Steve’s brow.

“It’s okay,” Bucky tells him, moving to Steve’s side and wrapping his arm around his back, over the rise of his body armor. He starts to walk Steve toward the back of the convoy, and the other soldiers stare in horror as they pass. Bucky quickly debates what to do with him. Jones can’t see him, and he can’t stay in the lead vehicle. He settles with taking him to the second Humvee, telling Ward to go to the third so that he can take Bucky’s place.

Parker joins them, guarded and pale, arms crossed over his chest. He purses his lips, and his dark brown eyes move back and forth in tiny little flicks, as if he’s pushing through some deep equation in his mind. He then relaxes his hands at his sides and moves to Steve’s side.

“I’ll take care of him,” Parker murmurs to Bucky, laying a tender hand on Steve’s shoulder.

Bucky frowns but nods anyway. As much as Parker shouldn’t be tending to anyone but himself, he’s one of the only people Bucky would trust to care for Steve right now. He doubts that it’s rational, but he feels it strongly.

“Here, Sir. Let’s sit,” Parker says, guiding Steve to take a seat in the back, his legs hanging out of the vehicle. Steve’s expression shifts slowly out of shock and begins to resemble worry.

“Need to cut the wire,” Steve mumbles to Bucky. “Gotta get back.”

Bucky lays a hand on his shoulder again and squeezes. “I’ll take care of everything. Don’t worry.”

Steve gives a single nod, and Bucky takes a few steps back, heavy and regretful. He feels the gears shift inside of himself, and he moves back into action, sending Maximoff and Reyes to cut the wire strung tight between two opposing streetlights. He then grabs a body bag from the mortuary affairs kit in the back of the first Humvee and steels himself to fill it with Trip’s body.

Rhodes approaches and grabs the other end of the body bag to unfold it. “You want some help?”

Bucky wants to say no. Desperately. He wants to spare Rhodes the burden of handling his own man’s remains. But practically, it’s going to take real effort to get Trip’s body out of the vehicle, and it would be disrespectful and graceless for Bucky to try to pull him out on his own.

“Yeah, thanks.”

It’s bad. Very, very bad. The wire went through Trip’s mouth. The upper half of his head lies on the floor, where Steve’s feet would have been. The bulk of the body was pushed off and rests partly in the seat and partly on the floor. From the pattern of blood, it appears that Trip’s body fell almost entirely on Steve’s side, sparing Maximoff in the seat across. God, Maximoff must have been shaken, too. Probably helped pull Trip off of Steve. Shit. Bucky wishes he’d thought of that before sending him to cut the wire. Shit. What the fuck is wrong with him?

Then he remembers. Then he hates himself.

Rhodes and Bucky work quickly to put Trip’s remains in the body bag, both seeming to find their
special place easily. The place where soldiers go when they have to do the unthinkable. The place that allows them to complete the mission and table the horror and sickness and fear for a later time. They load Trip’s body into the back of the vehicle and start rallying everyone to get in their Humvees so they can finally get the hell out of here before more bad shit happens. Bucky digs his woobie out of his assault pack and drapes it over the mess of blood in the back, cringing, wondering briefly if he’ll ever be able to use it again without thinking of Trip and Trip’s blood and Trip’s mutilated body.

When they’re mounted up, Bucky, Rhodes, and Dugan make the rounds with all the men to check in. Jones is a wreck, but Reyes, Mack, and Foggy are looking after him. Steve has moved into dark, stony silence, responding with only a faint nod when Bucky asks if he’s doing okay. Bucky makes a special point to praise Luis for his quick thinking, jumping on the turret as soon as Trip went down. He also sends Maximoff to the fourth vehicle, where they have an extra seat in the back, leaving Bucky alone in the lead vehicle with Private Wilson and Luis. Bucky settles in the front passenger seat and looks over at Wilson, who’s mouth is caught somewhere between a frown and a sneer.

“That was fucking balls-ass fucked up.” Wilson lays his shaking hands on the steering wheel and grips it tightly. He looks into the back, at the parts of the mess Bucky couldn’t quite cover.

Bucky nods. “Yeah, it was.”

“I should have seen it.”

“Hey.” Bucky reaches over and firmly taps the 82nd Airborne unit patch on Wilson’s right arm, drawing his attention back. “We all missed it. Luis missed it, Trip missed it, Lieutenant Rogers and Maximoff missed it. I missed it. Everyone missed it. They’re almost impossible to see.”

“I still should have seen it.” Wilson curses softly.

“This was not your fault.”

“I’m beginning to sense a little bit of a trend when I drive lead,” Wilson replies. “People tend to die.”

Bucky thinks back to the little girl they hit. He thinks back to Wilson’s fear, his apprehension, his frantic need to be told to swerve around her, and his grim resolve when he realized he couldn’t.

“We have you drive lead because you can handle it.” Bucky sets his jaw firmly and slides on his headset. “You could make a good career out of this, if you’d just stop getting in so much goddamn trouble.”

Wilson puts on his headset as well. “Right now might not be the best time to convince me to re-enlist, Sergeant.” He’s smiling, though, and in that smile, Bucky sees himself.

“All right, Private Wilson,” Bucky says over the radio. “Let’s get this convoy home.”

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Biphobia, internalized homophobia, blood, gore and violence, reference to binge drinking and aftereffects, minor character death

Military Stuff:
EOD: Explosive Ordinance Disposal (i.e., bomb techs)

Woobie: A poncho liner that closely resembles a blanket. It’s beloved by grunts everywhere. More generically, a “woobie” is a term for a security blanket that a child might carry for comfort.

A picture and brief article about the importance of the woobie

Also, here’s a picture of what a soldier would look like with a typical amount of armor and gear on. There are more armor pieces, but they are very uncomfortable, difficult to move in, and often not worn. There would also be a sidearm holstered on the thigh for an NCO or officer.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content and other things. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic that I still wanted to share with you. More info about the series here.

Thank you to my incredible beta, who is the Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. Seriously. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very special thanks to kissmissangbang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
When Bucky become a senior NCO, nobody ever told him that half his job was going to be paperwork, piles upon ungodly piles of forms and reports and counseling statements. And this paperwork is typically demanded at the most inopportune times, such as immediately after one’s convoy returns to base after the crippling loss of a soldier. Before they can even get Trip’s body to mortuary affairs, Morita is in Bucky’s face, demanding a verbal briefing. Bucky muddles his way through it as best he can while half-watching Steve blink and try futilely to report the situation to Barton. It’s a relief for everyone when Barton ends Steve’s pathetic efforts with an uneasy smile and a clap on the shoulder and walks him to his trailer.

After spending nearly two hours assuring the command team that Steve’s decision to take Route Baghdad was sound, Bucky goes to see Steve in his room. When he arrives, he finds Steve sitting at his desk, clean and dressed in his PT uniform. He’s staring at the incident report form on his laptop, fingers hovering over the keyboard, cursor planted on the line where he’s supposed to type his name. Bucky watches him for a few minutes, watches him strain to even type the first letter, and Bucky finally pushes the laptop aside and pulls up a seat next to him. Steve murmurs half of an objection.

Bucky tries to talk to him, without much success. Steve’s repertoire of responses is limited to bare words and simple body language, and his dirty blond eyebrows slowly furrow with every failed attempt to do better. Bucky wonders if Parker dosed him with a couple lorazepam or something, and he actually hopes that he did, because if that’s not the case, then... well... fuck. Bucky again fights a
powerful urge to comfort him, to lay his hand over Steve’s, maybe squeeze it, to physically tell him the ‘I’m sorrys’ and the ‘I still love yous’ that he can’t bear to say after everything that went down between them yesterday.

At a loss, Bucky offers to take him to the chaplain, the wizard, anyone else who might be able to help. He offers even though he doesn’t want Steve to talk to any of them. With Steve the way he is now, they very well might relieve him of command, or worse, secure him a one-way ticket back Stateside. Steve shakes his head at each suggestion until Bucky proposes that he lie down — just for a quick nap, he clarifies, after Steve balks over all the paperwork he has due to Barton tomorrow. As if he’s in a condition right now to do anything more than breathe. Bucky walks him over to his bed and pulls his blanket over him, stealing a few moments of contact by laying his hand on Steve’s shoulder. Maybe he’s just imagining it — Christ, he could be — but something in Steve seems to settle under the weight of his touch. With a weary smile, Bucky turns back toward Steve’s desk, stopping fast when he hears the other man’s muffled voice.

“Sorry, Buck.”

Bucky frowns. “For what?”

“…I’m so sorry.”

By the time Bucky scans through the catalog of things he might be sorry for, Steve’s breathing has already shifted into a slow, deep rhythm. Regardless of what it’s for, Bucky sure as hell has more than enough sorries to give back.

“Me, too.”

Bucky works for the next few hours at Steve’s desk, filling out a massive collection of post-incident paperwork and completing whatever he can of Steve’s reports. Somewhere in that timeframe, Sitwell comes home, but he’s quiet and respectful, even after curfew starts. Around 1:30, Bucky’s vision starts blurring from exhaustion, and he takes his laptop back to his own trailer. He talks briefly with Sam, who honors his request to save the details for later, because he’s got something more important to do right now — namely, grabbing every drop of remaining alcohol in his possession and dumping it into the blue waters of the nearest Porta-John. As liquid hits liquid, Bucky promises himself that he’s done drinking, that his first stop when they get back to Bragg is AA. His resolve is deathly serious, which is the only appropriate response to what his drinking made him do today.

The next two days are so blessedly busy that Bucky barely has a chance to think, let alone process one solid granule of the emotions roiling inside of him. He works closely with Morita, Rhodes, and Barton to ensure that all of the moving parts fall into place just so. After pulling out of his stupor, Steve inserts himself into the process as much as he can. But his helpfulness is limited, and Bucky’s not sure if he can chalk it up entirely to Steve’s ignorance of the intricacies of managing the death of a soldier. Bucky assigned him the task of securing emergency leave and arranging travel home for Jones, something simple to keep him occupied and make him feel useful. Bucky doesn’t think that he’s up for anything more than that, even if Steve would never admit it himself.

Steve goes where he needs to go and does what his responsibilities require him to do. Physically, at least. But wherever he is, it’s clear that his mind is far away, tucked inside itself, no doubt churning with the same things every leader churns in his head when he loses his first soldier — or any soldier, for that matter. What if. I should have. If only. The bottom line is always the same: my soldier is dead because of me. And that line of guilt is not even taking into consideration the personal horror of watching his soldier die in front of him. On top of him. For all the awful shit Bucky has seen in his many deployments, Trip’s death may very well be the worst. He wonders, very reluctantly, if Steve will ever be able to come back from this.
For now, Bucky watches him from a distance. He’s made a few more attempts at conversation, only to be met with dead eyes and cold, curt responses. It’s day one of deployment all over again, except instead of brimming with composure, Steve now seems fragile. Apparently it’s only Bucky who sees him this way, because Morita makes a point to mention on several occasions how well he seems to be holding up. Bucky agrees with Morita, hoping that he’s right, hoping that maybe their years apart have made his old reads on Steve obsolete. Maybe he’s doing well after all. With no relevant data points to anchor him, Bucky’s left with only his guesses and doubts.

The day after Trip’s death, the Combat Stress Control psychologist visits the platoon to debrief. The men go quiet. Steve and Bucky watch the one-sided production from a distance, arms folded. It’s all very well meaning, very proactive. But infantrymen generally approach all things mental health with caution and wariness, partly because most Army shrinks don’t know shit about being in combat, so what could they possibly have to say? There’s also the unspoken understanding that the wrong words could get a man pulled off duty, which is the last thing any of them want right now. If anything, dedication to the unit digs even deeper in the face of a fellow soldier’s death. Each man covers down harder, watches his brother closer, renews his commitment to getting everyone home alive. And no man’s hurt, no matter how profound, is worth risking the integrity of the unit they have left.

The second day after Trip’s death is his memorial service. Bucky and Rhodes scramble to get a good picture of him, preferably one in uniform, preferably not the ridiculous mugshot everyone gets in basic training. Fortunately, Parker has a fantastic one on his digital camera of Trip in all his gear, his face a warm, handsome glow. It’s such a precise embodiment of the light he brought to the unit that Bucky tears up at the sight of it blown up, framed, and situated beneath the boots, rifle, and helmet they arrange at the front of the chapel. He lets himself have that moment, very carefully, which Rhodes mercifully ignores. Rhodes already had his moment yesterday, and one moment’s about all a leader can afford in the first week of loss.

At 16:00, soldiers assemble in the chapel for the service. The turnout is immense, though not at all surprising. The whole company shows, in addition to a collection of men and women from various support units, people who know Jones and knew Trip through him. Natasha’s stuck in the field this week, and Bucky laments her absence. But at least Sam’s here, and he takes a seat directly behind Bucky as the service begins. Having him there seems to pull some of the tension from Bucky’s spine, offering a counterbalance to the unsettled energy coming off of Steve beside him. Bucky tries to read his face but can’t. It’s hard, glossed over, clearly a piece of window dressing hung to keep the rawness out of sight. It’s there, though. Bucky can feel it like he feels his own heartbeat. Maybe it’s for the best, especially when it’s time for Last Roll Call. Bucky braces himself and feels Rhodes on the other side of him do the same.

Morita plants himself at the front of the chapel and commands everyone to their feet. He then runs down the rolls for the company, calling out the name of each soldier in the unit alphabetically. Each man replies with a “Here, First Sergeant!” of varying degrees of tone and stability, some booming, some tight and modest, some already cracking.

Trip’s name is saved for last.

“Specialist Triplett.”

The room is silent.

“Specialist Antoine Triplett.”

Silence.
“Specialist Antoine Michael Triplett.”

There is a response now, as the ceremony typically goes. There’s a scattering of sniffles, along with the sound of a man very quietly sobbing while the rifle detail just outside the chapel conducts a three-volley salute. The sniffles and sobs come to a crescendo as Taps plays. This is good, Bucky thinks, his mind drifting far enough to keep his chin from quivering. Get it out now. Mourn so you can carry on. He wants them to do all the things he can’t afford to do right now.

Bucky does his duty afterward, making his rounds, accepting condolences from higher-ups and NCOs from the other platoons, giving condolences to Trip’s friends and once again to Rhodes, who’s lost men in previous units but never quite like this. Even Sitwell comes up to him and offers a few kind words. At one point, Bucky scans around the chapel for Steve. Not tough to pick out a man who stands six-foot-three in boots, so Bucky’s able to conclude quickly that he already left. He does find Sam, though, who gives him a mournful smile from across the room. Sam stays with Bucky until the very end and helps clean up.

After, Sam stands with Bucky as he chain smokes two cigarettes in silence. Sam’s seen nearly every season and every mood of Bucky Barnes, and when they get back to their trailer, Sam knows that he needs a very long hug and a few episodes of In Living Color, which Sam first introduced him to when they met as roommates at the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course. They take off their ACU jackets and sit together on Bucky’s bed, eating from the box of Ho Hos Bucky’s ma sent with the note “For my little snack cake,” likely written for the sole purpose of embarrassing him in front of at least one other person.

Despite the loss, Bucky laughs with Sam and enjoys the feeling of being cared for, both here and at home.

“When’s your leave again?” Bucky asks Sam in the middle of the show’s credits.

“August.” Sam smirks. “Right around the time when the devil’s gonna take a big, gritty sand shit on this entire country.”

Bucky shoves the last of his Ho Ho in his mouth and talks around it. “Want me to send you anything while I’m home?”

“No, thanks.”

Sam wraps his arm around Bucky’s shoulder and pulls him close. Bucky wants to relax into him. He really does. But Sam’s physical displays of closeness are confusing for him, because he’s not sure if Sam’s doing it because he knows Bucky craves physical affection or if he’s doing it because he genuinely wants to be close. Lord help him if it’s both. For a man who presents himself as almost vehemently heterosexual, there are enough moments between them that Bucky sometimes questions whether Sam’s feelings for him are entirely platonic. Sometimes he’s afraid that Jamie and Sam are going to end up being Bucky and Steve, and it makes him never want to touch Sam ever again. And it also makes him so, so sad.

“You okay?” Sam asks. Bucky can feel the movement of Sam’s chin against his head.

He nods against Sam’s clavicle.

Sam pulls him closer. “My little snack cake.”

Bucky clasps his hands together on his lap with a sigh and allows himself to be held.
Steve knew it was wrong to leave as soon as he walked out of the chapel. He knew it was wrong, but he had to go, because he truly did not know what he was going to do if he stayed. Maybe he would have held himself together. Maybe he would have done what he pictured himself doing back when he was at the Academy, sad as it is that he imagined such things. So many of them did, because they knew they were all going to at least one of two wars after graduation, and in war, soldiers die. The math is breathtakingly simple.

Back then, Steve pictured himself standing strong and stoic, comforting his men, a pillar of strength for them to lean on. A real leader. The type of man he carefully sculpted himself into during his time at West Point. A far cry from the soft and powerless man who wept and worried for Bucky Barnes while he searched for survivors at Ground Zero and chased the Taliban around Afghanistan. Steve harbors a deep fear that he might still be that weak man underneath everything, that this is who he really is and that this part of himself is re-emerging, coming to reclaim its natural place. He scowls at the thought of it and walks faster.

On the way back to his trailer, Steve stops by the phone center and tries to call Sharon, waiting in line for an hour just to get her voicemail. He calls multiple times, growing more detached and reluctant with every failed call, eventually realizing that he has no idea what he would say to her if she picked up.

How could he possibly convey to her what happened two days ago? How could he describe what it felt like to have his soldier’s decapitated body and head fall on his lap? How could he tell her what it felt like to be covered in Trip’s blood? To taste it in his mouth? To smell his shit when his nervous system so violently shut down? To have the man he used to love grab at his shirt cuff like a little kid and wipe that blood away like it was playground dirt? And how could he tell her that it was all because he made the wrong choice as a leader? How could he tell her that it was his fault? How could she ever understand any of that? How could he ever even say the words?

Steve lays the phone on the receiver and gives the next soldier his seat. He drifts back to his trailer and finds Sitwell lying in bed in his PTs, reading John McCain’s “Character is Destiny.” Half of a joke blooms and wilts in Steve’s mind.

“How you holding up?” Sitwell asks.

Steve snorts and sits down on the edge of his bed, laying his rifle next to him. “I don’t even know how to answer that.”

“You left early.”

Steve presses his palms together. “I’m aware of that.

“Losing a man is hard.” Sitwell’s expression is solemn as he puts his book down on his lap.

“Oh, yeah? How many have you lost?”

Sitwell sighs. “I meant it as—”

“A platitude. That’s what you meant it as.”

“Look, if you’re gonna be an asshole…” Sitwell tenses and trails off.

Steve raises his eyebrows. “If I’m gonna come into my own room and be upset after one of my men was brutally murdered, then what?” He cocks his head. “Then what? What’s gonna happen?”

“I’m just trying to be supportive. I’m sorry Triplett died.” Sitwell shrugs one lazy shoulder. “It
sucks.”

Steve can’t say exactly why those words and that single shrug light up his insides the way they do. He can’t trace the cryptic path between Sitwell’s efforts at kindness and the wild explosion of fury that rips through his chest. There is no path. Not one that makes any sense, anyway. It doesn’t make sense when Steve stands and storms over to Sitwell’s bed with eight powerful strides. It makes even less sense when he rips the book off the other man’s lap and throws it as hard as he can against the wall.

“Hey! What the hell—”

“Oh, I’m so sorry about that. Really, so sorry.” Steve’s shoulders rise and fall sharply in an exaggerated shrug. “Man, that sucks.”

Steve then looks down at where Sitwell’s boots and sneakers are lined up neatly beneath his bed. He grits his teeth and sends them flying across the room with a pair of swift kicks.

“Having your shit kicked around is really hard. Golly, so fucking hard. I know. But, gee-fucking-whiz, this stuff happens!” Steve’s yelling now. Maybe he’s even screaming. He’s so out of his head with rage that his calibration is completely obliterated.

Sitwell scrambles back into the corner of his bed. “What the fuck, Rogers?”

For the first time in Steve’s life, he fantasizes — very briefly — about taking another man’s life. He settles instead for bending down to eye-level and forcing his ire through his clenched teeth.

“You’re lucky I’m throwing your stuff and not throwing my fists against your face, you disingenuous, sniveling piece of shit.”

While Sitwell sits, dumbfounded, Steve lets his anger carry him back to his side of the room, where he grabs his rifle and makes for the door. He reaches for the knob and pauses.

“If I were you, I’d keep my fucking mouth shut for a couple days.” Steve glares back at his roommate. “Think you can manage that?”

Sitwell nods with an impressive level of calm.

It’s well after dark by the time Steve settles down. It’s a herculean task, because his mind keeps flashing back to horrific things. Trip’s severed head. The dazzling spray of blood. The thump his head made when Steve pushed it off his lap onto the floor. How Steve could see where Trip’s tongue disappeared down his throat — down his fucking throat. He sees the aftermath. The way his men stared. The look on Bucky’s face. He hears his furious words and revisits his wildly inappropriate assault on Sitwell who, God damn it, was only trying to be kind to him.

He makes three loops around the entire base perimeter, earning suspicious looks from the guards with each pass. The images flash and flash, but by the end of the third loop, he’s built some small skill in distracting himself from them. He mentally walks through the procedure to clean his rifle. He recalls the step-by-step directions to make chili in the slow cooker. He tries to think about Sharon, hoping it might help, but he’s repelled by the remembrance of her innocence.

Gravity pulls him away from the perimeter and toward the senior enlisted quarters. He doesn’t think or plan his way there. Instead, Bucky’s door seems to appear in front of him through serendipity, and Steve tries be surprised by his unconscious decision to land here. He stands outside for a while, listening for sounds inside. He hears what he thinks might be TV, along with intermittent rumbles of men’s voices laughing, one of which definitely belongs to Bucky. Steve doesn’t know how he’s
managing to find anything funny right now, and he envies Bucky’s ability to pack everything away so tidily. But then again, maybe Steve doesn’t want to be such an expert in traumatic loss.

Steve’s fist hovers an inch from the door, coming in for several failed attempts to knock until he finally forces his knuckles against the surface. Sergeant Wilson comes to the door, and Steve’s relieved when he invites him in without anything more than a greeting.

Bucky’s face grows serious when he sees Steve, and he slides off his bed to meet him at the door. He looks comfortable, dressed down in his ACU t-shirt and pants. Steve’s gaze pauses at Bucky’s incongruous argyle socks for several disbelieving seconds.

Bucky crosses his arms and uncrosses them almost immediately. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

Bucky and Wilson stare at him, their expressions expectant, and it suddenly feels very wrong that he came here. Steve’s mind blows outward, forming a barren vacuum in which no coherent thoughts seem to be able to materialize.

“I should go,” Steve says, absently fingering his pistol holster on his right leg.

Wilson gestures toward him. “No, Sir. You stay, I’m gonna go.”

Steve doesn’t argue. Instead, he watches Wilson put on his boots with deft swiftness. He then watches Wilson glance over at Bucky, giving him a look that only Bucky must be able to understand. Steve wonders how long they’ve been friends and realizes how terrible it is that he never bothered to ask.

As Wilson leaves, he holds up two fingers to Bucky, who nods in reply. Something close to envy burns in Steve’s gut, even though he’s not sure exactly what he envies.

“You can put your rifle down,” Bucky tells him, pointing to his desk.

Only when Steve looks down does he even remember that he’s holding it. He lays it on the desk and stands in the middle of the room, his hands flexing a little, as if they don’t quite know how to behave without a weapon in them.

Bucky takes a few steps forward, stopping an arm’s length away. “How you holding up, Sir?”

“Don’t.” Steve shakes his head. “No ‘Sir.’ Not now.”

“Okay. How are you?”

Like back in the phone center, Steve finds that he doesn’t have words for how he’s holding up or what he’s feeling right now. But unlike back in the phone center, he thinks Bucky might understand what lies in the silence.

Bucky’s expression contorts in concern. There are lines on his face that weren’t there before. Small wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. A deep line between his brows, etched there from three full deployments’ worth of stress, along with every train-up and redeployment in-between. Steve’s not sure how the aging algorithm works, how wrinkles and burned-off baby fat conspire together, but Bucky looks far more handsome pushing 30 than he ever did at 22.

“Do you wanna talk?” Some of Bucky’s concern seems to lift, possibly with effort, as if Bucky thinks Steve’s words will come if he only seems friendly enough. It’s the look and tone one might
offer a scared child or a skittish dog, and Steve doesn’t find either patronizing.

“Not really,” Steve replies.

“What do you need right now, Steve?”

The sound of his name shakes something loose in him, and several possibilities die on the tip of his tongue. They’re all completely outside the bounds of the way that reality is currently configured, all vestiges of the past trying to take root in the wastes of the present. He wants something that he has no right to ask for and no right to receive.

But he wants it still. Because Trip is dead. Because he caused Trip to die. Because he’s stranded himself on a sinking island and feels so devastatingly, painfully alone.

Bucky’s frowning now, his jaw clenched so tightly that Steve can see it tick. His fingers twitch, then his forearm, and then he’s reaching out, tentative, like Steve is made of a fire he has to touch.

Bucky lays his hand on the vulnerable juncture of Steve’s shoulder and neck, and Steve chokes off a pitiful little sound from his throat. Relief crests within him, and it’s only in this moment that Steve understands how scared he was that Bucky would never touch him again.

“It’s okay,” Bucky whispers.

Steve nods.

Bucky’s hand slides down Steve’s collar, down to the zipper of his ACU coat, which he pulls down with clinical composure. Steve shrugs his coat onto the floor, and his heart kicks into a gallop when Bucky drops into a crouch and starts undoing his sidearm holster. He unclips it from Steve’s belt then goes to work on the thigh straps, and Steve sucks in a quiet breath when Bucky’s knuckle inadvertently brushes against his crotch.

Bucky lays the holstered pistol on the floor and stands. Without a word, he takes Steve by the hand and leads him over to his bed.

Anxiety permeates every capillary of Steve’s body when they lie on top of the comforter and Bucky pulls him close. He guides Steve’s head to rest on his shoulder and pets his head in a way that’s almost maternal. Somehow, it’s completely congruous, completely Bucky, an epitome of everything he does day by day to care for everyone in this unit but himself.

Steve attempts to relax. He takes a few deep breaths. He breathes in the smell of Bucky, which he’s always strained to describe. Something warm and lightly piquant, something distinctly masculine. Along the edge of Bucky’s well-worn and stretched t-shirt collar, Steve sees a sparse growth of dark chest hair, which Bucky always shaved or waxed away when they were together. Steve touches it with his fingertips.

“Yeah, I’m a big, hairy gorilla now,” Bucky says in a tone that strains to excuse his own natural form.

“I like it.”

Bucky snorts and gives Steve’s head a gentle pat.

For a long time, Steve lies in the sound of Bucky breathing, his gaze following the metronomic rise and fall of Bucky’s well-muscled chest. When the pull becomes too great, Steve unfolds his arm from where he’s tucked it against his own body and lays it across Bucky’s waist.
“Are you supposed to feel empty after?” Steve eventually asks.

Bucky lifts his hand from Steve’s head and slowly runs it up and down the bare parts of Steve’s arm. Even though his hand is warm, it leaves goosebumps in its wake.

“I don’t think there’s any right way to feel,” Bucky says. “You might feel empty or numb. Maybe angry. Maybe sad.”

“I freaked out at Sitwell today.”

“Yeah?” Bucky sounds pleased. “What’d you do?”

“Screamed at him. Threw his book. Kicked his shoes.” Steve winces at the memory and feels the hot burn of shame at how ridiculous, how utterly insane, it sounds now.

“Good for you. I’m surprised you lasted this long.”

“I feel stupid. I was furious, and he didn’t deserve it. He’s been trying.” Steve pauses and bites the inside of his lip. “I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to beat his face until he was…” Until he was what, Steve refuses to say.

“That’s how it is for a lot of people. You get mad, really fucking mad, because it feels so much better to be angry than sad or hurt.”

Steve watches his own fingers trail over Bucky’s skin. The ridges and dips of his collar bones. The hollow of this throat. The pleasing rise of his Adam’s apple. The ball chain on which his dog tags hang. Steve touches him with the fascination of a man who’s never touched another man before, even though his fingers have traveled these paths countless times.

“How do you handle this life? How do you lose men and keep going?” Steve asks.

Bucky shifts and bends his right arm around Steve so he can push up the left sleeve of his t-shirt. Steve lifts his head and looks at the thin tattoo that winds upon the surface of his upper arm. It’s a Fibonacci spiral, and when Steve looks close, he sees that the line is composed of a long sequence of names strung together.

“These are soldiers I’ve lost,” Bucky says, using his pinky to trace the line from the tight center outward. “The ones I was really close to, anyway. My friends. My men. Most died in action. One guy killed himself. One OD’d. Still casualties, as far as I’m concerned.”

Steve traces the spiral from the outside in, until their fingers meet. “I’m so sorry.”

“You never get used to it.” Bucky abruptly draws his hand away and pulls down his sleeve over the tattoo. “You shouldn’t, anyway. Not if you have a heart.”

“But how do you move forward?”

Bucky shrugs one shoulder. “Personally, I stay busy. Why do you think I deploy every five minutes? So I don’t have time to think about it.” He shifts his weight, until he’s flat on his back again. “This is the only place where anything makes sense, anyway.”

Steve settles his head back on Bucky’s shoulder and lays his palm on his sternum. “How do you figure?”

“Everything’s simple here. The tasks are simple. The mission is simple. The details, yeah, they’re all
jacked up and morally fucked. But people like me can thrive here. Thrive in the disorder, as you put it.” Despite the bitterness in the words Bucky’s borrowing, his tone is fond. “Back home, all this stuff has no place. Nobody wants to hear it. And who wants all that space to think and feel it? Too much space. Too much time. Too much nothing for all this shit to fester in.”

A hesitant question rises up Steve’s throat and stops at his glottis. He swallows uncomfortably around it until it finally dislodges and leaves his lips.

“Is that why you drink?”

Beneath him, Bucky tenses.

“Who told you that?”

“I just heard.”

“I don’t drink anymore. I’m done with that. But yeah, it helped. Temporarily, anyway.” Bucky takes a pair of deep breaths, the kind you take on purpose. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes over the years, and I shoved away a lot of stuff I shouldn’t have. Stuff I should have dealt with a long time ago. Now it’s all there behind this partition.” He forms a flat plane with his hand and draws a vertical line with it in the air. “And there’s so much garbage backed up, and the pressure’s so great that there’s no way to pull out even a little bit without blowing the whole thing to hell.”

Steve imagines a viscous membrane, black and alive, pulsing and bulging with all the evil Bucky’s experienced, every ghost and demon he’s carried with him since long before he came to Brooklyn.

“What does that mean for you” Steve asks.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how to live without war anymore. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true.”

Bucky lays his hand on top of where Steve’s rests at the center of his chest.

“I don’t want you to be like me,” Bucky tells him. “You have a chance to do things differently.”

There’s an unsettling irrefutability in Bucky’s tone, like he’s resigned himself to whatever fate a man like him is destined to have. Steve thinks of Mr. Keating down the hall, out of his mind with the horrors he saw in Vietnam, booby trapping his front door, hoarding supplies, screaming in the middle of the night. He hanged himself with a belt in his closet on Steve’s fifteenth birthday, and when Steve volunteered to help the super clean out his apartment, because Mr. Keating didn’t have a relationship with any of his next of kin, they found fourteen guns, five knives, and two presumably functional grenades. He thinks about Mr. Keating and then imagines Bucky, and he’s stricken by the ease with which he can interchange the two.

“Give yourself some time to feel this stuff,” Bucky tells him. “Feel the grief. We have time. We tell ourselves we don’t, but we do. Even if it’s just ten minutes a day to be sad or pissed or guilty, take that time. Let the pressure off. Don’t wait until you can’t even touch it because its so toxic.”

“I’ll try.”

Silence settles on them like a blanket, and in the quiet, something in Steve, something staunch and stubborn, falls away. Space emerges where there was none before, and in that space arises the words that Steve should have said so many years ago.

“I’m sorry.”
“For what?”

Steve pushes down on Bucky’s chest, like doing so will help Bucky know how sincere he is. How wrong he was. “I’m so sorry for leaving you the way I did.

Bucky touches his lips to the side of Steve’s head. “That really fucked me up. Really bad.”

“I know. I know it did. But I was so hurt. I couldn’t hate my mom for dying, but I could hate you for choosing to leave.”

“Did you really hate me?”

Bucky sounds young, nervous, like the day he told Steve he was gay, his face blanched, fingertips trembling. How could he ever hate Bucky? How could he ever hate someone so desperate to be loved?

“No. I never hated you.”

Bucky pulls him close, but there’s angry energy in his muscles. “I wish you’d just waited. We could have worked it out when I got home.”

“I don’t know about that,” Steve frowns as he considers the possibility. “There was something not right about our relationship. Something deep. It’s like you weren’t ever settled, like you were just counting down the days until we failed. And then you left, and everything went to shit, and it was like a self-fulfilling prophesy. And I was so mad at you for that.”

“I thought about what you said. About why I left.”

Steve tilts his head up, surprised. “Really?”

“I tried to think about it, and logically, it doesn’t make any sense why I’d do that. But maybe there’s something beyond logic there. I don’t know. I’m not good at thinking about myself that deep. Maybe because I know I’m gonna see a lot of really fucked up stuff if I look there.”

“We all have fucked up stuff. I wish I could take back what I did to you. I wish I could go back and fix my fucked up stuff.”

“I wish I could, too. Maybe I wouldn’t have left.” A frustrated breath leaves Bucky’s nostrils. “I don’t know.”

Steve’s fingertips drift back to the hair on Bucky’s chest. “Do you really believe what you said before? That I was just playing gay?”

Bucky hesitates, then finally says “I don’t know.”

“You know, there really are people who like both men and women. One’s not a consolation prize for the other.” Steve lifts his head then, so that he can look Bucky in the eye. So that Bucky can never deny Steve his own truth, because he must be able to see it in his face. Steve feels it there. “I didn’t love you in spite of the fact that you were a man. I loved you because of it.”

“Steve—”

“It was real. What we had was real.”

Bucky lays his hand on Steve’s cheek, and he seems to unfurl, open up, almost like he believes him this time. A sweet smile blooms on his face, on his beautiful mouth. And Steve doesn’t stop Bucky
when his hand curves around the back of his neck and pulls Steve’s head down, when he tilts up his clefted chin just enough to touch their lips together.

Steve doesn’t stop a damn thing. He doesn’t fight the gravity that draws him into Bucky, into his kiss, into his touch, which has been stripped of its maternal tenderness. As the kiss deepens, Bucky’s hands grasp and travel Steve’s body with greedy fervor, like he’s afraid he might evaporate at any moment. And when Steve shifts and settles on top of him, he swears he hears an “Oh, God” just below Bucky’s breath.

The feel of Bucky fucking his tongue into his mouth, the sound of him breathing, the weight of his leg as it wraps around him, it all unleashes something unruly and visceral in Steve. It sucks the present out of the room — the war, their ranks, the death and guilt and sand. It sucks all that out and replaces it with the past. Here, they’re not Sergeant Barnes and Lieutenant Rogers, the men who command the second platoon of the first company of the most elite regular infantry unit in the Army. Here, they’re Bucky and Steve, two friends who fell for each other, two men who are fantastically in love, two lovers who can’t stop touching each other, who make love often and with abandon, who know each other’s bodies better than they know their own.

In this past, all the horror, the gore, the blood, the mind numbing trauma, the heartache of losing Trip, all of that falls away. And in this unburdened space, Steve feels himself get hard. Maybe he should be ashamed for it, and perhaps some part of him is. But when Bucky slides his hand between them and grasps the straining hardness he finds there, Steve whimpers and pushes himself into Bucky’s palm.

Steve slides his tongue out of Bucky’s mouth and pulls away. Bucky’s eyes are dark, his blown pupils pushing his irises into thin blue rings. Steve slides Bucky’s shirt up his belly, and Bucky helps himself out of it before sending it flying across the room. Steve then pulls off Bucky’s dog tags and lays them on the corner of the nightstand. Before the he went to West Point, he always thought they were so sexy on Bucky. But now that he’s had to wear them for six years straight, he sees them for the nuisance they really are. He thinks to suck on Bucky’s nipples, scrape them with his nails and teeth the way Bucky likes. Maybe if he were more patient, he would. Maybe he’d touch every rise and ridge of Bucky’s incredible torso because, Jesus, Steve knew he was fit, but Christ.

Steve’s not patient, though. He’s ravenous and fraying, and all he wants to do right now is rip off Bucky’s clothes and make him come.

It all goes. Pants. Underwear. Those fucking argyle socks. And when Bucky’s finally naked, Steve settles between his legs and looks up at him, at his flushed and curious face. He then wraps his hand around Bucky’s cock, which rests hot and heavy in his grip. It’s the first and only cock he’s ever held besides his own, and he breaks briefly from the torrent of his lust to appreciate it.

“You have a perfect penis, you know,” Steve says. “You could be a penis model.”

“Um, I think that’s called pornography, isn’t it?” Bucky raises a skeptical but amused eyebrow.

“No, I mean like for a textbook. Like for a urology textbook.” As Steve talks, he tilts said perfect penis, runs his fingers along the shaft, traces delicately around the head. “‘Here is an ideal specimen of a circumcised penis. See the handsome frenulum and the noble crown. Observe its perfect balance and symmetry.’”

Bucky breathes out a laugh. “Alright, alright. You gonna put my handsome frenulum your mouth or just compliment it all night? Not that I mind the compliments, but—”

Steve cuts Bucky off by going as far down on his dick as he can, which he’s impressed to learn is
almost all the way before he starts to choke. Bucky’s words are swallowed by a loud groan, followed by a slipstream of breathy and profoundly sexy sounds as Steve works him over. Most of the finer art of cock sucking gets tossed across the room with Bucky’s clothes, leaving behind Steve’s wandering fingers and raw enthusiasm. Bucky pulls a breath between his teeth when Steve ghosts over his hole, and Steve feels the weight of Bucky’s hand on him, stopping him.

“Hold on,” Bucky says, then reaches over to his nightstand. From it, he procures a bottle of lube and hands it to Steve, who promptly chuckles.

“Isn’t this from Private Wilson’s care package?” Steve asks, turning the bottle to inspect the labels.

Bucky props himself up on his elbows. “Yeah, I traded him a carton of smokes for it.”

“Oh yeah? How’d that conversation go?”

“I told him I have to jerk off a lot.” Bucky shrugs with a grin. “Pressures of leadership and whatnot.”

Steve pushes Bucky’s knees up so he can get better access to him. He feels the movement of the bed as Bucky drops back onto the mattress. Bucky’s breathing deeply, eyes closed, getting himself ready, and he lets out a dirty moan when Steve slides his index finger inside him. Steve’s cock stiffens uncomfortably at the practiced ease with which Bucky takes him in, and his mind veers briefly from his present task to other thoughts, like how he wants to be in there, how he should just free his dick from his pants and shove up into him. Fuck him right here.

Something stops him, though. Some force without clear form. Steve pulls his attention back to the gorgeous man splayed out before him, the very first person to really open him up, the one who helped him learn let go and give himself over to his body. The man who tore out his gauges and checks and balances and taught him that it’s okay to writhe and cry out and make a mess on the sheets.

While he fucks his finger in and out of Bucky’s ass, Steve goes back to Bucky’s cock, taking it in his free hand and brushing his lips over the head.

“What do you think about?” Steve asks.

“Huh?”

“When you jerk off. What do you think about?”

Steve goes back down on Bucky while he utters a simple list of things, his voice tense and gritty and punctuated by the sounds of his enjoyment.

“This. You… You inside me. Any part of you…. Your fingers. Your tongue…”

Bucky squirms, his legs shifting, and Steve can tell he’s already getting close. He goes in for the coup de grace, fondling Bucky’s prostate and loosening his throat. He slides a hand under Bucky’s ass and coaxes him up, letting him know he can fuck his face and feeling pretty damn brave for it. Bucky gathers the two fistfuls of comforter and takes the offer with some restraint, fucking up into Steve’s mouth while Steve focuses on keeping his gag reflex in check. Bucky continues his gravelly narration of his jerk-off fantasy, and Steve grinds his hips into the mattress to get whatever small relief he can.

“Fuck… I think about your cock. Your big, hard cock… Fucking me… So hard…”

Bucky repeats “so hard, so hard” until he finally gasps, and Steve braces himself for the load that
Bucky shoots down his throat, which is so far back that he doesn’t even taste it. He holds Bucky’s cock in his mouth until it stops pulsing, keeping his finger pressed on that sensitive place within him. His own cock throbs in time with his heart, as it has been since they started kissing, but he resigns himself to the discomfort.

Steve pulls off and out of him then, smiling despite his neglected hard-on and the ache in his lower back from awkwardly folding his tall frame on the mattress. He’s been trying not to think about how ridiculous the scene looks, the unwholesome picture Sergeant Wilson would see if he walked in now — Bucky sex-addled and buck-ass naked, Steve almost completely clothed, contorted at the foot of the bed between Bucky’s legs, his own legs half hanging off the bed, with a family-sized tent pitched in his uniform pants.

Bucky doesn’t seem worried about that, or anything at all, for that matter. He’s blissed out, eyes still closed, breathing deeply. He seems relaxed for maybe the first time since they’ve been deployed. He feels for Steve’s hand and grabs it, because despite how utterly nasty Bucky can be, how filthy his mouth and his mind are, he’s one of the sweetest people Steve has ever known. He craves tenderness even more than he craves the heady madness of fucking, and after wiping his hand off on his pants, Steve makes his way back to Bucky’s side, enfolding him, reversing their earlier positions.

Bucky makes a sound of deep contentment and drapes his leg over Steve’s. His hand travels down the midline of Steve’s abdomen, over his belt, and comes to rest on his erection. Steve takes in a deep breath through his nose, not only because he’s desperate for relief but because he’s fighting a brutally unfair uphill battle pinning his desire for Bucky against what he knows is the right thing to do.

“What do you think about when you jerk off?” Bucky runs his hand slowly over the bulge in Steve’s pants. “I told you what I think.”

Steve feels his face redden from embarrassment and shame, because not only does he remember all the times he’s thought of Bucky, he very clearly remembers of all the times he’s thought of Sharon.

Bucky works open the top button of his pants. “Do you ever think about me?”

“Yeah,” Steve breathes.

“Doing what?”

Steve swallows heavily. “On top.”

Another two buttons come undone, and Bucky slides his fingers inside the slit in the front of Steve’s briefs, caressing the hot skin of Steve’s cock. “Riding this?”

Steve musters every ounce of moral strength within himself and stops Bucky’s hand with is own. He holds it there for a few moments, heart pounding, chest heaving with the anxiety of his indecision. The memory of every ecstatic moment Bucky has given him collides violently with the commitment he made to Sharon, the deep abiding love he has for her. And the love he still feels for Bucky is also there, a third vehicle in this cataclysmic collision that only makes the gnarled wreckage uglier.

In the end, the only really option Steve sees is to remove Bucky’s hand and clasp it over his own heart. Bucky frowns, of course he does, but he doesn’t seem shocked.

“You don’t want me?”

“I do. You know I do. But I can’t.”

Bucky buries his face into the crook of Steve’s neck. He then lets out a small laugh. “I was supposed
to be comforting you. I was supposed to make you feel good.”

“You did. You did make me feel good. And I like to make you feel good.” The matter-of-factness with which Steve says this surprises him, as does his comfort with the present tense. “But we can’t do this again.”

Bucky nods. His voice holds no bitterness. “I know.”

Steve sighs, pressing his nose against the top of Bucky’s head. His hair doesn’t smell sweet anymore. Not like it used to.

“So, are we friends again?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah.” Even though it’s not really what friends do, Steve squeezes Bucky’s hand. “But if we’re gonna be friends again, you can’t badmouth Sharon. That’s not okay.” The wrongness of acknowledging her while he’s holding someone else only just begins to settle upon him, and it’s enough to loosen his grip on Bucky.

Bucky reads the message and lazily draws his limbs back toward his own body. “I was totally out of line when I said all that. I’m sorry. She sounds like a good person.”

“She is.”

That wrongness blooms in the room like a swift, poisonous algae, and Bucky sits up until he’s seated on the edge of the bed. He looks tired, and the crease between his eyebrows is back.

Steve slides off the bed, adjusts himself, and buttons up his pants, each one of these an easy task now that his boner has been completely vanquished. He pads across the room and starts collecting Bucky’s clothes.

“Do you have someone?” Steve asks, because if they’re friends and all, this is the stuff he figures they can talk about.

“Not really.” Bucky scratches his chest, and his mouth quirks into a smile that’s somehow both fond and despondent. “There’s this one guy I slept with a few times. Five times, he says. Five times in four months. For me, I guess that’s practically married.”

Steve rights himself from where he’s bent to pick up Bucky’s underwear. “That’s it?”

“No, that’s not it-it. There’ve been other guys. But that’s the longest term one, I guess.” Bucky looks down at his hands, which are wringing between his thighs.

“That’s…” So many words come to Steve’s mind, all of them painful. The thought of Bucky being alone all these years, not being held, not being held at night by someone who loves him, is so awful that it makes Steve feel sick.

“‘Pathetic’ is the word I think you’re going for.” Bucky looks up with that smile still on his face.

Steve walks to the bedside and hands Bucky the clothes he’s collected. “I was going to say heartbreaking.”

Bucky takes his clothes and fishes out his stupid socks from the pile, then puts them on as he talks. “Want me to get you anything while I’m on leave?”

Steve frowns at the predictable evasion. He doesn’t answer for a little while, because he can’t think
of anything he wants from New York. He can think of a bunch of other things he wants. He wants
Bucky to get the hell out of the Army so he can have a life. He wants Bucky to stop sabotaging his
opportunities to have the things Steve knows he wants. He wants Bucky to get help to address all the
terrible things Steve can’t even begin to imagine he’s experienced. He stewed while he watches
Bucky dress, but the little looks and smiles Bucky gives him along the way thaw his displeasure
enough that he throws out an answer.

“I want you to bring me two side-on-tops from Papaya King.”

Bucky pulls his pants over his ass, which looks objectively phenomenal in the briefs he’s wearing.
“Jeez, get one wiener in your mouth and it’s all you can think about.”

Steve laughs as he walks over to the nightstand and picks up Bucky’s dog tags. He approaches
Bucky just as he finishes tucking in his t-shirt and slides the chain over Bucky’s head. The tags make
no noise when Bucky pulls out his collar and drops them inside his shirt, thanks to the worn rubber
silencers he has on them.

Bucky then makes some dubiously necessary adjustment to Steve’s clothes, taking a few liberties by
dipping his fingers below the waistband of Steve’s trousers to re-tuck his shirt. When he appears
satisfied, he lays both hands on Steve’s shoulders and looks into Steve’s eyes with the naked
earnestness that rests just below his salty, sarcastic exterior.

“You’re not alone with this, Steve. What happened to Trip, to you, what might happen later, you
don’t have to bear it alone. I’m here for you, no matter what. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank you,” Steve says quietly.

“Can I kiss you?” Bucky asks. “One last time?”

Steve blinks through the sudden blurring of his vision and nods.

The kiss they share is soft and bittersweet, infused with the finality and closure they denied each
other so many years ago. At first, it all seems fine, a natural ending to this phase of their lives
together.

But then Bucky begins to pull away, and a surge of terror spikes in Steve’s body. Steve reaches out
for him, pulling him into his arms with the frantic desperation of a man clutching onto a life preserver
in a flood. He’s scared, so incomprehensibly scared, and it’s only when Bucky returns his embrace
that he realizes he might not be the only one.

They break the kiss and hold each other tight, their hearts pounding, fingers digging. They only get a
few moments like this before a loud knock tears through the air. Bucky startles so intensely that
Steve can barely keep hold of him, and when Bucky pushes him back by the shoulders, his eyes are
wide and wild.

Pain descends on Steve, settling heavily on his face, and he cups Bucky’s cheek for the briefest of
moments before stepping back and creating a platonic distance between them.

“Come in,” Bucky calls, then checks his watch with a quiet “fuck.”

Sergeant Wilson opens the door slowly, as if he’s expecting the scene he nearly walked in on, and
when he steps into the room, Bucky gives him an Academy Award-winning smile.

“Hey, Sam. We were just gonna dip out for a smoke before curfew.” Bucky sits on the edge of his
bed again and begins slipping on his boots.
“Better make it fast,” Wilson says, glancing down to where Steve’s uniform coat and pistol lay at his feet. He then looks up at Steve and raises his eyebrows in a decidedly suspicious way.

If he’s really Bucky’s friend, Steve figures he’s already got the correct sight picture in his head. But still, he feels himself flush as he picks up his weapon and uniform coat, putting them on with crisp, practiced movements. His gaze flits over to Bucky, who’s started a line of smalltalk with his roommate that Steve can barely hear over his receding concentration. Their words take on a milky, underwater quality, and Steve’s mind once again tries to spool up the hideous 3-D pictures show of sorrow and guilt that brought him here in the first place. Trip. Sitwell. Sharon. Trip. Trip’s head. Thump…

“I’m gonna head out,” Steve says, pulling the zipper of his coat up to its regulated position. He walks to Bucky’s desk and gathers his rifle in his hands.

Bucky stands quickly. “Wait, you don’t wanna—”

“Sergeant,” Steve replies, half intending do re-assert his authority to grant himself his exit. But when he sees the look on Bucky’s face, the pleading there, begging him to change the way things went before, begging him to not run away, Steve lets himself be moved.

“We'd better hurry,” Steve says instead, checking his watch.

Bucky smiles and fishes his cigarettes from his nightstand. “Lead the way.”

Chapter End Notes

Military (and Other) Stuff:

Note: I’m trying to be sensitive to the international nature of fandom, so some of these things might be total "duhs" for U.S. readers.

Lorazepam: A benzodiazepine used to treat acute anxiety

Wizard: A nickname for a military psychologist or psychiatrist. Named for the Wizard of Oz for their ability to transport someone out of a war zone or out of the military for mental health issues

Fallen soldier memorial: Here’s a picture. This is a standard memorial arranged when honoring a service member who has died in a war zone. The boots, rifle, and helmet typically belong to the service member who died.

Taps: a song traditionally played at military funerals. It’s also played in Army garrisons at night at “lights out” time. Here's the song

In Living Color: A sketch comedy show from the 1990s featuring an almost all black cast.

Ho Ho: For those outside the U.S., a Ho Ho a chocolate and cream snack cake shaped kind of a like a small log or... poop (?)

Papaya King: One of the most renowned hotdog joints in New York City
Side-on-top: A Papaya King hotdog covered with chili, cheese, and curly fries

Sight picture: When the sights on a fire arm align with a target. In this image, emulating the M16A2 standard issue Army rifle, the rear (circular) and forward (three-pronged) sights align to establish proper aim.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Bucky goes on leave.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, pitchforkcentral86, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

WARNINGS AT THE END

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
BAGHDAD WALTZ

AN IRAQ WAR LOVE STORY IN THREE MOVEMENTS

BY DREADNOUGHT
Despite this being his seventh time home from deployment, counting all his leaves and redeployments, Bucky still can’t help the tears that blur his vision when he first sees his ma and sister in arrivals at Laguardia. The happiness and relief that wash through him at seeing them safe — safe and normal — is almost overwhelming, and he wonders briefly how he can still feel anything at all. So many guys he knows don’t seem to remember how to feel, after a deployment or two or five. After observing him for the past few weeks, he wonders if Steve’s headed down that road, too.

Since Trip’s memorial, Steve’s managed a skillful impersonation of getting back in the saddle. Bucky’s been watching him, though. He knows what to look for, because he’s seen it in so many men. He’s been looking for the dark circles under the eyes. The thousand-yard stare once the camera of command has panned away. The heavy, burdened tenor of the quiet when it falls between them. Steve seems to have finally crossed that inevitable line, one that infantrymen cross by necessity, where the internal strife begins metabolizing into numbness or anger, because there’s not a lot of room for anything else in war.

For as much as he understands it conceptually, he doesn’t know the logistics of how other soldiers gut out their feelings with such proficiency. Bucky’s always burned so hot and bright, ever since he was a kid, and not a single day goes by when he doesn’t feel a menacing tide of sadness or shame trying to consume him. He can’t succumb to it, and he can’t seem to turn it off, so he’s cultivated great talent in kicking things down the road. He’s practically a professional at packaging up those feelings, balling them up tight with twine, and giving them a hard punt into the future. The future, of course, tries to catch up with him at the end of each day, which is what the booze is for. Was for. Because Bucky Barnes doesn’t drink anymore. Not after Trip. He’s done, and things are gonna be different this time.

His ma breaks her stoic Army Mom facade when she sees him, cupping her hands over her mouth while Rikki lays a comforting hand on her shoulder. When Bucky drops his bag, Winnie pulls him into her arms with tearful desperation. She grabs him like he’s six years old again, like she’s yanked him out of the street just in time to save him from getting plowed over by Chief Perez’s Pontiac Bonneville.

“I can barely get my arms around you,” she eventually says, rubbing his back with a tear-thickened laugh.

Bucky breathes out a chuckle and sniffs, taking in the lingering smell of conditioner in her wavy grey-brown hair. “Not much to do downrange but lift,” he lies.

She pulls back and lays her hand on his cheek, where he’s already got a day’s worth of stubble there that he has no plans to shave today or tomorrow. Her hazel eyes are warm and fond and glistening, and he lays his hand over hers with a smile.

Rikki steps forward and pokes Bucky in the back until he hugs her. They embrace tightly, and she continues Winnie’s teasing for being huge, then asks him how much he benches now, what he’s eating, what supplements he’s using. It’s flavored like the conversations they used to have as brothers, and even though they’re both different now, the familiarity is very welcome.

The sunburst of joy is ephemeral, as it always is, and when it explodes into dust, anxiety fills the vacuum. It’s insidious. For Bucky, it’s always insidious. Whenever he comes home, he thinks that
maybe this time he’s got it. Maybe this time he’ll remember that New York is not Iraq or Afghanistan — not only remember it, but know it. But each time, the truth evades him. The panic steals through him and corrupts his senses. The arrivals area grows louder. The people around him edge closer. The temperature climbs and soaks his undershirt. The egress pathways grow hazy and complicated—

Winnie takes him by the arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

Bucky looks down at her and nods, grateful that she’s done this enough times and loved him for long enough to know that his nerves are a mess of frayed wires right now. He had a small fistful of Benadryl on the flight over from Germany, but the first couple days are always a little more intense than substances can fully manage. All three of them know that he’s going to spend the next few days holed up in his ma’s apartment, breathing his heart rate down to normal whenever the neighbor slams his door. Petting Oscar until he gets swatted. Sleeping in fits and starts until he gets used to the sounds of the city and the rhythm of the sun and moon on this side of the world.

They fall into the taxi line, where Rikki starts her pre-brief for the week. She pulls a pair of white-rimmed mod sunglasses from her purse and slides them on, then stares out into the street with the cool composure she left behind in New York when she saw him off at Fort Bragg in February.

“We have reservations on Saturday at Candle 79,” she tells him. Her blue maxi dress drifts in the summer breeze, along with her long chestnut hair. “If you can handle some vegan food.”

Bucky drops his duffle on the concrete. He pulls out on the collar of the navy blue long-sleeved shirt he stupidly packed, trying to ventilate himself in the heat. “Hey, I like Candle 79. Not as much as Daisy, of course.”

“Rikki’s vegan now, too,” Winnie says. “And I’m almost there.”

Bucky chuckles. “Ladies, I will eat whatever you put in front of my face, as long as it doesn’t come in a brown plastic bag.”

“Eight o’clock. Sharp.” Rikki’s face is mostly stern, save for the small upward quirk at the corner of her mouth.

Bucky makes a point of referring to her as “lady,” “woman,” or “girl” as often as he can, even when it’s not really conversationally necessary. Even if it makes him sound like a fag. He knows it makes her happy, and he hopes maybe it offsets some of those times she still gets called “sir.”

He snorts. “You know I’m in the Army, right? I do know how to be on time for things.”

“Well, you like to run off and do your own thing, so consider this your first of several reminders. Saturday. 8:00. And then next Saturday at 7:00. You’re gonna help me out with that, right?”

“Of course I am.” Bucky looks over at Winnie. “You coming, ma?”

Winnie shakes her head and nudges her children forward in the creeping line. “I have work.”

“He snorts. “You know I’m in the Army, right? I do know how to be on time for things.”

“Well, you like to run off and do your own thing, so consider this your first of several reminders. Saturday. 8:00. And then next Saturday at 7:00. You’re gonna help me out with that, right?”

“Of course I am.” Bucky looks over at Winnie. “You coming, ma?”

Winnie shakes her head and nudges her children forward in the creeping line. “I have work.”

“How, they still got you working nights?”

“How, I’m at Mount Sinai now, so I work any shift they want me to. Lord knows they pay me enough.”

Bucky slides his arm around her shoulders and pushes his bag forward with his foot. “About damn time.”
They exchange more talk in a variety of very safe subjects until they finally get a cab to Brooklyn Heights. In the back seat, Bucky feels himself crash hard. While his ma and sister talk, he watches Queens go by as they cruise down 278. From his vantage point in the front passenger seat, he takes in the spectacular view of Manhattan that always makes his chest feel tight and warm at the same time. Sometimes he thinks that being able to see Manhattan like this is the best part of living across the river. You can’t really see it when you’re in it, but from here, God, it’s glorious.

When they finally get to the apartment, it’s nearly noon. Rikki runs out and grabs sandwiches while Winnie gives him the tour which, given its modest size, takes about five minutes.

“This is a real nice place, Ma.”

Winnie ducks her head with uncharacteristic reserve. “Well, I figured I wasn’t getting any younger.”

“Hey, you deserve it.” He smiles when she looks back up at him. “You deserve a nice place that’s all your own.”

She gestures absently to the couch he’ll be sleeping on for the next fourteen days. “Doesn’t leave a lot of room for you, unfortunately.”

Bucky walks over to the couch, upon which she’s left a gym bag of clothes he keeps here just for leave. He fishes out a black Evil Empire t-shirt he’s never been able to part with and pulls off his sweat-damp shirt and undershirt. His ma turns away, as if she actually thinks he might have some modesty left, and he manages to barely squeeze himself into the shirt that’s been with him since he and Steve were studying for AP exams together.

He lays the gym bag onto the floor and drops heavily onto the couch. He drinks a glass of iced tea Winnie brewed on the roof while Oscar rubs himself along Bucky’s shins, leaving behind strips of orange fur. Winnie leaves him alone while she busies herself around the apartment, putting away the dishes, scooping out the litter box, things she doesn’t need to do right now but does anyway because she knows he needs the time alone.

Amid her bustling, Bucky thinks about his men. He wonders what they’re doing right now. He wonders if they have a mission today. He wonders if Rhodes is filling in for him okay and if Mack is filling in for Rhodes okay. He re-activated his phone before he left and is expecting a phone call from Steve on the fourth for an update and — fuck. The fourth. Well, at least he knows now what he’ll be doing that night, and it sure as shit isn’t going to involve watching a theatrical display of massive explosions designed to emulate a fucking war.

When Rikki comes back, she plants herself on the couch next to him and drops a reuben and a paper plate onto his lap. He unwraps his sandwich like a gift and smells it, his eyes rolling back. It’s hot and real and fresh, and that’s more than he can say about anything he’s eaten downrange in the past five months. He takes the biggest bite he can, moaning over how delicious it is, and Rikki waves a napkin in his direction.

“Your face.”

“Mmm, I don’t care,” he mumbles with his mouth full. He holds the sandwich toward her, licking thousand island off the sides of his mouth because he knows his bad manners drive her nuts. “Want some?”

“Dude, I’m vegan, remember?”

“So what’s in your sandwich? Tofu?”
Rikki regards her sandwich thoughtfully. “There are these things called vegetables, and they’re really good for you, and they can be configured into sandwich form.” She shows him. “See?”

“Huh. I almost forgot what a fresh vegetable looks like. That actually looks really good.”

She takes the other half of her sandwich and lays it on the plate he’s not using. “You can have it.”

“I’m not taking your food.”

“I’m not gonna eat it, anyway.”

“Why? You don’t like it?”

She doesn’t respond, and she doesn’t take back her sandwich. They all know why she’s not eating it. Unlike Bucky, Rikki Barnes has always converted food almost instantaneously into muscle and, as she’s fond of putting it, “That’s not really the aesthetic I’m going for these days.”

Still, Rikki sneaks a steady stream of potato chips from his bag while they eat and, eventually, Bucky does finish her sandwich. There’s no arguing with her, and it falls in line with silent rule of their family that each member generally gets to kindle their unhealthy behaviors in peace.

Despite his weak efforts to stay awake until nighttime, Bucky’s out cold before two. When he wakes up, it’s dark, and his head is canted back at a wicked angle that gives him a worm’s eye view of the ceiling fan spinning above him.

It reminds him of when he was a kid, when he’d look up at the ceiling fan in his bedroom — somehow, no matter what base they moved to, his room was always the same — and he’d think about Blackhawks. He’d think about the thump-a-thump-a-thump-a of the rotor blades cutting through the air. He’d think about how cool his dad looked in his pickle suit. How cool his dad’s job was. How he got to tell the other kids, whose dads were clerks or grunts or cooks, that his dad was a pilot.

Stupid. How could he be so fucking stupid?

———

On Friday July 4th, Bucky is awoken by two things: the shrill blare of his cell phone and four sets of claws digging violently into his torso. His eyes fly open in time to see Oscar in mid-air, spring-boarding off of him like a gymnast, and the room fills with his shout of “Ow, you fucker,” followed by the cackle of his ma from her room.

Bucky lays his hand over his racing heart and checks the caller ID. It’s a 703 area code, and his heart rate kicks up into fifth gear when he realizes that it’s probably Steve. He clears his throat, trying to kick loose the nerves bunched up there, and accepts the call.

“Sergeant Barnes.”

“Hello, Sergeant Barnes. This is Lieutenant Steve Rogers calling from Alpha Company, second platoon, 107th Infantry Battalion of the—”

“Yeah, yeah, all right. Cut me some fuckin' slack.” Bucky smiles and rubs the sleep out of his eyes.

“Hope I didn’t wake you.”

“It was actually the cat that woke me by mauling my chest with his talons when he heard my phone
“He was sleeping on your chest?”

Bucky shrugs to nobody. “I guess so.”

Steve makes a small sound of endearment. “That’s adorable.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty cute.” Bucky pats his stomach to coax the cat back up, who’s currently eyeing him from the floor. “Happy almost 30th birthday.”

“Is that what they’re calling 28 now?”

“See, I’m doing you a service. I’ll keep saying that you’re almost 30, and then when you turn 30, you won’t have a meltdown because I’ll have you prepped for it.” Bucky holds his hand out for Oscar, who leans just out of his reach, coy little bastard.

“Who says I’d have a meltdown at 30, anyway?”

And thus illustrates one of the key differences between mostly straight guys and gay guys, as least as far as Bucky’s got it figured. At 30, Bucky’s going to wallow in his doomed, eternal singleness by way of an epic, catastrophic meltdown. He’s practically already got it planned. Of course, such plans necessitate copious amounts of alcohol, and he hasn’t developed a contingency plan for the event that he’s still clean and sober at that time.

“Doing anything special for your birthday?” Bucky asks.

“Well, Colonel Fury got a bounce house, which should be fun. And Sitwell swears that he aced the Clowning 101 survey course at Duke. But he did get a B minus in the lab, so although we’ll probably have balloon animals, they may not be very pretty.”

Bucky smiles with aching relief over their hard-earned return to The Way They Used To Be, which he pegs at around circa 1999. That was when the stride they hit in the friendship department was starting to wobble a bit under the weight of the quietly blooming attraction between them. Of course, Bucky had carried a torch for Steve since the day they met, but it was only in the last year of the millennium that Steve started to shift. Held eye contact a little longer than was polite. Sat a little closer than the space required. Put his arm over Bucky’s shoulder a little too often and pulled him a little too close.

For all he longed for it, 1999 panned out to be one of the worst years of Bucky’s life, because he suffered profoundly under the presumption that nothing would ever, ever come of it. He drank a lot that year. Mostly alone. Often to the point of puking or losing consciousness. Thankfully, never both at the same time.

But this is better. This is better, because Bucky knows that chapter of their lives is finally closed. He’s been trying to tell himself that he’s okay with it, that this is better, figuring that if he repeats it to himself enough, that truth will manifest.

“Did you finally work things out with Sitwell?” Bucky asks

“Yeah.” He leaves it at that.

“How’s everyone?”

“A little lost without you, but Rhodes and I have been trying to pick up the slack.”
Bucky hears the smile in Steve’s voice. He hopes Steve can hear his, too.

They chat for fifteen more minutes, talking shop as much as they can over a dubiously secure line. In that time, Bucky finally cajoles Oscar back onto his stomach, where sits like a bemused sphinx while Bucky pets him. Bucky has to stop himself from voicing the acute sadness he feels when Steve has to let him go. He wishes that Steve was here, sitting on the couch with him, drinking a cup of coffee and checking the news on his phone. Just sitting here. That’s all.

Bucky keeps smiling through the pain. “Well, tell the guys I say hi. Tell them to drink water and change their socks and wash their nasty asses.”

Steve laughs. “I will quote you verbatim.”

“Oh, they’ll love that.”

“Say hi to your ma and Er—” Steve catches himself and corrects swiftly to “Rikki.”

“Ma!” Bucky calls out toward her bedroom. “Steve says hi!”

“Steve Rogers?”

Bucky lowers his voice and talks fast before his ma tears out here with a thousand questions. “Okay, gotta go. Happy birthday. I’ll eat two wieners for you.”

“You’d better.”

Bucky hangs up after their final goodbyes, just in time for Winnie to bombard him with questions. He briefs her in partial truths, lets her know that things are good between them now, that they worked everything out. His energy around the subject fades fast when it fully dawns on him that his ma is wearing her uniform.

“You’re working again?”

“Time and a half,” she tells him over the rim of her coffee mug.

He sits up fully, once again insulting the cat. “Why’re you working so much?”

Winnie is quiet for a few moments. Bucky tries to fill the silence with everything he can think of, like: did they raise the rent, are you sick, are you gonna retire early—

“I’m helping your sister pay for her surgery.”

Bucky frowns. “Insurance doesn’t cover that?”

“I don’t think insurance covers it for anyone. Certainly not Rikki. Her insurance is terrible.”

“I thought the business was doing pretty well.”

Winnie puts down her cup on the kitchen table and pulls out her lunch bag from the fridge. “It is, but they’re still shy of turning a profit. Daisy had to pick up a white hat job with the Federal Reserve to keep them in their apartment.”

“Shit.”

“What’re your plans today, honey?”
Bucky folds his arms over the back of the couch and rests his chin on them. “I dunno. Maybe get a bagel.”

Winnie tips her palms up toward the ceiling. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Winnie opens the fridge and gestures at things that Bucky can’t see as she talks. “Well, there’s lots of fruit in the fridge from the farmer’s market, and I have some romaine lettuce and salad stuff, too. There’s a really good Thai restaurant two blocks south, if you want something more substantial.”

“Are they gonna have fireworks this year?”

“Right over there.” She closes the fridge and points toward New Jersey.

Bucky runs hand through his hair with a sigh. “When will you be home?”

“I’m working a double, so probably after ten.” Winnie clears a couple of plates off the counter and sets them in the sink. “Could you do the dishes while I’m gone?”

“Sure.”

She stops and crosses her arms over her chest, looking at him with unmasked concern. “Are you gonna be okay tonight?”

“Sure.”

“I’m sure Rikki and Daisy would be happy to have you over.”

“I’m fine.” Bucky smiles in an attempt to make it seem true. It feels flat, and based on the way her lips thin, it probably is.

“Are you going to see any friends while you’re home?”

“Like who?”

She shrugs. “Anyone.”

“No.”

Winnie nods shallowly. “Okay. Well, I hope you at least get to relax a bit today.”

“Sure, Ma.”

After she leaves, Bucky spends the next two hours staring at the ceiling, trying to talk himself out of rushing out to buy a fifth of vodka at the liquor store on the corner. He could drink it all and nobody would know. And he’d be able to relax. And he’d sleep through those fucking fireworks like they were a lullaby. And he wouldn’t feel the awful, gaping emptiness burning in his chest.

He manages to peel himself off the couch around ten, but only because he has to take a piss. He figures he might as well shower while he’s in the bathroom, and since his ma’s not home, he stands under the water until his skin goes pruney, his thoughts circling around that night with Steve. How Steve made him feel so good. How it felt so right to be together like that. How obvious it quickly became that it was actually very, very wrong. How vulnerable he felt after, not only because he opened himself but because Steve saw how pitiful he is, how desperate he is to be loved by anyone, even someone who’s completely unavailable. He drives his shame into himself like a dagger.
Eventually, Bucky dresses and leaves the apartment. He stays close to the buildings he passes, hands crammed in his pockets, gaze shifting uneasily over the urban landscape. He does stop by a bodega, but only for some gum, a pack of smokes, and a couple Cherry Cokes for later. He finds a mediocre bagel shop and gets an everything with chive and onion cream cheese, ’cause he doesn’t have anyone to impress today. He makes it home before his anxiety cripples him and eats his bagel standing at the counter. He barely tastes it.

When night falls, he queues up Led Zeppelin on his iPod and blasts it as loud as it goes. He balls himself up on the couch, face pressed into the cushions, and plays Steve’s favorite album on a merciless, self-pitying loop while explosions light up the skyline.

———

On Saturday night, just after appetizers and just before the main course, Daisy Johnson proposes to Rebecca Barnes at Candle 79 — gets down on one knee with a ring and everything. Rikki is shocked to tears. Winnie cries, too. Bucky is blindsided by a terrific surge of anger and anxiety, and he barely muster enough self-control to mutter a perfunctory ‘congratulations.’ Nobody hears it, because it gets drowned out by joyful weeping and the clapping of some daft tourists.

Between kissing Rikki’s mascara-stained cheek and clasping Winnie’s outstretched hand, Daisy gives him a look, hard and knowing, one that makes Bucky want to fall through the floorboards. She sees right through him. Always fucking has. Like Foggy Fucking Nelson. She knows. She’s never said it, but she knows everything. Everything. She must. There’s no other explanation for the way her stare shreds up his insides.

Bucky stands, because he absolutely has to, because his lungs are seizing up and the room is impossibly small and hot right now, and he tries to ignore the confusion, hurt, and concern in Rikki’s eyes as he leaves the table. He waves a hand behind his back, as if to swipe her feelings away, then takes the stairs down to the first floor and bolts out the front door. He gasps when he hits the night air and bends at the waist, every breath feeling like he’s sucking it in through a straw stuffed with gauze. People are looking at him, watching him hyperventilate and, of course, nobody does or says anything. Just another crazy man losing his shit on the streets of New York City. Move along.

And that’s fine. Bucky wouldn’t even know what to tell them anyway, because his thoughts are a fetid pile of shameful garbage. Yeah, my sister just got engaged, and I’m losing my fucking mind because she’s four years younger than me and somebody loves her so much that they want them to be wives together in this shitty, hateful world — wives, for fuck’s sake — and they’re both idealistic idiots and I’m so fucking jealous that I could rip my own fucking guts out with my bare hands and thanks for asking.

He manages to reign it in, closing his eyes and taking breaths slowly through his nose. The panic, the hyperventilation, it all usually happens when he comes home on leave. But the difference is that it typically kicks off only when something bad happens. This? This is just low. Low and sad.

When he stands to his full height, he blinks through the black splotches and reaches into his pocket for his phone. He reads a text from Rikki, asking if he’s okay, and he cranes his neck to look up at the second floor of the restaurant where their table is. Just this small act fills Bucky with dread, and he gives a mournful sigh and texts back that he’s fine but that he has to go home. She replies with a frowny face that nearly kills him. But still, he can’t. He just can’t.

So Bucky untucks his polo shirt and lights up a smoke. Then he walks. He walks and smokes until he gets to Central Park, where he hangs a left and skirts the perimeter on 5th Avenue. At Grand Army Plaza, he sits down wearily on the edge of the Pulitzer Fountain, marveling at how he can feel so exhausted after having done absolutely nothing his entire leave. Nothing except regret and worry.
and sleep and remember the weight of Trip’s severed head in his hands and think about how much better everything would be if he were drunk.

He pulls his pack of smokes, matches, and his phone from his pockets and lights another cigarette while he scans through five new texts, four from his ma and one from Daisy:

Are you okay?
Do you have enough money for a cab?
Do you want me to come home?
I love you sweetheart
You could have at least TRIED to act happy. Shit

Bucky’s knee starts to bounce. He shoots off an “I’m fine” to his ma and an “I’m sorry” to Daisy, then takes a long, bitter drag off his cigarette. He pokes around his phone, scrolls through his contacts, noting with dismay (but not surprise) the paucity of actual friends on the list. He doesn’t even have Steve’s number, because they’ve only been remotely civil with each other for a small handful of months.

He scrolls down and nearly blows by the letter O completely when he’s stopped by THOR ODINSON ;)

Thor Odinson. All caps. Smiley face.

Bucky bites at his thumbnail while his thoughts fly into a dervish of indecision. But his fingers move faster than his mind can settle, and before he even fully knows what he’s doing, he’s sent off a simple Hey! It’s Jamie Barnes.

The reply is almost immediate.

I think you have the wrong number

Bucky panics, briefly, then remembers that it’s not the wrong number so much as the wrong name.

Sorry I meant Sam Wilson. And I have an explanation for that I swear.

He stomps his cigarette butt decisively into the ground and resumes gnawing his thumb until he gets a response.

Didn’t think I’d ever hear from you again Sam/Jamie :)”

Holy shit.

I’m on leave in NYC til the 14th. Bucky pauses before adding the next part. Wondering if you wanted to meet up.

I’m in NY too! And yes absolutely ;)

Bucky runs his hand up the nape of his neck and smiles. Maybe this week won’t be so terrible after all.

———

By Wednesday, Bucky’s actually feeling pretty good. He smoothed things over with Rikki and, to a lesser extent, Daisy. He went to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden with Winnie yesterday and didn’t let his anxiety around being in a crowd of tourists get the best of him. And at six this morning, he ran
the Brooklyn Bridge over to Battery Park and then back, sending a bolus of endorphins into his bloodstream that seem to be circulating there still.

Now, once again, he’s on the Upper East Side, walking up East 57th with a day bag slung over his shoulder and a smoothie from Whole Foods in hand. He’s been fantasizing about tonight for the past few days, trying to create the scene in his head by pulling old memories of Thor from the spotty collection of drunken fucks he has stored in his mind. He remembers some things with exceptional clarity. He’s hot. He’s hung. He’s good in bed. He remembers other things too, like the fact that he’s nice, that he makes breakfast, that he’s considerate. Bucky’s not quite sure where to fit those last things into the scene, but he finds that he can’t discard them, either.

Bucky’s so down to fuck that he can barely contain his energy around it. There’s an angry, empty space that Steve left in him that night they were together, when Steve refused to fuck him because he suddenly grew a conscience and decided to draw an arbitrary line around the act. But that’s just fine, because now Bucky’s got someone who’s probably more than happy to plow him until he’s so fucked out he can’t even move. And Bucky’s ready for it. He’s freshly shaved and impeccably groomed, looking fine in olive green shorts and a black tank to showcase his deployment muscles. If anyone will appreciate them, it’ll be the guy whose future gym he’s currently trying to track down.

In the waning daylight, Bucky eventually does find it — what’s there for him to find, anyway. The place is still in the very early stages of renovation, freshly gutted of whatever was here before. He steps inside cautiously, feeling intrusive despite being invited. The space is immense, ideal for its new purpose, and when Thor emerges from behind a wall of plastic sheeting, Bucky’s already smiling.

“Nice place you got here.” It comes out smooth enough, which is a feat given how Bucky seems to have forgotten just how ridiculously good looking Thor Odinson is. He didn’t know that beer goggles could actually go in reverse.

Thor smiles as he approaches. “I’m glad you found it.”

There’s an awkward moment where neither of them seems to know what to do, whether they should shake hands or hug or stand an acquaintance-length apart. They settle for standing slightly closer than acquaintances might, close enough for Bucky to smell Thor’s cologne, far enough away to ache for more closeness.

“You cut your hair.” Bucky gestures to his own hair, which, pushing past the limits of regulation, is about the same length.

“Does it look okay?” Thor asks, turning his head to one side and then the other. His insecurity is entirely feigned.

“I think you could have absolutely any haircut and still look amazing. That’s a gift.”

“Speaking of, I have something for you,” Thor tells him with a playful grin. “You have to close your eyes, though.”

Bucky closes his eyes, because he’s generally not one to turn down gifts from smoking hot Scandinavian guys.

“Now hold out your hand.”

He does. A piece of fabric drops into his palm, and when he opens his eyes, Bucky sees a sock. His sock.
Thor lets his hand fall back to his side, but not before brushing his fingers against Bucky’s. “I found it behind the dresser when I was moving.”

Bucky breathes out a laugh. “Guess I’ll have to call you Prince Charming now.”

“You can call me whatever you like.” Thor winks. “Want me to show you around?”

“Absolutely.”

Thor gives him the grand tour, speaking in lofty, questionably hyperbolic terms about how his gym is going to be a “comprehensive wellness experience,” complete with a massage clinic, yoga, personal training, and physical therapy services. Bucky tunes in and out of the spiel as he battles his distraction over Thor’s tan skin, exquisite musculature, self-possession, and easy charm.

“Want to get out of here?” Thor finally asks when they make their way back to the entrance.

“Yes.” Bucky almost adds “please” but chooses not to sound quite that desperate.

“Let me call a car.”

Thor calls a car, because apparently he has one on standby 24 hours a day, and it takes them about eight minutes to pull up to the towering behemoth that is 1 Central Park West. The car stops outside the front entrance, and Bucky looks out the window at the doorman, frozen in incredulity.

“You live here?”

Thor nods.

“Jesus,” Bucky says under his breath, then gathers the courage required for him to step out of the vehicle and into the unknown.

The thing is, he doesn’t know how to do any of this sober. He doesn’t know how to flirt, how to be sexy, how to be cool. Bucky’s reminded of how many decisions booze made for him over the years so that he didn’t have to. He’s also reminded that the only man he’s ever fucked sober is Steve. And suddenly, when the elevator doors close behind them, he’s scared to death.

“I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing,” Bucky confesses, gripping the strap of his bag tightly.

“Right now?”

“In general. And right now.”

Thor looks over at him, his eyes placid. “We don’t have to go to my apartment. We don’t have to do anything.”

“No, I want to. I just…” Bucky shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

A few seconds of silence pass.

“Coming back can be tough,” Thor says quietly.

Bucky looks down at his feet and wishes that’s all this was.

When they get out of the elevator, Thor leads him down the hall to his apartment, a two bedroom, two bath expanse of modern luxury, cut with those same clean lines as his apartment in Chapel Hill. Bucky drops his bag on the floor near the couch and walks to the window, which offers a panoramic
view of the sunset over Central Park and the Manhattan cityscape that is the most literally breathtaking thing he’s ever seen in his life.


Thor approaches him from behind, careful to stay within Bucky’s peripheral visual field. He lays his hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Thor tells him. “Take some time and relax. Make yourself at home. Have a drink, if you’d like.”

Bucky sets his tone to the degree of resolution he only wishes he had internally. “I don’t drink anymore.”

“Good.”

“Good, huh?”

“I get to see the real you.” Thor smiles with an earnestness that’s almost embarrassing.

“Well, don’t get too excited,” Bucky tells him. “I’m probably better wasted.”

Thor squeezes his shoulder. “I doubt that.”

Thor walks back toward his bedroom, and Bucky wanders around the apartment. He looks at Thor’s books and doesn’t remember a single title he sees. He sits on his couch for a minute or two, crossing his legs in a few different and uniquely uncomfortable configurations before standing and wandering again. He browses around the kitchen, opening and closing the cupboards, finding all the liquor — so much liquor — and, miraculously, leaving it be. When he hears the shower start, he grabs his bag and walks slowly to the master bedroom.

Thor’s room is as meticulously clean and tastefully decorated as he remembers. It creates an illusion of vastness, one that makes Bucky feel small and unsure. He peels off his tank top and socks, drops his shorts, then stuffs them all into his bag, where he’s got a change of clothes, lube and condoms, toiletries, and Benadryl.

Bucky touches his fingers to the waistband of his underwear and wonders whether it would be slutty to take them off already. Whether this whole endeavor makes him slutty. Of course, it’s pretty pointless to be concerned about being a slut after he crossed that line eons ago — not just crossed it but gleefully skipped over it with wild, drunken abandon.

But he cares now. Beyond any reasons he can see, he cares. Where he once privately regarded his sexual exploits with something resembling pride, he now regards that history with chagrin. And suddenly, Bucky feels very old. Old and used up. And, at the same time, way too damn young to be either of those things.

Bucky keeps his underwear on and lies down on Thor’s bed. He stares at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of Thor in the shower. He tries to get himself in the mood a little, tries to picture Thor naked and wet, maybe touching himself, stroking that huge cock of his. But the image in Bucky’s mind emerges in only two dimensions, flat and factual and uninspiring.

The water shuts off, and Bucky takes a deep breath, shifting, trying to relax, clenching and unclenching his hands, touching his still-soft dick through his briefs and mumbling at it to wake up already.
Thor comes out wearing a towel around his waist. He looks incredible, far better than Bucky’s memory of him and even more built than the lines of his clothing suggested. He gives Bucky a small smile and lies down his side next to him, towel and all.

The look at each other for a few long moments, neither making a move to touch the other. Bucky’s muscles tense as the discomfort of not knowing how to do this — how to do one simple thing he’s done a thousand times — grows worse. Eventually, the eye contact is too much for Bucky to keep, and he presses his palms against his eyes with a sigh.

“God, why is this so awkward?” he murmurs.

“I didn’t realize it was awkward.”

Bucky lets out a sigh. “I’ve been thinking about tonight ever since Saturday, and I had this very clear idea of how everything was gonna go, what I’d say, what I’d do. I had this whole nasty script in my head, like I’m tell you to do this to me and that to me, and you’d be like ‘oh yeah,’ and then we’d fuck, like, ten times.”

Thor’s blond eyebrows climb with amusement. “That’s a lot.”

“But now that I’m here, and I’m thinking about all that, I’m telling you about it, it all just sounds so…lame. Lame and sad. My sister just got engaged. That’s where I was on Saturday night. Her girlfriend popped the question right in the middle of dinner. She’s 25, and she’s already engaged.” Bucky lays his hand on his forehead, like maybe it’ll help him contain the stream of honesty flying out of him right now. “I mean, fuck, I’m 29, and I’ve only had one real relationship. One. In my entire life. The rest has just been me fucking around, trying to fill empty space with dick and vodka and whatever else I could cram in there.”

This is the first time Bucky’s ever acknowledged aloud that he uses sex and alcohol for the same purpose. And it comes out easy, like its just been waiting for the right moment. Maybe it’s because Thor’s seen it so many times. And it’s not like he doesn’t know, on some level, what Bucky’s about. It can’t be that subtle.

“I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me,” Bucky says, lips pulling into a frown. “And I don’t know why I’m telling you all this, because we were just supposed to hook up and fuck and have a good time.”

Thor touches his fingers lightly to Bucky’s bicep. “Like I said earlier, we don’t have to. We can grab dinner and come back and hang out. Talk. Watch TV. Like a date.”

Bucky snorts in a way that belies how much he likes the idea. “A date, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” Bucky looks up and to the left, doing some quick math in his head. “I haven’t been on a date in six-and-a-half years.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s been a while.”

“Well, for food, there’s Thai, Italian.” Thor smiles. “Middle Eastern.”

“You’re gonna laugh, but Middle Eastern actually sounds great. They never let us eat the local food, even though it’s a thousand times better than DFAC food.” Bucky turns on his side to face Thor,
propping his head up on his hand. “It’d kind of funny, I’ve been pretty much eating only fruit and salad since I got here. My mom got all these strawberries at the farmer’s market, and I ate probably two pounds in one day. She was like, ‘did someone break in here and steal our strawberries?’ I’m like, ma, I haven’t had fiber in five months. Cut me a break.”

Thor pauses for a moment, hesitating, while his face flushes pink.

“About a month after I came back from deployment,” he finally says, “I went to the doctor. I was worried, because I was shitting every day. He asked me what the problem was, and I said I thought it was normal to shit only once a week.”

Bucky laughs. “For three hours at a time.”


“I always tell people they haven’t known suffering until they’ve had to live off MREs and DFAC food for six to twelve months.”

Thor’s reaches out and runs his fingertips along the raised veins atop Bucky’s hand. “This is not a very sexy conversation, is it?”

“No, but it’s a real one. And that’s pretty fucking great.” Bucky turns his hand over and watches Thor’s fingers trail over the lines of his palm. “Do we have to go to the restaurant, though? Going out to eat isn’t really relaxing for me.”

“No problem. I’ll have someone pick it up.”

Bucky grins. “Well, then, it’s a date.”

They both dress and chat in the living room while they wait for the food to come. They talk about Thor’s family, how his dad was trying to groom him to take over the bank, but Thor turned him down because he couldn’t stomach the idea of sitting behind a desk for the rest of his life. They talk about Bucky’s family, about his ma and Rikki, a terse sentence about his dad being dead, then about Daisy, since she’s going to be family soon.

They continue talking over dinner, sharing dolmas, halloumi, and hummus with pita bread. They even share their main courses. It’s casual and easy, like how things used to be with Steve. It dawns on Bucky that he seems to have a type — tall and blond, confident and a little rigid. Someone who can contain his energy, keep him tethered to the ground. It’s a very nice feeling, one he nearly forgot.

After dinner, they start watching Transformers, which for Bucky is like watching Michael Bay take a giant crap on his childhood. Thor seems to enjoy it, because unlike Bucky, Transformers cartoons and toys weren’t his lifeblood growing up. Much of Bucky’s sourness is neutralized when Thor puts his arm around him and pulls him in close. Bucky cuddles with him the way he wouldn’t let himself cuddle with Sam, because there are no hidden or mixed messages about what’s going on here. This is a date, a for-shit date. Jamie Barnes is on a date.

Things do heat up, gradually and organically. About three quarters of the way into the movie, they start kissing, and Bucky straddles Thor’s lap so that he can run his fingers through his hair, touch his face, and grind against him. They make out for a long time, until the movie’s over and the title menu starts repeating on an obnoxious loop. They take that as their cue to move to the bedroom, where they strip each other out of their clothes and continue their kissing on the bed. They kiss for what seems like forever, until the heat and pressure in Bucky’s groin grow almost unbearable and he asks Thor to fuck him. Bucky even lets him finger him and lube him up, because Thor asks to and he’s
sweet about it, and because Bucky really wants him to.

Thor asks him how he wants it and—he wants it face-to-face, so they can kiss, so Bucky can wrap his legs and arms around him and lose himself in the closeness, God the shit he fantasizes about sometimes. But just the thought of it makes him flush with embarrassment and, below that, abject fucking terror. So he asks for it from behind, but close, deep; he wants to feel him, and Thor says “Yes” and gives him exactly what he wants, sliding his huge cock in gently, kissing his shoulder, his neck, and it’s hot and slow and deliberate, and Bucky gives himself over to it, even as he works to still the writhing, primordial part of him that is still crying out, warning him—but it’s okay, he brought poppers, he just—he just needs a little hit or two and it’s fine. Thor drives into him, Jesus, so fucking deep that he can feel it in his guts, his huge arm wrapped around him, holding him, he takes another hit to relax, it’s fine, God, it’s good, it’s so fucking good—and Bucky comes after just barely touching himself. Thor fucks him through it and then stills, groaning loudly against Bucky’s neck.

After settling into the warmth of the afterglow and, eventually, cleaning up, they turn the lights out and crawl into bed. Thor holds him, and Bucky lets himself be held, tense and worried as Thor begins to drift into sleep. He wonders if two Benadryls will be enough to keep him from thrashing around. He wonders if Thor will still be the same in the morning, if he’ll still want all this. He wonders if it’s okay to feel this good, this safe. He wonders if this could be something. Something real. He then wonders where the catch in all this is, and he doesn’t have to try hard to find it. Because in a week, he’ll be back in Iraq, back to being Sergeant Fucking Dickhead Barnes, who lives almost every day of his life as a bold, hypocritical lie.

Almost every day. But not today.

“Goodnight, Jamie Barnes,” Thor says, kissing the top of his head. “It was nice to finally meet you.”

Bucky stares up at the ceiling. He forces a smile into his voice.

“Goodnight.”

———

By the time Bucky gets to Rikki and Daisy’s apartment on Saturday afternoon, he’s already teetering on the edge of a panic attack. He made the mistake of taking the train to Park Slope, a colossal miscalculation of his capacity to handle stress today. Floating high on how good he’s felt since Wednesday night, he decided that it would be a fantastic idea to take the 3 and F trains from Brooklyn Heights to Park Slope on a Saturday afternoon. He was able to white-knuckle through it, barely, but now he’s digging deep just to craft the mere appearance of being okay. Because tonight is Rikki’s big party, and he’s not about to ruin any more of her personal milestones while he’s here.

When Bucky gets to the apartment, he’s struck by two things: first, the odd decorative balance stricken between hacker lair and Pier One Imports catalogue, and second, the sound of Daisy’s rising voice as she tries to impress something important about a garbage disposal to whoever’s on the other line. Rikki leaves him standing in the doorway while she flits around the room living room in an old Sleater-Kinney t-shirt and cut-offs, opening and closing drawers, calling out to Daisy, “nope, not in here” and “not here, either.”

“What’s wrong?” Bucky finally asks, when the nervous, frustrated energy in the room starts becoming unbearable.

Rikki gestures sharply to the sink. “The garbage disposal’s broken, and it’s been almost impossible to get someone here to fix it.”
“And your landlord’s not doing anything about it?"

“We’re not renting.”

Bucky’s eyebrows climb in disbelief. “You *bought* this place?”

Rikki nods, then says in a low voice, “Kind of regretting it, at the moment.”

Bucky slams into yet another wall of envy for his sister, and he fights an angry urge to tell them that they’re screwed and they’re just gonna have to figure it out themselves. But he knows he’s only angry at himself, and he’s getting about sick of using his self-loathing as an excuse to screw up other people’s lives.

“All right, where are your tools?” Bucky asks. “I’ll fix it.”

Rikki puts her hands on her narrow hips. “Like what?”

“Screw drivers, wrenches, that stuff. Basics.”

“We don’t have any.” Rikki winces preemptively.

“You don’t have screwdrivers? Are you serious? How is that even possible? You’re an engineer.”

“Software engineer,” she corrects. “Not quite the same as a garbage disposal repairman.”

“They didn’t issue you a full set of tools when you joined the lesbian brigade?”

Daisy growls then, drawing their attention to her as she tosses her phone on the couch. “Unbelievable.”

“Daisy, how do you not have tools?” Bucky asks, then gestures to the two sprawling computer work stations against the wall. “How do you build all this shit without tools?”

“I *have* tools, but they’re this big.” She makes diminutive lengths and diameters with her fingers. “Maybe Carol has some.”

“Oh, Carol definitely has some,” Rikki replies, then turns to Bucky. “I’ll go see if she’s home.”

Rikki leaves him alone with Daisy, who gives him the type of smile that she typically gives him, an effortful one that’s just a little sour.

“You know how to fix a garbage disposal?” she asks, crossing her arms.

“No, but I’m sure the internet does. What’s the problem, anyway?”

“It’s been making a nasty grinding noise. I think something’s caught in it.”

“Probably clogged up with chia seeds and kefir grains or whatever you vegans eat.”

He tries for a joke, a nervous one, and he feels a steep pitch of relief when Daisy’s smile goes genuine. For a moment, anyway.

“Are you gonna be okay tonight?” she asks, and once again, that acrid essence infuses back into her face.

Bucky purses his lips but then nods. “I think so.”
“Coco’s is pretty busy, especially on a Saturday night.”

“I’ll just step out and take a breather, if I need it.”

Daisy’s eyes narrow. “Please don’t fuck this up for her. She’s been waiting for her surgery forever, and she’s scared, and she just wants to have a good time tonight.”

Bucky frowns at the way Daisy so easily implies that he’s a fuck-up, despite the fact that she has plenty of evidence to prove it. He also frowns because it hadn’t even dawned on him that Rikki might be struggling right now.

“I didn’t know she was so scared.”

Daisy shrugs. “Well, you haven’t exactly been spending much time with her since you’ve been back. She misses—”

The door opens then, and Rikki walks in with a brilliant smile and a large canvas bag. “Okay, I’ve got tools!”

Bucky and Daisy smile back at her, throwing her off any possible scent of conflict, and Bucky grabs the tools and gets to work.

It takes him an hour-and-a-half, but he successfully dismantles the disposal and dislodges a shard of hard plastic that somehow made it into the sink. Daisy thanks him wholeheartedly and offers to clean up the mess and return the tools so Bucky can spend some time with his sister.

Bucky finds Rikki in her room, seated in front of an antique style vanity that clashes with the rest of their decor. Bucky imagines it was purchased with the sort of wide-eyed, irrational infatuation with which he purchased his truck. Maybe it was one of those props of femininity that she sorely needed to feel good about herself.

At any rate, she looks at home in front of it, wearing a bold print dress with thick straps to minimize her shoulders and a cinched waist to create the illusion of hips she doesn’t have. She eyes him in the mirror as he walks in, and he sits on the edge of the bed just behind her.

She looks back at her reflection and frowns, pulling her hair up and letting it down again, turning her head, tilting her chin. She sighs loudly and lets her mass of hair drop, then runs her fingers hard around her jaw, like maybe if she presses hard enough, she can re-shape it.

“I look like you in a dress,” she says to him, her frown sharpening into a scowl. “Everything that makes you handsome makes me look like a drag queen.”

Bucky treads very, very carefully here, marshaling all his mental resources to find that delicate balance between validation, support, and honesty.

“You don’t look like me in a dress. And you don’t look like a drag queen.”

“You know I have to shave twice a day?” Rikki runs her hands over her cheeks and chin, pausing to poke angrily at its cleft.

“What about electrolysis?” Bucky says. “They… you do that, right? Trans women?”

“Well, it’d be about two or three hundred hours of treatment just for my face, at about fifty bucks an hour, so that’s ten to fifteen thousand dollars right there. And then getting my face to look more feminine, that’s another fifteen to twenty thousand.”
“Jesus Christ. How much were your boobs?”

“Eight thousand.”

“And the one next week?”

“Thirteen thousand. Plus whatever we spend on the celebration tonight.” Rikki smiles at him in the mirror. “You can’t even say it, can you?”

“I can say it. What’s it called again?”

“Vaginoplasty.”

“Yeah, turning your dick and balls into a beautiful vagina.”

Rikki snorts, smiling fondly. “You don’t even know what a vagina looks like.”

“Like a Georgia O’Keeffe painting, right? Like a flower?”

“Yes, exactly.” Rikki leans close to the mirror and begins painting her lips a deep mauve pink color.

“And I know what a vagina looks like. You don’t think I tried really, really hard not to be the way I am?”

Rikki presses her lips together to even out the color and glances back at him. “I didn’t know that.”

“I’m so fucking desperate that I even tried it last year.” Bucky’s words sound pitiful to his own ears, so he can only imagine how they sound to his sister. But he still keeps going, because he figures this is something siblings can talk about. “I have this friend who agreed to be my beard for the Army Ball last year. She was basically my fake girlfriend until she left me for my best friend.”

“Ooh, cold.”

Bucky feels his face heat, because his relationship with Natasha was so much deeper than that. But this is the story he’s decided on, because it’s the story that he can live with telling himself. “And, I mean, we tried. She was a good sport about it. And she’s the type of woman who’d give literally any guy a boner. That’s how hot she is.”

“No dice?”

“I always start off okay, but I can’t keep it up unless I think about being with a guy, and that’s just rude to think about someone else during sex.” Bucky shrugs. “So we stopped.”

Rikki turns in her seat to look at him. “You really hate being gay, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” he says through his teeth. “Of course.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just wanna be normal. I don’t wanna be part of a group of people who have to have a big fucking parade every year to prove that they’re legitimate human beings. They call it Pride, but it’s just an overcorrection for all the shit gay people go through every day. Like, oh, here’s one day that we can be relaxed and happy and mostly not afraid of being harassed or looked at like we’re a bunch of deviants and child molesters. And it just ends up being a big fucking spectacle for straight people to gawk at, anyway.”
“Wow.” Rikki turns back to her vanity and pulls her hair back once more, twisting it into a messy bun. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“You don’t?”

“No.”

Bucky looks down at his hands and tries to fight off the nagging voice in his head that tries to delegitimize her experience of gayness. After all, she got to be straight until she started transitioning two years ago. But that voice falts quickly in the face of her life now, where she’s more at risk for being harassed, beaten, and murdered than he ever was for wanting a dick in his ass. All his old self-hate suddenly seems so petty, so immature, an unshakable vestige of that scared little faggot forged in the midst of the AIDS crisis and the unrelenting hostility of Deep Southern hatred.

“What would dad think?” Rikki asks him, her voice soft and uncertain. “Of me? Of this?”

“You know how he was,” Bucky says.

Rikki fidgets with her engagement ring. “Not really. Not with stuff like this. My memory of him gets worse every year.”

“He’d be proud of you.” Bucky reaches forward and lays his hand on her shoulder. He feels his throat tighten. “He’d be happy for you. He’d want to walk you down the aisle.”

“Would you?”

Bucky’s mouth goes slack as he processes the question.

“Walk me down the aisle,” she adds.

Bucky pulls his hand away and brings it close to his body. “Why? Why me?”

Rikki spins around on her stool, not about to let him get away. She reaches out and clasps his hand in hers. “You’re my brother. You’ve always supported me.” One half of her mouth curls up into a cheeky smile. “And I just want you to. So you should say yes.”

Bucky can think of a thousand reasons why he shouldn’t be honored with something like that, how he doesn’t deserve even the implication that he’s worthy of taking his father’s place. But looking at the expectancy in Rikki’s eyes, eyes that match his own perfectly, eyes that match their father’s, there’s no way he could deny her.

“Of course. Of course I will.”

———

Saying that Coco’s is pretty busy on a Saturday night turns out to be the equivalent of saying that water is a little bit damp. Nobody bothered to mention to Bucky that it’s the most popular queer bar in Brooklyn, so not only was he not expecting it to be packed, he wasn’t expecting it to be packed with a bunch of gay people.

Bucky leaves within the first ten minutes of being there, just to get out. Just to get some air. He smokes and walks the sidewalk from one end of the block to the other. He then calls Thor and talks with him for a few minutes, asking him to tell jokes, talk about his day, anything to distract him. Thor ends up regaling him with a story about skiing with his family, where he was racing with his brother and made the wager that he could ski better and faster with his eyes closed than his brother could.
using all his faculties. The ending is predictable, with Thor ending up face-down in a snowbank, but he tells it with such enthusiastic self-deprecation that it’s actually very funny, and it gives Bucky enough energy to hang up with him and venture back into the bar.

He wanders around, drinking glass after glass of water to wet the dryness of his mouth, putting on a production of mingling, saying hi to Rikki and Daisy but not wanting to monopolize their time. At one point, Bucky gets wrangled by a guy named Jon, a friend of Rikki’s, who asks if he’s Rikki’s brother, the one in the Army. Without thinking to lie, Bucky says yes, breaking out in a cold, anxious sweat, and Jon brings him to a small group of men gathered at a round table in the corner of the bar. There’s a pitcher of beer there, and Jon pours him a glass and puts it in front of him. Bucky’s heart races, and like in the airport, everything gets louder and sharper and closer.

But he can’t leave. He can’t bail out again. He can’t be the brother who can’t ever be around because he’s too scared to function in the real world. So he does some rationalizing around it, weighing the pros and cons, and his hard fought and long held resistance cracks under the pressure of his obligation to be present.

So Bucky drinks.

And, Christ, he needs it. Jon and his friends are a bunch of flamers, a troop of worn out stereotypes, the kind of gay that makes Bucky ashamed for all of them. So he drinks, paying for round after round of shots until he stops caring about their flapping hands and asinine conversation about celebrities or cute boys or whatever the hell else he can vaguely glean while trying not to lose his shit. Eventually, he starts actually enjoying himself, starts finding the conversation interesting, and that’s when he knows he must be pretty fucked up.

Things go all right until he gets up to go take a piss. And when he comes shuffling and weaving back to the table, Jon leans over the table conspiratorially, raising his eyebrows. He then asks the question that completely lays waste to the modest amount of control Bucky’s managed to maintain in the midst of this epic shit show of a night:

“So, you ever killed anyone?”

Bucky smiles, like he’s been waiting to answer this goddamn question all night. He reaches over and grabs the untouched shot of tequila sitting in front of Jon, slams it down, then lays the glass face down on the table.

“Jon, my friend.” He gestures to Jon, then the other men at the table. “My friends. You wanna know if I’ve ever killed anyone?”

Jon and three of the other guys nod and say “yeah,” but the fifth guy looks to have already pieced together where this conversation is heading. That guy, the smart guy, sits back in his chair and visibly clenches his jaw.

“All right, friends, let’s count.” Bucky lifts up the right sleeve of his t-shirt and angles his elbow to the ceiling so he can point to the string of sniper rounds tattooed on the back of his upper arm.

“Okay, here we go. One, two, three…”

He stops and looks at the men with dismay as the amusement fades from their faces. It pisses him off, and he raises his voice as he continues.

“What, you guys don’t wanna count with me? C’mon, these are all the fucking hajis I killed when I was a sniper.” Bucky starts his counting over “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen — Oh! Number seventeen was a kid
whose head I blew off because he was running munitions to some insurgents with a wheelbarrow."

Bucky smiles at the horror on the men’s faces and lets out a burst of humorless laughter.

“But wait, there’s more! So I’m watching this kid go back and forth, back and forth, and my spotter’s telling me yeah, there’s a bunch of fucking rounds in there, and yeah, intel on the ground says the same, so I fucking man up and do my fucking job, and I spray this fucking kid’s brains all over the fucking ground and, wouldn’t you know, that wheelbarrow tips over, and it was filled with fucking bricks!”

His words fly out with a manic fortissimo that makes every man at that table squirm. But just as much as they fidget and writhe in their discomfort, Bucky can see that those fuckers are actually enjoying something about this, like a bystanding rubbernecker enjoys the gnarled, gory mess of a fatal car crash.

“And on this deployment — my fourth deployment, guys, holy shit — I blew up a few fuckers with a grenade launcher, then watched their remains get smashed to hamburger by the fucking autocannon from Fairchild-Republic’s gift to mankind, the A-10 motherfucking Warthog.”

Bucky grabs another full shot from in front of what’s-his-fuck — Steve? Mitch? Peter? — and tosses that one down the hatch, too. What’s with these guys and not drinking their shit?

What’s-his-fuck reaches his hand across the table and stops it just shy of where Bucky’s own is pressed into the finished oak. “Hey, I think maybe you should lay off the—”

Bucky lifts his palms and presses them to his cheeks. “Oh, and I almost forgot! How could I forget? Yeah, I ordered my driver to run over a little kid standing in the middle of the road. Exploded her all over the front of the vehicle. Whew, guys, I’m telling you, if you’ve never seen a little kid explode before…”

He gags and very narrowly stops himself from puking all over the table.

But he’s gonna puke soon. He can feel it. So he stands, bracing himself against the table as the room spins violently. He looks down at the undulating collection of idiots in front of him and points his finger at all of them as he yells.

“So here’s a take-home lesson for you stupid fucks. The next time you fucking faggots think you wanna ask a veteran if he’s ever fucking killed someone, why don’t you try to have a little fucking tact, you know, maybe some basic human decency. Or better yet, why don’t you get your faggoty asses down to the fucking recruiter and sign the fucking line, and then you can see first hand what it’s like to kill some poor—”

Bucky feels a hand on him then, gripping his arm hard. He whips around and drives his elbow into the face of whoever’s fucking stupid enough to touch him when he’s like this. He reels with the momentum. Stumbles to keep himself upright. And when he gets a couple of his bearings back, he looks up and sees Rikki cupping her hands over her mouth, her face contorted in pain. There’s fear in her eyes when she looks at him — honest-to-God fear — and when Bucky tries to reach out for her, she steps away.

“Oh my God, Rik, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry, oh my God, I’m so sorry…”

He repeats himself while he watches her assess the damage. Her lip is bleeding pretty badly, and she wipes the blood off with her hands until Daisy comes to her side with a napkin. Daisy tends to her fiancee for a few moments, then glares at Bucky with such intense resentment that his insides lurch.
“You need to leave,” she tells him. “Right now.”

Bucky grabs the back of a nearby chair to try to steady himself. He keeps repeating that he’s sorry, sorry to both of them, sorry to the men at the table, sorry to the many staring queer people who overheard his homophobic ranting.

“I’ll call you a cab back,” Rikki says, dabbing at her lip. “Let’s go outside, okay?”

Bucky nods, nausea bubbling back up his throat, and he lets her take him gingerly by the arm and lead him out of the bar. Before they get out the door, Daisy shoves an empty plastic bowl in his hands, the one they put snacks in at the beginning of the night. To celebrate. To celebrate for Rikki.

“Wha’s this for?”

Daisy claps him on the shoulder. Hard. “So you don’t ruin the cab driver’s night, too.”

The night gets very spotty then. He doesn’t remember if he and Rikki talked while waiting for the cab and, if they did, what they talked about. When the car arrives, Rikki tells the cabbie the address and gives him enough cash to pay the way back to Brooklyn Heights, where Winnie is waiting for him.

He’s too proud to barf on the cab ride home, but he does barf almost immediately after he gets out, all over the sidewalk, right in front of where his ma’s waiting for him. It’s only as he heaves that he realizes how much he drank, and it’s also then he realizes that he forgot to eat dinner. Winnie watches him vomit with an expression that’s difficult for him to read when he’s so drunk. Maybe something between disappointment and pity. Something he never wants to see on her face again.

The last thing he remembers is her tucking him in on the couch, propping him on his side with pillows before she leaves for her shift at the hospital.

“Love you,” Bucky mumbles. “Sorry ‘m such a fuckin’ fuck-up loser.”

She touches his head gently. “Shhh. Go to sleep, honey. I’ll be back in the morning.”

“’kay. Bye, Mama,” he mumbles, then passes out.

———

The next morning, Bucky wakes in the same position he passed out in, his pillow soaked with drool. Fortunately, that’s the only thing it’s soaked with, and he reaches down to his crotch and says a small prayer of thanks that he didn’t piss himself, either.

He very, very slowly sits upright on the couch, and from the way the room cants off its axis, it’s clear that he’s not sober. He stands, still fully dressed, and braces himself on the furniture and along the wall as he makes his way to the kitchen for some water.

At the table, he sits and gradually pieces together the events of the night. As each piece falls into place, he feels sicker. Not the sickness of a hangover, but a deep, existential sickness. Bucky clutches his head with his hands and grimaces over his utter failure. His failure to stay sober. His failure to be a good brother. His failure to Trip and to himself and to everyone he’s ever hurt or failed to protect because of his drinking.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, once, twice, five times. He waits until the succession stops to check it, because when someone sends a sequence of texts like that after a night like last night, it’s never anything good.
There’s an old one from his ma from last night, asking him to let her know he’s okay. He answers that one right away, because Christ, it’s the least he can do for being a drunken, puking wreck in front of her.

Then there are the six rapid-fire texts from Daisy, and Bucky’s breathing goes shallow and fast as he presses a shaking finger to the screen to view them:

*I know your family has this weird thing where people get to self destruct without any accountability to anyone else. But I’m not going to play along. Because it’s wrong.*

*You’re an alcoholic.*

*You went to war a bunch of times and got messed up, so everyone thinks you’re entitled to act however you want, drink as much as you want, do whatever you want. Maybe you are entitled to do that. Maybe you’re entitled to drink yourself to death.*

*But you’re not entitled to hurt Rikki. You’re not entitled to hurt your mom. You don’t get to do that. That is not your right, no matter how much you’ve sacrificed. You don’t get to ignore how much you hurt everyone else just because you’re in pain.*

*You’re an alcoholic, and you need help. And if you want to get better and you want help, I’m here for you. But if you keep going like this, I’m not going to be able to have a relationship with you. And that would suck, because you’re going to be my brother-in-law, and I think you’re a good person.*

*It goes without saying that you need to apologize to Rikki. So I want you to come over and have dinner with us tonight so we can all talk. Your mom, too. Let me know.*

Bucky presses his hand to his mouth and squeezes his eyes shut as he tries not to cry. Part of him wants to cry, though. Cry for all the pain he’s caused. Cry for how fucked up he seems to irredeemably be. Cry in relief that somebody finally noticed how fucked up he is and actually said something about it.

But he doesn’t cry. He tries to let himself, thinking it might feel good, but he can’t. Instead, he drinks more water, texts Daisy to tell her that he’ll be there for dinner, and drags himself to the bathroom to shower. When Winnie comes home, she asks if he wants to go to brunch, and despite feeling like absolute shit, he says yes.

He says yes to everything that Sunday. Yes, he has a problem. Yes, he needs help. Yes, he’s going to get help when he comes home from Iraq. More than AA. He’s going to self-refer to the Army Substance Abuse Program. He knows Barton, Morita, and Steve will support him, and if they do, his career might survive it. After dinner, when he texts Thor, he says yes to coming over. And when Winnie jokingly asks whether Thor is his boyfriend, Bucky gets her enthusiastic blessing to go see him when he says that yes, maybe Thor is his boyfriend. Because they kind of might be together now.

On Monday, Bucky calls USAA Bank and arranges for a transfer of $17,000 to Rikki’s account, almost his entire reenlistment bonus, with instructions to deposit the money next week when he’s back in Iraq. He then asks Thor to go with him to the tattoo shop, where he gets Trip’s name added to his Fibonacci spiral.

Later, when he and Thor are lying on a blanket in the grass in the middle of Central Park, Thor asks Bucky if he can hold his hand. And Bucky says yes, and they hold hands in front of all of Central Park and God and everyone else.
And for the first time in a very long time, despite all the heartache he’s felt and caused over the past week, Bucky thinks that maybe — just maybe — things are going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Internalized/externalized homophobia, homophobic language, internalized transphobia, references to disordered eating, severe alcohol abuse/binge drinking, sex, vomiting, lots of swearing, reference to graphic violence against children

Military (And Other) Stuff:

Redeployment: A confusing term that means (among other things) to come home from deployment

Brown plastic bag: Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) come in brown bags like this

Evil Empire: An album by the super-leftist political rock band Rage Against the Machine.

Pickle suit: An green flight suit that Army helicopter pilots used to wear. Here’s a picture of one, along with an interesting article from a veteran regarding asking about military service

DFAC: a military dining facility

Restaurants/bars in this chapter: Candle 79 is a real restaurant, and it is fantastic. If you are ever in NYC, I highly recommend it. Coco’s is not real.

1 Centra Park West : a.k.a Trump International Hotel and Tower. Super expensive apartments ranging from around 1 to 35 million dollars.

USAA Bank: A bank that caters primarily to service members and their families. Rikki would be eligible to have one because she’s the child of a veteran.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Steve goes on leave.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September 2, 2008

Steve doesn’t remember ever being afraid of flying. He’d never been on a plane before joining the Army, not once, but since then, he’s taken more flights than most people he knows have taken in a lifetime. Planes to the South for training. Planes to and from the UK for more training. Planes to the Middle East and back. Hell, the Army even took him up in a plane five times just so they could push him out with a parachute. With the exception of his second Airborne jump at Fort Benning, Steve has never felt afraid to be in the air. Until now.

Maybe it’s the “little bit of chop” that’s been tossing their plane around for the last hour-and-a-half, causing the passengers around him to gasp and blurt out shocked cries whenever the aircraft lurches. The energy in the cabin is sharp with fear from the rows and rows of bow-tense bodies, and Steve’s been consciously working to relax his muscles, to close his eyes and remind himself of the mathematical probability of this plane crashing. He remembers reading once that there are approximately 100,000 flights worldwide on any given day, 36 million per year, give or take. And he supposes that even if a hundred of those flights went down in a year, a probable overestimation, there’d still only be a .00028% chance of this plane going down today. Of course, the peace he finds in this logic is periodically dashed by the middle-aged woman next to him, who’s grabbed his thigh twice already, scaring the bejeezus out of him each time. She’s apologized repeatedly, looking only half sorry to have done it.

“You just seem very solid,” she told him with a nervous laugh.
The humor he finds in her comment is pitch black, if it could even be called humor at all. She has no idea, no clue whatsoever, how brittle he is right now. How terrified he is, not of this plane crashing, but of the what’s waiting for him in DC.

Steve has replayed the night of June 26th in his head so many times that it’s verging on obsessional. At this point, it’s even superseded the number of times he’s replayed Trip’s mutilated body falling on him and dousing him in hot blood. He’s not even sure which one is worse now. Having Trip die on him is the worst thing that’s ever happened to him, but Steve decided that cheating on Sharon is probably the worst thing he’s ever done. But after deciding that, he wasn’t sure whether it was worse to dump Bucky while on deployment or to suck Bucky’s dick while engaged to Sharon, and the process of trying to decide which deplorable act wins first place has been sickening and ultimately pointless. It’s pointless because both are impossible to take back, and both are rooted entirely in Steve’s moral failing as a partner and a human being.

So, maybe that’s why he’s crawling out of his skin. This pitching plane is delivering him straight to the ruin of his own making. Worse, he has no idea what’s going to come of any of it, and the terror of not knowing is worse than any he’s ever had on any patrol or convoy or raid.

But fear hasn’t been Steve’s only emotional companion recently. There’s also been ample confusion, accompanied by deep and exceptionally misplaced jealousy. Bucky went on leave and came back almost an entirely different person. He was evasive at first, denying that anything special happened with a furtive smile that screamed the opposite. Steve went through the list of some possibilities — ma doing well, sister doing well, get some good sleep, eat some good food — and got a “yes” to all. For fun, just for some friendly, friendshiply good fun, Steve then asked if Bucky had a new boyfriend or something.

That was when all the pieces slammed together with concussive clarity. Bucky’s secret little smile exploded into a grin, and Steve didn’t know if he should give him a high five or rip his pillow off the bed and scream into it. Fortunately, he didn’t do either, pulling from the special reserve of self-control he has saved for when the world flips over ass-backwards and he has to pretend like he’s totally okay with it.

So, Bucky Barnes has a boyfriend, one he calls regularly whenever they’re on the FOB. And foremost on Steve’s mind is how much he would have appreciated even a fraction of that effort from Bucky back when they were together. He also wonders how Bucky is going to make space for this guy in a life that’s completely inhospitable to their relationship, either by way of regulation or by way of Bucky’s expertise in creating the conditions for relationships to die.

But managing Bucky Barnes’ life is not Steve’s job and never was, so Steve will do what friends do. He’ll support Bucky. He’ll do his best to appear happy for him. And when everything goes to hell, he’ll be there. Because that’s what friends do, and that’s all they are now, even if it punches Steve in the sternum every time he remembers it.

There’s a change in the tone of the engines then, followed by the pilot’s announcement that they’ve begun their final descent to Reagan. The announcement is followed by a smattering of claps and a murmur of “Thank you, Jesus” from the woman beside him.

Even in the midst of his relief, there’s a small part of Steve that prays to an empty sky that maybe this will be one of those .00028% planes, because plummeting into the Atlantic would probably be a more merciful fate than what’s in store for him on the ground.

———

When Steve sees Sharon in the arrivals area at Reagan, the last thing he expects is for her to start
running toward him. It’s not a very Sharon thing to do, as far as he knows her, but from the way she
deftly moves in strappy sandals and an A-line dress, it’s as if she’s trained for it the entire time he’s
been gone. He feels his face contort into something that’s definitely not the scripted response for this
moment, something closer to fear than affection. It doesn’t seem to deter her, though, especially
when he drops his carry-on bag. She rushes him and throws her arms tightly around his neck, pulling
herself against him with a strength that belies her smallness. And despite the fear, Steve envelops her,
drawing her in with the same force, lifting her off the ground with ease.

“God, I missed you,” she whispers against his cheek.

Warmth blooms in his chest then, up his neck and into his face, heating him with something more
than shame for what he’s done to her. He’s missed her. He’s missed the solid core of her, her
unwavering steadiness, her unselfish support of him despite every effort to hide himself from her.
He’s missed the smell of her and the way she smiles for him and not for anyone else. The weight of
their separation descends on him, and his throat feels thick when he tells her that he missed her, too.

They walk to baggage claim with their arms around each other while Steve answers questions about
the flight, which he succinctly describes as “fucking terrifying.” And, God, it feels good to be able to
say that. He doesn’t know how she’s able to pull honesty from him so effortlessly. Steve pushes back
the insidious creep of anxiety and puts it in the same place he’s been trying to put his unease over
being unarmed in such a crowded place.

He wonders how people can walk around so casually without having something in their hands. A
rifle. A knife. Even a sturdy piece of wood. As they wait for his bag, Steve entertains various
scenarios of what would happen if a shooter or bomber came in through this door, that other door, or
that corridor. He imagines who he’d push out of the way, how he’d shield Sharon’s body, which exit
he’d take them through, which everyday object around him he could repurpose into a weapon. He
wonders how Sharon can feel so relaxed against him, how she’s not fighting to keep her eyeballs
from scanning the building like he is. He wonders if these habits, habits that have helped keep him
alive downrange, will die when he finally comes back — if he even wants them to.

Steve tells Sharon that he’s game for an early dinner at Ethiopic, because at the moment, it feels true.
But when they arrive and there are no more doors to walk through or traffic to navigate, the gulf
between them begins to expand, the one born from 6,200 miles, 201 days, and 57 missions of
difference.

“How are the men?” Sharon asks, taking a sip of the bland Ethiopian lager they both ordered. It’s the
first question she’s asked about Iraq today, and from the upward shift of her tone, she doesn’t seem
sure that it’s safe territory.

Steve drains the rest of his beer from its glass and politely waves off the waiter when he asks if he’d
like another. “They’re fine.”

Sharon nods and gives a small smile. There’s no expectancy there, no pressure to spill. Just open
space, an invitation for anything Steve has to offer, even if it’s just silence.

Steve wets his lips, wishing he’d taken the waiter up on his offer for more beer. He drinks from his
glass of water instead and fights the announcement of Trip’s death when it tries to tumble from him.

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glass of water instead and fights the announcement of Trip’s death when it tries to tumble from him.

“Excited to rotate back Stateside,” Steve tells her. “Home stretch.”

“What day are you coming back again?”

“November 22nd.”
“Good. Just in time for Thanksgiving.”

“I should be able to make it up to DC by that Wednesday, as long as there aren’t any issues that come up.”

“I can come down to Bragg, you know. I’m happy to.” Sharon folds her arms on the table. “Maybe you can introduce me to Bucky.”

Steve takes another hurried gulp of water, and in an undeserved twist of karma, the waiter chooses that exact moment to deliver their food. He lays everything out on the table and describes each item on the two samplers they ordered, and by the time the fanfare is done, it’s as if Sharon never implied that she should meet the man Steve just cheated on her with.

They spend most of the rest of their dinner in silence that vacillates between companionable and painful for Steve. The pain comes in waves, always on the heels of his unrelenting conscience. He should tell Sharon now. Right now. About Trip. The memorial. Sitwell. Bucky. He almost does it. He works himself up for it while he picks at his fried croaker fish. But then Sharon tells him that some of the members of Steve’s old team want to have drinks tomorrow night at O’Malley’s, and maybe it’s the wrong thing to do, but Steve lets this be his new benchmark for telling her. He needs to rest and have that conversation with a clear head. So he’ll tell her in two days.

He only hopes he can make it until then.

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It’s dark by the time they get to the apartment. Sharon’s hasn’t changed anything except the comforter, and she apologizes for it, saying that she wanted everything to feel like home for him. It doesn’t feel like home to Steve. Not at all. But it’s not for want of her efforts. Even the painting on the easel in the spare room, the one he didn’t have time to finish before his sudden deployment, doesn’t feel like his. He barely remembers the guy who painted that, barely remembers the way he thought about the world. He wonders if that man was a better man or if he was just a bad man who didn’t yet realize it.

Steve unpacks his duffle and takes a shower. He makes it fast, like he’s still downrange, and when he gets out, he and Sharon drink camomile tea and catch up on the final season The Wire. It used to be his favorite show, but now he hates every goddamn minute of it. He doesn’t say a word about it, just sits with his hands clutched tightly around his mug, jaw clenched and ticking while Sharon furtively glances over at him ever few minutes. She stops the DVR about half way through the first episode and flips it to The Office instead. She moves closer to him then, just a little, and lays her hand face-up on the couch next to his thigh. He can feel the uncertainty behind it, an uncertainty that’s at least a little warranted. But he can’t stand her discomfort, never has been able to, so he lays his hand on hers and accepts her fingers when she laces them together. She exhales deeply and squeezes, running her thumb gently over his.

They head to bed at around 10:30, going through the motions of brushing their teeth and getting ready as if there’s been no seven month interruption in their routine. Steve doesn’t miss the way Sharon’s eyes travel his body when he strips down to his underwear and crawls into bed. And even though he tries not to watch as she undresses, he still catches a flash of one pale breast as she slips on a satin camisole and tiny matching shorts that he’s never seen before.

They fall into their usual sleep configuration, Steve on his back, Sharon pressed against his side with her head on his shoulder. He fights his brain as it flashes back to his night with Bucky, and he tries to pull himself out of his head by smelling her hair and running his hand along the silky material of her pajamas. Her smell is sweetly floral, nothing like sand and sweat and spent ammunition. The hand
that roves over his chest is smooth and uncalloused. Her energy is strong but contained, like a well-controlled burn.

And when she lifts her head to kiss him, her lips are soft and determined. The urgency of her kiss grows, and Steve opens his mouth to her as his cock begins to stiffen. He pulls in a sharp breath through his nose when her fingers land eagerly on his dick, dipping below the waistband of his underwear to stroke him. God, it’s been so long since he’s been satisfied, since someone else has touched him in earnest, except—

Except Steve is then reminded of why he’s barely touched or kissed Sharon since he’s been back. He’s reminded of where his mouth and tongue and hands have been and the pleasure they gave to someone else. And with the heaviness of this acknowledgment, the stirring in his groin flags. She must feel him going soft, because she pulls her hand from his underwear and draws back from their kiss with a self-conscious smile.

“Sorry,” she says as the apples of her cheeks turn pink. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Steve touches one of those embarrassed cheeks with his knuckles, even though the embarrassment should be entirely his. “It’s not you. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“I know. I’m being selfish. I’m sorry.” Sharon lowers her head back onto his shoulder and lightly pats his chest. “I’m just really glad you’re back.”

Steve kisses the top of her head, frowning. He wants to tell her that he’s glad to be back too, but all he can think is how badly he wants to be in Iraq again. He already misses the simplicity of it. The predictability of the chaos there. It’s just like Bucky said — in Iraq, everything seems to make sense. He couldn’t see it until he got outside of it. And here? There’s no training for what he’s gotten himself into, no manual or drill to fall back on, and no one to call for backup.

“I love you,” Steve tells her, because it’s the God’s honest truth, even if his actions suggest something different. He decides then that he won’t be intimate with her until the truth is out, because it’s the least he owes her for completely betraying her.

Sharon smiles against him. “I love you, too.”

She falls asleep quickly in his arms, but rest evades Steve entirely. Before deployment, he always thought their place was quiet, but now he hears everything — the footsteps upstairs, the rush of the plumbing next door, the voices coming up from the floor. Every sound seems to push a little bit of adrenaline into his bloodstream, which builds until he can’t stay still anymore. He slides out from underneath Sharon, careful not to wake her, and walks to the window in the bedroom to make sure it’s locked. He then goes around the rest of the apartment, checking the windows and door as he patrols. He looks over the courtyard outside, scanning for signs of activity and finding none.

When Steve’s satisfied that the apartment is secure, he lies down on the couch and tries to fall asleep. When the couch feels too uncomfortable, he tries the floor, then the chair. It’s nearly sunrise by the time he makes it back to bed, having not slept at all. There, he curls on the edge of the mattress, facing the door, his mind trapped in a loop of worry and regret that doesn’t cease until well after daybreak.

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“So, I was thinking about the spring,” Sharon says from the bathroom, where she’s putting on her makeup.
Steve sits heavily on the edge of the bed to pull on his socks. The task feels disproportionately immense and tiresome. “For what?”

“The wedding.”

It’s fortunate that Sharon’s not in the room at that moment, because it’s impossible for Steve to suppress a grimace. He feels anger at her for bringing up their engagement and immediately castigates himself for it. He presses his hands to his face and sighs heavily into them.

“Can we stay in tonight?” he asks, dropping his hands to his lap.

Sharon leans out of the bathroom doorway. Her blonde eyebrows are drawn inward. “Is something wrong?”

If he were a more sarcastic man, he’s ask aloud if there was anything that wasn’t wrong right now.

“I don’t want to go to a bar. I don’t want to sit around drinking with a bunch of people I don’t even care about anymore.” Steve shrugs. “I’m sorry. I just don’t.”

The last thing Steve wants is to talk about war, and he knows the guys’ll ask about it. Congratulate him on it, even. He doesn’t know what he’ll say, either, especially with a few drinks in him. More than that, he can’t help but wonder if this is the last night he and Sharon will have together, because God knows what she’s going to say to him tomorrow. And for right now, maybe for just one more night, he can pretend like there’s nothing fatally wrong between them. He’s obviously skilled at this type of pretend, given how easily he was able to disregard Sharon’s entire existence for nearly four hours last week.

Sharon approaches him, the gossamer fabric of her sleeveless shift dress swishing as she walks. “Of course we don’t have to go. I shouldn’t have scheduled it so soon, anyway.”

She reaches out for him, and Steve wraps his hand around her thin wrist to stop the tenderness she’s about to show him.

“I told you it was okay when you asked me,” he says. “I just don’t want to go anymore.”

Steve lets her go then. Undeterred, Sharon touches his face anyway.

“Sure, babe. I’ll give them a call. What would you rather do instead?”

“I don’t know. Order in. Watch something. Something low-key.” He leans into the warmth of her hand.

“Sounds great. Guess I should change, huh?”

Steve touches the hem of the dress she’s referring to, then the smooth skin of her thigh below it. “You don’t have to.”

“No?”

“Only if you want to.”

Sharon smiles and runs her hand through his short hair. “It is pretty comfortable.”

Steve wraps his arms around her waist and pulls her in between his legs. He looks up at her, chin resting on the soft rise of her belly. She looks ethereally beautiful in rose pink, her long blonde hair flowing down her chest to where cut of her dress dips low.
“What’s wrong, Steve?”

“Nothing.”

“You can tell me, you know.” She pets his head, just like Bucky did. “You can tell me anything.”

Steve’s eyes flutter closed, but only for a moment. He then dips his chin and presses his cheek to her belly instead. He holds her there, enjoying the feel of her hands on him, listening to the sound of her insides.

“I just want to have a nice night with you,” Steve murmurs. “That’s all.”

“Sure. Then that’s what we’ll do.”

They order pizza and split a bottle of red wine, which they enjoy on the deck overlooking the courtyard. It’s warm and clear outside, and the setting sun paints the sky a brilliant spectrum of orange and pink. Steve keeps the conversation entirely centered on Sharon. Sharon successfully thwarting Captain Adams’ advances. Sharon spending a long weekend in Boston with her aunt. Sharon training for the Marine Corps Marathon in October.

He watches her smile and feels her easy presence. He notices the little details that he’d nearly forgotten — the shape of her little toes, the knobbiness of her knees, the way her cheekbones seem to pop when she grins. He especially notices how alcohol brings out her Piedmont drawl, the one she spent four years at Virginia trying to eradicate. It’s adorable, and he delights in parroting back the occasional “y’alls,” extra syllables, and gerunds with severed g’s, earning him a hearty thwack on the shoulder and a friendly reminder about how people from New Yawk City tawk.

After dinner, they open another bottle of wine and yell at the contestants on The Bachelorette, which Sharon TiVo’d and stockpiled for them to hate-watch. After several drinks, Steve’s developed the most fantastic tunnel vision, one that shields him from all thoughts about Bucky Barnes and Antoine Triplett and IEDs and dead civilians. Actually, he does have one passing thought about Bucky, in which he finally understands why Bucky likes to drink so much. Even though he’ll probably regret it tomorrow, he feels like a million bucks tonight, and a little myopia once and a while never hurt anyone, did it?

In the middle of the third episode on their queue, Steve gets up and walks to their en-suite bathroom. He braces himself against the wall while he pisses to help counteract the tilting of the room. It was hard to tell sitting down, but now that he’s up and about, he realizes that he most certainly drank way too much. Fortunately, he’s an excellent marksman, because he also realizes that he forgot to put the seat up.

Steve steps back into the bedroom, where Sharon is there waiting for him, standing in the middle of the room with her panties dangling from her hand. Steve freezes, locked in a very unfairly matched battle between yesterday’s promise to himself and the very forward and very sexy advances of the woman in front of him.

The choice is practically made for him when Sharon drops those lacy panties on the floor and comes after him, pulling his head down to kiss her. Steve doesn’t stop her. He doesn’t push her away, doesn’t use his rehearsed lines about needing more time, doesn’t keep his tongue in his mouth. The wine seems to have spirited away all of his noble intentions, leaving behind a weak, touch-starved, and thoroughly intoxicated man unable to resist his own desire.

Never one to be shy, Sharon grabs his hand and guides it up her dress and between her legs. She’s already wet, and she lets out a shuddering sigh when he rubs two fingers over her clit. The sound of
her, the feel of her, the obliteration of her inhibitions and his own, it all pulses its way down to his cock. Steve backs her up against the edge of the bed and pushes her down on it, hard enough to please her but not hard enough to hurt. She hikes her dress up over her hips and grabs for his crotch, where he’s busy fumbling open his pants. When he’s finally freed himself, he lifts her legs over his shoulders and slides his hands under her ass to lift her.

“Still on the pill?”

She nods and takes his dick in her fist, giving it a few ardent pumps. “Yeah, so don’t hold back.”

Steve outright growls at that, a bedroom sound that hasn’t left him in many years. He then pulls her hips up and off the edge of the bed and drives into her. All of the worry, fear, guilt, and anger he’s carried with him from Iraq seems to break down with every thrust, like releasing a pressure valve he didn’t even know existed. It burns off bright and fast like white phosphorous, and the whole thing is rough and loud and embarrassingly short. Steve comes before her, shooting his load deep into her body, and he apologizes breathlessly as soon as he regains some of his wits.

“I’m sorry,” Steve pants as he pulls out of her. “Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll be good to go again.”

She holds out her arms to him, motioning him toward her. “It’s fine, baby. C’mere. Take your clothes off and lie down with me.”

Steve smiles when she calls him “baby” in that sweet drawl of hers, and he presses a kiss to her calf before he lowers her back down on the mattress. He does as she asks, and Sharon pulls off her dress and casually touches herself as she watches him disrobe. She dips her fingers inside of herself and wets them with the come he put in her, and the image alone is enough to jolt some life back into his spent cock. Sharon’s always been like this with him, unabashedly sexual and unapologetically real. The poise with which she operates in her professional life is no less honest than the way she is now, and Steve could only hope to one day hold such a dichotomy with her grace.

Sharon lies on her back and opens herself to him, and Steve settles down on the bed next to her. He lovingly regards the litheness of her body and the flush that colors her pale skin, and he takes over for her with his right hand while he cups her breast in his left. He knows exactly what to do, exactly what turns her on, because she’s never hesitated to tell him. He works his mouth over her nipple while he works his fingers over her pussy, his hand remembering every angle and point of pressure effortlessly.

It doesn’t take long until she’s pulling his hand against her and pushing hard against it, crying out as her climax takes her. Steve has been praised plenty for being a giver, but he secretly gets off on it, and by the time her orgasm ebbs, he’s already hard and ready for more. They fuck again, slower this time, and by the time they both come again, Steve thinks he might actually be able to sleep tonight.

“Didn’t think we’d have to change the sheets so soon,” Sharon says as she settles against him.

Steve pulls her in close and hums his agreement. Christ, he put so much come in her that he almost feels bad about it. It can’t be very pleasant for her. He didn’t even think to fire off a test round beforehand, because this wasn’t supposed to happen.

None of this, not one bit of it, was supposed to happen.

He’s starting to sober up. He can feel the thick tendrils of guilt coming alive in his head, curling around the small joy his compartmentalization has afforded him. He reaches over to the nightstand and clicks off the lamp, and in the dark, after the “I love yous” settle, Steve is afraid.
Friday comes like a freight train, barreling in and jerking Steve awake with a gasp so loud that Sharon comes rushing in to make sure he’s okay. It’s nothing, he wants to say. Just a simple wire strung across a simple road. Just some blood, is all.

He’ll get his chance for that, though he’s not completely sure when. What Steve is sure of is that his head feels ready to explode from the wine, and he almost wishes that it would so that he could be put out of his misery.

While Sharon makes coffee, Steve puts on a pair of West Point sweatpants and a white undershirt and pads to the bathroom to look for pain relief. He opens up the medicine cabinet and is grateful for the ibuprofen he finds. He shakes out four tablets and swallows them with a cupped handful of water, and it’s only when he puts it back that he catches the bottle of St. John’s Wort on the bottom shelf. As he turns the bottle, he frowns at the label’s bold claim that it “promotes a positive mood.”

Steve has been in the Army long enough to cultivate a keen eye for euphemism, especially when it comes to mental health. “Relaxation training” becomes “battle readiness training.” “Post-traumatic stress disorder” becomes a “combat stress reaction.” And in this case, he’s pretty sure that “St. John’s Wort” is code-speak for “antidepressant that won’t screw up my career.” And learning that Sharon’s been suffering to the point of medication while he’s been fucking around downrange turns all his wavering squarely on its head. A strange calm washes over him when his decision becomes clear. She needs to know now. He can’t make her wait one more hour — one more minute — for the truth.

Of course, all that calm collapses when he remembers what’s on the other side of that truth, and his stomach cramps in on itself as he makes his way to the living room.

“Morning,” she calls from the kitchen, then pokes her head out the doorway. “Want some coffee?”

“No. I need to talk to you.”

“Well, good morning to you, too.”

Sharon’s mouth quirks up in a wry smile, but she’s sportingly follows him to the living room. She brings a cup of coffee with her and sits facing him on the opposite end of the couch. Steve looks down at his shaking hands and clamps them tightly together.

“That bad, huh?” she says. “Thought we didn’t do serious first thing in the morning.”

“It can’t wait.”

Sharon’s smile fades, and she brings her coffee mug down to rest on her lap. “Okay.”

Steve winces and tells her about Trip. He keeps his tone clinical, giving the police report version that holds none of the horror or guilt or confusion. As he talks, Sharon’s expression shifts through concern, shock and, finally, deep sadness. He doesn’t need to ask to know who the sadness is for, because he knows it’s for all of them. Because that’s the kind of woman Sharon is.

“Babe, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to. I tried calling, but you were probably working.” He keeps his tone factual, not wanting to imply that anything he’s about to say is her fault. “I didn’t know what to do. I was so…” Steve tries to recapture that feeling on the day of the memorial, but it’s hard to even imagine it now, let alone embody it.
He continues. “I was in a bad space, so I went to see Bucky. I knew he’d understand what I’d been through. Probably better than anyone. He’s seen so much horrible stuff, and I thought he’d get it.”

Sharon’s lips thin. “I imagine he’s seen a lot.”

Steve opens his mouth and takes a deep breath. He stops there, poised on the edge of speech, hovering at the point from which they can never return. He then clenches his jaw shut, pulling up all the courage he can muster, and says it.

“We had sex.”

It takes a few moments for the disbelief to settle on Sharon’s face. But when it does, its every bit as bad as he expected it to be.

“Oh my God,” she says, and that disbelief sharpens into dismay. “Oh my God, Steve…”

Steve leans forward, finding his momentum, imploring her to hear him. “And I’ve regretted it every single moment since it happened. Every single moment. It was unfair to you, and I was weak and fucked in the head for letting it happen. And I know that doesn’t excuse any of it. And I can’t apologize enough for betraying your trust.”

Sharon closes her eyes, and her eyebrows furrow while she tries to comprehend the depths of that betrayal. She lifts her fingers to her forehead, as if to touch a sudden pain there. “So, you had sex with him, and then you had sex with me? Did you even use protection?”

How the does he even say it? How the fuck does he tell her what he did? How does he tell her that he sucked Bucky’s dick like it was a lifesaving measure? That he stuck the same finger in Bucky’s ass that he stuck in her just last night?

“It wasn’t that kind of sex.”

Sharon shifts uncomfortably, shoulders tensing and climbing high. “God, Steve, do I need to get tested?”

Steve’s voice falters, cracking under the weight of his words. “I don’t know.”

“How could you?” She’s angry now, brown eyes flashing. “How could you sleep with me after that? How could you not tell me? Do you have any idea how messed up that is?”

“I did not intend to sleep with you,” he tells her, cringing at his words while spilling out even more words that sound awful and wrong. “I wanted to talk to you first. But, last night, I just… I was drunk, and I wasn’t thinking.”

“For a guy who’s so goddamn smart, you sure have a lot of problems with thinking.”

“Sharon, I’m so sorry.” Steve shifts closer, toward the middle of the couch. He’s desperate now, desperate to soothe something that he has no right or ability to soothe. “I am so, so sorry. I fucked up bad. I know I did.”

Sharon closes her mouth and begins to nod slowly. Her gaze drifts to the floor beside her, and when she finally speaks again, her voice is quiet.

“I actually believed you when you said I didn’t have to worry about him.” She smiles at Steve, but there’s no joy in it. “Pretty stupid, huh?”
“I don’t love him,” Steve grinds out, fists balling in the fabric of his pants. “I don’t want to be with him.”

“Do you really think that matters now?”

Of course it doesn’t. It never mattered. It never mattered at all.

“No.”

Sharon goes quiet again. She tries to take a sip of her coffee but aborts it after one try, setting the mug on the coffee table next to them. She crosses her arms over her chest and pulls them in tight, looking into the middle distance like it has an answer to this cluster fuck. And maybe it does, because her verdict comes back quickly.

“You need to go pack your things, and you need to leave.” She nods to herself then makes eye contact with him. “Yeah. That’s what you need to do.”

“Sharon—”

She cuts him off. “No. You don’t get to say anything else right now.”

She stares him down, watches his face twist in anguish with the kind of deft coolness he’s only seen in professional settings.

Finally, Steve rises to his feet, but that’s all he can do at first. He stands there, swaying a little, his mind desperately scrambling for anything that might save them. Some confession, some emotion or truth he’s never revealed. But real life doesn’t work like that, and Sharon Margaret Carter doesn’t work like that, either.

When Steve finally gathers the means to walks to the bedroom, he sees the tangled mess of sheets and feels disgusted. Disgusted with himself for what he’s done to Sharon and disgusted for all the things he didn’t do. He barely registers his movements as he shoves his clean and dirty clothes back into his green duffle bag and packs away the toiletries he just unpacked yesterday.

It’s all over so fast, and when he brings his belongings out to the living room, Sharon is still seated where she was. Only now, she looks composed, clear and self-assured. She looks at him with an equanimity that makes him want to scream at her, because doesn’t she know what’s happening right now?

“I can’t marry a man I can’t trust to be faithful to me for a few months,” she says. “I can’t marry a man who turns to someone else for comfort and then doesn’t even have the decency to tell me before fucking me.” The word “fucking” pierces the air like a knife.

“I’m sorry,” is all Steve can repeat as numbness washes over him.

Sharon presses her lips together. “I thought you were the one, Steve. I really did. And I had no idea I could be so wrong about someone.”

Steve knows it won’t make a difference, not now, but he has to tell his truth to her one last time:

“I’m so sorry, Sharon. I love you, and I never, ever meant to hurt you.”

“I’ll put your things in storage. You can get them when you come back.”

She turns away from him then, toward the blackened screen of the TV. She takes her mug back into
her hands and once more lifts it to her mouth, only to set it back on the table again.

It’s his cue to leave, and Steve respects her for her resolve. He walks to the door, not even thinking to take one last look at the place, and grabs his boots by the mat before stepping into the hallway.

The door closes behind him and he stops. He looks down at his bare feet, at his sweatpants and undershirt, and he tries to remember what he’s supposed to do next. Behind him, he hears the sound of quiet weeping, and inside, he feels nothing.

———

It’s easy for Steve to change his flight from September 14th to September 7th, once he plays all the cards he never played back when he had some self-respect. He plays the soldier card. The deployment card. The leadership card. The “my men need me” card. And in the end, the airline representative not only changes his ticket but upgrades him to business class for the flight to Berlin. She even thanks him for his service, which is good for a laugh.

However, it turns out it’s not so easy to get back into a war zone when nobody’s expecting you. Steve is stuck in Kuwait for two days just trying to get a ride into Baghdad, going back and forth with Sousa, who goes back and forth with XO of the 107th, who goes back and forth with the XO of the 88th Transportation Battalion. Barton eventually gets him on the line and asks what the hell he’s doing back so soon, and although he doesn’t buy that Steve just missed having sand in his eyebrows, he finds him a lift with some Northrop Grumman contractors.

It’s incomprehensibly hot. A different kind of hot from DC. The kind of heat that stifles the breath and seems to defy the laws of reality. But Steve is glad for it, because its means he’s home now. When he goes to company HQ to sign in from leave, even Barton has resigned himself to removing his jacket to try to beat the heat, which the air conditioner can’t seem to touch.

“Trouble in paradise?” Barton asks, rocking back in his chair.

Steve slides his signed leave form across Barton’s desk and falls into a loose parade rest. “Just want to save some leave, Sir.”

“For your honeymoon?” Barton raises an eyebrow.

Steve doesn’t answer, which he imagines is answer enough.

“I’m sorry, man,” Barton says. “Third time was a charm for me, so hang in there.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You should go talk to Sergeant Barnes. He’s got some good news.”

“Where can I find him?”

“Slumming around the motor pool.”

Steve nods once. “Thank you, Sir.”

“Good to have you back, Steve,” Barton offers a crooked smile. “Now we can get some shit done.”

Steve snaps into the position of attention. “Yes, Sir.”

He does find Bucky in the motor pool, though he’s not exactly slumming. He’s up to his elbows in Humvee guts while a pretty female specialist gives him directions. Steve stops a few meters away,
slings his rifle over his back, crosses his arms, and looks on.

“Like this?” Bucky asks. His arm jerks as he cranks a socket wrench.

“Just like that,” the specialist says with a grin. “You’re a natural, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Well, it’s ‘cause you’re such a good teacher.” Bucky glances up at her and winks.

Bucky’s not a mechanics prodigy or a novice by any stretch of the imagination. He started working on cars and motorcycles with his dad almost as soon as he could hold a screwdriver. Hell, Bucky could probably disassemble and reassemble that entire Humvee singlehanded, which is more than the mechanic who’s “teaching” him could do. But Bucky likes to flirt, especially when there’s no chance of it going anywhere, so he’ll make up stories of ignorance on any number of subjects he knows just to enjoy the exchange.

“Yeah, he’s a real natural, all right,” Steve says.

The look on Bucky’s face when he lifts his head pulls the first smile that Steve’s had since the night before Sharon left him. Bucky looks happy, lighter, as if some burden has been siphoned out of him like poison. Steve wonders what that burden was or whether this is just the lingering glow of new love.

“Hey, Sir.” Bucky thrusts the socket wrench toward the specialist, who takes it from him with a perplexed look, as if she’s just realized her utter insignificance to him. Bucky grabs a clean rag from a nearby workbench and wipes the grease off his hands and forearms as he approaches Steve.

Steve uncrosses his arms. “Captain Barton said you had some good news.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on.” Bucky holds out his dirty right palm to Steve. “First, what are you doing back so soon? What happened?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Bucky’s eyes narrow, but he nods. “Fair enough. To be continued. So…” He stops and looks around the stall at the assorted junior enlisted soldiers bustling about. “Hold on.”

Bucky jogs back to the work bench, throws the towel in a bin, grabs his rifle and ACU coat, and thanks Specialist Soto for teaching him about engines. She gives him a goofy smile, despite the earlier slight, and invites him to come back anytime. When he sides back up to Steve, he’s electric, and when they get out of earshot of the other soldiers, the good news spills out of him like a torrent.

“Okay, so remember our old friend Colonel Nazari? Whose wife’s cousin has ties to the Islamic State?”

“Rami Khouri.”

“We found him. Apparently when Nazari flew the coop, Khouri got nervous and moved around a few times. But we got fresh intel on a location, and we’re gonna go get him.”

Bucky smiles then, the predatory type of smile he gives when he’s raining down hurt on someone. Steve wonders if he smiled that way when he used to blow people’s heads off for a living.

“When?” Steve asks, lifting the front of his patrol cap to wipe off the sweat pooling on his forehead.

“Well, now that you’re back, we should go ASAP, before he gets wise and decides to move again.”
“Snatch-and-grab?”

“Yep. Night’s probably best.”

They’ve done random night raids before, but never a nighttime snatch-and-grab. It’s a different animal entirely, carrying with it a different degree of danger. A man who knows he’s being hunted is dangerous, and Steve hopes he can contain his untouched agony for long enough to lead a successful mission.

“Let’s see if we can go tomorrow or the day after,” Steve says. “Wanna go with me to sell it to Barton?”

“Absolutely.”

They change directions and head toward company HQ.

“How are you?” Steve asks.

“Good.” Bucky snorts. “Bored.”

Steve looks down at his feet as he walks. “Sorry.”

“Hey.” Bucky jabs his elbow against Steve’s arm. “We are gonna talk later. You can’t get out of it, you know.”

“Let’s get Khouri first,” Steve says, looking over at Bucky.

When Bucky looks back at him, he’s discretely biting his lower lip. He’s worried, but he concedes.

“Deal.”

—

The next night, second platoon stacks in front of the back door to Khouri’s two-story home. They’re geared up in night vision goggles, armed to the teeth, with third platoon and a squad of military police there to back them up. Steve can feel the nerves in himself and in his men, but it’s the good kind of nerves. The kind that’s going to bring in Rami Khouri alive tonight. According to intel, Khouri’s an IT guy, not a fighter, but they’ve learned not to put too much stock in what MI tells them. If there’s one thing Steve’s learned on this deployment, it’s that any man can become a killer if stressed just the right way.

Rhodes and Dugan do silent checks with their men and signal their readiness to Bucky. He nods to Steve, and Steve signals Reyes to breach the door. It bursts open with a loud crack, and the two squads file in. First squad takes the first floor with Bucky, and Steve follows second squad upstairs. The men move swiftly and quietly, with a smooth mastery of tactical procedures and signaling that sets off a burst of pride in Steve. His men are professionals. His men are proficient. And that means his men are dangerous, which is exactly what they’re going to need to be to get home in one piece.

Upstairs, the squad splits off into two teams to infiltrate the two bedrooms simultaneously. Steve leads Foggy and Reyes to the first room while Rhodes takes Ward and Rumlow to the second. When his men are positioned for breach, Steve drives his foot into the door in tandem with Rhodes.

The door flies open, and there’s screaming. Two kids, one old woman. All screaming. The kids are screaming in terror, the woman in fierce indignation. While Reyes begins his search of the room, Steve and Foggy point their rifles at them and yell for them to get on the floor face-down. The two
little girls cower against the old woman, who screams at them to get out of her house, get out of her house, you beasts, you beasts, these are children, you beasts, poison to you, poison to you.

The old lady then reaches out and takes a swipe at the barrel of Foggy’s rifle. Fortunately for her, Foggy’s not an infantryman at heart, or else she’d have a few bullet holes in her by now. Her resistance pisses Steve off, and he comes frighteningly close to kicking her in the back to get her on the fucking floor.

He doesn’t, though. He changes the cadence of his voice to very loud and very slow. He speaks to the trembling girls first, whose faces are gnarled little masks of horror. Night vision devices on fully armed infantrymen appear terrifying even to adults, but to children, they turn men into very literal monsters. Steve suddenly perceives himself clearly, imagines how he must look, hears how angry and menacing he sounds, and he takes a deep breath and lowers his voice.

He tries his commands again, with the gentle tone he’d give a frightened American child. Foggy helps, mustering a smile and giving small words of encouragement in Arabic whenever the kids do something Steve asks. Good, good girl, very good, no afraid. The girls look to Foggy like a doughty beacon of warmth and safety, as absolutely fucked up as that notion is, and they finally lie down on the floor with their faces pressed to their folded arms. Their breaths come in little hiccuping gasps.

When the girls are down, the old woman yells more, more curses, more names. Finally, Khouri shouts at her from the next room, telling her that she needs to do what the soldiers say. She spits out a few more choice insults and finally does as they’ve been instructing her for the last five minutes.

“Watch them,” Steve tells Foggy, gesturing to the bodies on the floor. He then looks to Reyes. “Anything?”

Reyes shows Steve the four small flip phones stacked in his palm. “Found these behind the bookshelf. There are five more.”

Steve nods. “Good work. Both of you stay here.”

They give a pair of “hooahs” in reply.

In the next bedroom, Steve walks in just as Rumlow is dragging Khouri up to his feet. Khouri’s wrists are snared tightly in a pair of zip cuffs that are obviously too tight. Khouri looks at the rank on Steve’s chest and tries to plead with him

“Please, Sir.” His English pronunciation is precise and accented with a flavor of the UK. “These are very tight. Would you please tell your men to loosen them?”

Khouri is a slight man, not much older than Steve, with delicate features and a full head of dark hair. His face is plaintive and possibly even a bit remorseful. And Steve doesn’t give a single fuck.

“Get him to the MPs,” Steve says to Rumlow. He looks to the woman who’s lying face-down on the floor, then to Ward and Rhodes. “Nice work.”

Ward nods. Rhodes smiles uneasily.

Steve doesn’t smile back. Instead, he follows Rumlow and Khouri down the stairs, his rifle trained at the back of Khouri’s head. While Rumlow hands Khouri over to the waiting MPs, Steve glances over at Bucky, who’s standing in the middle of the living room the men trashed during their search.

“Find anything?” Steve asks.
“Three laptops. SIGINT will be very happy.”

“Good.”

Steve looks around the room, at the upended furniture, the books and trinkets spilled on the floor, and the carelessly tossed textiles. He thinks about the four people upstairs, afraid and angry, and he thinks they’ve all had about enough for one night.

“All right, Sergeant Barnes. Round everyone up. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Bucky nods. “Yes, Sir.”

———

By the time they get back to base, it’s nearly sunrise. They get Khouri processed with Sergeant Romanoff, who looks elated to have him on her interrogation docket. Steve thinks Khouri’s going to crack easily; Romanoff takes one look at him and tells Steve that he’s already cracked.

With first platoon out on a mission, Bucky comes back to Steve’s trailer to debrief. And the second they lay their rifles down, Bucky’s on him.

“You gotta tell me what happened, Steve.” Bucky lays his hands on his hips “Because that was not you tonight.”

Steve lets out an ambiguous huff. “Then who was it?”

“Some guy who’s got shit he’s taking out on other people. Some guy who needs to spill it before he puts a round in someone he shouldn’t.”

Steve walks over to his bed and sits on the edge of it, dropping his head into his hands. “I wonder if there’s anything else I could fuck up in my life right now.”

Bucky shrugs one shoulder. “You didn’t fuck up tonight. But you could have. Easily.”

Steve lifts his head and looks up at Bucky. “I did fuck up tonight. I was cruel. I was mad. You should have seen the way they looked at me.”

“Who?”

“The family. The men.” He drags his hand over his scalp. “Fuck.”

Bucky sighs and crosses the room. He takes a seat on the bed next to Steve, close enough that their shoulders touch.

Steve takes one deep breath and then another, a half-hearted delay that gives way to the truth fast. “Sharon left me.”

Bucky’s jaw drops. “What? What happened?”

“I told her.”

The word “about” dies on Bucky’s lips as the realization settles upon him.

“Fuck…” Bucky lifts his hand to his mouth and looks over at Steve with wide eyes. “Fuck, I’m so sorry.” He shakes his head. “I’m so, so sorry. I never should have—”
“No.” Steve heads him off with a glare that he hopes impresses upon him the seriousness of his words. “You’re not responsible for this. This is on me. Not you.”

Beside him, Bucky tenses. His voice is rough.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. I kissed you. I literally took you to my fucking bed.”

Steve stops himself from placing his hand on Bucky’s thigh, bunching it into a fist instead. “It was my choice, Buck. I could have said no at any time. That was my job, and I failed. I failed both of you.”

“You didn’t fail me. That’s not how it felt.” Bucky frowns with another sorrowful shake of his head. “I’m just so sorry.”

Steve tries to say something else, something comforting, but his throat tightens up and doesn’t let anything pass.

“What can I do?” Bucky asks, laying his hand on Steve’s back. “What can I do to help you?”

Steve’s face fills with horrible pressure. Bucky’s expression is so kind, his touch so concerned, and it’s so much more than what Steve deserves after everything that’s happened. Everything he’s done. It’s more than Sharon. It’s everything before her, everything that led to her and everything that destroyed his life with her. It’s his abandonment of Bucky all those years ago, his anger toward him, his treatment of him when he got to Iraq. It’s his withdrawal from Sharon, his assumptions that she wouldn’t understand him. It’s Trip’s death. It’s his weakness, his want for comfort, his choice to come to Bucky, his stupid, stupid choice to touch him, to kiss him, to make love to him, because for Steve, it wasn’t just a blowjob. It came from love. Because he loves Bucky Barnes. He loves Bucky, and he let that love for Bucky devastate his love for Sharon, corrupt the beautiful life they had, the seamless trust they had, the whole goddamn future they had, because they had a viable fucking future together. And now, Bucky has someone else, someone he loves and who loves him back, and Steve has nothing but a pile of regrets. And it’s entirely his own fault.

Everything swells in him then, the anguish, the self-loathing, the shame and disgust. It swells and expands and breaks past its thin, jury-rigged containment like it was never there at all.

“Just don’t fuck up your relationship the way I fucked up mine.” Steve’s chin quivers, and his vision goes hot and watery. “Be good to your guy. Better than I was to Sharon.” He forces out his next words in a sob that’s barely understandable. “Better than I was to you.”

“Oh, Steve.”

Bucky moves his hand to Steve’s shoulder and pulls him in. Steve resists at first, tries to hold himself steady, but Bucky’s insistent. He tucks Steve’s head under his chin and wraps his other arm around him to enfold him. Steve breaks apart there. Cries harder than he’s cried since his ma died. And Bucky holds him through it, gently rocking him. He might not be a natural at fixing engines, but he’s a natural at this. Always has been, ever since Steve’s known him.

“I’m sorry,” Steve eventually murmurs when he’s cried himself out. “It’s not your job to take care of me whenever I fuck up my own life.”

“Of course it is. You’re my friend. I mean, it’s not like you wouldn’t do it for me.”

“You’ve never done this.” Steve sniffs and wipes at his face. “I’ve never seen you cry. Not like this.”
Bucky shifts his chin and lays his cheek on Steve’s head. “I’m not exactly a role model for stuff like that. Remember what I said? Don’t be like me.”

Steve grasps onto Bucky’s forearm, his small way of holding him back. “Tell me about your boyfriend.”

“C’mon, Steve.” Steve can hear the smile in his voice.

“What’s he like?”

Bucky makes a small *hmm* sound. “Well, he’s tall. He’s blond. So I might have a type.”

Steve gives a choked laugh.

“He’s nice and affectionate. And he’s considerate. And sweet. He’s really hot. He has a huge dick. He’s really good in bed. He’s rich. And he’s a personal trainer who owns his own gym. And he’s really honest, and he’s passionate about his work. He’s former special forces. And—”

“Are you sure this guy’s real? Kinda sounds like you’re making him up,” Steve says, trying to mold the acute sting of jealousy he feels into something less toxic.

“Oh, he’s real. Wanna see a picture?”

Steve tightens his grip on Bucky’s arm. “I don’t think I can handle that right now.”

Steve shuts his mouth tight when he recognizes the implication of his words. But if Bucky took anything inappropriate from them, he doesn’t show it.

“You’ll find someone, Steve. I know you will. You’re a catch-and-a-half.”

Steve exhales deeply and closes his eyes. He lets Bucky hold him until his arms get tired. And when they finally part ways to get some shut-eye, Steve feels hollow and exhausted. But maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe he can start filling that emptiness with something good. Something better. He’s not sure exactly what that means or how he plans do it, but in this moment, it feels like hope.

Chapter End Notes

**Warnings:** References to past minor character death, fallout from infidelity, explicit heterosexual sex, military terror, terror involving children, abuse of authority, cruelty to detainees, moral ambiguity

**Military (and Other) Stuff:**

*Ethiopic:* I mentioned this in an earlier chapter, but this is a really good Ethiopian restaurant in DC (among many)

*Virginia:* University of Virginia, the flagship public university of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

*White phosphorous:* a self-igniting material that burns very hot and white in color. It can be weaponized (though should not be, because it does absolutely terrible things to flesh), but it is most commonly used in smoke grenades and as a tracer material for mutations
XO: Executive officer

SIGINT: Signals intelligence

Cell phone limit: Having extra cell phones in one’s home would likely be considered contraband, since they can be used to remotely detonate IEDs

MP: Military Police

Snatch-and-grab: Busting into somewhere and grabbing a person (or people). It sounds redundant, but that’s what it’s called!

MI: Military Intelligence

Night vision device: There are many different configurations, some monocular, some binocular. I believe the helmet-mounted monocular version was used most often in this time period
October 2, 2008

“Not feelin’ good about this mission. Not one bit.” Sam stomps his boots on the floor to settle his feet in them. He laces them up with sharp, jerking motions.

Bucky slides on and secures his armored tactical vest, patting down all of the pouches, counting magazines and clips through the fabric with his fingertips. “Yeah, well, gotta get it done.”

“You don’t feel it?”

Bucky’s not sure where it came from, whether it’s just the sheer amount of time spent downrange or whether it’s something honed from years of special operations, but his intuition around operations like this one is so accurate that he’s almost inclined to call it something else. Something that would get him laughed out of a room of his peers, probably. He wonders sometimes if he over-identifies with the enemy, if he’s tapped into their brutal intelligence in a way that other men can’t be because they fear what that kind of intimacy might mean — that they’re un-American, that they’re sympathizers, bleeding hearts, traitors. It’s dangerous territory, and if not managed properly, it can break a soldier down, make him doubt his purpose, his mission, his own fundamental sense of self.

But Bucky’s already doubted all of these things in the dark hours, and somehow, he carries on. He thinks it might be a gift, though he’s not sure if it’s one he really wants.

“Of course I feel it,” Bucky says. “They probably knew Khouri would fold in a second, so they’re gonna try to put themselves at least two steps ahead.”

Sam stands and bounces on his toes, then rocks back on his heels. “And what the hell are they gonna leave behind for us?”

“Well, guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

“I miss Afghanistan, y’know?” Sam tilts his head with a whimsical glimmer in his eyes. “Get some of those ANA guys, put ‘em right out front, have ‘em take point, have ‘em take all the shit first.”

They did some of that on Bucky’s last deployment to Iraq. On joint missions, they’d always put the Iraqi soldiers up front. The purpose was ostensibly to show the Iraqi people that their own troops were spearheading operations, that leadership in the war effort was changing hands. But all the
American soldiers loved the arrangement because the Iraqis were the first ones to go down. The first ones to step on IEDs. The first ones to get shot. To Bucky, it always meant one less American son or daughter sent home in a bag, and that was a moral arrangement he could sleep peacefully with.

“I hear you,” Bucky says seriously. “I’m not feelin’ hot about this one, either.”

“You think your man’s gonna be up for it?”

Bucky tosses a look over his shoulder at Sam’s smug face. “You mean my boss?”

“Sorry, your former man.” Sam grins. “Not the new one.”

“He’ll be okay.”

“He’s looking a little twitchy.”

Bucky shrugs. “We could all stand to be a little twitchy today.”

Steve’s been doing pretty well, all things considered. Better than Bucky would be doing if their places were exchanged. Hell, sometimes Bucky thinks he’s taking it worse than Steve is, especially knowing that he was the catalyst for it. He’s the reason Steve cheated on Sharon, after all. He’s the reason Sharon left him. Bucky’s been a lot of awful things in his life, a lot of things he’s not proud of, but “home wrecker” is a new one. A new personal low. He tries not to think about it, tries to remember that Steve’s a grown man who made his choices, but it still eats away at him like a cancer. When he sees Steve touching his brow when he thinks nobody’s looking, when his eyes are screwed shut and his chin starts to tremble, Bucky know he’s the reason for it...

They do the rest of their final gear checks in companionable silence. Bucky’s had Sam in his life for so long that he sometimes takes for granted how easy things are between them. Even when they’re pissed off at each other or have one of their rare but epic fights, they never lose their true north. It’s a comfort Bucky’s not sure he could live without.

“I’m just glad we’re going together,” Sam says, laying his kevlar helmet on his head and snapping the chinstrap.

“Damn straight. And since your boss suddenly decided to be a leader and not a giant fuck stick, I think we’re gonna be okay.” Bucky smirks, even though he’s provisionally impressed with Sitwell’s turnaround.

“I don’t know what happened to him, and I don’t care. Just get us home, man. Just get me home to my mama for Thanksgiving.”

“A-fucking-men to that.” Bucky grabs his pack of smokes and zippo and shoves them in his left cargo pocket. “‘Bout sick of this shit.”

Sam makes a thoughtful sound. “I never, ever though I’d hear you say that.”

Bucky walks to the mirror next to their door and gives himself the once-over, making sure everything sits right along the planes of his shoulders and hips. “I’m ready to go scream at kids for a couple years. Let off some steam.”

“How’s that gonna work with your Norwegian suitor?”

“Well, he’ll just have to fly down and see me, I suppose,” Bucky says with the saucy cadence of Scarlett O’Hara.
Sam walks up behind him, and Bucky makes some room for him in the mirror’s reflection. “Fly himself to Fort Benning on the weekend?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Little Sunday morning booty call?” Sam gives Bucky’s ass a slap on the word ‘booty.’ “Because you know that’s the only time off they’re gonna give you when you’re a drill sergeant.”

“A booty call doesn’t take that long, y’know. But I realize it’s been a while since you got laid.”

“No thanks to your ass always being here.”

“Just tell me to fuck off, man. You know I will.”

Sam gives a dramatic sigh. “Well, that would require my girlfriend to actually be on base once and a while. I’m glad she’s getting her field ops but, damn, I am lonely.”

“It’s okay, Sammy. I’ll keep you company.” Bucky lays a peck on Sam’s cheek.

“You’re my favorite side dish, Jamie Barnes. You know that, right?”

“Boy, you really know how to make a guy feel special.” Bucky brings his arm around Sam’s back and gives his armor a clap. “Now let’s go get some bad guys.”

———

At the mission staging area, Bucky checks in with Rhodes and Dugan, who are trying to get the men jazzed up with slaps on the back and a few rounds of “ready to go fuck up the Islamic State?” They’re trying to keep the edge of doubt out of their voices, just like Bucky’s trying to do for them. Bucky scans the throng of dismounted men until he finds Barton and Morita, who may not be thrilled by this particular mission but seem very thrilled to at least be on some mission. Barton weaves himself through the mass of his company, brandishing his crooked mouth and easy confidence, bolstered by the surly grunts of encouragement from Morita at his side. The energy is on point.

Bucky finds Steve and Sitwell double-checking supplies in the back of one of the vehicles, talking quietly through the op. First and second platoons breach the facility, third and forth pull security. As of three days ago, both signals data and human intelligence assets confirmed that an Islamic State cell has been seen entering and exiting a two-story building on the outskirts of Khalidiya. Personnel movement has also been linked chronologically and proximally to IED strikes between Ramadi and Fallujah.

It seems like a solid mission. It really does. The data point to it. The logic points to it. The HUMINT points to it. And yet, It feels off. It’s just a whistle, just a little hum of wrongness, formless and vague. But it is absolutely there.

Bucky closes the distance to Steve, laying heavy steps on the ground to herald him. Bucky knows twitchy; he lives twitchy more than he’d ever admit. Steve still turns fast and jerky, like he was yanked by some invisible string, and Bucky greets him and Sitwell with a nod.

“Morning, Gentlemen. Ready to go cause some trouble?”

“Absolutely,” Sitwell says, slamming the back hatch of the Humvee shut. “Have you seen Sergeant Wilson?”

“Back there, Sir.” Bucky jerks his head toward the back of the convoy.
Sitwell makes a face, something he’s been trying lately, something approaching a genuine smile, and makes his way to his platoon sergeant.

Bucky gives Steve the once-over from toe to head, checking his gear. He’s never once seen anything out of place, but he still does it before every mission. Deployment logic would suggest that maybe it’s the thing keeping him alive, and Bucky doesn’t mess with deployment logic.

“How you doing?” Bucky asks quietly.

“Okay. Feeling good.” Steve’s brow is set in a tense line that tells a different story.

“You got the heebie jeebies?”

Steve purses his lips and looks at a spot on the ground a few meters away. “I don’t know why. There’s something…” He hesitates. “I don’t know what.”

“Okay, good.” Bucky quickly move to clarify. “I mean good because I’ve got ‘em, Sam has ‘em, Dugan and Rhodes have ‘em, so at least we’re all on the same page.”

“It’s a good plan,” Steve says, shaking his head. “All the constituent parts are good.”

Bucky fishes out his cigarettes and puts one between his lips. He talks around it while he fingers through the contents of his cargo pocket for his lighter. “But when you smash it all together, the pucker factor goes up big time.”

“Exactly.

“It’s gonna be okay. We’re all ready for whatever they have in store for us.”

“You’re right.”

Bucky lights up his smoke and inhales deeply. It’s over two hours to Khalidiya, and they’re not stopping along the way. Not voluntarily, anyway. So they’ll be pissing in Gatorade bottles and channeling their anxiety into whatever conversation they can still manage with a bunch of guys they’ve been nuts-to-butts with for the past eight months.

Steve watches him smoke, making no attempt mask his interest. Bucky notes the joint sensations of self-consciousness and delight curling in his chest, and he wonders why Steve’s attention still has the ability to knock him out of sorts. Even after all these years. Even now that Bucky’s happy with someone else.

“I want you to stay by me,” Steve says as Bucky scrapes his cigarette butt along the bottom of his boot.

“What?”

“Stay by me.”

Steve’s tone is clear — it’s not “stay by me and protect me.” It’s “stay by me so I can protect you.”

Bucky pockets the cigarette butt and looks squarely at his platoon leader. “You’re scared.”

“Please.” Steve takes a step forward, until the gear on their chests nearly touches.

“I can’t promise that. I might be needed somewhere else.”
“Just try.”

That sick, nervous feeling — the nagging ache of Bucky’s intuition — sharpens. “All right. I’ll try.”

Steve nods, and the two serious lines above the bridge of his nose soften. “Good.”

The space between them thickens, electrifies, becomes tangible and a little frightening. Bucky’s thankful when the sounds of Barton and Morita’s voices cut through that space, demanding that they all mount up so they can get this show on the road.

“See you in Khalidiya,” Steve says, plain as anything, completely divorced from whatever was just going on inside him. Between them.

Bucky watches him circle the vehicle to take his place in the back seat. He stands there for a few moments, heavy and confused, until Rhodes snags him and shakes him out of it.

The men are ready, Rhodes says, and Bucky is glad. They’ll need to be.

———

When they finally roll up on the facility two hours later, the nebulous nervousness around the mission takes a swift and penetrating form. The quiet smacks Bucky upside the helmet as soon as they dismount. It’s jarring and unnatural. There should be some sound. An air conditioner. The wind. Some distant cow. The slow drag of the Euphrates. The soundtrack of life in this ancient land is silent, and Bucky shudders.

The company meets the quiet with their own brand of it — infantry quiet. The rustling of pant legs, the bouncing of gear, the light hiss of a tactical whisper. First and second platoons line up on either side of the metal double doors they plan to blow down, as third and fourth platoons surround the building to pull security. At the front of the line, Rhodes watches over Rumlow as he sets up the C4 charges on the doors’ hinges and locks. Bucky rushes up to where Steve is pressed against the concrete of the building. He runs in a low crouch, keeping his core solid to center himself while all his gear shifts about his body. He settles just behind Steve, trailing his attention up and down the lines of kneeling men. They’re itching to file in just as much as they’re dreading it, all except Rumlow, the tip of the spear, who looks ravenous and roaring and ready to blow shit up. Bucky’s glad to send him in first.

Steve looks behind his shoulder, nods once to Bucky, then makes eye contact with Barton down at the end of the line. Steve’s presence is calm and calming, stable and grounded. It’s everything a platoon sergeant could want from his platoon leader, and yet, Bucky still can’t kick the free fall sensation in his stomach. He thinks to maybe reach out to Steve, touch his back, see if he can’t siphon off some of that coolness or maybe inject Steve with some of his nerves. Something to balance them out. But he knows better. Instead, Bucky leans to the right, trying to look down the wall on the other side of the doors. Trying to see Sam. Trying to get a feel for first platoon’s readiness, even though he’d be powerless to change it. Steve reaches back and gives him a stern pat on the side of the arm, signaling for him to pull in tight against the wall.

Final checks leap down the line from man to man, a chain of thumbs-up running all the way back to Barton and Morita. There’s a dense pause while Barton and Morita confer, but moments later, Bucky feels Reyes’ hand drop onto his shoulder, which prompts him to lay his hand on Steve’s shoulder. He feels the muscle below his hand shift when Steve reaches out to Ward in front of him.

Bucky feels the shift, his shift, as his body readies for the unknown. His vision narrows. His heart dips into a low, steady rhythm. The free fall in his stomach becomes kinetic energy, like a shot of
amphetamine driving through his veins. At the front of the line, Rumlow raises his hand with the detonator in it, and all the men dip their heads in unison, helmets becoming shields.

A burst of sound cuts through the air, followed by a two thuds as the doors fall to the ground. The men of Alpha company rise tall and filter into the building in two serpentine columns of aggression. Bucky follows Steve into the building, and even though their platoon is cutting left to the stairwell, Bucky looks at the open expanse of the first floor and tries to take in as many details as he can. Plans change, missions deviate, and he needs to know it all. Just in case.

The first floor is a cross between an industrial kitchen and a lab. Along the wall are vats and cylindrical tanks. A stainless steel bench rests in the middle of the space, lined with burners and steel kettles. He wonders if they’re still hot, if there’s residue in them. Whatever it is they’re cooking up, Bucky’s pretty sure it’s not edible. He looks to Steve, whose eyes are trained on that same sinister equipment. From his grave expression, Steve appears to be entertaining some of the same nightmare scenarios that are careening through Bucky’s head right now.

Rhodes leads second platoon up the stairs to whatever awaits them. Their intel stopped at the front door, so what’s up there is anyone’s guess. Bucky looks over his shoulder at the men behind him, to their fearful but committed faces. He gives them a smile, a confident one, one he pulls from the bullshit factory where he manufactures artifacts of straightness and simulations of respect and self-assurance. Reyes’ bitch face, constant even amid such uncertainty, seems to lighten by the barest of measures. A large, open-mouth smile blooms underneath Dugan’s ginger mustache, and Bucky wishes he had more of Dugan’s recklessness. He used to. He’s not sure where it all went. Maybe he left it here on his last deployment.

Rhodes pulls the formation up the stairs and into a corridor, where he stops them. The men reflexively press against the wall as they assess the situation. Three doors are visible, all closed, and in the eerie glow of the fluorescent lighting, the hallway becomes a morbid gameshow shitck. It’s a Monty Hall problem, something behind each door, except instead of a car or a goat, maybe they’ll get an ambush. Maybe Muqtada al-Sadr. Maybe an all expenses paid trip to the gates of hell. It doesn’t help that the place is dead silent, save for the eerie hum of electricity coming from above. It’s quiet enough for Bucky to hear his heart, which has begun to beat insistently.

There’s a plan for this general situation, of course. The platoon splits into fire teams, which is what Steve communicates to Rhodes and Dugan by making a trident with three gloved fingers. Rhodes and Dugan mirror the gesture for all the men, who nod in acknowledgment. Steve points to Dugan and then to door one, then to Rhodes and door two. He then turns back to Bucky and points to three.

Bucky leans in and whispers next to Steve’s ear. “Start with three.”

Steve’s eyebrows pull together, but only for a moment. Those brows part and then rise, along with a nod when Steve recognizes the advantages of systematically clearing in reverse. It’s an unexpected search pattern, and in this situation, unexpected is one of the few assets they have at their disposal.

The platoon skirts down the hallway, taking defensive position while Bucky, Steve, Mack, Maximoff, and Ward stack up on the wall alongside the door. Bucky hates that Steve’s here, that he’s right behind him, that he’s so eager to be close. He shouldn’t be clearing any of these rooms, just like he shouldn’t have been in the lead vehicle the day Trip died. But Steve’s going to do whatever he wants, clearly, and this is neither the time nor the place for a conversation about tactical stupidity.

When everyone is in place, Bucky plants himself squarely in front of the door. He becomes the fearsome beast he’s trained himself to be, dauntless and lethal. Bucky slams his boot against the door, bursting it open, and he immediately notices two things as he steps inside. The first is the rock in the
middle of the room, and the second is the man scrambling up from where he was crouched on the floor next to it. Bucky’s brain makes a few trillion calculations, all of which conspire to bring his rifle up to his face and aim at the fucker as he dashes toward a door leading to the next room. He hears Steve and Rhodes yelling behind him, feels Steve grabbing him by the body armor, yanking him backward through the doorway, but Bucky still gets a burst of three shots into the man’s spine.

It’s the last thing he does before everything goes black.

*****

Steve got a hammock for his ninth birthday, something he requested repeatedly, obsessively, because he’d swung on one at camp the summer before. He remembers the way his ma smiled, soft and alive, when he opened the box and laughed in the intense way children do when their deep wishes get fulfilled. He set up the hammock on the roof of their building that same day, built the frame all by himself. And when he was done, he and his ma laid on it for hours, his head resting on her bony shoulder, swinging, reading, listening to the traffic, drinking pink lemonade. After sunset, they split a Snickers and listened to the fireworks over the river, because they couldn’t see them from their building. And she kissed his head —

Or was it his eye? It seems like it should be his eye. His left eye. Because he can feel the leftovers of her kiss there, the stabbing, throbbing pain of never being able to touch her or talk to her again. He feels them swinging again, only something’s off now, like the hammock’s stretched out, scraping against the hot asphalt of the roof. And above him, the sky is a blur. He blinks to try to clear it, but it keeps coming in white, and then he blinks again, tilts his head back, and Mack is there, face stony, and he’s saying watch it, keep him steady, there you go.

Mack looks down then, and his face changes, takes on a manufactured patina of reassurance.

“Hey, Sir. We got you,” Mack says, and for a moment, Steve wonders who he’s talking to. He becomes acutely aware of the pressure of Mack’s hands digging into his armpits. There’s another pair of hands, Rumlow’s, that have him by the legs. Rumlow’s face is tight and red with effort, and he’s looking over his right shoulder, grunting out curse words that Steve can somehow hear over the shouting. He sways as they step, and his lower back scrapes against — the stair. They’re on stairs.

He chokes then, coughing loose something that sloshes in the back of his throat. He works it to his lips, cringing at the metal he tastes, and spits out a thick clot of blood. Nausea rolls over him so forcefully that he starts to panic, and he panics even more when he tastes that blood fully, and his heart slams frantically against his chest when he sees Trip in his mind, falling into pieces, blood gushing out of him, onto his face, onto his lips, where it’s flowing now in a steady stream. Steve tenses, spitting out more blood, and he looks up at Mack.

“Put me down,” Steve grits out, his words coming in a rough slur. His stomach lurches.

“Hold on, Sir,” Mack tells him. “Just a few more steps.”

They jostle Steve down the last couple stairs and lay him not-very-gently on the cement of the first
floor. As soon as he hits the ground, Steve rolls over and hawks up more blood from his throat. Drops of red hit the floor rhythmically, dripping from his face, and he breaks out in a sweat as the nausea hits him in another brutal wave.

Mack crouches down next to him. “Sir, we need to get you out of here. You need a litter?”

Steve shakes his head weakly and pushes himself up to his hands and knees. Mack and Rumlow help him to his feet, a godsend, because the room goes black for a few frightening moments when he blinks. And then again. And he closes his right eye, just his right eye, and it’s black again. He reaches up to touch his left eye and can’t see his own hand approaching.

“C’mon, Sir. Let’s go.”

Mack leads him out of the building and men swarm around them. Steve stares at them, trying to name them, trying to tag them, Maximoff, Ward, Luis, Wilson, and where’s Bucky, where the fuck is Bucky, and he remembers Bucky, remembers the IED, the one disguised as a rock, and he pulled him, and then…

Steve wheels clumsily and grabs hard onto the front of Mack’s tactical vest. “Where’s Bucky?”

Mack’s head tilts. “Who?”

“Bucky…”

Steve lets Mack go, tries to push off of him to give himself some momentum, but Mack holds fast. Steve’s head jerks as he scans his surroundings, the swirl of soldiers dashing around him, searching the first floor, the distant pops of M4 rounds. He mutters “Bucky” under his breath until he catches sight of Parker next to a body laid out on the ground just outside the building. Parker and Foggy and first platoon’s medic, Kaplan, are all there. They’re kneeling by the body, their movements purposeful and quick, and Steve wrenches his arm away from Mack and staggers over to them.

Steve stops again when his vision splotches luminous black, and when colors return, the body just out of his line of sight. He watches as Mack jogs over to Parker and says a few things to him in a low voice. Parker glances up from his work on the body, glances at Steve, at whatever the hell he must look like now, then goes back to his work. Steve can’t make out what Mack’s saying, not with all the bustling around him, all the shouting, all the orders passing around, Rhodes’ voice, Barton’s, Sitwell’s. He doesn’t hear Bucky’s. He knows Bucky’s voice, like he knows his own mother’s — God, but does he ever remember her voice? — but he doesn’t hear Bucky’s voice. Mack pats Parker on the back and rises, gives the body a mournful look, then lopes back toward the building.

“Hey, Sir,” Parker calls to him. “How you doin’ over there?”

Steve opens his mouth and plans to say something that makes sense, but what comes out is “Yeah.”

“Yeah? You get your bell rung?”

“Yeah. How many?”

“How many what?”

“Time.”

Parker dips his chin to check his watch. “Maybe fifteen minutes.”

Steve blinks slowly. Fifteen minutes until what? He doesn’t even remember the purpose of his
“What’s the date?” Parker asks.

“October.”

“Who’s the president?”


“You wanna come help me over here? He’s been asking for you.”

Steve chokes on more blood. Coughs it up. Spits it on the ground. “He” could be anyone. Anyone, really. Anyone in his platoon. Some of his men really like him, maybe enough to ask for him. So it could be anyone, he thinks.

He sees legs first. Watches for a few dumb seconds as Kaplan cuts off a boot, moving carefully around the spike of rebar jutting from the top of a foot. The legs are naked, what little clothing left is cut away. Naked and bloody, both legs are bleeding from a wall-to-wall spray of shrapnel wounds, each one snaking out a rivulet of blood. More blood from another piece of rebar lodged in a knee, blood from a chunk of calf sheared off. Steve’s eyes pause, frozen in morbid curiosity, at a bloody groin, where Foggy is holding pressure. The whole area is a mess of white soaked red. A naked torso, pristine, toned, and flawless, the only plane of skin unmarred. And an arm, an arm Peter Parker is stuffing gauze pads into — into — because there is a massive, gaping hole where much of a forearm should be, a canyon carved into skin and muscle, into bone, two pink bones, one shattered and missing a chunk. Steve can’t remember which bone is which.

He’s sweating again, he can feel cold beads pool up on his forehead, on his upper lip, marrying with the blood there. Steve shudders, because he doesn’t want to see the face, because he knows who it is, and he doesn’t want to know. His stomach lurches again when he looks, accidentally, because he hears a loud groan coming from that body, the first sound it’s made, and he sees Bucky’s face, eyes still closed, head lolling, and—

Steve takes a handful of stumbling steps to the left and vomits up dark blood and peanut butter crackers from his MRE. He sways, bracing one hand on his knees while he wipes his mouth with the back of his other sleeve. Bucky. He can’t quite meld the two together — the broken body and the person, his friend, the man he loves, that face, mostly spared save for angry, open gashes on the chin and brow. He threads together bits of nonsense into a coherent logic — Bucky had his weapon up to his face, and his arms and hands took the brunt, because he had to shoot that guy, just had to, stupid fuck, stupid fucking fucker. Maybe the only reason a piece of rebar isn’t sticking out of his head is because he was too fucking stubborn to let the guy go. Maybe he’s alive because of it.

He’s alive, and Steve can’t care that he can’t make complete sense of it, that he can’t really believe it. He has to get back, because that’s Bucky, and he has to be there, because he promised. Friends make promises like that, promises about what one will do if the other falls, I’ll be there, Steve told him. I’ll be right there, no matter fucking what. It was serious enough to earn a superfluous f-bomb, because this is one of those things you just cannot fuck up. No matter what. So he’ll be there, no matter fucking what. No matter if Bucky lives, no matter if he…

Steve rights himself, works up more blood from the back of his throat, and goes back to Bucky, correcting his course a few times when he veers too much. He drops to his knees next to Bucky’s right shoulder, which is bloody from a wound in the muscle there, bloody all the way down his right arm from tiny holes where ball bearings are lodged, tears where screws and other shards of metal have ripped through him.
“Hey, Buck.”

Bucky’s head rolls to the side, toward Steve, and he mumbles something Steve can’t understand.

“It’s okay,” Steve says, because he doesn’t know what else to say. He looks for a place to touch him, a place to hold him, and in that moment, all he can see is wounds and places he cannot be.

Something flips then, like a switch, and Bucky’s mouth opens. He takes in a few breaths, ragged and wheezy, and his eyes fly open, wild and terrified. Bucky gasps, tries to suck in air. He looks up at Steve, and that terror gets bigger. Bucky lifts his right hand and reaches feebly for Steve’s face, and blood spills down his hand, down his wrist, because his index finger isn’t there anymore. There’s just empty space now, empty space meeting mangled flesh.

“Doc,” Steve says, and he takes Bucky by that bloody wrist, because he can’t watch that stump try to reach anymore.

Parker looks up from where he’s busy trying to salvage what’s left of Bucky’s arm. He freezes, just for a second, like he’s trying to snap out of a trance.

“His breath,” Steve says.

Parker re-orients quickly, taking in Bucky’s distress, the bulging veins on his neck, the blue that’s beginning to tint his lips, and Parker swears as he digs his stethoscope out of his medical bag. He puts it on and leans over Bucky’s body, pressing the chest piece to various places, auscultating systematically. Upper, lower, over, upper, middle, lower. Parker then scrambles to his feet, snatches up his medical bag, and plants himself next to Steve.

“You’re gonna have to move,” he tells Steve, gesturing brusquely toward Bucky’s head.

Steve moves over a little, taking Bucky’s wrist with him. Bucky’s fighting him, and Steve doesn’t know why. But really, he can’t tell if Bucky’s fighting him or wanting him, and it perplexes him that he can’t tell the difference. Parker scoots in close and swabs over the right side of Bucky’s chest with an alcohol pad.

“You have a collapsed lung, Sergeant. So you know what that means.”

“Fuck,” Bucky breathes.

For the first time since Steve’s been here, Parker smiles, wryly and half way. “Yeah, fuck is right.”

Parker digs through his bag again and pulls out a long and frighteningly thick needle. His gloves are bloody, so bloody that he can’t work open the package. He tosses it to Kaplan, who’s part way through bandaging Bucky’s calf, and Kaplan manages to get enough traction with his fingers to tear it open.

Steve’s and Bucky’s attention doesn’t leave the menacing needle as it’s passed from Kaplan back to Parker. Bucky’s already labored breathing hitches when Parker uses two fingers to trace a line down the center of his chest and over his right pectoral. Parker positions the needle at the edge of his fingers and glances at Bucky’s straining face.

“Ready?”

Bucky hesitates, eyes flitting back and forth from Parker’s face to the needle, and he nods.

Kaplan pauses his bandaging and watches Parker with keen interest. Foggy seems torn between
staring at the blood dressings underneath his fingers and gaping at Parker’s unpleasant task.

Parker makes a tense but determined face and pushes the needle hard into Bucky’s chest, through the mount of thick muscle there, into his chest cavity. Air hisses loudly out of the needle, and Bucky gasps again, harshly, arm curling against Steve’s grasp. When Bucky finally exhales, it’s with something close to relief.

“Okay, keep that there,” Parker tells Bucky. He then pulls a roll of gauze out of his bag and hands it to Steve. “Wrap his finger,” he instructs. He also hands Steve two gauze nose plugs. “And these are for you.”

Steve unceremoniously shoves the two plugs up his bleeding nose, wincing at the sharp sting. He then goes to work bandaging the stump where Bucky’s finger used to be. He fumbles with the gauze roll, distracted by looking down repeatedly at Bucky, who’s drifting on the brink of consciousness. Steve looks to Foggy, who’s been tasked with holding pressure on the juncture between Bucky’s thigh and pelvis, then down to Kaplan, and then to Parker, who’s back on Bucky’s left side, checking the tourniquet around his left bicep.

“Better save that arm, Doc,” Bucky mumbles.

“Doing my best, Sergeant.”

Steve finally gets the tape off the gauze so he can unroll it, a minor miracle with how badly he’s shaking. He positions Bucky’s hand, really looking at the stump for the first time, at the trickle of blood, at the bone and flesh. It’s cut in a flattish plane, as if chopped off deliberately, if a bit sloppily. Steve tries not remember the history of that finger, the triggers that it’s pulled, the lines that it’s traced over Steve’s face, the paths it’s traveled over his body, the way it threaded so easily with Steve’s own when things were quiet and they were alone and they needed to be close.

“Oh, Parker, you better get over here. This isn’t slowing down,” Foggy says. The pressure dressings below his hands are completely soaked through with blood, and Foggy’s pale, freckled hands are drenched in it.

Parker switches places with Foggy. He lifts the dressings, and deep red blood gushes in a way that’s mortally unsettling.

“Shit. Okay.”

Parker digs through his bag and procures several packages of hemostatic dressings.

Bucky stirs at the sound Parker’s voice, maybe the concern in it, and his blue eyes crack open. He blinks heavily and makes a face like he’s forgotten something important. His eyes roll over, stop when they get to Steve, and Bucky grimaces while his remaining fingers curl around Steve’s hand.

“It’s okay, Buck. You’re gonna be okay.”

As consciousness takes hold, Bucky’s jaw clenches tightly, and his breathing starts coming in quick huffs through his nose.

“What did you give him?” Steve asks Parker.

“Five milligrams of IV morphine. He was in a lot of pain. I didn’t know he had a collapsed lung.” Parker shakes his head as his lips press tight.

“Give him more.”
“I can’t,” Parker tells him, obviously trying to bite his words back. “He’s lost too much blood, and he’s in respiratory distress. I’m not gonna risk it.”

Steve glares at Parker. Tries to, anyway. He’s not sure how it’s coming off, if Parker can read his displeasure, his horror, his fear. Maybe he does. Steve looks to Kaplan for a second opinion, and all he gets is a firm nod of confirmation.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Parker says then.

Bucky lifts his head and mouths a soundless “yeah.”

“I have to do something, and it’s gonna hurt a lot. But I gotta do it so that you stay alive.”

Bucky nods, lets his head fall back, and closes his eyes. His Adam’s apple slides as he swallows. Steve takes advantage of the lull and bandages Bucky’s stump as fast as he can, knowing that he might not get a chance to in a minute or so. He’s thankful for these few moments of peace.

When the hemostatic bandages are readied, Parker tosses the bloodied dressings aside. He takes a deep, quavering breath and says, “Here we go.”

Steve has never, ever heard Bucky scream. Not really. Not reactively. Not in pain. He’s never heard anything like the sound coming from him right now, a scream of pain so intense that his whole body bows. His remaining fingers grab Steve’s like he’s hanging from a cliff by them, and Steve grabs back, squeezing Bucky’s hand with both of his, his own teeth grinding, eyes welling, stomach twisting. Parker shoves the hemostatic gauze into Bucky’s body, packing it tight, while Bucky screams and spasms. It must only take a handful of seconds, but it feels like an hour of agony. And when Parker’s finally finished, Bucky sags, his bottom lip quivering, tears streaming down the sides of his face, breathing harsh and unsteady.

Steve pats Bucky's hand and turns his head toward the sound of an approaching jog, turning until he can get the person in his monocular line of sight. It’s Sergeant Wilson, and he kneels on the other side of Bucky, directly across from Steve, and lays his palm on Bucky’s shoulder above where the tourniquet is pulled tight.

Steve takes a moment to look around, because he doesn’t know — doesn’t have a clue — what’s going on around him. He doesn’t know if they caught someone, if they found something, if they’re in danger, if they’re clear. The energy is restless, but the chaos seems controlled. Men from their platoon look over at them when they pass, curiosity seeming to edge out their shock or dread. They try not to stare too long, and sometimes they’ll try to say something like “hang in there, Sergeant,” but it always sounds weak and tentative. Nobody teaches you things like this, what to say when your platoon sergeant, the man you trust the most to be there for you, is laid out in the dirt, naked and bloody, screaming and shaking and crying. In the background, dimly, Steve hears Parker tell Kaplan to start an IV line for fluids.

Steve’s grateful for Wilson’s presence, which is steady and controlled. Wilson smiles when Bucky looks over at him. Bucky tries to give him one back, but it’s twisted all wrong.

“Doc’s gettin’ you all patched up,” Wilson assures him. He looks down Bucky’s body, down to his groin, and his smile drops, just for a moment, before he picks it back up again. “Your ultra high-speed expert field medic.”

“Told ya you’d get your combat medical badge, Doc.” Bucky tries to smile again.

“And I told you I didn’t want it.” Parker’s face is hard and serious. Angry.
“Yeah, well, tough shit, Peter Parker.”

Bucky’s hand trembles in Steve’s as he slips further into shock. Steve can feel Bucky’s pulse beneath his fingers, fast and weak. His breathing is rapid again, body tensing, shifting, like something is crawling inside his skin.

Bucky lifts his head, suddenly very interested in what everyone’s doing to save him. He looks down at where Parker’s taping over the dressing he just packed, and Steve can see his attention trail over a few inches, to the mess of bandages over his genitals. Bucky’s eyes go wide, and he tries to sit up all the way, tries to look closer, tries to rip his hand from Steve’s to reach down, to see what’s underneath or what’s not underneath.

“What the fuck?” Bucky says. It starts out as a disbelieving whisper and escalates rapidly into sheer panic. “What the fuck? What the fuck?”

Steve doesn’t let him go. “Shhh. It’s okay.”

“What the fuck? What’s wrong with my dick, Parker?”

“You’re gonna be okay, Sergeant,” Parker says. It’s a flat, unconvincing assurance.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Bucky shouts.

Everyone knows that any answer aside from an enthusiastic “you’re good” means that it is definitely not good. Steve feels sick again.

Bucky grows frantic and tries harder to reach for those bandages. When Steve won’t give him his right hand, he tries with his left, tries to lift that gutted, limp, useless forearm until Parker tells Wilson to hold him down at the elbow. Steve presses on Bucky’s shoulder, presses him down to the ground, where Bucky fights with surprising vigor to see what’s become of him.

“Where’s the goddamn dustoff?” Steve asks to nobody in particular.

“Captain Barton called it a while ago,” Foggy tells him.

Steve yells Ward’s name repeatedly, his voice cracking. The men around them echo Ward’s name, belt it out like they know how important it is. Below Steve’s hands, Bucky continues to struggle, yelling at them to let go, to just fucking let go.

“Hey!”

They all turn to the sound of that voice, to Barton, who’s stalking over to them with heavy, purposeful strides. Barton slings his weapon over his shoulder and gets on his knees just above Bucky’s head. He takes Bucky’s head firmly in his hands, his scarred hands, and Bucky looks up at him, jaw yawing, teeth grinding, breath heaving, like a cornered animal.

“You need to calm down so these guys can save your life.” Barton jerks his head over to Kaplan, who’s waiting with an IV needle and bag in hand. “Okay?”

Bucky’s upper lips curls, bearing his teeth, and his eyes lock onto Barton’s upside-down face like he’s fixing to fight him.

“You need to trust me. Do you understand?”

After a few labored huffs of breath, Bucky nods. Steve feels some of the tension in him slack.
“Sergeant Rhodes and Sergeant Dugan are going to take care of your guys while you’re getting better,” Barton tells Bucky. “And your dustoff is inbound. Five minutes.”

Bucky’s eyes flicker closed. He mouths something over and over, like a prayer he wants to keep secret. Steve thinks it might be “thank God.”

Barton takes one look at Steve and says, “And you’re going with him.”

The thought to balk crosses the syrupy muck Steve’s mind. He should be here, he thinks. Maybe doing something. He doesn’t know what. He doesn’t remember the mission, not exactly. He can’t recall the writing in his notebook, can’t see the shapes or angles of the lines. There’s just silence and vastness where that memory should be.

Barton gives Bucky’s face a gentle pat. It’s the most warmth Steve has ever seen from him. And then he’s gone, back to hollering at the men to wait for the chemical corps before they start moving shit around.

“Hey,” Steve says to Bucky.

Bucky opens his eyes. They’re watery and exhausted and bloodshot. “Hey.”

Steve doesn’t know where to touch him now, now that Kaplan’s feeding a needle into the top of the hand he was holding.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Steve says.

Bucky’s lower lip quivers. “No, I’m not.”

Steve doesn’t have an answer to that. He doesn’t have a counterpoint. He doesn’t even have stern retort. He just sits there like an idiot, like a goddamn fool, leaving a blank line where comforting words should go. Instead, he lifts his bloody hand and rests it on Bucky’s forehead. Bucky’s eyes close again, tightly, and his face becomes a mask of pain.

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The Blackhawk comes, landing in a patch of dry earth adjacent to the building. Steve stays at Bucky’s side as much as he can, even though they won’t let him carry the litter. They do let him hold the IV bag, which he does with grave seriousness. They’ve covered Bucky’s middle with a blanket, affording him some small dignity, and Kaplan and Foggy have to hold it in place as the rotor wash threatens to carry it away.

Steve’s hurting in earnest now. His head’s pounding viciously, his legs stinging, probably from kneeling so long. He feels less sick now that the helicopter is here, less helpless, less ineffectual.

Steve passes the IV bag to one of the flight medics, a Specialist named Johnson, and the team gets to work loading Bucky into the helicopter. Steve swears he hears his name then. It’s hard to tell over the monotonous din of static resonating in his head and the thumpa-thumpa of the rotors. When he hears it again, louder, he turns and sees Maximoff bolting toward him with something in his hand. Maximoff stops, shielding his face from the whipping wind, and hands Steve something.

“Here, Sir. Sergeant Rhodes found this.” Maximoff is yelling, he has to, and it makes his accent stronger.

The something is covered in tan leather, about three inches long and an inch wide. Steve rotates it, straining to understand it, and it’s only when he turns it just the right way that he starts to
comprehend what he’s holding. It’s the red that gives it away, shiny red with a core of off-white. A finger. Maximoff gave him a severed finger sheathed in a combat glove. Bucky’s finger. Bucky’s glove. Steve blinks away the blurriness, the wetness, the incomprehensible reality of this moment.

“Is he going to be okay?” Maximoff asks.

“Looks like he’ll live,” Steve says, too quietly for Maximoff to hear him. He has to repeat himself.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Steve nods along with it, knowing the lie was too quiet to discern.

Maximoff reaches out and lays his hand on Steve’s upper arm. “Tell him I’m praying for him.”

“I will.”

“And for you.”

“Okay.”

Maximoff takes a few steps back, not yet turning away, his expression downcast but somehow still quietly optimistic, like he knows beyond doubt that everything’s going to be okay. Steve wants that. Steve wants just a little bit of that. He tells himself to remember that face, hold it in his heart, because he’s probably going to need it soon.

Steve turns back to the helicopter, holding Bucky’s finger. He’s not entirely certain how he should hold it — or whether it’s even viable anymore. He makes a soft fist around it and steps up to the door, where Parker’s leaning down and saying something into Bucky’s bloody ear canal. Bucky listens, smiles crookedly, and mouths something that looks like “bullshit.” Parker nods matter-of-factly, gives Bucky a wink, and leaves him in the flight crew’s care. He gives Steve a modest nod as he walks by, and it’s only now that Steve can see how beat he looks.

“Parker,” Steve calls after him.

Parker turns, somehow still able to appear expectant and willing, ready to do whatever is asked of him.

“I’m very proud of you,” Steve says.

He doesn’t know if he has a right to be proud of Parker. He didn’t train him. He didn’t make him into the man he is. But he’s proud. And he’s thankful. But it’s more than that. His gratitude to Parker for saving Bucky is so immense that he could never speak it without giving himself away completely.

Even though he’s tired and covered in Bucky’s blood, Parker smiles. “Thank you, Sir.”

Once they’re airborne, Johnson tends to Bucky. Wraps his right bicep with a blood pressure cuff. Starts an O neg blood transfusion. Administers prophylactic antibiotics. Checks his dressings. Dresses wounds that they didn’t have time to care for earlier, mostly the smaller ones on his face and arms. Steve watches it all from a nearby jump seat, where he’s being assessed by a young medic named Bowen.

“How you feeling, Sir?” Bowen’s blue eyes are sharp and evaluative.
Steve looks down at his hand, where he’s still got Bucky’s finger secured in his grip. A strange possessiveness washes over him, like giving that finger to Bowen will take something away from him. Something important.

“I have this.” Steve reluctantly holds out the finger to her. “It’s his.”

There’s a moment of computation as Bowen processes what she’s being offered. She takes it from him, takes one look inside the glove, and lights up.

“Johnson!” She turns to look at him. “We got his finger!”

“Excellent,” Johnson replies. He rises from where he’s seated next to Bucky and takes the finger from her. Steve doesn’t know what he does with it next.

From the floor, Bucky watches his severed finger get passed around, and from the look on his face, he can’t seem to decide if he’s happy or horrified.

Bowen turns back to Steve. “On a scale from zero to ten, zero being no pain at all and ten being the worst pain imaginable, how much pain are you in right now?”

There are so many different kinds of pain competing for his attention. The stabbing in his head. The pounding in his face. The throbbing and stinging in his legs.

“I don’t know.” Steve shrugs. “Seven.”

Bowen procures a pen light from her breast pocket and shines it in each of Steve’s eyes.

“Any dizziness?” she asks him.

“Yeah.”

“Confusion?”

“I think, maybe.” Definitely.

“Anything else I’m missing?”

“Nausea.”

“Okay. How bad, zero to ten?”

“Six. And there’s static.” He points to his head.

Bowen doesn’t miss a beat. “Okay, maybe some tinnitus. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Four.”

“Okay, close your right eye. Now how many?”

Steve doesn’t have an answer for her, though he’s relieved to at least see some vague shadows now.

“I can’t tell.”

Bowen pockets her light and slips on a pair of nitrile gloves. “I’m gonna feel around your face, okay? See what’s going on.”

Bowen begins pressing around Steve’s skull, palpating around his eye, his brow, his nose. Steve
startles when her finger dips in a place it shouldn’t, like the bone there has completely fallen away.

“Do you remember what happened?” she asks him while she continues to feel around.

“Sergeant Barnes entered a room. There was an IED. I tried to pull him out. I don’t remember after that. Until the stairs.”

“Maybe you got hit by Sergeant Barnes’ kevlar when he was thrown back.”

Steve frowns. That would make sense. He looks down at his lap then, at the blood there, at his empty chest, and he suddenly wonders where his rifle is. Where his tactical vest is. Where his helmet is. Where his pistol is. They’re all gone. Everything. All his gear, gone. He has nothing but his uniform. How did he not realize that until just now?

Bowen sits back on her heels. “Okay, got all your teeth?”

Steve feels around his mouth with his tongue and nods.

Bowen then starts feeling around Steve’s legs. There are smears and droplets of blood from thigh to calf. It’s Bucky’s blood, Steve thinks, until Bowen’s hand hits something that makes him hiss.

“Whoa, got something here. Hold on.”

Bowen reaches into a nearby medical bag and grabs a pair of trauma shears. She cuts open his pants, both legs, flaying them open from his boots to the hem of his underwear. When she pushes the fabric away, Steve is dumbstruck by all the places where shrapnel hit him. A big piece of it — a bolt, from the looks of it — is deeply embedded in his thigh, the head of it almost flush with the muscle. And there’s a spray of smaller wounds, like the ones all over Bucky’s arms and legs, tiny ball bearings pocking him.

“I didn’t know,” Steve says, shaking his head. “How did I not know…?”

“Adrenaline’s a hell of a drug.” Bowen smiles at him, holds that smile steady even when she gets no response, and goes about bandaging him up.

Steve swallows heavily, ambivalent about wanting an honest answer. “What’s wrong with me?”

“You probably have a mild brain injury. Your face is probably broken. Your nose is broken. The bone around your eye is definitely broken. The shrapnel, obviously. I’m not entirely sure what all’s wrong with your eye, but I don’t see any puncture wounds. Your pupil’s blown and won’t contract, so it could be a few things.”

“I can barely see out of it.”

“They’ll take a look at it in Baghdad, and they can repair the rest of your face at Landstuhl or Walter Reed.”

Bowen digs through plastic container and pulls out two bottles of pills. She shakes out four from one bottle and one from the other into her hand. When she realizes he has no canteen, she snags him a bottle of water.

“Take these,” she says. “Can’t give you anything stronger ’til we get you a CT scan and see how your brain’s doing. One’s for the nausea.”

Steve stares at the pills in his hand. He can’t go to Walter Reed. Bucky’s going there. Steve already
knows that. He also knows that Bucky’s getting med boarded. It must be obvious to Bucky, too. To everyone in that Blackhawk. But Steve can’t afford a med board. The unit can’t afford it. They can’t lose both of them.

Steve takes his pills and drains the whole bottle of water. While Bowen works on his legs, he looks down at Bucky. His eyes are closed, but not in the way eyes close during sleep. Maybe he’s trying to shut out the pain. Maybe he’s pretending he’s somewhere else. Back in New York. Back in the arms of someone else. Or maybe he’s alone. Maybe he’s crawling into a hole, completely alone.

“Can I sit down there?” Steve asks Bowen as she tapes a final square of gauze over his shin.

She looks over her shoulder, at Bucky and at Johnson next to him. When she looks back at Steve, she spends an unusual amount of time searching his eyes in silence, maybe working through some flow chart in her head.

“Sure. Just keep this straight.” She gives his right thigh a soft pat and turns her attention to the other medic. “Hey, Johnson. Can you help me with this paperwork?”

Johnson makes a face, and then Bowen makes a face back at him. Steve can’t really understand the exchange, but it results in Johnson leaving Bucky’s side and joining Bowen in the row of jump seats.

When Steve moves, there’s pain everywhere. He clenches his teeth and quickly unclenches them when he remembers he can’t breathe through his nose. Slowly, he settles on the floor next to Bucky, stretching his right leg out and curling his left leg in.

“Bucky.”

Bucky turns his head toward him and opens his eyes. “Hey.” His gaze flits around Steve’s face. “You look like shit.” He lifts his right forearm and holds up his hand.

Steve takes Bucky’s hand in both of his, like before. All three are still painted with dried blood. “How you feeling?”

“Okay.”

Of course, Bucky doesn’t look okay. Not at all. He’s a mess. Covered in wounds and blood and sweat and bandages. Filled with metal and fear and agony. Steve feels himself starting to cry again, and he dashes away the tears pooling in his intact eye with the palm of his hand.

“We’re almost there,” Steve tells Bucky, blinking and looking at the sky outside the window.

“You don’t know that.” The corner of Bucky’s mouth quirks up. “Don’t make shit up.”

Steve lets out a tremulous sigh. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“I want to say things. I have something to tell you…”

Steve’s voice breaks, cutting his words off. Bucky must sense what it is, must have enough conscious awareness to synthesize the clues, and his face changes. But it doesn’t open like Steve wants it to. It doesn’t invite those words, the words Steve hasn’t said in over six years. Instead, a scowl forms, angry and intense, and his hand goes limp.

“Don’t. Don’t you dare tell me. I don’t wanna hear it.” Bucky glares at him with ice in his eyes,
forcing syllables out like they’re poisoning him. “I mean it.”

Steve lowers his forehead to where their hands are joined, careful to avoid Bucky’s raw, bandaged stump. He’s not even thinking about how he must look, how they must look together. Steve keeps his words, choking them down along with the lump in his throat. He feels Bucky’s pulse beneath his pinky, stronger and slower than before, and despite the wrenching pain in his heart as it tears open, Steve is overwhelmed with gratitude.

In the end, Steve says it anyway, deep under his breath. The sound dies in the din of the aircraft.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Violence, blood and gore, medical realism, pain, suffering

Notes:

ANA: Afghan National Army

Fort Benning: An Army base in Georgia that’s home to the Army Infantry School.

HUMINT: Human intelligence

Gentlemen: The proper way to address two or more male officers. "Ladies" is the equivalent for female officers.

Pucker factor: A way of expressing how intense/stressful something is. Basically, how much an event will cause your asshole to clench with fear (one of my personal favorite military expressions)

Nuts-to-butts: super close together

Monty Hall problem: There's a game show called “Let’s Make a Deal.” One of the games in the show was either to take a prize that a contestant could see or trade it for what was behind one of three doors. The Monty Hall problem is a probability puzzle (named for the original host of LMAD) where someone has to calculate the probability of picking a car from behind three doors - the other two doors contain goats.

Muqtada al-Sadr: A very influential Iraqi cleric and anti-American militia leader - a most wanted man.

Get your bell rung: Get hit in the head

A litter: A stretcher

Dustoff: A medical evacuation

Bird: slang for helicopter

Landstuhl: Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, where many of the medical evacuations from Iraq and Afghanistan go. Someone may be further routed back to America (see below) or may possibly go back downrange after treatment.
Walter Reed: A major Army hospital in Maryland. It was in the news a while back for patient neglect and being unsanitary and gross

Medical board: A process where the military determines whether or not you will be discharged for an injury or illness

IED contents: IEDs can be full of any number of things. Some of the most damaging materials can be screws, small pieces of rebar, ball bearings, nails, and other small metallic things that can be turned into fatal projectiles. There’s also whatever casing the IED is in, metal, cement, etc., which gets weaponized as well.

Genital injuries: Have not been uncommon in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and are rarely talked about due to embarrassment and concerns about masculinity (among other reasons). I’ve heard more than one service member say that they’d rather have multiple limbs amputated than have any injury to their genitals. Here’s a helpful NYT article, if you’re interested in learning more:
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky spends the next eight days drifting in and out of sleep. Sleep from morphine. Sleep from anesthesia. Sometimes when he wakes up, Steve is there. At first, Bucky thinks he’s hallucinating, because why would Steve be there? But he eventually figures that if he was hallucinating, he’d probably hallucinate a Steve who didn’t look like such a mess, one who wasn’t in a hospital gown and robe, one who didn’t look so sullen and nervous and swollen. Occasionally, Steve talks, but most of the time he’s silent, ghosting in and out with the blinking of Bucky’s eyes.

Bucky usually pretends to sleep when they come and clean his wounds and change his dressings. He thinks he might have most of the medics and nurses fooled, but one nurse always calls him out on it. She’s a local German civilian with the same gray-brown hair and stout stature as Bucky’s mother. She tells him that she knows he’s awake because he’s terrible at pretending not to be in pain, a hilariously ironic assessment of someone who’s made a small career out of concealing his misery.

Sometimes he stays silent when she comes. Sometimes he gets pissed off at her voice and her hands and lets her know it. Regardless of what he does, she tells him about his injuries every day. Damage, treatment, prognosis. Her lessons are always prefaced by a small lecture about why he needs to understand his injuries so that he can recover faster. She tries to appeal to him as a leader and an infantryman, tells him that he needs proper intelligence in order to successfully complete his mission. Boy, does he have some things to say to her about the importance of accurate intelligence, but he doesn’t say them. He’s usually too tired to fight her much.

So he takes it. He takes it because she also tells him every day that she’s seen a lot of guys worse off than he is. He still has four limbs. Two eyes. A beating heart. An intact set of guts. He’s not brain dead. He can still feel his toes. The list of things that aren’t wrong with him is extensive, and maybe once or twice, it’s been enough to calm the tempest of cruel ire that boils underneath his skin.

He blew past the denial phase of grief the second he woke up in Khalidiya. The pain was too great to pretend it away, and he immediately accepted that after four deployments and hundreds of missions, his number was finally up. It made sense, he supposed. So the anger barreled in next, crashing against him in waves and waves that hit him still, each wave somehow stronger than the last. Every moment he’s not sleeping, he’s seething, because the list of things that are wrong with him is also extensive. Terrible and inescapable.

His foot is broken. His knee is shattered. His calf muscle is badly damaged. His pelvis is broken. His femoral artery was ripped open and repaired. His radius and ulna are fractured, almost — but not
quite — beyond repair. The soft tissue of his forearm was gutted. His severed finger was replanted. He’s still full of shrapnel. He has a brain injury. He lost one testicle and very nearly lost the other. His dick is… there. A portion of it, anyway. The nurse’s voice always gets dim and distant when she gets to this point, and Bucky’s not sure if it’s her or him. Something about lacerations and reconstruction and salvaging. There’s enough dick for her to shove a catheter up, at least. Bucky sure knows that.

Bucky tried to look at it once. Only once. The day after his sixth surgery, he dared to lift up the covers, dared to pull up his hospital gown. He was prepared for the worst, but what he saw was the truncated remainder of his dick smashed against his body beneath a yellowed vacuum-assisted closure device. He could make out the lines of sutures trailing over his flesh, each of them a scar in the making. He could see a too-thick tube shoved up into it, one that suggested he might still be able to pee out of it, thank God. He looked at it until his mouth filled with saliva, then covered it again so that he didn’t puke all over himself.

There was something to see, though. There was something there. There is something there. It’s not completely gone. He thought for sure, back in Iraq, that it was completely gone.

He feels like he should be grateful but, somehow, he’s not.

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Today, when Bucky wakes up, Steve is there again, sitting in the chair next to his bed. He looks better. The white of his left eye is white again, not that horrible bloody red that Bucky saw when he first looked up at Steve from the dirt. And the blue of his iris is back. His nose looks straight enough. The bruising has gone from purple to green and yellow.

Bucky still doesn’t really know what happened to Steve. It’s been tough to see through his own pain and lingering horror, which is so immense and intense that even his deep concern for Steve can’t quite survive in it. The pain is with Bucky right now, as it always is, a constant, moody companion that eats his patience like sustenance. He hasn’t pulled from his morphine drip in many hours, because he’s been stuck on that hazy precipice between sleep and awake, where the pain is profound and vibrant but still unreachable. And now that Steve is here, the part of Bucky that wants to be present keeps his hand from reaching for the pump at his side.

Steve’s in uniform today, a crisp, new one. New name tapes. New rank. New unit patches. Fresh and spiffy and ready to go… Bucky doesn’t know where. It’s the first question he asks, yanking Steve from his unfocused staring into nowhere. Steve looks surprised that Bucky’s even awake, let alone talking, let along talking coherently. Steve’s hands grip the arm rests of his chair tightly.

“Baghdad,” Steve tells him in a low voice.

“Good.”

Steve looks down at his lap, at where his knees crest and slope down to his shins.

“The unit needs you,” Bucky adds. “They need closure.”

“On what?”

“You. Me.”

Steve snorts quietly. There’s nothing derisive about it. “You act like you’ve done this before.”

“My squad leader died on my second deployment.” Bucky leaves a palpable full-stop there, because
there are few things he’d like to recall less than the sight and smell of Sergeant Anderson’s body, charred and twisted almost beyond recognition. Almost. “Need to see you and know we’re okay.”

Bucky could see it already on his men’s faces — not just the miserable sheen of pity but the shadow of doubt and fear over what it means to lose a core member of platoon leadership. But it’s more than that, because if the most highly trained and experienced member of the team can get blown to shreds, what does that mean for the regular Joes? The ones who aren’t operators and career murderers? What does that mean for the Luises and the Foggys and the Joneses? The Maximoffs? The one-terms who are looking for a place to sleep, money for school, citizenship, and the laughably euphemistic “life experience”?

“You want me to say you’re okay?” Steve asks, his brows sliding upward in a slow look of disbelief.

“Say that I’m fine. On the mend. However you wanna spin it. Just spin it right.”

“You think they won’t find out when we’re all back at Bragg?”

Bucky lifts his right hand to his chin, scratching the healing gash there with one of his good fingers.

“That doesn’t matter. They just need to stay focused and make it home to their families next month. That’s the most important thing. Get them home.”

“Do you know when you’re going home?” Steve asks

Bucky shrugs. “Maybe a week til I go to Walter Reed. Dunno know when I’ll get transferred down to Womack. Ma’s already trying to get me diverted somewhere else. Calling her congressman or some shit.”

His ma has been far less composed than Bucky ever expected her to be, in the few conversations they’ve had since he’s been here. He’s not sure why she’s being this way. Everything he knows about her, her tough compassion, her many years in the military community, her own previous experience as a soldier, all of it suggests a woman who’d rise far above the usual handwringing routine. But she hasn’t. The first time he got her on the phone, she cried. Cried. Not even Rikki cried, and she cries when something is very cute.

Steve nods. “Will your ma be there when you arrive?”

“Yeah. She’s got some vacation.”

Silence stretches out between them. There’s something approximately unpleasant about it, between the hum of anxious energy coming off of Steve and the way the quiet seems to highlight the varying textures of pain in Bucky’s body. It could also be the way Steve is staring at the floor, tense and wary.

“What about him?” Steve asks.

Bucky’s throat goes dry — or maybe he’s just realizing that it’s been dry all along. “Who?”

Steve looks Bucky dead in the eyes and tilts his head at a long-suffering angle.

Bucky remembers this line of questioning, questioning about a man whom neither of them will name aloud. What to do about Thor Odinson. What to tell him. When to tell him. Only Bucky’s not sure if Steve’s asked him these questions already or if they’ve just been circling above his hospital bed this whole time — circling around with all the other what-ifs and if-onlys. Until this point, Bucky’s never felt strong enough to hold the questions in his mind for more than a few moments. The handful of times he’s tried, he’s become so overwhelmed with despair and rage that he’s had to shove them
aside with drugs or drown them in hate.

But Bucky tries to hold the questions now, as carefully as he can. He tries not to smash them into atoms. He tries to imagine action and reaction, tries hard, but he falls short with a noncommittal grunt.

“You are gonna tell him, right?” Steve asks.

Tell him. Tell him. Hear his voice on the phone and tell him. Tell him that his skin is full of holes and that those holes will all become ugly, permanent marks. Tell him that he’s had so many parts of his body harvested and grafted onto other places that he looks like a patchwork monster. Tell him that he’s going to be disabled for the rest of his life. Tell him that his dick is not even half there now, and the part that’s left looks like it was rummaged from a meat grinder and reassembled. Tell him that he’s just another Iraq War sob story now, and not even the type of shredded-dick wonder who ends up in the Times because some woman found the courage to love his mangled body. He’ll never be that story, because gay men don’t do shredded-dick wonders. No fats. No femmes. No guys over 30. No body hair. In-shape only. No cripples need apply.

Bucky shakes his head.

Steve’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

“I don’t want him to try to come see me. Because he would.”

Steve waits, as if Bucky’s withholding some final, necessary logic to make this all seem reasonable. But no other logic avails itself, not in Bucky’s mind and not in the space between them.

“So you’re just not gonna tell him,” Steve says, his voice thin and distant.

Bucky winces at a rolling pain that cramps its way up his leg. “Please just drop it.”

“No,” Steve shakes his head. His lips press into a tight, determined line. “No. You can’t do that. You need to tell him.”

Bucky hasn’t had a drink in months, not since New York, but some vestige of drunkenness overtakes him then. The part where he drifts outside of himself, where he can watch over his own shoulder at whatever act of lunacy he’s creating. He feels that disembodied floating, a very old friend of his, and marvels at how easily he can muster it sober. Maybe what he needed was the right stimulus, the precise combination of physical and emotional agony. And maybe he needed the right target, someone for whom he’s harbored a small lifetime’s worth of devastating emotions, someone who’s made him ache and burn and whither and suffer with an intensity no other human could match. And maybe he needed that target to tell him the plain truth, which comes out arrogant and moralistic from his cheating mouth.

Everything happens just-so, just perfectly, and Bucky watches himself go ballistic.

“What don’t you fucking understand about this situation?” Bucky says, balling his blanket and sheets in his hands. “What the fuck do you think my life is gonna be like now?”

In a weak feat of strength and coordination that feels superhuman, Bucky throws his bedding off his body.

“Look at me,” he says to Steve, forcing his words out between his teeth.

Steve stays frozen, save for the widening of his eyes, and Bucky repeats himself.
“You stand up and you fucking look at me.”

When Steve does as he’s told, Bucky tries not to show his surprise. Instead, he makes a hard plane with the fingers of his right hand, his newly reattached index stiff and discolored, and he gestures to the appropriate parts of his body as he speaks. The plasma-wet bandages. The knotty rows of staples. The cast on his foot. The brace around his knee.

“So, which part do you think he’s gonna like the most? Maybe the shrapnel wounds? Maybe how they rebuilt my arm out of my pelvis and muscle from my back? Maybe how they grated the skin off my ass to patch up my calf and cover all the shit they tore out of me to fix my arm? Maybe he can enjoy the way I limp for the rest of my life because my entire fucking knee was shattered and still, after two surgeries, can’t be fully repaired.”

Steve follows Bucky’s hand dutifully, bearing witness to him. Steve’s cheeks and lips begin to blanch a sickly shade of pale. His fingers, hanging loosely at his sides, tremble.

Bucky presses on. His voice rises and smashes against the walls and spills out the open door into the hallway.

“And maybe he can come visit while the nurse is wiping my ass, because I can’t even walk to the fucking bathroom to shit like a normal person.” Bucky grabs the thin hem of his hospital gown and yanks it up, exposing his shame to both of them. “Or maybe he follow the trail from my piss bag up into my pathetic little half-dick. Bet he can’t wait to get that thing in his mouth. I mean, just look at it!”

Steve shushes him, imploring him to lower his voice. Bucky makes it louder.

“‘Sure, I could have any man in New York City, but I’ll take the old, crippled, mutilated sack of shit I’ve been dating long distance for three months!’ That’s exactly what he’d say, Steve. Exactly. You’re right. ‘I could fuck any guy in the world, but I choose the flaming pile of wreckage in room 307.’”

“Shut up,” Steve hisses, pointing to the open door. “Someone’s gonna hear you.”

Bucky rolls his eyes. “Oh, like I give a fuck. What are they gonna do? Kick me out?” Bucky catches sight of a young medic walking past his door and calls out to him. “Hey, you! Yeah, you. Guess what?”

The medic, Specialist Rosenblatt, takes a hesitant step into the room. From behind his glasses, his eyes go glassy and confused. “What, Sergeant?”

“‘I’m a fag, and I like to suck dick. You wanna know how many dicks I’ve sucked?”’

“Don’t answer that,” Steve tells the medic, deathly serious, then glares at Bucky.

Rosenblatt visibly clenches his jaw shut. Bucky persists.

“I’ve sucked so many dicks that I’ve fucking lost count.”

“Okay… That’s okay.” Rosenblatt nods, his face earnest and compassionate.

“The fuck it is,” Bucky spits. “Fuck you.”

Steve walks over to Rosenblatt and leads him out of the room. Bucky can hear Steve apologize for him, tell him that ‘he doesn’t mean it.’ That he ‘isn’t thinking straight.’ He tries to make excuses, and
Bucky yells the miserable truth from his bed.

“Oh, I fucking mean it! I know exactly what I’m saying!”

There are more murmurs. Bucky waits them out, chest heaving, breath passing loudly through his nostrils, hands clutched over his chest, balled feebly in the fabric of his gown. He’s so flushed with rage, so out of his mind with pain, that he doesn’t even know what to do next. He can’t think of a single thing he can do. He can’t run. He can’t fight. He can’t stand. He can barely even string two thoughts together. All he can do is lie there and clench his useless hands and reel while anguish pulls him deeper into the mattress.

A few minutes later, Steve is back and closing the door gently behind him. He stops there, face so close to the jamb that they’re nearly touching, and lays his hand on the heavy wood. Steve speaks against its surface, and Bucky can barely make out his words with his good ear.

“If you care about him, even a little, you’ll tell him. Tell him you’re hurt. Tell him you’re gonna live.” Steve turns his head to the side but still won’t look at Bucky. “You don’t wanna see him? Fine. But he has to know.”

Bucky then does the thing he’s been avoiding since he first opened his eyes back in Khalidiya: he thinks about Thor. Really thinks about him. Lets himself imagine his face and remember his kindness. Remember the tenderness with which he held him. The sweetness of his smile. He lets himself sit with the devastating realization that things will never be the same between them, even if Bucky did muster the courage to let him visit one day. Bucky couldn’t bare to see the sadness in his eyes, couldn’t stand the thought that he might stay by him, sacrifice a part of himself to the false hope that maybe they could one day be together like they were. He squeezes his eyes shut and wills himself to be still. He wills his face to become a mask.

While he fights himself in darkness, Steve crosses the room. He shuffles around Bucky’s bed, gathering his blankets. Bucky opens his eyes to watch Steve cover him up. Steve is pale again, and the skin on his forehead is damp with sweat. He makes it back to his chair in time to drop heavily into it, and his head dips low between his knees.

“Are you okay?”

Steve’s hands threat together at the back of his neck. He nods, barely, and takes a very deep breath.

“Do you want me to call him when I get back to base?” Steve asks, not moving.

“Steve, that’s….” Bucky shakes his head. “That’s not fair.”

“I just wanna make sure it gets done. You have enough to worry about.”

Of course. Bucky wouldn’t trust himself to do it, either.

“My phone’s in my locker,” Bucky tells him. “Sam has a key.”

“Okay.”

“Will you update Sam and Natasha for me?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”
“Yeah.”

“Your eye’s gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.”

The silence is back again, save for the crisp sound of new uniform and the creaking of plastic upholstery as Steve rights his posture. Steve’s face has color in it once again, but he still looks very far from well. His dirty blond eyebrows gather together in a serious groove.

“In the helicopter, why wouldn’t you let me to say it?”

Bucky pulls his blankets closer and turns his head away. He can’t give Steve one more second of vulnerability, and he can’t — he won’t — send his mind wandering down that road. Not for one fucking second. After long, pathetic years spent hoping that Steve would one day love him again, the cost of even glancing down it would be impossible to bear.

“I just told you why,” Bucky says quietly.

Bucky’s hand drifts down to the side of his right thigh and lands on the button that controls his morphine pump. He takes it in his fist and presses it with his thumb.

“Please leave.”

There’s a heavy beat of silence before Steve stands. Across the room, Bucky can see part of Steve’s face in the mirror above the sink. The pain in it has softened, becoming something close to… Christ.

“I mean it,” Steve tells him. “You won’t let me say it, but I mean it.”

Bucky presses the button again. Then again.

“My plane leaves for Kuwait this afternoon.”

“Okay.”

Steve stands over him for a few more moments, looking stricken and wan, then makes his way to the door.

“I’ll see you back home,” Steve says with finality, then leaves.

“Okay,” Bucky whispers.

In Steve’s wake, Bucky’s body fills with heavy heat. It’s supposed to feel really good — it usually does, for the first few minutes. But all it does now is dull the edges of his consciousness. Blur his sorrow a bit. It’s not nearly enough, though. Not enough to swallow him up. Not enough to make him forget. So he waits until the nurse comes to lecture him, and he begs her for something more, just this once.

He must look pretty wretched, because she shoves a fentanyl lollipop in his mouth to shut him up while she tends to him. He drifts off somewhere around “you’re very lucky, Sergeant Barnes,” and for a few beautiful moments, he pretends that it’s actually true.

———

October 12, 2008
When Steve’s helicopter lands at Forward Operating Base Renegade, he knows it’s for the last time. Certainly there’s a strong chance he’ll be sent back to Iraq in a year or two, but it’s unlikely he’ll be back at Renegade. The realization falls upon him like an anvil, crushing him with unspeakable relief.

This war has been nothing that he thought it would be, bearing only a passing similarity to the wars he learned about at West Point and The Pentagon. He imagined there would be a discrepancy between the strategic vision and the reality on the ground, but he never imagined that policy’s departure from reality would verge on delusional. Nothing he learned prepared him for this. Nothing he learned warned him of the decisions he and his NCOs would have to make, the real decisions, the ones tantamount to choosing between a bullet to the brain or a knife to the heart. Steve thinks back to his naiveté, his shining innocence, and feels disgust.

Steve almost didn’t make it onto the plane to Kuwait. After walking away from Bucky bedside, he stepped outside his room and froze — froze, truly, like his body didn’t remember how to walk. Like all of his muscle memory had been wiped. He stood there in the hall, his stomach curled up inside his throat, paralyzed by the frantic thought that maybe he’ll never see Bucky again. Maybe he could die in one of the many surgeries he still has to endure. Maybe he could throw a clot from his leg and stroke out. Maybe a piece of shrapnel could dislodge and sever some deep artery, and they wouldn’t catch it in time because Army doctors are slow and disinterested. And so why wouldn’t he just fucking say it, because what if? What if…?

He did move, eventually. Poor Specialist Rosenblatt roused him with a gentle hand on his arm. Asked him if he was okay. Steve thinks he might have shaken his head when he meant to nod, because Rosenblatt coaxed him down the hallway to a small lounge, where he plopped Steve down at a tiny table with a cup of coffee and told him about Brooklyn. He told him about how Prospect Park looks in the spring. How cool it feels underneath Endale Arch on a hot day. He talked about his sister’s wedding at the boathouse, how the lake was covered in a thick layer of reeking water fern. Steve never told Rosenblatt that he was from Brooklyn, and given how diligently he hides his accent, there’s no way he could have known. But, somehow, he knew. He knew exactly what to say.

Steve signs in at the company and is waylaid by the entire command team, Fury included. All they know is that Bucky is currently not fit for duty, and they’re starving for details. Steve’s hackles rise in the midst of their questioning, and he thinks to ask why the hell they think they deserve to know any of it. But he keeps a cool exterior, one that’s probably closer to cold, and plays the hand Bucky told him to play. Sergeant Barnes is doing well. He’s in good spirits. He’s hopeful about the future. He maybe takes it too far with that last one, because they all seem a bit surprised by it. But then Morita says “That’s Sergeant Barnes” and, suddenly, Steve’s entire narrative seems to satisfy them.

Steve pops four ibuprofen on his way out the door. He’s had a constant headache ever since the explosion, one that waxes and wanes but never stops. He’s been quietly frightened by it, by everything that’s different now. The static. The way he drifts in and out of conversations. The things he can’t remember anymore. He hasn’t fully tested it, but he knows something is terribly, terribly wrong.

“Sir, wait!”

Steve stops and turns at the sound of Sousa’s voice. Sousa bounds after him, down the stairs, shielding his eyes from the sun with one hand and waving a piece of paper in the other.

“I almost forgot to tell you. Your, um…” Sousa looks down at the paper in his hand, expression pensive. “Captain Carter called while you were in Germany. Many times. She wants you to call her ASAP.”

Steve’s brain slowly computes Sousa’s words, which clash so discordantly with Steve’s last
encounter with Sharon that he can’t formulate a response.

“I guess she’s listed as your emergency contact, and she just got a message saying you were medevaced. No details, of course. So she tracked down the company HQ number, somehow. My number, actually.”

“What was she like?”

Sousa blinks at the question and answers carefully. “She was definitely concerned. Angry at the runaround.”

“Did you tell her anything?”

“I just told her what I heard. About your face. The coughing up blood. The thing when you got back here.”

Steve’s jaw tightens. “I wasn’t coughing up blood. There was blood running down the back of my throat from my face. That’s completely different.”

Sousa looks down at his boots, and Steve tries to remember that he literally is just the messenger.

“Sorry, Sir. I was just telling her what I heard. I probably shouldn’t have said anything, but she’s been calling every day.”

Of course, her messages were never relayed to Landstuhl, where he languished for days upon days, helplessly fretting over Bucky whenever he wasn’t attending one of a dozen appointments for ocular tests, ENT checkups, neurology consults, and surgery follow-ups. But none of this is the fault of Dan Sousa, a hapless butter bar who spends most of his days accounting for gear, making and receiving phone calls, and drafting memos for the commander.

“Thanks, Dan. Sorry for snapping. And I’m sorry you got stuck in that position. I’ll give her a call today,” Steve says, pulling off a damn fine impersonation of nonchalance.

“Okay, good.” Sousa draws his lips inward, as if they could capture the words he already said. “That’s not what I meant—”

“I know what you meant.” Steve offers him a thin smile. “I’ll see you later.”

Morita told Steve he could find his men at the base chapel, pinch hitting for another battalion to spare them having to clean up after a memorial service for one of their guys. Steve enters the chapel silently, where he leans against the back wall, arms crossed, and watches his men work. They’re quiet, but not as quiet as he feared they might be. There are still little jabs and dirty jokes being tossed around, par for the course in any infantry unit. Steve wonders if he should find something untoward about their joking like this after a memorial service, but with everything they’ve seen, all the violence and death, maybe this is how they push forward. This is how they process and stay the course — the course that leads them back home.

Luis is the first one to glimpse him, and he nearly drops the garbage bag he’s holding out for Jones at the refreshment table. Luis calls out to him, loudly enough for his voice to resonate off every surface.

Steve’s chest clenches at the exuberance, at the fondness and relief on Luis’s face. Luis’s call is followed by others — Dugan’s, Private Wilson’s, Maximoff’s. It’s overwhelming, almost alarmingly so. But then, it doesn’t take much to overwhelm Steve these days.

The men gather around him as he walks toward them. They don’t ask about Bucky, maybe on purpose. Instead, they ask about Steve. Is he okay? How was Germany? Did he eat good food?
Drink any beer? Is he staying through the end of their deployment?

Steve marshals them to arrange a platoon’s worth of chairs in a circle. They sit and look at him expectantly, hopeful and anxious. He gives them a briefing on his own condition, keeping everything appropriately vague. He then tells them about Bucky, and unlike with the command team, it’s painfully difficult to lie to them. But he does lie. Mostly. He tells them that Bucky’s hurt badly, that he’s going to have a long recovery ahead of him. But he remembers the importance of closure and consistency, how the Bucky recuperating in agony at Landstuhl needs to be the same Bucky the men know and love. And the Bucky they know is not a despairing, bitter pessimist. Frankly, that’s not the Bucky Steve knows, either.

The men take the news with grace and maturity. And when Steve tells them that the platoon will be base-bound until they go home, they don’t ask why. They don’t press him to tell them that it’s because his brain is so scrambled and that he’s not even cleared for physical training, let alone missions. They seem content with the idea that maybe they’ve done enough on this deployment. Afterward, Maximoff hugs him. Dugan and Rhodes clap him on the back and make plans to meet after breakfast tomorrow.

After some cursory milling about, trading nods and pleasantries, Steve takes his leave. On his way out, Parker follows him and asks how Bucky really is. Steve marvels at how adeptly Parker shifts in and out of seriousness, able to yuck it up with the men in one moment and then stare at Steve like he is now, grim and painfully grown up. Steve thinks back to Bucky. He slips clean out of the moment, until he’s standing back at Bucky’s hospital bed. He thinks back to Bucky’s eyes, scared and furious and desperate. He thinks back to Bucky’s body, fragile and already wasting away. He thinks back further, to the dizziness and the blood and the sounds of Bucky screaming, and his vision goes splotchy while his stomach threatens to eject its contents at Parker’s feet.

Parker nods and says okay, it’s okay, I understand, and other well-meaning shit. Steve works to stay composed and walks away when he can’t.

He walks and, at some point, the walking turns into wandering. He weaves a drunkard’s path around the base, one that miraculously gets him the senior enlisted housing by sundown. When Steve gets to the trailer that Bucky and Sergeant Wilson share — or, he should now say, shared — he pauses. He tries to use his breath to untwist his insides, a very fine idea that has little effect on actual reality. He’s not sure how long he stands out there, but the moment he hears Wilson’s voice inside, his fist slams twice on the door. It’s so reflexive, so urgent, that it startles him.

Wilson invites Steve in quickly and warmly, offering him the chair at his own desk. Wilson joins Romanoff on the edge of his bed, all of them very obviously clumping on one side of the room. Bucky’s furniture and personal effects lay across a great expanse, untouched, like museum pieces. A choking, sinking feeling claims Steve, and he has to check with his fractured memory twice to make sure Bucky didn’t actually die. He doesn’t remember him dying. He remembers him alive. Screaming. Yelling. Swearing. Fighting. Dead men don’t do those things, and Steve lets himself feel calmed by that.

Glancing slowly between the two NCOs in front of him, Steve is struck by how unguarded they look. Of course, they want something from him, but it’s more than that. Bucky’s absence is palpable, and it feels like someone’s torn the scaffolding out of every dynamic that existed before he was blown up. All the tidy boundaries and pedestals suddenly mean nothing, and the nothingness left behind is good and real.

Wilson’s hands clasp tightly over his knees. “How is he?”

Romanoff holds her hand out to Wilson. “No, first, how are you?”
“I’m fine,” Steve tells them.

“Really?” Wilson asks. “Because you did not look fine a couple weeks ago.”

Steve tries to smile, unsure if he’s doing it right. “It looked more dramatic than it actually was.”

Wilson gives him a look of distant incredulity, so similar to the one Bucky wields that he must have picked it up from him. “Even the part after the helicopter?”

“Where’d you hear that?”

Wilson jerks his head toward Romanoff. She floats Steve an apologetic look.

“It’s fine now,” Steve tells him. He’s so eager to dash away this part of the conversation that he dives straight into a place he wants to be even less. “Bucky’s in rough shape.”

Steve realizes his error only when he sees their responses, the slow dawning of confusion, and then amusement. Their expressions are an uncanny mirror of each other.

“We’re talking about Jamie, right?” Romanoff clarifies.

Steve rubs his brow with a long sigh. “Yeah.”

“Okay, first the update, then you have to circle back to that, whatever that was,” Wilson says, grinning. “Bucky, huh?”

“His injuries are extensive. I still don’t know most of the details.” Steve certainly recalls the list of the basics, yelled at him scornfully, the physical evidence of them burned into the backs of his eyes. “We didn’t talk a lot. He had so many surgeries that he was always in prep or recovery. And the nurses didn’t like me creeping around.”

“But you did anyway,” Wilson says.

Steve nods.

“How’s he doing?” Romanoff asks.

“Not good. He’s really upset. Really angry.”

“At who?”

“I don’t know. He’s worried about how he’s going to look when he’s…” Steve strains for the right word to use and settles on “better.”

“That’s not surprising,” Wilson says. “He’s always been very conscientious.” He also seems to do a little straining for the right adjective.

“You mean vain,” Romanoff corrects.

Wilson shrugs one shoulder. “No matter how messed up he was, at least he looked good.”

“Does he have a drinking problem?” Steve asks.

Both Wilson and Romanoff seem to deliberate internally on the question. Romanoff’s fingers thread and unthread. Wilson’s mouth twists to the side. Wilson voices his conclusion first, though his tone is only marginally conclusive.
“Nah. Not really.”


There’s a wordless exchange between the two of them, in which Romanoff is questioned with the disbelieving rise of Wilson’s eyebrows. Romanoff holds her ground.

“It’s true,” she says to Wilson. "You don’t want to see it, but it’s there.” She looks to Steve. “I see it.”

Steve nods. “He’s going to need a lot of support from us. I think he’s going to struggle when he gets back, functionally and emotionally.

“I’m up for PCS in a few months,” Wilson says.

Romanoff frowns. “That’s gonna be really hard on him.”

“I know.” Wilson shakes his head at the obvious futility of fighting the monstrous Army human resources apparatus. “Number’s up, though.”

“I’ll be around for another year or so. He’ll be discharged by then, I imagine. And you’ll be around, right?” Romanoff asks Steve.

“Yeah, I think so. I just got here.”

In truth, given the unusual — and, he’s learned, heavily orchestrated — circumstances of his assignment with the 107th, Steve’s really not certain what the Army will do with him when they return Stateside. He trusts that they’ll err on the side of inaction and situate him at Bragg until they send him downrange again.

“Okay.” Sam pauses, heralding the change in topic. “So, what’s a bucky and what’s the story?”

“Bucky is a nickname, and the story is that when we met on the first day of sixth grade, that’s what he said his name was.”

“He said his name was Bucky?” For the first time since Steve has known her, Romanoff smiles in full, broadly and carelessly.

“He said, ‘that’s what all the kids called me back in Kentucky.’” Steve finds Romanoff’s smile contagious, even though he still can’t completely shake the feeling that they’re talking about someone they’ll never see again. “Took him until age 20 to come clean and say that he made it up. But that’s what I learned to call him, and I never stopped.”

“He does not look like a Bucky,” Wilson says.

Steve supposes that he might be right, even though Steve’s never seen him as a James or a Jamie. Not once. Of course, he never thought to ask if Bucky even wants to be called that anymore.

“Well, that’s good, because he’ll murder me if you repeat it. So please don’t.”

“Roger that, Sir.”

“Steve,” he says. “Call me Steve.”

“Sam.”
“Natasha.”

They all bask in this rare moment where the Army doesn’t exist, where their uniforms are just ugly, checkered cloth and their trailer is just a room. The moment stretches until it pops delicately, like a bubble.

“I need to get in his wall locker,” Steve finally says.

“I’ve got a key.”

Sam stands, crosses the threshold to Bucky’s side of the room, pulls out his dog tags, and uses the key strung along with them to open Bucky’s locker. It reminds Steve of a friendship necklace, two jagged halves forming a heart, and he wonders if Bucky had Sam’s key in the same place — wherever those dog tags are now. He can’t remember. He had them in his hands that night—

“I should probably pack his things,” Steve says, rising. “Send them to his mom.”

Natasha stands with him. “We’ll help.”

“I need his phone first. I have to call his boyfriend.” Even now, after all these weeks, the word feels wrong in Steve’s mouth.

Sam turns around and looks at Steve, his expression drawn and serious. “You don’t have to do that. I can do it.”

Steve waves him off. “I told him I would. Then I’ll call his mom and get her address.”

Sam searches Steve’s face, like he’s trying to suss out some ulterior motive or satisfying explanation for why Steve would volunteer for something like that. Steve had almost forgotten the baggage that preceded him, all the half-decade-old dirt that Bucky flung around for Sam to see and take on and build a fort of loathing out of. Still, Sam doesn’t seem to find whatever he’s looking for, maybe because Steve’s so bare and pitiable right now. He hands Steve Bucky’s phone, which Steve powers up. He holds it in his hands and thinks about Bucky’s hands holding it.

“What either of you know the code?” Steve asks when the home screen lights up.

“7480,” Natasha says briskly. The corner of her mouth curls up. “Mean anything?”

Steve shakes his head, his first lie of the hour.

“All right, Yankee Doodle,” she says, calling him out on it quickly. “Let us know how it goes.”

There’s playful kindness in her eyes that only thinly veils the concern there, and Steve can see why Bucky likes her so much.

“Will do.”

———

While Natasha and Sam begin packing Bucky’s things, Steve makes the too-short walk to the phone center. He’s rehearsed his lines more times than he can count and still can’t get them even close to right.

So far, he’s got:

Hello, this is Lieutenant Steve Rogers…
No.

This is Lieutenant Rogers, platoon leader of second platoon, Alpha company, 107th infantry battalion, and I’m calling on behalf of one of my men, Sergeant First Class James Barnes, who requested that I contact you [Mr. Thor Odinson, Norwegian Multimillionaire Sex God Personal Trainer] to inform you that Sergeant Barnes was involved in a…

No.

That he sustained injuries from an IED…

No.

That he was wounded on a mission and has been evacuated to Landstuhl…

No.

Evacuated to Europe for further evaluation and treatment, and he requests that you [Mr. Blond Hugedick who is Very Nice and Sweet] please not attempt to contact him during his recovery…

Or, rather, he requests that you please wait for him to contact you when he’s ready.

Needless to say, Steve is nervous.

Miraculously, Steve not only reaches Odinson but also slips into some preternatural flow state that allows him to deliver a near-flawless report on Bucky’s status. As all of Bucky’s blushing hype would suggest, Odinson takes the news admirably. Among his many qualities and talents, Steve had forgotten that he’s also a former military officer, enabling him to pull off such an artful combination of earnest concern and coolheaded understanding that it makes Steve want to gag.

And Odinson thanks him. Thanks him for his concern and for taking such good care of his men. Steve fights a crazed impulse to spill everything, to say who he is, to say that he knows Bucky, that his name is Bucky and not Jamie or James or Jim or whatever Odinson knows him as.

But Steve thinks that if he told him that, maybe he’d have to tell him everything else. Maybe he would also have to say that he dumped Bucky while he was on his very first deployment in Afghanistan. Then he would say that there’s technically nothing between them except a tacit agreement that they’re friends again. Then he’d say that he’s the one who broke Bucky’s heart and, if Bucky can be believed, sent him spiraling off on a six-year-long war orgy that’s left him emotionally deadened and in a near perpetual state of moral crisis. Might as well add that he assigned Bucky to lead fire team three, which got him blown apart physically and probably psychologically and likely disabled him for the rest of his life.

Steve hangs up the phone before he says anything stupid, and he reflects for a few hot, shameful minutes on how he finally got everything he wished and prayed for all those year ago.

When Bucky first went to Afghanistan in 2002, Steve stared at the ceiling and imagined war for hours on end. He nearly lost his job at Strand for not being able to concentrate enough to even properly shelve books. He resented Bucky daily for choosing to perpetrate violence overseas rather than stay with him. And in those hours and minutes and moments, Steve wanted Bucky to get hurt. Just a bit. Nothing too serious. Enough to bring him home alive. Maybe enough to get him out of the Army. Bucky never wanted to be a grunt, anyway. Not really. He chose the infantry his senior year of high school for the credibility it would afford him later, but he never intended to stay. He was pre-medical in college. He was brilliant. He could have been anything. Absolutely anything.
In those days, “what if” came to rule Steve’s life. What if Bucky went to war and never came back? What if he died? Maybe worse, what if he didn’t come back because he adapted? What if Bucky ran so far away that he tumbled off the edge of a cliff he could never un-tumble from, where men drop into the hands of war and somehow become it, take it into their bodies and into their souls? While Steve stared at the ceiling and tried to work and tried not to tear all of his cuticles out, he sometimes wondered if Bucky was already gone, and the thought filled him with such terror that he began to pray. Steve prayed that Bucky would get hurt. Just a bit. Nothing too serious. Morning and night, over and over. Just a bit. Nothing too serious.

And now Bucky really is hurt, and it’s not just a bit. And it is very serious. And he’s never, ever going to war again. And Steve is sick off the fruit of his terrible wishes and disgusting prayers. What kind of man wishes something like that on someone he loves?

Steve is so disquieted by his thoughts that he almost forgets to call Sharon. For the first few weeks after their breakup, he almost always forgot that he was supposed to not call her. His righting reflex was all wrong, upside down and inside out. And now it’s both of those things again, and Steve’s not even sure anymore which way is up. They say when you’re disoriented underwater and you can’t tell where the surface is, you’re supposed to follow your bubbles. But there aren’t any bubbles to follow here, and Steve can’t seem to make any with all the air punched out of his lungs.

His fingers find their way, though, shaking a little as he dials. A trilling sensation vacillates in his chest, darting hummingbird-fast between hope and dread with every ring. Sharon’s voice hits the line like a canon.

“Steve?”

He wonders if she’s been answering every 703 area code number like that for the last week.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, thank God. Thank God.”

Steve drifts back to the sight of those words on Bucky’s dry lips. He should have offered Bucky water. He should have called out for it. Taken it from someone else, anyone else. He should have tried to—

“Steve?”

“I’m okay,” he says.

“I’ve been trying to get ahold of you for so long.”

“I know. I heard.”

“After the first message, they wouldn’t tell me anything because I’m not family. Your XO was the only person who’d give me any information, and he didn’t seem to know what was going on, either…” Sharon lets out a long breath, steady and deliberate. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Steve’s not sure if he’s going to be able to sell that storyline, but he’ll damn well try.

“Your XO said you nearly died.”

“Yeah. I guess I did.”

A mere three minutes after setting foot on Baghdad soil, Steve got dizzy, vomited, and passed out in
a succession so quick and violent that he doesn’t even remember it. His heart rate apparently dropped so low that they had to pump him full of atropine and pace it externally. The official diagnosis was orbital floor fracture with entrapment of the inferior rectus. He recalls snippets of men’s voices going on about the oculosomething reflex and somethingcardia and how it explains the nausea and vomiting. All the medics missed it, maybe because it’s something that usually happens to children. Steve hopes Bowen didn’t get in trouble for it.

“I was so worried about you.”

Steve closes his eyes against a swift flood of regret. He’s tried so hard not to think of Sharon these past few weeks, how badly he hurt her, how deeply he betrayed her. But her concern is so raw, so utterly sincere, that it burns right through him. Right through his poise and pretense.

“Bucky got blown up really bad,” he says, hating himself for telling her but unable to stop it. “I’m sorry. I know you don’t want to hear about him.”

“Is he going to live?”

“Yeah. But I don’t know how well.”

There’s a long pause on the line. If not for the distant sound of horns and ambient interstate noise, Steve would wonder if she was still there.

“Steve,” she begins, slowly, “do you know why I left you?”

“I think I have a pretty good idea.”

“I don’t do cheating. It's a hard and fast rule for me.”

“I know.”

He knew. He knew, and he did it anyway. Surely there’s a special place in Hell for men who know and do it anyway.

“Despite that rule, there’s a small chance I might have considered trying to work things out with you. I really did think you were the one, Steve. I wanted to be with you more than I ever wanted to be with anyone.”

Steve can hear the pain in her voice, still as fresh as it was the day he told her. He can hear the self-blame there, the sour, lingering awe over how she let herself be betrayed by someone she trusted so fiercely.

“But,” she continues, “I only would have considered that if the person had been someone else. Because I don’t think you’re being honest with me, or yourself, when you say you don’t love the person you cheated on me with.”

She’s very careful to avoid any indication of maleness in her words, properly paranoid about who may be listening somewhere between Iraq and DC.

“Sharon, I—”

“Please, just wait.” Steve can hear the thin, weary smile in her words. “I’m not going to compete in a race I’ve already lost. And I’m not going to be your second choice for the rest of my life.”

“You were never…” He shakes his head soberly, even though she can’t see it. “That’s never how I
thought about you.”

“What I’m saying is, you hurt me, but I almost think it was inevitable. Whether it was a physical or an emotional affair, it was going to happen sooner or later, as long as that person was in your life.”

There’s a reaction in Steve, like the brutal kick of a horse, that moves to deny it. It’s a stubborn, ignorant refusal to accept that he’s the kind of man who rolls over and lets history blindly define his future. But given what the past few weeks have borne out, it seems once more that he’s not the kind of man he thought he was.

“Maybe,” Steve admits.

“I still care about you, Steve. And I’m still angry and hurt. And I know this is probably confusing, and it’s not how breakups are supposed to go, but I want you to know that I’m still here for you, in some kind of way.” Sharon pauses and utters a small sound of frustration. “I’m sorry, I just… I don’t know what the boundaries are now. We’re not engaged anymore, so I can’t be that for you. But I know I can’t just pretend that I don’t care what happens to you. Not after everything.”

Jesus. There’s never been an act in Steve’s life so selfless or valorous that it could possibly balance out the suffering he’s caused her. And yet, here she is, giving him kindness, creating a new way of being with him that has no template. She’s created it from her heart, from the strength of her own internal compass, and he wonders how he could have ever — for one moment — failed to see how rare and important she is.

Steve covers his eyes with his hand in a poor attempt to hide his pain from the other men in the room. “Thank you,” he whispers.

“Is he coming Stateside?”

“Yeah. Walter Reed, probably.”

“Let me know if there’s something I can do, like if his parents need a point of contact for lodging in Bethesda. Master Sergeant Nguyen might know—”

“Don’t tell Nguyen,” Steve says. “Bucky doesn’t want people to know how bad off he is.”

“Okay. What’s going to happen with you?”

He gives her the bullet point version, the only version he can give without slipping into the quiet panic that has been his closest companion since the attack. Desk duty, he tells her. More testing. More appointments. God knows what, after that.

“Are you still thinking of flying up here for Thanksgiving?” she asks.

“I have so much shrapnel in my body right now, I don’t even want to think about flying commercial.”

“God, Steve, I hate it when you lie about being okay.” Her voice is low and heated, a tone she seems to realize is too intimate for what they are now. She corrects it. “But you don’t really owe me honesty anymore, I guess.”

Steve drops his hand from his face, letting it fall heavily on the table. “Fine. I’m not okay. You happy?”

“No.”
“But I will be okay,” he tries to assure her. “I just need some time. And I just wanna go home.”

“Okay. All right. Maybe I’ll drive down and see you for Thanksgiving. Bring your things.”

“I probably won’t have a place by then.”

“Christmas?”

“Okay.”

“Do you have people you can be with for the holiday?”

Steve’s eyes dart back and forth. Right now, he can’t see any Thanksgiving scenario where he’s not alone in a hotel room. “I might, yeah.”

“Okay. Good.”

“I have to go.”

“Please keep in touch,” Sharon says. “Let me know how everything goes.”

“Okay.”

Steve hangs up. He can feel the soldiers in line behind him shifting, rising up on their toes, straining to look into his cubicle to see what the hold up is. Too bad, he thinks, because he’s got one more call, the one to Winnie Buchanan.

He and Winnie share a secret darkness, one she confessed to him as she comforted him after his mother’s funeral. She whispered her prayer to him, her prayer about Bucky, and told him that any good mother would pray for the same. Just a bit. Nothing too serious. He wonders if she feels as terrible as he does for even thinking it, let alone wishing it on the tail end of every breath.

But it’s too late to take it back, and it’s too futile to regret it. They all have to be strong now, as strong as Bucky has been. They have to meet his raging despair with courage. They all have to hold the hope that he can’t.

So that’s exactly what Steve is going to do. And history, which will beg to repeat itself once more, will just have to be disappointed.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Homophobic language, internalized homophobia, medical stuff, potentially upsetting discussion of the aftermath of mutilation, a lot of emotional despair

Joe: A colloquial term for an infantryman

Operator: a member of special operations

Bragg: Fort Bragg, the base in North Carolina where this crazy adventure started

Walter Reed: A major Army hospital located in Bethesda, Maryland (which I forgot to mention last time), the one with the scandal for being gross and infested
Womack: Womack Army Medical Center, the hospital at Fort Bragg

Butter bar: A second lieutenant, the most junior commissioned officer rank

Leaning against walls: a big no-no for a soldier. Same goes for putting one’s hands in one’s pocket.

Trailer: I realize that although I say trailer in this story, the housing on this imaginary base in Iraq is really more like a very large shipping container (often referred to as a “CHU” for containerized housing unit or a “Conex”)

PCS: A permanent change of station - when a service member moves from one base to another.

Yankee Doodle: A folk song from the American Revolutionary War. Yankee Doodle is a person (Uncle Sam’s nephew, apparently) who was born on the Fourth of July. Here’s a great short video on the history of the song, which started off as a tune written by the British to describe how dumb the American colonists were

Strand: A large bookstore in Manhattan

XO: Executive officer

Oculocardiac reflex: When the orbital floor is broken, sometimes it can trap a piece of muscle in it, which can activate something called an oculocardiac reflex. This reflex can make a person feel very nauseated and can cause the heart to slow dangerously.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The 107th returns to America.

Chapter Notes

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

November 5, 2008

“God, this place. I can’t believe they have you here, of all the places.”

It’s the third time Winnie’s said it in the four hours she and Rikki have been here. She says it with disgust, with a sharpness that bleeds into her movements as she circles Bucky’s bed and pulls his sheets tight over his body. Bucky strains to not tell her to cut it out while she undoes all the work he did to arrange everything just-so. In his month he’s spent lying flat on his back, he’s learned the exact way to arrange his bedding to maximize his comfort. He knows the places that get too cold, the places that get too warm, the places where even the weight of a blanket feels too heavy. But Winnie undoes it all, tugging and tucking the covers like an angry habit.

“It’s fine, Ma. Haven’t seen a single cockroach. Everyone’s on their best behavior now.”

“Even the rats,” Rikki says from her chair in the nearby corner, where she’s been busy clacking away on her laptop ever since the novelty of this morning’s reunion wore off.

“Still,” Winnie says, smoothing over Bucky’s waffle quilt with her weathered hand. “I don’t want you here. I wish I could take you home.”

“It’s fine,” Bucky tells her. “Just sit down. Please.”

Winnie lays her hands on her hips and scans his bedside table. She’s already arranged the pink water pitcher and plastic cups and magazines and everything else in a configuration that suits her. No, not quite, because she now finds some intolerable flaw in the angle of his straw and inches it to the right. It’s directly in his line of reach now, where he’s almost sure to hit it with his clumsy left hand when he comes in to grab it.

Rikki sets her laptop on the floor and walks over to Bucky’s bedside. She holds out her phone to him. “Here. Daisy sent you a picture of Oscar.”

One side of Bucky’s mouth pulls upward, and he reaches out to touch the screen. He presses it with his replanted finger, feeling nothing, settling uneasily in the notion that Oscar’s orange fur would feel like nothing, too.

“Maybe you can print it out and tape it to the ceiling,” Bucky says, pulling his hand away.
“Winnie sighs heavily. “They should be moving you around more.”

“I can barely walk right now. And please sit down.”

“Are you using those?” Winnie points to the pair of crutches leaning against the wall.

“Yeah, I can use those.”

In theory. He hasn’t yet. He’s been nervous about bearing any weight on his left forearm, because it hurts like a motherfucker just looking at it.

Winnie takes her seat next to Bucky’s bed, perching on its edge, her body loaded like a spring.

“They should have physical therapy in here working on your fingers and hands.”

“I just got here last night. I don’t—”

His protests are interrupted by a sharp knock at the door jamb. A doctor comes in without being invited, a young civilian wearing blue scrubs and a white lab coat. He introduces himself as Dr. Patel in a thick South Asian accent.

“How much longer until he goes to Fort Bragg?” Winnie asks on the heels of the doc’s introduction.

“Ma,” Bucky says.

“We’re working on getting him transferred from the 107th to the Warrior Transition Battalion down there. He still needs three more surgeries here before we can release him.”

“What surgeries?”

Bucky sits up, lifting his back off the bed. “Ma.”

Dr. Patel looks at Bucky. “Do you wish for me to share that information?”

God, how Bucky wishes he had the courage to be honest and tell him ‘no.’ He doesn’t want his mother to have any more inroads into him. He doesn’t want anyone, not even the woman who gave birth to him, to know what lies beneath. What lies upon the surface is quite bad enough.

Bucky lets himself fall heavily back against his mattress. “It’s fine.”

Dr. Patel thumbs through Bucky’s chart, his movements unhurried amid Winnie’s silent pressure.

“One more surgery for his right knee. One for final adjustment of the orthopedic hardware in his right foot. And one more for…” He pauses. “…Further repair of shrapnel injury.”

Bucky hopes that his gratitude is evident on his face when Dr. Patel makes eye contact with him. It’s a funny way of saying that he’s getting his missing right nut replaced with a prosthetic, but he’ll take it.

“Then the transfer?” Winnie confirms.

“After recovery, yes. I’d imagine he’ll be there around the first or second week of December.”

“Did you start my med board?” Bucky asks.

One of Dr. Patel’s eyebrows rises. “You’d like a med board?”

Bucky flexes and un-flexes his hands, his movements stiff and painful. “I told literally every single
person at Landstuhl that I want a med board. How can it not be in my chart? I mean, I can’t even feel my trigger finger.” Bucky holds it up and demonstrates how he can barely move the thing.

“Well, they’ll assess your condition again at Bragg. It takes time for a replanted digit to heal. Your arm and knee are more likely to be the disqualifying injuries.”

“I don’t really care which one gets me out. Whichever gets me out fastest.”

“I’ll note it in your chart and pass the word along to the WTB.” Dr. Patel smiles in a way that makes Bucky think he might actually follow through. “Given the extent of your injuries, they may make a case for an expedited board.”

“I know.” Bucky lets out a huff of frustration. “I just don’t know how many times I have to ask.”

“Sergeant Barnes, the Army is not exactly in a hurry to let soldiers go these days. You must understand that.”

“C’mon, Doc. Really. Look at me. You ever seen anyone with all this stay in?”

“No.”

“All right, then. So what’s the hold up?”

“A med board is going to be your unit’s decision, not ours. But we can start putting together the documentation, if you’d like.”

“Yes. Please.” Bucky tacks on a “thank you” as Dr. Patel steps into the hallway, which is received with a good-natured nod.

Winnie stands up again, eyeing the doorway Dr. Patel exited through. “I don’t like him. You think they’d have better doctors at the Army’s flagship hospital.”

“Sinking flagship hospital,” Rikki mumbles from the corner.

Bucky grits his teeth while frustration seeps out of the fragile container he’s been trying to keep it in. “Just give it a rest, will ya? Jesus. He’s actually a good one, believe it or not.”

“I won’t apologize for wanting you to be taken care of.”

“They’re doing the best they can.”

Winnie bends down to her purse and pulls a small bottle of lotion from it. She dabs some of the thick cream in her hands and rubs it in methodically. Her eyes un-focus as her hands move, mouth pursing sharply, like she’s stuck on the unsolvable problem of her broken son. She then approaches Bucky’s right side, takes his hand in hers, and squeezes a small glob of lotion onto the center of it. Despite the crepiness of her skin and the faint, early spots of aging, they’re the same hands that massaged eczema cream into his fingertips and palms when he was young, back when his world was already more cruel than he could stand. Her motions are deliberate, firm, bearing down into muscles he didn’t realize were so tight. She passes over the seam of his index finger cautiously, smoothing into territory where her touch becomes dull. His hands are fine, only the smallest bit dry, but she seems to need this for herself.

“When’s the 107th returning to Bragg?” Her tone is shaved of its critical edge, rounded and soft. It’s the voice she once used to tuck him in at night.
“End of this month,” Bucky says.

“Steve will be there?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s he doing?”

Bucky shrugs. “Don’t know.”

“You haven’t talked to him?”

“Can’t exactly call him, can I?”

“What about Thor?”

The one subject Bucky wants to talk about about less than his mangled dick and balls is Thor Odinson.

“Steve called him for me.”

“Do you think he’ll come see you?” Her eyebrows rise expectantly — and why wouldn’t they, after every shining thing Bucky’s ever told her about him?

Bucky takes a deep breath against a swift advance of irritation “No. I don’t want to see him. I told Steve to tell him that.”

“You should let him see you.”

“Don’t.” Bucky slaps her hand away, regretting it instantaneously but too sodden with anger to apologize. “Just don’t. I don’t need your fucking guilt trip, too. I’m a fucking adult, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Winnie blinks, eyes wide, and gathers her hand to her chest. She folds her other hand over it and pulls it in tightly. Maybe he yelled it, he must have, because Rikki’s mouth is gaping.

“Don’t talk to me like that.” Winnie’s voice is thin. Breathless. “You don’t get to talk to me like that.”

Bucky drops his gaze from her wounded face. He feels the heat in his own, and he traces over the waffled rise of his blanket with the tip of his nerve-dead finger.

“Sorry. Just need my meds,” he tells her, because it seems like a reasonable excuse to give.

Winnie lifts her chin, composing herself, re-gathering her toughness around her like armor. “You’ve got to stay ahead of the pain.”

“I know.”

“I’m gonna grab some coffee,” Winnie tells him, reaching down for her purse. She turns to where Rikki is sitting. “Want any, honey?”


Winnie leaves without offering to get Bucky anything. He deserves that, but he doesn’t dwell on it, because he’s just glad she’s gone. She’ll be at least a half hour in that miserable cafe line he hears the
nurses complaining about.

“Cut her a little slack,” Rikki says, eyeing him coolly.

Bucky sighs. “Why’s she being so annoying?”

“C’mon. Think about it.”

It takes him several moments to register what Rikki’s talking about. It’s a memory he’s worked so diligently to block out that he has to dig deep for it. But when he glimpses it, it slams into him with the force it always has, stealing his breath, punching his gut. He remembers sitting in a hallway in a hospital very much like this one, digging his nails into the bare flesh of his legs as he tried not to cry in front of all the soldiers who passed by. He remembers the distant murmurs, the sobbed words of his mother as she clutched the arm of her husband, who was only still warm because machines kept him that way. She begged Bucky to come in to see him, to say goodbye. Even Erik had agreed, because at age nine, even he seemed to know that it was the right thing to do, to spare himself years of unborn regret.

She begged him. Bucky shook his head. She told him he would never forgive himself if he didn’t say goodbye. He didn’t tell her that he had already condemned himself to that, that he was already unforgivable in this life and the next. He stayed and made her cry, and he sat in the hall and choked on his shame, pressing red half-moons into his skin, while his ma and Erik told his dad that they loved him, that they would see him in Heaven. Bucky already knew that this is how it would always be anyway, the three of them in one place and him in another. So why put on a production that suggested anything different?

That same pang of shame finds its way into him again, and he takes it in like an old friend. Bucky never bothered to think of what this must be like for his ma, to see her son ruined and pained, yet another Barnes sacrificed on the bloody alter of Uncle Sam. Another era, another hospital, another man, but the fear must be the same for her.

“I just wish she’d stop being such a control freak,” Bucky says, tempering his annoyance with all the sympathy he can muster.

“She loves you and she’s worried. This is how she shows it,” Rikki says.

“I guess.”

Bucky winces as his arm begins throbbing. It does this often. Takes him by surprise. Asserts itself the moment he forgets how badly he’s hurt. The pain is deep, the pain of mismatched bones trying to knit together below the slab of muscle grafted from his back. Sometimes Bucky plays chicken with the pain, mostly out of boredom, trying to see how bad it’ll get before he caves and uses his meds. He could stay ahead of it. Probably should. But he craves the extremes of pain and numbness, because it’s one of the few things he can control. He doesn’t hit his morphine drip, though. Not yet. He won’t hit it until his teeth begin to clench, and he’s not even halfway there. Instead, he tunes in to the steady sound of clacking keys, imagining what his life might be like if that were his occupation. Sitting. Typing. Frowning at a screen.

“What are you working on?” Bucky asks.

“Just trying to break into a network security program Daisy wrote.”

“No dice?”

Rikki gives a dry smile. “If I were half the software engineer she is, I don’t even know what I would
do with myself.”

“You two are good together,” Bucky says. “Even if Daisy doesn’t like me.”

“She likes you. She sent that picture of Oscar for you, y’know. She talks about you. Worries about you.”

Rikki stops typing, closes her laptop, and lays it on the floor. The threads her long fingers together over her trim stomach, over the cable knit of her lavender sweater.

“You can stay with us, when you finally come home,” she tells him. “We have a spare room.”

Bucky snorts, even as he’s secretly delighted by the idea. “Yeah, right. Better clear that with the tower before you make any offers.”

“Daisy suggested it.”

Rikki opens her mouth to say something else and stops. Her blue eyes drift away from Bucky’s face and trace down the length of his body. There’s nothing judgmental in her expression, no pity or sorrow. And when her gaze meets his again, there’s determination there.

“I hope you still intend to follow through with your promise,” Rikki says.

“Which one?”

“To get help for your drinking.”

Instantly, Bucky bristles, his face going sour. “I’m not drinking, Rikki. Do I look like I’m drinking?”

Rikki stiffens, but she doesn’t relent. “No, but don’t tell me you haven’t been thinking about it.”

Oh, but she’s got him there. The morphine is fine, an adequate substitution, but Bucky wasn’t even two weeks into his hospital stay before he started thinking about drinking. He misses it acutely, especially its singular ability to put him into dreamless sleep. Whatever they’ve got him on is shit for that, offering him a mere three or so hours of uninterrupted peace in any given day. He never thought lying in a hospital bed for a month would be exhausting, but he feels worse than he did even at the end of Ranger School, when they could all barely haul their weary, starved carcasses into the position of attention.

So, yeah, he’s thought about drinking. A lot. And very fondly.

“I’ll do the best I can,” Bucky tells her halfheartedly. “That’s all I can do.”

Rikki nods slowly. “I’ll take you to meetings. I already checked, and there’s one two blocks away from our place.”

“I’ll try. I will.”

He might.

Bucky looks at the clock on the wall and figures he’s got about ten minutes before his ma is back with coffee. He looks down his body, down to the disconcertingly modest rise between his legs, and remembers that it’s up to him to empty his bladder now. It’s a new liberty they’ve granted him that is now starting to seem more like a punishment than a gift.

“I’ve gotta piss,” Bucky says, grimacing at the need to announce it at all.
Rikki straightens her posture. She looks around the room and rises when she catches sight of the bedside urinal on his side table. “Okay. Do you, um, need help?”

Bucky glares at the plastic jug they expect him to use and does a miserable calculation over whether it’s more embarrassing to piss in that unassisted or ask for Rikki’s help to stumble his way over to the bathroom. The indignity is vastly different, almost impossible to compare, and Bucky decides that he could at least parlay a trip to the bathroom into a small mobility exercise.

Bucky jerks his head toward the door to the private bathroom the Army so generously afforded him. “Help me out, will you?”

Rikki’s at his side in a heartbeat, tall and solid and healthy. He gives her the briefing on what not to touch, what needs to go where, and it takes them nearly five minutes just to swing his legs off the bed to get him sitting on the edge of it. Every inch traveled produces an avant-garde jazz production of pain, each injury a different instrument barreling into all the others at a wild pitch. He breathes his way through it like a woman in labor, shaking this head in disbelief, finally pressing his morphine pump out of sheer desperation.

Rikki leaves him to regroup on the edge of the bed and moves to bring along his IV stand. They give it a few minutes to kick in, and it’s enough to inspire him to try to stand and lean himself into the pair of crutches Rikki grabs from the far wall. He stands, armpits pressed hard into the pads, weigh balanced on his left leg. He tests some weight on his right, bearing down on heavy boot that covers his foot, and immediately regrets it. He then tries out some pressure on his left arm, and he’s surprised and pleased when the pain is manageable.

Rikki stands at his side, arms bracketing him protectively, while he shifts and tests and gathers some base of strength from which to move forward.

“You okay?” Rikki asks when he finally settles.

Bucky takes a deep breath and finds his makeshift center. “Yeah. Okay. Here I go.”

He moves. Slowly. Inelegantly. Rikki pulls his IV stand along and expertly paces him, keeping her smile contained, encouraging him forward firmly. He has to stop for a moment, just shy of the doorway, but not because he’s tired or too pained to go on. He stops because he has another calculation to make, a cruel one, another impossible choice that leads to mortification either way. But it’s not as though he has much dignity left; he can feel the air on his bare ass.

He shoos Rikki away from him and crutches the remainder of the way into the bathroom. She stays close, arms folded over her chest, stepping out of the doorway but lingering just outside it.

Bucky stands in front of the toilet, still perched on his crutches, staring down into the water while he tries to think his way through a thick, toxic cloud of emotion. Chief among these emotions is fear, which has already set in enough to shake his fingertips. He’s scared — scared to perform the most basic motions required to take a simple piss, motions that have been thoughtless and natural and easy for over two decades, motions so practiced that he could do them perfectly in the dark, blacked out after a night of hard partying.

And here he stands, trembling at prospect of lifting his hospital gown and exposing himself to the private audience of his own eyes and hand. He’s avoided it with remarkable skill — as much as he could, anyway. Parts are unavoidable. His half-empty scrotum rests differently between his legs. What’s left of his dick falls differently, incompletely. And it’s lifeless, now, unmoved even by his natural circadian rhythm. He still hasn’t dared to touch it once, hasn’t even dared to look at it in passing. The one time he used the bedside urinal he did it blind, hiding the process below his gown,
imagining himself in a vast poppy field in Afghanistan, young and intact, relieving himself in a brief window of tranquility, naive to the man he would one day become.

Bucky lifts his right hand, pocked with shrapnel scars, and ghosts it over himself, eyes widening at the feel of things that should’ve been there and things that should be there but aren’t. He pulls his hand away and sways, bouncing a few times to regain his balance.

“You okay in there?” Rikki asks.

Bucky scowls and sets about the awkward process of turning himself around, the crutches creaking and squealing while he grits out a snarled string of curses. He gets really fucking brave — or perhaps really fucking careless — and squats as much as he can until his good leg gives and he lets himself fall back onto the toilet. He lets out a bark of pain at the reminder that he still has a hairline pelvic fracture. Rikki pops her head in at the commotion and raises one well-manicured eyebrow.

“I could have helped you, y’know,” she says, holding out her hand for the crutches.

“Just…” He presses his lips shut before he can tell her to fuck off and hands her the crutches. “Give me a minute.”

Rikki disappears with them and he sits, adjusting himself so that he can piss like a goddamn woman. Like a useless fucking eunuch. Bucky seethes quietly, breath loud and shallow, his glare turned inward at how incomprehensibly pathetic he’s become.

He sits long enough that Rikki dips back into the bathroom to turn on the sink, calling it “a little mood music.” Bucky’s too furious, too humiliated, to even offer an acknowledgment.

It works, eventually, but only because Bucky starts to zone out from sheer exhaustion. He tries to tell himself that he should be grateful that he can pee almost of his own volition. He’s tried to remember his nurse from Germany, her stark frankness, her demands that he keep his predicament in its proper perspective.

But God damn it, he is not grateful. Especially when he tries to stand. The grab bar is on his left side, impossible to grasp with his splinted forearm. His right leg, which is turning out to be more of an honorary leg than anything, can’t even bend because of the brace around his knee.

He’s stuck. Stuck. An Army Ranger with four deployments, who’s maxed every PT test he’s ever taken, who’s sprinted through combat and clawed his way up ragged Afghan mountains, is stuck on the fucking toilet. He’s stuck because he’s too scared to touch his own flesh. Stuck because he’s too scared to accept that he will never jump or sprint or climb again, that he’ll never feel the full weight of his dick in his hand again, that he’ll never feel at home in his skin again, that nobody will ever want to touch his naked body ever again.

He is stuck. Absolutely, insurmountably stuck.

Bucky presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, pushing them as hard as he needs to drive back the ruthless onslaught of tears. His mouth twists into an ugly shape, a shape he’d be ashamed to ever show anyone, now that he’s a grown man. It’s the kind of shape his mouth took when they lowered his father’s body into the dirt.

He stays like that in silent agony, jaw clenching, chin quivering, every ounce of his concentration laser-focused on not losing it, on not letting anything come out of him. Not a tear. Not a sound. He hasn’t lost it yet, not like that. Not in years. Not since Steve. He’s managed to burn up all his sadness and convert it to white anger, a skill he owes to a career of dealing and receiving death. He’s not
really sure what would happen if he let himself cry, what it would look or sound like, and he’s not about to find out now. Not on a toilet — and certainly not on a fucking Army toilet.

Bucky pulls it together, slowly. He wipes his face and sniffles, clearing up any remaining evidence of what might have been, and he pushes out a pursed breath of air before calling Rikki in to help him up.

In the end, it’s utterly anticlimactic. With a maternal calmness that leeches its way into him, Rikki grabs him and pulls him up and away with ease. He leans into her, an accident of momentum, and she wraps him in a warm and careful hug.

“It’s okay, you know,” Rikki murmurs against his cheek.

Bucky brings his arms around, holding the space surrounding her in a pantomime of an embrace. “What is?”

“To grieve.”

Bucky doesn’t quite know what to do with something that’s not a “cheer up” or a “think of how lucky you are” or some other manner of subtle dismissal he’s received since being blown up. He doesn’t know what to do with Rikki’s permission to wallow in the unfairness and the grimness of his future. He doesn’t know how to be told that the thing he’s already doing is what’s supposed to happen, like maybe it’s somehow part of moving forward.

“Be sad about it. Be angry. It sucks. It fucking sucks,” she tells him, tightening her grip.

He lets himself hold her then, lightly, like her body is made of thin crystal. “Yeah, it does.”

“We’re here for you. Me and Ma and Daisy. We’re always here for you. Even if Ma’s annoying. Even if Daisy’s grumpy. We love you, and we’ll always support you.”

He nods against her shoulder.

“We want you to come home.”

“I’m working on it.” Bucky stiffens defensively in her grip, but Rikki pulls him even closer.

“I know, but we want you home,” she says seriously. “You got me?”

“Yes, I got you.”

“Good. Now, let’s get you back in bed before Ma comes back and sees your ass hanging out of your shitty little gown.”

Bucky smiles, which spreads about halfway over his mouth, and kisses Rikki’s cheek. “Thanks, Rik.”

Rikki takes a step back, still holding him steady. “Take a look.” She jerks her chin over his shoulder.

Bucky twists his head around and catches a mirrored view of himself from behind. On another day, maybe even in another moment, he might haveed in bitterly on the ugly places where the docs harvested his good flesh to save his bad. But in this moment, emotionally and physically spent beyond description, the sight of his grated ass peering out from the thin, parted material of his hospital gown is outright hilarious.

And in that moment, the unthinkable happens: Bucky laughs.
On December 1st, 2008, First Lieutenant Steven Grant Rogers receives the Purple Heart, along with four other men of the 107th Infantry Battalion who were wounded on the Khalidiya mission. The ceremony is held in the athletic field across from the headquarters building of the 107th, a ceremony accompanied by the yelling of men as another unit conducts PT very loudly in the background. Lieutenant Colonel Fury presides over the sparsely attended event, which has been well-soured by the current drizzle and the colossal HR debacle that led to the medals being delayed for everyone involved.

The mission, as it happens, was deemed a success, despite the fact that they were obviously expected and ambushed accordingly. Steve has given up on trying to understand what success and failure are during war, just like he’s given up all the interest he ever had in earning accolades and promotion points. Once coveted like treasure, as they are by most excited young West Pointers, Steve now sees them as trinkets and tokens, mere pebbles exchanged for the sweat and goodness and innocence that they’ve all given.

He’s pleased for Ward and for the three men from other platoons wounded during that action, because they’re getting the recognition they’re owed for their spilled blood. But when Fury walks up to Steve and clips that medal to his chest, all he can think about is the absurdity of be awarded for having his face broken by another man’s head. By Bucky’s head. He thinks of himself and he thinks of Bucky, mind tumbling back to that day as it compulsively does, nausea rolling in as it automatically does, and all he wants to do is fucking scream.

But he doesn’t. They’re all home, now. They’re safe. He got them home, just like Bucky asked him to. They’re home, and they’ve spent time with their families and friends for Thanksgiving, and they’re all on the glide path to Christmas holiday block leave. In the end, Steve didn’t have to weather Thanksgiving alone. In a turn of events shocking in every conceivable way, Sitwell invited him to his home to have dinner with him, his *wife*, and his *kids*. Steve barely managed to stumble his way through that conversation without insinuating questions like: how did he not know Sitwell was married, who would possibly marry Jasper Sitwell, and who reproduce with him, not once, but twice? Of course, Sitwell’s invitation was something of a clue in itself, another window into the likability he seems to deliberately conceal from others.

After they’re dismissed from the ceremony, the company scatters. Fury granted them the rest of the day off, which feels almost meaningless, given that the unit is still lazily demobilizing. Steve walks toward Alpha Company headquarters, back to his office, stopping only momentarily to pull the medal off his chest and drop it into the trash can near the smoke pit. He looks to his left and right and is satisfied that nobody saw him do it. That is, until he checks over his shoulder and glimpses Foggy Nelson walking up behind him. The expression on his face is one of perplexed esteem, and it’s odd enough to inform Steve that he didn’t quite get away with it.

Steve turns around and faces Foggy, who stops dead in his tracks. Steve is suddenly reminded of the business he has with him, old business niggling at him for months, and he jerks his head in the direction of the nearby Alpha Company HQ.

“Come with me,” Steve tells him, then resumes his course.

Behind him, there’s a soft rush of footsteps as Foggy catches up. He stays dutifully to Steve’s left side, where a soldier of junior rank belongs. They walk in silence, strides long and purposeful, as firm and composed as they can be against the wall of prickling rain coming down diagonally at them. They both breathe sounds of relief when they finally make it into the building, and Foggy follows his motions as Steve pulls off his patrol cap and shakes whatever wetness he can out of it.
In Steve’s office, Foggy becomes a tall, slightly overweight pike of obedience as he stands at attention in front of Steve’s small, cheap desk. Steve suppresses a snort that might show how tired he is of this routine, the customs and courtesies, the assumption that he’s somehow better or worth more because he signed a different contract from the man in front of him. He takes his seat behind his desk and instructs Foggy to sit as well.

“What are you doing here, Foggy?” Steve asks.

“In your office?” Foggy replies, cautiously, like he’s braced for the kind of psychological stunt a drill sergeant might pull.

“In an infantry unit,” Steve clarifies. “In the 107th.”

“I signed up for it.”

“You’re a lawyer, right?”

“I passed the bar, so, I guess. Yeah.”

“So, why did you join the infantry?”

Foggy breaks eye contact and seems to take an interest in the row of challenge coins lined up in the corner of Steve’s desk. “I want to be a JAG officer. I’ve wanted that since my first year at Columbia. But I wanted to know what the Army was really like before taking a job defending or prosecuting soldiers.”

Steve can think of at least a dozen ways his infantry experiences might make his job as an Army lawyer easier. He’ll know the rules of engagement and the challenges inherent in following them to the letter. He’ll know the stressors of prolonged warfare and remember the hot boil of vengefulness after the loss of a comrade.

Steve nods. “That’s admirable, even if it’s the wrong place for you.”

“Could say the same about you, Sir,” Foggy replies. He twists in his chair and looks over to Steve’s bookshelf, to the rows of books on the history of the Middle East, Arabic language, political philosophy, Islam, and international relations. “I mean, just look at what you read. We don’t call you ‘Professor Rogers’ for nothing.”

“Professor Rogers, huh?”

Steve smiles a little, even as he thinks back to the fight he and Bucky had — Christ, it was so long ago. Bucky hurled the name at him like a hex because Steve dared to call him out on his reasons for going to Afghanistan. Steve thinks he remembers Bucky admitting to that, to leaving because he was afraid to stay. But what if he didn’t? What if Steve is remembering it all wrong? What if his whole library is wrong now, all his memories mis-shelved?

“For officers, especially at the Academy, the infantry is the most prestigious and competitive branch,” Steve explains, dragging himself out of his head and back into the safety of their conversation.

“Was it worth it?” Foggy asks.

Steve tilts back in his swivel chair, marveling at the candidness of the question.

“You first,” Steve says.
Foggy doesn’t miss a beat. “Yes. You?”

Steve dares to be honest, because he can’t give his men anything less. Not anymore. Not after everything they’ve been through together.

“No. I don’t think so,” Steve tells him.

“Are you gonna get out?”

“I still owe the Army five more years.”

“You could change branches. Go MI or something.”

“Maybe.” Steve rights his posture and folds his hands on his desk. “I think it’s time to put in your JAG packet. You don’t belong here.”

Foggy’s fair cheeks flush the barest shade of pink. “I mean, I guess I know I haven’t been the best soldier. I’m not very athletic or—”

“I don’t mean it like that. I just want to see you in a position where you’ll thrive and get compensated for your expertise. And you’re an excellent soldier,” Steve clarifies. “You’re ethical and thoughtful and supportive. You helped save Sergeant Barnes’s life.”

There must be something in Steve’s face then. Something he’s not meaning to convey. Something that makes Foggy’s eyes soften.

“You two are really close,” Foggy states.

Steve nods against the sudden stiffness in his neck and shoulders.

“I miss him,” Foggy says. “He was solid. He really cared.”

“He did care. He does,” Steve corrects. “He thinks about all of you all the time.” Of course, Steve doesn’t know this for sure, but he can’t imagine a universe where Bucky’s not thinking about his men regularly. As for being solid, well... it’s good that Foggy thinks that.

“Tell him I say hi, next time you see him,” Foggy says.

“You can tell him yourself. He’ll be here next week.”

Steve tries not to let himself barrel off into an emotional tangent on that very sensitive subject. He’ll have all evening to fret over it, making it similar to most of his other evenings spent worrying about Bucky.

Foggy tilts his head. “Why did you throw it away?”

“It was nothing. What happened to me was nothing. I don’t want an award for nothing. It doesn’t make sense,” Steve mutters, far less coherently than he intended.

Foggy looks at him, face curious and sincere. He regards Steve for several long moments before offering an agreement.

“I’ll put in my JAG packet in January, Sir.”

“Good.” Steve’s not sure why, but he’s relieved. Profoundly so. “Whatever you need from me, you let me know. Letters, recommendations, anything. You have it.”
“Thank you, Sir.”

Steve dismisses Foggy and shoots out a few emails to Sousa and Barton before running to catch the post shuttle to the Fort Bragg housing office. He’s the only officer on the bus, which is packed with junior enlisted soldiers, a couple of wives, and three kids. Nearly half of the occupants disembark at housing, forming a queue at the front desk a dozen soldiers deep. Steve offers his advanced place in line to one of the families, taking a spot at the end of the line where he should have been all along. He’s fine with watching a string of soldiers receive keys to their first homes and apartments. Their smiles are rapturous.

Steve wonders if he’ll feel anything when he gets his keys. He’s never lived in a house before. He’s never needed a lawnmower or an in-unit washer and dryer. He’s never even needed a car before now. He originally planned to get an apartment off post, before everything went to hell. But now, he needs a house. At least two beds. Two baths. One story. No exceptions. He had to fight for that, and fight he did, perhaps at the expense of someone else. He doesn’t know, and on this account, he doesn’t care. Bucky’s got some harebrained idea that he’s going to live in the senior enlisted barracks, and Steve’s not about to supply him with any more reasons why that would be a good plan.

It takes him another two hours to sign his housing agreement and get his keys, and it’s nearly sundown by the time the shuttle drops him off in his neighborhood. Steve recognizes it immediately as the same part of post where Sitwell lives, and he even passes by Sitwell’s home on the walk to his own. Steve stifles a full-body shiver against the freezing air, which is especially cruel to the parts of his body that haven’t fully dried from earlier.

But he warms a little when he finds his place, a one-story home with an exposed brick exterior and a single vehicle car port painted in green. The lawn is wide and shaded by an old oak tree. There are dead flowerbeds in the front, where maybe perennials will sprout and bloom in the spring. The home is part of a long duplex unit, but with three bedrooms — three — it’s more than Steve could ever have hoped for.

The warmth erupts inside Steve then, bursting with a painful sort of joy, when he thinks about all the days he and Bucky spent imagining a life like this. A house. A yard. Flowers. Steve would take care of the lawn and Bucky would take care of their vehicles. They’d both try to make something grow, something they could cook, squash or kale or something robust enough to endure their inexperience. They’d cook together, talk about their day, shoot the shit and bicker and discuss the world passionately. They’d sit on the couch together and hold hands and watch movies. They’d embrace in the bed they share and… and…

Steve chokes then, and he’s not entirely sure if it’s mechanical or emotional. He falls back in time and chokes some more, chokes back sick, and he bends over and breathes and breathes and breathes while the static plays softly in his head. He works his way through it — breathing, focusing, self-soothing — and finds his center, which is made of pure, molten resolve. It carries him forward to the entrance, up one modest stair that Bucky could manage in crutches, and when Steve opens the door and turns on the lights, he starts planning.

He imagines the configuration of the furniture he doesn’t yet have, one that will minimize inconvenience and maximize maneuverability. He picks which room will be Bucky’s, the largest one with the en-suite bathroom and a north-facing window. He’ll need light. Good light. Enough light to keep him from slipping further into the despair he seems mired in now. Steve hopes he’s a little better now. He sounded better, just slightly, when they talked on the phone last week. Steve called Winnie the second he got his phone re-activated, and not ten minutes later, he was hearing Bucky’s voice. Bucky called him. He wanted to talk, he must have, even though their conversation was short. It was enough to give Steve some hope — hope for what, he’s not entirely sure, but hope all the same. And
with hope in such short supply these days, he’ll take whatever he can get.

December 10, 2008

Ever since they first met, Steve has admired Sam Wilson’s ability to exude calm. Notoriously unflappable, Sam is the glue that holds together his platoon, even when Sitwell’s idiosyncrasies threaten their equilibrium on a daily basis. But tonight, the Notoriously Unflappable Sam Wilson is radiating anxiety and excitement, rubbing his hands together and pacing wide angles around the arrivals area at the Raleigh-Durham International Airport. Of course, Sam was the one who demanded that they leave Fayetteville three hours ago, landing them here two hours ahead of Bucky’s scheduled arrival, as if aircraft are in the regular habit of arriving early.

“You’re making me sea sick,” Natasha tells Sam after his umpteenth pass across the room.

“I doubt that,” Sam replies, and the two of them exchange a smile that probably has a story behind it.

Steve doesn’t ask what it is. He’s so nervous that he’s afraid of saying much of anything — not because he’s afraid of saying something stupid, but because he’s afraid of saying something serious. He’s afraid of confessing any number of bothersome thoughts he’s been grappling with, like what if Bucky rejects his offer, what if he starts drinking again, what if Steve goes for neuropsychological testing and finds out that his brain really is broken, what if the static in his head never stops, what if the new platoon sergeant they get is a cad or an idiot. As optimistic as Steve has tried to be, his worries haven’t left a lot of space for it.

“How you holding up?” Natasha asks him, pulling the sleeves of her thick sweater over her hands. Maybe he and Sam aren’t the only ones who are scared of Bucky’s return. Maybe Natasha’s just a little better at hiding it than they are.

“Okay.” Steve checks his watch and then the arrivals board. His stomach flips when the notification next to Bucky’s flight from Dulles screams ARRIVED in flashing white letters. “Plane’s here.”

Steve startles when Natasha lays her hand on his shoulder. It doesn’t deter her from keeping it there while she speaks. “It’ll take a while for him to get here.”

“They should have a wheelchair or something,” Sam interjects as he joins them.

“He won’t use a chair. Not if he can crutch his way down,” Steve says.

“So, we might be here for a while longer.” Natasha takes Sam’s hand, maybe if only to keep him in place.

“Stubborn jackass,” Sam mutters, vocalizing Steve's thoughts.

After a few minutes, a throng of passengers descend the stairs, moving like a single able-bodied creature. Despite how illogical it is, Steve starts scanning, heart skipping every time he sees a man in uniform. There are several, and for each one that isn’t Bucky, for each one who walks unassisted with youthful, confident strides, Steve feels a dark stab of spite.

They wait five minutes. Ten minutes. Twenty. Twenty-five. At thirty minutes, Sam calls Bucky to ask if he even got on the plane at all, only to be kicked straight to voicemail. Steve is moments away from contacting airport security when they finally catch sight of a slow figure dressed in gray-green, stilting forward, his right leg motionless, his left moving in tandem with the aluminum crutches bearing most of his weight. His attention’s on the floor several feet in front of him, and his head
hangs low, partially concealing the look of rapt concentration on his face.

Sam breaks their three-person formation and runs toward him, earning a scolding from a security officer when he crosses the line into the terminal proper. Bucky hears the commotion and lifts his head.

“Hold your horses, Wilson,” Bucky calls out, picking up his pace as much as he seems able to. His face is washed pale and verging on gaunt. His uniform is at least a size too big.

Sam waits on that line, bouncing with impatience, and when Bucky finally crosses over, Sam’s on him. Hugging him. Whispering something to him. Sam’s affection is almost entirely one-sided, though, save for the burdened movement of Bucky’s right arm as it pats Sam on the back with clinical indifference. Over Sam’s shoulder, Bucky’s expression is flat, but it’s a manufactured sort of flatness that comes with practice. The type of flatness you make when you’re scared to make something else. Steve doesn’t read too much into it, though. He’s just so fucking happy to see Bucky alive and upright that he’ll gladly take him as-is.

Natasha moves in next, crowding out Sam, edging him over that line and getting him yelled at again. She kisses Bucky on the cheek and hugs him cautiously, reading him a little better than Sam did. Bucky gives her the same mechanical response, which remains unmoved even when he makes eye contact with Steve in the midst of their hug.

There’s a sinking in Steve’s chest, and it’s only then he realizes that he was nurturing some foolish hope that Bucky might react differently to him. Happier. Angrier. Sadder. He hoped for anything but the bland facade he’s wearing now. Steve hoped that he would mean something. Anything. Anything but nothing.

Natasha releases Bucky so that they can stop blocking the Arrivals entryway. She tries to get Bucky to give up his assault pack, but he won’t budge. When he gets close, Steve can see why she asked for it in the first place. Bucky’s covered in sweat. His collar and too-long hair are damp with it. He smells like it. There’s a hard channel carved between his eyebrows and a tension in his jaw that Steve’s seen before. In the hospital. In the dirt.

“Hey,” Steve says. He smiles easily, despite how clear it is that Bucky is suffering. Because Bucky is alive. Bucky is here and safe and alive.

“Hey.” The corner of Bucky’s mouth flits up, just for a moment, before being flattened by a wave of something that makes him take a deep, shaking breath.

“We’ll go get the car,” Natasha says to Bucky, stepping away and pulling a reluctant Sam along with her. “Meet us out front in, say, fifteen minutes?”

Bucky nods and stands statue-still until Sam and Natasha are out of sight. When they’re gone, he visibly sags, crutches over to a nearby chair, throws his assault pack on the floor, and drops into the seat in a rough, barely controlled fall. He growls softly when he hits the cushion, lip curled up in a sneer of pain.

Steve takes his crutches from him and sets them neatly on the floor beneath the row of seats. He takes irrational delight in seeing Bucky’s green sock poking out from the black walking brace on his right foot. It’s endearing and soft and human, and Steve chides himself for forgetting for one moment how terrifying human fragility is.

He rises, takes a seat next to Bucky, and tries to remember to thank Natasha later for giving Bucky the break he so obviously needed — and the brief alone time Steve so obviously wanted. He keeps
his gaze trained at the far wall, not wanting Bucky to feel any more vulnerable than he already does.

“How are you?” Steve asks.

“Better.”

“You’re getting around okay?” Steve openly cringes at the stupidity of his question.

“Yeah.”

“So, you’re assigned to the Warrior Transition Battalion?”

“Yeah. All I have to do is go to appointments and wait for my med board to go through.” Bucky snorts loudly.

Acutely aware of the unusual speed with which time seems to be moving, Steve steels himself and dives straight into hostile territory. “So, you wanna stay at the barracks, huh?”

“I don’t want to, but I don’t know what choice I have. I can’t drive because of my meds, and there’s a shuttle to the hospital from there. I’m not gonna put Sam out any more than I already have. Plus, he’s moving in with Nat, so…” Bucky shrugs, tired and defeated.

Steve takes a deep breath and dares to look over at his friend. Bucky’s wan complexion has warmed a bit, which seems to offset some of the deep purple exhaustion beneath his eyes. Even now, despite the two new scars on his brow and chin, despite the hollows below his cheekbones, despite the look of quiet suffering on his face, Bucky is still achingly beautiful.

“Stay with me,” Steve says.

“I don’t think that’s—”

“I just got a house. One story, three beds, two baths. I don’t need that much space for just me.”

“Then why’d you get it?”

“I wanted you to have a place to stay.”

Bucky sighs softly and shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

Steve shifts in his chair, angling himself toward Bucky. “I’ll take you to the hospital and pick you up. I can get a car.”

“I have one,” Bucky murmurs. “What about when you’re in the field? Or when you have to stay late?”

“I’ll talk to Barton. I’m sure he’ll be supportive. Sam and Natasha said they’d pitch in, too.”

“Oh, so they’re Sam and Natasha now? You guys friends now?”

There’s a bitterness in Bucky’s voice that Steve can’t quite make sense of. But he’s not about to feel sorry for rallying a little support, so he doesn’t mince his words.

“Yeah, we are.”

Bucky sighs again, louder this time, and lays his arms on the arm rests of his chair. He stares out at nothing for a while, face pensive. His good leg starts shaking quickly, like it does when he’s had one
too many Rip-Its.

“I can’t be what you want,” Bucky finally says.

“No, no. No, I don’t…” Steve shifts even more, until his knee almost touches Bucky’s. He musters every iota of earnestness he can, because there’s no room for misunderstandings here. “That’s not what I meant. No strings attached. No expectations whatsoever. Whatever you need me to be, I’ll be that person. You want a friend, I’m there. You just want a roommate, a taxi driver, okay. Whatever you want. You don’t owe me anything, Buck. Not one thing.”

Bucky clears some roughness out of his throat. The words that follow are soft and hesitant. “I don’t know what I’m gonna be like.”

“That’s okay. Be however you are.”

“Ma and Rikki and Daisy are coming down here for Christmas.” He raises his eyebrow and looks at Steve, like maybe this is a test that Steve’s dedication won’t be able to pass.

“Great. No problem,” Steve assures him, consciously skirting around the issue of Sharon, which can surely wait for another day. “I have an extra room. I’ll get a sleeper sofa. They can take my bed. Whatever it is, we’ll work it out.”

It’s a promise of more than just accommodating his family. At least, that’s the way Steve hopes Bucky heard it. That’s all he really needs Bucky to know. That they’ll work it out. Whatever it is, they’ll work it out. Together.

Bucky nods in a slow, absent rhythm and goes quiet again. Steve can feel the intensity draining out of him, leaving behind a man who looks like he’d forfeit his entire next paycheck for one good night’s sleep.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says.

“For what?”

“Germany.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. I shouldn’t have showed you…” Bucky trails off and pulls his braced left arm off the rest between them, bringing it down to his lap.

“I’m just glad you’re here,” Steve tells him. “I’m glad you’re doing better.”

Bucky’s mouth curls into a wry smile. “But you didn’t want to hug me, huh?”

“You didn’t want it,” Steve says softly.

“No, I didn’t.” Somehow, Bucky still sounds disappointed.

Steve reaches over, unthinkingly, and touches his fingertips to Bucky’s thigh. They both look down at the place where their bodies now connect, and Steve smiles at the pressure of Bucky gently pushing back against him. It’s a request, one Steve could never deny him, and he lays his hand just above Bucky’s good knee. He doesn’t dare ruin the moment by thinking about who might be watching them, or what they might label the scene. Instead, Steve focuses on the warmth of Bucky’s leg, the undeniable proof of life it affords, and something powerful aches inside of him.
“Come stay with me. Please.”

Bucky regards Steve’s hand for a moment longer before lifting his own from his lap. At first, Steve is certain that Bucky is feeling bold and is going to lay his hand on top — and for the most fantastic half-second, he does. But then his fingers grip Steve’s, and then the warmth of Bucky’s leg is gone. Bucky relocates Steve’s hand to his own thigh, where Steve probably should have kept it all along.

But, oh, Steve’s heart pitches into flight when he feels a squeeze at the end. It’s a squeeze that tells him that he wasn’t wrong, that the Bucky he knows survived the explosion. The Bucky who craves touch like he craves air. The Bucky who loves Steve at least in some small way.

“I’ll stay with you,” Bucky says, taking his hand back and pushing it against the arm rest. “But we should get going.”

Steve checks his watch, which has definitely blown past fifteen minutes. “Oh, shit. Yeah.”

“I’m gonna need some help up.”

Steve rises to his feet and gathers Bucky’s crutches from the floor. They negotiate the procedure and pull it off without more than a grunt of discomfort from Bucky, which Steve figures is just how Bucky moves now. He hands Bucky his crutches and picks up his assault pack.

“At least let me carry your bag,” Steve says, slinging it over his shoulder.

Bucky rolls his eyes. “Fine.”

Steve lets Bucky lead the way, trying not to grin in his wake.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Heavy medical realism, detailed contemplation of genital injury, angst, misogynistic language, body hatred

A note on Bucky’s dick: As I’m writing this, I’m trying to be very sensitive to the nature of urogenital injuries without getting weird or fetishistic about it. At the same time, I hope it’s become abundantly clear that Bucky is deeply connected to/preoccupied by his sexuality, particularly as it pertains to his self-worth and his ability to give and receive romantic love. So, if it seems like I’m spending a lot of time on it, it’s because I think Bucky would be mentally consumed by it. I hope that makes sense to you as you’re reading it. It will continue to be important thematically as the story continues and Bucky works through his issues with sex and sexuality and identity.

Med board: Colloquially, the process by which the Army evaluates the extent of one’s injuries, their impact on service, etc., and determines whether or not that person should be retained in the military. This is where I’m taking a bit of artistic license, because this process usually takes an extremely long time, and I’m allowing for Bucky’s med board to be processed within a few months rather than close to a year.

WTB (Warrior Transition Battalion): When soldiers have been wounded (physically and/or psychologically) and require complex or prolonged medical care, these units exist to help the soldier rehabilitate. The soldier may or may not be retained in the military,
after being assigned to one of these units.

Max one’s PT test: To score the maximum number of points possible on one’s physical fitness test, which consists of running, pushups, and sit-ups.

Purple Heart: An award given to service members who have sustained injuries or were killed as a result of enemy action in a military conflict.

Walking to the left: In the Army, the higher ranking soldier walks on the right side, if walking side-by-side.

JAG: Judge Advocate General - the military legal corps consisting of attorneys and paralegal specialists. Because Foggy has already passed the bar exam (the licensing examination for lawyers in the US), he could be directly commissioned as a lawyer and a First Lieutenant, which is Steve’s current rank.

Challenge coins: Units can award something called a challenge coin for exceptional performance or as a token of gratitude. They were originally used as proof of affiliation with a certain unit and can sometimes still be used that way. Technically, you’re supposed to have the coin on you at all times, and another soldier can “coin-check” you and ask to see your coin. This gets especially fun in the showers, where one has to get creative about carrying one’s coin on one’s person whilst naked.

Here are some examples of challenge coins

MI: military intelligence

Rip-its: Cheap caffeinated beverages that are popular among deployed service members

Erik vs. Rikki: In Bucky’s mind, he still remembers Rikki as Erik (w/male pronouns), back when they were younger. This is not intended to be transphobic on Bucky’s part; rather, it’s a reflection of how he holds his sibling in his memories of this time period. From a meta level, it could be argued that this is transphobic, but the determination of that would probably lie with Rikki and how she regards herself as a child - and how she’d want her family to regard her in the past.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Bucky processes his injuries and his shifting roles. Steve receives news. Bucky and Steve get honest.

Chapter Notes

Warnings in the footnotes, including some stuff not tagged.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

By the end of his first two weeks at the Warrior Transition Battalion, Bucky longs for the type of inert exhaustion he experienced back at Walter Reed — the exhaustion of boredom and uncertainty and impotent rage. This brand of exhaustion, the type he’s feeling as he sits in the waiting room outside the urology department, is in another league entirely. Nobody informed him that navigating the world in crutches would be the rough equivalent of climbing up a never-ending hill on his hands and knees — painful, strenuous, and demoralizing, not to mention humiliating. In addition to in-processing with an entirely new company, Bucky’s been sent all over Uncle Sam’s brown earth, crutching from department to department of Womack Army Medical Center to be evaluated by a lengthy parade of doctors and therapists. Neurology. Orthopedics. Pain management. Behavioral health. Physical therapy. Occupational therapy. With the exception of behavioral health, they’ve all taken one look at him and recommended him for an expedited med board. Bucky’s not sure whether to be thrilled or dejected, and he oscillates between these states at unpredictable intervals.

As far as behavioral health is concerned, Sergeant First Class James Barnes is the paragon of sound mental health. Maybe it’s old habit, but the second he hobbled into that clinic, he was a new man. A man who sleeps without dreaming. A man who has a well adjusted, compassionate view of his actions during war. A man who has accepted his new disabilities with composure and optimism. A man who most certainly does not feel sad or disinterested, fearful or pathologically preoccupied with the horror of the day he was blown to shreds, or any of the other horrors he’s witnessed and perpetrated during his years as an infantryman. And, of course, he’s certainly not at all distressed by the fact that his career is over, the career he’s constructed the entirety of his paltry self-worth around. No, Sergeant First Class James Barnes — soon to be worthless civilian asshole Jamie Barnes — is just fine, thank you. The psychologist ate it up gladly.

Bucky’s not exactly sure why he even bothered with the act in the first place. A few possibilities come to mind. It’s an infantry leader’s obligation to appear healthy and sane and capable of managing the physical and psychological rigors of the occupation. That’s a hard habit to break, especially since hiding himself has been a skill he’s honed mercilessly since he was twelve. Maybe it’s also that the last thing Bucky wants is to have someone in a position of authority tell him that he really is as f***ed up as he thinks he is. That he really is just as broken mentally as he is physically, perhaps even more so. Maybe he wants to preserve the illusion of psychological wellness just a little bit longer, until he’s out of uniform for good. Until he’s gone from the Army and from North Carolina and from Sam and Nat and Steve and all the men who once looked at him and thought he
The thought of leaving all those things, all those people, isn’t one he can hang onto for long. It’s too inconceivable. Too terrifying. It’s like being held over a bottomless chasm by a fraying rope, knowing the plunge is inevitable but still clinging to the desperate denial of its certainty.

Bucky shakes the thought away with the jerk of his head, impervious to the evaluative glance of the other soldier in the waiting room with him. Bucky’s quickly growing accustomed to being looked at like an oddity, even in an Army hospital surrounded by sick and broken soldiers. It could be his grooming and dress, which, by any written standard, is not good. He’s already been yelled at by two officers for having his hair too long. The physical therapist, whom Bucky hated almost instantly, commented passive-aggressively about the size of his uniform. Of all the small allowances Bucky has given himself in the wake of his injuries, keeping his old uniforms has been one of the most important to him. They’ve traveled with him for the past three years, one of the only constants in his military life. They’ve kept him warm and shielded him from the sun. They’ve wiped Trip’s blood from Steve’s incredulous face. Even the loss of one — the one he was blown up in — was considerable.

They call his name fifteen minutes after the scheduled start of his appointment. They call him James. Bucky wonders if it’s a way to condition him toward his civilian fate. He remembers how proud he was to make E-7, to become Sergeant First Class Barnes. He did it younger than anyone in his peer group, because he was stronger, faster, smarter, and more talented in the art of soldiering and murder than all the rest of them. And now he’s just James. James the Lumbering Wunderkripple.

The medical assistant makes small talk with him on the way to the exam room, and she comments like everyone else does at how well he moves in crutches, like it’s a compliment to point out how fantastically he drags his broken body around. He tries to be polite and use his canned answers, but he’s starting to run short on supply. His Percocet is wearing off, and his armpits and shoulders feel like they’ve been punched enthusiastically.

She sits him down on the edge of an exam table and begins asking a series of rote questions he’s heard from every provider preceding her. The paper on the table crackles when he inevitably shifts his weight between her inquiries, a regular response to the deep ache in his pelvis. He’s been uncomfortable for so long that he strains to remember what it feels like to not have to constantly squirm or tense or clench against pain.

“And what’s the purpose of your visit today?” the assistant asks, continuing to stare at the computer screen in front of her.

“A check-up,” Bucky supposes. He stops there and hopes that the vagueness will satisfy her.

“For what?”

“Shrapnel injuries,” he says brusquely. “It should be in my notes.”

The medical assistant, probably some officer’s wife or daughter, mutters an acknowledgment and scans through his notes from Walter Reed and Landstuhl. She makes a small clicking noise with her tongue as she scrolls and nods and says “oh” and “okay” a few times.

In response, Bucky snorts and shakes his head and works feverishly to not say something rude.

When she finally swivels around again, her face is pulled back in a mannequin-like impersonation of okayness. She smiles at him stiffly, and her gaze flits down to his crotch. It only lingers there for the briefest of moments, but when she meets his eyes again, Bucky’s decided to be done with politeness.
“What, you wanna see it? Maybe take a picture?”

Her face ducks and goes red.

“This your first day on the job or something?” he asks.

“First week,” she admits.

Bucky’s mouth twists as he feels the hot burn of shame. “Sorry.”

“No,” she says, waving her hand dismissively. “No, I’m sorry. I’m just filling in for my friend who’s on leave.”

“Ah. Well, I’d want to take leave from this job, too.”

“I’m usually in ophthalmology.”

Bucky snorts out something close to a laugh. “That’ll teach you to help out your friends.”

“I’ll go tell Colonel Stewart you’re here. Sorry again, and I hope you feel better soon.” She says the last part hastily, awkwardly, and beelines it out the door.

Bucky nods and revels in the sterile quiet of the room when she finally leaves it. Then he admonishes himself again for being cruel, because that’s never been his way. Not with people he doesn’t know. Not with strangers who are trying to help him. He wonders if he can blame it on the pain again and decides that the excuse has grown quite worn already.

Colonel Stewart bursts into the room a few minutes later, cracking through the silence like a clap of thunder. He’s a tall, lank man who appears far too boyish to be wearing such a high rank, with a smile that’s bright and straight and a little goofy. But it’s really the hair that puts Bucky at ease, the inappropriately long flop of golden brown that nobody’s going to call him out on because he must outrank nearly everyone he meets. He introduces himself to Bucky with a handshake that seems deliberately careful, one that tells him that this guy actually read his chart before coming in. They exchange pleasantries that are remarkably pleasant, and by the time Stewart asks him to stand and pull down his pants and underwear, Bucky doesn’t put up much resistance.

Bucky hasn’t been able to completely avoid his dick anymore, now that he’s living with Steve. He’ll be damned if he’s gonna piss into jug or sit to pee in Steve’s house. Either of those options seems cowardly and shameful, though somehow less shameful than the new shape of his genitals. He actually knows the shape of them now. He took a look at them once, after an hour of psyching himself up and waiting for his doubled dose of Percocet to kick in. And even though the way he looks now is repulsive, misshapen and deficient, it’s still less terrible than he imagined while lying in that German hospital bed.

Bucky looks up at the pocked white ceiling while Colonel Stewart examines him. He has a passing though of how many ceilings he’s looked at while a stranger has touched him and sucked him, and he finds the juxtaposition so perverse that he chokes on his own saliva.

Stewart’s hands are warm through his nitrile gloves as he gently feels around Bucky’s penis and scrotum, over the rises and valleys both natural and terrorist-made. He applies some pressure to Bucky’s real and prosthetic testicles, and Bucky shakes his head when Stewart asks if there’s pain anywhere. It’s mostly truthful.

“So, everything looks good,” Stewart says. “Things are healing nicely.”
Bucky swallows heavily. He blinks up at the ceiling tiles and opens his mouth to ask what actually happened to him — what happened, specifically, that makes things look the way they do now. He opens his mouth, and the words catch in his throat, making a little creaking sound.

“You okay?” Stewart asks.

“So…” Bucky starts, then closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “So what, exactly, happened?”

“To your genitals?”

“Yeah. Why does my dick look like that?”

Stewart says the word “you” and stumbles over it a few times, repeating it like he means to follow it with something like “you don’t even know what happened to you?” But he kindly spares Bucky the embarrassment.

“Uh, okay. You can pull your pants up, and I’ll walk you through it.”

Bucky tucks everything back into his underwear quickly and pulls up his pants. The buttons take an inordinately long time with a useless dominant finger, and his overwrought nerves don’t help, either. He can feel a sheen of sweat at his hairline from the pressure to perform the basic act of dressing perfectly, and he drops back on the table, relieved, when the task is complete.

Colonel Stewart educates him with just the right amount of restrained enthusiasm for someone who’s talking about the radical alteration of manhood itself. He walks Bucky through it, making the most eye contact any Army doctor’s ever made with him, careful to speak in moderately paced layman’s terms that even a man who’s anxious out of his mind can understand.

The shaft of the penis was badly damaged about two-thirds of the way out. The trauma surgeons at FOB Renegade tried to graft tissue onto it to fill in the damaged parts, but shortly after his arrival at Landstuhl, the graft went necrotic — a word no man ever wants to hear associated with his junk. Surgeons had to remove the graft and debride the wound, including some previously healthy tissue. So rather than chance any more complications with grafts, they cut a clean line across the shaft and attached the largely intact head back on. Like with his amputated finger, Stewart explains, the microvascular surgeon was able to connect the blood vessels and nerves to preserve urinary and, supposedly, also sexual functioning. Bucky suppresses the urge to laugh bitterly at the comparison between his perpetually numb finger and the repair job on his dick.

To illustrate, Stewart draws a penis on a nearby dry erase board and cuts a red line clean through it, as if the verbal description wasn’t vivid enough. He narrates his drawing NFL-style.

“Penis tissue is largely uniform from the base to just below the glans.” Stewart runs his finger along the tissue of the drawn shaft until he reaches the head. “So they just re-attached the glans…” He draws an energetic arrow back to the middle of the original shaft. “…To healthy tissue here.”

The result: almost half a dick. And a very scarred one, at that.

“The scars will get smaller over time,” Stewart assures him with a smile that’s far too confident for Bucky to believe. “I can prescribe you a topical cream to minimize their appearance down the road.”

Bucky’s lip curls at the thought of spending one more intimate moment with a part of his body he’s now so disgusted by, the part of his body he used to love — truly — for the immense pleasure it brought him over the course of his life. Sometimes when the world seemed overwhelmingly ruthless and cold and hateful, getting lost in his own body alone or with someone else was the only way Bucky could stomach facing another day of it. And now… he can’t imagine ever having that again,
and the reminder of his loss is like a slow-driven knife to the chest.

“How’s everything in terms of physical sensation?” Stewart pauses and cautiously adds on, “And sexual function?”

Bucky hopes his face looks as appalled as he feels by the question.

“I don’t fucking know,” Bucky snaps back, then tacks on a “Sir” when he remembers that he’s talking to a man who vastly outranks him. “Haven’t exactly been in the mood.”

Stewart takes the outburst in easy stride. “On that subject, we should get your testosterone levels checked.” He slides his chair over to his computer and begins typing something. “I’m putting in a lab order for that.”

“It’s… not a priority for me,” Bucky says, hoping it’ll stop him, because he doesn’t know how else to tell Stewart that his sex life is as good as over. Half-dick or no, any interested guy without an unreasonably strong scar fetish would run away screaming the second his jacket came off.

Stewart swivels back around. “Testosterone isn’t just important for libido and sexual functioning. It’s important for mood and energy and other things that impact quality of life.”

“It’s fine, really,” Bucky says, shifting his weight onto his good leg and standing. “May I be dismissed, Sir?”

Stewart gives Bucky a sour look that softens rapidly into kindness. “You’re free to leave whenever you want. I’m not your commander. Would you at least like the prescription for the cream?”

Bucky takes a long, deliberate breath. “Sure.”

Stewart types something else in his computer, then pauses to glance back over his shoulder at Bucky. “These types of injuries can be difficult to work through, emotionally. I’ve seen them in a number of folks. But the docs down at behavioral health can probably help you navigate some of this stuff, if you’d like to talk to someone. I’m happy to make a referral.”

“Thanks. I’m good.”

Stewart turns around again and clasps his hands together between his spread legs. He glances at Bucky’s left hand. “Do you have a significant other?”

For a moment, Bucky doesn’t even know how to answer the question. Six months ago, he might have answered with something coy or lightly sarcastic. Three months ago, he could have legitimately said yes. And now, Bucky can only answer with the turn of his hollowed-out cheek as his thoughts drift to Thor Odinson and how fucking badly he aches for what they had.

Stewart continues, undaunted by the silence. “Well, when you do find someone you connect with, I think you’d be surprised by how many partners are open to different kinds of sexual experiences. It helps to start figuring out what feels good to you and figuring out where the issues are, so that you can communicate that.”

“Yep. Okay.”

“And, of course, I can help on the medical side. We have drugs for ED, supplements for low testosterone—”

“Thanks, Doc. I’m good.”
“All right,” Stewart says, giving a resigned smile. “My door’s open, if you change your mind.”

—

Bucky crutches down to the hospital lobby with a prescription for scar cream, which he shoves deep in the cargo pocket of his uniform pants. At the bottom, his fingertip brushes a few grains of sand that somehow made it through the laundry, and the wave of longing that washes over him is astonishing. Somehow, in spite of everything, Bucky pines for that arid stretch of brown land, carved through with tendrils of the Tigris-Euphrates, the cradle of early civilization cut to pieces by foreign men and beleaguered by turmoil. He craves the sharp smell of spent ammunition and the ecstasy of destruction. And he’d give his last remaining nut for one more cigarette at the FOB smoke pit. He wonders how many more unexpected losses he’ll forced to reconcile. He wonders if the grief will ever stop.

Bucky waits at the front entrance of the building, just inside the sliding glass doors, and watches soldiers shuffle into and out of the cold. He presses up against the wall and tries to make himself small, angling and curling in on himself to hide his rank and all the badges on his chest that he earned when his body was strong and able. He lingers there until a black Toyota Tundra pulls up in the loading area. Steve waves to him from the driver’s seat, finding him easily, and Bucky beats back a surge of diffuse resentment.

Steve meets him outside the truck, looking tall and handsome and tired. He holds out his hand for Bucky’s crutches and stands by silently while Bucky goes about the cringeworthy motions of climbing into the high cab with only one good arm and one good leg. Steve learned early on not to even attempt to help him, certainly not in front of other soldiers, but that doesn’t stop him from trying to shield Bucky’s struggle from the view of others with the enviable broadness of his body.

When they’re both finally situated in the truck, Steve looks over to him and smiles.

“How was it?” he asks.

“Fine.” Bucky feeds the latch of his seatbelt into its fastener, his hands still trembling from his earlier exertion.

Steve waits a beat, as he often does, just in case Bucky has anything more to say than what absolute basic politeness demands. When nothing else comes, he shifts the truck into gear and steps on the accelerator. The truck lurches forward, accompanied by a muttered “God damn it” from Steve as he remembers how ridiculously overpowered the engine is.

“We don’t have to stay long,” Steve says when they eventually turn onto the main road. “Just let me know when you’re tapped out.”

“Too late for that.”

“It’ll mean a lot to them. They really want to see you.”

“They think they really want to see me,” Bucky corrects.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bucky watches Steve’s lips purse and un-purse as he works toward a response that Bucky can’t easily refute.

“It’s important for them to see you. They need it. The last image they have of you is…” He cuts off then, hands tightening around the wheel. “They need to see you like this. Getting better.”

One side of Bucky’s mouth curls up faintly. He feels something like pride welling up in him,
something that pushes aside the persistent, sour boil of irritability. He’s nurtured a lot of fear about his platoon since he went down. Fear that the structure of the unit will collapse without him. Fear that his men won’t be ready for their next inevitable deployment without him. But in the two weeks Bucky has spent with Steve, those fears have been slowly dissolving. Despite the burdens that Steve is carrying, the ones he tries to hold tightly out of view, he’s taking care of his soldiers. Bucky hasn’t failed to observe the long, late hours Steve spends planning training for the next calendar year. He hasn’t missed the nighttime and weekend phone calls Steve takes from the men, always with a tone of grounded compassion no matter how late or inopportune the timing. He hasn’t missed the warm joy on Steve’s face when he talks about the accomplishments of his soldiers, from Wade Wilson’s overdue promotion to Reyes’s completion of his AA degree. And he hasn’t missed the energy Steve has put into the holiday party they’re currently driving to, energy Bucky knows that Steve doesn’t actually have.

So, for Bucky, the only thing that’s really left regarding his men is the fear that they will forget him, that his time with them will mean nothing. He doesn’t want them to remember him like he is now, fragile and weary and crippled and unshakably angry. He doesn’t even want them to remember him as the man he actually was, the man who had to drink himself into a stupor just to sleep, just to be close to another person, just to temporarily forget the deeds his country demanded of him. He wants to be remembered as the man they thought he was, confident and capable. Vicious and caring and solid. He’s not even sure how he created such an illusion at all, because he’s none of those things now. Not a single one.

“I know. You’re right,” Bucky concedes.

He digs in his pocket for a bottle of pills and pops a Percocet dry. He might be getting a little too good at that.

“Maybe try to enjoy yourself a little bit, too,” Steve says. “You should at least stay for the white elephant exchange.”

“Shit. I didn’t even—”

“Don’t worry. I got something for you.”

Bucky finally cracks a full smile. “Oh, Jesus. Do I even wanna know?”

“Nope.” Steve steals a glance over at him. “It’s good, though.”

“Better be. I got a reputation to uphold.”

In the waning light, Bucky leans close to the window and looks into his small reflection in the truck’s side mirror. He tries to put something into it, something to sharpen him or soften him, anything to counteract the vacant vestige of Sergeant Barnes staring back at him. A dash of dark humor, maybe. Or something resembling acceptance. Maybe even grace. He plays with different subtle movements of his brows and eyes and mouth. He tilts his chin and angles his head. He tries to fashion some fiction that’s easier than the truth, and by the time they pull up to company HQ, Bucky thinks he might even look content.

After two failed attempts to get the massive vehicle between the lines of his assigned parking spot, Steve finally parks the truck. Bucky watches Steve pull down the visor and check himself in the mirror. Steve grimaces at his own face and flips the visor back up a little harder than necessary.

“You look good. Don’t worry,” Bucky tells him.
Steve gives a dry chuckle. “That’s a lie, but thanks for it anyway.”

“You really do.”

Steve looks over at him, and the expression on his exquisitely angled face flits in and out of neutrality. There’s a subtle uptake in his respiration, his broad, muscled chest rising and falling like he’s walking up a light incline. The cab of the truck charges with an intense energy that Bucky is completely unprepared for, even as he welcomes the weightlessness in his stomach. He doesn’t have moments like these anymore. He used to have so many with so many different men. He used to wield that charge like a magnet to draw in strangers and make them into his lovers. And now, that energy fills him with fear.

Maybe Steve feels his fear, because he pulls his gaze away, ripping apart their connection so violently that Bucky reaches out for him instinctively. He catches Steve by the arm and holds him like that, fingers digging into the flesh of his thick bicep. Bucky doesn’t even know what he’s grasping for or why he’s grasping for it so desperately, but he’s frozen like that, paralyzed by his own doubt and by the way Steve is looking at him, confused and worried.

“Are you okay?” Steve asks.

Bucky shakes his head faintly. He’s not okay. He’s scared. He’s fucking terrified. He’s terrified of the next five minutes. The next five hours. The next five years. And when he feels Steve’s hand over his own, so tenderly, Bucky just wants to be held. He wants it more than he’s ever wanted anything in his life. More than booze. More than sleep. More than forgiveness. He wants to sag and crumple and weep in Steve’s arms until he’s completely empty. He wants the feel of Steve’s hands gliding slowly across his back. He wants the smell of Steve’s skin to make sparks in his brain. He wants the solid weight of Steve’s body against his own from head to broken foot. He wants to go back to Steve’s campy little house and lie in Steve’s bed and forget about the Army, about the 107th, about Iraq and Fort Bragg and everywhere outside the warmth of his embrace.

And Bucky knows that all he’d have to do is ask, and Steve would gather him up and give him whatever he wanted. He’d take him home right now, if that’s what Bucky asked of him. He knows that…

“We can sit for a while,” Steve says. His finger traces over the juncture where Bucky’s arm brace meets the skin of his hand. “We don’t have to go in right away.”

Outside the truck, there’s a raucous smattering of laughs as a group of soldiers cross the sidewalk in front of them. They’re absorbed in conversation, and they don’t seem to even think to look up to see two of their leaders touching in a parked truck. Steve watches the men pass with wary eyes but doesn’t pull away. Bucky loosens his grip on Steve’s arm. He bites down on the inside of his lower lip as he works up the courage to ask for what he wants, fighting against a clamoring premonition which warns him that it’ll only make things worse in the end. Only make it harder to do what he needs to do. And when Steve takes Bucky’s hand and holds it in both of his own, careful not to turn it because he knows it hurts his arm, Bucky opens his mouth to tell him—

Both men startle at the sudden crack of knuckle on glass, bodies jerking toward the sight of Sam and Nat peering into the passenger window. With the windows tinted the way they are, there would be no way for Sam and Nat to see their joined hands. Their serious and weary faces. There’s no way it wasn’t completely innocent, because who would expect such a dour scene on the eve of the Alpha Company holiday party?

But even still, the intrusion and the panic it incited is acutely infuriating, and Bucky can’t completely banish the anger from his face when he rolls down the window.
“You guys coming in?” Sam asks, the lightness in his voice faltering when he registers Bucky’s expression.

“Yeah,” Bucky replies automatically. “We’ll be there in a minute.”

“Better hope you get my white elephant gift,” Sam says, playing it cool and holding up the metallic green and red bag in his hand. “You will not regret it.”

“Mine’s better, of course,” Natasha counters.

Bucky feels a small smirk bloom on his face. “I’m pretty sure I can get whatever gift I want. No one’s gonna try to steal a Christmas present from a cripple.”

The image of this in Bucky’s head is actually quite funny — at least, it is at first. He imagines someone trying to steal his gift from him, and maybe he holds up his crutches or his patchwork left arm and makes a pitiful face. And then maybe someone jokingly accuses him of playing the “cripple card,” yelling it across the room in mock indignation. Maybe someone like Dugan or Private Wilson. He then imagines a scattering of good-natured laughter in response.

But then he also imagines the faces of some of the other men, the ones who look down at the floor and try to force themselves to smile. Or maybe they look at him with sad eyes. Maybe they fight back their memories of that day in Khalidiya. Maybe they feel sorry for him. And as the scene plays out fully in his head, Bucky’s smile fades.

“We’ll see you in there,” Natasha says. She tries to pull Sam along from where he seems to be stuck, staring at Bucky with unmasked concern in his eyes.

Bucky hates that look. He sees it so often now. From Steve. From Sam. From his doctors. Less so from Nat, but only because she dashes it away quickly whenever he catches her with it. He wants to scream at all of them to just act normal. Act like they used to. Act like he’s okay and that he’s going to be fine. Act like his world is not in the process of completely falling apart.

“We’ll be there in a sec,” Bucky repeats to Sam. “Save us a seat, okay?”

Sam pulls it together and manages a grin. “Don’t take all night.”

Bucky nods as he rolls up the window, and he and Steve watch the couple make their way to the company entrance.

“What were you gonna say before?” Steve asks.

Bucky unbuckles his seatbelt. “Nothing important.”

“If you need something, if you want something from me, you know it’s yours, right?”

Bucky turns to look at Steve, whose earnestness is cascading out of him, spilling into the void between them. Imploring. Offering.

“I’m fine. I am. Let’s just go have some fun.” Bucky curls his mouth into a weak smile. “Okay?”

Steve’s gaze falls to the center console that separates them. “You don’t have to pretend with me, but I get why you want to. So, okay.” Steve glances up again. “Let’s go have fun.”

Bucky ignores Steve’s desiccated tone and the pained resignation in his face. For tonight, they’ll pretend to be how they’re not, put on one final production of joint platoon leadership before the ruse
starts to get too pathetic.

It makes Bucky ache. All of it. So he lets Steve help him out of the truck, lets Steve take him by the elbow and touch his waist. He lets himself grasp Steve’s shoulder and lean into him once he’s safely on the ground. He lets himself steal a few extra seconds of contact, getting closer than necessary, close enough to catch a whiff of Steve’s cologne — and, God, it makes him dizzy, because Steve knows Bucky loves that brand and used to wear it just for him. It used to make Bucky so crazy, so high on his lust for Steve Rogers, and now Bucky just wants to fall into it and never emerge again.

In the cover of dusk and shielded by the truck’s open passenger door, Steve presses his lips to Bucky’s temple. It’s so fast that it would look like an accident to anyone walking by, but it feels anything but accidental. It feels like a kiss.

And then it’s gone.

Bucky lays his right hand on the side of Steve’s neck, the most intimate gesture he can think to make in that moment. He whispers “thank you” and wants to ask for ten thousand more and then ask for everything, everything else Steve has to give.

But one is enough. It’s enough to get him into the building and through the night, through every stuttered greeting and awkward pause. It even gets Bucky to give up the bottle of whiskey that he got in the gift exchange, despite how badly he wanted tear the wax off with his teeth and slam down the whole thing right there in front of everyone.

After Steve drives them home that night, Bucky almost asks if he can sleep in Steve’s room. Just on the edge of the bed, he thinks. Nowhere near those arms and warm hands. Nowhere that might make things more complicated and defined. In the hallway just outside Steve’s room, Steve pauses and seems to wait for it. God knows he would never ask, not after promising no expectations. Bucky grips his crutches until his knuckles whiten and pain sears up his left arm.

“Can I…”

Steve lifts his brows incrementally. Bucky drops his gaze to the oatmeal-vomit colored carpeting while his brain plays through a litany of scenarios. Reflexively, his mind barrels toward the intensely physical, toward opportunities that no longer exist for Bucky or for them. Disgust and dismay crest swiftly and give way to a familiar burn of anger — anger over all the possibilities that are dead to him now.

“Thank you for your tonight,” Bucky decides to say instead. He hopes a smile will help soften the disappointment and hopes that the configuration of his mouth resembles a smile at all.

“For what?”

“Helping me be there tonight. You were right. They needed to see me.”

Steve’s head tilts in curiosity. “And what about you?”

Bucky’s sure he’s smiling now. The pull on his lips is unmistakable and deeply welcome.

“I guess I needed to see them, too.”

Steve doesn’t take any time off for holiday block leave. Instead, he stays on duty and mans the company so that Rhodes, Dugan, and Barton can visit their families out of state. It’s the Very
Responsible Thing to do, and from a professional perspective, Bucky respects him for it. From a personal perspective, however, it’s an awful idea. It’s something the old Sergeant Barnes would do, a distraction to stave off the commotion of chaos inside. Bucky can only guess at what Steve might be running from. There are so many possibilities, and every attempt to coax Steve to be forthcoming about it is met with assurances that he’s fine. Just tired, is all.

Steve’s a pretty skillful actor now, as opaque and polished as onyx. He never used to be like that. In fact, he was always laughably easy to read, back then they were best friends. When they were together. Bucky would tease Steve relentlessly for his transparency, though he not-so-secretly admired Steve’s honest passion and his vocal contempt for fakeness. Bucky always considered fakeness to be his own greatest talent, his standard operating mode, and he wonders to this day why Steve still wanted him so close. Maybe, like so many things, Steve saw something in Bucky that Bucky never could.

But still. Bucky can’t help but lament what Steve has become. A product of his position. A product of loss. The act can’t hold indefinitely, though. In the weeks that Bucky’s been back, he’s watched Steve slip into glassy-eyed listlessness when he thinks nobody’s looking. Some nights, when he doesn’t want to be alone but is too stubborn or scared to ask for closeness, Bucky lies on the couch and tries to sleep while Steve works in the adjacent chair. Sometimes he cracks open his eyelids and sees Steve pressing his hands to his face, breath passing through his nostrils in panicked heaves that he’s obviously trying to stifle. The first time Bucky asked what was wrong, Steve startled, wild-eyed, like he’d been violently wrenched out of a dream. There was nothing Steve could say to explain it away, so he said nothing rather than burden Bucky with the truth. Incidents like these haunt them — unmentioned, unresolved — until sometimes it’s almost painful to be alone together.

And so Bucky’s immensely grateful that the house is now filled with his family. It detracts from the weight of the unknowns and the ghosts and, more importantly, gives Steve a break from fretting over Bucky’s appointments and medications and mood and sleep patterns and food intake and countless other major and minor daily concerns that he’s become obsessed with. That’s all become Winnie’s self-appointed occupation, which she undertakes singlehandedly and with vigor. Bucky accepts her doting better than he did at Walter Reed, because if he needs a break, he can always hobble to his room and bury himself in blankets and pain killers.

On Christmas Eve, Winnie and Daisy cook while Steve, Bucky, and Rikki sit in the living room and watch flames dance in the gas fireplace. Steve and Rikki have been almost civil with each other since her arrival, and Rikki has finally stopped glaring at Steve for sitting so close to Bucky on the couch. It’s a welcome change from the tension of several hours ago, when Steve mentioned that Sharon would be visiting in a few days. It earned an acrid half-joke from Rikki about how many exes Steve can cram into one room, which Bucky found both cruel and privately satisfying. Bucky hates that Sharon will be in the place he now calls home and can’t understand why the two of them have to be so goddamn mature about everything. Sharon is yet one more reminder of Bucky’s moral malfunctioning, one that he would rather never hear about again.

After dinner, they exchange gifts. Bucky is charmed by the drill set he receives from his ma, and he plans aloud for its use before remembering that this isn’t really their house. On the heels of that comes the brutal reminder that they’re not even a couple, no matter how many times a day Bucky might momentarily forget it.

The discomfort multiplies when Steve opens Bucky’s gift, an iPod Shuffle pre-loaded with Led Zeppelin’s first six albums. Steve’s face goes pale as he stares at it and stumbles through words of baffled thankfulness. Steve’s pallor then flushes deep pink when Bucky opens his present — a full set of barber-quality clippers with beard grooming attachments. Bucky instantly appreciates the gift for its thoughtfulness and optimism, perfect for a man who will soon be able to have any
combination of head and facial hair he pleases.

But despite Bucky’s naked gratitude, Steve disparages himself vocally for how practical and generic it is compared to what Bucky gave him. Despite many assurances, Steve collapses in on himself and goes quiet until bed. Steve’s distress is so disproportionate that Bucky figures that there must be something else behind it. Bucky’s no stranger to this phenomenon. It’s a well-known symptom of too much being held back by too little. It’s the same force that nearly got Bucky arrested before deployment, when he went ballistic on a guy for taking a picture of his truck outside a gay bar in Chapel Hill. It was nothing, just a random guy admiring his lift kit, but to Bucky, that photo was his entire career disintegrating before his eyes. He wonders what that iPod and those clippers are to Steve.

Later that night, when Bucky’s family is sleeping, he limps carefully out to the living room, taking a chance on being able to make the trek at least one way in his walking boot. It’s slow and awkward and painful, and he needs the wall more than he wishes he did, but the carpet is a high enough pile to muffle most of the noise. He finds Steve curled up on the sleeper sofa in a shape so small that it seems to defy the laws of physics. He stops and listens to Steve’s breathing, which is shallow enough that Bucky knows he’s still awake.

Bucky unsteadily lowers his body to sit on the edge of the mattress and lays his hand on Steve’s shoulder. Steve exhales slowly, leaning back into his touch, and then turns and unfolds his body. Steve looks up at him, studies him in the low light of the Christmas tree in the corner while Bucky runs his fingers through Steve’s hair. He’s taken a page out of Bucky’s playbook and has let it get rebelliously long — by Army standards, anyway. Indeed, the man beneath Bucky’s fingertips bears little resemblance to the man who deployed with him to Iraq last year, and he bears even less resemblance to the man Bucky knew before that. Bucky’s not even entirely sure who’s here now, but he feels such raw adoration for this man and craves him so much that he can no longer hide it away. Not tonight. Not on Christmas Eve. Not after everything.

And so when Steve shifts toward the center of the bed and lifts up the edge of the covers, Bucky doesn’t try to talk himself out of crawling in with him. Steve watches with patient, soft eyes while Bucky maneuvers his injured limbs into a comfortable position. And when Bucky’s finally settled on his back, the only way he can sleep now, he extends his right arm in invitation for Steve to slide in beside him. Steve rests his head on Bucky’s shoulder and drapes his arm over Bucky’s chest. Steve holds him close, and Bucky tenses as he’s visited by a series of what-ifs — what if Steve wants to kiss him, what if Steve wants to touch his bare skin, what if Steve wants to feel him through his layers of clothing, what if he wants to see what’s underneath. But his fears can’t survive in the warmth of Steve’s affection, which he has missed so, so badly.

Bucky barely sleeps that night, and neither does Steve. But it’s a sleeplessness that Bucky would gladly inhabit for the rest of his life.

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December 28, 2008

When Steve opens the front door and sees his ex-fiancée standing there, bundled in a wool pea coat and lavender scarf, the last thing he expects to feel is happiness. And after how angry she was at him, how hurt and betrayed, he most certainly doesn’t expect to see that same happiness on her face. But it’s there, strong and sure as the embrace that follows. The oddness of their joy seems to follow when
Sharon comes inside. He could be misreading it, though. From the way Sharon’s eyes shift as he leads her into the home, maybe she’s just nervous that Bucky Barnes is going to pop around the corner at any moment. He’s imagined a number of possible meetings between the two of them, some not entirely terrible, but Bucky squashed all that when he announced that he was taking the ladies to Chapel Hill for the day.

“They’re all out of town,” Steve tells Sharon, taking her into the living room. “He wasn’t exactly excited to see you.”

Sharon smiles thinly. “The feeling’s mutual.”

There’s nothing mean about the way she says it. It’s honest, something she would probably say to Bucky’s face, something that they might even say to each other without much offense.

Steve gestures to the couch he’s been sleeping on for nearly two weeks and takes her coat and scarf from her to hang them in the coat closet. When he returns, she’s seated on the edge of the cushion, hands rubbing slowly across the length of her thighs. He takes a seat next to her and tries to look more relaxed than she does, sitting back and crossing his legs.

“How was the drive?”

“Fine.” Sharon makes eye contact with him, but only momentarily. “And I’m sorry to be like this, but I have something important to tell you, and I’m nervous, and I just need to say it before we talk about anything else. It’s been cranking through my head nonstop since I left DC, and I just need to say it.”

Steve’s eyes widen. “Okay.”

“So, the last time I saw you, there were some concerns about… testing, which I had done last month.”

The words wallop Steve upside the head, knocking away every bit of the sparse calm he’s been able to cultivate for her. Suddenly he’s back in their apartment — her apartment — on that awful day, feeling the force of her astonished anger as her trust in him fragmented into dust.

Sharon sees whatever horrified expression Steve must have on his face and holds out a reassuring hand. “All the tests came back negative.”

There’s a long pause, a gaping ellipsis that sucks the room dry, like the way the tide peels back from the shore just before a tsunami hits. Steve’s breath halts in his chest while Sharon works to get the words out.

“Except the pregnancy test.”

If her opening line about the testing was a blow to the head, this part is the gauzy, reeling aftermath. The static. The chaos. A dozen replies start to generate in Steve’s mind, none of them making it past the first few unbelieving words.

“Steve?” Sharon’s hand drops to the couch cushion between them, almost, but not quite, touching his leg.

“How is that possible?” he finally asks. “You told me you were on the pill.” There’s no way to say it that doesn’t make it seem like he’s blaming her for it, and he hates the sound of it in his ears. But everything makes so little sense right now that Steve’s desperate for some modicum of clarity.
“I was. And you know how neurotic I am about it. But apparently I was taking something else that interferes with it. I don’t know. I didn’t know.” Sharon lets out a deep sigh, punctuated at the end with a tired shrug. “It failed, at any rate.”

Steve reaches into the disorganized vault of his memory and tries to recall the medicine cabinet in their bathroom. He remembers the bottle. He can see the color of the label and its promise to “promote a positive mood.” Did he read about that somewhere, how those pills could make contraception fail? Was it even that? Was she taking something else? Does it even matter at all?

“You know how on the fence I’ve been about kids,” Sharon continues. “And given how complicated things are right now, I didn’t really know what to do. So I sat with it for a while, and the more I sat with it, I don’t know.” She smiles then, heartfelt and alive. “I just thought about there being someone inside me, someone who came from you, something that was actually good this time, you know?”

Steve looks at her then, suddenly clear-eyed, punching through the haze of his disbelief and self-blame. Sharon only once ever talked to him about being raped when she was in college, including the abortion she had after. She said it once and never again, and only when she was drunk enough to let her guard down. She thought it might be a deal breaker for him, being with someone who’d let that happen to her. Her words, of course. He remembers being so angry that anyone would ever do that to her, maybe even angrier that she thought it was her fault. And then he was sad for what she had to do after, for the burden she carried with her, the burden she still carries with her.

And now she’s pregnant, and they both know it’s his, and she’s found something good in that, something to ease some of the pain of the past, and she looks so beautiful and vibrant now, even as she stumbles through her explanation of why she’s still carrying that part of him inside her.

“I don’t know. I just couldn’t imagine getting rid of it. It’s crazy. Truly, it’s nuts. That’s not… I’m not really the type of person who, you know, gets all mushy about this stuff. And maybe it’s the hormones talking, but when I went to the doctor and heard that little heart beat, I kind of fell in love with it.” Sharon lays her hand over her still-small belly, looking down at it sheepishly, like she’s embarrassed by all that love she feels. “I know it sounds stupid, but that’s how it felt.”

“It’s not stupid. I just…” Steve presses his palms to his temples. “I don’t know how this happened — I mean, how all this got so messed up.”

He telescopes back to a picture much larger than this room, back before he ever deployed, back to the very start of their relationship. God, what they had was good. Their smooth dynamic, their close bond, the way they brought out the best in each other… It was rare and good and remarkably stable. It was different from any other relationship in Steve’s whole life, a sturdy shelter from nearly three decades of unpredictability. And he singlehandedly destroyed it because he was weak, because his heart and his body were weak.

“But I do know how this happened,” he says, frail and faltering. “God damn it, I know how this happened. And it was my fault. It’s my fault that I wasn’t—”

“Please don’t. Let’s not rehash all that. It’s really not helpful.”

Steve chafes at being shut down, but he supposes she’s right. No matter how sorry he is, no matter how vehemently he blames himself, he can’t change what’s already done.

But he now has a chance to do right by her, even just a small one, and he’ll be damned if he’s going to squander it like he’s already squandered so many good things. He takes a deep breath, regrouping himself as best as he can.
“What do you need from me?” he asks.

“I mean, there are some things I’d like from you. Things that I think would be good.”

“I’ll give you whatever money I can.

Sharon gives a small snort. “You know that’s not an issue.”

Whatever solution there is here, Steve feels utterly blind to it. But then, very slowly, a possibility begins to emerge. It seems improbable, maybe even impossible. But it also seems like an actual solution, a mature one, something with the potential to create something right out of so many mistakes. He turns and shifts toward her, folding his right leg atop the couch, and makes the most meaningful eye contact he can.

“If you want me to marry you, I will. If that’ll make this right, I’ll do it.”

Something distant and a little melancholy settles on Sharon’s face. “I get that you want to do the right thing, Steve. I really get that. But all those things I said before are still true. I mean, he lives with you. He sleeps here.” She looks down at where her hands are folded on her lap. “Maybe with you.”

Steve couldn’t honestly deny it, even if it only happened once. Even if it was just the two of them half-awake and resting together on Christmas Eve, floating in all the words unspoken between them.

“I would never ask you that,” Sharon says, definitively. “It would be unfair to all of us.”

“So, what is the right thing here? I don’t even know, Sharon. I don’t even know.”

“Well, I’d like to know that, when I get deployed, you’ll be able to take over. Be a parent. Even if I don’t get deployed, I’d like you to be there as a father.”

“Of course I will. You know how I feel about that.” Something passionate stirs inside him, fragments of the promise he made to himself that he would be everything his own father was not.

“I want it to be loved by both of us. I want it to know you. And that’s going to be really interesting with both of us being on active duty, but I wanna try to make it work.”

Steve nods. “What about other things?” He then adds, cautiously, “What about people I have in my life?”

“I trust that you won’t let our kid be around people who are psychologically unstable. Even people who mean a lot to you.” There is absolutely no doubt that she’s talking about Bucky — or, at least, the way Bucky is right now. “I think that’s reasonable, don’t you?”

It is reasonable. Painfully, irrefutably reasonable.

“Yeah.”

They sit in silence for a few minutes. Steve uses the space to nervously contemplate how and when he’s going to tell Bucky about all of this. He has trouble imagining what the reaction will be. If it were still September, he could imagine a Bucky who would hug him excitedly. But being injured has changed Bucky, making him simultaneously tougher and more vulnerable than Steve’s ever seen him, and he truly has no idea what side Bucky might fall on now.

“I’m sorry,” Sharon says, breaking through the quiet. “I know it would be easier for everyone if I just terminated.”
“No.” Steve refutes her with the firm shake of his head. “It’s not about making things easy. It’s about doing what you think is best. And it’s your choice, one I’ll support however you need me to.”

“I know you’re freaking out right now.”

“No, I’m not.”

She smiles fondly at him. “Yes, you are. You’re being polite about it, but I can tell you’re freaking out. Don’t worry, there’s time to let it marinade.”

“Until when?”

“May 27th.”

May. He can pull himself together by May. Bucky should be feeling much better by then, and maybe things will finally be settled between them. Maybe they’ll figure out what they are together. Maybe there will be more good days than bad. Maybe Steve will be able to relax and not worry so much, not have to sniff for alcohol on Bucky’s breath and try to guess how many Percocets he’s taken on any given day.

“Okay. I’m sorry. I’m just really surprised, is all.”

“I know you are.” She reaches out and lays her hand on his knee. “I was, too.”

Steve glances down at that hand and wonders how her touch can still feel so calming, so welcome, even after everything that’s happened between them. Even despite how much he cares about Bucky. Maybe because he’d give anything for Bucky to touch him like that, a simple, unexpected gesture of affection. The only time Bucky ever lays a hand on him is when Steve is helping him or when Steve is visibly upset, and even that feels detached and conciliatory. He’d give anything for the easy contact they used to have.

“How are you?” Steve asks, bringing himself back to that warm hand and the woman it belongs to.

“How are you doing?”

“So far so good. Barfing a lot, but that’s normal.”

“I’m sorry.”

Sharon chuckles at his apology. “You didn’t do this to me, Steve. You know that, right? I was pretty insistent.”

He thinks to recount that night for her, remind her of the way he got drunk and let himself be persuaded by her, despite knowing it was wrong — God, he wanted her. But he has to move forward now. They have to move forward now. All of them.

“It’s gonna be okay. We’re gonna make it work, somehow” she assures him.

“I’d ask you to stay with us, but I don’t even have a bed for you,” Steve says, eager to change the subject but debatably wise in his choice of direction.

“No, no, full house. That’s great. How’s it been?”

“Pretty peaceful.”

“I’d say you deserve some peace.” She gives his knee a pat and rises to her feet. “C’mon. Let’s go get your stuff out of the rental, and then we can catch up some more.”
Steve stands and looks down at her kind face, at the new fullness of her breasts. He tries to imagine the life growing inside her, but his mind goes white. He wants to believe that it’ll be okay. He really does. He can’t see it, can’t even fathom it, but for now, he thinks that maybe he can try to trust it. Trust her.

“There’s a decent Italian restaurant off post, if you’re feeling up to it,” he offers.

“That sounds great. I lost my breakfast on the way down, so be prepared for me to eat a shocking amount of pasta.”

Steve smiles. “That I’d like to see.”

Steve waits until after Bucky’s family has flown back to New York to tell him about Sharon. He picks a good day, a Saturday where Bucky’s managing his pain well and has been spending most of the day outside his room watching a Saved by the Bell marathon on TBS. Steve waits all day for the right moment, preoccupied by how he’s going to word it, telling himself that he’ll bring it up after the next episode. Then the next. With Bucky actually smiling and mocking the show lightheartedly, it feels impossible to bring up something so serious. Steve even entertains waiting until much later — several months later, even — to tell him, but he can see that very clearly exploding in his face. And if they really are friends, that’s certainly not what friends do.

It’s after nightfall when Steve finally tells him, and he figures that maybe they can smooth it over with some dinner afterward. He forces the words out of his mouth, past the choking sensation and the terror of uncertainty. Bucky takes the news in absolute stony silence. There are no congratulations. There’s not even something resembling surprise. It’s as if he never heard Steve at all, even when Steve begs him for a response.

So when Bucky eventually works himself to his feet and tells Steve he’s going to step outside, Steve welcomes it. Bucky does that sometimes when he’s overwhelmed or frustrated. He stands on the stoop in the crisp winter air and breathes and thinks and usually comes back better than when he left.

So Steve gives Bucky time. Ten minutes. Then twenty. He’s out there without a coat, he must be freezing by now, so at twenty-five minutes, Steve cracks open the front door to check on him.

No Bucky.

Steve frowns, slides on his shoes, and heads out to the yard. The truck is still in the driveway, not that Bucky can even drive it right now with his foot still healing. Steve walks around the house, saying Bucky’s name, looking in odd places where Bucky would never actually be. Behind the shrubs. In the shed. And when he does a full loop around the building and still finds no Bucky, panic crawls up his esophagus. He walks down the driveway, slipping on a patch of black ice and nearly wiping out face-first on the sidewalk. He says Bucky’s name again, his voice loud and shaky, his thoughts jumbled and racing, and then runs into the house to grab his cell. He calls Bucky’s phone. It rings from the couch. Then he calls Sam and Nat and tries not to sound scared. They haven’t seen him but promise they’ll check around the neighborhood. Steve snatches his keys from the counter, grabs his coat and Bucky’s, and drives.

He finds Bucky four streets down, crutching in the general direction of Sam and Nat’s neighborhood. It’s at least another mile away, but he looks resolved. Steve slows the truck and drives along beside him, talking to him through the open passenger window.

“What the hell are you doing?” Steve calls, hearing anger in his words that he didn’t even know he
was carrying.

“Going for a fucking stroll,” Bucky snaps back.

His crutching picks up speed, like he’s aiming to out-limp the truck, and he gasps sharply when he hits a small slick of ice with his good foot. He steadies himself, pausing only for a beat, then resumes his course.

“Get in the truck.”

“No.”

“You’re being immature.”

“So what? I’ve earned the right to be a little fucking immature. It’s fucked up. Everything’s fucking fucked up. This is just the fucking icing on top of the fucking bullshit cake.”

Underneath the street light, Steve watches Bucky’s face contort into an angry scowl, jaw clenching, teeth bared, snarling into the darkness.

“What the fuck else could be fucked up right now?” Bucky says. “Is there anything left?”

They’re the very same questions that Steve has silently asked for days. Weeks. The past three months. He’s fantasized about screaming them, sometimes at work, sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes in the shower, sometimes when he’s trying to park Bucky’s goddamn truck. He’s fantasized about screaming them at Barton, screaming them in Bucky’s face, screaming them into his pillow, at his own reflection in the mirror. He’s wanted to scream them into the sky, out into this sick fucking universe, the kind of place that gives a single mother cancer three different times, decapitates young soldiers with piano wire, and mutilates selfless men who kill themselves in small ways, day in and day out, in order to spare other people pain.

Steve wishes he could tell Bucky that he feels the same way, that he’s just as terrified and angry and lost, all the time. But the words would be wasted on him now, dismissed as platitudes. So Steve takes another tact.

“Get you ass in the truck right now, or I’ll come out there and throw you in myself. You’re gonna brain yourself on the sidewalk.”

Bucky barks out a laugh, but he does slow down a bit. “Y’know, a good braining sounds pretty goddamn nice right about now.”

“Please get in the truck.”

“Just let me throw a fucking tantrum for a minute. Jesus Christ.”

“Fine, but will you please stop walking?”

Bucky slows to a stop and turns away from Steve, toward an empty field stretched out before him. His shoulders rise and fall as something begins to crescendo in him, and he pulls in a deep breath.

“This is bullshit!” Bucky screams into the night, as loudly as he screamed when Parker shoved him full of hemostatic dressing. The sound travels out like an explosive wave, and Steve hopes that nobody calls the police.

The passenger door opens, and Bucky drags himself into the cab with enough ease to tell Steve that
he’s probably pretty high on painkillers.

“All right. I’m done,” Bucky says flatly, buckling himself in.

Steve hands Bucky his coat and starts driving. He’s pissed, and he doesn’t want to say anything to make it worse for either of them. So he drives and waits for Bucky to talk, which he does a few minutes later.

“Sorry. I couldn’t handle yet another thing to feel terrible about.”

“What are you talking about?”

“C’mon, Steve. If I hadn’t taken you to bed, kissed you, and had you suck my dick, which I desperately wanted, you’d be able to have a real family now.”

“You don’t get to take credit for that. I already told you. I could have said no any time, and it would have stopped.” Steve takes it one step further, to prove his own culpability. “I shouldn’t even have come to see you that night.”

In the light from the console, Steve watches Bucky wince.

“A kid needs a mom and a dad. Together. In a family. A real one.” Bucky looks over at him, expression determined. “You’ve gotta make this right.”

Steve shakes his head against Bucky’s rigid thinking. Christ knows where he picked up all that nonsense. “There is no ‘right.’ She doesn’t want me back, anyway. It’s not an option.”

“Did you even try?”

“Yes.”

Bucky makes a noise that sounds both injured and impressed. “Still, it’s wrong. No kid should have to grow up like that.”

“Yeah, God forbid the kid turns out like me, right?”

Steve means for it to come out harsh, and it does. No matter what people might say about Steve and what kind of man he is, Sarah Rogers raised him right. She sacrificed everything she had, ran her body into the ground to send him to a good school and all the camps and college courses he wanted so that he didn’t languish intellectually. All his adult mistakes, especially the big ones, were certainly no fault of hers.

“That’s not what I meant,” Bucky says, plaintive.

“And what about your ma? She did a pretty good job after your dad died.”

“Oh, did she? I wouldn’t know, because she was never home. Because she had to work double shifts practically every night to keep us in our apartment.”

“That’s not the situation here. Sharon’s family has a lot of money. The kid will probably have a full-time nanny.”

“Well, good for Sharon. See, you could’ve been rich. And you blew it.”

“It is what it is, Buck. I don’t have a time machine, so this is just how it is.” Steve sighs and rakes his hand through his hair. “I don’t understand why it bothers you so much. Why it actually bothers you.”
Bucky goes very quiet, and when he finally speaks, his voice is low.

“I just hate you sometimes. You get all the things I’ve ever wanted, and now you get a kid, and you don’t even want it. I can see it in your face.”

“That is not true. This just isn’t how I wanted it to happen. That’s all.”

“You should be grateful, not moping around like someone died. I’d kill for the things that fall on your lap by accident.”

Steve shakes his head, exhausted by this entire conversation. “I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“There’s nothing to say, Steve. It just sucks.”

They pull up to an intersection at the border between the residential community and the base proper. A left turn will take them to food and a right will swing them back around toward home again.

“Do you wanna grab some dinner?” Steve asks.

“No.”

Steve takes a carefully controlled breath and makes a right turn. They drive in silence. Bucky stares out the passenger window, scarred chin resting in his upturned palm. Steve can’t tell if he’s actually looking anything or if his gaze is dull and turned inward.

“I can’t do this,” Bucky finally says.

“What?”

“Whatever this is. With us. It’s just not gonna work.”

Even though Steve strains to define what their relationship is now, Bucky’s words fill him with dread. “In what way?”

“Any way. Practically.” He pauses and then, very quietly, he adds, “Physically.”

“Bucky, I… That’s not an issue for me.”

“Well, it is for me. Plus, in five or six weeks, I’m out. And then I won’t even be able to stay here.”

“Why?”

“Civilians can’t live in military housing if they’re not family.”

“We’ll just move off post.”

“And then what?” Bucky’s looking over at him now, eyes sharp and daring him to work an unworkable scenario. “Wait ’til you get kicked out for being a part-time homo?”

Steve carefully ignores the last part in favor of the first. “I don’t know. Just be together. Or not. We can just be roommates. Friends. Whatever. I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give me.”

“That’s sad.”

“What is?”
“That you think I have anything to give you.”

“I don’t want to take anything from you,” Steve tells him. “I just want you in my life. That’s all.”

“I don’t know why.”

“Because I love you. I can’t help it.”

Steve blurts out the words, sharp and frustrated and desperate. Beside him, he feels Bucky soften and open, his walls retracted in a stunned sort of processing error. For a few breathtaking moments, there are no boundaries between them, no roadblocks to weave around, no resistance to negotiate. It’s what Steve has always craved from Bucky, one of the reasons they fucked so much when they were dating. Because back then, it was the only time Steve ever got to see him unguarded like this. This is like that, somehow, and Steve would pay any price to drag this feeling into eternity.

It doesn’t last long, of course. Bucky can’t tolerate the openness, and he swings back around with a magnificent coup de grace.

“I’m going back to New York when I get out,” Bucky says plainly.

“To visit?”

Bucky stiffens against the back of his seat, jaw set firmly. Stoically. “To live. With Rikki and Daisy. So this just isn’t gonna work.”

Steve… knew. Deep beneath all of his fragile hopes and daydreams about their life together, he knew all this would probably end with Bucky leaving. It happened before. Why wouldn’t it happen again? Why would things be different between them this time, when the stakes are so much higher and the pain so much greater?

But even though the logic is entirely sound and quite possibly unstoppable, Steve still rages against it. He’s not about to write another scene to regret in the coming months and years. He’s not about to let Bucky go without a mess, at the very least. Even if it wrecks them in the process.

“Do you love me?” Steve asks. “I want the truth.”

Bucky pulls in a long breath and keeps it in, brow furrowing, until he finally says, “Yes.”

“Then stay with me. We’ll figure it out together.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I just can’t.” Bucky’s dispassionate resolve audibly crumbles with those words. It falls away, exposing the kind of bare anguish that turns Steve’s stomach.

“When will I see you again?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says, sandpaper rough.

Steve’s imagination catapults into the future, a future with no Bucky in it. A future where Steve doesn’t get to see Bucky’s pillow-marked face in the morning and his disheveled hair; where he doesn’t get to hear his grumbling for coffee and doesn’t get to smell the sleep on him; where he never sees Bucky’s rare, brilliant smile and never hears his voice down the hall saying anything. Anything at all. A curse. A song. A complaint. A perfunctory phone call to some doctor.

He imagines a future where Bucky is far away, unreachable, hollowed out and miserable, faking wellness by day and drinking himself into oblivion by night. Steve imagines him alone and aching
for comfort he’ll never allow himself, an eternal prisoner of his own self-loathing. And he imagines Bucky slowly dying from grief and guilt, wandering his own life like a phantom. And Steve is so fucking scared, so fucking sick with sadness that he has to pull into an empty parking lot.

Steve slams the shifter into park and presses himself hard against the door. His eyes prickle with hot tears as he looks out the window and tries to blink them away, failing fantastically. He can’t stop them from coming, not when his heart is breaking open. And it only gets worse when Bucky unbuckles his seatbelt, flips up the center console, and slides in close.

“C’mon, Steve. Don’t. Please.” Bucky lays one hand on Steve’s shoulder, gripping weakly, even though Steve knows it’s as tight as he as he can hold him now. “I’m sorry.”

Steve shakes his head and tries to pull away, even though he has nowhere to go. Bucky’s touch feels like a wound, one he both deeply desires and can’t stand to feel.

“I’m being selfish,” Steve murmurs. “You should be with your family. I shouldn’t have so many goddamn ideas.”

“Your ideas are sweet.” Bucky slides his hand from Steve’s shoulder up to his neck. “They’re just not possible. I just don’t have anything to give to anybody, even to someone who loves me. It’s not right.”

Steve clenches his teeth together and presses his forehead to the cold window. “I hate this. I fucking hate this. I hate what happened to you. It’s all I think about, every single fucking day, and I just want to make things better. I just want you to be okay…” He chokes out a single wet sob, and his breath paints a flair of condensation on the glass.

“I think I should stay with Sam until I get out. We talked about it, and he thought it might be good, too.” Bucky’s voice is gentle, as gentle as the feel of his fingers on the nape of Steve’s neck.

Steve turns, surging with fear, every part of him begging Bucky not to take away the small time they have left. “No. Please don’t.”

Bucky cups Steve’s face in his hands. “The longer I stay with you, the harder it’s gonna be when I leave.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care if it’s hard.”

Bucky guides Steve’s head down to his shoulder, cradling him with such tenderness that it makes Steve want to scream his agony into the wool of Bucky’s sweater.

“It might be the most devastatingly honest thing Bucky has ever said, spoken like a secret that’s carving up his insides, hemorrhaging out of him like so much blood. Staining Foggy’s hands. Staining the dirt.

Steve lifts his head. His knows his face is ugly with tears and snot and heartbreak, and his words are messier still, gushing forth in a torrent of blind fear while he balls his fists in the front of Bucky’s sweater.

“You will come back from this. You have to. You don’t get to quit. You are loved so much, and your family and I, Sam and Natasha, we need you. I need you. And I want you in my life forever. Even if you move on and find someone else, you’re still my friend, and I’ll never stop caring about
you. I’ll never stop loving you. I never did stop. I can’t—"

“Shhh.” Bucky brushes the wetness from Steve’s cheeks with his thumbs. “Shut up, okay? Let’s go home. Order pizza. Prank call Sitwell. Okay?”

“But—"

“I love you, Steven. You’re going to be such a good dad. I see how good you are to the men, how much you care about them. And you’re sweet and so loving to me. You take such good care of me.” Bucky smiles, and he blinks a tear out of his left eye. “But you’ve gotta take care of yourself now, ‘cause what you’re doing now, it’s gonna ruin you. It’s already happening. Worrying about me, thinking about all that horrible shit all the time, it’s gonna eat you alive.

“And that’s why I’m gonna go stay with Sam. Because I love you so fucking much, and I can’t watch you mourn me anymore.”

Steve squeezes his eyes shut and presses his forehead to Bucky’s shoulder, taking in hitching, ragged breaths, spent and disbelieving and utterly powerless to stop the future from happening. Bucky shushes him, holding him, his own voice thick with sadness. It feels like the breakup they never really got to have, except this feels so crushingly final that Steve wishes he could just cry himself into extinction right here in Bucky’s arms.

“Fuck,” Bucky breathes, then kisses Steve’s head. “I’m not dying, Steve. I’m just going to New York.”

“So why does it feel like I’m never gonna see you again?”

“Look, I just need some time to adjust to all this. That’s all. I don’t know what that’s gonna look like, but I’m gonna try. And you can take leave and come see me in the spring, and we can troll around Brooklyn together. Or, I guess, limp around Brooklyn together.”

Bucky sounds earnest enough. He sounds like he means it. He sounds like he’s going to actually try. He sounds like he really does want Steve to come see him, that he’ll be okay until then. Cautiously, very cautiously, Steve allows himself to hope for it.

“I want that,” Steve says fiercely. “I want that so bad.”

Bucky raps his knuckles lightly against Steve’s skull. “And go to the goddamn doctor already. Get your tests done. Do what you need to do to get better, too. You’ve got people counting on you, and you’re gonna have a really important person counting on you soon enough.”

“Fine.” Steve lifts his head from Bucky’s shoulder and wipes his face with his sleeve. “But I want to take you to the airport, when you go back. I want to say goodbye to you properly.”

Bucky nods seriously. “Done.”

“I swear to God, if you even think of leaving without saying goodbye to me, I will go AWOL and hunt you down.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.” Bucky smiles and presses one more kiss to Steve’s salty cheek. “Sam and Nat are going to take care of me, Steve. Don’t worry. And we can still talk, you know.”

“I know they’ll take care of you.” Steve pulls away from Bucky and re-orients himself to the manual tasks of driving. His arms and hands feel heavy and dull as numbness sinks into his whole body. He doesn’t feel better so much as washed out, too tired to cry anymore, too defeated to argue. “I should
call them and let them know I found you. Should we see if they wanna join us for dinner?”

Bucky lays his hand on Steve’s thigh, tentatively. “Not tonight. I just want it to be us tonight.” There’s something charged about the way Bucky’s fingers slide down to the tender skin of Steve’s inner thigh, angling in just slightly. It’s not exactly sexual, but it’s something close to it. “I want to go to bed with you. I want you to hold me.”

Bucky looks down at his where his hand rests on Steve’s leg. He hesitates, taking a couple of unsteady breaths, before continuing.

“I want you to kiss me. I want to feel you on top of me, just kissing me. And I want to know that you’ll stop there.”

Steve’s heart quickens. “Of course I will.”

“You have to promise.”

“I promise. Of course I promise. I would never do anything you didn’t want me to do.”

Steve lays his hand over Bucky’s and squeezes softly, just like Bucky squeezed his hand at the airport. He hopes his squeeze conveys as much to Bucky as Bucky’s conveyed to him. He hopes Bucky feels all the love he has for him, all of the respect, all of the gentleness he feels and wants to give him.

Bucky accepts Steve’s hand in his own. “Okay. Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Mentions of abortion and past sexual assault, pregnancy, hopelessness, homophobic language, some vaguely shmoopy angst-mush, details about genital injury, ableist language

In-processing: All of the logistical stuff and human resource stuff you do when you join a new unit

Behavioral health: So, this is the Army’s lovely little euphemism for mental health. It used to be called mental hygiene, then mental health, and now it’s behavioral health. The idea is to try to de-stigmatize mental health issues and mental health treatment, which I think has been met with some success.

White elephant: Not sure how broad this tradition is around the world, but it’s essentially a gift giving game where you bring a present and get someone else’s present based on chance. When your turn comes up, you can opt to steal someone else’s gift or try your hand at a new unopened gift.

Lift kit: Gawd, not sure how many people are familiar with this, but it’s something that makes the body of one’s truck (commonly) or other vehicle sit further off of the axel. These can range from tasteful lift jobs to ridiculous ones. I’m imagining Bucky would have a slight one to make his truck look bigger, because in the Army, truck size = manliness size. If you’re looking to play straight, a truck with a lift kit is one way to go.

Saved by the Bell: A sitcom about high school that ran from 1989-1992, when Bucky
and Steve would have been pre-/early teens.

AWOL: Absent Without Leave. You can technically be listed as AWOL if you show up for work an hour late, but punishment for it usually reserved for longer stretches of time. An AWOL of 30 days or more would constitute desertion.
Nearly a week after Bucky moves out, Bucky calls to tell Steve that his med board results came in. It was fast, much faster than Steve ever thought a med board could go. Bucky jokes about it being the clearest case of permanent gimp-ism any of the docs have probably ever seen, a joke that Steve makes laughing sounds at as he sags into his office chair.

“Jeez, it’s not like I’m leaving today,” Bucky says.

There’s a rushing muffle on Bucky’s end, maybe wind passing over the speaker of his cell. Steve looks out his window and wonders where on post Bucky is. A week ago, he’d know exactly where he was. He’d be going to pick him up soon.

“So when are you leaving?”

“Well, I’ve got about two weeks of leave saved up. Figure I might as well take it here so I can spend time with everyone. It’ll take me a week to out-process.”

Three weeks. Not five or six, as Bucky suggested earlier. Bucky couldn’t have known it’d be so fast, but Christ. Like a fool, Steve latched onto those numbers with fervor. Held them like treasure. Like a promise. In his head, Steve breaks it down into days, hours, minutes. Despite the fact that each iteration produces a larger number, it still doesn’t feel like nearly enough.

Sousa glances into Steve’s office as he strolls down the hallway toward Barton’s. Steve doesn’t think about what expression he might be wearing, but from the quirk of Sousa’s entire face, he’s guessing it’s not a great one. Sousa gives him a wave, anyway.

“Big news,” Steve finally says, waving back a little too late. “How are you doing?”

“Uh, okay, I guess. My head’s kinda spinning a little.”

“I bet.”

“You should come over tonight. We’re gonna watch Spaceballs.”
“Yeah, sure,” Steve replies, trying not to sound like his stomach just launched into his throat.

It’s been an excruciatingly long six days since Bucky left, and although they’ve talked every evening, the physical separation has been difficult. Steve pretty quickly ran out of tricks and excuses to keep Bucky on the phone at night, and doing so was starting to feel desperate, maybe even a little pathetic. So they just decided to stay on the line without pretense, even if neither has much to say. They usually chat until Bucky gets mumbly and his voice fills with sleep, when all he can manage is just a few gritty “mm-hmms” to whatever Steve’s rambling on about. Sometimes Steve just keeps talking long after Bucky goes silent, talking about work, talking about safe things, staying on the phone until the hours are small. Sometimes Steve keeps the line open until morning. Sometimes he can hear Bucky breathing.

“Don’t sound so excited,” Bucky says.

“I am excited.”

“Bring your jam jams and we can have a sleepover.” Bucky says this with a thick Brooklyn accent, pitching his register high in an admirable impression of Sarah Rogers.

Put on your jam jams, and I’ll make you boys some popcorn. Good lord, the same routine until Steve was seventeen years old. Until Bucky moved out of his ma’s place and got an apartment with the concession stand girl from Cobble Hill Cinema.

“We can pile on the living room floor,” Steve says, imagining it.

“No way. Sam’s got a king size bed. A comfy one, too.”

Steve’s eyebrows rise. “Oh yeah? Spend a lot of time there?”

“Only when I have bad dreams.”

It’s clearly meant to be a joke, but it lands like a brick. Steve’s heard Bucky’s bad dreams, and there’s nothing faintly amusing about them. He’s laid in bed, fists clenched in the bedding, listening through the shared wall while Bucky moans, tosses, and gasps or screams himself awake. The memory shakes Steve, almost as badly as the reality, and he moves to change the subject.

“Mack made the E-5 list.” Steve pulls the promotion list printout from a manilla envelope and scans down to Mack’s name, which he highlighted liberally in his excitement.

“Of course he did.”

“You should call him. He’d love to hear from you.”

“I don’t know about that,” Bucky mutters.

“You prepped him for the board. Call him.” Steve stiffens his posture when Mack himself appears in his doorway, knocking on the frame tentatively. “Speak of the devil…” Steve waves Mack in. “Hey, I gotta let you go,” he says to Bucky.

“Come after work. Tell Mack I said congratulations.”

“Tell him yourself. And I’ll be there.”

“Hey—”

Steve hangs up and slides his phone into his pocket.
Mack plants himself in front of Steve’s desk at the position of attention, a solid wall of ground pounding force with a face that Steve will never forget. “You wanted to see me, Sir?”

“At ease, Sergeant Mackenzie,” Steve tells him, standing. He holds out a hand to him and nods toward the new rank on his chest. “Congratulations.”

Mack takes Steve’s hand in his own gigantic one and gives it a firm shake. “Thank you, Sir.”

“You gonna celebrate?”

“Absolutely. If you want to stop by, Sir, we’ll all be at Mickey’s tonight.” The tone of the invitation is sincere rather than obligatory, and Steve almost regrets having to turn it down.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got something else I need to do.” Steve presses his fingertips against the varnished surface of his desk. He’s still trying to remember what he used to do with his hands, before the war. “I’m really proud of you, Sergeant. Not that I had a lot to do with it.”

“That’s not true, Sir. I always feel like you have my back. We all do. You trust us. You give us the space to grow and make mistakes. That’s important to becoming a good leader.”

Hearing Bucky’s words from the mouth of a brand new NCO feels like a kind of birth. Or maybe a rebirth. It’s a way for Bucky to live on even after he’s gone, Mack’s words harkening back to the man who once led him, who probably learned them from another man who’s now long gone.

“You’ve all earned that trust,” Steve tells him through the sudden tightening of his throat. “I’m going to have you shadow Sergeants Dugan and Rhodes on a rotating basis so you can start learning to be a squad leader.”

Mack gives a self-effacing smile. “Don’t quite think I have the rank for that.”

“No, but I’d like you to pinch hit whenever you can. And I want to sit down with you to look at your goals and see what we need to do to get you where you want to go.”

“I was actually thinking of applying to Ranger School.”

Steve nods, touching his hand to Mack’s file as an odd sort of excitement crackles under his skin. “You definitely have the scores for it. Let’s talk more on Monday at 15:00, see about getting you slotted. I’ll talk with Sergeant Dugan, too.”

Mack stands a little taller. “Hooah, Sir.”

“All right, Sergeant. You’re released for the day.” Steve gestures toward the door. “Go have fun. Safely.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Mack snaps back to the position of attention, then turns to leave.

“Can you close the door on your way out?” Steve calls behind him.

“Yes, Sir.”

The door clacks shut, and a smile bursts wide on Steve’s face. He gives himself these moments to be happy for Mack, to feel proud of him, to hope for his future. This shifts into a prayer — the secular kind — that Mack makes it out of the Army alive. It fades his smile, even though Steve knows his odds are pretty good. He tries not to be too scared for all of them. He tries not to imagine them ending up like Trip or Bucky or worse, if there is a worse.
Steve closes his eyes, clears his head, and tries to sink into the quiet of the room. Under his breath, he murmurs a series of words: *salamander, egg white, distill, hedge, osmosis… osmosis… something, talon, verge, quince. Osmosis…*

“Fuck.”

He can still see parts of the list, the college ruled paper etched with his neat block lettering. But he can only see it in fragments now. There’s a gap that stretches from osmosis to talon, where at least two or three words lay. Steve dips his hand into his pocket, pulls out the list, and unfolds it. He stares at it, cursing silently to himself, wondering how he could forget butter and victory and cat. He scowls and tries to capture the whole sheet in his brain, scan it in like a photograph, the way he used to see things. He’s never had to think about it before. He doesn’t even quite know *how* to think about it. He doesn’t know how to reclaim something that he never learned, never even earned, in the first place.

Steve sighs and folds the paper back up. He’ll just have to try again later.

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Over the next three weeks, Steve falls into two modes of operation: spending time with Bucky and waiting to spend time with Bucky. The modest restraint they showed in the days after Bucky moved out — the restraint that was supposed to make things easier on both of them — has vanished. There’s no time for that now. No time to do the right thing. No time to waste on high ideals.

It’s not lost on Steve that this new arrangement has done little to ease his obsession with Bucky. Only instead of worrying about and attempting to orchestrate every moment of his day, Steve has become fixated on having as many moments with Bucky as he can before he leaves all of them for New York. Not only that, Steve wants them to be good moments. Normal and healthy moments. No breaking down, no moping, no crying, no fighting, no reasons to create more worry between them. So Steve has to be good. On point. Fine and dandy and ready to do whatever Bucky asks of him. He’ll do anything, he’s already decided. Anything to make him happy.

So Steve drags himself heavily through slow-moving days, living entirely for the evenings and nights he spends with Bucky at Sam and Natasha’s house. It’s safer there, they both figured. Having Sam and Natasha there keeps the mood lighter. It keeps the quips and smiles flowing. It keeps them all from visiting the dark places where the unknowns live. It keeps Steve from remembering that he’s going to be a father. It keeps him from remembering that Bucky’s leaving and never coming back.

Steve rarely goes to his own home now, and when he does, it’s only to grab new clothes, do the odd load of laundry, and shove some food down his gullet. It’s a relief to be away from home, because in the gaping quiet Bucky left behind, it’s hard to keep his mind from straying to the places he hates to go. Khalidiya, mostly. God, he might not be able to remember simple words on a fucking list, but he can remember every single detail of that day. Every smell, every sound, every wrenching second of watching Bucky writhe naked and bloody on the ground. Sometimes Steve gags. Sometimes he’s sure he’s going to vomit, just like he did when he first saw Bucky’s face and knew. And so he rushes in and out of his home like he’s on a timer, pushing through it because he knows Bucky’s waiting somewhere for him on the other side.

At first, it was strange to be in Sam and Natasha’s home. Steve wasn’t quite sure how to act in front of the two of them, especially knowing how protective they both are of Bucky and how keenly they once despised Steve. Hell, maybe they still despise him, albeit quietly. Sitting on the love seat next to Bucky, as they so often do to watch TV, Steve wasn’t sure how close he should sit, or if they should hold hands, or if they should lean into each other the way they always used to when they were friends and then more.
The awkwardness lingered until Bucky resolved the issue for them one night, pulling Steve’s arm over his shoulders and sinking against him. Sam eyed Bucky warily from the other couch, where he and Natasha were similarly arranged. Steve watched the silent exchange between the two men, one so subtle he couldn’t possibly translate its parts. It ended with a resigned shake of Sam’s head, one offset with a thin smile. Steve felt Bucky relax into him then, not even realizing he’d been holding himself back.

At night, Steve sleeps on the couch because Bucky asks him to, and he carefully keeps the disappointment from reaching his face. It’s almost enough just to know that Bucky’s in the same house, that if Steve walks down the hall to use the bathroom, he can pass by Bucky’s door and know he’s behind it. He entertains other things, entirely to himself, things that he would never ask for and may never come to pass. But he can’t deny that he wants them. Not if he’s honest.

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The second-to-last night before Bucky leaves is a Friday. They’re all in the living room watching the last few minutes of a movie Steve can barely recall. His thoughts have been weaving through those dark places, unable to stay the course with Bucky’s departure looming. Steve is trying to be present, trying to memorize these moments as vividly as he’s memorized so many terrible ones. He’s trying to remember the way Bucky’s hair smells, the angles of his body once padded by muscle, the way Bucky’s hand feels against his own, the exact timbre of Bucky’s laugh. Bucky’s been in such good spirits lately, and Steve hopes it’s because he’s actually doing well. He’s not sure he’d want to know, if it was something else.

The credits roll, and none of them move. It’s late, and the week has been long for all of them. Natasha stretches her arms overhead with a drawn-out groan, which turns into a yelp when Sam digs his fingers into her ribs. It earns him an elbow to the chest and is enough to get them both off the couch. They grab and squawk and laugh and tickle their way toward the bedroom, and Steve watches Bucky smile lazily in their direction.

“Bedtime, you turkeys!” Sam calls out, presumably to them.

Bucky reaches up to where Steve’s hand is draped over his shoulder and pulls on his fingers. “Wanna try out Sam’s amazing bed?”

Steve’s eyebrows gather. “Where will Sam sleep?”

“In his bed.”

“And Natasha?”

“In the same bed.”

“Like, all of us…?”

Bucky tilts his chin up so he can murmur in Steve’s ear. “To sleep, you perv.”

Steve takes a very quiet and very deep breath. Bucky can surely feel it beneath him. He can surely know how foreign this is to him — scratch that, how fucking weird this is to him.

“If that’s what you want,” Steve eventually replies.

Bucky presses a kiss to the underside of Steve’s jaw. “That’s what I want.”

“Okay.”
Steve’s the last one to get ready for bed, perhaps to delay the inevitable for a few more minutes. He stares into the mirror above the sink and traces a hasty mental path to how he got here from the Pentagon just one year ago. One year ago, he would be in the bathroom he shared with Sharon, wondering what it would be like to go to war. Today, he’s in the bathroom of another soldier he barely even knows, wondering what it would be like to commit a gross act of fraternization by sleeping in a bed with three NCOs, one of whom is Bucky Barnes. Not even a Mad Lib could describe such an improbable future.

Even though he’s wearing a t-shirt and sleep pants, Steve feels exposed when he reaches the doorway to Sam’s room. He leans on the door jamb and slides his hands into his pockets. He has to put them somewhere. The three of them are already piled into the bed, Nat then Sam then Bucky, and all three of them look to him and smile at his self-consciousness. Bucky is positively grinning, even giggling, and he lifts the sheets to cover the joyful half of his face.

What a life other people live. What closeness they share. The separation Steve’s cultivated over the years has left him with so little, left him aching for what the three of them seem to have so easily. And now as they’re inviting him in, he’s frozen on the edge of it, scared of what it might mean to let go.

“C’mon L.T.,” Sam says, extending his hand toward the empty spot next to Bucky. “We’re waiting on you.”

Bucky pats the mattress and seems to sober a bit. This is what Bucky wants. For Steve to be with him. To be with them. Steve swiftly moves to overthink it, to imbue it with significance. Maybe it’s Bucky’s way of taking care of him, to leave Steve with at least two friends when he goes. If they’ve all slept in the same bed, hell, can they really keep being mere acquaintances?

Sorrow seeps into him and pulls him toward the bed. He crawls in next to Bucky and lets himself be embraced in the awkward way Bucky embraces him now, with his broken arm and braced right leg and covered body. It still feels just as warm as it ever did. Just as earnest.

Bucky kisses the top of his head. “Comfy?”

“Yeah.”

“Told you.”

Steve snorts and lays his hand on Bucky’s sternum. He imagines those scant chest hairs he saw back in Iraq, resting just below his fingertips. He wonders distantly if he’ll ever see them again.

“All right, kids, ready for lights out?” Natasha asks.

“Yep!” Sam says.

“Yes, Sergeant,” Bucky adds. “What about you, Professor?”

Steve buries his face in Bucky’s shirt. “Oh, Jesus. Sure.”

Steve drifts in and out of sleep, trying to stay awake as long as possible so that he can engrave the feel of Bucky’s body onto his mind. He pulls himself out of Bucky’s arms at daybreak to use the bathroom, and when he comes back, he sees Sam pressed up to Bucky’s other side, his arm draped
over Bucky’s waist. Steve wonders if Sam was like that before he got up, and he’s halted momentarily by a hot wave of jealousy.

He glances at Bucky’s face and finds him awake, looking up at him with fond eyes. Bucky holds his right arm out to invite Steve back into the fold and Steve accepts, but not before leaning down and pressing his lips to Bucky’s, heavy and possessive. After a stunned second, Bucky gives it right back, meeting him with equal force, and something sparks inside of Steve. Something intense and wild that has no business sparking. Steve pulls back and hovers over him for a few more tense seconds before crawling back into bed.

The Bucky of the past, Steve’s insatiable, dark-eyed lover, might have murmured any number of things then. A promise for later. A playful chiding. But this Bucky only strokes his hair and releases a deep breath when Steve’s arm settles back over his body, careful to avoid the places Sam Wilson has claimed. Steve hates his own jealousy. How misplaced it is. How selfish it is.

Bucky should be loved like this, Steve thinks. Bucky should know that he’s loved like this. Now and always.

———

At some point, Steve must fall asleep again, because he feels himself being pulled out of it by a clacking sound, then another, and by the time Steve gains enough sense to open his eyes, the door is slowly swinging closed. He doesn’t move because, beneath him, Bucky is actually asleep. And beside Bucky, the bed is empty.

From the cushion of Bucky’s shoulder, Steve looks at where his hand is pressed to Bucky’s chest, how it rises and falls with the steady rocking of Bucky’s breath. Fear blindsides him when he thinks about how close that chest came to never rising again, and he wonders morbidly how many pints away from death Bucky was. He remembers how pale Bucky’s face was, how cold sweat beaded upon it, how his lips turned blue when his lung collapsed. That unstoppable horror begins to crest, the kind that makes Steve sick, and he curls in so closely to Bucky, holds onto him so tightly, that it wakes him.

Bucky moans and brings his splinted arm up to lay across Steve’s. He grips Steve weakly at the elbow, then gives it a few soft pats.

“‘Morning.”

Bucky’s greeting is muffled by the sound of Steve’s own blood pounding in his ears.

“You trying to squeeze me to death?”

The turn of phrase couldn’t be more awful, and Steve forces his hand and arm to relax. He tries to force his whole self to relax, breathing the way he might before weapons qualification, deep and slow.

“I want you to stay over tonight,” Steve says, impervious to how forward and unaccommodating and opportunistic he might seem. “Bring your stuff. I’ll take you to the airport tomorrow.”

“You sick of sharing me?”

“Yes.”

There’s a long pause then. Bucky runs his hand up and down the length of Steve’s forearm, over the golden hair that dusts it.
“Fine,” Bucky replies, “but you’ve gotta give me some time alone time with Sam and Nat today. I have to say goodbye.” That final word hangs in the room like a pendulous, menacing creature. Bucky’s hand stops at Steve’s wrist and then clasps onto it, as if it could tether him here. Keep him from winding down into the unknowns.

“Take as much time as you need. You don’t even have to come over at all,” Steve says, backtracking as fear and horror burn off, leaving ashen guilt behind. “We can just stay here, if you want.”

“No, I want to stay with you. I wasn’t sure if you’d… If that’d be a bad idea.”

Steve smirks. “Maybe. Probably.”

“We can just regret it later, I guess.”

“I won’t regret it. I’ll never regret being with you. Not for one moment,” Steve says seriously. Bucky pets his head. “You’re sweet in the morning. You never used to be sweet in the morning.”

“Well, morning can’t be all that bad when you wake up in a warm bed, right? At least we’re not waking up on top of a Humvee or a pile of rocks.”

“Fuck that,” Bucky replies, chuckling.

Bucky goes quiet for a few moments, and his next words are hushed. Reverent.

“I will miss that sunrise, though. My God…”

Steve lifts his head so he can see Bucky’s face, so he can capture this moment, too. The twitching of Bucky’s scarred chin. The watery shimmer in his eyes. The pain. The loss. Steve takes it in as hungrily as everything else. He lays a hand on Bucky’s cheek and everything gets worse, though nothing spills out and nothing spills over.

Steve’s not sure if it ever will.

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Steve leaves shortly after they wake up and retreats back to his empty house. Bucky’s grateful for his departure. Grateful for the break from the intensity. Steve’s intensity. Their intensity. It’s an intensity Bucky has trouble naming. It feels close to the way things were before he first left for Afghanistan in 2002, except then, Steve was the one being left behind. Now, it’s Bucky’s turn to be tossed aside, like all his years of service have meant nothing. Just a certificate of appreciation and a monthly retirement check. Thanks for playing, have a nice life. He still hasn’t had a chance to fully process the fact that tomorrow he’ll no longer be a soldier. He keeps reminding himself, trying to inoculate himself for when it finally hits home, but it seems too inconceivable right now.

He’s in pain today. A lot of it. He’s been loading up on painkillers at night to maintain appearances, but it’s taken a real hit to his supply. He once overheard Sam refer to his nightly dosing as “sailing the U.S.S. Percocet,” spoken in a worried tone to Nat when they thought he was conked out on the couch. But all the back channel fretting has been worth it to keep Steve from worrying, from seeing how things really are. Above all, Bucky wants to leave Steve with the impression that he’s okay and that he’s going to continue to be okay, even though Bucky doubts it frequently. Every single morning when his body is stiff and uncooperative. Every single time he strips out of his layers of clothes to shower. Every time he whips out his mangled dick to piss. Every time he sweats through surges of bone-deep pain. Every time he comes dangerously close to throwing something — a crutch, a plate, a book — because he’s so overwhelmed with anger or fear or resentment.
But today is his last day with Sam and Nat, and he’s trying to make it a good one. Despite the pain, he wants to be here for them and wants to give them the same assurance he thinks he’s giving Steve. It’s the best way to make a clean break with them, really. Bucky’s not naive enough to assume that they’ll actually stay in touch after he leaves. He knows how these things go. There will be promises that they’ll talk every week, which will turn into the occasional awkward phone call or text on a birthday or anniversary, consisting of some variant of “we really need to talk more often.” Then there’ll be another deployment, and they’ll be off the grid, and then a redeployment and then a PCS and then, knowing Bucky’s luck, they’ll probably get married and have kids, forget about him completely, except maybe late at night when the air smells just-so, and they’ll say, “man, do you remember Jamie Barnes? I wonder how he’s doing.”

Bucky knows how these things go.

Which is why he’s trying to make the best of it today, taking selfishly from and giving selflessly to both of them. While Bucky enjoys a final dose of super juicy brigade gossip from Natasha, Sam makes sausage frittata and French toast for breakfast. Natasha’s being especially affectionate with him today. That kind of thing would send him over the moon with happiness before he was blown up. Now, every touch from her or anyone else feels both greedily wanted and intensely uncomfortable. The opposing forces swirl and weave and alternate, and it’s hard to land on just one for very long.

He wants to want it completely, like he always used to, but it’s all beset by fear now. Fear that they’ll know how fucked up he is. How gross his body is. Nobody wants to be friends with a gross person. Nobody wants to walk around town with the limping guy with the ugly skin grafts and wide fields of scars covering every limb. And nobody wants to be friends with a discount eunuch. Not really. And, Jesus, when he remembers that he’s fucked Natasha, that she’s sucked his cock… He can’t imagine she doesn’t think about what he must look like now. What his dick must look like. She’s always been good at hiding her feelings, so God knows what she thinks. He tries to assume he has her compassion, which he doesn’t even really want, but at least it’s better than having her disgust.

So Bucky lets her snuggle him on the couch while Sam cooks, because she wants it and he kind of wants it, too. It’s like the old days, if he looks at it the right way. Back when he and Sam lived together and Natasha was the guest. He’ll miss this odd sort of domestic life they’ve fallen into, even if he’s just a third wheel in it.

After breakfast, Bucky and Sam sit on the couch and talk while Natasha runs to the PX to look for a DVD copy of Labyrinth, which they decided has to be the last movie they watch together. They sit close, touching from shoulder to knee, and Bucky’s glad when Sam doesn’t ask for any more contact than that.

“So, what’re you gonna do when you get to your next duty station?” Bucky asks. “With Nat, I mean.”

“I dunno. We’ve kind of been avoiding the subject.” Sam picks mindlessly at his meticulously kept fingernails.

“You should try to make it work.”

“Well, she’s thinking of getting out.”

Bucky pulls back in surprise. “What? To do what?”

“CIA, DIA.” Sam shrugs. “You know they’d snatch her up in a second.”
“They’d be crazy not to.” Bucky tries to imagine Natasha out of uniform, working the civilian intel circuit. Maybe in a crisp suit, bossing men around. The image brings a smile to his face.

“It got me thinking, y’know?” Sam’s voice is pensive and a little hopeful. “I was gonna go for my full 20 but, honestly, I’m getting pretty tired of deploying.”

It’s not what a grunt is supposed to say, which is why it felt like a dirty secret when Bucky said it to Sam back in October. But there is such a thing as getting old in the infantry, and it happens around age 28. That Sam made it to 33 before uttering a word about it is not a little impressive.

“I was right there, man,” Bucky reminds him. “You know I was. I get it. You know you could get a job anywhere, right?”

“Yes, with all my vast experience in riding in vehicles and marching long distances and teaching men to kill better,” Sam says with a light scoff. He’s smiling, but it’s a cynical one.

“That’s what the GI Bill’s for. Go get your MBA or master’s in… what did you get your bachelors in again?”

“Mechanical engineering.”

“There you go. Go get yourself a master’s in that and go get wealthy and rested and fat and happy. Get a Prius and a house with solar panels or some shit like that.”

Sam chuckles. “Is that what you think engineers do?”

“It’s not?”

Sam seems to seriously consider it, before shaking it off with the jerk of his head. “I dunno. Maybe I’m too institutionalized. Might as well at least see if I can make E-8.” Sam goes quiet, then lets out a mournful sigh. “But what am I gonna do without you?”

“Maybe they’ll send you to Fort Drum.” Bucky looks over at Sam and elbows him several times in the arm.

“Fuck you. If that happens, I’m personally blaming you. I know you have the power to put people in whatever unit you want them in, apparently.”

Bucky presses his hand to his forehead. “Jesus. Don’t remind me.”

“I hope it was worth it,” Sam says, not very lightly.

Bucky got exactly what he thought he wanted last year, which was to have Steve Rogers in his life again. And now Steve’s here and, incredibly, Steve still loves him. He said it that night in the truck. He’s thought about saying it again, Bucky can tell. He’s stopped himself from saying it at least twice. All in all, it’s more than Bucky ever hoped would come out of his meddling, with the exception that now he can’t give Steve what he really wants. The thing Bucky wanted for so long as he searched bars and nightclubs for something even approximately close to it.

Not that it particularly matters. Bucky knows very well where the road with Steve ends.

But even still, to receive such heartfelt love and devotion, even for a short time, is a gift. One he wants so goddamn badly. He’s starving for it. Steve thinks he’s the one who’s desperate, but Bucky knows he’s just as bad. He’s just better at lying about it.
“I love him,” Bucky says, feeling suddenly fearless about it. He doesn’t know why it feels so important to say right now. It strikes him that he’s never told anyone but Steve.

For a heartbeat, Sam looks wounded. He swiftly corrects it. “Is it weird that I’m a tiny bit jealous of him?” he asks quietly, almost like he’s asking himself.

Bucky shrugs with the faint shake of his head. He doesn’t know what’s weird anymore between them. “I dunno. I’ve never been very good at this stuff."

“What stuff?”

“Feelings.”

Sam leans his head in toward Bucky. “I’m gonna miss you, my little snack cake.”

Bucky braces himself against a rush of panicked sadness, telling him that this is all wrong, that this can’t be the way it goes. He’s heard it before, nearly every day since he’s been blown up, and it never seems less true.

Bucky presses a kiss to Sam’s temple one last time. “I’m gonna miss you, too.”

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“I like having sleepovers with you. I always did,” Bucky says, apropos of nothing in particular.

They’ve long since run out of important things to say and have taken to watching late night TV in Bucky’s bed at Steve’s place. They’re seated up against the headboard in their sleep clothes, their bodies adjacent but not overlapping. They haven’t yet overlapped, not for more than a few moments, when Steve started to put his arm around Bucky and Bucky rebuffed. Regretfully. It’s just been too much today. Too much bittersweetness. Too many goodbyes. Too much of everything. Bucky feels like the raw end of a severed nerve, craving a connection that feels too intense to hold.

“Do you think your ma ever thought we were more than friends? Like in high school?” Steve asks.

“Oh, I know she did. Why do you think she always wanted us to sleep at our place instead of yours?” Bucky can almost see his ma’s skeptical face right now, grudgingly agreeing because she adored Steve but absolutely certain of the hanky-panky that must be going on between him and her son. Jesus, if only.

“I mean, did she sneak in and check on us in the middle of the night?”

Bucky shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

Steve leans in close, speaking in a conspiratorial whisper. “But how do you know for sure?”

Bucky’s jaw works unproductively, soundlessly, until his words finally slip out of him. “I didn’t really sleep a lot when you were over.”

“Why?”

Heat rises in Bucky’s face. “I dunno.”

“You don’t know?” Steve gives him a teasing smile. “You’re choosing this moment right now to start being shy?”

“It’s embarrassing.”
“Well, now you have to tell me.”

“When we’d turn the lights out…” Bucky fidgets with the wrist strap of his arm brace with his reattached finger. It’s like touching a ball of fuzzy wool, even though the material is coarse and hard. “I’d stay awake for a long time. At least until you fell asleep.”

“Why?”

Bucky ducks his head, bewildered by how difficult the words are to get out. “It’s stupid.”

Steve grabs the remote and turns off the TV. The room falls into silence.

“Say it,” Steve insists.

“I kept kind of hoping — a stupid hope, obviously — that you’d maybe get up and…” He shrugs. “I dunno. Crawl into my sleeping bag.”

Steve laughs, but in a gentle way, like he fully realizes how goddamn difficult — how bafflingly goddamn difficult — this is for Bucky to talk about. “Is that why you always left it unzipped?”

“I mean, I wanted to make it easy.” Bucky’s smiling now, even with his head hanging low. “So I’d stay awake, and I’d wonder if you were thinking about that, too. And I thought maybe if you woke up in the middle of the night to pee or get water, you’d come back and lie down with me. So I slept pretty light. I know it’s stupid. I was pretty stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Steve tells him.

Steve takes a risk then and lays his hand over Bucky’s good forearm. His touch is light, tentative and comforting. This time, it’s not so overwhelming, and Bucky rotates his hand, palm-up, inviting Steve to take it.

“Did you ever…?” Bucky starts to say, unsure of what, exactly, he’s trying to ask Steve. Nearly a dozen possibilities come to mind, but they all feel impossible to speak.

Steve presses his palm to Bucky’s and threads their fingers together. “I didn’t really know that was something you wanted from me. Not back then.”

“I assumed you wouldn’t be into that.” A cock sucking quarterback wasn’t anything you could find outside the world of pornography, as far as Bucky knew back then. “Would you have…?”

Another unfinished question, but one Steve still seems to know how to answer.

“I don’t know,” Steve says softly, sliding his thumb over Bucky’s. “I wish I knew you really felt that way. I’d give anything for that, now. Anything for those years with you. Like this.”

Another pang of sadness ripples through Bucky, this one more like grief. Grief over lost time. Lost love. Not just when they were younger but also when they broke up all those years ago. Steve ended it, but maybe because Bucky didn’t know how to keep what they had or go any deeper. He didn’t know how to trust Steve and let Steve love him. He didn’t know how to stay. He still doesn’t know any of those things. He hasn’t grown up one goddamn bit in seven years. And here they are again, and Bucky’s leaving again, and, Christ, it’s the same thing all over again—

“So, what if I did crawl in with you?” Steve asks, voice low, interrupting Bucky’s dismal chain of thoughts. “What then?”
Bucky takes a deep breath. “I don’t know. I just wanted to be close to you. I mean, I obviously thought about other things sometimes, but I really just wanted to have you like this.”

Steve leans in close, his breath warm in Bucky’s ear. “You have me like this.”

Bucky crosses his other hand over his body and lays it on Steve’s head, pulling him in, just wanting to hold him like that in a perfect moment of sweetness.

“You have me any way you want,” Steve whispers, and Bucky’s not deaf to the quiet desire there, something Steve’s probably not even aware of. He’s been so good in these last weeks, so gentle and restrained, even though Bucky has felt him get hard when they kiss. Felt his hunger. Felt those things that Bucky doesn’t seem to be able to feel anymore. And never once has he taken anything Bucky didn’t freely offer him.

“Lie down,” Bucky tells him.

Steve leans away and looks at him, his breath already quickening.

Bucky smiles. “Go on.”

Steve scoots down the mattress and does as he’s asked. Bucky watches and hates, hates that he has to strategize about how he’s going to arrange his own body. He has to jettison his first few impulses because of the fucking knee brace alone.

So he decides to wince his way down to Steve and press up along his right side, which takes some profoundly unsexy maneuvering. He holds himself up on his healing forearm, which feels like it can take his weight for a little while.

When he finally gets in place, he looks down at Steve, dwelling on his handsome face before dragging his gaze down the length of his body. Down the curves and planes of his torso, over his belly where his hands are folded, down over the generous rise of his groin, over the length of well-muscled thighs that fill the slim fit of his USMA sweatpants. Bucky can feel Steve watching him as he appraises his body, which is appealing to Bucky in the way that a finely sculpted statue might be appealing. Very nice to look at. Vaguely moving. And there’s also that small scratch — that niggling, recurrent itch — of bitterness.

But even still, Bucky wants to give Steve something before he leaves. In case he turns out to be right. In case this really is their last night together. He wants to show him something, some part of himself, something honest. Something true he can give with his body that he could never give with his words. He’s been nearly slain by honest words, and so he learned early on to be honest this way, with his hands and his mouth and his cock and his ass, whatever he could use. It makes him almost laugh, in a deeply fucked up way, to think that maybe he’s been more honest with a nameless Chapel Hill hookup than with his own mother.

Bucky leans down and smiles, mere inches from Steve’s face. Steve returns it, and he looks so young, like a dopey 19-year-old in love.

“So, here I’ve finally got you in my sleeping bag.”

“After I pulled my head out of my fourth point of contact.”

“Yes.” Bucky runs his thumb over Steve’s bottom lip. “Well, when I got you in my sleeping bag, I definitely wanted to kiss you. I didn’t know if you’d like it, though.”

“Oh, I like it.” Steve’s mouth follows Bucky’s thumb as it moves.
Bucky lays his fingers on Steve’s cheek and turns his head back toward him. “That’s good, because I used to dream about your mouth.” Bucky kisses him softly. “This incredible mouth…”

“Mmm, doing what?”

Bucky huffs out a laugh. “Plenty of things. But mostly this.” He kisses Steve again, then breathes, “This is the best thing.”

They kiss again, and it’s so sweet, kiss after kiss, like a gentle conversation. Like they’re trying it out for the first time, smiling and reveling in the ecstatic lightness of it. Steve lifts his hand to rest on the back of Bucky’s neck, to start to hold him. Bucky replies with a hand on Steve’s chest, sweeping close to his nipple but stopping just a little short.

“Remember when you came back from camp just before junior year?” Bucky asks, moving from Steve’s mouth down to his jaw, laying more kisses there between handfuls of words. “I swear to God, I barely recognized you.”

Steve lifts his chin with a sigh, offering himself to Bucky’s lips. “Yeah…”

Bucky rotates his hand, fanning his fingers wide, passing each one over Steve’s pectoral. Steve arches up into his touch, just a little, then seems to stop himself, pulling his breath in and holding it.

“It’s okay,” Bucky murmurs against his neck. He makes another pass with his fingers over the fabric of Steve’s t-shirt, over the taut nipple below, and Steve squirms beneath him.

“I like that,” Steve tells him, eyes closed, lips parted. He’s still holding the back of Bucky’s head, keeping him close.

“I know you do.”

Bucky kisses his way back up to Steve’s mouth, taking it harder this time, and Steve now has him with both hands, touching him in safe places, encouraging him, kissing back with that energy from this morning. Bucky shifts some of his weight so that he’s lying half on top of Steve. It hurts now, but the closeness is welcome and very well worth it. He leaves space for his hand to travel down, past Steve’s diaphragm, over his belly button, down further still, past his waistband, landing boldly on the rising swell of his cock. He sighs against Steve’s mouth. Maybe he’ll never get over the feel of it, the heady knowledge of what he can do to another man, even if his own body no longer resonates the way it used to.

Steve pulls in a sharp breath through his nose, and Bucky opens his mouth to him, meeting Steve’s tongue with his own. Steve knows how to kiss. Even before they ever started messing around, he knew how. Bucky always imagined some girl teaching him, because he kisses like a girl. He kisses like Natasha. Sensual and responsive, languorous and judicious. No boorish stabbing or weird teeth licking or swirling tongue gymnastics, the artless shit so many men seem to think is sexy. Kissing Steve is like a good slow fuck, the kind that could go on forever and never be enough.

Bucky can feel something shift in Steve, as he palms his dick through his sweatpants. Steve starts to fall into it, get lost in it, and his hands slowly start to travel. One passes down Bucky’s back, over the concave, negative space where a strip of muscle used to be. The part of his back that’s now part of his arm. Bucky pauses for a moment but pushes through it, using all his skills in denial to shove the lingering creepiness aside. He tries to breathe through the tightness in his chest and the anxiety trying to take hold there, but it crests again when Steve’s hand travels down to his ass, settling right over the mottled pink strip where they grated his skin off like he was a brick of cheese.
Bucky breaks the kiss and pushes himself awkwardly off of Steve’s body, back to his side, hand pulling away of him like he’s a hot stove. Steve looks up at him, addled and blinking, as if startled from deep sleep. The realization dawns on him exponentially, and within moments he looks horror-stricken, pulling his hands away and holding them up like Bucky’s got him at gunpoint.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” Steve says roughly. “I am so, so sorry. I didn’t even… I’m so sorry, Bucky.”

Bucky has no words to describe the shame he feels, the shame Steve thinks belongs to him. The shame of not being able to be touched in ways that Steve’s touched him so many times before. Ways he used to beg to be touched.

“No. No,” is all Bucky can say, brows drawn inward, shaking his head at Steve’s stammering apologies.

“I know. I wasn’t even thinking—”

“No,” Bucky growls, suddenly angry. Suddenly furious with himself. Furious that even this has been taken from him.

Bucky leans in again, takes Steve by the chin, and kisses him with that fury. Steve’s lips are unresponsive, still frozen, and Bucky keeps kissing him, his lips, his face, muttering “it’s okay, it’s okay,” until he finally gets something back. Steve’s hands don’t return, but his mouth begins to warm, and his body settles back into something like calm. Steve shudders when Bucky goes for his cock again, which lost a little bit of life in the panic.

“Can you just let me?” Bucky whispers against Steve’s cheek. “I just want to touch you. I just want to remember you…”

When he pulls back, Steve’s eyes are glistening with recognition so sincere that it steals the wind from Bucky’s chest. Maybe it’s what Steve wants, too. Something to remember Bucky by. Maybe he’s just as scared that this is really the end for them.

Bucky looks down Steve’s body and watches his own hand slide beneath the waistband of Steve’s pants. He feels for the band of his underwear and skirts underneath it, where Steve’s cock rests. He touches it, traces the natural contours of it. It feels normal. It feels perfect. And Bucky both wants to see it and almost can’t bear the thought of it.

He bites his lip as he teeters, as he struggles against these competing forces. And in the end, he pulls his hand out and has Steve lift his ass so he can push down his clothes. Just enough to free his dick. Enough to watch it fill and rise, something he’s witnessed countless times. But this time, Bucky watches with fascination, like he’s never seen it happen before, like he has to commit each detail to his memory. And when he takes it in his hand, when he can get his full hand around and still have there be more length, he doesn’t know if it’s awe or anguish that seizes his throat.

Bucky glances at Steve’s face, which is flushed like his cock and full of consolation. Bucky has grown to hate that look, hate it so hard, so he starts moving his hand to make it go away. To replace it with something else.

It works, and Steve exhales slowly and sinks into the mattress, his hands clenched into disciplined, unmoving fists. And why wouldn’t they be, after the way Bucky reacted?

“Touch me,” Bucky says.

Steve shakes his head.
Bucky tries not to let anger overtake him again, even though he feels it burning through his guts. This shouldn’t have to be so fucking complicated. It was never complicated before. Sex used to be the one thing that wasn’t complicated between them.

Bucky kisses him. “Please. Just… stay above the equator.”

Steve regards him, his blue eyes dark and intense and penetrating, looking for permission somewhere deeper, somewhere that can’t be faked. Bucky’s not sure if he finds what he’s looking for, because those eyes roll back and close as a wave of pleasure hits him, and he grabs onto Bucky’s shoulder as if it was the sole anchor keeping him from floating away.

Bucky speeds his strokes, picking up drops of pre-cum to ease some of the friction. Steve moans and hitches up his hips in tiny rhythmic thrusts, fingers digging into Bucky’s flesh. The sight of Steve coming apart is unbelievably hot, and yet, Bucky feels nothing in his own body beyond the satisfaction of being so intimate, which is vastly more emotional than physical. His own dick has barely even stirred, and Bucky wonders if this is just how his body is going to be now, limp and sexless.

The thought very nearly breaks his heart, but he can’t hold it for long. Because Steve’s eyes open then, and he stares up at Bucky like he’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, even though it makes no sense that Steve could see him that way now. It touches that ache in his heart and soothes it, and Bucky kisses Steve again and then again, stopping only when he begins to pant, when he’s so close. Bucky tightens his grip and jerks him hard, and Steve comes into Bucky’s hand with a strangled gasp, never once looking away from Bucky’s face, like he’s coming at the sight of him. It’s wishful thinking, but for just a moment, it feels like the apex of joy.

They lie together while Steve comes down, while his breathing slows and his dick begins to rest. Bucky’s hand is still full of his come, but he can hold it for a while. These moments with Steve holding him, touching him, thanking him, kissing him, they’re too important to interrupt.

He wants this forever. This right here.

“Me too,” Steve murmurs, and Bucky realizes that he said it aloud.

He expects Steve to ask him once more to stay, to throw one last Hail Mary pass before the clock runs out. But he doesn’t. And Bucky doesn’t know if he should be grateful or crushed.

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The next day, Bucky crutches into the Warrior Transition Battalion headquarters and prepares to sign out from his unit one last time. Steve is parked just outside the building, waiting to take him to the airport in Raleigh. He offered to come with, but this is one thing Bucky wants to do alone.

Even though it’s Sunday, there’s still a skeleton crew manning the battalion orderly room, including one junior NCO and two privates. They all seem to recognize him immediately, even in civilian clothes, and they greet him by name. It’s unsettling that they know him, and he can only imagine the context of their familiarity.

“You signing out, Sergeant?” the NCO asks, grabbing the battalion sign-in log and sliding it across his desk. He hands Bucky a pen, one with a good grip, like it was made for guys with messed up hands.

“It’s just Jamie now,” Bucky says, printing and signing his name, then reluctantly writing “ETS” in the section that says “Reason.”
“Any last words before you’re officially a civilian?” one of the privates asks from another desk. It seems like a well-worn question, maybe one they ask everyone who’s transitioning out of the unit.

Bucky scrawls in the time and drops the pen onto the log. “Tell Uncle Sam he can suck my prosthetic nut.”

There’s something exhilarating about saying it, just throwing it out there, letting it hang in the room because he put it there. Embarrassment stirs, but it’s tempered by Bucky’s tenuous ownership of it. Because, yeah, he’s that guy now. This is just his miserable fucking lot. This is just the fucking price he paid to play soldier.

Still, the NCO laughs. A real laugh. One look at the badge on his chest tells Bucky that he’s a combat medic, and with the exception of Parker, those guys can laugh at pretty much any tragedy. It’s a means of self-preservation, the way that a grunt can laugh about blowing a haji’s head clean off.

“Take care of yourself,” the NCO says, “and enjoy some of that freedom for the rest of us.”

Bucky nods. “Keep your head on a swivel.”

“Bye, Sergeant Barnes!” one of the privates calls behind him as he crutches out of the orderly room. Using his rank is a small act of rebellion, but a meaningful one. And Bucky can’t help but smile his way back down the hall.

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They get to Raleigh with plenty of time to spare, so Steve parks the truck in short term parking, far away from all the other cars. They sit and listen to the radio for a while, tense and dreading. Bucky’s thoughts veer in disorganized directions, making jagged angles and shapes. Across the cab, Steve’s body is strung tight, and his molars click as he gnaws on his cuticles and stares out the window at nothing.

“Maybe I should just go in,” Bucky suggests. “Get it over with.”

Steve’s head snaps around, eyes wide and spooked. “Why?”

“We’re just delaying the inevitable, aren’t we?”

Steve frowns. “I’m sorry, I got lost in my head.” He reaches over and touches his fingers to Bucky’s hand where it rests on the seat. “I should be here with you.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m doing the same damn thing. Seems much easier than saying goodbye.” One corner of Bucky’s mouth curls up in a self-conscious smirk. “You’d think I’d be pretty good at it by now. All the duty stations, all the moving when I was a kid, all the leave and deployments…” He shakes his head. “I don’t know. Maybe I just don’t know how to say goodbye to you.”

“It’s not goodbye.”

Bucky raises a skeptical eyebrow. “No?”

“I’m gonna come see you, first chance I get. So, right now it’s just ‘see you later.’” Steve gives a small laugh. “Plus, I don’t want the last thing you remember to be my ugly crying face.”

“It’s not ugly,” Bucky says quietly, feeling oddly sad that Steve could think that way about something so wonderfully earnest. “The fact that you feel that way, it’s not ugly.”
Steve smiles. “Well, it’s not pretty, but I guess at least it’s honest.”

“Some people go their whole lives without anyone ever feeling that way about them. Or ever saying it, at least.” Bucky takes Steve’s hand in his own. “I’m really lucky, and…”

And he thinks to say that he’s glad he got to have it, even for just one moment, something that might let Steve know that it’s okay to never come to New York, that it’s okay to move on, to be a father, to find someone else. Someone better. All the things Bucky’s pretty sure are going to happen anyway. He just wants Steve to know that he understands and accepts it. He wants Steve to know that it’s okay to let go.

“And what?” Steve asks.

“And I want to kiss you. And then I should go.”

Steve slides across the seat and wraps his arm around Bucky’s shoulders. “Okay.”

They kiss. It’s soft and sincere, and it speaks clearly for both of them, saying that it’s okay, that whatever happens is okay.

“You ready?” Steve asks, taking one more gentle kiss.

“No,” Bucky whispers. “Not at all.”

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When Bucky’s plane touches down at JFK, it seems to taxi on the runway for days. So he’s got plenty of time to check the four text messages queued up from when he was in the air for a whole 90 minutes.

The first is from Steve. It’s a picture of his truck with the caption “Don’t worry, I’ll take real good care of her. Yee-haw y’all.” Bucky snorts fondly and texts back that he’d better not get too attached and “forget” to ship it back to New York next month.

The second and third messages are from his ma and Rikki, one with a picture of a chocolate frosted “Welcome Home” cake and another with a picture of Oscar captioned “Can’t wait to bite u.” He smiles at both and responds with a message that he made it home.

The final message is a photo from Natasha with no caption. It’s a picture of Bucky and Steve in Sam’s bed, tangled together in a sleepy embrace. Bucky’s stunned by it, so much so that he doesn’t even try to hide it from the person in the next seat. It’s so unguarded, so tender, so achingly beautiful. If love had a physical form, Bucky thinks, it would look like the two of them in that moment.

He’s so thankful that Natasha was there to capture that love between them, even if looking at it rips Bucky’s guts out. Because men like him don’t get endings like that. Men like him only get moments, little matches to light up the dark once in awhile. And though he thought he’d accepted that fact, like so many other unmovable facts of his life, he still has to press his forehead to the plexiglass window and blink back tears.

But even with his vision blurred, he texts Natasha to thank her. Because at least he has this now, proof that someone knows a part of him and still loves him. His tiny little match in the dark.

Chapter End Notes
Medical discharge: When someone is released from the Army for medical reasons, they can either receive a severance check or be medically retired from the Army. Each depends on what “percentage” disabled someone is at the time of separation. Someone with 0% is generally able to conduct most functions of daily life. Someone with 100% would be extremely impaired in occupational and social functioning (e.g., completely unable to work). If someone is rated at 30% disabled or higher, they can be medically retired from the Army and receive retirement pay and benefits. Someone lower than 30% would receive the severance check. The person can also go on to file a claim with the VA, which is an entirely different rating system that’s so complex I can’t even begin to explain it. So someone could receive compensation from the Army and from the VA as well.

Out-process: All the admin stuff someone has to do to formally leave their unit

E-5: The rank of Sergeant, which comes after E-4 (Specialist) or, in rarer instances, Corporal [sigh]

Mad Lib: A word game where one person has a story on a piece of paper that has blanks written throughout it representing different parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.). The person with the story asks at least one other person for random words to fill these blanks, and the resulting story is supposed to be funny in a nonsensical (or, in some cases, a hilariously sensical) way. Here’s an example

PCS: Permanent Change of Station - when a soldier moves from one installation to another, typically to stay longer than 6 months

PX: Post Exchange, like a Walmart or a Target that serves the base

CIA, DIA: Central Intelligence Agency; Defense Intelligence Agency

Full 20: The retirement age for the military is usually 20 years. Any release before that (barring medical retirement) does not earn someone retirement pay.

E-8: Like Bucky, Sam is a Sergeant First Class (E-7), so the next rank up would be either First Sergeant or Master Sergeant, both positions at the E-8 pay grade. Which one you are depends on what your responsibilities are.

Fort Drum: Home of the 10th Mountain Division, this base is in New York State near the Canadian border. It’s known for being super cold and awful.

USMA: United States Military Academy, the proper name for West Point

Fourth point of contact: When you jump out of a plane and parachute to the ground, you’re supposed to land in a very particular way, with certain body parts hitting the ground in order. The first point of contact (with the ground) is the balls of the feet. Second is the calf. Third is the thigh. Fourth is, you guessed it, the ass. Fifth is the side of the back.

TL;DR Fourth point of contact = your ass
Orderly room: An Army unit’s administrative office

ETS: Expiration of Term of Service - the day you officially out of the military
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

February - May 2009: Steve

Chapter Notes

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with my plot, characters, and style. She’s also available for beta work and is amazing at it. Go visit her on Tumblr

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In February, Steve has his first migraine.

It creeps upon him insidiously, starting as a dull pain at his right temple around 10:00 am. He’s had headaches — frequent ones — since he got blown up. Those first few weeks after the explosion were practically one continuous headache. But there’s something special about this one, especially when the pain starts to crawl behind his eye. At lunch, when he leaves his office to grab a sandwich with Sitwell, the scant sunlight feels like it’s cutting a hole straight into his brain.

“You okay?” Sitwell asks when they get out of his car.

“Why?”

“You’re squinting.” Sitwell looks up at the sky with eyes wide open, showing how obviously not-bright it actually is outside.

“Just a headache,” Steve says, tipping his chin down to let the brim of his patrol cap do its job.

But by the time they get back to the company, it’s clear that this is not just a headache. Steve closes his office door, sits at his desk, and stares at his footlong as he tries to convince himself to eat it. He was starving for it after missing breakfast, a semi-regular occurrence now that his body has decided it can only sleep soundly between 3:00 a.m. and the start of the duty day, only after he’s completely exhausted himself. He tries to find the hunger he had earlier, but all he finds is a snarl of sourness in his stomach. He wraps the sandwich back up sloppily and pushes it to the side of his desk. Desperate for any relief, he slumps forward and holds his head tightly between his hands, pressing his palm as deeply into his left temple as he can press it. It seems to diffuse the pain, dull it, spread it around a bit, but it doesn’t relieve it.

By their 13:00 staff meeting, Steve can barely stand the overhead lighting. None of them are expecting him to say anything beyond his usual personnel update, but Morita and Sam can’t help but comment on how sick he looks. Sousa suggests that he go to sick call, and Steve snaps back that the only way he would ever go to sick call is if he couldn’t fucking walk. After that little gem, Barton
orders him to go. Immediately. When he stands, the impossible pain becomes impossibly worse, blotching his vision while his brain surely tries to extrude itself out of his skull. He bends at the waist and exhales vocally, and Sam walks him to his car and drives him straight to the medical clinic.

Steve has to wait nearly two hours to see a doc; half the damn base seems to be sick today. The pain is utterly unreal, searing like a pulsing hot spike through his eye socket. He shoves the heel of his palm so hard against his eyeball that he wonders if maybe the whole thing will just explode, and maybe that would finally give him some relief. He breathes and breathes and breathes, like he would if he were trying to get through his first Airborne jump again.

Sam has been sitting in the waiting room with him all this time, and Steve can now hear him bugging the nurses to push him ahead in the queue. Steve’s in so much pain he can’t even be embarrassed to let an NCO beg for him.

Sam plops down in the seat next to him with a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry, man. They are not budging.”

Steve nods against his hand and thanks Sam, but he’s not even sure he’s getting the words out loudly enough for them to be heard. Every rustle sounds like thunder and lights up his brain with pain. His own quiet murmur sounds like a shout.

When Steve finally gets in to see one of the docs, his eyes are watering so badly that he wonders if maybe he could sneak in a few actual tears and have them go unnoticed. It takes the doc about three minutes to diagnose him with a “textbook case” of migraine. She uses the rest of her time to make him follow up appointments with neurology and, when she reads through his TBI notes, neuropsychology.

“What’s that?” Steve mutters around his clenched teeth. “What’s that mean?”

The doc swivels around in her chair. “Just some testing for different cognitive functions. Memory, attention, executive functioning. It’ll be down at the main hospital. Given how long you were unconscious and the confusion after you woke, I think it’s a good idea. Have you noticed any changes?”

“Memory,” Steve grits, pressing his palm back up to his left eye.

“Okay. So, make sure you go to that one, okay? We wanna see how your brain’s doing now.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he manages to say.

Steve leaves the clinic with a prescription for sumatriptan, which he rushes to the bathroom to take with a cupped handful of water. He doesn’t even know if it’ll work, or how long it’ll take, but the pain has obliterated all sense of self-preservative wariness.

Sam drives Steve home, where he’s been ordered to stay for the next 24 hours. Steve thinks he remembers to thank Sam. He certainly remembers insisting that he can make it inside without Sam’s help. The last thing he wants is for Sam to come inside and see how he’s been living.

Steve closes the front door and locks the deadbolt. He then shambles through the living room, stopping to clumsily unlace and peel off his boots. He unzips and shrugs off his ACU coat in the hall and hangs a left into the first room, where he unbuttons his pants and hops precariously on one leg as he yanks them off. His balance is thrown, but at least his slow fall is canted in the direction of the bed he’d like to land on. He hits face down on the rumpled comforter with a groan, and gracelessly pulls his shirt over his head as he twists over onto his back. He drops the shirt off the edge of the bed, and his body grinds to a halt.
Damn the fucking light in this room. Bucky probably hated it as much as Steve hates it right now. He squeezes his eyes shut and breathes through the ruthless rhythm pounding in his head. It’s his heart, his blood, flaring and surging, and he wonders a little fearfully if it’ll ever stop. He doesn’t know what to do. What to think. How to distract himself. He wonders whether he should just dive into the pain, rush into it the way it’s rushing into him.

He seems to use up enough time half-wittedly pondering his options, and the next time he checks in with himself, the thrumming has eased up just a little. And even that incremental change is enough to bring a quiet “Thank you, Jesus” to Steve’s lips. It continues on like that, the pain bumping down in fits and starts, on and on, until all that’s left is absolute exhaustion and a dim whisper of discomfort tapping gently at his temple.

Steve moves then. Slowly. He rolls onto his side and works himself awkwardly beneath the comforter. He then presses his face to the pillow and breathes in deep, as deep as his lungs can pull. Something comforting and warm fills him, like a blanket enveloping him from the inside. The bed smells like Bucky. His sweat. His skin. His hair. Steve tries not to come in here often and tries even harder not to touch the bed. He’s scared — truly scared — that the smell will go away if he mixes too much of himself into it. But today, Steve lets himself take some of what’s left of him. He inhales Bucky into his body and soaks him in through his skin. If he concentrates hard enough, it’s like an embrace.

He only comes in here when he’s having a really bad day, or when he’s missing Bucky and can’t get to his voice. On those really bad days, he comes in here and usually sits on the floor. Then he closes his eyes and remembers, sometimes while he listens to Led Zeppelin on the iPod Bucky gave him. Steve has a few things he likes to remember most. Like the way Bucky’s face scrunches up when he’s laughing, one of those real, gut-deep laughs. They’re so rare — Steve has maybe only seen one a handful of times.

Other times he remembers this one particularly beautiful day when he and Bucky were on the Brooklyn Bridge. He doesn’t even remember what the hell they were doing there, but he knows it was before they were ever physically involved. He remembers that Bucky was drinking a bottle of expensive tourist water you buy from guys squatting next to Coleman coolers they bring from home. It was the middle of summer, and Bucky was nineteen, looking sleek and sexy in a tank top and shorts. He was drinking so greedily that a rivulet of water dripped down his chin and onto his chest, which was strong and lean from two recent weeks of hard drilling with his unit. He drank half and offered Steve the rest, and Steve was so acutely aware of Bucky’s saliva on the bottle that he blushed as he took it in his mouth. It felt almost like a kiss, with Bucky watching him like that. With his lips parted like that.

Steve used to think mostly about how erotic it was, how sensual and charged, but now he thinks about Bucky’s face. How happy and alive he looked. And it makes Steve glad to think of him like that for a little while, because maybe he’ll look like that again someday. Maybe he’ll look like that when Steve goes to see him. Maybe he’s really doing okay. Whenever Bucky doesn’t answer the phone, Steve tells himself that it’s because he’s with his family. Or maybe he’s at an AA meeting or at the VA. Maybe he’s in therapy. Bucky tells him he’s working on getting all that stuff set up, and Steve, in turn, tells himself that it’s true.

Steve lingers for a few more minutes, and he decides he’s going to push himself up and out of bed. Maybe he’ll go to the kitchen and get some food. It seems like a good idea. He knows the movements to make with his hands and arms; he’s done tens of thousands of pushups in his life.

But something keeps him still, almost like Bucky is holding him there. And before very long, it pulls Steve into sleep.
Steve keeps his appointment with neuropsychology, but only because his migraine scared him so badly. He shows up and fills out an absurdly large packet of questionnaires. He tries to be very careful with some of them, especially the ones that clearly measure depression and PTSD and anxiety. He skews his answers tactfully, knowing that he should at least endorse some problems, having recently come back from deployment. They say it’s normal to feel a little on-edge, to be a little jumpy, to have problems sleeping. To think about the things that happened from time to time. He’s mildly concerned by how much he has to shift all the numbers to the left.

He’s then taken to a room by a young captain named Gutierrez, who introduces herself as a psychology intern. The room is very distinctly a therapy room. Steve’s been in one before, just one time. When his ma thought he needed to talk to someone about her sickness. Turns out he didn’t. Turns out it was okay just to keep it inside.

But now, he really needs help, so when she asks him about his cognitive symptoms, he doesn’t lie. He tells her about the memory problems. The headaches. How he seems to zone out and go somewhere else. She asks follow-up questions, very specific ones, and as they move through the interview, it feels like she really gets it.

And then she asks him what happened.

“What do you mean?” Steve asks

“Tell me about how you got your head injury.”

“IED.”

“Okay.”

She waits. She’s very patient. It takes her a long time to raise her eyebrows at him.

Steve opens his mouth, but his throat seems to clench up, locking his words in tight. All he tries to say is “My platoon sergeant’s head slammed into my face when he got blown up by an IED.” It’s one sentence, and a highly sanitized sentence at that, but it feels as thick as a manifesto.

“Is it that you can’t tell me or you don’t want to tell me?” Gutierrez asks. “Is it a classified mission or something like that?”

Steve frowns and sinks back into his chair. The harder he tries to force it out, the more it seems to stick. But his thoughts aren’t stuck at all. His mind shifts back with no effort at all, and his memories come in a relentless strafe. His senses fill with Iraq, his mouth fills with saliva, and he ineffectually tries to beat everything back while his leg shakes wildly.

“I just can’t,” he finally whispers.

“Okay.” Gutierrez scrawls something in her notepad. She doesn’t appear phased by what’s happening to him, almost like she sees this kind of minor freakout a thousand times a day. “Maybe I can just ask you some more basic questions, then?”

“Okay.”

“Were you knocked unconscious?”

“Yes.”
“Do you know how long?”

Steve bites at his thumb nail. He shakes his head.

“Less than thirty minutes?”

“I think so.”

“Any other symptoms afterward? Dizziness, disorientation, amnesia?”

“First two.”

“Was it a closed head injury?”

“What…” His mind goes blank. “What does that mean?”

She gestures to her head, pointing at it sharply. “Did any foreign body penetrate your skull, or did you have a skull fracture of any kind?”

“My face broke.” Steve touches the bone below his eye. “Here.”

“Okay. Did anyone do any cognitive testing with you afterward?”

“My medic asked questions.” Steve’s eyebrows draw together. “I think I messed them up.”

“Do you remember the questions?”

“Something about the president. The date.”

“Okay.” She regards him with compassion, then sifts through the questionnaires he filled out earlier and holds one out toward him. “You sure this is accurate?”

It’s the trauma questionnaire. The one about horrible memories. The physiological and psychological reactions. The sleeplessness. The nightmares. Steve’s leg shakes harder.

“Yep,” he says.

She jots another note in her pad.

“Alright, Lieutenant Rogers. Anything else you’d like to add?”

Steve’s leg stops, and he freezes in a moment of recognition before straightening his posture. He almost forgot he was Lieutenant Rogers. He almost forgot that he’s supposed to be better than this. Stronger than this.

“No,” he states. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Not pushing.”

Gutierrez waves off his gratitude. “Everyone processes things at their own rate. Have you been to behavioral health yet?”

“No, Ma’am. I’m fine,” Steve insists.

“Okay. Well, if you ever want to, you can always let us know. We help a lot of people process the
things that happen overseas.”

Steve glances at her bare right shoulder. “You ever been deployed?” he asks, even though he already knows the answer.

She shakes her head. Her brunette bob grazes her jaw. “No. Not yet.”

“How long have you been in the Army?”

“Um, only seven months.” She looks down at the floor. The insecurity doesn’t suit her very well.

Steve has every intention of telling her that she doesn’t know anything about combat or IEDs or watching her best friend get blown to shreds, screaming in agony because she made the wrong choice. Because she picked the wrong fucking door. The wrong fucking road. The wrong fucking time to break up.

But it doesn’t matter what she knows or doesn’t know about deployment. He still wouldn’t talk to her about it, anyway. And she shouldn’t feel ashamed for not yet enduring the hell of war. He hopes she never has to see one minute of it.

“Well, I wouldn’t have known it was only seven months, Ma’am,” Steve says instead. He tries to smile.

Gutierrez smiles back and nods her thanks. “Let’s take a break, and then we’ll get to some assessments. Any questions?”

“No.”

Steve takes his break outside, where the cold feels like a reset button. The winter air seems to siphon the anxiety out of him, leaving behind a comfortable hollowness. He wishes for a cigarette, even though he doesn’t smoke, and he has a weak argument with himself over whether or not to accost the junior enlisted soldiers grouped at the smoke pit to bum one off them. His time runs out before he can decide.

The rest of the day is a marathon of task after task. Steve defines words. He makes patterns with blocks. He picks patterns out of shapes. He traces trails from number to letter to number to letter. He spends about three hours trying to memorize words and shapes and patterns. For each task, he tries to read Gutierrez’s face to see how well he’s doing, but she maintains a carefully neutral expression the entire time.

By the time 16:00 rolls around, Steve is spent and discouraged, and the most difficult task of all seems to be waiting for the next afternoon to get feedback. He heads back to the office to check emails, even though he could do it on his Blackberry from home. He can’t go there now. He can’t sit in the silence. He can’t sit in the places where Bucky used to be.

He sleeps on the floor in his office that night.

The next day, Gutierrez tells him that everything’s normal. His memory is average. His overall IQ is impossible to calculate, since his performance on the tasks was so variable. He has superior verbal and spatial reasoning abilities. His executive functioning is average. On average, Steve Rogers is now average.

“Of course, we don’t have any baseline data to go off of,” Gutierrez reminds him. “Your educational background and some of your scores suggest that you have exceptional baseline intelligence, so it’s possible that average scores on memory and processing speed and executive functioning tasks would
be considered low for you. Personally.”

Steve nods slowly. “But I’m not actually impaired.”

“No, not according to the broader population. But that doesn’t mean it’s not real.” Gutierrez taps the top of her pen against her thigh and seems to consider her words very carefully. “A disorder like PTSD would explain a lot of these things, too. When the brain is in fight or flight mode, it’s always looking for threats, whether they’re there or not. And that can really impact one’s ability to concentrate and attend to things. That could make some of the timed tasks and memory tasks especially difficult. And in addition, if you’re having nightmares or just not sleeping well, that can impact scores, too. Also depression can have similar cognitive effects.”

“But I have a TBI,” Steve reminds her. “Not those other things.”

“With a mild TBI, which sounds like what you have, most people experience a full recovery within six to twelve months of the traumatic incident. So if you’re still having cognitive symptoms after that period, it’s more likely that there’s some other condition — probably a psychological condition — which is impacting your cognitive functioning.”

Steve pulls some command into his voice. He manages it with less control than he hoped. “I don’t have PTSD. Or depression.”

“Not based off your questionnaires.” She glances up from her notepad. “But that’s not the only information you’ve given me.”

Steve stares at her, making his face hard and impassive.

“Don’t worry.” Gutierrez says. She gives him a flat smile. “I can’t actually diagnose you unless you endorse the symptoms. Just please remember what I said earlier about behavioral health.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Are we done here?” Steve stands, imposing his height over her and flagrantly ignoring protocol.

“Uh, yeah,” she stammers, rising. “I guess so.”

Steve gives a single, curt nod. “Have a good day, Ma’am.”

—

That night, Steve lies in his own bed and calls Bucky. It’s late. So inappropriately late to be calling. But Bucky answers after nearly five rings, and Steve can’t help but choke up at the sound of his voice.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asks, his words muddled by sleep.

“Nothing.”

“’S late.”

“Yeah.”

Bucky lets out a long, quiet groan, like he’s stretching. “You can tell me, y’know,” he says at the end of it.

Steve sighs and lays his hand on his stomach. “The doc said my head’s okay. I’m normal.”
“That’s good, right?”

“I guess.”

Of course it’s not, and they both know it. Steve Rogers was never normal, not when it came to his cognitive abilities. Hell, they might never have even become friends, if Steve hadn’t been skipped ahead one grade because of his magnificent brain. For Steve, normal is as good as broken.

Silence settles and drags on for a while. It doesn’t feel uncomfortable, though. If Steve tries hard enough, he can close his eyes, imagine Bucky in the bed beside him, resting in the stillness. He can imagine the outline of his body beneath the covers. The warmth coming off of him. The handsome lines and curves of his profile in the moonlight.

“I miss you,” Bucky tells him then, like he knows just how badly Steve needs to hear it. It’s clearer than all the other words he’s spoken. It’s unequivocal.

Steve smiles with a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “God, I miss you, too.”

“I’mma fall asleep now.”

“Okay.”

“I’m here, though.”

Steve rolls onto his side and rests his phone on the pillow beside him. “Me, too,” he says, reaching out to the nothingness beside him.

In March, Steve takes command of Alpha Company.

It all starts with Barton who, for absolutely no discernible reason, decides that it’s time for Steve to be promoted to captain. Sitting in front of Barton’s desk, Steve struggles to make sense of the words Barton strings together. Exemplary performance under extenuating circumstances. Can-do attitude. Clear and unwavering dedication to the unit. Exceptional commitment to the men of his platoon. Plays well with others. Jesus Christ, Steve nearly looks over his shoulder to see if there’s someone else standing there, someone these words are actually meant for. Someone who actually has his shit together and isn’t just dragging himself from one duty day to the next, trying not to crack apart.

“So, to give you a little experience, I want you to take the company while I’m on TDY,” Barton says. “Three weeks.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Barton gives him a crooked smile. “That was easy. I expected a little more resistance.”

“If you think I’m ready, then I’m ready,” Steve says.

“You know what I think?”

“What, Sir?”

“I think if something doesn’t change, you’re not gonna be able to do this job for very long.”

Steve tilts his head. “Sir?”
“Before I got blown up, I was fun. I always had something on the tip of my tongue. Some shit remark, some joke.” Barton smiles again, but this one’s tired and a little sad. “After, all that just shut off. Like someone yanked the cord out. Poof.” He flares his fingers out like the explosion that took those things from him. “Just gone.”

Steve tries to imagine a Barton like that. He can kind of see it a little in the blue of Barton’s eyes. Maybe a shadow of the mischief that used to thrive there.

“You’re different now,” Barton tells him. “And that’s okay. I think that’s normal.”

There’s that word again.

Barton leans back in his chair and steeples his fingers in front of his chest. He speaks mostly to the wall with occasional glances at Steve. “But there’s a point where… it’s really hard to come back. And if you can’t come back, you can’t be a good soldier. You can’t lead if you can’t connect to people. And when that light shorts out, when that disconnect happens, it’s really fuckin’ hard to get that plug back in that outlet.”

“But you did it,” Steve points out.

“I had to work my fucking ass off,” Barton snaps back. “And I nearly ended up divorced for a third time. And if I could’ve intercepted it before all that, I would’ve saved myself a whole lot of trouble.” He straightens his posture and points a scarred finger at Steve. “And I never, ever got back to where I was before. Never.”

Steve stiffens. “What are you trying to say, Sir?”

“I’m saying that either you go see a doc — about your sleep, at the very least — or I’m gonna command refer you to behavioral health. And you’re not gonna like that.”

“Lemme guess, you’re sleeping about three, four hours a night?” Barton ventures in a knowing tone. “Maybe not even that? I’ve seen you sacked out in your office. On the goddamn floor. Jesus, we can get you a couch.”

Damn. Steve forgets sometimes about the narrow glass panel in his office door. He forgets that anyone can pass by and probably see his boots peeking out from behind his desk.

“Do I have to go to behavioral health?” Steve asks.

“No. You can go to the regular medical clinic, get some trazodone or something, and carry on. Go to sleep. That’ll help a lot.” Barton gives him the knife hand now, chopping it at him in time with his threats. “If you’re not sleeping, not taking the meds, I’ll know. So don’t fuck around.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I wanna give you my company while I’m gone, Steve. I want you to lead. I wanna send you to the Captain’s Career Course this summer. I want you to sit for the board in May. I want you on that O-3 list in August. I want a lot of things for you. The next time you deploy, I don’t want it to be with us.”
Barton gives a quick, jerking shrug with one shoulder. “No offense. I just want you to have your own company by then.”

For as much as Steve has wanted his own company, he strains to comprehend why someone would actually give him one. Surely someone must be able to see him for what he is now — exhausted, nearly paralyzed with fear and guilt, constantly strung out from reliving his deployment day in and day out…. Normal. Average.

“Just the sleep,” Steve confirms. “Nothing else.”

“Just the sleep. That’s all I’m asking. You’d be surprised how much better you’ll feel when you’re sleeping every night.”

“Fine,” Steve concedes.

“Good. You’ll make your appointment now.”

“Right now?”

Barton turns the phone on his desk toward Steve. “Extension 4518.”

The unit changes a lot in March. Barton goes to Fort Benning for three weeks of training. Foggy gets his transfer to JAG. Sam gets PCS orders to Fort Carson. Parker decides not to re-enlist, even when Steve offers to send him to the Primary Leadership Development Course and tries to get him a sweet re-enlistment bonus. Bucky’s replacement finally arrives from Fort Lewis and appears to be serviceable.

Steve runs the company well. He throws himself into the work full-bore, migraines and all. He works the unit hard. Campaigns aggressively with Fury for them to get extra range and convoy training hours. He PTs the crap out of them before daybreak and gives them an extra hour of free time at the end of the duty day. The leadership respects him. The men respect him. Perhaps most importantly, the job gives him a scaffold to try to rebuild his life around.

Steve tries to change a lot, too. He gets his own car, a used Toyota Corolla he buys cash off another officer PCSing to Korea. He goes to the medical clinic and gets a script for trazodone. It’s shockingly easy to lie his way through even more questionnaires. Just the sleep, he insists. Just can’t shake those deployment hours. The doc says “yeah, that happens” and barely glances at his chart. The meds don’t seem to work, at first, but when he titrates up to his full dose, it gives him another hour or two a night.

The first night he sleeps more than five hours straight, Steve wakes up in a panic, certain that he’s let something terrible happen by sleeping so long. He scrambles through the house, checking all the rooms, looking for something to be wrong, out of place, and when he bursts into Bucky’s room and sees only an empty bed, Steve is so overwhelmed with terror that he actually says Bucky’s name. He does it just once, and the sound of his voice — his yelling — startles him back to clarity. It only happens once, thank God, but it’s enough to shake him and kick off a string of awful, hyperrealistic nightmares about Khalidiya.

Steve also decides he should try to be more… normal. More average. That is what he is now, after all. After his talk with Barton, it became clear that he’s not containing as well as he thought he was. He’s been thinking about a lot of things since his talk with Barton. He starts thinking that maybe he shouldn’t keep Bucky’s room the way it is. He thinks that maybe he should wash the sheets. Every
time he thinks about it, he gets scared and stops the thought cold, but at least he’s thought about it. And at least he tries not to go in there as much as he used to.

He also tries to have a life. He goes to Sam and Natasha’s a couple of times for movies and pizza. While he’s there, of course, he can’t help but ask about Bucky, and they can’t help but ask him the same. When they compare notes, the big picture doesn’t look so great. Steve thought he was the only one Bucky was dodging. It feels like dodging, anyway. The few times Steve does get ahold of him these days, he’s often either half asleep or in a rush to do something else.

The change in Bucky’s availability was so slow that it was easy at first to chalk it up to a rash of bad timing. But then, daily contact gradually became talking most days, which gradually became talking some days and, now, talking only occasionally. Sam and Nat say that they get the same treatment. They speculate a lot about what’s going on with him, and they try to be hopeful. Bucky’s told all of them that he’s getting hooked up with the VA, so they go with that story. He’s busy getting better. So far, Steve’s resisted the temptation to call Winnie, just barely. He’s had the phone in his hand with her name under his thumb at least half a dozen times. But he’s stopped himself, because he needs to give Bucky some space to find his way, just like he’s trying to do for himself.

But still, Steve worries. They all do. Especially when none of them can reach Bucky on his birthday, no matter what time of day they try. When Steve finally does get him on the phone several days later, he has an overly elaborate story about how he celebrated with his family in Manhattan. And, gosh, he forgot his phone back in Brooklyn. And then he was just so busy getting better that, well, he plumb forgot to call back. Steve doesn’t have the balls to ask him what really happened. None of them do.

Also notable in Steve’s quest for normalcy is spending time with people he’s actually authorized to spend time with. Sam and Nat are his friends, but they’re highly illegal friends, and he doesn’t want to risk their getting in trouble just because Bucky wanted to leave behind some cute little friendship legacy. So Steve tries to hang out with other officers. He has drinks with Dan Sousa a couple times and finds that he likes the guy. It’s nice to be friends with another bachelor, if only to bypass the sting that Steve so often feels when he’s around Sam and Nat’s nauseating canoodling.

Perhaps most bizarrely, Sitwell decides that he likes Steve. Really likes him. When he invites Steve over on March 27th to watch the Heels stick it to Oklahoma, Steve forces himself to go. It’s just the two of them, so it’s weird. It’s really, really weird. Just the two of them in Sitwell’s living room while his wife and kids play down the hall. Steve imagines he might have invited some of the other guys, given the number of snacks and beers sitting out, and he’s surprised by how sad he feels that nobody else came.

But still, it’s weird.

After a couple beers, it does start to get less weird. Sitwell yells at the TV, whoops when the Heels score, and drops shockingly funny expletive substitutions when there’s a bad call. Steve has never heard Barbra Streisand’s name taken in vain until today, screamed at the referee for failing to call what is clearly an offensive foul.

Steve doesn’t know why, but when it’s clear that the Heels have won, stuff starts to tumble out of his mouth. Stuff he tries not to talk about with Sam or Nat. Stuff he barely mentions to Dan. Stuff he couldn’t ever discuss with Bucky.

“Sharon’s having a baby.” Steve marvels at how much distance still remains in his words, even though he’s know about it for three months.

Sitwell turns toward him, a full body pivot, and gives a look that Steve could never fathom before
this moment. It’s nearly ecstatic and just as strange as it is unexpected.

“You’re gonna be a dad?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Sitwell smiles and holds out a hand for Steve to shake. It’s an awkwardly stereotyped reaction, like he picked it from a very short list of prescribed responses. “Wow, congratulations!”

Steve shakes Sitwell’s hand, which is cold and a little damp from the beer he was holding. “Thanks.”


“End of May.”

“You excited?”

Feeling candid, Steve moves his head and shoulders noncommittally. “I don’t even know. I really don’t feel a whole lot of anything, to be honest.”

The look on Sitwell’s face is openly curious, as if the concept is completely foreign to him. “Do you even want kids?”

“I thought I did,” Steve says, understating how single-mindedly he once desired fatherhood. With Bucky, of all people. Jesus, what an odd thing for a nineteen-year-old kid to wish.

“Kids are the best,” says Sitwell. He grins in a stupid, lovestruck way that’s shockingly endearing.

If there’s one thing Steve has been the most surprised by with Jasper Sitwell, it’s who he is as a parent. His children adore him. He remembers the first time Sitwell brought him over, the way his daughters flung themselves at him when he walked in the door, even though he’d only been gone for ten hours. They regularly cling to him. He twirls them. He carries them. He throws them over his shoulder. He tickles them and laughs with them. He compliments them and tells them jokes. He disciplines them consistently and fairly. It’s the strangest goddamn thing Steve’s ever seen, made especially strange by the impossible contrast between Sitwell the minimally competent platoon leader and Sitwell the incredible dad.

“How did you know how to be good at it?” Steve asks. His knee is bouncing again. “I don’t even know how to be a father.”

He doesn’t even know how to imagine being a father. He had such clear ideas of it, back when he was young and stupid and dreaming of moving to Vermont with his wild boyfriend, a guy who was vocally opposed to everything Steve fantasized for them, a guy who called his dreams crazy and predicted it would end with them being bludgeoned to death with bibles by bloodthirsty Christian rednecks.

Sitwell smirks in a way that’s just a little bitter. “I just do the opposite of everything my dad did to me.”

If Steve goes by that metric with his own dad, all he will have to do is stay in the kid’s life past the 13 month mark. Of course, that probably won’t quite be enough.

“I guess it just hasn’t quite sunk in yet,” Steve admits.

“It will. When that kid’s born, you won’t be able to avoid it anymore.”
“Well, it’s gonna be in DC with Sharon,” Steve tells him, and he feels his face warm with guilt.

“Wait, you don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“Sharon didn’t want to know ahead of time,” Steve says, careful to make the distinction between bad pre-parenting and a mother who simply likes a good surprise.

“Well, it doesn’t matter if it’s gonna be with Sharon. That’s your kid,” Sitwell says, eager and sure of it in a way that Steve envies.

Steve looks down at his lap, to the bottle he’s rolling between his hands. “I know.”

“If you don’t get it yet, you will,” Sitwell tells him, gesturing at him with his beer. “Your whole life is gonna change. That kid has to be the number one thing in your life. And if it’s not, you’re wrong.”

Steve nods. He knows that’s how it has to be. How it should be.

“And you’re gonna have to work that much harder, since you’re gonna be long distance. All your leave, it’s gotta be for that kid. All your plans, you’ve gotta consider that kid.” Sitwell shrugs. “I mean, if you wanna be a good father. You don’t have to do those things, I guess.”

“No, I... I want to be good.”

Sitwell gives him a hard clap on the shoulder. “Hey, it’s gonna be okay, Rogers. You’ll be good. You’ll be just fine, if you just remember what’s really important.”

Steve thinks about his promise to Bucky, how he’d use his leave to go see him in the spring. Back then, it was the only thing he could ever imagine doing with with his time off. He was so damn scared of what would happen to Bucky once he left that he would have promised him a trip to the moon, just to give him something to hope for. And Steve is so lonely for him, and all he wants is to go to him, pull him into his arms, and never let him out of his sight.

But now Steve wonders if he’ll have to choose between being a friend and being a father. They can’t both be his number one priority. And it’s almost impossible to imagine choosing someone he doesn’t even know over the man he loves, even if that someone is very small and impressionable and made from his own body.

He dashes those thoughts from his mind with a firm shake of his head.

“God, I love you,” Sitwell says to the TV as he blows a kiss to Danny Green. “That’s my boy.”

“I thought you went to Duke.”

“I did.”

“But you root for the Heels.”

Sitwell leans in close, like he’s about to tell Steve a secret. “I root for both,” he mutters.

Steve gives an incredulous chuckle. “What the hell do you do when they play each other?”

“I just fill with joy.” Sitwell smiles broadly.

“God, you’re weird,” Steve says under his breath.

Sitwell huffs. He’s still smiling, though. “And you’re not?”
Well, he is watching basketball with notorious weirdo Jasper Sitwell at a party that nobody else dared to attend. If that doesn’t also make Steve a weirdo, he doesn’t know what would. The corner of his mouth curls up.

“Guess I am.”

—

When Steve gets home that night, he’s feeling something almost like clarity. Everything’s been so twisted and muddled and wrong ever since, fuck, ever since he got to Iraq. And Steve hasn’t been able to cling to any absolute truths since then. But this becoming a father thing, it’s not going anywhere. And even though the thought terrifies him, the certainty of it now offers some small comfort, too. He thinks, very quietly, that it might be nice to have a daughter.

Steve is still a little buzzed from the beer. It’s a good kind of buzz, so when he steps in the kitchen and sees Bucky’s mug on the counter, the one he’s been keeping there because he can’t bear to wash it, he doesn’t feel the full burn of heartache he usually feels. Like with the bedding, Steve does a thought experiment, one where he imagines himself putting the mug in the dishwasher. Washing away all traces of Bucky. He tries to see the big picture. He tries to be practical. Cleaning a mug doesn’t mean that he’s erasing Bucky. It’s just a mug. It’s not Bucky. It’s just a mug.

Still, he leaves it.

But Bucky doesn’t leave his mind. He lingers there, gently, while Steve takes his meds and gets ready for bed. He has a routine, now. The doc told him about sleep hygiene, about creating habits that prepare the body and mind for rest. He’s started taking a shower at night, in addition to the one he takes before work. He uses some fancy bar soap infused with lavender, because the internet said it’s supposed to relax him. He tries to focus on breathing deeply, clearing his mind. It does clear out, for a few moments at a time. But it always comes back to Bucky. Bucky’s face. Bucky’s voice. Bucky’s mannerisms. Bucky’s fire.

After his shower, Steve feels the pull to go to Bucky’s room. He just wants to see what’s left of him there. He hasn’t been in there for weeks, and he’s curious what he’ll feel now. He’s been keeping the door closed, and rather than it seeming like Bucky’s waiting for him behind it, it’s almost starting to feel like Bucky’s really gone. It’s almost starting to feel real. The wound Bucky left behind is almost beginning to scab over. It’s almost beginning to heal.

He cracks open the door and flips on the light. Some of Bucky’s things are still here, things he asked Steve to hang onto until maybe he gets his own place. He still has Bucky’s bed. The frame. The mattress. The bedding. His nightstand and dresser, which still has some of his clothes in it. Pants that don’t fit anymore. A stack of t-shirts that he now refuses to wear.

Steve stands by the door, deliberating. His good sense tells him to close the door again and move on, but the part of him that misses Bucky so badly begs him to stay, just one more night. One more, and then he never has to do it again. And when he succumbs, there’s a rush of dopamine. An exhalation of relief. An elated smile. He turns on the bedside lamp, turns off the overhead light, and buries himself in Bucky’s things. He lies on his stomach and gathers Bucky’s pillow in his folded arms. God, it still smells like him. Just like him.

There’s a rush of energy that pools in Steve’s groin, and it shames him. It seems wrong for that to be his first reaction. It usually isn’t, and he doesn’t know why it is tonight. He presses his face into the pillow and tries to think about something else. Bucky doing something boring. Bucky watching TV. Bucky sleeping with his mouth open. Bucky fumbling with his silverware because his hands are clumsy now.
But his mind circumnavigates his efforts and lands back on the Brooklyn Bridge. It trails that thin stream of water as it travels down Bucky’s chin and drops down to his chest. It searches for Bucky’s voice and finds it in another place and time, back in Red Hook, back in Bucky’s apartment, and he can almost hear it. Steve can almost hear Bucky moaning while he fucks him, and his cock gets hot and full between his legs.

Steve grinds his hips into the mattress, and it’s almost like he’s grinding against Bucky, because he can smell him. In his memory, he can hear him. And in his mind’s eye, Steve can even see him. It’s the middle of the day, and Bucky’s just destroyed his immunology final, because he’s brilliant and that’s generally what he does to tests. And now he wants to celebrate. He’s been holding out for all of finals week, and he wants his reward for his celibacy. He wants Steve to fuck him. It’s been their plan for days and days. They’ve talked about it, worked out the details, gotten horny and turned on from just imagining it. And when Bucky comes home, he’s so ready. When he walks through the front door and throws his backpack on the floor, he gives a feral smile and pushes Steve down to the bed. Bucky climbs on top of him, and Steve can feel how hard he already is. And then Bucky pulls off his clothes and then Steve’s clothes. And Steve gets lust-drunk off Bucky’s body, his mouth, his touch, and Bucky gets on his hands and knees, says he wants it hard and rough, and he’s so fucking hot…

Steve stops rutting against the mattress and gets up on his knees, just like he did that day, kneeling between Bucky’s legs, running his hands over his beautiful ass, down his muscular back, up his flanks. He grabs the headboard with one hand and pulls his dick out of his underwear with the other, and he closes his eyes and fucks himself into his fist while he remembers what it felt like to push himself into Bucky’s body over and over, to make him moan and pant and swear and say Steve, Steve, oh Steve, oh fuck, fuck, fuck. And Steve would give anything to hear his name on Bucky’s lips, to hear his voice scrape out that sound, gravelly and needy—

Steve opens his eyes to the ceiling and stops his hand. He pauses for a moment, riding through the impulse to grab his phone off the nightstand and call Bucky right now. He does a lazy search for reasons not to call and can’t seem to find any. So he snatches his phone with his left hand and jerks himself while the line rings.

“Hey,” Bucky drawls on the other end.

Steve closes his eyes again with a loud sigh.

“Steve.”

“Yeah,” he breathes, because it’s exactly what he wants to hear. He pumps his hand faster.

“Oh my God, are you jerking off?”

“Yeah…”

There’s a wet laugh on the line, followed by a stretch where no words pass between them, where the only sounds are Steve’s rough breathing and, more quietly, Bucky’s answering breath, open-mouthed and uneven. Steve thinks, for a few hazy moments, that Bucky might even be joining him—

That is, until he hears something that vaguely sounds like “naughty, naughty.”

Steve cracks his eyes open and slows his hand. Bucky sounds like he did on those very late nights when he was still at Bragg and staying with Sam, back when they would talk in the middle of the night. Slow and tired and… off.
“How are you?” Steve asks, pressing him for more words to analyze.

“That’s not a question you ask when you’re jerking off, ya dummy. That’s a dumb question.”

Steve lets go of his cock and laments the loss of a rare few minutes of actually being in the mood. He then tucks his flagging dick back into his underwear and sits back on his heels. Another sigh escapes him, one that’s charged with something close to anger.

“I wish I could jerk off, too,” Bucky mumbles. “I’d jerk off with you, but I think my dick’s broken. I tried, but I don’t think it works anymore. It’s just dead. I think it’s a dead, dead dick.”

Steve presses his hand to his forehead. The tips of his fingers are trembling. “That’s okay…. It’s okay.”

“Says you. Says you with your perfect fuckin’ hard dick in your hand.”


“Oh, did I kill your boner? Did thinking about my limp gross li’l dick kill your boner?” Bucky says bitterly.

“Stop it.” Steve’s mouth goes dry, and he’s just pissed off enough to throw caution to the wind. “Are you drunk?”

“Yes, Sir. I am drunk. In fact, I’m fuckin’ wasted.”

Steve thought he’d be at least a little surprised to learn that Bucky’s drinking again. He supposes he’s known it all along, deep below that hope they all tried to collectively delude themselves with.

“Where are you?” Steve asks.

“My secret place,” Bucky stage whispers.

“Where’s that?”

Bucky snorts loudly. “I can’t tell you, or else it wouldn’t be secret anymore.”

“You can tell me.”

“Nuh-uh. You’ll just tell Rikki.”

“Well, we care about you. We worry about you.” Steve tries to push the earnestness past the dawning fear over Bucky being somewhere, smashingly drunk, without anyone knowing where he is. “I bet it’s a pretty good hiding place.”

“Don’t try to fuckin’ trick me. I’m not a fuckin’ idiot,” Bucky spits.

“God.” Steve shakes his head. “I never said you were.”

Bucky’s next words come like a stumbling blitzkrieg, brutal and furious and unrelenting.

“Y’know what? I’m fuckin’ sick of everyone telling me I can’t drink. I shouldn’t drink. ‘Go to AA. Go to a meeting. Are you going to a meeting today? Did you go to your meeting?’ Well, y’know what? Fuck. That. I’m a fuckin’ grown-ass man. If I wanna drink, I fuckin’ make a choice. I wanna drink, so that’s what I do. Fuck all you, fuckin’ questioning me like I’m some fuckin’ child. Like I’m some fuckin’ criminal. I’m sick of it.”
“Bucky—”

“You wanna be a fuckin’ little baby tattle tale, tell my ma, tell my sister on me, like I’m some fuckin’ kid, like I didn’t earn the right to make my own fuckin’ choices, after all the shit I did for this fuckin’ ungrateful shit country full of fuckin’ ungrateful assholes… all those fuckin’ years of my life I wasted for the fuckin’ Army? Well, fuck you, Steve. I’ll fuckin’ drink if I want. Fuckin’ tell on me and just you just… you can just see what happens. You just fuckin’ try it. I dare you. I just motherfuckin’ dare you.

“Or you can leave me the fuck alone and let me be a fuckin’ grown-ass-motherfucking man and make my own choices, which I fuckin’ earned the right to make for my own self.”

There’s a gap in the torrent, a place where Bucky seems to wither, where his breaths come in harsh draws, like he’s just finished a PT test.

“You’re right,” Steve admits softly. “You’re an adult.”

“Don’t I deserve to make my own choices? Don’t I get to be a drunk fucking fuck up, if I want to? Don’t I have a right to make all the bad, ugly, bloody, miserable shit go away for a little while? Don’t I?” Bucky’s voice is breaking now, cracking around the edges.

Steve winces as he moves from kneeling to sit down cross-legged on the bed. He’s torn between fear and understanding, between wanting to call everyone — Winnie, Rikki, Sam, Nat, the police — and wanting to respect Bucky’s choice. Despite the slurring rage, his words aren’t wrong. They’re not even irrational. Bucky’s paid for his freedom more than anyone Steve knows, and if this is how he chooses to use his freedom, how can Steve logically argue against it?

“You’ve definitely earned that. If that’s what you really want.”

Steve’s voice is weak and wavering, because even though he can’t rationally argue with Bucky’s choice, he can still be plenty afraid of it. He wants to give a different answer. Maybe beg him to stop. Beg him to go home. Give him some ultimatum. Drop everything and fly to JFK and walk the whole goddamn borough of Brooklyn until he finds him.

But there’s a small part of Steve — a shameful, bleak part of him — that wants to let Bucky do whatever the hell he wants. It wants to just let Bucky go. It wants to let the burden be Bucky’s and not his own. Even if it means self-destruction. Steve hates and fears that part of himself, but he can’t honestly deny that it’s there.

“It’s what I want,” Bucky says solemnly. “I don’t wanna feel it anymore… I can’t…”

“I get that.” And he does, more than he’d ever admit. “Can I just ask one more thing?”

“Okay.”

“Are you in a safe place? Are you being safe?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going back to Rikki’s tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“And you can get back there okay?”
“Yeah.”

“And you’re not driving.”

Bucky gives him a weary sigh. “I can’t drive anymore, Steve. And that was a lot more than one question.”

“I just want you to be safe. That’s all. If this is your choice, I just want you to be safe.”

“You gonna tell on me?”

“No.” Steve reluctantly qualifies it, because he doesn’t want to lie. “I don’t think so, anyway.”

“But you might.”

“I don’t know. If I call you and you’re like this, or you ignore my calls…” Steve presses his lips tight. “I don’t know. I’m worried about you.”

“Well you won’t have to worry about that anymore. You don’t wanna talk to me? That’s just fuckin’ fine.” Bucky spits the words like they’re venom, hard and mean.

Steve’s stomach clenches, and he scrambles to clarify. “No, I want to talk to you. But if you’re gonna be like this—”

Bucky’s voice crescendos. “Don’t you worry ‘bout that. You won’t have to talk to me like this anymore. I promise.”

“What does that mean?”

The line goes silent.

“Bucky?”

Steve tries to call back, but the phone goes straight to voicemail. He leaves a message apologizing, because he’s scared. He’s so scared that he makes promises he knows he can’t keep even for a few minutes, like how he won’t tell anyone if he just please calls back. After that message, Steve calls and leaves another, telling Bucky that he loves him and that he always wants to talk to him, and that if it’s a choice between talking to him after he’s been drinking and not talking to him at all, he’ll choose the first one every time.

He gives Bucky ten minutes to call him back, staring at his phone the whole time as if it could will him to dial on the other end. After that, all bets are off, and fear takes hold. Steve calls Winnie. He tells her everything that just happened. What’s worse is that she doesn’t even try to feign surprise. She sounds tired, almost indifferent to it. She also sounds like she’s tipping on the cusp of telling him something else, but she never does. Steve doesn’t have Rikki’s number, but he calls Sam to fill him in, knowing he’ll tell Natasha. By the end of the hour, he’s broken every careless promise he made to Bucky, except the one to love him, no matter what.

He calls Bucky again, and then just one more time, and all he says on the voicemail is “I love you” and “I’m sorry.”

In April, Steve becomes a father.

Of course, rather than preparing for impending fatherhood, Steve spends most of April alternating
between losing his mind with worry over Bucky and halfheartedly studying for the O-3 promotion board. The former overshadows the latter almost constantly.

Bucky’s unreachable by phone now. Instead of voicemail, all anyone can get is a message saying that the number they’ve dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service. In fact, it seems that Bucky’s disappeared completely, leaving only a brief note for Rikki and Daisy saying that he’s okay but that he just needs some time alone. Whatever the hell that means. Winnie files a missing persons report, but the police don’t do anything. They can’t. He left a note. He’s a grown man. He’s not beholden to any of them to make his whereabouts known.

Inconceivably, it gets even worse. After Bucky’s been gone for a few weeks, Winnie finally tells Steve what she was keeping from him last month. Bucky’s had legal trouble, a DUI charge with a side of third degree assault. He was supposed to be in court on April 14th and didn’t show, so now there’s a bench warrant out for his arrest.

Winnie tells Steve this with a detached, factual tone, like she’s fully given herself over to it. She seems to have done what Steve wishes he could do — give up. Give in. Let go. Because it’s unstoppable. It’s unchangeable. Steve can’t blame her even slightly for letting it bulldoze her over.

In the second to last week of April, Steve finally resigns himself to it as well. It’s a terrible struggle. He fights himself on it constantly, because giving up is wrong. It’s the wrongest thing he can imagine. But when he runs through the known facts for the thousandth time, and then a dozen more times for good measure, he concludes with finality that there’s absolutely nothing he can do. He can’t call. He can’t go to New York. Hell, Bucky might not even be in New York anymore. The only thing Steve can do now is try not to let Bucky’s chaos destroy everything he’s been trying to build since he left.

So, one afternoon, Steve decides to do a little house cleaning.

He grabs Bucky’s mug off the counter, drops it into the dishwasher, and runs the load. He then goes to Bucky’s room, rips the sheets off the bed, and crams them in the washing machine. He runs it on hot, hot as it’ll go, and then scorches them dry. He does the same with the comforter. He takes one of the empty boxes from the shed and stuffs it full of the bedding, Bucky’s clothes, his lamp, and whatever else he can shove in there. He then puts Winnie’s address on it, drives it to the post office, and sends Bucky’s shit back to New York.

By the time Steve gets back home, he’s sweating, white knuckled, and nearly blind with rage. He screams at what’s left of Bucky’s furniture, saying “you selfish motherfucker, you inconsiderate fucking asshole,” and he rips the empty drawers out of the dresser and launches them across the room. They smash against the drywall. One of them breaks. The other breaks the drywall. The third manages to stay in Steve’s grip for a little longer and ultimately ends up on the floor at his feet.

He goes to Sam and Nat’s that night and sleeps on their couch.

Five days later, Sharon calls to tell him that she’s in labor.

—

The baby comes three-and-a-half weeks early, demonstrating a precocious and ironic sense of humor. Barton grants Steve immediate emergency leave, and he gets a standby ticket on the first flight out of Raleigh to DC. He travels in uniform to get through security faster and to better sell the fact that his legs still contain tiny bits of shrapnel. The TSA agents pass the wand over him, look at the patch on his right shoulder, the Combat Infantry Badge on his chest, his Ranger tab, and whatever thousand yard, no-fucks-left expression he has on his face. They then wave him on without
so much as a single question. The American Airlines agents find someone to give up their seat for him, once he tells them that his wife’s having their first baby as they speak. The word “wife” comes easily to him, even though he can barely believe that’s almost what she became.

None of it even comes close to sinking in until he lands at Dulles and has to wait 45 minutes for a rental car counter attendant to meet him. It’s 1:00 a.m., so there’s only a skeleton crew manning the desks. While he waits, Steve gets a call from a nurse at Walter Reed saying that Sharon was taken in for a C-section. She tells him that Sharon’s doing okay, that the baby is breech but otherwise healthy. She tells him it won’t be long now.

It takes a few minutes for his brain to calibrate. For all the pieces to topple into place. But when it finally happens, everything becomes superbly, exquisitely clear.

Sharon is having a baby. Sharon is having his baby. Today, Steve is going to be a father. Right this moment, his child is being born. And nothing else in the world really matters. Not Bucky drinking, not Bucky’s DUI, not Bucky’s warrant, not Bucky’s spiral of agonized self-destruction. Steve lets this baby — his baby — be his anchor, and the clarity opens up his chest and unclenches his throat. It lifts some of the crushing weight of Bucky Barnes from his shoulders.

This is the most important thing in his life now. This has to be the most important thing in his life now.

Steve makes it to Walter Reed at 2:20 and parks in the garage near Building 10. He doesn’t dare stop to rest before going in, because he’s afraid if he doesn’t seize the momentum, he’ll vapor lock on the spot. The fear started to set in and cloud some of his clarity on the half-hour drive over, and now it seems to be compounding by the second. He takes the skywalk to the labor and delivery wing, where he’s escorted to Sharon’s recovery room by a young nurse.

The nurse leaves him there, and he stands outside the doorway, just out of sight, just for a few moments. His stomach feels like it’s consuming itself, the nervousness worse than all his Airborne and Air Assault jumps combined. Just inside the room, he hears voices — Sharon’s and another woman’s. He can’t make out what they’re saying, and he tries to focus harder. When he feels something tap hard on his shoulder, Steve startles and whirls around, wild-eyed, fists clenched.

A middle-aged nurse squawks and holds up her hands defensively. “Whoa, whoa,” she says. “Are you Steve?”

Steve wills himself to not say what he’s thinking, which is that she’s a stone-cold fucking idiot for sneaking up on a soldier like that. “Yeah,” he says instead.

“S-Steve?” he hears from inside the room.

The nurse wags her hand in a shooing motion, maternal in a way that sits entirely wrong with him. “Well, go on.”

Steve steps inside the recovery room and finds Sharon in bed, pale and shaking, like she’s just been pulled from icy waters. A nurse is layering blankets on her and whispering something Steve can’t quite hear. She then pats Sharon’s blankets down and gives them some privacy.

“Steve,” Sharon says, smiling as her teeth chatter.

“Jesus,” he says, walking up to the bed. He grabs the quivering hand she holds out to him and presses it between his own. “What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s okay. They said this is normal. Just adrenaline. I was awake the whole time. For the surgery.”
“I’m sorry I wasn’t here,” Steve tells her, suddenly overcome with guilt. She was alone the whole time. God, did she drive herself here?

He squeezes her hand and then glances around the room. He doesn’t see any baby, and he thinks with mounting panic that there should probably be a baby. He’s already imagining possibilities, most of them horrible. The baby’s sick. The baby is dangerously underdeveloped. The baby is… maybe it’s… but…

“He’s in the nursery getting cleaned up,” Sharon says. “They’ll bring him when they move me back to my room.”

It takes Steve several moments to understand that “he” is the baby.

“He?”

Sharon’s face lights up. It’s brilliant, like the day she told him she was pregnant. “Yeah, it’s a boy. They said he looks really healthy, for being a little early. He was already eight pounds. Eight.” She sputters. “Just imagine if I’d carried him the full term. And twenty-two inches!”

“Holy shit,” Steve murmurs. He’s guessing that’s big for a newborn.

He lifts one hand and lays it gently on her head. He strokes her hair, which is damp with sweat, and she closes her eyes and leans into his touch. He fills with the affection he has for her, the love he still has for her, the respect he has for her, the mother of his child.

“Did you pick a name?” Steve asks. He left the naming entirely up to her. It didn’t seem fair for him to have any preference in the matter.

Sharon’s cheeks flush a little redder. “Yeah. Ethan Flynn Carter-Rogers. If that’s okay.”

When Steve hears his mother’s maiden name, a name he’s guarded so close to his heart, one he’s shared with only two people he’s ever loved… Maybe he’s just exhausted, or maybe all the shit with Bucky has just sucked him dry, but when he hears her name, it guts him right there on the spot.

She should be alive. She should be here with him. She should be meeting her grandson today.

“Oh, babe,” Sharon says, squeezing the hand that’s still linked with hers. “Is that okay? I know it wasn’t on the list, but I thought it’d be a good middle name.”

“Yeah.” His voice is so thick that he nearly chokes on it. “Thank you.”

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Four hours later, Steve holds his son for the first time. They say he’s big, but he’s so, so small. He almost disappears in Steve’s arms. The nurse says hold him just like this, hold his head, make sure you hold it, because he can’t hold it himself. And he does, and it’s one of the scariest things in his whole life. And as Steve looks at that sleeping face, which is red and peeling like a sunburn, he wonders why he doesn’t feel what he’s supposed to feel. Love. Affection. Connection. Any positive emotion at all. The things he sees so clearly on Sharon’s face.

Steve’s own face is supposed to smile, and he’s supposed to talk in a higher pitch, because babies like that. He read a paper on it recently. He can see scraps of the page in his mind. Babies also like to be rocked. So Steve holds his son and sways in front of the window while the sun rises outside, and he doesn’t know what to say, so he talks quietly about the colors and how it looks like it might rain in a little while.
He can’t bring himself to say anything of substance. Not to either of them. It’s too much. It’s just too goddamn much right now.

So he does the things he supposed to do. He does the face and the voice and swaying movement and the special hold. In the bed, Sharon falls asleep. And in his arms, the kid sleeps so hard that Steve checks twice to make sure he’s breathing. The thought that he might not be breathing scares the hell out of him, and the relief is barely any relief at all.

It feels more like nothingness.

On the first of May, Steve gets a call from Winnie Buchanan.

The world once again hurls off its axis.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: masturbation, drunkenness, alcoholism, TBI, PTSD, childbirth, c-section talk, baby stuff, parental bonding issues

Sick call: If you’re sick on any given day, you go to sick call and get seen by a doctor. You may be placed on mandatory quarters for 24 hours or more, meaning that you’re prohibited from working for that duration of time. Supposedly.

Drilling: The Army National Guard typically drills for one weekend a month and two weeks a year in the summer.

Right shoulder: A soldier with a unit patch on their right shoulder has deployed to theater of war, usually Iraq and/or Afghanistan. If they’re with a different unit that they didn’t deploy with, a soldier would have their current unit patch on their left shoulder and their deployment unit patch on their right. In Steve’s case, he’d have the same patch on both shoulders, since he deployed with the unit he’s currently serving with.

TDY: A temporary duty assignment (e.g., training) that lasts less than six months

O-3: The pay grade associated with the rank Captain in the Army. One would go to a promotion board to make the promotion list, like with SGT Mack in the last chapter.

Command referral: A commander can refer a soldier for a mental health evaluation, and the commander would be privy to the results of that evaluation.

Trazodone: an old school antidepressant that’s used more commonly for sleep

Fort Carson: An Army base near Colorado Springs

Primary Leadership Development Course: Where soldiers (used to) go to learn basic skills needed to become an NCO. It’s now called the Basic Leader Course.

Heels: The University of North Carolina’s sports teams are called the Tar Heels (or just “Heels”), named after North Carolina, which is The Tar Heel State. The origin of the name Tar Heel is possibly up for debate, though readers from NC tell me it has
something to do with how during the Civil War the North Carolinians had a reputation for never retreating, as if they had tar on their heels (thanks Sophie and Heirofsltherin!). It may also be related to the fact that NC once exported tree-related products like tar, pitch, and turpentine back in the olden days.

Heels/Duke: University of North Carolina’s Tar Heels and Duke University’s Blue Devils are rivals in many sports, especially basketball
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

February - May 2009: Bucky

Chapter Notes

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with my plot, characters, and style. She’s also available for beta work and is amazing at it. Go visit her on Tumblr

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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In February, Bucky visits his father’s grave.

That’s the plan, anyway. That’s what Winnie tells them that they’re all doing. February 8th marks the day that George Barnes was taken off of life support at Blanchfield Army Community Hospital, and his widow has decided that visiting his remains on the day of his death is a necessary family activity. Bucky always figured that you visit graves on birthdays, maybe veterans’ graves on Memorial Day. Bucky doesn’t visit any graves, not even those of his own men or his friends, and it seems especially morbid to commemorate the worst day of his life like that. Because despite everything that happened on this last deployment, despite Steve breaking his heart open when he was in Afghanistan, February 8th 1992 is still the worst day of James Barnes’s life.

In years past, Bucky endured the day in a number of ways that didn’t involve visiting the dead body of the person he loved more than any other person he’s ever known. More than his ma. More than Rikki. More than Steve. More than the sum of all the other friends and lovers he’s ever had in his whole life. And for each of the past 17 years since the day George was interred — Jesus fucking God, is he really going to be thirty next month? — Bucky has managed to avoid ever setting foot on the soil of Mount Saint Mary Cemetery. The first couple of years, he was too sick to go. Truly, he would be sick to his stomach all day, and the neighbor would have to take care of him while his ma and brother visited the grave. After he turned 16, Bucky would ensure that he was terrifically drunk that day and, accordingly, also terrifically sick. And then when he gave his life over to active duty, he was too busy being Sergeant Barnes, traveling to exotic lands, meeting new people, and killing them.

“Can’t get out of it this time,” Rikki tells him, glancing back at him in the vanity mirror she’s readying herself in front of. She almost sounds pleased by this fact, like she’s nurturing some schadenfreude over how he can no longer justify his absence from their shared family grief.

Bucky’s perched on the edge of the bed again, just like he was so many months ago when he was home on leave and Rikki was preparing for the party he proceeded to ruin. In the couple of times he
can stand to glance at his own reflection, Bucky sees someone diametrically different from who he was then. His muscles wasted to nothing. His hair still short but clearly not groomed. The healthy, youthful tan in his face faded to the sort of haunted, wan complexion of the sole survivor of some terrible tragedy, like a plane crash or mass murder. There also used to be something in his eyes — a glimmer of humor, maybe hope — that has been consumed by a different kind of grief. Grief for himself.

“I wasn’t trying to get out of it,” Bucky lies. “I kinda had to, y’know, work.”

Rikki raises an eyebrow at him, then brushes that same arch with dark powder.

“You were only deployed for four years,” she says. “You could have taken leave for the other two. And you could have been there before.”

Bucky snorts. “Didn’t know you’ve been so butt-hurt about it all these years.”

Rikki snaps the makeup case in her hand closed. Her glare back at him matches the sharpness of the sound it makes.

“‘Butt-hurt?’ Really? You think it’s stupid or silly to be upset by how you douche out on visiting our father’s grave every single year? Do you think we don’t notice that you’re gone? You really think you’re getting away with something?”

“Because it’s pointless,” Bucky counters. “He’s dead. He’s decomposing in the ground. Or maybe not even. They probably didn’t even give him the chance. He probably looks like a wax museum piece.”

Bucky can still see his father’s once-handsome face, posthumously sculpted and plastered and painted over to not look as if it’d been crushed, just so that people could gawk at it at the funeral. It didn’t even look like him. It was like it was someone else’s father, and in his most desperate times, Bucky would sometimes pretend that was the truth.

“It’s fucked up,” he concludes. “So what if I don’t wanna be there for that? What good is it gonna do?”

“You’re not supposed to go for him,” Rikki says, her voice low. “You’re supposed to go for us.”

Bucky looks down at his lap, at where he’s pressing his thumbnail hard into the numb flesh of his index finger. “I don’t belong there.”

Rikki rises from her seat at the vanity, looking like a pillar of mourning in a calf-length black dress and black boots. She turns around and looks down at him.

“Well, I guess you’ll just have to Ranger up and pretend you don’t believe your own bullshit for an hour.” She smooths down her dress and wraps herself in the black cardigan draped over the back of the vanity chair. “Think you can do that?”

Bucky shrugs. “Guess I don’t have much choice.”

Rikki’s face softens then, and with a sigh, she lays a long hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry for being bitchy.”

Bucky crosses his right arm over his chest to lay his hand upon hers. “Don’t be. Today sucks.”

“I shouldn’t take it out on you. I know this is really hard for you. We just really want you there. We
want you back.” Rikki bites down on her lower lip for a beat. “It feels like you’ve been gone for a long time, even when you were here.”

Bucky nods. He feels that way, too.

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They take a Zipcar to Mount Saint Mary Cemetery in Flushing, a move tacky enough to be hilarious, if Bucky weren’t expending so much energy trying not to have a panic attack. Bucky offered his truck, even though the cab only comfortably seats two. He also offered to lie down in the bed of the truck and tried to sell the idea to Rikki, since they used to do that in their dad’s truck when they were kids. What better way to drive to their dad’s death day celebration? But Winnie decided that it was more respectful to cram the four of them in a Volkswagen Jetta emblazoned with the Zipcar logo.

Mount Saint Mary’s is a grand, masturbatory sprawl of Catholicism, carpeted wall-to-wall in dead Italians and Irishmen. George might have laughed and called it a “McGraveyard” or “Goomba’s Acre” or something like that. His jokes were pleasingly off-color like that, often — but not always — sanitized for their young ears. Bucky wonders in a protectively detached way what it would be like to know George as an adult. He wonders if George might find the same parts of today darkly amusing, as much as Bucky can find anything approaching amusing as he crutches through the slush and snow, fourth in a somber line of Buchanan-Barnes-Johnsons.

George Barnes himself was about as Catholic as a yarmulke, and that in itself is enough reason for Bucky to find this whole thing offensive. He’s pretty sure it was really Winnie who wanted him buried here. In her limited understanding of Catholicism and her even more limited understanding of her husband, she probably figured this might increase the probability of having his mortal soul rest with God rather than whatever grim alternative her own wacko Pentecostal church told her was Truth.

His headstone is in the style that one might find at a military cemetery. There’s a cross at the top, under which reads George M. Barnes - CW4 - Grenada - Panama - Persian Gulf - Loving Husband and Father. Bucky always thought his dad might be happier at Arlington, or at least a VA cemetery, given how goddamn much he loved the Army.

Happier, as if he’s living in his casket right now, bitching about the cold.

They stand around the headstone in a quiet semi-circle. Winnie lays a single white rose upon the dead, slushy grass beneath the stone, and Rikki crouches down and jams a small American flag into the damp ground next to it.

“Hey, Dad,” Rikki says, standing to her full height. “It’s been a really big year, as you probably know.”

Rikki goes on to talk about her surgery. Her engagement. Her company. Her new apartment. And as she talks, Bucky stares at her with wide-eyed incredulity. She’s… talking to him. Like he really is just a few feet below, listening to them through the dirt. His ma looks down to the place where Rikki’s talking, dead serious. Only Daisy seems to exhibit a little bit of the discomfort Bucky feels. He sees her eyes flit to the plots on either side of them. To the bare oak tree a couple dozen feet away. To her feet. To Winnie.

“Anyway, we miss you,” Rikki says at the end of it. “And we love you. And we wish you were here. I wish you could come to the wedding next year. But don’t worry, Jamie’s gonna walk me down the aisle.” Rikki looks up and smiles at Bucky. “Because he’s the best.”
Bucky’s still frozen, he thinks. He doesn’t know what command to give his face, because he has no repertoire for crazy shit like this.

“I’ll go next,” Winnie says, then directs her words down to the hunk of rock at their feet. “Hello, darling.” She smiles. “I can’t believe it’s already been a year. And look, we even got Jamie here this year. I know it’s been so long since he’s seen you.”

Jesus Christ, it’s been 17 years since anyone has seen George Barnes. So why act like it’s only him? Why act like they’ve all been visiting him the way they used to visit Aunt Meme at the nursing home? Why act like he’s been making himself sick with grief and shame and alcohol and deployments to avoid seeing his actual living father? As if Bucky wouldn’t spill buckets of innocent blood, pay any price at all, to see his father alive just one more time.

This delusion they’re supposed to be sharing is perplexing and, frankly, infuriating. The sound of his ma’s voice pushes into him like a thumb pushing into a bruise.

“Our son is finally home with us after such a difficult deployment. I know you’ve missed seeing him here all these years—”

“Are you kidding me?” Bucky says, not very quietly at all.

Winnie stops mid-sentence and looks at him with an affronted, slack mouth. Rikki’s looking at him, too, only she seems close to kicking his crutches out from under him.

Still, Winnie tries to recover. Bucky’s new to this stupid, ghoulish routine, so she tries to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Did you want to say something first?” she asks.

Bucky forces his mouth shut and shakes his head.

Winnie stares at him for a few more moments, expression guarded, then continues.

“It’s been really hard on all of us since you’ve been gone. I’m sure you know that. It feels like we came apart after you passed. We almost lost Jamie...” She pauses, and her lips purse as tightly as the sudden clenching of her hands. Her next words are spoken quietly, like a private aside to George. “Sometimes I think you two are the same person. Always so much work. Always so extreme....”

Bucky rolls his eyes back and groans behind his clenched teeth.

“But maybe now it’s time for us to heal as a family. Maybe you can forgive Jamie for being so lost —”

Oh, Bucky really does try to keep his mouth shut. He does. If he weren’t on the tail end of a miserable withdrawal from the Percocet he ran out of four days ago, he might be able to clamp his jaw closed through will. But the opposite seems to happen instead, and his words fall out of him.

“Where the fuck is this all coming from?”

Winnie brings her gaze to his face. “I think your dad should understand why you haven’t been here in seventeen years.”

“Dad’s not judging me for not coming here, Ma. He’s not lying awake at night worrying about it. He doesn’t live at the cemetery. He’s not judging, and he’s not listening, either. Because he’s dead.”
“Jesus,” Rikki says. “Have a little respect.”

Bucky ignores his sister and pivots right to make it clear exactly who he’s talking to. His voice rises while something inside him expands out violently, like a universe of unspoken rage cutting through the void.

“You wanna know why I never come here, Winnie? Because of shit like this. I don’t wanna listen to you talk shit about what a bad son I am and pretend it’s a memorial.”

Bucky feels a hand on his arm brace. Daisy’s. She’s not pulling or yanking. Her hand is just there, a presence touching him just above where his arm was blown apart.

Winnie shakes her head. "I'm not saying that you're a—"

“Dad wouldn’t be judging me, because he never judged me. He loved me and accepted me for exactly who I was. And now he’s dead, and I have to live with that for the rest of my fucking life. And I don’t need you saying shitty things about me to some fucking hunk of rock and some rotting corpse underneath it—”

Rikki tries to interject. Bucky drives his good index finger into his ma’s shoulder, stabbing her with it as he talks.

“Dad wouldn’t put up with your weird guilt trip bullshit for a single goddamn second. He never did when he was alive.”

Winnie’s eyes go dark and as cold as the air. “What you don’t know about your father could fill the Guggenheim, James.”

Bucky has no idea what’s happening to him right now. It’s like he’s standing outside himself. Like he’s watching himself have a meltdown from a few feet away. Like he’s watching a long-dormant volcano spew nearly two decades’ worth of vitriol at the woman he thinks he might very quietly, very secretly hate. He’s pretty sure she very secretly hates him, too, and that only seems to make him madder.

“Fuck you,” Bucky spits. “I knew him. I knew him, and you don’t get to tell me that I didn’t. So fuck you, and fuck this.”

As Bucky angrily crutches off in the general direction of the car, it feels like he’s both liberated and damned himself, if he could possibly damn himself any further in the eyes of his mother and sister. He feels oddly giddy, talking about his dad like that. Maybe because his family doesn’t really talk about George Barnes, except on his death day. They certainly don’t even allude to what happened in the year preceding his death. They don’t dare uncover those old, smoldering wounds. Maybe it’s too painful to talk about together, even after all these years.

Or maybe they just don’t talk about it around Bucky. Maybe they whisper about it while he’s locked in his room, where he hides himself away as long as he can manage without being excessively impolite. Or maybe they discuss it aloud when he’s slogging through his miserable daily AA meeting, which he only goes to because Rikki and Daisy insist upon it. He’s never met a sorrier collection of tortured souls than at the noon meeting at the Methodist church down the street. In that regard, AA is a great fit for him, and they all seem to regress to the same pitiful mean together.

At any rate, Bucky’s said way too much, even if it was uncommonly honest of him to do so. Nobody ever accused him of having good timing. He looks over his shoulder and doesn’t see anyone following him, which is fortunate and disappointing. If he hadn’t burned through almost all his pity
capital in the couple of weeks he’s been here, shittong on their annual mourning ritual — Jesus, talking to his ma like that — most certainly took care of whatever might have been left. And he starts to get a little afraid of what might happen when they get home.

Fortunately, there’s an old woman with radiant, thinning red hair parked alongside the cemetery road. She’s hunched outside her 1988 Cadillac Deville in a fur coat that practically swallows her, fishing a Virginia Slim out of a black leather cigarette pouch. Bucky makes his way up to her and taps into the small reserve of charm he has on deck for when he needs something real bad. And this he needs real, real bad.

“’Scuse me, but you think I might bum a smoke off you?”

The woman gives a gritty little chuckle as she eyes him from head to toe. “You look like you could use one more than me, honey.”

She holds out the pack to him, and he fumbles one of the long cigarettes out with the clumsy pinch of his right thumb and forefinger. He nods his thanks and accepts the butane light she holds out for him.

Bucky takes the smoke deep into his lungs, closing his eyes at the filthy, familiar taste. It takes him back to Iraq, back to the last one he had just before the Khalidiya mission, which he smoked hurriedly in tense silence. He barely gave himself the chance to enjoy it then, and he’s damn well going to make up for it now with this dainty little menthol stick quivering between his fingers.

“What happened to you?” she asks, waving her wizened hand at his leg.

“Car accident,” Bucky tells her. “What happened to you?”

“Dead husband.” She takes a small puff off her smoke and pushes it back out matter-of-factly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He had Alzheimer’s.”

Bucky nods and exhales smoke through his nose. He reads the push-pull of ambivalence in her face and takes a guess at something else she might add in different company.

“Must’ve been a relief,” he says, then adds “at the end.”

“I’m not supposed to say I was glad, but I was. If you love someone, you can’t stand to see them suffer.”

“Bet you were pretty tired.”

“You have no idea.” She gives him a twitchy smile. “Unless you do. Maybe you do, if you’re here.”

Bucky nods again, even though he’s hardly thinking about his dad. For some reason, he’s thinking about himself. How sick they must already be of caring for him. Even just caring about him. Between the silent routine and the shit he pulled today, they must be regretting ever inviting him back to New York.

The woman drops her half-smoked cigarette into the slush, the filter mauve with her lipstick, and taps it with the tip of her loafer. She probably puts away a pack of these things a day, judging by how easily she parts with them. What a waste. Bucky would’ve gladly smoked the rest of it, even with the lipstick.
“Well, I hope you get better soon,” she says, sliding her purse up her arm and reaching out for her car door. “You gotta get back in that saddle.”

“How do you know I’m not in the saddle right now?” He’s wildly curious about the comment, about her, and if he had just a little less shame, he’d ask to hitch a ride to wherever the hell she’s going.

She barks out a little laugh and shakes her head. “Honey, you look like you just crawled out of a bottle of gin.”

He gives her a lopsided smile. ”I actually prefer vodka.”

“All the best drunks do.” She lowers herself carefully into the driver’s seat. “I should know.” On that ambiguous note, she closes the door and starts the engine.

Bucky holds his cigarette between his lips and crutches out of her way. She takes a ridiculously long time to finally drive away, until he’s slow-smoked his Virginia Slim down to the filter. As he watches her creep down the road in her land yacht, he wonders if maybe that’s why he likes her so much. She’s a drunk, just like him.

He looks back toward his dad’s grave and sees his family making their way back. With a nervous sigh, he drags himself over to their fakakta Zipcar. When he gets there, they don’t talk to him. They barely even look at him, except for Daisy, who’s never seemed afraid to really see him, no matter what state he’s in.

Bucky takes the front seat only because he has to, on account of his knee brace, and in the silence before his ma fires up the engine, Bucky says the last of his piece.

“Don’t ever ask me to come here again.”

He expects at least one person to say “no shit” or something else overtly or covertly hostile, but no one breathes a word. The silence is so unbearable that now he really wishes he’d hitched a ride with Cadillac Lady. At least she saw him for what he is — a dried out alcoholic white-knuckling it through a weak impression of sobriety, maintained exclusively to meet the expectations of those he’s let down so many times in the past.

Maybe she came into his life for a reason. Maybe she was the universe’s way of setting things right again, shepherding things back to their natural place. Nobody can say he didn’t try, because he tried. He’s been trying. And look at where it’s gotten him still. He’s the same old fuckup he’s always been, even without booze, so why continue denying himself the small relief it gave him?

Bucky considers all of this very carefully on the way back to Park Slope. He really does try to think it out. His impulse to drink has been consistently strong since he got blown up, with spikes of “Jesus-I-gotta-drink-now” that he’s managed to ride out through the life-wrecking magic of guilt. He tries to make sure that he’s not dealing in cravings but in reason, if such a thing can ever be found in the relapse decision-making process.

He weighs his choices carefully. Keep not-drinking and keep riding it out, even if it turns him into the kind of guy who tells his own mother to fuck off. Or give himself a little break, cut himself some slack, afford himself and his family a tiny respite from the 24/7 shit show of his life. Bucky vacillates until about four blocks from Rikki and Daisy’s apartment, when he decides that a little bit can’t hurt. In fact, it may actually help him at least get some halfway decent sleep. He’s done this before. Hell, he’s done it for most of his life. He knows how to do it and do it discretely. He knows how to do it without making a complete mess of things.
And so, in February, Bucky takes his first drink in eight months.

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By the end of February, Bucky’s got a pretty good routine down. Things have smoothed over somewhat with his ma and Rikki, thanks to some tactful and wholly theoretical apologies for how he behaved at the cemetery. He couldn’t take back a single word of it; the small crumb of self-esteem he has left simply wouldn’t let him. It was all true, and he’d say it again no matter how many do-overs he got. Instead, he pivoted and diverted by focusing on the timing and tone and the f-bombs, blaming them on his ubiquitous physical discomfort and how the cold makes his joints feel. He also threw in a cursory dig at his grunt mentality, where he don’t do feelings so good, y’know. Too many years spent making the green grass grow with the blood of America’s enemies. They seem to buy most of it, albeit warily. He knows he’s on thin ice but still skates across it well enough. For now.

It’s morning and he’s up, booting around the kitchen for coffee to toss down the hatch before he faces the one-two kidney punch that is getting ready for the day. He’s tried getting ready before coffee and he’s tried it after, and he’s learned that the lingering physical and psychological suffering is almost intolerable without a little stimulant action to kick him out of the darkest part of his day.

There are a few seconds when he first opens his eyes — a few expansive, infinite seconds — where he has no recollection of who he is or what his problems are. He has no history. No future. He’s just awake and clear and free. Free of thought. Free of pain. Free of burden. It never lasts more than a few seconds, though, which is usually when the first thought dawns. Usually it’s something like “I hope this lasts forever,” which is the cue that it’s already over. And once that line is crossed and everything floods back to him, the contrast is so jarring and horrible that it’s a damn demi-miracle he can even drag himself out of bed at all.

And sometimes he can’t even do that. A few days this month, he only got out of bed twice in a full 24 hour period, only to piss, and he had to win a fierce argument with himself to even do that. Rikki and his ma asked if he was sick those days, and he couldn’t even answer. He supposes he was sick, in a way. Sick in the heart, maybe. Sick in the soul or spirit or whatever one could call the thing that makes a man eternal.

“Depressed,” Daisy ventured, and Bucky balked with a weak snort.

Today he drinks two cups of coffee at the eat-in kitchen table, alone and unoccupied by anything but his vague plans for the day. Get ready. Go out. Come back. Call someone. The very last part is something he promised Steve he’d do. Of course, the person he calls usually is Steve, and that seems to sit okay with both of them. Bucky misses him so fucking badly that sometimes he can’t even bring himself to dial his number. Sometimes it’s just easier to not hear his voice, to not hear the impotent longing mirrored in his own wavering words. He hates it when he can’t stay strong, when his voice gets thick and he tells Steve “I miss you” and “I wish you were here” and “please don’t hang up.”

Maybe he’ll call Sam today. Sam is easy. Sam doesn’t complicate things with ancient unsolvable problems and messy confessions. Sam will give him gossip about the 107th and talk music and movies and tell him about things he cooked. Then he’ll give the phone to Natasha, and she’ll take it outside and tell him how everyone is really doing, particularly Steve. Lately, she’s been using words like “distant” and “professional” and “driven,” which make Bucky heavy with worries that Steve will shrug off, just like Bucky shrugs off all of Steve’s worries about him. The only honest thing they seem to share is the wretched love they have for each other, which flails like a wounded beast that can never be comforted.

Bucky drinks his coffee for as long as he can, taking fractional and infrequent sips while he listens to an argument between Rikki and Daisy in the living-room-slash-workspace. Business is good. Really
good. Almost good enough to hire someone else. Almost good enough for Daisy to quit her contract work on the side. They bicker through the growing pains in a way that’s enviably mature. They fight loud, they take a break, they calmly talk it out.

It’s remarkable, being near a healthy couple. Their parents were never very healthy together, fighting almost daily about work or parenting or the goddamn dishes. Bucky’s rarely been healthy in a relationship with another person. Certainly not in any sustainable way. And somehow, Rikki has this thing with Daisy, an easy, beautiful love that seems to evolve and strengthen daily. They’re sweet together. They kiss and hold hands and have sex often. He can hear them at night, and not even booze and Benadryl can smother the envy and anguish that their love kindles in him.

Rikki storms into the kitchen and rolls her eyes at something Daisy says behind her. Rikki looks so similar to him that Bucky can clearly imagine what he looks like when he makes the same face. No wonder it pisses people off so much. But at least she’s rolling them toward him and not at him, which is a welcome change.

“‘Morning,” Rikki says to him, visiting the coffee pot for a refill. “How’d you sleep?”


“You just sounded… not good.”

Bucky swallows. He couldn’t even say for sure what she’s referring to. He’s hoping it’s just a nightmare he can’t remember. “If you know, then why ask?”

“Have you made an appointment with the VA yet?” she asks above the rim of her mug.

Bucky takes a swig from his own cup. He’s getting dangerously close to the bottom. “Nope.”

“Are you going to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you even know how long you’re supposed to be on crutches?”

“Not really.”

Rikki leans her hip against the counter. She regards him seriously. “Are you going to a meeting today?”

“Yep.”

“How’s it going?”

“Okay.”

“Are you, like, doing your steps or whatever?”

Bucky gives a small smirk at the “steps or whatever” part. It’s close to how he refers to them in the safety of his own mind, except that there’s usually an expletive thrown in somewhere around there. Maybe his “dumb fucking steps” or “steps or whatever bullshit.”

“I need a sponsor first,” he tells her. “I’m looking for the right one.”

Rikki nods. She appears pleased by the entirely false implication that he’s making some actual effort to engage in AA. “Good. Maybe you can find another veteran or something.”
“Maybe.” Bucky drains his cup, grimacing at the grit at the very bottom and what it means for him. He sets the mug on the table and rises to his good foot. “Better get ready if I want to make my eleven o’clock.” He gives her a smile that he intends to be reassuring.

She returns it. “Yeah, sure. Do you need a ride or anything?”

“Nah,” Bucky says over his shoulder while he hobbles down the hallway. “The walk is good for me.”

Back in his room, Bucky slowly gathers his clothes for the day. Socks and underwear and undershirt he digs from a basket of unfolded laundry. A long-sleeve grey shirt from the floor that passes the smell test. A pair of black jeans draped over the foot of the bed. He then leaves his crutches and limps down the hall to the bathroom they all share.

He takes a long time brushing and flossing his teeth, if only to delay the rest of it. As he does, he appraises the two scars on his brow and chin, tilting his head to catch the light from multiple angles. The one on his brow is the worst, cutting a hairless, ridiculous line through his left eyebrow. The scar on his chin is certainly more troublesome, at least when it comes to trying to shave around it. But if there’s one scar on his body that’s not patently hideous, it’s that one. Very Harrison Ford.

When he’s done with his teeth, Bucky turns on the shower as hot as it will go and lets the water run until the mirror is completely fogged up. He then takes off his knee and foot braces and spends a few minutes clenching his jaw at the pain and stiffness. Next, he peels off his long-sleeve sleep shirt, makes a sour face at the sickly-sweet sweaty booze smell, and drops it in the hamper. He glances at his arms, which are both still dotted with pink spots and streaks that scream in contrast to the pale, unmarked skin of his torso. He sometimes wonders how much metal would rip out of him if someone stuck him in an MRI machine. He imagines it, sometimes, what that would feel like to have all that burden torn from his flesh.

Bucky has tried out various ways to make light of his injuries over the months, sometimes using stupid images and similes and nicknames. White shirt with pink sleeves. Humpty Dumpty. Gimp-o-tron 2000. He thought it might make things easier, humor as medicine or some shit like that. But none of these tricks have made him feel even the smallest bit better. Because he used to be beautiful, and now he’s disfigured. He used to be hot, and now he’s disgusting. He used to be hot, for fuck’s sake. Countless people told him so. Countless people wanted the body he used to have. Bucky figures the only thing those same people would want from him now is to please keep himself covered up.

He pushes down his sweatpants and steps out of them, frowning at even more pink stripes and spots. The surgical slices over his knee and foot. The thickly-scarred oval where he lost a chunk of his calf, which is now covered by the skin from his ass. Christ. Why? Nobody ever asked him if he’d want his ass to be left intact. Nobody asked him anything about any part of his care, in fact. Nobody thought that maybe he’d like some physical aspect of his sexual self to not be ruined. But then, what straight guy needs to worry about his naked ass looking perfect?

When undressing, Bucky always saves his arm brace and underwear for last. It’s a toss-up some days which one he dreads the most. Today it’s definitely his underwear, but only because of what happened last night.

Bucky’s been thinking of Steve a lot this past week, and usually those thoughts are suitable for general audiences. But last night, Bucky just wanted something. Just a little something different. Something familiar. Something that could help him feel like things aren’t as hopeless as they actually are. Something to make him feel like a man again, if only for a few minutes.
He wanted to feel *good*, for fuck’s sake. Could anyone blame him? And maybe he also wanted to know if it was even possible to feel good like that again. He’s been very fearfully wondering about it ever since he got hurt, and it’s never seemed like a good time to do a functions check. Because what if it doesn’t work? What if he really is broken down there? He knows he’s unfuckable now, but he’d at least like to be able to fuck himself once in awhile and pretend that he’s not. What if he can’t even have that?

But last night he was feeling brave, so after he got off the phone with Steve, he tried. He tried to think about Steve in all the hot, nasty ways he used to. Mostly Steve doing things to him. Steve kissing him. Steve touching him. Steve… definitely not blowing him. That’s the last thing he ever wants to imagine again. But Steve touching him. Steve… well, probably not Steve complimenting him on his body or his sexual prowess, but Steve at least fucking him. Fucking and fucking him, in all sorts of positions and all sorts of ways. They’ve practically done it all—

At that point, Bucky was regrettably detoured by how he doesn’t have a single memory of ever fucking Steve. Because Steve never wanted that. He’s never even wanted his asshole touched. Not by a single finger. And then the bastard had the nerve to wonder why Bucky would ever question his sexuality because, Jesus, what quote-end-quote bisexual man wouldn’t want something in his ass at least once…?

Bucky caught that reckless train of thought before it completely derailed him. He’s gotten pretty good at reigning in the frequent swells of bitterness that threaten him throughout the day. There are so many, after all. So he pushed all that old garbage aside and tried to remember the best sex they’ve had, like one of the nights after Bucky came back from drilling with his National Guard unit for two weeks. Or finals week. Jesus…

The memories came back to him easily. He’s lost track of how many times he jerked off to them in the past. But last night, there was nothing. No matter how hard he imagined, no matter how many details he tried to recall, his dick remained listless. Completely unmoved by any of it. Even when he built up the courage to touch himself through his pants, there was nothing. Nothing. Not a single twitch.

Bucky very nearly wept. He came so, so close. Closer than he’s come in years. Closer even than that dumb day on the toilet back at Walter Reed. Instead, he drank until he blacked out. Apparently things werebad after that, according to Rikki. He couldn’t say how. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t want to know.

So after that disastrous experiment, Bucky opts to take off his arm brace first, letting it fall to the thick rug with a muffled thud. He doesn’t look at what lies beneath it. He already knows it’s horrific. Nightmarishly ugly. Same when he pushes down his underwear. He doesn’t need to see that traitorous little dick. That limp, pointless flesh. He finds himself wishing the whole thing had been blown off. He’d almost rather have nothing there than the hope for something that will never be.

Bucky showers as quickly as he can, soaping up his mangled body with clinical detachment. He’s found that he can use one of those stupid, girly poofs and liquid shower wash and hardly have to touch himself at all. He can just close his eyes and scrub, like a nurse would do to a stranger.

Afterward, he dresses so fast and with so much clumsy anger that he nearly loses his balance. He hops on his good foot and grabs for the wall and tries not to scream his frustration. Bucky swallows his despair like he so often does, chokes it down into the chasm where he stuffs all the other emotions he can’t bear to the world. To himself, even.

He feels that place inside of him starting to get full, but the drinking helps with that a little. It seems to act like a kind of composting agent, or an acidic compound that wears down some of the edges and
makes more space. Every sip lets Bucky tolerate his life for just a little longer, and surely nobody would blame him for wanting to keep going, even like this.

After dressing, he doesn’t bother to shave, or even look in the mirror. He’s pretty sure he still looks like a pile of very tired dog shit, the kind of rough that no amount of grooming can really mask. So why fucking bother at all? He doesn’t have anyone to impress anymore.

He goes back to his room, grabs the backpack Daisy bought him when he moved in, and fills it with empty vodka bottles he pulls out from under his mattress. The pints are thin and fit pretty well, but he’s had one too many close calls to feel comfortable drinking at home anymore. Last night — whatever that was — was the last straw. On top of that, he recently had to fake an acute stomach ache to keep the cleaning woman from finding the stash hidden in his bed. Too sick to get out of bed. So sorry. Who the hell has a cleaning lady, anyway?

So today, he’s decided to move his base of operations.

Bucky crutches out to the living room and slips on a single black Merrill moccasin shoe from the pair that he picked up last week. They’re highly functional and ugly as fuck, though less ugly than the embarrassment of failing at basic tasks like tying his shoes.

“I’m going to a meeting, then I’m gonna meet one of my AA buddies for coffee,” he tells Rikki and Daisy. He’s careful to keep his posture as straight as he can to keep the bottles from clanking. He stuffed a towel in there to muffle them, but there are half a dozen threatening to rattle around regardless.

“Great,” Rikki says, smiling over at him from her monitor. “Do you know when you’ll be back?”

“I’ll text if I’m gonna miss dinner.”

“What’s your friend’s name?” Daisy asks. Her expression is carefully flat, but her tone doesn’t quite match.

“David,” Bucky says, pulling a name randomly from the air. “He’s been in the program for a while.”

Daisy nods shallowly. “Have a good time.”

“Thanks. I will.”

Bucky struggles his way down the stairs, as he always does. Because of his knee brace, he can’t bend his right leg, so he slides up to the left rail and hops down each step on his left foot. Glass rattles in his bag, and Bucky curses under his breath. He goes slow, and fortunately, nobody’s there to witness his shame.

Outside the building, Bucky hangs a left down 4th Avenue and crutches his way toward the church. Just in case they’re looking out the window at him. He’s staked the route from the living room and kitchen window, so he knows how far he has to go before he can hang another left down 6th Street. Once he makes it halfway down the block, Bucky looks up and down the sidewalk. When he’s convinced nobody’s going to see him, he drops the bottles in someone else’s garbage can. He tries to use a different can every time, and he’s been trying to consolidate to make a drop on garbage days. He tries to be considerate, for what it’s worth.

Bucky finds his truck one more block down, parked in front of a spread of brownstones. It’s a pretty lazy street. Perfect place to sit and think in peace. He climbs up into the cab and settles heavily in the driver’s seat. He can still see his breath, so he starts the engine and gives himself a few minutes of heat.
He came for a reason today. On another day, he really might have tried to go to a meeting. He’s been to a few. He hasn’t always been lying. He’s been to a couple while drunk. He never admits to being a newcomer and he always goes to open meetings, where maybe he’s not even a drunk at all. Maybe he’s just a curious community member. Just some guy named Sam who blows in and out with the winter wind.

Bucky pulls out his phone and turns on the screen. There’s his damn reason, clear as anything. Three missed calls and two voicemails from THOR ODINSON :) He must have gotten them last night, after he turned his ringer off while he was pathetically trying to jerk some life back into his dick. God, what hilarious, shit timing.

He’s gonna need to be drunker for this.

Bucky reaches under the seat and pulls out a thermos, the type that working men take to construction sites. He pours some cool vodka into the cap and chugs a few shots’ worth to get his buzz going and take some of the edge off. While he waits to start feeling good, Bucky takes off his walking boot and knee brace and practices depressing the gas and brake pedals. He presses them soft, moves from one to the other, tries to get the RPM gauge just-so and keep it there. He grits his teeth through the pain, because he’s gonna drive this thing again, and soon.

He also listens to 101.9, where he’s promised a “New York Rock Experience” that seems to get better with every passing minute. The drunker Bucky gets, the radder the hits, and he nods his head to the rhythm and pumps his fist and mumbles “we’re fated to pretend to pretend we’re fated to pretend to pretend” while he pretends to drive and pretends to not give a shit about the tragicomedy of his miserable life. Choke on vomit and that’ll be the end. Sounds pretty fucking good. God knows he’s come close several times.

It takes about 20 minutes for the booze to fully kick in, to make him feel floaty and smooth and fundamentally okay as a human being. It’s the sweet spot he’s found, and he tries to keep himself here as long as he can. Too far one way or the other, and he gets angry and desperate and dangerous, and he doesn’t want to be any of those things for Thor. Not even for his recorded voice. He deserves so much better. Better than what Bucky’s given him — or, in this case, not given him.

But despite feeling good, he still has to stare down his phone and hover his finger over the voicemail button, which is fine until he accidentally presses it. He yelps “Oh shit!” and then bites his lip as the message plays.

*Hey, Jamie. It’s Thor. I haven’t heard from you in a while and wanted to check to see how you’re doing. I got a call from your platoon leader back in October, and he told me to wait for you to call me, but it’s been five months, so I thought I’d reach out and say hello. I know... I’m not sure where things really stand with us, but I just want you to know that I’m he—*

The message cuts off, probably because his cell carrier sucks so badly. Bucky’s face is hot, and the whole cab is hot like the surface of the goddamn sun, and he rolls down the windows and turns off the truck, and he gasps hard, like the backswing of a sob that never comes. And all the wrong he’s done to that wonderful man comes back to him, and it’s so unconscionably unfair. At least Steve deserves some of the pain Bucky’s given him, but Thor… all that man ever gave him was his own goodness.

Bucky slams his palm against the steering wheel, growling at the pain, and he does it again, and then again and again and again, until he goes white with it. A passing lady with a dog slinks to the far side of the sidewalk while he hits and yells and tells himself all the horrible truths of who he is, stopping only to slam down more vodka before slumping bonelessly in his seat.
He closes his eyes and feels his lungs aching for air, making him pull in the kind of hitching, panicked breaths that children take when they’ve cried themselves too hard. The winter air feels like acid, and he takes it in gladly.

He deletes Thor’s second message without even listening to it.

In March, Bucky spends his 30th birthday in jail.

The last part of it, anyway. Up until he was arrested, he thought it was going pretty well, considering he’s now thirty-goddamn-years-old. Thirty years old, getting drunk in his parked truck while he’s supposed to be at AA. While he’s supposed to be at physical therapy. While he’s supposed to be meeting the expectations of the people who love him. It was remarkable that he was only half-drunk when that dumb, ugly fucker ran his light at Chambers and Church and smashed the front end of Bucky’s truck — Bucky’s beautiful truck — with his shitty Cadillac SRX. Could anyone really blame Bucky for being pissed? He almost had the whole thing paid off.

Speaking of pissed, Rikki looks like she’s strongly considering drop kicking him down Centre Street as soon as they get outside. She stands, glowering, when Bucky’s escorted to the waiting area of the Manhattan Detention Complex. He can’t move quite as quickly with these crutches, some crappy handouts the county gave him because they felt sorry for him. His were left in the street, and the cops were so concerned with preventing him from committing second degree murder that they didn’t grab them before they hauled him off to jail.

“Hey, Rik,” Bucky says, trying to sound at least as embarrassed as he feels. Some people in the waiting room are staring at the two of them, which is saying something for Manhattan. “Thanks for picking me up.”

Rikki’s mouth presses into a tight line. She makes a “mmm-hmm” sound and turns sharply to make her way to the door. She moves with fast, deliberate steps, and Bucky has to crutch like crazy just to catch up to her at the curb outside the building where she throws her arm up in the air to hail whatever taxi will pick up a six-foot-one trans woman and her crippled, ragged, black-eyed brother.

“I’m really sorry,” he tells her.

She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t turn to look at him. She only raises her arm higher and with more urgency.

Bucky worries his lower lip with his teeth. “Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“Are you gonna ignore me now?”

Rikki waves her hand at a taxi that looks like it’s considering pulling over. She smiles at it broadly, a winning Barnes move in virtually all settings, and the cab slows to a stop in front of her. They slide into the back seat, and Rikki gives the driver the intersection of the church where Bucky has been intermittently attending AA meetings for the last month.

“Aw, c’mon. Can’t we just go home?” Bucky complains.

Rikki turns her head to him, her face tired and angry, the type of anger that’s been simmering low and slow since God knows when.
“How long?” she asks.

Bucky pushes a sigh out through his nose. He tries to count the days — the weeks — and he keeps fumbling the numbers as they get higher and higher. “Since February.”

“When in February?”

“How long?”

“When in February?”

“After the fucking… thing at the cemetery.”

“So, a month?”

“I guess.”

Rikki’s jaw grinds to the side, and her chest begins to rise and fall noticeably. “A month. In our apartment?”

“At first.”

“Jesus Christ.” Rikki shakes her head and looks out her window.

“Then just the truck.”

Her head snaps back. “You drank in your truck? Were you driving this whole time?”

“No. Just these past couple of days.”

“So when you were going out, when you said you were going to all these meetings and coffee and whatever the fuck, you were getting drunk in your truck?”

Bucky knew that what he was doing was sad and pitiful, but when he hears it from Rikki’s gaping mouth, shame pools hot in his gut.

“Yeah,” he admits.

“Did you ever go to any meetings at all? Even one?”

“I went to some meetings.” He doesn’t tell her the state he was in when he went, or how he barely remembers any of them because he was so wasted.

Rikki shakes her head again, like she’s shaking off a fresh wave of disbelief. “I’m just so… disappointed. And mad. When did you become such a liar? You lie all the time now. Just lies upon lies upon lies.”

God, it is new for him. Not lying in general, but certainly lying to Rikki. He’s never had much of a reason to lie to her before. She’s already seen him at his absolute worst, and here she still is, paying his bail and scooping him up from jail.

“What do you want me to say?” Bucky asks.

“I don’t give a shit what you say,” Rikki snaps. “I want you to stop drinking, like you said you would.”

Bucky thrusts his finger toward her. “I never said I would stop drinking. Never. I said I would try.”

“No, that’s horseshit. When you were home on leave you said you were getting help, after you got shit-faced at my—”
“Yeah,” he interrupts, because he can’t tolerate the memory of that night. “And then I got blown to kingdom-fucking-come, in case you didn’t notice.”

Rikki bears her teeth, snarling at him while she unleashes an unchecked stream of candor.

“So what? So you got hurt. Go see a fucking doctor. You’re all fucked in the head, go see a shrink. You’re retired from the Army. You get free medical care. There’s not a single goddamn reason why you’re not getting help right now. Not one.” She drives her palm hard against the seat between them.

Bucky clenches his molars together as her words crash into him. It’s all true. Irrefutably true. There’s absolutely no good reason why he’s not in at least three different kinds of therapy right now. He has no excuses for what he’s allowed himself to become. And yet, he can’t imagine any of this being any other way. He does have reasons, and maybe they’re bad ones, but they’re real. And they’re the truth.

“I don’t wanna deal with it,” Bucky tells her. “I don’t wanna work on it. I don’t wanna talk about it. I don’t think…” He pauses as the thought veers into a very dark place that he doesn’t dare turn into words.

“I don’t think I can live with all this,” he decides to say instead.

Rikki’s eyebrows draw together. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky mutters.

“Yeah, you do.”

He gives a weak shrug. “Some things can’t be fixed.”

“Like what? What about you can’t be fixed?”

“A lot. The things I’ve done, the way I am now, there’s nothing to be done for it.”

It’s more than just his wrecked body. It’s more than just the end of his sex life and his romantic life and the stupid, fanciful futures he imagined with Steve or Thor. It’s all the choices he made downrange. His callous disregard for humanity. His ethical inconsistency. His hypocrisy. It’s the innocents he’s killed and the soldiers who’ve died from his choices. It’s the burdens he took upon himself so that others didn’t have to have them. And now, there’s no more road to kick them down. They’re all here, walking the world with him, sleeping in his bed at night. And there’s no cure for those ghosts. Not really.

“I think you’re depressed,” Rikki says. “I think Daisy’s right.”

“Maybe.”

She shifts her knees toward him, facing him with intense resolve. “So, start there. Start somewhere. Do something. Just one thing.”

“Like what?”

“You can start by telling the truth. Being honest with me. I want you to stay with us, but if you’re just gonna rot away and be a full-time alcoholic, I don’t know how long you’re gonna be welcome in our home. Daisy sure as hell won’t put up with it. You know she’ll support you, if you wanna get better, but if you’re not even trying, she’s not gonna tolerate it.”
Bucky gives a decisive nod. “And Daisy makes all the rules.”

“No.” Rikki makes a slashing gesture across her neck with the flat plane of her hand. “You don’t get to do that. You stay with us rent-free. We never ask you for anything except to work on getting better. That’s what we thought you were doing, and you weren’t doing any of it. That has to change.”

“Or what? You kick me out?”

Rikki falls quiet for a few moments, fingering the metal zipper of her leather jacket. When she speaks again, her voice is low and regretful.

“If you’re not gonna do anything but drink, and you don’t wanna do anything else, then, yeah. That’s what’s gonna happen.” She glances over at him and averts her gaze again. “I’m sorry. If it were just me, I’d probably let you do whatever the fuck you wanted forever. Because I don’t know how to set boundaries with you. Because I love you. And Daisy loves you too, but she’s not gonna let you walk all over me. And that’s why I love her. I love both of you, and I don’t want to feel like I have to choose between the two of you. It’s not fair.”

“Well, and Daisy’s gonna win anyway,” Bucky states.

“See? When you say things like that, I don’t know what to say back. I just told you I don’t want to be in a position where I have to choose, and you say something that makes me have to choose. It’s like you enjoy pushing me away. And I don’t know why.”

“You’re just gonna get hurt. That’s what I do. It’s what I’ve always done, isn’t it?” Bucky gives her a solemn smile.

“You just make me tired, Jamie. Really tired,” she says, letting some of that tiredness seep into her voice. “Loving you is exhausting sometimes. You know that?”

“Maybe you should just cut me loose. It’d be easier on everyone.”

“Shut up. I’m not gonna do that. Just please try. Actually try. Please.” She lays her hand carefully over his left, over the brace that he probably should have stopped wearing a long time ago.

“I’ll try,” Bucky tells her.

“And, Jesus, what happened to your face?”

Bucky lifts his eyebrows. “You should see the other guy.”

It comes out like a joke, but Bucky was both immensely relieved and surprised that he didn’t kill that man. He desperately wanted to. The guy was such a shit-talker, screaming at Bucky like he was the one who ran the goddamn red light. Screaming and pink in the cheeks, eyes bulging, fist shaking in Bucky’s face while Bucky goaded him on and dared him to hit a cripple. The guy was too big of a chicken shit, and he turned around to go back to his car, and Bucky was so fucking furious, so fucking wild with adrenaline and fear, and, God, he wanted that asshole to punch him. He wanted to feel the contact of the guy’s knuckles against his cheek. He wanted his nose to break, for blood to flow out of him and splatter onto the asphalt. More than that, Bucky wanted to kill him, maybe more than he’s ever wanted to kill another man. So the guy turned away, and Bucky dropped his crutches and rushed him. Grabbed him from behind. Put him in a chokehold and tried to crush his trachea with his arm brace. Christ, it hurt. It hurt so fucking bad, and the pain just made him pull harder. And the guy’s hands grabbed his head and smashed into his face, giving Bucky some of what he wanted, until the guy went heavy and limp and the cops pulled Bucky off of him and dragged him to the
patrol car while Bucky screamed at them and called them fucking fascist bastards and flexed his weak body against them while bystanders took pictures—

Rikki holds up both hands to him. “Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“No,” Bucky says ruefully. “You definitely don’t.”

—

Rikki takes away his keys. Both sets. His truck didn’t get totaled, but he sure as hell won’t be driving it anymore. No more secret club house. No more freedom to leave whenever he wants. For the first week he’s out of jail, Bucky goes to AA meetings twice a day. Rikki and Daisy take turns escorting him, and they sit next to him and glare if he doesn’t identify himself as a newcomer. So he does. He raises his hand and says “I’m James, and I’m a drunk,” even though he’s supposed to say he’s an “alcoholic” or that he’s “powerless over alcohol.” But that’s all he’ll give, both to the group and to his escorts.

Despite the pouting, Bucky tells Rikki and Daisy that he’s going to do 90 meetings in 90 days. He tells them he’s going to be sober during that time. He tells them that he can do it. He’s really convincing about it, too. And in those moments, he actually believes himself. He really means it. He really, really wants it.

Of course, Rikki and Daisy can’t babysit him forever. They have work to do, especially since they’ve decided not to hire anyone new. They seem relieved by his fresh dedication to wellness. He stays out most of the day, telling them that he’s going to the park. That he’s going to the VA. That he’s going to meetings. That he’s going for coffee. That he’s going to eat something, because he’s about had it with their nagging on that front, too. He doesn’t know what’s different this time, whether they’re more desperate to believe him or whether his acting is better. But they buy it, hook, line, and sinker.

He manages to stay sober for eleven days. Despite his very good intentions and an abstract desire to get better, the truth is that Bucky just doesn’t care enough to be sober right now. He doesn’t care, and he’s fucked anyway. He’s a criminal now. He’s been charged with a DUI and assault, both of which could be proven guilty of well beyond reasonable doubt. He has a lawyer now, a slight, pale little public defender named Karen. She’s deeply interested in his military experience and tries to find legitimate reasons for why he’s such a goddamn mess. She has compassion for him. She wants to help him. She’s young and excitable, fresh out of law school, no doubt. He says honey, honey, don’t try so hard, and she tells him not to call her that and says she’ll try as hard as she wants, like if she tries for the both of them that’ll be enough to fix him. She tells him he has a court date on April 14th. She tells him to wear a suit and bring his DD-214. He has an uneasy feeling that he’s going to become a lifelong cautionary tale for her.

Bucky now spends most of his time in Prospect Park. Relaxing, he tells everyone. Watching people, he tells them. Reading the Big Book and working his steps. Rikki and Daisy seem to think the fresh air is doing him good, that all the reflection and sobriety work he’s doing is so very good, and they would never think he was stupid or desperate enough to drink on a bench in a public park.

Once again, they’ve overestimated him.

Bucky’s found a new routine, now that they’ve stolen his old one. Every day, he wakes up, gets ready, drinks a few shots, and waits until his nerves feel numb enough to allow him to take the train without getting hot and panicky and nauseated. He then takes the F train to the D train to the Q train, riding all the way to the other side of the park, so far away that neither Rikki nor Daisy would accidentally happen upon him. The Prospect Park Station is just a block away from the fantastically
named Liquor Town on Flatbush and Maple. Bucky goes there and buys a pint of vodka every morning at 9:00 am, when all the classiest liquor stores open. Sometimes he buys orange or cranberry juice with it and mixes both in his thermos in the little half-alley behind the building. There’s even a garbage can right on the street corner, where he can drop off the bottle before making his way to the park. There’s a large scattering of benches near the Concert Grove Pavilion, and that’s where Bucky sits. Just a regular guy with his morning pick-me-up.

The pint usually lasts him until two or three in the afternoon, at which point he goes back and picks up a second. He’ll take this one on the road. On the train. He’ll usually hit an AA meeting on the way back home. At least he doesn’t lie anymore. He always says he’s zero days sober. He’ll usually drink that second pint pretty slowly, saving the last few shots for just before bed. He’s very careful to appear sober when he eats dinner at home, which is often his only real meal of the day. It seems to please his sister and Daisy.

Now that he’s spending most of his day drinking, Bucky tries not to take any calls, even though he gets them often enough. From Sam and Nat and Steve and his ma. Thor sometimes calls him, too, the persistent son of a bitch. Sometimes Bucky hates all of them. He hates them for caring and for worrying and for having jobs and for having beautiful bodies. Every exchange and near-exchange becomes an occasion for bleak comparison. Healthy/unhealthy. Lovable/unlovable. Purposeful/purposeless. Responsible/irresponsible. Sober/drunk.

Sometimes when Bucky gets these calls, or when he’s suddenly reminded of what his life is now, he stays in the park to drink more. Sometimes he feels so fucking scared and sad and hopeless that he chugs whatever’s left in the thermos at the time. It might be just a little bit, but sometimes it’s a lot. He usually pukes when there’s a lot, but it feels kind of good to get everything out. He even has a particular garbage can he barfs in. He doesn’t want to make a mess of the park. He loves that fucking park.

One night at the end of March, he’s just drunk and stupid enough to take a call from Steve, who sounds so fucking hot while he’s jerking himself off. Hot, that is, until Bucky’s quickly reminded of everything Steve has that he doesn’t and everything they used to have together but can never have again. It gets ugly fast, and Bucky says a lot of shit he regrets, most of it truth. He turns off his phone and retreats back home, knowing he’s probably going to hear about it from Rikki and Daisy. Because Steve is a bastard and a fucking liar.

And Bucky does hear about it. Rikki and Daisy glare at him and throw up their arms and yell. He passes it off as a one-time relapse. He makes up a story about being depressed and something triggered him (all true, all true, but that’s every day for him, isn’t it?). Bucky’s gotten so skilled at lying that he’s pretty sure they believe him, and they make him promise to go to three meetings the next day. He promises. He crosses his finger over his heart, because he’s sofuckingwasted, and he didn’t make himself sick with it, so he’s swimming in booze.

The next day, a very hungover Bucky shoves some clothes in his duffle bag and leaves a note in his room that says, “I’m gonna stay somewhere else for a little while. I just need some time to think. I’m okay. I’ll call if I’m not okay.” He then takes the train to the T-Mobile store and buys a new phone with a brand spanning new number. The sales associate imports everything from his old phone and leaves Bucky with a one-way ticket to freedom from everyone. If he could jump for joy, he’d be doing it.

With a limp and a whistle, Bucky hops the Z train to Jamaica Center and boards the first Long Island Rail train he sees. He has no idea where it’ll take him and he doesn’t even give a fuck, as long as it’s far, far away from Brooklyn and everyone in it.
By April, Bucky’s living in a hotel.

When Bucky and Rikki were younger, the family would go on summer vacation every year. They never knew exactly when they’d go. Sometimes it was May or July or October, but they still called it their summer vacation. Their dad’s schedule was always so messed up. Sometimes he was deployed. Sometimes he was training. Sometimes he did the good guy thing and gave some of the other soldiers their time off first. Sometimes he took leave first so they could accumulate more leave hours. He was always doing stuff like that for his soldiers, and there were always fights about it at home, he and Winnie arguing for hours about his priorities, an argument that really never seemed to have an end.

But every year, no matter where or when they went on vacation, they would stay at the Holiday Inn. They’d pass by a dozen Best Westers, Ramadas, and Days Inns, drive through the shittiest parts of town just to get to a Holiday Inn. George wasn’t even part of a rewards program or anything; he just loved the Holiday Inn. And because he loved it, Bucky loved it. They both loved the colors of the awful art, the patterns of the carpet, the smell of the chlorine in the hallways. Bucky loved how relaxed his dad seemed when he was there; how he’d put on his swim trunks and play Marco Polo with them or use all his Army muscles to hurl them into the water; how they’d watch TV until late at night after Bucky and Erik fought over who would share a bed with George. It sure as hell was never Winnie. Bucky never stopped to think how shitty his ma must have felt, having her kids argue over who was going to be stuck sleeping with her.

So when Bucky first hopped on the Long Island Rail Road back in late March, he started looking around for a Holiday Inn. He tried Floral Park, Rosslyn, Pinelawn, and Central Islip, stations he chose because he liked their names. He would get off and ask the locals if there was a Holiday Inn within walking distance, and he weathered the sour looks and irritated snorts and garbled directions because he was in the drunken sweet spot that gave him the patience and good humor to do so. Eventually, someone told him that there’s one in Carle Place, right near the station, and Bucky thanked him with a slappy half-hug, already warming in his belly at the thought of settling in and watching Cartoon Network until midnight.

Fuck, why stop at midnight? At the Holiday Inn, he could do whatever he wanted! Stay up as late as he wanted. Drink as much as he wanted. Go wherever the hell he wanted — or not go anywhere at all. At the Holiday Inn, he could be free. Free and alone.

And that’s how Bucky came to stay at the Holiday Inn Westbury, where he’s been for the past three weeks. It’s 135 dollars a night, but he’s got cash to burn. All that pay he got downrange was never taxed, and even though he gave nearly his entire re-enlistment bonus to Rikki to help with her transition, he still has a good chunk of money left. He’s been spending it liberally, mostly on alcohol and tips and small gifts for the hotel staff. He keeps them happy because he likes this little arrangement and doesn’t want to risk losing it. He’s probably got a warrant out for his arrest now, since he spent his hearing with his head in the toilet. He doesn’t know for sure, but he looked it up online, and he’s pretty sure that missing that hearing has fucked him royally.

Of all the possible futures he’s imagined for himself over the years, he never expected that he might one day be living in a hotel as a full-time drunk hiding from the law — which is really saying something, because he’s imagined a lot of really fucked up trajectories for himself. He’s messed up a lot personally and, arguably, professionally. He’s been an ass to his family and a shitty friend. But he’s never been in trouble with the law before. He’s conscientiously avoided it for over a decade. He’s kept himself from driving drunk. Willed himself to walk away from many an argument that could easily have turned violent. He did these things because he always had an incentive — his men.
They counted on him to be there, to teach them and mentor them, to serve as an exemplary soldier and a strong NCO. For them, he had to at least pretend to be a good man. For them, it was worth it.

But Bucky doesn’t have his men anymore. He’s not an NCO or a leader or a soldier anymore. He doesn’t have a boss or any subordinates. Hell, he doesn’t have a job or even a bachelor’s degree, for Chrissakes. He doesn’t have any internal or external proof that he’s worth anything now. All he ever gives his family is grief, and all he ever does for his friends is make them worry from afar, where they can’t do anything to save him from himself. All he has left is his wrecked body, his fucked up mind, and the weight of every wrong he’s ever done to so many people.

And so Bucky drinks.

His routine is somewhat more relaxed now, so relaxed that it’s hard to even call it a routine. He wakes up whenever he wakes up. Sometimes it’s before dawn but usually it’s barely before noon. It all depends on how late he stays up and how much he drinks. Old habit has kept him on his modest two-pint-a-day schedule for a while. It seems wrong to drink more than that, to graduate up to a fifth, but the effect is starting to diminish noticeably. He’s starting to remember more and more where he used to reliably black out.

It’s the stuff that comes in the dark of the night that’s the worst. That’s when his brain drags him on a stroll through the highlight reel. The worst of the worst. All the shit from Kentucky. His dad’s death. The stuff with Alex that still doesn’t sit right with him, no matter how much he justifies it. The good couple years he had with Steve and their terrible end. Afghanistan I. All the terrifying mornings he woke up and didn’t know whose apartment he was in or how he got there or if he’d even consented to being fucked or not. Afghanistan II. Sergeant Anderson. Iraq I. All the heads he blew off and guts he sprayed around. That kid with the wheelbarrow. Iraq II. Little kid brains and Trip and fucking around with his engaged ex and getting blown to pieces, helpless and in excruciating pain, everyone staring or trying not to stare at him as he trembled and bled, naked in the dirt…

It all comes to him. Unbidden. Unwanted. Unrelenting. And he’s finally realized that it’s not going to ever stop. This is his life now. This is what he’s earned for himself. This is the price. He always knew he’d have to pay it. He just never thought it would be quite this painful.

Today he wakes up to the memory of one year ago. He and Steve, back in Iraq, standing at the smoke pit after one of their lifting sessions, talking about absolutely nothing of importance. Back when things were good between them but not too good. Back when they were just friends. Back before Bucky wrecked the life Steve was trying to build for himself by taking advantage of him when he was most vulnerable. Back when Bucky was strong and clear and sober.

It doesn’t seem real, looking back on it. The passage of time makes no sense. He thought it would take longer to get to this point. He thought all this rock bottom shit they talk about in AA was supposed to happen gradually. If he’s even near the bottom, that is. He wonders where the bottom is, sometimes. He’s not sure what’s worse than waking up in a hotel in a mess of dirty sheets, surrounded by empty vodka bottles, thinking about a man he can never allow himself to have because that would just be too damn good for him. Far more than he deserves. He wonders how much further he has to go before he’s sick of it, before he either drinks himself to death or decides he wants to live.

Bucky sits up in bed and presses his hand to his throbbing head. He can feel how greasy and long his hair is with three of his fingers; the fourth is still numb, though maybe not quite as numb as it used to be. It’s strange to think that some small part of him is getting better while so much of him is deteriorating. He reaches over with his still-braced left arm and grabs a half-full bottle among the dozen or so empties crammed atop the nightstand. Christ, he knows it can’t be good to still have that
brace on, but it does him the favor of concealing his ugliest wound from him, so he leaves it be.

Bucky takes a few long pulls off the bottle to ease the blare of his hangover. Mid-chug, he picks up the sound of laughter as a couple of kids run down the hallway outside his room. He wonders how many drunk has-beens were lurking behind closed doors back when he was running down hallways as a child. Probably not a lot. The Holiday Inn isn’t exactly the destination of choice for month-long vodka benders. But now that Bucky’s saved all the people in his life from his chaos, the only things he has left are his miserable memories and his heartbreak, and this goddamn hotel was the one kindness he could think to give to himself.

Bucky limps out of bed and sidesteps piles of clothes and a couple more empty bottles on his way to the bathroom. There he takes a very long piss and stands in the bathtub while he runs the beard trimmer Steve got him over the wild growth on his face. He tries not to look like a complete disheveled mess on the rare days he leaves his room. He’s careful not to let the staff think he’s doing the exact thing he’s doing.

He steps out of the bath, leaving behind a thick dusting of dark whiskers, and hobbles back into the room to dig a clean shirt, underwear, and socks out of his duffle bag. The shirt still has the tags on it, one he bought specifically for his outings, because there’s not an awful lot of laundry being done these days. He’s also taken to just buying new, cheap underwear rather than washing the old. Doesn’t matter what kind he gets, anyway. Not much of a package left to show off and not anyone to show it off to. He then fogs up the bathroom, closes his eyes, and washes the booze sweat off his body while he thinks about anything but what he’s doing.

When washed, brushed, dressed, and braced up, Bucky shoulders his half-full duffle bag and crutches his way down to the lobby. Maria is five doors down with the housekeeping cart, looking neat and severe like she always does, and she waves a brusque hand at him as he greets her.

“You need housekeeping today?” she asks him, nodding.

“No, Maria, I’m all good.” Bucky gives her a big ol’ cheesy Barnes grin, which he hopes will help to settle the matter quickly.

She makes a dour face. “Oh, no. You need it. You need it.”

“Nah, I’ve got bunch of stuff spread out for a project I’m working on. I swear, I’m good.”

“Maybe your sheets?”

“Sheets are fine. It’s all good. Trust me. Okay?”

She sighs and waves her hand again, but it’s a wave of dismissal this time. “Okay, Mr. Barnes.”

“Oh, wait.” Bucky digs into his very loose back pocket and pulls out his wallet. He holds out a ten dollar bill to her. “Please.”

“No. I didn’t clean,” she objects, shaking her head.

“Well, I want you to have it anyway.” He lays the bill atop a stack of clean sheets on the cart. “For all the hard work you do.”

She mutters something in Spanish that’s probably thematically related to all the other mutters of resignation he elicits from the people in his life.

“Have a good day,” he says, giving her another smile as he crutches off. Over his shoulder, he sees
her fold the ten in half and slip it into her apron pocket, frowning.

In the lobby, Bucky’s greeted by Adam, the baby-faced front desk clerk who claims to be the great, great, great grand nephew or something of town namesake Silas Carle. Bucky’s heard the story four times already, but he always pretends that it’s the first time and says “no shit” and suffers the folklore and the glow of pride on Adam’s face over having been born.

“Hey, Jim. How’s the job search going?” Adam points to a tray of cookies on the counter. “And you have to try one of these.”

Bucky fires up another toothy smile and makes his way over to where Adam’s pointing. “Not too bad. Had a couple phone interviews this week. Crossing my fingers.”

“How much longer you on the crutches?”

“Should be another few weeks,” Bucky says.

It’s always another few weeks, whenever anyone asks. People don’t really pay attention to the answers to these types of questions. He could say “another few weeks” for a year and still not have anyone think anything of it.

“Monique made these,” Adam tells him. “I’ve gotta stop eating them. But you should definitely have one.”

Bucky takes one and puts it in his mouth. He mumbles “thank you” around it while he crutches his way to the door.

“Have a good day!” Adam calls behind him. Bucky stops mid-crutch to give him a little wave.

When he’s outside and out of view of the lobby, Bucky takes a single bite of the cookie and drops the rest into the trash. It’s cloyingly sweet and makes his stomach heave a little. Everything tastes too rich these days. Too salty. Too fatty. Too sweet. And the sun is definitely too bright. He squints against it as he makes his way down Old Country Road, then down past the Ruby Tuesday, past the Walmart, until he reaches Westbury Liquors, a warehouse of a liquor store that makes Liquor Town seem even quainter and trashier than it already was.

In contrast to the hotel, Bucky tries to keep a low profile here. He doesn’t really have an excuse to be buying alcohol in the quantities he buys it. He feels like he should have an excuse for it, but any excuses he comes up with are so far removed from reality that he can’t even fathom holding the line with them. They usually involve having lots of friends and lots of parties, both of which remind him a little too powerfully of how achingly, desperately lonely he is.

So he slinks in and out of the liquor warehouse on different days and at different times and tries to check out with a different cashier each time he visits. So far, nobody’s looked at him sideways. They’ve barely even looked at his face at all except to compare it to his North Carolina driver’s license, which usually involves at least a fractional rise of an eyebrow. One girl gave him a full-blown gape and tried to prattle it away with benign comments about how his hair is longer now. He was embarrassed and, frankly, surprised that he could even get embarrassed anymore.

Bucky gets a cart, loads his crutches into it, and boots to the vodka aisle. He first checks the imports section to see if there’s anything new, just in case he decides he wants something fancier than Smirnoff. It’s all the same overpriced crap, and he’s about to go back to his old steady when he catches sight of a sign that says Local! In the case of vodka, “local” could probably be considered anything distilled Stateside, but it still chafes Bucky when he looks closer and reads “Clifton, New
Jersey” on the very fancy label. It would make any New Yorker squirm, really. Not that he’s a real New Yorker. He supposes that’s just one more fraud he maintains for himself and everyone else, because he can’t bear to tell anyone that he was born in Texas.

Devil’s Springs Premium Four Times Distilled 151 Proof Vodka. It’s enough to wring a vocal “ooh” of interest out of him. He’s not sure if it’s the bucolic picture or the cute little Devil’s Springs anecdote or the 151 proof part, but he drops bottle after bottle into his cart until it’s way, way too many. An atrophied part of his brain, the part that still retains some small sense of self-preservation, screams at him to stop. But the rest of his brain, the majority that is tired and despairing and angled hard toward that nebulous bottom, lights up with something close to excitement. Bucky stops at eight bottles and grabs two boxes of water crackers on the way to the register. It’s about the only thing he can stomach, and the tasteless crunch of them has become something of a comfort to him.

Bucky checks out without chagrin today. He’s not sure why. The part of his mind that makes dark thoughts whispers that he’s probably not going to be back again, anyway. He stuffs the bottles into his duffel bag, wrapping them loosely in the dirty and clean clothes he’s got all mixed up in there. On the way out the door, he tests it for rattling and is satisfied when he doesn’t hear any.

When he gets back to the hotel, he enters through a side door. He’s shown his face for today so that the staff know he’s not dead. He’s done his due diligence. When he gets to his room, he locks the door, lays the duffle on his bed, digs out a bottle, and opens the cap. It smells damn close to rubbing alcohol, and when he takes a hearty gulp, he imagines the sensation is akin to chugging Draino. It burns and burns. It feels terrible and amazing. Electric and fatal.

And when Bucky pulls his lips off the bottle, he’s smiling. He looks down at the label with endearment in his eyes, like he’s finally found a solution to a problem he couldn’t quite define until now. The problem of living. Simple as that.

He switches on the TV, turns it to Cartoon Network, and opens up a sleeve of water crackers. He nibbles on a few to pad the runway for the fire he’s about to start in his stomach and takes these few relatively sober moments to look around the room, to the messy little hovel he’s built for himself. It’s disgusting. Truly. He can only imagine how ashamed Rikki and Daisy would be to see him like this. His ma. Steve and Thor and Sam and Nat. His men. They’d curl their lips up at this version of him, which is perhaps the most honest representation of himself he could ever offer them.

Because for the first time, his outsides match his insides, and there’s something profoundly relieving about that. In here, he doesn’t have to pretend to not be devastated. He doesn’t have to pretend to be good or handsome or charming or sweet. He can just be the pathetic wreck that he’s been since he was twelve years old, the one he thought he could fix with work and purpose and sex and alcohol. And now he’s fresh out of all of those things except one, and the singularity of it feels almost like
peace.

He puts the bottle to his mouth and drinks.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Ableist language, body hatred, failed masturbation, lots of alcohol consumption and bad behavior around alcohol use, ambiguously suicidal ideation and behavior, legal problems, references to trans character by birth name and birth-assigned sex/gender in past tense

Other Notes:

Ranger up: Kind of like “cowboy up” or “man up”

Zipcar: A car sharing service for people who don’t have cars. You pay a monthly fee and get access to a car when you need it.

Arlington National Cemetery: For those who aren’t American, this is America’s premier military cemetery, located in DC

Headstone: This is approximately what George’s headstone would look like

CW4: Chief Warrant Officer Four. So, there are three classes of service members in the U.S. military: commissioned officers, enlisted personnel, and warrant officers. Warrant officers are the smallest group (approx. 1%) and they usually do very specific technical things, like operate certain machinery or pilot certain vehicles. Helicopter pilots are always either commissioned officers or warrant officers. You can be a warrant officer without a college degree. I imagine George starting out as an enlisted soldier and then “going warrant” early in his career. This would entail be accepted into warrant officer school and having additional follow-on training for one’s job. Warrant officers are ranked from 1-5, with 5 being the most senior.

Regression to the mean: In statistics, this is the tendency for extreme variables to edge toward the mean (average) with each subsequent measurement. It could also be used more colloquially to refer to a bunch of people clumping in the same place.

Blood makes the green grass grow: This is an actual expression that they teach (or used to teach) in basic training. You’re supposed to yell it while pretending to stab your enemies with a bayonet. The drill sergeant would yell “What makes the green grass grow?” and the soldiers reply, “Blood! Blood! Blood makes the green grass grow, drill sergeant!” Fun times.

Functions check: When a service member assembles their firearm, it’s appropriate to conduct a functions check that includes checking that all the fire settings work (e.g., semi, burst, safe for a rifle). It’s also an easy ejaculation metaphor, as you can see.

“we’re fated to pretend…” : from the song “Time to Pretend” by MGMT

DD-214: the document you get when you leave the military (or come off of active duty)
that summarizes your activity duty time, including years of service, awards, and discharge disposition.

Big Book: the “bible” of Alcoholics Anonymous
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

May First

Chapter Notes

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with my plot, characters, and style. She’s also available for beta work and is amazing at it. Go visit her on Tumblr

Warnings at the end.

May 1, 2009

It’s nearly nine in the morning when Steve’s phone vibrates, not that he’s particularly aware of the time. He’s seated in the gliding rocking chair in the spare room. The one he used to paint in. The one he used to work in. The one he liked to read in. Sharon’s long since cleared his things out of here and was halfway to repurposing it as a nursery when she went into labor. He built the chair and the changing table soon after they got home from the hospital, both tasks interrupted by having to wrangle Sharon back into bed. She’s been abjectly terrible at asking him to help her, either through stubbornness or habit, so he’s tried to anticipate her needs as best as he can.

Some of it is very straightforward, things he used to do back when they lived together. Straighten up the apartment. Prepare meals. Do the dishes. Do laundry. Run errands. But there is also a host of new baby-related tasks that make Steve feel incompetent and inadequate. Listening to Sharon’s frustrations over breastfeeding and not being able to do anything about it. Changing diapers. Giving the baby a bath with a soft little cloth with ducks on it. Taking him out in the stroller so that Sharon can get some peace. Being the go-to person when the kid won’t stop crying, because something about Steve seems to make him a walking, talking baby sedative. The internet seems to think it’s because Steve is warmer and has more body mass and probably holds on tighter. Sharon smiles and says it’s because the baby loves him, which is so absurd that Steve can barely play along with it.

Steve spends practically every free waking moment reading Sharon’s baby books and articles upon articles from the internet about caring for a newborn. He’s making up for lost time, for all those months he was obsessing over Bucky when he should have been focusing on becoming a parent. He’s learned a lot, like how to execute the tasks of swaddling and burping and bounce-holding, but he’ll be damned if he knows when to do them. Oftentimes Sharon seems just as clueless, and in these moments of shared bewilderment, they’ll just stare at the baby while he screams, sharing a frazzled what-the-fuck sensation that makes Steve feel close to her.

He feels stronger about Sharon now, in some ways. Very protective. He likes being able to take care of her, when she lets him, and such caring feels effortless and natural. He always makes sure she has water and comfortable clothes and well-balanced meals. Sometimes he rubs her back or her feet.
When she seems overwhelmed and exhausted, sometimes he hugs her or gently holds her, mindful of the scar that traverses her belly. Sometimes he kisses her forehead or her cheek when she leans in and silently asks him for it. Sometimes he just does it spontaneously when she looks distraught or happy or pretty. He usually sleeps on the couch, but sometimes he falls asleep in the bed and wakes up next to Sharon after dreaming of dead children, the ones they saw crushed in rubble, caked in blood and dust, sometimes blown up and cradled in their weeping parents’ arms. He’ll startle and search the room and remember that he’s in DC, that he’s with Sharon in the bed they used to share, and imagines what it would be like to wake up next to her for the rest of his life. Them in one room, their child in another.

Of course, such thoughts are always cut apart by the reminder that Steve ensured that this will never really be their life. And that reminder always brings him back to Bucky, and the thought of Bucky opens a black hole of anxiety in Steve’s stomach. Rips the breath out of him and makes him feel hot and nervous. He tries not to dwell there, because he feels so fucking helpless and hopeless and scared that he can barely contain it. Fortunately, the baby is a near constant source of distraction, even if being around him generates some of those same emotions.

Like last night, for instance. The baby spent much of the night crying, he couldn’t say why. He wouldn’t latch onto Sharon’s breast for more than a few seconds, and he was crying and crying, and he was clean and changed and burped, and so obviously hungry, and then Sharon, bless her, was crying from frustration and exhaustion, and Steve didn’t know what to do because they both seemed inconsolable. It went on for hours, during which he and Sharon started panicking about whether the baby was sick, and then, for no reason that was apparent to either of them, the kid latched on and nursed for 20 minutes straight without a peep.

And Steve was angry. He was angry at a premature baby born just a little over a week ago.

After all that, he knew Sharon needed a break. It was morning by then, so he took the baby out in the stroller to the Starbucks three blocks down and to get coffee for himself and a chocolate croissant for Sharon. A lady at Starbucks did the thing that older ladies seem to do when they see him with the baby. They coo and say, is it a boy or a girl and how old is he, and they compliment Steve for giving the wife a break, like it’s a big fucking achievement to be basically supportive to the person who just brought this screaming creature into the world after building it inside of her for eight months. And today Steve had no patience for it. So he said that his boyfriend just needed a little alone time back at the apartment, and he watched impassively as the woman turned pink and apologized.

It didn’t feel good. It felt mean and sad and painful.

By the time they got back to the apartment, Sharon was out cold, slumped over in a pile of pillows on the bed, her hair slipping out of the messy bun she pulled it back into however many hours ago, her right breast threatening to fall out of her spit-up-stained nursing top. Steve felt a glimmer of compassion and admiration for her then. And love. He tried to reach out and touch the love he knows he has for her, as distant and gray as it feels right now. He’s been telling himself that he can love her and still love Bucky, because his love for them is different.

Maybe it’s always been different. Steve hasn’t put much thought into the different kinds of love there are, maybe because he’s loved so few people in his life. But he definitely has put thought into why he can feel at least some love for Sharon but still feel so little for their child, and the answer is like ether that disappears from him as soon as he catches a glimpse of it. God knows he can’t remember what he sees. He just doesn’t work like that anymore.

And so ever since they got back, he’s been sitting in this chair, rocking, cradling the baby in his right arm while he drinks coffee with his left. At the moment, the baby is quiet, swaddled tight, sleeping
like a grunt with his woobie after a 48-hour training exercise. He’ll go like that for about an hour or two at a spell, until he stirs and his face scrunches up and he pulls his fists in tight. Steve wonders if that’s how he sleeps. It was how Bucky slept. Not the fists, necessarily, but certainly the face, serious and worried even in slumber. The baby will make that squished, serious face and then he’ll want to eat, because he’s a creature of endless need, endless intake and output.

It takes Steve several moments to register the vibration in his pocket, nudging him in the haze that he’s been mired in ever since he came here. It could almost be mistaken for a twitch of the baby’s foot or the twitch of his own frayed nerves. But it’s insistent in a way that only a cell phone can be, and by the time he has very carefully snaked his hand underneath the kid and into his pants, the sensation has stopped. Steve nearly leaves it there, because it’s probably a wrong number or a telemarketer. Nobody really calls him on his personal cell anymore, not now that Bucky’s disappeared.

But then he gets that niggling of hope, the one that lights him up whenever he gets a personal call, because what if it is Bucky? What if he’s finally reaching out? Finally sober? Finally come home? Finally…

Over these past few months, Steve has been somewhat successful at shutting down dreadful lines of thinking involving Bucky. There are so many of them, and his brain seems to be dazzlingly creative when it comes to cooking up more. But when he sees that the missed call was from Winnie, every terrible possibility blooms violently in his mind. His heart beats wildly, and when his voicemail notification lights up, he doesn’t even check it. He just dials.

She picks up on the second ring.

“Steve?”

“Yeah,” he replies, keeping his voice low.

“Did you get my message?”

“No, I just saw you called.”

“Jamie’s in the hospital.”

Her voice is a flat, factual line that passes through Steve like an object through air, frictionless.

“Okay,” he says.

“He…. Sorry.” Winnie pauses. In the background, there’s an ominous, single tone alarm, followed by a resonant call of a code blue. The pause stretches tight over a few more moments, then she continues. “He overdosed on alcohol. He’s alive, but he hasn’t woken up yet. They’re not sure if he will. They can’t tell yet.”

“Okay,” Steve says again.

He hears himself say it, and it sounds misplaced. It’s the tone he’d use to receive a routine comms check over a radio, where all he hears is the barest acknowledgment of fact. Bucky nearly drank himself to death. He’s in the hospital. He might not wake up. Roger that, reading loud and clear.

There’s another gaping gulf of silence, punctuated by a few quick sniffs on Winnie’s end.

“I just wanted to let you know,” she says.
“Okay.”

“What’s that? No, it’s Steve,” Winnie says. There are mumbled words then, a woman’s voice just outside of discernible range, followed by, “Sure. Hold on. Steve?”

“Yeah.”

“Daisy wants to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

“Hey, Steve.”

“Hey.”

“Gimme a sec.”

There’s more quiet then. More indistinct murmurs. More beeps and hospital sounds. Steve recognizes them well from when he would visit Bucky in Germany, but he knew them by heart from long before then. He’s probably spent close to a year in the hospital, with all his ma’s stays combined.

“Okay,” Daisy says at last. “Where are you?”

“DC.”

“You need to be here.”

“I—”

“It’s bad. It’s really bad. And I think you really need to be here.”

Steve’s eyebrows gather, and he feels a familiar kindling of anger. “Listen, this—”

“His BAC was .45 when he got to the hospital,” she tells him, firm and unrelenting. “He’s on a respirator now. Can’t even breathe on his own. That’s how much he drank. He stopped breathing on the way to the hospital. In the ambulance, thank God, so hopefully he doesn’t have brain damage. But it was just… awful. And you need to be here when he wakes up.” There’s a staticky sound as Daisy lets out a long, reluctant breath. “Or in case he doesn’t.”

Bucky’s blood was nearly half a percent pure alcohol, and now he can’t breathe on his own, and he might not wake up. And the carpet is oatmeal brown. The sun rises in the east. Steve is a father. The facts all weigh the same, somehow.

“Okay,” he says.


“I don’t know. I’ll call you back and let you know.” Steve hears Brooklyn in his voice, saying he’ll cawl her back, and it’s the most surprising thing that he’s heard all morning.

“I wouldn’t be insisting if it wasn’t really serious.”

Steve looks down at the baby in his arm, who’s just beginning to wake up. His hands flex, fanning and clenching slowly, and his little body twists and tenses as he stretches. Steve holds his cell between his ear and shoulder and loosens the swaddling blanket, freezing when the baby’s hand lands on his and grips his finger.
“How’s Rikki?” Steve asks softly.

Daisy gives a small murmur of uncertainty. “Not good. She’s really upset, but like in a quiet, scary way. And I don’t know what Winnie’s deal is. She’s hard to read sometimes.”

“I’ll call back soon,” he assures her. “Text me your number.”

“Sure.”

When Steve ends the call, the baby’s beginning to open his eyes. He looks up at Steve, regarding him with blue irises that match Steve’s own. Steve might call the expression thoughtful, if the kid had any thoughts in that little head of his. He imagines they’re about the same, in that aspect. It’s as if Steve’s brain has been vacuumed clean, all the ideas and feelings scraped and sucked out of it, leaving behind a wasteland in which brilliant and terrible and mundane things once happened. What’s left is the two of them, staring at each other, meeting on a level that lends itself poorly to words.

It doesn’t feel beautiful, though. It feels like a malfunction.

“I’m sorry,” Steve breathes. He holds for one more moment, searching the baby’s face, wondering if the baby can even see him clearly, before rising smoothly to his feet.

He walks to the bedroom and stops in the doorway. Sharon’s in the exact same place he left her, and he’s suddenly struck by how much he hates this. He hates this whole fucking thing, this fucked up life he’s made for himself. He can still see the threads so clearly, all of the choice points he fucked up that branched and spiraled and got Sharon pregnant and blew up Bucky and made Bucky into the type of man who drinks himself to the point of shutting down his own brainstem.

The baby makes a fussy little cry, the kind with the potential to build and crescendo into the operatic hellstorm he serenaded them with throughout last night. It’s enough to make Sharon startle violently from sleep, jerking half-upright before clutching her stomach with a hiss.

“How’s he doing?” she asks, her voice sharp with pain. She moves slowly, gathering the pillows around her to prop herself up again.

“Fine. Just woke up.”

Sharon holds out her arms, and Steve approaches and carefully hands the baby over.

“C’mere, baby,” Sharon says, positioning him on the pillow she’s laid across her lap. “Did you guys go out?”

“Yeah. I got you a croissant.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“Want me to warm it for you?”

“Sure.”

Steve shifts his weight, as if he’s making to leave, but he’s halted by a sight he’s seen countless times over the past week — Sharon pulling out one of her breasts from her top, full and heavy, guiding it toward the baby’s whimpering lips. It’s odd to think of all the times he touched and licked that same breast, all the times he got breathless and warm just thinking about doing those things. Seeing her use that breast to feed their child is like a punch in the gut. It punches him in the place that Winnie’s
phone call probably should have punched him.

“You okay?” Sharon asks.

“I got a call from Bucky’s mom. She said he’s in the hospital. He OD’d on alcohol, and they don’t know if he’s gonna wake up,” Steve says blandly. He slides his hands into his pockets when they feel restless, like they might ball into fists.

Sharon gives a quiet “oh my God.”

Steve shrugs.

The sympathy or pity on Sharon’s face, whatever it is, becomes the canvas upon which other emotions start to play. Confusion. Concern. A spark of anger.

“Do you need to go?”

She doesn’t look at him when she asks. She looks down at the baby instead, rubs his blond head gently while he sucks on her. Steve frowns and tries to swallow a sudden and powerful feeling of sickness.

“They said I should be there, but I know I should be here. At least I can help you.” He can help a lot here. Here, he can be the pale twin of the partner he might still be if Bucky Barnes had never manipulated his way back into Steve’s life. “I can’t help him.”

“I can handle Ethan on my own,” Sharon tells him. Her jaw is set tightly, the way it does when she’s correcting herself, corralling herself, making herself say the things she’s supposed to say. He’s seen her do it in a dozen staff meetings, when she knows better but has to pretend that she doesn’t so that men in higher stations can preserve the appearance of authority.

“I can’t go,” Steve murmurs.

“Listen, Lieutenant Yates said she wanted to come over to see Ethan and cook for me, so I’ll ask her over. I won’t be alone.”

Steve shakes his head, tired and resigned.

“And maybe you can help him. Maybe there’s some way. Maybe he’s ready for help now,” Sharon says, conceding that even though she should be cursing Bucky for choosing this week of all weeks to drink himself to death and back.

He shakes his head again, weaker this time. He waits in the silence for something to blossom, like hope or determination, but nothing comes to claim the space.

“Could you just clean up a little before you go?” Sharon’s voice is light and deeply fond, because she’s looking at the baby again. And he’s looking up at her intently, mesmerized by her face, sharing something with her that he and Steve will never share.

“Of course. And I think I’m gonna take the train. There should be one leaving Union Station in the next few hours. I’ll be back tomorrow. Maybe even late tonight,” he adds after a second thought. Because if he gets there and… and if Bucky is… it might be fast.

“You don’t have to—”

“No. I’ll be back soon. I just need to see him. If he’s awake, if he’s not, if he doesn’t…” Steve
presses the side of his fist to his mouth and stills as his coffee lurches in his stomach.

Sharon looks back up at him and goes somber, like she can clearly see the empty place where Steve’s heart should be, ripped from his chest so fast that it can’t even hurt.

“Steve,” she says, but stops there, lips parted. It’s as if she’s hanging on the edge of permission, the kind that no mother in her right mind would ever give. Permission for the father of her newborn baby to go to the bedside of the man he cheated on her with. She seems to hang on that edge, teetering, and she takes in a breath. But Steve interrupts her before she can betray herself, sparing her the indignity.

“I’m going, but I’ll be back within 24 hours, regardless of how he is.”

She nods. “If that’s what you feel you need to do.”

“It is.”

“If you could just…” Sharon tilts her head in the general direction of the kitchen.

Steve touches his hand to his brow. “Right. Croissant. And then cleaning.”

“Oh kay.”

“Okay.”

———

Steve moves around the apartment with robotic cadence, getting Sharon’s breakfast, tidying up, arranging things around the place to maximize convenience for Sharon or Yates. It’s a wonder that he’s managed to conduct himself with such contained precision when his head feels so stuffed with must-dos and can’t-dos. Must call Sam. Must check the train schedule. Must prepare for the worst. Can’t imagine the worst. Can’t imagine anything at all. Can’t find the emotions he’s supposed to have. When he’s done, he doesn’t even pack a bag. He just showers, shaves, kisses Sharon on the cheek, apologizes twice over, and goes.

Steve calls Sam in the taxi he takes to Union Station. Sam takes the news as well as can be expected. Like with Steve, there’s no real evidence of surprise. If anything, Steve thinks he might even hear some echo of secret relief, the kind Steve feels reflected within himself, because at least they know where Bucky is. At least he’s being cared for. At least he’s alive, even if they’re not sure how long he’ll stay that way. Steve also calls Barton, who grants Steve an additional two weeks of leave, on the condition that he makes it back in time for the O-3 board. A little later, Sitwell and Sousa text him to send their regards to Bucky and to ask if Steve is okay. The sickness swells in him; something about their good will makes him want to vomit. It’s like his body can’t tell the difference between kindness and terror and heartbreak anymore and seems to be converting it all to nausea.

He makes it just in time for the 11:30 Acela to New York. He gets a seat in first class just for the space, so that he can stare out the window and try to think. Try to feel. It’s not that he particularly wants to drown in the typhoon of emotion that should be wrecking him right now. It’s more that he can’t understand and can’t believe its absence. More than that, he’s more than a little concerned that it’s building somewhere off camera, compounding wildly and conspiring to utterly obliterate him when he’s least prepared. Even when he thinks of what Bucky’s death might be like, what he might look like dead, what they might do with his body, what his funeral would be like, the nothingness stretches for miles.

Steve doesn’t start to feel anything until he’s in the middle of the 45 minute ride from Penn Station to
NYU Winthrop Hospital. It happens somewhere in Queens. It begins as a pressure in his chest, like he’s got every piece of gear he owns piled on top of him. Except it feels like it’s coming from the inside, like a vise clamping down on his lungs. The pressure tightens when the mental image barrels into a memory, Bucky with blue lips, gasping, lung collapsed, his eyes wide and scared — eyes Steve has stared into from above and below and beside. Eyes that have made him feel a galaxy of emotions. And that vise grabs tight, stealing Steve’s air, and he slumps over in the back seat of the cab.

“Pull over,” Steve mumbles.

The cabbie, who’s been watching him warily since he picked him up, glances over his shoulder. “You okay?”

“Pull over.”

The driver swerves two lanes over and pulls into the emergency lane with remarkable urgency, and Steve stumbles out of the car just in time to bend over and dry heave a whole lot of nothing in the direction of the pavement. He sways there for a little while, gagging and gasping in his body’s terrible, impotent attempt at expelling the nothingness out of itself. Steve can still feel the nothingness there, even as it’s coming out of him. Long lines of cars fly past him, watching him be a retching mess, the mess he couldn’t be in front of Sharon and the mess he can’t be in front of Bucky and his family. He’s sick with something that can’t be purged onto the Long Island Expressway, toxic from an insoluble poison. He can’t say what it is for sure. Maybe some bastard of fear and horror and helplessness.

When they finally get to the hospital, Steve pays the cabbie and tips him very generously for having the misfortune of picking up a nervous, pukey Brooklynite who has barely slept in a week. He exchanges texts with Daisy and drags himself to the critical care ward, but not before getting off on the wrong floor and heading down the wrong wing of the hospital before he finally gets to where he needs to go. With every step, with every room he passes that might have Bucky in it, his stomach climbs higher and higher up into his chest cavity, until he’s practically choking on it when he gets to the waiting room.

All three women look up at him from their seats when he walks through the entryway. Steve stops awkwardly in mid-stride, forgetting the basics of simple ambulation. Winnie’s dressed in her pale blue work scrubs, clutching her massive purse tightly on her lap. Despite probably being on the front end of her work day, she looks harrowed and frayed, grayer and older than Steve remembers her looking just last year. She says his name in the way she said it back then, like a breath of misplaced relief, but she doesn’t rise to greet him. Next to her, Rikki sits stiffly, spring-loaded, clutching the armrests of the chair, her face an angular, hard mask. Her greeting to him is a glare, and he half expects her to say something shitty to him. She doesn’t, but only because her jaw seems already occupied with crushing her molars together. It’s a relief, really, because it tells him that Bucky’s still clinging to life somewhere on this floor.

“Hey, Steve,” Daisy says on the other side of Rikki. She looks the most composed of the three of them, like she’s holding the entire room together with her presence. “I was just gonna grab some coffee. Wanna come with me?”

“Sure.”

“Want some?” she asks Rikki and Winnie.

“No, thanks.” Winnie says.
Rikki shakes her head incrementally. Daisy presses her lips together and looks down at her fiancee with barefaced and tender concern before turning to leave the room.

Steve follows her in the general direction of the elevator. He glances in every room they pass, looking for Bucky and also terrified of finding him.

“He started choking on the respirator tube after I got off the phone with you,” Daisy says as they pass the nurse’s station. “It’s a good thing. That means he’s breathing on his own.”

Steve lets his breath go and nods. “Okay.”

“And he regained consciousness about an hour ago. They’re just observing him for a little while longer before they let in any visitors. He’s on fluids and valium for alcohol withdrawal.”

Daisy leads them to a window seat in a large, sunlit space just outside the critical care ward entrance. They pass a small coffee kiosk, where a clump of young doctors are shooting the shit and laughing in a way that makes Steve want to chokeslam them through the floor.

Daisy sits first, leaving a wide berth for Steve on the bench next to her. He sits on the opposite edge of it, which gives him a good view all three hallways that merge on the space like spokes.

“Was he… he was drinking a lot?”

Steve’s question is abysmally stupid, but it’s the one that emerges from the snarl of a hundred questions twisted together in his head.

“Let’s just put it this way, that hotel room — he was at a Holiday Inn this whole time — was wall-to-wall vodka bottles. It was incredible,” she states, sounding impressed in the morbid way that one could be impressed by the guile and passion of an addict.

Steve’s eyes flick back and forth as he tries to imagine such a scene. It’s nearly incomprehensible, especially the Holiday Inn part. “How did you find him?”

“So, it’s seven at night, and I get this text… hold on.” Daisy fishes her phone from her jacket pocket and unlocks the screen. “Yeah, so I get this really long, really bizarre text from this number I don’t even know.” She scrolls down her text messages, stopping at a sizable chunk that seems to go on forever. “Well, here. I’ll just let you read it.”

Steve takes the phone and starts with the first message in the chain.

*i was thnking abut all th times we were togher when we firstmet back at bragg. an you were so pretty and i thought shit this is gonna a be the one. this is they one maybe i can make it work with cause u wer so fucking inanely beautifull. and i was kings thinking about the first time we wert together and holy shit sid i tell you you give really good blowjobs because you do. and i was thinking the is the woman I’m gonna fuck and its gonna work and all my problems will go away yeah. and after all that you remember how long we made out and i was so sure, a d then i as fucking you and its was working and then - it just fuckin failed so hard. or not hard lol right?*

*i was wo mad at myself be zaeu i knew then i ws stuck being a fag forever, because if you can’t keep it up for natasha romanofg you have to be the biggest fucking faggot who ever live sd in the history of man . anadn now her i have this dick thas just awful sp fucking embarrasihn and id give antyghin to be able to not be able to fuck uou with just a normal dick. i codlin fuck you then and now i cnat fuck anyone now or even get off on soemown fuckin g me. maybe tier really is a god and this is my punishment for being such a homo. maybe god just ha a good sense off humor like here you go there s no hell but here s a life of having a small gnarly scared half dick that dosnt even work and
nobody will want to touch it not even you. here is your personal hell surprise. guess i shouldn't
have killed all those kids and fuckea all those hot guys. ha fuck. who new god was such a comedian

Steve can feel his mouth fall open as he reads, in part because it’s so fucking raw and so clearly
Bucky, but also because it’s the Bucky that Steve would never, ever be shown in person. He keeps
reading, down to where Daisy replies.

Jamie?

yeah

Where are u?

long ialdn

What the hell u doing on LI?

thinking. drinking. lol stinkin thinkin. dont let anyone say i never learn anhtng at aa

U staying w your sister?

no

hotel

“Smart,” Steve murmurs, even as he shakes his head in disbelief.

Which hotel?

some holiday inn West something blah blah english name

Westbury?

Its nice lots ofk ids. weird place to go no vacation. who goes to carl plca for vacation

Carle Place?

there sa guy who works her who says hi great great graega treat great uncle or some shit was carl i
think his full or shit

There’s a 15-minute gap in the messages then, judging by the time stamp, followed by a series of
three texts from Daisy.

Hey u still there?

Jamie?

Are you ok?

There’s another gap, this one 20 minutes, which is punctuated by an ominous and singular “no” from
Bucky’s end. The response is a swift string of increasingly desperate one-liners from Daisy:

No how?

You can tell me

Jamie?
Hey

Text me back

The chain stops there.

“Jesus,” Steve says under his breath. He hands the phone back to Daisy with trembling fingers.

“Yeah. So we found the hotel, drove his truck there, which still had the front smashed in from his accident. And then we had to convince the people at the hotel to tell us what room he was in, which took forever. And then we got in there, and thank God he only used one of the locks, and it was just —“ Daisy pauses and shakes her head. “I’ve never seen anything like it. The whole place was just trashed. And he was… let’s just say if he’d been on his back, he’d probably be dead. He wasn’t responding and barely breathing, so we called an ambulance.”


“It’s good you found him in time,” he says automatically.

Daisy looks over at him with keen eyes that still have last night’s makeup smudged on them. “Yeah.”

“I just don’t know—”

“Hey, you two.”

Steve whips his head around to the sound of Winnie’s voice coming from the edge of his periphery.

“We can see him now,” Winnie tells them, looking like she’s stuck somewhere between excited and petrified.

Steve gives a final glance to Daisy, feeling some sort of nebulous closeness with her, and rises to follow Winnie back to the ward. They walk down to where Rikki’s standing outside one of the rooms, her arms folded in tightly over her chest.

“They said we can go in two at a time,” Winnie tells them. “Rikki, you wanna come in with me?”

Rikki shakes her head. “No. You go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Steve?”

Steve’s eyes get big. “I’ll go after”

Winnie hesitates at Bucky’s doorway, fidgeting with the straps of her purse. “You can go wait in the waiting room, if you want. I’ll come get you after,” she tells them.

“I’ll stay here.” Rikki plants herself defiantly just outside the door, tall and thin but utterly immovable. She seems to have mastered the detached grace that so many women in New York City chase after, wearing it like uptown chainmail.

“They said to make it short, so…” Winnie says quietly. “I’ll try.”

Steve’s gaze follows her as she enters the room, which is constructed in such a way that you can
only see the lower half of the bed from the doorway. He can see Bucky’s feet beneath the blankets, and when Winnie starts talking, saying, “Honey, hi” and “oh, sweetheart,” he can see one of those feet move, his left pulling in toward his right. And when he hears the sound of Bucky’s voice, low, gritty, and impossible to discern but absolutely, undeniably Bucky, he finally gives himself permission to believe that Bucky’s alive.

Steve stands poised at the door, ear angled toward whatever conversation they’re having, unabashedly trying — and failing — to eavesdrop. He’s got such shit hearing now, even after the static has mostly subsided. Still, Steve keeps trying, finding some comfort in the tired sound of him. Rikki’s listening too, but she doesn’t look comforted. Her jaw yaws and ticks while Daisy stands beside her, holding her by the pinky and ring fingers, swaying their joint hands gently.

It’s painful to watch their major and minor acts of love, in a way that makes Steve feel petty and selfish. He used to have that with Bucky, back in those too-brief years that they were untouchably copacetic. Back when they knew each other and could predict the other with precision. Steve thinks he remembers it being like that, anyway. Now he wonders if he’s remembering it right, or if they even knew each other at all. If he knew Bucky at all.

This Bucky, the one who checks into a family hotel on Long Island and binges on vodka for a month until he’s mostly dead… Steve’s not sure who that is, if he’s the same person he used to know or someone different. He almost hopes for the latter, because the idea that this is how Bucky has always been on some core level is too devastating to seriously consider.

Winnie does an admirable job of keeping her visit to ten minutes. When she comes back out to the hallway, her eyes are glassy. She smiles at all of them in a strained, twitchy way and motions to Rikki and Daisy.

“Honey, you wanna…?”

Daisy starts to move, but Rikki grabs her. Daisy looks up at the determined scowl on Rikki’s face, the ice in those blue-gray eyes, and holds fast while Rikki strides into the room and closes the door behind her. It doesn’t shut completely, and there’s still a crack of space through which some sound travels, or, in this case, the absence of sound. But then, this particular silence almost has a sound of its own, a low, sinister rumble, like the way the air feels before a tornado.

Bucky’s voice starts rolling, but he’s abruptly cut off by a loud, bitter volley from Rikki.

“What the fuck is your problem?” she asks. “Huh? How many more times are we gonna do this?”

There’s more mumbling from Bucky, stuttering in tempo, which Rikki once more slams into with the rising pitch of her voice.

“I am sick of this shit. I’m sick of finding you half-dead, trying to kill yourself, you selfish fucker. You fucking asshole.”

Winnie blanches and presses her hand to her throat. Daisy and Steve exchange an uneasy look to the sound of Steve’s blood thrumming in his ears. Rikki keeps going.

“What do you have any idea what you put us through? Huh? Do you even give a shit that we care about you? Must think we’re pretty fucking crazy, right? We must be a bunch of fucking masochists or something. We must love to spend our days and nights slamming our faces against the goddamn wall, because that’s what it feels like to be around you.”

“Rikki, I—”
“Shut up! Shut the fuck up! I don’t wanna hear it. I don’t want to hear more of your lies and your excuses. You fucking liar. You fucking, fucking liar… I will never trust you again. Never, ever again. You fucking asshole…”

Winnie shakes her head and turns away, taking slow, shuffling steps down the hall away from the sound of her daughter screaming at her son, overcome with the same disbelief that they all seem to be. Steve looks between Daisy and the door and watches Daisy’s face crumple as Rikki starts crying and mumuring something that sounds like “fuck you” between the sounds of her furious sadness.

“I am done with you,” Rikki continues. As she speaks, her voice strains to stay in the range she’s so carefully trained it, tripping intermittently down into the same masculine tenor she once shared with Bucky. “I am fucking done. You wanna die? Be my fucking guest. Just try harder next time so we don’t have to keep doing this shit for the next twenty years. Because I’m fucking sick of it. I’m sick of it, and I’m done. I am done with you.”

Steve jolts back from the door when Rikki steps toward it and opens it just enough to fit her body through. She moves in a way that seems both heavy and fragile, wiping her face with the cuff of her shirt like Bucky did to Steve when he was covered in Trip’s blood. Daisy links her arm in Rikki’s and guides her down the hall to where Winnie’s wandered, back toward the coffee kiosk. Daisy gives Steve a glance over her shoulder, one that shows her condolence for him and her solidarity with Rikki, one that tells him what side of this rift she’s already settled on. They leave Steve alone, standing in front of the door, still paralyzed by what he just heard, because some of Rikki’s words might as well have been his own. Before the baby, he thought them. Formed them under his breath. Yelled them in the car. Imagined screaming them in Bucky’s face.

Steve takes a step forward and recoils inwardly at his own inevitable momentum, which keeps going until he’s in the room, closing the door fully behind him. He locks his eyes on Bucky’s feet, which get closer and closer until they’re right there, until the whole bed is right there, with Bucky in it. Steve’s gaze drags up the length of the bed, up the covered stretch of Bucky’s legs, up to his torso. He’s half on his back with his upper body twisted away from where Steve is standing, where Rikki was standing, turning the thin remains of himself into a makeshift shield. Steve can’t make out his face because it’s buried in his hands, hands that Steve follows up to bare forearms, the left one almost consumed by gnarled scar tissue that jarringly mismatches the surrounding native flesh in texture and color.

Steve gags in disciplined silence as the nausea blindsides him, the same kind that seems to strike whenever he’s at Bucky’s hospital bedside. Then he pulls the blanket up over Bucky’s arm so that he can summon the poise to lay upon the bed next to him. Bucky’s hands migrate down to his mouth, clamping tight over it while his eyes screw shut. When Steve turns on his right side and slides his arm around Bucky beneath the covers, he can feel a rhythmic trembling that starts in Bucky’s belly. It takes Steve an exceptionally long time to realize that Bucky is crying, hard and nearly soundless. It’s only his breath that betrays him, coming through his nose in sharp, rapid bursts.

Steve’s never really seen Bucky cry before, not in earnest. He almost forgot that the possibility even existed. He’s not even entirely sure what to make of it, but he seems to know what he should do to make it better. He bends his knee and slides his leg over Bucky’s blanketed thighs, covering him with his weight, grounding him. Steve comforts Bucky like he comforts the baby back in DC, with algorithmic knowledge of what he needs to feel better. If this, then that.

He moves in close and presses his face to the base of Bucky’s neck, because Bucky’s always liked to be held from behind. He smells like days-old sweat and hangover, with a sharp undertone of bile. It doesn’t matter though, because at least he doesn’t smell like death. He doesn’t smell like the bloated, animal-bitten corpses they passed in the ditches on dismounted patrol, or like the musty corpses they
sometimes found in the shade. He smells dirty and warm and alive, shaking with the agony of survival. Steve lays his hand over both of Bucky’s and pulls them away from his mouth, which is twisted downward, wrenched in anguish.

Bucky is silent for a few more seconds before he cracks, before sound finally spills out of him. Before he sobs, loud and unstoppable, his whole body tense and quaking with the force of it. The sound tears through Steve, but it tears into practically nothing. It leaves Steve feeling empty and unmoved by one of the rawest displays of vulnerability he’s seen since his mother took her final breath in 2002. Steve has waited for this moment for what seems like his entire life, waited for Bucky to burst open and bear himself with total honesty, and he can barely even be bothered by the fact that it feels like nothing.

Well, almost like nothing. Because something does galvanize in Steve as Bucky weeps in his arms, a resolve that forms and calcifies quickly. And as he holds Bucky and whispers kindness against his salty skin, he decides that he’s never going to let anything like this happen ever again. It’s another immovable fact, like the oatmeal carpet and the direction of the sun in the morning. It sounds like his promise to himself so many years ago, after Bucky fled to Manhattan to help dig people out of the rubble of the World Trade Center. He promised that he’d never let himself feel helpless and scared like he did that day. And look at him, spending day after day feeling helpless and scared over Bucky Barnes yet again, now trying to make up for the chaos by containing him physically, pulling him in and holding him down. Christ, hopefully he’s better at keeping this promise than the last one.

The crying doesn’t last very long. Somehow, Bucky summons what’s left of his armor and brings one hand back to his mouth to physically stifle himself. Cram his grief and sobs back into his body. It takes a while longer for the shaking to stop, and even then, Steve still feels the reflexive, intermittent jumping of Bucky’s diaphragm as his body stages a last ditch revolt against his efforts. Steve kisses Bucky’s gown-covered shoulder as he calms, and he pulls Bucky tighter against his body. Bucky’s breathing slows and relaxes, and he finally drops his hand from his mouth with a long, quavering sigh.

“I’m sorry about Rikki,” Steve says quietly.

Bucky’s body curls in, and a small sound comes out of him that’s foreign to Steve, another thing he’s never heard before - a whimper, like a dog makes when it’s been kicked. He chokes it off, but there’s no way he can take it back.

“You gonna ask me what happened?” Bucky asks a few moments later, his voice hoarse.

“Daisy told me.”

“At least somebody knows.”

“You…” Steve stutters. “You don’t remember?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” Bucky repeats himself, weaker with each iteration, until Steve shushes him.

“Whatever happened, it must have made sense to you,” Steve says.

Bucky goes quiet. Steve’s not sure if that quiet is a confirmation or a denial, but he can’t imagine a world where someone would drive themselves to the brink of death for no good reason at all, even if it looks like lunacy to everyone else.

“I really fucked up. And I’m gonna go to jail,” Bucky says. “I don’t think…” His stomach trembles
again and he sniffs, then brushes his fingers harshly over his cheeks. “I’m… I don’t…. I fucked up, Steve.”

Beneath the blanket, Steve presses his palm to the center of Bucky’s chest, over his solar plexus. Below his hand, he feels the precipitous drop off the edge of Bucky’s ribcage where a hard plane of muscle used to lay.

“I’m gonna take care of you,” Steve tells him.

“How you gonna do that?”

“I’ll figure that out. But I’m gonna come here, and I’m gonna take care of you.”

Bucky presses his hands to his face again, and he shakes his head weakly.

“And if you have to go to jail, I’ll be here when you get out.”

Bucky presses against Steve and shifts, dropping his hands and rolling onto his back while Steve edges away to accommodate. Steve can now clearly see Bucky’s face, hollowed, pale, and rough with days and days of stubble. The whites of his eyes are startlingly red, painted with burst blood vessels. Steve’s not sure how they got that way, and he’s too disturbed by them to imagine many possibilities.

Bucky frowns and looks acutely confused, a deep groove forming between his eyebrows. His words come clumsy and slurred.

“You can’t do that. You promised. You signed a contract. You can’t…. You can’t leave those men. Our men. They need you. I can’t, so they need you.”

“I’m not even going to be with the unit in a few months. Barton’s sending me for training after I make O-3, so it’s—”


“That’s my choice to make.”

“The hell it is. I don’t want it. I don’t want any of it.”

Steve moves to lay his arm across Bucky’s body again, but Bucky squirms and pulls the bedding up over his body as much as he can with Steve lying on top of them.

They fall into silence. Steve pulls his arm in against his own body and rolls away from Bucky, giving him the space he’s silently requesting. Because it’s what Bucky needs right now. Steve stays tensely crammed in the narrow space between Bucky and the edge of the bed.

In the quiet, Steve hears Bucky’s breathing change, shifting into a shallow rhythm. He stares at the pocked ceiling tiles and tunes in to the sounds of life. Bucky’s breath. The beeping of the monitors. He tries to memorize the rate of Bucky’s heart, tries to figure out how many times it beats per minute without looking at the screen.

Steve can tell from all of it that Bucky’s asleep, and it feels safe to look over at him then. He watches the rise and fall of Bucky’s chest beneath the blue hospital blanket, follows the central IV line and the wires that snake up from below the loose collar of his gown, feeding into the heart rate monitor and the saline drip next to the bed. And he lets himself close his eyes too, just for a minute, because
Steve jerks awake to the sound of a voice, thick and gritty. He scans the room - the door, the window, the... Bucky. Bucky’s next to him, looking at him with those heavy-lidded red eyes, with those deep, dark bags beneath them. Steve blinks as he tries to bring Bucky and his baffling context into focus.

“What?” Steve asks.

“How’s Bragg?”

Steve sags back against the bed. “Okay, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I’m on leave. In DC,” Steve says, too stupid with exhaustion to stop the truth from coming out.

“What— why?”

“Sharon had the baby.”

Steve still struggles to say it. To make it real with his words. He closely watches Bucky’s face, waiting for it to go angry or resentful. But it doesn’t.

“Holy shit,” Bucky murmurs. “Really?”

Steve’s Adam’s apple bobs and slides as he forces out a “yeah.”

Bucky angles his body toward Steve, his movements slow and drugged like his words. “Boy or girl?”

“Boy.”

“Oh my God.” Bucky bites his lower lip while a lazy smile pulls the corners of his mouth. “Lemme see a picture.”

Steve trips over the realization that he doesn’t have one. He doesn’t have a picture. He’s been a father for over a week, and he doesn’t have any proof of it aside from a piece of paper with all their names on it.

“You don’t have a picture of your own baby?” Bucky’s tone is sharp and incredulous.

“No,” Steve says under his breath.

“Well, get one. Text Sharon. I wanna see.”

Bucky rests his head against Steve’s shoulder and watches with sleepy interest as Steve takes his phone from his front pocket and shoots off the request to Sharon.

“What’s his name?”

“Ethan.”

“Did you pick that?”
“No.”

Bucky makes a small ‘hmm’ sound. “What’s he like?”

Steve’s brow furrows. “He’s a newborn. He just cries and eats and sleeps and shits. And then starts all over.”

“Oh, c’mon.” Bucky bats his hand feebly against Steve’s chest. “Bet he’s cute, too.”

Steve is saved from addressing the comment when he gets a text back from Sharon. It’s a picture of the baby awake, looking up at the camera like he knows what it is and who it’s for and that he’s supposed to appear adorable just to make Steve seem like a callous asshole. He holds the screen up for Bucky.

“Oh my God.” Bucky touches his fingers to his lips, including the one that was severed and re-attached. It looks like it’s healed pretty well, even though it doesn’t seem to move much. “I can’t believe it,” he says through them.

Steve takes in the full scope of Bucky’s reaction. The awestruck, dopey look on his grizzled face. The fact that he drank himself to the brink of death less than 24 hours ago. The skill with which he obscures the tragedy in his life, maybe because he just doesn’t know what else to do with it.

“Can you send it to me?” Bucky asks.

“I would, if I had your goddamn phone number.”

“Oh, yeah. Hold on.” Bucky’s eyes roll upward in thought, as if he could actually find anything in the mists of leftover drunkenness and drugs. “Wait— I don’t know. Text Daisy.”

Steve sighs and sends the request to Daisy. He barely gets a chance to finish typing before Bucky’s pulling him by the arm, encouraging him to get close again. To hold him beneath the blanket. He even lifts his head so that Steve can stretch his arm out for him to rest on. Steve obliges because, Jesus, there’s no way he couldn’t.

“I’m so tired,” Bucky mumbles. “They gave me some shit, I don’t know.”

“Valium. Probably so you don’t die again from withdrawal.”

“Fuck. I have to call my lawyer. Fuck.”

“You don’t have to call right now,” Steve assures him. “Just rest.”

“What if I fall asleep?”

“It’s okay.” Steve doesn’t have the heart to tell him that he already did. That they both already did. Under the blanket, Steve feels Bucky’s fingertips against his knuckles, stroking softly. “Will you be here?”

“I don’t know. I have to go back soon.”

“Good. Jesus.” Bucky gives an ambiguous nod, an odd one of relief and disappointment. “Good.”

“But I meant what I said earlier.”

“So did I.” Bucky’s hand clamps down weakly on his wrist. “Don’t you fucking dare, Steve. I mean
“It. Don’t be stupid.”
“T’m pretty stupid, Buck. You know that. Especially when it comes to you.”
Bucky replies with a grunt and a whisper of a smile. It’s not long before he’s asleep again, pulled under by the benzos keeping him alive. Steve lets himself follow, letting time and worry slip away.

—

Steve is woken some time later by a voice again, one he recognizes quickly as not-Bucky’s. Turns out it belongs to a stern, shaved-headed nurse standing at the foot of the bed, eyeing him indifferently.

“Sir, you can’t be in there with him.”

Steve gives him a look that feels patently foul on his face. “Why? Because we’re men?”

“No, because it’s hospital policy. Beds are for patients only.”

Steve carefully disentangles himself from Bucky and stands. Bucky stirs but doesn’t open his eyes. He does mumble a small “bye,” which Steve returns by pushing Bucky’s greasy hair back off of his forehead and kissing him there. The nurse busies himself typing something at the computer workstation against the wall and doesn’t even give the gesture a second glance.

“You do plan to bathe him at some point, I hope,” Steve says quietly. Coldly.

The nurse looks up from the computer screen, barely masking his annoyance. “Now that he’s actually stable, yes. And we’re going to have the social worker refer him for treatment.”

“He’s a veteran.”

The nurse walks to the bedside and jots down the numbers on the heart rate monitor. “Yeah, I gathered that from the tat.” He gestures to Bucky’s right arm with his pen. Steve sees the eagle, globe, and anchor inked on the nurse’s own forearm and feels a pang of relief, followed quickly by a counter-pang of anxiety.

“He should be connected with the VA, if he’s not already,” Steve says, gentler now, reminding himself that he has no power here and that one should never, ever piss off the nurses.

“I’ll let the social worker know.” The nurse finishes his jotting. “What branch?”

“Him? Army.”

“I meant you.”

Steve’s face and mind go blank. He then pivots clumsily around several answers before remembering that most things about him probably scream active duty, most notably his fresh haircut and meticulously clean shave. “Same.”

“We’ll make sure he’s taken care of.”

Steve doesn’t flinch when the nurse gives him a pat on the back, the type of firm slap that grunts give each other. Given that the Marine Corps doesn’t have nurses, Steve’s guessing this guy made a very radical career change when he got out. Maybe this is his way of balancing things out. Spend a few years killing, spend a few years saving.
Steve nods once and walks out of the room, reluctantly and backwards, trying desperately to photocopy the image of a sleeping, safe, alive Bucky over all of the fear and hopelessness and uncertainty of the past month. But as the bed gets further and further from him, that trifecta of emotion doesn’t fade. If anything, it just seems a little easier to box up and take back on the road again.

When Steve makes his way back to the coffee kiosk area, Rikki and Daisy are gone. Winnie is still there, sitting on the bench Steve and Daisy were at earlier in the morning. She has her eyes closed and her lips are moving, her hands clutched together. When Steve clears his throat, she shakes herself out of her praying and looks up at him expectantly.

“He’s sleeping,” Steve tells her. “Are you okay?”

Winnie gives him a series of fast, jerky nods but is ultimately betrayed by the tears that well in her hazel eyes.

Steve holds his hand out to her. “Let’s get some fresh air.”

She takes it and lets him pull her to her feet. They walk past the kiosk and to the bank of elevators, which they take to the ground floor. The weather is nice, so they stroll the perimeter of the hospital. They rest in the quiet between them until Winnie finally breaks it.

“It’s so good to see you.” She reaches up and rubs his upper arm in a slow, maternal way. “How are you?”

“Okay.”

“Are you okay?” she asks, doubt weighing down her words.

He shrugs. “I guess.”

“You look tired.”

“I think we all are.”

“I’ve barely slept all month. Last month, I guess. Since he went missing.”

Has it really been a month? An entire month? What the hell has he been doing all this time? How the hell has he been functioning? How the fuck has he not gone mad yet? How has he not yet had a total, catastrophic, thermonuclear meltdown? He never really questioned it until this moment, because it always just seemed like one day and then one day and then one day. That’s all he’s been able to handle since he got blown up. Since they got blown up.

“You get hard to it, after a while, you know?” Winnie says, her eyes unfocused. “You can only worry so much before you just can’t do it anymore. You just kinda shut down.”

“Yeah. I get that.”

Winnie’s steps slow and Steve pulls back with her, taking one stride for every two of hers. She looks small and scared and something else that Steve can’t quite name until she starts speaking again, when her voice thickens with shame.

“I should have sent him to rehab when he was younger. I had the chance to, but I didn’t. He wouldn’t have been able to join the Army, and that was the one thing he wanted.” She gnaws on her lower lip, just like Bucky so often does when he thinks nobody’s watching. “So I let it go. Because I
owed him for a lot. Because I did wrong by him. I really did. I thought I was loving him, but I was hurting him.” Winnie ducks her head low. “I just didn’t know how to love him, Steve. I never, ever stopped, but I didn’t know how to love him the right way.”

Winnie’s words flow over him, perfectly understandable linguistically and almost entirely unclear contextually. He can’t even begin to unpack ninety percent of what she just said, so he starts at the beginning.

“When?” he asks.

“When what?”

“The rehab.”

“In high school. He was drinking all the time.” Her voice drops. “I imagine you knew.”

He has memories of Bucky drinking when they were younger, but it was usually at some party. Solo cup keggers when someone’s parents were out of town or voguishly permissive of teenage drinking parties. Bucky wasn’t usually the type to get wasted at those things. Tipsy, certainly, but never obliterated.

Except one time. The time Steve brought his girlfriend and got stupid-drunk stupid-fast and decided to round third base with her on the couch, oblivious to everyone else in the room. After their little show, Bucky laughed extra loud and let the girls fawn over him extra hard, especially the party’s hostess, who’d been trying to get with Bucky all night. And when the hard liquor started flowing, Bucky tossed down shot after shot until the very early morning hours, drinking everyone else under the table and then making out obscenely with the hostess on the living room floor amid the sprawled bodies of everyone else who was asleep or passed out. He saw Steve still awake on the couch, curled up with his sleeping girlfriend, and Bucky made sure to hit all the bases while Steve watched. And he made sure to look Steve in the eyes as he pushed up her skirt, rolled on a condom, and started fucking her from behind. He looked at Steve the entire time, and Steve watched, uncomfortably hard and unable to tear his eyes away while Bucky fucked her until he came, loud and unselfconsciously, like he knew just how hot he looked while he was doing it, completely unconcerned with the person he was actually fucking. After he was done, he pulled off the condom, pulled his pants up, left the poor unsatisfied girl in the middle of the living room, and went to the kitchen to polish off the rest of the tequila. When Steve got up a few hours later to take a piss, he found Bucky passed out in the hallway with the empty bottle still in his hand.

He was so angry at Bucky for what he did, so turned on and fucking furious. He never understood it until much later, when Bucky told Steve how long he’d wanted him, long before that party was ever a thought in that poor hostess’s head. It was a very Bucky thing to do, fucking a girl he wanted nothing to do with out of spite for his best friend, because he didn’t know how to be honest. Because he didn’t know how to say “I want you” and “I love you.”

Steve shakes his head, shaking away the memory with it. “I knew he drank, but I didn’t think it was a lot. Just once in a while.”

“No, it was a lot more than that. When I’d catch him, he'd tell me he’d quit on his own. And I think he would, for a little while. And then he'd get busy with school and other things and wouldn't be home. Maybe he was drinking then, too.” She gives a defeated shrug. “I don’t know. Honesty’s never been his strong suit.”

Steve looks down at his shoes, at the way the laces have come untucked from where he shoved them beneath the tongue. He can’t stand them like this; the Army’s made him too neurotic about shoelaces
and salute angles and droves of other inconsequential bullshit. He stoops down to tuck them back underneath.

“He’s been through a lot,” Winnie says into the air, not to him or anyone in particular. “And I doubt I even know half of it.”

“Does anyone?” Steve asks, standing.

“I don’t know. I thought you might.”

“No. I don’t think I know him very well at all.”

“I’m so scared for him,” she whispers, just loudly enough for him to hear. She presses her hand to her sternum, over where her heart is. “I can’t lose him…. Not like this.”

“No one is gonna lose him. I’m gonna make sure of it.”

She looks at him fondly. “Oh, honey. You’re sweet to say that.”

“No, I’m not,” Steve states unequivocally. “But I am serious.”

The softness in Winnie’s face begins to resemble pity — pity for him or for Bucky, Steve’s not quite sure. Maybe for both of them. What a pitiful pair they are. Not even a pair, when he really thinks about it. He doesn’t know what they are now.

“How’s Sharon?” Winnie asks.

“Fine.”

“How’s the pregnancy going?”

“Fine,” he tells her, because he can’t weather one more member of this family cooing and grinning over a child that feels like his in name only.

“Are you excited?”

Steve forces out a “yes.” It comes out frail and fabricated, and it has the curious effect of making Winnie smile and pet his arm again.

“It’s okay to be afraid. George and I were terrified after Jamie was born. Completely clueless. It’s very normal.” She smiles, even though there’s an incongruous coldness in her eyes that Steve can’t quite place. “Your mama and I used to laugh about it. She said she cried the whole first week she brought you home. I cried for at least a month, and Jamie was a good baby, certainly compared to Rikki. So if Sharon cries, you just hug her and tell her it’s all fine and all normal.”

Steve swallows heavily. “Sure.”

Hearing “your mama” in Winnie’s attenuated Texas drawl makes Steve visibly wince, because he’s reminded of how she and his ma used to be friends. How Winnie used to come over often and bring soup when his ma was bedridden from chemo and radiation and Steve was too busy caring for her to cook. Winnie would always find some excuse to stay longer, insisting that he take “just a little break” while she was there. He wouldn’t have taken her charity under other circumstances, and she knew it. Winnie would usually bring Bucky and send them off to a movie while she helped his ma bathe and do the small, very personal things she didn’t want Steve to be burdened with. In the dark on the walk home from the movie, Bucky would sometimes put his arm around Steve’s shoulders and not say...
anything. Sometimes it would make Steve cry.

“You’re gonna be a good dad,” Winnie tells him with completely unearned confidence. “Because
you are sweet. Being here, leaving work to come here, it’s sweet.”

“It’s not sweet. I should be here. I should have been here this whole time.”

“That’s not—”

“It’s not sweet,” he repeats firmly. “It’s correcting a mistake.”

Winnie tilts her head at him, like he’s a hieroglyph she’s trying to decipher. “You didn’t do this to
him, Steve. You know that, right?”

“I might as well have.” He looks out over the green lawn, over to the loading zone, down to the
ground — anywhere but at Winnie. “Might as well have tried to kill him myself.”

She reaches up then and lays her hand on his face, guiding his attention back to her. “Oh, no. No.
Baby, he’s been like this for a long time.”

Steve feels his face get hot beneath her palm. “You should have told me.”

“I thought you knew.”

“If I knew, I never would have let it get this bad.”

Winnie pulls her hand away then and lets her arm fall to her side. She blinks a few times and opens
her mouth in hesitation long before her words come.

“Are you suggesting that this is my fault?” she finally asks.

Steve nods, shallow and over-controlled. “Yeah, I am.”

“How—

”You should have told me. You should have made sure I knew. Before he got blown up. Back when
we were together. Jesus, back in high school.”

“He would have been so ashamed to have you know. And I wanted him to tell you, but he was
afraid you wouldn’t want to be friends with him anymore. He loved you so much, even back then
—”

“Enough,” Steve snaps through his clenched teeth. “I don’t wanna hear it. You just make sure he
gets into rehab when he gets out of here. If he has to go to jail, you make sure that rehab is the first
place he goes when he gets out. No more checking out. No more apathy. No more colluding and
enabling. You take care of him until I get back, if you can manage that.”

“It’s not fair to blame me,” Winnie says, voice wavering. “That is not fair.”

“No, you just had to make sure he could join the fucking Army so you could feel better about
whatever shit you did to him. Which was what, by the way? I’d sure like to know.”

Winnie purses her lips. “It’s a long story.”

Steve gives a frigid, mirthless smirk. “Of course it is. More unspeakable Barnes family bullshit. Well,
whatever happened, you decided that instead of making him get help, you were gonna let him
become a soldier and an alcoholic.” Steve drives his index finger into his own chest. “I’ll take credit for fucking him up after that, but you get to take credit for letting him raise his right hand in the first place. For signing that fucking paperwork. He was seventeen, for Christ’s sake.”

Despite the waves and waves of anger he’s throwing at her, despite wishing he could be even more angry at himself and her still, thinking that they both deserve so much more, Winnie drops her defenses. She steps toward him and takes him by the forearms, which she can barely get her small hands around. He doesn’t remember her being so tactile. Or maybe it’s just been so long since someone has tried to comfort him with their touch that he forgot it was even an option.

“Steve, I’ve made a lot of mistakes. With Jamie, with Rikki, with George, with my parents…. And I’m trying to own those mistakes. I really am. And that’s all I can say and do right now.” She squeezes into his muscles. “I’m trying. You’re trying. Jamie is trying. Rikki and Daisy are trying. We’re all just trying to do our best here.”

If Steve had anything left inside him, any guts or his heart, the plaintive sadness on Winnie’s face right now would probably tear them out of him. He has no right to blame Bucky’s addiction on her, and he knows it. Bucky probably lied to her like he lied to everyone else, or at least painted some softer version of the truth for her in palatable, rosy shades. Steve can only imagine the promises he made to her about stopping his drinking, about joining the math club or the swim team or the student newspaper, about all the club meetings he went to that didn’t even exist. God knows Steve was busy enough with his ma and work. And football, but only because his ma asked him to play to help him get scholarships he ultimately refused to take. So he wasn’t paying enough attention to Bucky, either. Not the way he apparently should have.

He should have known, God damn it. He should have fucking known.

“Well, we need to do better than that.” He steps back until he slides out of her grip. “Call me as soon as you know anything.”

Winnie gives him a slow nod. “All right.”

“I mean it.”

“Have a safe flight.”

Without another word, Steve turns and heads back toward the loading zone in the front of the hospital. There, he only has to wait a few minutes before a Yellow cab pulls up to drop someone off from the city. He moves quickly to take it before anyone else can, and it feels good to finally have some energy, even if it’s aggressive energy. Steve stews the entire way back to Penn Station, throwing lighter fluid on his guilt for letting all this happen and on his bitter anger toward Winnie and Rikki for doing the same. Sometimes his anger crests to the point of fury, and he thinks about punching the seat or his thighs just to discharge some of his rage. But he doesn’t need to give any more grotesque displays of emotional dysregulation to New York City cabbies today. So he sits with his fists clenched and eats it.

He gets to the station in time to catch the 7:40 train back to DC. Shortly before departing, Steve gets a text from Sharon — a picture of her and the baby taken by Yates, presumably. They’re by the window that overlooks the courtyard, and Sharon looks beautiful and quietly amazed by the small, sleeping person in her arms. Steve labors over what to text back. Everything he thinks to type is disingenuous, even a smiley face or a less-than sign smashed together with the number three. Those symbols, succinct and certain, are nowhere near adequate in capturing how he really feels about the two of them.
Steve settles with the heart anyway, because maybe loving your own child is one of those fake-it-til-you-make-it deals. Maybe he just needs to do better. Try harder. He’s never had to try to love someone before. He’s always been pretty sure that’s not how it works. If love was a choice, he might never have chosen to love Bucky, because doing so seems to have ruined him on some fundamental level.

But he can’t blame Bucky. He can only blame himself. Like Winnie, maybe he just doesn’t know how to love Bucky the right way. Maybe he’s never loved him the right way, whatever way that is. However you love someone so complicated and guarded. Someone who so adamantly refuses to be loved.

Steve puts that to the side, because it’s not about love. It’s about making things right. Fixing things. There is a way to fix this. There has to be. Every problem has a solution, including the problem of Bucky Barnes. If this, then that.

The train pulls out of the station, and Steve begins planning.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Newborn baby difficulties, nursing, parental attachment issues, misogynistic behavior, homophobic language, aftermath of alcohol overdose

Notes:

Eagle, globe, and anchor: The symbol of the United States Marine Corps. Here’s a picture

Raise right hand: A reference to the swearing-in ceremony when you join the military

Acela: The high speed (well, “high speed” for America) train line that runs from Boston to DC

Seventeen years old: With a parent’s written permission, seventeen-year-olds can join the armed forces in America.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Bucky receives his sentence. Steve's plans come to fruition.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

Warnings at the end.

May 13, 2009

When Bucky called his lawyer from the hospital last week, she told him not to worry too much. She said that jail is kind of like the military. Bunk beds and early wake-ups and government chow and discipline and constant supervision by authority figures. You can handle it, she said. Like a cakewalk. Just keep stepping until someone tells you to stop. Eventually, your number’s gonna get called.

It turns out she was right — jail is a lot like the Army. Just not in most of the ways she thinks.

For Bucky, jail is a crowded city in the desert, where the living spaces are stacked and stacked, with people hanging out the windows, watching, looking on with quiet hatred, cell phones in hand. Jail is a marketplace that’s just a little too empty. It’s a road that’s just a little too clear. It’s uncountable lawless variables in a claustrophobically closed system. And he has no weapon. No plan of attack. No backup. No extraction. For someone whose nervous system is still stuck in the Middle East, jail is yet another deployment. A deployment he has no training for. A deployment where he is utterly alone.

Right now, Bucky is where he can be found every day, nearly every moment except for chow and showers. He’s in his cell on the bottom bunk, seated upright with his back against the hard cement wall. Supporting his body — in the loosest of terms — is a three inch thick, hard, plastic-covered mattress. He’s got cover, at least, from the top bunk hanging over him, where an older man named Johnny T is talking about how the FSB has activated one of their sleeper agents to kill him, but
they’ll never find him because he has mastery over the space-time continuum and will find a way to evade them, like he always does. It’s benign and constant, almost like white noise. It’s worse at night, when Johnny T is asleep, and all Bucky can hear are footsteps, jingling keys, low male dialogue, and slamming cells, each of which jolts him like it’s the first one he’s ever heard, driving his heart into a frenzy, making his hands shake. The booze is out of him now. He was in the hospital for a week just to detox. The only thing left to make his hands shake is pure adrenaline. Pure fight-flight, except that he’s too fucking broken to flee and he’s too fucking weak now that fighting would be a death wish.

Bucky folds his arms tighter over his chest. It’s always so cold in here — every surface, every inch of air — and the jumpsuits are short-sleeved. They took away his braces at the hospital after x-rays showed that his bones had healed as much as they were going to, so he’s practically naked now. He still burns hot with embarrassment every single time he’s outside his cell. People stare at the cripple on crutches. They double-stare at the cripple on crutches with the chewed-up arms. The other inmates have come up with some creative explanations, usually yelled at him in some form of rhetorical question. A favored theory is that he got into a fight with a bear, and now a lot of the guys curl their hands into claws and growl at him when he passes them in the chow hall, crutching along while Johnny T carries both their trays, bless him.

Bucky looks out the barred door to their cell, eyes sharp and nervous as a corrections officer pauses just outside but then keeps walking by. There’s no clock. There’s no outside light. There’s no way to know what time it is, exactly. It’s some time between lunch and dinner, which means that Karen should be here soon, hopefully with his DD214 and some good news. She’s been sickeningly hopeful about his prospects, in her good-natured puppy way. Something about some veterans’ court upstate that doesn’t yet exist in New York County, like drug court for wayward vets. It all sounds very appealing and unlikely, and he can’t stand to tell her how childlike she sounds when she starts talking about society’s debt to soldiers and community responsibility for war or whatever topic she picked for her high school civics essay.

But he’s grateful. Behind his sour cynicism, Bucky is sometimes touched almost to the point of tears when Karen talks about wanting to help him. He can barely tolerate her innocence, her ignorance of everything he’s done that’s made him worthy of nothing she’s proposing. He’s just such a fucking wreck these days. He can’t even think Rikki’s name or face without his guts twisting up in a knot of grief. He can barely talk to his ma without apologies spilling unchecked from his lips. Daisy had enough nerve to tell him what he did. She came back the day after Rikki… said her piece, he supposes. She showed him his texts, his awful, humiliating texts that he thought he was sending to Natasha — Jesus. Jesus, he fucked up.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Johnny T says at a pitch above his rambling.

Bucky has been answering to Johnny T’s chosen nickname since he got here, never thinking to correct him. He’s had to pick his battles wisely, given that there are so many here.

“Yeah?”

“You know, I think your thoughts sometimes. You know?” He says this in a hushed voice, which Bucky can hear because he’s saying it against the wall. The sound travels downward like water toward the ground.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The thing about the money. About your pin number for the ATM.”

“Yeah, I mean, money, right? Who doesn’t worry?”
“That’s right. You gotta watch out.”

“Absolutely.”

They have plenty of conversations like these. Bucky rolls along with the nonsense, because he’s seen what happens when people voice their confusion over the thought reading or openly reject his paranoid ideologies. Johnny gets freaked out by it, gets quiet and reclusive and sometimes extremely distressed. It’s sad, because the guy clearly belongs in a psychiatric facility. Bucky’s not even sure what he’s done to land himself here. Probably close to nothing. But hell, maybe it’s for the best. Maybe it’s better than being on the street.

A few minutes later, Johnny T climbs down from his bunk and sits down on the metal toilet at the foot of their rack to take a shit. He talks even while he’s shitting, though thankfully not to Bucky, complaining about the food and how it blocks him up. And he’s still trying to shit when the CO finally comes by to take Bucky to Karen. Bucky endures a few lively roars and sporadic claw-hands thrust between bars as he crutches past the long row of cells.

He thought he would be better at ignoring them by now, that they’d just fade into all the other ambient noises of confinement. But he hears every single one, and he flinches pathetically for the guys who’ve learned that he’s easy to scare. And every time he does, he tries not to think of where he was a year ago. Who he was. He tries not to remember that he used to be a respected, high ranking, physically intact, non-commissioned officer in the United States Army whose only fear on this Earth was emotional intimacy — which was also, of course, the one thing he craved as much as he craved alcohol.

And he craves both of them still. Powerfully. Almost every minute of every day. Even as he remains terrified of both.

Karen is waiting for him in a cubical room with barred walls. She rises when he walks in and gives him a smile.

“Hi, Jamie,” she greets, gesturing to the seat across from her at the bolted-down table in the center of the room.

Bucky leans his crutches against the table and bites back a groan as he lowers himself into the chair.

“Are you in pain?”

“Yep,” Bucky says in the disinterested drawl of a man who’s always in pain. His foot, his knee, his arm, his calf, his back, his armpits, his shoulders — they all hurt in concert, aching and stabbing and throbbing together like a well-orchestrated oratorio.

Karen lays her hand on the table, reaching out and touching the space between them. “You’re entitled to medical care while you’re here. Don’t feel like you can’t ask for at least some ibuprofen.”

“I’m just trying to lay low. Until my trial or whatever.”

“This is not going to trial.”

Bucky rolls one shoulder in a lazy shrug. “Whatever you say.”

“I did go to law school, you know. I know what I’m doing.”

She pulls her hand back but doesn’t stiffen or attempt to defend herself further. His dismissive shit doesn’t phase her much. He’s not quite sure why he continues with it.
“And your mom dropped off your DD214,” she adds. “Maybe you can help me make some sense of it.”

Karen reaches down into her briefcase and pulls a manila envelope from it with her thin hands. She opens it to his discharge summary, which he scarcely remembers receiving when he out-processed from the Army. Probably because he was higher than the fucking moon. The single sheet is dense with writing, the boxes crammed to the edges with text.

“Should be pretty straightforward,” Bucky tells her.

“So what’s SFC again?”

“Sergeant First Class.”

“Pay grade E7.” Karen glances up at him. “That’s pretty high, right?”

Bucky makes an intensive effort to keep his eyes from rolling, picking a spot on the lapel of Karen’s blazer and keeping his attention fixed there.

“Pretty high,” he says.

“And you were a Ranger. That’s good, right?”

“I don’t know about good. It’s special operations. I was only with a Ranger battalion for three years, though.”

“Why’s that?”

Bucky thinks to supply one of his two pat answers — the front he offers for the general public or the rarer version he offers to people he might risk being a little vulnerable with. He supposes he could tell Karen that he got sick of lying in one place for hours waiting for the perfect moment to blow some unwitting asshole’s heart out of his chest. That wasn’t the reason he quit, of course. He could tolerate the stillness and the boredom. The unrelenting sun and the hunger. And he feels little remorse for the dozen-and-a-quarter men he took down. But it wasn’t just men he murdered, was it?

“I killed a kid,” he decides to say.

He stops himself before he can spill any more. Before he can say And I dream about him at least once a week and have lost countless hours wondering what kind of man he would have grown up to be and I can’t just stop there because I killed a little girl too and touched her splattered brains with my bare hands and think about her poor mother and wonder if there’s a special place in hell for people like me who volunteer to take the lives of children in countries they have no business being in —

“Was it an accident?” Karen angles the end of her question upward, hopeful.

“No. I watched him for forty-five minutes before I shot him.”

She averts her gaze. “I’m sorry you were put in that position.”


Karen takes a deep breath through her nose and traces her finger across the fields of his paperwork. “Okay, now we’ve got time in service, medals…” She’s quiet for a moment, her face frozen in pale
disbelief. “Wait — you got the Silver Star?”

This time Bucky does roll his eyes. “Oh, God.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It was for practically nothing.”

“Well, I doubt it was ‘practically nothing.’”

“Any other soldier with my knowledge and training would have done the same thing. I just got caught doing it. That’s the only difference.”

“What happened?”

Bucky gives his head a weary shake. “Just normal shit. We were ambushed, I killed some guys doing a bunch of stupid shit, and I kept my men alive. It was basic grunt work. Stupid thing to get a medal for.” He doesn’t go on to describe how embarrassed he was to get that fucking thing pinned to his chest in front of the whole goddamn battalion. And he doesn’t tell her that he ungrudgingly misplaced it somewhere during his move from Fort Benning to Fort Bragg. He wonders if there’s a garbage man somewhere in Georgia using it to pick up women at some backwater dive bar.

“So, not just any soldier would have done what you did, is what you’re saying.”

Bucky turns up his palms on the surface of the table, wincing at the pain in his forearm when he does it.

“I don’t know,” he growls. “I don’t fucking know. What does it have to do with anything?”

“Did you ever get in trouble in the Army? Any DUIs or anything?”

“No.”

“So, clean record. And you have a bunch of medals and awards, including a prestigious one for valor.” Karen looks up from the paper, her expression placid and certain. “It’s important because it’s going to help us make a case for you to get clemency. I’m working with the DA’s office on a plea bargain right now. If we can prove that military factors contributed to what happened, we have a good shot of getting the charges reduced, I think.”

“What do you mean by ‘military factors?’”

“You know, PTSD. Traumatic brain injury. Things like that.” She seems to confidently buy into the new formula floating around these days — man plus war equals crazy equals sob story.

Bucky juts out his chin, and the skin around the scar there stretches tight. “How do you know I have either of those?”

“Well, I don’t,” Karen admits softly. “But the DA wants a psychologist to evaluate you. And I agree with her.”

Bucky’s lied his way through more psych evals than most shrinks have probably given in their entire careers. Maybe it’s no wonder that he’s so fucked up, if he had to lie so much just to stay on duty. Maybe his career should have ended long before it did. He sometimes wonders what might have happened if he’d been honest, if they would have pulled him from special operations or helped him or given him the boot from the service completely.
“Whatever you think,” he defers.

“Does that bother you?”

“An eval? I mean, no one wants to be told by a professional that they’re crazy. Even if they strongly suspect it.”

Karen closes the folder and lays her hands over it. “You’re not crazy. Let’s not use that word.”

“Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Psychologically unfit. Mentally ill. Fucked in the head. Whatever the fuck you wanna call it.”

She frowns at his list of euphemisms. “It could be a tough evaluation. She’s probably going to ask a lot of very detailed questions.”

Bucky shrugs. “I’m just gonna be honest. I literally have nothing left to lose.”

“Is tomorrow too soon? Both sides want to fast-track this, since your hearing is next Friday.”

“Tomorrow?” Bucky gives a theatrical sigh. “Well, I guess I could squeeze something in. If we must.”

Karen finally yields a smile. “Good. I’m optimistic about this.”

Bucky nods, but not in agreement. It’s an acknowledgment of Karen’s strategy, a collection of moves that form a very disconcerting trend.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of a copout? This whole thing?” Bucky asks.

“In what way?”

His attention travels absently to the window that lies beyond the bars. “Seems wrong for me to get a free pass, don’t you think?”

“It’s not a free pass, Jamie. The idea is that…”

Bucky glances back to see her staring at him, pressing her lips together as she thinks. Her blue eyes flit incrementally as she searches his face. She has this way of looking at him, of trying to read him, like he’s actually worth reading. Like he’s worth salvaging from all his homegrown calamities. He errs on the side of thinking she’s stupid for it, but sometimes he lets himself think that maybe she might not be completely wrong.

She tilts her head with compassion, the kind that makes him feel ill and hopeful.

“I think the idea is that you’ve already paid.”

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Bucky’s meeting with the shrink isn’t tough so much as incomprehensibly long. The psychologist who conducts it is serious, with thinning, dry brown hair and thick, black eyeliner traced around the entirety of both eyes, making them look small and intense. She pores through a hefty stack of questionnaires he muddled his way through earlier, asking for additional clarification on nearly every single answer. So by the time they get to the part where she asks about the worst thing that’s ever happened to him — because apparently he has to choose — Bucky is already keyed up and fidgety. He picks getting blown up as the worst of it, even though it barely makes the top five. And he gives curt answers to questions like “In the past month, how often have you been bothered by thoughts of
self-blame, as a percentage of time?” As a fucking percentage of time. The demand to make such conversions is boggling. She also asks how long he was knocked out when he was blown up, if he had any memory loss around the event — Christ, if only. When she asks him about his drinking, he prickles and understates the more shameful parts. What age he started. How much he was drinking when he was at his worst. What contributed to his drinking. So maybe he’s not quite ready to be honest about everything. By the time six hours have passed, he’s had quite fucking enough of all of it and thinks he might be content to just rot in a cell for a year.

He makes it out of the assessment in time to get one of his phone calls before dinner. He calls his ma a lot now, not because he especially wants to talk to her but because she’s always so disproportionately glad to hear from him. He’d rather call Rikki. He’s tried several times, and she’s refused each call. He’s longing to hear her voice. To have her forgiveness. He can’t remember ever going this long without hearing from her, except maybe when he was at Ranger School. And even while incommunicado, he knew she was thinking of him with some positive regard. He knew she would be at his graduation, back when she was in that awkward phase between Erik and Rikki, still handsome but with beautiful shoulder-length hair and a hesitant dash of mascara. She’s always been so brave, so much braver in one moment than he’s ever been in his whole goddamn life. But nobody gets a Silver Star for authenticity. Which is a pity, really, given how rare it is.

Calling his ma every day is at least one small thing he can do to try to pay her back for his atrocious behavior since he’s been out of the military, sad as it is that he can only be a good son when he’s behind bars. And if he’s honest, which he’s trying to be, talking to her does lift his spirits for a little while. Until he has to walk the bear claw gauntlet back to his cell, where Johnny T is waiting with a perpetual mouthful of crazy. Each piece of this life isn’t so bad on its own, but it makes for a very cruel composite.

But today he doesn’t call his ma. He’s tired of her platitudes and questions, well-meaning as they are. And Steve… God, talking to Steve these days is almost too stressful to bear, because he’s just off. He’s off in a way that can’t be classified, functional and supportive and fine and somehow not fine at all. Bucky doesn’t even know how to ask what’s wrong, because when Steve questions his question, he can’t offer any evidence except for a feeling in the bottom of his stomach, a nagging, dull sensation that could mean a dozen unrelated things. And then Bucky second- and third-guesses himself, because what the fuck does he know? What the fuck kind of expert is he on anything right now? Well, except maybe on how to endure the humiliation of showering with a horde of sniggering drug addicts and drunks and petty criminals who taunt him over how disgusting his body is. How fucked up and minuscule his dick is. Because they look, and they’re not particularly shy about their interest. He doesn’t know how to be more ashamed of it than he already is. He doesn’t know what that would look like. Instead, things in the shower have just started to white out around the edges. Become dull and unreal.

But this very particular kind of expertise is all he can claim now. He’s in the fucking hoosegow without an ounce of credibility left, occupying his time listening to a paranoid schizophrenic try to make sense of the world, which has begun to sound increasingly sane with each passing day.

With Winnie and Rikki and Steve out of the running, Bucky only has one more choice, given that he only has four numbers memorized. So he decides to call Sam.

“Well, if it isn’t Lazarus himself,” Sam says when the line connects.

Bucky angles himself toward the wall, the closest thing he’s got to privacy. “Sometimes I wonder about that.”

“How are you?”
“Tired,” Bucky admits, since he’s being honest and all. “Completely drained, actually.”

“Anything I can say that’ll help?”

Sam is excellent at being friends with the chronically troubled. He knows all the shortcuts and the shorthand. He knows that one of the greatest gifts he can give Bucky is nonchalance, an easy, untroubled response to his mayhem. Bucky’s not exactly sure how he does it, or whether it’s even healthy, but he doesn’t question it out of fear that maybe it’ll stop. He tries to trust that Sam is giving it to him freely and knowingly.

“I dunno. Can you just…” Bucky runs his numb finger along the phone cord as he tries to find words for the need he feels. “I dunno. Maybe just talk for a while?”

“Whatever you want.”

“You just wanna hear my voice, huh? I don’t blame you,” Sam coos, and Bucky wishes he was with him. Maybe sitting on the couch or lying on the bed next to him. He wishes for Sam’s arm around him, the gentle way he’d do it without any expectations, treading in the strange, joyful place between friendship and whatever comes after.


“All right. Do you wanna hear about how much I hate the transportation office, or how much I hate the housing people at Fort Carson?”

Bucky smiles. “Oh, gentleman’s choice.”

Bucky listens with a soft, private smile and pictures Sam’s face in his mind while the man bitches enthusiastically, pausing once to briskly field a non sequitur from Bucky about when he’s going to propose to Natasha (the answer is “Oh my God, will you ever shut up about it?”) Their fifteen minutes fly by, and the automated message warning of their imminent disconnection jostles both of them.

“I gotta go,” Bucky tells him, only marginally succeeding at keeping the edge of anxious disappointment out of his voice.

“Already?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn.”

Bucky jerks his head around to the sound of a hearty roar behind him and answers with a tense, distant “Yeah.”

“Okay. Well, you call me any time you want. You know I’m—”

The line cuts off abruptly. Bucky stands frozen for a few moments, mouth open and ready for the goodbye he doesn’t get to have. The silence of the dead line becomes a vacuum that quickly consumes most of the comfort the call gave him. Bucky is reminded yet again that this is his life now, chasing meager fifteen minute chunks of solace in a storm of disorder and uncertainty. He lays the phone on the receiver and is escorted back to his cell.
Johnny T greets him with cockeyed cheer, and the only response Bucky can offer is a silent nod before crawling onto his bunk and curling up on his side. He watches the door with renewed disconsolation, wondering how anyone can survive like this. Wondering if it’s like Iraq or Afghanistan, where an alien world becomes an infection that roots deep in the body, painful and staggering at first, until the sickness begins to feel normal. Until it begins to feel like health. If he were to languish in here long enough, would the whole entire outside become the new foreign land, like America now feels to him sometimes? Would he crave his cell like he now craves his trailer downrange? Would he pine for his khaki jumpsuit the way he pines for his ACUs?

Christ, he hopes not. He hopes he never gets the chance to miss this shit hole.

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Bucky’s hearing takes place ten meals after his psych evaluation. He doesn’t get to wear the suit he briefly thought about buying while getting wasted in Prospect Park. He imagined something in charcoal gray, with a French blue shirt and maybe a navy tie. He cleans up pretty well, when he wants to. Well, he used to, anyhow.

Today, he’s involuntarily relegated to wearing his new uniform, beige and fittingly hideous compared to everyone else sitting in front of the judge today — a pair from the DA’s office at the table across the aisle and Karen at his right. The judge is a bland, slight man who starts calling him Sergeant Barnes once Karen opens the hearing by referring to him that way. As in “Sergeant Barnes is a multiply deployed combat veteran of two wars” and “Sergeant Barnes has endured immense physical and psychological injury in service of his country” and “Sergeant Barnes doesn’t belong in jail; he belongs in treatment.” Even the DA’s office gets in on it, probably because it’s highly unfashionable to appear disrespectful to veterans, even the ones who don’t particularly deserve respect. They use it as in, “Sergeant Barnes committed a pointed act of assault on a man whose back was turned to him, possibly with intent to kill,” and “Sergeant Barnes has a long history of chronic alcohol abuse and dependence, even predating his deployments,” and, surprisingly, “even though Sergeant Barnes is a troubled man, he has served his country honorably and with distinction, and the State believes he deserves the opportunity to receive intensive treatment for his post-traumatic stress disorder and residual combat injuries.”

Bucky drifts in and out of the three-way volley where his fate is actively being negotiated, getting lost in the carved wood panels on the wall and the smiling sun of the New York state seal shining between Ladies Liberty and Justice. He shifts in his chair and bends and extends his leg to ease the persistent ache in his knee. He watches the judge flip with slow interest through the packet of documents Karen furnished for him, records and medical reports and his psych eval, and even a notarized letter from his last commander back at Benning. The whole affair is sedate and civil, and the judge accepts the plea deal without much coaxing. It’s disappointingly anticlimactic, and when it’s over, Karen smiles over at him and lays her hand on his good arm, even though she’s probably not supposed to. It’s the first caring touch he’s received since he got out of the hospital, where he vaguely remembers Steve holding him and distinctly remembers his mother clasping his hand while she sat next to his bed, while she prayed when she thought he wasn’t awake.

Lunch is a blur, and the growls barely even penetrate his consciousness. His mind is thick and humming with thoughts, an unexpected turn from the relief he expected to feel. The relief that comes when the impossible becomes reality. When Karen’s doe-eyed idealism proves to be just as grounded as she promised. When he’s dead fucking wrong. When he gets yet another lucky break. He’s barely cognizant of his choice to call Steve first, before he calls even his own mother to tell her the news. It happens in an autonomic, unstoppable progression, one that takes him from the chow hall to the bank of phones, one that guides his finger over the right succession of numbers starting with 718, as all his most important numbers start.
“Hey,” Steve says when the line connects. “How are you?”

The sound of Steve’s voice after so many days of not hearing it — days that Bucky deliberately avoided it — is like a hand twisting around inside of him. It’s intense and almost impossible to discern, like it could be joy or fear or dread or love and he’d never know the difference. It’s the general effect Steve has always had on him, but it seems immense now, sharp and violently alive.


There’s an empty beat, followed by, “Getting ready to head to the MOUT site next week.”

A smile flits over Bucky’s mouth as he remembers his last time at MOUT training, that fateful week that they lost Lieutenant Shen and Bucky decided to bring Steve Rogers back into his life. “I’m jealous.”

“I bet.”

The line goes quiet, save for some faint rustling on Steve’s end, followed by the grind of a zipper.

“So, my plea agreement went through.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. It’s a lot, but I fucked up a lot, so, I guess it’s fair.” Bucky says this with great irony, as if the hand the justice system dealt him is even remotely proportional to what he’s owed.

“What do you have to do?”

“Four months of residential treatment at some shitty VA hospital with a bunch of crusty Vietnam vets who eat fags like me for breakfast. So that should be fun.”

“Don’t call yourself that,” Steve warns. “You know I hate it.”

Bucky snorts. Steve makes himself such an easy target sometimes. “Oh, yeah. I forgot I was talking to Lieutenant P. C. Rogers, commanding.”

“That’s not why, and you know it.”

“Then why?”

“Do I really need to explain it for you? After we’ve had this conversation about a thousand times?”

To call these incidents “conversations” is a bit of a stretch. They’ve been more like episodes of Bucky’s ritualistic self-denigration interrupted by Steve’s incredulity over it, the type of disbelief only a mostly straight guy could have while he looks on from the comfort of his fortress of heterosexuality. Bucky treats Steve’s objections the way he usually treats them -- by ignoring them completely.

“Anyway,” Bucky continues, “I have to basically live at the VA. Two months for alcohol treatment and two months for PTSD treatment. Then when I get out, I have to go to ninety AA meetings in ninety days and get a fucking AA punch card stamped or something to show my probation officer.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? Getting treatment?”

“It’s better than being in jail. But it’s kind of a different jail, you know?”
“But then you’re free.”

Bucky makes a sour face. “I mean, kind of. I’ll be on probation for a year, and after that I can get my license back.”

“I’m happy that it worked out,” Steve says with the same dry quality as his other words.

“Yeah, you sound thrilled.”

There are more sounds on Steve’s end, dull pats followed by a single thump and the unmistakable turning of a Toyota engine.

“Are you nervous?” Steve asks.

“Why?”

“You sound nervous.”

Bucky basks in the brief but powerful sensation of being known by Steve, profoundly, even despite nearly two decades of Bucky’s lies and omissions. “I guess I am, yeah. Also, are you driving on base while talking on your cell?”

“Yes. What’s making you nervous?”

“Well, you for one. Those MPs don’t fuck around, y’know.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Steve chides.

Bucky shifts his weight to his good leg and looks down at his feet, at his laceless, beige slip-on shoes and the dirty white of his county-issued socks. He thinks of what lies below, the rough tread of the scar that cuts down the top of his right foot where he was impaled by rebar and then opened up twice over to fix his shattered bones. He can’t remember the last time he looked at his own body for any real length of time. He’s mostly forgotten what it used to look like and is not quite sure how it looks now, because despite the spectacle it’s become, he feels somehow more distant from it than ever. It’s like he’s walking around in another man’s heavily used flesh.

“I’ve never even been to therapy before, and now I have to live at a residential treatment program for a third of a year. I don’t know what that’s gonna be like,” Bucky says, letting his nerves come fully to the surface. “But I guess it’s a moot point. I don’t have a choice now. It’s just gonna happen.”

“It’s scary. Facing everything.” Steve’s voice is quiet, almost consumed by the sound of the world around him.

“It is. I don’t really know how to do it.”

“I know you’ll find a way.”

“How’s Ethan?”

“Okay.”

“How’s Sharon?”

“Why?”

“She’s fine.”

“Do you have any new pictures?”

“No, but I could get some for you. When do you get your phone back?”

“I guess Monday, when I get released to the VA.” Bucky gnaws on his lower lip, which is tender from all the chewing he’s done on it since he’s been behind bars. “Are you okay?”

Steve’s answer comes fast. “Sure. Why?”

“You just sound weird.”

“ Weird how?”

“I don’t know.” Bucky shrugs to himself. “Just… I don’t know.”

He’s not sure what else to call the dead space that lives between them now. He can’t quite trust himself to feel it the right way — to feel anything the right way, really — but Bucky thinks the weirdness was there when Steve came to him in the hospital, like it followed him into the room and laid in the bed with them. And it seems to be here now, reaching toward Bucky from six states away, pushing against him like a wall of negative air.

“I’m fine,” Steve says.

“You said something when you came to see me. You said, I think, that you’re getting out.”

“I’m working on it.”

Bucky wraps an anxious fist around the phone cord. “Please don’t. Don’t wreck your career because I fucked up.”

“I want to help you. I want to be there when you get out of treatment. I need to be there for you.”

Bucky exhales slowly. “I know, but… I mean, it’s not like we’re…. You know.”

“What?”

“You know….”

Bucky lets the rest of it go unspoken, but only because he has to. He can’t form the words for what they could possibly be right now, if he wasn’t so catastrophically fucked up.

Sometimes Bucky has moments, brief and euphoric, when he remembers how spectacular they can be together. How spectacular they were together, before the war. When he would wake up to Steve most mornings. Have breakfast with him. See him off to one of his two jobs. Call throughout the day just because. Meet up after work and school for dinner. Laugh and bitch and touch feet beneath the table. Stand close on the train home. Walk back to Bucky’s apartment with their arms around each other -- maybe even hold hands, if it was dark enough. Have Steve blow him because they both love it, maybe fuck after but maybe not. Brush their teeth together. Lie close in bed, reading or talking or watching Conan. Fall asleep together. Wake up and do it all over.

They were normal once. For a while, they were so good that Bucky wasn’t sure how to make sense of it. He wasn’t sure how he managed to abandon his own chaos and try out security and contentment for once. It obviously didn’t last; Bucky made sure of that. It was too hard to sustain. It was too incongruent with everything he’d learned about himself and what he deserved.
And as he stands at a noisy phone bank at the county jail, Bucky fights the part of himself that aches for the way they used to be, the part that begs him to say *Yes, I need you. Yes, I want you. Yes, please love me.* The part that wants to pull Steve through the phone and grab onto him and kiss him and dump all of his suffering at Steve’s feet and let him help and learn to trust him and forget everything they’ve done to hurt each other. He fights it because that part of himself is fucking terrifying. The things it wants are abjectly terrifying.

So he does what he’s very good at. He says “no” instead. And then he bites his lip in the silence that stretches and stretches until Steve speaks again, halting and distant.


“I mean, right?”

“….I guess not.”

Bucky grimaces and lowers his eyes against a wave of emotions, another clotted tangle he can’t quite unfurl. Whatever it is, it feels awful and morbidly symmetrical.

“But you’re still my friend,” Steve says, guarded and dimly hopeful. “Right?”

“Of course. Of course I am.”

Bucky waits for something else. Some proof that this is the right thing to do now, because it feels wrong and inevitable and responsible, and maybe if Steve fights him, it’ll mean he’s doing it right. Maybe it’ll make things easier--

“Look, I’ve gotta go take a PT test. But call me when you get out,” Steve says, then adds, “If you want.”

Bucky’s throat clenches. “Can I call before then?”

“If you want.”

Something rips through the tightness then, an accidental salvo of honesty. It tumbles from Bucky, naked and careless.

“I love you.”

Christ, the silence. The fallow, barren waste that follows. Bucky tries to swallow, but everything catches until he just about gags.


“Okay. Talk to you soon.”


Bucky slams the phone into the receiver, hand trembling, breath quivering out of him. None of it is right. Steve’s not supposed to roll over. He’s not supposed to let Bucky win. He’s supposed to argue and say *I love you, too* with the low, blue-fire intensity that made Bucky fall for him in the first place. He’s supposed to say *Fuck you, Bucky* and *I need you* and *You’re wrong.*

Bucky’s almost too upset to miss a half-hearted growl from a passing inmate, one so casual that it’s almost a greeting. Bucky pivots around toward the sound, toward the half-toothless meth head walking by, and his eyes sharpen.
“Shut the fuck up,” Bucky yells at him, loudly enough to send echoes down the hall. Loudly enough to stop every conversation at the phone bank. Loudly enough to get the attention of the CO, who hooks his thumbs into his duty belt and walks his dumpy ass over to where Bucky stands, distraught and shaking.

“You got a problem?”

Bucky scoffs. It comes out all wrong. “I wish I had only one single fucking problem.”

The CO clasps one of his huge hands around Bucky’s upper arm. “Grab your crutches. Phone time’s over.”

“Good,” Bucky grumbles. “I’m fucking done anyway.”

Steve sits in the car and stares at the phone in his hand, which has been disconnected from Bucky for at least ten minutes now. He sits, impervious to the time and to the steady trickle of soldiers in PT uniforms filing past his car toward the track, swinging their arms and running their mouths and drinking water and collecting at the smoke pits for a pre-test cigarette. He sits while his brain trips over the same fact repeatedly — that he and Bucky are not… whatever. They don’t exist together. He’s not sure why he’s staggered by it. It’s just another blip on a wide map of chaos, just another truth of many that’s fundamentally incomprehensible. He’s a father and he’s alone and he and Bucky are nothing. These things are obvious, apparently.

He shouldn’t be surprised. It’s classic Bucky. Shoving him away with one hand while holding him close with the other. Punching him in the gut while he soothes him. Wantonly fucking someone else while pining openly for him. The difference now is that Steve is letting it happen. Because he’s forgotten if he’s supposed to lean into the punches or try to dodge them. He’s forgotten the steps of their dance, along with all the other memories he’s misplaced.

Steve startles sharply from a knock at his window and flips his phone screen upside down, as if the action could stop whoever’s knocking from seeing the utter mess in his head. The whoever is Sitwell, bent at the waist and eyeing him critically through the glass. Sousa is standing further back, arms crossed over his chest, surveying the field just on the other side of the parking lot.

Steve drops his phone into the consul and yanks his keys from the ignition. He pushes open the door, and Sitwell jumps back from it with a squawk.

“Hey, watch it.”

Steve rises very deliberately to his full height, giving him a good five inches on Sitwell, who has to lift his head to get a good look at him.

“Probably shouldn’t be late for your own formation,” Sitwell says, unimpressed.

“I’m not late.”

Sitwell glances down at his watch. “Well, you’re sure as hell not early, which is just as bad.”

“We’ve got a little time,” Sousa says with his mellow ease. “But we should get going.”

Steve slowly realizes what he’s doing, staring down one of the few people on this planet he could call a friend. He can feel anger pulling on his brow, anger that Sitwell hasn’t even come close to earning. He slides his jaw to the side, unhinging the tension, and tilts his head to stretch the stiffness
from his neck.

“Sorry.”

Sitwell gives him a single nod, and the three lieutenants walk in silence to the field where the company is gathering. Steve fakes some self-possession while he forms up his platoon and gets accountability, then the men of the company arrange themselves in lines in front of a cadre of gruff-looking NCOs from another unit who will be grading them. They suffer through the mandatory demonstration of what a proper push-up looks like, then begin the testing. Steve makes sure to go first, barely managing to knock out the 77 pushups in two minutes he needs to max his score.

He tries to ignore the slithering creep of insecurity by sticking near the graders, where he walks the line of testing soldiers and offers encouragement. He keeps a special eye on PFC Wilson, who’s decided to try out for Special Forces in the fall. He isn’t sure if Wilson will make it through selection, given his spotty disciplinary record. But even the romantic, Steve believes strongly in second chances, and he plans to support Wilson until the moment the door slams in his face. So Steve crouches down next to him while he pushes and mutters “good” and “keep your form” and “c’mon, you can do two more” and “you’ve got this.” They do the same routine all over when it’s time for the sit-up portion of the test, which Steve maxes with barely any effort at all. And when it’s time to run, Steve blasts through two miles in just under thirteen minutes, pacing PFC Wilson along the way, burning through the miserable leftovers of his conversation with Bucky like fuel. When he crosses the finish line, he even hits another lap, picking up the slower stragglers along the way and sprinting them to the end. Some of them aren’t even his. One of them is Sam.

After it’s all over, the company disperses to shower and grab chow. Steve wanders back to his car after carefully avoiding Sam, barely aware of anything but the sink hole inside him that endorphins would usually fill. And then Sitwell’s there again, suddenly right behind him, scaring the hell out him and twisting him around, his right fist clenched to strike.

“Whoa,” Sitwell says, raising his hands defensively as he stops. “Jesus. Chill.”

Steve falters and tries to relax his grip. He stands there, shoulders high and bow-tense, grasping frantically for an excuse and finding that he’s fresh out.

Sitwell frowns. “Seriously, what’s wrong with you lately? Ever since you came back from leave you’ve been weird. Weirder than usual, anyway.”

Steve can’t even be amused by Sitwell’s choice of wording. Because he’s fucking weird now, he supposes. Iraq made him weird, which nobody really talks about when they come home. It’s not exactly glamorous to walk the perimeter of the house every night before bed and sometimes in the middle of the night and definitely first thing in the morning, looking for anything that feels out of place, any blade of grass that’s bent the wrong way, knowing there’s no tangible reason for it but unable to resist the impulse to do it again and again. It’s not normal to stare at the ceiling for hours on end, trying to push away memories of Trip’s severed head dropping onto his lap. Trying to forget the taste of another man’s blood in his mouth, the smell of his death, the shit and the metal and the whiff of his deodorant. And it’s certainly odd to be terrified of sleep, knowing that it’ll drag him into a different kind of hell, one where he can’t stop the worst days of his life from happening again and again, knowing that he’ll wake up gasping and sick to his stomach, covered in sweat and doomed to more of the same the minute he lets himself fall back asleep. So yeah, maybe he is weird now.

“Steve.”

“What?”
“Wanna grab dinner?”

“Not really.”

“Okay, well, I think I should come over or something,” Sitwell says.

“No.” Steve shakes his head, thinking of what a mess his place is, the Jenga tower of dishes stacked on the drying rack, the clothes all over the floor, his barren refrigerator. “No.”

“Well, then, you should come over to my place.”

“I can’t.”

“Then we’ll just have to stand here until you tell me what’s going on.” Sitwell fixes his posture defiantly, hands on his hips, dark eyes firm behind his glasses.

Steve works his jaw to the side again, anxiously debating with himself about whether he should utter the reckless plans that have been festering in his mind since he left Bucky in the hospital. Plans to get out. Plans to tank his very hard-earned career so he can take care of a man who doesn’t even want him anymore. And as ashamed as he is of his scheming, he’s also dying to tell someone about it. He’s desperate to know if he’s as crazy as he feels, and for some reason, he thinks Sitwell is the man to make that call.

“I have something I need to do,” Steve says, “and I don’t exactly know how to do it. And I want to ask your help, but I have no idea what you’re going to say.”

“Well, you won’t know until you tell me, right?”

Steve nods and works his words out with hesitance. “Sergeant Barnes means a lot to me.”

Sitwell makes a face as he processes the change in topic, but he recovers quickly. “Okay.”

“I’ve known him since I was twelve. We used to be best friends,” he says, lingering a little too long on the “used to be” part.

“Really?”

“And after high school, before I applied to West Point…”

Steve strains for the right way to tell Sitwell what he and Bucky were. He’s beginning to question everything now, whether they were lovers or boyfriends or just friends who kiss and have a lot of sex.

“We were more than friends,” he decides, because that part seems true. He waits as the realization dawns on Sitwell, watches his face shift through the phases of neutrality and confusion and shock.

“Oh, God,” Sitwell murmurs.

Steve continues, words coming in a barely controlled cascade, going much deeper than he intended and much further than what’s appropriate for a standing-outside-your-car conversation.

“And I ended it badly. Very, very badly. Right after my mother died, because I was so fucked up after that… I was just fucked up. There’s no other way to say it. I applied to West Point, because after she died, I didn’t have a reason to stick around New York. I didn’t really have anyone left. And then I got assigned here, and we got involved again. Briefly.”
Sitwell’s shock seems to intensify exponentially. “Downrange?”

Steve continues. “And when he overdosed, I realized that his family doesn’t know how to take care of him. They can’t. They failed completely. And if something doesn’t change, he’s gonna do all of it again. And he could die—”

“Hold on. Just fucking whoa,” Sitwell says, gesturing sharply as he cuts Steve off. “So you’re gay?”

Steve’s eyebrows gather, and for a moment, he wishes that he actually was gay. It’s not like he never considered it before, and it would make his life a lot simpler in some ways. It maybe would have made his actions make sense, to himself and also to Sharon. Maybe that would have eased the blow, if his cheating with Bucky was an inevitable part of his sexuality rather than a terrible choice made in the wake of unspeakable trauma. But he shakes his head, because it’s not simple at all.

“So you’re, like, bisexual or something?”

Steve shrugs. “I don’t know. Something.”

“But Barnes is gay, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I knew it,” Sitwell gloats. “So he wasn’t actually dating Romanoff?”

“I mean, I think he...” Steve recalls the drunk text Daisy showed him at the hospital. ”I don’t know, actually.”

“Wait, are he and Wilson—”

“No. No, they’re friends. That’s all,” Steve insists, even though he’s not sure of that, either. Just like he’s not sure about Bucky and Natasha. He thinks back to the message on Daisy’s phone, about the fucking and the blowjobs, and he doesn’t know anything anymore.

“Jesus, Steve.” Sitwell shakes his head in the urgent way someone refuses something they hate, and Steve prays that he didn’t just make yet another unpredicted, unfixable mistake.

“I have to get out,” Steve tells him. “I have to go be with him. I have to take care of him. I have to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“The OD thing?”

“Yeah. He’s an alcoholic. Apparently for a very long time. You were absolutely right. Nobody else would see it except you. And now I see it. And I have to stop it.”

“You know how long I spent — how much time and energy I spent — trying to get my dad to stop being an alcoholic?” Sitwell asks, the freshness of it still plain on his face. “From the time I was 8 until he died of organ failure when I was 21. I spent 13 years trying to fix him. And guess what?”

“What?”

“I couldn’t. Only an alcoholic can fix himself. You can’t fix Barnes. You just can’t.”

“I have to try, though,” Steve says, voice wavering. “God, you had to try, didn’t you?”

Sitwell looks down and seems to seriously consider this, pursing his lips. He takes a few moments before he states his conclusion. “For myself, yeah. I guess I had to. Even though it didn’t work.”
“And now I have to try. I have to at least try to help him feel stable enough so he can do what he needs to do to get better. I can’t just sit here and wonder when I’m going to get that next goddamn phone call.” Steve’s chest tightens like it did in the cab on the way to the hospital, and he presses his palm against his sternum. “I can’t.”

Sitwell goes quiet again and gazes out over the empty parking lot. He’s suddenly terrifyingly unreadable, and Steve eyes him anxiously.

“You said you wanted me to do something,” Sitwell finally says, still staring at the horizon.

Steve takes a deep breath. “I have to get out, so I was thinking of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. If there was an investigation, if command found out what I am, that I was with a man on active duty, I’d be cut loose. I could go home and do what I need to do.”

“And you need a tattle-tale.” Sitwell looks at him now, face smug. “You need someone to go crying to Barton about what a degenerate you are.”

“Do you really think that?” Steve asks, thinking of the times Sitwell called Bucky a fag, thinking of his ambiguous disgust over men like him. Men like Steve.

“No. But I also don’t think you should get out of the Army. You’re good at this. I know you had a lot of catching up to do after being at the Pentagon, but you could really lead men next time you deploy. Like really lead them, as a company commander. And, hell, even after you get blown up you’re still ten times the officer I could ever be.”

Steve gives a derisive snort. “I haven’t done anything close to extraordinary. I’ve barely done anything at all.”

“Extraordinary isn’t the point. And you do a lot, every day. You take care of your men every single day. You take their stupid phone calls and run with them on their PT tests and train the hell out of them so that they get home alive next deployment. You punish them when they need it and reward them when it’s deserved. Being a great leader isn’t about being a hero. It’s about being present and fair and really knowing your guys. You care, and you let them know that you care.”

Sitwell squares up to him, impressive and fervent in a way Steve’s never seen him before.

“That’s what leadership is about,” Sitwell continues. “The little daily acts. The best leaders don’t get awards for heroism, because they lead from behind and let their men grow and learn and make their mistakes and get the credit for the good things they do. Not a lot of leaders do that.”

It’s too much for Steve to take in all at once. Too much unexpected kindness. Too radical of a reframing to make much sense at all. In the end, he just can’t quite buy it. So he deflects instead.

“You sure learned a lot from all those dumb books.”

“Oh, shut up.” Sitwell smirks. “The point is, I look up to you. I try to be like you. And I just think it’d be wrong for you to get out of the Army for something so stupid.” He corrects himself swiftly. “Not that Barnes is a stupid reason. I get that. Believe me. And if you have… feelings for him, I mean… you know.”

Feelings. If only it was such a tidy construct, or maybe one single feeling multiplied a hundred times rather than the rat’s nest of contradictory extremes.

“Right,” Steve says.
“But it’s stupid to get out for being gay. Or acting gay. Whatever. Doing gay things.”

“It’s stupid, but I have to try. I won’t be able to live with myself if I don’t.”

“I want you to succeed. I do.”

“Then help me. Please.”

Sitwell softens, and for a handful of moments, Steve gets to clearly see the man his daughters might see. The man his wife probably sees. The man nobody in the unit sees because Sitwell won’t let them.

“Fine. I’ll do it,” he says, and then the softness is gone. “But you have to take all my staff duty shifts until you get out. Every single one, especially on weekends and holidays.”

“Done.”

“And you’re gonna watch my girls next Friday so I can take my wife out for her birthday.”

Steve tenses, but utters, “Fine.”

“It’ll be good practice.”

“I said fine. Jesus.”


Steve nods. The weight of his planning begins bearing down on him, giving birth to a vaguely ill feeling that roots itself deep. But even so, he’s grateful.


Sitwell walks to the passenger side of Steve’s car. “I just hope it works. I hope it’s enough.”

Whether it’s enough or not is almost inconsequential. It’s the only option now, an eleventh-hour effort to do the right thing. To be the man Steve should have been this whole time.

“Me, too.”

———

It takes until the second week of June for Barton to finally call Steve into his office to break the news. By that time, Bucky’s been situated at the alcohol treatment program at the Northport VA on Long Island, a residential program that, if Bucky can be believed, isn’t too far off the mark from his prediction. Bucky’s the youngest person there, entrenched with a cohort of old drunks still suffering forty years after the end of their war.

Unlike when Bucky was in jail, he and Bucky can talk for as long as they wish, even though they usually don’t. Too often they sit in silence, grasping for relevant things to say, awkward and self-conscious. Steve doesn’t know what to say anymore. Neither of them seem to know. But still, they try.

It happens on a Tuesday afternoon that falls on the heels of a day spent planning for the weapons range, one which has Steve buried in administrative hell as he tries to turn stacks and stacks of dirt-smudged paper into an orderly spreadsheet of scores. It’s the type of office drudgery he’s good at — or used to be good at. Before his attention span went to hell. Now he fights distraction every couple
of minutes, tracking every soldier who walks by his door, every noise, every errant memory or worry. He can’t count the number of times he’s lost his place, and he’s dangerously close to swiping the entire stack of papers onto the floor when Barton pops his head in.

“Hey, I need to see you,” Barton tells him. He wears a constricted expression, unusual in its lack of flavor. The guy’s always got a mild look of something on his face — amusement or annoyance or boredom. The absence of those things is striking.

“Sure.”

Steve rises, grateful for the reprieve even as anxiety uncoils inside of him. He follows Barton down the hall to his office, shuts the door at Barton’s command, and takes a seat in front of the desk after Barton takes his.

Barton sinks back in his chair, leaning back and rocking at a slow, thoughtful pace. He can’t seem to look at Steve, even though he tries a couple of times. He fusses with the clear wire that now snakes up from the inside of his ear, eye twitching as he fingers it. Steve knew he barely made the cut to deploy but he didn’t know it had gotten this bad.

“I’m having a hard time saying this,” Barton admits, finally making eye contact. “But there was an allegation made about you by someone in this company.”

“What kind of allegation?” Steve clenches his hands tightly on his lap.

Barton exhales forcefully through his nose. “Someone went to the colonel and said that you were engaged in homosexual acts with another soldier.” He says the word *homosexual* with a contemptuous emphasis that Steve can’t quite place. It’s hard to tell whether Barton’s disgusted by the word or by the concept.

“They went to Fury?”

“I’m about sick of his open door policy being used to keep me out of the loop on important shit. But yes. So, when someone makes an allegation like this, we have to initiate an investigation. We have no choice. Especially since it went to Fury first.”

Steve nods as the brilliance of the move dawns on him. Sitwell clean jumped the chain of command, ensuring that it became a battalion issue and not just a company one.

“Okay,” Steve says.

“Is it true?”

“Yes.”

Barton’s eyes sharpen. “Was it Barnes?”

Steve blinks at the blunt force of the question, the sureness of the accusation, and he starts to wonder if it was obvious to everyone in the unit. “Yeah.”

“You two, I swear to God.” Barton pivots his chair forward and leans close to his desk, thrusting his finger at Steve. “I asked you, both of you, if there was gonna be any drama. And both of you assured me that there wouldn’t be. But Jesus H, I thought it was just that you wouldn’t be able to get along. But no, you were fucking instead.” He scoffs. “What the fuck, Steve? And I’m just leveling with you now, man to man. What the fuck were you thinking?”
“I don’t know.” It’s an honest answer; very little thought went into any of it. If they’d had an ounce of sense between them, they’d never have even touched again, let alone had sex.

“Is this why you’re not engaged anymore?”

Steve gives a single nod.

“Jesus,” Barton mutters. “Does anyone else know?”

“Yeah. Did the person say it was with Sergeant Barnes?”


“Who?”

Barton dismisses the question with the wave of his scarred hand and sags back in his chair again. “You think I didn’t know that Barnes is gay? You think First Sergeant didn’t know? We’re not stupid. That and Romanoff and I have been friends since PLDC, so… We knew he was gay, and we didn’t care. And he never left any proof, so nobody who wanted to complain could ever substantiate anything.”

Barton’s voice climbs.

“And this fucking policy — your goddamn head would spin if you knew how many highly qualified soldiers we’ve lost, how many Arabic linguists we’ve lost, because of it. And if that fucker had come to me instead of Fury, you wouldn’t even be hearing about it. I don’t pursue shit like this, and that’s a risk I live with happily. It would have been a fucking travesty to lose Barnes for that, and it would be just as bad to lose you.”

It’s not the response Steve was expecting from him. Steve’s gratitude to Sitwell for his forward thinking becomes immense, even as he starts to feel some kind of ill-defined ache over how upset Barton is.

“There’s gonna be a 15-6 investigation. They’re bringing in an officer from another unit to take lead. So I can’t sweep this under the rug. And I can’t ask you to tell people to lie, if they know, but… fuck.”

Quiet expands in the room, which Steve eventually interrupts with a tactless, “Whatever happens happens, Sir.”

“Bullshit,” Barton spits. “Fucking bullshit. All of it.” He then scowls and jerks his chin toward the door. “Get out.”

Steve rises to his feet and reflexively snaps to attention.

“Yes, Sir.”

If Steve was distracted before his meeting with Barton, he’s practically non-functional afterward. He tries to go back to his spreadsheet and ends up staring listlessly at the screen while he tries to calculate the course of his impending investigation. He can think of several permutations of how everything could play out, so many that he’s quickly overwhelmed by the possibilities. So instead of working, he looks up the homosexual conduct policy in AR 600-20, and he’s floored by the things that could get someone kicked out. Holding hands, slow dancing, kissing, or passively permitting
these things — Christ, even intent to do or permit any of them — is enough to earn a discharge. The language of the policy, clearly written by old straight men, is stilted in a way that would be humorous if it wasn’t so profoundly offensive.

Steve scans until he gets to the part stating that the burden is upon the soldier to prove his or her heterosexuality, whatever that looks like. For Steve, he has a modest track record with women, most notably the woman he was about to marry, and he concludes that Sharon would be a very reasonable initial target for the investigating officer. If he were tasked with proving someone’s gayness, he’d sure start with the ex-fiancée.

With that unsettling thought, he pulls his access card from his computer and makes his way out to the parking lot. He passes Morita in the hallway, who greets him in a way that’s just a little off-center. Of course he knows. Of course this is how things will be now, everything canted to the side, permanently irreparable. He can’t think about that, though. Not with so much adrenaline in his blood, which takes him swiftly to his car. He texts Sharon to see if she’s awake and if she’s free, and when she says yes, he dials.

The facts come out of him with measured detachment. Someone found out about him and Bucky. That someone reported him. He was called into the commander’s office. There’s an investigation underway.

“I won’t say anything,” Sharon assures him. “I know how hard you’ve worked, and it would be ridiculous for you to get kicked out just because you had some fling.”

Her tone is carefully controlled, nonchalant in a way that is clearly effortful. Moreover, her words for what he and Bucky shared strike Steve hard and very wrong, and he rebounds with sharp determination.

“Actually, I’d like you to be truthful.”

“You want me to tell a fellow officer that you cheated on me with your platoon sergeant while you were deployed?”

Steve hesitates. “I mean, if you could not say who it was, then yeah.”

Sharon’s only response is a sound, the type of huff that comes from being vigorously blindsided. Steve can’t say why he doesn’t stop. Maybe it’s because he knows he’s fucked, that his career is already over, that his relationships with Sharon and Bucky are both over. Maybe because he has nothing left except the truth.

“And it wasn’t just some fling,” he states. “It was never that.”

“What do you mean?”

“We were together for two years.”

“Like, together-together?”

“Yeah.”

“Like you and I were.”

Like he and Sharon were? No. Not at all. Being with Sharon was like stepping into a warm home after freezing in the wilderness for the better part of five years. Being with Bucky was like having a gaping hole punched in his chest, one that left his heart exposed to every element, every emotion,
every moment of raw ecstasy and ferocity and the most unbearable love he’s ever felt.

“We were serious. And exclusive.” Steve pauses, then quietly adds, “I think.”

“You think.”

The line goes silent, and Steve’s doubt lingers palpably. He’s never spoken it out loud before, and he doesn’t have any hard evidence to back it. But sometimes after they fought, after they dug deep under each other’s skin in the way that only best friends can, Bucky would disappear. He would usually only be gone for an hour, but sometimes he’d be gone for a whole night. He’d shut off his phone and come back in the very early morning, stumbling and smelling like sweat and belligerently secretive about his whereabouts. Steve would listen to him shower and wonder what he was showering off. Sometimes he wondered who he might be showering off. But he never breathed a single doubt until now, not even when he was at his angriest.

“I just….” Sharon trails off. Steve can imagine her face, slack and disbelieving.

“I didn’t think you cared about that stuff.”

“What stuff? The fact that you’re….” She pushes out quick breath. “I mean, do you even like women?”

It’s one thing to hear shit like this from Bucky — the demand, direct or indirect, for Steve to choose a side. To demarcate a clean line around his sexuality. But he never, ever thought he’d hear it from Sharon.

“Are you serious? I mean, God, what do you think? You think I was faking it with you?”

“I’m sorry, but I just I don’t know. I’d like to think you weren’t. But then, I also thought you were honest with me. So I don’t know. When we were together, you told me you had this friend that you used to sometimes mess around with. And now the story’s completely different. Now you tell me that you had a longer relationship with him than you did with me. Why would you lie about that?”

Sharon’s response is so plaintive, so sincerely confused, that Steve can’t justify the blistering anger coming through in his voice. He tries to remember that she’s not Bucky. She’s not judging him or forcing him to choose anything. She just wants to know why he would lie to her about his first real love, and the answer is clearer to him now than it’s ever been. The least he can do now, after everything, is give her his honesty.

“I still loved him, and I didn’t want to. I wanted to move on. I thought I could do that. Clearly I couldn’t.” Steve’s conviction flags when he remembers the rest of it, and all that uncertainty is here with him once again. “Plus, I didn’t know what you’d think of me. If you’d still want me.”

“Do you honestly think I have a problem with… I mean, I don’t even know what to call it. What should I call it? What should I call you? I just want to know. I’m just trying to understand.”

Steve clenches and unclenches his jaw. “Would it have changed your perception of me? If I told you.”

“You can’t just drop a huge bomb on me and ask me to rationally imagine what I might have done or thought differently.”

“Wow,” Steve replies, frankly surprised at her equivocation. “That’s not what I was expecting to hear.”
“No, I think you wanted to hear ‘Sure, Steve, I would have been totally fine with that.’ And I’d like to think I would have been, because at least it would have been the truth.”

“That’s not—”

“Don’t you get it? I don’t care if you’re attracted to men. I care that you lied about something really important, and I care that you betrayed me. And now you want me to tell some stranger that you cheated on me with a man so that you can get out of the Army, and…. God….?”

She trails off, voice thick, and he realizes that she’s trying not to cry.

“I’m sorry,” Steve murmurs. “I’m so sorry.”

Sharon gives herself a few moments to breathe, to clamp down tight on the pain he’s causing her. “What, exactly, are you sorry for?” she asks.

“I’m sorry for what I did to you. I’m sorry I’m asking you to do this.”

“Would you take it back, if you could?”

Steve would give anything to be able to say “yes” without hesitation. He’d give anything to be able to say it at all. But the truth is that he might not take it back, even after all the damage his unfaithfulness caused. Because he wanted Bucky more than anything that night, just for one night, even though he lost him later to Thor Odinson and then to his injuries and then to his addiction. Even though it’s left Steve with nothing, he might not take it back.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her. “I don’t know.”

Sharon lets out an unsteady sound. “If I get contacted, I’ll tell them what you want. And I’ll protect his identity, even though I have every right not to. Even though I don’t want to. Because this isn’t his fault. It’s yours.”

Steve lifts his hand to his temple, where he feels an ominous tension gathering. “Thank you.”

“If they kick you out, are you at least going to come back to DC?”

The ugly, awful truth is that Steve never once considered moving back to DC. He’s been fixated on New York, has become solely preoccupied by it, already started looking for apartments and jobs even though he has no clear exit and absolutely no guarantee that Bucky will even let him back into his life.

“You’re going to New York, aren’t you?” Sharon supplies in a low voice.

Steve lays his free hand on the steering wheel and wraps his fist tightly around it. He grips it until it hurts, until his veins rise and his knuckles go pale. He tries to force his mouth open to tell her, and in the silence of his cowardice, she comes to the conclusion all on her own.

“Okay. I’m gonna go, because I’m really pissed off right now. Really, really pissed at you. And I’m just gonna need… I just… I’m gonna go.”

When Steve finally does manage to speak, all he can eke out is a “Sharon, please don’t,” which she promptly shuts down.

“No. I get to be angry about this. Because not only have you hurt me, but now you’re hurting your son by choosing to live away from him so that you can be with your alcoholic ex-boyfriend. If he’s
even your ex at all. So save your ‘Sharon, please don’t.’ I get to be pissed about this.”

Steve’s mouth twists into a pained frown. “Okay.”

It’s the first time she’s ever hung up on him, so unexpected that he can’t believe it until quite a few moments after the line goes dead. He lets his hand drop to his lap, and he looks out the window of his Corolla with dead, unseeing eyes while his thoughts collapse, leaving behind a dull silence. Sharon’s words, her anger, her moral correctness, none of it quite penetrates the fog. They skim the edges and fall away.

It’s clear that none of them get it. Bucky’s too deep in it to see clearly. Sharon’s love for the baby has made her myopic. Barton can’t see past his own indignation. Sitwell’s participation in all of this is a mystery, and it’s still too odd to think he might be the only one who understands.

But he might not be the only one. Sam and Natasha need to know, too. Maybe Steve can make them see that this is the right thing. Not only the right thing but the only thing. Maybe they’ll be reasonable. Maybe they’ll even help him.

He blinks and looks down at his watch. Impossibly, the duty day has already ended, and when he thinks about going back inside, about passing the command team in the hallway, about seeing Barton’s disappointment and Morita’s feigned indifference, he starts the car and pulls out of the lot.

“I’m so sorry, Steve.” Natasha gives him a sympathetic frown. “It’s not fair at all.”

On the couch next to her, Sam mirrors her dismay as they process the news about the investigation. Steve wonders in passing whether he should let them linger like this, whether they should all take time to sit with the insanity of a policy like this existing in the first place. He shifts in his seat and crosses his boot over his knee, foot bouncing as soon as his ankle comes to rest. The wrongness thickens, and he pushes the conversation forward to squirm away from it.

“No, it’s fine,” he says. “It’s really fine. It’s good.”

“Good,” Sam repeats.

“I asked for this. I asked Sitwell to initiate it. So I could get out. So I could take care of Bucky.”

Steve lays out his points bluntly, the way he might explain a set of directions. Turn left. Turn right. If this, then that.

Sam’s face contorts as he tries to absorb Steve’s logic. “You arranged this?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, but you gotta walk me through this, because I am seriously confused.”

Steve flattens his hand and edges it stepwise along the length of his calf as he calmly explains each step. “I get discharged, I go home. I get a job. Bucky gets out of rehab. He can live with me, go to therapy, get treatment, whatever he needs. I’ll take him to his appointments. I’ll pay the bills. Whatever he needs. I’ll take care of him.”

“So you think you’re going to be the one to save him?” Natasha asks with the skeptical tilt of her head. “You think you’re gonna be the hero here?”

“Do you care about him?” Steve asks.
“You know we do,” Natasha replies.

“Then you’ll support me with this. Tell the investigator everything.”

Sam balks. “Steve, this is crazy.”

Steve plants both feet on the floor and leans forward in the chair. This shouldn’t be so difficult for them to understand. The reasoning is simple. There’s a problem, and he’s offering a sensible solution.

“Here’s what I know — his sister isn’t about to forgive him anytime soon. He obviously shouldn’t live on his own. He can’t live on his mom’s couch, because she’s an enabler, too. His family’s doing a shitty job of caring for him, so someone else needs to step in. I’m not about to let him die. And this is how I’m gonna prevent that from happening.”

“There has to be another way,” Natasha says.

“This isn’t a debate,” Steve states. “I’m not asking for advice. I’m doing this, one way or the other. You can either help me, or I’m gonna have to get creative.”

The room falls into stark silence. Steve looks between them, trying to make sense of the conflict on both of their faces, because the concept is basic. The stakes are clear. Their hesitation is as bewildering as it is disappointing.

“Don’t you think this is throwing him under the bus?” Sam asks, and Steve recognizes the shift immediately. After a refreshing ceasefire, it’s once again Sam versus Steve, adversaries in the battle to see who cares about Bucky Barnes more. Fat fucking chance Sam is gonna win this time.

“No, I don’t think I’m doing that at all.”

“You’re basically outing him to the whole unit. What about his reputation? His legacy?”

Steve’s voice rises with his frustration. “There is nothing wrong with being gay, God damn it. What the hell is the matter with everyone? Bucky’s the biggest homophobe I’ve ever met, and you two seem to think his whole reputation is going to collapse if people find out. And that’s assuming Barton or you two go blabbing about it to everyone, because Sitwell didn’t disclose his name.”

“It’s your reputation, too,” Natasha reminds him gently.

“Fuck my reputation,” Steve snaps. “I don’t have a reputation.”

“Yes, you do. A good one. Once this gets out—“

“Once this gets out, people will know I’m not straight. They’ll think I’m gay, and I wouldn’t be ashamed of that.”

“What they’ll know is that you were sleeping with your platoon sergeant.”

“We had an exception to policy,” Steve replies weakly.

Natasha’s eyes narrow. “Not so you could fuck.”

“It only happened once while he was my subordinate.”

“It doesn’t matter how many times it was. You should have known better.”
Steve opens his mouth to shoot back a reply, because he certainly has quite a lot to say to both of them about knowing better about very important things, but Sam cuts in.

“Are you sure you’re ready to face the consequences, personally? Because there will be consequences.” Sam’s expression is grave and concerned, like he still doesn’t realize that this isn’t about Steve’s career at all, that Steve’s career is a trivial factor in the equation of Bucky’s life and death.

“He’d do it for me,” Steve insists.

“Do you really believe that?”

Natasha’s words crash against him, igniting a flash of anger that burns so hot and so fast that Steve can’t even stay in his chair. He rises and squares himself in front of the couch where Sam and Nat sit like a pair of idiots.

“I don’t know what choice you think I have here,” Steve says. “Someone has to take care of him. Someone has to help him stay alive, because clearly he can’t do it on his own. And you two, you’ve just let him self-destruct for the entire time you’ve known him. You’ve been colluding with his addiction for God knows how many years, because you refused see past his charm to see how sick he was.”

Steve’s hands tense, and his lip curls into a snarl. He drives his finger into his own chest as he speaks, just like he did with Winnie, just like he has to do with everyone these days. He doesn’t know how else to make them see that this is his responsibility, this is his charge, because there’s simply nobody else who can be trusted.

“I know him. I see him for who he is. I know how to take care of him. I know how to keep him safe. And that’s what I’m going to do. It’s either going to be this discharge or something else. Something worse. But I’ll do it. Don’t think for one second that I won’t do what it takes, because I will.”

Sam stands, mustering his NCO presence, solid and daunting. “You’re so far out of line, I don’t even know where to begin. I’m sorry, but you’re just—”

“I need to fix this!” Steve yells.

In the span of a heartbeat, the tight band of energy in Sam’s body seems to snap. “Fix what?”

“I fucked him up, and I need to fix it.”

Now Natasha’s standing, situating herself next to her boyfriend, forming a wall of confused concern with him. “You didn’t blow him up, Steve. You didn’t make him the way he is.”

“The fuck I didn’t,” Steve says, straining to keep his voice level. “All the shitty things I did led him to that moment.” He shakes his head firmly. “The fuck I didn’t cause this.”

“What shitty things did you do?” Natasha asks.

“The way I broke up with him.”

“What else?”

“Just… all of it.”

Sam hooks onto Natasha’s momentum. “No, seriously, what else did you actually do? You broke up
with him seven years ago, which was dick, but you did it. And then what? What else did you do to fuck him up?"

“I…”

Steve starts the sentence so certain of his ability to complete it. Certain that he has an extensive inventory of terrible things he’s done to make Bucky into the man he is today. But when he tries to name those things, they’re suddenly gone.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought,” Sam says quietly.

Steve flags, digging deep into his fractured memory for anything he might have done wrong. Any explanation for how he caused this. “I fought with him,” he recalls. They fought cataclysmically, passionately, and he could have stopped it. Maybe he could have stopped it. Maybe that’s what he did wrong.

Natasha takes a step toward him. “Friends fight. Lovers fight. It’s normal to fight. And yes, you made a big mistake, but you don’t get to take credit for him being an alcoholic. You don’t get to take credit for him being a mess. He’s made his own choices all along the way.”

Steve looks to the floor. He sees his feet, still in boots, because he couldn’t even be bothered to change before rushing over here after work to set this right. The side of his head throbs, low and deep, and he remembers that he forgot to fill his prescription. He’s forgotten so many things, all except the things he’d most want to forget.

“I have proof.”

Steve raises his head to look at Natasha. “What proof?”

She hesitates momentarily, then grabs her phone from the coffee table and presses some keys. Steve’s phone vibrates in his pocket.

“Check your phone.”

Steve pulls out his cell and checks his message. There he sees a picture of him and Bucky, curled up together, sleeping in Sam’s bed. The bottom drops out of his stomach, taking the air in his lungs with it, kicking his heart into a dizzy rhythm, pumping panic into his blood. It has to be panic. It has to be fear. Or maybe anger. There’s no other way to describe the swell of suffocating agony, the tightness that seizes him, crawls up his neck, curls up over the sharp line of his jaw.

“You didn’t think to send this to me?” Steve grits out, pushing the heel of his palm against his forehead, where pressure is blooming, filling him up. “You didn’t… You didn’t think I’d… Fuck…”

His vision blurs, and he clenches his teeth together, and he sucks in a gasp, and he blinks and blinks, shifting the picture of them in and out of focus. He’s dimly aware of Natasha saying “Sam, let’s…” And then he’s alone in the middle of their living room, clutching his phone, choking and wretched and paralyzed and absolutely fucking terrified of what will happen if he moves the wrong way, thinks the wrong way, lets his tenuous grip slip.

“Fuck… fuck.”

He stands there, trembling and vainly trying to pull in air, and he squeezes his eyes shut to get rid of the image of them, which lingers even behind his eyelids. His head on Bucky’s shoulder, Bucky’s face in a rare relaxed state, achingly handsome, nuzzled against the top of Steve’s head, the two of
them twined together so organically, and now Bucky’s gone, living in some hospital, sleeping alone, vulnerable and exposed while Steve’s here begging for someone to just fucking help him so that he can be there, keep him safe and alive, and why the fuck is it so unbearably difficult—

Steve hears footsteps, too light to be Sam’s, and he stifles a shudder when Natasha lays her hand lightly on his shoulder. He musters enough courage to open his eyes and slides his phone back into his pocket. He sniffs harshly to halt the running of his nose and looks down at her.

“Did you send it to him?” he asks.

Her hand travels down his back and then across his shoulder blades, slowly, like a mother might do. Like he might do for his mother. “Yeah. When he left.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“We talked. We’ll do it,” she tells him.

Sam rights himself from where he was leaning in the doorway and approaches Steve carefully. “But seriously, you think he needs help? You need help. You know that, right?”

Steve shakes his head and scrapes his knuckle over his left eye to dash away the sheen of moisture clinging there “I’m fine. I just… I just need to get out. I just need to fix this. I just need to make it right. Then I’ll be fine.”

Sam and Natasha don’t try to hide the look that passes between them.

———

“Lieutenant Rogers, pursuant to the results of investigation under AR 15-6, you are being recommended for discharge under chapter 15-2, AR 635-200. This recommendation has been made by me — under duress — for homosexual acts. This action is in the best interest of you and the U.S. Army. This condition meets the criteria for administrative separation under the provisions of AR 635-200, chapter 5-2. You are being flagged for initiation of separation. Blah, blah, blah.”

Barton stops reading and throws a thick packet of paperwork in the middle of his desk. It slides a few inches, and its pages fan enough for Steve to see some hint of what lies below the counseling statement he’s about to sign. The officer conducting the investigation on him was extremely thorough. Steve got confirmation from Sitwell, Sam, and Natasha that the woman was diligent and incisive to a fault, to the extent that even Nat struggled to dance effectively around her questioning. The only confirmation he got from Sharon was a text that read Talked to MAJ Vicente, told her everything, and they haven’t spoken of it since.

“I’m recommending an honorable discharge, and there’s no reason that shouldn’t go through.” Barton reaches to the packet and turns it in Steve’s direction. “Sign and date.”

Steve pulls his pen from his sleeve and briefly debates whether to bother looking through the report. He feels pulled to read it, if only to see what a comprehensive investigation into a man’s sexual activities looks like. It’s very darkly humorous to think of how many man hours were wasted building a case to fire him from his job because he touched his mouth and hands to another man’s body. Because he let that man touch him back. But today Steve embraces the cruel absurdity of institutionalized discrimination, because it means that he can be where he needs to be. He signs his name to acknowledge the separation action and slides the packet back over to Barton, who flips the thing face-down on the desk.

“There’s more.” Barton’s jaw ticks, and he gives two long shakes of his head. “You’ve been
reassigned to the S-3.”

The sentence penetrates slowly, perhaps because it brings with it a realization that’s almost impossible to believe.

“You’re taking my platoon,” Steve clarifies softly.

“The colonel is taking your platoon,” Barton says, shoving his finger into the packet. “Not me.”

“Why? Is he afraid I’m gonna try to fuck the whole unit?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think he just knows that this is gonna create drama, and I think he wants to minimize that.”

“Drama.”

It’s a punch upside the head that Steve hadn’t prepared for. And so he reels from it, hurtled into the kind of furious disbelief that he didn’t even think he could feel anymore.

“This was not a UCMJ violation,” Steve states. “I didn’t break the law.”

“Well, sodomy is against the UCMJ.”

Steve sputters. “Jesus, there wasn’t even—”

Barton holds up his hand to stop him from going any further, because for all the fucking meddling that’s been done by people who have no business in Steve’s private affairs with Bucky, Barton can’t be bothered to hear about what actually happened between them.

“And even if you didn’t do that particular…thing, it’s still considered conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman and an act of indecency, which is covered by at least two UCMJ articles that I know of. So although you’re not being charged, you still technically broke the law.”

“Bullshit,” Steve spits. “That’s bullshit. Taking my platoon for this is absolute bullshit.”

“I agree that it’s bullshit, and I’m sorry. But some of these guys, though, when they find out — because they eventually will, one way or the other — they’re gonna have a big problem with it. Not all of them. Not even most. But some. Definitely.” Barton softens. “And maybe this is better.”

“I’ve lead this platoon for over a year, after they already lost their platoon sergeant in one of the worst ways imaginable. And now you’re telling me that this is better. That this is good for the unit. Taking my men away is the best choice here. Is that what you’re saying?”

“This is not personal, Steve. I promise. This is not me.”

Steve’s teeth grind audibly. It’s a sound he’s never made before, the type of sound that a cornered animal would make, if it could. A sound of complete, helpless outrage that has no other outlet except violence.

“When?” Steve finally asks.

“You’ve already been re-assigned. Dan will take your platoon. He’s due for one anyway. He’ll be good to them.” He adds the last part as if that was ever the point, as if Dan Sousa’s readiness to be a platoon leader has any bearing on the absolute unfairness of the acquisition.

In the cold of utter defeat, Steve’s rage dissipates into a boneless simmer, and he sinks into his chair.
“What are you gonna tell them?”

Barton shrugs, even as he supplies his answer. “That you’re getting an admin sep and that I can’t say anything more.”

Steve is left with the striking, reluctant acknowledgment that he’s getting what he wants, and that this is what the cost is. This is what Sam warned him about. Getting back to Bucky is worth it; he’d endure a thousand investigations, a thousand violations and intrusions, just to have the chance to set things right.

But even still, some things cannot go unsaid. And so Steve says them.

“There’s nothing wrong with being gay. There’s just nothing wrong with it. Sergeant Barnes may have been good at hiding, but he paid the price. A real price. There’s no way he couldn’t have.”

“God damn you two,” Barton says under his breath. He frowns and looks away. “You were gonna make the O-3 list, you know. You would have had your own company by winter. I wanted to pin that rank on you. I wanted to be the first to call you Captain Rogers. I really did.”

“I wanted that, too, Sir.”

He really did.

Barton returns eye contact. “Clint.”

“Clint.”

Barton slouches and swivels minutely in his chair. “What are you gonna do when you get out?”

“Go back home.”

“Gonna live happily ever after with Barnes?”

Steve shakes his head without a thought. “I just want to help him. I’ll get an apartment. Find some work. I can help him.”

“Good. I’m glad. I always liked him. I didn’t know he was struggling.” He purses his lips. “I should have known.”

The last thing Steve can endure now is another conversation about that particular subject, how everyone in Bucky’s life should have known he was an alcoholic. How they should have done something about it. How Steve himself should have known, somehow. Back at that party, when he found Bucky passed out in the hallway, he should have known. And maybe that February back in ’95. Maybe he should have trusted his instincts. Seen drunk for drunk. But he couldn’t see it, maybe didn’t want to see it, and so he didn’t. They all didn’t.

“So, last chance as a platoon leader in this company — is there anything else I can do for you?” Barton asks.

Even though Steve only considers it halfheartedly, he does think of one thing. “Do you have Trip’s contact info? For his family. His parents.”

“Probably. Why?”

“I should…”
Steve trails off, because he now doesn’t know what he should do. He’s thought about Trip’s mother relentlessly, imagined her receiving the news. Imagined her learning what happened. Imagined her getting a hold of their reports. Imagined her imagining what his death must have been like. Imagined her receiving his body. Imagined her crying over it. Imagined her burying her child in the dirt.

“I already contacted them. Twice. You don’t need to do that, Steve.”

“Yes, I do. I need to… apologize,” he supposes. At the absolute minimum.

Barton’s words are startlingly confident. “No, you don’t. You made the right choice. Barnes backed you, though I guess that’s not a surprise now. But Dugan and Rhodes did, too. I read all the reports, and I would have made the exact same call.”

“Still.” Steve shakes his head. “Still.”

“I’ll get it for you. Just don’t apologize for something that’s not your fault. You don’t need to have that on your conscience. You start getting too fast and loose with the guilt, you’ll never stop.”

It’s pointless to argue. Steve is too goddamn tired.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t let Major Stone boss you around,” Barton warns with up-quirked lips. “He used to be a Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Is S-3 just a repository for shit bags and troublemakers?”

“More or less. It won’t be all that bad, though.”

Steve stands without being dismissed. “I doubt that.”

“Don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

“Sure thing,” Steve says mechanically, then turns and walks out.

———

In the weeks during which his discharge is processed, Steve slogs his way through his exile to the battalion S-3. He’s acutely aware of the fact that this is the last thing he’ll ever do as a soldier, and even though he should take the work seriously and savor the moments and all that other clichéd crap, Steve uses his time to update his resume and look for a place to live and apply for jobs and try not to vocalize his many disdainful thoughts about his new boss. He tries not to think about how angry Bucky was when Steve told him he was getting out under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. He tries instead to think about how sober Bucky sounded. How safe he is. How he’s worth all of this, even if he doesn’t think so.

Steve’s transfer from the company was quick and poorly executed, and he wasn’t even given the formal opportunity to meet with his leaders to ensure continuity in the platoon. Of course, he met off the books with Sousa, Bucky’s replacement, and his squad leaders at Dugan’s place to tie up loose ends and bitch about Fury and Barton and drink beer. None of them mentioned Bucky’s involvement, and Steve was quietly relieved. They said they’d tell the men the truth about why he was transferred, given the rash of wild rumors flourishing in the wake of his departure, all of them much worse than the reality.

None of his other men have tried to contact him since, and he crushes down his disappointment. This
is what he gets. This is the cost. He resigns himself to his persona non grata status until the day it’s disconfirmed, when his apartment hunting is interrupted by the voice of Peter Parker talking to the clerk in the front office. Asking for him. He rises and leans out the doorway to his office, catching the attention of both Parker and PFC Wilson, who’s with him for some reason. Steve calls both of them back and sits on the corner of his desk while they greet him and try to determine if they should stand at the position of attention.

“At ease,” Steve says, waving away the formality. “How are you?”

“Good,” Parker says. “I’m out-processing.”

“Congrats. Where you off to now?”

“Back to Queens.”

Steve gives a pleased nod to his fellow New Yorker. “Gonna go back to school?”

“Yeah, for sure. Maybe nursing school or PA school.”

“That’s great. Let me know if you ever need a letter of rec or something.”

“Sure. Yeah. For sure.”

“Sir, we also wanted to say that we don’t care,” Wilson tells him. “I don’t think anyone really does.”

Parker folds his arms over his chest and angles himself toward Wilson. “I mean, maybe Rumlow does.”

Wilson rolls his eyes. “Oh, fuck Rumlow.”

“Don’t care in general, or…?” Steve raises an eyebrow.

“About why you’re here,” Parker clarifies.

“What’s the word?”

“That you’re…” Parker pauses, then finishes with a casual “gay.”

“Anything else? Any other rumors about that?”

“No, that’s it, really.”

“Huh. All right.”

Steve scans both of their faces for signs of insincerity. Signs that would point to their knowing about Bucky. But all he sees is a pair of kids who should never have had to do the things they’ve already done, kids who quietly and gracefully carry the burden of knowing what war really looks like.

“It was great serving with you, Sir,” Parker says. “We miss you. The rest of the guys miss you, too.”

“It’s been a pleasure serving with both of you.” Steve turns his attention to Wilson. “How’s the Q Course prep going?”

“Added five push-ups and cut another ten seconds off my run.”

“Very nice. Now just keep yourself out of trouble, and maybe they’ll even select you.”
Wilson smirks. “Why do you think I’m hanging out with Parker?”

They chuckle, and the sound of his own voice joining them is peculiar. It sounds like a laugh, but it doesn’t feel joyful.

Parker gestures with the packet of out-processing paperwork in his hands. “Well, I should get going. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

“Okay. You have my number, right? Both of you? If you ever need anything, just let me know. Even though things happened the way they did, even when I get out, I’m still here for you. Recommendations, advice, support, having a shitty night and you don’t know who to call, you can call me. Let the others know, too. Okay?”

“Yes, Sir,” they say.

“I mean it.”

“Hooah, Sir.”

Steve sits on his desk until long after they’re gone, arms crossed, gaze unfocused. He’s not sure where he goes, but when he checks the clock again, over an hour has passed. Losing time like this used to scare him, because it was more proof of how broken his brain is. Now it’s just more of the same. It’s just the way he is now. A lonely, threadbare ghost on yet another island he’s created for himself, building a citadel for a man who doesn’t even want it. And yet he cannot stop, because if he does, he might just disappear completely. So he’ll keep building, even while the sand erodes around him and the water licks at his ankles.

Steve settles back in his chair and scours neighborhood after neighborhood for a place with two rooms that he could conceivably afford for several months with his savings. He’s not sure where he goes, but when he checks the clock again, over an hour has passed. Losing time like this used to scare him, because it was more proof of how broken his brain is. Now it’s just more of the same. It’s just the way he is now. A lonely, threadbare ghost on yet another island he’s created for himself, building a citadel for a man who doesn’t even want it. And yet he cannot stop, because if he does, he might just disappear completely. So he’ll keep building, even while the sand erodes around him and the water licks at his ankles.

He then remembers that his DD214 will have a JRA code on it, which would tell any person with internet access that he was kicked out for engaging in “homosexual acts.” And so he’ll probably have to say what really happened, and that, he supposes, will have to be okay. It’ll all have to be okay, because he can’t afford for it not to be. He can’t stop. He can’t despair. He can’t and he won’t, because he’s nothing if not the most stubborn Irish motherfucker to be born on the Fourth of July.

His phone vibrates, and it’s a text from Bucky. It says How are you? And Steve says Fine. How are you? And Bucky says Can’t wait to get the fuck out of here. Actually looking forward to PTSD treatment just to get away from these people.

Steve’s stomach lurches at the mere thought of PTSD treatment, whatever that looks like. He imagines something horrible. He imagines being in Bucky’s place. He imagines everything coming unraveled, like his guts falling out onto the floor and on top of his feet, leaving him standing there, flushed white with panic, covered in his own blood, trying to shove everything back into his body even though there’s no way to get it all in.

I’m very happy for you, he writes. You’ve been working so hard. He wants to say that he’s proud,
but he has no claim to any of Bucky’s successes.

_Do you know when you’re getting out?_ Bucky replies.

_My orders should be cut by the end of the week_

_And then you’re coming here?_

_Yes_. Steve pauses and bites at his lip before typing _Maybe I can visit you_

Bucky takes a while to reply, and when he does, Steve can see why.

_They’re sending me back to fucking NC for PTSD if you can believe it. Some special program for guys who are extra fucked up or something. All combat vets I guess_

Steve’s face warms with the uptick in his heart rate. They weren’t supposed to send him away. They were supposed to keep him in the city. Steve was supposed to know exactly where he was. He was supposed to visit, even. They talked about it, albeit briefly and always in hypotheticals. This is _not_ how things were supposed to go.

_For two months?_

_Yes. I asked, and they have a family and friends day right before graduation, so maybe you can come for that. If you want_

_Of course_

_Can you believe they have a graduation? Stupid. Congrats for being crazy. Here’s a certificate_

_Making it through a program like that is a big deal_

_We’ll see. I gotta go to group now. Listen to a bunch of bullshit_

_Ok_

_Miss you_

Steve isn’t sure why it’s so hard for him to reply, but he eventually writes, _Same_. Maybe even after Bucky’s already gone. He doesn’t understand it, how it used to come so naturally. How he used to be able to reach in and touch the things that lie in his heart. He’s not even sure what’s there anymore, because it’s veiled behind a wall of thick emptiness. He just has to guess at it now like he guesses at so many other things.

But he can’t stop to worry about it, because that road leads to a place he’s definitely not ready to visit. And so he furrows his brow and keeps on building, one click at a time.

———

_August 24, 2009_

When Steve began imagining his last day at Fort Bragg, he tried not to picture anything special. He maintained a modest image of an empty house, the house he picked out for Bucky. He imagined how he would wander through each room and dimly reflect on everything that had taken place here. He imagined that he would remember Bucky’s limping footsteps in the hall. The two of them in bed together. Bucky kissing him and touching him. And he would distinctly try not to remember lingering in Bucky’s room. Jerking off in his bed. Breaking his dresser. Sharon sitting on the couch.
telling him that she’s pregnant. Perhaps most prominently, Steve always imagined that he would spend his last day at Fort Bragg alone.

But he’s not alone. Natasha and Sitwell are here, making awkward conversation in the front yard while Steve does one final sweep through the house. Sam’s been at Fort Carson for three weeks now, and in his absence, Natasha has insisted herself into Steve’s life on a daily basis. Phone calls. Texts. Visits. If Steve thought of himself as even remotely appealing these days, he might think she was trying to move in on him. But what she’s offering is decidedly sororal, and he wouldn’t be surprised if Bucky or possibly even Sam put her up to it. Sitwell has also remained stubbornly attached to him during these last few months, not only because Steve has been beholden to him but also because Sitwell genuinely seems to give a shit about him. It’s beyond what he ever expected from either of them, and even in the din of his restless mind and obsessive planning and recurrent lapses in time, Steve finds sincere gratitude for both of them.

He stops at the front door and turns to take one final look at the first house he ever lived in, the house he shared with Bucky, if only for a month or so. The home that gave him a fleeting glimpse into the silly domestic life he once craved for them, when he was nineteen and deliriously in love and so ingenuously hopeful that Bucky would one day come to want the same thing he did. Back when he was so certain that if he only loved Bucky enough, maybe Bucky could find a way to love himself. He thought, at one point, that maybe it was working, because Bucky stopped living so hard and fast and started talking seriously about his future, about graduate school, about how he could help other people, how maybe he could be a doctor, commission in as a medical officer in the Guard or Reserve, maybe get a job at the VA or at Langone, maybe own his own little place, somewhere he could paint the walls—

But then those planes crashed into their city, and Steve asked Bucky one simple question, one that scared Bucky so badly that he requested a transfer to active duty three days later so that he could leave New York and Steve and his family and live faster and harder than ever before, so that he could become a killer and an alcoholic and a tragic story for other men to tell.

To hell with all of it, Steve thinks. To hell with the past and his half-baked, stupid fantasies. To hell with the Army and everyone in it. To hell with this house and this goddamn installation.

“What a waste,” Barton murmured when Steve signed out of the company earlier that day.

What a fucking waste, indeed.

He closes the door behind him, hard, and steps into the muggy North Carolina heat.

“How long to get to DC?” Sitwell asks, squinting in the late morning sun.

“About five hours,” Steve replies.

Five hours, that is, if he takes I-95 straight up. He’s given fleeting thought to cutting west toward Salisbury, where Bucky is. He’s thought about going there just to park outside the building, just to know where he is, even if he can’t visit. But even he can recognize how patently creepy that would be, and the last thing he needs is to tell Sharon that he’ll be late to dinner because he took a two hour detour to stalk Bucky at his PTSD program.

“You excited to see Ethan?” Natasha asks.

He’s four months old today. Steve remembered on his own. He’s reportedly close to rolling over. He sleeps most of the way through the night. He smiles and goes wild when he sees Sharon. Kicks and squawks and flails his arms. Steve has seen a video of it. He reviews these facts and gives Natasha
an absent nod.

“When do you receive your household goods at your new place?” she continues.

“Thursday.”

“Where’d you say you’re moving again?” Sitwell asks.

“Windsor Terrace.” When Sitwell gives him a blank stare, he clarifies, “In Brooklyn,” though that doesn’t seem to help much.


“Well, I don’t hate it, and I expect to have a couch to crash on when I come visit,” Natasha says, siding up to Steve as he walks toward the car.

Steve gives her a small smile. “Sure. Might be a little cramped, but…”

She shoots him a look that reminds him that they’ve all piled up in same bed. It’s a fact that would probably make Sitwell’s head explode, and he’s immensely relieved when she keeps that particular memory to herself.

They walk him to the driver’s side door and all stand with fidgeting hands as they say their goodbyes. Steve pulls each of them into an embrace, feeling a weak pang of sadness when he acknowledges that this is probably the last time he’ll ever see Sitwell. He doesn’t doubt that Nat will follow through on her promise to crash at their place — if it even is their place by the time she gets there. For all Steve knows, Bucky might just leave again. In fact, he’s expecting it, if history is any predictor. But Steve will be damned if he won’t try to make a home for him in the meantime, even if he rejects it like he has so many other times. He has to try.

When it’s all over, after they smile and wave more than necessary, after Natasha kisses her finger and presses it against his window, Steve pulls out of the driveway and makes his way toward the main gate one last time. He doesn’t look back, because if he does, he’s not sure what’ll happen, what might come out of him.

And so he drives on, back to the real world. Back to the place he was born. Back to the man he has loved and hurt. Back to make things right — or completely fall apart trying.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Ableist language, jail, legal problems, dissociation, institutional homophobia, homophobic language, attachment issues, parental attachment problems, body shaming

Military Stuff:

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue: a.k.a. DADT. The official Department of Defense policy allowing for closeted service of gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members. Basically, Bill Clinton ran on the platform of opening military service for LGB individuals in 1992. Members of Congress flipped out and thought that would end the world, so they tried to solidify a universal ban on LGB people in the military and did some pretty dick political things to keep Clinton's vision from becoming reality. In the
end, Clinton compromised and endorsed DADT, which would allow LGB people to serve as long as they didn't say they were LGB or do anything gay. Also, nobody could ask them if they were LGB unless there was substantive evidence pointing toward that as part of the investigative process. This was done to end "witch hunts" for LGB people. The policy was repealed by Obama in 2011.

MOUT: Military Operation in Urban Terrain. Basically, training in a simulated urban environment, which may resemble a city in the Middle East.

DD214: The document summarizing one's military service, including time served, discharge disposition, medals, rank/pay grade, etc.

Downrange: A term for deployment, usually to a theater of war. I think the term comes from the weapons practice range, where the bullet would strike the target downrange.

ACU: Army Combat Uniform

718: The area code for much of New York City

MP: Military Police

PLDC: Primary Leadership Development Course. This is where junior enlisted people would get their training when they become non-commissioned officers. It's now called the Basic Leader Course.

15-6 investigation: A fact-finding investigation into some violation of policy. It's usually conducted by an officer appointed by a commander, someone who shouldn't have a stake in the matter at hand. Named after Army Regulation 15-6 - Procedures for Investigating Officers and Boards of Officers

AR: Army Regulation

UCMJ: Uniform Code of Military Justice - The laws of the military, which are often different from civil laws

S-3: The office in charge of training and operations for an Army battalion.

Q Course: Army Special Forces qualifying course, which lasts anywhere from 1-2 years.

Admin sep: Administrative separation - a separation from the military for a non-legal reason (overweight, PT failure, pregnancy, personality disorder, etc.). Meaning that the person didn't necessarily break the law, but they're unfit for military service for some reason. The commander recommends the discharge disposition, which is usually honorable or general under honorable conditions. The majority of people discharged under DADT received honorable or general under honorable conditions discharges.

Silver Star: The third-highest award a service member can receive for valor in combat, after Medal of Honor (#1) and Distinguished Service Cross (#2)
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky reunite

Chapter Notes

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with my plot, characters, and style. She’s also available for beta work and is amazing at it. Go visit her on Tumblr

Warnings at the end

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October 22, 2009

“I wouldn’t normally consider someone for this position without a masters or a J.D. At the bare minimum.”

Steve’s shoulders tighten, and he takes a deep breath through his nose. He’s been cycling in and out of these moments for the past twenty minutes, seizing up with every unreadable look from the very stern woman scrawling notes over his painfully brief resume. Her physical presence alone is an assault on his composure, beautiful and sharp and impeccably dressed in a grey twill sheath dress. His own suit feels tight and loose in the wrong places, his own fault for wearing it straight off the rack. After sending nearly forty applications into the black hole of the New York City job market and hearing little more than silence in return, Steve had resigned himself to the impossibility of his receiving even a courtesy phone call notifying him of his rejection. So getting a last minute interview was a shock he was ill-prepared for, and he scrambled to Men’s Wearhouse and into an un-tailored Paisley & Gray suit just two hours ago.

Hill glances up from the his resume and regards him coolly.

“That said, General Phillips gave you a very strong recommendation, and I take his recommendations seriously. Your work on Joint Task Force Polaris seems broadly applicable to what we do here, in terms of analysis and policy. But what do you think makes you the best fit for this job compared to someone with the education you don’t have and the same kind of policy experience? Because we have quite a few of those. Lots of lawyers floating around looking for meaning.”

Steve trips momentarily over his curiosity about how Maria Hill would know — and even respect — Chester Phillips. Phillips never struck him as particularly compassionate, beyond the occasional gruff acknowledgment of human vulnerability when anyone would timidly broach the subject of the collateral implications of their efforts. Even then it was a throwaway gesture, maybe a truism about the tragedy of sacrifice but how sacrifice in service of the greater mission is a necessity, even if the mission itself was often too ephemeral to be easily grasped.
But Steve doesn’t question it too much, because Phillips apparently landed him here, and this is the best job prospect he has right now. The only prospect, unfortunately, one so ill-fitting that he’ll have to dig deep into the scrap pile of his intellect to piece together a rationale for her.

“I suppose I’d ask how many of those lawyers have experience in-country,” he says.

There’s a painfully long stretch of dead air, which stagnates to the point where Hill cocks her head to the side.

“Sorry — are you waiting for an answer?” she asks. “Because I don’t have one for you.”

Steve shakes off the hiccup. “Sure, well, I’m guessing it’s not a lot of them. And I have that experience.”

“How does your work as an infantry officer apply here?” She says the words “infantry officer” like she would pronounce a foreign item on a menu, intrigued but wary.

Steve’s lips thin as he works through the perverse stream of logic required to link the two offensively disparate occupations of infantry work and human rights advocacy.

“It’s important to recognize that the decisions made at the policy level, like recommendations this organization might make, translate in asymmetrical ways on the ground. There are regional and local and individual factors that will impact trajectories in ways that those who haven’t been there might not anticipate.”

“Like what?”

The pathway through this conversation drops out suddenly from under Steve, leaving him standing in a void of nothingness. It’s the latest in a disheartening sequence of lapses that Steve can’t even count anymore, there’ve been so many of them. The vacuum stretches for what seems like minutes, during which Hill’s lips gather in a sour twist. Steve’s heart dashes into the rhythm of a man on the run, or maybe a man who’s had his brain smashed violently against the inside of his skull, like jello thrown against a wall. He grasps at the frayed edges of his knowledge, harried and afraid, until he finally catches a thread and yanks it like a rip cord in a free fall.

“Most policy calculates for Sunni-Shia dynamics. But there are also complex networks of families and Ba’athist artifacts from the old regime that often get overlooked. Or they’re merely nodded to without a sophisticated understanding of their role. And then there’s the rebranding of the AQI into the ISI. Maybe it seems arbitrary, but I would argue that it signals a larger regional trend toward mass radicalization that’s especially relevant to the human rights monitoring apparatus.” He swallows, a little stunned by his coherence, then adds, “And, like I said, I’ve seen it from the ground floor.”

Hill nods and leans in. She’s hooked but still tugs on the line like it might snap at any moment.

“But how might that apply practically here?” she asks. “How do we account for individual differences and tribalism and these other factors if we don’t always have reliable information from the ‘ground floor’?”

“Even if you don’t know the exact dynamics, accounting for that variability in planning and analysis can help shape policy that’s more robust and has greater applicability across communities. I’ve seen those factors play out locally, so I can try to anticipate them in ways that others might not.” Steve shifts in his seat and stifles a grimace at the dampness that’s collected between his shoulder blades.

Hill taps her pen metronomically against the edge of her portfolio while her serious blue eyes scan over the text of his resume for what has to be the dozenth time.
“We’re an international advocacy organization,” she finally says. “That is our fundamental mission. Do you think that, given your background, you’ll be able to do this kind of work?”

“Why wouldn’t I be able to?”

“Well, some of the current human rights crises are connected to coalition military intervention in the region. Sometimes people who were part of making the mess have a hard time looking at it and trying to clean it up.”

“That won’t be an issue,” he states.

Hill’s eyebrows arch and then drop back down just as quickly. “And you understand that this is a temporary appointment, not to exceed one year, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And we need someone to pinch hit and cover a few different countries in the Middle East. What other countries aside from Iraq do you have a solid working knowledge of?”

“Syria and Lebanon. Jordan and Saudi Arabia, to a slightly lesser extent.”

“And what’s your Arabic proficiency?” Hill asks, jotting furiously.

“My last DLPT was a 3+ 3+.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s solid,” Steve tells her. It’s the strictest truth, because that is a solid score. Whether or not it reflects his current proficiency is another matter entirely. “That’s my score for Modern Standard Arabic. My Iraqi and Levantine dialect proficiency is a bit lower.”

Hill’s tapping again, staring at his resume with narrowed eyes. Steve’s fingers twitch against the armrest of the stiff leather executive chair she seated him in.

“I notice you were only on active duty for three years after you graduated the Academy. What was your discharge?”

“Honorable.”

“No, I mean for what? If I might ask.”

Steve pauses, but not because he’s considering a lie or another deflection. He pauses because he’s scared, which is enough to tell him that he might actually really want this job. Moreover, it tells him that he’s been so brainwashed by the Army that he’s forgotten that this is not only New York City but also the Human Rights Watch conference room.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” he says.

“Ah.” Hill’s mouth begins to resemble a smile, and her body palpably relaxes. “Well, that’s good. I mean, not good, but not problematic, as far as we’re concerned here.” Her smile becomes apologetic. “I didn’t mean that it was good. I’m very sorry about that. I’m sorry policies like that exist.”

Steve nods slowly, and maybe there’s a little bit of mourning in it. Maybe some regret. Some very quiet regret.

“I have a question about that, actually. My partner is a disabled veteran, and he’s going to require
some assistance throughout the week getting to VA appointments. How flexible are you in terms of flex time, alternate work schedules, leave, things like that?”

He shouldn’t call Bucky his partner. It’s a lie, and a painful one at that. He’s not sure if he even wishes for it to be true anymore. Not after knowing how Bucky feels. Not when he lines up every subtle and deliberate act of rejection from him over the years. But Steve will weave any tale he needs to ensure that Bucky is cared for, even if it costs him some part of himself.

“Well, we want you to be in the office most of the time, but if you need to come in early or stay late or telecommute a few hours a week, that’s something we could probably negotiate,” Hill says.

“Good. What about medical benefits?”

“For permanent employees, we offer medical, dental, and vision. As a temp, you wouldn’t have access to these benefits unless we hired you on permanently, which is a possibility but by no means guaranteed.”

He wonders if the policy covers kids, because Steve has one of those. He’ll be six months old on Saturday. Steve has seen him seven times since he’s been back in New York. The baby rolls across the floor and his favorite food is sweet potato and he squeals when he sees the Pomeranian that lives in the apartment next door. He smiles at Steve and says “ba-ba” when he walks in the room, and Steve makes himself smile back while he silently hates himself for having to force it. He shouldn’t have to force it. He does it because it’s the right thing to do, because it’s what a father is supposed to do.

“Do you… does the insurance cover children?”

“Until age 21, I think. But I’d have to check with HR for sure.” Hill slides his marked-up resume into her portfolio. “But let’s not put the cart in front of the horse, shall we? Any other questions?”

“No. Thank you.”

She stands first, smoothing down her dress, then extends her hand to him. “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Rogers. We’ll be in touch soon.”

Her hand is cold but firm in his grip. Steve can’t interpret anything from her expression. He can’t tell if he impressed her or bored her or if he’ll be the punchline in a joke she shares with her colleagues about ironic and inappropriate applicants. In a last-ditch effort to endear himself to her, he smiles as he buttons the top button of his suit jacket, banking on archived knowledge that he might look halfway decent doing it. He hopes he’s not wrong. He hopes it doesn’t look like a sneer. He hopes he doesn’t look like an exhausted, spent, brain-damaged veteran who’s not sure if he’s going to be able to pay the rent through the end of the year.

Hill smiles back. Maybe because she now thinks he’s gay and safe and non-threatening. And he’ll take it. He’ll take all of it.

As he embarks the elevator that will take him from the 34th floor of the Empire State Building down to the lobby, Steve wedges himself close to the door and keeps his breath shallow as they descend. He tries not to think of how many people surround him. How thick the air feels. How wet his armpits are. How few hours of sleep he got last night. How he dreamed about Bucky when he never dreams about Bucky; torn open and bleeding and writhing in the dirt and moaning in agony and then screaming, that unparalleled sound that Steve will never, ever forget, a sound that ripped him from sleep and left him gagging over the edge of the bed above a garbage can he keeps there just in case.
Instead, he tries to pretend that he’s just a regular guy, maybe a few years out of grad school, maybe some associate something somewhere respectable. He fakes it while he sweats and starts wondering how he’s going to survive nine hours in a car with Winnie tomorrow. He supposes it doesn’t matter, because at the end of those nine hours is Bucky. They’re bringing him home. On Saturday night, Bucky will be just down the hall in his own bed, safe and sober, and the relief the reminder brings is immediate. It’s enough to get him through eight more elevator stops, six more people crowding him, and the dense throng of New Yorkers awaiting him on the sidewalk.

On the way to the parking garage, he calls Sharon to tell her about the interview and to remind her that he plans to pay child support as soon as he starts working. She balks at the money and says she’s happy for him, even though her voice sounds as sad as it did a few days ago. The Army is making her go back to work full time next week, even though she’s still breastfeeding. Even though she has enough money to stay home for the rest of her life. She says she’s not sure if her heart is in her work anymore. She tells him that things don’t make sense like they used to. The job doesn’t feel good like it used to. She’s scared of what’s going to happen when America pulls out of Iraq, which Obama has pledged to do. She’s scared for the people they helped. It’s kind and compassionate and hits closer to home than Steve would care to admit. There’s some of that resting on his own conscience, and it’s sore and red and burns to the touch.

“Are you going to pick him up?” Sharon asks. ‘Him’ is Bucky. She still won’t say his name unless she absolutely has to. It seems to be the compromise she’s made with herself for even considering him in the first place.

“Yeah. We’ll be down there for two days for his graduation.”

“How’s he doing?”

“I think okay. We’ll see. It’s hard to tell over the phone.”

Steve shoves his way through a crowd of tourists clustered outside the CUNY Graduate Center and murmurs at them to get the fuck off the sidewalk.

“How are you doing?” Sharon asks.

“Fine.”

“It’s okay to say that you’re happy,” she tells him. “You don’t have to censor yourself with me. I’m a big girl. I can handle you talking about him.”

“I know.”

“Are you happy?”

Steve’s happiness has been so irrelevant for so long that he doesn’t even quite remember what it feels like. He’s not sure if he’d even recognize it if he was experiencing it.

“I don’t know,” he says.

The line goes silent, and Steve picks up his pace as he cuts his way through the Park Avenue crowd. People part for him when he walks this way, like he has important business to attend to. On Sharon’s end, there’s the sound of running water and the clanking of dishes.

“I have to go on TDY to Fort Lewis for a week in January,” she tells him.

“Okay.”
“I think it would be good for Ethan to stay with you, but I’m just not sure about your new roommate. So I kind of have some investment in this, too. That’s why I’m asking about him.”

Steve’s heart quickens again, and he’s not sure whether he should be more distressed by the prospect of being left with the baby for a week or by Sharon’s implication that Bucky is a tangible problem for her in that scenario. He strains to imagine the three of them in the apartment together, a preview of what that week might look like, any image at all, but it’s impossible.

“Wouldn’t Halima be a better choice?” he asks.

“A better choice for whom?” She lets the question hang rhetorically for a few moments. “You’re his father. Halima is the nanny. This is where you step in, Steve. This is where you need to step in.”

“I hear you,” Steve says, because he’s been practicing good communication, stripping away the curt, factual prosody of an infantry leader that civilians read as angry and mean. “I see why you would think that’s best. But can we talk about this later?”

“We don’t have to get into details, but I want to know I can count on you to watch him and provide a safe environment for him.”

Steve huffs out a sigh. “Just say what you mean, Sharon. Skip the bullshit,” he says, wincing.

“I don’t want Ethan in a home with a person who’s going to be drunk or high on pain pills. I don’t ever want Ethan left alone with your friend. I don’t want him exposed to the chaos that man brings into your life.”

“You want me to kick him out before he’s even moved in?”

“I didn’t say that. I just want you to be a good custodian and be able to place the needs of your child over the needs of your friend, if that’s what it comes down to.”

Steve wants to tell her that she’s being unreasonable, but her request is overwhelmingly fair. Bucky is chaotic. Bucky is sometimes unsafe. Bucky is an addict who has been wrecked by multiple traumas. Bucky’s list of faults makes Steve’s chest tighten, and a fierce protectiveness stokes within him, even as he admits how correct Sharon is to be concerned.

But there’s no way out of this except to fall into it. Steve knows that. To decline would make him the same kind of shit bag as his own dad, and he can’t — he won’t — be that man. Even though he’s afraid. Even as he entertains nightmare scenarios like losing time while he’s giving the baby a bath or forgetting him in the car or passing out from sheer exhaustion while he’s holding him.

“If I have any question about Bucky’s ability to be sober and safe, I’ll send him to his ma’s for the week,” Steve offers. “I hope it won’t be necessary, but I’ll do it.”

“Thank you. That’s fine with me,” Sharon replies. She takes a very measured sigh. “Maybe he’ll be okay. Maybe his program is really helping him.”

Steve can’t quell the doubt crawling the walls of his mind, reminding him of all the times Bucky hasn’t been okay. All the times he was supposed to be fine but wasn’t. All the times he appeared well but was silently imploding. Leaving that behind feels like another impossibility, but it’s one that Steve has to at least try for. For Bucky. For Sharon. For the baby.

“I guess we’ll see.”
It doesn’t take as long as he expected for his time in the car with Winnie to turn sour. She’s nervous from the moment Steve picks her up in front of her apartment. They both are. Winnie carries her nerves in a very particular way, one Steve knows by heart, and she fingers a crease on her pants while they keep the conversation corralled around gossip from Mount Sinai and her church. None of it is personal, and some of it is mildly amusing, so Steve keeps the benign questions coming, even if he can only half-attend to her answers. It’s enough to get them out of the city, through New Jersey, and to the Maryland border, where they stop to grab coffee and use the bathroom.

“How’s the job search going?” Winnie asks after Steve finally slots his car into the steady flow of traffic on the I-95.

“I had an interview at Human Rights Watch yesterday. And I’ve picked up some translation work on the side.”

“Sounds like a great opportunity,” she says, smiling. “What position?”

“One of their Middle East analysts is out on maternity leave.”

“So it’s temporary?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that going to be enough, financially?”

She probably doesn’t mean for it to come out as cynical and doubtful as it does, and she’s right to be concerned. It would be a lot less money than he expected he’d be able to pull in, because he forgot how well-educated and experienced and downright competitive New Yorkers are. This isn’t grunt world anymore, where Academy grads are the reviled nobles of the hierarchy. In Manhattan, he’s not much at all to look at. It’s a wonder Hill even glanced at his resume, let alone decided it was worth scribbling all over.

Winnie continues. “I just mean that Jamie has quite a bit of income now, with his retirement pay and VA compensation. He should pay half the rent and expenses.”

“I can take care of it,” Steve insists. “I can take care of everything.”

Her fidgeting returns, but her voice is steady. “Treating him like an invalid isn’t going to help him get better. And he’ll want to pay. He needs to take responsibility for himself so that he can move forward on his own locomotion.”

He’s not a fucking train, Steve thinks to say. Instead, he goes with, “I don’t want him to worry about little stuff. Let him worry about the big stuff. Getting better. Staying sober. Not the rent.”

“You’re going to make this really difficult, aren’t you?” Winnie replies with a weary breath.

“No offense, but it’s none of your business. My finances are none of your business. Your son is not going to be homeless, so don’t worry.”

“Of course he’s not. And maybe it’s not my business, but I still worry. About you.”

“I’m not the one you need to worry about,” Steve tells her. “If you want to worry about anyone, it should be Jamie. Or better yet, Rikki. She should be here. This is a really big deal, and she’s AWOL for it.” His foot gets heavier on the accelerator, and he scowls as he whips past the rickety minivan crawling ahead of them.
Winnie grips the handle on the door, and the pitch of her voice climbs. “She’s not AWOL. She decided not to come. She’s not ready yet.”

“She needs to get over herself and get her priorities straight.”

“They have a complicated relationship.”

Steve snorts. “Who doesn’t have a complicated relationship with him? She just doesn’t want to do the work. And he’s going to be disappointed. And hurt. And that’s bullshit, because he’s working really hard and he doesn’t deserve to be shunned for struggling.”

Steve has thought often and enthusiastically about going to Rikki’s apartment and explaining all the ways in which she’s a selfish bitch. He hates the word and reserves it for very special people, like sisters who scream at their brothers because they survive their desperate attempts to escape their pain. Sisters who tell their brothers to be more efficient the next time they try to end their suffering. Sisters who make their brothers weep — and their brothers never, ever weep.

“She’s not shunning him,” Winnie says. “She’s really hurt, too. This has been going on a long time, and she’s shouldered a lot of it on her own. Especially when you weren’t around.”

“And where were you?” Steve shoots back.

Her reply is subdued, and she looks down at where her hands are gathered on her lap. “He only lets me in so far. You know that.”

It’s always been that way, with George Barnes holding court as the king of Bucky’s heart and Winnie as the woman who happened to give birth to him. Winnie’s efforts to love him have been persistent, no matter how many walls Bucky put up to block them. Steve can’t count the number of painful exchanges he’s witnessed between them, Winnie reaching out, Bucky collapsed and unavailable. Or maybe worse is when they pretend to be okay, a superficial piece of theater that they’ve thoroughly mastered. Steve’s love for his own mother was so profound and unchanging that he can only make sense of Winnie and Bucky in theoretical terms. It doesn’t help that Bucky is vexingly nonspecific whenever Steve asks what happened between them.

The tension lingers as they clear DC and head into Virginia. Steve has a handful of moments where he entertains turning off onto the exit to Crystal City, where Sharon is. Where the baby is. The impulse is powerful and jarring, and when he fails to follow it, the pit of his stomach feels hollow. It would have been a good place to take a break. It might have been nice to have Winnie—

Steve crushes the rest of the thought and distracts himself by guessing what they might be walking into tomorrow. It’s odd that he’s barely considered it, but maybe it was self-protective, because the moment his imagination spools up, he begins to feel the familiar clawing of dread.

“How many people are going to be at this thing?” he asks

“The lunch? No.”

“No. Why?”

“Just trying to… “

He has a hard time finishing the sentence, because the calculations he’s trying to work through would probably make him sound insane. He’s trying to figure out how many people will be there.
How many might be in close proximity. How many of them might be veterans. How many might be unstable. How many might be children. How many exits there might be. How many items he could use to protect himself and Bucky and Winnie if something went down. What chairs he might be able to use. He wonders exactly what kind of chairs will be there. Folding chairs? Upholstered chairs? Metal chairs? The questions grow more ridiculous and yet somehow more crucial with each iteration.

“Maybe tomorrow we can meet a little early and have coffee,” Winnie says. “Take a breather. Try to relax a little.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve sees the tender concern on her face, creasing her eyes and plumping her cheeks. Clearly “we” don’t need to take a breather and relax. He needs to take a breather and relax. Unlike Bucky, Steve has never been very good at rebuffing Winnie’s attempts to mother him. He secretly craves it from somewhere in that bleak wasteland left by his own ma.

“How about you, darlin’?”

He has to smile a little when she goes all Texan on him. It’s been her go-to method of dragging him out of melancholy since he was in braces. It always makes Bucky roll his eyes and say, “Oh Lord, here we go,” but Steve shamelessly loves it.

“Okay.”

During Bucky’s last group session in his alcohol treatment program, he watched the clock the entire time. Kept his arms folded tightly across his chest while the old men blathered about Vietnam and how the government screwed them over and how they never would have been alcoholics and addicts if their first wives weren’t such bitches and whores and how they’re walking the righteous path now with God and baby Jesus and God damn Barack Hussein Obama who’s taking away everyone’s homes and is singlehandedly responsible for the recession despite only being in office seven months. Bucky learned to keep his trap shut and his head down, and even that didn’t save him from lectures about how the VA cares more about Iraq and Afghanistan vets than it ever did about the men who were forced to go to Vietnam. Certainly they weren’t all idiots. Many of them were kind. Some tried to take Bucky underwing. But the loudest ones had the worst opinions, and he couldn’t wait to never see them again.

Today is Bucky’s last group of his residential PTSD program, and he’s still looking frequently at the clock, but only to note with chagrin how quickly it seems to be moving. He sits in a circle of twelve men and the therapist, Kate, all within ten years of his own age, and he hangs on every word he can. Beside him, Quill is offering his final reflection of what he learned in the program, eliciting burbles of laughter in the way he does. He was messed up, squirrelly and paranoid and miserable and angry. Now he’s a bit less messed up. It’s the theme here, in one form or another.

When Quill’s finished, he looks over at Bucky expectantly, and Bucky shifts in his chair as all eyes land on him. There’s no way Bucky can match Quill’s charm, which is saying something, considering how much Bucky has relied on his own magnetism to throw people off the scent of his many problems over the years. But he seems to have left it somewhere along the line, maybe in a puddle of puke at the Holiday Inn.

“How about you, Jamie?” Kate prompts. She’s a baby — just barely out of grad school, and she handles them like they’re not made of glass. She handles them like they’re made of raw titanium, strong and resilient and just in need of a bit of refining.

“I’ve learned a lot,” he says. “I feel like this place has helped me take a step back from all this shit
that’s constantly going on in my head.” He flares the fingers of his better hand out toward his temple.
“Doing CPT, learning how to challenge my stuck points, my crappy beliefs… I mean, it’s good. It makes sense. I’ve been able to look at some of the stuff I was trying to run away from. So that’s good.”

Bucky bites at his lower lip, and he tries to let himself speak from a place of honesty, pushing back his well-worn instinct to minimize.

“But if I’m being honest, this has barely even scratched the surface for me. Which is not to say anything bad about this program, because it’s great. It’s more that I’m really f*cked up — or I have a lot of stuff that I haven’t been able to touch yet. Like some of the worst stuff. The stuff I was working on here was the easier stuff. Like safety. I’ve done the most work on that. And that’s a big deal. I feel like I can relax a bit more now. Not be so on-edge, always looking around. See?” Bucky glances over his shoulder toward the door to the group room. “Back to the door, not f*cking out.”

It really is a big deal. He’s been forcing himself to sit here for the past two weeks, after Kate suggested it. They do experiments like these on their group outings. Riding public transportation, sitting in the middle of crowded restaurants and movie theaters. If they do it enough times, it’s supposed to help recalibrate their brains to realize that they’re not actually in danger in these situations. Most of them were indignant when they were told about that part of the program. One of the guys up and left that afternoon and never came back. But it really works, even if they hated it every step of the way.

“So safety’s okay,” Bucky continues. “But some other things like trust and esteem and intimacy… fuck. I’m still terrible at all those things. I don’t know if I learned much of anything except how stuck I am.”

“And that makes sense,” Kate says. “This is just a starting point. Everyone’s coming from a different place, and some have more things to work on than others. That’s why we emphasize becoming your own therapist by challenging those beliefs that are keeping you from having the quality of life that you want.”

Bucky gives a slow nod. “Yeah. So, I figure I have a couple of options when I get out of here, in terms of how to deal with the rest of it. I could try running away from it again. Not address all the real core issues. The way I always did that was with booze or work, but I’m trying not to do the first and don’t know how to get the second. Another option is that I face all that stuff, and maybe it’s too hard. Maybe I relapse anyway because it’s too much.”

He shrugs.

“Do you think that’s a stuck point?” Kate asks, raising her eyebrows knowingly.

“Well, yeah.”

Kate slaps her palms on her thighs and springs to her feet. “All right, let’s do a CBW on it.”

She strolls over to the whiteboard and writes “If I work on my most difficult issues, I’m going to relapse” as a belief to challenge. Bucky’s not the only one who thinks this. A few other guys are in recovery, too, and together they run through a series of challenging questions and point out the cognitive errors in the statement. By the time they make it through the Challenging Beliefs Worksheet, it’s clear that the concern isn’t entirely founded and represents habitual, self-defeating thinking — Bucky’s calling card.

“So, okay,” Bucky says, tilting his head as he considers all the ways he’s turning the possible into the
probable. “It’s a possibility that working on this stuff could push me over the edge, but it’s also possible that I’ll be able to do it without drinking. But I’m still fucking terrified of relapsing. I cannot…” He holds up his hand to stop the inevitable question to follow. “So, this is going to sound like a stuck point, but if I start drinking again, I will die. I absolutely will die. And that’s something I need to tell myself. If I’m dead, then none of this means anything. So that’s my number one priority. It has to be. Even over this stuff.”

“Maybe you can work on both,” Kate suggests.

“Yeah, well, the great state of New York is gonna make sure that I do just that. So I guess I’m a little hopeful. That’ll make it harder to sabotage myself, because I really, really hate jail.”

This draws some laughs. He’s the only one here who’s been in the slammer, and it’s earned him some unexpected credibility even beyond his substantial military pedigree.

“But still. When I think of all the stuff that’s still there, it’s terrifying. It’s simple to be sober in residential treatment. But I’m going back to New York, where there’s a bodega on practically every corner. So yeah, I’m fucking terrified of what’s gonna happen when I get out of here and out into the world again.”

“And it’s okay to be terrified,” Kate says with an assuring smile.

“And it’s okay to be terrified. Yeah.”

Now it’s Kate’s turn to be what he supposes is truthful. It still sounds a lot like lip service to him, but at least he recognizes that’s because of his own self-loathing and not necessarily a reflection of her reality.

“You’ve done really great work here,” she tells him. “Really great work. One of the things I appreciate about you the most is how you’ve always been so supportive of everyone.”

“Even though you told me to cut it out on a number of occasions,” Bucky reminds her.

“And why do you think I did that?”

“Because it let me avoid my own stuff.”

“Yep. Exactly. I know you’ve worked on finding a balance between caring for yourself and supporting others, and I hope you’ll continue trying to find that balance as you move forward.”

“Yeah, cut it out, Sergeant Barnes,” Frank drawls, stone-faced. It’s especially rich coming from a former officer, and Frank must know it. He may be a prick and a straight up crazy motherfucker, but he makes up for it with breathtaking self-awareness.

“Don’t encourage him,” Quill says, slashing his flattened hand over his own throat.

“I mean, yeah, you’re right. I’m not in the Army anymore. I’m not an NCO anymore. I’m not a platoon sergeant anymore. I’m just a guy,” Bucky says with sorrowful finality.

Each admission is almost untouchably painful. He’s not sure if that’ll ever get better, if it’ll fade like his fear of the door.

“But here’s the big difference now — I don’t know what comes after that. I don’t know what it’s like to be just a guy…’’
Bucky pauses because he feels something, that tightness, that pressure behind the eyes, the thing that’s led to him spilling over twice since he’s been here, once in front of everyone. It was awful, and it was incredible, and fuck, it might just happen again.

He smiles and blinks through it.

“But at least now I’m willing to stick around and see.”

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So he cried a little today. Most of them did. Even Frank’s eyes got a little glossy when he talked about wanting to get his wife and kids back. That’s another common theme — they’ve all been destructive and terrible to the people they love. Some with drugs or booze, some with violence, some with isolation, some with lies. Bucky’s done it all, save the violence, and he’s immensely grateful that he’s not built to physically harm people he loves.

Quill lets out a slow “fuck” as he empties out the drawers of his dresser onto the floor. He’s looking for the movie stub from the first movie they went to as a group. It wasn’t even anything good, and maybe that was the point; they got to sit with their anxiety rather than be distracted by the film. Through collective stubbornness, they all made it through, because nobody was willing to be the first to fall out. Quill sat, leg bouncing frenetically, bumping his knee against Bucky’s until Bucky put his hand down hard on Quill’s thigh and held it there for a good ten minutes. Quill never batted him away or got weird about it. He even thanked him later.

It was pathetically platonic. Entirely practical. Quill is very obviously straight, and not Sam Wilson straight. Straight straight. Bucky couldn’t derive even some small enjoyment from it the way he might have with other straight guys in the past, the excitement of closeness with someone who will never reciprocate. He doesn’t even think like that anymore. He doesn’t notice men anymore. He doesn’t notice anyone like that anymore. All that erotic energy that’s dragged him over the rocks since he had his first wet dream about Jordan Knight at age eleven, it’s all gone.

Bucky’s been waiting for some of it to come back to him ever since he realized that his dick isn’t completely broken. It was the fourth week of the program, and he was up early because Quill was tossing and groaning like he always does when he forgets his sleep meds. Bucky learned the hard way not to shake him awake, because the one time he tried it he got a fist to the face and about five hundred apologies that continue to this day. Bucky learned to just let him ride it out until it fades or until he startles himself awake.

As he slowly woke that morning, Bucky realized that another part of him was most definitely awake as well. It’d been so long since he’d been hard that he’d forgotten the feeling. He lifted the blankets and stared down at it with his mouth agape, shocked and relieved and scared to do anything but look at the modest rise of it beneath his two layers of clothes. The disappointment was there as well, the letdown of finally knowing for certain that his erections will forever be pathetically small. But there was also the thrill of possibility, because if he can get hard, maybe he might be able to come. He’d all but abandoned that possibility when he was in Landstuhl and realized the full extent of his injuries. Not that he could claim an ounce of interest in putting forth the effort to test it out, but maybe someday he might. Maybe someday he might build up the will to try to touch himself again.

Of course, Quill caught him looking, chuckled sleepily and said, “Got a good one there?” and Bucky very nearly died on the spot from mortification.

“A-ha!” Quill says, launching up from the floor and holding out the stub toward Bucky. “Found it. Sneaky little fucker.”
Bucky looks on from where he’s perched at the edge of his own bed, curling and relaxing his toes to help correct nearly a year of neglecting his physical recovery. “You’re so fucking sentimental,” he teases.

Adorably sentimental, actually. The guy hangs onto everything even remotely important, and not the way a hoarder might. He hangs onto things like a man who lost his mom at ten and spent the next eight years getting passed from family to family like he was radioactive.

Quill gives a deft shrug. He’d be the first to admit to it. “Who all’s coming tomorrow again?”

“I know my mom is. My friend. Maybe my sister, but I don’t know.”

He’s been calling Rikki. Leaving voice mails. He’s stopped asking her to call him back. Instead, he tells her about his day or what he’s doing in therapy — as much as he can cram in until he gets cut off. He’s not sure if it’s welcome or if she even listens to them, but he’d do almost anything to have her call him back just to tell him to stop and leave her alone. But she hasn’t even tried that.

“Which friend is this again?” Quill asks. “Your NCO friend?”

“My officer friend.”

Quill’s mouth twists like he’s just bitten into a lemon. “Ugh, gross. Okay.”

“Is your girlfriend gonna be able to make it?” Bucky asks.

“Nah. She’s still trying to decide if she wants to be my girlfriend or not. So not exactly fly-to-North-Carolina committed, at this point.”

Bucky’s face falls. “I’m sorry.”

“Did you find out from the social worker where you’re doing aftercare?”

“Yeah, New York Harbor VA. You?”

“Same!”

“Nice. We should do homework together or something,” Bucky suggests.

Quill lays the ticket stub on a small pile of keepsakes he’s amassed since he’s been here. Restaurant menus, his first CPT worksheets, a weekend bus pass. “We can go ride the train together.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Yeah— oh no. No, please don’t.”

Quill predictably breaks into an impromptu rendition of “C’Mon ’N Ride It,” complete with the moves from the music video. It’s unselfconscious and completely wonderful.

“Oh, Jesus,” Bucky says after Quill works through the first chorus. “Yes. Only if you do that the whole time.”

Quill stops rapping, even as he continues the fist-pumping. “Did they play that song at your prom? That’s such a prom song.”

“Probably. I was drunk, though, so who the fuck knows.”

“Were you ever not drunk?”
“Feels like almost never.”

Bucky smiles as he says it to counter the old ache that lingers there. The ache of having the town bicycle as his date and having to drink himself into oblivion so it didn’t hurt so bad to watch Steve and his girlfriend slow dance to “All My Life.” Steve did dance with him more than a few times to the uptempo stuff. At the time it felt so conciliatory, like table scraps. But as Bucky sifts through his patchwork memories of that night twelve years later, he remembers that Steve was happy and present and insistent that they dance together. He was into it. In the clarity of hindsight, dancing with Bucky obviously meant a lot to him.

Quill apologizes. “I don’t know if we’re at the point in our relationship where I can joke about your terrible drinking problem.”

“Sure. Only if I can continue joking about you being in the Navy.”

“Oh, don’t act like that was ever contingent on anything from me.”

“My ma’s gonna give you so much shit,” Bucky warns, “so just be prepared.”

“Why?”

“She’s Army, too.”

“God damn. Was your sister in, too?”

“No, she decided to get an education and a real job.” Not that it was never on her mind. Rikki the all-state wide receiver was scouted by West Point so aggressively that she finally had to tell the recruiter, verbatim, to go fuck himself back to Fort Knox where he came from.

Quill plops down on his bed directly across from Bucky. “Is your friend also gonna give me shit, while everyone’s at it?”

“I hope so.”

Quill snorts. “Thanks.”

Quill doesn’t know about Steve. Not in any way that’s important. He doesn’t know that Steve being in a shit-slinging mood would be a full blown miracle. His whole “I’m fine, how are you?” routine is stale and unconvincing, and Bucky’s frankly scared to see him tomorrow. He couldn’t tell the group that nearly half of his terror over leaving the program is about living in the same apartment with Steve — fuck, just being in the same room… They’ve been talking nearly every day, and somehow they haven’t said a single meaningful thing over the past five months.

“You should hang out with us tomorrow, though,” Bucky says. “My ma’s a collector of lost boys. She’ll love you.”

“She sounds great.”

“She’s all right.”

“Dude, don’t take your mom for granted. I’d do anything to have mine back. I’d do anything for her to show up tomorrow.” Quill goes quiet, then adds, “You’re fucking lucky.”

Replace the words “her” with “him” and “mom” with “dad,” and Quill would be speaking right to Bucky’s heart. And it’s not that he doesn’t agree. Four months of reflection has given Bucky the
space to see all the ways in which Winnie has been trying. But even still, he can’t relax into it. He can’t let go of everything that’s happened between them. He imagines there’s probably a metric fuckton of stuck points keeping him from doing so, some of that really hard stuff.

“You and Steve might get along,” Bucky supposes. “His ma died of cancer, too. Dad left when he was a baby.”

“Shit. You sure you’re not the collector of lost boys?”

It’s an intriguing notion. While Bucky thinks about it, he rubs at his left forearm beneath his long-sleeved shirt to try to loosen up the scar tissue like his physical therapist told him to do. He’s supposed to rub it with lotion, but he still doesn’t like to look at it, and he sure as hell doesn’t want to show it to Quill. Bucky’s content to be the oddball roommate who changes in the bathroom while Quill drops trou and strips in front of Bucky on the reg without the slightest hesitation.

“Steve might be weird, just so you know. He’s always been a little weird, but the Army made it worse.”

“Yeah? Is he messed up like you?” Quill says it with the refreshing factuality in which he reflects most of Bucky’s flaws. He’s not afraid of them the way everyone else in his life seems to be.

“I really don’t know. He’s good at pretending to be okay when he’s not. Which is new. He was always really easy to read before.” Bucky looks down at his arm. “I hate not being able to read him anymore.”

Quill nods sympathetically. “It’s gonna be alright. Don’t worry about your mom or your weird friend. Tomorrow is about you.”

“And you,” Bucky says, smiling.

Quill smiles back. “And me. Yeah.”

The weather is appropriately chipper for the family and friends picnic. They’ve all been working hard preparing for the arrival of loved ones, setting up tables and chairs, arranging the catered food on platters. Bucky has been tasked with unpacking and lining up rows of sliced cheese and crackers. He was assigned the job like it was one of the most important, even though it’s clearly busy work to keep him from attempting to help in any real way. It’s cripple’s work, and he tries not to let the guys see him struggling to open the plastic packages. His fine dexterity is still complete shit, even after working with occupational therapy for three months. The guys razz him good-naturedly, remarking about how the rows are perfectly dress-right-dress, even though they’re not.

When everything’s been prepared, there’s an excruciating twenty minutes of awkward mulling around, waiting for everyone to arrive. Bucky sits next to Quill at one of the tables, glancing obsessively in the direction of the door where everyone will start filing in any minute. He got a text from Winnie last night saying that she and Steve made it to town safely and without Rikki or Daisy. He couldn’t claim to be surprised, though it was somehow more painful than he expected.

Right now, he’s glad to have Quill at his side. Quill is the only one among them who’s even remotely calm, like a bird gliding smoothly over a tossing sea of anxious combat vets. His legs still move, because he’s a restless kind of guy, but they don’t move with nervous, jittery energy anymore. They sway like a kid’s do, and the change is remarkable.

When the trickle of family members starts, Bucky rises and stands in the most dignified, unaffected
way he can, a task made easier by the cane he got to replace his crutches. It took him a while to learn to move with it, but it’s so much better now. It wasn’t until he got his right hand freed up that he realized how inconvenient it’s been to have both hands occupied all the time. To be able to carry something and walk at the same time is a luxury he forgot was supposed to be normal.

And when he catches sight of Winnie streaming in behind a woman and two children, she gives him the once-twice-over with her eyes, he sees pride mixed in with her obvious joy.

She walks towards him unaccompanied, taking purposeful, frequent steps befitting her small stature. Bucky looks to the door, waiting for Steve to trail in behind her, but she reaches him before that happens and pulls him into a tight hug. He bends down to embrace her with his free arm, and his emotions begin to unstick from where his nerves have trapped them when he smells the familiar scents of his mother, her lotion and her shampoo. And, God, in that moment, he’s fucking glad to see her.

Winnie says nothing while she holds him, her face pressed to his neck. Maybe she’s smelling him, too. He can feel the wetness of her tears on his skin and her fingers clutching his back just above the scar where his muscle was taken to reconstruct his forearm. He feels the impulse to squirm away from her hand but doesn’t act on it.

“You look so good,” she murmurs against his neck.

He’s put on some weight since he’s been in treatment, and not necessarily in the ways he’d like. They say you get a sweet tooth when you stop drinking, and they were not bullshitting. Even though he’s far from normal-fat, he’s getting damn near gay-fat. Bucky supposes it’s better than being on the very slimming vodka diet that landed him here in the first place, but he feels miles away from looking even remotely good.

Bucky starts pulling back first, righting his posture. His ma looks up at him with maternal warmth and runs her thumb beneath his eye.

“Yeah, I cry all the time now,” he tells her. “Did it once and can’t seem to fucking stop.”

The smile she gives him is strained, like she’s not sure what to make of it. His therapists say it’s good. Bucky would rather never do it but has given up struggling against its inevitability. He’s done a lot of years of holding back his sadness, and the bill has definitely come due with wildly compounded interest.

“Where’s Steve?”

“He needed to take a little break. He’ll be along soon.”

“A break from what?”

Winnie glances over her shoulder toward the door. “He’s just a little stressed out.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

She’s quiet for a few moments. “I’m not really sure. He’s just very anxious.”

Bucky doesn’t have long to imagine what’s actually going on, because on the heels of Winnie’s words comes the unmistakable six-foot-two figure of Steve coming through the door, catching Bucky’s breath in his throat. Steve stops and starts scanning the courtyard systematically, his face a serious mask. Bucky raises his hand and waves it a little, and Steve pauses when they make eye contact to give a small wave back before resuming his visual sweep. When he seems satisfied, he
walks toward them, his attention darting to anything that moves too quickly, like the children already starting to run amok around a nearby oak tree.

Bucky limps over to meet Steve, feeling drawn to him even as his stomach rolls. When they get within arm’s length, they pause to appraise each other. Steve looks exhausted and nervous and leaner than Bucky’s seen him since high school — a degraded emulation of how he looked during deployment. But he’s still as handsome as he ever was, especially now that his hair’s grown out a bit from the strict fade he kept in the Army. His jaw is still sharp. His eyes are still penetrating. His mouth is still full, and it breaks into an uneasy smile when he reaches Bucky.

“Hey,” Steve says.

Bucky mirrors him. “Hey.”

Steve makes the first move, stepping in and wrapping his arms around Bucky to hug him. Steve is warm and solid and he smells good, and Bucky stiffens as he becomes acutely aware of everyone who might be watching, Frank and Quill and all the other guys, not to mention the staff. Bucky’s mind races around the sum of their relationship, all the things they’ve done and been through, and he’s overcome by the irrational notion that everyone must be able to tell that they’ve held hands and kissed and shared a bed and fucked. So he gives Steve a few light pats on the back before pulling away, and he doesn’t miss the disappointment in Steve’s tired eyes when he does it.

“How was the drive down?” Bucky asks, trying to sound casual. “Did my ma drive you nuts?”

“It was fine,” Steve replies, because that’s all he seems to be able to say these days. He’s fine. Winnie’s fine. Sharon and Ethan are fine. It’s all fucking fine.

Bucky looks back to where his ma is standing with Quill, who’s smirking with his hands in his pockets while Winnie smiles and gabs at him.

“Wanna meet my roommate?” Bucky asks Steve.

Steve’s jaw tenses, then he says, “Sure.”

Bucky lingers for a few beats, anxiety ratcheting, before turning and making his way toward Quill and Winnie.

“I see you already met Quill,” Bucky says to his ma, shooting Quill a look of long-suffering fondness.

“He told me he’s from Yonkers! What are the odds?”

“We even get to do therapy at the same VA after this,” Quill tells her.

“Do you need a ride back up?” Winnie asks, touching him on the shoulder.

Fortunately, Quill declines. Not that Bucky wouldn’t welcome the company, but he’s pretty sure he and Steve would not mix well on such a long ride. He can feel Steve beside him, stiff and edgy in a way that no amount of Quill’s levity could probably ease.

“This is my friend Steve,” Bucky says, and he watches as Steve and Quill shake hands with stilted formality. Quill gives Bucky a fleeting, wide-eyed look when it’s over, which Bucky returns with the critical tilt of his head. It’s enough to erase the expression off Quill’s face, and Bucky reminds himself to thank him later for being especially astute today.
“How wonderful that they roomed the New Yorkers together,” Winnie says. “Did they do that on purpose?”

Bucky shrugs. “Maybe. He’s Navy, though, so it kind of felt a little like a punishment.”

Winnie clutches her hand over the pearls she’s not wearing. “Oh, no. Why on Earth would you join the Navy?”

“I didn’t want to get my knuckles all scraped up from dragging them on the ground,” Quill replies, making a loose fist to demonstrate.

Bucky huffs out a laugh. “Says the corpsman with First Marines.”

“That was beyond my control. Blame Uncle Sam for that one.”

Quill, Bucky, and Winnie share a smile. Steve doesn’t join them, because his attention has drifted back over his shoulder to where Frank is standing, looking hard and lethal, giving Steve his typical thousand-yard stare. Steve turns to face him, chest out and chin up, hands twitching at his sides, and they mug each other in silence, charging the air with aggressive energy for God knows what fucking reason.

Bucky scrambles to figure what the hell’s going on, scrambles to recall something he might have missed between them, some insult or some actual threat, and then Steve takes a step toward Frank — and, fuck, Frank takes a step too, a deathly serious one, and Bucky grabs Steve by the arm as hard as he can, startling him out of it, causing his whole body to jerk.

“Don’t,” Bucky warns. “I mean it.”

Steve glares back over at Frank.

“Please,” Bucky begs. “He’s fine. He’s cool. He got blown up, just like we did. He’s one of us.”

There’s a very slow dawning of recognition, one that seems to disturb Steve profoundly. He pulls himself back and looks at Bucky’s face and Bucky’s hand on him. The hostility drains away and then he’s plaintive, and he sees the way Winnie and Quill are staring at him, the concern and the fear, and he flushes.

“Sorry. I’m sorry,” he murmurs to Bucky. To all of them.

Bucky gives Steve’s arm a squeeze before he lets go. “Let’s go grab some food. I’ll show you the terrible cheese plate I made.”

Steve offers a small nod. “Yeah, sure.”

Bucky extends his hand out toward the food table and passes a sidelong glance to Winnie, who gives a subtle shake of the head.

Steve seems to relax marginally when they sit down to eat. His eyes still dart around when he thinks they’re not paying attention to him, but he stops whenever he gets caught and shifts his focus back to his plate. He barely says anything while Bucky talks with Quill and Winnie, and Bucky’s distracted much of the time by how uncomfortable Steve seems and how much effort he clearly has to exert to appear normal. Jesus. It’s almost impossible for Bucky to fathom what the hell happened after Steve dropped him off at the airport back in January, and not knowing is both infuriating and awful. He supposes he has nobody to really blame but himself for going off on a bender for three months and writing Steve off completely. He could have been tracking what was going on with him. He should
have been tracking.

After lunch, the director of the program stands up and tells the visitors about what the men have done for treatment. The exposures. The cognitive therapy. The support groups. The treatment planning. Winnie watches the director, rapt with fascination. Sometimes she looks over at Bucky and beams, and he ducks his head to stare at his lap each time she does it. Steve looks at him, too, with something slower-burning, something deep and meaningful. Bucky doesn’t shy away from it, because it feels important to hold what Steve is giving him, to connect with him and acknowledge how obviously difficult it is for him to be here.

By the end of the picnic, it feels like Steve’s also accomplished something monumental, and when it’s time for everyone to say goodbye until tomorrow’s graduation, Bucky doesn’t want to let him go. Not when he’s just started to settle. Not when he’s grown fond of the warmth of Steve’s shoulder against his own. Not when Bucky feels just how badly he missed him.

Bucky and Quill receive Winnie’s hugs and Steve’s firm handshakes, and Bucky wishes he hugged Steve better — longer and more presently — when he first got here. He wishes he’d ignored the crackle of shame and fear for wanting to be close, something he hasn’t felt with any other man since he left Bragg. Instead, he watches Steve go, watches him glance back repeatedly, like he’s afraid Bucky might evaporate once he loses sight of him. And when everyone’s gone, the men clean up, some powered by their lifted spirits, some dragging with quiet sadness, and afterwards they head back to their rooms to get ready for tomorrow.

There, Quill is unusually quiet as they start packing their bags. He’s got his piles sorted — sentimental trinkets, graphic tees, colorful boxers, patterned socks. Bucky’s piles are drab in contrast — solid colored long sleeved shirts, pants, plain socks, black underwear. A couple of books. The Big Book. His iPod. Bucky sits with the discomfort, repeatedly losing track of what he’s doing, and he gives it ten minutes before asking Quill how he thought the day went.

“I think you should have brought your friend with you to the program, because holy shit,” is Quill’s reply.

Bucky pauses with a handful of underwear.

“What a basket case,” Quill continues. “Is that what we used to look like? Is that what PTSD looks like, because shit. What a mess.” He gives a hollow chuckle and shakes his head.

“It’s not fucking funny.”

Quill turns to him and offers an apology. “I know. I’m sorry. I know it’s not funny. But just… wow. I mean, I wouldn’t want Frank glaring at me either, but I thought your friend was gonna go over there and deck him in the teeth. Which would have been a hell of a fight, to be honest. I don’t even know who’d win that one.”

For all his cavalierness, Quill’s not wrong. The whole first half of the picnic was almost unbearably out of character for Steve, who’s never been one to volunteer into physical fights with anyone. Verbal ones, yes. Steve’s brain was always faster than anyone else’s, and he’d readily destroy people with his intellect without effort. This, though… Bucky doesn’t have a category for what he saw today. There’s no file in the vault of his memory that can hold it. And so it rattles around unrestrained, barreling into hitherto unmovable truths of how Steve is supposed to be.

“He wasn’t nearly this bad before,” Bucky says quietly, shoving his underwear into the duffle bag on his bed.
“This isn’t the guy you’re gonna go live with, is it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“And you think that’s a good idea?”

“He said he wants to take care of me.”

“With what?” Quill exclaims. “How the hell is he gonna do that?”

“I think he feels responsible for me getting blown up. So he wants to… I don’t know.”

“Make himself feel better?”

“It’s not like that.”

Steve wants to take care of him because care-taking is what Steve does best. It’s how he’s always been. Bucky knew it from the start of their friendship and made it a point to never be someone Steve had to tend to, hiding his sickness away until it festered like a chronic infection deep in his marrow. Bucky always wanted things to be equal between them, especially when they weren’t.

But Bucky doesn’t have the ability to be impenetrable anymore. He’s been ripped open physically and emotionally by war and by his overdose and by Rikki’s words and by jail and a stream of well-meaning therapists taking turns yanking his guts out for the last four months. He can’t hide his fragility anymore, so of course Steve would want to take care of him.

Quill sighs and rubs at his brow. “Listen, I’ve been through three PTSD programs, so I know what I’m talking about. That’s the type of guy who’ll wake you up in the middle of the night looking for Osama bin Laden under your bed or in the fucking oven or do that creepy Terminator standing-by-the-window-all-night thing. Or he’ll hide guns and knives all around the apartment so you accidentally blow your hand off when you’re digging around in the junk drawer for a battery or something. That’s not a guy who’s gonna be good to live with while you’re trying to get over this stuff.”

“I get what you’re saying,” Bucky admits reluctantly. “But if that’s what he needs right now, to take care of me, or feel like he’s taking care of me, then I’m going to let him try. It’s important to him.”

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“I get what you’re saying,” Bucky admits reluctantly. “But if that’s what he needs right now, to take care of me, or feel like he’s taking care of me, then I’m going to let him try. It’s important to him.”

Quill abandons his packing and walks over to Bucky’s bedside. He’s got a determined look on his face, hands poised to animate.

“So, I’ve only known you for eight weeks, but can I tell you how I think this is gonna go?”

Quill narrates his prediction with the confidence of a preacher.

“You’re gonna get all wrapped up in whatever the hell is going on with him.” He coughs a couple times while muttering “PTSD.” “And you’re gonna let your own recovery take a nosedive. You’re gonna go into Sergeant Barnes mode and try to fix him and avoid all that scary shit that you need to do to get better. You’re gonna try to teach him all the skills you learned here and whip out the worksheets so that he doesn’t have to do any of the hard work of getting help for himself. That way he won’t have to own anything. And, of course, that’s not gonna work, so you’re going to get discouraged, completely stop doing your own recovery stuff, and then you’re gonna drink.” Quill ends with the coup de grace, slapping the back of his hand hard into his palm. “And then you’re gonna be fucking.”
“Wow.”

Quill quirks an uncertain eyebrow. “Too far? Not far enough?”

“It’s a possibility,” Bucky says. What he doesn’t say is that there’s also an entirely different possibility, an antithetical one, where he’ll become so self-absorbed that he’ll ignore Steve’s needs and suffering altogether. Because addicts are selfish, and Bucky is an addict, through and through. Hell, there’s more than enough precedent for it.

“It’s good to let people take care of you,” Quill says, “but your friend can’t even hold himself together at a little VA picnic. He doesn’t have the bandwidth he thinks he does.”

“It would have been hard for both of us, before coming here,” Bucky says, pointing to Quill and back at his own chest.

“Well, yeah. That’s why you weren’t wrong when you implied that he’s one of us, too. Because he totally is. And good luck getting him to seek help. I bet he’s a stubborn motherfucker. He looks it.”

“He is.” Bucky smiles a little. It’s one of Steve’s best and worst qualities, one that drives him to extremes of success and catastrophe. “But I care about him, so I’m gonna try.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Not really.”

“I think you are.”

Quill counters the kindness with a dismissive shrug, as if the two cancel each other out. It’s amusing the way he performs masculinity in the midst of vulnerability. And Bucky envies him, because he can’t even pretend to be manly anymore. He’s neutered and dull, unconvinced by his errant morning wood, which is merely a sign that his body is functioning at a basic level. His sense of self, so centered in his physical form and capability, is still mostly shattered. He’s cobbbling a couple fragments together into something new, though. Coming here, graduating, doing the work, it’s something. It’s important. He was mandated to be here, but he wasn’t mandated to try. And he tried. He tried hard.

“Do you feel like you’re better?” Bucky asks.

“In the relative sense, yeah. Better than before I came here. Still got a lot of things to work on, but I feel like I can do it. I feel pretty good. How ‘bout you? Still fucking terrified?”

“Yeah. And that’s okay,” Bucky says, repeating Kate’s mantra. Because it’s okay to feel shitty and scared. Because all feelings are fires that’ll burn themselves out naturally, if you don’t throw lighter fluid or 151 proof vodka on them.

Quill nods. “And that’s okay.”

They look at each other for a few moments, until Quill gets antsy and suddenly finds his feet interesting.

“I should finish packing,” he says, walking back to the piles on his bed.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Sorry for being a dick about your friend.”
Bucky runs his replanted finger along the strap of his duffel, firing up a burst of pins and needles. “You weren’t being a dick. I think you were trying to be nice.”

Quill gives a crooked smile. “I’ll have to use you for a reference next time my girlfriend accuses me of being a fucking asshole.”

“Have her call me. I’ll tell her what a marshmallow you are.”

Quill turns away, angles himself awkwardly toward the bathroom. A pair of purple and gray argyle socks dangles loosely from his hand.

“I used to be really nice. Before everything.” Quill says softly. “I did some shit, though. I’m not proud of it. I still don’t know what to do with it, because it’s cruel, cruel shit.” He takes a long breath through his nose. “I still don’t know how to be both of those people. The guy who’s nice and the guy who’s…”

Bucky waits to find out what kind of guy Quill thinks he might also be, but the answer never comes. Bucky also gets stuck in that same place — how to be a good man and a man who deliberately murders children. He hasn’t touched that particular question since he’s been in treatment. He doesn’t even know how to begin to touch it in any serious way without having a complete breakdown, because he’s pretty sure the answer isn’t a good one.

“Do you ever miss it? Being downrange?” Bucky asks.

Quill spins back around, face incredulous. “Do I miss Fallujah? Fuck no.”

Bucky feels his face heat, but he wants to say it. He wants to tell someone, even someone who doesn’t understand. He feels it so powerfully, feels it simmering in the back of his mind every day along with his desire to drink.


“Even with the drinking?”

“Absolutely. I don’t know how to live anymore.” Bucky gestures vaguely at the uncertainty. “I guess I’m gonna have to figure that out when I get home.”

After a beat of consideration, Quill comes clean. “Maybe I miss it sometimes. A little. Sure was simple.”

“Oh, hell yes. Hell yes.”

“Well, we’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto. Time for shit to get real.”

“Wait, I’m Toto?”

“You wanna be Dorothy?”

Jesus, Bucky can’t help but laugh. He considers saying ‘No, but I’m a friend of Dorothy.’ but he’s definitely not ready for that particular strain of honesty. He hasn’t told a single soul that he likes dick since he left the Army, least of all Quill. So far, Bucky has successfully dodged every girlfriend or wife question anyone’s thrown at him, including Quill’s many increasingly creative inquiries. It’s not like it was with Sam. Bucky only told Sam because he got a distinct flavor of deep-buried queerness from him and thought they might fuck, which never ended up happening. And even that courage took over a year to ferment.
“Sure, I’ll be Dorothy,” Bucky says, because at least it’s a start.

“It’ll be really funny to see you try to skip down that Yellow Brick Road.”

Bucky grins and tosses a wadded up shirt at Quill’s face. “Oh, fuck you.”

Graduation is an emotional affair. Frank’s wife and kids show up unexpectedly, which is enough to nearly bring down the whole place. Frank cries. His family cries. Winnie cries. All the therapists cry. Half the other guys rub at their eyes excessively. Bucky works hard not to join them but almost fails when he thinks about how badly he wants Rikki to surprise him in the same way. Steve’s face goes abruptly vacant, and he doesn’t seem to fully come back into the room until it’s Bucky’s turn to get his certificate of completion. Bucky says a few words, like they’re all supposed to do. He thanks the treatment team and all the guys and Quill for helping and suffering him. Thanks his ma. Thanks people who saved his life, even though they’re not here — Parker and Rikki and Daisy and his lawyer and Judge What’s-his-name.

Then in the middle of it, he pauses and looks at Steve, at the way his lips part when they make eye contact, and Bucky’s overcome by the swell of backlogged affection he’s been dashing away since he left Fort Bragg. It was the only way he could manage while he was drinking himself to death. While he was in the hospital. While he was in jail and then in treatment. He was so sure that Steve would leave him behind, carry on without him as he lived another five years of Army life. Deploy a couple more times. Probably find someone else. Maybe even patch things up with Sharon. Go play daddy and mommy and baby. And even after Steve got discharged, Bucky wouldn’t let himself even come near the love Steve so clearly still has for him — or the love he still has for Steve.

Not until this moment.

Because here Steve is, neither whole nor hale but here and ready to take him home. And this is where Bucky finally starts to lose it, because all that love hurts so fucking badly, and because Steve is suffering in a way Bucky’s never seen him. It all blooms wildly and crushes his insides, and all he can do is say “Thank you” while he keeps his gaze on Steve’s weary face.

And, God, Steve smiles at him, and Bucky drags the heel of his palm over his tearlogged right eye before limping back to his chair.

Later, they pile into Steve’s little car after Bucky says all his goodbyes and his “see you later” to Quill. Winnie sits in the back seat while Bucky takes shotgun, still struggling to believe that he’s here with both of them on the way back to New York. Steve drives through the night, with Winnie conked out and lightly snoring by ten. Bucky checks his voicemail and listens to the one from Sam four times, where he congratulates Bucky for getting through treatment and wishes he could be there to see it. There’s one from Natasha, too, a sweet one saying that she misses him and is proud of him. He only listens to that one once. He’s come to feel such guilt over the way he’s treated her that he can barely stand her kindness. He saves Sam’s message for a shitty day, takes three ibuprofen for his knee, and tries to settle down.

While Winnie sleeps, silence between Bucky and Steve is companionable and easy, and sometimes Bucky looks over at Steve and Steve looks back in the darkness, and it’s like nothing has changed. Steve is just the cute guy who befriended him in English class back in 1992. The kid who skipped third grade. The kid whose mom had cancer. The kid liked well enough by many but known by few. The kid who picked Bucky out of all the others to share himself with. The one Bucky would
fantasize about while he shamefully touched himself. The one he pretended was touching him whenever someone else was. The first one outside his family who ever said “I love you” and meant it. Bucky lingers there as long as he can, in a place where Steve is happy and well, until he drifts off to sleep.

Bucky wakes up on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, just as the sun is beginning to bleed color on the horizon. He smiles at the view, at the sight of Brooklyn approaching fast, the place he’s decided to call home after a lifetime of drifting.

“Hey.”

Bucky turns his head toward Steve and groans and rubs at the crick in his neck. Steve looks no less tired than he did when he started driving ten hours ago, which is either impressive or alarming. Bucky can’t decide.

“Hey,” Bucky says back.

“After we drop your ma off, wanna pick up some coffee and bagels?”

“God, yes.”

“There’s a good place right down the street from the apartment.”

“Then you picked well.”

“There’s a movie theater, too. Some restaurants. A laundromat.”

Bucky nods. “Is there a train station close by?”

“I think the Prospect Park West is three or four blocks down.”

Thank God Steve doesn’t know about Bucky’s sordid history with Prospect Park. Bucky never thought to tell him because he never thought he’d live so close again. Just the mention of it makes him think about drinking again, and not un-fondly. That also puts them within walking distance of Park Slope, and he imagines himself limping down there and knocking on Rikki’s door, refusing to leave until she talks to him. It’s a pitiful scene, but one that’s not below him. He’s done pitiful before, and he’ll probably do it again.

“Have you taken the train yet?” Bucky asks.

Steve’s hands twist around the steering wheel. “No.”

“Do you ever take the train?”

“No.”

Bucky gazes out the passenger window as they pass by Fort Hamilton, and his mind drifts to memories of Steve and him riding the train together growing up, sometimes sitting so close that Bucky would get nervous and certain that Steve could feel how much he enjoyed it. Like maybe Steve could feel the frantic beating of his heart and the pressure between his legs and the dizzy tangle of his thoughts about what-if, like what if the brakes came on suddenly and they were pushed even closer, or what if the air stopped working and they had to take all their clothes off like some dumb broken elevator sitcom trope.

Later, when Winnie’s dropped off and they pick up breakfast, Steve parks on 17th Street and leads
Bucky to a three-story brick apartment building painted white. There are six steps leading up to the front door, which Bucky navigates slowly while Steve frowns and apologizes and asks for the third time if he can take Bucky’s bag. Bucky waves him off, because stairs are an inevitable part of New York living, though he’s not a little relieved when Steve walks him to a railroad-style unit on the ground floor.

Steve sets the food and drinks on a small, familiar wooden table in the kitchen, which has aging appliances and decent counter space for its size. The apartment is narrow but cozy and clean and decently maintained. It’s missing something, though. It’s not like their place at Bragg, which Steve started imprinting with his taste for Hopper and the American Realists before Bucky moved out. After Sharon came and dumped his things on their doorstep. There’s no art on any wall here, not as far as Bucky can see. There’s nothing but years and years of thick paint.

“Sorry this place is old and small,” Steve says sheepishly, then points toward a smaller room at the back of the apartment. “My room’s there. Bathroom’s there.” He turns and points toward the front of the building. “Living room, then your room on the end.”

“Stop apologizing already,” Bucky chides. “It’s great. And you didn’t have to give me the nice one.”

Steve replies with a thin smile and follows Bucky toward his new bedroom. On the way, they walk through the living room, a narrow space with Steve’s pull-out couch, entertainment center, TV, and dark-stained wood coffee table. Their time living together at Bragg may have been fraught, but having all of Steve’s things here is calming, because despite the agony of those days, Bucky still remembers it with fondness. When Bucky makes his way into his room, he sees his bed and his sheets and his nightstand bathed in the ample sunlight from the two tall single-hung windows. There’s a dresser, too, but it’s not his. It’s only a close approximation to the one he carried to his past three duty stations.

“I broke it,” Steve says from where he’s paused at the doorway, posture tense, hands flexing slowly. He says it mournfully, and Bucky pivots to face him.

“You *broke* it?”

“I hope this one’s okay.”

“It’s fine.” Bucky works his jaw to the side as he tries to ask his next question with tact. “Did you break it… accidentally?”

Steve’s reply is barely a whisper. “No.”

Bucky grips the handle of his cane hard as he imagines what might have happened. Nothing sits right. Nothing seems realistic. Nothing seems like something Steve might do. Not the Steve he knows, the one he thought he had in the car for a little while.

“Do you think this is gonna work?” Bucky asks.

“What?”

Bucky tilts his hand out at the room. “This. This whole thing.”

Steve’s brows gather, forming a deep groove between them. “I don’t— You think it won’t?”

“I want it to.”

There’s nothing more to say about it, really. Nothing that Bucky would dare to bring up now. It’s all
too big to break apart, too complicated and scary. Steve seems to sense that, too, angling the subject away.

“When’s your first VA appointment?” Steve asks.

Bucky fishes his phone from the pocket of his jeans and checks his calendar. “This Friday with my new mental health treatment coordinator. PTSD aftercare starts in three weeks.”

“I can take you to your appointments. I’m not working yet, and when I do get a job, I’ll still make time for that.”

“I mean, I can take the train, too. I think I’d be okay.”

“No,” Steve argues. “No way. I’ll drive you.”

Steve’s tone leaves no room for debate, and Bucky effortfully hides his bristling over Steve’s insistence.

“Where’s my bike?” Bucky asks. “Not that I could ride it, but…” But it’s his most treasured possession, one touched by his father’s hands, one he’d store in his own damn bed if that was the only option.

“I put it in storage. I found a really good place,” Steve says, because he knows exactly what it means to Bucky. There’s probably a bunch of other stuff in storage, too, given how much they both have that’ll never fit in here.

“How about my truck?”

“Rikki still has it.”

“You can drive it, if you want. Might be a little smashed up, but I think it still works”

“I might.”

Steve hasn’t moved from the doorway. He’s still stuck there, strung tight as a tripwire, like he’s waiting for some bomb that might never drop, something else that’ll shear away what’s left of his poise and control. Bucky’s still not used to seeing Steve so fearful, in all its insidious and brutal permutations. Not when Steve has always been the level-headed one. The stable one. The one maintaining precise and unrelenting control. It’s painful to see, and it’s almost unthinkable that it’s probably much worse on the inside...

Bucky limps toward him as carefully as he can manage and leans his cane against the replacement dresser. He slides his arms in the space between Steve’s biceps and torso and flushes himself to Steve’s body, pulling him close, pressing his palms to the flexed muscles of his back. He lets out the breath he was holding and relaxes against him.

It takes Steve several moments to move, but when he finally does, he enfolds Bucky tightly. Desperately. He presses a long kiss to Bucky’s temple and keeps his lips there to whisper, “I missed you. So much.”

Bucky’s eyes drift closed. “I missed you, too.”

“I’m glad you’re here. I’m sorry I’m…” Steve lets out a sharp breath. “I’m just really sorry. I’m sorry if I embarrassed you. I’ll be better, now that you’re here. I’m just so sorry…”
“Shh. Just hug me,” Bucky murmurs, leaning so that Steve kisses his head again.

He does. And they hold each other for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Misogynistic and ableist language, references to alcohol overdose, PTSD, mental health treatment/therapy, internalized homophobia, parental attachment problems

Notes:

AQI/ISI: Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Islamic State of Iraq

DLPT: Defense Language Proficiency Test - a test gauging how well someone can utilize a target language. 3+ would be quite proficient, and 3+/3+ is shorthand for 3+ in reading and 3+ in listening

Maternity leave in the U.S. Army: is terrible and, at this point in history, was nowhere near six months. Maybe four, I think. MAYBE.

Fall out: A way to refer to someone who leaves formation without being dismissed, often because they fainted from locking their knees

CPT: Cognitive Processing Therapy. This is one of the top evidence-based treatments for PTSD focusing on addressing beliefs (i.e., “stuck points”) that are keeping people from the natural post-traumatic stress recovery process. It’s a great therapy that works really well for a lot of people.

CBW: Challenging beliefs worksheet - a worksheet used to challenge stuck points to create more balanced beliefs

C’mon ’N Ride It (The Train) - You’re welcome (and, oddly, there is no actual train in the video…?)

Dress-right-dress: in perfectly straight order

Corpsman: A medic in the Navy. The Marine Corps does not have their own medics and other professional personnel (doctors, mental health, lawyers, etc.). So these positions are taken from the Navy. Technically the Marine Corps falls under the Department of the Navy (as I’ve been told several times by Marines, it’s “the men’s department” har-har)

Fallujah: Fallujah was the site of some of the bloodiest battles in the Iraq War, particularly around 2004.

Friend of Dorothy: a slang for a gay man dating back to World War II.
Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with my plot, characters, and style. She’s also available for beta work and is amazing at it. Go visit her on Tumblr.

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 30, 2009

“Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky looks up from an ancient edition of the Army Times he found on the waiting room side table. He’s barely been reading it, though not for lack of trying. Every time he does, the words slip loose from his attention as it gets sucked into the slow hurricane of diffuse worry twisting in his head. And then there’s the worry about the worry on top of it, because he shouldn’t be feeling this way after everything he’s already been through. Seeing some VA social worker is hardly a cause for concern, and yet here he is, his hands sweating into the brittle paper he holds, warily eying the perky guy with a clipboard calling his name from the doorway.

The guy glances between Bucky and the only other man in the waiting room, an angry-faced kid who looks like he’s freshly back from the sandbox. Maybe he’s still partially there. Maybe, like Bucky, that’s why he’s here. The clipboard guy catches sight of Bucky’s cane, and that seems to be confirmation enough that he’s found the veteran he’s looking for.

He holds out his hand to Bucky. “Hi there. Scott Lang.”

Bucky offers his own hand, and Scott glances down at the replantation scar on Bucky’s index finger and shakes with the sort of awkward hesitance that Bucky hates.

“Jamie.”

“Great! Good to meet you. C’mon down to my office.”

Scott takes off at an energetic clip, one Bucky doesn’t even try to match because he knows how ridiculous — how clumsy and lumbering — he looks when he tries to move quickly.

“I’m slow,” he says, and Scott stops and turns back around.
“Sorry about that! Too much coffee.” Scott holds out his hand and watches as it trembles. “Wow. Have you been to the canteen? They have Starbucks now.”

Bucky shakes his head, perplexed by the guy’s effusive candor, and follows him to a modest but tidy office. Scott gestures to a chair that banks his desk and sits in his Herman Miller Aeron chair, one Bucky recognizes from his old office back at the 107th. He tries to shove aside an onslaught of memories of himself sitting behind his desk in his uniform, typing up a counseling statement or a quarterly evaluation or a training plan. Or maybe leaning back in it while he bullshits with Sam or Dugan or Rhodes or First Sergeant. In every case, he’s young and strong and healthy and purposeful. He’s a man who loves his work, who lives for it, who’s goddamn good at it -- the best at it. It burns through him like a hot lance, because it’s so fucking far from where he’s fallen, so pathetically, unbearably far that it hurts. Bucky clenches his teeth and jerks his head sharply to the side, like he’s trying to work out a crick in his neck.

“You okay?” Scott asks.

“Fine.”

Scott doesn’t look especially convinced, but he still rolls into the spiel about the limits of confidentiality and hands Bucky the clipboard with two papers attached to it. Bucky’s seen both enough times to know that one’s for depression and the other’s for PTSD. He fills them out carefully and honestly, shaking out his hand as it cramps and fails half way through the longer one. He’d switch to the left, but it’s no better. Not with the way his forearm healed — or failed to heal properly because of his negligence.

He passes the clipboard back to Scott when he’s finally done, and Scott scans down each page, nodding slowly and uttering the occasional “okay.”

“So, you’re having some thoughts about killing yourself or thoughts that you’d be better off dead?”

Bucky blinks through the bluntness of the question. It’s a hell of an opening salvo, he thinks, before remembering that he’s not here to fight.

“Not killing myself,” he clarifies.

“You have a history of suicide attempt, correct?”

Bucky’s mouth quirks, and in the deepest reaches of his memory, something terrible stirs. “I don’t know about that. I just wanted to drink until something irreversible happened, I guess.”

“So you did or didn’t drink with the intent to kill yourself? Just so I’m clear.”

Bucky’s not sure if he could ever offer any clarity on what he did in that Holiday Inn five months ago. After all, it’s hard to be clear on something you can’t even remember. He recalls flashes of it, peaks of sobriety that usually happened only when he woke up in the various places he passed out. Slumped against the headboard of the bed. On the bathroom floor, draped over the toilet. He recalls a whole lot of not giving a shit, interspersed with moments of sheer terror that he’d quickly douse with more vodka.

“I don’t know. I just wanted everything to stop. And, I mean, it almost worked. I guess I briefly died on the way to the hospital or something.”

“When was the last time you thought about actually killing yourself?”

“If you count that, end of April, I guess.”
Bucky looks down at his hands, which are joined loosely on his lap. He looks at the scars on them and remembers the scars on his arms and on his back. On his legs. On his ass. Other places he chooses not to name. He remembers how ugly he is just underneath the cotton, and he’s not sure why he so easily forgets, even after all this time. Maybe because he still closes his eyes when he washes and dresses himself and has gone back to sitting down to pee so that he doesn’t have to touch himself, even though doing so painful and laborious. Maybe because he’s so detached from himself that if he didn’t have the pain to remind him of his battered body, he’d almost forget he had one at all.

“I don’t want to kill myself,” Bucky repeats. “But I think it might not be the worst if I suddenly died or something. I’d be okay with that. If a meteor fell out of the sky and landed on me, that would be fine.”

Scott jots something on one of the measures. “Right now you’d be okay with that?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

It’s oddly thrilling to say it, like there’s a nervous, wounded bird flapping around in his stomach. He didn’t think that honesty could be exhilarating, especially this grim, bleak brand of it. He reads Scott’s face for signs that he’s made a terrible mistake, but he doesn’t find any.

“So, you’re depressed.” Scott holds up the clipboard, showing him the shorter of the new measures. “Quite a few twos and threes here.”

“Yeah, but it’s not awful. It’s just how I am. It’s been this way since I got blown up. It’s normal now.”

“Is that something you’d like to work on in therapy?”

Bucky shrugs. “I guess.”

“Is there something else more important?”

“I think I have a meeting with the PTSD people here.”

Scott swivels in his chair and logs onto his computer. He clicks around until he says “Yep. Next Tuesday.”

“But not drinking is the most important thing. More important than that other stuff.”

“Have you been going to AA? That’s part of your plea agreement, right?”

“Yeah, there’s a fellowship near home that has a million meetings a day.”

It’s surely no coincidence that it’s within limping distance of their apartment. Steve thought of almost everything when he chose the place — everything except the liquor store and two bodegas he has to dodge to get to his meetings. And he dodges, all right. He crosses the same street four times just to avoid them. He’s too scared not to be completely paranoid about relapsing. He harbors a vivid fantasy of him slipping into the liquor store, buying a bottle of Smirnoff, and glugging it down right there on the sidewalk without even the decency to wrap it in a paper bag. Drinking and drinking until it’s dripping down his chin and burning down his throat and corroding his insides. The image is frightening and exciting and too enticing to hold comfortably.

“How’s it going?” Scott asks. “Do you have a sponsor?”
Bucky rolls his eyes. “No.”

He can’t help it – it’s the three hundredth time someone’s asked him that in the past week. Every meeting, every day, some grinning bozo accosts him after a meeting and asks if he needs a sponsor. No matter how fast he tries to get away, no matter how cold he schools his expression to be, he can’t shake their tiresome do-gooding.

A sheepish smile spreads on Scott’s face. “Okay, sorry, I’m getting a little ahead of myself. Hold on.”

He lays the clipboard down and pulls a legal pad from the top drawer of his desk. Next to his monitor, there’s a picture of a little girl dressed in a dinosaur costume, her hands curled into claws, teeth bared. Scott’s left hand is glaringly ringless, and there’s a fading tan line that suggests it might have been different this summer. If the guy is heartbroken over it, he sure doesn’t look it. Except maybe around the eyes. That’s where Steve keeps his quiet suffering. God knows none of it ever comes out of his stubborn mouth.

“I’m gonna ask you some more questions that didn’t get covered in your initial intake before you went to residential,” Scott says, clicking his ballpoint a few times.

“Ohkay.”

“What’s your ethnic identity?”

“White, I guess.”

“If, I mean, what’s your heritage?”

“Irish. And Scottish, maybe? Maybe something else. I didn’t know my grandparents on either side.”

“No? Why’s that?”

It was always just the way things were. Christmases, Thanksgivings, birthdays, it was always just the four of them, an almost-fire team of Barnes-Buchanans in their Army-issued house in whatever godforsaken shit hole state Uncle Sam dropped them in. Bucky would ask about his grandparents sometimes. So would Erik. Other kids at school had them. Sometimes four of them. Were theirs dead? Did they live too far away? Could they visit? And Winnie would look at his dad and bite her lip, and his dad would say that it’s a long story and that they were doing just fine on their own, weren’t they?

“We were our own family, I guess,” Bucky tells him.

“You and your parents and your…”

“Brother. Sister now. She’s transgender.”

“And what’s your gender identity?”

For a moment, Bucky doesn’t even know how to respond. Not because he doesn’t know, but because he’s never been asked quite that way.

“Man. Male. I’m not like my sister or anything.”

Scott nods. “Okay, and what’s your sexual orientation?”

If the gender question threw him off balance, this one catapults him off a cliff into a freefall of sheer
anxiety. His mind scrambles to grasp at any good reason for the question, and he can’t think of any except that Scott somehow knows, that he can read Bucky’s gayness despite all his years of scrupulous concealment.

“Why?” Bucky asks.

“Why?” Scott repeats, like he’s never uttered the word before.

“Why do you want to know that? Why’re you asking me that?”

“I ask all my patients.”

“Why didn’t the other social worker ask me?”

“It’s not part of the standard intake, but I think it should be.” Scott rocks back in his chair, impersonating coolness in a way that doesn’t quite ring true. “You don’t have to answer.”

“Well, that would be pretty fucking obvious, wouldn’t it? If I didn’t answer.”

The only people who wouldn’t answer are people like him. People who crawl in the shadows and hide their affection and their feelings and their fucking and the mere fact of their existence. To not answer would be to answer, even when Scott gives him the chance to pass, because maybe he’s just a private guy who doesn’t ever talk about sex.

“Do you have to put it in my record?” Bucky asks quietly.

“No, that wouldn’t be.” Scott writes “S/O No” on his notebook in quick shorthand.

“What kind of residence are you currently living in? Apartment, house, something else?”
“Apartment.” Bucky frowns. “That’s it? You’re not gonna ask me any more about that stuff?”

Scott tilts his head. “Do you want me to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is that something you might want to talk about in therapy?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think you can help.”

“Help with what, in particular?”

“I hate that I’m... that way. I keep trying to change it, but it seems to be here for good.” Bucky shifts in his seat, stretching his right leg out, cringing as he pushes through the stiffness. He gives it a few moments to settle, for the lock on his joint to loosen. He speaks the rest wistfully, like a confession. “It’s been weird, though, because I haven’t been interested in sex or anything since deployment. I used to think about it all the time. I used to do it all the time.” He shrugs again, but his shoulders are so tense that they barely move. “Even just... with myself.”

Scott swivels back to his computer and starts clicking around Bucky’s chart. He seems to find what he’s looking for and scrolls down the page. “You had a pretty extensive genital injury, right?” Again there’s that tone, that spurious nonchalance, that effortful ease. It’s the tone therapists and doctors get when Bucky tells them that he’s missing over half his dick or that he shot and ran down children with Humvees when maybe he didn’t actually have to.

Bucky leans in to see what’s on Scott’s screen. “It says that?”

There’s a list of service-connected injuries, each with a percentage attached to the end: Loss of motion, finger (10%) Leg muscle injury (25%) Deformity of penis (10%) Loss of testicle (0%) 3rd degree burns (10%) Superficial scars (10%) Post-traumatic stress disorder (50%) Limitation of flexion, knee (30%) Limitation of flexion, foot (20%) Limitation of flexion, hand (10%) Limitation of motion, forearm (15%). Somehow, it all equals 100% service connection. VA math, he was told. Somehow this all makes sense to someone.


Bucky’s hands reflexively gather over his groin. “Yeah. It’s bad. It’s gross.”

“Have you been connected to endocrinology yet?”

“No.”

“I’m wondering how your hormone levels are. That could affect your libido. It might also explain some of the depression and the low energy.”

“Maybe...” He knows the answer is really “probably.” He hasn’t felt the same since Khalidiya, like there’s something missing. Some vital energy he’s lost. The subtle vim that makes colors pop and makes other people interesting.

Scott’s face brightens. “Have you ever been to a lesbian, gay, and bisexual AA meeting? There’s one I know of that meets in Chelsea.”

Scott clicks around on Google Maps, zooming in on Chelsea, then zooming in further to the border between Chelsea and The Village, to the LGBT Community Center. Bucky makes a sour face when Scott goes to street view, exposing a red brick building with an ominous rainbow flag hanging from
“I’m not into that stuff,” Bucky tells him, eyeing the picture warily.

“LGBT stuff?”

“I don’t wanna be around all those gay people. Gay men, especially. They’re annoying. Superficial. Bitchy.”

Scott pauses for a moment, tapping his hand thoughtfully on the armrest of his chair. “Have you ever been friends with a gay man?”

Bucky’s thoughts drift uptown, up and over to 1 Central Park West, up a fancy elevator to an apartment with a view that he couldn’t ever imagine getting used to. He remembers the steel gray and blue, the pewter faucets, the granite counters, the California king bed. He thinks about the man who lives there — if he still lives there. The ease with which he smiles and laughs and touches and talks about his goals like there’s nothing that could ever stop him from reaching them. Bucky remembers his voice, concerned and hopeful in the messages he left, the messages he deleted, and shame floods him.

“Briefly.”

“And was he annoying, superficial, and bitchy?” Scott asks.

“No.”

“What would you say to trying out that AA meeting a couple of times to see how it feels? Just to see.” Scott raises his eyebrows eagerly, so fucking sincere that Bucky’s embarrassed for him.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think hating yourself like that contributed to your drinking?”

“Wouldn’t you drink, if you hated yourself?”

To his credit, Scott doesn’t take the bait. “Maybe addressing that is going to help your sobriety.”

Bucky sighs and rakes a hand through his hair. “I guess.”

“That meeting runs every Friday.” Scott checks his watch. “If you leave here by eleven thirty, you could make it to the one today.” He clicks around the map a few more times, squinting at the screen. “Looks like the L train goes right there from 1st Avenue.”

“How do you know so much about it?”

“You’re not the only gay veteran in the VA, believe it or not. Not even the only gay veteran in recovery. Not even the only gay veteran in recovery who I’ve worked with this year.”

Bucky snorts at the unlikelihood. “Do I have to go?”

“Nope.”

“You’re not gonna tell my probation officer that I’m being uncooperative or something?”

“Nope.”
Bucky holds up his right index finger, the one that’s inherently serious by virtue of having been sheared off of him by shrapnel and sewn back on. “I’ll try it once. If I hate it, I’m not going back.”

“Sounds good.” Scott’s poking around his chart again, clicking through tabs, eyes narrowing as he scans each one. “I’m gonna put in a consult to endocrinology. They’ll give you a call to set up an appointment and get some labs done. And it looks like you’re not on any psych meds right now. Would you like to be connected to psychiatry to look into something for depression or any PTSD stuff? The nightmares?”

“I don’t want meds. I don’t want anything messing with me. I wanna be clear. I wanna know what’s left over, now that I’m not drinking…”

Bucky cuts himself off before he commits himself any further into the terrifying wasteland of his life without alcohol. Because he’s not actually sober right now. He knows that. He hasn’t been drinking, but he hasn’t really started recovery. He’s just backed into a corner by the promise of consequences, quietly scouting the room for ways to get back to the thing he still seems to love the most, even after everything it’s cost him.

“I can understand that,” Scott says.

Bucky scrubs his hands over his face and heaves a breath into them. He’s not sure how this session went so off the rails. How it got so painfully honest. Christ, he didn’t even know he was feeling this way in the first place, because he was just fucking fine when he woke up this morning. He’s just been keeping his head down, going to his meetings, trying to help around the apartment, trying to keep tabs on Steve, trying to be available for his ma, trying not to get too upset about Rikki continuing to ignore him, trying to be fine and normal and grateful.

“I don’t get it,” Bucky says, letting his hands fall back onto his lap. “I felt pretty good in rehab. Now everything feels crappy again. It feels impossible again. I wonder if this is just how things are gonna be from now on.”

“People can fall into a slump after residential treatment. That’s why we try to pick you up pretty fast on the other side.” Scott logs off his computer and angles his chair so that he’s facing Bucky again. He’s got an earnest twinkle in his eye, like he still doesn’t know he’s the only one in this room holding hope.

“Fortunately, this is all stuff we can work on, and I also think that if you find a really good sponsor, you could do some really great work on a lot of it in AA.”

“Are you, like, paid by AA or something?” Bucky gives a wry smirk. “Or maybe you’re an alcoholic, too.”

Scott waves it all off. “Nah. I’ve just seen a lot of veterans do really well with it.”

“Seems like a racket to me.”

“Maybe you just haven’t found the right group yet.”

“If you think the ‘right’ group is gonna be the gay group,” Bucky warns with a pair of stiff air quotes, “you’re wrong.”

Scott smiles. “Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not. Just try to keep an open mind, okay? You’ve got nothing to lose.”

Bucky might have a little something to lose now. He’s not rock-bottom anymore. He’s done good
work. He’s got people counting on him. He can’t run and hide anywhere, because he’s pretty sure that Steve would walk away cold from his brand new job and hunt him down like a fucking bloodhound, until he ground himself down to dust. He’s got some things now, small but real things, so maybe he should try to show up for life for a little while.

But he sure as shit isn’t gonna go commune with the rainbow brigade today. He’s had his fill of confessing his self-loathing bullshit to nosy strangers, and all he wants now is a good, long nap.

Bucky limps out of his appointment with Scott with a follow-up scheduled for a month from now. He stands in the foyer at the front entrance and waits, and it’s like Fort Bragg all over again. Except the Steve who comes to pick him up isn’t the composed lieutenant who came to collect him from that Army hospital. He’s the harried, exhausted temp worker who sits on the couch and stares at the wall when he thinks he’s alone, who paces the apartment at night and wakes up gasping or gagging while Bucky listens from his room, eyes wide and sheets clutched in his weak fists.

But still, when Steve pulls up in his blue Corolla, Bucky’s happy to see him. He’s always happy to see him, at the very least to know he’s still vertical, and the feeling seems mutual.

“How’d it go?” Steve asks once Bucky’s buckled in. He looks pretty good today, sharply dressed and alert. A venti Starbucks coffee cup sits in Steve’s spot between them, always the cup holder closest to the shifter. There’s a second cup in the spot behind it, a grande, and Bucky carefully handles it and pries off the lid to find a pile of whipped cream and something brown dusted atop.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Hopefully?”

“Fuck. I’m trying not to get any fatter than I already am.” Bucky says it, but he still darts his tongue out to lick off a glob of whipped cream, because he can’t help himself and has given up wondering when he’s ever going to stop craving sugar like a fiend.

“There’s no dimension in this universe where you’d be considered fat,” Steve tells him as he pulls out onto 23rd Street to head toward FDR Drive.

“Says you. I’ve never seen an ounce of fat on your body.”

“It’s not a competition.”

“Still. I’ve gotta stop.”

Bucky feels along the waistband of his pants and pinches the fat he finds there. It’s not much, but he’s never had fat like this before. He went from skinny to lean with intermittent spells of being jacked, whenever he could manage it. This is all new. Being weak is new. Being disabled is new. Having flab, no matter how modest or reasonable, is new.

“Food isn’t the worst vice you could have right now,” Steve reminds him gently.

“That is very true.” Bucky carefully presses the lid back on the cup and takes a sip. It’s incredible and delicious and exactly what his first booze-free November requires. “God, I do love eggnog.”

“I know.” Steve’s demeanor shifts abruptly, brows drawing inward. “Damn it. I didn’t even think that it might be triggering for you.”

“I’m not addicted to eggnog lattes. I’m addicted to vodka.”
“I know, but it was thoughtless of me.”

“It was sweet of you. I had a shitty session. I needed this.” Bucky smiles against the lid of his cup. “Guess you knew.”

Steve looks doubtful. “What was shitty about it?”

“Just… A lot of stuff came up that I didn’t think would come up. That’s all.”

“I wish I could stay home with you.”

“I’m fine, Steve. It’s fine. Everything’s good. And this is great. Thank you.” Bucky lays his left hand on Steve’s shoulder and gives a little squeeze into the tight muscle beneath. Bucky has tried not to touch him too much, but it’s hard. It’s another want that Bucky swats away. It’s safer. For both of them. Isn’t it?

Steve’s jaw ticks, and he gives a stiff smile. Bucky releases Steve’s shoulder, letting his hand slide down Steve’s upper arm, lingering until he reaches the angle of Steve’s elbow before pulling away and cupping his drink. He takes another sip and looks out the window at the sprawling Con Edison power plant, wishing that Steve could stay home with him, too. Maybe they could just sit on the couch together, Bucky on one side, Steve on the other. Maybe watch TV. Maybe read. Maybe get Steve to do anything except work around the apartment or work on his work, which he always brings home and clearly struggles to do, if the frequent cursing under his breath is any indication.

“Wanna grab Thai tonight?” Bucky asks.

“Sure.”

“Maybe we could actually go there. Eat there.”

Steve shakes his head. “I think… I have to work, I think. Maybe some other time. There’s just a lot to learn right now.”

It’s a load of bullshit. Steve can take over an hour to cook dinner — he most assuredly will, in fact. He just hates going out. He hates how small and crowded everything is. He couldn’t even stay through their meal last time they tried to go out to dinner. Barely touched his food. He was too busy looking around or trying not to look around. It was stressful and sad, and Bucky now resents himself for even asking.

“Okay,” Bucky says. “Take out, then?”

The relief on Steve’s face is palpable.

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November 13, 2009

It takes Bucky nearly twenty minutes to build up the courage to walk through the front door of the LGBT Community Center, all twenty spent freezing on the sidewalk across the street, shifting his weight with each sway of his indecision. He gave himself ample time for this predictable course, knowing he would psych himself out before even getting off the train. He was never more grateful for his slowness and the time it bought him, though perhaps the long minutes spent second and third-guessing himself were ultimately self-sabotaging. Another predictable pattern he can’t seem to shake.

He waits across the street until there’s a decent influx of folks, seeping through the entrance with
them, and he follows them up to the mezzanine, taking each stair painfully slowly, to a large room
with rows and rows of chairs — so many that he pauses to wonder if he’s in the right place. Surely
there can’t be this many gay alcoholics in the entire state, let alone on Manhattan Island.

But as Bucky watches the room fill from the very back row, fill so full that he can’t even get a space
between himself and the sturdy woman next to him, he finds himself proven spectacularly wrong.
The room is sparking with energy, with laughter and fond conversation, the type that cranks up his
anxiety and makes him feel like even more of an outsider than he already does. There are gay men
everywhere, talking with their hands and their lilting cadence, wearing pants and shirts that are a little
too tight in the crotch and ass. He’s gripped by the frightening realization that they all know who he
is — what he is — by the mereness of his presence here at this meeting. He wonders if they’ll peg
him as gay or bi and hopes for the latter just as fervently as he’s wished it for himself so many times
in his life. The self-consciousness hits hard, the feeling of drab ugliness, the gripping sureness that
they all know he’s damaged, half-castrated, empty and neuter. He feels it every time he gets in a
room with other men. He thought it couldn’t get worse than when he’s at the VA, but it turns out he
was wrong.

Bucky doesn’t have long to wallow in insecurity before the young woman at the front calls for quiet.
Her request is echoed, barked out by one of the men, a bald, mustachioed dead ringer for an old
timey strongman. The room falls into silence, and the woman opens the meeting in a thick Slavic
accent.

“This is the Village Agnostics meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. I’m Wanda, and I’m an alcoholic
and an addict.”

“Hi, Wanda,” the group replies in unison.

For the first time since Bucky woke up this morning, he feels a momentary break in the constant
thrum of his worry. He had no idea Scott was sending him to a bunch of gay nonbelievers. He’d
thank God right now, if he believed in such a thing.

“Let’s open the meeting with a moment of silence, followed by the Serenity Prayer.”

Around Bucky, people close their eyes. Some bow their heads. He’s always liked this part, even
back in the Army. Whenever the chaplain came around to bless some ridiculous event or another,
like some high ranking officer’s promotion ceremony, Bucky loved looking around to see who else
had lost their faith in God — or never had it in the first place. He remembers the other godless
soldiers very well. Parker was one. Foggy was another. Rumlow went through the motions of prayer
but was most likely only playing at pious.

Steve always bowed his head. Bucky has never known that side of him in any real way. He could be
a lapsed Catholic or a true believer, for all Bucky knows, and the sudden realization that he has no
idea which one it is sits uneasily with him. He should know. As his friend, Bucky should at least
know that.

Wanda starts in at “Grant me the serenity,” skipping over “God” entirely, and Bucky mumbles the
rest of it along with all his fellow drunks. She then reads the AA preamble, reminding them that all
they need to be part of AA is a desire to stop drinking, and Bucky gets detoured there by the
question of how strong his desire to be sober actually is. He wonders if he’d be in AA at all if the
court didn’t require it of him. He wonders if he’d have alcohol in his room, maybe hidden at the
bottom of his hamper or shoved between the mattress and the box spring….

There’s a different voice now, a middle-aged man reading the requisite “How it Works” statement.
It’s clearly not his first time; his voice is resonant and sure, and every word cuts clean through the
room. Rarely have they seen a person fail who’s actually tried this AA bullshit. All your other efforts to stop drinking have been in vain. Alcohol is cunning, baffling, powerful, and all you have to do to get sober is be honest and earnest and fearless and every other quality Bucky is terrible at being.

“Is there anyone who’s at this meeting for the first, second, or third time?” Wanda asks after the grim preamble is finished.

One guy raises his hand and introduces himself as Alex. Even now, even though it’s not his Alex, the name sends a shudder through Bucky. Part of that shudder is disgust and shame, but another part is squarely somewhere on the excitement spectrum, which is enough to make Bucky feel not a little ill.

Wanda’s looking at him now. Straight at him. She says, “Anyone else here for the first, second, or third time?” and Bucky takes his cue.

“Jamie,” says with the lazy raise of his less damaged hand. “Alcoholic.”

“Hi, Jamie,” the room says.

Wanda gives a subdued smile. “Welcome.” Her attention shifts back to the room at large. “This meeting gives out chips for periods of sobriety. If you’re celebrating a birthday this week, please come up and get a chip when your time is called. 30 days.”

A couple of people climb through the rows and head to the front of the room. There are enthusiastic claps for them as they collect their chips from a tall, thin man wearing blue nail polish.

“60 days.”

The room claps once. There’s another scattering of takers.

“90 days.”

The room claps once.

“Six months.”

Clap.

“Nine months.”

Clap.

“One year.”

Clap.

Wanda and the room go through two, three, four, five, ten, and fifteen years, announcing and clapping and handing out chips. Bucky keeps his hands at his lap, his left over his right, unwilling to bring them together to draw attention to them and to himself.

“Anyone over fifteen years?” Wanda asks. She gives a cursory scan of the crowd before settling it on an older man in the second row from the front. She smiles at him, and he raises his hand high into the air.

“Hank,” she says.
His name is echoed as a whoop in a dozen voices scattered through the room.

“I’m Hank, I’m an alcoholic,” he says. Like Wanda, his accent is thick, but it’s very New York, like Steve’s gets when he’s really tired. Maybe Queens, maybe Brooklyn, maybe Staten Island. Bucky still isn’t very good at telling the difference.

“Would you like to say a few words for us, Hank?” Wanda offers.

Hank rises and walks to the front, his gait stiff but still energetic. He wears what a regular older guy might wear, slacks and a button down with a thick wool cardigan. There’s nothing particularly flamboyant about him. No paisley or flowers or pink. Blue fingernail guy lays the coin in the center of Hank’s outstretched palm, and Hank clutches it in his fist before turning to the room and speaking.

“This week is my thirty years sober. It would have been Howard’s thirty years, too. I thought that if I ever got here, Howard would be here with me. But that’s not how the universe decided to work, and so I’m here for both of us.” Hank pauses, and his lips bow up in a sad smile. “I’d like to tell you that being sober gets easier with every year. And sometimes it seems like that. But then life punches you upside the head, and it feels like the first year all over again. Sometimes the first week. White knuckling it, remembering how wonderful Bombay Sapphire tastes, how warm it makes you feel. Now that I’m alone, I’ve missed that. I’ve missed feeling warm. Nobody tells you how cold the bed is going to feel at night.”

The woman Bucky’s sitting next to lifts her hand to her chest. Bucky glances at her face, at her tremulous frown, her quivering lower lip. It feels too private to keep looking at, so he turns his attention back to Hank.

“But this is a place where I feel warm again,” he says. “With all of you. I remember when we started this group in 1988. We only had five people here. Me and Howard and three of our friends. We lost all three to AIDS within a year. So many men came into these rooms and then left so soon. They were so young. It was awful. We lost almost everyone. We watched our dearest friends waste away, and nobody outside the community cared because it was gay men who were dying. Some people were happy about it. Said we deserved it…”

Hank continues, but his words fade until they become a stream of muffled sound. A memory emerges, sharp and insistent, intrusive and terrible. Other memories like it stack atop it in a shuddering sequence that quickens Bucky’s breath and makes him feel hot and claustrophobic. The fear coalesces with a stinging tang of anger, anger at himself, anger at who and what he is, anger that he even came here in the first place, that he listened to Scott-fucking-Lang, the idiot social worker who thinks he knows the first thing about what Bucky’s gayness means to him. Finding peace with himself, sobriety, getting better, it all seems abruptly meaningless and futile and entirely unworthy of the suffering, and he begins to search the room, scanning for the doors, wondering which one would be the least embarrassing to limp to in the middle of Hank’s speech, and he looks down the row at all the people he’d have to stumble past, all the knees he could knock with his cane, and the anger compounds over the fact that he’s thirty fucking years old and an unfixable wreck of scars and damage, and—

“You look spooked, son.”

Hank’s words are distinct again, and judging by the way he’s staring through the rows, straight at Bucky’s blanched face, those words are for him.

“It’s not always this morbid, I promise,” Hank tells him, then looks to others in the room. “We have fun here, don’t we?”
There’s a raucous, affirmative reply, and Bucky swallows heavily. Hank gives a warm smile that lands on him for a few long moments, then he speaks again.

“Thanks to all of you for making this group my family. Thanks to my dear Wanda for secretarying. Thanks to my higher power for getting me into these rooms today, because I didn’t want to be here today. But I’m glad I came. So thank you.”

“Thank you, Hank,” Wanda says, then gestures to a table at the back of the room. “We brought cake.”

“I see that. Thank you.”

Hank takes his seat again, and Wanda does the bit about AA being fully self-supporting while two coffee cans make their way around the room. Bucky reaches into the pocket of his leather jacket and pulls a couple of ones he stashed there for this purpose. Wanda goes on to ask about new business, including the Thanksgiving potluck, and some lady talks about The Grapevine while Bucky’s nervous system settles down. Of course, he somehow forgot about one of the worst parts of every AA meeting until Wanda announces it — when they all have to get up out of their chairs and hold hands in a big circle. There’s no opting out of it. No one does. Ever. And so Bucky shuffles awkwardly against the wall, ensuring that he situates himself between two women, and reluctantly offers his hands to them. They recite a prayer that Bucky’s never heard before, one trading out any mention of a god with “higher power,” and he doesn’t even try to mumble along because all he can think about is how the woman on his right must be able to feel the seam where his finger was sewed back on.

Bucky can’t pull away from her fast enough when it’s all over, even though it earns him an affronted look, and he shoves through the mass that’s already gathered near the cake table, blocking the exit. Any other day he would have been tempted to stop, as if the half-eaten bag of Swedish Fish in his pocket hasn’t given him enough sugar today, but he makes his way to the stairwell and takes them as fast as he can, adrenaline helping him push past the pain. He blows past the front desk, ignoring the volunteer’s wish that he has a good day, and he doesn’t stop until he’s out on the sidewalk, cold air hitting and enveloping him in a way that feels so good that it takes him far too long to remember that he has to get his goddamn paper from his parole officer signed to prove that he attended.

Bucky looks back at the front door and swears under his breath. He’ll be fucked if he’s gonna go back in there, so he settles for shivering in front of the building for thirty minutes until Wanda finally makes her way out and over to where a small crowd of smokers is gathered near a rainbow-painted cigarette butt receptacle by the curb.

He gets her attention as she’s pulling a pack of Marlboro menthols from her purse, long auburn hair falling down the sides of her face like a curtain.

“Can you sign this?” he asks, holding out a crinkled piece of paper and a pen toward her.

She doesn’t take it right away. Not until she puts a smoke between her lips. “Ninety in ninety?” she mutters around it.

“Yeah.”

She looks over the list of signatures and dates. “Did you need a sponsor?”

Bucky shrugs one shoulder. “I suppose. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if you need a sponsor?”
“I don’t know if I want one from here.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know how I feel about being here.”

“In AA, or with us queers?”

Bucky winces at the word, one he still can’t get used to hearing as anything different from a slur. “Both.” He gestures to the pack of cigarettes Wanda is trying to put back in her bag. “May I?”

She holds out the pack to him, and he struggles to get a good grip on one, fumbling until he’s warm with embarrassment and she takes pity on him, easily pinching one by the filter and giving it to him. She lights it for him and then lights her own using a hot pink Bic with the child safety pried off.

“You just move here?” she asks.

“From here. I just got out of residential.”

“Are you here to actually work or just to get your papers signed?”

It comes out weak and reflexive. “I want to be sober.”

The corner of Wanda’s mouth flits into a smirk as she takes a drag on her cigarette. “But you don’t want a sponsor,” she says after blowing the smoke over her shoulder.

Bucky sighs and takes his own long pull, exhaling out of his nose. “I guess I need one.”

“Hank’s in the market for someone. You should ask him.”

“What about you?”

“I already have three sponsees. Hank rarely sponsors anyone anymore. But he’s the best. He was mine.”

Bucky looks back toward the building, where Hank is standing and talking to a young guy with a neat beard. “I don’t know.”

“If you want to recover, if you really want to get better, Hank’s the person.” She points at Bucky with her cigarette. “He works well with guys like you.”

“Like me?”

“Guys who think they’re too good to be here.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Then what is it?”

Bucky touches his eyebrow, running his numb finger over the length of it as he tries to think of a neutral way to tell her that he doesn’t particularly want the emeritus king of the homos directing his sobriety.

“Just the whole gay thing,” he says.

Wanda nods in a way that’s unexpectedly knowing. “I couldn’t be honest with myself, true to
myself, until I started working with Hank. He helped me with that. Because if you can’t be honest and true with yourself, you’ll never be able to recover.”

“Is—was Howard his…” Bucky trails off when his words fail him, though not for want of options. Boyfriend. Partner. Lover. Companion. He doesn’t speak this language, never really has, and he feels stupid trying.

“Husband. They got married in Massachusetts when it became legal. They met at MIT back in the ’60s, so it was very fitting.”

Bucky rolls his next question around in his mouth, chewing on its bitterness, before finally asking it. “Did Howard die from AIDS?”

Wanda shakes her head and blows out a cloud of smoke. “Stroke. Back in March. It was very sudden. We were devastated.”

“Thank you for the cake, Wanda.”

Bucky turns toward the sound of Hank approaching, making space for him to slide in and wrap an arm around Wanda’s narrow shoulders. He gives her a paternal squeeze, and Wanda leans against him so he can kiss the top of her head. It takes Bucky back three weeks, to Steve and him in their apartment, Steve holding him so tightly, so warm through the weave of the ribbed sweater clinging to him. It was the only moment like that they’ve shared since he’s been back, and Bucky’s longing for more is confusing and troublesome, because he needs to have boundaries now. He should. He needs to at least try not to crash back into Steve, even though he wants to, because he has serious doubts that Steve could sustain the force of it. Bucky knows he’s hard to handle. He’s messy and intense, even at his best, and holding back is a consuming chore he’s only able to manage through retreating to his room and sitting on the edge of the bed while his emotions — the love and concern and frustration and fear — roil under his skin. He breathes through it and tries not to let his mind spin in catastrophic directions, to the place where he and Steve stay mired in awkwardness forever and neither of them get any better at living with themselves and each other.

“And remind me of your name,” Hank says to him. “Starts with a J.”

“Jamie.”

“He doesn’t have a sponsor yet,” Wanda says, looking up at Hank. “I told him you’re looking for someone.”

Hank makes a small sound of agreement. “I think it’s time I got back on the horse.”

“You two would be a good fit,” Wanda says, looking pointedly at Bucky.

“What do you say, Jamie? Wanna go for a test run?”

Bucky flicks his thumb against his cigarette repeatedly, even though there’s no ash there to fall. “What does that mean?”

“Oh, we’ll meet a few times, see if it’s a good fit. If it’s not, I can recommend you to someone else.”

Bucky looks down at his feet, at the black boots he spent nearly ten minutes tying this morning. They’re not particularly comfortable. In fact, they hurt. But they look good with the slim cut of his black jeans, and that’s worth the pain. That’s something he’s got going for him. Maybe the only thing right now. He wonders if maybe this is something else he could have going for him, because even though he hates the idea of Hank, Hank himself doesn’t seem too bad. He’s a wide-open door
just waiting for Bucky to pass through, an expectant energy charging the air, and even though Bucky has no faith in anything and barely trusts himself, he figures maybe this is something that was meant to happen.

“Sure,” he says.

Hank releases his hold on Wanda and reaches into his pocket for his phone. “Great. Let me get your contact info.”

Bucky pulls his phone and hands it to Hank to input his number. Even though he feels sore and self-conscious and anxious, there’s something else there, too. Something like relief — a very tenuous relief that’s dashed away by Hank’s next words.

“Oh, you got a text message from Steve. Something about groceries.” Hank looks up from Bucky’s phone. “Boyfriend?”

Bucky snatches the phone from Hank’s hand with unusual deftness and clicks off the screen before shoving it in his jacket pocket. “No.”

Hank makes a sound, but doesn’t push. “What days work best for you?”

“Whenever. I don’t work. Can’t,” he hastens to add. He gestures vaguely with his cane, as if that’s any explanation. He supposes it’s better than circling his index finger around his temple to signal that it’s really because he’s depressed and still has PTSD and is a dried out drunk who might only be sober right now because he’s scared of what’ll happen to his definitely-not-boyfriend if he goes back into the slammer.

Wanda looks him over in a piecemeal, evaluative fashion, from his bad leg to his cane to the scars on his chin and brow. “May I ask what happened?”

“IED.”

“You’re a veteran?” Hank asks. “What branch?”

“Army.”

Wanda gives Hank an indulgent look.

Hank replies with a small chuckle. “I’m guessing you and Howard might not have had the same MOS.”

“Yeah, not a lot of guys from MIT in the infantry,” Bucky says, though, to be fair, he did know one back in the Ranger battalion. A fellow biology guy named Bui who got half his jaw shot off after he joined up to pay off his student loans.

“I’m sure the science types all wish they were in the infantry,” Hank says.

“Then they’re fucking idiots,” Bucky spits, not even thinking that Hank might be talking about his dead whoever. His husband.

“Oh, you’re gonna be a fun one, aren’t you?” Hank decides.

Bucky’s not sure how to reply, so he takes a long drag off of what’s left of his cigarette, sucking the cherry down to the filter, then drops it on the sidewalk. He crushes it underfoot.

“Gotta go,” he says. “Groceries.”
“All right. I’ll call you tomorrow to check in, and we can arrange our first meeting.”

“You’re the boss,” Bucky says, then nods to Wanda. “Thanks for the smoke.”

“I’ll see you next week, right?”

Bucky gives a noncommittal grunt and heads down the sidewalk as quickly as he can safely manage. He doesn’t even care that he’s going the opposite direction of the train station. He’ll take a fucking cab, if he has to, and being a cripple does have its advantages in the cab-hailing department. He snags one fairly quickly and takes it to the Whole Foods at Union Square, where he white knuckles it past display after display of beer and wine, grabbing some staples, plus things he knows Steve likes — frozen berries for smoothies, whole grain pancake mix, grade B maple syrup, cucumber kimchi. He treats himself to some sort of enchilada casserole from the hot bar and, fuck it, he goes against his better judgment and also grabs a slice of pumpkin pie. It’s not like there’s any point anymore in trying to look attractive to anyone. It’s an old habit to break, though.

He eats his food in the dining area, barely tasting any of it, using it only to dull the unrelenting anxiety that being around both alcoholics and gays gives him. He’s left feeling full and dissatisfied and a little sick on the cab ride home, while his mind sinks deep into the past, meandering through salted and fouled fields he wishes he could leave behind for good.

On the bridge, he’s torn from his wallowing by a text from Winnie, inviting Steve and him to Thanksgiving on behalf of Rikki and Daisy. Bucky’s too overwhelmed with nervousness to be happy about it, and when he gets home, he rushes to put the groceries away so he can lock himself in his room, prop himself up against the headboard, and open up YouTube. He knows what search terms to type now — some combination of Iraq, Afghanistan, Army, Marine Corps, drone strike, haji or “dead haji,” firefight, killing, blowing up, Apache, Cobra, Warthog, Hornet, RPG. There are hours and hours of footage of American forces letting loose on the enemy with their .50 cals and missiles and mortars, all to the rapturous soundtrack of soldiers screaming, yelling, and swearing.

The really good shit can’t be found on YouTube, the stuff with the real guts and brains and scattered limbs. Bucky’s not always in the mood for it, but today he is. It’s the only thing that gets his blood pumping anymore, the only thing that gives him any sensation that’s even close to pleasure, fucking up as that is. It’s not like he gets off on it, because he doesn’t get off on anything anymore, but, Christ, at least it makes him feel something besides confusion and fear and self-loathing. He’s shielded this hideous part of himself from his own consciousness for so long. The part that loves the thrill of violence and destruction. The part that takes pleasure in watching shit blow up. Watching people blow up. The part that whoops ecstatically when an A-10 lays waste to the motherfuckers trying to take his men from him. The part of himself that sleeps right next to the part that hates the very same things, the part that agonizes and despairs over his role in stealing fathers from their children and children from their parents.

Bucky sits and lets that perverted, fucked part of himself revel in slaughter. He lets himself grin and cheer and shout “fuck yeah,” even though he knows he’ll feel like shit afterwards and vow never to do it again. It’s been worth it every time, because at least he gets to remember what joy feels like, even if it erodes a little of his humanity. And maybe that’s okay, because at least monsters can’t die from sorrow and shame like men can. Like he almost did. Like he might do one day. God knows he’s come close more than once.

So he rejoices.

———

“Steve?”
Steve looks up, squinting against the dual bombardments of the fluorescent lights above and the sun streaming in from the conference room windows. Hill’s staring at him. Everyone at the meeting is, except the blind guy whose name Steve can’t remember, even after nearly three weeks on the job. His eyes are hidden behind dark glasses and vaguely directed toward the carafe of coffee at the center of the table. There might be a look of longing there, a look Steve recognizes as his own from the moment he crawls out of bed each morning. He sees it in the mirror when he shaves. When he pulls down the skin on his cheeks to assess the weary redness in his eyes. A longing for energy, for something to drag him through the hours until he can get back home and collapse on the couch and try not to stay there too long because there’s dinner to make and work he couldn’t finish during the day and Bucky waiting, not asking for anything but expecting the lie Steve’s been telling with his expressions and his words — that things are okay and tenable and not collapsing in slow, terrible motion.

“Did you get the edits from Kamala?” Hill asks.

“I got them.”

“Can you get them incorporated into the executive summary before tomorrow?”

Steve gives a terse nod. Pain jabs into his temple like a hot spike. “Yes.”

One of Hill’s eyebrows arches in the subtle way it does when she’s not quite sure if she should call bullshit. Steve would almost prefer something more conclusive, a frown or a snort or a flight of sarcasm. Instead, she drops the subject and moves on to talk about Boko Haram. He tries to stay engaged. He tries to care as deeply about it as the subject deserves, especially given its relevance to his own region of interest. But his attention staggers around, landing on a stumble-through of the apartment, his room, the bathroom, where he tries to visualize some place where he might have some meds stashed. He used to be the type of guy who would prepare for an emergency, keep a reserve of sumatriptan with a note saying “order more!” But all he can see are empty blister packs tossed aside carelessly, one that dropped behind the microwave, two crinkled at the bottom of his night stand drawer.

And then people are rolling back their tall executive chairs and standing. A couple of them smile shallowly at him. Most ignore him. One guy looks at Steve and then another guy and makes some comment while shaking his head. The blind guy guides himself to the carafe, feels for it, and pours coffee into an empty mug that says “I run because punching people is frowned upon.” Steve can’t figure out how he always pours a perfect cup for himself, something he’s wondered far too often when he should be wondering about important things like the Islamic State.

Steve squeezes through the mulling chatters so he can get back to his desk, choke down some dry ibuprofen, and hold his head in his hands until some miracle allows the over the counter stuff to even touch the pain. He almost makes it back to his office when Hill calls after him.

“Steve. Wait up.”

His shoulders hunch, and he turns back toward the sound of her voice. It’s not even the second time he’s heard it today in that exact disappointed tone, and she stops in front of him, hand on her hip, portfolio clutched loosely to her chest.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah. Fine.” He’s squinting. He feels it. He tries not to. He must look ridiculous.

“You don’t look it.”
“Just a headache.”

“Why don’t you head home?”

Steve gestures with the briefing packet in his hand. “I need to finish this.”

“What were you doing all morning?” There’s nothing understated or passive about the question. It’s not even a question. It’s a barely-veiled accusation.

Panic unfolds while Steve tries to remember what he did before the meeting. He drove here. Parked in the garage. Somehow made it to the 34th floor. Maybe said hello to the receptionist, he’s not sure. Maybe he did it reflexively. His ma raised him to be polite. He went to his desk and sat, and he tried to remember what he put on the grocery list. Then he remembered the fight he had with Bucky this morning about who was going to go to the store, and Steve insisted, and Bucky told him it was stupid for Steve to go, and then Bucky dropped his coffee mug on the kitchen floor and yelled “fuck!” and Steve decided as he was cleaning it up that this was proof enough of why he should be the one to get the groceries, and Bucky told him that he could carry a fucking grocery bag, that he’s not a fucking invalid, and Steve took all the reusable bags they have and quietly stormed out and forgot to copy the list from the white board on the fridge into his phone. And then Bucky texted him a while later and said he took the train into Manhattan, knowing it would piss him off, because they’ve fought about it before. Steve just doesn’t want Bucky to have to walk up and down all those stairs, because it must take forever, and it must hurt, and Manhattanites don’t fuck around on the subway stairs, and Steve could just give Bucky a ride if he didn’t live to prove Steve wrong about everything.

And he remembered all that for, Jesus, how long? Longer than the actual fight took. Much longer. Then he checked some emails. He got one from Kamala telling him all the ways in which his summary was wrong, that the language was too curt and the bullets were too short and lacked “gravitas,” because at Human Rights Watch, even the bullet points should have gravitas.

“Just get it to me before noon tomorrow,” Hill says as she starts back to her office. “And go home. You look awful.”

The door to her office slams shut, and Steve’s heart launches up his throat. There’s only the blind guy in the hall with him, sweeping his cane in front of him as he walks. He smiles and greets Steve by name as he passes, and Steve stammers a response as he tries to figure how the guy knows it’s him. And Steve wonders if the guy can also somehow see the shame on his face, the shame of inadequacy over underperforming in the most basic administrative tasks. Emails. Bullet points. Briefing packets. It’s all bullshit, simple bullshit that he can’t seem to get right no matter how hard he tries.

Steve turns and ducks into the office he shares with an intern named Per who is perpetually absent. He shuts the door and leans against it, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back until it thunks on the surface. The pain is starting to verge on that point of unbelievability, the way it felt the very first day that Barton ordered him down to sick call, and he scrubs his hands over his face, combing through the mess of competing thoughts tumbling through his mind, trying to nail down the practical steps he needs to take to get out of here. The things he needs to collect. Laptop. Portfolio. Messenger bag. Phone. He has lunch in the fridge, but he’ll eat it tomorrow.

He entertains the idea of driving and just barely decides against it, because the worst slight he could give Sharon now would be to get himself killed and leave her alone with the baby. Not that he’s much good to either of them. Not that the money he’s started to send actually means anything beyond a statement of responsibility. He thinks sometimes that the kid might be better off without such a fuck-up for a parent, a guy who can’t even write a few bullet points without getting his ass
chewed. A guy who can’t remember a damn thing without writing it down. A guy who’s not only a temp worker but also shares a tiny office with a college kid who doesn’t even get paid.

He’s pretty sure Bucky wouldn’t miss him much. He barely seems to care that Steve’s around, most days. He’s polite and distant, when he’s not being an irritable prick, and even though Steve would never say it, the distance hurts. Bucky touching his shoulder over that fucking latte two weeks ago was the best thing that’s happened to Steve since they started living together. He holds the moment close, one of the few recent ones he remembers vividly, and selfishly wishes for more even though he shouldn’t. He has no right to ask or expect anything of Bucky. And so he doesn’t.

Steve feels around in his pants pockets for his phone and, when he finds nothing, searches through the drawers of his desk. He finds it under a notebook. There are no new notifications. He shoots off a quick text to Bucky letting him know that he’s coming home, and he receives a reply when he steps off the elevator on the ground floor that says, Sorry you’re sick :( see you soon.

The cab ride to Brooklyn seems unnaturally long, but at least he doesn’t have to move. He sits in the back seat with the heel of his hand pressed firmly into his left eye, because it seems to diffuse some of the pain there. When they finally get to Windsor Terrace, he tips the driver too much and shambles his way through the front entrance and to their door. There he stands, fussing with the shitty lock that needs to be finessed just-so, until it unlocks from the inside and Bucky’s there, face shifting swiftly into concern when he makes eye contact.

“Hey,” Bucky says, limping back to give Steve a wide berth.

“Hey.”

“Do you want me to get your meds?” Bucky asks, closing and locking the door.

Steve lays his bag on the kitchen floor and pulls off his coat, draping it over the back of one of the chairs at their small dining table. “I’m out.”

Bucky’s dark eyebrows draw together, making him look pensive and intense, and he glances over his shoulder toward his bedroom

“Hold on,” he murmurs.

He grabs his cane from where it’s resting against the wall and walks to his bedroom, his steps uneven against the creaking floorboards. He shuffles around in there, opening and closing drawers and saying “c’mon” in a low, frustrated voice. There’s one final slam, and then he’s back, holding a green plastic prescription bottle. A few pills rattle inside it and he hands it over to Steve.

“I found them when I was unpacking,” Bucky tells him, then quickly adds, “I swear I didn’t take any.”

Steve scans the label. James Barnes. Oxycodone and acetaminophen. Take 1-2 pills every six hours as needed for pain. 0 Refills. Christina Ervin, M.D.

“Take two now. You can probably take the other two in four or five hours,” Bucky says.

Steve gives the bottle a weak shake. He’s never taken anything like this before. Never had to. Never wanted to. He glances up at Bucky, who’s watching him expectantly.

“You sure you don’t want to keep them just in case?” Steve asks.

“In case I want to get high? No. Please take them. You actually need them.”
Bucky pivots and walks to the cupboard for a glass that he fills with tap water. He brings it back to Steve and holds it to him with the same hand he dropped his mug with this morning. It’s steady now. Sure and insistent. Steve lets that be enough to convince him, because if anyone knows real pain, it’s Bucky. He shakes out two pills into his hand and swallows them down with as little water as he can to appease his riotous stomach.

“Thanks.”

Bucky pries the glass from Steve’s hand. “Sure.”

“I gotta lie down.”

Steve starts toward his room, unbuckling his belt and pulling it off as he walks. Everything feels too tight, even his dress shirt, which he unbuttons and strips off when he gets to his hamper. He hears the footfalls of Bucky trailing after him, but he can’t care enough to feign modesty, so he drops his pants, steps out of them, and walks to his dresser in his underwear and white undershirt. From the doorway, Bucky looks at him and then abruptly away while Steve puts on his gray West Point sweatpants and a navy sweatshirt with Virginia written across it in orange.

“Do you want me to rub your head?” Bucky asks quietly. Cautiously. He’s still looking away, though not at anything particular.

Steve pauses, clumsily processing, and a “yes” teeters on the tip of his tongue while he looks at his bed. A plane of blankness expands through his mind, displacing his desires and objections and ambivalence.

“Or not,” Bucky mutters as he turns and limps back into the hallway, leaving Steve standing at his bedside, mute and empty.

Pain brings him back, the pulsing surge in his temple and his brow filling the emptiness. Steve presses his palm to the place it hurts most and wanders back through the apartment toward Bucky’s room. He passes the bathroom and walks through the kitchen, where he catches sight of Bucky in their modest living room, seated on the couch. He looks up at Steve with an unreadable, guarded expression, one he’s worn habitually since he moved in. Steve leans unsteadily against the door frame while the room shifts, pulling his arm close over his own waist while he presses his hand into his head.

On the couch, Bucky looks at the empty space beside him, a place where Steve might lay, if the thought alone didn’t fill him with such unnamable discomfort. But even still, he imagines what it would be like to lie down there, unsure and self-conscious of his size. He wonders how heavy his head might be on Bucky’s thigh, what it would be like to rest upon him, and he wonders why the notion makes him feel vaguely ill in a way that could be dread or longing or some confused amalgam of both.

Bucky then looks to the rug at his feet, the burgundy high-pile thing Steve inherited from Sharon when she decided she didn’t like the color for the baby’s room. It used to be their office. He remembers the thickness of the fabric under his soles and between his bare toes while he painted, back when he had something inside of him that was worth bringing forth onto canvas. Bucky spreads his legs into a wide V and pushes his hair back from his forehead in the compulsive way he does now. It’s been so long since his hair has been like this, like it was between his chin-length Kurt Cobain phase and his induction into the Army. When he first joined, Bucky never talked about how hard basic training was or how tough infantry school was. He talked about how horrible it was to lose his incredible hair, dark and thick and beautiful. It was a prelude to the battle he would continue to fight with Army regulation until the very end, the one battle he finally got to win.
Bucky gestures to the space between his legs, his eyes going soft, and Steve finally accepts the invitation. He walks forward and sinks to the floor in front of Bucky, sliding back close to the couch so that Bucky won’t have to strain to reach him. Steve tries to relax, even though he’s vibrantly aware of his position, with Bucky exposing the most vulnerable part of himself, one wound among so many that Steve can’t hold in his conscious mind because of how viscerally and existentially horrifying it is. His thoughts travel back there, even as he commands them away, and he swallows back a wave of sickness that is just as likely from his horror as it is from his migraine. He closes his eyes and tries to focus on the feeling of Bucky’s hands as they settle on his head.

“How do you want me to do it?” Bucky asks.

“Any way,” Steve replies as heat warms his ears and face. He leans forward enough to peel off his sweatshirt, stupid as it was to put it on in the first place, then leans back into Bucky’s touch.

“You should go to the doctor,” Bucky says, fingertips pressing slow circles into Steve’s temples. “For this. And other things.”

Steve opens his mouth to reply, to ask what other things Bucky’s talking about, but Bucky keeps going.

“Maybe get something for your sleep, too.”

“Do I keep you up at night?”

The pressure on Steve’s temples eases. Bucky is silent.

“That bad?” Steve asks.

“You should just go see someone.”

“I need to wait a little bit. Until I have some more money saved.”

It’s not that Steve hasn’t looked at how much it might cost to go to a general practitioner. He could get away with paying less than $200, if he didn’t need any tests or prescriptions. But his migraine meds alone will set him back $150 a month, and he’s not sure how to tell Bucky that all the money he thought he’d bring in from freelance translation work isn’t coming, because he can’t even focus enough to finish his regular work during business hours. He’s not sure how to talk about being such a failure. He never failed at anything before Iraq, except his relationship with Bucky and certainly with his ma, and he seems to be making up for lost time by failing catastrophically in every single domain of his life.

“Steve, I’ve got money. Let me help you.”

“No.”

“At least until you save up.”

Steve glares at the dim reflection of Bucky in the TV. “I said no.”

Bucky pulls his hands away and flexes them a few times, sighing loudly and saying “God” under his breath. He then firmly guides Steve’s head back so that he’s facing forward and starts massaging Steve’s scalp, clearly putting his frustration into it.

“How was your meeting?” Steve asks.
Bucky doesn’t answer right away, and it feels a little like a punishment.

“I have a sponsor, I think,” he finally answers. “Some old guy named Hank. I can’t tell if I hate him or really like him.”

Steve gives a fond snort, closing his eyes as a feeling of warmth begins to unfurl in his belly, pulling some of the pain into it and turning it into something pleasant. “That sounds about right.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

Bucky lets him get away with it, because Steve’s pretty sure Bucky knows what he’s getting at. Bucky lives in extremes — hate or love, perfection or disaster, sobriety or drunken mayhem. Maybe it’s what made him such an incredible leader in such a morally complex occupation, because he always knew the bottom line. He would piss on any mission, lay waste to the entire Middle East, if it meant getting his men home alive. Bottom line. No exceptions. Steve doesn’t know why he couldn’t be the same way. He doesn’t know why he insisted on nuance, why he demanded that from his men, when the result would be the same in the end. They still lost. They’re still pulling out of the region, and the whole place is going to collapse in the vacuum they leave behind, and everything — Trip’s death, Bucky’s injuries — will all be for nothing—

“I got some groceries.”

Steve makes a small sound of acknowledgment, tensing, leaning his head forward and away from Bucky’s touch. It’s too much. The anguish of loss, the futility and purposelessness of everything they did, of everything they sacrificed, it can’t live in the same place as Bucky’s caring hands. It can’t sit in the room with benign talk of chores. The incomprehensibility of their war is too stark and brutal, and Steve can’t decide if he’d rather scream or cry or collapse in despair. So he stays paralyzed by his indecision while Bucky’s voice goes soft, soothing him.

“You can’t do everything on your own, Steve. Maybe this is your body telling you to slow down.”

The movement of Bucky’s fingers shifts then, migrating to the front of Steve’s face, pulling him back. His fingers trace around Steve’s eye sockets, smoothing from the inside outward. He pauses at the juncture where the bone of Steve’s eye becomes the metal hardware installed there when his face broke. Bucky touches around it carefully, gently curious. That touch pulls Steve out of his listlessness, giving him something to focus on, something to ground him. He lets himself relax into it, lets Bucky touch his damage – the only part of it that can actually be touched. The rest of it lives so deep in Steve that he can’t even see it clearly. He only sees its ugly shadow streaking across his life. Across Sharon’s life and the baby’s life and Bucky’s life.

“I’m sorry I keep you awake,” Steve murmurs.

“Did…” Bucky pauses. “Were you sick last night?”

Steve hoped it wasn’t loud enough for Bucky to hear. He had just fallen asleep after hours of lying awake, and he dreamt about Trip again, as he often does. And when he startled awake, he tasted hot blood, salt and iron, and he stumbled to the bathroom — shit, he probably woke Bucky when he closed the door. He spit blood into the sink and gagged with disgust until he woke enough to realize that it was his own blood from where he must have bit his cheek in his sleep. He runs his tongue along the inside of his mouth, over the raw spot where a sore has formed.

“Maybe something I ate for dinner,” Steve says.
“We eat the same food. And it wasn’t the first time I’ve heard you.”

“It’s nothing.”

“What if you’re sick?”

“I’m not sick.”

“Then what is it?”

It’s a very fair question, one Steve can’t answer and doesn’t really want to know. He’s not sure if he’s more worried about it being physical or more worried about it being psychological. It feels like a creature sometimes, like a sentient toxin that lives in his guts, one that feeds on the horror of what happened to Trip and to Bucky and to that little girl and all the people and animals and homes they saw laid to waste by war. The horror awakens it, and Steve has to get it out, has to cough or gag or retch it up so that it can’t fester and consume him from the inside.

But that’s one more thing he can’t explain to Bucky. He can’t tell him that it’s always worst when he remembers Bucky getting blown up. That’s when he’s most apt to vomit, to sometimes heave so violently that it’s painful. It’s a powerful deterrent, but sometimes Steve can’t help it. Sometimes the memories are stronger than his already very strong aversion to puking.


“Stress about what?”

Steve hesitates, and Bucky’s hands go limp against his head.

“Is it me?” Bucky asks.

“No.”

“Is it work?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe it’s an ulcer or something.”

“I don’t think so.”

“But what if—”

Steve tenses again. “Leave it alone. Please. It’s fine.”

Bucky runs his fingertips over Steve’s eyebrows, slowly smoothing over them a few times. It feels good, nurturing and comforting, until those fingers move down Steve’s cheek in a way that’s most definitely a caress. Steve’s breath catches, and he holds onto it while Bucky’s hands come to rest, cupping his face.

“I want you to make an appointment,” Bucky says seriously. “I can help find a good doctor for you. Winnie will know one. She knows everyone.”

Steve’s hand twitches in his lap as he thinks about what it would be like to lay it over one of Bucky’s, to feel Bucky’s warm skin beneath his palm, feel the smooth flecks of raised scars beneath his fingertips. But imagining that inevitably makes him imagine all the shrapnel that was in there, that might still be in there, the incomprehensible damage all those little pieces wrought, and he has to
“drive the thought aside before it can turn into poison.”

“How do you feel?” Bucky asks

“Better.”

Bucky huffs a laugh. “That’s the good shit. The stuff I gave you.”

Steve checks in with himself. Certainly the pain is better, dulled into a floating sensation that’s spread from his stomach to his head, all the way down to his feet. But it’s more than that. It’s sitting here between Bucky’s legs, feeling Bucky’s hands and hearing Bucky’s words. It’s the closeness he hasn’t allowed himself to want too badly, because to ask anything from Bucky seems wrong and selfish and wholly undeserved.

“It’s not that,” Steve murmurs.

“No? Then what is it?”

“It’s just… This. This…” Steve heaves a frustrated sigh when his useful words evaporate. “I don’t know. It’s just this.”

“You’re getting kinda loopy, huh?” Bucky says.

“No,” Steve says firmly.

Bucky smooths his thumbs over Steve’s sideburns. “I never get to see you loopy. I’ve hardly even seen you drunk.”

“You’ve seen me drunk plenty of times.”

“No, but I mean really drunk. Goofy, sloppy drunk. God, I think the first time was my birthday…”

Bucky trails off abruptly, and the word *birthday* hangs heavily in the room.

“Sorry. I mean…” Bucky’s hands loosen on Steve’s face, but he doesn’t let go completely. “I don’t know why I’m apologizing.”

“I should be apologizing,” Steve murmurs.

Steve still flushes at the memory, even after nine years. He remembers the low lighting in the bar, a place that was probably hipster before the word even existed. It’s not like they were into that; it was just the only place that would serve them both underage. It was known for that, and that’s why Bucky chose it. They did shots, a bunch of them, and with each one, Steve was more grateful that it was just the two of them, because he was feeling odd that night. Off. And Bucky seemed off. Different. He looked different under those lights. He looked magnetic and handsome, and his smile — the way he smiled that night, smiled at Steve like they were orbiting the din of the bar on a planet of their own, his eyes so blue and alive and locked on Steve’s own — that is, until Bucky caught sight of some guy in a v-neck t-shirt tighter than Steve’s, wearing gray skinny jeans that left no room for Jesus in them, jeans that Steve could never pull off because he worked out so hard, and why wasn’t *that* appealing to Bucky — and oh, that thought hit him like a fucking freight train, and Steve got angry and told Bucky to put his eyes back in his head and just go get the guy’s number already so they could carry on with their night. And Bucky’s lips parted as his brow got heavy and serious, more heavy and serious than a drunken man’s face should ever get, which means that he probably wasn’t very drunk at all, knowing what Steve now knows.
Steve didn’t want to go home to his ma drunk. So Bucky took him back to his place so he could sleep it off, and the whole train ride back, Steve sat in the seat while Bucky stood over him, holding the rail, his pants just the right kind of tight, his crotch right there in Steve’s face, and Steve tried not to look but couldn’t help but glance down repeatedly as Bucky talked to him, and all he could think were filthy things, the filthiest things you should never think about your friend, things he never had the disinhibition to think about before, never so frankly, so vividly, so practically. They talked about sex sometimes, with the inflated affect that guys do. What they like, what they don’t like. Summaries of memorable encounters. Bucky endured Steve’s talk about girls with nonchalance, and Steve tried to do the same as Bucky confessed how he loves getting blown more than anything, how if he had a magic lamp and one wish he’d ask for a hot guy to magically appear and suck his dick every night before bed. They laughed about it then, but on that train, Steve was preoccupied by it, wondering what Bucky would look like completely naked and hard, wondering what kind of sounds he might make, what Bucky’s dick would taste like in his mouth, what his come would taste like, if he’d swallow it or spit it out, if he’d even be able to go through with it. What it would mean if he liked it. If they both liked it.

And during the whole walk from the train station to Bucky’s apartment they talked, but Steve was barely there, because all he could think of was how good Bucky’s cologne suddenly smelled, and why didn’t it ever smell that way before, and why did it make him want to press his face to Bucky’s neck and breathe him in. And so Steve asked if he could put his arm around Bucky, even though he’d done it plenty in the past without asking, and Bucky didn’t say anything for a whole block, maybe the longest block they’d ever walked. Instead, Bucky looked around, over his shoulder, across the street, once and then twice, and then he said yeah, okay, and Steve draped his arm around him and pulled him close, and Bucky’s arm came tentatively around his waist, and Steve’s heart slammed against his ribcage, and Bucky asked if he was okay, then joked about Steve being wasted. But still, Bucky’s hand gripped him harder and he relaxed a little against him, and Bucky couldn’t hide the tremulous waver in his voice and in his laugh as he tried to keep the conversation going, babbling about his microbiology professor’s penchant for bowties and barely making any sense while doing it.

And when they got to the apartment, Bucky shut the door behind them, and when he turned, Steve got close, backing Bucky up against the door, so close that their noses were almost touching, and Steve was dizzy from the shots and from his nerves and his frenzied thoughts from the train, and he dropped down to his knees, knowing it was insane but risking it anyway, and when he looked up at Bucky, Steve saw the terror in his face, the way he was pressed to the door, so Steve kept his hands to his side and didn’t touch him, because the last thing he ever, ever wanted to do was scare him or hurt him — and, Jesus, nothing was going the way he thought it might…. And when Bucky stammered a question about what the hell he was doing, Steve opened his stupid fucking mouth and said he wanted to give Bucky a blowjob for his birthday, since it’s the thing he likes the most, said that he’d been thinking about it the whole ride home, and Bucky shook his head hard and said that Steve was just drunk and that he didn’t want to do anything like that, reminding Steve that he likes girls and that this is just the tequila talking, and Steve sat back on his heels and argued back that he does like girls and that he wants to do this, too. And Bucky… God, he looked like he’d been shot, his mouth twisted into a pained grimace, and he straightened his posture, walked to the bathroom, and closed the door, leaving Steve on his knees on the linoleum floor groaning “fuck” into his hands at what a splendid moron he was, wondering how he could have been so wrong about everything.

He stayed there until Bucky came back to the kitchen. He’d changed by then into a pair of sleep pants and a t-shirt, and he coaxed Steve to his feet and gave him something similar to wear to bed. And Steve apologized, said I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry I— until Bucky cut him off and gave a dim smile and told him that it’s fine, that he knows Steve was just trying to be nice, and damn it, Steve couldn’t let it go at that, because he wasn’t just trying to be nice. And they stood there, looking
at each other, Bucky with his hands clenched at his sides, Steve with Bucky’s borrowed clothes hanging loosely in his, and Bucky said quietly that if Steve still felt the same way tomorrow, well, that would be another conversation entirely. And Steve changed right then and there and said he’d sleep on the floor, and Bucky told him not to be stupid and to get in bed, and Steve said he’d sleep on the edge, and he showed Bucky just how far over he’d sleep, and Bucky laughed and told him not to be weird and said it’s fine, Jesus, just be normal. And Steve was so tired, so frustrated and drunk and tired, that he was asleep before Bucky even turned the lights out.

And when he awoke the next morning, Bucky was already up, already showered and dressed and in the kitchen toasting a bagel. Steve shuffled to the kitchen and stood in the doorway. Looked to the place on the floor where he knelt the night before. Looked at the strained look on Bucky’s face. Remembered everything in painful, painful detail. Bucky kept it casual, like he meant to give him a pass, like maybe they could just forget that it ever happened, and Steve excused himself to the bathroom to stare at his haggard face in the mirror and ask himself what the hell he actually wanted. And the answer, it turned out, was simple. Completely clear. Irretrievably loosed by his bold, inebriated idiocy. So he washed his face, gargled some mouthwash Bucky kept under the sink, and went back to the kitchen to tell the truth.

He walked up to where Bucky was leaning against the counter, looking spooked but curious, and Steve said about last night, and Bucky waved him off and told him to forget it, and Steve said that he couldn’t, that he wouldn’t, and then he asked Bucky out to dinner. Like a date, he clarified. And Bucky tilted his head and searched his face for a long time, until slowly, very slowly, he smiled and said okay, and Steve asked if he could kiss him, and Bucky said yes, and Steve pressed his mouth to the stubble on Bucky’s cheek, carefully, deliberately, sweetly, and when he pulled back, Bucky didn’t speak. He just blinked and touched the place where Steve kissed him, stunned, and Steve will never, ever forget that moment, because it was their very first.

“Are you really sorry for that?” Bucky asks, sounding as uncertain now as he did back then.

Steve lifts his hand to touch Bucky’s, which is still resting lightly on his face. He traces over narrow bones, over the rise of his knuckles, down to the finger Maximoff handed him — handed him, like it was something Bucky had just accidentally dropped — and says, “No.”

That finger twitches, and Steve wonders if Bucky can feel his touch. It’s been so long since he’s asked about it, because it’s so unspeakably awful, but he should ask. Even if it fills him with nausea and despair.

“Are you okay?” Steve asks softly.

Bucky doesn’t respond right away, probably because he’s calculating his response. He’s always calculating now. Always modulating and attenuating. Steve’s not so obtuse that he can’t tell when he’s being handled with kid gloves, and he’s just about sick of it.

“Be honest,” Steve tells him. “Don’t bullshit me.”

“I’m just worried about you. I’m really worried about you. I think maybe you should go to the VA.”

“You hate the VA.”

“I don’t hate it. I just always have to do shitty things there.”

Steve thinks about the couple of times he went to the VA with Bucky. He remembers the haunted men there, the 30-year-old quadriplegics, the old Vietnam guys with amputations, the kids with walkers being trailed by their physical therapists. The people like Bucky.
“Other veterans deserve it more,” Steve says. “I don’t want to take anything from them.”

“Steve, Jesus, you have a fucking brain injury because of the Army. You probably have PTSD—”

“You don’t know that,” Steve objects.

“No, I don’t. You’d have to go to a doctor to find out what’s wrong with you. Stubborn f…” Bucky huffs and grips Steve’s face tight. “God, you’re stubborn.”

Steve’s eyes dart back and forth as he tries to work through the steps he might have to take to see someone there. He tries to remember the briefing he got before the Army threw him out. Tries to remember anything at all from it. He remembers the lady who taught it, with her big, blond Southern hair and impractically long fingernails. But he can’t recall a single, actionable word about the VA, even though they must have spent at least an afternoon learning about it.

Steve clenches his jaw. “I don’t even know how to sign up.”

“You go down there with your 214 and they sign you up right there.”

“You know what’s on my 214.”

“That doesn’t matter. The only thing they care about is if it was an honorable discharge.”

“I doubt that’s the only thing they care about.”

Bucky takes a deep, slow breath, the kind the Combat Stress Control shrinks used to teach them. The kind you use when you’re about to panic or lose your shit on someone. “Look, it’s just until you get insurance. Then you never have to use it again. Just for your headaches. You don’t have to make a big fucking deal out of it. You just have to show up and let them take care of you.”

Bucky’s obviously not going to let him excuse his way out of this one. And, really, he’s not wrong. But it doesn’t stop a hot surge of irritation over Bucky’s own stubbornness, which is at least as adamant and obnoxious as Steve’s own.

So Steve agrees. He says “fine” under his breath, and Bucky claps his hands firmly on Steve’s shoulders.

“Okay, get dressed. We’re going now.”

Steve cranes his head back and expects to find a smirk on Bucky’s face, but all he sees is the stone-cold, thousand-yard seriousness of a former sniper staring back at him. Steve tries to say that he left the car at work, and it comes out stuttered and clumsy, and Bucky’s already got his retort on deck.

“Then we’ll take the--”

“I’m not taking the fucking train,” Steve snaps. “Stop asking me to.”

“Fine, I’ll call a car,” Bucky says easily.

Steve groans, but it softens into a whimper when he feels Bucky’s hand pushing through his hair, a little rough but most assuredly affectionate. Steve leans into it, closing his eyes, relishing the sweetness of it — and then it’s gone.

And then Bucky bends over, getting so close, his breath hot on Steve’s ear.

“Now move your ass,” he whispers. “They close at 16:30.”
“Yes, Sergeant.”

The comment lands like a brick. Bucky’s breath is gone, and the couch gives a little creak as he settles back against it. But then there’s a warm sound, a deep rumble of a laugh, and Steve exhales his relief.

“Can you believe I’m supposed to be at Fort Benning right now, screaming at a bunch of kids, with my fucking drill sergeant hat? Can you even imagine that?”

Steve gives a fond smile. “Kind of.”

Bucky laughs again, but it’s sadder this time, and Steve reaches across his body and lays his hand on Bucky’s shin.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says. “I’m really sorry.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

Steve gives Bucky’s leg a pat, then pushes his sluggish, woozy body up from the floor. “All right. Lemme go put on some actual pants, and then we’ll go.”

“Good idea.”

Steve stretches his arms over his head, grunting from the feel of it, and he distantly misses the way Bucky’s gaze would have once landed on the sliver of exposed skin between the waistband of his sweats and the hem of his t-shirt. Bucky’s not even looking at him at all; he’s on the phone with the car company, all business. Maybe that’s just how things are going to be now.

Stupid. Steve has nothing to offer anyone, anyway. But maybe this is one thing he can do. For Bucky. For Sharon, too, because if he can’t keep his job, he can’t give her child support. He can’t put money in Ethan’s 529 plan. And if he can’t even do those very basic things, then what’s the fucking point of any of it?

So he puts on his clothes and helps Bucky up from the couch. And Bucky thanks him, thanks him for getting help, and he looks so relieved, and Steve can’t bring himself to imagine how much this has been quietly weighing on Bucky since he’s been back. He can’t, because it might break him apart, and so he stuffs it away along with everything else. ‘Suck it up and drive on,’ Drill Sergeant Barnes might say, and so Steve does.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: homophobic language, racist language, internalized homophobia, body hatred, references to graphic violence, references to alcoholism and treatment, references to trans character by previous name/pronouns,

Notes:

Apache and Cobra: Attack helicopters for the Army and Marine Corps, respectively

Warthog: the A-10 Warthog is a US Air Force attack aircraft

Hornet: The F/A-18 Hornet is a Navy/Marine Corps fighter/attack plane
MOS: Military occupational specialty - The term for a service member's job, specific to the Army and Marine Corps

214: DD-214 is a document one receives when discharging from the military that summarizes one’s service

529 Plan: A tax-deferred college savings plan, kind of like a 401k for school
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Steve goes to the doctor. Bucky reconnects with Rikki.

Chapter Notes

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with my plot, characters, and style. She’s also available for beta work and is amazing at it. Go visit her on Tumblr

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November 23, 2009

Ten days after Bucky goaded Steve into enrolling at the VA, he’s sitting in the waiting area at the VA New York Harbor primary care clinic. He almost cancelled his appointment twice in that span of time, one of which was today. Hill called him out in the middle of their morning meeting, taking him to task over yet another overdue assignment. She’s been keeping her mouth shut, mostly, speaking to him in the intimidating language of raised eyebrows and tightly flattened lips. But today she had enough of subtleties, stating in no uncertain terms that this is becoming a pattern and that the rest of his team can’t keep waiting on his products “which leave much to be desired, even when they do finally get turned in.” It’s a tactic Steve recognizes from the Army — single out the weak link amid peers and hope that humiliation is a potent motivator. Steve’s eloquence fled in short order, leaving him a hemming, hawing mess of inarticulacy. Around the table, his colleagues — if he can even call them that — suddenly took great interest in their pens and coffee cups and legal pads. Matt the blind guy, whose name Steve finally, finally retained, was the only one who didn’t seem embarrassed for him or disgusted by him, giving Hill a sour look in what might have been Steve’s defense. It was the closest thing Steve had to support in those miserable moments, a small gesture that unfortunately offered little lasting comfort. Later, Hill firmly rebuffed Steve’s attempt to skip this appointment, telling him that the last thing he probably needs is to fail to meet any more obligations. She apologized, but the attack on his integrity already cut him through to the spine.

Steve rubs his hands together between his legs, nervously eyeing the rows of veterans to his left. He stood against the wall until he could get the seat he wanted, one with a clear path to the exit and where he couldn’t be boxed in by gruff, angry men or sick, old men with their wives. Down the line a toddler is wailing and squirming in the arms of a weary-looking woman, who’s there with a young man who looks like he’s halfway crawled out of his skin already. Steve grinds his molars together as the sound evokes memories of all those helpless times that his own child has cried intractably, where all the rocking and bouncing and quiet assurances seemed to mean nothing except more proof of Steve’s utter inadequacy as a parent.

Steve’s picked out five of them so far. The OEF/OIF crew. Men with well-shaped beards and tidy
hair and tattoos. Men with swaying knees and ticking jaws. There’s a lone, dull-eyed young woman, too, tense and crossed at the legs and arms. The room feels loud and thrumming like a sore, and Steve frenetically debates bolting out the sliding glass doors until a nurse yells “Mr. Rogers!” over the thick noise. He’s on his feet in an instant, spring-loaded, and he takes hasty steps to meet her by the code-locked entrance to the clinic proper.

She gives a cordial smile as she holds the door for him. “How are you today?”

“Fine.”

The nurse narrates the next few minutes for him as she leads him around several corners, each of which Steve tries to map in his head.

“I’m Emily, and I work with Doctor Carrera. I’m gonna take you to get weighed before we go get your vitals.”

She pulls him into an enclave, where he steps on a scale and endures the shock of how low his weight has dropped. He imagined he might a bit lighter than he was last year, because his clothes don’t hang the way they used to, especially in the chest and shoulders. But his weight is lower now than it’s been since his high school days, back before he began lifting for lifting’s sake, because he liked the accomplishment of adding weight and reps, the way he could count the weeks in progress, the way he could shape and hone his body. He hasn’t exercised at all since he got out of the Army, save for the days when he just can’t stand to take the elevator at work and isn’t so late that he can’t climb a couple dozen floors of stairs.

“And how tall are you?” the nurse asks. He’s forgotten her name already.

“Six two.”

She jots the numbers down on a sticky note and leads him to a room where she takes his temperature and blood pressure.

“134 over 86,” she says, typing the numbers into the computer.

Steve’s brows gather sharply. “Really?”

“Is that high for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you eat something really salty today?”

“No,” Steve replies, his already cynical expectations for this appointment sinking lower as he internalizes that he’s not only apparently wasting away but is also verging on hypertensive.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions we ask all veterans.” The nurse leans forward and starts reading from the computer screen. “During the past month, have you often been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?”

“No.”

“During the past month, have you often been bothered by little interest or pleasure in doing things?”

“Yes.”

“In your life, have you ever had any experience that was so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that, in
the past month, you have had nightmares about it or thought about it when you didn’t want to?”

Steve holds his breath tight as he fumbles through a series of calculations on the consequences of honesty. He’s answered this question before, inaccurately, back at Fort Bragg. Back when he had a career to lose. He still has something resembling a career to lose, but he seems to be doing a fine job of tanking that all on his own without a routine questionnaire to help. In the end, he reminds himself that he can walk out the door at any moment and never set foot in the VA again. Nobody can force him to do anything. He learned that well enough from his ma, who stubbornly turned down painkillers even after her docs insisted and filled her opioid scripts anyway, until she was so immobilized by her suffering that Steve turned to begging her, holding her hand and blinking back tears and begging. He never asked her for anything, and he reminded her of that, and only then did she touch his cheek, her fingertips trembling, and say ‘all right, sweetheart.’

“Yes,” he mumbles.

“Tried hard not to think about it or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?”

“Yes.”

“Were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?”

“Yes.”

“Felt numb or detached from others, activities, or your surroundings?”

“Yes.”

If the nurse is surprised or concerned, she doesn’t show it. She merely clicks through a few more screens before marshaling him out to a smaller waiting area to sit until the doctor comes to grab him. There Steve sits, stone-faced, smoldering in regret over letting himself slip yet again, over doing the wrong math once more. He let himself be swept into complacency by his sorrow, the nagging ache for his mother that’s never quite abated, even after all these years. They say it’s supposed to get better with time, but he always feels it resting just below the surface of his perception, like a symbiotic creature that feeds on his denial and propels him through the world like a shark that dies if it stops to rest or reflect or grieve.

He’s startled out of it by a woman’s voice belting his name into the room, belonging to a tiny, cheerful woman in a flower patterned shift dress and a white lab coat.

“Mr. Rogers, how are you?” she asks, craning her head up to look at him. Her English is layered thickly on what might be a foundation of Tagalog, and it rings bright with unearned familiarity.

“Fine.”

“Come back with me, Mr. Rogers,” she tells him, waving him through the door.

She clacks ahead with quick, sure steps, barely breaking five feet tall even in heels. Steve follows at a reasoned distance, spatially reorienting himself in the structure as they turn down a hallway and slip into an exam room. She gestures to a chair next to her desk and takes a seat on a wheeled stool. She rolls up close, and Steve presses himself against the back of his chair, hands tightening on the arm rests. Her attention is acutely and confusingly friendly, especially after so many appointments in the Army where he’s barely earned a glance more than what was necessary to ascertain his physical condition.

“Mr. Rogers, what can I do for you today?”
He tells her about the migraines. How he ran out of sumatriptan and can’t risk missing any more work than he’s already had to in order to be here today. She asks him a few questions — who diagnosed him, what they usually feel like, when they started. It inevitably leads to the place where he tells her about being blow up, which is does in the most concrete, factual, and brief way he can.

“Mr. Rogers, let me look at your records from the military.”

She rolls over to her desk and begins clicking around his chart while Steve surveys her office. On the wall are a couple of child’s art pieces, one in crayon and one in magic marker, both on heart-shaped paper with “Mom” scrawled in the middle. Steve tries to imagine getting something like that from Ethan, a simple thought experiment that generates such powerful shame and self-loathing that he has to cut it off at the arteries before it drowns him.

“Mr. Rogers, I see you answered yes to a few questions earlier about feeling a loss of interest or pleasure in things. Tell me more about that.”

Steve shrugs one shoulder. “It’s just that. I’m not sure what else to tell.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Since…”

Steve searches the last two years for the place where all this started. He goes back to before deployment, when he was at the Pentagon. He enjoyed some things back then, didn’t he? He took pride in his work. He was with Sharon. They had fun. They went to the movies and ran together and went skiing in New Hampshire. They laughed and talked passionately and made love, and things were good. She pulled him out of the dead, joyless space he inhabited ever since his ma died. Ever since Bucky broke his heart and he broke Bucky’s in return. And then he let himself be pulled away from Sharon and found his way back to Bucky through Bucky’s own troubled machinations. Back to Bucky’s arms. Back to his body.

Steve closes his eyes against an unbidden image, Bucky naked on his bed, sculpted and beautiful and open, flushed with arousal, his cock hard and wet, just waiting for Steve’s mouth — and then another image, violent and awful, Bucky naked and covered in his own blood, writhing in the dirt, his body ripped apart, his arm gutted of flesh and bone, chunks of rusted rebar jutting from him, blood-soaked bandages covering the mess of his genitals, screaming and bowing in agony while Parker shoved a fistful of dressing into him — and more blood, the hot taste of it in Steve’s mouth, the feel of it dripping off his chin, the wet thunk of Trip’s head as it hit the floor, the weight of his decapitated body as it fell on Steve’s lap—

Steve leans forward, doubling over and holding his head as he fights off the powerful urge to lose his lunch on the linoleum.

“Mr. Rogers, are you all right?”

Steve nods between his hands and exhales a deep, shaking breath through pursed lips. He concentrates every particle of his energy into slowing his body down, swallowing his saliva as it pools in his mouth, fighting off mental images of the many times he’s failed, all the unfortunate places he’s puked.

The doctor’s voice softens. “What are you feeling right now?”

“Sick.”

“You answered these other questions about a horrible thing that happened to you—”
Steve’s fingers clench against his scalp. “Deployment. It’s all deployment.”

There’s a chasm of silence and stool rolls, and Steve flinches as the doctor’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder. It lingers there for a few moments, chafing over the wool of his sweater, then she pats him, gently, before rolling away again. The mouse begins clicking. Steve breathes through the sickness, in through his nose, out through his mouth, pushing back the memories of deployment as they cycle and cycle, a rolodex of horror after horror. He tries to think of anything else, but he thinks of Bucky that morning, sitting on the edge of his bed massaging his arm, wincing with his eyes closed tight, and then Hill’s face, sharp and disappointed, and he chokes off a groan when he can’t think of a single fucking thing that’s not horrifying or nauseating or showcasing his inadequacy as an employee, a father, a fiance, a leader, or a friend.

“Mr. Rogers, I can see your records here from the Army. There’s a skull fracture here, is that right? Around your eye?”

Steve heaves a heavy breath and slowly rights himself, his vision clouding with gray splotches as the blood rushes from his head.

“Yes,” he says.

The doctor twists around and folds her hands over her thighs. “How often does the nausea happen?”

Steve shakes his head, despite knowing the answer. He’s been quietly tracking it, worried as Bucky was that he might have an ulcer or some other gastrointestinal problem. But the pattern is clear, from the first instance next to Bucky’s bed at Landstuhl to this moment.

“When I think about stuff from deployment,” he says, hoping that he doesn’t have to spell out any of the details. “Sometimes I wake up like that in the middle of the night.”

“How many hours a night are you sleeping?”

“Three. Maybe four, when I add up all the chunks.”

“What wakes you?”

“Noises. Dreams.”

“Nightmares?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you feel nauseated at other times, or just with these memories?”

“Just the memories,” Steve tells her, impatience creeping into his tone. Because he can deal with the nausea. It’s uncomfortable, but at least it’s predictable. “I can’t remember things, though. That’s the worst part for me. I can’t focus on anything.”

The doctor swivels back to her computer and talks as she begins typing. “I’m going to put in a referral to neurology for you. And to psychiatry.”

And like that, one of his most feared outcomes manifests, the insidious worry that he’s carried ever since he lied his way through his neuropsychology testing back at Bragg. The worry that this is all in his head, and not in the physical sense. The nightmares. The sickness. The cognitive problems. He remembers the officer who assessed him back at Womack Army Medical Center, the intern who told him that it’s probably psychological, probably PTSD and depression, because his brain isn’t so bad.
Because he’s average.

“Why psychiatry?” Steve asks.

“I think you have some trauma and depression, and with the sleep problems and the brain damage, psychiatry is better at managing all those things than I am. I don’t feel comfortable prescribing for all those things.”

Brain damage. Steve’s mouth opens, but his mind is slower, trailing after until he finally utters, “It was just a concussion. A mild TBI.”

“No, Mr. Rogers,” she exclaims. “Come here.”

She waves him over to her desk, and he rises, his body humming with dread, and he bends to look over her shoulder as she pulls up a set of four CT scans of his brain.

“See this here?” She points to a dark blotch of gray at the top of the scan. “This is a contusion. A bruise. This is brain damage, Mr. Rogers. Who told you you had a mild TBI?”

“Some intern,” Steve says, voice distant as he stares into the dark space behind where Bucky’s head smashed into him.

How could he never have been shown these scans before? How could he have been in the hospital for a week and not have anyone tell him that his brain was bruised? How could they call it mild, tell him he’s normal, when this is what they saw? Did the intern see these scans? Did she just not care? Is this normal? Is this what a mild TBI looks like?

Worse, what if he was told and and he was shown, and he just doesn’t remember any of it? Both possibilities are uniquely disturbing.

“Why did she tell you that?” the doctor asks.

“I don’t know,” he snaps, because why the fuck would he. “Something about being unconscious for some amount of time. That made it mild or something.”

“You had a frontal lobe injury here.” The doctor uses her small finger to circle the darkened area on all four scans. “This part controls focus and making plans and judgment.”

“That’s…”

Finally, after over a year of feeling insane and weak and powerless, Steve makes some small amount of sense to himself. He thinks of the days he spends drinking coffee after coffee, desperate for anything to help him focus. He thinks of the way he has to read every page of every document several times over just to basically grasp it, how he loses time, how he checks out during meetings, how he can’t remember a grocery list of three items or remember the date or organize his workspace without pitching a fit in the middle of it.

“I’m putting in a consult to neuropsychology for more testing,” the doctor says. “But you need to go to psychiatry.”

Steve frowns and stands to his full height, towering over her. “But you just said it’s my brain. That’s neurology, not psychiatry.”

Her voice drops into an emphatic, exasperated cadence, making her accent stronger. “Mr. Rogers, this is very serious. This was a terrible thing. Getting blown up is traumatic. It’s all connected. So
you’ll go to psychiatry and neurology and neuropsychology. You need to go to all of them.” She scoots forward, perching on the edge of her stool. “Have you filed for service connection?”

Steve shakes his head.

The doctor digs through a filing cabinet next to her desk and pulls a sheet of paper to hand him. “This is information for the county veterans affairs office. They’ll help you file a claim.”

Steve doesn’t reach for the paper. He glares down at her, tense with frustration and confusion. “I just want my headache medication. That’s the only reason I came here. I don’t want to file a claim.”

“This is frontal lobe, too. Irritability.”

She thrusts the paper in his direction, unrelenting, until he snatches the fucking thing from her.

She smiles, undeterred, and rises to her feet. “Let’s check with Dr. Van Dyne. She might see you today. Come with me.”

She opens the office door and walks out, leaving him standing there, clenching the paper in his hand, wrinkling it in his grip. The commotion in his mind collapses into gauzy static, like the kind that filled his head for weeks after the explosion. His brief clarity has evanesced, taking his volition with it. So he stands there dumbly until she calls his name from the hallway.

Her voice yanks him back into the room, and he follows with measured steps as she takes him down one hallway and then the next, stopping him in front of yet another office. She excuses herself and goes in without him, shutting the door politely in his face. Behind it, he hears the staccato rhythm of her voice countered by another woman’s, smooth and even, but he can’t make out the words.

Moments later, the door swings open, and the doctor waves him in and seats him in a cushioned chair next to a full bookshelf. Steve doesn’t have the chance to glance over the titles before his doctor is waving and leaving, reminding him of his many referrals, telling him that she was glad to meet him.

He mumbles a reply as he sizes up the new woman. She isn’t wearing a lab coat. She’s dressed meticulously, like Hill, her hair cut into a precise bob, her nails impeccably manicured and painted a light shade of gray not unlike the Swiss cheese of his frontal lobe.

“Hello,” she greets.

“Hello.”

“I’m Dr. Van Dyne. I’m the primary care psychiatrist.”

Steve shakes his head with dismay. “I told her I didn’t want to come here.”

Van Dyne gives him a wry smile. “Dr. Carrera is very insistent sometimes. What’s brought you in today?”

“I just wanted some migraine medicine,” Steve states for the umpteenth goddamn time. “That’s the only thing I came here for. Now I have fifty follow up appointments, and I’m sitting here with you even though I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have to stay. You’re welcome to leave at any time.”

Steve looks to the door, breath quickening as he calculates again. But once again, the math is all
wrong, with disparate variables vying for precedence in an unsolvable equation. He wants to leave. Desperately. He wants to grab his migraine meds from the pharmacy and ration them until he can find a permanent position somewhere and get some real insurance. He wants to walk out the front door to this depressing fucking place and never, ever set foot in it again.

And at the same time, he can’t continue like this, where he’s perpetually one fumbled step away from crashing into a wall and shattering into a million pieces. He’s surviving on Maria Hill’s charity alone, a precarious charity at that, and Steve cannot abide that. He won’t. He prays every day for something to change — he’s resorted to that now, a reckless, childish hail Mary borne from abject desperation. He prays for something to happen to make this better. Maybe, somehow, this is that something. Maybe God or fate or folly is working in the form of a Filipino doctor and a Fifth Avenue psychiatrist.

“Maybe to help you with something,” Van Dyne says. “Why do you think Dr. Carrera brought you down here?”

“Obviously she thinks I’m crazy,” Steve, low and unsure.

“Hm.”

Van Dyne angles away from him and clicks through his chart. Her lips move while she reads under her breath. “Says here that you’re having some depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms. And Dr. Carrera mentioned that you’re having sleep, concentration, and memory problems.” She looks over her shoulder at Steve. “Sound about right?”

“The last part.”

“But not the first part.”

Steve sighs. “It’s not wrong, but it’s also not the problem.”

Van Dyne turns her chair back to him, her head canted in an analytical tilt. “Not even with your sleep? The trauma stuff isn’t a factor there?”

Steve can’t even begin to unfurl the tangle of problems that have been wrestled out of him today. He’s just about sick of the questions. Sick of the subtle shifts in tone, each angled to try to extract a little more information out of him with every pass. Frustration rallies past the slow flowing tide of his exhaustion.

“Look, I don’t know,” he grumbles. “I don’t know what causes what.”

“But you do have problems with depression.”

“I’m not sad.”

“Are you blah?” Van Dyne flips her hand casually, modeling a flat, dispassionate expression. “Like things don’t really matter?”

Steve’s gaze drifts away from her face, straying to a well-tended devil’s ivy plant creeping down over the edge of the nearby end table. He’s checking out again, and it’s not really a bad thing. It happens fairly regularly when he starts to boil inside and doesn’t have anywhere to put the energy, when everything crests to such immense intensity that he can’t contain it but can’t let it loose, either. When he shuts down like this, everything feels dim and hazy and dull. Blah. The haze takes the pressure off, smooths the razor’s edge of his anger. He doesn’t try to fight it, if only because he doesn’t have the energy for that anymore. These people and their interrogations have worn him
down to the marrow, and Steve draws his response from a deep and very private well of honesty he hasn’t tapped for a small eternity. He can’t see the point in lying right now, because he can’t see how this could get much worse. How it could get much more out of his control.

So he lets it come out, halting and raw, slowly running his hands over the upholstered arms of his chair as he talks, his attention hovering in a distant, unsteady orbit.

“It’s like things either don’t matter or they make me so anxious I can barely function.”

“Anxious how?”

“Just nervous,” he says, feeling it powerfully. “All the time. Everywhere I go. My body can’t shut down.”

“And the memories? The nightmares?”

Dr. Van Dyne’s passing mention of the memories elicits them once again, but they’re choppy now, little cross-sectional splinters stabbing in and out of consciousness. “They just happen. I can’t control it.” Steve’s hands grip tight into the fabric beneath them. “I can’t ever relax. I don’t even know if I know how to do it anymore.”

Dr. Van Dyne gives a knowing nod. “Do you have anything you still enjoy doing?”

“No.”

“How are your relationships?”

It doesn’t take long for Steve to blaze through the meager list of important people in his life. Bucky. Sharon. Ethan. Hill. Winnie. Even Rikki. The people at work. He strains for the words to describe how he relates to them, finding no commonality save for the gaping abyss that separates him from all of them. He’s used to distance, but this exile is not a self-imposed one. It’s an inevitable, unstoppable one, and one he doesn’t know how to close.

“I don’t know,” he says.

Dr. Van Dyne becomes thoughtful, tilting her head toward the ceiling while her green eyes flit back and forth. It’s her turn to calculate, he supposes, no doubt much more efficiently than Steve can these days. He feels an echo of the past, a twinge of mourning for how well his mind used to work. How sharp he used to be. How swiftly he could crack math problems and memorize functional groups and synthesize literature and learn Arabic. Now he can only look on with dim envy as the doctor works to crack the problem of Steve Rogers and his broken brain.

“You have migraines, sleep problems, depression, anxiety, TBI, and nightmares,” she summarizes, clicking her tongue. “So, here’s what we could try. Citalopram is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, which helps with depression. It can also help with anxiety. And then we could add on some amitriptyline, which is an old-school antidepressant that works for both sleep and migraine prevention. And then you could take your sumatriptan as needed for breakthrough migraines. I can also prescribe something for the nightmares called prazosin, which works really well for a lot of people. Just watch out when you wake up in the middle of the night to pee or check some noise or something, because you could get dizzy and conk out. How does that sound?”

Steve blinks as he absorbs her words. Most of them make sense from a strictly linguistic perspective, but there is still the fact that she’s saying them at all. The fact that he’s here talking candidly about how fundamentally fucked up and damaged he his. The fact that she’s brainstorming a recipe of chemicals to supposedly un-fuck him, if such a thing is even possible.
“I don’t know,” he tells her. “I just came in here for migraine medication. And now… I didn’t come for this.”

“I can appreciate that. Sometimes veterans come in for an ingrown toenail and leave with an EKG and an angiogram. If we see something a patient is struggling with, whether it’s their reason for being here or not, we want to help. It’s clear that you’re having a rough time.”

“Is it? Is it so clear?”

His hostility is reflexive and embarrassing, but she doesn’t seem to mind it. “If you want to start with one medication and see how it goes, you could try the amitriptyline first. Get some better sleep. Maybe stave off the migraines. See how you feel. Then we could maybe talk about some therapy.”

“I don’t need therapy,” he shoots back. “I’m barely holding onto my job right now because I can’t focus and I can’t remember anything. Don’t you have any medication for that?”

Dr. Van Dyne gives a tentative nod. “We have some things we could try, but I’m not going to give it to you without additional neuropsychological testing.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve mutters under his breath. “Then this is just a big goddamn waste of time.”

“For any of these problems, meds are only going to help make the symptoms more tolerable. They’re not—”

“That’s fine. That’s what I want.”

“They’re not going to actually fix whatever’s going on with you. The idea is that you take these meds to help you along while you engage in some sort of psychotherapy.”

The only thing Steve knows about psychotherapy is what he learned from Bucky’s program which, as far as he can tell, is an emotionally obliterating upheaval that he neither has the time, energy, nor inclination to engage in.

“I’m just trying to pay my rent and pay my child support and not get fired, and that’s all I have time for right now,” Steve says plainly. He ignores the nagging part of him that speaks of his actual fear — not that he’ll piss Hill off or even risk his job altogether, but the fear of what will happen if he looks too closely at what’s happening to him. He’s imagined it, remembering Bucky’s gutted rawness, his vulnerability, and the picture scares the fuck out of him. He can’t break right now. And that would break him.

Something like endearment cuts through Dr. Van Dyne’s professional veneer, softening her eyes and curving her mouth. “You have kids?”

“One.”

“Boy or a girl?”

“Boy.”

“How old?”

Steve’s tone goes cold and mechanical. “Seven months. He lives in DC with his mother. We’re separated. My mother’s dead, father left, no siblings, I’m single, never married, Army officer, infantry, West Point grad, one deployment to Iraq, work at Human Rights Watch, live in Windsor Terrace, first floor apartment, I sleep on my back, I’m right handed… Am I missing anything?”
“What’s your son’s name?”

Steve bristles, because even though it’s a perfectly reasonable question, it also feels like a potent intrusion. “Ethan.”

“I like that name.”

Steve is silent, a barometer for how unattached he is to it. The only caveats he ever gave Sharon on a name was that he didn’t want it to be his own and he didn’t want it to be James. The latter made the shortlist, Sharon’s top three, and Steve used his single veto because he just couldn’t stomach the sick irony of their kid sharing a name with the man Steve destroyed their future with through one wayward blowjob in a Baghdad trailer.

Dr. Van Dyne glances up at the clock and grabs the government-issued paper appointment book from her desktop. “So, here’s one option — you could meet with me every couple of weeks. Just for 30 minutes or so, like today. We could check on your meds, maybe talk a little.”

“What’s going on with you. I think you know a little of what’s going on, right? You’ve got some idea.” She raises her eyebrows then, presuming what Steve won’t dare admit to himself.

“My head’s fucked up,” he states. “That’s what I know.”

She gives a satisfied nod. “Well, that’s a start. Let’s schedule a follow-up and check in two Fridays from now.”

“You people aren’t big on asking patients what they want, are you?”

“Oh, you’re free to say no to any of it. You’ve been free to leave for the past half hour.” She finishes jotting in her calendar, and when she looks back up at him, it’s with an incisive confidence that he never saw in that intern from Fort Bragg, the kind that probably comes from spending day in and out trying to sell drugs and hope to bitter, desperate men. “And yet, here you are. What do you think that says?”

Steve snorts. “That clearly I am crazy.”

She smiles. “Or maybe you’re sick of feeling this way.”

“Maybe.”

Dr. Van Dyne spins gracefully in her chair and throws a few medication orders into the computer. “You can pick your prescriptions up at the pharmacy before you go. I’ll start you with one refill on everything and we can see how that goes.”

She gives instructions, writing detailed notes on a piece of paper for him in elegant cursive. Citalopram in the morning, amitriptyline and prazosin at night. Sumatriptan as needed. She also writes down all of his referrals and upcoming appointments, many of which he’s forgotten in the past thirty minutes. It’s clear that he’s not her first anything — not even her fifth or tenth or fiftieth complicated, stubborn head case. She might even see veterans like him all day, every day. It’s the one counterargument to his many frenzied internal objections to this entire thing, one that says “wait,” because maybe, just maybe, this isn’t completely pointless. Maybe the situation isn’t completely hopeless.

“Do you have any questions?” she asks as she watches him read over the paper. “Any questions
“Are you going to make me go to mental health?” Steve asks, folding the paper into tight, flat planes.

“No. I can’t. Not unless you tell me you plan to kill yourself or someone else, and we can’t manage the risk together.”

Steve fishes his wallet out of his right back pocket and slips the paper in with the cash he always has on hand. “How are you different from the docs in mental health? I still don’t get it.”

She sets down her appointment book and swivels around to face him. Her hands move smoothly as she talks. “In primary care, a psychiatrist’s job is to assist the docs in working with veterans like you, who might have a lot of different things going on. We call it polytrauma, meaning that you have both physical and psychological injuries that are interwoven, often from a major traumatic event like the one you’ve experienced. Or ones. I’m not sure.”

“Ones,” Steve clarifies softly as he chews on the term ‘psychological injury.’

“We also see veterans who refuse to see psychiatry at the general mental health clinic. Also like you.”

Steve shifts in his seat, crossing his left ankle over his right knee. His black Oxford bounces with nervous energy. “Are you just gonna try to wear me down until I give up and agree to go?”

“My job isn’t to wear you down, Mr. Rogers,” she says seriously. “It’s just to help you wherever you’re at. If this is where you’re at, great. I can only help you if you come back, though. Right?”

Steve’s nod is almost imperceptible.

“Okay. I’m gonna kick you out now, because I have another patient. But here’s my card, and don’t hesitate to call me with any questions.”

She hands him her card and stands, prompting Steve to rise with her. She’s taller than he thought, poised and perfect in posture.

“It was nice to meet you,” she says, offering her hand for him to shake.

Steve takes it with a sardonic twitch of his mouth. “I doubt it.”

“I don’t lie, Mr. Rogers. Most veterans can smell B.S. from a mile away.” She lets go of his hand and opens the door for him, gesturing him out into the hallway. “Have any Thanksgiving plans?”

“Yes.”

“Going to see your kiddo?”

Steve clenches his jaw, as if to manually stop the shameful admission he has to make, if he’s going to pay her honesty back in kind. So he shakes his head.

“Ah.”

“But maybe for Christmas,” Steve adds, qualifying it with an “I don’t know.”

She gives a smile that seems genuine enough. “Well, I hope you have a nice holiday, and I’ll see you in a couple weeks. Door’s down the hall and then to the right.”
“Yeah. Okay.”

Steve makes his way to the pharmacy, but only after stepping outside to breathe for a few minutes. It’s not even that he’s overwhelmed; he’s far past that. He’s so far past it that he’s become white noise in the shape of a man, ghosting around the VA campus. By the time he picks up his pills, it’s already 4:00. Hill will be pissed, probably, but he’s so incomprehensibly spent that he can’t even think of driving back uptown.

So he goes home. Bucky’s surprised to see him when he walks in, but he looks pleased. Steve collapses on the couch next to him and sits mutely, staring up at the ceiling, while Bucky reads from one of his AA books, fumbling with a highlighter and cursing under his breath.

It’s nice. It’s nice to have Bucky here. It’s nice to see him work, his handsome face serious and intense. Steve can fade into it, fade into Bucky’s stunning aliveness, like he’s not even there. Like he’s distant particles, slowly diffusing into nothing. And that might be the nicest part of all.

———

Hank and Bucky get together for the first time the day before Thanksgiving. They meet in a coffee shop in Chelsea, at Hank’s insistence, and Bucky can’t help but suspect that it’s because he knows Bucky would hate it. Wanda could have talked to him. Told him about how Bucky squirms in the presence of gays. Maybe that’s why Hank picked the gayest fucking coffee shop in the entire fucking city, decked in rainbows and vibrating with the sort of lisping, fay energy that makes Bucky sink low in his chair.

“So, are you gay, son, or what?”

The question wallops Bucky over the head so violently that all he can do is stare across the table, wide-eyed and incredulous. It’s the first thing Hank has said since they sat down with their coffees, and Bucky was expecting at least couple dozen brutally invasive questions about his darkest boozing history before even one insinuation about his sexuality.

Hank rests his chin on his hand and cocks his head to the side. He doesn’t seem amused, precisely, but there’s a levity sparkling in his eyes that makes Bucky want to fuck this entire sobriety endeavor altogether — certainly with this guy at the helm of it. Of course, that’s the kind of shit thinking that landed him here in the first place, and he can scrape together enough wits to distantly acknowledge that.

But still. He’s not sure how to reply. It’s not like in Scott’s office, where there was a gentleness, an openness, and unambiguously accommodating intent. This feels like a dare, a jab with a sharp stick, and Bucky curls his hand around the heat of his cup, staying with the feeling like Kate told him to. She called him a runner, and he was deeply insulted at the time, because what kind of runner leads men in combat? But that was Sergeant Barnes, he supposed. Sergeant Barnes was an untouchable force, a near-perfectly compartmentalized and concentrated manifestation of the good parts of Bucky Barnes, a distillation so potent that it bore little resemblance to the man it came from. The man who runs from comfort and love and honesty and pain and seeks refuge in a bottle or in a bed with someone he both wants profoundly and hates himself for wanting. That’s not the man Bucky wants to be, but with the death of Sergeant Barnes, he’s left sifting through the waste that remains, left to build a merely decent man out of the scraps of a great man whose time has ended.

So Bucky breathes through the discomfort, and he doesn’t run. Not exactly.

“‘Or what,’ maybe,” Bucky says.
One of Hank’s gray eyebrows rises. “Undecided?”

“More like unwilling.”

It’s more than that — or maybe less. Bucky thought that telling Scott he was gay was a milestone, of sorts, an undrugged, unforced, sober admission of who he really is. He expected to maybe feel some relief after, a metaphorical sigh, a tension he could maybe start to release. But the conversation still clings to him, follows him around like a shadow, and even though he’s repeated the gay label in his head and with his lips, hoping that it would settle, it feels more ill-fitting than ever.

“How old are you?”

Bucky’s answer is expelled with the force of an expletive. “30.”

“And how long have you know you’re ‘or what’?”

Bucky swallows and looks into the dissipating art the barista made in his latte, a leaf of foam and espresso. The number doesn’t seem real when he says it. It doesn’t seem real that he’s been falling apart for eighteen years, falling apart and falling apart without an end.

“And how long have you been drinking?” Hank asks, folding his arms on the table.

“18 years.”

Hank’s lips purse, and he nods with a sort of paternal knowing. He’s not crude enough to reflect the obvious correlation. “What’s the first step in AA?”

“To admit that I’m powerless over alcohol and that my life has become unmanageable.” Bucky says it with a jaded weariness that makes Hank snort.

“I want you to reflect on the past eighteen years since you took that first drink. I want you to think about all the times you tried to control your drinking but couldn’t, and then I want you to write all the consequences of your drinking.” Hank jerks his chin toward the green Army-issue notebook next to Bucky’s right hand. “Go on, write it down.”

Bucky pushes out a sigh through his nostrils and opens the notebook to the first page. He takes his pen in hand — ballpoint, because he doesn’t have the control to write legibly with the faster, thinner ink of other pens — and scrawls “Step One” on the top. He then adds Hank’s continued instructions to think about all the domains where his drinking has fucked his life — his family, his friends, his work, his finances, his sex life, his health, his self-esteem.

“Wow,” Bucky says when he’s done, shutting the book and dropping the pen on the table. “That’s gonna be really tough.”

“It’s supposed to be.”

“There’s just so much. That’s a lot of years. A lot of bad shit.”

A lot of bad shit and a lot of really bad shit. Bucky already feels shame uncoiling in the pit of his belly as some of the uglier incidents return to him. The first time he got drunk. The time Steve saw him. The times Winnie found him. The countless, careless drunken fucks with random men and the well-planned, desperate fucks and half-fucks with women. All the times he had to drink just to be able to be close to Steve. The entirety of Alex Pierce. The many near-misses during the duty week. The drinking on deployment. The drinking and ranting at Rikki’s party. The whole first third of 2009. The Holiday Inn... Jesus.
“When was your first drink?” Hank asks.

“When was yours?” Bucky retorts, his voice edgy.

“College.”

Bucky shakes his head. “Fuck. I don’t even want to say mine. Fuck. College?”

Bucky can’t even imagine what it would have been like to wait until college. By the time he started at CUNY, he was already a professional alcoholic. He’d already mastered the art of concealing his use — pre-gaming and under-drinking publicly, hiding booze in the apartment, building a creative library of excuses to drink and excuses for his many hangovers.

Hank presses his hand into the lacquered wood of the tabletop. His skin is weathered, lightly spotted from age, and the rose gold band on his right ring finger picks up the light from the Tiffany lamp on the table’s edge. “This isn’t gonna work very well if you’re not honest. You know that, right?”

Bucky knows that. He’s been reminding himself daily, sometimes by the hour, whenever his brain starts rotating and tweaking the truth because it’s ugly and uncomfortable. It’s so reflexive that he’s barely started grasping the frequency with which he does it, let alone be able to do anything to correct it.

“When we moved here,” Bucky admits. “Back in ’92.”

“What’d you drink?” Hank asks it with a warm, voyeuristic curiosity, like the fucker really is still pining for it, even after thirty years.

“Gin.” Bucky makes a face as he remembers the spicy, Christmas tree taste of it. “It was gross, but it didn’t stop me from drinking it every day after school. Sometimes before.”

“What was going on at school?”

Bucky gives a tense shrug. “Nothing.”

“Right,” Hank says over the rim of his coffee mug. He takes a sip. “Well, I look forward to hearing about all the ‘nothing’ that led you to becoming a drunk.”

Bucky’s upper lip twitches in and out of a sneer. “I thought you were supposed to be nice.”

“Being nice never got anyone I know sober, honey.”

“You’re nice to Wanda.”

“You ask Wanda how nice I was to her when we worked together. She’s an honest girl. You could learn a lot from her.”

“I wish I was learning from her right now,” Bucky grouses.

Hank thrusts his finger in Bucky’s direction. “If you can harness even a little of this energy into your sobriety, rather than looking for excuses to stay sick, you might actually make it.”

Bucky grunts and takes a deep swig of his cold latte and licks the foam off his upper lip. “We’ll see, won’t we?”

“Get out your Big Book. I’m gonna give you more homework.”
Bucky rolls his eyes. He gets his book anyway.

———

Bucky stands with his back to the bathroom mirror, avoiding his reflection as he always does. It’s not like at rehab, when he could leave the fan off and fog up the glass to prevent any accidental glimpses of his mangled flesh. Now the fan is always on, wired into the light switch itself, and so he has to rely entirely on his situational awareness, remaining vigilant even as his worries about dinner cyclone through his head.

In his hands, he turns a bottle of AndroGel, turning it and turning it until he’s memorized the whole label. He’s already primed the pump. He did it two days ago, when he thought he was going to take his first dose but aborted the attempt, washing it from his fingers before it could start seeping into his skin.

He’s not sure how long he’s been standing here, fretting about whether or not to rub testosterone on his body, but judging from the light outside, it must nearly be time for them to head to Rikki and Daisy’s. The reminder flushes him with a new wave of anxiety, and he shoves the bottle in his shaving kit, burying it under his beard trimmer and shaving cream just in case the bag is ever open when Steve uses the bathroom. He can’t bear for Steve to know he was prescribed it. That he even needs it in the first place. That he’s too scared to actually take it.

Bucky’s got his undershirt half way over his head when Steve raps his knuckles on the door with the soft caution of a man who knows exaggerated startle response well.

“We should get going,” Steve murmurs through the door. “Your phone keeps ringing. Your ma.”

Bucky groans. “Call her back, will you? See what she wants. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Sure.”

Bucky finishes dressing as quickly as he can, slipping on the gray J. Crew sweater Steve got him with who knows what money. Bucky tried to refuse it, even though he could certainly use clothes that fit this well, and Steve got such a case of the ass about it that Bucky ended up yelling that, fine, he’ll take it already, Jesus Fucking Christ. It’s a really nice sweater, a Cashmere v-neck that accentuates the blue-gray of his eyes when it’s finally safe to turn to the mirror. Bucky checks his face, tilting and rotating to make sure he got all the stubble that’s been accumulating for the past three days. Shaving with a nerve-damaged hand is a grueling trial of Bucky’s very limited patience, one that has ended more than once with his razor chucked pointlessly at the bathroom wall - pointless because the bathroom is so small, the wall so close, that the goddamn thing just bounces gently off and hits the floor without consequence. The light catches the scar on his chin, and he presses his finger into it, flattening it as he tries to remember what his chin was like before, when the cleft his father gave him was the only remarkable thing about it. When men would trace over it and say “I love this,” and Bucky would swipe them away with a playful smirk that belied his hatred of the intimacy.

He combs his fingers through his hair, pushing it back with the help of some product. God, he missed having his hair. Sometimes when he’s lying in bed and his entire body feels foreign and soft and ugly, he’ll close his eyes and run his better hand through it, and in that moment, maybe it’s 1999 again, and maybe it’s Steve’s hand or Alex’s hand, the hand of someone who thinks he’s beautiful, and maybe Iraq and Afghanistan never happened and the past ten years were just a twisted, hyper-realistic nightmare. And usually it’s only a minute or so before he feels that cramping tightness in his left arm or remembers that he’s a repulsive, disabled drunk and a criminal and a jobless fuck-up. But sometimes knowing that he still has this one thing, hair that’s thick like Winnie’s with the slightest
wave to it, is enough to push him from the fatal edge of the lingering devastation over his body. It’s been over a year now, and sometimes his grief feels so acute and fresh that it’s like starting all over, like a recursive loop of horror that never quite moves into acceptance.

Bucky exits the bathroom and limps to the kitchen where Steve is waiting, looking pensive in a navy sweater like his own and a pair of olive green chinos. He’s typing something into Bucky’s phone, and he jerks his head sharply when he catches sight of Bucky out of the corner of his eye.

“What did she want?” Bucky asks, lifting his leather jacket from the back of the chair and slipping it on.

“Cool Whip,” Steve says. “She asked us to pick some up.”

“For fuck’s sake…”

“I know.”

They drive for nearly 45 minutes to find a supermarket that’s open on Thanksgiving evening. And when they finally do, it’s pandemonium. Steve parks and looks ill as he surveys the thick clots of people entering and exiting the store in an unrelenting stream. It’s enough to make even Bucky nervous, and he spent week after week with Quill in busy grocery stores, trying not to have a panic attack.

“I’ll go,” Bucky offers, unbuckling his seatbelt. “It’s my stupid family.”

Steve opens his mouth to undoubtedly object, but he keeps staring at those sliding glass doors that never close until he finally acquiesces with a stiff nod.

They’re an hour late by the time they get to Rikki and Daisy’s apartment. There it’s Bucky’s turn to hesitate as they sit in the parked car, thumbnail clicking between his teeth as he gnaws on it.

“We don’t have to go,” Steve says, looking over at him, his expression tight but compassionate.

Bucky shakes his head and lets his hand fall to his lap. “No. I have to. I need to…” He starts to say ‘I need to make things right with Rikki,’ but he’s trying not to have any expectations for tonight. It was the one wise thing Hank said to him yesterday. Don’t push, he said. For Bucky, who lives to push and pull, it’s a rejection of his most essential nature.

“Well, if you need to leave, just let me know. We’ll go any time.”

Bucky manages a strained smile. “Thanks.”

Winnie answers the door, cheerful and resoundingly grateful for the Cool Whip so she can finish her watergate salad. How she could forget the essential component of that abomination is beyond Bucky. But he can’t be too resentful over having his favorite childhood dessert, even though he’s almost too nervous to think about enjoying it.

Winnie leads them into the eat-in kitchen, where Daisy is mashing a bowl of skin-on Yukon golds with some vegan butter. She looks up at them and shoves the masher into the potatoes so that she can properly greet them. She surprises Bucky with a hug, a warm, full-body one that lasts long enough for him to pick up the smell of conditioner in her still-damp hair.

“I’m so glad you came,” Daisy whispers, giving him a squeeze.

He fumbles out a “Thanks, you too,” and then she’s pulling away to do the same for Steve, who’s
stilted and awkward against her unanticipated sweetness.

Bucky pivots around at the sound of footsteps entering the kitchen, and, God, there’s Rikki, tall and lithe and utterly **striking**. Her face is narrower, her chiseled jaw softened, her nose smaller, her brow smoothed of its masculine ridge. Bucky feels his own jaw go slack as he takes her in from where she’s stopped in the doorway. She stands in the doorway, crossing her thin arms, closing herself off to him, her blue eyes regarding him coolly.

“Hey,” Bucky manages.

In his periphery, he dimly perceives Steve flanking him, mirroring Rikki’s cagey stance.

“Hey,” she replies, looking him up and down.

She doesn’t say anything, not “you look good” or “you look healthy,” so Bucky begins to imagine other alternatives that could be going through her mind, like “you look fat” or “you look like a sad, emasculated loser.”

“Rikki, I’m so—”

“Let’s go outside,” Rikki says, turning gracefully and walking back toward the living room.

Bucky stands there for a moment, frozen. He looks over at Winnie, who raises her eyebrows eagerly. He then glances at Steve, whose expression is dark and suspicious. Bucky looks to the empty doorway Rikki vacated and grips the handle of his cane tight before mustering the courage to follow her.

He finds her by the front door sliding on a pair of knee-high boots over her black tights. Bucky waits in silence as she slips on a puffy coat and opens the door, leading him down the hallway and up a flight of stairs to the roof. She waits for him as he takes each step in the slow, cumbersome way he does, and it’s a welcome relief to step out into the chill of the night.

Rikki walks to the edge of the roof and approaches the waist-high wall that borders it. From her pocket, she procures a baggie containing a glass pipe, a lighter, and a small, metal container. Bucky watches her pack the bowl of the pipe with weed, her movements practiced and easy, despite the tension that lingers between them.

“I’m really sorry—” Bucky starts to say.

“Stop.” Rikki glares over at him, enough to shut him down, then continues preparing to smoke. “I don’t want your apologies. I don’t want your reasons or your excuses. I don’t want to hear about your sobriety, how well you’re doing in AA, I don’t want your promises or all your big plans for whatever. Because, honestly, I don’t believe any of it.”

She lifts the pipe to her mouth and lights the contents of the bowl. She inhales deeply and holds it, closing her eyes, then blows out a thick cloud of smoke. She’s refreshingly unconcerned about whether she’s triggering him, which she isn’t. He’s never been much of a stoner. It’s never been strong enough to drown the things he needs to drown.

“I’m sorry,” Rikki says, opening her eyes and looking out toward the lights of Manhattan Island. “I know that sounds terrible, and it’s not what I’m supposed to say, but it’s gonna take a long time before I trust you again.”

Bucky swallows heavily as he absorbs her painful but fair words. “Okay.”
She continues to gaze out into the distance as she speaks. “I wanted to see you tonight, because I miss you, and I love you. But I’m a long way from forgiving you.” Rikki looks at him now, very deliberately, making hard eye contact. “Not for overdosing, because that’s not something that needs to be forgiven. But all the other stuff, the way you lied to me and to Daisy, the way you betrayed our trust, that’s gonna take some time.”

Bucky can’t help his mind from traveling back to those grim days in March and April, the times he said he was going to AA and got wasted in Prospect Park instead. The bottles he hid in his room. The dead, empty promises he made, well-meaning and true in that moment as many were. And he realizes how unspeakably lucky he is to even be standing here now, having his sister even look at him again.

“Okay,” he repeats, nodding.

Rikki takes another full hit off her pipe, and her voice goes soft and conciliatory. “I am sorry that I didn’t go to your graduation, though. I heard you were disappointed. I got an earful about it.”

“From Ma?”

“No, she understood.” Rikki smirks. “It was Steve, actually. I got a very long voicemail the next day.”

Bucky tilts his head. “What did he say?”

“I won’t repeat it,” she tells him. “He’s obviously very protective of you.” She pauses, then pointedly adds, “He obviously loves you a lot.”

Bucky makes a small, appropriately ambiguous sound for a thoroughly ambiguous situation. There’s undoubtedly love between them, but whether it’s the kind Rikki’s referring to is still very uncertain. Bucky was overwhelmed by it, nearly bursting with it, back at graduation from his PTSD program. But since they’ve lived together, everything has been so strained between them, so oppressively practical, so consumed by mutual worry, that there hasn’t been room for much else. And then there’s the matter of Bucky’s nonexistent libido, another casualty of war that he’s still not sure he wants to resurrect.

“How are things with you two?” Rikki asks.

“It’s not like that.” Bucky flexes his hands, stiffened by the cold, and shoves them into his pockets. “He’s really struggling. He’s all ‘I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine,’ but he’s obviously not.”

“What’s going on with him?”

Bucky frowns. “I don’t know, exactly. He went to the doctor last week for his headaches, and the doctor actually walked him down to the psychiatrist’s office herself. That’s how bad it was. He came home with this big bag of pills…”

Bucky only saw them for a second, and he probably wasn’t supposed to. They were sitting on the edge of Steve’s bed, and Steve was in the shower, and Bucky used some basic moral gymnastics to justify the intrusion on the grounds that Steve can’t be trusted to be an accurate reporter of anything related to his mental or physical health. He recognized one of the meds from when he was in his program, the one that killed his nightmares with stunning effectiveness, but the rest were unfamiliar, and then the shower stopped, and that was the last he saw of them.

“Is it deployment stuff?” Rikki asks.
“I think so. I just wish he would talk to me. It’s not like I don’t know what that stuff’s like.” Bucky shrugs. “So that’s us.”

Rikki takes a final, contemplative hit off her pipe before placing it in the baggie and slipping it back into her coat pocket. “What ever happened with Thor?”

Bucky clenches his teeth, cringing. “Oh, I fucked that all up. So bad. Jesus.”

“How have you talked to him?”

“He called my old number a few times. He doesn’t have my new one.” He passes the name in his contacts sometimes — THOR ODINSON :) — and each time he does, he briefly considers deleting it. But something always stops him, some nigging whisper that gives him pause. “I feel like I should call him. Just say I’m sorry. Give him some closure. He probably won’t want to talk to me. Definitely moved on, I’m sure.”

“Maybe not.”

“I would be fine if he did. I’m…” Bucky trips as he treads into this territory, but if there’s anyone who might get this stuff, it’s the woman who spent most of her life fighting with hormones. “Everything’s all messed up from my… you know.” He pulls a hand from his pocket and gestures vaguely at his groin. “I got some testosterone gel I’m supposed to rub on my shoulders, like some fucking old man. I don’t know. I haven’t started it yet.” He shakes his head sharply. “I don’t know.”

“That stuff seriously affects your mood. If your T is low, you should take it. Especially if you’re depressed.”

Bucky doesn’t tell her that his endocrinologist saw how low his numbers were and called to do a risk assessment on him. He framed it like a simple check in, but Bucky knows an implied suicide question from a mile away, and the doc caved and confessed to looking at Scott’s note about the meteor crashing through the ceiling and blah, blah, blah. Bucky could have been annoyed by it, but it showed some guts, given how skittish docs usually are about mental health stuff.

“I get that,” Bucky says. “It’s just gonna complicate everything, though. Being this way is a lot simpler.”

“How so?”

Bucky bites his lower lip, and now it’s his turn to stare off at the distant cityscape, because what he’s about to say is so raw and personal that he shouldn’t be uttering it to anybody. So he pretends he’s saying it to the dark, to the million and a half uncaring Manhattanites across the river.

“I don’t think about men anymore,” he says quietly. “I don’t want them. I don’t want to touch them. I don’t look at them and think about how hot they are or how…”

Bucky can’t say some of the other things that come to mind, the dirty things he shamefully wondered about so many men back in his beautiful days — how big a guy’s dick was, how hard Bucky could make him come, how hard the guy could fuck Bucky or how hard Bucky could fuck him. None of that — none of it — crosses his mind anymore.

“In a way,” Bucky muses, “it’s kind of like I’m not gay anymore. So I’m pretty happy about that. Testosterone would fuck all that up.”

Rikki’s silence is heavy, and in the dim, ambient light, Bucky can see her brow furrowing deeply. “That’s really sad.”
“Oh, I don’t know. There are worse things than not being a fag anymore, right?”

“I don’t understand you,” Rikki says. “I don’t understand how you’re still like this, after all these years. I get before. I mean, that made sense. But now… It’s been a long time. I hoped you’d get over it.”

“Get over it.”

“How can you be supportive of me and Daisy and still hate yourself so much? I don’t get it. You’re such a hypocrite, in a really weird, ass-backward way.”

Bucky looks at the ground, at the toes of his boots. His mind whites out before it can travel too far into the past, and he’s thankful for it, falling very quiet as he feels Rikki appraising him. Disappointed, no doubt, in his inability to be as strong as she is. In his inability to excavate through the fear and trauma and agony to fully uncover his truth, to look at it plainly and without judgment, to hold it like it’s something precious rather than something to be reviled.

Maybe she’s disappointed, but she’s not cruel. Bucky can feel her soften, feel the shift in her posture as she changes the subject.

“Steve’s gonna be okay,” she tells him. There’s the barest waiver in her voice, though, one Bucky hears more clearly in his own when he replies.

“But what if he’s not?”

“Well, I guess now you know what it’s like for us. With you.”

God damn it. God fucking damn it. It’s an exercise in empathy that Bucky never wanted, and if what he’s feeling right now is anything close to what he’s made his loved ones feel, he deserves a lot worse than anything he’s ever gotten from them.

“I hope you’ll let me apologize one day,” Bucky says. “I really just… I hope you will.”

“We’ll play it by ear,” Rikki replies brusquely. “Don’t push me, though. I mean it. I need time.”

Bucky blows out a puff of cold air and stifles a shiver. “Maybe we should go in. I’m freezing my nut off.”

Rikki chuckles, the one place where her voice still slips sometimes into a rich, Barnes tenor. “I wish I could have saved one of mine and given it to you. Banked it for a rainy day.”

“Yeah, those things really cranked out a lot of juice. You could put on ten pounds of muscle just looking at a barbell.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. Good riddance.”

“Sorry.”

Rikki waves off the apology. “It’s fine. They’re long gone.”

“Did you…” Bucky gestures in a circle around his face. He’s not sure what to call it, another place where language regularly fails him. He learned early after Rikki came out that sometimes it’s best to not even try to name something, to leave the door open for her to walk through and lead him.

She smiles broadly, for the first time that night. Her features light up a little different now, but she looks happier than she has in a very long time. “Yeah. I found a really good guy in San Francisco.”
“You look great. I mean, you looked great before…”

“No, I didn’t. You don’t have to lie.”

Bucky bites back a smug comment about his talent in that particular domain. “Do you feel better?”

“Well, I now pretty much pass for an extraordinarily tall woman rather than an ex-football player in a dress, so, yeah.” She turns and starts toward the entrance to the building, glancing over her shoulder at him as she keeps talking. “Thank you. For the money. I’m going to pay you back, once the business picks up, which should be soon. We just hired our second full-time person.”

“You don’t have to pay me back,” Bucky states firmly. “Ever. It was a gift, and you’ve been more than generous in return. Congrats.”

“Thanks.”

They take their time descending the stairs while Rikki tells him about the new contract they’re vying for, and her voice fills with pride when she tells him about how one of the biggest cybersecurity companies has already been sniffing around. “But fuck that,” she says. “We’ve worked too hard to sell out so soon.”

Bucky agrees and, God, he’s missed her.

They’re not five steps back into the apartment when Winnie calls to him from where she’s seated on the couch next to Steve, angled toward him with her legs curled under her. She’s got that look about her, eyes bright with an excitement that sends a thrill of anxiety through Bucky.

“Steve was just telling me that you’re having a guest in January,” she says,

“We are?” Bucky replies, limping up to the couch and standing in front of them. Steve looks up at him, his face etched with dread, helpless as Winnie spills the news.

“About Ethan coming,” she says, her words hitting Bucky like a buoyant, joyful cluster bomb.

“What?” Bucky exclaims. His attention homes in sharply on Steve, who’s blanched and speechless. “Were you ever planning on telling me, or was I just gonna come home one day to a baby in the apartment?”

“It’s—” Steve starts his weak reply, but Winnie saves him with the casual flick of her wrist.

“You’ll be just fine,” she says. “I was just telling Steve that a week will go by so fast.”

Bucky’s eyes go wide. “A week?”

Winnie rises from the couch, struggling a little with her low, plump center of gravity. She gives Bucky a fond pat on the shoulder. “Oh, honey, calm down. It’ll be fine. I’ll come over and help out.”

“What the fuck?” Bucky spits, glaring at Steve. “How long have you known?”

“Sharon asked last month,” he mutters. He doesn’t make eye contact, gazing instead at Daisy and Rikki as they set the table, wisely pretending not to hear this bullshit. “She’s going on TDY.”

“Last month. Wow.”

Bucky scoffs and shakes his head. He fights against a powerful surge of rage — honest-to-God rage — over yet another crucial omission that Steve’s made, especially when he wonders how long Steve
would have kept it from him, if Winnie wasn’t such a loudmouth. The rage climbs up his neck and
threatens to fly from his lips and push out months of backlogged frustration along with it.

But then he sees Steve — really lets himself see him. The dark circles under his eyes. The hard line
of his frowning mouth and the ever-present gouge between his brows. All of the quiet, insidious
stress he’s been bearing since Khalidiya, the burden he’s tried to carry alone, and Bucky can’t bring
himself to say the things he wants to really say. Not here. Not when they’re trying to have a nice
evening. Not when Bucky’s trying to not fuck up, for once.

What the fuck ever. We’ll figure it out.”

Steve doesn’t look relieved. He stays tense and distracted for the rest of the night. After dinner, when
Bucky’s alone in the kitchen to ostensibly grab a glass of water, he quietly opens all the cupboards to
look for anything Rikki and Daisy might have to help take the edge off. Something clear he could
top his water off with. Just a little something to get him through the evening. He doesn’t find
anything and doesn’t know what he would ultimately do if he did, but he’s still disappointed.

—

The short ride back to Windsor Terrace is a wordless one, set to the soundtrack of some classic rock
station that Steve likes. Or maybe it’s one he would have liked in the past. Bucky’s not sure. Steve
doesn’t seem to like much of anything these days.

It inevitably reminds Bucky of back when they were together, those gilded days when Steve would
crank up one of his Led Zeppelin records and cook dinner, nodding his head with the rhythm,
singing the lyrics unselfconsciously even though he’s never had great pitch. Sometimes Bucky
would just sit at the kitchen table and watch the ease of his movements, the grace of his spectacular
body, the vibrant hum of life in it, feeling the first whispers of want, raw and feral, uncurling in him.
It was the best kind of foreplay, and Steve didn’t even know he was doing it. He was oblivious to his
beauty, to the way he made Bucky want to hold him down and kiss him and bury his cock in him,
even though Steve was never into that.

But the desire would come anyway, and Bucky would settle for what he could get from him, which
was pretty much anything. Anything except real intimacy, the kind of sex where Steve would be
sweet and tender and tell Bucky that he loved him, the kind that would come on the tail end of a
romantic date — as romantic as things could get when Bucky rejected public affection almost entirely.
He could usually see it coming. Maybe it was the way Steve would look at him, like he was worthy
of love, like he was beautiful beneath his skin. And Bucky simply couldn’t tolerate that. It made him
feel scared and sick, and the only thing he could do to calm it was to fill himself with booze and hope
that Steve never realized how much it took just to be able to hear that love, even if it could never sink
through the vodka and enter his heart.

Steve finds parking two blocks from their building, wedging the Corolla into a spot so tight it’ll be a
wonder if the bumpers go unscathed until morning. He waits with his usual conscientious patience
while Bucky makes it to his feet and bends his knee a few times to work the soreness out. It’s so
much worse in the cold, and it’s slow going back to their apartment. Bucky doesn’t exactly mind,
because he knows once they get inside, the awkwardness will multiply exponentially, even when
they break off toward their separate rooms. It might even get worse then, because Bucky will start
imagining Steve behind closed doors, his stark aloneness, kept company only by his quiet suffering
and his many secrets.

Bucky feels pressure then, a rekindling of the anger he quelled back at his sister’s. He thinks to
maybe bring it up tomorrow, before remembering that Steve’s going in to work to catch up on some
report or another. The realization pisses him off even more, maybe because it’s one more sign pointing to an immense problem that neither of them will speak about openly, because to name it would be to make it real, and there’s no going back from that. He’s just not sure if he can keep choking this urge back, now that it’s awake, and he swallows, throat dry, and he’s just about to fuck it and say something when Steve beats him to it.

“I should have told you about Ethan sooner,” Steve says, voice low and contrite in the darkness.

Bucky picks up his pace, energized by his mounting irritation. “Like I said, it’s fine, but you don’t tell me anything anymore. I just don’t have a fucking clue what’s going on with you. Ever.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

His apology hits Bucky like a gust of gasoline, igniting the spark of his anger into a conflagration. Because he’s sick to death of the ‘sorries’ and ‘I knows,’ which are about as useless as his gut-knotting, daily fretting over this stubborn bastard.

He’s tried to stand back. He’s tried to remember what Quill said about needing to care for himself. He’s tried to let Steve have his own agency, praying in his godless way that maybe Steve will step up and take ownership of whatever the fuck is happening to him. But this surprise baby bullshit takes the cake, and Bucky’s tenuous restraint snaps like a rubber band.

“Stop,” Bucky says. He follows his own command, because he wants Steve to really hear him, really see him, really know just how untenable and gravely serious this situation is.

Steve halts his steps and turns back, gaping at Bucky with a tupperware of Winnie’s hideous green marshmallow salad in one hand. His other hand twitches at his side.

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Steve halts his steps and turns back, gaping at Bucky with a tupperware of Winnie’s hideous green marshmallow salad in one hand. His other hand twitches at his side.

“You need to stop hiding things from me, Steve. You gotta stop fucking pretending like you’re okay, because you’re not. You’re fucked up, and you’re shutting me out, and you gotta stop, because I cannot fucking stand it anymore.”

Bucky’s shaking, and he grips tight onto his cane to steady himself. He’s shaking with fury and fear and helplessness, because he has no control over this man. He never had any. Not for a moment. He’s not sure why he’s never realized it before — maybe because the thought is abjectly fucking terrifying. He’s not sure how he’s kept it locked away for so long, compartmentalized and wrapped and stowed beneath a pile of his own pathetic problems like his broken dick and his cowardice and his court-ordered sobriety.

He’s scared. He’s completely, utterly scared out of his mind.

Steve’s reply is weak. Tremulous and feeble. “I’m taking meds.”

“Good,” Bucky replies, voice cracking.

“I’m seeing the psychiatrist next week.”

“Good.”

Steve shakes his head in resignation. “I’m sorry, Buck. I’m really sorry. I don’t want you to worry, I’m—”

“Don’t say you’re okay,” Bucky warns. “Don’t say you’re fine. I don’t wanna hear it.”

“Okay.”
Bucky sucks in a deep breath and pushes it out slowly, willing himself to settle, telling himself it’ll be okay, it’ll be okay, Steve will be okay, just like Rikki said. He thinks it until he says it, spinning it toward something good. Something hopeful.

“It’ll be okay. It’ll be good to have Ethan here, right?” Bucky gives a small smile, one Steve doesn’t return.

“Okay,” Steve replies stiffly.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yes.”

He looks it. Nervous and adrift and alone. It grips Bucky’s heart and pulls him forward, until he’s close enough to see the rapid rise and fall of Steve’s chest.

“I can help, you know,” Bucky assures him. “You don’t have to do it alone. Any of it. Not baby stuff, not financial stuff, not medical stuff, not emotional stuff. I care about you.”

It doesn’t hit the way he wants it to. It feels inadequate. Incomplete. Bucky swallows heavily.

“I care about you a lot,” he corrects.

Steve lifts his hand then, carefully, tentatively, and touches his fingertips to the collar of Bucky’s sweater. He starts at the bottom of the V and traces up Bucky’s chest with a sort of misplaced reverence that seizes Bucky’s body and derails cogent thought, so that all he can do is make a small, stunted sound and spout the first asinine thing that comes to mind.

“It’s a nice sweater,” Bucky says. “You have good taste.”

Steve’s hand flattens and slides up over Bucky’s shoulder, slipping around the back of Bucky’s neck to hold him. Steve ducks his head, eyes closed like he’s in pain. An exhale shudders out of him.

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispers.

Then he lets go.

Steve turns back toward their apartment and begins walking, stiff and slow. Bucky follows, frowning, charged with fresh uneasiness as they clear the final half-block to their building.

Inside, they part ways, Bucky to his bedroom and Steve to his own. Steve’s door closes, and Bucky stands in the middle of his room, his mind a jumble of confused, conflicting thoughts. He works to sift through it, to decipher some sense from it, but his efforts are ill-equipped for this kind of turmoil. Defeated, he grabs his sleep clothes and goes to the bathroom to wash his face and brush his teeth. He strips absently, pulling his pants down and stepping out of them, catching unfortunate glimpses of the chaotic pattern of a couple dozen scars of various shapes, depths, and colors that mar his legs. He drags his sweatpants up over his markings, grimacing as he often does at the wretched, virtually nonexistent silhouette of his dick beneath the fabric.

The top part is worse, somehow, the part he usually rushes through the fastest, if only to avoid the horrifying mess of his arm and the soft flesh of his belly. He pulls off his sweater and undershirt, but something stops him before he can hide himself again — a warmth that trails up over his collarbone and curls around the nape of his neck. The echo of Steve’s touch, one Bucky now traces with his own fingertips. In his mind’s eye, he sees Steve’s face, the tender adoration there, the hurt, and something quietly shifts in him. Something subtle and unexpected.
It’s been so long since Steve has touched him like that. Since anyone has touched him like that. And underneath that nebulous shift is something new and delicate, some distant cousin of desire. An ache to have something inside him filled, some gutted out part of him that should have life in it. Some need that he can’t satisfy on his own. Some chasm that he used to pour alcohol into, because to let love or light seep into it was just too goddamn overwhelming and frightening.

He misses this, whatever this is. This fragile aliveness. This thing that Steve gave him with the pads of his fingers and the heat of his palm. He remembers the words of Scott and Rikki and his endocrinologists both here and at Bragg, telling him that it’s not normal to feel lifeless inside and that, maybe, there’s something he can do to make it better. Something in a bottle at the bottom of his shaving bag. Something he’s been denying himself, because to feel alive is also to feel ashamed.

But maybe it’s just that it’s been too long. Maybe he’s been dead inside for too many miserable months. Because if this is what life feels like, what want feels like, maybe — just maybe — it could be worth the cost.

So he digs out the bottle, pumps two squirts of gel into his hands, and rubs it over his shoulders and upper arms. He dresses quickly afterward, pulling on a black, long-sleeved shirt, and instead of turning left to go back to his room, he turns right, leaving his cane behind and limping the short distance to Steve’s door.

There’s sound on the other side of it. It’s hard to hear, but when Bucky presses his ear to the wood, he hears a fast stream of Arabic. He leans away, heart racing as the language kicks up old memories — the disorder of an overcrowded market, the wailing of a man as he cradles the body of his mother, the angry rumble of a crowd as the platoon passes by in their poorly armored vehicles. Bucky presses his palm to his chest, grounding himself, calming himself, telling himself that he’s responsible but not to blame, except where he was, which is an unsolved problem that no therapy has ever really been able to touch. He falls back on the assurance that this isn’t a problem he has to solve now, because there’s a bigger one at hand, and Bucky grits his teeth and knocks before he can retreat.

The Arabic abruptly stops.

“Come in.”

Bucky pushes open the door and surveys the room. Steve is sitting up in bed, covers drawn up to his waist, with his computer on his lap and a green Army notebook under his hand. It’s the same kind Bucky uses from the pack Steve brought with him from Bragg, notebooks and notebooks he probably thought he’d fill with the footnotes of his career, now full of Twelve Step homework and whatever the fuck kind of work Steve is doing on Thanksgiving night. He’s wearing glasses, a pair Bucky’s never seen that fit his brilliance better than when he goes without, when he looks more like the douchebag jock Bucky mistook him for when they first met in English class. The illusion was short-lived, because the second he opened his mouth to answer one of the teacher’s questions about The Canterbury Tales, it was clear that he was the smartest person in the room.

“How are you?” Bucky asks.
Steve tries to give an easy shrug, but it comes off tight and forced. “Okay. Working. Trying to, anyway.”

“If I’m bugging you—”

“No, it’s not you,” Steve emphasizes. “Just hard to focus. Generally.”

“You must be tired.”

“Yeah, but I have to get this done.” Steve gives his laptop a forlorn look, tapping the pen in his hand against the hard cover of his notebook.

Bucky straightens his posture and loosens his arms, letting them fall to his sides as he takes a tentative step in the room.

“What’re you working on?” he asks.


“Cheerful.”

“Just watching some news on it. My Levantine is garbage, so it’s not going so well.”

Bucky pulls in his lower lip between his teeth, looking to the empty right half of the bed next to Steve. He’s never in the middle, like he’s holding the place there for someone else, and Bucky wonders if maybe Sharon slept on the right side. It’s the side Bucky used to sleep on. It’s been so long since they’ve slept in the same bed — since Bragg back in January, and things were so different then. Steve was completely different then.

Bucky tries to backtrack the path to how Steve got to who he is now, tries to think of what happened to collapse him down into this man, the one who seems to live on the lowest levels of Maslow’s hierarchy. It pains him to remember the ease with which Steve used to work. The enviably thoughtful, well-written papers he could cram together in just a couple hours before they were due. The tests he could ace without even studying, even though he put up the front of needing to whenever they worked together. The readings he could do for hours without pause, locked in rapt attention while Bucky paced the room and huffed his antsiness and read in chunks measured in minutes.

Steve is looking at him, gazing over with restrained curiosity. He seems content to simply regard Bucky, even while Bucky begins to move his fingers and shift his weight under the scrutiny.

“Do you… want some company?” Bucky asks, marveling momentarily at his audacity before tensing against it, bracing himself against Steve’s rejection or acceptance; Bucky’s not sure which one would be worse.

Steve’s face goes slack, and he looks to the empty space next to him, then back at Bucky.

“Like…” Steve trails off. He lays a hand on the comforter where Bucky might go and grips loosely onto it.

Bucky’s face warms. “I mean, only if you want.”

Steve pulls the comforter down, exposing the pillow below, and pats the mattress. For the first time all day — maybe the first time all week — he embodies some kind of positive emotion. Not happiness or joy or pleasure, but maybe something like cautious hope.
Bucky’s stomach flips as he approaches the bedside, excitement competing with fear, and he maneuvers his graceless body into bed, turning on his side facing Steve, even though it hurts his leg.

Steve looks down at him, open and unguarded. “Do you mind if I still work?”

“Sure. I’ll just watch.”

Steve gives a small snort, and there’s a ghost of a smile on his face as he opens up his laptop again to resume watching the news. Bucky lies there, working to keep his nerves in check while Steve does his research and jots his notes and closes his eyes tightly when he seems stuck on an idea. Sometimes Steve glances over at him, and each time he catches sight of Bucky looking back, he smiles again. Just a little. Each time, he looks relieved.

Even though it’s difficult for Bucky to lie there and fight his thoughts about Iraq and his worries about Steve’s obvious decline, he can’t deny the pool of warm satisfaction, the feeling of rightness, that fills him from the inside. It trickles into that chasm, and it doesn’t hurt nearly as much as he thought it might. It even starts to feel good, as sleep edges up on him. He feels safe here, watching Steve, feeling his presence, and Bucky swears he can feel the testosterone sinking in through his skin, seeping into his blood and muscles, infusing him with the existential energy he’s both desired and dreaded.

And God damn, it feels good. Right now, this feels good. And in this moment, Bucky’s content to let it be.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Gore, weed, homophobic language, body hatred, PTSD, and alcoholism

Notes:

OEF/OIF: Operation Enduring Freedom (another name for the war in Afghanistan); Operation Iraqi Freedom (another name for the Iraq War)
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Ethan comes to stay. Steve gets honest. Bucky gets triggered.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content and other things. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic that I still wanted to share with you. More info about the series here.

Thank you to my incredible beta, who is the Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. Seriously. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very special thanks to kissmissangbang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

January 8, 2010

“I know what you’re going to try to get me to talk about, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

Steve is sitting in his usual chair in Hope Van Dyne’s office, arms crossed over his chest, knee bouncing like it does every time he drags himself here. It was especially hard to come this week, with the convergence of two unstoppable trains in his life — the finalization of Human Rights Watch’s annual report and the impending arrival of the baby. He’s not sure how much time he lost staring at his phone, finger hovering over Hope’s contact information, fighting the urge to relieve even just a little bit of pressure in his life. Their sessions have been a draining, grueling struggle to beat back the things he so badly wants to forget, as Hope asks relentlessly about them. She tries to be gentle about it, and she’s doing it because she wants to help. Because the only way she can help with all the shit wrecking his life right now is to have him talk about it. Because the only way to treat a wound is to look at it first. Last time, he got as far as starting to tell her about Khalidya — just the setup for the operation, the way they stacked outside the door of the building — until he had to leave her office and step out for some air before he got sick. He stood outside the clinic, eyes closed, sweat cooling on his forehead, until she came out to check on him. He said ‘I’m done with that,’ and that was that.

And Steve’s not having it again today. He can’t. He can’t afford the emotional and motivational slump that follows him around for days after their sessions, especially when they broach anything even remotely related to deployment. It takes him days to shake off the black maw of hopelessness about his situation, about the prospect that he’ll ever get better. That his brain will ever be back to normal. That he’ll ever be able to relax during his waking hours and not have to constantly guard
against the twisting of his own mind as it transports him back to the worst days of his life over and over and over again, often without any warning.

“What do you think I’m going to try to get you to talk about?” Hope asks.

“Deployment. I don’t wanna talk about it. So I’m not going to.”

Hope’s lips press together like they’re holding something back. Probably some iteration of her wound comment from the previous session. Perhaps she’s realized that even the finest analogies collapse in the face of stubborn resistance to pain. “Well, let’s check in about meds, then. You’re still taking the amitriptyline?”

“Yeah. My sleep is better. And the headaches are less frequent.”

“How about the prazosin?”

“I’m working up my dose. I’m not waking up covered in sweat as often. Still some nightmares, but less than before.” Steve also counts it as a victory that he only woke up gagging four times since they last met and only vomited once, but the whole thing is embarrassing enough for him to keep it to himself.

Hope smiles. “Great. You can just keep upping your dose slowly until you reach 15 milligrams, if you even need to go that high to get the results you want. And how about the citalopram?”

“I started it. It seems okay so far.”

“How’s your anxiety been?”

“Maybe a little bit better. I don’t seem to get quite as panicked at work when I inevitably screw up.”

“Good. And how about your depression? The blah stuff.”

Steve shrugs. “I don’t know. The same.”

“Go ahead and up it to 40 milligrams, then.” Hope turns her chair away from him and types something into his chart. The keys clack with every stroke, the sound of her perpetually fresh manicure hitting plastic. She swivels back to him, resuming her open, relaxed attentiveness, hands folded lightly on the herringbone patterned wool skirt. “What else is going on with you these days?”

“Ethan is coming to stay with me next week. For a week.”

“You mentioned that last time,” Hope reminds him. “You don’t look very excited about it.”

Like every time he verbalizes it, Steve’s fingers clench while his brain decides to suddenly be brilliant again, if only to showcase a dazzling collection of horrible possibilities for how the week might go. He’s imagined leaving Ethan in pretty much every place he frequents during the week, most horrifyingly in the car or in the bathtub, the most common baby-killing mistakes he reads in the news. He’s also imagined Ethan getting sick and crying the whole time, the kind of crying that can’t be comforted, the kind that will make him a basket case for work and will spell his dismissal from HRW for sure. He’s imagined Bucky being distant and cold like he always was whenever Steve brought up the prospect of their having kids together, back in the ancient days of their relationship when they were fantastically misaligned on that particular subject. Not that this is anything like that. Not that this is their child. Not that they’re a couple. Not that this is Vermont and they’re happy and sane and in love.
“I’m stressed out. There’s so much to do.”

“Like what?”

“Shopping. I need a crib and a changing table and toys and extra bottles and formula and diapers and pretty much everything.”

Hope makes a sound of sympathy. “It’s hard to take care of a baby alone.”

“I won’t be completely alone. My…” Steve pauses to choose the right word. “…Friend will be there, too. My roommate.”

“You hesitated there.”

Steve gives a weak snort. “You don’t let anything slide, do you?”

“It’s part of my job to read the pauses. The expressions. The tone of your voice. They give a lot of information.”

“He was my best friend. A long time ago.”

He pauses again to make yet another choice, the one of whether to take the bait she’s so clearly left for him or to shut it down and divert to some other path. There are several possibilities — one leads back to Khalidya or to Trip, another to work, another back to Ethan and Steve’s inexhaustible feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. They’re all uniquely aversive and immediate. But the path Hope is offering leads to the past, back to the wreckage of his relationship with Bucky, the lingering weight that rests between them in every conversation, every glance, every night they chastely sleep in the same bed because neither wants to be alone but neither can really manage to get close. Their ruin is a nagging ache, a hungry ghost that has never been satisfied, merely obscured by the war and its indelible mark on them. It seems somehow safer than the other paths, if only because it’s done and unfixable.

So Steve takes a long breath, pulling air deep into his lungs, and he tells her their story. The short of it, anyway.

“We got involved and were together for two years. Then he went on active duty and left me and my ma died and I dumped him. I ended up in his unit on deployment as his platoon leader, something he arranged without my knowledge. Then we had sex and my engagement to Sharon ended because of it. But not before I got her pregnant, which was one of the worst things I’ve ever done in my life.”

Hope’s brows draw together. “Getting her pregnant?”

Steve shakes his head. “Not telling her about the cheating right away, as soon as I got home on leave. Or as soon as it happened. We got drunk and had sex. I told her after, like a fucking pig. And, so, now we’re here.”

“What’s your friend’s name?” Hope asks, because she seems bent on this part of their work. The naming. Naming people. Naming thoughts. Naming feelings. Naming the goddamn naming.

“Jamie. James. But I call him Bucky. It’s a nickname he made up for himself when we met. It stuck.”

“So, he can help you out with Ethan.”

“Sharon doesn’t want him to, understandably. He’s had problems with drinking in the past. He disappeared last year, checked himself into a hotel, and nearly drank himself to death.” The
immensity of it all halts him, washing over him in the overwhelming way it always does, forcing him to push through it like he might shove his way through a wall of gelatinous awfulness. “Then he went to jail for a DUI and was mandated to treatment and AA. He seems like he’s doing pretty well now. I’m not really sure how. But I might have to ask him to help, anyway. Maybe his ma. She offered. I just absolutely have to go into work for a couple of half days. Maybe a full day. We have a really big project we’re finishing up, and I can’t afford to miss it.”

Steve looks down to the floor, down at the toes of his shoes, the black leather of them splotched with white salt from the sidewalk.

“I always said I didn’t want to be a deadbeat dad, like my dad was. But I’m not doing a very good job. I’m pretty terrible, actually. Maybe worse than my dad, because I’m just partially in the picture, by my own choice. I could have moved to DC, instead of coming here to be with Bucky.” Steve tenses against the hot sting of shame, recalling Sharon’s words when he told her. The profound disappointment in her voice. “It’d probably be better if I wasn’t involved at all, but I could never do that.”

Hope crosses her legs and threads her fingers together over her knee. She gives him an appraising look, her green eyes thoughtful but with that ever-present edge of sharpness that reminds him that she’s always thinking, always constructing her picture of him in her mind, always planning for her next step while she sits with him in the present.

“Tell me more about your mother,” she says at last.

Steve grimaces. “Is this going to be some dumb Freudian Oedipal bullshit where you imply that I want to have sex with her and kill my dad or something?”

“No, not at all,” Hope assures him. “I work from an attachment perspective, meaning that I look at important relationships you had growing up and what they taught you about how to have relationships today. Mom and dad are really big figures, whether they’re there or not. Both shape the person you are.” She says “mom and dad” with the plain, unaccented prosody of someone who’s not originally from around here. Maybe California or Washington or Colorado.

“I know about attachment theory."

“You do?”

“I’ve read about it. So, what do you want to know?”

“Give me three words to describe her.”

Steve considers it briefly.


“She died of cancer, right? When was that?”

“2002. It was the third time she had it. The first was ovarian when I was ten and the second was breast cancer with liver mets when I was fourteen. She opted for a partial mastectomy, and it came back in 2001 with brain mets. She had the BRCA1 gene. I didn’t…” He trails off when it hits him — that he could have the gene, too. That he could have gotten Sharon pregnant with a daughter and doomed her to his mother’s fate. The thought is sickening and reminds him once more of his irresponsibility.

“Did she have partners or family to help take care of her?” Hope asks.
“Just me.”

Hope tilts her head, bobbed hair shifting to reveal a single diamond stud earring on her left ear. “What did that look like?”


He had a rhythm. Wake up at 5:00. Shower. Blow through whatever ridiculously easy homework was due that day. Make his lunch and his ma’s lunch. Make his breakfast and hers, not that she would usually eat it, when she was so sick. She’d always thank him for it, call him sweet for doing it, but he’d often find it in the garbage after school, along with most of her lunch. It was one way he could gauge how she was really doing, when all she ever told him was that she was fine. He’d leave a plate by her bed and wake her up to tell her he was leaving. Ask her if she needed anything from the store on the way home. Then he’d take the train to school and scowl his way through hours of drivel and rush home as quickly as he could, maybe stopping for eye drops or Imonium AD or lotion or ginger ale or crackers. Sometimes he’d surprise her with nail polish, and she would cry and hug him with her brittle arms and say ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Steven.’ He would smile and pat her back softly and offer to put it on her toes, and even though he was terrible at it, sometimes she would say yes. And then he would put on music and clean and make dinner and answer her questions about his day, always making sure she heard good things. He’d get her through one day and another day and the next, until she was well again.

And then he would watch and track and count. Watch her appetite. Note the tone of her skin. Look out for purple under her eyes. Count the number of hours she slept. The number of hours she stayed at work. And any time he saw any change, any at all, he would be extra good. Extra responsible. Extra helpful. Anything to take the load off of her so that she wouldn’t have to worry. So she could stay healthy and alive.

“When did you start doing that?” Hope asks.

“When she first got sick,” Steve says.

Hope’s lips purse again. “Do you think those are reasonable things for a ten-year-old to do?”

Steve frowns. “It doesn’t really matter if they’re reasonable or not. It’s what needed to be done. She couldn’t work. She was on disability and state medical. The home health aide was only paid enough to come once a day to help her bathe and dress. What was she supposed to do the rest of the time? She didn’t have anyone else. I did what she would have done for me.”

“But you were ten.” She says it as if he can’t grasp the language, or like he’s not hearing her clearly. And maybe he’s not. Maybe he’s never quite heard it like that before. Because when she says it, it sounds bad. It sounds wrong, like it was a mistake to love his mother the way he did.

“So what?” he snaps back. “When you love someone, you take care of them. And I love her — loved her — more than anyone.” Steve shakes his head at the slip in tense, how he still manages to do it after all these years.

“I imagine there were some consequences for you. School. Friends.”

“Believe it or not, I used to have a photographic memory and an IQ of 157. School was a joke. I could have skipped two or three grades, but she only let me skip one. And I didn’t care about having friends. Nobody wants to be friends with cancer boy, anyway.”
“Was it the same when you were fifteen?”

“It was worse for her, though maybe better for me. She spent a few months at the county hospital in critical care. I stayed there with her as much as I could. Bucky’s ma insisted that I stay with them instead of going home alone, when the nurses made me go home at night. Winnie — Bucky’s ma — helped take care of my ma when she got out of the hospital. Bucky and I got really close then. He was really supportive, even though he was going through his own stuff. That was around the time he told me he was gay. Or his version of that. He hates the word. I don’t think I’ve heard him use it. He was really torn up about it. Really scared about how I was going to respond.”

“When did things get romantic?” Hope asks.

“When I was nineteen.”

“What happened? Why didn’t you stay together?”

“9/11.”

Hope raises an eyebrow. “What about 9/11?”

Steve closes his eyes against the memory of that day and the excruciating two that followed. Bucky in his uniform with his gear, walking out the door, riding his motorcycle into fire and death. Bucky, unreachable, the cellular network disabled from the chaos. The North Tower collapsing, Steve sick with worry that Bucky was dead, a sickness that grew with each passing hour that he didn’t hear from him, so bad that he called out to work and alternated between pacing the apartment and curling up on Bucky’s side of the bed, sleep impossible, CNN humming constantly in the background of his anxiety and dread. And by the night of September 13th, Steve was numbed through with grief, staring listlessly at the ceiling, and then he heard it — the low rumble of a motorcycle coming down their street, one that Steve could never mistake for anyone else’s, the growl of the rebuilt Triumph that belonged to George Barnes. And Steve was on his feet in a heartbeat, rushing through the apartment, barreling down the stairs two at a time in bare feet. He threw the front door open and ran toward the sound of the bike as it throttled down half a block away, and he didn’t slow until he saw Bucky dismounting, no helmet, no cover, no gear, his slack face streaked with sooty marks, his eyes miles and miles away as they made contact with Steve’s. Steve closed the distance between them and yanked Bucky into a hug so fierce that it drew a pained grunt from him, and Steve said, ‘Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead. Jesus fucking Christ,’ and he was crying and furious and relieved, and Bucky was so limp in his arms, and all he could do was murmur ‘Sorry, I’m sorry,’ his voice hoarse and cracking. Bucky didn’t even have the energy to resist Steve’s arm around him as he walked him to the apartment, slow and dazed, and Steve clutched his shoulder, loosening and tightening his grip to reassert his hold, to let Bucky know that he had him, to let himself know that Bucky was really here. Steve took him upstairs and got a good look at him in the light of the kitchen — the filth coating his uniform, the rusted splotches of what might be blood, the layer of gray painted on every inch of exposed skin, the smell of smoke and metal and something acrid. The dead expression on his face. And he wiped at Bucky’s cheeks with his thumbs in a pointless, caring motion that only seemed to make it worse, so he let his hands trail down to rest on Bucky’s arms, stiff and sturdy, and he said, ‘I’m so glad you’re okay, I was so scared,’ and Bucky’s gaze trailed off while his mouth ticked, like it meant to open to let something out but couldn’t. And Steve asked if he wanted a shower, and Bucky gave a single nod, but when Steve made his way toward the bathroom, Bucky just stood, swaying a little in his dirty, scuffed boots, and Steve went back to him and walked him there and unbuttoned his BDU coat, revealing his clean, brown t-shirt beneath, and Steve slid the coat off Bucky’s shoulders and it fell to his heels. He untucked Bucky’s t-shirt and asked Bucky to lift his arms so he could pull it over his head, the smell of old sweat mingling with the stench of debris, and Steve pulled in a gasp when he saw the horrible bloom of purple spread over Bucky’s left
ribs, like someone had taken a baseball bat to him, and Steve brushed his fingers around the edges of
it, saying ‘Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,’ and he felt his eyes well, and he sat Bucky down on the toilet
seat so he could pull off his boots and socks and then started the shower, because, God, the thing
took a decade to warm up. And Steve put his hands on Bucky’s thighs and looked up at him, and
Bucky’s lips were moving soundlessly in the shape of ‘I’m sorry,’ and Steve squeezed his hands
lightly into Bucky’s muscles, because who knew what other bruises he might have underneath. Steve
pulled him to his feet and undid his belt and the buttons on his trousers, pushing them down his hips
and letting them pool at his feet, and Bucky watched him as he gently slid his underwear down and
helped him to step out of everything, supporting him while he struggled to get his feet through the
narrow taper of his pants. And when the water was warm enough, Steve opened the curtain and
coaxed him in, then closed it to give him some privacy. And he stood outside the shower, heaving
harsh breaths into his hands below the sound of the water as he tried to piece together the nightmare
of what Bucky might have just endured, and when his voice was finally calm enough, after fifteen
minutes or so, he said ‘Buck?’ and when he got no reply, he pulled back the curtain and saw Bucky
standing in the same place Steve left him, eyes closed, water washing over his bent head. And Steve
frowned and pulled off his clothes and went in with him, and Bucky let him wash his hair, let him
turn the water gray and opaque, and he let Steve lather up a washcloth and wipe the pulverized
remains of the World Trade Center off of him, groaning softly when Steve washed a tender or tense
spot, and when Steve was done, he pressed his chest to Bucky’s back and wrapped his arms around
him and kissed the nape of his neck and said ‘I love you,’ and Bucky reached up and wrapped a
loose hand around Steve’s forearm, and it was — Jesus — it was like just before he left three days
before, and Bucky said ‘I’ll be out in a few minutes,’ and he squeezed Steve, and Steve nodded
against his shoulder and reluctantly let go, and he got dressed quickly while Bucky finished and
pulled out Bucky’s favorite things to wear — his favorite underwear and favorite shirt and cotton
shorts. And when Bucky got out of the shower, he came out with a towel around his hips, and Steve
showed him the things he laid out and asked if he wanted anything to eat, and Bucky said no, but he
wanted some water, so Steve left him to get dressed and pulled out the A&W Root Beer Bear glass
from the far back of the cupboard, the one Bucky brought with him from Kentucky when his family
moved to the city, and he filled it nearly to the brim and brought it back to the bedroom. Bucky was
dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed, absentmindedly touching his ribs with a scowl on his face, and
he took one look at the glass and, God, he smiled a little, and Steve let out the bit of air he’d been
holding in his lungs for the past hour, and Bucky drank the whole thing in one swoop. Steve went to
get him more, and when he came back, Bucky was stretching himself out on the comforter and was
talking on Steve’s phone, murmuring ‘yeah, Ma, I know, I’m sorry’ in a distant tone, and Steve set
the water on the nightstand and laid down next to Bucky, breathing and breathing to calm himself.
And when Bucky hung up, he curled onto his side so Steve could slide up behind him and hold him
and nuzzle the smooth juncture between Bucky’s neck and shoulder, and Steve said ‘how are you
doing?’ because he didn’t know what else to say, and a noise came from the back of Bucky’s throat,
one that told Steve that he was too exhausted to lie, and so Steve let it be and pulled him closer and
told him again that he loved him, and Bucky threaded his fingers through Steve’s and let himself be
held like that until they both fell asleep. And some time later, in the early hours, Steve awoke to find
the bed empty, and when he followed the light from the kitchen, he saw Bucky there, hands braced
against the counter he was facing, shoulders hunched, body tense, his A&W cup half-empty and
sitting on the counter next to him, and when Steve came up behind him, Bucky turned unsteadily,
startled, and Steve picked up the glass and sniffed it, picking up a dry ethanol smell, and he didn’t
bother asking how much Bucky already drank, because judging by how glassy and unfocused his
eyes were, Steve knew it was a lot. Steve dumped the rest of it down the sink and pulled Bucky back
to their room and got him back into bed, and Bucky rolled toward him and slid in close and ran his
hand down Steve’s flank and sighed and said ‘fuck me,’ and Steve said no, that it wouldn’t be right,
and Bucky said ‘please… please,’ and Steve held Bucky while he grabbed at Steve’s shirt and
begged and begged him, until he let out a single sob and called him a fucking asshole and pushed
weakly against him while Steve shushed him and rubbed his back, until Bucky gave up struggling
and sagged against Steve’s body, breath ragged, and drifted back to sleep. Steve tried to join him but couldn’t, because his heart was pounding and he couldn’t stop thinking about how much he loved the man in his arms, how he almost lost him and somehow didn’t. How he never wanted to almost lose him ever again.

Steve shifts in his chair. He has to, if only to move some of his anxious energy around his body. “Something like that really makes you rethink your priorities. After he came back from helping at Ground Zero, I wanted to get serious. I wanted to take over his roommate’s lease and move in with him. I was already practically living there, and his roommate was practically living with her boyfriend, and I wanted to make it official. I wanted to be with him for the long haul, and I told him that. I know we were young, but I meant it.” He clenches his molars together, jaw ticking. “He signed up for active duty the day after I said that. So I guess that was his answer. He deployed. My ma died. I dumped him.”

“You said that before, but I don’t quite get the connection,” Hope says, turning her hands up. “Tie those together for me.”

His palms are sweaty, and he rubs them on the arms of the chair, vaguely aware of all of the other palms that have done the same. He pulls in a breath as he decides whether he wants to go further, into the dark reaches of his grief and fear, the place he’s only alluded to with Sharon and Bucky, the latter with furious hurt on the day they fought back in Baghdad. Steve looks at Hope’s face, her warm curiosity, her genuineness, her desire to know him, and maybe he can tread this path with her and not completely fall apart. Maybe she can keep him here in the room, keep him from untethering completely and dropping into the abyss. Maybe she can hear him and understand in ways that Bucky never could and Sharon never had the chance to.

More than that, he is goddamn tired. He’s so unspeakably tired of holding everything back, crushing everything down, shoving everything away to protect Bucky and protect his job and protect his own tenuous emotional integrity. Part of him is aching to let go, even as he resists it with all the strength he can muster. Aching to feel, no matter how ugly the feeling.

“When 9/11 happened, I knew my ma had a recurrence,” Steve tells her, swallowing past the tightness in his throat. “But she told me it was stage one. Something really easy to manage. Just a few rounds of chemo. She insisted that she could do it without my help. And so I let her. I’d still see her every week, but I wasn’t really living there. I wasn’t watching closely enough. I was in love. I was working. I wasn’t thinking about her. I should have been…”

Hope gives a small smile of encouragement.

“After Bucky left for active duty, I moved back in with her.” He pauses to steady his voice, because he remembers her face suddenly, her sunken cheeks and sunken eyes, and he can’t remember if he just didn’t see it clearly before or if he just didn’t want to. “And I found out that she was really sick. Really, really sick. Stage four brain mets. She lied to me. She was that sick the last three months I was living with Bucky. Every time I came over, it was all an act. She always had an excuse for why she was tired or not at work that day, and I just… I just fucking believed it. She cashed in her retirement to pay for someone to care for her so I didn’t have to. She didn’t want me to be burdened by that.” He pauses again, because his throat is so tight, so full, that he has to struggle to get the words out. “Not when I was so happy with Bucky.”

“And he left you,” Hope states, as plain and stark as the fact itself.

Steve nods. He blinks back tears, the first that have come to him since Fort Bragg. They feel terrible, stinging and sharp and angry. “I was so mad at him. And I was so mad at my ma for lying to me, because it was all for nothing, in the end. I think of all that time I could have spent with her. I could
have helped her. I didn’t think he’d leave. I felt so…” He sniffs and shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Try to name that feeling.”

He shakes his head and says ‘fuck’ under his breath. He doesn’t want to name the fucking feeling, but it’s screaming and it’s raw and coming out of him unstoppably, and Hope wants him to just say it, just call it what it is, and so he gives it a name, thick and choked.

“Just sad.” A shaking sigh escapes him, and he wipes at his eyes with his knuckle. “So sad. I couldn’t stay with him after that. I shouldn’t have broken up with him while he was deployed, but I didn’t have anything left in me to care about his feelings. I couldn’t be mad at my ma, I just couldn’t, and so… I let myself be mad at him. He hurt me so badly. I was so, so fucking hurt. And then I was alone. And I joined the Army and swore I’d never get close to anyone again, because it was just too painful.”

Hope nods slowly and lets the silence engulf the room, so that the only sounds are of Steve trying to get a hold of himself, sniffing while his nose runs, huffing out breaths of frustration with the slow stream of tears that won’t stop leaking out of him.

And in the quiet, Hope offers no questions. No solutions. No advice. No comfort other than the presence and compassion in her eyes as she watches him cry and try to not cry. She waits patiently for him to speak again, when he’s ready to continue the story, when he gets to the part about Sharon, the first good thing to happen to him in such a long time.

“It took me five years to be able to trust someone again. And Sharon was good. She was stable and warm and loving. And I loved her. I fucking loved her. I still do. And I betrayed her for the person who hurt me the most. She didn’t deserve that. God damn it....”

Steve scrubs his hands over his face and then holds them there, covering himself.

“And I can’t seem to stop loving Bucky, either. I wish I could. Because I almost lost him twice, since we reconnected, and it’s just…” He lets his hands fall to his lap, and his vision begins to blur again. “I can’t lose him again. I’m so scared that he’s gonna relapse. I’m worried about him all the time. He says he’s fine, and I’m really worried that he’s not, that he’s hiding from me, like he’s always done. He’s lost weight, and he seems anxious all the time now. Ever since Thanksgiving.”

He’s been quiet. Quieter than usual. They don’t argue as much, which might be a relief if it wasn’t so fundamentally not-Bucky. Theirs has always been a relationship of conflict and closeness, rubber banding wildly between the two. And now, there’s just a hum between them, one Steve can’t place because it’s so strange.

“I love him,” Steve says, solemn and earnest. “And at the same time, it’s hard for me to feel close to him. It’s like everything is wrapped in gauze. I don’t feel things the way I used to. Generally, but with him, too.”

“When did that change?” Hope asks. “When he was injured in Iraq?”

The direction of her question is clear — someone somewhere along the way told him that something like that can numb a person out, which might be the proper name for the gauze. But he felt so strongly after Khalidiya. Horror over what happened to Bucky. Anger and sadness at Bucky’s decision to leave him for New York. Gut-tearing fear over his drinking and his disappearance in April—
“When he overdosed,” Steve says thoughtfully. “I’m just seeing that now. It was like a switch flipped, seeing him in that hospital bed. Something just shut down in me. I don’t know why.”

Hope un-crosses and re-crosses her legs, smoothing her skirt over her patterned tights. “Well, I can’t imagine that didn’t bring up feelings about seeing your mom in the hospital. And I think you said it — he almost died, because of something he did to himself. The loss would have been unbearable. It makes sense why you’d have trouble getting close again, now that you know you could lose him to his addiction at any time.”

And just like that, a wall drops, sealing off a notion so frightening that Steve can’t even stand to look at it. The emotions he so reluctantly allowed — the sadness, the grief — evaporate, and Steve’s expression goes cold.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he says.

Hope regards him for a few moments and acquiesces “Sure. So, did you see you have an appointment with neuropsychology on the 21st?”

“Can you write that down for me?”

“No problem.” Hope turns to her desk and grabs one of her business cards. She writes the date on the back with an expensive pen, one that probably comes nested in felt. “Let’s make another appointment for the week after that, then we can take a look at the results together. I might be able to give you something to help with your concentration. Will the 29th work?”

“Okay.”

“Is Bucky going shopping with you for baby stuff?” she asks, handing him her card with two appointment times on it.

Steve takes it and puts it in his wallet in the place he always puts them, the most recent in a stack of five, one for each time he’s forced himself to come here. “I didn’t think to ask.”

“You might involve him in the process. He can help you keep track of everything.”

Steve’s mouth quirks. “I hate asking him to do that.”

“I bet you do. But you also want to make sure your son has the things he needs, right? That’s important to you.”

“Yeah.”

“Think about it.”

She smiles, and Steve’s attention drifts from it to a framed picture on Hope’s desk of a little girl grinning and holding a frog. He’s meant to say something about it for the past three sessions but has always been such a wreck by the end that it slipped his mind.

“Is that your daughter?” he finally asks.

Hope looks back, glancing at the picture. “Yeah. She’s eight.”

“What’s her name?”

“Cassie,” Hope says, then swiftly adds, “Do you want to put those appointment times in your calendar now?”
“Okay.” He pulls his phone and opens his calendar app. He stares at it, eyebrows drawn sharply, as he tries to remember the dates she wrote down. She lets him struggle for a minute or so before telling him again, and he curses as he types them in.

“Maybe we can get you into the cognitive rehabilitation program,” Hope says. “They have a skills group that can help you remember things and keep track of things better.”

“Okay,” Steve grumbles, slipping his phone back into the pocket of the coat he has draped over the back of the chair.

Hope turns to her computer and begins clicking around the way she does when she’s setting some other wheel in motion in the grand machine of his wellness. “I’ll put in a consult. They might want to wait until after your testing, but we can bug them anyway. Get you on their radar.”

Steve thanks her and puts on his coat, once again thankful that he had the foresight to schedule his appointment with her at the end of the day. By the time he makes it out of the building, the wall keeping everything contained has already started shifting, letting the anxiety flood back in, the worry about Ethan’s arrival, the overwhelm from everything he still has to do to prepare, and the nagging sense of shame and self-loathing for allowing himself to crack open in Hope’s office. It’s so bad that the thought of settling down for the evening cranks up his anxiety even more. So on the way home, he calls Bucky, who seems thrilled to be torn from whatever he’s doing by the reluctant invitation to go shopping for baby stuff, an invitation Steve can barely believe he’s making as it leaves his lips. By the time he swings by to pick Bucky up and switch vehicles to Bucky’s truck, Bucky’s got a list of stores that he wrangled from Daisy. He sets about ranking them out loud while Steve takes Prospect Avenue toward Park Slope, following Bucky’s directions to a boutique that Bucky immediately dismisses as they drive by it, looking for a place to park the monstrous vehicle.

“No way,” Bucky says, craning his head to look back at the storefront. “Way overpriced.”

“It’s Park Slope,” Steve replies. “The whole neighborhood is overpriced.”

“Well, we can do better. Let’s try this other one. Hold on...”

Steve bristles. “No, I want to at least look.”

Bucky looks over at him with an expression that’s difficult to place, maybe concern wrapped in doubt. “You don’t have to spend a million bucks on one little week.”

“It’s not one little week. This might become a regular thing.”

“Do you want it to become a regular thing?”

“What I want isn’t the point. I have an obligation. At least eighteen years long.”

“Jesus,” Bucky says, shaking his head.

Steve doesn’t push further, because the last thing he wants today is to hear about Bucky’s resentment over Ethan’s existence. He bites back his response and circles the block until he finds a spot on a side street. There he stands outside the truck and watches Bucky closely as he gets out, mindful of the slick spots on the sidewalk, close enough to help if needed but not close enough to make Bucky feel smothered. It hardly feels like a year since he was chasing Bucky down in their neighborhood the night Bucky found out about Sharon’s pregnancy. The night Bucky screamed into the darkness. The night he told Bucky he loved him in this very truck, and Bucky said he felt the same, and Bucky told him he was leaving for New York, and Steve wept, because he was so scared and broken and trying not to be, and his feelings came so easily then. He has no idea how. He has no idea how he cried and
felt and crumbled right there without a thought. He doesn’t remember how to be that man anymore, what steps he would need to become him again, if that’s something he even wants.

The store is as posh on the inside as it is on the outside, in an eco-conscious Brooklyn way, with baby clothes in organic cotton and furniture made from sustainable wood. Steve and Bucky are the only two men in the store, and they’re accosted instantly by a sales assistant who looks like she’s stumbled upon an endangered bird she’s overwhelmingly excited to see but doesn’t want to scare away.

“I need a crib,” Steve says, short-circuiting her sales spiel before it starts. “And a changing table.”

“Of course,” the woman says, pushing past a brief, flustered pause in the wake of Steve’s directness. She waves them to the back of the store, passing by several browsing women who eye them with either fondness or amusement.

The sales woman stops and turns, and she fans out her hand at their selection. “Do you know what kind of crib you’re looking for?”

“Yes,” Steve says.

“Is it a gift? Are you buying from a registry?”

“No.”

She smiles. “Is it for your baby?” she asks, hesitantly angling up the word ‘your’ while gesturing between Bucky and Steve.

“His baby,” Bucky clarifies, jerking his thumb in Steve’s direction. Because God forbid anyone mistook them for a couple.

“I’ll let you know if I have any questions,” Steve tells her, hoping it’s enough to get her to go away and relieved when she takes the hint.

“No problem,” she replies.

“Thank you,” Bucky says pointedly, flashing his teeth to charm the edge off of Steve’s tone, and she gives him a small, bashful wave as she walks off.

Bucky’s face then goes serious as he approaches the display, evaluating the first crib visually and then checking the tag with a cringe.

“Jesus Christ, I hope it changes diapers, too, for that price,” he says, then hobbles over to a cradle next to it, one cut handsomely out of wood with a deep espresso finish. He runs his fingers along one of the smooth curves of it, admiring the shine. “What about this one?”

Steve approaches Bucky’s side and glances down into the cradle. “It needs to be deeper. He likes to stand up and grab onto the rails.”

“He stands?” Bucky says, incredulous. “Does he walk?”

“Not yet. But he can walk when you hold his hands.”

Bucky looks at him with the most unexpected expression — he’s smiling, and not in the coy way he smiled at the sales woman, or the sarcastic way he sometimes smiles at Steve when he’s grumpy. He’s grinning, eyes soft and fond.
“That’s cute,” he says.

Steve makes a sound of acknowledgment.

“I took forever to stand and walk,” Bucky tells him. “Ma said I was very defiant about it. I was too into crawling.” He looks down to his scarred right hand as it continues tracing over the wood. “Guess I just really like to be on my hands and knees.”

Steve blinks, jostled dumb by the comment, which is so far outside of Bucky’s post-rehab repertoire of speech that he’s not sure what to make of it. It’s the first innuendo he’s made since, Jesus, he can’t even remember.

Bucky’s pale cheeks pink up in the silence. He angles his body away and takes a step toward different a selection he’s spotted a few feet away. “Sorry. Bad joke,” he mutters.

Steve shakes his head faintly. “No, it’s—”

“What about this?” Bucky interrupts as he approaches a large crib with a frame and rails of pristine beech wood. He rests his cane against it, grabs it with both hands, and tries to shake it. “Definitely sturdy.”

Steve approaches and grips onto it, his right hand deliberately close to Bucky’s left. He tries to shake it, too, as if that’s the most important test of its desirability. He’s still tripping over Bucky’s comment, feeling pulled to respond but wholly unsure as to how. He tries to think back to what he might have said back at Bragg. Or back in Iraq. Or many years before, when they bandied easily through the strata of sexual suggestion. No reasonable response comes to him. Not when that domain of their relationship has been locked away for so long.

“This is good,” Steve says instead. He looks to the changing table to the right of the crib in matching wood. “I can get this, too.”

“Well, that was easy. What else do you need?”

Steve closes his eyes tight as he tries to remember. He made a list in his head on the way back from Manhattan and repeated it to himself to lock it in. And now, all he can recall are the two items he already has. So he walks through the apartment room by room in his head and runs through the baby’s average day when he was there for Christmas. He lists the items slowly, as they come to him.


He tries to think of more, but he’s distracted by the unsettling sensation of someone behind him, a presence just out of reaching range. He opens his eyes and quickly turns around, and he nearly bumps into two women. One is hugely pregnant and fawning over some bedding with anthropomorphic vegetables on it. The other woman gives Steve a sour, defensive look and puts her hand on the pregnant woman’s lower back to guide her away from him.

“Now I remember why they call it Dyke Slope,” Bucky murmurs over his shoulder. “They’re everywhere.”

Steve glances around to the other pairs of women in the store, finding easy familiarity in several of them, the kind that couples have. The kind he and Bucky used to have sometimes, because God knows things weren’t always easy or simple with them. But there was a comfort there, when they settled into the rhythm of their relationship. A constancy that hit somewhere around their first year anniversary, when Bucky started to calm down and focus on school, when he became a little more
open and a little more pliant. Sometimes when they were together in public, Steve would touch him — reflexively, because Bucky was someone he loved to touch and who loved to be touched, but only behind closed doors. Steve would sometimes forget himself and put a hand on Bucky’s back, or touch his thigh at the movies, both of which Bucky would often squirm away from. But sometimes, if it was dark enough or deserted enough, he’d let Steve’s hand linger, and sometimes he’d even lean against that touch, welcome it, invite more of it, and it was like an explosion of elation every time Steve’s affection was accepted. And as Steve watches the women in the store, something in him begins to crack open, something like longing, dampened but not entirely dead.

Steve turns back to Bucky, only to find him gone, wandered off half way across the store to a collection of accessories. Steve takes a moment to pull out his phone and type a note with as many of the necessary items as he can remember, then walks over to where Bucky is holding an orange knit hat with a fox face and ears.

“Oh my God,” Bucky says, rubbing one of the ears between his left thumb and forefinger. “Isn’t this the fucking cutest thing you’ve ever seen?”

He looks to Steve for confirmation, which he offers with a nod.

“I’m getting this. Wait — is this the right size?” Bucky asks, pulling at the edges as if he’s trying to imagine a baby’s head inside it.

Bucky went to a class in Williamsburg last week, something he found all on his own, even though Steve said he’d teach him everything he needed to know. He said he wanted to know how to do everything himself — feeding, changing, emergency first aid — but the class was for newborns, and he’s been straining to translate that knowledge into caring for a baby who’s nearly nine months old.

“You don’t have to buy him anything,” Steve says. “I can pay for it.”

“Don’t argue with me. I want to,” Bucky insists, picking up the same hat in a different size and comparing the two with intense scrutiny.

Steve sighs softly and points to the one in Bucky’s right hand, the one they might be able to get a little more mileage out of as the baby’s head keeps growing. Bucky discards the smaller one and holds it up again for Steve to see, smiling wide. Steve forces his mouth into a smile too, even as his mind circles anxiously back to all the things he still has to buy.

Something else catches Bucky’s eye a few displays away, and he limps over to it and holds it up triumphantly.

“Look at this. You can front load him like a rucksack.”

It’s a carrier that straps around the body and holds the baby against the chest, hands-free. It’s practical, even tactical. “That’s better than a stroller, with the snow,” Steve muses. “Grab one.”

Bucky tucks the carrier box under his arm. “I think we might need a basket or something. There’s way too much good stuff here.”

Steve does get a basket, and then some time later, when Bucky enthusiastically fills the first one with toys and books and sippy cups and baby silverware, he gets another. It’s odd to see Bucky enjoying himself at all, let alone enjoying himself picking out items for the child he never wanted Steve to have. He seems to find something on every rack, which he holds up to Steve for approval before saying ‘I’m getting this.’ Steve argues with him at first about insisting on paying for so much, but after Bucky restates his insistence with a few blunt expletives, Steve decides against his better
judgment to just let him do it.

It’s a lot, even with Bucky covering some of the costs. When the woman at the counter checks him out, the same woman Bucky charmed earlier, Steve has to stifle sticker shock while he hands over his credit card. He then has to bite back a sigh of relief when the transaction actually goes through. He doesn’t dare look to see how much Bucky racked up, but from the unflapped look on his face, it seems like enough for him to afford.

In the truck on the way home, Bucky is quiet. But it’s a placid sort of quiet, a welcome change from the heavy, strained quiet that too often falls between them. For the moment, he seems placid, relaxed and at ease. It lasts until they get back to Windsor Terrace, where it quickly becomes a pain in the ass to get everything in the building, especially when Bucky tries to help but can’t quite be helpful, which proves frustrating for both of them. By the time they get everything in the apartment, the place looks like it’s been hit by a typhoon of consumerism. Steve checks the door locks for the second time since they’ve been home before meeting Bucky in the living room. Bucky sits on the couch and starts trying to work open the boxes of smaller things with his tactical knife while Steve absently unpacks the furniture and half-watches Bucky in a fluxing state of worry. Bucky fumbles often now, and Steve’s still trying to get accustomed to it, especially when he worked with such dexterity as a soldier. He was a man with precise aim. A man who perfected the tactics and techniques of his own force and knew those of the enemy with encyclopedic depth. Even remembering the thoughtless ease with which Bucky laced up his boots the night they had sex in Baghdad fills Steve with a hopeless ache that gnaws at his insides.

Bucky slips and swears and puts down the knife periodically to shake out his right hand, but he doesn’t stop until he’s surrounded by unboxed toys and accessories. He then offers to help Steve assemble the crib in his room, where the baby will sleep, but Bucky quickly realizes the futility of his request because he can’t kneel or sit comfortably on the floor with his knee.

“You could wash all the food ware and put the boxes in the recycling, if you want,” Steve offers. “I’ve got this.”

Bucky huffs and grips tight onto his cane. “Sorry I’m so fucking useless.”

“You’re not useless. I’ll have these together in no time.”

Bucky steps toward him, until he’s standing right over him. Steve tilts his head back to look up at the serious furrow on Bucky’s brow and the tight line of his mouth, the intensity of his eyes, and Steve’s lips part when Bucky’s hand cups his face, thumb rubbing softly over his cheekbone. Bucky’s hand is smooth now, not like it was when he was on active duty, roughened by the manual nature of their work. He keeps his hand like that as his expression softens to something more wistful, and Steve dares to lean into that touch, dares to take what Bucky is offering to him, even if he shouldn’t. He shouldn’t take anything from Bucky, and yet he keeps doing it over and over, loathing himself for it with every iteration.

And when Bucky’s hand slides up his face to run through his hair, Steve can’t help his eyes from sliding closed, because it feels so good. It always has, and Bucky knows that. He must. Bucky knows exactly how to touch him, exactly what makes him feel comforted or turned on, based on two years of solid data points, and Steve lets himself be soothed without thinking about what it means or how many hours until Ethan arrives or how fucked his brain is or how much he hates therapy. He lets himself be a man receiving affection and comfort from someone who knows him better than anyone alive, a man who’s hurt him and loved him and driven him crazy with worry and lust and joy and anger.

“Want me to order Thai?” Bucky asks quietly, continuing to pet Steve’s head.
Steve makes a sound of affirmation.

“Massaman curry?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you want in it? Wait, lemme guess — tofu,” Bucky says, fondly mocking what he thinks is a silly health kick and not Steve’s inability to eat meat anymore because it reminds him of the bloody, shredded tissue of Bucky’s flesh-gutted arm.

“It’s good,” Steve replies, opening his eyes to see the warm amusement in Bucky’s own.

“I’ll take your word for it.” He looks at the disassembled pieces of furniture, tools, and assembly parts organized on the floor in front of Steve’s crossed legs. “I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

“Please stop apologizing. I’m just thankful for today. You helped a lot.” Steve gives him a smile, one that comes easily, now that he feels almost relaxed for the first time all week, lulled by Bucky’s gentle touch and gentler teasing.

“You got a lucky kid. He’s gonna have a proper gentrified Brooklyn experience.”

“You’re gonna be here on Sunday, right? When they come?”

Bucky’s hand slows to a stop. “You actually want me here?”

“Sharon does. She wants to meet you.”

Bucky sputters. “Meet me or murder me?”

He gives Steve’s hair a tug, forcing his head back further, sending a zing of dissonant exhilaration through Steve and pulling a gasp from him. Bucky seems to realize at the same time that he’s crossed a very distinct line between friendly touch and the charged kind that would have sent them to the bedroom in the past. He releases his grip, hand hovering momentarily over Steve’s head before drawing back completely, cheeks flushing again like they did in the store.

“...I’ll go order.”

Steve swallows heavily, heart racing, and he watches Bucky limp quickly to the living room to grab his phone. He pushes out a breath and lifts a hand to his brow, shoving back a deluge of memories which, for once, aren’t about deployment. But they’re unwelcome nonetheless. He can’t afford to visit their past life, their past selves, because ten fucking years is a long time, and those hapless young men are only cold shadows of who they are now, dead and lingering.

“Food’s on the way,” Bucky calls from the kitchen a few minutes later. “I’m gonna wash stuff.”

“Thanks,” Steve replies, and he stares at the pieces of crib while his mind meanders away, back to that place he can’t afford to be, anger stirring toward Hope Van Dyne for taking him back there in the first place. Toward Bucky for yanking him back again. Toward himself for every awful choice he’s made since 9/11. Every choice that landed them both here, crippled and stilted and preparing to welcome a child Steve feels almost nothing for, who will surely realize it soon enough and, Christ…

He shakes his head with a low growl, willing himself to focus, because he has a crib to build. He’ll do it perfectly, however long it takes. Because at least it’s one thing he can give, even when his heart has receded into nothingness.
Sunday

Bucky’s bottom lip is nearly raw from being bitten compulsively for the past 24 hours, a surefire response to every time he remembers that Sharon Carter is coming over today and wants to meet him. It’s been bad enough that not even Sam’s cool wisdom could calm him down, which he very gracially offered by phone during his staff duty shift last night at Fort Carson. Sam is up for deployment again, to Afghanistan this time, but only if he chooses to re-enlist. He’s on the fence, despite Bucky’s best efforts to push him off. He should re-up. He’s almost got ten years. Another deployment will be good for him. Garrison sucks. He offered as many reasons for Sam to stay in the Army as he could muster, reasons he’d give himself, if he was up for re-enlistment again. Bucky would give his last nut to be back on active duty again, and he’s shamelessly envious of Sam’s choice point — Christ, to even have a choice in the matter, rather than be relegated involuntarily to this wretched, crippled civilian life… He’s jealous, and Sam was less than appreciative to learn of it.

“You’re goddamn lucky to be alive, Jamie. Man the fuck up and live.”

Bucky didn’t tell Sam to go fuck himself, but he came damn, damn close.

Bucky’s currently sitting on the couch, tapping his hands together between his spread legs, wearing the best clothes he has and looking as clean-cut as he can manage, face shaved smooth, hair freshly cut thanks to a last-minute cancellation at the Korean salon three blocks down. Steve is darts from room to room, making sure everything is dress-right-dress, always seeming to find something new to re-arrange with every pass. Steve looks exhausted and frazzled, and when his cell phone rings, he nearly jumps through the ceiling. It’s Sharon; it has to be. She called from the airport over an hour ago as she was collecting her bags, Ethan crying loudly in the background, which made the already impressive line between Steve’s eyebrows deeper. It has to be her, and Bucky is electric with dread.

“They’re here,” Steve tells him, pocketing his cell phone and slipping on his shoes by the door. He looks back at Bucky. “Ready?”

“No,” Bucky exclaims, much louder than he intended.

Steve takes in a deep, slow breath through his nose, one of his therapy tricks. “It’ll be fine.”

“In what way could it possibly be fine?”

Steve looks to the floor, takes one more breath for good measure, and then he’s out the door. Bucky scoots up to the edge of where he’s seated, grabs his cane, and braces himself on it as he rises to his feet and, fuck, should he wear shoes? He should wear shoes. And, of course, he doesn’t have the requisite five minutes required to get them on his feet and tie them, a stretch even on his best days, and so he’ll have to stand here like a shoeless idiot while he meets Steve’s ex-fiancee and motherfucking kid for the first time.

He groans softly when he hears an enthusiastically repetitive ‘bababababa’ sound, echoed by a woman’s voice saying ‘Yeah, it’s baba’ in the lyrical tone and rhythm that babies seem to draw out of people. Of course her voice has to be pleasant, contrary to the grating, noxious version of it he’s nurtured in his stupid, jealous fantasies about meeting her.

By the time they make it through the door, Bucky is nearly catatonic with anxiety, and he feels his eyes go wide as he stands awkwardly in the middle of their narrow living room. Because, of course she also has to be beautiful, not that he didn’t know that from her picture back in Iraq. She’s a little fuller now than the lean, sinewy distance runner thing she had going in the photo, and strapped to her
chest in a carrier like the one he picked out is a baby, bundled in a puffy green coat with a blue knit hat and matching mittens, and God damn it, she’s going to hate the hat he bought, stupid fucking idiotic impulsive purchase, and he is so deeply regretting not hiding out at Rikki’s today and—

She catches a glimpse of him, and the smile on her face drops, and Bucky would give anything in his possession — anything in his entire self — to fall through the floor right now.

Steve looks between them, hands full of bags, his own face drained of color. “Sharon, this is Bucky. Bucky, Sharon.”

She doesn’t say hello, just gives him a shallow nod, one he returns perfunctorily. The baby stares at him, eyes big, and Bucky stares back because it’s so much more pleasant than the cold, impassive expression on Sharon’s face.

Bucky glances at Steve as he sets the bags down in the kitchen. He starts digging through them and pulls out a handful of thin, long plastic packets filled with something white. He opens the freezer and puts them in, then moves to stand next to Sharon, shoulders and jaw tense.

“Can I get you anything? Have you eaten yet?” Steve asks her.

“Let’s go grab some breakfast,” Sharon says. She’s staring directly at Bucky, but he’s not sure who, exactly, she’s talking to. She might just be keeping her eyes on him, appraising him, no doubt thinking any number of horrible and probably true things about him.

Bucky looks to Steve, quick to pull him into this ridiculously awkward dyad. “You wanna grab something?”

“Just you,” Sharon says, and there’s no doubt anymore that she’s talking to Bucky. She even points to him as she says it with the officieral authority of the soldier she is.

Bucky lets out an unsteady breath. Steve watches on, helpless as the night Winnie blabbed about Ethan coming to stay with them. He offers no defense or distraction, leaving Bucky in the lurch wondering frantically how the hell he’s supposed to say yes when every cell in his body is saying ‘Jesus fuck no,’ as if it would be an actual option to deny her anything, after what he’s done. He owes her a hell of a lot more than breakfast. He owes her a lifetime of breakfasts and repentance and apologies, and even that wouldn’t be enough to even their score.

So he says okay.

Steve’s hands clench at his sides, and his words come out in a halting march of nervousness. “Do you want me to drive you somewhere?”

“We can go to that bagel shop down the street. We passed it in the cab on the way here,” Sharon says, hitching her thumb in the direction of Prospect Park West. She silently acknowledges Bucky’s cane. “Can you make it there?”

Bucky looks down at his socks. “Yeah.”

“Do you want me to take him?” Steve asks, nodding his head at Ethan.

Sharon gives Steve an appreciative smile. “I wanna hang onto him just a little longer, if that’s okay.” She rubs her hand over the baby’s head, and he cranes his head back to look up at her.

“Of course.”
Bucky glances over to his shoes, which are next to the welcome mat Sharon’s standing on. “Lemme just… get my shoes on.”

Sharon looks down and steps away from Bucky’s boots, and he limps over to retrieve them and bring them back to the couch. There he lowers himself with as much grace as he can and loosens the laces more than he usually would so he won’t have to struggle too much to get his feet into them. He’s acutely aware that Sharon is watching him, and he looks up at Steve, eyes pleading.

“Can we go through some of this stuff real quick?” Steve asks her, waving her over to the kitchen table where he’s put the baby’s bag.

She follows Steve, and Bucky whispers “thank you” under his breath. He then sets about putting on his boots, the left one easy, the right one painful and difficult because of his bum foot. When he grabs onto the laces, his hands are shaking, and he can barely thread the ends through the eyes. Minutes and minutes go by, Steve keeping Sharon distracted in the kitchen, and by the time Bucky’s done, he tastes a tang of metal. He touches the scarred back of his hand to his lip, and it comes away bloody.

“God damn it,” he mutters. He touches it again, and it’s worse, and he has to decide if he’s going to hobble into the kitchen looking like he’s just been punched in the face or bear the indignity of calling for Steve to bring him a napkin. He curses again and hoists himself up from the couch, mustering some false composure, and he breezes past Steve and Sharon to snag a paper napkin from the holder by the toaster.

“You okay?” Steve asks, turning with Sharon to look at him.

“Fine.”

From Sharon’s chest, the baby reaches out and pats Steve on the arm repeatedly, saying ‘babababa,’ taking both their attention away from Bucky and allowing him to escape to the bathroom to tend to his lip in privacy. He closes the door behind him and inspects the skin, cringing at how pathetic he looks, how ugly and weak. He puts pressure on it with a clean washcloth, staring at his reflection, imagining the fucking thing splitting open again in the middle of his bagel with Sharon watching him, knowing how it happened. And he wonders if it’s satisfying for her to see him like this, the sad, homewrecking whore, the broken has-been who’s so scared that he bit a hole in his own fucking face at the mere thought of meeting her.

When the bleeding finally stops, he washes his hands and tosses the cloth in the hamper. He checks himself one more time in the mirror and then goes back to face both of them, who are chatting next to the door when he comes out.

“Ready?” Sharon asks. She’s already got a hand on the knob.

“Sure.”

“We’ll be back,” Sharon tells Steve, who replies with a distant “okay.”

Bucky follows her out, but not before shooting Steve a look of barely contained terror. Steve’s hand comes up, almost as if to reach for him, but he stops short and lets it fall again. Bucky frowns and proceeds to follow Sharon down the hall, watching the hypnotic way her blonde hair bounces against the back of her coat with purposeful, quick strides that he struggles to keep up with.

Once outside, she turns right on the sidewalk headed toward Prospect Park West, and it’s only then that she slows enough for him to catch up. When he finally reaches her side, she’s looking at the
walk-ups on either side of the street, her forefingers clasped by the baby’s mittenized hands while he babbles on.

“This is a nice neighborhood,” she says, breath making a cloud in the chilled air.

It’s safe territory, for the moment, safe enough that Bucky wills himself to sound calmer, hoping his nerve-wracked body will take the hint and follow suit.

“It’s pretty good,” Bucky replies, shoving his bare right hand in his pocket. “My sister lives in Park Slope, which is one neighborhood over.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s a software engineer. She and her fiancee have their own business.”

“Are you going back to work some time?”

Fuck. She might not know it’s one of his softest spots, but she slams it clean on the head nonetheless. She’s not even accusatory about it, at least not in any direct way. But the implication of his incompetence could be there, if he reads it that way. Which he does.

“I don’t know.” It comes out defensive, so he’s quick to correct his tone. “I don’t know what I’d do. I have a very specific skill set that is not only useless in the real world but which I couldn’t even do if it wasn’t useless.”

“Do you have a bachelor’s?”

“I dropped out my last year so I could go to Afghanistan with the 101st.”

“That must have been a rough deployment,” Sharon says, eyeing him with something distantly resembling sympathy.

Bucky shrugs, because he’s not about to let her have that, even if it is overwhelmingly accurate. “It was okay.”

They walk the next two blocks in tense silence while Ethan continues playing with Sharon’s fingers, and Bucky spends that time wondering if the rest of this shit morning is going to be a series of intentional or unintentional slights that he has to either eat or push back against like an insecure, reactive asshole.

Terrace Bagels is relatively deserted, given how late it is in the morning. Sharon scans the place from wall to wall and stops when her eyes settle on the high chair by the hall leading to the bathroom. She tells Bucky she’ll be right back and goes to retrieve it, robbing Bucky of the opportunity to offer to help, not that he would be able to without looking like a complete fool. She brings the chair back and parks it next to a table near the window, then asks Bucky what he wants to eat.

Bucky points to the counter, eyebrows angled quizzically. “I'm just going to order.”

“I know,” Sharon says. “I'm asking what you want so I can order for us.”

“You're not seriously offering to pay for my breakfast, are you?” The idea itself is lunacy.

Sharon blinks. “I was, as a gesture.”

“A gesture of what?”
“I’m not sure,” she says, her voice a reflection of the strained confusion on her face. “Basic politeness, I guess.”

Bucky scoffs. “I don’t know what kind of Southern charm school you went to before West Point, but I don’t think basic politeness applies here.”

“I didn’t go to West Point,” she’s quick to reply.

“Well, thank God for that. But I’ll pay for my own breakfast, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Fine. What’s good here?”

Bucky turns his head back toward the menu boards, even though he’s not in a place to actually absorb the information on them. He tries to remember every order he’s ever placed here, and they are numerous and varied, but the only thing that comes to him is the eponymous ‘bagels,’ which he’s fortunately able to prevent himself from saying. So, instead, he stands there, jaw slack, pretending to study the menu, and says nothing.

Sharon graciously saves face for him, murmuring “There are a lot of choices, all right,” and then starts walking toward the counter, leaving Bucky behind to gape and flounder.

He snaps out of it and follows the bouncing of her hair and the loudly projected squawking coming from the baby, like he’s trying to bounce his voice off the farthest wall just to see if he can. He can hear Sharon say ‘yeah, bagels, yummy’ to him as they pass by a display of them. Bucky stands behind her and basks in the brief respite from direct eye contact and the accusation that may or may not actually be there, trying not to tear his lip open again with his teeth. By the time he gets up to the counter, he hasn’t put a moment’s thought into what he wants, so he ends up with an everything bagel with plain cream cheese just because it’s the first thing that comes to mind.

They stand near the counter to wait for their orders, during which time Bucky watches Ethan kick out his legs in time with his vocalizations and half-heartedly grab at the plastic container of fruit Sharon holds. The kid is a perpetual stream of sound, saying more in the last twenty minutes than he’s heard Steve say in the past six months. Sharon interacts with him almost constantly, and Bucky wonders if that’s how she always is or if she’s welcoming him as a distraction from this bullshit breakfast date she cooked up.

They get situated with their food at the table, and Sharon takes the baby out of his holster and seats him in the high chair. She takes off his coat and his hat, and he’s dressed in a little sweater — and do babies usually wear sweaters, or is it some yuppie DC thing? Bucky’s not sure. She then pulls a baggie of Cheerios from the great big bag that could also be a purse and offloads them on an extra plate she got, along with some pieces of fruit from the cup she bought. Bucky watches her cut the fruit into smaller chunks, the ease with which her long, thin fingers manipulate her fork and knife, and when she’s done, she sets the plate in front of the high chair and looks Bucky dead in the eyes.

He never realized before that she has brown eyes; he imagined they were blue, like Ethan’s. Like Steve’s.

“I wanted to talk to you and just get everything out on the table,” she says.

Bucky’s stomach drops. “About what?”

“Are you and Steve together?”

It’s like coffee with Hank all over again, the question violently exploding all over him. He might be growing used to it, after so many meetings with his obnoxious sponsor, because he can formulate a
response relatively quickly, one that’s as honest as it is dissatisfying.

“Not really,” he says.

“Not really?”

Bucky presses his lips together. “I don’t know what’s going on. It’s not nothing, but it’s not really something. He’s… ” A list of adjectives erupts in Bucky’s mind — weird, absent, worrisome, irritable, stubborn. But he doesn’t want to give any of them to Sharon. He’s not about to give her anything. Not so easily. So he settles with, “He’s got a lot going on.”

“Is he okay?” Sharon asks.

Bucky tilts his head. “In what way?”

Now it’s Sharon’s turn to hesitate. She watches Ethan for a few moments as he concentrates hard on picking up a piece of cantaloupe.

“I’m worried about him,” she finally says.

“How so?”

She gives a weary shake of her head. Her eyes flit back and forth, like she’s not sure how much to offer Bucky, either. But in the end, her worry seems to win out. She starts slow, still watching Ethan, not daring to speak to Bucky directly.

“So, on one hand, he seems to be functioning. He’s working and talking with me and coming down to visit and spending time with Ethan. It was really nice to have him down for Christmas. But when he comes down, it’s really…” She shakes her head again, maybe against her own daunting list of adjectives that she doesn’t want to use. “I don’t know.”

Sharon pushes her plate to the side, her egg sandwich untouched. She uses the space to lay those perfect hands of hers on the table, pressing her fingers into the plastic as she talks, moving them as she describes the man they’ve both loved. The one Bucky still loves more deeply and frightfully than he can fully admit to himself.

“He’s very good at going about the motions of parenting,” she says, making eye contact at last. “He’s skilled at it. He knows how to feed Ethan and change him and play with him in the ways he likes. He’s really good at putting him to sleep and soothing him when he’s crying. Better than I am. He reads journals — honest to God scientific journals — about developmental psychology and child development. He’s read all the books. He knows his stuff inside and out.”

It’s Steve exactly — fastidious in his research, even as slow-going as it seems to be now. Thoughtful in his execution of tasks, when he can get around to remembering to do them.

“And when they play, Steve will make faces, like play faces, smiling and playing peek-a-boo or whatever. But it’s somehow disconnected.” She brings her hands together in a gesture of prayer and pulls them apart, spreading them wide. “Like he knows he’s supposed to do it a certain way and does it because that’s how it’s done. Not because he’s enjoying the interaction.”

She looks at Ethan again, at the way he pinches his Cheerios between his tiny thumb and forefinger as he babbles to himself, and she smiles.

“When I look at Ethan,” she says, “I feel happy. I smile because he makes me smile uncontrollably. He’s adorable.” She looks back at Bucky, and she’s serious again, analytical, searching his face for
something she’s not entirely pleased to find. “Even when you look at him, you’re more engaged than Steve is. In the eyes. Steve’s eyes always look far away.”

Bucky nods unwittingly, because she’s nailed it — that pervasive distance, that constant state of being unsettled, the mismatch between what should be and what actually is. What he might want to convey and what he actually conveys. The only thing that seems to ring true in Steve is his anxiety, which is more alive in him, more transparent, than any other emotion. When he’s anxious, he sings with it. Everything else is a breeze over water, a stirring on the surface that can’t touch its depth.

And then Sharon, Christ, something drops right off of her. That cool, protective coating. That Pentagon armor. And in the moment it drops, Bucky sees something he’s seen so often in his own reflection — sadness and, just below that, fear.

“He’s just really different,” she says. “He was never like that when we were together. I fell in love with him because he didn’t hide his heart. Not after I got to know him. He almost couldn’t hide it, once he opened it.”

“He’s having a lot of trouble at work, I think,” Bucky says.

It’s a deflection, and a rough one at that. But he has to do it, because he can’t stand to imagine Steve being that way with her. He can’t stand to think that she’s seen the Steve he first fell in love with in middle school, the sensitive, brilliant boy who was so achingly earnest, so heartfelt and loving and warm, just below his bland, pretty boy exterior. It was like he was always near-bursting with it, just waiting for someone to come and open him up. And somehow Bucky was that person, the one just loud and persistent and charming enough to wedge himself in there and crack him open. God, he had no idea what he would find. No idea that he would find something so special, something Steve wanted him to have, for some unfathomable reason. And to think that Sharon saw the same thing, was given the same thing, is enough to make Bucky want to tear her apart with his words and the pitch-dark emotions that would give them their terrible life.

But he doesn’t. He knows he can’t. He knows he has no right, because he walked away from Steve. Because he never actually thought that Steve would let him — that Steve would not only let him go but slam the door on him and change all the locks.

“I was wondering about work,” Sharon says. “He said he was going to be able to take the whole week off, but now he’s telling me that he has to go in. Apparently there’s no room at the daycare they have contracted out, either. Not on such short notice.”

Bucky sniffs and eyes his bagel, which looks pale and unappealing. “I mean, I’m home. I can watch him.”

Sharon’s hands are busy again, this time knifing against the tabletop as she delivers her verbal blows. “That’s the thing — I don’t want you to. Because I don’t like you. I just don’t.” She shrugs sharply, and her head shakes again, and she stares intensely out the window out at the cars passing by on Prospect Park West. “You had sex with Steve knowing that we were engaged. Because you knew we were engaged, didn’t you?”

He watches her cheeks change color, pink up with some emotion he can’t name. He’s not sure if it’s anger or embarrassment, even though only one of those would be appropriate.

Because the answer is yes. Bucky knew, and he knew damn well. He knew Sharon was important to Steve. Steve told him as much, and Bucky could see it plainly in the way he would smile at her picture and talk about her. If it wasn’t for how colossally fucked their deployment was, they wouldn’t be having this conversation. If Trip hadn’t been killed, Steve never would have come to
him like that or let what happened happen. And Bucky was a selfish piece of shit who took what he wanted the second he could conceivably get it, Sharon Carter and Steve’s integrity be damned.

“I knew,” Bucky tells her.

Her mouth flattens into a frown, and she blinks a few times. But then she locks her eyes on his again, all carefully corralled intensity that’s unashamedly on display but firmly contained. “And I know about your overdose. And your drug problem.”

It’s a blow so low that it’s a wonder he can form the words to sling back at her. “I haven’t taken any pills since March,” he says sharply, hands curling. “And I got really fucking blown up, if you didn’t notice. So I took meds. It wasn’t a ‘drug problem,’ wherever the fuck you got that idea.”

She presses further, undaunted. “But you’re an alcoholic, right?”

“I haven’t had anything to drink since May. I’m in AA. I have a sponsor.” Bucky lifts his chin, because above all things, he wants her to hear this part. “I’m working really hard.”

“And that’s all fine and good, but even so, can you understand why I wouldn’t want you watching our son, given your addiction? Given what your actions in Iraq say about your character?”

Christ. It’s nothing that he hasn’t thought about himself tens of thousands of times, but to hear it from Sharon, to have his fatal flaws so succinctly distilled and packaged, is another thing entirely. Any thought that he might be able to do this — that he might be able to help with the baby, that he and Steve could play house for a week — now seems childish and sickeningly misguided. Selfish. Naive.

“Yeah,” Bucky concedes. “I can see that.”

Sharon gives a quiet, tense sigh and pulls her breakfast back in front of her. She picks up the bagel sandwich and takes a small bite out of it before losing interest again, chewing slowly while she watches Ethan pick contentedly at the food in front of him.

“Do you even know how to care for a baby?” she asks.

“I went to this class two weeks ago. I learned baby CPR. Diapers, food, sleeping, what to do when they cry. It was me and a bunch of pregnant ladies, so that was weird.”

His answer throws her, and her puzzlement would be delightful if it wasn’t so inherently uncomplimentary.

“Really,” Sharon says.

A smile ghosts over Bucky’s face. “I like kids. Before I realized I was... the way I am, I really wanted them. I had this perfect image of a family, like the one I had — mom, dad, two kids — and I really wanted to be a dad. Like my dad.”

“Realized you’re what?” Sharon pauses, then ventures a guess. “Gay?”

That fucking word cuts him like it always does, somehow both ill-fitting and bitingly, irrefutably correct. “I guess.”

“Can’t you have kids when you’re gay? I mean, with some extra effort.”

“I don’t know. I don’t like that idea.” Bucky makes a face to match his disgust. “But when I was little, I really liked helping my ma take care of my sister. I even...”
He stops abruptly. Sharon leans forward a little, golden brows raised expectantly. It’s odd that she’s listening to him in the first place, really, let alone wanting something out of him. Her attention heats him, and his nerves zing their presence again, and his mouth moves, and words are there, and a story rolls out, one he hasn’t thought about in so many years that it sounds fresh and untold to him.

“Okay, so… I’m a child of the ‘80s, right? So everyone had a Cabbage Patch doll, right?”

One corner of Sharon’s mouth twitches up. “Or several.”

“Right. So… all the girls at my preschool had one, right? And when I was that age, my ma would ask me to help out with Rikki sometimes, and I guess I really got into it. I really liked it. I really liked being a big brother. And then I’d ask if I could help out sometimes, and she let me, and soon I was doing it all the time. Like, even if it was just throwing a dirty diaper in the trash, I was all about that. And so I saw these girls at school with their Cabbage Patch, taking care of them like I helped take care of Rikki, all the same stuff, and I liked that idea, so I asked my parents for one.”

Sharon takes another bite of her sandwich, and it’s easier this time, almost casual. It’s almost like she doesn’t hate him and that they’re not implicitly fighting over who loves Steve Rogers more.

“How’d that go over?” she asks after she’s swallowed her bite.

Bucky gives a hasty smile as the story keeps spilling out of him. “My dad thought about it for a minute and then was like ‘sure, okay, do you want a boy or a girl?’ My ma was a little more on the fence about it. I don’t think she knew what to make of it. But my dad bought me this Cabbage Patch anyway, and his name was Casey. Not my favorite name, but it was on the birth certificate, because that was a thing, right? So I didn’t think to change it. So I’d carry him around the house, pretend to take him places. Like a football game or the commissary or the car wash. All the things my dad did with me. And when my ma would take care of Rikki, I’d do the same things with Casey. My ma wouldn’t let me take him to school because she thought I’d get teased. And I probably would have. We were at Fort Rucker, so…”

There’s a glitch — a hiccup in the stream — as a different memory surges to the surface, tethered to Casey, he doesn’t even know how, it’s got nothing to do with— but it’s one so dangerous and frightening that it stops him cold. It’s one he’s learned how to dispel only through drinking, one that has the power to melt him down right here, he knows it. And for a few seconds of sheer terror, he sits with the sensation of it rushing toward him, rushing into him, filling him to the brink of drowning in it, and his lungs get tight, and his heart kicks into a frenzy, and he’s not… he can’t… he can’t—

And then something else happens, something different, something he didn’t even think was possible. Instead of drowning, he rises up out of it, out of himself, detaches, floats away like a balloon, leaving the new, devastating memory and its agony to slick back into the abyss it crawled up from. And as his words come again, as this story unfolds from him, a much less painful one, the story of Casey and Winnie and George and five-year-old Bucky, it’s like he’s watching himself from across the room, just a passive witness to the past as it burbles out uncontrollably.

“My ma would take me to church every week, to this ridiculous evangelical hell hole. She was really into that stuff at the time. My dad hated it, he was a raging atheist, but she was insistent. She grew up really religious, and I think she really wanted us to believe in God. She wanted us to be saved, whatever the fuck that means. And one day, after a lot of begging, she lets me take Casey to church, so I’m like hell yeah. And I figure everything’s fine and that this is gonna be a thing now, so I was excited.

“But then I come home from preschool one day the week after, and Casey is gone. I always put him on my bed when I was gone, propped up on my pillow. And suddenly he’s not there. And I look
everywhere and freak out and start having a meltdown to my ma, and she’s just like ‘I’m so sorry, honey, but you can’t play with Casey anymore.’ And I was just like, what the fuck, why? And I’m just a total fucking mess, and I keep asking about him, and she keeps deflecting and just repeating the same thing over and over, and she’s getting really torn up about it, and things are just escalating and escalating. And then my dad comes home from work, so I’m crying to him, and he goes to my ma and is literally like ‘where the fuck is that doll?’ And my ma starts telling him about the people at her church telling her that it’s wrong for me to play with dolls because then I’ll grow up to be a homo or something — maybe that’s how it happened, I don’t know. She said it nicer than that, but that’s how I remember it.”

He gives a light shrug. Sharon’s tentative interest has turned into something else, and her eager eyebrows have flattened and gathered, and she’s frowning, and it’s fine, it’s just fine, it’s all just fucking fine. And so Bucky keeps going, nothing to see here, because it’s all just fine.

“And my dad went fucking **ballistic** on her. Which was really scary. I don't remember seeing him get that angry before then. And he was screaming at her and calling her crazy and calling her religion made-up bullshit, and I’m crying again because I’m scared out of my mind, and my ma is crying and saying she’s sorry, and my dad’s yelling at her to give it back, and she can’t because she threw it in a fucking **dumpster** behind the church. So my dad leaves, slams the door so hard that shit falls off the wall, and he gets in his truck and speeds off to find it, tires screeching, and of course, it’s gone. And while he’s gone, she’s just apologizing to me and trying to hug me, and I’m shoving her away and sobbing and….” Bucky lets out a dry laugh. “And my dad comes back, and he’s still furious, but he tells me to get in the truck so we can get another one. And I’m just like fuck that. No fucking way.

“And I never, ever forgave her for that. One of many things I’ve never forgiven her for.”

He looks down at his bagel, at the uniform spray of poppy seeds and sesame seeds and dried onion, and he feels himself settle into himself again, because the worst is over. Now it’s just the afterimage of the story hanging between them, dim flashes of crying and disbelief and betrayal, and he glances up to see Sharon staring at him, expression grim, and, fuck, what a mindless, ridiculous fucking mistake, because there might also be pity there, and he sure as hell doesn’t need that from her.

“I don’t know why I told you that,” Bucky mumbles, and he pushes his bagel away so he doesn’t have to look at it, because the thing makes him feel sick to his stomach.

“That’s really awful,” Sharon says. She even seems to mean it. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. It’s awful.”

“You have every right not to like me,” he says. “I’ve done some really shitty things. Really, really shitty things. But I’m trying to be better than that now.”

“I know.”

Sharon’s looking out the window again, and so Bucky looks, too. Together, they watch the passing Brooklynites with their high collars and scarves and hoods, shuffling by on the snowy sidewalk. Bucky sees her reflection in the glass, the pensive look on her face, the conflict there.

“What if my ma was around when I was watching Ethan?” Bucky offers. “Would you be okay with it then? You can probably meet her before you fly out. It’s her day off today.”
Sharon glances at his reflection, meeting his eyes there. “After that story?”

“My ma got over all that crazy stuff. She was just part of that terrible church when I was a kid. She’s a unitarian now or something. She’s super LGBTXYZ blah blah friendly or whatever. I mean, my sister is transgender. My ma is very accepting and supportive of her. And of me. She just didn’t know what to do with me when I was a kid, I guess. But she’s a nurse practitioner and she’s really good with kids.” Bucky smiles, because the next part is true and kind of sweet and laden with the good parts of their history. “And Steve is like her surrogate son, because he spent so much time at our place when his ma was in the hospital. So she’s super into Ethan, because she wants to live out her grandma fantasies or something. And my sister doesn’t want kids, so this is probably as close as she’s gonna get, so—”

Ethan chooses that moment to swipe a bunch of Cheerios onto the floor, and from the highly amused, three-toothed grin he’s giving them, it may have been intentional. He yelps when Sharon attends to him, saying ‘thanks a lot, kiddo,’ as she bends down to pick them up. She’s hardly mad. In fact, she looks relieved to not have to listen to Bucky blather on about his family drama. Maybe she’s just as glad as he is for a break in the tension.

“I’d really have to meet her,” Sharon finally says when she sits upright. She busies herself with cutting a few more pieces of fruit as she speaks. “I mean, I could take Ethan with me on TDY. They’ll have child care there. But I really want Steve to spend the week with him, as much as I don’t want to be apart. I think it’s important for them to spend time together.”

Bucky nods. “Yeah, I think that’d be good. And my ma’s great. Don’t let that story get to you. That was a long time ago.”

Sharon brushes her hands together and takes another bite out of her breakfast, which would probably be inedibly cold by now to anyone who’s not in the military. “Do you think Steve is having trouble at work or something?” she murmurs around her food.

“He brings a lot of work home. He struggles with it.”

Sharon chews in silence, watching the baby eat. When she’s finally finished, she pushes her plate over next to Bucky’s. Her next words are distant and sad.

“Sometimes I think of how Steve was before deployment, and it’s really upsetting to see how he is now. I don’t know how to help him because I don’t know what’s wrong.” She glances back at Bucky. “I still really care about him. Even after everything.”

It’s too raw for Bucky to go too far down that road. He can’t go where she is, that place where old Steve and new Steve can be seen clearly side by side, because if he goes there, he might not be able to get back intact. There’s too much pain down that road. Too much regret and heartache. So he stays where he is, speaking in the safety of generalities.

“I’m trying to help him out, however I can. But he’s stubborn. He is getting help, though.”

“Help for what? Do you know?”

Bucky’s jaw goes stiff as he tries to keep too much of the truth out of his voice. “Not exactly. I think some TBI stuff. Maybe some trauma stuff.”

Sharon leans forward in her chair, folding her arms on the table in front of her. “Do you think he has PTSD or something? He never sleeps when he’s staying with us. I always hear him up at night. And he looks unsettled all the time. He can’t sit still. He never used to be like that. And he’s really
paranoid about some things, like locking the doors and windows. He checks them repeatedly, and I don’t know if he forgets that they’re locked or if he just wants to make sure.”

“He does that at our place, too.”

The checking has been consistent since they moved in. And Bucky’s seen it enough to be pretty sure that it’s not forgetfulness, because there’s a compulsiveness to it that speaks to clear-headed intent. It’s the same thing he saw with Quill at the residential program, except that there were no locks on the door, so he ended up checking that it was firmly closed multiple times every night, pulling on the knob to make sure it stuck. He did that until Kate gave him homework not to, and he held that fucking hill, staunchly refusing the work, until Bucky started calling him on it every time he did it. It earned him a ‘fuck you’ more than once, which is better than the punch in the face Quill once gave him as a reward for trying to help, and he eventually stopped. Steve is nowhere close to there. He’s so far from realizing it’s a problem that Bucky can’t even bring it up without risking more than he’d gain from it.

“I don’t know,” he says. “He might have it.”

“Do you think it’s a mistake to leave Ethan with him?”

“No. He’ll be okay. He’s been better lately. I mean, he’s at least sleeping more.”

He doesn’t go on to tell her that he knows this because he spends most nights in Steve’s bed. He also doesn’t tell her that sometimes Steve’s sleep is so restless, his nightmares so bad, that Bucky wakes him up just to relieve him of it. Sometimes he’ll lay his hand on Steve’s shoulder to ground him to something, and sometimes Steve won’t even let him do that. Sometimes he wrenches his shoulder away and curls up on his side, breath strained and halting, until it passes, and Bucky can only listen helplessly in the dark, his own heart pounding out of his chest, aching with empathy.

Sharon nods. “I know this is an awkward position to put you in, but are you comfortable keeping me in the loop with Steve? Like if I’m noticing something about him and can’t figure out what’s going on, can I maybe get in touch with you and get your take?” She asks the question with plaintive hesitance, soft for the first time since they’ve met.

The question lands rough, even despite its gentleness, and Bucky bristles with protectiveness of Steve’s privacy. Their privacy. It’s a frank feat of maturity for him to push through to the other side of it, to the stark reality of the situation, one where Steve has his cards pulled so close to his chest that not even he can see them, let alone slip any clues to the two of them.

“Can’t say I’m super comfortable with it,” Bucky tells her, “but maybe you’ll be able to get through to him. He doesn’t like to listen to me.”

“Can you give me your phone number?” Sharon says, looking for all her agreeable facade like she’d rather be eating a spoonful of shit than stoop to asking for such a thing.

“Sure.”

She digs through her massive bag and pulls her phone, and Bucky gives her his number with robotic cadence.

“You can call her,” Sharon tells him when she’s entered it. “Your mom. I’ll meet her. If she seems okay, then, I guess I’m okay with leaving Ethan with the two of you. If Steve’s really hell-bent on going in to work. I guess it’s only for a few hours, right?”

“Yeah, okay.”
Bucky swallows hard as he dials Winnie’s number and takes a long gulp of water as the line rings. She picks up, brimming with joy at the unexpected call, and she agrees to meet them at the apartment in an hour.

Sharon picks up the mess of spilled Cheerios and tiny pieces of discarded fruit, some half-chewed, others merely played with. She does it with enough nonchalance to suggest that this is just how eating out with a baby is, and she impresses Bucky with the level of cleanliness she leaves behind. But he never took her for discourteous, even despite her curt formidability, so he shouldn’t be all that surprised. Bucky tries his hand at talking to the baby when he directs some of his babbling in Bucky’s direction as Sharon loads him into the harness. It feels silly and evaluative at first, like Sharon is gauging his ability to engage in lopsided dialogue with a barely-verbal infant. But Ethan is excited enough about the exchange that the awkwardness slips away quickly.

When they make it back to the apartment, Bucky sits on the couch to take off his boots, using it as an excuse to finally break out of his painful orbit around Sharon. Ethan squirms in Sharon’s arms and reaches out to Steve, saying ‘bababa,’ and Sharon hands him over reluctantly. The baby yelps and pats Steve’s cheeks, and Steve schools his expression to something less aloof, sneaking glances to Bucky as he talks to the baby about his breakfast with mama. It’s nearly goddamn adorable and might be more so if Bucky didn’t see the threadbare nerves resting just behind the veneer of engagement.

Winnie knocks on the door not 30 minutes later, and Bucky can practically picture her running out of her own apartment to drive over. She’s been dying to get her hands on this kid ever since she learned about his existence, and she can’t help but charm Sharon with her unbridled enthusiasm for meeting both of them. Bucky’s lip curls into a sneer as he watches his ma with the baby, which he recognizes only after Winnie cocks her head at him and asks what’s wrong.


Sharon cries when she finally has to leave to catch her plane, the stoic kind of silent crying that she probably learned to do on active duty. Winnie coddles her and rubs her arm while Sharon gives Ethan a final hug before handing him over to Steve again. Steve says ‘say bye-bye to mama,’ and waves at Sharon, and Sharon waves back as she blinks back tears and Winnie tells Ethan that mama will be back soon, and the baby starts crying when Sharon makes her way out the door, reaching for her the way he so insistently reached for Steve earlier, and Bucky’s fingers dig into the couch cushions because, Jesus, it’s bad. And when the door closes, Ethan wails and pushes against Steve as he tries to comfort him, and that’s the final fucking straw for Bucky.

He uses his cane to leverage himself to his feet and limps back to his room, closing the door behind him as he pictures Casey in a dumpster and his dad digging through garbage to find him and Winnie — that fucking self-righteous bitch — daring to beg him for forgiveness for breaking his fucking heart open.

Bucky closes his eyes and leans back against the door, wondering how he can do that floating away thing he did earlier, willing himself to show up in some other part of the room so he can watch himself from that safe distance again because, God damn it, it hurts. He curses himself for telling that fucking story in the first place and curses himself for being small and sensitive and weak and curses himself for having a heart in the first place — and maybe that’s how he became such a terrible person who can’t walk this earth without a war to fight or booze to chug or a cock to suck. Maybe he’s always just been too weak, a little faggy sissy who plays with dolls and weeps when he can’t and grows up to crave war and murder kids because he’s too fucking scared to live in the real world.

He wishes he were a better drunk. A better drunk would have booze slipped in-between the mattress
and the box spring, or behind the dresser, or deep in the back of the closet buried in the middle of all his Army gear that he can’t even consider parting with — not without incurring the kind of howling anguish that makes him never want to crawl out of bed again. Not that he has fuck-all to do, anyway. He’s not going to therapy, certainly not while Quill is bent on taking the world’s longest girlfriend-wooing detour back to the city. He’s barely going to one meeting a day, and only because the accommodations in Windsor Terrace are slightly more appealing than the county jail’s. Steve, for all his terrifying problems, is a better roommate than Johnny T any day.

Bucky wishes he were a better drunk, but today he’s not. And so he hobbles to his bed, because he can’t even properly sink to the floor with his shit knee. He falls onto the mattress, hissing in pain, and wraps his pillow around his ears to drown out the inconsolable cries of a little boy who is learning his first lessons in heartbreak and loss.

It doesn’t quite work.

———

Thursday

Hank is pissed. He hasn’t said it yet, but Bucky can tell. Even as he’s holding Ethan, as he’s cooing at him and bouncing him in his arms, Bucky can tell that Hank is not impressed with the fact that Bucky showed up for their weekly meeting with not only a baby but also, by virtue of his arrangement with Sharon, with his mother. Winnie is up at the bar waiting for her coffee, chatting with Paul the uber-gay barista. The whole coffeehouse is uber-gay, and Paul is the king of it — or maybe the queen, since gays apparently like to be that. Winnie eats it up with a spoon, which is enough to make Bucky want to gag himself with one.

At least, Bucky thinks Paul is the king of the uber-gays, until a man approaches Hank and starts speaking with the most oppressively heavy gay-talk that Bucky has ever heard, which is really saying something, considering how much Hank likes to drown Bucky in gayness every second they’re together. The fucker is wearing a green paisley button-down underneath a magenta sweater, making Bucky’s head-to-toe black ensemble feel so grim and jaded that it almost approaches how grim and jaded he actually feels.

“Oh my God, is that Tony’s baby?” the guy lisps. He sticks his hand in Ethan’s face to stroke his cheek, still pink with the chill they just came from, and it takes a colossal feat of restraint for Bucky to not smack that motherfucking hand clear across the room.

Hank keeps his expression and voice in cooing baby mode, even as his words slice sharply through the din of the coffee house. “No, and you really don’t want to get me started on that particular subject.”

Ethan turns his discerning attention away from Mr. Paisley and pets Hank’s thick goatee with his little hand, like it was a cat stuck to his face. Like he pet Oscar yesterday when they visited Winnie’s apartment. He strokes it softly and reverently while he says ‘duhduhduh,’ and Hank smiles and says ‘duhduhduh’ back while Paisley turns to appraise Bucky with a single raised eyebrow.

“Is that your baby?” he asks Bucky.

“Sure is.”

Next to Paisley, Hank shakes his head.

“You look just alike,” Paisley lies, the lying, pandering, fuckface liar.
Bucky’s chuckle is as dry as foam on the nonfat cappuccino he’s anxious to get back to, as soon as Winnie gets her ass over here. “Yeah, we get that all the time.”

“Cute hat.”

Bucky’s glaring now, cold and furious, because the fucker just had to mention the fox hat, which is almost as good as ruined for him now.

Paisley looks affronted, dramatically so, and he turns to Hank to exchange a few more words that Bucky only remains half-present for. He chooses instead to talk to Ethan, because he’s looking over at Bucky and smiling, and it’s just too sweet to ignore. The kid has taken a shine to him — not that he should feel particularly special, given that he’s one of those babies who seems to take a shine to almost everyone, charming strangers hither and yon with his exuberant flirtation. In the background, Paisley sounds like he was one of Hank’s sponsees, because they talk about the program in the way that oldtimers do, with effortful, wise affect that reminds Bucky of how much of an outsider he still is. How new and untested his sobriety really is. He wants to be resentful, and he is, but he also can’t quell the stirrings of hot jealousy.

Paisley excuses himself and leaves, and Bucky seizes the few moments of privacy they have left before Winnie joins them. He moves in close, close enough for Ethan to pat his shoulder. Bucky fights a nebulous impulse to back out of reach, even as he craves more contact, and not without acknowledgement of how pathetic it is to so badly want a baby to like him. He passes it off as Ethan enjoying the sound of his hand smacking against leather, or maybe the texture or something, because he keeps doing it while Bucky speaks.

“Who’s Tony?”

Hank snorts. “My awful son who refuses to give me grandchildren.” He dips his chin then to look at Bucky from above the rim of his glasses. “He’s not actually awful, but he’s certainly not doing his job in the procreation department. Been with his girlfriend for three years and still hasn’t even proposed to her.”

Bucky tilts his head thoughtfully. “How did that happen?”

“What?”

“Him being your son.”

“He’s Howard’s son with his ex wife, but—”

“Howard had a wife?”

“He did.”

“Are you a home-wrecker?” Bucky asks it with a glib nonchalance that belies his immense discomfort.

Hank’s mouthtwists. “Oh, I wouldn’t call it that. Howard and I were in the same lab in our Ph.D. program, and things just happened over time.”

Things just happened over time. They just happened. Bucky’s taken a chapter from this shitty book before, and he sure as hell knows that things like that don’t just happen. They’re the result of a complex interaction between stoppables and unstoppables — the loss of a soldier, the horrific aftermath of his slaughter, the pints of fucking blood, the deadscape of shock, the desire for comfort, the opportunism of someone who was supposed to be a friend and an advisor… His mind has been
consumed with these countless moving parts ever since his stupid breakfast with Sharon, because, Jesus, he fucked her harder than he fucked Steve’s mouth that night, and neither of them deserved that. Neither of them deserved his selfishness. His weakness.

“I’m a home-wrecking shitbag,” Bucky tells Hank. He winces at yet another instance of swearing in front of the baby, certain now that they’ll be returning him to Sharon with an even more expanded vocabulary of one-syllable words. “I wrecked Steve’s engagement to Sharon. I knew they were together, and I let him suck my dick anyway.”

“Was it consensual?”

“Of course,” Bucky retorts.

“Then he’s a big boy who made his own choice to do it. You don’t get to take full responsibility for that. Maybe some, but not all.”

Hank’s words are warm and sincere and almost believable, even when it seems impossible to implicate Steve in any of it, given how fucked up he was at the time. Hank’s next words, however, are not so kind.

“So when are we going to meet to work on Step Two? You’ve been avoiding me.”

“What’s Step Two?”

Bucky turns to the sound of Winnie’s voice, a sound that scrapes over his eardrums and makes him clench his teeth. She flanks Hank’s other side and wraps her fingers around one of Ethan’s little arms, and he stops patting Bucky in favor of reaching over to pet her poofy hair, and Bucky tells her the second step of AA with such unchecked bitterness that she might not even miss it this time.

“To come to believe that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity,” he grits out, then looks to Hank. “And I’ve been a little busy this week, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Too busy to work on your sobriety?” Hank asks.

“Does that mean you have to believe in God?” Winnie asks. She’s barely paying attention to her own question, and probably will barely hear his answer, because she’s grinning wide-eyed at Ethan saying ‘Hi! Hello! Hello!’ and he’s loving every obnoxious second of it.

So he doesn’t even give her a courtesy answer, which probably would be somewhere along the lines of ‘fuck no, fuck that.’ But he’s trying not to swear and all.

Hank is quick to offer alternatives. “It doesn’t have to be a big white man with a big white beard. It can be anything greater than yourself.”

“Like what?” Bucky asks.


Bucky snorts as he tries to imagine how hilariously self-sabotaging it would be to entrust his sobriety to a bunch of shit he either can’t commit to or can’t accept. “So, nothing abstract or anything.”

“Snark all you want,” Hank replies. “You just need to find something that works for you. We’re not moving to Step Three until you find something you can work with.”

Winnie now has Ethan by both hands, her coffee abandoned on the table next to them, and he’s
smiling at her, and she’s smiling back, and she says, “I’m sorry, Hank, but I need to cuddle this baby,” and Bucky’s hand goes so tight on his cane that it hurts.

Hank hands the baby over, and Winnie pulls him into her arms joyfully, like it’s the first baby she’s ever held. Her face glows with love and adoration, and she touches her nose to his and says, “you are so cute, just like your daddy,” and something socks Bucky so hard in the gut that he flinches. He can’t quite name it, because it’s a moving target, but he’s felt it a lot this week. Sometimes it’s the disgusting, shameful memory of what he’s done to other people’s children. Sometimes it’s the awful reminder that he has no right to enjoy Steve’s son after his betrayal of Steve’s trust in him as an advisor back in Iraq. Right now, it’s seeing Winnie love this baby — Steve’s baby — when, Jesus Christ, she couldn’t even give a little of that same love to—

It all converges on him at once, coupled with the white-hot rage at his mother’s affection for a baby that’s not even her own, and his chest gets heavy and the room starts to tilt a little and it’s sweltering and he has to move and he limps toward the door and shoves past some gabbing queens and throws the door open and the cold gusts in his face and it feels so good and he breathes the freezing air and it hurts and it’s good. So, so good.

Bucky closes his eyes and breathes and breathes as the cars shush by in the slush. And for a few pristine moments, his head and body are clear, and he feels incredible and empty and full of the world and made of it and, somehow, not any of it and—

“What’s going on?”

Bucky’s eyes slide open, and he gives his head a weary shake at Hank’s question. “Nothing.”

Hank moves to stand beside him, “Doesn’t look like nothing.”

“Just some shit I haven’t dealt with.”

“Yeah, you’ve got a lot of that.” Hank crosses his arms over his chest and puffs out a cold breath. “This act is charming, but it’s not doing you any favors.”

“What act?”

“This domestic act. It’s a distraction. You’re avoiding me, you’re avoiding the work, and you’re avoiding the rooms as much as you can without getting hauled back to jail.”

Bucky scowls because it’s true, and he hates that Hank can see it so readily, that Hank can cut through his crap like a knife through jello.

“I’m fine. I’m not drinking.”

Hank angles his body toward him, gravely resolved. “You’re stalled out, and things are gonna get real for you real fast, if you don’t start taking this seriously. And when they get real, you’re gonna relapse. I can almost guarantee it.”

“Oh, please,” Bucky groans. “You don’t know me, Hank. Stop acting like you get me.”

“I get you just fine, kiddo.”

Bucky whips around, a stumbling, off-kilter move that he barely saves with his cane. His blue eyes flash, and he shoves his finger hard into Hank’s shoulder as he speaks.

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your fucking kid. I’m not your fucking son.”
Hank squares up to him and moves in closer, driving Bucky’s finger even further into his clavicle. “You got that right. He’s actually in recovery while you’re just bullshitting at it.”

Bucky sputters, and his mouth curls into a bitter smile. “So you and Howard raised an alcoholic, huh? Nice work.”

“You’ve got one week, Jamie,” Hank replies, pointing skyward. “One week to get yourself together and get back on track, or I’m firing you.”

“Yeah, that’d be fucking terrible.”

“It would be. Don’t think for a second that you’re better than the program, because you’re not. You’re just an arrogant, scared, dried out drunk who’s one bad day away from crawling into a handle of Popov.”

Bucky thinks to shoot back that his relapse sure as fuck wouldn’t be on Popov, but he knows that’s not even a verifiable falsehood. He’d already have relapsed on mouthwash, if Steve kept it in the house. But he knows better. He knows Bucky better than that. It’s a cynical goddamn thing to know, but a true thing.

The acute fury drains out of Bucky through the soles of his boots, leaving him feeling wobbly and hollow and crushed under Hank’s unrelenting scrutiny. He’s frankly shocked to see no evidence of disappointment in Hank’s eyes. Only concern, charged by years of hard drinking and hard sobriety. Bucky can’t meet those eyes for long, because he can’t stand the fierce compassion that’s also there.

“I’ll go to a meeting after this,” Bucky grumbles. “And two tomorrow.”

“Good. And don’t blow me off on Saturday. I mean it. Bring the kid, if you have to. Leave your mother at home.”

“Fine. Jesus.”

“Don’t ‘Jesus’ me. You want a future where you get to have that?”

Hank points back to the storefront of the coffee shop, through the glass and to the robust figure of Winnie holding Ethan. She’s pointing back towards Hank and Bucky, making an exaggerated flapping motion with her hand, looking at the baby in her arms and then back out the window, over and over until Ethan looks out the window with her and sticks his palm toward them. He rotates it in a slow wave, and Winnie is ecstatic, and Hank’s question finally settles and percolates, and Christ, he can’t even imagine that life for himself anymore, one where he has a family of his own, one he used to imagine for himself before he was old enough to know how broken and toxic and sick he is.

Bucky swallows, Adam’s apple sliding beneath the unshaven skin of his neck. “I don’t know.”

“Of course you don’t,” Hank says gently. “I don’t think you know yourself very well at all. How could you, after all those years of running away?”

Bucky gives a single nod. It’s the core storyline of his life, the thread that ties his worst deeds together.

“Now go enjoy your family. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

Hank turns toward the building but lays his hand on Bucky’s shoulder before he steps away. Its weight brings Bucky back, pulls him out of the unrelenting, low thrum of his miserable thoughts.
“Okay,” Bucky says. “Saturday.”

Hank offers a small smile. His hand squeezes tight.

—–

That night, after his meeting, Bucky convinces Winnie to drop Ethan and him off in front of their building. She fights with him about whether he can get the baby into the apartment, but he can carry a fucking car seat, and he tells her as much, and he pretty much can, even though he has to stop and put the thing down four times to adjust his shitty grip on it. She calls out the car window, saying ‘careful, are you sure you don’t need me to help, oh, be careful,’ as if he doesn’t fucking know he should be careful with Steve’s baby.

Steve’s baby. It still blows his mind open every time he really thinks about it. It blows his mind open as he climbs the four stairs of their landing and puts the baby down to fish his keys out of his pocket, his hand shaking from the strain, from how weak he’s gotten. He gets the door open and pushes his way through. In the car seat, the baby is whining, fussy and overtired from his first trip to Chelsea.

“Yeah, you got that right,” Bucky mumbles, looking down at Ethan’s face, his crinkled frown, and he’s thankful that Steve is home to work his uncanny baby magic.

By the time they get to the door of the apartment, Steve is there waiting, hands flexing at his sides, his body a tight line of stress from the fourteen hour day he put in. He’s out of his work clothes, dressed comfortably in his West Point sweats and a long-sleeved t-shirt that hugs the contours of his chest just right. Bucky has no idea how he keeps some of his shape, considering that he doesn’t seem to make any time to work out. Perhaps it’s because he keeps such a fastidious diet, one Bucky should probably adopt himself but hasn’t cared enough to. The anxiety of the month-and-a-half leading up to the baby stripped Bucky of much of the extra padding he stacked up in his early sobriety, giving him the sad silhouette of a reed, and he’s not quite sure which one is worse, because both states are ugly and undesirable. Not that he cares about that.

Except that, these days, he kind of does. It’s new, young and fragile, but it’s there when it wasn’t before, not since before Khalidiya. And he doesn’t know what to do with it just yet. He’s been sitting with it, feeling it as it pulses within him, as it wakes up his dick in the morning and sometimes at other times. Sometimes when they’re watching a movie where people are fucking. Sometimes when he catches a glimpse of Steve walking around in just a towel. Sometimes at night when he can’t sleep because Steve is lying next to him reading some stupid report, and Bucky can feel his presence, can see the outline of his body beneath the blankets, and it sometimes makes him want to slide in close and skim his hand over the curves and lines of him. Sometimes he’s almost tempted to touch himself beneath the blankets, to press his hand against the aching pressure he feels there, but the thought still disgusts him, because he doesn’t want it to be his own hand and can’t imagine it being anyone else’s. So sometimes he just settles for rolling onto his stomach and pretending to sleep like that while he pushes his hips into the mattress, very subtly, never nearly enough to satisfy himself— God, if he can even come anymore. He still doesn’t even know if he can. He hasn’t tried, because he’s still too scared to find out that maybe he can’t, and that might just fucking ruin him for good.

“How was it?” Steve asks.

He holds out his hand to relieve Bucky of the car seat, and Ethan starts crying as soon as he sees his father, like he’s been waiting all day to fall apart in this moment and just needed the permission to. Steve has that effect on him, making himself the safe container in which his kid can scream and laugh and cry and sleep. It’s beautiful and enchanting, the way he does it, even though Bucky could never say what, exactly, he does.
They enter the apartment and Bucky closes the door behind him, locking it deliberately to show Steve that he did it, because he’s damn well looking and will most certainly look again later.

“Winnie would barely let him go. She’s obsessed.”

Bucky talks loud enough for Steve to hear over the crying, watching as Steve scoops Ethan up and settles him in his arms, bouncing him a little and going ‘shh, shh, shh.’ The baby looks at him and cries, red-faced, his hands bunching in Steve’s shirt.

“When did he eat?” Steve asks.

“Couple hours ago. But he didn’t sleep at all. Too much going on.”

Steve continues shushing the baby until he collapses against Steve’s shoulder, wetting his shirt with tears and saliva as he sobs.

“He’s tired, huh?” Bucky says, stating the obvious because he doesn’t know what else to do. Every time Ethan cries, it tears his guts out, especially when he cries like this. He should be used to it by now, but it yanks so much out of him, so many memories, all of them terrible. Bucky crying as a little kid. Bucky crying as an older kid. Babies crying in the God-forsaken tribal lands in Afghanistan. Babies crying in the streets of Baghdad. He wills himself not to bite his lip because the damn thing is just about healed from his shitty breakfast with Sharon, so instead he digs his fingernails into his palm as hard as he can, knowing he won’t draw any blood because he keeps them so short and his hands are so weak. But it brings enough pain to pull him out of it a little.

Steve nods and sways his body while Ethan cries himself out, and every time he sways, the material of his sweatpants shifts, and the bulge of his cock appears and disappears and appears and disappears again, which Bucky knows because he’s watching it, and he knows he shouldn’t be, but it’s hypnotic, and even the press of his fingernails can’t completely distract him from it.

“We went to see Hank,” he says, still watching. “I guess he and his partner or husband or boyfriend or whatever had a kid. From Howard’s marriage.”

“That happens,” Steve says quietly because the baby is finally quieting, breath hitching, still clutching onto Steve like he’ll fly away if he doesn’t.

“It’s just weird.”

“Why is it weird?”

Bucky shrugs. “I don’t know.” He closes his eyes and shakes his head sharply and forces himself to lift his chin so that when his eyes open again, he’s looking at Steve’s face rather than his crotch.

Shit, did Steve catch him? Bucky can’t tell. He looks curious, in the numb, flattened way he now expresses most of his emotions.

“I’m gonna change him and put him to bed,” Steve tells him, that faint emotion still lingering.

Steve carries the baby toward his room, where the baby sleeps and Bucky doesn’t. Not this week. It wasn’t Steve’s choice. Hell, he even asked Bucky if he wanted to stay. But Bucky can’t stand the idea of the two of them sleeping in the same bed with a baby right there, because what a fucked thing for a baby to experience. He’s not about to give him a reason to need fifty years of therapy, talking about how daddy and his man friend used to share a bed right in front of him, and how daddy’s friend used to sport his pathetic excuse for a boner half the fucking time and do fuck-all about it because he’s a fucking loser who can’t even jerk himself off just to rid himself of the fucking thing.
“Do you want me to heat a bottle?” Bucky calls after him, recoiling at the jarring rise of his voice.

Steve turns a little, looking over his shoulder. He has one hand on the back of Ethan’s head, petting him gently, and it’s so sweet, so nurturing, even as dismay settles on his face. He grimaces at his forgetfulness and silently mouths something that looks like ‘damn it.’

“Sure,” he says aloud. “Thanks.”

Bucky heads to the fridge and finds a bag of thawed breast milk in there. He starts the water in the sink and moves the thin bag back and forth beneath the warm stream. He’s done this before, one of the small ways he’s made himself useful with the baby. He takes it seriously, making sure the temperature is just right, which he’s getting a pretty decent feel for. He’s also gotten pretty good at not making a goddamn mess as he transfers it to a bottle, something he’s exceedingly careful about after dropping one on the floor before he could put the nipple on it. He swore up a shit storm and was wiping Sharon’s breast milk off the floor for what seemed like hours, his knee screaming along with the baby, so now he’s super extra careful, and when he gets to Steve’s room, he finds the two of them seated in a rocking chair Winnie bought for them when she saw they didn’t have one. She may be giving Bucky a massive case of the ass this week, but she was dead right about how much it would come in handy.

Steve has Ethan cradled in his big arms, rocking him, saying ‘it’s okay, shh-shh-shh’ in a low, soothing voice. The baby is still sniffling, which continues even once he’s got the bottle in his mouth. He holds it himself, with a little of Steve’s help, and Bucky watches the two of them in the low light of the room for a good fifteen minutes as Ethan’s eyes get heavier and heavier. Steve would normally read him something before bed; he’s neurotically attached to the routine he’s built for the kid, each segment populated with the developmentally appropriate activity that supports the various physical, cognitive, and psychological domains of growth. Sharon was spot-fucking-on about the formulaic nature of Steve’s parenting, all content and so little process, inorganic and task-focused. He fakes the funk pretty well, plays the role with great skill, but now that Bucky sees it, he can’t un-see it. It’s an effort that’s been sustained throughout the week with countless lists and post-its and reminders on his phone and checking with Bucky to make sure he’s remembered the timeline of every feeding and changing and nap and playtime. Bucky tries to fill in the gaps preemptively, before Steve can feel like he’s forgotten something, because he can see how much it kills him to feel like he’s not doing a good job. It’s both endearing and completely heartbreaking to watch.

The baby falls into a sleep so deep that he doesn’t even stir when Steve lays him in his crib. Steve waits by the bedside until he’s sure the sleep is going to take. And when it seems like it is, he backs away, clicks on the baby monitor, and ushers Bucky out of the room, closing the door behind them.

“Did you eat?” Steve asks when they get back into the kitchen. “I have some leftovers. I can heat them up.”

Bucky waves him off. “I’m good.”

“Did you eat, though?”

“I’m fine. I’m not hungry. I’m good.”

Steve crosses his arms and plants himself firmly on the linoleum.

“You got something to say to me?” Bucky asks, tensing his own stance defensively.

“You don’t seem to have much of an appetite lately.”
“What, because I’m not shoving ice cream and pie and candy in my face every minute of the day?”

“Because you need new clothes, and you just bought those a few months ago.” Steve nods to the ill-fitting hang of Bucky’s pants and shirt, brows drawn in a concerned line.

The attention hits him like Hank’s, back outside the coffee shop. It’s evaluative and intense, and Bucky feels his insides and outsides shrinking under it.

“Maybe you don’t remember, but this is how I was before the Army,” Bucky reminds him. “This is just how my body is, when I’m not jacked to fuck or coming fresh off booze.”

Steve’s brow lightens at that, like he’s paged through the catalog of his fragmented memories enough to validate what Bucky’s telling him. “I mean, it’s fine, you look… good. I just wanna make sure you’re okay.”

“Pretty big pause there.”

In the warm light of the kitchen, Steve’s cheeks flush. “I didn’t mean anything… It’s… you’re…” Bucky tilts his head. “I’m what?”

“You look good. I remember now. It’s just been a while.”

It’s nice to hear. It’s nice to see Steve’s face give him up like that when his words struggle to. Bucky certainly hasn’t been vocal about his appraisal of Steve’s appearance, which has been constantly, resoundingly positive in the past few weeks. It would seem cursory to offer praise in this moment, but Bucky sure feels it.

“Wanna watch a movie or something?” Bucky asks.

Steve’s mouth curls into a small smile. “Sure.”

They take their usual places on the couch, except that the distance between their bodies is distinctly smaller than most other nights. It wasn’t even Bucky’s doing; he sat down first. The proximity makes it almost impossible for Bucky to focus on the movie, especially with the lights out. The long, muscled line of Steve’s thigh is right there, right next to Bucky’s hand, and sometimes it moves a little closer, and it feels like they’re on a date in junior high, where every millimeter means something profound and not entirely clear. Nerves bunch in Bucky’s stomach and his heart leaps into a flight of bravery, and he oh-so-casually slides his hand over the material of the couch and up the outside bank of that glorious thigh, up the slope of it, until he stops square in the middle. Steve looks down at his hand, his lips parted, just like when Bucky yanked his hair back last weekend, and he moves closer, and he lifts his arm and lays it over Bucky’s shoulders, gingerly at first, but as the minutes drag on, Bucky’s hyper-focused concentration detects the weight of it increasing as he relaxes. It’s like permission then, and Bucky lets himself lean against Steve’s torso, stiff at first, but looser with every breath he forces himself to take deeply.

And so they sit there, Bucky’s hand settled resolutely on Steve’s thigh, Steve’s arm around him, pulling him close, and the movie slips even further into the background of Bucky’s thrumming blood, and all it takes is for him to shift his head just a little, and Steve’s face is right there, and he smells so good, and when Bucky nuzzles his cheek, it’s rough with blond stubble, and Steve turns his head, pulling back to look Bucky in the eyes, but Bucky doesn’t back away because he doesn’t see disgust there or unease there, just the same excited uncertainty that must be in his own eyes. And Bucky takes the risk and closes the distance between their lips, cautious, like the caution of Steve’s arm, and it’s so wonderfully soft and careful at first, so gentle and warm and so good. Like the cold
air lighting up Bucky’s lungs, it’s just so, so good.

It’s good until that hunger spools up again, that new, clumsy nagging, that desire that he’s still trying to make tentative peace with. Bucky feels it, and he doesn’t fight against it this time. He feels it, and it makes him greedy and ravenous, and he parts his lips to touch his tongue to Steve’s mouth, just to test it, and Jesus, when Steve opens his mouth to receive him, it’s all fucking over, and they’re making out in earnest, and Bucky’s hand is wandering up Steve’s thigh while Steve pulls him closer, grabbing onto Bucky’s other shoulder with his free hand, grabbing him tight enough to tell Bucky that he’s starting to lose it too, and that’s all the encouragement Bucky needs to slide his hand up to that hypnotic bulge where Steve’s cock rests. It’s half-hard and stiffens even more under Bucky’s palm as he cups it, presses against it, runs his fingers over the growing length of it, feeling the heady power of making another man hard for him, and God damn it, he has missed this.

He pushes through the pain of shifting his body as he pushes Steve back and over and down, until he’s flat on his back, and they readjust themselves until Steve is stretched on the couch with Bucky on top of him and, oh, God, the feel of Steve underneath him, the heat of his mouth, the hardness of Steve’s cock against his hip, the firmness of Steve’s own hip as Bucky grinds against him, because he’s hard, too, and the pressure and friction feels so good that Bucky can’t even remember that he’s broken and half-dicked and and one-balled and scarred to fuck and back, and it’s so fucking good, so deliriously wonderful that Bucky lets out a moan, a loud one—

And then Steve’s mouth is gone, and his hands are pushing Bucky back, and his eyes are no longer dark and wanting but sharp and… something else that’s definitely not sexy.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky breathes.

Steve gives a single shake of his head and pushes back against Bucky hard. “I just… need to slow down.”

Bucky frowns and tries to make sense of the diametric turn of events, even as Steve is pushing him off, as he settles back on his ass and Steve sits up, bowing his head and taking it in his hands and breathing slowly and deeply, like he’s shoving back a tide of panic, which Bucky has certainly seen and felt more than once. It’s impossible not to feel completely, agonizingly rejected, and his mind scrambles to think of what he did to set all this off. He can’t think of anything, and maybe that means he’s just so pathetically out of practice with this stuff that he fucked up without even knowing it. It’s a helpless feeling, and one he can’t even dare to confirm with Steve because he’s too goddamn embarrassed to even ask. The pressure between Bucky’s legs eases, flags down to nothing, and God fucking damn it, he’s such a fucking idiot….

Bucky sighs and scrapes his hands through his hair, the lust sucked clean out of him, leaving him empty and ashamed and vaguely angry with himself for even trying.

They watch the rest of the movie on opposite ends of the couch in complete and terrible and utterly desolate silence.
Art by the wonderfully talented and strikingly insightful kissmisssangbang

Warnings: Homophobic language, internalized homophobia, toxic religion, childhood trauma, 9/11

Military Terms:

BDU - Battle Dress Uniform

10 years - The retirement age for active duty military is 20 years, so 10 would be the magical half-way mark where many folks decide whether they're going to push through or leave the service

Re-up - re-enlist

Dress-right-dress - in perfect order
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky pay some visits.

Chapter Notes

A "small" update for you!

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and mistress of keeping me motivated and on track with my plot, characters, and style. She’s also available for beta work and is amazing at it. Go visit her on Tumblr

Additional consultation for this chapter provided by SofsObsidian74

Thursday, February 4, 2010

It feels odd to be able to focus. Steve’s still trying to get used to it, to not having to read every sentence three times to retain its meaning. He still has to read many things twice, or once, very slowly, but even that is an improvement so marked that he wonders how he could even function before Hope gave him something for it. She walked him through his neuropsychology testing results with painstaking patience, even though a psychologist already did the same when he got his initial feedback. He couldn’t comprehend it then, even though the psychologist was very nice and careful in her rate of speech. What he couldn’t comprehend was how different his results were from when he was initially tested at Fort Bragg. It makes no sense, and he told her as much. It makes no sense that he’d be so much worse now, that he’d go from unremarkable results to legitimate deficits in processing speed and attention and memory. Not just relative deficits — he’s defective relative to the entire population. And it made no sense to him, even when the psychologist repeated it, and maybe it was because he couldn’t stop himself from slipping into the void of dejected disbelief over how his 157 IQ could drop so low that it couldn’t even be interpreted. Or something couldn’t be interpreted. He can’t remember, exactly. Something about his general intelligence being high but his other stuff being pathetically bad.

Hope’s interpretation was dissatisfying, but not surprising, because he heard it before from the stupid intern at Bragg — TBI plus depression plus PTSD equals Steve Rogers’ fucked brain. He should be relieved by it, that it’s not all just the mush leftover from when his head was smashed in. He should be relieved that, according to Hope, depression and PTSD can be treated — not that he has PTSD, because he doesn’t, even though she tells him he probably does. She refuses to diagnose him formally, saying that he probably meets full criteria for it but that the proper assessment for it is long and not one that she’s trained to do — oh, but the folks over at the PTSD clinical team can do it, and wouldn’t he like a referral? Especially now?

And his answer, as it has always been, is no. Not now. Which begged Hope’s question of when, and, as always, he can’t give her the answer she wants. Because he just doesn’t know when will ever
be the right time to upheave the very tenuous hold he has on his job and on his routine and on his emotional state. When is it ever a good time to dive headfirst into trauma? When is it ever a good time to seek out blinding agony and despair? The last thing he needs is to end up in some program, some hospital, because Hill isn’t going to give him any more passes. She’s already given him so many, little and big — ample time to attend his appointments, ample extensions on deadlines, ample breadth to fuck up — and he’s fucked up, big time. He’s been such a chronic fuck-up that he was put on another project entirely, one barely suitable for the parade of interns from NYU. He’s been tasked to the legal team to help with PowerPoints, which appears to be the extent of his responsibilities there, as far as he can tell. It’s humiliating, but he tries to be grateful that he hasn’t been fired and, frankly, he has no idea why he hasn’t been. So he should feel good, and he absolutely does not.

But he can read now, at least. Sort of. And that’s what he’s trying to do in the low light from the nightstand. He’s reading up on international law — war crimes stuff, Geneva Convention stuff. Stuff Murdock told him to read up on to get a feel for the work. It seems like it should be interesting, but he still can’t track it closely enough for it to be compelling. He’s horizontal, reading propped up on his chest, because he’s trying to get tired, a small feat when he takes Ritalin twice a day. It’s a trade-off, the slinking back into insomnia, but it’s one he’s pleased to do if it means regaining some of his daytime functioning.

Next to him, Bucky’s trying to sleep. He’s especially restless tonight, twitchy and distracted ever since Steve got home from work. Ever since Ethan was here, things have been different. Bucky was obviously shaken by his breakfast with Sharon. God, why did he let that happen? He should have insisted on going. He should have tried to… to what, Steve’s not sure. Neither of them would say much about it to him, but ever since, Bucky has been odd. Extra vigilant, maybe. Bucky watches him a lot now, at mundane times, like when he’s doing the dishes or working on his computer or making dinner. Sometimes Bucky will sit at the kitchen table with his AA work and notebook, and Steve can feel him glancing up. Feel him staring. Bucky’s gaze has a way of crawling into him, digging underneath his skin, and it makes him warm and self-conscious, like he needs to wash the dishes just right or angle his chin in just so or be extra dextrous when he cuts up vegetables.

Bucky shifts, and very softly groans. It’s his first night back in Steve’s bed since before Ethan came. Steve thought he might never come back at all, and he’d never dare to ask for his return no matter how badly he wanted it. He grew far too quickly accustomed to company, and it’s strange to think that he might be growing weary of loneliness. Even having Ethan there was better than the dead silence, hearing his shallow baby breath, because most nights Steve was too scared to sleep soundly for fear of waking up shouting or puking from a nightmare. He loaded himself up with as much prazosin as he could, but he still slept deployment-light nearly the whole time. And so he got to be present like that, staring up at the ceiling, with his child sleeping just next to his bed, and it began to seem almost normal after a while, like being a father was something that he could do, and maybe not terribly. He tried so hard to be good. He tried to make up for being so absent. He’s going to DC tomorrow to visit, because he should, even as he remains disappointed by how obligatory everything still feels. He wants to want to go there. He does. So badly.

Bucky sighs into the darkness. He’s facing away, curled in on himself, his bad leg sliding slowly as it stretches out. Some nights he just can’t get comfortable, and he staunchly refuses to take anything for it, even over-the-counter stuff. He’s been working so hard on his sobriety, even amid all the stress of Sharon and the baby and, for some reason, Winnie. She’s been driving him crazy lately, and he rants about her at disproportionate length and intensity, given her very minor transgressions. He can’t stand the way she talks. The way she walks. The way she laughs. The way she played with Ethan. All the things Steve loves about her, Bucky seems to despise now. And like with most things, Bucky can’t say why. Or won’t. Steve’s not entirely sure.

Steve tries to go back to his reading, the condensed lines of legalese blurring into thin, rectangular
chunks, but Bucky is breathing hard, like he’s in the middle of a bad dream, and for a few moments, Steve wonders if he is. But then he shifts again, onto his back, face grimacing with discomfort, and then he turns again, facing Steve now. His eyes are closed, and he pushes out another sigh through his nose. Below the covers, his hand moves, skimming over his own hip and then disappearing down. Steve lays his reading face-down on his chest and he watches for a few moments, as Bucky’s brow furrows and un-furrows—

And then he feels it, the tentative touch of fingers brushing against his side, and Bucky’s breathing quickens, and that hand becomes bolder, flattening over Steve’s stomach, smoothing over him, slowly. Steve holds his own breath as Bucky’s hand climbs up his sternum, traveling underneath his reading, and Steve looks to Bucky’s face again to see his lips parted. His eyes slide open, but his lids remain heavy over his unfocused gaze, which is directed at the silhouette of his own wandering hand. The packet of papers shifts and starts to slide, and Steve grabs it before it can fall to the floor and lays it on the nightstand, and Bucky’s touch passes over his chest, coming to rest at his left nipple, and Bucky’s fingers play over it in the way he knows Steve likes, and Steve sucks in a breath as that touch sparks a current in him that he’s not sure what to do with. The memory of their ill-fated make-out session on the couch comes back to him — the sudden ruining of the mood, the acute feeling of sickness — and he doesn’t want that again. This is important, and he doesn’t want to fuck it up, because he saw how disappointed and hurt Bucky was by it, and he can’t fuck this up again.

So Steve stays still while Bucky slides in closer, edging his body to mold against the side of his own, and Steve moves his arm to circle around him to let him in as close as he wants to be. Steve can feel the pressure of Bucky’s groin against his thigh, the unmistakable density of an erection, different from how it used to be, more hesitant and less substantial, and as Steve fights against the memory of Bucky’s mutilated body, mangled in the dirt, he inches his thigh closer, because he wants Bucky to know that it’s okay, even as he struggles to control the violent wanderings of his mind. And so Steve presses against him and pulls him in, and Bucky snatches the cue, leveraging himself until he’s half on top of Steve, one leg between Steve’s own, draped over his chest and bracing himself on his better arm.

Bucky doesn’t kiss him. Instead, he looks down at Steve’s face, pupils blown dark, and he grinds himself against Steve’s hip in a rough, even rhythm, and it feels surreal, because Steve can’t risk being here for him the way he might want, because with every panting breath Bucky takes, Steve is wrestling for control with the part of himself that’s trying to rip him into the past. He shoves away the horror of Khalidiya, shoves away the sickness, while Bucky shoves himself against Steve’s body, harder and more frantically, his hand weakly clutching Steve’s shoulder, and Steve lets himself be used for this, because Bucky deserves to feel good. It’s the least he can do for letting Bucky get blown up in the first place. For turning him into what he is now.

He knows Bucky is close when his panting becomes vocal, gaining a harsh timbre. He’s heard it so many times before. He used to live for the sound of Bucky’s pleasure, the look on his face, the unguarded passion and immaculate transparency. But he looks different now, eyebrows gathering sharply, jaw clenching, and when he cries out, it’s a strained, desperate sound that would be indistinguishable from pain without the context. Steve whites out his mind as Bucky’s body goes tense and he presses himself so hard against Steve that, God, maybe it does hurt, and how terrible that Steve can’t tell the difference between pleasure and suffering anymore, because the two are woven so tightly together that he can’t even pull them apart. Or maybe he doesn’t even know what real pleasure sounds like anymore, because there’s been so little of it for both of them since Iraq.

The tension drains out of Bucky, and he hangs his head, lower and lower until it almost touches Steve’s shoulder. He buries his face in the place where Steve’s neck and shoulder meet while his breathing deepens and slows, and his whole body sags and collapses. It’s not much weight to bear, but it’s substantial enough to pull Steve back from his fraying efforts to control himself. He settles
into himself and wraps his arms around Bucky, holding him close, running his hands slowly over
Bucky’s back. He feels for the first time the changes in texture beneath the thin fabric of his long- sleeved shirt, a large swathe of scarring that makes no sense because he wasn’t injured there — or
was he? Was there something Steve missed? Was it from some other deployment? The sick feeling
resurges in response, and so he tries to think of something good, something to distract him from the
horrors that Bucky has lived through. But there’s nothing good, no good that isn’t linked inexorably
with its comparison to the terrible present. Desperate for something to ground him, he tilts his head
toward Bucky and smells his hair, smells his shampoo from his recent shower, the piney scent of
rosemary, and feels the hint of lingering dampness against his nose.

And then there’s more dampness, but it’s on his skin where Bucky’s face is pressed, and Bucky’s
body is trembling, and a wet sound comes from him, and, Jesus…

Steve instinctively pulls him in tighter, pets his hair, kisses his head, and the shaking continues, and
Steve has no idea what’s happening to him, so he kisses him again and murmurs “what’s wrong?”
which makes Bucky sob — sob — and God damn it, he doesn’t know what to do, so he says “shh,
shh,” because that sometimes works with Ethan. But, God damn it, Bucky isn’t Ethan, not at all, and
his hand clutches tight against Steve’s shoulder, and he sobs harder, and Jesus…. Jesus, now Steve is
blinking back tears, and he has to keep himself from shutting down now, because Hope would tell
him to let go and name the feeling that’s consuming him, and it’s just goddamn despair and
helplessness and bleak, bitter sorrow over everything. Everything.

Steve’s tears never quite fall, staying stuck and shimmering on the surface of his eyes because there
just aren’t enough of them. He just can’t wedge the door to his agony open wide enough, because it
might fly off the hinges and smash into a million pieces if he tries too hard. And if he loses that
protection, the one thing keeping him very minimally functional, he just might lose everything. So he
doesn’t push anymore. Hope’s not here, and he doesn’t need her shit to be here, either. Not when
Bucky is like this. Not when he’s falling apart because… Jesus, he still doesn’t know why. So Steve
holds him tighter and whispers ‘it’s okay, it’s okay, I got you.’

Eventually, Bucky’s crying fades, his sobs weakening, his shaking abating, his body relaxing again.
His breath hitches as he tries to control it, and he sniffs to stave off the running of his nose. And his
hand loosens its grip on Steve’s shoulder, but it doesn’t linger. It starts to move, sliding down, back
over Steve’s chest, down his stomach, down further to cup his dick through his sleep pants. Steve
goes rigid as Bucky’s hand works him. It’s artless and insistent and totally pointless because Steve
couldn’t be softer, and not even the physical stimulation is enough to change that. Bucky sighs,
frustrated, and slides his hand under the band of Steve’s underwear, like that’ll make all the
difference, and Steve grabs onto Bucky’s wrist.

“Stop.”

Bucky lifts his head. His eyes are red, his face still wet. His fingers still twitch against Steve’s dick in
a last-ditch effort to make it do something.

“You don’t…” Bucky trails off, bewildered.

Steve shakes his head. “I’m fine.”

Bucky’s expression goes sour, and he pulls his hand out of Steve’s underwear and yanks his wrist
out of Steve’s grip with surprising strength. He presses against Steve’s chest to push himself off,
hissing in pain, and he slides off the bed and starts limping across the room toward the door,
dragging his palms roughly across his cheeks.

Steve sits up on his elbows. “Where are you going?”
“To put on some underwear that’s not full of come,” Bucky snaps.

“Wait— why are you mad?”

Bucky makes a brusque sweeping motion with his hand from head to groin. “Sorry I’m so fucking disgusting that you can’t even get it up.”

“That has nothing to do with….” Steve sits up, the comforter sliding down and bunching at his waist. “You’re not —”

“Oh, save it. I don’t need your fucking pity. You can lie all you want, but at least your dick is honest.”

The wood flooring thuds with Bucky’s uneven steps as he makes his way through the kitchen towards his room. The door slams, hard, and Steve blinks in stunned silence for a few moments before throwing the comforter off and going after him.

Steve stops just outside Bucky’s bedroom door and listens. There’s movement inside. The sliding of a drawer. The slam of it closing. “Can I come in?”

“No.”

Steve pushes out a long breath. He rubs at his jaw as he searches for a way to explain to Bucky something that he can barely explain for himself. “That’s not why….”

Bucky’s self-loathing is nothing new. He’s hated himself in some way for as long as they’ve known each other, and the hate has been a moving target, like a fucked up game of whack-a-mole. Hating his character. Hating his sexuality. Hating his body…. Well, the body stuff is actually pretty new. Bucky never hated his body before, except in the vague pining way that skinny adolescent boys can’t wait to grow up and out. And then Bucky grew up and out and strikingly beautiful, and Steve looked at him one day and saw him entirely differently, like he had been reworked from black-and-white to Technicolor, and his body became something they could both take refuge in, Bucky honing himself, honing his vanity, Steve touching and tasting and fucking him as often as he could. Even so many years later, when Bucky brought them back together, his body was an exquisite machine, running and pushing and lifting and shooting, shaped to perfection, loved by its owner, admired by his peers and subordinates and lovers.

So this hate is new to Steve, and it’s here, and it’s inescapable. And Steve doesn’t know what to say, because the problem is not Bucky’s body — at least, he hopes to God that it’s not.

“Your silence is very reassuring,” Bucky says on the other side of the door.

Flustered, Steve returns to the facts. “Listen, you were just crying, and I don’t know what’s going on with you. I don’t know how you expect me to be in the mood after that.”

Steve listens as there’s more rustling, the dull movement of clothes, the unsteady hopping as Steve imagines Bucky limping back to his bed to put his pants back on. It strikes him then that he hasn’t seen Bucky’s body since Landstuhl over a year ago, when he threw off his blankets in a fit of agonized rage to show Steve the wreckage left by the IED — the dressings, the drainage tubes, the yellow surgical plastic… Bucky has been so fastidious in his concealment, and Steve so overly respectful of his space, that he hasn’t even seen parts of it on accident. He entertains a fantasy of barging in right now. He wonders what he would see. What Bucky can’t stand to show him. What Steve possibly can’t stand to bear witness to.

He waits there until the rustling stops, until there’s a meek hum of silence. Steve lays his hand on the
door, pressing into the wood with his fingertips, and asks once more.

“Can I come in?”

After a beat of quiet, Bucky says okay.

Steve finds him sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands folded loosely on his lap. He looks tired and empty, and Steve takes a seat next to him, almost close enough that their shoulders touch.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asks.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just… I didn’t know if I’d be able to…” Bucky’s hands shift, coming to rest over his groin. “And I guess I can. And I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Isn’t that good?”

Bucky shrugs. “I guess. I don’t know.”

“But you were upset…”

Bucky’s face hardens pensively. He considers the question for a long time, and with each passing moment that he doesn’t answer, Steve’s anxiety ratchets, because the silence makes the overpainted walls feel thick. It makes the wood beneath his bare feet feel cold. It makes Bucky feel far away, like the atoms separating them are light years apart.

“I want things from you, and I don’t know if it’s okay to ask for them. If it’s even possible.”

“What do you want?”

Bucky’s lips purse and his chin twitches, delaying so long that Steve wonders if he’ll say anything at all.

“For you to want me,” Bucky finally says. “Like you used to. But I know I’m not the same. And I wouldn’t blame you for not wanting me anymore, looking like this. Being like this.”

“I do want you.”

Steve replies fast and with certainty, even as he questions whether his definition and Bucky’s definition of ‘want’ are even the same. He wants Bucky, profoundly. He’s always wanted him. He’s always wanted him in his life, even when he didn’t. Even when wanting him hurt. Even when Bucky’s actions suggested to Steve that he wasn’t wanted back. Even now, when Bucky wants his desire, when he wants something that Steve’s not even sure he has for anyone, he wants Bucky. With every cell of his body, Steve wants him.

Bucky scrubs his hands over his face, talking into them as he does. In the low light, it almost looks like he has no scars at all, the deep pink-purple of each mark faded to an opaque whitish-pink. “I know this is weird. This whole relationship. I don’t know what we are. I’m fucked up. You’ve got stuff.”

“You can say it. I’m fucked up.”

Bucky drags his hands up over his forehead, pulling his hair back. It’s so long now, almost long enough to tuck behind his ears. But it seems to have grown through neglect, not in the very careful way he grew it out in junior high and early high school on the way to emulating Kurt Cobain, circa 1993.
“I just want something to be normal, you know?” Bucky says. He glances over, and there’s something distantly whimsical in his eyes, something hopeful, and it’s like a kick in the gut.

“I don’t think I can give you normal right now. I’m just not there,” Steve states.

Bucky looks down at his lap, frowning deeply, and then there’s more silence. This time, it isn’t unbearable, because there’s so much of it between them these days. In the old days, before Iraq, before everything between them went to shit, Bucky used to not be able to stand it, demanding that the quiet be filled with music or chatting or reading or something, like he needed those things to drown out the howling of his own mind. But Bucky tolerates the quiet now, and in moments like these, he even creates it. It expands like a protective bubble around his next words, which are spoken haltingly and with uncharacteristic self-consciousness.

“I’m taking testosterone for my, you know,” Bucky says, and he ducks his head, hair sliding back into place from where he pushed it back. “And it makes me want sex. And I want it with you. But I can’t stand the thought of you seeing me. Or touching me. I can’t stand doing either myself. So, I don’t know.” He shrugs. “I have a lot of shit to work out. And I’m frustrated. And I should probably stop taking it, but I feel so much better now. My energy, you know. But I’m also horny all the time, so….”

It explains a lot lately. The long, fixated looks. The proximity. The restlessness. It’s been so long since Bucky has been truly sexually interested — Christ, since Iraq — that Steve hasn’t even known how to interpret most of it.

But this is a good thing, isn’t it? Wasn’t it good to feel Bucky’s dick against his body? Isn’t it good that he can get off? Isn’t this progress? Isn’t this healing? Isn’t this something that Steve should support with great energy and enthusiasm?

“What would you like me to do? How can I help?” Steve asks.

“I don’t know. I feel like I’ve gotta be pretty fucking brave with this stuff. I don’t know why you pushed me away that time.”

Steve recalls his reaction with embarrassment and not a little shame. He’s tried to take it apart and put it together again, to analyze each step and figure out how they went from A to B to NO in a handful of minutes. He was enjoying it. He wanted it. He was into it. And then he was one moment of lapsed control away from puking on the floor.

“I just wasn’t feeling well,” Steve says. “I’m sorry.”

“Your stomach stuff?”

Steve nods.

Bucky gives a long-suffering shake of his head. “You’ve gotta get that checked, Steve. Jesus. Promise me you’ll talk to your doc about it next time you see her.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

Steve doesn’t mention what he is now reminded of, that he did get it checked and it was determined to be “psychogenic,” as his chart so bluntly put it. He was insulted, even after Hope walked him through exactly why it was true. Nobody wants to hear that they’re so crazy that their bodies are creating illness out of nothing.
“I’m sorry for tonight,” Bucky tells him. “I just had a hard-on for like an hour. It was driving me nuts.”

Steve lifts his hand and lays his hand on Bucky’s thigh. Beneath his fingers, through Bucky’s thin pants, he can feel the tough texture of his scars, some oblong, some circular. Raised impressions of the fragments that created them. Jesus Christ, there are so many of them, he almost forgot how many. He clears the thickness from his throat.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Buck. I didn’t mind. I want you to feel good.”

Bucky heaves a tired sigh and covers Steve’s hand with his own. He threads his fingers between Steve’s and curls them around to hold his hand.

“You just make me crazy sometimes. Some things don’t change, you know? Some things do, but that never has. When I saw you again at Bragg, at the airport, Jesus Christ.” Bucky looks over at Steve, his eyes bright and earnest. Then he reaches over with his free hand and touches his fingertips to Steve’s cheek. “You’re the most handsome man I’ve ever known. You really are. Just classically, beautifully handsome. I love just looking at you.”

Steve’s brows gather. Bucky has always spoken about Steve’s appearance in the language of fire and passion — he’s hot, he’s sexy, he’s fucking whatever Bucky could cook up while he was being fucked or handled or held. This is so different, so sober, so lucid and open.

“You’ve never told me that before,” Steve says softly. “Not like that.”

Bucky strokes his thumb over that serious furrow, smooths it down and moves to cup his face. “No, and I’m so sorry for that. I want to be better than I was.”

“Me too.”

“Can I kiss you?”

“Yeah.”

It’s a sweet, fragile echo of their very first kiss. Bucky searches his face for a few moments, gaze traveling from his mouth to his nose to his eyes. He leans in but he doesn’t kiss Steve right away. He touches his nose to Steve’s and nudges Steve’s head down to press their foreheads together. Bucky closes his eyes then, and Steve can feel his fingers at the nape of his neck, just touching, and time is sucked away from them — their tumultuous, traumatic past, their uncertain future. All that remains is this single, pristine moment, and the two of them together in it.

And when Bucky presses his lips to Steve’s, it’s gentle and sincere, undemanding and utterly perfect. It’s one peerless kiss, and his next words are whispered after it.

“I just want you to be patient with me. I know you’ve already been so patient, but I’m just a little lost here with this stuff. It’s weird to feel lost like this. This shouldn’t be so complicated. But I guess I’m just complicated.”

Steve smiles and brushes Bucky’s hair off his forehead. “If you’re complicated, that makes me complicated, too.”

Bucky returns the smile and gives him another kiss.

“Do you want to sleep in here?” Steve murmurs.
Bucky nods. His attention flits away, down toward the wood floor. “Maybe some time… I could watch you.”

“Watch me what?”

There’s a beat of quiet. Even in the dim light, the pinkness is still visible in Bucky’s cheeks.

“Jerk off,” he says, then adds, “You still do that, right?”

“Sometimes,” Steve lies. He barely remembers the last time he did. Somewhere around Thanksgiving, alone in the shower with Bucky asleep on the couch. He felt guilty thinking about Bucky that way — even the Bucky of the past who lives in his memories, the most tireless, sensual, hungry lover Steve has ever had. He couldn’t finish, and he hasn’t tried since.

“I’d like that. I wanna see you do that.” Bucky’s voice is breathy, and his hand drops to Steve’s thigh. He rubs slowly along the length of it, from Steve’s knee to the juncture of his hip and then back again. Steve swallows heavily, lips parted as he takes in an unsteady breath.

“You don’t want me to do it now, do you?” Steve asks.

He regrets the form of the question but is not at all prepared for the pressure of putting on that kind of show. It’s too important, now that he knows what Bucky’s struggling with. If that’s what Bucky wants, if that’s one of the few ways to get his needs met, it’s gotta be good. And tonight, Steve is nowhere near good.

“We should probably sleep,” Bucky says, mercifully.

“Good idea.”

“But can you hold me?”

“Of course.”

Bucky’s hand stops near Steve’s groin, so close that his finger tips almost touch Steve’s very soft dick. “And can we just kiss for a little while?”

Steve takes Bucky’s hand before it gets any closer and presses a kiss into the heel of his palm. “Yeah.”

“I miss kissing you.”

Steve nuzzles Bucky’s hand and cradles it to his cheek. He lets his heart speak, lets his words pour directly from it. “I miss you. All of you.”

Bucky tilts his head, and there’s a flash of pain, so brief that it’s almost imperceptible. It quickly gives way to a warm smile, one that’s a little bashful and entirely stunning.

“Me, too.”

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Friday

“There’s a proven inverse correlation between how interesting one of these talks sounds like it’s going to be and how interesting it actually is.”
Steve nods, even though he knows it won’t be seen. Steve’s not sure why he’s following Murdock through the last row of seats in the small U.N. auditorium where they’re attending an invited talk about something Steve can’t remember. Maybe because he would have picked the last row anyway, close to the door, the place that offers the best vantage point in the room. Murdock apparently likes to hang out in the back too, as he does in most rooms and settings Steve has seen him in. He always looks like he’s taking in the lay of the land, even though he’s literally blind to it, listening carefully with his unseeing gaze directed at the middle distance. Steve used to wonder if he was paying attention at all, until he started noticing that every time Maria calls on him to speak, it’s to ground whatever topic was being discussed. He always does it with uncanny perspective and wisdom, and usually with a good deal of tact, too. His words quiet the room, imbue it with the calm that he bears in his presence. He’s definitely not the worst person to be around.

Murdock looks over his shoulder as he slowly walks the row, hand brushing the backs of the chairs on his right side. “I went to a talk on micro-loans once and practically saw God. Went to another one about the Rwandan genocide, and it was so boring I could barely stay awake. Genocide shouldn’t be boring, but the man who gave the talk was just awful at it.”

“I guess this one sounds okay.” And Steve really is guessing.

Murdock smirks back at him. “Semi-relevant, at least.”

Murdock takes a seat a little off-center, and Steve scoots past him to sit on his other side, the side that’s closer to the aisle. He tries to keep his idiosyncrasies suppressed at work, not wanting to look exactly as paranoid as he feels. But he’s already nervous enough being here, far from the comfort of his crappy office. Nervous about the weekend to come. Nervous about his new position. Nervous about his brand new boss, even though Murdock hardly seems displeased to have Steve plopped onto his lap very abruptly.

“So, how do you feel about all this?” Murdock asks, folding his cane with precise, practiced movements.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do you feel about working in my department? Being taken off your previous assignment.” Murdock leans in, like he’s about to share a secret. He smells good, like aftershave, even though he looks perpetually — if possibly deliberately — scruffy. “You can be honest.”

Steve grips the armrests of his chair. “It feels like a punishment.”

“I can see why you might think that. I don’t know if Maria told you, but I actually requested you. So, it’s not a punishment, unless you hate international humanitarian law.”

Steve looks at him and raises a skeptical eyebrow. “And why, exactly, would you want to work with me?”

“You’re very thoughtful. Very analytical.”

“You mean very slow and careless.”

“Methodical. Rushed, maybe,” Murdock reframes. “This isn’t the annual report. This is a longstanding, ongoing project that doesn’t have the tightest deadlines. It might just be a better fit.”

“I don’t know anything about law,” Steve says, which isn’t entirely true. He took an international law class at the Academy. Did very well in it, in fact, like all of his courses, back when his mind was a polished plane of glass, sharp and smooth.
Murdock waves his hand. “It’s not that complicated. You have a good mind for it.”

Steve smiles, and it feels tense and bitter on his face. “How do you know? You only see…” He pauses to correct himself, as he often has to do around Murdock’s disability. “Hear me in the morning meetings, and I can barely string four words together most of the time.”

“You make a lot more sense than you think you do.”

“What, exactly, do you want me to do for you?” Steve asks, skating over the ridiculous notion that he’s actually not the inarticulate, fumbling idiot he takes himself for. “Be your PowerPoint Ranger until what’s-her-name comes back from maternity leave?”

Murdock shakes his head. “No, no. That’s just until the end of next week. Then I’m gonna have you do some legal research for me. We’re gonna be doing a report on the Sri Lankan Civil War and whether there were war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan Army and the Tamil Tigers. It’s a retrospective, so it’s not as hot as some of the other projects you’ve been on. I mean, it’s all a little hot, since it’s advocacy, but not scorching.”

Steve responds with a grunt. It all sounds thoroughly overwhelming and most assuredly hot enough for him to drop squarely on the ground like he’s done with most of his other assignments.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine.” Murdock leans in again, excitedly this time. “Oh, and I got you a proper office. No more sharing with that weird kid. What’s his name?”

Steve couldn’t tell Murdock the kid’s name if he wanted to. He never cared to learn it, because there’s no use taking up his very limited storage space for something he’s just going to have to forget in a month to make room for something else.

“I don’t know, but thanks,” Steve says, moved, because it was hardly necessary, and he’s done nothing to earn such a generous gesture. “Thank you. Really.”

“Can’t say I’ve seen how small and crappy your office is, but it doesn’t sound very nice.”

Steve blinks at Murdock for a few seconds, paused by Murdock’s turn of phrase, and in the midst of his stupefaction, a woman in a sharp pant suit walks out onto the stage. There’s a lackadaisical smattering of applause as they collectively try to rouse themselves out of the post-lunch slump. She introduces the speaker, who gives a lecture on the Eurozone Crisis that utterly proves Murdock’s algorithm — it’s easily the most boring crisis Steve has ever heard about, and he struggles to stay awake the whole time. He wishes on more than one occasion for Murdock’s dark glasses to close his eyes behind, just like Murdock does throughout most of the talk.

The talk and subsequent discussion go so long that by the time they’re done, it’s the end of the work day. Steve has to get a move on, if he wants to make the drive to DC before ten, but he finds himself dallying while Murdock deconstructs the lecture, awestruck at how incisively he rips apart the speaker’s thesis. Steve isn’t even sure if he buys his own arguments. Maybe he’s just ripping them apart to rip them apart, as lawyers are wont to do. At any rate, it’s stunning.

But at the same time, it’s crushing, brutally so, because that used to be Steve. Steve used to stun and strike awe with his logic and quick wit. Steve used to tear arguments apart, ruthlessly and brilliantly. He used to be brilliant. Just brilliant.

And now that brilliant sun has set, and there’s nothing left but the bleak stretch of dark mediocrity. Maybe forever. Maybe this is just his life now. Maybe Hope is wrong. Maybe Steve’s hope — meager and brittle as it is — is wrong.
Murdock burns himself out by the time they get to the corner outside the garage where Steve is parked, and he shifts seamlessly into personal territory apropos of absolutely nothing.

“You’re Army, right?” Murdock asks, stopping near the curb as his white cane skims off the edge of it.

Steve stops with him, edging off to the side to avoid the heavy flow of commuters shoving their way home.

“Was,” Steve corrects.

“So you’re not like Marines, where if you say someone was a Marine they tear your head off because they’re always a Marine?”

“No. I’m done with the Army. For good.”

“Do you still work out?” Murdock asks, and there’s an edge of excitement in his voice that lands uncomfortably close, like Murdock’s own body as he shifts into Steve’s bubble of physical space.

Steve shakes his head, leaning his weight back on his heels. “Not really.”

Murdock’s smiles, rueful. “Ah, bummer.”

“Why?”

“I’m a runner. I had a racing guide, but he moved to Austin. I’m getting the itch again. My partner says I’m getting cranky, which usually means I’m not running enough.”

The word ‘partner’ lights up Steve’s brain, despite its nonchalance. Steve trips over it and turns it around his head to get a better read on it, to determine if it means what it might mean. He glances down at Murdock’s hands and doesn’t see a ring on either.

“I used to run a lot with my ex,” Steve tells him, thoughts traveling back to those long afternoons when he and Sharon would run and run, talking about everything except the really important stuff, the stuff Sharon wouldn’t even know was missing because she didn’t know it was there in the first place. Stuff like Bucky. “I used to work out a lot in general.”

“Did you get hurt?”

There’s the barest hint of ellipsis at the end, one that might contain a few additional words, like ‘in the war.’ He’s not sure how much Murdock knows, and he’s not in the mood for that kind of disclosure. If he could ever be.

“I did, but it’s just more of a time thing now.”

“Well, if you’re looking for an excuse to get back into it, I’m offering one.” Murdock smiles, and there’s a hopefulness to it, a very modest pleading, one Steve can’t bring himself to ignore.

Steve speaks his next words carefully, because the order and tone with which they line up in his head is not only ignorant but also insensitive. “Do you… need someone to lead you? How does that work?”

“I get around really well on my own, but it’s tougher when I’m exercising. There’s just a little strap my guide holds. No big deal. Just to make sure I don’t veer into the ditch or something. I hate training on the treadmill, but I don’t really have much choice til I find someone.” Murdock holds out
a forbidding hand toward Steve. “No pressure. I’m just kind of picky about who I run with. If I’m gonna spend hours a week tethered to someone, they should at least be interesting. And you’re interesting. I wanna pick your brain.”

Steve crosses his arms over his chest and gives a snort. “Not much there to pick.”

“Bullshit. I read your vita.”

“There really wasn’t much on there.”

“I know. Which tells me that you’re modest. Joint Task Force Polaris, straight out of West Point? Someone snatched you up for a reason. Aside from the whole top-of-your-class thing. Which, for West Point, is kind of a big deal.”

“Bad luck, more like.”

Murdock gives Steve a grin, wrinkling the corners of his eyes behind his glasses. It’s impossible to tell how old he is, precisely, his lightly retreating hairline and wisdom collating in odd harmony with his boyish face and disposition. “Oh, come now. Don’t pretend that it wasn’t interesting.”

“The personalities were interesting,” Steve clarifies. “The PowerPoints, not so much.”

Murdock gives a soft groan. “All those meetings… God, what I wouldn’t give to be a fly on that wall. I’m kind of surprised you’re not in DC with DIA or CIA or the State Department.”

Steve’s glad that Murdock can’t see his face, which must show at least a shadow of the shame that blooms within him. “I should be. But this is home, so, here I am.”

“Funny how that works. Where you from?”

“Brooklyn. You?”

“I thought I heard a little accent in there somewhere. Hell’s Kitchen, born and bred.”

“Oh, don’t you mean Clinton?” Steve asks, dodging the comment about his accent, which seems to have re-emerged in the irrepressible way accents do when they find their way back to their birthplace.

Murdock thrusts his index finger out, and it somehow lands squarely in the middle of Steve’s shoulder. “Oh, no, don’t you start that. I refuse to live in a place called ‘Clinton.’ I’ll sell my apartment and never come back.” He pokes his finger into Steve’s muscle again for emphasis. “And that is an apolitical statement, by the way. It’s just so damn boring.”

“I’ve heard there’s quite a gay contingent there.”

Steve blurts it out, suddenly and unintentionally, like it’s been waiting behind his teeth all day. He presses his lips together as soon as he says it, and the act of clamping down such an innocuous comment is perplexing and not a little unsettling. It’s something Bucky would do, and that’s never, ever been Steve’s style.

“You know when the gays move in, your neighborhood is doomed.” Murdock corrects himself immediately, and his hands are out again, both of them, the right one still holding his white cane. His left makes contact with Steve’s shoulder and doesn’t flinch away, like he needs to physically impress his words, too. “And I don’t mean that in a homophobic way at all. Whenever the white gay men settle somewhere, you can bet that the price of real estate is gonna multiply exponentially. Because
they come in and clean up the place and open a bunch of great businesses, so of course everyone wants to live there. They’re all coming up from Chelsea because now that’s too expensive.” He lowers his hands and gives a tight shrug. “I’m just overprotective of my little crummy neighborhood. I do love a good brunch.”

Steve feels his face heat, even in the afternoon chill. “I thought you said your partner, so…”


The question is obvious. And Steve’s answer, the one he supplies to people like Murdock and Hill, is particularly fitting for the circumstance.

“I got kicked out under ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.’”

Murdock frowns. “Well, that’s about the worst reason I can think of. I’m sorry. You can get back in, you know. I think they’re letting people back in. But you’re done with the Army, so never mind. Do you have a boyfriend or partner or husband or…?”

“Yeah.”

Steve’s answer comes easily, because it seems true. They haven’t hammered anything out in the weeks since things got physical again. No declarations or specifications. For now, they’ve seemed content in the not-quite-knowing. But then, they never really had a discussion about what they were, even when they were together for two years. They came together, and then they shattered apart. And that was that. And this is this. But whatever it is, it feels substantial. It feels good and mutual and coherent, and so, yeah, they’re something. They’re one of those things, or something close to it.

“What does he do?” Murdock asks.

“He’s not working right now. He was injured badly in Iraq, so he’s recovering.”

Murdock looks away, like he’s averting his gaze, and Steve wonders if it’s an artifact of a time when he could see. Reflexively avoidant, as people tend to be when they hear about men who get chewed up in the gears of war. “Wow. I’m sorry.”

“He’s tough. He’ll be okay.” Steve’s mouth twitches into a small smile. Thinking about Bucky’s strength lightens him, makes it easier for him to find his own, sometimes. “And maybe I will join you. Running. I’m pretty out of shape, though.”

“No, no, I’m coming off a knee injury anyway.” Murdock’s face lights up, and his hand is on Steve again, clapping him lightly on the shoulder “That’s great. Great.”

Steve checks his watch. It’s already five, and there’s no way he’s getting out of the city limits anytime soon. He resigns himself to the kind of helplessness commuters routinely experience when the city struggles to breathe them all out at once.

“Want a ride home?” Steve asks.

Murdock wraps his hand tightly around his cane, and his head dips. “I mean, I’m perfectly fine taking the train.”

“Okay, but would you like a ride instead?”

“I think Brooklyn is kind of the opposite direction.” Murdock jerks his head eastward.
“I’m heading out of town, anyway. So it’s fine.”

“Where you going?”

“DC.”

“What’s in DC?”

Steve hesitates, and when his answer finally comes, it’s indefensibly weak. “My son.”

To his credit, Murdock doesn’t appear confused by the existence of Steve’s child and his previously implied homosexuality. Instead, he smiles. “Do you have a picture?”

Steve reaches into his pocket to pull out his phone, but he stops when his fingers make contact with it. He holds there, waiting, until Murdock’s smile spreads wider.

“You were about to show me a picture, weren’t you?”

“Yep.”

“I’m just messing with you. I’m sorry. I’m terrible.”

When Steve laughs, it’s rusty and foreign to his ears, like he’s relearning both the sound and mechanical production of it. But it’s genuine, and it feels good.

“That is terrible.”

“If you’re gonna work with me, you better get used to it.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll take the train. Go see your son, and I’ll see you on Monday. Bring your running shoes.”

Murdock poises his cane at the ready, and Steve resists the urge to tell him the direction of the train station. It would have been entirely unnecessary, anyway, since he orients himself to it precisely, turning 180 degrees and taking a decisive step in exactly the right direction.

“Thanks, Mr. Murdock,” Steve calls after him.

“Matt,” he shoots back.

“Matt.”

He watches Matt walk away, cane sweeping smoothly in front of him, and for the first time since Steve started at HRW, he entertains the possibility that he might not be a complete failure, that maybe he’s not doomed to flame out catastrophically and get fired for the very first time in his life. It’s a strange comfort, one that comes with the unease of actually being comfortable.

By the time he gets to his car, that buoyant feeling has dissolved into the sourness that’s lingered with him ever since he decided that this will be the weekend he finally visits Trip’s mom. It’s been weighing on him ever since he was kicked out of the Army, often arriving on the heels of the unbidden memories of what happened that day. And he’s been delaying it, making excuses for why each weekend was a bad one, why the task would be too impractical or patently impossible, because he’s a family man now, and he owes that time to his son, which is about the most egregiously hollow excuse he could possibly come up with. Because Ethan doesn’t care if he’s there or not. He’s just fine without Steve, and that’s a cold fucking fact.
It was Hope who finally ripped it out of him, as she’s so skilled at doing. He was talking about Trip — not the details, because he still can’t touch those voluntarily without being consumed by them in a flood of gut-crushing panic. It’s not for want of trying, because he tried. He thought that maybe if he can’t talk about what happened to Bucky, maybe he could very carefully talk about what happened to Trip. And Hope has been testing him out, nudging him toward disclosure, coaxing him to show her his wounds, the ones so old and festering that they’re eating him alive.

She’s gotten close, and he wants to help her. He really does. So they’ve talked about bigger things than Trip’s thunking head. Bigger things like what it means to lose a man. (‘It means I fucked up,’ was Steve’s blunt response.) And he remembered going to the O-room back at the 107th to collect Trip’s emergency contact information, how important it was for him to know who his mother was, so that he could say he was sorry. His own ma might want the same, wouldn’t she? For someone to care? For someone to say ‘I knew your son and I mourn his loss and I’m sorry for causing it’? They talked about what it would mean for Steve to go see her. Hope first tried to get him to think through whether Trip’s death was actually his fault, and he got angry, furious even, because how could it not be? So she changed her tact and framed it as an act of repair and atonement, if he’s so insistent on blaming himself. And Steve was raised Catholic, so he knows atonement. And it’s time for him to atone, because something — something — has to give. Because his feelings, the feelings he’s been bottling tight ever since Iraq, are a slow-mo, unstoppable explosion trying to burst their way through his skin, and he’s cracking. Cracking. And if he doesn’t do this, if he doesn’t relieve at least a little of that pressure he might not be able to hold. He might rip apart and break across the universe.

And so he’s going to see Melinda Triplett on Sunday. And although he’s content to shove the memories of that horrible day aside forever and ever, he can’t shove aside what he owes that woman. Even if what he actually owes her can never, ever be repaid.

———

Sunday

Steve waits outside what he thinks is the Triplett residence for over two hours. He knocked on the door already, three times, before retreating back to his car to fidget and worry and rehearse his words carefully. He’s earned an abundance of suspicious looks from the neighbors along the way, who are probably wondering what the hell he’s doing staked outside the home of a widow who presumably lives alone. He’s the only white person on the whole street, it seems, sticking out like a blonde, pasty thumb lost in Anacostia.

He closes his eyes, letting his head fall back against the headrest, and takes a few deep, diaphragmatic breaths that Hope taught him. Bucky does them sometimes, when he’s getting really irritated or having a rough day with his pain. Sometimes they even do it together, like when they’re waiting for a table at a restaurant, crammed in some crowded doorway. Steve hates it — hates it — but he’s tried to tolerate it for Bucky’s sake. And because sometimes their dinners feel like dates. Sometimes Bucky looks at him like he used to, smiles in a way that’s coy or seductive or just beautifully heartfelt, and that sometimes makes all the stress worth it. Steve will take it, even though he’s not quite sure what to do with it once he has it in hand.

In any case, it feels like they’re both in this together again, floating through the unknown in the same general direction, and it’s a good feeling. Steve thinks of Bucky now, imagines him in the seat next to him, and he feels himself calm.

Not ten minutes later, a new-ish Hyundai Accent pulls into the small gravel driveway outside the house. Steve catapults into action, turning off the idling car, yanking out the keys, and getting out as quickly as he can, slamming the door behind him and making his way to the woman who gets out of
the driver’s side. She looks young, dressed casually for the cold, and as he crunches through the snow on the lawn, he distantly wonders if he’s got the right woman at all.

“Excuse me, are you Melinda Triplett?”

The woman rights herself from where she was bent over on the passenger side, retrieving a bag of groceries from the floor. Her eyes are wide, rattled and cautious, and she clutches her purse tightly to her shoulder as he approaches. She manages a small, wary nod as she moves to the other side of the open car door, making a barrier between them.

Christ, he forgets himself sometimes. What a large man he is. What a dangerous, intimidating figure he might seem. He slows himself and tries to relax his posture, tries to gentle his face. He comes to a stop a good distance away, well in advance of the car’s rear bumper.

“I’m Steve Rogers. I served with your son. I was his—”

“I know who you are,” she says flatly “I got your letter.”

“I’ve been meaning to come down here, but…” He trails off, fingers twitching at his sides, because he doesn’t have an excuse to offer her for why he’s taken five months to show up in her driveway.

“But what?”

Steve tenses, because this already feels more difficult than he planned for, and he planned for it to be damn near excruciating. “It’s been hard”

Melinda’s wide eyes narrow. “I bet it’s been hard.”

Steve can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic or kind or something else entirely. He doesn’t know how to read her at all, which makes his next words come out tremulous and halting.

“I just wanted to say how very, very sorry I am.”

“Sorry for what?” she asks.

“I’m just… I’m sorry.”

Her lips purse, and she gives a few shallow nods. “So, you’re not here to say that you’re sorry for getting my child killed?”

“I…”

Steve’s mouth doesn’t close again. He gapes, his mind a wide span of nothingness, and all he can do is watch as Melinda grabs her grocery bag, slams the car door, and trudges over the snowy sidewalk leading to the front porch of the house. She moves quickly, shoulders hunched, and he knows he shouldn’t follow her — he knows he shouldn’t — but he is, and when she looks back at him, she stops dead and turns to face him, halting him in his tracks.

“Did you even think?” she asks. “I’ve got a cousin in the Army, and I told him what happened. He said you were damn irresponsible for going on the same road twice. Nobody ever does that. So did that even cross your mind?”

And in that moment, he’s back in Iraq again, frowning over a map, surrounded by Dugan and Rhodes and Bucky, tracing routes Indigo and Baghdad with his squinting eyes, remembering what Ward said about Indigo, knowing that Baghdad was a crapshoot at best, but at least a crapshoot that
wasn’t teeming with known threats. He remembers Dugan’s warning. Bucky’s uncharacteristic impassivity. The fight they had the afternoon before and the shadow it cast on the whole patrol that day.

“There were two roads. One we knew was full of IEDs. The other was the way we came. I made the call with that information.” Steve tries to sound decisive, and it comes out defensive and prickly, hitting her in a way that makes her lip curl up.

“Well, it was the wrong call. An IED, maybe he would have lost a leg, or two legs. You can live without those, Lieutenant Rogers. You can’t live without—”

She stops abruptly, pressing her hand to her mouth. Her eyes close tightly, and she pulls in a slow, shaking breath. When she opens her eyes again, they’re clear and shimmering, and she lowers her hand from her face and grips onto her purse straps again, her knuckles going tight.

“That was my baby,” she says. “He was my only baby. He was my gift.”

Steve swallows. “I know.”

“Do you? Do you even have kids?”

“A boy.”

She drops her gaze to the ground, to the packed snow at their feet. To her own shoes. Her winter boots are well-worn but serviceable, practical and functional. Her grocery bag hangs so low that it almost touches the ground. A green tuft of something — carrots? — pokes out the top and waves gently in the cold breeze. When she looks up again, the vitriol is gone, replaced by a thoughtful sobriety that anchors her words as she drops them on top of him.

“If you’re any half-decent parent, you’ll put love and energy into that child as he grows up. More than you ever thought you could. You’ll love him more than any other person on this planet. And he’ll grow up and he’ll take everything you taught, all the energy, and become his own man.

“And then one day maybe he’ll make a choice you won’t agree with. He’ll take the wrong job. Get the wrong boss, some stupid, Pentagon college boy who doesn’t know the most basic rules of war. And he’ll be in the wrong vehicle at the wrong time. And then he’ll be cut down, and some men will visit your door in their uniforms and tell you that your son was murdered by stupidity and terrorists in a country he has no business being in. And you’ll think that you knew what Hell was before, but you’ll realize that you didn’t.”

Melinda presses her lips together, moving them a little, like she’s smoothing chapstick between them.

“You’ll know that the real Hell is empty. It’s the place where your child used to be.”

As she speaks, Steve imagines himself being the type of parent she thinks he might be. A caring father who nurtures his son, teaches him to be a good man, one who respects women and works hard and feels his feelings. The fantasy collapses there, because he can barely even imagine that, let alone all the rest. He can’t see Ethan growing up to become a man under his loving guidance, because there’s one key ingredient absent from that scenario.

“I don’t think I love him.”

Melinda stares at him in silence, her eyebrows slowly gathering together as confusion settles upon them.
“My son,” Steve says, his tone arced with distant curiosity, like he’s just realized that he doesn’t know the precise speed of light or the state bird of Utah. It’s like the opposite of a revelation, because it’s not devastating. It’s beyond that. It’s the silence that lies beyond devastation. “I don’t feel anything for him.”

She tries hard to read whatever expression he has on his face, like he’s a wall of hieroglyphs she has no Rosetta Stone for. And of course she would be confused, because what father doesn’t love his child? What kind of unfeeling creature could disprove her entire parenting theory with six little words?

“Guess I’m not too surprised,” she says, but her statement doesn’t seem to sit quite right with her. Her eyes flit subtly back and forth, the way eyes do when their possessor is deep in thought. Her next words come slowly, softly, almost like they’re meant for comfort, even as they land like a blow.

“Maybe because you know he can be ripped away from you at any time. You’ve seen it. You’ve caused it. And now you know.” She gives a stiff nod. “Now you know.”

She firms her grip on her grocery bag and turns back toward the house, her pace slower and heavier now. Steve doesn’t follow, because he’s faltering in her wake, and he’s crumbling under the weight of her stark assessment because it somehow seems both impossible and irrefutable.

She gets to the stairs that lead up to the porch and makes as if to start climbing them, freezing with one foot on them, and she can’t seem to push herself up onto the next. Not until she says her piece, which she does with factual force.

“Antoine was supposed to go to college. That was always the plan. He was smart. Smart and hard-working and kind and good. But he wanted to do his part. He wanted to see the world. Be part of something bigger. The recruiter tried to get him to take another job. What Gabe did. All that military intelligence stuff. His scores were so high. But he insisted on being infantry. He just had to be. He said ‘they’re the ones on the front lines, and I want to be there to support them. They need smart guys in the infantry, too.’” She snorts. “Lot of good that seems to do.”

Steve ducks his head. Christ, it’s the same thing Bucky said when Steve ragged on him for letting the Army branch him infantry instead of medical. He should have gone medical. He was primed for it. He was smart and caring and wanted to help people. He was going to apply for a professional scholarship after college, make the Army pay for him to become a physical therapist or a nurse or a doctor. Commission in as a medical officer. That was always his plan — until it wasn’t. Until he decided it was okay to be at the tip of the spear, do the toughest work, the kind that would teach him to take life rather than save it. ‘They need some brains out there,’ Bucky told him. ‘God knows they must.’

“I’m sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry I am,” Steve says. He doesn’t even know what to say anymore, and even his very sincere apology feels like it’s being pitched into a black hole, where it will never, ever land.

Melinda shakes her head and takes the rest of the steps, until she gets to the porch door. Steve’s pretty sure he’s going to lose her then, that she’s going to close that door on him and leave him standing in the snow, bow-tight and ashamed. She reaches for the door knob, and he shouldn’t say anything else. He should turn around and go straight back to New York, right this moment. Because he’s cracking open, and even though this visit was supposed to prevent all of that, it’s making it worse, and Steve cannot fucking stop himself, because maybe some part of him wants to crack open, because breaking would be the least he could do for stealing this woman’s son, whom she loves. She loves her son, and this is what love looks like, and maybe creatures like Steve who elude that kind of love don’t deserve to stay intact.
“How’s Gabe?” he asks, stepping cautiously toward the stairs.

Melinda turns to him then, hand still on the door, her face a mask of control as she tracks his steady approach.

“He’s out, thank God.”

“Is he… in school, or working…?”

“No. He was in the hospital.”

“For what?”

“Lieutenant Rogers—”

“Steve.”

“Lieutenant Rogers,” she says, letting his dead title hang in the air for a beat, “my family is no longer any of your business.”

Steve plants his foot on the first step. It’s automatic, like he’s being pulled to her, pulled in by the gravity of what she’s not telling him.

“Is he okay?” he asks.

“What do you think?” she snaps back. “He saw what happened. It changed him.”

Steve shakes his head. “No… No. We— they shielded him from it. The guys, they held him back so he wouldn’t see…”

“And where were you? Hm? Were you even there, or were you in the back of that convoy, sitting pretty, riding easy?”

“I was there. I was right there.”

His voice cracks, and he leans forward, gripping tightly onto the metal railings on either side of the narrow stairs. The memories surge, predictably, bending him at the waist as they crash into him. The blood. The thunk. The shouts of Wilson and Luis and Maximoff. The dead stretch of his shocked silence. Bucky’s face, horrified and then determined, as he tried to direct the situation. As he ordered Dugan to stop Jones before he could see — but, Jesus, he saw, didn’t he? He saw Steve while Bucky walked him back down the convoy. He saw the blood smeared over his face, soaking his uniform. He might have seen Bucky wiping him off with the cuff of his sleeve, saying ‘It’s okay, I got it. I got it.’

Steve’s heart kicks into a manic, fluttering rhythm, and even though it’s freezing outside, sweat dampens his undershirt. The air, icy and cutting, can’t come in fast enough, so he sucks it in, faster and faster, while his vision blurs and lurches. He’s had panic attacks before, but never quite like this. He’s never let one fully unfold in front of someone else. Never when it was so vitally important to not have one. And the panic makes him panic even more, because this isn’t how this was supposed to go, because he was going to say he was sorry, and she was going to forgive him, and they were both going to be sad, and he was going to go home—

“I think I’ve given you enough of my time, Lieutenant.” Her voice is tinny and very far away. “So please leave.”
“Wait—”

“What did you think you were gonna get out of this?” she asks. “Did you think I was gonna invite you in for coffee and soothe your white, upper middle class guilt?” Her voice climbs and broadens in a mocking, histrionic way. “‘Oh, I am Godly woman, Lieutenant Rogers. I forgive you, my sweet child, Lawd a’mussy.’ Is that what you thought I was gonna say?”

Steve swallows heavily. He knows Zora Neale Hurston when he hears it slung at him, knows it intimately, even while his head is spinning, and before he can sputter a response, she barrels forward.

“Because I am not that woman. You are never going to get that from me. You’re just gonna have to live with your choice. And so am I. So is my family.”

“Wait…” he breathes. Steve reaches into his coat pocket, barely managing his own weight with one arm, and pulls out a folded piece of paper he prepared in the car. He holds it out to her, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, and he pushes out his words through his shallow breaths. “Can you just give this to Gabe? It’s my phone number… Please. He can call me any—”

“No.”

Steve buckles, so goddamn dizzy and air-starved that his face is going numb, and he drops to his knee to stabilize himself. He braces himself on one hand, pushing it into the snow-covered stair, keeping his phone number extended toward her. He lowers his head in a way that would seem plaintive, if it wasn’t necessary to keep him from feeling like he’s about to lose consciousness.

“Please…” he croaks.

“If you don’t leave, I’m gonna call the police—”

"Please," he begs. “Just tell him that I—”

“Get off my stoop and don’t come back here again. I mean it.”

The door slams behind her. Then it locks. Steve is still holding out the paper, head ducked low, his panting breaths puffing out of him in cold clouds. He tries to slow them. He tries to pull oxygen deep into his lungs, coughing, as he blinks through the curtain of darkness that his hyperventilation has wrought.

He’s not sure how long he stays like that, until the splotches fade, but when he lifts his head again, the door is still closed. Melinda is still gone. He reaches a little further, toward a gap in the seal of the door, and struggles to slide the tightly folded paper inside. He swears until he gets it, pushing it through as far as he can, then chances verticality, using the rails to pull himself upright.

The world tilts. Steve stays standing and lets it, gripping the rails tightly. And when the tilting stops, he turns, carefully, and makes his way unsteadily down the stairs. By this point, several neighborhood residents have gathered on the sidewalk, bunched together and staring. They watch him as his wobbly legs carry him back to his car, his pant legs soaked by the wet snow, his hands red and burning from the cold. They part wide as he passes, and Jesus, he must look pathetic. Absolutely fucking pathetic.

In the driver’s seat, he slams the door shut and slumps forward, pressing his freezing palms hard against his eyes, the way he does when he has a migraine. He takes in a breath, a harsh, deep one, and huffs it out. It trembles.

“God damn it….”
He stays like that until he feels steady enough to drive. It takes a long time, and even then he’s still washed out, pale and tired. He still has a four-hour drive ahead of him but it might as well be infinity-hours, because he can’t get back soon enough. He just wants to be home in bed, showered and warm with Bucky there. And maybe Bucky will touch him, or maybe just hold him or let himself be held, and maybe Steve can forget today, forget the Tripletts, forget DC and everything outside their little railroad apartment, if only for a little while.

———

Bucky has been limping up and down 57th Street for almost an hour now, punctuated by a short, restless break inside the coffee shop between Park Avenue and Lexington, barely able to taste the cloying sweetness of his chai because he’s so frayed. He’s made the decision to hop the train back to Brooklyn about every five minutes or so, each time very decisively, but so far he’s yet to hop on anything except the 4:30 express to Sheer-Fucking-Panic Town. He hasn’t been able to drag himself back to the train station, because his better self knows that he has to do this. He simply has to.

And he knew it would be hard, from the first moment he decided to be better than he was before. He’s played out an array of ruinous scenarios in his head — Thor yelling at him, Thor turning his back and walking away forever, Thor looking stoically and deeply disappointed. There’s a fourth variation, a fanciful one where Thor is happy to see him, because Bucky is barely a third-rate patchwork of the man Thor wanted before. And even if Thor did want him now, well, there’s Steve now. Bucky and Steve are something now, even though neither of them seem too sure what that something is. And something isn’t nothing.

But it’s not really a proper thing, either. It’s a strange, tacit, mutual arrangement, one that Bucky’s not sure is organic or merely proximal. Hank asked him something last week, something that Bucky still hasn’t been able to cough up an answer to. Something that’s haunted him, ghosting on the sidelines of all his other thoughts —

‘Do you even like Steve anymore?’

Bucky was astonished by the question and astonished even further by his inability to answer it, because the question of liking Steve never once crossed Bucky’s mind. Because he cares about Steve. He wants him to be okay. He wants him to be happy. He wants to fuck him. But liking him?

Those six words were enough to send him rummaging through the past, which he’s been doing instead of other things he should be doing, like going to CPT group with Quill and working on his Steps. But it seems important — urgently, vitally so. Bucky has scoured the course of their relationship, trying to recall the things that drew him to Steve in the first place. And maybe the real question is not whether he likes Steve but rather what — aside from circumstance — is keeping them together, such that they are. What makes Bucky want him, even after so much has changed between them. After so much has changed within them.

Bucky has thought about qualities that sucked him into Steve’s orbit initially, aside from his powerful physical attraction to him, and he’s not so sure whether some of those even exist anymore. He’s not sure if they’re buried underneath his brain injury and the gordian knot of his trauma, or whether they’ve been lost forever. Bucky remembers Steve’s quiet confidence. His raw emotionality. His brilliance — staggering brilliance, really. His artistic talents. His thoughtful, dazzlingly critical approach to the literature he used to love so much. His passion. His humor. They seem like small things, maybe superficial ones. Maybe he’s shallow for clutching those little pieces of Steve so
tightly. But to Bucky, they’re all the details that made the difference between a decent person and one he couldn’t bear to live without.

In short, Bucky’s not sure. He’s not sure about anything with them. And he doesn’t know how to get sure, either.

And maybe that’s why he’s here now, stalking outside Thor’s gym like a weirdo. Maybe that’s why he’s still eyeing that single thread of hope, that Thor won’t hate him completely, that he won’t reject what they had because of how terribly they ended. And Bucky tries not to hope too hard, but he can’t seem to help himself, because there’s not a lot of hope going around these days, and each meager tendril of it gleams. Above all things, Bucky just wants something to feel normal, like things used to before Khalidya, and maybe — just maybe — Thor could be that normal-feeling thing.

Or maybe not. Jesus. He’s just not sure.

Bucky gulps in a deep breath as he approaches the broad, high glass window that looks into the gym. He stops in front of it, looking in, squinting like it’ll actually help him see better. It’s hard to see inside, past his own reflection and the sheen of condensation on the windows, but from the pieces he can discern, the place looks several leagues out of his price range and packed to the hilt. And of course it is. Thor was never one to cut corners in his “comprehensive wellness experience,” and it’s just the thing these Upper East Side douchebags live for.

He’s just about to reach for the door — God, he’s just about to. But just before his hand makes contact, he’s overcome by a swell of terror as all of his well-planned apologies dump out of his brain en masse. Christ, they were all completely inadequate anyway, because what the hell could he really say to explain why he tanked their relationship so cataclysmically? What can he say to make his behavior make any sense without having to resort to something as grim as ‘I’m just a terrible alcoholic, you see, and I can’t fucking help myself’? And how the hell can he face that man — that beautiful, athletic, capable man — when he’s now a limping, scarred, pitiful echo of who he was when Thor actually wanted him?

It’s paralyzing, all prospects horrifying, and he pulls his hand back and shoves it into his pocket. He then does a graceless 90 degree turn back toward Lexington, back toward the Lexington and 59th station where he started this preposterous mission, moving as fast as his bum leg can take him in the cold. And just when he thinks he's about to get away with aborting the mission entirely —

“Jamie!”

Bucky ducks his chin into the upturned collar of his coat and trudges forward. Because it’s not Thor, even though that’s most definitely Thor’s voice. There are probably a dozen Jamies on this block alone, and not-Thor is most certainly calling one of them. So he carries on, heart slamming, dodging around obstructive Sunday shoppers left and right, until he hears it again, much closer this time, and there’s no way he can outrun it now, if he ever had a chance in the first place.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” he mutters, slowing to a stop as he hears the heavy falls of running feet clomping toward him.

Bucky steels himself and turns. And there he is, all six feet and three inches of him, clad in dark gray workout gear that fits him like it was tailored to his magnificent body. He’s not even winded by the time he reaches Bucky, even though he’s run at least two blocks and, good God, he’s stunning. Just stunning. Bucky forgot how gobsmackingly gorgeous he is, with only the wrinkled memories of their drunken fucks and their single week together to remind him.

“Hey,” Bucky manages.
Thor’s dirty blonde eyebrows climb high. “Hey?”

“I—I don’t….” Bucky falters, grinding his teeth. “Fuck.”

“What are you doing here, Jamie?”

It hits like an accusation, even though Bucky’s not sure if he’s asking what he’s doing in the city or what he’s doing on 57th street or what he’s doing still walking the Earth at all.

“I came to say… I wanted to see you. To apologize.”

Thor shakes his head in a weary and decidedly disappointed way, resting his hands on his narrow hips.

“Do you have any idea — any idea at all — how worried I was? I tried to call you. Many times. I left you messages. And then, nothing. Your phone number gets disconnected.” He huffs out a breath, and his head is shaking again. “I thought… I don’t know. I don’t know. I thought the worst.”

“I got them. I listened to one, but I couldn’t…. I was really, really fucked up. I was very fucked up. And I changed my number, because I didn’t want anyone to call me, and a bunch of really bad shit happened, and now I’m here. And I don’t have enough apologies to even start to make anything right.”

Bucky bites his lower lip, his face drawn in nervous shame. Thor stares at him, anger and concern flashing in his blue eyes. Bucky doesn’t try to deflect and he doesn’t lower his gaze, because the least he can do — the very least — is to meet the consequences of his addiction head-on. He made his bed, soaked the comforter in vodka, and lit it on fire, and this is what it feels like to lie in it. And it feels like shit. And it’s absolutely no less that what he deserves.

And he’s sure Thor is about to say something that he also deserves, something befitting the betrayal of trust he committed. Because that’s what it was, really. Thor trusted that he would be a sane adult and take some small accountability for their relationship, and Bucky missed the mark by a lightyear.

But then, Thor’s expression softens, and his broad shoulders give up some of their tension. “How are you?”

Relief, warm and desperately welcome, floods Bucky from the inside. “Better. Yeah. Still working through some stuff. The fucked up stuff.”

“How are you physically?”

“Shit. Yeah.” Bucky glances down at himself, at his glaring leanness, at his cane, imagining the wreckage of his body below his clothes. “You must barely even recognize me.”

“You do look different. But still the same.” And then, Jesus Christ, Thor smiles. It’s small, almost furtive, but it’s unmistakable.

“So do you. I like your hair.” Bucky feels his face warm at the admission, adolescent and charmless as it is.

Thor gives a low chuckle. “You said that last time. I like yours, too.”

Bucky rakes his hand through it, pin-and-needly from being clenched in his pocket, and pushes it back self-consciously. It’s so much longer than it was since their last meeting, back when he was pushing Army regs like it’s what they were meant for, back when he owned the world and didn’t
even know it.

“How’s business?” Bucky asks.

“Very good.” Thor’s chin juts, but it doesn’t seem arrogant. He’s never seemed arrogant, really. Self-possessed and ambitious, yes, but always tempered with the humility befitting a former special operator.

“Looks really busy. That’s awesome.”

Thor hikes his thumb over his shoulder. “I have a meeting I’m supposed to be in right now. Perhaps we could grab coffee later? Only if you want. If you don’t—”

Bucky can’t answer fast enough, and it comes out in a bumbling stream of monosyllables. “No, no. I do. I do. And I’m sorry again. So, so sorry.”

“What are you doing this evening?”

“I have to go to a meeting, too. I’m doing AA now.” Bucky pauses, suppressing the urge to cringe. “Alcoholics Anonymous.”

“Oh.”

“But there should be a meeting around here, so, maybe I could come back?”

Thor gives a shallow nod. “I should be done by six, if you would like to swing by.”

“Sure. Yeah. Sounds good.”

It all seems a little too easy. There should be more shouting. More huffing dramatics. More maudering excuses. And yet, here they are, and they’re going to have coffee, and holy shit, it’s so much more than Bucky could have reasonably hoped for. He’s not sure what the hell he did to deserve things going smoothly for once, but he almost feels like crossing himself just in case, like Steve’s ma used to do compulsively when things went well or things went poorly or things just went. Pascal’s wager or some such superstition.

“It’s good to see you. And I’m glad you are okay. I was very worried,” Thor says, earnest in a way that might as well be a slug in the gut, it’s that painful.

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

“Consider that enough of apologies. I’ll see you at six.”

“Yeah, good. Okay. Good. See you then.”

Thor gives a small wave and hesitates, walking backward to look on Bucky for a few moments longer, before turning back toward the gym, taking off at a steady jog. Bucky shamelessly watches his tight, perfect ass as he goes, most certainly grinning as he does, not only because the sight is sublime but because he feels better than he’s felt in weeks and weeks and weeks and…

Yes— No. Yes. Yes, it’s okay. Feeling good is okay. Feeling good because he did the right thing, that’s okay. Hank might even be proud of him for it. And that makes it even better, even though he shouldn’t give half a shit what Hank thinks about most things.

And Hank right now would be telling him to find a meeting, on the double, and so that’s exactly what Bucky does.
“Were you officer or enlisted? I can’t remember.”

Thor makes an amused sound. “You didn’t ask.”

They’re back at the same coffee shop Bucky visited earlier to stress drink. He and Thor have been seated at a small, quiet table in the back corner for the last twenty minutes, talking about every conceivable thing except what happened between them. Thor’s business. Thor’s family. Bucky’s family. The military. Safe topics that keep them in an unstable orbit around the dark, humiliating terribleness that was Bucky’s catastrophic meltdown last spring.

“I was probably afraid you’d say you were an officer, which I get the sneaking suspicion you’re about to do now.”

“I was.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, only half-seriously. “Oh, Jesus.”

“Service is compulsory. Might as well be in charge.” Thor angles the cup in his hand in Bucky’s direction, punctuating the end of his statement.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about that.”

Bucky lifts his latte to his mouth to try to take a drag off of it — decaf, since the last thing he needs is more fuel for the jitters. The thing is done, all foam now, because he’s been compulsively sipping it whenever there’s a silence he doesn’t want filled with talk about their demise. He sets the cup back on the table and is quick to rest his hands back on his lap in an effort to avoid yet another unpleasant conversation, one about how fucked up his body is now.

“Do you miss it?” Bucky asks quietly. Below the table, he fingers a crease in his jeans with his nerve-dead finger, which picks up pressure and little else these days.

Thor’s expression becomes thoughtful — maybe a little nostalgic, from the way he smiles. It’s a little sad. A little distant. A little regretful. “I do, sometimes. I miss the simplicity. The mission. The camaraderie. Do you?”

“Every single day. I’d give anything to be back in.”

Bucky says this a lot, almost any time he’s given the chance to. Like he needs to remind everyone and himself that being in the outside world with stupid civilians and their stupid priorities and their stupid problems was not his choice. He distantly recalls his first conversation with Thor on the matter, back in Chapel Hill, during their little impromptu post-fuck breakfast. He was gonna make sergeant major by 35. If all went well, he’d probably be on his way to first sergeant next year.

First Sergeant Barnes. Not that he particularly wanted to relinquish his platoon sergeant position, because he loved it like he’s never loved anything before in his whole life. But he would have been something, at least. He would have had some proof, one little diamond-shaped speck of proof, to show that he was worth something. That he had value. That he was really, really good at something and someone saw it and said yes. Yes, you are. It’s childish, really, but he holds onto it as tightly as his mangled hands can.

“So, what are you doing now? With your life,” Thor asks.

“That’s a really good question.” And Bucky doesn’t mean to let that question hang, but it hangs all
the same, his answer embarrassingly slow to come. “Working on my sobriety. I’m on Step 4, which is to make a big inventory of how awful I am and how much I resent others. So, that’s been a fun little project.”

He pulled a fast one on Hank — or, at least, he thinks he might have — with the whole higher power thing. He made up some bullshit on the spot about his higher power being reality, bullshit he can’t even repeat because he pulled it out of his fourth point of contact so fast and so thoughtlessly. In the midst of it, he actually paused to marvel at how effortlessly he fabricated not only the content but also the sincerity behind it. Hank did give him a look, a mild and incredulous one, but he couldn’t prove that Bucky was lying about it, so he gave him a pass with the caveat that if he actually doesn’t have a higher power to tether his sobriety to, he’s not going to be able to maintain it. Bucky figured that’s a problem for future Bucky to navigate, and he’s nothing if not adept at kicking shit down the road.

Thor goes quiet then, and in the din, amid the sounds of grinding and slamming and clanking and chatting, Bucky imagines that he’s processing this embarrassing AA business. As he does, his finger fidgets around the cuff of his maroon sweater, then travels to his Bell & Ross aviation watch, tracing around the square face of it.

“Are you seeing anybody?” he finally asks.

Bucky blinks. “Like... romantically?”

Thor looks up from his watch, mouth flitting on the edge of a smile. “Yes.”

“What do the kids like to say? ‘It’s complicated?’”

“How so?”

Bucky mutters an ‘Oh, God’ as he scrabbles together a narrative in his head, some semblance of logic that might lead Thor to see how point Q links to point D and then to K in the cluster-fuck of an alphabet that spells his relationship with Steve.

“Remember my ex, Steve? The one I was with for a couple years? The one who was also my platoon leader in the 107th?”

“Ah, yes.”

Thor leans back in his chair, sticking his chest out a little. His sweater is thin enough to show the outline of his immaculately shaped pectorals, and Bucky catches himself following the curves of them with his gaze, vaguely wishing his gaze was his hand or his mouth or…. for fuck’s sake….

Bucky tilts his head back and closes his eyes, ostensibly to get his complicated story together, but actually just to scrape his shit together. He swears under his breath and wills himself to focus, righting himself and keeping his attention on Thor’s Adonic face, which is only slightly less distracting than his prodigious musculature.

“I live with him. And he’s got a lot of stuff from Iraq. Mental stuff. Brain stuff. We’ve been kind of messing around, but it’s weird.” Bucky shrugs, tensely, and it doesn’t feel like the right gesture at all. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

“That does sound complicated,” Thor says, then takes a drink of his coffee, his tone effortfully casual.

Bucky looks down at his paper cup. His mind empties, as it sometimes does when the monolithic complexity of Steve and the question of him and Steve can no longer be processed. And from the
emptiness comes a question, uttered with such great reticence that it barely comes out at all.

“What you and I had, that was good, right?”

Thor doesn’t answer right away, and maybe it’s been one second or maybe it’s been one hundred, Bucky’s not sure, so he keeps blabbing, words toppling out of him in an unremitting stream.

“Because it was the healthiest relationship I ever had. I thought it was really good, until I fucked it up at the end. And I just want to know if you think it was good, too.”

“It was very good, until the end. It was real.”

Thor’s reply is so gentle and so genuine that Bucky aches from it. He aches because, God, sometimes he thinks he dreamed the whole thing up, that he made Thor Odinson out of scraps of Steve Rogers because he just couldn’t handle losing him. Sometimes he thinks that he made up the week they had together when Bucky was on leave two summers ago. That he made up the two of them holding hands in the grass in Central Park, because Bucky Barnes doesn’t do that kind of thing in public. He would never do that, would he? And yet, he remembers it, because it was scary and beautiful. And he didn’t make up the phone calls downrange, either, those ephemeral glimpses of normalcy, the eerie sense of contentment over having a boyfriend, a for-real boyfriend that he wasn’t ashamed of, because the Army made him stronger than he was when he was with Steve. The Army grew him up, set him right, for a few deliriously good years.

And now the Army is gone, and now Bucky is tumbling through the world, lost again, and what he had with Thor is lost, too. But it existed. And it was good. And it was real.

“I’ve been working too much to see anyone,” Thor continues. “But things are stabilizing, so…” One corner of his mouth curls up, squinting his left eye a little.

“What did you even like about me, anyway?” Bucky asks, then qualifies it quickly. “I’m not fishing for compliments, but I just want to know. Aside from my body, which, I’m sad to say, is totally wrecked now.”

“You look good.”

Bucky barks out a dry laugh, pulls his hands up from underneath the table, and holds them out so Thor can see. “You haven’t seen what I’ve got underneath. Wall-to-wall of this. Lost this finger. Still can barely use it.” He points to the pocked scars on his left hand with his replanted index finger, wiggling it for emphasis. He then points to his maimed body parts as he narrates his injuries. “Had a huge chunk blown out of my arm. Metal rods and everything. Had a big chunk taken out of my back to fill it in. They took a skin graft from my ass, so that’s really attractive now. Had a big piece ripped out of my calf. My knee is totally fucked, and my foot is, too, courtesy of a shit ton of rusted rebar and a fuckload of ball bearings and bolts and screws and shit.”

He leaves out the part about his shredded dick and balls, because there’s only so much humiliation he can take in one day. So he moves to his face, which Thor’s attention is locked on, expression utterly unperturbed by any of the theatrics.

“The only reason my face is mostly un-fucked is because I had my rifle up to it. The thing was shattered into a dozen pieces.” He pauses and swallows, remembering the next part viscerally. The pressure of his tactical vest against his chest, the sensation of being yanked out of the room, the desperate power with which Steve tried to save him from all this. “Steve, he pulled me back. Probably saved my life…”
It’s the first time he’s said it out loud. Maybe the first time he’s thought it. Bucky tries not to think about that day at all, the day his career and his body and his sex life and his self-confidence were destroyed, the day that turned him into the rotted out sack of crap he is today. But he came close to no longer even existing at all, and his literal raison d'etre might be Steve Rogers.

Bucky slides his hands back beneath the surface of the table, because he can barely tolerate the sight of them anymore, and he certainly can do without images flashing in his mind, ones of Steve kneeling beside him, holding his bloody hand, trying to wrap up the stump where his finger used to be while Parker and Nelson and Kaplan tried to stop him from bleeding to death--

Bucky clears his throat and shoves those images back into the box of horrors from which they sprang. He starts talking again, and he’s repeating himself, and it’s better than Khalidya and better than Steve’s broken face and helpless, bloodshot eyes, even if it’s drivel and the question he’s repeating is, frankly, pitiful.

“I guess that’s why I’m wondering if there was anything else you liked about me, since, you know, my body is garbage now.”

“Why is it important for you to know?” Thor’s voice is warm with curiosity, like the fact of Bucky’s ruined body isn’t actually enough evidence of a reason for him to walk out right now and forget this whole painfully ambiguous waffling around whether or not there’s anything left between them.

“I wanna know if that’s all there is. I’m not a very good judge of my own traits, because I generally think I’m a piece of shit. But other people seem to think there’s something good about me. I’m just curious as to what you saw in me. That’s all.”

Thor props his chin in his large, upturned hand and gazes upon him with thoughtful attention. “You’re sweet. You’re caring. You’re smart. You’re funny and honest.”

“Honest?” Bucky chuckles. “That’s good. That’s hilarious, actually.”

“Why?”

“Because I lie a lot. To myself, mostly. But to others, too.”

“Did you ever lie to me?”

Bucky’s mouth flattens in a solemn line. He shakes his head. “No. I didn’t. Never.”

Thor folds his forearms on the tabletop, and he leans in, his voice dropping low and breathy. “You’re also sexy. It goes beyond whatever your body looks like. You have a very strong sexual energy. It’s very attractive.”

“Jesus.” Bucky shakes his head again, for an entirely different reason, like he can shake off the wild bloom of redness blushing his cheeks. “You sure… God damn. You sure know how to lay it on.”

“I’m not laying anything on. You asked what I like about you, and those are the things I like about you. Even still. Hell, I would invite you for a drink after this, but…”

“Yeah. That would be bad.”

“Maybe we could do dinner, then?” Thor asks, hopeful.

“Right now?”
“Why not?”

Bucky’s mouth quirks. “I should get back. Steve’s coming home tonight, so….”

“Are you sure it’s not less complicated than you say?”

Oh, but there’s something new and intriguing — the tightening of Thor’s jaw. The stiffness of his tone and the creep of jealousy along its edges. It’s oddly endearing. Oddly flattering. Oddly thrilling.

“It’s plenty complicated,” Bucky states. “I just want to be there when he gets back. He’s usually bent out of shape when he comes back from DC. He has a kid there. Wanna see a picture?”

Bucky pulls his phone from his coat pocket without waiting for a reply. He’s already gotten several texts from Steve asking where he is, and... Shit. Shit, it’s almost eight o’clock, somehow. Bucky shoots off a quick message about a late meeting in the city and pulls up a picture of Ethan from his camera app, one where he’s strapped to Steve’s chest in the harness they bought, wearing the fox hat that managed to remain unsullied by the commentary of Princess Paisley. Ethan is smiling, and he looks a lot like Steve, back when Steve used to do things like smile. He angles the screen toward Thor and pushes it toward him.

“Isn’t he cute? I got him that hat.”

“He’s very cute.” Thor’s expression is soft, like the lilt of his accent as he says it.

Bucky flips to the next photo, which he knows is a particularly fetching one of Steve looking up from where he’s reading on the couch. He looks pensive and very handsome, if a bit tired.

“And that’s Steve.”

Thor leans back in his chair again, crossing his arms over his chest. His attention darts from Bucky’s face back to the screen a few times. “I see you have a type. A tall, blonde, blue-eyed officer type.”

Bucky snorts a laugh. “Yeah, you think?”

Bucky receives one more text from Steve, one asking him to please, please let him know when he’s going to be out late. He scowls at it and shoves the phone back in his pocket.

“I would still like to have dinner with you some time,” Thor says. “Maybe that Middle Eastern place.”

“Oh, man, that halloumi. Yes. Definitely.”

Bucky can’t stop his memories from traveling again, back to that night that they ate in Thor’s kitchen and half-watched that Michael Bay abomination and made out on the couch and fucked afterward and, Jesus Christ, it was so fucking hot, so passionate and uncomplicated and mind-blowingly good that Bucky feels himself get a little hard just thinking back on it.

“We should probably eat at the restaurant this time,” Bucky murmurs, shifting in his chair.

Thor raises a playful eyebrow. “Don’t want to come to my place?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“You could try being honest.”

Honest. Honest? He doesn’t know what would happen if he went to Thor’s place. The thought fills
him with an alloy of dread and excitement, and along with it, a very distinct sense that he would be wronging Steve, even if they are one big goddamn question mark right now.

“I’m… I just don’t know,” Bucky says with the resigned shake of his head. “And I’m being totally honest.”

“Nothing has to happen. Not one thing. You know that.”

“Yeah, I do. I do.”

They bus their table shortly after that, clearing it for a young hipster couple wandering around with their laptops and messenger bags. Outside on the sidewalk, they say their reluctant goodbyes. Thor offers to have his driver take Bucky across the bridge, but he needs a good long train ride to clear all this confusing mess out of his brain before he gets home. And the confusing mess tangles even more when they hug, because it’s a very long hug. It’s long and powerful, and Bucky doesn’t want it to end, because Thor is big and warm and strong and blessedly, fantastically solid. It feels so good, and maybe it does for Thor, too, because it takes concerted effort to pull away.

And it seems for a moment like they’re going to do what gay men like to do and give each other a little kiss on the cheek, but when they do kiss, it’s not on the cheek, and it’s not little, and the feeling of Thor’s mouth against his sets Bucky’s whole body on fire. It’s so intense that he has to push himself away from it, his hand pressed to Thor’s hard chest, and even then it doesn’t feel like a mistake. Not at all. Because this feels good, too. It’s so good that he can’t even care that they kissed in public, in front of the whole Upper East Side, because God damn it, it felt good and it felt normal. And it felt real.

And Bucky smiles like an idiot as he limps down the street to the train station, all the way down the stairs, even though they’re a bitch and they hurt. And it’s only eight stops down the line, when he transfers to the F train to Brooklyn, that reality starts to percolate through him.

Thursday night with Steve… it was painful. It was painful for Bucky to want what he wants — just something normal, something familiar, something out of time — and know that Steve might not be capable of giving it anymore. Even when he said he would give what he could, when he asked so honestly what he could do, all Bucky could feel was bitter wrenching hopelessness. Even lying in Steve’s arms after, kissing him, it was like a production of what they used to be, a meticulously staged impersonation of what used to be so insuppressibly organic that neither of them could stop it and neither certainly had to request or create it. It shouldn’t be a service that is offered. It shouldn’t be a plan that is executed. It should just be real. And after Steve fell asleep, Bucky’s head pillowed on his shoulder, Bucky lay awake, and he didn’t want to cry again, but he teared up anyway, because all he could think was how much he fucking missed the man he was with. Missed him even while he was there.

And on that F train back to Brooklyn, Bucky remembers where he’s going and who he’s going home to, back to the man who’s not really there anymore.

And his smile fades.
Notes!

PowerPoint Ranger: A derogatory term for a soldier who does primarily administrative work

Clinton: In an effort to re-brand Hell’s Kitchen, there was a movement to re-name the neighborhood “Clinton.” The residents did not like it.

O-room: Orderly room, an administrative office in a company (Army)

To branch someone: To assign someone a military job in a general category (infantry, medical, logistics, military intelligence, etc.). Within each branch (not to be confused with branch of SERVICE [i.e., Army, Navy, Marine Corps]), there are different jobs.

Diamond: The rank of First Sergeant can be distinguished from the rank of Master Sergeant (both the same pay grade of E-8) by a diamond in the middle of it. Here’s a pic

Fourth point of contact: Your ass, in reference to the fourth thing that should hit the ground after an Airborne jump

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Come squee and suffer with me on Tumblr
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve learn the truth.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Thursday, February 11, 2010

“Steve?”

Steve starts out of the thick haze of his memory of Sunday, sprawled out on Melinda Triplett’s stairs, reaching for her, trying to give her something she refuses to take from him. He’s been drifting there so much this week, both compulsively and involuntarily, as if visiting it enough times will somehow diminish his pain and his guilt. So far, it hasn’t worked that way at all, each revisiting redoubling his shame and driving it deeper into his viscera.

“You were talking about something she said,” Hope reminds him.

Steve nods, because it feels impossibly difficult to force the words out. But he manages it, barely, and only because of the woman sitting in front of him, demanding nothing of him. Cultivating the space for him to open himself to her. Maybe even be honest with himself. Because those are two things, and he thinks he might be better at the first.

“I told her I didn’t love Ethan.”
Hope’s eyebrows shift upward, just barely. “You told her that?”

“I have no idea why. I’d never said it before. Never ever thought it before. Not quite like that.”

“What did she say?”

“She said maybe it’s because I know he can be taken away from me.” It still doesn’t land quite right, at once true and untrue. Logical, perhaps, even though the logic eludes him. But it’s not organic. It’s not intuitive. It hits empty space and falls into nothingness.

Hope jots something on her notepad. “What do you make of that?”

Steve shrugs. “I mean, you said something about Bucky a few sessions ago, like why would I want to get close to him if he’s just going to drink himself to death.” He shrugs again, heavier this time. “Maybe it’s similar.”

Hope smiles a little, in a powerful and knowing way, the way she does when something makes sense to her. When he makes sense to her. When some corroded gear clicks into place.

“Well, it’s hard to feel loss if you never attach to anything, right?” she points out. “If you don’t love your son, you won’t ever have to feel pain if you lose him.”

Steve pushes out a breath, shaking his head. “But why would I even be thinking about losing him?”

“You’re his father. You’re supposed to take care of him. Protect him, right?” She taps her pen against her portfolio as she speaks, each tap an underscore, like maybe it’ll sink this way when all other ways have failed.

Steve is his father. He’s supposed to take care of him. Protect him. Because that’s what fathers do, even though Steve’s own father wasn’t even courteous enough not to drop off the grid entirely, let alone take care of either of them. If that was his father’s job, his most basic responsibility, he not only failed but failed catastrophically. Maybe that’s why Steve can’t be a good father. Maybe this is Joe Rogers’ handiwork, which not only shaped Steve’s life but also his grandson’s. The thought makes him feel ill and angry.

“I guess,” Steve mutters.

“What’s happened all the times you’ve tried to take care of people? Tried to protect them?” Hope asks.

He scrambles as all his answers scatter, leaving him to vacantly stare at his therapist’s expectant face, prompting for connections his mushed up brain can’t make.

“What happened to Trip when you tried to protect him?”

“He died.”

“What happened with Bucky, when you tried to protect him in Iraq? When you tried to take care of him after?”

“He got blown up. He left. He OD’d.”

Steve squirms in his chair, sinks as deep into it as his large body can. He tries not to distill Bucky down like that, because every time he does, through chance or persuasion, the facts become so ugly and unsurmountable that he has to back away, lest he collapse under its sheer, grim magnitude.
Hope leans forward, uncrossing her legs and planting her high heels firmly on the floor. “And what ultimately happened when you tried to take care of your mom?”

Steve’s mouth turns downward, and the words that come out of it are strained. “She died.”

“So why would that be different here?” Hope asks gently.

“But I’m not that kind of person. I’m not a… heartless person.”

“Is it heartlessness, or is it maybe that you’ve been so hurt that another loss would be unbearable? That’s kind of the opposite of being heartless, right?”

The possibility that Steve might be failing at fatherhood because he cares too much is almost enough to make him laugh. It’s self-congratulatory tripe that not even the Ministry of Truth could cook up, and he can’t abide it for a moment.

“What kind of dirtbag doesn’t love their own child?” he says, hands curling tight around his kneecaps. “What kind of shitty person can’t love a baby? Sharon loves him. Hell, I think even Bucky might love him, and he only knew him for a week. So why can’t I? Why I am I so fucking afraid? Why the hell am I such a fucking coward?”

“Steve.” Hope can’t mask the exasperation in her words, if she even wants to, because maybe he needs to hear it. “You’re severely depressed and have a lot of trauma. People with trauma and depression often have trouble getting close to others. They have trouble experiencing positive feelings altogether. Do you even love anyone who’s alive right now?”

“Bucky. Sharon. Winnie,” Steve lists, keeping this mouth open a little, because there must be more people. There should be more.

“But do you feel love for them?” Hope holds her right palm to her chest, then pats it insistently over her heart. “Do you feel that love in here, like you used to?”

“I don’t know.”

She keeps her hand there, pressing her manicured fingertips into the fabric of her blazer. “You don’t know? Really?”

“No.”

There’s a gap of quiet, and Hope cocks her head to the side, waiting for him with narrowed, incisive eyes. The look forces him inward, into the cavernous space of his own heart, and it’s dull in there. Void and lifeless. Because the love he feels isn’t a feeling at all. It’s an idea. It’s an echo from the past. It’s a force of habit. And none of those things are love. Not at all.

“I don’t feel it,” he clarifies, breathless in the face of reality, backed onto a ledge he didn’t even know existed, teetering alone with the hopeless, Godawful truth.

Hope sags, her hand dropping to her portfolio with a dull smack. It’s like the therapeutic equivalent of an orgasm, a climax of agonizing insight rather than pleasure. It’s particularly fitting, since Steve now seems completely incapable of having the enjoyable kind.

“Does this make sense, Steve? Is this starting to click for you?”

Steve gives a slow nod. He wants to ask what the hell is supposed to happen now, but he’s pretty sure her answer will involve a trip upstairs to the mental health clinic. And that sure as hell is no
option, since he’s already on Maria Hill’s extra rotten shit list today after their talk this morning, the one where she told him that the only reason he hasn’t been fired is because Matt sees something redeeming in him, some je ne sais quoi that none of the other team leads seem to see, because they apparently refuse to work with him anymore. So he has one more chance — insert upturned index finger — to get his shit together, or he’ll be turning in his badge and losing his apartment and losing the small way he can contribute to Ethan’s life in a positive way. He can’t lose any self-respect, at least, because that would require there to be some in the first place.

“The only way this is going to get better is if you go to therapy. Real therapy. Not that this isn’t real, but I’m talking about real treatment for your trauma. Because I think that’s where this is all coming from, whether we’re talking about the trauma of losing your mother or the trauma of Trip’s death or the trauma of watching your boyfriend get blown up. Hell, the trauma of you getting blown up. It’s all trauma, and it’s the reason why you’re here right now. And I’m pretty sure much of your depression is part of that trauma, too. Do you see that?”

Steve nods again.

“Still no dice?” she asks, softer now in tone and expression, the way a mother would look upon a weeping baby that she wants desperately to soothe but can’t, because she can’t reach inside him and take his hurt away with her bare hands.

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t owe me an apology. I’m not the one…”

She stops herself, an unusual move, and on the other side of that ellipsis, there’s something very human, something that Hope Van Dyne, M.D. would never say. Something like ‘I’m not the one you should apologize to. That would be your son.’ That would be the baby that Steve can’t love because apparently he’s too soft and too afraid, because he’s so wracked with loss that he’d rather leave his own child an emotional orphan rather than risk the devastation of loving and losing him, too. It’s inconceivable. Absolutely fucking inconceivable.

And maybe, just maybe, it could be the truth.

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“So, we have some news.”

Bucky looks up from his styrofoam bowl of thoroughly picked-at chicken noodle soup and eyes Rikki across the table. There’s a gentle smile on her rose-colored lips, and she exchanges a sweet look with Daisy.

“Daisy’s pregnant,” Bucky guesses, which earns him a pointed look from both of them.

“No,” Rikki replies.

“You’re pregnant.”

Rikki rolls her eyes. “Nobody’s pregnant, Jamie. Jesus.”

“C’mon, that’s the only thing that’s ever preceded by ‘we have some news,’” he says.

He feels his face go sour as he remembers similar words from Steve that night back at Bragg last January. They were at the kitchen table in their house — their house. Jesus Christ, what the hell were they thinking, anyway? Bucky was feeling good that day, high as a fucking kite and contented with
it. As contented as he could be with the calamity his life had become. And Steve was fidgeting with the edge of the placemat, nervous in a way that he can’t get nervous now, because to do so would mean feeling something — really feeling something. Steve could feel back then. He was real and raw and open and sad. And he said ‘I have some news,’ and Bucky was so blessedly naive that he never predicted the next words out of his mouth. It was like they were spoken in some dead language that’s only used to talk to God or incant some horrible curse. And Bucky just stared dumbly at Steve’s strained expression while his brain enclosed around those words and worked them through every translation program he had, each spitting out some null result that couldn’t coincide with reality. But it was real. Disastrously so.

And now there’s Ethan, who’s not a disaster at all. And once again, Bucky wasn’t prepared for that. He wasn’t prepared to be so wrong, though he should certainly be used to it by now.

Daisy presses her fork into a piece of pasta salad. “Well, now it doesn’t sound nearly as exciting, since there’s no baby involved.”

“What is it, honey?” Winnie asks, looking to Rikki and Daisy as if the word is suddenly plural.

“Daisy and I picked a date and a place,” Rikki says. “November 20th. On Kauai.”

“Can you even legally get married there?” Bucky asks, quirking his eyebrows.

Daisy shakes her head. “No, but you can’t here, either, so might as well make our not-legal wedding Hawaii.”

Winnie’s eyes gleam, like she’s already picking out the terrible decorations and the terrible flowers and the terrible venue for them, because she can’t fucking help but meddle in every fucking detail of every fucking thing. “That’s wonderful. How exciting.”

Bucky’s fingers tighten around his plastic spoon, and he stabs at a large piece of chicken he’s been eating around. He fights back the urge to mock her, a childish whim to parrot her. He can imagine it, kicking up his tone, throwing a little backwater twang in there.

“At least a destination wedding will keep all the riff-raff away,” he says instead, steering himself toward safer shores, places where he’s less likely to turn this meal into the skirmish he kind of wants it to be.

“I figure it’d just be us,” Rikki says. “Daisy’s parents. A couple friends from school.”

“Steve’s invited, too,” Daisy adds.

“Yeah, right,” Bucky mutters. “He’ll never fly that far. He won’t even fly to DC.”

The table goes quiet. Even Rikki and Daisy know how messed up Steve is now, even if they sometimes forget. He was a nervous wreck at Thanksgiving, and he’s been tweaky and unsettled at all the recent outings they’ve tried in their lame attempts to be a family. He even had to leave a restaurant once, this busy Greek place downtown, where the owner’s son was playing the oud and singing, and people were clapping, and the three women were so absorbed that they didn’t notice Steve quietly crumbling in his chair. God, he tried to stay. Bucky knows he did. He could see Steve gripping his seat, the only thing he could really hold onto. And when Bucky dared to touch his leg under the table, thinking it might comfort him a little, he nearly rocketed through the ceiling, getting up so fast that his chair would have fallen to the floor, if the place wasn’t so fucking packed with people. He shoved his way out — literally shoved through people — and Bucky followed him outside, where Steve alternated between pacing the sidewalk and bending over, hands braced on his
knees, breath coming in ragged heaves. Bucky didn’t know what to do, what he could do, so he stood there and watched, freezing, white-knuckling his cane, and he started asking questions about the Giants line-up or whatever the hell the words are for football. Who’s the quarterback and who’s the halfback and who’s the something back and the guy who kicks, and it actually kind of worked, because Steve started to pull out of it with the distraction. Only he abjectly refused to go back inside, so Bucky had to go in for them and get their coats and slip Daisy some cash and tell everyone they were sorry but they had to go. And it nearly broke Bucky’s heart to see Steve so ashamed, back at their apartment, where he retreated to his room and closed Bucky out.

“Well, maybe he’ll be better by then,” Winnie says, smiling a simpering little smile.

Bucky snorts. Who the fuck does she think she is, pretending she gives a fuck about Steve all of a sudden?

“I wish we saw more of him,” Winnie continues.

“You have his number. Your fingers aren’t broken.”

Bucky makes sure to say it just loudly enough for her to hear but maybe not loudly enough for Rikki to. But when Rikki shoots him a baleful scowl, he knows he misjudged. Sometimes he forgets that not everyone has had their hearing obliterated by the crude tools of warfare.

Winnie stops chewing and stares over at him, and he stares right back, meeting her disbelieving eyes with his own cool blues, fucking daring her to say anything back. Anything. The tension between them is tripwire tight, just as it’s been all week, and it seems they’re all poised for something to blow at any moment, even though nobody has done anything to try to defuse it. Certainly not Bucky, because God, does he want to fight her. But he’s kept himself in check for Rikki and Daisy’s sake, and for his own, because the last thing he needs is to have them think any worse of him than they already do. He’s not sure why at least Daisy hasn’t tried to calm the waters. Maybe it’s because he isn’t going after Rikki. Or maybe she’s becoming inoculated to the Barnes family shit show. Maybe she’s scared to poke at it because he’s radioactive and volatile, apparently. Maybe she’s scared of upsetting the very tenuous peace they seem to have found as a family. Maybe that’s why she’s looking to Rikki to say something, raising her eyebrows in hopes of something that doesn’t quite come.

“We should get going,” Rikki decides, even though they haven’t finished their food. He can’t blame her. It’s good self-care to pull out at a time like this, when the family addict is getting feisty and picking fights. When the meal has become an awkward, contrived, bullshit impersonation of normalcy. “You should come with us,” she tells Bucky.

“Oh, no. I’m just fine here,” he replies, then takes a conspicuous slurp of his cold soup.

Rikki stares at him, her mouth set in a hard line. Her jaw muscles tic. Next to them, Winnie looks down at the remnants of her sandwich.

“Are you sure?” Rikki asks.

“Yep.”

Rikki and Winnie exchange a deliberate look, one where Winnie nods.

“I’m right here, you know,” Bucky grumbles.

“I’ll call you later, honey,” Winnie tells Rikki, and it’s permission enough for Rikki and Daisy to close their take-out containers in tandem and put them back into the plastic bag they came from.
Their movements are stiff and hurried, and so are their goodbyes, Rikki pecking Winnie on the cheek and brushing her hand over Bucky’s shoulder, Daisy raising her hand for a little wave to both of them, looking uncharacteristically demure. It’s all such a put-on that it must be something else, some routine they’re trying now, some suppression of self that might just be because of him. God, he hopes not, but what other reason could there be?

When they’re gone, Bucky and Winnie sit in dense silence, chewing absently at what’s left of their early dinner. Oscar wanders over and sits on the floor between them, gazing up at the table, his intent abundantly clear, and Bucky fishes out a small piece of chicken from his bowl and lays it on the linoleum at his orange feet.

“I wish you’d come on Monday,” Winnie finally says.

He was invited, of course, even though he told them last year in no uncertain terms to never ask him to come again. So nobody pushed him when he told them not only no, but ‘fuck, no.’ Last year was a painful disaster that drove him straight back into the bottle, and he’s not nearly secure enough in his sobriety to risk a repeat. Plus, if he had to sit through another boggling round robin of gut-spilling to a dead man, well, there aren’t enough Cadillac Ladies and Virginia Slims on the whole of Long Island to be able to cool him down from that.

“After everything went so well last year?” Bucky says. “All your passive-aggressive bullshit, talking to the non-existent ghost of Dad about what a shit kid I am for not visiting his corpse while I was on active-fucking-duty?”

Winnie nods in a slow, introspective way that bleeds into her words. “I’m sorry for that. I am. You’re right. That was inappropriate. I just think it’s really important to honor him, and I guess I was upset that you didn’t seem to think it was important.”

Bucky scoffs. “Fuck’s sake. You want it for yourself, not for him. He doesn’t care.”

Winnie’s mouth purses, and she picks up her sandwich like she’s about to try to get a last bite out of it, even though it’s falling apart. But she aborts before it reaches her lips, and she wraps the remnants in the white butcher paper it came in, her movements sharp. The paper starts to unfurl again as soon as she lets it go, and she grabs the whole thing, wadding it fumblingly, then gets up and drops it into the trash can. When she comes back to the table, she sits in the seat Rikki abandoned so she can look at him directly, her stare penetrating Bucky’s own.

“I don’t understand what’s going on with you,” Winnie says. “Ever since you came home, you’ve been different.”

“Well, no shit.”

She holds her hands out toward him. “See? Like that. Ever since you were injured, you’ve been angry.”

“Of course I’m angry. Look what fucking happened to me.”

Bucky’s lip curls at her infuriating density, at her inability to connect the most basic concepts that even a small child could grasp. Fuck, even Ethan can at least pass an object from one hand to the other, following the movement of it from Hand A to Hand B, the type of logical succession that a 54-year-old woman with a master’s degree can’t seem to comprehend.

“No, you’re not just angry. You’re angry at me. You don’t talk to anyone else the way you talk to me. Not Rikki, not Daisy, not Steve or Hank. It’s just me.” Winnie drives her stubby finger into her
chest, above her left breast. “And you look at me sometimes… and it’s like you can’t stand me, and I
don’t know why. I don’t know what happened. I don’t know what I did wrong.”

Bucky’s memory saturates with the major and minor wrongdoings Winnie has committed. There are
so many that he’s excavated in the past two weeks that he’s not even sure where he would start, how
he would begin to tell her how badly she’s fucked up. How badly she’s fucked him up.

“We used to be so close.”

There’s a lugubrious heaviness to her words, one that strikes Bucky as so darkly humorous that he
can’t help but hack out a cheerless laugh. It’s like she’s mourning the death of Superman or Donald
Duck, mourning for something that never existed in the first place. A figment of someone else’s
imagination.

“Oh, please. We were never close.”

Winnie’s retort is pointed and precise. “Don’t be a revisionist historian. When you came home on
leave, when you were deployed, you were just fine. You were kind and respectful and just…
yourself. And then, after you got out, everything changed.”

Bucky opens his mouth to highlight the myriad obvious reasons for why having his career ripped
away from him — the one thing that kept him tethered to the fucking Earth and to sanity and to any
meager sense of self-worth — would change him, which is not even to stack atop that all the reasons
why having his body destroyed has wrecked him that much worse—

“And I’d expect that it would change you,” she adds. “But now that things have gotten better with
your sister, now that we’re all spending more time together, I can see that you just seem to have a
problem with me. And I want to know what it is. Because I don’t like it. And I want to know what
changed.”

Bucky shuts his mouth tight, pressing his molars together. In a moment of the dimmest empathy, he
can see why she might be confused. When he was in the Army, he didn’t have time to trowel around
in the past. He couldn’t, and he didn’t have to. He could just pretend like none of it ever happened,
that the Winnie he’s known since they moved to New York was the Winnie he always knew. He
even thought he was being mature about it, maybe, leaving the past where it was so that he could
hone his skills and lead his men and get them home again, because that’s all that ever mattered. And
Winnie could just be Ma, and he’d see her on Christmas and maybe Thanksgiving and smile at her
care packages and take her calls gladly and keep all the hurt between them locked up with all the rest
he collected over his four deployments.

But Bucky doesn’t have the Army anymore. He doesn’t have his men anymore. He doesn’t even
have a locker to put all his hurt anymore, not a properly sized one, anyway, because that fucking
IED blew his old, reliable one into splinters. And his work with Hank has laid all his hurt out again,
like a crime scene: piles for Army hurt, Steve hurt, Dad hurt, Kentucky hurt, and, of course, Winnie
hurt. Bucky has catalogued it all, everything Winnie did or said, every assault to his sense of self,
direct and indirect. Every wrongdoing that cannot be undone. And as he traced the evidence back in
time, as he connected event to event to event, he noticed something else. When he traced the seeds of
his self-loathing from the moment they were first planted, he found that the gardener was Winnie
Buchanan.

And over time, that loathing became so much more. His loathing became hatred. Hatred for
everything he’s become. Hatred for the very core of his being. Hatred that infuses every cell of his
body, every breath that he takes, every neuron that sparks in his chaotic brain.
“You wanna know what changed?”

Winnie gives a firm nod. “I do.”

Bucky gazes into the murky broth of his soup, making one final set of calculations, launching multiple possible trajectories and charting their landings. Some of those paths lead to denial and fabrications, a speciality of Bucky’s — he’s tired. He’s having trouble in recovery. He’s goofed up on testosterone. It’s fine. He’s fine. They’re fine. Other paths cut through longitudes they’ve never crossed before, roads that can’t be unwalked, words that can’t be unsaid. He’s skirted away from them for so long, always choosing the safety of familiarity, the ease of disingenuousness.

And Bucky can’t say why he chooses differently today. Maybe because it feels like less of a choice now, like it’s an unstoppable next step in an evolutionary process. And when it feels like an inevitability, he can almost relax into it, lean back and let it happen, like the way vomiting makes you feel better when you’ve had too much vodka and you just need to be empty. When you just need to be free of it.

“I’m doing my Steps,” he explains. “For AA. We have to write down a list of our resentments. Institutions, principles, people. And wouldn’t you know it, you were at the very top of my list.”

Winnie blinks a few times, incredulous and then turned inward, like she’s sifting through her many piles of history, too. “For what?”

“All your religious bullshit. For Casey. Not fully supporting me when I needed you the most.”

Bucky’s mouth pulls into a tight scowl. There’s more he could say. Things about the worst stuff. Things about the wounds that are still too tender, still too red and festering and untouchable. “That fucked me up, you know.”

Winnie lowers her head and shakes it a few times, slow and ponderous and weary.

“Jamie, I have apologized so many times for that — so many times that I can’t even count. I have asked for your forgiveness time and time again. I’ve admitted I was wrong, and very honestly, too. I’ve tried to do my best to support you over the years to try to make up for it. And I really don’t know what else I have to do for you to forgive me.”

“Maybe I never will.”

The notion is fresh, and when he tests it on his lips, it seems like it could even be true. And wouldn’t that hurt her, to never be forgiven? Wouldn’t that be one of the best ways he could pay her back for everything she did and didn’t do to him? Everything she took from him? The things she took that can’t ever be un-taken?

“So you’re going to hold it against me for the rest of my life, no matter what I do?”

“Maybe. Because I hate myself,” he says. The words — the first time he’s spoken them aloud — tremble out of him. “And I think you’re the reason I started to hate myself in the first place. All I did was be myself when I was little. And I wasn’t bad. I wasn’t wrong. I was sweet and caring, and you told me that was wrong, that I was gonna burn in Hell—”

Winnie juts her finger in his direction, points at him in time with her retort. It’s a bit half-hearted, a bit off-balance. “I never, ever told you that. Never once.”

“Well, you might as well have. God forbid I showed any compassion. God forbid I pretend to nurture someone. God forbid I grew up to be a faggot.”
He heaves the word out, launching it across the table. She shrinks when it hits.

“Don’t say that word.”

“Why not? Your fucking church used it.”

“No, they didn’t,” she insists, but she doesn’t sound sure at all, and her head tilts sharply to the side when she reads the dead-serious expression on Bucky’s face. “When?”

“So you’re telling me that I never overheard Pastor Fuckwad saying ‘...he’s a little faggot, but what else could you expect from a kid raised by a commie pinko from New York’?”

The guy said it over a styrofoam cup of coffee, chuckling with one of the deacons about it with the door to his office wide open. Bucky was wandering the hallway while Winnie was in bible study and he was supposed to be at the junior evangelist version of it. He’d routinely get out of it by saying he had to go to the bathroom, and he’d walk the building, mentally recording the paintings of the many strained faces of Jesus — he was always stressed out in them, always in some state of anguish: being crucified, being betrayed, being whipped and scorned. Bucky barely thought twice of the comment, except the New York part, but there were plenty of soldiers from New York, and plenty had kids, and it was nothing at all to do with him.

Winnie is stricken, mouth contorting like something out of an Edvard Munch painting. “You never told me he said that—”

“Because I was ten! I didn’t even know what a faggot was, or that they were talking about me. Not until later.”

“But I stopped going—”

“After Dad got gorked,” Bucky snaps, recoiling at the crudeness of the term and the way it evokes an image of his dad, lifeless in a hospital bed, face crushed beyond recognition, broken body teeming with tubes and leads. Not that Bucky ever saw it. He couldn’t bring himself to see it, because he couldn’t stand the thought of that being the last time he saw his father. It somehow seemed better than the actual last image he has of him, screaming, slamming his hand against the trunk of the car… somehow, that was better than seeing him in that hospital bed. And so Bucky only has the macabre images that his mind can emulate and Winnie’s warning about how he’d regret if he didn’t say a proper goodbye. And, fuck, he never got that. She stole that from him, too. She stole his last moments, that fucking selfish bitch.

Winnie touches her lips. The tips of her fingers shake a little, each one chapped and cracked from washing them a hundred times a day at the hospital. Her eyes are unfocused and vaguely directed at the couch in the adjoining living room. When she speaks again, the sound is tinny and washed out.

“I left before that. I don’t think you really understand—”

“Oh, I understand perfectly,” Bucky interjects, bypassing her truth. “I understand that Dad loved me for who I was, and you didn’t. He didn’t have to have a crisis to realize that he loved me, or that it was okay for me to be how I am. He just accepted me. And I think if…”

Bucky stops abruptly, and he presses his hand to his throat, feeling his Adam’s apple shift under his palm as he tries to continue. Christ, why is he choking up now, still, after all these years…?

“If Dad had been here,” he continues, forcing the words through that tightness, “maybe I wouldn’t hate myself so much.”
Winnie lays one of those weathered old hands of hers on the table between them, reaching for him, voice pleading. “I have always loved you, even when I was slow to understand you. And your dad… he wasn’t…”

“Wasn’t what? Hm? Wasn’t good? Wasn’t supportive? Wasn’t better than you at parenting in every single way?”

“You only knew one part of him—”

Bucky slams the side of his fist on the table. The sound cracks off the cupboards, and there’s a rush of staccato ticking as the cat barrels out of the kitchen. “No! I knew him, Winnie. All of him. Stop fucking telling me I didn’t know him. I knew him, and I loved him, and he loved me, and he was good and kind and a fucking hero, and before he died, you took away the last good thing we could have had—”

Winnie’s voice climbs high to overpower his, fierce and cutting in a rare and impressive way. “You have no fucking clue what was going on, Jamie—”

Bucky is shouting louder now, because there’s no way she’s gonna out-scream him. Not today. Not over this. “And you’re just dumb, Southern, corn-shucking white trash who married way out of her league! God knows what the fuck he ever saw in you.”

Winnie’s eyes go wide, her over-plucked eyebrows climbing in disbelief — maybe even horror. The horror of being eviscerated by a raging, flailing drunk who can’t even use the excuse of his drunkenness for the vileness coming out of him. The horror of being blamed for stealing a boy’s father from him. The horror of being pinned as the driving force behind a grown man’s hatred of himself, hatred that grew from when he was innocent and only wanted to love in the way he knew best. Before he knew what the world and God and God’s minions demanded from boys like him, which was nothing less than the murder of his goodness — or the start of it, anyway. Winnie started it, so that by the time Bucky got to Uncle Sam, he was primed for more, ready for each bullet to rip more goodness from him. And now there’s only a starving, empty place where that goodness should be, space that demands to be filled with booze or cock or more self-hate, because it’s a creature that will eat its own tail, if it’s hungry enough.

Bucky pushes back hard, shoving his chair away from the table, because he can’t look at her face anymore, because it both shames and disgusts him, and it disgusts him further when he touches the part of himself that enjoys it, the part that relishes her pain, because it’s the least he can do for all she’s given to him.

He stands and grabs his coat from where it’s hanging off the back of his chair and snatches his cane from where it’s leaning against the kitchen counter. He’s gotta move. He’s got to get the fuck out of here before he says too much, before he rips open something that can’t be mended, even as he longs for it. Even as he longs for a world where George Barnes was the man who raised him and Rikki, who countered all of the agony of Bucky’s world with his love and devotion and savage defense, who could fill that place that used to hold his goodness, maybe even help him hold onto that goodness in the first place. Help him realize how fragile and invaluable it is. Help him in the way that Winnie never could. That Winnie never would.

But George Barnes is dead. Dead and boxed and buried. And as Bucky limps to the door, he stops, and something comes out of him, something that he’s never articulated before. It spills out onto oatmeal-colored linoleum and floods the room, even though it’s spoken with the quietest of rage.

“I wish it had been you.”
Silence swallows them, thick and viscous. Bucky stays stock-still, blood rushing and thrumming in his ears, and below that, he hears a sniffle, a wet one, and then another.

“You can be really cruel sometimes, Jamie,” Winnie choke out. “Really, really cruel. You’re just like him, sometimes.”

“Oh, I fucking wish I was like him. I fucking wish it. Every fucking day.”

And, Jesus, it should make him ashamed, to make his mother cry. He angles himself toward her, so he can see the long cascade of her wavy, graying hair that falls down her grief-hunched back. She looks so vulnerable like that, just a sad little woman who let her child be crushed by the world, one who wouldn’t stand up for him, wouldn’t protect him. One who chose her church over him before he was old enough to be able to defend himself, before he knew he couldn’t rely on her to protect his sweetness. He thinks of the type of man he could be, if it wasn’t for her. Maybe a man who could have real relationships, one who didn’t despise himself so much that he ran into the arms of war rather than the arms of the man he loved and who loved him back furiously, because he couldn’t stand the light of that love and what it would mean if he accepted it. And then he thinks of the precious days he can never get back with George, days that Winnie ripped from them because she was too fragile — God, and Bucky was fragile then, too. Too fragile to fight back. Just too fucking fragile...

He thinks of all this and he hates her. He fucking hates her. And he wants her to know it.

“But if you’re really trying to tell me I’m not kind enough, that I’m not compassionate and sweet enough, well, guess what? I was those things. I was all those things. But you took care of that, didn’t you? Congratulations. Thanks for saving my fucking soul.”

Bucky surges toward the door and makes to pull it open, cursing aloud when it sticks. He fumbles with the deadbolt and yanks on the handle, and it barks open. He steps through the doorway and drops one final word in his wake before slamming it behind him:

“Cunt.”

The slam echoes through the hallway, and he grimaces as he limps past the next door neighbor as he’s fiddling with his keys, flustered and glancing worriedly at Bucky as he passes. It’s not until he bursts through to the outside that he pulls in a sharp breath, the frigid air burning his lungs. He stops and huffs, closing his eyes against a white-hot rush of despair.

“Fuck…” he mutters, shaking his head sharply, like he could possibly ever shake off the last ten minutes of his life.

He doesn’t know how long he stands there. How long the conversation replays in his head in a nonstop reel-to-reel. How long he hears his vitriol, sees how it wounds her, feels the filthy echo of his satisfaction over it. Eventually, the cold starts to sink into his bones and he slips on his coat, his body shaking from the exposure and from the force of his cruelty. He looks down both sides of the sidewalk and tries to remember which way it is to the station, even though he’s taken the train here dozens of times since he’s been back. He settles on going left, because that side of the street seems more familiar, and he passes by three bodegas and a liquor store before he gets there, hesitating and even once stopping briefly in front of each as he wrestles with the keen desire to slip in and grab anything to make this feeling go away. Hell, he’d take beer or wine even, because it’s been so long since he drank that it’d probably wreck him pretty fast.

The idea festers on the 3 line, which he takes one stop too far to Bergen Street instead of Atlantic, so he backtracks so he can catch the N or the D south to 4th Avenue and 9th, and by the time he
catches the G to 15th and Prospect Park, he’s fixated on it, because the conversation keeps looping and looping, each iteration twisting his guts more and more.

And when he gets back to Windsor Terrace, he actually does limp into the second bodega on Prospect Park West, where he stands in front of the refrigerator for an inordinate amount of time, brain surging and short-circuiting by turns as he stares at the rows of beer cans, tall ones, ones he could slam down before he even got back home. But Steve will be there, unless he’s still off running with Matt Motherfucking Murdock, and he’d sniff it out in a second, and the thought of getting caught, the thought of kicking off that torrent of worry in Steve, is just enough to get him to abandon the idea.

But the craving is still there, maddening, as he unlocks the front door and crosses the threshold into their apartment. He tosses his keys on the table and pulls off his coat, glancing around for the signs of Steve and finding them in the pair of running shoes kicked off haphazardly by the welcome mat. Bucky stoops down, wincing at the pain in his knee when he bends it, and straightens the shoes, sliding them up against the wainscoting.

Bucky pauses, picking up the sound of the running shower, and he rests his cane against the kitchen table and hobbles over to the bathroom door. There he listens to the rush of water, the heavy sounds of it running off of a body, Steve’s body, and maybe Bucky shouldn’t be thinking this way. Thinking of Steve this way. But he does it anyway, because he can’t help himself, because he needs this, because he needs somewhere to direct this craving, fierce and insistent, and if he can’t drink, well, there are other things to crave. Other ways to scratch an itch.

Bucky’s eyes slide closed as he lets himself imagine the scene behind the bathroom door. He imagines the powerful lines of Steve, the trimness of his angles, the smoothness of his skin, dotted sparsely with moles and freckles, the location of each Bucky knows intimately. He could draw them from memory, because he’s traced his fingers over them countless times. He imagines the water flowing over him, traveling over the smooth rises of his musculature, dipping into the spaces between his pectorals and his abs, down and down to his hips and lower still, and as Bucky pictures the sight of him just on the other side of that shower curtain, the craving surges, warming and tightening his groin, and when the shower stops, he steps closer to the door, listening to the brush of towel over skin, the howl of the blow dryer, because Steve hates it when his hair goes flat.

Bucky knows better than to stay where he is, because scaring the bejesus out of Steve when he opens the door is hardly the direction he’d like things to go. So he steps back and retreats into the kitchen, flipping extra lights on to warn of his presence, until the door opens a few minutes later. Steve emerges, and despite Bucky’s efforts, he still starts when he sees Bucky leaning against the counter. He’s naked from the waist up, a gray towel wrapped low around his hips, and Bucky stares at the juncture between fabric and flesh, face going hot, as Steve pushes out a nervous greeting.

“Did you have a nice time with your family?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Steve looks down at himself, following the line of Bucky’s unrelenting gaze. “I’ll be ready in a minute…”

Bucky doesn’t want to hear anything about getting ready. He just wants what he sees. He wants, desperately, to touch, and so when he makes his way over to where Steve is stupidly frozen in place, he reaches out with both hands and lays them on Steve’s waist. Steve’s abdomen tightens as he sucks in a breath, and Bucky runs his hands greedily over the spread of contracted muscle, more modestly sculpted than it was the last time he touched him like this, so very, very long ago, but still smooth and
firm beneath his fingertips.

“Bucky…”

The sound of Steve’s name for him, breathed, is almost as intoxicating as the alcohol he wished for. Bucky’s hands get bolder, more insistent, and he presses his palms to Steve’s chest, diggin his fingers into the twin muscles of his pectorals, and the sound Steve makes, the feel of his maleness in Bucky’s grasp, Christ, it makes him hard, and he steps in to press their bodies close, to feel for any sign of reciprocal interest, and even though he doesn’t find any right away, he knows damn well how to get it.

Steve’s room is only a few steps away, so Bucky pushes, guiding Steve back, glancing behind him for anything that he might trip over. Steve looks over his shoulder for the same, his jaw slack, brow a little heavier than Bucky might like it to be. And Bucky presses on until the backs of Steve’s knees hit the bed, and Steve looks at him then, a little helplessly, and Bucky slides his hands up to Steve’s broad shoulders, urging him to sit.

He does, hands braced behind him on the mattress, legs spread, and Bucky looks between them and thinks of how badly he wants to kneel there, push the towel aside, and run his mouth up the inside of Steve’s thighs, feeling the light dusting of his leg hair against his chin, tasting the clean on his lips. But then he remembers — Jesus, how could he forget? — that he can barely even bend his fucking knees, let alone drop down to them, and there’s a flash flood of anger and despair, because he can’t even suck dick properly anymore. Steve looks up at him, his eyes uncertain, but he seems to read right into Bucky’s anguished thoughts, because he scoots himself up onto the bed and lies down on it. Bucky considers the best angle, hating that he has to put so much effort into calculating the position of his gimp leg, and he opts to let it hang off the bed as he lays himself on the mattress at a roughly perpendicular angle to Steve’s body, grunting his discomfort but swift to re-orient to the task at hand.

He lays his good forearm between Steve’s legs and braces himself on it, sliding his hand beneath the towel. When he uncurls his fingers, the tips of them brush against the soft skin of Steve’s balls, and Steve’s stomach jumps and tightens at his touch. So Bucky keeps touching, smoothing over them, gently massaging them while Steve tries to keep his legs still, his breath coming shallow and quick. Bucky uses his other hand to pull at the towel until it comes loose, and he spreads it out, opening Steve like a gift, and what a gift… The sight of him is magnificent, even though he’s not really hard yet, and Bucky’s lips part as a sigh escapes them, because, Jesus Christ, it’s been way too long.

Bucky grinds his hips against the bed to ease some of the ache of his own hardness, and he glances up to Steve’s face to see his eyes closed tightly, face drawn in something resembling concentration, and it’s… odd. It’s an odd expression, because he was always one to want to watch something like this. He’d get off on it, just watching. It’s the face he was making when he jerked off for Bucky a couple nights ago — or tried to, anyway. He made a good effort, sad as it was that so much effort was required. And it was really hot… until it wasn’t, until Steve gave up after twenty minutes of jerking himself, fast and frustrated, trying to make himself come. And not even halfway through it, Bucky was so preoccupied by how much difficulty Steve was having that shoving his fully clothed crotch against his pillow stopped being vaguely enjoyable. And so they stopped, and Steve apologized profusely, and Bucky gave as many reassurances as he could muster that it was okay, that it happens sometimes, straining to keep the disappointment out of his voice. And maybe Bucky should just expect it to be different now, because Steve is different now.

But now it makes Bucky only that much more determined to turn him on, to get him hard, to draw the sounds out of him that will let Bucky know that he’s good, that he’s desired, that at least after everything he’s lost, he can still suck a mean cock. And so he takes Steve’s dick in his left hand and
keeps fondling his balls with his right, and he starts jerking him a little, to the extent that one can jerk a soft dick. And when he still barely responds, Bucky decides the hell with it, and he goes down on him, taking him in his mouth, working him with his tongue, trying to translate his skills to this unusual situation, one he’s never really found himself in before. He’s used to the kind of firmness he can grab in his fist, the kind he can shove down his throat, the heady taste of pre-come that’s distinctly absent now.

And despite his very best efforts, he doesn’t seem to be doing a very good job of it, because when he looks back up at Steve’s face, dick still resting limp in his mouth, Steve’s brows are sharply gathered, mouth downturned in a grimace, like he’s in the middle of an o-chem exam and can’t remember all the functional groups. It’s profoundly un-sexy, hopelessly so, and it’s in that moment that Bucky knows this is not only futile but, God, maybe it’s even wrong. Maybe Steve doesn’t even want it at all — want him at all — and he’s just too over-accommodating to tell him no. And the thought that sex between them is now a chore to grit through drops like a cluster bomb in Bucky’s stomach. He feels sick, and he pulls his mouth off Steve’s dick and gently lays it back down, then pushes himself up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

Bucky lets out another sigh, this one tired, and he stares at the floor, at a wayward running sock that the Steve of eight years ago never would have just left there. Behind him, he hears the rustling of heavy fabric, and then he feels the tentative touch of Steve’s fingers against the side of his thigh.

“It’s not you.”

Bucky continues to look down, responding with only a modest shake of his head, because how could it not be him? Steve clearly had no problems fucking Sharon. No problems back at Bragg, the couple times they got physical, which was a goddamn Christmas miracle, given that his demolished body should have been at least some small deterrent to Steve getting it up and getting off. The only thing that’s changed is that Bucky fell off the deep end and landed himself in jail and then the hospital and then jail again and then the hospital again twice over, and he’s since been utterly unemployable and has barely made real effort to better himself in any way. And even though Bucky knows that he’s well beyond pathetic for it, he held out some small, clearly misplaced hope that Steve didn’t also think so.

“You know you’re really good at that,” Steve says, and it sounds placating and hollow and conciliatory.

“Yeah, obviously.”

Steve’s hand is moving now, smoothing down the length of Bucky’s thigh then back up, pausing briefly before turning the corner and creeping toward Bucky’s groin.

“Lemme do something for you,” Steve murmurs. “Let me…”

Bucky grabs onto Steve’s wrist and sets his hand firmly back on the mattress. He schools his voice to be softer than his grip. “It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

The bed shifts, and Steve is sitting up. He moves gracelessly to the edge of the mattress, pulling the towel down to keep himself covered. And Bucky turns his head away, because it’s just so fucking sad, and he doesn’t want Steve to see the ugly way his mouth must be turned.
“I just had a long day. That’s all.”

“No, I get it.”

“We could go to a movie, if you want,” Steve offers. “Dinner.”

Christ. The two things Steve hates the most now, aside from the train. Two of the things he knows Bucky likes the most. Christ. Christ, he has to get the fuck out of here…

“I think I’m gonna go to a meeting. At the LGBT center.”

“In the city?”

It’s a hail, hail, hail Mary, a one-two jab straight in the bouche, sobriety and voluntary queerness in one fell swoop, and when Bucky dares to look at Steve to give him a nod, he sees the shadow of approval there.

“Lemme give you a ride, at least.”

“It’s fine. I’ll take the train.”

Steve still approves; the proof is in the very small but pleased smile he gives. But another shadow also emerges — the shadow of loneliness. He must know that the train rides alone will eat up almost two hours of Bucky’s night, coupled with at least an hour of AA shenanigans. And it fucking kills Bucky to see that vacant sorrow, but he cannot stay around for it. He just can’t.

So Bucky stands, and he can’t bring himself to look back at Steve as he watches him go. And as he gets to the door and gathers his cane and coat again, he realizes that he didn’t even take off his shoes — he didn’t even take off his goddamn shoes.

“What time will you be home?” Steve calls from the bedroom.

Bucky looks down at his watch, as if that would tell him how long he’ll be at a meeting that he doesn’t even know will be happening. So he throws some numbers into the air.

“Nine-thirty, ten.”

There’s an excruciatingly long beat of silence before Steve says, “okay” and then “have a good meeting,” and Bucky thanks him and hobbles his way to the train station, thoughts tempestuous, memories of Winnie and Steve and his own callous words and cowardice crashing against the insides of his skull. He doesn’t remember the walk at all, barely remembers transferring to the 1 at Borough Hall, and he knows that he should get off at 14th Street and has ambiguous intentions to, but he doesn’t. Not until he gets to Columbus Circle, where he ghosts out of the train and floats up the escalator, and then he’s standing in front of 1 Central Park West, staring up at the checkerboard of lights, swaying in the cold.

And his brain kickstarts then, finally, and he orients to his surroundings fully, shaken, ashamed, and excited to be standing where he is, like he was pulled here by a string tied to his deep, abiding insecurity. And why wouldn’t he want a little security? Why wouldn’t he want the delirious feeling of being wanted? Or fuck delirium — all he wants is just the most basic sense of comfort from it.

And there’s a man up there, somewhere on one of those floors, who wants him. He wants Hurricane Jamie, Uncle Sam’s hapless castoff, dry drunk shit bag who calls his mother a white trash cunt and walks away from the man he cares about most because he can’t get it up, casting lies in his wake, pretending he’s a hard worker when he can barely be arsed to go to his AA meetings, now that the court is done with him.
And as the hate for himself brims, he looks up even more intently, trying to backward engineer the view he’s taken in so many times, trying to pinpoint which one it is, which living room window he’s watched the sunset from, been fucked up against just because they could. And Bucky pulls out his phone and shoots *THOR ODINSON :)* a text, because fuck it all and fuck himself and his minuscule dignity and enormous awfulness.

*How about that dinner?*

Bucky waits, tapping his phone against his thigh, looking up at the towering monolith of extravagance leaning over him, bearing down on him, blocking out the moon, and in his hand, his cell vibrates.

*Tonight?*

*You free?*

*I am. Where are you*

*Outside your building. I think I can see your lights on*

*You remember which one is mine?*

Bucky looks up again, gaze traveling in the general direction of where he thinks Thor’s apartment is, lower-right quadrant, seven to ten floors up.

*Kinda?*

*Do you see me waving?*

Bucky squints, searching the rows and rows of windows with his sniper vision, then catches sight of a broad body with a wide-waving arm, well within range of his M24, and he remembers how many shots he’s landed that were even longer than this one. He’s got the proof on his arm still, untouched by shrapnel, and it’s such an errant, fucked-up thought, but it lingers, along with his dead-eyed, thousand-yard stare, even as he types his next line.

*Yes :)*

*Come on up. I’ll tell the front desk*

*Ok ;)*

Bucky stares down at the string of text, glaring in its utter detachment from the dark shadow eclipsing his mind. Never too late to start lying, he supposes, because he’s nothing if not painfully predictable.

He shoves his phone into his coat pocket and starts for the grand sliding glass doors across the street. Bucky nods at the doorman, like he’s some kind of kin to the motherfuckers who live in places like these. He learned this stuff even before he met Thor — when to nod, when to speak, when to tip — fuck, of *course* he didn’t bring any cash. And he says good evening to the gent at the front desk, that he’s here to see Mr. Odinson, and the boy-faced man smiles and says ’of course, Mr. Barnes, elevator’s to your left,’ as if he’s a regular here, and as if he’s blind as well as middle class.

The elevator moves at an overly contemplative pace, giving far too much space for the twinges of ill-contentment to burst into a conflagration, and it’s stubbornly un-shovable, and it grows with each passing floor until the doors slide open, where it generates a wild energy in Bucky that paces him at
the cripple equivalent of a sprint, an off-kilter lumbering that lands him in front of Thor’s door too fast and too desperate. He raps his knuckles against the door, and it’s open in a heartbeat, and Thor is there, tall and fucking perfect and just right fucking there.

Thor steps back, opening the door for Bucky to come in, and Bucky lays his cane against a black painted wood side table, and the apartment hits him all at once, and hard, because it’s been so long since he’s been here, a lifetime ago, and Thor’s already got a hand on him, smoothing over the back of Bucky’s coat, and that feeling is growing again, displacing his insides. And he turns to Thor, who says ‘Hey’ with his crinkle-eyed smile, and Bucky presses his palms to Thor’s smooth-shaven cheeks and holds him there so he can kiss him, because he needs to put this terrible feeling somewhere, needs to give it to another body, or maybe he needs to take something from one — he doesn’t know which way it flows. He doesn’t know how to make this feeling go away.

And when their mouths meet, it happens, whatever it is, and they’re kissing, and Bucky’s hands grab at Thor, fisting in his short hair, pulling on his shoulder, clutching his substance, his solidity, his absolute presence in his own body. It barely takes a moment for Thor to catch up, to shove Bucky’s coat off, breaking them apart so they can slam back together, and Thor grips him hard and hungry. But Thor won’t find anything solid here, just liquid matter, hot and unstable, which Thor pushes back toward the master bedroom, through the doorway, and it’s Bucky now who’s being driven, just like Steve but actually fucking wanting it, so hard that Bucky tears his mouth away from Thor’s just to see it with his eyes, and, God yes, it is hard and it is real, and his fingers work Thor’s button and fly and, fuck, he’s fumbling, and Thor takes his wrists, so sweetly, and guides his hands to his hips as he does the work for him.

“I wanna blow you.” Bucky’s words quiver out of him as he watches. “God, please, let me…”

Thor looks at him, and their eyes meet, and he’s smiling again but it’s heated this time, and Bucky follows Thor’s gaze as it trails down to his cock — his huge, naked, uncut cock — as he pulls it out. Bucky wraps his hand around it, his marred flesh enveloping its smoothness, and it’s warm against his palm.

“Lie on the bed.”

Bucky lets go, reluctantly, and Thor pushes his pants down, then his underwear, and steps out of both, pulling off his t-shirt as he does what he’s told. Bucky watches his round, glorious ass as he goes, and Thor sprawls himself out on the California King, so much wider than the queen in Steve’s room. Bucky regards him for a moment, his resplendent nudity, his ease, his utter engagement, and when Bucky lies down like he did with Steve, there’s no work to be done, no options to consider, no adaptations for a long day at the office.

Bucky wraps his fist around the base of Thor’s incredible cock and points it toward his lips, and he takes it in, working it with his mouth as he moves his hand in time, hasty and starving, and Thor moans and shifts and, fuck, he lays his hand on the back of Bucky’s head, guiding him deeper, and Bucky relaxes and goes down as far as he can, choking ecstatically, because it’s a goddamn gift to be able to do this, to feel how aroused this man is, feel it in the back of his throat and in his gliding hand, and Bucky really is fucking good at this, because it’s not two or three minutes before Thor’s breathing goes quick, and Bucky braces himself, working his hand faster, bobbing shallower, so that by the time Thor shoots his load, moans cresting, Bucky can taste every salty, spurting drop of it on his tongue.

And he pulls off, even though there’s still a little come to follow, because he is so achingly hard that not even his disgust can keep him from rolling onto his back and shoving his hand down his pants,
where he takes the meager remains of himself and yanks, rough and frantic, panting, until he’s coming with a loud gasp. Coming and coming and coming.

Bucky lies there, breath slowing, letting go of his dick as soon as the need for pressure subsides. And when he pulls his hand out, there’s barely anything on it, the remainder of his load soaking into his underwear, God damn it. He slides his hand beneath his sweater, wiping the little bit of it off on his white undershirt, and lets that hand fall onto the mattress, heavy and boneless. The room fills with the sounds of both of them breathing back down to normal, and Bucky closes his eyes when he feels Thor’s fingers in his hair, stroking softly.

The feeling from earlier, that frantic pressure, is gone, spent with their spent dicks, he supposes. And he’s empty, floating on Tempurpedic foam, and there’s no sign of Winnie or Steve or his cruelty or shame. Just silence.

“I feel a little underdressed,” Thor says, quietly chuckling, and Bucky’s eyes slide open to look at him, long and powerful and completely naked, a gulf of golden, sturdy health next to Bucky’s pale, broken leanness.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky murmurs, fingers tightening around the fabric of the comforter. “I don’t… This is what I was trying to say earlier. When I wasn’t sure.”

“You feel bad about it?”

Bucky nods. “It’s really bad. I wasn’t being dramatic.” He glances down at his crotch, where the loose material of his pants is still tented from having his hand crammed down there. “I got blown up.” He swallows. “Everywhere.”

“Even…?”

“Yeah.”

His face gets hot. Thor’s hand pauses.

“How would that work, if we wanted to go further?”

Bucky lets out a bow-tense laugh. “My asshole is one of the few places that didn’t get shredded, so you can still shove it in there just fine.”

“That’s only if you—”

“I want to. I want you to fuck me.”

So hard, he doesn’t add. So hard that he can’t even think anymore. So hard that Thor fucks all the misery right out of him.

“Do you want that now?” Thor asks.

Bucky shakes his head adamantly. “No. I’m not ready. I don’t know when I will be.”

Thor goes back to petting him. “That’s fine.”

“If we’re gonna be together, this is just how I am now. So I hope that’s okay.”

Thor’s hand slows again, and he makes a small, ambiguous sound. Bucky tilts his head up, because he has to see Thor’s face right now. He needs the clarity. He needs to know that Thor is really okay with his brokenness, that it wasn’t all just sweet-talk to get him right where he is, raw and vulnerable,
with the taste of come still lingering in his mouth.

The hard unreadability in Thor’s face becomes a smile, and Bucky smiles back.

—

Thor offers his driver to Bucky, and this time, he takes it. Riding the train for an hour with come-stained underwear might have been cute back in the Alex days, but now it’s just nasty. On the way home, the blissful post-orgasmic emptiness doesn’t last, filling swiftly with dread as they cross the bridge and enter Brooklyn Heights. Bucky thinks about Winnie, how he didn’t even get a text from her — but shit, why would he? What could she possibly have to say to him after that? He thinks about her, alone in her apartment with the cat on her lap, maybe staring at the TV or trying to read something, thoughts returning again and again to her hateful son, and chagrin sprouts in the garden of his dismay.

He has the driver drop him off two blocks away from their apartment, and Bucky still doesn’t have money to tip him and doesn’t know if he should anyway, because he’s never taken a private car before. So Bucky thanks him with as much energy as he can channel out of his mouth and limps his way home in the cold, making a wide four-block circle when he realizes it’s not even 9:00 yet. He doesn’t cut it too close, because he’s freezing, and all he wants is stand under hot water and wash the come off and try to chase that emptiness again.

When he gets inside, Steve is there, sitting on the couch with a slide packet in hand. He looks up from it, eyes a little wide behind his glasses. But he smiles, effortfully. Bucky’s an expert in Steve’s fakery now, seeing it always where he used to see it never.

“How was your meeting?”

“Fine.”

“There’s broccoli and tofu in the fridge, if you want some.”

Tofu, tofu, fucking tofu. Bucky can’t help the little smile he gives, one that crawls up through the pile of lies and remorse he brought home with him.

“Thanks. I’m gonna shower first.”

Steve’s fake smile retreats. He nods and pretends to go back to his reading. But he’s still watching with his ears and all his other senses as Bucky hastily plods past him to grab clean clothes.

“The room was packed. I sweat like a motherfucker,” Bucky calls from his room as he opens up his dresser. He pauses, coherency skittering away from him, like he’s staring into the maddening depths of the Mariana Trench rather than his underwear drawer.

“I’m glad you went,” Steve replies.

Bucky’s reply is a listless murmur. “Yeah. Me, too.”

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Friday, February 12

“So let me get this straight — you made a list of resentments, decided your mother was at the top of it, and went to her apartment and called her a cunt?”
That last word cuts sharply through the din of the coffee shop. Bucky flinches at it, even though Hank isn’t even directing it at him. And as it hits, Bucky can spare so much more sympathy now for Winnie, even as he’s already rife with it. Even as it’s been occupying nearly every waking thought he woke up with this morning — whatever space isn’t consumed by fond memories of Thor and painful memories of Steve.

“Pretty much,” Bucky says.

Hank’s head dips and shakes with slow resignation. “That was not the purpose of that assignment. At all. You’re so far off the mark that you’re not even on the same continent.”

“I didn’t mean to. That wasn’t my intent.” Bucky says it emphatically, because it’s important for Hank to know that he didn’t set out that morning looking to wreck his mother. His desire to unload the years-long backlog of rage against her was entirely theoretical before then, one trajectory he never actually planned to take until he was rocketing away on it. “It’s just that ever since Ethan was here, all this stuff has been coming up. Watching her with him, thinking about all the ways she screwed me over when I was a kid…” He shrugs. “And, normally, I’d just drink all that away, but I’m not drinking now. So I guess I don’t know what to do with all these feelings.”

Hank slumps against the backrest of his chair, his eyes intense and exasperated beneath his gray brows. “You do the work. You come meet with me, you call me, and you go to meetings, and you make friends in the program, and you work. You don’t get that. You’re half-assing this whole thing and then wondering why it’s not giving you results.”

Bucky’s mouth twists downward and he looks at his hands, which are curled around his half-empty cup of black coffee, the sleeves of his shirt pulled down to the knuckles, the fabric stretched that way from the force of his habit to cover himself. The order and logic of Hank’s words make perfect sense. Bucky’s been in AA long enough to know how it’s supposed to work, how he’s been skipping superficially over the surface, how Hank has been trying to push him deeper. How he’s been resisting.

“I told you that you had one more chance to get serious about this. And you didn’t step up,” Hank says seriously.

“You gonna fire me now?” Bucky asks, glancing at Hank’s face, searching for any possibility that he’ll get one more shot, even though the sinking sensation in his gut tells him that he probably won’t. Hank doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to give second chances, especially ones as unearned as this one would be.

“Yeah, I am gonna fire you,” Hank tells him. “I’ll talk to Wanda to see if she could be your temporary sponsor until you can get a new one.”

Bucky could see this coming, of course, in the inevitable way a falling man can see the ground rushing up to meet him. But even though he’s been preparing himself for the likelihood of this day, it still hurts. The rejection, the knowledge that Bucky invited it with his lackadaisical approach to sobriety, even with fair warning… it hurts. Bad.

Bucky gives a weary snort. “So, that’s it.”

Hank crosses his arms over his stomach. He looks away, out the window, into the street, which is brown with dirty, melting snow. “One of the biggest parts of recovery is becoming accountable for your actions. It’s not about shitting on people who wronged you. Resentments are about you, not the other people. But I suppose it’s easier to blame your mother for how you are than to take any responsibility for your part.”
Bucky bristles, gripping his cup tightly, the tips of his fingers going white. “I was a kid, Hank. You’re saying I should have been responsible for her bullshit as a kid?”

Hank looks back at him then, unfolding one arm so that he can point a chiding finger in his direction. “You might have been a kid then, but you’re an adult now. And you can take responsibility for the quality of your relationships, now that you’re an adult.” He relaxes his arm and gathers his hands again over the modest rise of his belly. “Though I’m not sure you can even relate to others as an adult. You never really grew up, which makes sense, considering how young you were when you started drinking. When you started running away from everything with booze and whatever else. And in some ways, you’re still twelve years old, flailing in pain, pushing everyone away one moment and trying to bring them closer the next, and you’re wondering why people can’t stay around you for long. It’s confusing and frustrating.”

“So, basically, I’m a twelve-year-old pretending he’s 30. Pretending to have adult relationships when he’s not equipped to have them.” Bucky says this slowly, as slowly as the words permeate, tilting his head as they sink through his layers of excuses and defenses.

Hank nods. “Exactly. And that’s one reason why this is so hard for you. And I sympathize. I really do. But I have to draw boundaries somewhere, for my own sake. I don’t want to invest in you and your sobriety if you’re not going to invest in either of those things. And I like you, Jamie. I do. But you’re obviously not ready to work, and so I can’t spend my time helping you if you’re just looking for excuses to stay stuck. I’m sorry if that’s hard to hear.”

Bucky takes a sip of his coffee. It’s bland on his tongue. His whole body feels bland, tired and defeated, save for a niggling ache in his gut. It could be an ache over anything; he’s fucked up so badly this week that the sensation has become a constant companion. But he thinks it might be the ache over disappointing Hank. Maybe the ache over losing this thing they have, whatever it ended up being. Something good that could have been better, if Bucky had only let it.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says.

“Well, I appreciate it, but sorry will only get you so far, if there’s no action behind it.”

Bucky gestures between them. “So, I guess we’re done here.”

Hank shakes his head in the slow, worn-out way that he does when Bucky is underworking, underachieving, or undervaluing. “You could do this, you know. If you really wanted to. But maybe the consequences just haven’t gotten bad enough for you to really want recovery. True recovery.”

Bucky makes a skeptical face. “Consequences haven’t gotten bad enough? How could they get worse? I already hit my rock bottom. Last April.”

“Did you?” One of Hank’s heavy eyebrows climbs. “I wonder about that. I wonder what more you have to lose for you to get serious about this.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why this is so hard.”

“You must still be getting something out of this, or else you wouldn’t keep doing it.”

“Fucked if I know,” Bucky says with a flippant shrug.

Hank smiles thinly. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

They cut their meeting short. Hank would have stayed longer and offered his time to help Bucky plan for the next stage of his work, but Bucky only has so much tolerance for others’ acute
disappointment in him. And he can only handle a few more minutes of Hank’s mournful resignation before he collects his things in his messenger bag and leaves. Hank watches him go, helpless, like Bucky is already lost, a drunk beyond redemption. Bucky was told to wait for Wanda’s call, and it’s a laugh-and-a-half, because Bucky initially wanted so badly for her to sponsor him. But now the thought of working with her instead of Hank fills him with the kind of primordial unease that makes him want to throw up his hands and chuck his Big Book in the nearest dumpster.

Why the fuck is he even doing this, anyway? He’s just waiting out the clock to get his license back, but he doesn’t owe the legal system any more meetings or feigned efforts. He doesn’t owe the VA. He doesn’t owe Winnie. He doesn’t owe himself. The only reasons he can think to not walk to the liquor store right now are Rikki and Steve, who are enough to stay him for now, but God knows how much longer they’ll be able to keep him sober just through their existence. God knows they weren’t enough before. And maybe he deserves to go off the deep end and lose them. He’s already set so many of his bridges aflame, including the one with his mother. Even after everything she’s been through with him, he’s doubtful that he and Winnie can come back from where he’s taken them.

The train ride back to Brooklyn is unusually short and spent almost entirely in Bucky’s wickedly spiraling head — spirals around Hank and Winnie and Steve and Thor… God, Thor. God, that incredible cock. God, that phenomenal body. God, that easy goodness, that keen desire. Bucky loves to spiral his thoughts around that man, loves the way it warms his body and heats up his blood, and as soon as he gets some reception, he shoots Thor a text asking if he can come over, because he just needs this man to steal his mind for a while. He needs to get fucked, hard and breathless. Fucked until he’s so full of cock and ecstasy that there’s no more room for anything else inside him. Excitement spools up in his belly when he gets a text back.

*I can be home in an hour*

*Good because I want you to fuck me so hard that I forget my own name*

The train goes back underground and all his bars disappear. In the dead space, Bucky’s nerves sing to life, because it’s been a year-and-a-half since he’s been fucked — Jesus fucking Christ — and, oh yeah, he’s so disgusted by his own body that he can’t even look at it, and oh yeah, Thor’s cock is fucking huge, a challenge even when he was taking dick on the reg. Jesus Christ. He doesn’t know how the fuck it’s going to work, but it has to. Somehow.

He gets two bars back.

*I can be home in an hour*

*Good because I want you to fuck me so hard that I forget my own name*

The train goes back underground and all his bars disappear. In the dead space, Bucky’s nerves sing to life, because it’s been a year-and-a-half since he’s been fucked — Jesus fucking Christ — and, oh yeah, he’s so disgusted by his own body that he can’t even look at it, and oh yeah, Thor’s cock is fucking huge, a challenge even when he was taking dick on the reg. Jesus Christ. He doesn’t know how the fuck it’s going to work, but it has to. Somehow.

He gets two bars back.

*Gladly. Can’t wait*

Bucky slides his phone back in his pocket and takes a deep, shaking breath. He rubs his hands together as the train seems to gain speed, bringing him home faster than his thoughts can collect themselves. By the time he limps through the front door, he’s got a to-do list going in his head that feels overwhelmingly long. Most of the things on it are artifacts from his beautiful days, back when his body was something he shared gratuitously. And as he digs through his dresser and closet, he wonders if he should even bother with some of it. There’s no way he’s gonna let Thor see him up close. No way he’s gonna let him touch or see his shredded dick. Fuck, how’s that even gonna work? They could pull the shades. That should work. He could lie on his stomach. Then he could focus on relaxing, because, fuck, he’s gonna need it. *Fuck.*

He finds one pair of fuck-worthy Calvin Kleins at the bottom of his drawer and fishes them out, then settles for black pants and a dark gray sweater that Steve definitely did not get him, dark and sexy as his limited wardrobe gets. He limps to the bathroom and takes time with his face, working over his stubble carefully with his razor, holding his wrist with his left hand to keep his right steady. He then
peels off his shirt and uses the clippers Steve got him for Christmas to buzz off his chest hair. He should really shave it properly with a razor, but he figures it’s good enough for fucking in the dark. He then unbuttons his pants, steps out of them, and pulls his underwear down just far enough to trim his pubes. God, this is fucking pointless, too, but he can’t not do it. He then slips his shirt back on, limps to his closet, and digs around the bottom of it to look for his overnight bag, the one he takes to all of his planned sexual encounters, careful not to look too closely at his bare legs as he moves the piles around. He takes a brief inventory — condoms, lube, and poppers, which he’ll most definitely need. Thank God nothing is quite expired. He also finds his enema kit and brings it to the bathroom along with the lube and washes out his ass. It feels good. It always feels good to feel warm inside, then empty and clean, ready to be filled up again, ready to be fucked into oblivion.

Jesus, he can’t wait for it, even as he dreads it. Even as he simmers with a low-burning shame over going to Thor for it. Because if anyone should be fucking him, shouldn’t it be Steve? Isn’t that what he’s been pining for all these years? Weren’t Alex and Thor and the endless slew of other men just poor approximations, frantically sought replacements for the real thing? And yet, here he is, with Steve literally in the same bed most nights, seeming more unreachable than he ever has, and Bucky can’t wait to take his pleasure in one of his facsimiles. Because at least Thor is present when they fuck. At least he’s hard and wanting. At least Bucky can make him come. At least he doesn’t look like he’s walking to his execution or running some algorithm for how physical intimacy is supposed to go. And isn’t it okay to want to be wanted? Isn’t it okay to hang onto one small part of himself that wants to be desired? With everything Khalidia has ripped away from him, with everything Winnie has robbed him of, isn’t it fine to hope that maybe something can be normal again?

Bucky strips naked and looks himself in the mirror, which fortunately isn’t large enough to reflect most of his injuries. He’s suffered so much from them. He’s wallowed so long, denied himself so fervently. Suffered so powerfully. So isn’t this okay? Isn’t at least some part of this okay? God, it’s not perfect, but what the fuck is? What the fuck can possibly be perfect for people like him? Maybe perfection is vestigial now, as ancient and outmoded as his artifactual sex prep routine. Maybe it’s time for him to scrape something new out of the shit pile Iraq left him with, and maybe that something new is Thor Odinson. Maybe this is the second chance he never deserved, never earned, and wouldn’t he be crazy not to take it?

Yes, he thinks. This is okay. What’s happening now is okay. Where he’s going this afternoon is okay. Getting fucked is okay. Bucky tilts his chin up, and if he does it just right, it’s almost like he believes it. Fake it ‘til you make it — isn’t that what Kate always said?

And so he fakes it in front of the mirror and fakes it in the shower and fakes it as he gets dressed. Fakes it at he grabs his sex bag and limps outside to the cab he called. And when he gets to the front door of Thor’s building, he fakes it with the doorman and fakes it in the lobby. Fakes it all the way up to Thor’s floor, wondering all along when the make-it part happens, because he’s scared and impatient and still hears that low soundtrack of self-hatred even as he’s knocking on the door.

Thor opens it. Bucky smiles. And it’s almost not fake.

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Steve paces the waiting room of the primary care clinic, back and forth past the rows of wheezing old men and the smattering of his angry-faced OEF/OIF cohort mates. They’ve all been giving him nervous looks for the last thirty minutes, like he’s fixing to lose his shit at any moment. And maybe he is. He’s been considering the possibility, because something in him is clawing through his insides, threatening to rip out of him and explode into the world. And walking like this, discharging what small energy he can, is the only thing that seems to be keeping that clawing thing in check.
The door to the offices opens and a nurse comes out, and Steve stops like he’s done each time he sees one of them, listening for his name and hearing Mister Davis, Mister Davis for Doctor Brown. Steve scowls and resumes his course, edging closer to something terrible with each passing minute — he just knows it, feels it — until Hope finally comes for him. Her smile is a little forced, a little frazzled, the smile he might give back to her if he could stretch his mouth into one.

“Hey, Steve. Is everything okay?” she asks as she holds the door open for him.

He starts down the corridor toward her office, slipping past an old woman in a wheelchair and a clump of nurses fretting over the copier. “No.”

Hope follows a few clacking, high-heeled steps behind him and doesn’t prompt him for anything else until she’s got him in her office. He takes his seat but doesn’t relax into it, perching on the edge like he’s planning to spring from it at any moment.

“I’m having problems,” he blurs out. “Sexually.”

Hope can’t quite settle in her seat, either, holding tension in her limbs even as she crosses them. “All of a sudden?”

Steve shakes his head. “For a month or so.”

And now she’s confused. It’s not a look she wears often, even when he’s saying things that confound her. She always seems to be able to root around in his disorder and find clues to the truth and, sometimes, even the truth itself. But now, she looks at him with perplexed concern, and it does nothing to soothe that scraping thing inside.

“I’m sorry, I don’t want to sound insensitive,” she says, “but why are you coming to me now rather than waiting for our appointment next week? Why the emergency?”

“It’s causing problems.”

“Urgent problems?”

“Yeah.”

Hope purses her lips, regarding him for a long moment, before swiveling around to grab her portfolio and pen off her desk. “Okay. Well, what kind of problems are you experiencing?”

Steve’s lips part for an answer to pass through, but as he flicks through the rolodex of his humiliating sexual failures over the past month, he can’t seem to shape it into words.

“Problems getting or maintaining an erection?” she offers.

“Both,” he forces out, his cheeks and armpits heating. “Also climaxing. And I have no drive.”

“Have you noticed anything in particular that seems to make it better or worse?”

“No.” His problems have been frustratingly variable, consistent only in his sheer inability to please Bucky in any way. He reconsiders his response only when he remembers the living room couch with Ethan sleeping just down the hall. “Well, maybe. Like… if we’re getting into it, sometimes I feel sick.”

“Sick how?” Hope asks.

“Like I’m gonna puke.”
“And other times, you can’t get an erection or reach orgasm.”

“Yeah.”

Hope swivels around in her chair again, pulling up his chart on her computer. She clicks through it as Steve watches over the tight line of shoulders. “Some of that could be related to your medications, especially the citalopram. It’s a known side effect. But the other part, the feeling sick, that doesn’t sound like the meds.” She turns back around to him. “When did that first happen, and what was the context?”

Steve closes his eyes, because it’s the best way for him to remember, even if he’s loath to revisit his embarrassment in such vivid detail. He walks her through it aloud. They were kissing. Making out. Bucky was on top of him. They were both into it. Bucky moaned… Steve frowns, then. He swallows. Bucky moaned, and Steve thought… he thought about Khalidya. He thought about Bucky getting blown up, and he almost puked. And they had to stop.

He opens his eyes, adding, “And I haven’t been able to perform at all, and it’s bad, and I need something for it.”

Hope touches the tip of her fancy pen to her bottom lip, thoughtful gaze directed at one of the water-stained ceiling tiles. “Did he make a sound like that when he was injured?”

It’s a stunning question, in the truest sense of the word. Steve’s brain pedals around the facts as he sits in frozen silence. Bucky was blown up, Bucky moaned on the ground. Steve vomited. Bucky experienced pleasure, Bucky moaned on the couch. Steve nearly vomited. The math is elementary, so basic that it eluded him entirely.

“Yeah.”

Hope nods slowly, then lays her portfolio and pen on her desk again, like she’s done all the complex calculations she needs to do to figure him out for today.

“Steve, I know you don’t want to hear this, but that’s probably PTSD.”

It hits him like a bottle over the head. PTSD. PTSD. Fucking goddamn motherfucking PTSD, the last fucking thing he wants to hear about for the rest of his goddamn life.

“I don’t give a fuck what it is,” he snaps. “I need it fixed. Just give me something for it. Viagra. Whatever. I don’t care.”

In the quiet that drags out between them, only Steve’s heavy, furious breathing is audible. Hope sits back in her chair, and for the first time since he asked for this emergency appointment, she looks relaxed, wholly in her element. “What’s going on with you right now?”

Steve frowns, and he almost tells her the truth. Just almost. He almost says that Bucky came home last night, and there was something about the way he was, some nameless, colorless element, that threw Steve right back into a dark chapter of their past. Back to those times when Bucky would disappear and come home and grumble and evade and run to the shower like he was suffering without it. And Steve has been trying so hard to cast it aside, reassure himself that there’s nobody Bucky would be running to, that he probably was at a meeting and maybe it really was hot, because maybe there were a lot of people there. But it keeps boomeranging around, knocking him off balance, and he can’t help but think that if he could only get it up, if he could only give Bucky what he wants, which really isn’t much — just a simple hard-on, just some simple come, things his body has produced a million times since he was a kid — then everything would be fine. It would be back.
to normal, whatever their normal is, and it would be good. And they could move forward together and be just fucking fine.

“I’m just sick of everything being a goddamn problem, and I just want one thing to go smoothly. I just want to have one goddamn thing that doesn’t suck. I can’t even fuck anymore.” Steve’s voice cracks through the tight strain in his throat. “How fucking sad is that?”

“Depression and PTSD and stress take a toll on sex drive and sexual response. When your body is depressed and stressed out, sex is one of the last things it wants to engage in.” Hope pauses then, eyes going soft. “I wish you would be more compassionate with yourself.”

Steve choking out a scoff. “Compassion. Jesus Christ. Yeah, that’ll solve everything.” Even as he scorns her, he can feel her words sinking through his skin, warm and kind and true.

She breathes out a sigh through her nose and then rotates back around to her computer. She speaks with a distant complacency, acquiescing to his anger in a way that makes him feel even hotter and even more ashamed. “I’ll write you a script that might help with some of it, but it won’t help all of it.”

Steve scrubs his hands over his face, his skin burning under his palms. He listens without looking, because he’s too damn mortified by everything. His tone. His broken dick. His wretched desperation.

“Take it 30 to 60 minutes before sexual activity. It should help with your erections, but it might not help you attain orgasm. And it won’t help with the nausea.”

“Fine,” he mutters.

When she’s done typing the prescription order, she swivels back around to him. He lowers his hands, letting them fall heavily to his lap. He hopes he looks as contrite as he feels right now.

“Did something happen between you and Bucky?” she asks.

“No. And that’s the problem.”

Hope glances at the government-issued clock on the wall, the same one Steve had in his office back at the 107th. “Okay. Look, I’ve got a patient I’m late to see, so I have to let you go. Are we still on for the 26th?”

“Yes.”

Steve stands and shoves his hands into the pockets of his coat. He looks down at the floor, at his shoes and hers — he’s looked down at them so many times since he’s been coming here, when the pain gets too big, when he feels too humiliated or vulnerable to hold her gaze. She’s been walking his path with him so staunchly, so steadfastly, competent and solid and empathic, and she didn’t deserve anything he gave her today. Because it’s not about her at all. It’s about him. It’s about Steve Rogers and his endless, clawing, colorless fear.

“I’m sorry, Hope. I was out of line.”

She stands with him and gives him a pat on the upper arm. It’s gentle and professional. It’s exactly her. “It’s okay. I hope it helps.”

He nods and thanks her, even as he doubts that it will, because he’s grasping for a rope that’s about a foot out of his reach and getting further away by the second. And maybe it’s foolish to keep stretching his fingers out to it, but he’s not ready to look down yet. He’s not ready to see how far left
he has to fall.

He shoots Matt a text, asking if he needs him to come back to the office. Matt replies quickly with a ‘Go home and enjoy your weekend! See you Monday.’ But even though Steve has nowhere to go in a hurry, he still cuts a fast clip back to his car, his fucking Viagra rattling in his pocket. And as he sits in traffic on the way home, he twists the bottle between his fingers — Steven Rogers, sildenafil citrate, take 30-60 minutes before sexual activity, you impotent piece of shit. The traffic across the bridge is nearly stopped because some idiot switched lanes straight into a utility van, and as his Corolla crawls past the scene of the accident, he rubbernecks with low-grade interest, and just before the traffic bursts out on the other side of the wreckage, Steve shakes a pill into his hand and swallows it with some spit.

By the time he finds a parking spot a block down from their apartment, he’s got a headache. He squints his way down the sidewalk and makes his way inside, saying Bucky’s name as soon as he walks through the door. When there’s no reply, he drops his keys on the kitchen table, where he finds a note from Bucky about going to a meeting in the city, saying he’ll be back by 6, and Steve frowns down at his messy handwriting, at the way his plans clash with Steve’s, and he wonders if the meds will even still work by the time Bucky gets home. Steve wanted to surprise him. Steve wanted him to be home right now. Steve wanted to show him how hard he could get for him, prove that it was him and not Bucky, just like he said.

Steve toes off his shoes and goes to the bathroom to take a piss, and in the mirror, his face and neck are flushed bright red, probably as red as they were in Hope’s office today as he was recounting his many sexual inadequacies. When he’s done peeing, he squeezes his dick a little, just out of curiosity, just to see how it responds. He rubs a thumb gently along the head and squeezes his shaft some more, watching and feeling as it hardens at his touch. He hasn’t watched himself like this in a long time, and he’s quietly fascinated by it as he works himself harder and harder, until it feels a little too hard a little too quickly, skin stretching tight, and the only thing that seems to relieve the sensation is to stroke it, which he does a few times before realizing that this is most definitely a time for some serious lube.

So he walks to his room, cock in hand, and pulls off his pants and underwear when he gets there. He props himself up on a few pillows and grabs the lube from his nightstand drawer, so underused that he has to fish it out from underneath a pile of notebooks and other junk he’s amassed since living here. And when he starts jerking himself in earnest, it feels like such a relief, like shucking off his ruck sack after a 10-mile road march, a relief that keeps going and going until he starts to let his mind wander, because he wants to be able to do this for real, when it matters, when Bucky needs it. So he calls up the image of Bucky watching him jerk off, Bucky sucking him off, but instead of ratcheting up his enjoyment, it lands like a layer of sawdust, dampening everything.

Steve sighs and thinks harder, of other times they’ve fucked, reliable images that have done him in plenty of times in the past. But each one makes his brow furrow deeper, his hand pump more furiously, and every time he edges close to finishing, something rips him back — the look on Bucky’s face when Steve couldn’t come, the look on Bucky’s face when he couldn’t get hard, the look on Bucky’s face when Steve shoved him away on the couch — and he growls, stroking as fast and hard as he can now, until he yells ‘Fuck!’ into the room and pulls his hand away and punches it into the mattress while he continues to curse, his painfully hard cock staring up at him like it’s fucking mocking him.

Steve clutches the side of his head with his clean hand, which is now pounding in time with the pounding of blood in his groin, and he hisses another expletive, because how much more fucking pathetic could he look right now? How much more fucking pathetic could he be right now? He wonders if there’s a limit to it, a critical mass of degradation, because he’s not sure how much more
he can take, and he hopes that he doesn’t have to find out what that particular limit is.

After stewing in pain and discomfort for a few more minutes, Steve walks back to the bathroom, his erection still achingly insistent even after he crams it back into his underwear. He pops a sumatriptan for the migraine he’s courted and goes back to his bed to flop down upon it. There he closes his eyes tightly and tries to relax his muscles, until all he can feel is the rhythmic thrum-thrum-thrum in his dick and in his head. What a fucking stupid idea this was. What a fucking cosmic joke, certainly the unfunniest one that the universe has pulled on him in a long time. And for some hideous reason, all Steve can entertain now is what his son would think of him, lying here with an unstoppable, medically-induced boner tenting his drawers, squirming because there’s no way to ease it. He lays his hand on it, pressing down just to give it something, but it’s not enough.

It’s nowhere near enough.

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“Are you okay?”

Thor’s voice is steady, so much steadier than Bucky’s, which is something of a marvel considering he’s been planking over Bucky’s splayed body for the past Jesus Christ knows how long.

It’s been hard for Bucky to track the passage of time, now that the sun has gone down. He got here around five thirty, and Thor invited him in, holding his long, muscular arm out to the expanse of his luxury apartment, with its blues and grays and modern lines and its spectacular view. There’s a familiarity to it, a comfort that Bucky takes in being enveloped by the hallmarks of wealth. Nice furniture. Expensive art. Newest electronics. Because he was groomed that way so long ago, back when he was starry-eyed and unworldly and thought that Alexander Pierce hung the moon — or, at the very least, paid for its mounting in the sky.

But unlike the other times he’s walked through the door, today Thor’s place felt cold. Too clean. Too organized. Too foreign. They chatted awkwardly in the kitchen, leaning up against the counter, drinking water. Drinking fucking water — and not even the bubbly kind — out of narrow highball glasses. And Bucky held his glass extra tight and shoved his other hand deep in his pocket to keep Thor from seeing him shake. And the chatter spiraled and Thor moved in close, tracing the line of Bucky’s arm with the tips of his fingers, down to Bucky’s empty glass, which he pried from his grasp and set on the counter behind him. And he touched Bucky’s face, tenderly, and kissed him with that same tenderness, and it was soft and perfect, and even still, Bucky’s mind spun back to Brooklyn, conjured images of Steve coming home from work, finding the note that said he’d be home around six, and then Bucky wondered how they were going to get this fucking business done in the next fifteen minutes so he could dash back home and, fuck, how could he so grossly underestimate how long it would take to get here and fucked and back again…?

But he tried to relax into Thor’s mouth and Thor’s large hands. He tried to forget about the manic dash of time and Steve’s worried face and the image of Steve wandering the apartment, ghosting through each room because he doesn’t know what else to do with himself. And Bucky blacked the image out and let Thor take him through the living room, where Bucky had to stop and sit on the couch like an old man to take his boots off. And after, Thor helped him up from the couch, so easily, like Bucky was as insubstantial as a broomstick, and they made their way to the bedroom, Thor kissing him slowly and deeply along the way, Bucky grabbing Thor’s waist and his ass, smelling Eternity and tasting toothpaste. And Thor’s room was already dark, just like Bucky asked for it to be, the vertical blinds drawn three-quarters of the way, with only the dim city lights leaking through to paint the room dark blue. And even though Bucky could feel the drag of time, ticking with the hot pulse of his blood, he wanted to suck Thor’s cock again so bad, to help him get a load out so that
their fucking could last longer, because even though he knew how late it was getting, Bucky wanted to get fucked forever and ever and ever.

And so he pulled Thor’s clothes off, tossed them to the floor, and blew him on the bed, wrangling his mind as it wandered, bringing it back to the task of making that gorgeous man come in his mouth. And after he did, Thor started pulling at Bucky’s clothes, pushing up his sweater, fingering the waistband of his pants, and Bucky froze then, suddenly and profoundly regretting this entire evening. But Thor was so good to him, cooing against his neck, kissing him there, telling him that he didn’t have to do anything he didn’t want to, reassuring him that he was beautiful, that his scars didn’t matter, that he’s still so sexy, and it was enough for Bucky to let Thor undress him, slowly, touching him carefully, keeping his hands above the belt and off the limbs. And when they were both naked, Bucky jerked Thor hard again and said he was ready, and he grabbed one of Thor’s throw pillows and placed it under his hips so that he was face down on the comforter, ass in the air. And Thor rimmed him to try to relax him, and for a little while, it was good, and he was really turned on, and he pressed his dick into the pillow, and it felt nice — until he glanced back to see what Thor looked like when he was eating his ass, and Bucky saw the way the light hit his own pale, bare skin, and all he could think was how Thor could see how scarred up his ass cheek is and how hideous the gouge on his back is. And Bucky wondered what time it was, because there was no clock, and he tried to gauge it from how dark it was getting outside, pointless, since the sun had long set, and he wondered if Steve was really worried now — not that he would know, since he shut his phone off before he even got here. And then Thor was lubing up his finger and sliding it in, and Bucky was so fucking tight, so fucking anxious, that he started huffing on the poppers he brought. And, Jesus, Thor must have spent thirty minutes just fingering him, and then another twenty just trying to get the head of his dick in, which he’s still trying to do this very moment.

“Do you want to stop?” Thor asks. He’s been careful to keep anything out of his voice that might resemble displeasure, annoyance, or frustration, all the things that Bucky is feeling right now, all stacked atop the sourness that has simmered in his gut all evening.

“No, I’m fine. Just gimme a sec.”

Bucky shakes up the little brown plastic bottle he’s clutching, screws open the top, and snorts deeply. The pungent vapor shoots straight to his brain, and he gets warm and lightheaded, and his temples pound, and he wills his ass to relaxrelaxrelaxrelaxfuckingrelax.

“Okay,” Bucky says, screwing the top back on and setting the bottle nearby on the mattress. He lays his head down on his crossed forearms and takes a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

Thor tries again, and God damn it, it still feels like he’s trying to cram his whole fist up in there. Bucky tenses against it with a low growl, clenching his hands so tightly that his nails bite his skin. “Jesus Christ… Maybe more lube?”

“There’s more than enough lube,” Thor assures him, and Bucky can feel the barest shift in the memory foam between his legs as Thor sits back on his heels.

“Fuck.” Bucky takes another hit off the poppers, which makes him so dizzy so fast that he can’t even keep his head up. So he lowers his forehead to the mattress and fiddles the cap back on blind. “Try now…” he mumbles into the comforter.

There’s a wet sound then, a fist slicking up and down a lubed up cock. And then Thor is braced over him again, arms framing Bucky’s body, and that pressure is there again, and it edges in bit by bit by exruciating bit, and it fucking hurts for no goddamn fucking reason, because since when does getting fucked in the ass with a gallon of lube and probably a whole goddamn hour of prep fucking hurt? But it does, and Bucky clutches the sheets and hisses.
Thor heaves a sigh, his first of the evening, and carefully pulls out the little bit of himself he managed to cram up there. “I’m stopping this.”

Bucky looks over his shoulder, reeling with dizziness. “No, it’s fine. I just need a little…” He grabs for the poppers again, but Thor’s hand comes down faster, and he tosses the bottle onto the floor.

“Stop,” Thor says firmly. “It’s not working. We’re stopping.”

Bucky groans loudly into his forearms as Thor flops down on the bed beside him.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says.

“It’s okay,” Thor replies coolly, and Bucky can hear him peeling off his empty condom and tossing it into the trash next to the bed. It lands with a limp, sticky sound.

Bucky pulls at the pillow he’s propped up on and throws it on the floor, not even wanting to know what disgusting state it’s in. He was so hard and dripping for a while, but after he became acutely aware of how exposed he was, it was mere stubbornness that kept him there, wanting to go all the way because he knew it’d feel like shit to tap out. Just like it feels like shit right now. And, really, this whole night has felt like shit, even the best parts. It feels like shit because it’s running — at least, that’s what Bucky thinks this is. Hank says that he’s always running away, all those years of running, running, running, and how could he know himself with all that running? And Bucky’s never caught on quite this fast before, never caught himself running as he was actively doing it. But here is he is, right in this very moment, running away from Steve. Chasing an ecstatic escape because he can’t stand how miserable it felt to call his mother a cunt. To get fired by Hank. To fail again and again, as if it should be some sort of surprise that he’s still doing it.

And when Steve couldn’t give him the kind of escape he wanted, even after he offered another — dinner and a fucking movie, God, how unbearably sweet — Bucky lied to him like a fucking whore and then went and acted like one. And then he did it again tonight, more self-loathing and more lies and more running, running, running. And for what? So he could be so preoccupied by his terrible behavior, by his guilt and shame, that he couldn’t even take a dick — the first dick he hasn’t been able to take in his entire adult life.

Jesus, what a fucking mess. What a fucking, incomprehensible mess he is. No wonder Hank fired him. No wonder Steve couldn’t get it up for him. He’s a goddamn fucking disaster, and he needs to make this right before he fucks something up irreparably. He needs to fix this. He needs to fix his entire self, from the ground up. And to do that, to even start to get his head back on straight, he needs to go home. Right now.

Bucky rolls slowly onto his back, grunting at the pain in his knee, the burn of his asshole, and the stiffness of his muscles. Surely no man so full of poppers was ever so fucking tense.

“This was a mistake,” he mutters into the dark.

Next to him, Thor shifts to his side, and in the glow from the city, Bucky watches him prop himself up on his upturned hand, his body a long, muscular line. His dick is hanging limp, already deflated.

“What do you mean?”

“I never should have come here. Not tonight, not yesterday. I fucked up.” Bucky sits up and scoots to the edge of the bed with a wince, sparing a disgraceful thought at how much lube he must be leaving on the comforter. Jesus Christ. “I have to go.”

“Back to Steve?”
Bucky stands slowly, finding his balance as his lingering dizziness threatens to throw him off. “Yeah. Back to Steve.”

“So it is less complicated than you said.” It’s an observation, one completely devoid of reproach, spoken with Thor’s melodic evenness.

“Yeah. It is. I need to be with him. I want to be with him.”

The stark clarity in Bucky’s voice startles him, a revelation so unexpected that it feels like a slap. And after a week of pitching angry slurs and lamenting his woeful past and hapless present, this feels good. It feels good to be sure of something — sure that he fucked up, yes, but for the first time in forever, also entirely sure of something that he wants.

“And I’m sorry I came here,” he continues. “I’m sorry for yesterday. I fucked up, and I shouldn’t have brought you into my mess.”

“So why did you come here?”

Bucky glances over his shoulder to gaze upon the man who’s been like no other for him, one with whom he’s shared something he might never have again — a love that’s simple and beautiful and maybe very brief, but real. And good.

“I guess I just thought maybe it would be nice to be together again. Like we were before,” Bucky says quietly.

Thor makes a small, ambiguous sound. “I meant to ask you yesterday — what do you mean by ‘together’?”

Bucky frowns and turns around to properly look at Thor, slowly and intensely, because like last night, he needs to see Thor’s face right now. He needs to anchor the words to something observable, some secondary proof, even though Bucky can only barely make out his face in the dark. Bucky reflexively gathers his hand over his groin, closely enough to cover himself but not so close that he can get a good feel of himself. And Thor’s face... God, it’s sincere enough. Curious, like he’s reached the limits of his English comprehension.

“What does ‘together’ mean?” Bucky replies. “Are you seriously asking me that?”

“Like do you mean boyfriends or something?”

“Something like that. Like we were before.”

Thor gives a single nod, and his focus drifts away from Bucky and toward the empty side of the bed, where there’s still an outline of Bucky’s lean body pressed into the blanket. “Ah.”

Bucky’s tone escalates as an uneasy disbelief stirs sharply in him. “Ah? Ah? What the fuck does that mean?”

“What we had before, the way I saw it...” Thor pauses. “I thought we were having fun.”

“I mean, we were having fun, weren’t we?”

“I mean, just having fun,” Thor clarifies. And he looks up at Bucky again, and there’s an apologetic kink to his brow, and Jesus Christ... This is an apology. This is a motherfucking apology.

“Just having fun,” Bucky repeats distantly. “Just fucking around, you mean.”
The ridge between Thor’s blonde brows deepens. “…I suppose.”

Bucky scoffs and turns away, halfheartedly scanning the room, because he needs his clothes. He needs to get dressed. He needs to fucking go. And… and he needs his clothes. And his words keep coming as he walks to the first thing he sees and picks it up, checking it, feeling the fabric between his fingers, smelling it.

“So all that shit about being real, being good…” Bucky says, tossing the shirt aside when he realizes it’s not his. “When I was talking about it being the healthiest relationship I’ve ever had… You didn’t even think—”

“Well, that’s when I started to wonder,” Thor admits softly. He’s sitting up now, cross-legged, watching Bucky scavenge in the dark.

“Yeah? Started to wonder if I was a fucking idiot who was completely misreading everything?”

“Not an idiot. No, not at all—”

“Why the fuck would you say all those things about me?” Bucky says, straightening his posture and clutching what he thinks are his pants in his better hand. “I’m sweet and all that bullshit, that it was real and good?”

“It was real, and it was good,” Thor says emphatically. And then he looks down at his own lap, maybe at his own giant dick. Bucky can’t really tell. “But… don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re just not the type I would, you know… settle down with.”

Bucky stops cold on his way over to someone’s underwear, which is hanging off the edge of the dresser. “Oh, wow.” He nods absently as the confession sinks through him. “Wow....”

Thor reaches over to the lamp and flips it on, flooding the room with harsh, white light. “I really—”

“Don’t fucking look at me,” Bucky snaps, squinting, covering his genitals with the pants in his hand, which, fucking hell, aren’t even his. He tries to turn away, but he’s not sure which way to turn, because all sides of him are marred and repulsive.

Thor covers his eyes with his hands, pressing his palms into them with a deep, serious frown. “I’m so sorry, Jamie. I never wanted to hurt you. I just didn’t think you thought we were together-together.”

Bucky throws Thor’s goddamn pants, and they hit with a dull thud of denim against painted drywall. “Then why the fuck take all my calls when I was downrange? Why the fuck ask if I’m seeing someone? Why get mad at all when I dropped off the grid last year?”

“Because I care about you,” Thor insists. “I thought we were friends.”

God damn it, Bucky can barely fucking stand the kindness in his voice, even as the realization of what it all means tears his fucking guts out. He starts moving quickly, limping to the things that are his, stooping in pain and snatching them up, his words coming in a hurt, angry spate.

“Jesus Christ. Jesus Fucking Christ… How could I be so fucking stupid? No wonder you forgave me so fast. This didn’t mean a fucking thing to you, so why the fuck would you be mad?”

“It meant something. It really did. Just not what you thought, I suppose.”

“I suppose not,” Bucky mocks. He hobbles over to the wall to lean against it while he slides his underwear back on. “So what’s my fucking problem, huh? While we’re being so fucking
transparent. Why am I so fucking un-datable? So absolutely fucking unlovable? What about me is so
fucked up that the thought of us being a real couple is a fucking joke to you?”

Thor uses his legs to drag himself to the edge of the bed, still keeping his eyes tightly covered. “It’s
not a joke.” He pushes out a sigh then, a long one that buys him time to craft his killing stroke just
right. “I just would want to be with someone who’s more stable. You’re wild, and it’s very
charismatic and sexy. But you’re not a very stable person. And I want stability in a partner.”

Bucky barks out a laugh, hopping unsteadily as he drags his pants up over his wrecked legs.

“So you want some unstable, charismatic asshole to shove your dick in and that’s it.”

Bucky shakes his head incredulously as he fumbles with his button and fly, then he limps over to the
other side of the room when he spots his shirt, crumpled up near the doorway. Thor stands then,
 facing the sound of him. He drops his hands but keeps his eyes closed, and God, he does look sorry.
He really does. Truly fucking sincerely. And for some reason, it makes Bucky feel even stupider,
because Thor is a goddamn open book, and it was like Bucky completely forgot how to read
altogether. He finds both socks, thank God, no Chapel Hill repeats, no blushing, hopeful Cinderella
bullshit. And he stoops down to grab his bag and limps back out to the living room, taking a seat on
the couch where he left his boots earlier that night.

Thor follows, eyes open now, still shamelessly nude. He watches Bucky put on his socks and shoes
from the doorway, giving him space as he offers more apologies, the infuriating earnestness pouring
out of him.

“I mean it, I never, ever meant to hurt you.”

Bucky grits his teeth as he yanks on the laces of his boots. Christ, he just wants to get the fuck out
of here, but the laces are so fucking tight — how the fuck did he even get them off in the first place?
Fuck. He strains to slip his right foot in, pushing out a grunt because it hurts like a bitch, and it makes
him cram his foot in even harder.

And Thor keeps talking, variations on the same goddamn apology, which should really be an
apology for thinking that Bucky wasn’t some pathetic, romantic idiot who latched onto the first man
after Steve to ever be sweet to him.

“I had no idea you felt this way. I really didn’t,” Thor says.

Bucky swears when he realizes that he left his cane by the door, and this fucking couch is so low to
the ground that he has to scoot to the end of it and shove himself unsteadily to his feet using the arm
rest. He doesn’t take the time to tie his boots, because he can’t listen to this bullshit anymore. He
can’t tolerate the humiliation anymore. He can’t tolerate Thor Odinson and his heartfelt, even-handed
consideration. Bucky grabs his bag and makes his way to the door, passing through Thor’s sprawling
modern kitchen, passing their glasses, still on the counter.

And Thor is coming up behind him, and he just can’t shut the fuck up. He just can’t seem to leave
Bucky alone with his indignity. “And I’m so sorry I didn’t make it clear that—”

“Fuck you,” Bucky spits into the empty space in front of him, because he can’t bear to turn and say it
to Thor’s ridiculous, remorseful face. “Just… Fuck you.”

Thor’s footfalls stop, and Bucky grimaces as he gets exactly what he wants. He lays his hand on the
front door knob and yanks it open—

“Do you want a ride back? My driver can take you.”
Bucky has no words. No sound. No response that could even vaguely capture the staggering magnitude of his shame. His embarrassment. His pitiful need to be desired, to be loved, by someone who just wanted a fuck and some fun. And so he steps out into the hall and lets the door slam behind him, leaving Thor standing naked on the other side of it. He limps his way down to the lobby and catches a loitering cab just outside the building, ignoring the greetings of the lobby man and door man as he passes. And as he climbs into the back seat of the taxi, he begins frantically thinking about all the things he needs to say to Steve, all the things that have been long overdue. Years and years overdue. A lifetime overdue.

And the cab takes him back home, over the bridge and back to Steve. Back to where he belongs.

———

It’s late. Too late. Three hours too late. And Steve is pacing again, as he’s been doing on and off all evening, rising when the anxiety becomes too volatile, sitting when he manages to cool his nerves using the breathing technique Hope taught him. Some business she learned from some Navy SEAL, as if that makes it more credible and effective. Four in, hold four, four out, hold four. Despite his real efforts, the intervals of calm have grown shorter with each passing hour, so he blasts out texts whenever the impulse strikes, calls his small army of Bucky minders as many times as he thinks is enough to get people to take it all seriously. He’s called Bucky at least two dozen times, texted him almost as many. He’s called Winnie and Rikki and Daisy and then Hank, after Winnie gave him the number. It wasn’t appropriate of her to do so, not at all, but the whole damn family is on high alert now, and a scared family is a careless family, especially when they’re scared about an addict who has a history of not only dropping off the map but falling through it to the fire-hot center of the Earth.

Steve is still groggy from his migraine meds, which, combined with the acuteness of his worry, makes him feel strikingly off balance. At least his fucking dick finally went soft again while he slept off his headache, because that would have been one sick twist that this scenario definitely did not need.

Bucky has been late before, with increasing frequency in recent weeks. He’s been restless and edgy, unsettled and moody. But he usually at least shoots off a courtesy text, even if it’s terse or clearly annoyed. But tonight, there’s been nothing. Nothing but silence. All calls go straight to voicemail. And right now Steve has checked off every box, marshaled every resource he can, and all he can do now is pace and worry and huff and entertain a slew of terrible possibilities for why Bucky’s not here right now. Maybe he’s drunk. Maybe he’s in Prospect Park drinking vodka from a thermos. Winnie told him about that little gem from Bucky’s descent last year, as if the drunken spiraling scenarios he imagined at Bragg weren’t awful enough. Maybe he’s in some bar somewhere getting wasted with other people. Maybe they’re good people. Maybe they decide to beat the shit out of him because they don’t like gay men. Maybe he fell down the stairs at one of the fucking train stations, damn his insistence on taking the fucking subway everywhere. Maybe he was mugged or stabbed. Maybe… maybe he’s out somewhere with someone else. Maybe he’s flirting with someone else. Touching or kissing someone else. Fucking someone else. And those possibilities strike a particular chord of fear within Steve. Somehow, they feel like the most frightening of possibilities.

Suddenly there’s a creaking sound, the front door of the apartment building opening. Like all the other times it’s opened tonight, Steve stops, senses amplified, and when he picks up a succession of uneven steps, he knows. Bucky has a very distinct walk now, a heavy, syncopated gait, and there’s no doubt that it’s him. No doubt.

Steve dashes for the door and flings it open, and there’s Bucky, head hung low, staring at his own boots as he approaches, and Steve’s fists clench at his sides.
“Where the *fuck* have you been?” Steve yells into the hallway. “I’ve been texting you and calling you a thousand fucking times. We all have.”

“I know,” Bucky murmurs, refusing eye contact.

“And you didn’t think to reply even once?”

“Sorry.”

Steve backs out of the doorway, making space for Bucky to limp through. His hair is mussed, his shirt and pants wrinkled, face flushed pink. Steve slams the door shut as soon as Bucky gets inside, locking the deadbolt and knob with the brisk, angry flips of his wrist. He turns and looks at Bucky, who’s stopped in the middle of the kitchen. He’s just standing there, with some bag Steve’s never seen falling down his right shoulder.

“We were worried sick about you. We thought something happened to you.”

“I was out.”

Steve sneers and shakes his head. “No shit.”

“With Thor,” Bucky adds. And as he brings that name into the room, Steve feels a shift inside, his rage balling up and dropping through the bottom of his stomach, leaving behind only stunned emptiness.

“Huh,” Steve utters. He crosses his arms over his chest, then lets them fall back to his sides, each position feeling stiff and uncomfortable. “I didn’t know you were talking to him.”

Silence engulfs them. Bucky stares back down at his shoes.

“We didn’t just talk.”

...And there it is. There it fucking is. The mystery piece in this fucked up puzzle clicks into place, and suddenly, everything is immaculately clear. Every grain of friction, every second of hesitancy falls perfectly into context. And when Steve speaks again, his voice is flat and modulated, clinical, like Bucky is an experimental subject he’s observing, an academic problem Steve has finally solved.

“Of course you didn’t,” he says. “That’s where you went last night, right?”

Bucky nods.

“Figures. Your little AA story sounded a little too good to be true. How long has this been going on?”

Bucky shrugs one shoulder, and his bag slides further down. He catches it with his elbow and lowers it to the linoleum. “Just... Sunday. We had coffee. I went to apologize to him for dropping off the—”


Bucky finally looks up, his eyes wide, face stricken with desperation. “It was a mistake. It was all a mistake. All of it. It made me realize that I didn’t want him. That I wanted you. That I’ve wanted you this whole time, and I just couldn’t...”

Just couldn’t what, Steve doesn’t know. And he doesn’t really care. He nods and purses his mouth.

“Well, at least you got your needs met. That’s all that really matters.” Steve points between them
with his index finger. “This thing between us, I guess it’s nothing, right? Just two dudes sleeping in
the same bed. Just two friends kissing. Just two pals fucking — or trying to fuck, which is my bad.
Which I guess is the point of this story. When at first you don’t succeed, run back to your ex. That’s
how the saying goes, right?”

Bucky takes a handful of steps toward Steve. His hips are tight, his stride guarded. Steve gives a
weary snort. Must have been some fuck.

“I mean, we never talked about it,” Bucky says. “We never said we were a couple.”

“No, we didn’t. I guess I thought…” Steve briefly ducks his head, and when he lifts it again, he’s
wearing a smile, rigid and incredulous and utterly empty of joy. “You know what? I don’t know
what I thought. I thought this time might be different, I suppose. I thought it wasn’t like before, when
you were fucking someone on the side. Right?”

The pink drains out of Bucky’s face, leaving him blanched. “What do you mean?”

“Back when we were together. Before Afghanistan. You were fucking someone else, right?”

Bucky touches his hand to his face. His fingers are trembling as they trace a line over his brow.

“Not the whole time,” he admits, so quietly that the sound barely travels.

Steve thrusts his upturned hand in Bucky’s direction. “Not the whole time. Well, that’s good. How
long? How many?”

“One regularly. Others just once. Just at the beginning.”

“Do I even know this one person? All these random, nameless people?”

“No.”

“Of course I don’t. Stupid question.”

Bucky’s blue-gray eyes are plaintive. Beseeching. “Steve, I stopped everything with Thor because I
had to come here to tell you that I love you—”

“No!” Steve shouts. The word explodes into the room, like that clawing thing from before, and they
both flinch from the force of it. Steve snaps his mouth shut and shakes his head again. “No. You
can’t say you love me when your actions clearly say the opposite. You either love me and you act
like it, or you don’t. You don’t get to have it both ways.”

But that’s Bucky, isn’t it? Running away and dragging Steve behind him on a tether. Asking for
love, pining for it, and shoving Steve away whenever he tries to give it. When he begs for Bucky to
take it. For a man who’s made a thousand impossible choices in the span of a single deployment, his
inability to choose to accept love, wholly and unconditionally, is baffling. And Steve Rogers is just
about done with it.

“You just couldn’t be patient,” Steve says. “You asked me to be patient with you, and I’ve done
nothing but give you patience. But when I needed a little of it from you, you couldn’t give it. You
couldn’t be compassionate. You asked me one time about why I’ve been having problems, and that
was after I had to practically drag it out of you. Once again, I was the one who had to chase after you
and ask you to pretty please show me the smallest amount of consideration. Maybe if you made any
actual effort to understand what was happening, I would have told you that I’m on medications that
mess with me, but they also make it so that I can get out of bed in the morning. I’d also tell you that
when I hear you moan, I think about you getting blown up. I think about you moaning and groaning on the ground, bloody and blown up. But you barely even tried to understand, so I guess you didn’t really give a shit.”

Bucky opens his mouth, but no retort comes. No excuse or explanation. No refutation. No admission of understanding or empathy. Just bafflement and blistering silence. So Steve continues, lining up all the pieces for them both to see, walking them through, step by terrible step.

“And who could blame you? It would take effort to give a shit, and who has time for that? I’m sure Thor is very uncomplicated, and I’m sure he has no problems in bed.” Steve coughs out a laugh, vividly remembering Bucky’s sparkling appraisal of his perfect new boyfriend when they were downrange. “Oh, and he’s enormous — let’s not forget that detail you couldn’t possibly spare me. I guess getting fucked is the most important thing to you now. I never took you for shallow, God knows why, but I guess I was wrong.”

Bucky rests his cane against the oven door and his demeanor shifts, finally, eyes sharpening, mouth curling viciously. “Yeah, well, how the fuck was I supposed to know that? Why wouldn’t I assume it was because you didn’t want me anymore?”

Steve steps forward, squaring up to Bucky, taking some small satisfaction at the way Bucky shifts his weight back on his heels, the way his shoulders tilt. “Not everything is about you and your inability to be intimate with other people.” Steve drives his finger into the center of Bucky’s chest, pressing into his carelessly creased sweater to the hard bone of his sternum below. “That’s your hangup. That’s not mine. And I’ve told you. I’ve told you that I want you. Maybe you should listen to my words and not assume I’m lying because my dick wasn’t cooperating on a handful of occasions.” He lowers his hand back down to his side, curling it tightly. “Jesus, you barely even gave me a chance. You just ran away, like you always do.”

Steve searches Bucky’s face, the stubborn set of his jaw, the faintest hint of worry threatening to crack him around the edges. It’s the look of a cornered animal who is only starting to realize that he’s cornered, one bent on denial of that fact even as it becomes undeniable.

“I don’t know why I expected you to change,” Steve murmurs, distantly. And something moves him then, an avolitional energy, one that animates him and pulls him out of this little impasse of theirs. He glides past Bucky, their shoulders brushing, and walks to his room.

“Hey, where the hell are you going?” Bucky calls behind him.

Steve flips on his bedroom light and heads to the closet. And then his hands are digging, shifting items on the shelf until he finds his duffel bag, green heavy nylon that still smells like sand, his last name and last four of his social security number stenciled in black Sharpie along the side. Behind him, he hears Bucky step through the doorway, boots falling heavily on the wood floor.

Steve unfolds the bag, pulling at the bottom, smoothing the sides. His hands are steady, movements calm — meditative, even. He speaks in a tone that matches his movements, his own steps measured as they take him to his dresser. He opens the top drawer, one full of t-shirts, athletic clothes, and undershirts, and he starts stuffing them into the bag.

Bucky folds his arms over his narrow chest. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve been… I keep opening myself up to you over and over again. I keep hoping that you’ll love me the way I love you, and you keep breaking my heart over and over and over again.” He glances over at where Bucky is standing, helpless, fear actively dawning over the fine, handsome lines of his face. “That’s the definition of insanity, right? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting
something different?” Steve looks back down at his hand, the way it grabs at the folded stacks of clothes with such smooth confidence. “I guess I’m just really fucking insane. And I can’t afford it anymore, because it’s destroying me. Loving you is destroying me. And maybe I just need to stop.”

“Steve, answer me. What are you doing?”

Steve flattens his hand to the front of the open drawer and shoves it closed. The slamming echoes, skirting along the hard surfaces of the room, and it’s followed by the squeaking open of the next drawer down, where he grabs fistfuls of socks and underwear and drops them into the duffel.

“You need to grow up and figure out what you want out of this life, Bucky. And so do I. I thought I wanted you, but I don’t want this version of you.”

Bucky pushes out a long breath, and on the other side of it, his voice is thin and exhausted. “I really am sorry. I mean... I just keep fucking up, and I don’t even know I’m fucking up until I’ve already done it. It’s like I’m fucking broken.”

“Then fix yourself.”

“I will,” Bucky says, and it’s shaped like a promise, firm and impassioned.

“Good,” Steve says, nodding shallowly. “Good. But you’re gonna have to do it without me.”

“No…” Bucky’s arms slip, dropping limply as he straightens his spine. “Please, Steve, I fucked up. I really just fucked up, and I’m sorry. Lemme make it better. I can do better.”

Steve finishes cleaning out his underwear drawer and slams it shut. He shakes the bag a few times to settle everything at the bottom, looking into it as he crosses back to the closet. Bucky pivots to track him as he goes, but Steve doesn’t glance up to see what Bucky looks like now, because he doesn’t want to see. He doesn’t want to see anything that might slow him, anything that might steal this movement from him, this deeper wisdom that’s driving him. So Steve begins yanking shirts and pants off their hangers, cramming them in on top of his underwear, all while continuing to speak his thoughts as they come to him with preternatural serenity.

“You say you want me, but I think you only want the idea of me. You want the idea of someone who loves you so much that they sacrifice everything that they have for you. That they would throw away their engagement to a wonderful person, practically abandon their own child, just to be with you.”

Steve pauses, gazing upward thoughtfully, like Hope did in her office when she started to figure out the couch incident. And now Steve does the same, piecing together the patchwork of chaos that is Bucky Barnes, the chaos he’s flung across their universe while he flares like a dying sun.

“Steve, I never, ever asked you to—”

“And, you know,” Steve interrupts, “I really think you want to be able to accept love from other people. But you just can’t. You not only can’t accept it, you actively work to push it away. You hate yourself so much that you can’t tolerate how much I love you. You’ve never been able to. And I don’t think you ever will.” Steve goes back to his packing then, his movements sharpening, infusing with the keen hurt stirring in his chest. “And I can’t keep trying to give you my heart when you refuse to take it, because it’s too fucking fragile to keep breaking over and over, until it’s just a pile of dust.”

He scans the closet for something he might have missed. He can’t fit everything, but he’s packed enough of the essentials. Work shoes. Belt. Ties. Work shirts and pants. Shirts and pants for
whatever else. Sweatshirt and sweatpants. Steve turns then, finally daring to look at Bucky. His straight teeth are biting into the flesh of his lower lip, brows knitted nervously together, hands clamped at his sides. He looks scared now. No, not scared. It’s more than scared. It’s terrified. It’s the look of a man who’s dangling off the edge of a building, fingers weak and slipping, feet skidding and scraping in vain.

“I don’t have a lot of feelings now,” Steve states. “I get that. I’m fucked up. I’m really fucked up, and I need help. And I’m getting it. But the few feelings I have? They’re for you. They’re only for you. I don’t even have feelings for my own son, but somehow, I still love you. And I don’t know why.” He shakes his head weakly. “I really don’t.”

Bucky moves then, stepping forward carefully, like approaching too quickly, too desperately, might scare Steve straight out the door.

“I love you, Steve,” Bucky says, his voice gritting out of him, raw and pained. “I love you so much. And all I want is you. Really.” He reaches forward then, fingers ghosting toward Steve’s arm. “All I’ve ever wanted, since I was thirteen years old, is you. I can’t—"

“This isn’t how you treat people you love!” It bursts out of him, so forceful and unintended that he’s not prepared for how good it will feel to just shout, to unleash every over-pressurized drop of anger and insecurity that’s been percolating in him since Bucky started drifting away from him again. “Fucking other people, that’s not love. Being thoughtless and self-destructive, that’s not love. I don’t know if you even know how to really love someone. I really don’t. I think you have this idea of what love is. And I think you really feel it. I don’t doubt that you feel love for me. But you don’t know how to do love.”

Steve is moving again, because the things he’s feeling are molten and uncomfortable, and he can’t tolerate the way Bucky is looking at him right now, apoplectically concerned in a way Steve has never seen in him before. Not with the little girl he scraped off their vehicle. Not in the middle of an ambush. Not with Trip. Not at Khalidya. Not in any other place where he was faced with imminent death. And what a fucking thing, the way Bucky navigates the darkness with such deft courage but withers and languishes in the light.

Steve snags his glasses from his nightstand and hangs them off his collar, fucked if he can remember where he put the case now. Then he advances into the hall and rounds the corner to the bathroom, flipping on the light and snapping open the medicine cabinet without registering what he looks like now. He can’t even imagine what such hurt, such rage, such disembodied resignation might appear like on a face.

He scans through the rows of items, grabbing the ones that are his and dropping them into his duffel. Deodorant. Shaving cream. Four bottles of meds. He’s certainly not going to bring the fifth, that goddamn Viagra, which is so ridiculously, laughably pointless now.

Bucky follows him, and in his periphery, Steve can see him lean stiffly against the door jamb, like he’s trying to play cool while the apartment is burning to the ground. “I do feel love for you, Steve. I really do. So much. I wish you’d believe me and let me—"

“See, what you don’t get is that love isn’t just a feeling,” Steve continues, tone ratcheting as something inside him begins to bloom, something ugly and pressing and dangerous. “Love is also actions. You can’t say that the only thing you’ve ever wanted is me and then go track down your ex for sex when I can’t perform a few times. Because I’m fucking traumatized—"

Jesus, he’s choking now, choking on something brand new. A realization so long in coming, something Hope has been coaxing him toward, something he feels now so intensely that it’s crushing
him, and all that liquid energy is solidifying and splintering apart. He sags against the counter, bracing himself on it with his free hand, and looks down into the sink, which is coated with a light dusting of dark whiskers that have dried there. He tries to swallow, but his throat is stuck, seized with anguish so thick that he can barely force his words through it.

“Because I am fucking sick — sick in my fucking soul — over what happened to you. Because I love you so much that the thought of you being hurt makes me physically ill. Because the memory of you being hurt — the constant, unending memory of that — has fucking ruined me.” Steve’s hand clutches hard at the edge of the countertop, and it creaks as it bears more of his weight. “I can take my brain being broken. I can take the forgetfulness, the shit concentration, the abysmal IQ. I can live with all that. But I can’t…”

Steve clenches his teeth together, trying and failing to hold back a wretched sound, a backswing of a sob that he doesn’t let come. His bag slips out of his hand and thuds to the floor, and he presses his palm to the sink to steady himself.

“I can’t stand what happened to you. I can’t stand when you’re in pain. I can’t stand that you hate yourself so much, that you won’t accept who you are, that you reject the incredible, beautiful love we had because you think it’s disgusting. I just can’t stand it anymore. I can’t….”

His head dips low, lolling, eyes squeezed shut to keep anything from coming out of them. He stays like that, dimly aware of Bucky’s heavy breathing as he watches from the doorway, biting and squeezing everything back, because if he lets it go, he’ll fall apart, right here on the bathroom floor, right here at Bucky’s boots. And he can’t… he can’t do that, either, because he has to go. He has to go.

So he musters every meager ounce of resolve he has left and he rights himself, rolling his shoulders back, standing as tall as he can. He closes the medicine cabinet softly, pausing to take in the pathetic sight he sees in the mirror, a tired man with red, watery eyes and a chin that won’t stop quivering. A man who has nothing left to grasp for, nobody left to chase. Just empty space to float in, endless and vast and black. He sniffles and drops his gaze, collecting his toothbrush and razor from the countertop, then he gathers his bag and drops them in. He turns for the door, where Bucky’s standing, his own eyes shimmering just the same, his mouth contorted with grief. Steve steps toward him, stopping inches away, and Bucky… he smells like cologne, Steve’s cologne, and he pushes his hair back with an unsteady hand, grooming himself nervously, and what fucking timing to start looking pretty, because it’s just too fucking late. Steve makes his face a mask of determination, staring Bucky down until he shifts just enough to let Steve pass, and a whimper comes out of him as Steve goes by, and then the words “Please don’t leave me…” and Steve doesn’t stop, even when those words hook into him and sink into the swiftly dissecting walls of his heart.

Steve scans the kitchen, eyes moving back and forth frantically, snagging items off the countertop and table as he passes — his wallet, his keys, his sunglasses. He does the same in the living room, gathering his laptop and his portfolios and computer bag and his running shoes, his movements mechanical and purposeful, but imprecise, like a software program where the 1’s and 0’s have been nudged just a little to the left, just a hair, just enough for the output to look almost okay, almost controlled, almost — but not quite — normal.

And when Steve gets back to the front door, when he steps upon the welcome mat, he does a last careless pass to see what he’s left behind, landing on Bucky’s sorrowful face for a moment before he slips on his shoes and unlocks the door. He pulls it open and steps out into the hallway, and when he moves to close the door behind him, it stops. And Bucky is there, holding it open, bottom lip trembling, a fat tear threatening to drop off his eyelashes.
“Please.”

Steve lets go of the doorknob and walks, hoisting his bag over his shoulder. He forgot his coat — fuck, how could he forget that? — but he doesn’t turn back. He can’t, because he hears Bucky’s footsteps following him out, and he has to keep going, has to keep going, through the front door to the building and down the stairs. And, Jesus, Bucky’s after him still, his own steps slowing as he takes the stairs one at a time, the way he has to now, where he has to grab the railing and cringe and drop his weight a little too hard on his better leg. But Steve doesn’t look back to see him do it, because he can’t watch, he can’t stand to see—

“Steve!”

He slows to a stop now, but only because there’s something in Bucky’s voice, some visceral, primal despair that somehow rips Steve’s heart open even more, even though such a thing doesn’t seem possible. And then he feels Bucky’s hand on his arm, tight as his grip can go, and then Bucky’s there, right in front of him, bathed in brightness from the streetlight above him, clutching Steve by the shoulders. Asking. Begging.

“Please, Steve. I love you, so much. So fucking much. And I need you. And I’m so, so sorry for everything. Just please, don’t leave. I’ll do whatever you want. Anything. Just please don’t leave me again. I won’t be able to…”

He trails off, breath hitching. And Bucky reaches up then, cupping Steve’s face with his warm hands, his warm, scarred hands, fingers brushing against the fine hairs on Steve’s earlobes and the dense stubble of his jaw. And, God, for a moment, for one delirious moment, Steve wants to give him everything. Give him what he wants. Give him his time and his effort and his body and whatever is left of his breaking heart. Because Bucky wants it, maybe more than he’s ever wanted anything from Steve before. He wants it, and in that moment, Steve wonders if maybe he’s ready to accept all those things. Accept him. Accept his love, after so many, many years of dashing it away.

But that’s not how things work. And that’s not how Bucky works. Because Steve knows him, better than he’s ever known anyone. And Steve loves him, more than he’s ever loved anyone. And loving Bucky is killing him. Loving Bucky is killing both of them.

Steve lays his hands on Bucky’s, gently, feeling him beneath his fingertips, committing to memory every detail of his flesh, every wrinkle on his face, every pigmented fleck of his irises — or, Christ, praying that he can remember them. Because if Steve has any compassion for himself, for Bucky, this will be the last time they touch like this. The last time they look at each other like this.

“You have a family that loves you,” Steve murmurs. “You have a therapist. You have an amazing sponsor. You have wonderful, caring friends. And you are the strongest person I know. I mean that. You’ve survived so much, so many horrifying things, so many things you won’t even tell me about, and you’re still here. And, Jesus, if only you could see that…”

“Please…” Bucky whispers. “I love you…”

Steve slides his hands down to Bucky’s wrists and grasps them, pulling Bucky’s hands off his face while Bucky pushes out a shaking breath, his fingers reaching even as Steve is forcing them away.

“I’m sorry. That’s not enough. It’s just not enough.”

He releases Bucky’s wrists, and Bucky’s hands stay frozen where Steve leaves them, holding the air, holding the space where Steve used to be. Steve takes a few steps backwards, takes in the sight of him one more time, and the tearing in his heart stops, because his heart seizes entirely and goes cold
and dead, and it’s the only thing that allows him to breathe his next words:

“Goodbye, Jamie.”

Bucky’s eyes squeeze shut, and his head falls back, mouth wrenching in agony as he begins to quietly sob, hands finally dropping limply to his sides.

Steve turns away, mind going as numb as his heart, and he walks down the block to his car while Bucky’s crying dissipates in his wake. He pops open the trunk and throws his duffel in, then climbs into the driver’s seat and turns on the ignition, shivering, teeth chattering. He sits while the car warms up, hands pressed up to the vents, waiting and waiting in complete mental silence. And when he’s warm enough to start moving again, Steve lays his hand on the shifter and throws it in reverse, then drive, then reverse, then drive as he wedges out of the spot. And when he pulls out onto the street, he drives, passing by their building, where Bucky is still standing, head dipped low, and Steve clenches his jaw until he gets to the corner of 17th and Prospect Park West. And he keeps driving down 17th, mindlessly, each block taking him further and further from their home, and he’s deep into Park Slope before he stops dead in the middle of the street, hands clenched tightly around the wheel.

Steve gapes, stunned and paralyzed as a realization descends on him, one that’s as incontrovertible as the other malignant, absolute truths of his life:

He has nowhere to go. Nowhere at all. And that truth lands in absolute, desolate silence.
PLEASE... I LOVE YOU...

I'M SORRY. THAT'S NOT ENOUGH. IT'S JUST NOT ENOUGH.

GOODBYE, JAMIE.
Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Homophobic language, misogynist language, ableist language

Note:

Gorked: a rather crude term to describe someone who has no brain activity and must be kept alive via machine
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve regroup.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

Warnings at the end

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing Bucky notices is the taste. Even before opening his eyes, even before any of his other senses come online, he tastes the sour, familiar tang of hangover in his mouth. He moves his tongue along the roof of his mouth, behind his teeth, then parts his lips to wet them. He smells his own breath, vile, boozy, and acrid, and he takes a few gauzy moments to debate whether he should open his eyes to see the state of himself. The state of whatever place he’s ended up in. The surface he’s sprawled on — on his side, thank God — isn’t hard like a bathroom floor or concrete. That’s a plus. He flexes his hand weakly and feels soft fabric beneath his fingertips and something tight pulling on top of his hand. The second part is strange, enough to get him to force open his eyes to the brightness of the room.

His room. It’s his room. It’s his bed beneath him. But the sheets— they’re the wrong color… the blanket is wrong. It registers as the vaguest alarm. Bucky looks over at his right hand, laying on the edge of the mattress, and there are three strips of tape stretched across his knuckles, the fine bones of his hand, the edge of his wrist. And a needle. And a clear tube attached to it that runs up his arm, disappearing beneath the comforter that’s not his. He frowns at it, because he’s in his room and he’s not in the hospital, and his mind can’t hold both concepts at once. He stares at the shape of his hand, pale skin pulled over bone, cut through with full, blue veins, speckled with pinkish-white scars, and his bleary gaze trails down to his fingers, long and formerly dexterous, the first one, the formerly bisected one, wrapped in a scar that could be a piece of twine or one of the rubber bands from his braces so many years ago. He curls them into the flesh of the bed, feeling the pressure and softness in all of them except one, which only picks up prickly static.

Bucky’s eyes trail past his hand to the light wood of the floor, also wrong in its bare lack of mess. The compounded wrongness of everything forces Bucky to lift his head — Christ, how it pounds in the light. He looks down at the sluice of drool on the pillowcase, his pillowcase, and he reflexively
lifts his hand to wipe the saliva from where it’s dried on his cheek, and the tubing taped to his hand pulls, and Bucky pushes down the comforter a little to see where it leads, where it diverts from its path up his arm and snakes along the edge of the mattress, then up to his headboard, where it meets with a half-empty IV bag that’s been hung on the edge of it. He follows the tube back again to his arm, his bare arm, and he throws down the comforter and finds bareness and more bareness. The breath is sucked from him completely, like every time he’s woken up in a stranger’s bed with come leaking out of him, something he never let anyone — anyone — do to him. He has no shirt. No pants. No socks. Just a pair of black boxer briefs that barely cover the most ghastly of his deformities. Bucky sits up, wincing at the crick in his neck, the ache in his lower back, and as he looks down on himself, he’s shocked, as he sometimes is, by the sight of his near-nakedness.

Bucky presses his palm to his forehead, grimacing in pain as scenes from Friday spill across his consciousness— Steve’s face, Steve’s voice, Steve’s words. Goodbye, Jamie. Goodbye, Jamie…

And then Bucky feels that stinging fullness in his cheeks once again, the kind that crawls up his face and digs in behind his eyes. And he blinks as his vision blurs over, but the blurring is still there, because tears are coming out of him now. And he doesn’t want to cry anymore, because he’s fucking sick of it, but he also profoundly wants to — needs to — because he is brimming over with sadness and regret. It’s sliding down his face, tearing from his throat in a bitten-back sob. And his chin is trembling, and his mouth is twisted with anguish, and he can’t stop any of it, and he can’t take anything back. All he can do is lay his head in his hands and weep.

Bucky’s not sure how long it takes for him to cry himself out. To expend this freshest wave of agony. He goes until the trembling stops and the tears dry up and his breathing calms to an even rhythm. Until he feels empty and numb and worn. He then moves to the edge of the bed and pushes himself to his feet, head throbbing, knee pained and unsteady underneath him. He sniffs and grabs the IV bag attached to him, then looks down himself and feels his stomach roil. So he turns back to the bed for something to conceal himself, when it hits him — it’s Steve’s blanket, straight from his bed, and it seems to make even less fucking sense. But he pulls it off the mattress anyway and wraps himself in it, adjusting his weak grip to keep hold of that fucking IV bag, too. Bucky starts toward the bathroom, and as he gets closer, his terrible hearing picks up a light clanging in the kitchen, like somebody putting away the dishes, and he rushes forward, because maybe it’s Steve—

He stops in the doorway to the kitchen. And there, pulling dishes from the dish rack and loading them into the cupboard is—

“Hank…”

Hank closes the cupboard door and looks to Bucky. “Morning.” He glances down at his gold watch. “Well, I guess afternoon now.”

“What’s… with this?” Bucky asks, holding up the IV bag in his hand as his mind tries to arrange the observable facts into a shape that makes sense.

“Your mother must really love you. After all that.”

Winnie. God. Winnie was here, after everything he said to her. After the verbal violence he slung at her. After all the blame for his failures he placed at her feet, unearned as so much of it was.

Bucky glances around. “She here?”

“No.” He’s at the coffee maker, pouring joe into a mug. Steve’s mug. USMA Class of 2006. “She called out from work, but I insisted that she go home for a while. She was up watching you all night. She’ll be back later.”
“Wait, what day is it?”

“Wednesday.”

Bucky sags against the door frame. “Fuck. How long you been here?”

“Since last night. Your mom, too.” Hank’s delving into the drawers now, opening and closing them.

“Last one on the right,” Bucky says, nodding to the utensil drawer. He suddenly catches a whiff of something, a sour and unmistakable smell coming from the living room behind him. The room is clean and orderly -- maybe a little too clean and orderly. “Did I puke?”

Hank nods toward the living room. “I’ve never seen a grown man cry himself sick before. I’ve seen kids do it, but never an adult.Probably for the best, since it was all vodka. At least half a fifth. Probably why you’re not in the hospital right now.” He pulls a spoon from the drawer and closes it with his hip. “I gotta hand it to you, when you relapse, you really pull out all the stops.”

Bucky looks around again, because in the dim light of his memory, he can see at least five or six fifths of Smirnoff, at least four of which he remembers being in the living room. He was on the couch. He was on his computer. He was-- What the fuck he was doing, he doesn’t know. And then another image slams into him, him with his laptop with his hand down his pants and he was… fuck.

“Where’s my clothes?”

Hank dips into the fridge and pulls a carton of half-and-half. It might be old. Bucky’s not sure. Steve always kept track of that stuff. “Your mom took them to be washed. You pissed yourself after we put you to bed. Figured Steve wouldn’t miss his bedding.”

Bucky closes his eyes with a woeful moan, because Jesus fucking God, it’s been forever since he’s done that, and of course he’d do it with his mother and ex-sponsor there. And of course they’d replace it with the bedding of the man who just left him, whose blanket still smells like him. Bucky pulls the blanket tighter around his body, face burning.

“Who undressed me?” Bucky’s voice is strung tight, anxious to know and anxious for the response.

“It was a two-person job. Couldn’t leave you like that. But like a good alcoholic, you had a waterproof mattress cover, so it was easy.”

Hank says it so casually, like it’s nothing. Roll drunk off pissy side of mattress. Undress drunk. Marvel and recoil at his gruesome scars. Blanch and cringe at his mutilated genitals. Clean piss off bed. Roll drunk back and forth from one side of the bed to the other as you exchange the pissy sheets for the ex-boyfriend’s used ones. Roll drunk onto his side so he doesn’t choke to death on his own vomit. Pump him full of fluids and electrolytes so he feels like he’s only been on a 72-hour bender instead of a 96-hour one.

“Did I call you?” Bucky asks, hopeful, because that’s how you’re supposed to do it, isn’t it? Call your sponsor? Even if Hank isn’t his sponsor anymore.

Hank pulls out one of the chairs at their kitchen table. Steve’s chair. The one facing the front door.

“Your mom did.”

“Did I call her?”

“Steve did.”
Fuck…

“…Did I call Steve?”

“I’m assuming so. Check your phone. It’s charging by the couch.”

Bucky turns and shambles over to the couch, steps hesitant, heart racing, IV bag sloshing in his grip. He falls heavily down on the couch, lays the bag on the cushion next to him, and reaches over the side to grab his phone from where it’s charging on the floor. He picks it up, pulls Steve’s blanket tightly around himself, and clicks his way to his call log with trembling fingers.

There are a few incoming calls from yesterday from Hank and Winnie. And then he finds Steve on the list not once, not twice, but eight times. Eight fucking times Bucky called him. And not once did Steve call him back.

Bucky grumbles and curses aloud, then cringes as he clicks to his texts and finds a few to Steve, each one more embarrassing than the last. One babbling about Valentines Day in New Jersey in 2001 — who the fuck goes to New Jersey for Valentine’s Day? Which was the part they laughed about later. They got a big hotel room with a huge whirlpool tub and spent nearly two hours in it just soaking, because neither apartment dweller had taken a bath in years upon years.

Im sorry I should stop sorry, was his last message.

Well. At least he didn’t drink his manners away completely.

“Your laptop was open, too,” Hank reports from the kitchen. “Might wanna check your outgoing.”

Bucky curls his hands around his phone and eyes his laptop, which is charging next to the entertainment center. He doesn’t even want to know what he did with it. He hopes it was just porn. Prays it was just porn.

“Drunk email?” Hank asks.

“I dunno.”

Hank’s chair squeaks across the linoleum, and he joins Bucky in the living room, taking a seat on the opposite end of the couch. Steve’s end, the theme of the morning. Afternoon.

“So, your mom cleaned up everything,” Hank says, “including everything that came out of your body, so be sure to thank her for that. I told her to leave the other stuff, the bottles and the mess you made of the place, so you could see for yourself what a relapse looks like. But she said you’ve clearly suffered enough, and there was no stopping her.”

Clearly suffered enough. What the hell is enough? If there is such a thing as “enough,” Bucky certainly hasn’t come even close to it.

Bucky looks to the floor, to his scarred right foot, which is poking out from the blanket he’s wrapped in. He tucks it back underneath. “What was I crying about?”

“Steve. Your mom. Something about killing kids. Killing someone named Trib or something. And your dad.”

The bottom drops out of Bucky’s stomach as he desperately combs through his patchwork of memories of the past 96 hours. He remembers crying. Crying Friday night. Crying Saturday morning. Stopping when he decided he was going to relapse, when a lightness overtook him and
dashed his tears away. And then when the vodka hit his veins, he was happy, like this breakup was the best thing to happen to him, and very soon after, he was crying again, and then he watched a lot of TV, then drank, passed out, woke, drank some more, passed out, drank again, cried, watched more TV while drinking, passed out again, maybe a shower in there somewhere, but probably not. And he knows he made it to Tuesday before he was on the phone to Steve. And he was also on his computer, at some point, apparently jerking off and maybe crying some more. Hopefully not both at the same time.

But he doesn’t remember a thing about his dad. Not a single goddamn thing.

“What about him?” Bucky asks quietly.

Hank regards Bucky from above the rim of his glasses. “You kept saying that you killed him, too. You didn’t elaborate. Wanna tell me what that’s about?”

No. No, no, no, no, no. Bucky shakes his head emphatically, mind going white.

“You mother didn’t hear any of that stuff, but she did hear your many, many apologies to her, which you know you’ll have to do sober too, right?”

Bucky gives a dim nod. “Does my sister know?”

“I think your mom called her, yeah. I don’t know exactly what she said, but it didn’t seem like she was particularly surprised.”

Bucky swallows heavily, clearing the sudden rush of saliva from his mouth, and he pushes himself up from the couch with a grunt of pain. “I’m gonna go puke again,” he mumbles as he shuffles forward, stopping only when there’s tight pull on his hand. That fucking IV bag is still on the fucking couch, and Bucky lets the blanket fall to the floor so he can rip the goddamn needle out of his goddamn hand, decency be damned. Who the fuck is he kidding, anyway? Hank has already seen the worst of him.

He swipes at the paper towel rack as he passes it on the way to the bathroom, ripping off a sheet, and presses it to the top of his bleeding hand.

“Do us both a favor and take a shower while you’re in there,” Hank calls after him.

Bucky closes the bathroom door behind him and bends over the toilet, hands still folded to stop the bleeding. He dry heaves a few times, retching loudly, but he’s got nothing left in him to expel. So he spits the excess spit out of his mouth, drops the paper towel in the water, and lifts the seat to take a piss. And maybe it’s some fucked up form of progress that he stays standing to do it, pulling out his tiny, mangled dick and aiming by sound, because he still can’t stand to look at the thing or the arms connected to the hands that hold it.

Even though he’s all out of puke, his stomach still feels awful, angry and acidic, so Bucky opens the medicine cabinet to look for the Pepto, snagging a bandaid for his hand first. He fumbles the box open and pulls one out, and then it’s a tragicomedy of effort to get the little fucking plastic strips off so he can press it over the copiously bleeding hole left by that tiny needle. He’s extra clumsy because the sight of the blood kicks up something in him, a burgeoning panic, and he sticks the bandaid on quickly and washes off the excess blood under the faucet. When it’s gone, he pauses to collect himself, breathing deeply to quell the racing of his heart, the churning of his guts.

There are gaps of empty space on the medicine cabinet shelves where Steve’s things used to be. He didn’t take everything, maybe because he was so blind with anger and hurt that he couldn’t see
straight. Or maybe the things he left were left with purpose. Like the after-shaving balm that smells really good. The kind of stuff you put on before a date, before the whiskers have a chance to crawl back out. And next to it is a prescription bottle from the VA, and Bucky doesn’t recognize the name, but the instructions are clear and, God. God damn it…

Bucky startles when Hank’s hand pounds twice on the door.

“You okay in there?”

He snatches the half-empty bottle of Pepto-Bismol, closes the medicine cabinet firmly, and glances at his reflection. “Yeah,” he murmurs, staring at his own tired eyes, his haggard, unshaven face.

“Well, hurry up. I’m starving.”

Bucky grimaces as the thought of food makes his stomach flip in on itself. He twists open the cap to the Pepto and takes a couple of swigs straight from the bottle. It’s Steve’s. He’s seen Steve do this. Drink it like this. His lips were here, where Bucky’s are now.

Jesus, what Bucky wouldn’t give to see those lips again, frowning or flattening or maybe smiling once in a while. What he wouldn’t give to kiss them one more time, putting every bit of himself into it, every ounce of his love, so that Steve would know. So Bucky could show him, show him that even if he’s not great at doing love, he can learn. He wants to learn. He’s not sure how, but he just wants the chance, even if it’s the last thing he deserves.

But Bucky knows that Steve isn’t coming back. And it’s a fact so cold that it burns.

———

By Wednesday afternoon, Steve has stared at the ceiling so long that he starts to see things that definitely aren’t there. Like an old, painted over water stain that becomes Lake George, where his ma sent him to summer camp every year until he was thirteen. She saved up all year just to get him out of the city for a few weeks, and she would cry into her thin hand every time she saw him off and welcomed him home. And when he came back, he was always surprised by how much he missed the smell of her — not even a perfume but a lingering, cottony combination of Snuggle fabric softener and Dove. And after he turned thirteen, camp became a very serious affair, because it was football, and colleges were already watching, and you don’t get money for school just for being very smart. And every summer when Steve returned from football camp, his ma would be a little shorter, and she would feel a little more fragile in his arms. And every summer after he returned, Bucky would be waiting, too, and he would smile and look him up and down and say ‘God damn, Rogers,’ and it seemed casual, teasing, until Steve looked back on it years later. And maybe Steve looked a little longer than he should have, too, because Bucky in the summer was a sight to appreciate, tanned and lean and easy, and he would clap Steve on the back, in a lazy way, a way that lasted a little longer than it needed to, and he would say ‘missed you,’ but quietly. Like it was a secret.

And then, if Steve looks over to the left side of the ceiling, there are dim shadows, which become the tall berms outside COP Bumfuck, which was really named COP Bumford, where Steve and his men lay and stared into the shimmering desert, waiting for an attack that didn’t come until eight hours after intel said it would, when a good third of them were choking down their fourteenth MRE of the week. Bucky barely flinched when first bullet cut through the dirt right next to his head, like it was a light breeze passing by, barely pausing his joke to Mack about how they should just throw their pound cakes at the enemy, because they’re the densest known form of manmade material. And then Bucky called to the men to lay down suppressive fire, climbed to the ridge of the berm, and calmly spent half a magazine, every shot precisely chosen through the telescopic sight he mounted whenever they left base. He was content to pick off whoever he could while Steve ordered the mortarmen to
lay down a blanket of 120s, which turned the enemy into charred debris within a handful of minutes. And Bucky yelled ‘fuck yeah’ and smiled wide at Steve, and he was so easy then, too, so confident, like he was in those New York summers, so utterly in control of himself and whatever situation he was in. A master of himself and his craft.

How can that Bucky be this Bucky? And how can that Steve be this Steve?

He’s turned these questions over in his mind ever since he checked into the Staten Island Comfort Inn on Saturday morning. After driving away on Friday night, he ended up on the 27 and then the 278, because his muddled brain actually thought it was a good idea to drive to DC to ask to stay with Sharon and Ethan. Of course, he quickly gathered enough wits from the haze of his heartbreak to realize the absurdity — and the gall — of showing up on Sharon’s doorstep after leaving the man he cheated on her with.

Leaving him, as if they were together. Clearly, they were not.

And when he finally realized the stupidity of his idea, he got off on the next exit, which happened to be on Staten Island, and he followed whatever road south, driving and driving until he had to stop, because he didn’t know where he was going, and so he pulled into a Costco parking lot and pulled into a spot, and he stared, unseeing, out the window as all coherent thought evaporated from his grasp. No plans could fulminate. No solutions could take shape. And so he stayed until the sun rose, drifting in and out of sleep, freezing without his coat, too numb to go to the trunk to dig out more layers. And when it was light out, he drove in a loop, one road to the next, until he drove past a Comfort Inn. He knows cheap when he sees it, and he needed cheap. They let him check in extra early. He thinks they felt sorry for him.

And ever since Saturday morning, he’s been here, staring. Staring at the ceiling. Staring at the TV. Staring at the wall. Staring over at his phone, which has been vibrating with some frequency. He’s thought to turn it off, but he hasn’t yet. He even plugged it in to recharge it. There were no calls on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. All he got was a text from Sharon — a picture of Ethan standing, holding the edge of the coffee table, grinning at the camera, two teeth on top, two on the bottom.

Almost!

Steve stared at that, too, face as blank as it has been ever since he left Brooklyn. He responded with Soon I bet because it was the right thing to say.


And then on Tuesday, he started getting bombarded by Bucky. He called at 11:42. He called at 11:47. He called at 12:20. Then 12:31. Then 1:58. Then 2:13. Then 3:05. And his last call came in at 4:51. Half of them went to voice mail, including the final one. And the calls were interspersed by bursts of texts of increasing incoherency, and Steve knew from them that Bucky was drunk — fantastically so. And after the calls stopped, Steve texted Winnie and told her, because a vague, well-practiced worry had started to erode his insides.

She later texted him a series of updates:

You were right

He’s been drinking since Saturday

Got him an IV. He should be okay. Passed out in bed.
Going to stay up to make sure he’s okay. Hank is here too.

Thank you honey. Hope you’re okay.

It was only then that Steve gave a reply:

Thanks. I'll let you take it from here

And that was that.

And then Steve went back to staring, because fuck it — he’s already blown it with Hill by not calling in. Fuck it — he’s already on her “I’m this close to firing you” list. Fuck it — might as well not go in ever again. Might as well keep staring.

And so he does.

And the room grows dimmer and dimmer, until it’s cast in darkness, and God damn it, he really has to pee, though it doesn’t make sense. He’s barely had anything to drink all day. He reaches over to the nightstand and clicks on the lamp, pausing to take brief stock of the empty wrappers covering its surface — Fritos, five granola bars, a Butterfinger, a half-empty bag of Red Vines. It’s the best the vending machine has to offer. They have free breakfast, but he’s never gotten it. Going downstairs feels herculean; hell, he barely even dragged himself to the shower once, and only because he was starting to reek.

Steve’s body is leaden, but he manages to get it upright and seated on the edge of the bed. He sits for a moment, remembering Thursday — God, was that not even a week ago? Bucky trying to blow him. Trying to think sexy thoughts when all that looped through his brain was Maria Hill and Hope Van Dyne and Melinda Triplett. Trying to will his dick to do something. And then after, Bucky dejected. Bucky lying. Bucky running off to fuck Thor Odinson.

It doesn’t even feel like pain anymore. It feels like a vacuum, emptying him from the inside.

Steve pees. Drinks a couple glasses of water. Turns on the TV, just so things don’t sound as bleak and barren as they are. He stares at his phone, which is resting on the other side of the bed next to his laptop. He should probably check a few of his voicemails — or maybe he’ll just delete them. Because fuck it. He thinks he knows what they say, anyway. Matt is worried and wants him to call. Bucky is sorry and wants him to come back. Or he’s angry and wants to make sure that Steve never comes back. The latter sounds more like Bucky.

He sits back on the edge of the bed and pulls the charging cable out of his phone. Then he calls his voicemail and deletes all of Matt’s messages the moment they start. And he goes on to delete all of Bucky’s. Except the last one.

Steve isn’t sure what stops him. Maybe it’s concern. Maybe it’s curiosity. Maybe it’s longing, because wouldn’t it figure that Steve still longs for him, even now.

He presses the phone to his ear. Bucky’s voice is thick and slurred but still coherent:

I won’t leave you any more messages. This is the last and then I’m done, I promise. I don’t know what to say anymore. I don’t know if I can say anything that’ll change your mind. And you probably shouldn’t change your mind, because I know, I know, believe me, Steve, I’m the first fucking one to know, that I’m not a good person. I know it in my heart and in my stomach and my soul that I only hurt people I love and who try to love me back. And you’re right about all the things you said, and I know you’re mad at me and sad at me and hurt, God, I can’t stop seeing how hurt you were. It’s playing over and over and over in my head, your face, and when you were... you weren’t crying,
though, and I guess that’s good. Or maybe it’s not. I was crying. I’m crying right now, and isn’t it funny that you used to be the one to cry and I couldn’t?

Steve grimaces as Bucky starts sobbing in a soft and tired way. Steve remembers that kind of crying well. The type of crying that comes from a heavy body and a wrung-out heart. It keeps going, Steve’s body tensing more with each hitching breath Bucky takes, and his next words are half-cried, sloppy and wet.

And now look at us. Look at us. I don’t know how this happened. I just… I don’t know. I don’t know how I got so fucked up. Even though I do know, and I have so many things I want to tell you, all those things you said I wouldn’t tell you, and I’ve wanted to tell you, Steve, God, I’ve wanted to tell you everything. But I’m too afraid. I’m too scared of what you’ll think of me, and I don’t want you to think I’m weak or… repulsive, I guess, but I know you do think that I’m weak. And I can’t be weak, Steve, but I’m just a boneless, disgusting mess and I don’t have anything left, and I’m sorry I didn’t see that you don’t have anything left, either. But at least you have your self-respect, because you left me, and I think that’s good. I think that’s good for you to do. Because I’m not the kind of guy you keep. I know that now. And you were the only one that kept me and meant it. Kept me because you saw something you loved that wasn’t just physical. You loved me. You’re the only one who ever really wanted me, and now you don’t… and I understand. I really do. So I don’t know why I’m leaving you this message, because I’ve just basically—

It cuts off there, and Steve is breathless as he waits on the edge for an ending that doesn’t come. He’s not sure what he’s waiting for. Maybe an ‘I love you,’ which is distinctly absent. Not that it matters. Love isn’t enough — isn’t that what Steve concluded? And it seems so true, even as he longs to hear it still. And he hates that he still wants it, that he still wants Bucky, even after everything he’s done—

His phone vibrates in his hand as he gets another text, this one from Sharon. It says, Sent you a video! Check your email!

Steve sighs quietly and, after pausing to gather himself, he opens his laptop. His email is already open in the browser, and he sees the newest email from Sharon. But two emails below that is one from Bucky, with the subject IM SORRY. Steve hovers the mouse over it and waffles around whether or not he should delete it. It’s half-hearted, because the voicemail left him wanting some sort of closure. And maybe it’s the kind of closure a drunk person can’t give, but he opens it anyway.

Jamie Barnes jammersbuch@gmail.com

Feb 14 (3 days ago)

Steve

Im so sorry. What can I do to make it up to you ? I there hast o be something I can do. I dont deserve to be forgiven but if you do I promise ill be better than I was. I know I didnt give ou what you needed and I’m so sorry I wasnt more patient with you Your right. I fucked yp. And I know you dont have to forjive me and I don’t know if I would eiithr. But I want to make it better. I just need to know how. Maybe we can go see someone. Like therapy or something. I know that sound stupid or gay or whatever but Im wiling to do whatever it takes becuasi I love you and I hope I didn’t lose you forever but I thin k myabe I did. You would be stupid to come back I guess. You wouldnt even hav been back if I didn’t stick my nose in LTC Furys busined when we lost 1LT Shen but I just missed you so much and I was mad because I hate that you left mew hen I was in AFG but I also wanted you back so bad I just missed you so bad Steve. I missed you all those years and I justw anted to see you. And I knew youd be a great officer. The best because you were always my best
friend the best I ever ever had in my life and I KNEW you. I think idid. I hope I did. And I know that selfish because you had your own life and if I never got you to the 107 you would be ok and not have PTSD and brain injury and so much fucking empty sadness and so its my fault you're hurt and sad and I fukced up so fucking bad steve IIm so sorry I'm so so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you or see you get hurt because fo me. Ever.

Steve’s gaze drifts from the screen. In all the thinking and regretting he’s done about what happened during and after deployment, he never thought to blame Bucky for why he’s fukced up. Never. Certainly Bucky was an essential link in the chain that got him to that building on that day in Khalidya, but it was nobody’s fault but the bomb maker’s. Has Bucky been carrying this guilt, too, atop all of the other unearned burden he’s shouldered? It’s a deeply unsettling notion, and Steve stares at the nauseatingly patterned carpet while the discomfort quickens in him.

He’s not sure how long he stares. Minutes. Chunks of minutes. An hour. Time seems to lose its anchor in this room. But, eventually, he comes back to the next paragraph.

But that's what happened. I took from you. You had a life of your own with sharon and I dint’ have anybody because I never had anybody after you or before you. Not one person. Not something real. Not love. I’ve fukced women—Tried to fuk women anyway, because I was looking for the one vag to make me straight, but you can see how well that worked huh. Not good. And Im a piece of shit for doing that. An I was with way way more guys- so many guys I don’t env know how many I lost track and I was so drunk and I never fukced the same one twice except Thor. I thought there was something because I went home with him a few times and never do that because I didn’t want to get caught. It’s not like they couldnt tell I was military and I couldnt stand to lose my career because the army is the only thing aside from you that I really loved. And Rik and dad. And sam. So I did go home with him a few times maybe because he kind of look like you tall and blond and blue eyes and so handsome but you’re more handsome than him and it doesn’t matter that he has a big cock because you have a perfect cock perfect size and its so nice and I know it but its NOT about cock and it not about sex and I don’t care if we can NEVER have sex again I just want to have you in my life. I want you in my life so bad Steve I love you. I want to show you that I can DO love like you said because I know I can learn. I may act dumb a lot of the time but I’m pretty smart -not asmart as you by a long shot but fucking smart enough but even still I don’t know wy I can’t stop running. I have to run and run and run and sex is a way I run away because I can just not feel things for a little while but its temporary and it feels like shit after. I’ve had a lot of sex with so many people and its never ever been the way it is with you. Your so sweet and gentle and yo care about me if I’m ok and you never hurt me but you can also fuk the fucking Sense out of me and it’s so so so good and I miss that so much and id give anything to feel you inside me fucking me fucking me jesus christ.,

Steve slams the screen of the laptop down, heart galloping, eyebrows gathered, lips parted. He’s baffled — if that’s the right word for it — by the ease with which Bucky shifts from apology to self-flagellation to… sexting, he supposes. It’s somehow both jarring and completely predictable.

It takes Steve a while to come back to the rest of the email. He stands and paces the length of the room a few times, hands on his hips, head dipped as he watches his bare feet step, step, step across the pattern of green diamonds on gray. He’s not sure if he feels irritated or sympathetic or turned on, and maybe he’s a bit of all those. And it all feels very, very uncomfortable.

So he strides to the bathroom and turns on the faucet, the water already chilled in the winter pipes. He splashes it on his face, puffing out a breath of surprise at just how cold it feels. It pulls him out of his head and into the sensation of the water dripping off his unwashed face, and he stays like that for another chunk of time, eyes closed, hands braced on the counter, until the dripping stops and the coldness fades.
And when he looks up and into the full mirror, his exhausted face twists with disgust, because he looks like shit. Absolute shit. There’s no better word for the thing he sees staring back at him. A tired, empty man. A man with fucked priorities. A man who can’t even sit through a goddamn email without taking two breaks.

Steve sets his jaw and rights himself in an impersonation of someone with a little bit of dignity, a man who resembles First Lieutenant Rogers, promising young infantry officer. He then walks back to the bed and opens his laptop. He skims past the cock part and past the excuses and past the “I’d give anything to have you inside me” part, which spins him a little off-kilter once again, because there’s a small, insistent part of himself that would give anything for that, too. Even now. Even right in this fucking moment.

But he continues.

But I don’t need sex - i don’t and I shoud just be okay with fucking myself but I just think my body is so gross and ugly its hard to look at and think abut jerking off or antynigs when I’m sober because its like I’m touching someone else’s dick like someone put it there by mistake, some terrible awful mistake and its not mine and how can I make myself feel good like that? So I just get this energy and its like a fuckig nuclear reactor and I don know how I couldnt take if. And so except drinking I guess fucking is all I had left and I couldnt even do that right. I couldnt even let him fuck me and he tried so hard and I huffed aboua bottle of papers and it still wouldn’t work because I was thinking about you and how I was wrong to be there. It wasn’t right and I knew it right way becaus it felt bad and I regret every second I spent there with him because I should have been HOME with you . I should have been taking care of you like you took care ofme and I’m so sorry so so sorry. I love you and I wish I could say sorry to you forever but I can’t because I don’t think youre coming back to me ever again but I love you

- Jamie I guess

By the time he gets to the end of the email, the furrow between Steve’s brows is deeper and even more serious. And if he had to name that fucking feeling, it would be anger. Anger that it took him leaving just to get Bucky to reflect on his actions and properly apologize. To say ‘I love you’ and mean it. But Bucky seems to live his life from crisis to crisis these days, and it’s only when he’s teetering on the edge of catastrophe that genuineness emerges, like it’s dragged out of him by the pull of gravity below.

And Steve is sick of it. He’s sick of chasing Bucky’s chaos. He’s sick of being a casualty of it. He’s not a teenager anymore, when Bucky’s wild charisma was endearing, something Steve wanted to taste and hold but didn’t know quite how. Because back then, at least Bucky gave something back, with private affection and humor and generosity and kindness, which he did with an easy confidence that Steve still doesn’t know the authenticity of.

Maybe there was no core to that confidence after all. Maybe it was just a projection. Maybe Bucky was continuously falling apart right in front of Steve’s face for years on end, not just the few times Steve saw it in action. Like when Bucky showed up at his apartment, drunk and despondent and only sixteen. He slurred and clung to Steve’s shirt as Steve led him upstairs, shushing him down the hall, and Bucky stumbled alongside him as Steve brought him to his room and sat him on the edge of the bed. Sarah was in the hospital and they were alone, but it didn’t matter, because Bucky barely said anything. He just muttered ‘I’m disgusting,’ and Steve asked him what he meant, and Bucky just
shook his head weakly and said ‘I can’t, I can’t,’ and so Steve wrapped his arm around Bucky and pulled him in, and his hair smelled like hangover sweat, and Bucky sagged against him and said he was tired. So fucking tired.

And so they lay on top of Steve’s comforter, and Bucky closed in tight against Steve’s side and laid his hand on Steve’s stomach. And Steve looked down at it, at the way Bucky’s finger tips dug into the fabric of his sweatshirt, and Bucky rested his head on Steve’s shoulder and pressed his face against Steve’s neck, and his breath was hot and piney and heavy. And then his hand started sliding down, very slowly, until it got to the edge of Steve’s sweatshirt. And Steve watched, diaphragm pulled tight, eyes wide, as Bucky’s hand crawled up underneath, the warmth of his hand sliding slowly across the bare skin of Steve’s abdomen. And Steve could barely breathe, and he felt his dick twitch, and Bucky’s hand crept up and up, until it came to rest just to the left of Steve’s solar plexus, on the edge of the pectoral muscle that he started growing in earnest that year. Over Steve’s racing heart. And they lay there like that until Bucky passed out and Steve fell asleep after he calmed himself enough. And the next morning, Steve woke to find Bucky lying on his back next to him, both hands clamped over his mouth, eyes closed tightly, breath shuddering out through his nose. And Steve turned on his side and asked what was wrong, and Bucky shook his head and closed his eyes even tighter. And Steve asked again, and then again, and then again, until Bucky growled, ‘I’m fucking fine,’ even though his eyes were red and watery…

And he can’t— he cannot keep doing this. He can’t keep going to the past, scraping up proof of their love to keep him fueled in the present. The wild Bucky of their high school years is gone. The slowly settled Bucky of their two years together is gone. The affable, capable Sergeant Barnes is gone. And the man who’s left is all those Buckys crammed together in one too-small container, along with his trauma and his injuries and his addiction and all the secrets he’s kept from Steve over the years.

And he cannot keep doing this.

Steve takes a deep breath and scans over the email again. The misspellings. The repetitive ‘I love yous’ and ‘I’m sorrys.’ The reliable talk about dick and how much Bucky hates himself. And it should move him, he thinks. Make him feel sad or something. But it only makes him tired and frustrated, and so he clicks on the trash button and deletes it, along with the all the texts and the voicemails from his phone.

He then opens the email from Sharon. There’s no text, just a video of Ethan standing at the edge of the coffee table with Sharon a couple feet away, hair pulled back, face bright and adoring. She’s holding out her arms, waving her hands toward herself, saying, ‘c’mon, come to mama,’ and there’s another voice behind the camera, Halima, saying ‘show daddy’ in Arabic. And Ethan grins at Halima, so it looks like he’s grinning right at Steve, and then he puts a coy finger to his mouth and looks at Sharon, still smiling. And then his arms are out to his sides, and he’s stepping forward toward Sharon’s arms, and both women are making high pitched sounds of encouragement. And he makes it three steps before he goes down, with Sharon right there to catch him. And she pulls him in and kisses his cheek and he laughs, and Halima keeps filming while Sharon turns him toward the camera and waves towards it, saying, ‘say hi to baba!’ and he flaps his hand and yelps—

And then it’s over.

And Steve feels nothing.

And he calls Sharon.

“Did you get the video?” she asks as soon as she picks up.
Yeah.”

“Ten months old,” she says proudly. “And he was premature.”

Steve lets himself fall back on the mattress with a dull thump. “I’m not surprised, with us for parents.”

“What’s wrong?” Sharon asks. The noise in the background, the delighted squealing, abruptly fades, followed by a clicking sound. “Is everything okay?”

He’s not sure how she reads him so clearly when he can barely even read himself. She knows something is wrong faster than he does, something specific that transcends the ambient low-level feeling of wrongness that permeates Steve’s life.

“I’m at a hotel,” he says. “I moved out.”

“What happened?”

She might know him, but he knows her, too. And he knows that tone. It’s the highly modulated neutrality that she takes in staff meetings when she’s talking to a more senior officer who doesn’t know shit but doggedly thinks he does.

“We had a fight. And I moved out.”

He’s hesitant to even call it a fight. It was more like a culmination, a come-to-Jesus so long in coming that maybe it was inevitable. And how sad that they always seem to end like this, with such cataclysmic anger and hurt and desperation.

“And you moved out? It’s your apartment.” She pauses for effect, then adds, “Right?”

Steve gives a quiet sigh and rests the back of his hand on his forehead. “That’s not why I called. I have to tell you something.”

Sharon takes a steady breath. “What is it?”

Steve has rehearsed this at least three dozen times in his mind. He was going to tell Sharon. He was going to tell work. He was going to tell… well, that’s about it. And now, as he stands on the edge of disclosure, fear swells in him. Fear and shame. But pride has no place in a run down Staten Island Comfort Inn, with a man who’s been staring at the ceiling so long that he’s practically hallucinating. And so he lets go. He lets the words come however they do, trusting that they’ll land in the approximate place he wants them.

“I have a brain injury that’s affecting my work. And I have depression. And probably PTSD. And I’ve had all them at least since I’ve been back in New York. And I thought you should know.”

“Oh, Steve…” Silence draws out, and he imagines her frowning in a pained way, like the way she looked when she left Ethan to go on TDY, before she started crying. He thinks that’s the face her voice suggests, but he could be thinking wishfully. “I’m so sorry. I thought you might be going through something like this, but I didn’t want to assume, and you always insisted you were fine.”

“I know.”

“Are you seeing somebody for it?”

“A psychiatrist. She gives me meds and some therapy. She keeps trying to get me to go to to the
mental health clinic.”

Steve leaves out the part where he obstinately refuses her every time, and Sharon astutely guesses that part straight away.

“So why haven’t you gone?” she asks.

“Because I was thinking that it would distract too much from work. To open all that up,” he explains weakly, offering only half the reason because the other is still painful and pitiful because it’s Bucky, Bucky, Bucky. “But I’m pretty sure I’m getting fired this week, so that won’t matter.”

“Fired? Why?”

“I haven’t been in for two days. I didn’t call. I’ve just been lying here since Saturday. Because I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to feel...”

As someone who has always felt, sometimes too much, it’s all still new. Steve always kept his emotions simmering just beneath his skin. He could siphon them out when he engaged with art, when he wrote or painted or fell into deep conversation. He could bring them to the surface and let them pour out of him. He could touch them, feel them, know they were there if he needed them. But now, there’s nothing there to feel. Just transparent, empty space where texture and color used to be. He would hate the thing he’s become if he was capable of something as strong as hate.

He girds himself and tells her the next part as plainly as he can, fidgeting with the drawstring of his West Point sweats, so old and frayed it’s a wonder it hasn’t disintegrated already.

“When I saw that video,” he begins, slowly, “I didn’t feel anything. And that is fucked up. That is so fucked up. And I need to go to therapy. Real therapy. Because I don’t want to be the dad who doesn’t feel love for his son because he’s messed up from war. That’s not who I am. That’s not who I want to be.”

Sharon makes a small sound as she ponders his confession. He can’t read it, whether it’s good or bad or neutral. Whether she’s horrified or disappointed or unsurprised.

“Do you think that’s because of the depression?” she asks, and her voice is steady and compassionate and, God, he has missed her.

“I don’t know. I think it’s a lot of things. I won’t know until they start treating some of it, I guess.”

There’s another gap of quiet, during which he can imagine her nodding, slowly, hand on her hip, centering herself. She’s always been good at that. Grounding herself. Taking root amid crisis. He could use some of that.

“Thank you for telling me,” she says. “And you’re more than welcome to stay down here. You can sleep on the couch until you get back on your feet.”

The image of that life is easy to conjure, because it’s how it always goes when he’s down there. Waking up on Sharon’s couch to the sound of the baby babbling to himself in his crib. Hearing her voice as she goes to get him from their old office, which is Ethan’s room now. Listening to the way she talks to him, so engaged, so present, so inherently interested. Watching her bring him to the living room and point to Steve and say ‘hi baba,’ and hearing his son — his fucking son — say babababa as Sharon plops the baby on his lap to go make breakfast. Holding Ethan, talking to him in a way that sounds like Sharon, holding him up so he can bounce and build his leg strength, crucial to fostering the walking process. Playing at fatherhood. Guessing at it. Lamenting his utter detachment from it.
“Maybe,” Steve says. He pauses then, pushing his hand through his unwashed hair. “I think I’m gonna go to work tomorrow. Tell them what’s going on. What I just told you. I don’t know. Maybe they’ll understand.”

“Well, if it doesn’t work out, you have a place down here. We’re family, Steve. You know that, right? You have us, and we love you.”

It’s not ‘we love you, even in spite of what happened.’ It’s just ‘we love you.’ Three words. Even in spite of what he did to Sharon… God, what a terrible choice. Such an awful thing to do to her. Just awful. Steve’s life would look so much different now, if he hadn’t gone to Bucky that night. If he hadn’t been so weak that he sought comfort from his ex, using some ham-fisted moral manipulation to justify it as seeking professional support from his platoon sergeant. As if Bucky was ever really only that. Things would be different if Steve hadn’t kissed Bucky and sucked his dick and slid his finger in his ass. Swallowed his come. Loved every fucking second of it.

If he hadn’t done all that, he and Sharon would probably be married by now. They would be stable, even if Steve was fucked up. Sharon would be a rock for him, someone he could trust. Someone who wouldn’t leave him if he couldn’t get it up a few times. And even though he never loved Sharon with the ferocity and intensity and recklessness that he loved Bucky, he loved her all the same. And she loved him. And, somehow, she loves him still.

He knows now that he can’t ever go back to Bucky. Not this Bucky. Not this Bucky who’s the confused mix of all the other ones, foundationless and free-falling. Because Steve needs to do better for himself now. He needs to do better for his family. For Ethan. He needs to be a real father, like the one he never got.

Now, for the first time since coming back to New York, Steve feels the faintest tendrils of hope, like maybe he could be that. Maybe there’s some way for him to be a good man after all. And his eyes close in slow, achingly sought relief.

———

“So, am I still fired?”

Bucky pushes his fork into the yolk of one of the over easy eggs he’s entertaining eating. It slimes out, deep yellow and thick, and he curls his lip at it. Breakfast for lunch no longer seems like a good idea.

“I don’t know. Jury’s still out on that one,” Hank replies. He’s not having any problems plowing through his croque madame, which he has been devouring with the enthusiasm of a man who hasn’t eaten for a day. And maybe he hasn’t. Watching over a pissing, crying, vomiting drunk is not exactly an appetite stimulant.

“Why did you even come over when Winnie called?”

“I thought you might be ready to work.”

It’s a novel concept, being ready to work. Being ready to tear open the seal he’s so carefully laid over the past, one he’s been tending fastidiously, spackling the weak spots with alcohol and war and fucking. And now, he’s fresh out of war and fucking and is sick to death — truly, to near death — of the alcohol. And Bucky knows that he needs to touch what’s underneath that seal. He needs to see it, turn it in his broken hands, figure out how the pieces slot together to create a man who can’t sit with anything anymore. A man whose job it used to be to lie in stillness for hours on end, watching from a vantage point, waiting with the greatest patience for the perfect shot. It’s as if the man he was and the
man he is are twins of each other, the fraternal type, the ones that others remark upon because they’re so different, and isn’t that just funny how that happens.

“Yeah,” Bucky says.

Hank stuffs a forkful of challah in his mouth. “Yeah, what?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“Tell me why you’re ready.”

Bucky pushes out a long breath through his nose as he thinks of the right way to phrase the vague, howling pain that’s choking and distending him.

“I lost Steve. I lost him again, and he’s not coming back. And I had him, right there.” Bucky cups his hands like he’s holding something breakable and singular. “He was right in my hands. And I just let go. And I hurt him. And I know I shouldn’t become sober for anyone but me, but I can’t keep hurting everyone because I can’t stand myself. Something’s gotta give. And I think this work can help me. I think you can help me.”

Hank’s eyes narrow and sharpen and scrutinize Bucky’s own. “If you want to be successful this time, something has to change in the core of your work. It’s not about going to more meetings or reading more pages of the Big Book. It’s about your approach. It’s about putting in the effort, a concentrated, dedicated effort to know yourself so that you can make meaningful changes.” Hank points his fork in Bucky’s direction. “So, what are you going to do differently this time around?”

Bucky chances a small bite of egg white from his full plate. It’s salty and light, and it buys him some time. He chews it slowly, digging through the detritus of his relapse. He trowels past the easy answers — that he needs to be more responsible, that he needs to structure his days better, that he needs a goddamn hobby besides surfing the internet — and searches beneath for the meaty roots that keep him stuck where he is, spinning in place.

“I’m tired, Hank. I’m tired of doing the same shit, over and over. I’m tired of lying,” Bucky says. “Because I’ve been lying. For a long time. To everyone, but mostly to myself. Maybe I need to tell the truth. Rigorous honesty, and all that.”

“What truth do you need to tell?” Hank asks.

Bucky tilts his head, glancing up to the ceiling, to the teal paint cleaved with hairline cracks. Where to start, when one’s life is one perpetually unfolding lie?

“I’m not sure. Maybe with the fact that I blamed my mother for why I hate myself. She was only one small part of it. An easy target.”

“So what’s the large part of it?”

If he’s digging around for the truth, the large part of it would be the roots of the roots, raw and inflamed, too tender to touch or soothe or repair.

“I wanna be honest, but some stuff… I’m just not ready to talk about it. I think I…” Bucky considers his next words carefully, because he doesn’t want to promise any more undeliverable promises. “I think I might want to be able to talk about that stuff, but some of it is just too ugly. It’s too fucking ugly to even look at, let alone talk about. I wanna have the option to kick that stuff down the road a little. Build up the courage. Find the words to say it.”
Hank nods. “That’s fair. You can take a pass, if you need to, as long as you do it thoughtfully and not reactively.”

Hank shoves the last bite of his bread in his mouth and chews vigorously, searching Bucky’s face like he isn’t quite sure where he lies in the taxonomy of sloppy, damaged drunks. Maybe somewhere between Liza Minnelli and Andy Dick.

“What do you want out of your life?” Hank asks. “What is your goal? A big goal you can work toward.”

Bucky blinks a few times as the question sinks in. “I don’t know. No one ever really asked me that before.”

Hank wipes his napkin across his mouth and drops it onto his empty plate. He leans back with slow satisfaction, folding his hands on his lap, and he waits.

Bucky takes a long drink from his near-empty glass of water. “You know Rent, right?”

“Well, I am a gay man living in New York.”

“Right. So, I saw it on Broadway, right after it came out. This guy I was fucking got me two tickets. Really good seats. Of course, he wouldn’t be caught dead with me in public, so he said ‘take a friend.’ So I took Steve. This was before we were together.”

Bucky pauses for a moment, because how was that time ever real? How were the two of them ever those people, those hopeful, vibrant young men? Or, at least, Steve was hopeful and vibrant. Bucky siphoned off what he could in Steve’s orbit, even though it was never quite enough to sink deep and sprout its own roots. But it sustained him, a little.

“And this thing starts up, and it’s fine until everyone starts singing about AIDS, and I swear to God, if I’d know that was what it was about, I would never have gone. The AIDS thing is definitely one of those kick-down-the-road stories.”

Hank gives a nod. Bucky continues.

“So I look over at Steve, because I just wanna get the hell out of there, but he’s enraptured. That’s the exact word for it. So I couldn’t ditch, because I wanted him to have a nice time. So I just fucking clenched my hands in my lap and sat through it. So then here comes Collins, and he gets the shit beaten out of him, which was just…”

The dryness in Bucky’s mouth lingers even after he drains his glass. He catches the waitress’s eye to come by with the carafe to refill it, and he takes a couple more hasty gulps before continuing.

“And then this other guy comes up to him and is like ‘you okay, honey?’ and, holy shit, Hank, those were two guys who were saying ‘honey’ and ‘my sweet’ — I mean, they were in love. Not just that, theirs was the love that all the other characters wished they could have. I’d never, ever seen anything like that before. I’d never seen love between men portrayed like it was a good thing.”

Hank gives a nod. Bucky continues.

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Bucky leans forward, perching on the edge of his seat, words coming at a charged clip. “And then there’s the song about everyone fucking. And there’s Angel — Angel the man, not Angel the drag queen — and he’s singing ‘take me, take me, take me,’ and he’s writhing and moaning in these flowy clothes, singing about getting fucked in the ass by his boyfriend.” Bucky presses his fingers to his temples. “And I am just like, what the fuck is going on here? ‘Take me, take me, I love you.’ Like is this musical actually saying that two guys fucking is okay? Two guys fucking who love each other? And it’s okay to sing about it — in no uncertain terms — on fucking Broadway?”
“It was a huge cultural moment,” Hank says, smile warm and dimly amused.

“Jesus. Yeah. And then the next song… Jesus Christ.”

Bucky crosses his arms over his chest and slumps back in his chair. He looks away, out the large window, because there are pinpricks behind his eyes and pressure in his cheeks that make no sense, and the last thing Hank needs is more of his emotional mess. So he takes a deep breath and tries to detach from it, float back a bit, watch himself from the outside so that when he speaks, his voice is only a little thick.

“Then it’s the ‘I’ll Cover You’ reprise, and Collins is singing about Angel, and he’s so fucking devastated, and he just fucking loved him so much, and it’s sad and beautiful, and the whole audience is just falling apart. And I look over at Steve, and he’s weeping, because that’s the kind of guy he is. Was,” he corrects. “And he doesn’t even try to wipe his tears away. He just lets them fall down his face like it’s nothing. Like it’s totally okay.

“And I’m trying not to fall apart, too, but I don’t want to leave in the middle of this song, and I’m fucking frozen to my seat, clenching my jaw so hard that I think I’m gonna break all my teeth, trying not to break down, and when the song is over, I say I have to go to the bathroom, and I basically have a meltdown in one of the stalls.” Bucky shakes his head, still half-watching the passersby, the couples and the lesbian mothers in the Park Slope ensemble.

“Why?”

“Because that will never, ever be me. I will never have that. Even if it’s possible, even if this fucking musical is telling me that it’s possible, I’m not going to have that.”

“Why can’t you have that?” Hank asks

“Because I don’t deserve it. I fucked up so much. Let myself be…. Bucky rakes an unsteady hand through his hair, letting the rest of the sentence die behind his tongue. “Took me like twenty minutes to pull my shit together so I could go back in and pretend I was fine.”

Steve didn’t buy it, either, because after they left the Nederlander, they walked to Bryant Park in silence. And Steve put his arm around Bucky’s shoulder on the park side of 6th Avenue in the comforting, substantial way he did when Bucky told him he wasn’t straight. And Bucky squirmed out from under it, shoved his hands in his pockets and said he was sorry. For what, he didn’t know. He just didn’t know. But he was. And Steve just looked forward, his beautiful mouth pressed in a firm line. Crestfallen.

Hank takes off his glasses, fogs them with his breath, and rubs the lenses with his cotton undershirt. “So, what does that have to do with your goal?”

Bucky bites at the inside of his lower lip. “I want what those two guys had. I want love. I want it so fucking bad that I’ll look for it everywhere, and I only see it in all the places it’s not. When it’s right in front of my face, when it’s dropped onto my lap or offered to me unconditionally, I can’t accept it.”

A joyless laugh cracks out of Bucky. “Because if someone loves me, they’re obviously making a terrible mistake. They don’t know what they’re doing. They don’t know that I’m a broken, ruined garbage pile. And if they’re so far off the mark, how can I trust that? They’re just going to figure me out.”

“The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return,”’’ Hank proclaims. “You
ever seen *Moulin Rouge*?”

Bucky picks up his fork again and pokes at his cold eggs. “Yeah. Steve basically said that I know how to feel love but I don’t know how to do anything else with it. I don’t know how to give it back, because I can’t accept it for myself.”

“He might have a point,” Hank says.

“But how do you *do* that? How do you accept love when you think you don’t deserve it?”

“Well, that’s where the AA work comes in. You can use the program to take an honest look at your flaws *and* your strengths and use the Steps to make things right with other people, where you can. I also think you should probably go back to therapy, too, because AA isn’t a replacement for that.” He gestures to Bucky in a grand, circular motion. “There’s a lot going on here that I think goes real deep, and if you don’t wanna talk to me about it, you should at least talk to *someone.*”

Bucky chances another bite of egg with a corner of dry toast. “So, are you my sponsor again?”

Hank pushes his plate to the side and rests one forearm on the table. He points at Bucky with his other hand, jutting seriously in his direction. “Just so we’re clear, this is it. Last chance. Work — and work hard — or we’re done. You don’t have a job. You screw around all day watching TV and surfing the web. You have time to do the work, so you just need to commit to doing it.”

“I can do that.”

“All right. What’s Step One again?”

“To admit I’m powerless over alcohol. And that my life has become unmanageable.”

“Are both of those things true?”

Bucky gives a firm nod. “Yes. Absolutely.”

Hank makes a ‘V’ with his index and middle fingers. “Okay. What’s Step Two?”

“Believing a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity.”

“Ah, yes.” Hank’s eyes arc up toward his gray eyebrows and back down again. “So, Reality didn’t pan out so well for you. What’s going to help you move forward?”

Bucky looks down at the table, to where his replanted finger is tracing a lazy star onto the lacquered surface. He watches, giving his brain a few moments to quiet, to unplug from rehashing his relapse as his finger moves up, down, left, right, down and up again.

“Maybe it could be the truth,” he murmurs. “Whatever that is.”

“And do you actually buy into that? Is that enough to hang your sobriety on?”

“I want to be honest. I want to find the truth. The real truth. Not the Jamie Barnes version of it. I want to know it, as much as it can be known. Accept it. Even if it’s ugly.”

Hank makes a sound of concurrence. “Good. What about Step Three?”

“To turn my life over to… the truth, I guess.” Bucky shrugs.
“So, once again, can you do that? Can you turn your life over to the truth, whatever that might be? Even if it goes against what you believe? And that includes the crap you believe about yourself.”

Bucky’s not about to let the tension into his voice, that fear over what it would mean if he didn’t believe all that stuff about himself. What it would mean if it wasn’t true. “Yes.”

“Well, all right.” Hank stoops down and pulls a folder out of his bag. It’s a blue folder that says ‘Jamie B.’ on it, and he pulls a stapled stack of worksheets from it. “Here. I don’t always use these for Step 4, but we saw what happened last time when I didn’t. I want you to do it right this time. No hunting down people on your resentments list and unloading all your anger on them. In fact, do them in the right order, in sequence. Flaws and assets, then resentments — which is about you, remember — then your fears, then your sexual inventory.”

Bucky flips the pages slowly, pausing when he gets to the sexual conduct inventory at the end. He chuckles, a hollow sound.

“Seven blanks? Seven? I fucked at least seven people by the time I was sixteen. Christ, I must have fucked at least ten times that number since. And I barely remember most of them, I was so wasted”

It should feel shameful to say the number out loud, but it just feels like a fact, like headline on page 12 — Local Alcoholic Man Fucks “at Least” 70 Dudes Under Uncle Sam’s Nose.

“This isn’t an inventory of your promiscuity,” Hank clarifies. “It’s about sexual wrongdoing that you’ve committed.”

Bucky laughs again, nervously, because he doesn’t know what other sound or words to make.

“Tell you what,” Hank continues, “have one of those seven rows reserved for all the ones you can barely recall. I’m sure they have something in common.”

“Oh, Fuck.”

“And for that flaws checklist, you’re expected to check off twice as many positive qualities. Aim to be honest with yourself completely, not just honest about your shortcomings.”

Bucky huffs. “This is gonna be hard.”

“It’s supposed to be. But this is how change happens.”

“Fine. Okay.” Bucky pushes aside his barely-eaten breakfast and takes a cautious sip from a mug of heavily sugared and creamed coffee. “I’m ready to work.”

“Good. Let’s walk through the instructions for these sheets. Get you started on the right foot.”

“Right foot’s the bad one.”

“Smartass.”

Hank smiles at him with fondness. And Bucky smiles back with a little bit of the same.

—

Bucky and Hank work for another thirty minutes, at which point Bucky is officially Too Hungover. When they get back to the apartment, Winnie is there, wiping down the kitchen counters when they walk through the door. Bucky hesitates, staying planted on the welcome mat as he closes the door behind him. When she turns to face them, her expression is difficult to read. Muted. Stiff and
guarded. It’s so unbelievably shameful, so telling of how low he’s gotten, that his own mother should be afraid of him.

In his periphery, Bucky tracks Hank’s retreat to the living room, offering them a small amount of privacy. Bucky’s throat seize, because there are so many apologies competing for his voice that he can’t sort them into the most important. So he rests his cane against the kitchen table and limps to her, and she clutches her fingers tight around the dish towel in her hand as he gets closer.

He stops and regards her through the veil of his pounding head and queasy stomach. Bucky softens his eyes and relaxes the furrow of his brow, because he can feel how salty and irritable he must look.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her.

She gives a single nod and a thin, effortful smile. It’s clearly not enough — God, how could it be? So he steels himself and gives her more.

“I’m sorry for the things I said to you last week. I’m sorry for calling you a cunt. I’m sorry for yelling at you and blaming you for all my problems. That’s not fair or realistic. And I’m sorry for drinking so much that…” He looks down at his boots as his face flushes. “I pissed myself. And I’m sorry for puking on the floor. I’m sorry for being so messy and drunk in front of you. I’m sorry for all of it.”

Bucky lifts his head. Winnie’s face is still drawn so tightly, and it’s not like her to be like this, to hold out so long when he’s being contrite. His stomach lurches.

“You said you wish I’d died instead of your dad,” she says, filling in the words Bucky was too scared to say. “Do you really think that?”

His mouth works into a ‘no’ shape, but he doesn’t utter it. Because ‘no’ would be a lie. ‘No’ would be going backwards. ‘No’ is no longer an option.

“I don’t know,” Bucky says instead, slowly shaking his head as the weight of his honesty falls on them. He’s not exactly sure what to expect from her in response, but he’s quite sure it’s not for her hand to settle on the angled slope of his cheek, halting him.

Winnie looks up at him, as she must with their height difference. Her smile grows wistful. “I appreciate your apologies.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“I don’t know.” Her thumb brushes across the roughness of his days-grown whiskers. “For the drinking and everything after, yes. But for the things you said, I’m just not sure. I need some more time.”

Bucky’s eyes widen as they sink into gray space, that excruciating middle place between good and bad, conflict and resolution. Something inside him rails against it, cries and grasps for certainty. But this will have to do for now.

“Rikki knows?” he asks

Winnie lowers her hand from his face, dragging her fingers lightly across his scruff as she does. “She said to call her when you’re on the other side of your hangover.”

“Is she mad?”

“No, just sad. We all feel that way. Sad for you because of Steve. Sad because you got off track.”
Bucky gives a one-shoulder shrug that’s far more flippant than he feels. “I don’t think I was ever on track, really. I was just checking the boxes. But Hank is going to work with me again, so…”

“Well, I’m here to support you. Rikki and Daisy are here.” Winnie reaches out and dotingly touches the sleeve of Bucky’s coat. “And maybe Steve will come around.”

Bucky looks away, jaw tensing, eyes blinking. His voice is rough and pained.

“I doubt it.”

———

By two o’clock the next afternoon, Steve is sitting in the waiting room at the Manhattan VA primary care clinic with Matt in the chair on his left. Steve got fired earlier that day, for about 50 minutes — until Matt shoved his way into Hill’s office, his charming “aww, shucks” act turned down to zero, his Hague-honed prosecution act turned up to eleven. Matt didn’t even know why Steve wasn’t coming in; he came charging to his aid, anyway. How odd to have someone do that for him. How odd to know what it feels like to be rescued.

And when Steve told them both about his broken brain and his fucked up mind, Matt, dauntless as ever, gave a smile and kindly asked Steve to give him some time alone with Hill. And so Steve paced the hallway outside Hill’s office, trying to ignore leery looks from other staff members, and then some HR lady with a portfolio and sensible heels also came down to join Matt and Hill’s secret negotiation of Steve’s fate. And when Hill finally called him back in, he was re-hired on probation, as if being a temp wasn’t probationary enough. “Extra-super” probation, she called it, requiring him to meet with Matt twice a week to be micromanaged, to meet with her biweekly for a check-in, and to attend whatever appointments he needs to get better.

Get better. She said it like it’s actually possible, like she really believes it. Steve is glad that at least someone does.

Matt was pleased with the outcome, in the way that a lawyer takes pleasure in artfully eviscerating his opposing counsel. Steve was merely stunned by it all. As his first act of micromanagement, Matt insisted that Steve go to the VA immediately to tell Hope what happened. He also asked to come with — no pressure, of course, he specified. Steve said yes, because it’s the least he could do for the man who just saved his job and everything else his job affords him.

It seems like an age ago when Steve was sitting here, nervous and scared, begging Hope for something to make his dick hard so that Bucky wouldn’t leave him. That’s all it was really about, in the end. Not being left. Not losing Bucky again, this time not to Uncle Sam but to another man less mentally and physically fucked up. The thought sickens him now, because how pathetic was he to think that was an actual emergency. How pathetic was he to invest so deeply in a relationship that was torn apart so easily by something so superficial.

But even though he’s less frenzied than he was last time he was here, Steve’s legs are still bouncing. He’s still eyeing the door every time one of the nurses comes out to gather someone. He’s still watching the points of entry to the room, whipping his head around at anything sudden or louder than a cough. He can’t fucking help himself, and part of him wonders why everyone else isn’t doing the same. Don’t they want to know what’s happening around them? Like Matt, who’s seated on his left, radiating cool collectedness, calm as still water. But then again, Matt’s always watching with his other senses. Steve can feel it in the silence they’ve been sitting in for the past half hour. He’s mapping sounds, smells, and sensations. Logging them. Planning contingencies around them. He must be. Because Steve can’t stop that process in himself, and he has all five of his senses intact.
Finally, Hope comes through the door to the clinic and makes eye contact with him, looking impeccably poised and far less frazzled than last time he was here. She gives a small wave with one hand as she holds the door open with the other, and Steve is so glad to see her that he forgets to say even a ‘be back soon’ to Matt before he ambles over to her. They make their walk to her office without exchanging a word, and once they’re seated behind closed doors, Hope crosses her legs and gives him a curious look.

“You’re back soon,” she says. “How did the meds work?”

Steve winces at the memory of his very ill-fated experiment, surely one of the lowest moments of his adult life. “It didn’t matter. We broke up.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“But I’m ready now,” he states.

“Ready for what?”

“I’m ready for treatment. I’m ready to go to mental health.”

Hope sits back, relaxing into her chair, and she appraises Steve with an incongruous, withering intensity.

“Why now?” she asks him. “We’ve been talking about this for a couple of months. You’ve been avoiding it and saying you’re not ready for it, even as recently as last week.” She purses her lips, and her eyes sharpen. “I hope this isn’t just to get your boyfriend back.”

Three weeks ago, Steve would have been naive enough to use that word. He realizes now how grossly misplaced it was, how childishly presumptuous he was, thinking that he could wish a relationship into being.

“He wasn’t my boyfriend. I see that now.”

“What was he?”

Steve frowns, and his gaze drops to the floor. He really has to think about it, combing through the many nouns and adjectives that inundate him.

“Someone I loved who refused to love me back,” he concludes. “Something from the past I tried to hold onto, even though it was toxic. And I have to put him away in the past where he belongs.”

“I see.” There’s an odd mixture of pride and melancholy on Hope’s face, like she’s pleased that he came to this conclusion and saddened by the circumstances that led him here.

She’s certainly not the only one.

There’s an odd relief in finally calling their relationship what it was. To see it for what it was rather than what Steve wanted it to be. And even though his heart still aches from it, in the dull way that his heart can ache now, it feels right to let those old wounds start to heal. It feels right to make a different choice, one that isn’t dictated by what Bucky wants or needs.

Steve lifts his chin to steady his eye contact with Hope, and the solidity she offers him back gives him strength.

“I’ve been so busy chasing after someone who won’t ever let me catch them that I’ve become
someone I can’t stand to be. And I have to get better for myself so I can wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and be okay with the man I see. Because I don’t remember what that feels like.”

He pauses, fingers clenching into the upholstery of his chair. “And if I’m going to give a damn about anyone else in this world right now, it can’t be Bucky Barnes. If anyone, it has to be my son. And I can’t give a damn about him the way he deserves if I’m fucked up like this.”

It comes out a little unsteady, a little unsure, a little scared. But it makes Hope smile in the sincere way she does when he’s made one more step toward this nebulous getting better stuff, wobbly as this particular step is.

“So you’re doing this for yourself. So you can be the person you want to be.”

Steve’s expression is ambivalent, even as he nods his assent. “I think so. Yeah. It feels weird, though.”

“Of course it would. You never do anything for yourself. This is a great thing, Steve.” She stops again to gauge him, scrutinizing him more intently now, green eyes flitting. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

She gives a single, terse nod. “Okay. I’m gonna call someone in the mental health clinic to consult. Do you mind if I do that while you’re here? In case I have questions.”

Steve’s rib cage tightens around him. “Sure.”

She gets on the phone then, and he tries to follow along as she speaks, even though she talks very fast and in clipped shrink-ese. Does he have to go through GMH when he’s a “slam dunk” PCT case. She doesn’t want him to get stuck in GMH. Something about someone seeing his ex? Something about a someone named Bruce. 2641. And then she’s talking about her daughter, how Hope has to see her teacher after school, and it’s not a disciplinary problem, it’s boredom.

And Steve is very lost and can’t make much sense of it by the time she hangs up and holds out a finger to him.

“Okay. One more call,” she says.

Now she greets Bruce. She talked to Scott. She wants to direct-refer. She did a biopsychosomething. She says Steve’s name, last four, 29-year-old OIF Army infantry officer with at least two major “Criterion A’s” from deployment. Something else. PCL 70 PHQ 22. He does have TBI but he’s going to be starting cog skills — even though he had no definite plans to do that. Doing MI. Doesn’t need prep work, oh, he’s a resilient guy, and does Bruce have room on his caseload?

Hope swivels around in her chair, receiver still pressed to her ear. “Do you have any times when you can’t come in?” she asks.

Steve shakes his head, eyes wide, because this is all happening very, very fast.

Then she tells Bruce that Steve knows it’s once a week, that he knows he has PTSD. And he’s a really smart guy. West Point grad. Always does his homework. Very consistent attendance. Lovely, good to work with. He needs more help with that. Stable on meds, something something.. She’s going to hang onto him for meds. PE would be a good fit. Something about a PCT consult. How great. Thanks, Bruce.

When she hangs up, she has yet another kind of smile on her face, the one where she shows teeth. A victory smile. She turns back to him and flashes it boldly.
“So that was Dr. Banner, who’s the PTSD Clinical Team lead. He’s wonderful, and he said he’ll see you directly without you having to go through general mental health first.”

Steve swallows as everything rushes to meet him, because just ten minutes ago he uttered his first word about being ready, and now he’s going directly to the PTSD clinical team, pass go, collect $200, holy shit.

“I wish you wouldn’t talk me up so much,” he murmurs.

“Why?”

“What if it’s like work, where everyone has all these expectations for me, and I can’t meet them?”

Steve is not sure if he can take being a therapy failure, in addition to all the other failures he’s racked up simultaneously — failure at work, failure at his relationship with Bucky, failure at parenting, failure at having a home and a livable New York wage. He barely failed at anything before that, except for the biggest things. Failing to keep his mother alive. Failing to keep Bucky safe on deployment. So maybe he’s better at it than he thought, but he has to get this right. He cannot fail at this.

“I know you can do this work, if you decide to put your mind and your heart to it,” Hope states firmly. “No doubt. You’ve already made such great progress.”

If what he’s experienced in therapy is progress, then Steve must no longer know the definition of the word. He’s been expending most of his energy during these sessions trying to shove back a life-threatening deluge of unspeakable things — truly, things that he cannot speak, because he can only guess at what they are. It feels like a blackened, tangled mass of anger, despair, agony, and memories of the worst things that have ever happened to him. And the longer he does this work, the weaker he gets — or the stronger it gets. And if he keeps going…

“Am I gonna fall apart?” Steve speaks with tenuous softness, eyes wide and uncertain.

“What do you mean, ‘fall apart’?”

“Lose it. Cry. Just…” He shrugs. “Go crazy with all the stuff I’m not feeling now. All the stuff that’s waiting.”

“It’ll be intense, if you’re doing it right. And when your PTSD and depression start to get better, you’ll feel more, yeah.” Hope takes a read of him and then holds out her hands like she’s clutching something circular between them. “But it’s like a two-liter soda bottle — if you shake it up, what happens to the soda inside?”

Steve’s mouth quirks. “It’s under pressure.”

Hope shakes her hands vigorously around that imaginary bottle. “So that’s like what you’re doing now, holding everything in, and the pressure is just building and building, the more life shakes you up. And what happens if you twist the cap off?”

“It explodes all over.”

“Right.” She mimes taking the cap off. “So when you start to let yourself experience your emotions, it might be a little messy at first. But does the soda keep spilling out and spilling out forever?”

He shakes his head.
“So the idea is that when you move forward from this, you’ll be able to experience your emotions more fully as they’re happening, so you don’t get that big buildup in pressure. And it can be a little challenging at first. That’s why Dr. Banner was asking about social support. Who do you think you can ask for help, when things get stressful?”

Steve’s first thought is of the man waiting for him in the lobby. Jesus, if he hasn’t been eaten by the other veterans yet. “My supervisor, Matt. He’s…” A slew of positive adjectives come to mind, some maybe even a little too fond for a man who needs to start protecting his heart better. “I like him. He’s a good man. And Sharon. I told her already. She’s very supportive.” His eyebrows draw together again as he scans his painfully small rolodex of friends and associates. “I can’t think of anyone else. That’s sad.”

Hope smiles, looking hopeful enough for both of them. “Two great supports are better than a bunch of sub-par ones.”

“I guess.”

Things go quiet again. Steve fidgets with the upholstery of his chair. There’s a tiny place fraying on the left arm rest, and he’s been picking at it little by little every time he comes in, fraying it more and more. He should stop, because it might be Hope’s own personal chair and not a VA chair. But the action is soothing in its repetitiveness.

“How are you feeling?” Hope asks.

“I don’t know. Nervous.”

“You can do this. I know it. I’ve known it from day one.”

Steve snorts and shakes his head. It doesn’t matter if he can or can’t do it. “I honestly don’t have a choice anymore.”

Hope holds out a single finger to him, perfectly straight, pristinely manicured. Sure as anything.

“Oh, but you do have a choice, Steve. You’re choosing this. And that’s pretty great.”

—

Hope sends him off with a list of tasks and reminders. Dr. Bruce Banner will call. Call the OEF/OIF neurocog lady. Re-order meds. Next appointment March fifth. Do something nice for yourself. Steve reads it through twice before he gets back to the waiting area, hiccuping repeatedly over item five. Something nice. For himself. The words might as well be in Cantonese.

Matt looks up at him as he approaches, wearing a soft expression.

“How’d it go?”

“How do you know it’s me?” Steve asks, because he can’t not-ask anymore. It’s uncanny, like many things about the way Matt Murdock operates.

Matt smiles. “Your walk. Your feel.”

Steve breathes a thin laugh. “My ‘feel’?”

“Your energy. It’s like a rubber band about to snap.”

No argument there; he’s been riding that edge for over a year.
They walk toward the parking lot in companionable silence, the only sound their footsteps and the shush of Matt’s white cane as it sweeps in front of him.

Matt breaks the silence in a fashion that’s become typical, not quite tactless but falling short of diplomatic. “So, you’re living in a hotel.”

“On Staten Island,” Steve adds, as if it’s the punchline of a joke.

“I know how much money you make, Steve. And it’s not nearly enough to live in a hotel.” Matt smirks. “Not even one on Staten Island.”

Steve shrugs and begins scanning the lot for his car. “I can’t go back home.”

“Yeah, breakups are a special kind of hell. I’ve been through a few doozies myself, most of them with Elektra.”

“Hard to break up with someone you weren’t really with,” Steve grumbles.

“Still. Something’s come to an end. Something important.” Matt turns his head toward him, mouth dipping into a frown. “Do you pay child support?”

“Yeah. Sharon’s family is old money, and she gets BAH and BAS, so it’s not like they’ll go hungry if I don’t. Okay, we’re in the lot, if you wanna…”

Steve glances over and angles his right arm away from his body. Matt takes Steve’s upper arm with his left hand, fingers gripping Steve’s bicep. Steve leads them to the left, toward the row where he spots his Corolla.

“I need to pay it for myself,” Steve continues. “It’s important. But if I have to stop, I guess I have to stop.”

Matt makes a thoughtful sound. “We have a spare room, you know. It’s an office, technically, but there’s a pull-out couch. It’s yours, if you want it.”

Steve shakes his head. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to intrude. You have a wife. It’s not right.”

Matt grips onto Steve’s bicep hard, enough to get Steve to stop in the middle of the lot. It’s freezing, and a still-coatless Steve wants nothing more than to climb back into his crappy hotel bed as soon as feasibly possible. But Matt is-- Steve knows Matt isn’t actually looking at him, but it feels like he is, especially when he offers one of his charming, easy grins.

“You know what Elektra hates?” he asks with a pause. “Cooking. You cook?”

“Yeah.”

“I swear to you, if you come stay with us and cook dinner a few nights a week, she won’t ever want you to leave. We’re so sick of eating out, but neither of us are very good in the kitchen.”

Steve snorts, because it’s hardly a fair exchange. Matt’s apartment would easily fetch two million right now, not the kind of boarding you pay for with a few meals.

“I don’t know,” Steve mutters, shoving his left hand in his pocket and balling up his right hand to
warm his fingers a little.

“Consider it a temporary stay, just until you get a new place. Then we’ll kick you out. I promise.”

Matt gives his arm another squeeze.

Steve thinks about that sticky item number five on his list from Hope, more daunting in this moment than even his terrifying foray into PTSD treatment. Maybe something nice could be letting someone else care for him for a change. Very, very temporarily.

Steve gives a heavy sigh, pushing a plume of condensation into the space between them. “Only if you promise.”

“Oh, I promise. Cross my heart, swear on my first born, all that. Just say yes.”

Steve gives a small smile, cautiously hopeful like the one that crept in yesterday. And even though Matt can’t see it, he can surely hear it in his voice.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Vomiting, references to nonconsensual sex acts, Rent spoilers

Notes:

Rigorous honesty: Is a reference to the “How it Works” chapter of the AA Big Book. An excerpt of this chapter is read aloud at the beginning of every meeting (or every meeting I’ve ever been to). The first paragraph, WHICH IS SUPER RELEVANT TO BUCKY, is:

“Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.”

COP: Combat Outpost - a small base of combat operations far from a main base, like a Forward Operating Base

120s: 120mm mortar system makes a big boom and looks like this. NOTE: Sticking your fingers in your ears is NOT proper - or adequate - hearing protection!!

(And please don't email jammersbuch@gmail.com, lol)
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

March

Chapter Notes

BEFORE YOU READ:

This chapter contains some uploaded media that will be very difficult to read on your phone. It is strongly recommended that you read this chapter on a computer or a tablet for maximum effect, if at all possible.

If you have trouble reading the content of the media, either because of your device or because of the quality of the media itself, I have included the content of it in the Endnotes section.

Special thanks to actonbell for consultation with this chapter. You are an absolute lifesaver.

Follow me on Tumblr for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Beta work provided by the fantastic Nonush, Princess of Power and of keeping me motivated and on track with this fic. I literally could not do this without her. You can find her on Tumblr.

And a very, very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

Warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
March 10, 2010

Hey Birthday Boy. There better be a good reason you’re not answering your phone right now. I’m just gonna assume it’s ‘cause you’re having a nice night with your family and you’re having so much fun that you just didn’t hear your phone ring. Anyway, aside from Happy Birthday, I also wanted to tell you that I got mid-tour leave supposedly coming up in July, and I’m gonna drop by New York and see you, so you better get ready. All’s fine here, stuck at KAF right now, bored out of our minds, but we’re headed out next week to hold down some godforsaken outpost out in goat country for a month — which probably means at least two months — so that should be fun. I’ll try to call again before we head out. Oh, and do me a favor and please call Natasha. She’s been asking for your number, and I know you didn’t want me to give it out to anyone, but she’s been talking about meeting up in New York while I’m on leave and coming to see you, too, and I don’t want to play middle man with all that while I’m downrange. So you two figure it out. Okay, I’m gonna go. Happy Birthday, Snack Cake. Hope it’s a good one. Talk to you later.

Bucky gives a thin smile as Sam’s message runs through his memory. There’s a twinge on his lips, a shadow on the fringes of this moment. Not only because he missed Sam’s call from Afghanistan but because there was an edge in Sam’s voice and Sam’s words, some overactive nerves, and not the
pre-mission jitters. Sam doesn’t get those very often — fuck, he did before Khalidiya, didn’t he? — and they sure don’t sound like that. No, that was the overcontrolled cadence of a normie friend who’s trying not to let his alcoholic friend know that he’s worried that he’s face-down in a gutter somewhere or face-up in a Holiday Inn somewhere. It’s become a new part of his routine, defying everyone’s expectations that he’s going to fuck up. It would be satisfying if it wasn’t so goddamn difficult most days.

Bucky looks down at where his hands are folded over his belly — left one over the right, because it’s the least disgusting one to look at. His body feels heavy and full, sinking into the couch cushions where he lies. It’s the literal fullness of a rare hearty meal and some other kind, a more intangible kind that’s adjacent to something that he’s grown very familiar with. It all kind of blends together now. Feelings. Sensations. Time. Past, present. He would throw future in there, but he usually can’t see more than an hour in front of his own face. But, God, does he get lost in time. He has no idea where the fuck it goes.

Bucky’s attention is grabbed by a sound from the loveseat on the other side of the room. Rikki’s voice. She’s laughing at something Daisy said, something she deadpanned, from the look on her face. They’re sitting on opposite ends of the couch, facing each other, feet nearly touching in the middle. He watches them for a while, which is all he can do because they’re talking so quietly now that he can’t hear them. He watches the little expressions. The quirks of their lips, the way they look at each other, how they lean in.

They’re frowning now, looking serious. Heavy-browed. Rikki picks at her nail polish and shakes her head. Daisy looks over at him, very deliberately. So does Rikki.

They both freeze.

“Thanks again for dinner,” he says, straining to smile and sound casual.

Daisy’s responding smile is the deliberately reassuring kind, the kind you give a child. “We thought you were sleeping.”

“Why would you think that?”

“You were really quiet,” she tells him. “Your eyes were closed earlier.”

Bucky’s brows draw together. How fucking long has it been since dinner? How long has he been lying here, staring at the ceiling or, Jesus, sleeping? When the fuck was he doing that…?

There’s no way. No fucking way. Winnie is still doing dishes. It’s only been ten or fifteen minutes. It’s fine. Everything is fine.

“Well, I was gonna say that I think I like vegan food. Between you and—” Bucky cuts himself off, severs the sentence with the clamp of his jaw.

“What?” Rikki asks.

“Nothing,” Bucky murmurs.

But it’s not nothing. It’s a creature that won’t be ignored, an old habit that cannot seem to die, crowding into the silence and forcing out the truth.

“I was about to say between you and Steve with his tofu, but I guess that’s not relevant anymore.”

“How you holding up with everything?”
Bucky has to hand it to Daisy, as he often does, for her readiness to cut through the Barnes Family Bullshit Apparatus. If there was an Expert Badge that could be awarded for such a skill, she would have earned it at least twice over in the five years she’s been with Rikki. Winnie and Rikki have been aggressively avoiding even tangentially approaching the subject of Steve since he left, which is usually welcome but sometimes feels like nothing happened at all. Like Steve never even happened.

“Well, I’m not drunk,” Bucky says, which would be a challenge right now anyway, since there is not a drop of booze to be found in the whole apartment. He checked as he was rummaging around the kitchen earlier. Checked the place where they used to keep some Tanqueray. Checked the other cupboards, just to see. Said he was looking for a snack to tide him over until dinner. He was not.

“And I’m not in jail, so that’s an improvement from last year,” he adds.

Rikki is picking at her nail polish again, vigorously, chipping sound audible even over the sound of the dishes. “He didn’t have to be such a fucking asshole about everything. He’s so dramatic.”

“I really fucked up. I guess he just…” Bucky frowns. “Had enough.”

Had enough. Like someone has had enough of smoking or had enough of a miserable job — better stop that shit before it kills you. Cut it off like a gangrenous limb. Cut him off like a—

“Did he even text you or anything today?” Rikki lets her hands drop heavily onto her crossed legs.

Bucky begins to reach for his pocket but hesitates. He doesn’t remember feeling his cell vibrate. But he doesn’t remember closing his eyes, and he doesn’t remember what they talked about at dinner between salad and coffee, or which Step prayer they said at closing circle today. So maybe he missed it. And if he missed it and it’s there, God, what will he do then? What if it says *Happy Birthday*? What if it says *I’d like to talk*? What if it says *I miss you*…? Or anything like that. Anything good.

Bucky lifts his hips and shoves his hand in his pocket to pull his phone. When the screen lights, nothing greets him except for his screensaver — a picture of the sun cresting over the bank of the Tigris, radiant, clear and quiet, taken during a piss break on a pre-dawn patrol in May 2008. Steve was standing next to him, just watching. Watching all of them, as he should have been, but also watching Bucky. Watching him watch the sunrise.

Bucky shakes his head. Slides his phone back in his pocket.

Rikki scoffs.

“I hope you can work something out,” Daisy says to him, either oblivious to or completely unconcerned with how wide Rikki’s eyes get when she does. “Even if it’s just to clear the air and get some closure.”

Rikki jumps in, voice rising. “Fuck closure. What’s the point? He’s not even worth the effort. I’ve always thought that.”

Bucky rolls his eyes. “That’s *bullshit*. You didn’t always think that. Don’t make shit up.”

Rikki pulls her arms in even tighter. “Well, it’s different now, anyway,” she concedes. “*He’s* different. He’s messed up.”

Bucky lifts his head off the pillow he’s using. A half dozen responses attempt to launch, all of them offended, a couple even viciously defensive of Steve, the kind of vicious he’s trying not to be
anymore. The kind of vicious Winnie accused him of being. Cruel. That was the word she used.

“That’s what fucking happens when you get blown up,” is what he says, words cutting through the room over the sound of the garbage disposal.

And Rikki unfolds herself now, plants her feet on the floor, and perches on the edge of the couch, like she’s making to spring across the room at him. Her blue eyes are sharp and locked on his matching set.

“Listen,” she says, “that fucker dumps you while you’re deployed, which is the dickest move in the book. That in itself is grounds for me to hate him forever and insist that you do the same. But no, you hook back up and he gets into this weird-ass relationship with you, which is utterly insane because he still thinks he’s gonna take care of you or something, but we can all see how messed up he is even though he can’t see it at all. He can’t even go out to dinner without having a goddamn meltdown in the middle of the restaurant. You two go to the grocery store for some fucking Cool Whip and he has to send you — the disabled one — inside because he’s too fucked up to go.”

Bucky lets his head fall heavily, and his gaze drifts toward the eggshell white of the ceiling. “Wow, that’s…”

Many words come to mind in the din of sounds coming from the kitchen. She’s not entirely wrong; the facts of most of the events check out. But the word that sticks out most is—

“True. It’s true,” Rikki supplies. “That’s the motherfucking truth, is what it is. Don’t defend him. He doesn’t deserve it.”

—Cruel. It’s cruel. Even if some of it is true. Bucky waits for that energy to uncurl again, the fuel to stage some objection, because it’s the least he could do. Half that shit is because Steve is traumatized out of his mind, and as a human, as a veteran, as someone who has been traumatized out of his own mind, he could at least defend that.

But the only thing that meets him is a leaden weight, one that pulls him deeper into the cushions and sinks into his chest. It’s a weight that has been pushing him into the ground, into his mattress, into any surface he dares to rest on, bearing down on his shoulders and heart and mind. Ever since the sparkling newness of sobriety wore off after a dazzling but paltry week and a half, he’s been straining against it. And he’s been straining extra hard tonight, because he needs to look fine. More than fine, he needs to look good. And he can’t spare that energy to fight for Steve. He just can’t.

And so he doesn’t.

“I’m sick of his shit,” Rikki says. “You could do so much better.”

Bucky huffs a dry laugh. There is not enough sarcasm in the entire city of New York to do that comment justice, just as there’s no man on this planet stupid and desperate enough to want a chewed up alcoholic with a shredded half-dick who is completely incapable of adult relationships.

Daisy looks steadily at Rikki, her mouth pressed into a flat, serious line.

“I think you’re being really harsh,” she says.

Rikki’s eyebrows rise. “Wow, you’re very eager to defend him.”

“I mean, it’s not like he didn’t have reasons for doing the things he did.”

“Reasons like Jamie?” Rikki shoots back.
“Well, like getting blown up,” Daisy clarifies, then looks at Bucky. “And, I’m sorry, but you’re not always the easiest person to have a relationship with.”

“True,” Bucky admits.

“Oh, can you not shit on my brother today, of all days?” Rikki snaps.

Bucky has never seen someone look both contrite and unapologetic at the same time, but somehow Daisy is pulling it off. “I’m sorry, Jamie.”

“No, please go on. This is highly entertaining.”

He isn’t sure why he’s smiling, because it doesn’t feel entertaining. Not at all. Perhaps the only thing worth smiling about is the ferocious solidarity Rikki is showing him. Maybe he has her back now, and all it took was Steve doing the exact same thing that she did to him after he overdosed. Cutting him off. Leaving. Being finished with him. Has he ever been easy to have a relationship with? Has he ever been easy? Has anyone ever been able to relax with him? Relax into their relationship? Be with him and feel at ease? Or has he always been a burden? And how can he not know the answers to any of these questions…?

“Listen, I just feel really bad for Steve,” Daisy says to Rikki, and she shrugs with the shake of her head, like it can’t be helped. “He doesn’t really have anyone else except us.”

“That’s just horseshit, because he can just go back to his girlfriend or baby mama or whatever the fuck she is.” Rikki glances over at Bucky. “What’s her name again? What did you call her? GI Barbie?”

And that is the last motherfucking straw, and Bucky’s fingers dig into the wool of his sweater as he volleys back through his clenched teeth. “Can we please fucking stop talking about Steve?”

Rikki and Daisy stare at him for a few moments, then exchange a glance between them before orienting back to him.

“Sure,” Rikki says. She seems to deflate a little, taking a long and possibly deliberate breath, and she shifts position, crossing her legs and resting her hands on her lap.

Daisy, on the other hand, does not deflate. “What about the apartment?”

“What about it?” Bucky grumbles, scrubbing his hands over his face.

“It’s technically his, isn’t it?”

Bucky sighs into his palms and lets his arms drop to his sides. “Yeah. I need to find a way to pay him for it. I have the money.”

Daisy dips her chin and gives him a pointed look. “And you need to talk to him to transfer the lease.”

Bucky closes his eyes and groans.

“Jesus. I don’t even know where he’s staying…”

It’s not that he didn’t try to reach out. When he first got sober again, when his regret was still freshly raw, he tried. He texted Steve to ask if he was okay, if he had a place to stay, and he threw out more apologies, heaps of them, because there could never, ever be enough. And all he got back was one single text:
I’m safe. I have a place to stay. That’s all I have to say to you.

And that was that.

Rikki snorts. “Just tell him you want to pay him. That should get his attention really fast.”

Daisy regards him for several moments with a sort of somber warmth, the kind you offer to someone who’s bereaved. Or maybe that’s just how it feels. But what a fucking ridiculous thought, preposterous, because you don’t give sympathy to someone who committed a murder. And as relationships go, well, Bucky stone cold executed this one. Just like he did last time — even if it was Steve who pulled the trigger. He double-barrel-loaded that motherfucker.

“Are you okay living alone?” Daisy finally asks.

Bucky pauses to consider his response. He has to really think about it, because until now, being alone has been a byproduct. A state of flux. He never thought that it might just be how things are now, that it’s not just an interlude between Disaster A and Disaster B.

“You know, this is the first time I’ve lived alone. Ever.”

He scans his memories for confirmation and finds it. Remarkably, after 31 years, this is the first time he has ever been completely on his own. Bucky looks at where his scarred hands are gathered on his chest, and the corners of his mouth sag.

“And I think it’s… good. To be alone.”

“You’re not worried about relapsing?” Rikki asks.

She has Daisy’s hand in both of hers and is playing with her fingers. Just… playing with them absently. Bending them one by one at each knuckle, gently, and they’re so loose, so relaxed, that it’s nothing. It’s casual. It’s easy. Daisy’s not even looking. She’s perfectly relaxed, just looking at him, waiting for him to answer. They’re both looking at him, and they’re waiting for him, and he can’t seem to find the words, because how can they just be like that—

He lifts his head sharply at the sound of heavy approaching footsteps, Winnie’s, as she enters the living room from the kitchen. She pushes down the sleeves of her sweater as she walks and moves to the end of the couch where his feet are, bypassing the perfectly good chair that Bucky knows for a fact is also very comfortable.

“Can I sit?” she asks, sweeping her fingertips over the socked toes of his bad foot.

Bucky stares at his mother, and then cranes his head to look back at the vacant chair, then back at her again. It’s no use, of course, because she continues gazing down at him with hopeful eyes until he pushes out a very long breath through his nose and moves his legs so that she can sit down. The right hurts like a bitch when he bends it, more than usual. Now that he’s committed to sobriety, he’s also committed to taking the train into the city for a meeting every day at his home group, which means scaling a thousand fucking steps at a Manhattan clip with a bum leg and a cane. Sometimes he has to take a cab back from Chelsea, because he just can’t stand to go down those stairs again with all those assholes pushing behind him. That New York is so utterly handicap inaccessible is as baffling as it is unconscionable.

He makes sure not to suppress a hiss of real pain, which he repeats when he stretches his legs back out on her lap. It’s weird, and he doesn’t like it. This isn’t how they sit. This isn’t how they do things. He wishes she would just give it up already, but the hostility that stirs within him is damp and halfhearted.
“Sorry, honey,” she says softly, laying her hand on his shin. “I wasn’t thinking. I can go sit in the chair.”

Something about her touch — the gentle regret in it, perhaps — makes it difficult for him to stay intensely annoyed with her. She’s been on exceptional behavior tonight, and so has he. They both know how tenuous they still are.

“It’s fine. Thanks for picking up,” Bucky says.

“Of course. Do you want some cake?”

“You just sat down. Relax for a minute.”

Winnie gives him a fond smile, one that crinkles the corners of her hazel eyes. “I’m gonna give you an extra big piece,” she says, then reaches over and pats him on the stomach.

“Hey!”

He swipes her hand away, rougher than he wishes he had. It makes a slapping sound that carries, and she pulls her hand back quickly, startled, like she touched a surface she didn’t know was hot. But she recovers with the deftness of someone woefully accustomed to the mercurial humors of her drunk of a son.

“Are you eating?” she asks him, laying her hands back on his legs. She’s squeezing him now, feeling around his calves, undeterred.

“Yes, mother, I’m eating,” Bucky grumbles. “This is what I normally look like.”

“No, it’s not. You’re not eating enough. You hardly have any meat on these things.”

She squeezes his lower legs vigorously, her hands like claws, snapping like a crab, and Bucky squirms, because it tickles and it’s uncomfortable, and he can hear Rikki sniggering from the loveseat.

“Stop it!”

Winnie stops clawing, but her fingers begin walking a path down his tibia, toward his foot. And, God damn it, it tickles, and he locks his jaw down, because if he lets it unhinge, he’s going to…

“Do I need to come cook for you?” she asks.

An uncontrollable smile breaks out on Bucky’s face, one that flickers around the edges, because he’s trying to keep it together. But between her playful fingers and her straight-faced offer to cook for him — Lord knows it’s no secret that she’s got no gift for food preparation — he just can’t.

“Jesus Christ,” he replies, “is that a threat?”

He yelps out a laugh — a real one — when Winnie digs her fingers into the sole of his good foot.

Winnie drops him off on her way home, sending him inside with the rest of the cake — German chocolate, vegan, somehow also very delicious — balanced precariously in his left hand. Two more months and he’ll be eligible to get his license back, which is utterly absurd, considering he nearly choked a man to death and could have easily killed several others on his drunken birthday drive one year ago. His “punishment?” Two stints in residential treatment, the first a fucking joke, the second
effective enough to get him on the train and walking down the street without looking over his shoulder every five limps, but that’s about it. And he met Quill, but he’s MIA anyway, so maybe that was a wash, after all.

It’s everything that’s wrong with the world. The bad guy gets off scot-free; everyone else pays the price.

Inside the apartment — Steve’s apartment, he supposes — it’s starkly quiet. Not even the upstairs-neighbor-cum-yoga-weirdo is stomping around or running the goddamn blender. Bucky dumps his messenger bag by the table, opens the fridge, and sets the rest of the cake on the shelf next to a half order of panang curry and a jar of bread and butter pickles. There’s not a whole lot else to speak of, save for some apples, condiments, cream cheese, hummus, eggs, and a pack of bacon that he bought on a whim but hasn’t ever felt like eating. It may already be expired. He doesn’t check to see.

Instead, he closes the fridge and looks over the hand-scrawled dry-erase calendar he has posted on the freezer. It’s muscle memory by now, part of the nightly routine that he’s supposed to have. Morning routine, afternoon routine, evening routine, night routine. Every one designed to keep him from hobbling down to the liquor store. Hell, won’t even go to the bodega this week after nearly walking out with a box of wine last time he was there. Turning 31, being in this apartment, reeling, still reeling after Steve… he needs a routine. That’s what Hank said. And so this is his night routine. Check the calendar. Have a plan for tomorrow.

Thursday is an 11 o’clock men’s meeting at the LGBT Center, and Hank will be there, and Bucky will be expected to mill around after and talk, because he’s supposed to be more social, even though Bucky’s told Hank that he doesn’t want to be social with anyone at that meeting — especially not that meeting. Paisley will be there and nail polish guy and some of Hank’s old man friends whom Bucky should probably respect and shit because they survived or whatever but fuck. There are a couple — like maybe an actual couple — of leather jacket guys in their forties with salt-and-pepper hair who seem fairly normal, but they always leave after. They have the right idea, and Bucky sometimes thinks to maybe follow them to see where they go, see if they get into a nice car, if they take the train or get a cab, if they keep their hands in their pockets when they walk down the street, if their shoulders touch… He’s not sure why.

And he’s got work ahead of him tonight — at least an hour’s worth. But as much as he loathes the task, his routine also includes a shower. He’s up to two a day sometimes, which is close to torture. He has to shower at night because of all the sweating he does hauling his broken body around the city, and now he has to do it in the morning because his sleep is shit again, after finally sleeping through the night when Steve was here. Too often he startles awake, covered in sweat, clothes soaked through, gasping, bedding thrown off or twisted around him. Sometimes he doesn’t remember what he dreamt but many nights he does, and it’s the shit that makes him wish he was dreaming about Trip’s headless body or dead kids instead.

On the way to the bathroom, Bucky passes by the closed door leading to Steve’s room. He couldn’t handle seeing all his stuff in there every time he had to take a piss, because it’s still all in there, every item untouched. Laundry still in the basket. Book still on the nightstand. Closet door still open. It’s the one clue Bucky has as to Steve’s possible living arrangements, which he suspects are either hotel or couchsurfing. But, honestly, Bucky doesn’t even know if he’s in New York anymore. He could be in DC with Sharon, like Rikki said. He could be back with Sharon. Maybe they can get married now and live happily ever after with Ethan and their happy hetero family, and Bucky can just slink away and rot into decrepitude, single and alone forever.

And maybe he’ll just relapse. Maybe he’ll just give all this AA shit up, thank Hank for trying, and go back to drinking. Because what’s the fucking point? He wonders sometimes. In moments like these,
he really can’t remember.

This is also part of his routine.

One day at a time.

— And Christ, he would roll his eyes if it wasn’t the God’s honest fucking truth. Except for him, it’s more like one hour at a time. Especially now, when he has to strip down and deal with himself. One year since he lived with Rikki and Daisy, steaming up the mirrors so he could get naked in front of them, and he’s still doing the exact same thing. One year of closing his eyes, shuddering at the feel of his own skin beneath his fingertips — the fingertips that still have sensation, anyway. Recoiling with humiliation or checking out entirely whenever he has to interact with his own genitals. And forget jerking off — not that he wants to, anyway. He threw his testosterone cream in the trash the day after he sobered up. Whole lot of fucking good it did him.

After he showers and dresses, Bucky grabs his bag from the kitchen and retreats to his room, passing through the living room on his way. Passing Steve’s couch, Steve’s entertainment center, Steve’s TV, Steve’s stereo, which he never once used. He never listened to anything, which… God. How fucked up. How fucking fucked up. Back when…. when was there not Led Zeppelin playing when Steve was home? When did Bucky not come home from class and hear Robert Plant wailing? And maybe Steve would also have his easel out, and he’d be sitting at it, his eyebrows knitted so tightly together, hand so steady, his body like art itself, his concentration unbreakable, and sometimes Bucky would just sit cross-legged on the bed and watch him work, wait for the right time to walk over to him and lay his hands on his shoulders and kiss the top of his head or the side of his neck or —

God damn it, stop. Stop. Shut off the lights. Close the door.

Bucky has a small desk in his room now where he does all his AA work, next to the window that overlooks 17th Street. He found it on a curb on Sherman Street and had Daisy help him load it into his truck and bring it home. He really does try to take all this AA stuff seriously — his daily routine stuff, the homework Hank gives him for his Step work. He told Hank that he would. He promised. He doesn’t have a job, after all, unless full-time disabled loser counts as one.

In rare moments of delirious hopefulness, he’s entertained options for what he might do, after this theoretical recovery of his. But these exercises have often been catastrophically discomforting. He’s one semester from a bachelor’s degree in a major that would make his head explode if he tried to finish it. His fine motor skills are garbage, so he can’t type and can barely write legibly. He can’t lift or walk far or stand for long. Which leaves approximately zero respectable jobs that he can think of.

But he can’t just screw around watching trash on DVR and haji killing on the web all day, even if they’re the couple of things that bring him something vaguely approximating contentment.

And when that pathway to any sort of viable future seems too overwhelming or too impossible, Bucky comes back to his routine. He pulls out the gifts he received from Daisy — two large notebooks, Army green, with sturdy spines, elastic closures, and thick, lined paper. He runs his hand over the cover of one of them, smooth and sturdy, and pulls an accompanying gift from Rikki — a canvas pencil bag, oatmeal white with black cats on it, filled with different colors of fine-tipped pens. They are clearly meant to be used for his Step work, and he supposes that it’s an investment in their own sanity to keep him on the path to recovery. He can’t blame them. He’d be nervous to be his family, too.

They’re so nice that he’s reluctant to use them for anything at all. His Step work is going poorly, and he’d hate to fill one of these beautiful books with the trash he comes up with, which he knows is
trash but simultaneously believes with every cell in his body. So he sets one aside and purposes the other for his first two tasks — daily reflections and gratitude.

Oh, the Daily Reflection Book — Reflections by AA Members for AA Members. He’s not sure where they scraped up some of these people, but some days he spends more time reflecting on what the hell he’s doing following this 12 Step bullshit than he does doing the actual work. And there’s no accountability, either; Hank doesn’t check his work. Not this stuff. He’s got some awful Step Four worksheets he’s gotta bring in next Tuesday, which he’s been avoiding enthusiastically, and the thought of working on those tonight motivates him highly to pluck this much lower hanging fruit.

March 10th:

Today, it’s my choice. ...We invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt.

Well, no shit. When does he not think of all the ways his past decisions have fucked up his life in the present?

There’s more to the passage. Stuff about blaming others for the circumstances that have led him to the present. Making past decisions based on fear, pride, and ego. Trying to allow God to guide us down the road to sanity — cross out God, write in The Truth. The truth. Reality. What actually is versus what he wants or what he tells himself out of habit or avoidance.

He tries to take it seriously, even through the rolling of his eyes, which he only does once. He tries to get over himself. He reads it again. Thinks about it. Writes about it, freeform, for as long as he can before his hand cramps up. He’s been surprised and, at times, disturbed by the stuff that comes out when he lets himself write. He can’t always sit with it. Sometimes he has to walk away. Sometimes he comes back that night, sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he crosses things out, because the words can’t coexist with how he understands reality. Sometimes it just cuts too deep, too fast. Most of the time, it’s only the surface that feels scratched, with at least another layer below, a cavern or two or eight that he can’t plunge into. And for now, he’s okay with that. He doesn’t want to fall into those just yet. Or ever.

Next is his daily gratitude list, where he’s supposed to list three things he’s grateful for every day. A simple task. But some days, it takes him ten or fifteen minutes, and he’s not sure if the strain is a function of his fucked up world or his fucked up mind. But tonight, it’s easy. Tonight, it’s Rikki, Daisy, and, somehow, Winnie. There’s a first time for everything, he supposes.

Bucky’s last task... maybe he shouldn’t have saved for last. He’s not sure why he always does; he should know damn well by now that avoidance is to be avoided. He closes his fancy new notebook and eyes the blue folder Hank gave him when they started working together again, the one with all his Step Four worksheets. It’s already worn along the corners and edges from being frantically or frustratedly crammed inside the drawer so many times. He’s almost done with them. Fuck, he should just Ranger up and finish the fucking things tonight. Maybe he will. Maybe tonight he can pull it together and keep it together.

This is yet another part of his routine.

With a deep, energizing breath, he pulls the last of the worksheets, the one he’s been laboring over for a solid week — his flaws. This whole Step is about exposing his flaws, he guesses, a task that really shouldn’t take this long since there are so many to choose from. This sheet is supposed to be his first pass at the task after completing the other worksheets before it, including an inventory of the stuff he resents, the stuff he’s afraid of, and his slew of awful sexual misdeeds. He’s done all that other stuff, somehow. Muddled along, line by disgraceful line. Scratched in a couple of entries most
nights, though not all nights. Some nights, he can’t. Some nights he stares out the window instead and lets himself drift. Sometimes to an alternate future where he’s drunk and not doing these worksheets. Sometimes to the past where he’s actively destroying his life. Sometimes to the past where he’s not self-destructing or being destroyed, where he might be content. Maybe even happy. Sometimes he loses hours.

But this sheet has given Bucky trouble. Real trouble. It’s been the one he’s looked at the longest, brow furrowed, pen poised above the page, mind gallivanting through a lifetime of fuckups until he comes to the inevitable conclusion that he is constructed almost entirely of flaws, so how the hell is he supposed to narrow it down to nine? He’s already got nine, and he’s got so many more just begging for the light. So much shit that’s been stirred up by Hank, by Steve, by these meetings, by these goddamn writings and worksheets… There’s no way that only nine flaws could orchestrate a production of failure and cruelty and weakness so grand.

The only time he’s ever free of them is when he first wakes up, when he stares up at the ceiling through the darkness or the nascent light of dawn. And for a little while, he doesn’t feel anything. He’s forgotten it all. And it’s the best part of his day, the closest thing to being obliterated.

And when he remembers again, sometimes it’s worse than Khalidiya. Sometimes it’s worse than Steve.

Bucky presses his lips together and grabs the pencil bag Rikki got him. He fumbles with the zipper and fumbles around with the pens inside, fumbling and fumbling, looking for a goddamn color that’s not purple or pink or God, what is with these fucking colors? And he dumps everything out on the table and shoves everything aside until he finds a plain black pen, fine-tipped, the brand he likes best, thank you Rikki.

He writes nine words.

*Useless - No fucking purpose. Shit body. Can’t do shit.*

Bucky stares down at those words, crooked on the page, factually flawless, and works the cap back on his pen. If Truth is his god, then he’s becoming more pious than any survivor of the Pentecostal church has any business being. He just wonders if Truth will ever be anything good, for all the lip service everyone pays it. Because right now, all it does is hurt, every single time he unveils it.

He shoves the worksheet back into the blue folder and pushes back from the desk. He stays like that, hands braced on the desk, arms straight, and hangs his head between them. His left forearm is uncomfortably tight, like it’s wrapped in fists, and he knows he should be massaging it. He should be working the tissue. He should be going to OT and PT and ortho and urology and everyone else and, fuck, he has Scott-what’s-his-fuck next Tuesday before meeting Hank, God damn it.

24 days. 24 days sober.

One fucking day at a time.

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March 12

Steve isn’t sure which waiting room he hates more, the too-big waiting room at the primary care clinic or the too-small waiting room at the PTSD clinic. Right now, this one feels like a closet stuffed
full of winter coats, stifling and hot, even though there’s only one other person in here — an old guy in a chair across from him, calmly reading a magazine. Steve taps his hands between his splayed knees, and his head whips to the side when footsteps finally approach and slow at the doorway.

But they belong to a woman who’s come for the old man, and they greet each other with smiles that are as perplexing as they are fond, because Steve can’t imagine anyone being happy about any of the work that gets done around here. This work, the literal stuff of nightmares.

Steve couldn’t wrestle more than two hours of sleep last night, but his body is a paradox of energy, and he bursts to his feet as soon as the old man has cleared the room. There’s barely enough room to pace, five steps, turn, five steps, turn. He wasn’t nervous about all this after the intake two weeks ago, which was something of a wonder. The clinical social worker who conducted it was easy going, soothing, and brief, and she didn’t make him say any details at all about what happened. He got blown up by an IED. Platoon sergeant also got hurt. Boom. She did ask what felt like a thousand questions about his symptoms, very systematically and often quantitatively, but it felt organized and grounding and manageable. And as he left that day, he thought that maybe he could actually do this, that it wasn’t just theoretical. That he not only had the will but also the capacity.

But then Dr. Banner called.

He called to introduce himself. To apologize for not doing the intake himself because of an unplanned professional obligation. To provide feedback about the assessment and confirm that Steve really does have PTSD. To provide treatment options and recommendations. And Dr. Banner is not a particularly soothing man. He’s a man who sometimes talks too fast, sometimes stammers, sometimes veers onto tangents of enthusiasm, and by the time the call ended, Steve had agreed to come in to meet Banner and talk about something called prolonged exposure, because that was what Banner thought would be a good fit, and Steve said “whatever you think is best,” because he didn’t know what else to say, because he could barely track what was happening and his head was spinning, and he just wanted to get off the fucking phone so he could jog down 34 flights of stairs and go get some fresh air.

And so that is what he is walking into today — Bruce Banner, Ph.D., stammering psychologist, and a therapy he barely knows anything about. And the uncertainty of it makes him want to just—

“Mr. Rogers?”

Steve wheels around, hands and teeth clenched, and standing in the doorway is a man in his late forties, smiling up at him in a weird, half-committal way, like he doesn’t want to show too many teeth. He smiles up, because he’s at least half a foot shorter than Steve.

“Bruce Banner. You can call me Bruce.”

Steve loosens his fingers and closes the distance between them.

“Steve is fine,” he murmurs when he gets as close as he’s willing to.

Steve keeps reading Banner as they head down the hall. The way he shuffles alongside Steve, hands clasped in front of him, corduroy pants scuffing. The complete absence of small talk. And when Banner leads him into the corner office at the end of the hall, Steve stops, aghast, as he takes in the piles of books and journal articles stacked on his desk and along various side tables. And they’re not tidy piles, either — they’re haphazard, disorganized afterthoughts.

Banner turns and catches sight of him, frozen in the doorway.
“Yeah, it’s a little cluttered,” he says, scratching at the back of his neck. “One of these days I’ll get it all organized. But you can just have a seat for now and we’ll get started.” Banner gestures to a small couch that, thankfully, is not covered or flanked by disarray.

It’s the first couch that Steve has ever seen in a shrink’s office, for all the cultural talk of them. This one is only big enough to fit a modest-sized couple.

Steve steps in, cautiously, and tracks Banner’s movements as he circles behind him to close the door. He feels his lip curl, even though he knows it’s rude — Christ, he must look like an asshole. But at least the couch is comfortable, the cushions firm, pressed against the far wall so he can see the door and both windows perfectly. For all its disorder, it’s a room for people like him.

Banner sits in his swivel chair and crosses his legs at the ankle. He pulls down on the sleeves of his cardigan, which are already pulled to the wrist and over the cuff of his rumpled button-down below.

“So, we spoke on the phone about doing Prolonged Exposure, which we would start next month when I get back from TDY,” Banner says. “Is that still something you’re interested in?”

Steve pulls in and releases a long breath through his nose. Straight to business, not even the most cursory of pleasantries. It’s one of the few times Steve would have sorely appreciated the buffer. “If that’s what you think is best.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“I’m not,” Steve admits, looking to the floor, because he should be made of stronger stuff than this. “I was. Now I’m not.”

Banner tilts his head a little. “What changed?”

What really changed, perhaps, is that Steve is now faced with doing what he said he would do, which used to live in the land of comfortable abstraction and heartfelt determination. Or maybe desperation. That’s where this really started, isn’t it? Desperate resolve.

“Hearing you talk about it. Just…” Steve shakes his head. “It was a lot.”

“Well, how can I help? What questions do you have?”

Banner’s eyes are bright and eager, like he lives for this, and maybe he does. Maybe he lives for hand-holding grown men — grown infantry officers — who are so terrified of talking about the past that they avoid treatment for over a year. Avoid admitting they even have a problem until their entire world collapses from beneath them.

“You could just start over. Just break it down for me Barney-style. Like I’m an idiot and I’ve never heard any of this before.”

It’s partially true. And in his mind, he catches an echo of Bucky’s voice, back in his trailer in Baghdad. Catches a glimpse of him, sharp and fit and dangerously handsome. Flawlessly competent. Telling him how he’s gonna have to explain to their men in children’s terms why they shouldn’t use adaptive racist slurs for their enemy anymore.

“I can do that,” Banner agrees.

Steve takes a deep breath, just like Hope would tell him to do. “What’s PE?”

“It’s a first-line, evidence-based, trauma-focused treatment for PTSD.”
“Meaning?”

“Meaning we’re addressing the trauma directly, not just treating the symptoms of PTSD.”

Addressing the trauma directly. Steve’s stomach lurches.

“And what does that mean?” he asks, the words pushing out of him slowly, hesitantly, preparing for the recoil of Banner’s response.

“It means that we’re talking about what happened. Talking about the event itself. With PE, you’re talking about the details in a systematic way, a way that puts the control of the event back in your hands. Because when people experience a traumatic event, they tend to re-experience the memory in these very unpredictable ways. These unbidden, intrusive flashes, and they might come at any…the purpose of this…back some control…”

Banner’s voice begins to cut out. Chop up. Not that it matters, because there’s really nothing more he could say that would be any more disturbing than the notion of “talking about the details in a systematic way,” whatever the hell that means. A slaughter is no more gruesome and brutal if it’s done systematically. What kind of fucking comfort is that supposed to be? So he’s supposed to systematically think about Bucky’s mangled body, about Bucky writhing in pain, about all the blood, about the look on his face, the sound of his voice when he screamed—

Steve sinks back against the cushions, swallows the saliva pooling in his mouth, and closes his eyes. He tries to breathe deep, the way that usually helps when he feels nauseated. He breathes deep and starts to count, visualizing each number vividly in his head. A giant number one. A giant number two. A giant number three. And every time Bucky’s body tries to shove its way back into his consciousness, he starts over. Giant number one. Giant number two—

“Steve?”

Steve swallows again and shakes his head weakly.

“I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

Steve opens his eyes, slowly, and gazes up at the ceiling. Banner lets the room get quiet, just like Hope would. He waits for Steve to speak, shifting a little in his chair, but only because he seems like a guy who always needs to move just a little bit.

“I can’t relive all that,” Steve tells him. “I’m sorry. If that’s what this is going to take, I don’t think I can do it.”

Banner moves big now, leaning forward, perching on the edge of his seat, rubbing his hands together. “That’s what I’m trying to say, though. You already are reliving it. Every day, multiple times a day, if I remember right from your intake. If you weren’t taking prazosin for your nightmares, you’d be reliving it every night, too.”

“I didn’t get most of what you just said,” Steve says, sitting up straighter now that some of the sick feeling is subsiding. “I forgot my Ritalin. I’ve been so fucked up today. Sorry — messed up.”

“No, you can swear. And, oh my God, your TBI. I’m so sorry, Steve.”

Banner presses his palms to his temples, and his face contorts with such remorse that Steve almost feels bad about lying. Because even though he did forget his Ritalin, that wasn’t the reason he wasn’t
tracking the conversation. He was just afraid. He was just terrified about facing what happened in Khalidiya.

Steve holds out his hands in a calming gesture. “It’s okay. It’s fine.”

“I’ll talk slower from now on. And take more breaks. And I have handouts, and I can draw diagrams and write things down, if that helps,” Banner offers in quick succession, shuffling around some items on desk.

“It’s fine,” Steve repeats. “And I’m not sure that’s really the point right now.”

Banner reorients, swiveling back around to face Steve again. But the man who faces Steve now isn’t disorganized or nervous or fidgety. He’s thoughtful and sturdy, and he regards Steve with dark eyes that are inquisitive and disarming.

“Tell me why you’re here,” Banner says. “Why you asked for a referral to the PTSD clinic.”

It takes Steve a few moments to remember. He said something generic at his intake, like he wanted to be less depressed, feel more emotions, something something. But now thinks back to Hope’s office the day he asked to be sent here. He thinks about the reason why he wants to be less depressed, why it’s important for him to be able to feel things. The reason he’s been visiting every other weekend and still cannot connect to, separated by a gulf of trauma so wide that he’s not even sure the two seams can ever be connected. If that’s what it really is. If it’s not that he’s just become a terrible man at his core, which is what he’s slowly beginning to suspect

“I want to be able to love my son. I want to feel happy when I see him. I want to miss him when I don’t see him. I don’t feel any of those things. The only thing I ever feel — when I feel anything at all — is fear.” He pauses. “And anger. That’s new.”

Steve’s chin drops to his collar and he grips his kneecaps tightly. Maybe he shouldn’t say this part, but it’s blooming in him like a poisonous overgrowth, and it has to go somewhere. He opens his mouth, and even then it takes two attempts to get the words out of it.

“I’ve started to get angry at him. He’s just a baby. Eleven months. I haven’t ever yelled at him or let him know it, but these last couple of visits... I got so angry over the smallest things. Like he tipped his plate on the floor, thought it was funny, made a big mess. And I got so fucking furious that I picked up that plate... and I swear to God…” Steve pinches his thumb and forefinger together, leaving less than an inch between them. “I was this fucking close to launching it at the wall — which would have been ridiculous, because it would have made more of a mess, but I was completely beside myself. Out of my mind.”

He touches his hand to his mouth and shakes his head, gaze drifting out the window.

“I dropped the fucking thing on the floor again and told Sharon to pick it up and walked out. Slammed the door, stomped down the hall, kicked the building door open, swore a bunch of times, kicked it shut, and walked around the block until I cooled down. Could have been an hour. I don’t even know. I was so fucking pissed.” He shakes his head again.

Banner gives a few shallow nods, and his next words are halting. “Have you ever done anything like that in front of him? Throwing things, kicking things, punching things?”


“Because that’s something I would have to report to child protective services. Just to remind you of the limits of confidentiality.”
“I want to be a good man,” Steve says, but it comes out faintly. “I want to be a good father. That’s why I’m here.”

Banner offers him a smile. A good one, a modest one, one that doesn’t seem placating or patronizing or loosely covering discomfort. It’s the smile of a man who isn’t surprised or distressed by anything he’s hearing.

“Thanks for sharing that with me,” he says. “I know it can be hard to talk about things you’re not proud of, especially when they go against your values. And that’s PTSD. Your fight/flight/freeze system is out of whack, so it sometimes goes off when it’s not supposed to. Like at your son. Make sense?”

Steve nods.

“And we can treat that, and PE is a really good way to get at these symptoms, which is why Hope and I recommend it. But it’s your choice completely.”

Choice? It doesn’t feel like a choice. Not anymore. It feels like the edge of dawn or the brink of death. But unlike those inevitabilities, it also feels impossible.

“What if I can’t do it?” Steve asks softly.

“We can stop any time you want,” Banner assures him. “Just please let me know and don’t just stop coming in, because there are other treatments we can try. But given your TBI and your avoidance symptoms, I think this is gonna be a great fit for you.”

Steve heaves a sigh and scoots to the edge of the couch so he can take his coat off.

“Explain it to me again,” he says. “Slowly.”

“I’ll do you one better,” Banner says, swiveling around and plucking a small voice recorder from in between two stacks of folders. He turns back and wags the thing at Steve. “The whole thing is recorded. It’s part of the protocol. Every session. You can listen to everything at home as many times as you want. In fact, it’s part of your assignments. Might as well start now, right?”

Steve lays his coat across the arm of the opposite end of the couch and tries to relax while Banner clears out some old files from the device. The interlude is nice. Banner takes his time and keeps his mouth shut, and Steve thinks he might actually like him.

“Okay, Steve, you ready?” Banner says, laying the recorder on a stack of psychology journals equidistant to both of them.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Okay. Here we go.”

March 16
“I’m sorry I’ve been blowing you off.”

Bucky concentrates on looking the part. Dropping the corners of his mouth. Staring at that snag in Scott’s carpet and not at his goofy face. There have been so many apologies this year — sincere ones, just like this one is — but Bucky can barely focus from exhaustion, so the extra effort feels necessary.

Scott smiles, but it’s strained. Polite. “It’s all right. Things come up, I get it. I know we were talking about getting you into cognitive processing therapy aftercare group, last time we talked.”

Scott swivels toward his computer and clicks his mouse around Bucky’s chart. Along the side of the screen, Bucky can’t miss the long chain of No Show notes from different clinics — mental health, physical therapy, occupational therapy, orthopedics, psychiatry, pharmacy, urology, polytrauma, OEF/OIF casework. He looks down at his lap.

“Looks like you never made it to the PTSD clinical team at all,” Scott says. Bucky sinks back heavily in his chair, his leather jacket creaking. “My buddy I was supposed to go with ran off to Alaska to be with his girlfriend.”

One of Scott’s eyebrows climbs up toward his hairline. “You decided you didn’t need PTSD treatment because of your buddy?”

“We were gonna do it together. That was the deal.”

He’s been going back and forth with Quill for five months by text, and the gist of most of their exchanges has been, Hey you coming back soon? and Totally man, this is not working out AT ALL. I’m DONE. And, of course, after the knock-down-drag-out raging comes the scraping and bowing, and he’s not done after all, and it works for another month. And with every iteration, with every blow-out and reconciliation, Bucky grows decreasingly optimistic that he will ever see his former roomie again.

The last thing he got was an envelope five weeks ago postmarked from Fairbanks. Inside was a photo of Quill in a red flannel shirt looking scruffy and worn, with large bags under his eyes, and on the back of the photo was a small, hand-scratched note that read: Hey Barnes, growing crazy veteran beard, gonna buy a cabin in the woods w/lots of shotguns and booby traps haha. Quill. Also crammed in the envelope was a menu for a restaurant called The Cookie Jar, with a single circled item — a “Stuffed Nolan’s,” some egg-battered, grilled, cream cheese-filled cinnamon roll topped with strawberries and “whip cream,” served with ham, bacon, or sausage on the side. You would fuckin love this, he scribbled, so come visit soon cabins are cheap.

“So, what about you?” Scott asks. “How are your PTSD symptoms?”

Bucky shrugs. “I mean, fine. It’s whatever. I have other things to deal with now. My sponsor said I have to work through some shit with you so I can do my Fourth and Fifth Steps and get on with everything.”

Scott grabs his notebook and pen from his desk. “Like what ‘shit’ are you talking about?”

“My messed up relationships. How I can’t handle anything. How I can’t feel anything without wanting to drink or just… fuck someone to make it go away.”

Bucky cringes as a rush of images come to him, mostly of sucking Thor’s cock that first time after he tried and failed with Steve — and Jesus effing Christ, as absolutely disgusted as he is, the memory of it still kind of turns him on, which has to be the most fucked up shit in the entire history of sexual
perversion. He shakes his head and starts talking again, just to rip himself out of his own depraved mind.

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do with anything. I just… I don’t know.”

“What feelings make you want to drink?” Scott asks.

“Just sitting here. Just talking to you about this is overwhelming.” He scoffs weakly. “I deployed four times. I was a Ranger. Like a real fucking Ranger. Not some dumbass college baby who went to Ranger school to get his tab and then fuck off to some desk job. I was a sniper. And now I can’t even sit in your office and explain what’s going on without feeling like I’m losing it. I had my shit together for so long. I was doing okay…. I wasn’t like this. This is just…” Bucky shakes his head again. “It’s fucked up.”

Scott tilts his head, birdlike. “Well, you were drinking before, right, to self-medicate and avoid things?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re not drinking anymore. You’re still in AA, still in recovery, despite everything being so hard. Right?”

Scott says it with one of his dopey smiles, like this is some After School Special, as if Bucky isn’t white-knuckling his way through virtually every waking moment of every single day, sometimes actively looking for reasons to relapse.

“It sucks,” Bucky replies. “I used to have my job and PT and deployment and everything else to get me through, but now I just have booze and sex. And both of those have given me nothing but trouble. So, that’s why I’m here, I guess.”

“Did you have these problems when you were younger? Like with managing your feelings?”

Bucky ventures inward, down to the vault of his memories — or, rather, the vault within the vault where he keeps his childhood. He treads carefully, slowly, tiptoeing around the tripwires and trap doors that might plunge him into places he cannot afford to go today.

“I’ve always been pretty emotional. Sensitive, I guess,” he clarifies. There’s a boomerang in his gut, a counterstroke. A retraction that makes him visibly wince. “Drinking helped with that.”

“What was going on when you first started drinking?”

“Stuff happened,” Bucky says, swallowing heavily. He flattens his palms, dragging them over the lengths of his thighs and leaving damp trails across the black denim of his jeans.

“What kind of stuff?” Scott asks.

“Just stuff.”

“You don’t want to tell me?”

“Nope.”

Bucky leans forward in his seat and squirms out of his coat, gritting his teeth and cursing under his breath as he struggles with it. His pits are swimming, and he can smell it and he prays that Scott can’t. He thought he’d mastered this talk by now. The “stuff” talk. As long as it’s just stuff, it’s fine.
Stuff could be literally anything. Stuff could be a shoe. It could be a bag of popcorn or a roll of 100-mile-an-hour tape.

“How old were when you started drinking to handle this ‘stuff’?”

It comes out unthinkingly, a spontaneous clap of honesty.

“How old were when you started drinking to handle this ‘stuff’?”

“12.”

A shadow of disbelief streaks over Scott’s face. “Okay. And did your parents shut you down a lot emotionally? Like if you were crying, did they tell you not to? Or if you were upset, they told you not to be upset? Things like that.”

“No. But I had some tendencies that my mother and her church didn’t like, so she put a stop to that.”

“Like what?”

“Faggy things, I guess,” Bucky says, watching Scott grimace at the word. “Girly things. Playing with dolls. Helping out with my baby brother. Sister. Winnie said it was wrong and bad, so I learned to just shut all that kind of shit down.”

Scott is also terrible at hiding the little snag in his upper lip, if he’s even trying. Maybe he’s not trying. Maybe Scott isn’t a guy who tries to hide himself from his patients. “What kind of shit, specifically? How would you classify that?”

“Just soft shit. And, I mean, I only tried to shut it down. I wasn’t very good at it.” Bucky rolls his eyes when he fails to explain it. “I don’t know. I was just soft. Just one of those soft kids. Small and soft and weak. You know.”

Scott props his elbow on his desk and rests his temple against his curled hand. “I’m sorry, I don’t. What, exactly, does that mean?”

Bucky sighs. A picture would say much of it — a spindly, pale boy with fluffy hair, one who couldn’t put on weight if he tried until puberty finally threw him a couple bones to partially make up for it. But it was more than physical; it was a palpable softness of spirit or heart, something that others saw, something that made him vulnerable. Some birth defect he wished they could have cut out of him when he was born so he could be safe. Don’t be too sweet or tender. The world will crack you open and ruin you. You have to really learn that one on your own.

“I was the kind of kid who’s small and soft and uses his allowance money to feed all the abandoned pets in the neighborhood. Because people are shithags, and they would leave their animals behind when they’d PCS to Korea or Germany or wherever. So I was like the Pied Piper of all the strays. I’d come home from school, and all these cats would just follow me around the neighborhood until I fed them. They’d just follow me around like I was made of food.” He smiles a little, a twitch at the corner of his mouth that flattens in his next breath. “And then Winnie made me stop because they wouldn’t go away. My dad bought the kibble after that.”

Bucky pauses, settling back into his chair. “But they never said not to feel certain things, like sad or angry or whatever. I mean, I always tried to hide stuff from them, because I didn’t want them to get bent out of shape, but that’s it.”

Scott nods and jots more notes in his notepad. And while he does, Bucky’s jaw slides, grinding his molars along with it. He shouldn’t say anything, because it’s stupid. But there is a gnawing, insistent thing trying to escape him, something that pulls him to the very edge of his very tenuous comfort, and his jaw works until his words come out as a dim murmur, barely audible even in the silence of
the room.

“You skipped over that other part,” he says.

Scott looks up, wide-eyed. “What part of what?”

Bucky looks down to his boots. “I say I’m drinking and fucking all my problems away… and all you talk about is my drinking problem. For a guy who pretends he’s all cool about sex and shit, you sure don’t seem to wanna talk about it.” One corner of Bucky’s mouth curls upward in a wry twist. “Unless you just don’t wanna talk about it with me because I’m a faggot.”

“Wow.” Scott leans back in his fancy Herman Miller Aeron chair, eyebrows drawing in, chin slack. “No, that’s not… That’s not it.”

Scott sinks into quiet, pen tapping slowly against his chin, eyes flickering back and forth as he looks at nothing that Bucky can discern. Maybe he’s looking inside, shuffling around for lame excuses. Not too lame, of course, because Bucky wouldn’t want to talk about that shit, either. Nobody wants to, except Hank. He can’t seem to shut up about it.

“I mean, you’re right. I’m sorry. I guess I wasn’t addressing it.” Scott makes eye contact, and frowns. “And I wish you wouldn’t use that word for yourself.”

It’s genuine and unexpected, even if the last part is the kind of cloying, self-righteous, PC evangelism that makes Bucky want to retch. But he only offer a listless roll of his left shoulder in return. “I’m just saying. I just…” He trails off. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Scott sits up charm-school straight and takes in an audible breath through his nose. “Well, since you want to talk honestly about it, and we covered this for drinking, when did you start having sex? Since you’ve been using that to cope for so long.”

Fuck... Fuck, he regrets it now, he regrets it, he regrets it, and his fingertips press into the flesh of his legs as his heart rockets into a frenzy. Images flash behind his eyes, and he closes them, shaking his head roughly, because sometimes that works, because it had to work, because when you’re downrange and your fucked up stuff is trying to abduct your brain, sometimes you’ve gotta improvise. And so he learned how to do it. Sometimes you just have to think about something else, call it up and grab it with both hands and think as hard as you absolutely can. The more detail the better. Think, think, think. Think about field-stripping your M24. Check the magazine. Check the chamber. Clear any rounds. Press the bolt release button. Remove the bolt. Hook the firing pin assembly under your bootlace, because a Kleineendorst is just one more extra piece of crap to take to the field. Pull. Slide a penny or some dinars — 25, 50, 100, who cares — in the slot. Unscrew the firing pin assembly. Wipe the spring. Wipe the firing pin assembly. Blow out the bolt. Lube up the spring. Grease the bolt threads. Screw it back together. Hook it back to your boot lace. Pull. Take out the coin. Slide the bolt back into the—

“Jamie—”

Bucky’s eyes fly open wide and Scott is there, and there is a deep line between his eyebrows, which are light brown and not very serious and—

“Are you okay?”

Bucky blinks a few times and nods.

“What just happened?” Scott’s tone is gentle and warm and inquisitive, and if Bucky were any less terrified—
“It looked like you were somewhere else,” Scott says.

“It happens.” Bucky shrugs again, so tense that his shoulders barely rise, and can they just shrug this whole fucking part of the conversation out the fucking window, please.

Scott asks a few more questions. How often it happens. How long. Bucky struggles to answer them all, because he can’t or doesn’t want to remember any of this shit. Scott nods slowly, scanning whatever he’s written, the collection of chaos Bucky has unloaded him since this shitshow has started unfurling.

“I know I asked you this before, and you said no, but I’m just gonna ask one more time,” Scott says. He looks up from his paper, eyes and chin determined. “Did you experience any physical, emotional, or sexual abuse growing up?”

There’s no tidal surge of panicked history that threatens to overtake Bucky this time. Bucky knows where it’s all stashed, and he’s got a lock on it. It’s distraction enough to see Scott’s face — the trepidation just behind the confidence, the concern, the desire to be of some sort of service. Idiot. There’s anxiety there, but there’s also a naked sincerity, an offer to meet Bucky wherever he is willing to go. Of course, he can’t guess where Bucky might lead him, and he has no idea what he might be in for, but it moves something in Bucky’s line of defense, and something — just a little tiny something — leaks through.

Bucky presses his hand over his stomach as a sick feeling twists around in there. “There was some stuff,” Bucky says. “Briefly. But I’m not going to talk about it. Ever. So don’t ask me again.”

“Fair enough.”

“I mean it,” Bucky states, his voice low and gravely serious. “Never.”

Scott gives a firm dip of his chin. “You got it. But you’ve had a lot of trauma as an adult, right? A lot of combat. Getting blown up. You were at Ground Zero too, weren’t you?”

Bucky returns Scott’s nod. Inside, he is blank.

Scott turns back to his desk and opens the bottom drawer of his desk. While he rifles around through his hanging folders, Bucky becomes acutely aware of his sweat cooling against his skin, and he works his way back into his coat.

Scott rights himself and slides a flyer across the desk toward Bucky, one with some old school generic clip art that says DBT SKILLS GROUP — Wednesdays from 1:00—2:30 — 2nd Floor Conference Room — Next Start Date: April 7th — Contact your MHTC for More Information and Referral

“This is a group I think could be a good fit for you,” Scott says, pressing his fingertips into the paper. “It helps people with managing their emotions and having better relationships. It stands for Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. You can go for as long as you want, but the full protocol is five months. They have start dates every few weeks or so when they begin a new module.”

“Five months? Jesus Christ.” Bucky purses his lips as his gaze trails over the flyer again. “And who’s in this epic group? A bunch of fucking bros having pissing matches about their deployments? Or a bunch of nasty old men bitching about how much the VA sucks?”

Scott smirks. “No. It’s mostly women, actually.”

Bucky folds the flyer in half once and then twice, trigger finger prickling and sparkling as he pinches
the edges. He slides it into his breast pocket next to another flyer, one for the next monthly Chips and Cake meeting at the LGBT center. He’s not gonna go until he can get at least 90 days under his belt, which would put him at May, if he can stay sober until then. Big Texas-sized “if.”

“I think you’ll get a lot out of it, if you’re looking for things to help with your emotions and relationships that don’t involve drinking and…” Scott pauses and rocks back in his chair again. “Wait, help me out — what’s wrong with having sex? Do you have some issues with your sexual orientation or—”


Funny, he can barely remember what the right way to use sex is, if he ever knew it to begin with. As he scans through the compendium of people he’s fucked throughout his life — there must be well over a hundred, God, probably so many more — he can only think of maybe a handful he’s fucked just because he wanted to be close to someone. Which is why people fuck, right? He thinks that’s maybe why people are supposed to fuck.

“Try this group,” Scott insists. “I think you’ll like it.”

Bucky pushes out a quiet snort while Scott looks over more of the scribbles on his notepad. There are things he wrote before they even sat down, numbered 1-6, and his pen drifts over the last item on the list now, over the double-underlined words “suicidal ideation.” He holds there, poised on the edge of whatever he’s planning to say.

“You mentioned being depressed last time, about not wanting to kill yourself but about being okay if a meteor hit you or something.” Scott looks up from the page. “Any changes there? Thoughts about suicide?”

Bucky’s attention drifts, weakly torn between wanting to give an honest answer and wanting to spin some bullshit just to get him to shut up about it. He settles for the truth, even if it answers another question entirely.

“Every time I deployed, I always thought, ‘maybe this time I won’t come back,’” Bucky says, tone carefully neutral. “Maybe I’ll come back in a bag. A bag inside a box with a flag over it and some unlucky motherfucker escorting my corpse around like it’s actually worth something.”

He glances at Scott’s face in time to see a tick there, one of his many soft little tells. “I think that’s a pretty typical concern,” Scott replies.

“But it wasn’t a concern,” Bucky says. “It was a hope. Like, man, I hope I get one of those beautiful, picture-perfect T-zone shots, like right in the face.” He passes his hand in front of his nose and eyes. “Straight into the brainstem. One shot, one kill. No fuss. Doc doesn’t even waste a dressing.”

Bucky smiles.

Scott purses his lips for a moment, and there’s strategy shifting behind his eyes, pieces of conversation that he’s rearranging to keep pace with Bucky’s evasion. “Okay, hypothetical question — if a doctor told you that you had an inoperable brain tumor and that you had six months to live, what would your reaction be?”

Bucky exhales loudly, and the tension palpably releases from his shoulders. “Thank God. Thank
fucking God. Because now I can just go drink.” He forms his right hand into a knifed plane and points it in the general northwestern direction. “Now I can just give up and go to Alaska or something and buy fifty crates of vodka and drink myself to death and not have to fight anymore. No more therapy. No more AA. No more Hank.” With each burden he checks off, he cuts his hand sharply into the air. “No more Winnie or motherfucking Steve Rogers or other shitty exes or war or guilt or awful memories or dead dads or shitty childhood shit.”

“No more trying,” Bucky states bluntly. “I can just let go and go away and it’ll just be done.”

“Wow.”

“Why ‘wow’?”

Scott scratches his chin in silence for a few moments before responding, and when he finally does, his voice is soft and distant.

“I just think it’s sad that you wouldn’t use that time to spend with the people you love. That you’d use it to kill yourself.”

“I just think it would be better for everyone if I went away.” It comes out easy, and his face lights up a little, because it’s so obvious. “I really think it would be a relief.”

“A relief,” Scott repeats, too worn or sad or something to even seem confused by it, like Bucky’s drained the capacity for disbelief right out of him.

“Yeah. It would be good if I was dead. I’ve thought that since I was a kid.” Bucky shrugs. “It’s nothing new.”

He remembers the first time with pristine clarity, lying in bed, staring at the streetlight-painted ceiling, his parents screaming at each other downstairs. Screaming about him. He was still woozy, drifting in and out of sleep, but the thought came to him, perfectly formed, that this would all be so much better if he had died. Then there would be no screaming and he wouldn’t be lying there, paralyzed by pain and anxiety and self-loathing that would haunt him until he was some 31-year-old has-been sitting in some social worker’s office getting grilled about what a fucking miserable, imploding loser he is and has been since he was old enough to get his first hard-on.

Scott abruptly straightens his posture, recomposing himself. “Let’s get you into DBT. I think it’d be a really, really good idea.”

Bucky waves his bad hand vaguely in Scott’s direction. “Fine.”

“How about seeing me individually, too?”

Bucky folds his arms over his chest and looks toward the small sliver of a window Scott got stuck with. Beneath his mangled forearms, his heart rate kicks into a hectic pace, and he tries to press down on his own chest to keep it from rising and falling too noticeably. It doesn’t work at all, and maybe it makes it worse.

“Why?” It comes out threadbare, extruded from a too-tight throat.

“Honestly?” Scott’s mouth curls into an odd little smile, tense and self-conscious and probably not meant to be a smile at all. “I’m worried about you. You’re obviously really depressed, you wish you were dead, and I know you’re not interested in psych meds. Does it make sense why I’d be worried about you?”
There’s that earnestness, that unearned sweetness, that softness, that makes Bucky want to reach over and grab him by the collar and shake it all out of him. Really fucking shake him, until his eyes get afraid and all that shit retreats to a safe place where it belongs. And maybe if he wasn’t such a useless, pathetic gimp, he might do it. He just might do it.

“I get it,” Bucky says. “But I’ll tell you one thing, and I fucking mean it — this isn’t gonna be some Good Will Hunting bullshit. You’re not gonna get me in here bawling about all my childhood shit. You’re not gonna crack me open and spill my fucking guts all over the place and leave me a fucking mess and be some fucking hero who fucking saves me. So get that fantasy out of your head right now.”

Scott’s chair edges back a little. “I wasn’t fantasizing about that.”

Bucky rolls his eyes. “Oh, bullshit. All you therapists jerk off to shit like that.”

“I don’t. I promise.”

Bucky takes a deep breath to try to calm himself down, hoping maybe his calm will calm Scott, too. “Well, I’m just letting you know that I’m not your goddamn project. I’ve spent my whole life locking myself down, and it’s bad enough that my sponsor is telling me that I have to do the opposite now, and I don’t need the same thing from you. So maybe you can just support me in staying sober or something. Or help me with this group skills stuff. And that’s your lane. And you stay in it.”

“If that’s what you want. Okay,” Scott says, nodding. Relaxing. He looks back at Bucky’s chart. “You’ve got an ortho appointment on the 22nd, by the way.” Scott leans in closer to the monitor and scans the text intently. “Last note said they planned to talk to you about surgery, but you no-showed your last two appointments. Think you might make it to that one?”

Bucky answers with a grunt.

Hank catches sight of Bucky as soon as he crosses the threshold into Cafe Lumiére, as if he’s been staring at the door just waiting for him to pass through it. Bucky limps in as fast as he can, shoulders hunched, teeth gritted as he shoves past the usual line of Greenwich Village pricks who raise their eyebrows and tisk and sneer at him. One lets a very pointed and very gay “excuse you!” and Bucky mumbles a lackluster “fuck you” under his breath as he maneuvers himself over to Hank’s table, throws his bag on the floor, and leverages himself into the wooden chair across from him.

“Sorry.”

Bucky rests his cane against the wall but the angle is wrong, and the fucking thing slides down it, and he misses catching it by a sliver, and it thunks to the floor behind him. He bends down and curses and drags his fingers across the crumby floor until he snags it, yanking it under the table and leaving it on the floor by their feet. He emerges, pulse racing, to Hank’s inquisitive face.

“You’re very late.”

“I know. I had therapy. It was shitty. I needed a break.”

“A call would have been nice,” Hank says. He pushes a small plate from the space between them toward the edge of the table. It’s dusted with the remains of a scone or something, maybe one of the cranberry orange muffins they split sometimes.
“I know,” Bucky repeats. “Sorry.”

“Apology accepted. I was actually using the time to enjoy the new art.”

Hank cranes his head up to a photograph on the wall above where they’re sitting, one of many black-and-white photos mounted around the cafe-slash-gallery, he guesses, because it’s fucking New York and every one thing has to be at least two things.

“They were inspired by the work of Anthony Friedkin.”

“Who the hell is that?” The question is lackadaisical.

Hank sighs. “One of our very good allies, way back before it was fashionable to be one,” he says, then adds, just within audible range, “Good lord, you need an education.”

Bucky follows Hank’s gaze, which has taken on a wistful, nauseating reverence. The photo is of a young man embracing another young man from behind. Their hands are joined, fingers interlocked in a kind of hasty, jumbled way, and the man in the back is kissing the side of the other man’s neck. And the man in the front, his eyes are scrunched, and he’s smiling, maybe laughing, like the kiss was a surprise. There’s nothing particularly scandalous about it. They look like regular people, maybe students, standing on some generic outer borough street, dressed for fall or early spring. But still—

“It’s awful,” Bucky states, tearing his attention away from it as fast as he can. To the crumbs on the plate. To the grain of the wood table. To the jackhammering of his own heart. Anything else.

“What’s awful about it?”

“Nobody wants to see that. It’s fucking disgusting,” Bucky says, and nothing is going the way it should be right now. This whole day has been fucked since the moment he dragged his aching, ruined body out of bed and listened to the emptiness and remembered that he’s absolutely, devastatingly alone. But, oh, it’s so fucking good to be alone, isn’t it? Isn’t that the shit he told his family? Just fucking great.

“Wow.”

Bucky slams his palm hard on the tabletop, rattling the ceramic dishware and widening Hank’s eyes.

“Stop fucking saying ‘wow!’” he says, dimly aware of the heads he’s turning. “Everyone just needs to fucking stop it. Jesus fucking Christ. I swear to fucking God, you and that motherfucker at the VA… The fucking questions. And what a fucking hypocritical fuckhead, acting like he’s this fucking progressive liberal fucking bastion of righteousness when he’s just as fucking grossed out by this shit as everyone else.”

Bucky juts his finger up at the photograph, and now the heads are really turning, and they’re affronted and nervous, and he’s doing it again, and he just needs to stop. He needs to stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. He takes and releases in a quavering breath and looks at Hank’s face while his own gets unbearably hot.

“God,” Bucky murmurs, curling in on himself, folding his arms in tight, slouching low in his chair. “I don’t even know why I’m here. I don’t even fucking know.”

“I think we should go to a meeting,” Hank says. He then glances over to the front counter and gives a shake of the head and a little wave to someone over there.

“I don’t want to go to a goddamn meeting.”
“Well, you’re almost an hour late, and there’s a meeting in ten minutes, and I’m going to a meeting. And I think you should come with me.”

Bucky shakes head.

Hank pushes his chair out from the table.

Bucky stiffens abruptly. “You’re just gonna leave me here?”

“Look, we had a meeting scheduled. We had a time set and—”

“I told you why I was late,” Bucky states, planting his forearms on the table and leaning his weight in.

“No, you didn’t. You said you had therapy, you said it was bad. But why, exactly, were you so late?”

Hank’s stare is penetrating, and Bucky can’t hold himself up to it anymore. He averts his gaze and presses his fingertips into the tabletop until his nails go white. This is one of those moments, isn’t it? When he’s supposed to prove that he’s committed. That he’s taking this seriously. That he really has given himself over to the Truth because he can’t manage even the most basic operations of his daily life.

And the Truth, which he tells Hank, is because he was standing in front of a shelf at Discount Liquors, trying to figure out if he wanted Smirnoff or Stoli.

There’s no surprise on Hank’s face when he nods. “And did you figure it out?”

“No. I left.”

But just barely. It was an agonizing forty-five minutes of waffling, shuffling up and down the aisle, acting like he was actually shopping for something and not just looking to douse his therapy session in ethanol. Vodka or rum or gin or whiskey, as if these were really options. Smirnoff or Stoli, as if it fucking matters. Back and forth he paced, sweating, coughing, raking his hand through his hair, cursing Scott and cursing the VA and scraping around his insides for any shred of a reason he could find to not take five bottles. Three times — three fucking times — he had a bottle in his hand, clutched by the neck. Three times he turned it in his hand, his good old Smirnoff No. 21, his dear friend and loyal standby, regal and smooth beneath his fingertips. And every time he held it, the fantasy came, too, of taking it home, putting it on the kitchen table, showering as he does — eyes closed and hands fast over his scarred body, but maybe smiling this time, because he knows what’s coming. Slipping on his sweats, taking the bottles to his room, because he’ll be damned if he’s gonna drink on Steve’s couch. Sitting in bed. Turning on the TV. Watching a bunch of crap he’s got stored on the DVR — The Cooking Channel, TLC, History Channel, he’s got miscellany from it all. Shit he doesn’t even care about. Not that it matters, because he’ll be drunk soon, thank God, and all those thorny branches twisting around him will loosen their hold and he will just float and float and be free of it for a little while. A little while. That’s all he wants. Just a little break.

Because this… this is not what he signed up for. Is this his future now? A protracted chess game where he has to expend hours of energy every day outwitting himself just to make it to bed without relapsing? God, he hopes this is not what he signed up for, because this is not a life. Not a real one.

“Why didn’t you buy anything?” Hank asks. And his hands are on the table now, too, fingers reaching toward Bucky’s.

“I don’t know,” Bucky rasps.
“And you don’t think you need to go to a meeting.”

Bucky hangs his head and his hair, which has grown carelessly long, falls to shield his eyes. “I still want to meet after. Please.”

“Then we’ll meet after,” Hank agrees. “But I want you to tell me why you didn’t buy a bottle.”

Bucky breathes a laugh and sits up, pushing his hair back. His gaze drifts toward the window, but he remembers that terrible art when he catches sight of another piece of it out of the corner of his eye and tracks straight back to Hank’s patient face.

“I didn’t wanna start my count over again.”

“Now, why was that so hard? How many days are you at?”

Bucky bites down on his lower lip, already bitten nearly raw from his excursion to the liquor store.

“Today will be 30.”

“Will it, now? Well, we’d better get you a chip.” Hank slaps his hands on his thighs and rises out of his chair with enviable spryness. “C’mon. Move your butt.”

When Bucky pushes himself up, he’s unsteady, unusually so, but Hank is there by his side. And it seems like enough just to have Hank standing by while he tries to flex the stiffness out of his knee, shielding him from the nasty looks and the nastier pictures.

“All right,” Bucky says, planting his feet firmly, boot heels to the floor. “Let’s go.”

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Back at Cafe Lumiére, they get a different table underneath some different photograph. Bucky assumes. He hasn’t checked. It’s black and white and has two figures and it’s enough to keep him intensely interested in his coffee and the small stack of worksheets he’s pulled from his bag.

“How long did you spend on these?” Hank asks, nodding at his pile.

It’s a sad sight. The sheets are crinkled. The writing is atrocious. The content is of highly dubious quality, recorded in spurts of stiff-jawed determination and left for days when he couldn’t bear to look at what he’d written. It’s the Truth, or as much of it as he could muster. Some version of it, filtered through a dimming lens, like the kind you have to use to watch an eclipse.

“Way too long.”

“Did you do any of the writing assignments I gave you before starting?”


Bucky slides the top worksheet across the tabletop and tries to drink his too-hot coffee while Hank scrutinizes his resentments worksheet. He has to look at it through his bifocals, making a face as he tries to find the right distance and angle to position Bucky’s scribbles.
“You don’t resent a lot, do you?” Hank comments, setting the sheet back on the table but keeping it close. It’s spoken like a gentle dare. “And you didn’t complete the worksheet.”

Bucky frowns into his coffee. “I know.”

“Did you have trouble thinking of things?”

Bucky leans back in his chair and rubs his hands together. They’re cold. The whole damn place is cold. Maybe it’s a good place to do this kind of work, excavating these monoliths, shining light on them, because he can already feel the heat start to creep into his cheeks. The heat of inadequacy and anger.

“I wanted to put one more,” Bucky says, “because I resent myself more than anything. But I don’t think that’s what they were asking for.”
Hank pats the sheet a couple of times. “You’ll think of more things as you keep going through the process. Sometimes it’s hard to admit that you’re resentful of someone or something. Especially if it’s someone or something you also care about.”

Bucky locks eyes with Hank, and that challenge is there again, that glimmer that reminds him that this isn’t even the beginning of Step Four. This is the just the appetizer. Maybe the thing that comes before the appetizer, if there is such a thing. It’s a look that tells him that whatever bitter soul searching he did to complete these worksheets was probably bullshit and that this is Hank being nice about it. And that is an absolutely fucking terrifying thought, because he almost relapsed at least five times just trying to fill out these four lame-ass pieces of paper over the past month.

Hank drags his finger along the last item on the worksheet, completely skipping over what must have been a completely cryptic ‘Casey’ and wholesale denouncement of the entire institution of religion.

“So ‘wanting to fuck men’ is the root of your problems.”

“Yep,” Bucky states.

“How so?”

“Every major problem in my life comes from it. Historically. It’s a chain reaction.”

“Interesting,” Hank says with the tilt of his head. “Care to elaborate?”

Does he care to elaborate? Does he care to elaborate on the sequence of circumstances that led him here, spurred by the shit hand he was dealt by some malignant gene or other folly of biology? How that error permeated and poisoned him, made him weak and soft, threw him to the social fringes, made him a target, turned him against himself in an endless war he can’t ever seem to win? Does he care to walk Hank through the worst year of his life, the year that ruined him forever, turned him into a fucked up, sex- and war-addicted alcoholic whose hands shake at the mere thought of unveiling tiny pieces his own biography?

“No. That’s one of those…” Bucky pauses as he tries to remember the language he used the morning after his last bender, when he was so hungover and desperate, when he would have said anything to get Hank to help him. “I get to pass on that. One of those things…."

He shakes his head and clasps his embarrassing hands together as tight as he can, left leg starting to bounce as he fills with queasy energy.

“Okay, not today. It’s fine,” Hank tells him, turning the worksheet over mercifully.

“Fuck,” Bucky says under his breath.

“Let’s look at your fears next.”

Bucky looks down at his fears inventory sheet for a few moments, not really seeing any of it but buying himself some time for his mind to race through a new circuit a few times, one that says calm down, you’re fine, calm down, you’re fine, calm down, you’re fine. It’s enough to loosen some of the tightness in his chest and the grip of his hands so that he can slide the sheet across the table.
Bucky watches Hank’s face as he scans the page, laser-attuned to his reactions — the rise and fall of his brows, the nod and cant of his head, the twitch of his lips. He did this sheet first, because he’s lived so much of his life in fear, so it seemed a natural place to start. But the fears were far less evident than he thought they would be, and the “whys” sometimes eluded him entirely.

At the end of the page, Hank gives a small smile.

“This is an okay start, though it gets spotty here toward the end, the ‘I’m a failure,’ and ‘pathetic’ stuff. What did you do to narrow these down?”

“I looked at the shit that went down last month with Steve,” Bucky says, stomach tightening sharply. He folds his arms and pulls them in towards his belly. “Things he said. Things you said. Things Winnie said. And my daily routine. The body stuff.” He shudders. “I’m sure there’s more.”

Bucky chews his lip as he waits for Hank to say more. He waits for him to start asking about the
details. What did he scratch out? What’s in the past that he’s afraid will catch up and make him fucking fall apart? Why can’t he even look at his own goddamn dick, for fuck’s sake?

Hank wipes his goatee with a napkin. “You obviously have a lot more exploration to do with these. And these are obviously very harsh. Very imbalanced.” He raises his eyebrows to an almost comedic height. “You see that, right?”

Bucky blinks at Hank and then at his upside-down writing, at all the loose, meaty threads that Hank just left dangling. “I guess.”

“Good. Let’s take a look at your sexual inventory next.”

“Oh, God,” Bucky says with a groan, looking away as he slides Hank the sheet.

Hank, the fucker, chuckles. “None of this is bad, you know. I’ve seen way worse. Not that it’s a contest.”

Bucky’s jaw goes slack as his retorts flee from him, because he cannot imagine a loser on this planet with more hang-ups than him. But he has some time to meander toward baseline, because Hank takes half an eon to get through the sheet. There’s not even that much to read, so his preoccupation is enough to spool up Bucky’s nerves and kick off a wave of second- and third-guessing.
“Interesting conclusion here with Steve. That you should have just stayed friends.” Hank looks up from the sheet. “When? Before you got back together?”

Bucky has replayed that night and that next day so many times before. The night that Steve first came onto him, drunk and eager and earnest, how terrified Bucky was — not terrified that he didn’t mean it but terrified that maybe he did mean it. And he remembers the next day, when he thought the whole thing might just blow over and they could get back to business as usual, back to his one-sided, eternal, unrequited pining and Steve’s oblivious, frustrating fraternal closeness. But then Steve asked him on a date, a real date, and then he asked — fucking asked — if he could kiss him. And Jesus Christ, he kissed him on the cheek. On the cheek...

Bucky used to play the memory before, when they were together, and it would fill him with
disbelieving, sometimes ecstatic happiness. But now when he thinks of that morning, all he feels is the bitter thickness of regret in his throat.

“Never. I wish we never kissed. Or touched. Or…” His mouth forms around the crude letter ‘F’ but shifts. “…Been together. Ever. I wish we were never together.”

God, there it is, that too-familiar fullness, the pressure of all of his mistakes, all the places he took when he should have given, the places he ran when he should have stayed. And like so many terrible trajectories in his life, it boils down to one genesis point — the place where he said “yes” to Steve in the first place.

“It’s just so fucking… l…” Bucky closes his blurring eyes, presses the heels of his palms to them, and rests his elbows on the table. He can feel the corners of his mouth pulling, twisting downward. “I let myself love him, so much… I wish I could just…”

The rest of it dies in his throat, which is too constricted to let anything else pass. And then something different grips him, strangles him tighter, a clutch of anguish that rips one single, choked lamentation out of him before it shoves him over the brink.

“I wish I never had anything good.”

Because that saying about it being better to have loved and lost is a bunch of bullshit, spoken by a bunch of heart-eyed mooks like Scott Lang who have clearly never been responsible for losing someone. Not even once or twice. Bucky has made a career of it. It might be what he does best of all.

He cries then. Right in the middle of the cafe. Sobs quietly, almost silently, into his palms while Hank and God knows who else watch him. But then, maybe nobody is watching him. Maybe nobody gives a fuck. And why should they?

Bucky’s not sure how long he cries before Hank finally says, “Do you wanna stop for today?” Long enough that it’s starting to feel self-indulgent. Long enough for Hank to get up and do something and come back. Long enough for a brilliant headache to begin blooming above his eyebrows.

He does want to stop for today. More than anything, he wants to get up, leave all his worksheets, all his AA stuff, and ditch this pretentious shithole and never come back. But he shakes his head and lifts it from his hands, sniffling as an unflattering quantity of snot threatens to flow out of his nose.

Hank hands him a napkin from a small stack that now sits between them. Bucky blows his nose and puts the used napkin in an empty to-go cup that Hank also picked up. Clearly Bucky is not the first sloppy sponsee Hank has had to wipe up in a coffee house.

While Bucky pulls himself back together, Hank grabs the last worksheet — his flaws. Bucky doesn’t look at Hank’s face. He already knows what he’s going to see.
Hank doesn’t take long to read it, and when he’s through, he is not impressed.

“All right, I was trying to be open with your other worksheets, because I was just glad you did them, but this…” He turns the sheet toward Bucky. “This is way off base. First, you weren’t supposed to go off-roading and do more than nine. And ‘slut’ is not a flaw. It’s a noun.” Hank pushes his glasses up his head and brings the page in close to his eyes, squinting. “What the hell did you have on here before?”

Bucky sighs, wads up the latest used napkin in his hand, and shoves it in the paper cup. “I know. It’s shit.”
Hank lays the paper on the table between them and rotates it back to face Bucky. “Is it? Or do you really believe all this stuff?”

Bucky fights the urge to reply with some lie or equivocation, but considering the first item on the list, he opts for a single nod.

“Step Four is about taking an honest and nonjudgmental look at your flaws and your strengths.”

Hank stabs his finger into the center of the page. “This is definitely not nonjudgmental. This is self-hating. Which you have on here, so that’s good. And you might think of putting self-pity on there, as a replacement for a handful of these other ones that are no good.”

The words hit Bucky like a foreign language, creasing his eyebrows.

“Self-pity.”

“Feeling sorry for yourself. Wallowing in your own dirty diaper, as one of my sponsees used to say. You do that a lot. Wishing you never had anything good? Self-pity. Crying in a cafe because you let yourself love a good man who loved you back, that’s self-pity.”

“Is that what you think this is?” Bucky asks, his words sharp with incredulity. “Wallowing in a dirty diaper?”

“I think—”

Bucky’s hands tighten into fists, which he lays on the table as he leans forward, his eyes cold and glaring.

“Do you have any idea what my life has been like? What I’ve had to live with?”

He means to speak it with authority, in some way that will firmly impress upon Hank just how fucked up his life has been, how much burden he’s carried, how many times he’s wanted to give up — God, what he would have given for the balls to do that. He wants Hank to know how much he’s hurt, and how being an alcoholic is pretty fucking reasonable, given everything that’s happened, and he’s not just some self-pitying shit stain whining over First World problems—

And fuck Hank-fucking-Pym and even the insinuation that this is just self-fucking-pity, fucking arrogant, ignorant, uppity Uptown motherfucker.

But it comes out weak and grainy, and Hank’s reply is as gentle as it is firm.

“No, I don’t know what your life has been like, because you refuse to tell me. Probably because you’re too used to doing this all the time.” Hank taps his finger on the ‘Lying’ entry on the worksheet. “I’m guessing it’s been pretty bad, given how secretive you are. So, my question is, and it’s rhetorical, so don’t try to answer it yet—

How long are you going to use your personal tragedy as an excuse to ruin the rest of your life? Even if it really has been terrible and tragic. When are you finally gonna get sick of using it as an excuse to self-destruct?”

The questions fall into Bucky’s stunned silence, ripping the spine right out of him — or they seem to, for how boneless he feels, how utterly wrecked. He sags, slumping back in his chair, his face as blank and colorless as his mind.

“As for self-pity,” he hears Hank say, dimly, like through a thick pane of glass, “take a look at your Living Sober book. Chapter 22.”
Fuck. That.

“Where’s your list of strengths?” Bucky hears next.

“Didn’t do it,” he mumbles.

The sharp flick of Hank’s wrist draws Bucky’s attention back to that goddamn sheet, which Hank flips over and slides in front of Bucky along with a fancy pen.

“You decided to list twelve flaws instead of a maximum of nine, so now you get to list twelve strengths.”

Bucky reaches for the pen. It’s heavy, stainless steel, with STARK imprinted on it in sleek, black font. Bucky’s not sure if the pen belonged to Howard or if it’s some corporate thing, if it feels ghoulish or just plain weird. He rotates it in his grip and stares at vast whiteness of the paper before him.


He touches the ball point to the page. He freezes.

“Five strengths,” Hank says.

Bucky’s eyes go wide and his chest begins hitching as he starts to panic, because why can’t he think of a single good thing? Why can’t he think of one — one — not-shitty thing about himself? Not one? Not a single fucking—

“One.”

Bucky throws down the pen, and it slides across the table, where Hank intercepts it before it can fly off the edge.

“This is bullshit,” he growls.

Bucky’s head falls back as he lets out a tense, tremulous sigh, and there it is, the picture he was avoiding. Two different men, maybe his age, standing face to face, shirtless, bodies pressed together, arms wrapped around each other’s waists. They look like they’ve just shared an inside joke in mixed company, a secret only they know. There are people around them. Nobody is looking. Bucky’s brain is too fried to properly revolt, and all he feels is a reflexive jolt of something in his body. He can’t even say what it is, whether it’s good or bad, approval or disapproval, fear or excitement. He doesn’t even know.

“Do you want to accept yourself?” Hank asks softly.

Bucky shrugs, still staring at the picture. “I don’t know.”

It takes a few more moments before Bucky can pull himself away from the photo. But even then, its afterimage lingers, superimposing itself on his thoughts.

Bucky holds his hand over his heart, and he speaks slowly, thoughtfully, because he wants to be clear. He doesn’t want to be pitiful, even though he is. He’s not trying to be.

“This isn’t arbitrary, Hank. This isn’t bullshit. It’s deep. Really deep. It’s tied to so many things. And I don’t know how to untangle it.”
“We can start here, with this work. This Step,” Hank says, gathering Bucky’s worksheets as he talks and arranging them in a neat stack. He handles each page with respect, smoothing out the parts that Bucky carelessly or purposefully wrinkled.

“If it’s tied into a bunch of stuff that you don’t wanna talk about,” Hank continues, sliding the stack back to Bucky, “remember that we’re only as sick as our secrets. Steps Four and Five are about getting everything out into the open, whether that’s through me or your therapist or someone else you trust. If you don’t uncover it all, you’re not going to get better. I can absolutely guarantee it.”

“Fuck my therapist, I’m not telling him shit,” Bucky grumbles, half-heartedly, because it’s hard to sling venom about a doof like that. The kind who only wants to help him.

“Then how are you going to continue doing this work without relapsing? You’re struggling a lot today, and I’m not going to drag you to meetings kicking and screaming. That’s not my job,” Hank says, angling a finger toward his own face. “You need more support than I can give you alone.”

Bucky’s gaze drifts and slips out of focus. God, he used to carry so many men on his shoulders. He used to keep a special eye out for the ones who were struggling. The ones who were too far from home or didn’t have a home to be too far from. The ones who were fucking up but were good, redeemable soldiers just behind their acting-out. He used to collect them, bring them in close, mentor them, teach them, see them through to their next unit or their next deployment or their next promotion or to the end of their enlistment. He used to be a man others could trust with their hopes and insecurities and lives. And now—

“I’m gonna do some group at the VA for fucked up women or something. People who can’t handle anything,” Bucky says. “Clearly I need to be there.”

Hank smiles. “Well, I’m glad you have a plan. And you can handle some things. Don’t sell yourself so short.”

Bucky replies with a tired snort, and Hank excuses himself to go to the bathroom. His throat is parched and his coffee is cold enough to gulp down to the grit at the bottom before Hank gets back. And when he does, he doesn’t sit down. Instead, he holds the back of his chair looks down at Bucky, eyes bright with something that Bucky might mistake for fondness, if he didn’t know how frustrated Hank is with him perpetually.

“I think we’ve done enough for today, don’t you?” he asks.

Bucky nods slowly, but he doesn’t move to pack his things. Hank starts putting on his pea coat.

“You can sort of think of this like spiritual chemotherapy,” Hank explains. “It’s going to be unpleasant. Sometimes very unpleasant. But it’s in service of healing you.”


“Jamie?”

Bucky snaps his attention toward the sound of Hank’s voice.

“Use those sheets to keep working on your Fourth Step journaling,” Hank instructs him, pointing to his stack. “You’re still doing that, right?”

“Yeah.”

Yeah, no. Not really. But he will. He’ll start again tonight. Much later tonight.
Bucky stays for a while after Hank leaves. He’s not sure how long, exactly, because he’s turned completely inward — so far inward that not even the terrible art and the terrible patrons who hate him can distract him from his galloping thoughts and slow-simmering trepidation.

R-Day. He missed it last year, because he was probably getting fucked up in Prospect Park — or else fantasizing about it while he was bullshitting his way through AA. And he was too damn bitter to reach out after Steve dumped him the first time, even though the thought flared ephemerally every time the date came and went.

But now he’s not fucked up on a park bench, and even though Steve dumped him again, he’s not bitter about it. Bitter isn’t the right word. He earned it. He is simply living the consequences of his actions.

In his gut — in his heart — he knows he has to do something, because R-Day means something. It’s always meant something. And he’s trying to be a better person. He’s trying to do the right thing. He’s trying to act in some way that he could write down on that sheet, that blank white sheet where he was supposed to put good things.

But all of that inherently involves Steve Rogers.

Fuck.

March 19th

Steve and Matt are five miles into the Outer Park Drive Loop, making pretty good time, especially considering that Matt is at the tail end of a nasty bout of bronchitis. He spent nearly a week home from work, sick as a dog, while Steve covered down for him and kept everything moving on the legal team. It was nothing, really; Matt’s department is so well-oiled that he could be gone for a month and things could probably run on inertia alone. But it felt good to be at the helm for a few days, to speak at meetings and be taken seriously, to not be seen as a total screw up anymore.

He has Matt to thank for some of the minor repairs on his reputation, even if his actual functioning hasn’t improved that drastically. He still brings work home. He still has to read some things twice, sometimes three times, if he’s tired. He still can’t remember some of the most basic things, even though Hope has him doing some cognitive skills class with a bunch of old men with dementia. He still needs therapy, which he’s planning to start next month after Banner gets back from some hoity-toity thing with muckety-mucks at VA Central Office in DC, because apparently he’s a pretty important figure in the VA PTSD community. And apparently he already had a Ph.D. in neuroscience before he got one in psychology. And now Steve feels the need to reassess the man all over again, because he’s not sure if he makes sense anymore. So little makes sense anymore.

Well, at least Matt does. At least this does.

“So, I’m going to a conference next month in DC, and I think you should come with,” Matt says, words coming out in cold puffs.

Steve frowns immediately at the idea, grateful that Matt can’t see. He tries to keep the frown out of his voice.

“What kind of conference?” He lays his hand on Matt’s right forearm and pushes gently. “Joggers
Matt veers to the left until Steve stops pushing and then corrects back on their original path when Steve gently pulls him back. They’ve been doing this routine for a month now, ever since Steve moved in, and it’s become easy. Intuitive. They didn’t even use the nylon tether after the first week; it felt too weird for both of them.

“The American Society of International Law annual meeting. They usually have some really excellent programming, and it would be a great opportunity for you to get a feel for the field and meet some of the major players.”

“So you know the major players,” Steve says, huffing a little smile through his nerves, wondering, as he often does, what someone like Matt is doing slumming around a nonprofit, even a respectable one like Human Rights Watch.

“I know some of the players from the ICC and from school.” Matt shrugs one shoulder. “And, you know, here and there.”

“Right, yes, here and there,” Steve says.

Matt gives a breathless laugh. “I think you’d learn so much. And I think I can convince Maria to fund your plane ticket. Maybe not a hotel, but I figure you could stay with Sharon.”

Steve pushes out an extra long breath as he glances over the blanket of dead grass covering Sheep Meadow. Plane ticket. Plane ticket means plane. Plane means something he’s been avoiding very deliberately ever since he’s been out of the Army, because the thought of being crammed shoulder-to-shoulder into a stuffy, pressurized metal tube with a couple hundred strangers — God knows who — at tens of thousands of feet in the air over great distances —

“What’s wrong?” Matt asks in the silence.

Steve shakes his head. “Just… I haven’t flown since Ethan was born.”

“Really? You drive to DC every time you go down there? I thought you were just parking at Laguardia or something.”

“I just haven’t been able to do it.”

“It’s fine if you need to drive—”

“No, I should try,” Steve says, talking some determination into his tone, even if it doesn’t cut below the surface of his insecurity. “I need to try it. And the conference, too. That’ll be a lot of people. That’ll probably go on my exposure hierarchy, when I make it.”

“I don’t know what that is, but it sounds very official,” Matt replies, looking over and raising his eyebrows in a silent request for more information that Steve can’t refuse, even if he’s not overly fond of talking about his mental problems with his supervisor. Not that their power dynamic isn’t squirrely enough, given that they live together and exercise together and are, Steve supposes, friends. Maybe even pretty decent friends.

“I’m supposed to expose myself to the things that give me the most anxiety.”

Matt’s head quirks sharply to the side. “And that’s supposed to help you?”

“If you do it enough times. That’s what the doc said. He told me it’s like a horror movie. Like,
“What’s the scariest movie you ever saw?” Steve catches himself almost immediately and catches Matt by the arm, slowing both of them to a jog. It’s something he tries not to do while they’re in this role, but his faux pas is so egregious that he needs Matt’s attention so he can apologize. “God, I’m so sorry.”

He gets Matt’s attention — and one of his wide, boyish smiles. “Before I went blind, I had the misfortune of seeing The Exorcist. It nearly ruined my childhood.” His smile sharpens. “I wish I’d gone blind before I saw it.”

Steve cracks a small, relieved smile of his own and keeps hold of Matt’s arm as he picks up their pace again. “Well, imagine if you saw it 100 times. Do you think you’d still be as scared of it?”

Matt thinks on it for a few moments. “No,” he concedes. “Probably not.”

They’re coming up on Tavern on the Green, signaling their last half mile, and Steve lets go of Matt’s arm so he can relax into his stride.

“Tavern on the Green. You’d probably even think the movie was a little boring. Like, oh yeah, here’s the part where her head spins around. Yeah, yeah. And that’s the idea. You do the things you’re afraid of over and over until you get used to them and they don’t scare you anymore.”

“Ah. I guess that makes sense.”

“We’ll see. My therapist is a real—”

Steve’s comment is interrupted by the sudden slam of Matt’s body against his own, knocking him off balance. Steve grunts and stumbles and reflexively grabs onto Matt, and Matt grabs Steve with a sharp gasp, vise-tight, fingers digging into Steve’s shoulder and bicep, steadying some of their falling force with quick feet. A cyclist, some douchebag on a racing bike with a phone in one of his hands, swerves and swivels and curses as he tries to unclip his foot from his pedal.

As soon as he pieces everything together, Steve is yelling, even as Matt is still clinging to him and trying to regain full balance.

“Hey, watch it, motherfucker!”

Bike guy swerves a little more and glances over his shoulder. The sinewy, overtrained fucker even has the nerve to look off-put by the whole thing.

“Yeah, I’m fucking talking to you!” Steve calls. “Why don’t you get off your fucking phone and come back here and fucking apologize!”

“Steve—”

“Tell your friend to run in a straight fucking line,” the prick calls back.

And that is fucking it, because Matt is fully upright again, and Steve has two working legs, and he’s moving, even though the son of a bitch is pedaling forward like a classless, rude asshole, faster than Steve could run after him. But even still, he’s screaming after the guy, thrusting his finger to the open road to the left of them, his face flushed with exercise and rage, other hand clenched into a fist that he can’t do anything with except squeeze so tightly that his short fingernails bite into the soft flesh of his palm.

“And stop acting like you own the whole fucking road! There’s plenty of fucking space right over there for your piece of shit bike.”
And of course the fucker keeps riding, and Steve keeps shouting, telling him to keep going, to try not to run over any more pedestrians, stupid fuck, all while Matt is walking toward the sound of his screaming, saying his name and asking him to please just let it go. And it’s not until Matt risks putting a hand on Steve’s shoulder that he finally stops. And they stand in the middle of West Drive, breaths heaving, as runners, walkers, and riders cut wide berths around them.

After that, they take a slow, silent loop around the lake and head back home.

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When they get back to Matt’s apartment, they’re greeted by the sound of Elektra’s voice, heated and displeased, as she argues on the phone with someone in what Steve thinks is Pashto. He can pick out a few words here and there. Month. Summer. Money. She’s pacing the living room, looking sleek, hawkish, and intense in all black. But she still offers a thin smile to both of them as they pass through to the kitchen for some water.

“Sounds serious,” Steve murmurs.

“She’s trying to get back to Afghanistan. Well, probably closer to Pakistan, if we’re being honest,” Matt says, opening the cupboard and pulling two glasses. He offers one in Steve’s general direction. “It’s not going well.”

Steve takes the glass and snags the Brita pitcher from the fridge. They don’t even put a filter in it, because New York City water tastes amazing. Not like that sludge at Fort Bragg that you had to pass through ten charcoal filters to make it even remotely drinkable.

“You must not be too disappointed,” Steve guesses, filling his own glass and then Matt’s.

Matt breathes a chuckle that turns into a sticky, wet cough. He works it out into a paper towel while Steve leans his hip against the counter and sips on his water, listening for more words he remembers from his dallying in Indo-European languages. Back when he wasn’t sure if they were going to send him to Iraq or Afghanistan, when he had so much intellectual bandwidth that he was desperate for things to occupy it. But what he hears is her English-accented voice crescendoing with a resonant “this is bullshit, Kushan,” and she’s probably right that nothing in Pashto could capture that sentiment quite like that. Steve always found swearing in Arabic dissatisfying, especially when he really needed it to count.

“I am disappointed,” Matt says when he’s done hacking, drawing Steve’s attention back to him. “Because it’s what she loves to do, even if I think it’s crazy and dangerous. She supports what I do, I support what she does. That’s how we work. That’s how we do it.” He shrugs with a smile and takes a long drink of water.

It’s been so long since Steve has been in a solidly reciprocal relationship that the concept almost evades him entirely. He had it with Sharon. God, he had it with her, didn’t he? He was such a fucking idiot. How could he have been so stupid to piss that away for a quickie in a trailer? For a man who fucked around on him God knows how many times over the years — what did he say? One regularly, others just once, just at the beginning? And his face — he said it like Steve should be impressed that it was only at the beginning, as if that’s supposed to be some sign of restraint. However long the beginning was. The first month. The first year. The first 20 months. Jesus, God knows how long or how many it really was, he’s such a pathological liar. How could he have ever thought Bucky was worth sacrificing everything for? What the fuck did they ever have? He can’t remember. He can’t remember anything good about them.

“How’s the training?”
Steve turns, brow furrowed, and sees Elektra in the doorway. The anger still hasn’t completely burned out of her dark eyes, but it’s there with other things now. Curiosity. Smoldering confidence. Deep affection. Her energy is somehow both displacing and magnetic...

It’s the way Bucky used to be. When they were in high school, when they were together, when they were deployed, when Bucky would enter the room, when he would just look at you, that’s how it would feel. Like he was ripping something out of you and filling you up at the same time.

“Good,” Matt answers. “Feels good to be out again.”

She glances at Steve and gives him a wink, then pads across the floor to drape herself over her husband, wrapping her arms around his neck. She smells the collar of Matt’s shirt — Steve doesn’t miss it, she loves it when he comes home sweaty — and kisses his scruffy jaw. Matt circles a loose arm around her and goes a little red in the ears.

“Anything I can do to help with dinner?” she asks Steve, turning her head back to look at him. She always asks, always very sincerely, and his answer is always the same.

“No, thanks. I’ll take care of everything.”

“You know we expect you to cook every single night until you move into your new place,” she tells him.

“No, we don’t,” Matt interjects.

“I can manage 12 more meals.”

“Thirteen,” she corrects, holding up one thin finger.

“Twelve, because we’re taking you out for dinner on your last night here. Wherever you want. And you can’t say no.”

Matt says it as if they have something to thank him for. As if he hasn’t been shockingly under-paying for his housing with lousey dinners that he’s been barely throwing together. Simple things. Stir fries with basic sauces. Some Middle Eastern dishes he and Sharon took classes to learn, back when they used to cook together after work. A couple of stick-to-your-ribs dishes his ma taught him, which his very cosmopolitan, very Continental hosts nearly died over, like they’d never eaten broccoli and cheese casserole before — Elektra actually hadn’t, and she rolled her eyes back into her head and moaned and sunk her teeth into her lower lip and it was… uncanny. He wanted to feed them normal food, but even looking at an unwrapped, raw chicken breast had him gagging over the sink. They never complained once about the lack of meat. They never gave him shit one time about tofu. Not that he would have minded.

“Sounds good,” Steve says, because there’s no use arguing with them. They’re impossible.

He’s going to miss them.

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After a shower and dinner, Steve retreats to his room-slash-Elektra’s study, though to call it a “study” is a bit off the mark. It more closely resembles a lair, with maps of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran on the walls. Steve hasn’t quite deciphered the hand-drawn markings on all of them — green versus blue versus red; hashed versus dotted versus solid lines; circle- versus square-shaped location markers. She can’t make more than a few hundred dollars off of every photo she gets or every article
she sells. But as Matt told him, it’s never been about the money. It’s about digging up the hidden wires that connect the region, that connect the families, that connect the money to the weapons and power and seats of government. She’s on the Taliban’s hit list, she told him, though probably not even on the first page, she groused. It’s how she likes to live — either on the edge of death or in the arms of Matt. She can’t seem to stay settled with either for too long without running back to the other.

It would sound achingly familiar, if not for the fact that Bucky never wanted to run back to him. He would only get a little less far away. Never close. Not really. Not in any way that truly mattered.

Steve unfolds the sleeper sofa and makes up the bed, then stacks the pillows up so he can rest up against them and get some work done. For once, it’s not work-work. It’s work for himself, sifting through quotes from moving companies, all of which seem bent on trying to screw him. He shoots off a few emails with counter-offers, not just on principle but because he has less than $1200 of credit left on his cards and nobody else he can ask for help. It’s an embarrassing position to be in, but an increasingly familiar one. He’s running very low on shame these days.

As he wraps up one of his last emails, his phone vibrates on the bed next to him. It’s Sharon, no doubt, probably with a picture or a video or a story about something Ethan did. It’s still the same. God, he hoped it would change after he left. After he got some space. But no matter how many little teeth the baby shows or how uproariously he laughs at the silliest thing or how remarkably he moves along his developmental trajectory, every moment of it grazes over Steve, skids along his surface and bounces off to nowhere. And so Steve still pantomimes fatherhood, trying extra hard now because he’s boiling just under the surface. And Ethan is all he and Sharon talk about now, even when he’s down there visiting. When they even talk. Or, rather, Sharon talks and Steve makes his mouth into a smile and says oh yeah? that’s great, wow. Everything has been weird since February. Everything. Everything has been fucked up and weird and just barely tolerable. And when Steve closes his laptop and picks up his phone to check his message, the fucked up weirdness surges, along with a wave of panic.

The text isn’t from Sharon. The text is from Bucky.

Happy R-Day

Steve flips the phone over and shoves it into the mattress, screen down. His eyes flit back and forth as he scrambles internally, as he pushes against disbelief and the force of a memory that he wishes to God was as fragmented and ungraspable as so many others.

But it’s clear. Tangible and whole and absolutely unstoppable.

He was at Bucky’s. He can’t remember exactly why he was at Bucky’s that day, except that he was so often at Bucky’s during the second occurrence. At Bucky’s dinner table. In Bucky’s living room. On Bucky’s bed. In a sleeping bag on his floor, after Bucky told him with fidgeting fingers and a stiff laugh that they were getting a little old to be sleeping in the same bed. Ever since his ma’s diagnosis two years before, Steve was in and out of Bucky’s home while she was in and out of the hospital. He got used to being there, maybe, so much so that when his ma finally got out and got back to her life again, it was hard to go back home again. He felt awful about it then, because he should have been so glad to go back to her. But two years is a long time. For Steve, it was a very long time.

They were home alone in Bucky’s room after school, on Bucky’s bed, Steve on his stomach, head resting on his arm as he skated through his homework for AP calc. He always liked Bucky’s bed because it smelled like him, even though he knew Winnie washed the thing regularly. And Bucky smelled good. Not in a chemical, deliberate way like so many over- or under-sexed teenagers who
wandered the halls at their school, but just his natural, human smell. Steve could never put his finger on it, because it didn’t have a name. But it had a feeling. A warm burn in his stomach. A lightness in his head. The smell was verified by outside sources, by some friend of his girlfriend who was drunk at a party he was dragged to, who spilled to him — as if he wanted to hear it — that Bucky was awful in bed. Couldn’t even get it up! she squawked. But he kissed good and smelled good, so it wasn’t all completely lame. Well, maybe she was awful, he reasoned, and that was how he decided to spin that nonsense. For whatever reason it was important for him to spin it.

And so Steve liked to lie on Bucky’s comforter like this, with Bucky next to him, his back against the headboard, nodding his head to the Smashing Pumpkins as he cranked through the same work, humming along with Billy Corgan, legs crossed at the ankles, toes tapping to the beat. Sometimes Bucky would catch his eye and smile or wink or make a tortured face or maybe ask what he got for one of his answers, even though Steve was pretty sure Bucky already had the solution.

And then beep-beep-beep, beep-beep-beep, beep-beep-beep.

Steve’s head snapped up and Bucky looked down at him, wide-eyed, and their stares locked for a few seconds before Steve pushed himself up off the bed and scrambled to his backpack to dig for the pager his ma bought him for urgent medical matters. The number on the pager was Steve’s home phone, better than the hospital, but his heart was still slamming when he stood and made his way back to the bed. Bucky was already there with the cordless phone in hand, and they sat on the edge of the bed, homework and Pumpkins forgotten, while Steve called home.

And when his ma answered, there were tears in her voice, and she told him that she had finally been declared in remission. And he was in shock, truly, because he was certain that she wasn’t going to make it through this bout. Certain that it would sneak to yet another organ and continue to devastate her tiny body until she was worn down to nothing. And she had to say, Steven, Steven, Sweetheart, and when he finally spoke, his words were dry and emotionless, and he wished he could fake more feeling into them, but everything had evaporated and there was only a crater where an ocean of turmoil had been. He told her he would be home later and that he had to go, and she got very quiet and said okay. And when he hung up, he laid the phone on the bed. And even though he was looking across the room in the general direction of an intensely handsome Kurt Cobain on the wall, he wasn’t really seeing anything. He was just empty space, disbelief, exhaustion and nothingness floating away.

And then he felt it — the sensation of something wrapping around him, grounding him. Bucky’s arm coming around his back, broad and strong from the first varsity football season he just finished at sixteen while his mother was fighting for her life. And now…

A hand. Bucky’s hand was at his waist, pulling him close, pulling Steve’s shoulder into the side of his chest. Holding him there. Holding him…

And then those words, spoken in a voice that Steve had grown fond of, like the voice of the brother he never had — except that comparison felt inadequate and somehow profoundly wrong. And Bucky said, it’s okay, it’s okay to feel whatever you’re feeling, there’s no right way, and Jesus Christ, why was that the right thing to say? Why was that what he needed to hear? Why did it fill that crater so high that it brimmed over its tidy edges, dropping him back into his body, making him radiantly aware of the surge of feelings competing to burst out of him? Relief, guilt, joy, anger, excitement, regret, worry — they grouped together and formed a phalanx of emotions so overwhelming that he laughed, face oscillating between happiness and anguish, and then began crying, and Bucky held him tighter—

And then Bucky kissed him. On the shoulder. Not a tiny, frivolous peck, but a heartfelt press of the
lips that conveyed something very real, something substantial, maybe something that Bucky couldn’t put into words, some comfort he didn’t know how to offer any other way. It wasn’t like the year before, when Bucky was stumbling drunk, with his hand up Steve’s shirt, reeking of booze and sweat. This was sober. This was intentional.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was a careless error. Because the moment he lifted his head, terror dawned on Bucky’s face, and his hand went away, and his arm went away, and he tried to make his entire self go away, standing to leave. But Steve grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him back down to sit, and he wrapped both arms around Bucky’s waist, and he rested his forehead against Bucky’s temple, because Bucky was still looking straight ahead, stiff and breathing fast, like a cornered rabbit. And Steve’s heart was racing again, because he could feel everything — every emotion, every cell of his own body, pulsing with aliveness, every quiver of terrified muscle in his arms. And amid the emotional chaos of everything with his mother — of the last 32 months of tests and surgery and chemo and radiation and complication after complication and a surprise metastasis and more tests and then chemo and radiation and another resection and more complications and tests — the smell of Bucky, so close, was like stillness.

So when Bucky’s arm finally moved and came around Steve, Steve smiled. Even as tears continued to incongruously fall out of him, dropping onto Bucky’s shirt. Even though Bucky’s grip was hesitant at first, ready to cut loose at any moment.

And they held each other.

“Well, Happy Remission Day,” Bucky said then.

*Happy R-Day, Bucky says now.*

Steve’s phone vibrates against his palm.

Bucky was sweet. Beneath the loudness and sarcasm and magnetic charm and rolling eyes and crooked smiles, Bucky was sweet. He was always nice and funny and warm with Steve, but that genuine sweetness was something different. It took Steve forever to drill down to the core, to break him open and really see it. For Bucky to *let* him see it. It took Sarah getting sick, Steve getting scared — God, did it take him *two years?* Two years to see this person. The one who decided that Remission Day should be something to celebrate every year. The person who somehow got a note slipped into his work locker that said HAPPY REMISSION DAY! ONE YEAR CANCER FREE!! on Remission Day 1998. Who bought him Remission Day basbousa in 1999 from Mansoura, Steve’s absolute favorite dessert on Earth. Who took him to this ridiculous “secret speakeasy” in Williamsburg on Remission Day 2000, where they drank fancy colored martinis and pretended to be British until two in the morning. Who picked Remission Day 2001 to do one of the closest things to making love to Steve that he’d ever done, which was so different from the way they usually fucked that it was almost like being with a different person entirely —

His phone vibrates again.

Bucky remembered today. Steve didn’t. But maybe he didn’t remember the day because it wasn’t really something to celebrate after Bucky left. Because on Remission Day 2002, Sarah Rogers was a pile of ashes, and Bucky was running around Afghanistan with the 101st, chasing a ghost who still hasn’t even been caught. After that, who gave a fuck? Who was left to give a fuck?

Steve checks his messages.

*I just wanted to let you know that I’m thinking of you and thinking about your ma.*
I hope you’re doing okay

And now Bucky wants to reach out, after conveniently blowing off Remission Day last year because he was in jail or drunk or God knows what selfish alcoholic bullshit he was engaged in. Making everyone tear their hair out. Keeping Steve up half the night, sick with worry, turning the house — their house, the house he fucking chose for them — into a goddamn mausoleum. Saving Bucky’s used mug. Sleeping in his used sheets... Jesus Christ, how fucking pathetic.

And now Bucky wants to be sweet again. Like if he just reminds Steve of all the things he used to be, all the things they used to be, if he just enchants Steve enough with the past, maybe — what?

Steve clutches his phone tightly, lip curling into a snarl. What the fuck does he think he’s gonna get out of this, anyway? Sarah is dead. They are done. Done as lovers, done as friends, done as acquaintances. Fucking manipulative bullshit. Classic Bucky bullshit.

He bangs out a reply.

I’m coming with movers on April 10th. I don’t want you there.

He presses Send.

He waits. He slumps back against his pillows and bites his thumbnail. He starts to type another message —

Thank you for

—and deletes it. He huffs and closes his eyes and breathes. He re-types and deletes the same message three times and nearly does it a fourth when one last text comes in from Bucky:

Roger that

Steve stares at the reply, frowning deeply. It’s as good as he could hope for. Civil. To the point. And it feels like an evisceration. And all he wants to write is I’m sorry, and he even does write it, because he is. He fucking is sorry. And he hates it.

So he deletes the message before sending it, turns his phone off completely, and tosses it onto the floor on the other side of the room near his drooped over, half-filled duffel bag. And as he settles into bed and stares up into the darkness, he tries as hard as he can not to remember anything good about Bucky Barnes.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Ableist language, racist language, homophobic language

Notes:

Step Four of AA: Make a searching and fearless moral inventory

Step Five of AA: Admit to God, ourselves, and to another human the exact nature of our wrongs

KAF: Kandahar Airfield - A large NATO base supporting Operation Enduring
Freedom.

Searchable version of the AA Daily Reflections Book

Ranger tab: The designator a soldier can wear on their uniform after they graduate from Ranger School, whether they serve as a Ranger or not. Here’s a short video about the Ranger Tab and school (which is also a recruitment video, so watch out that you don’t get recruited into the Army!)

100-mile-an-hour tape: Duct tape

TDY: Temporary duty

After School Special: A long-running TV series that featured dramatic portrayals of “situations or interest” to children and teenagers such as substance abuse, molestation, teen pregnancy, etc. Starring pretty much every actor.

PCS: Permanent change of station

ICC: International Criminal Court

Anthony Friedkin: An American photographer known for his photo series entitled “The Gay Essay,” which portrayed the everyday lives of sexual minority men and women in California the late ‘60s and early ‘70s

The Fourth Step worksheets in this chapter came from here

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BUCKY’S WORKSHEETS

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REVIEW OF RESENTMENTS

COLUMN 1: I’M RESENTFUL AT:
COLUMN 2: THE CAUSE:

1. (1) Winnie -- (2) Casey


3. (1) Wanting to fuck men -- (2) The ROOT of my problems

-----

REVIEW OF FEARS

COLUMN 1: I’M FEARFUL OF:
COLUMN 2: WHY DO I HAVE THE FEAR?

1. (1) Closeness? -- (2) [illegible] I don’t know
2. (1) The truth -- (2) It sucks and it’s going to show people who I am and that’s not good. It can’t be.

3. (1) The past catching up to me -- (2) Because when it does I’m going to fucking fall apart probably and I don’t know when that’s going to happen. And it scares me more than ANYTHING on this EARTH.

4. (1) Disappointing my family -- (2) I’ve already let them down. I want to be good. I’m such a failure.

5. (1) My body -- (2) It’s disgusting. I can’t stand to look at it. It’s been a year and a half and I still haven’t looked at my own dick. Not really. Fucking pathetic.

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REVIEW OF OUR OWN SEXUAL CONDUCT

COLUMN 1: WHOM DID I HARM?
COLUMN 2: WHERE WAS I AT FAULT?
COLUMN 3: WHAT SHOULD I HAVE DONE INSTEAD?


2. (1) Sharon -- (2) Slept with Steve knowing he was engaged -- (3) Not slept with Steve

3. (1) Natasha and random women -- (2) Slept with them. Didn’t want them really. Just didn’t want to want guys. -- (3) [blank]

4. (1) Random men -- (2) Let dudes fuck me. Was wasted. Didn’t care. Just wanted to get fucked. Didn't want names. Hated them. Hated myself. -- (3) [blank]

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REVIEW OF FLAWS

COLUMN 1: FLAW:
COLUMN 2: GIVE YOUR BEST EXAMPLE OF THIS SPECIFIC FLAW IN YOUR LIFE:

1. (1) Lying -- (2) Lying sack of shit who lies to everyone. Mostly to myself. What don’t I lie about?

2. (1) Selfish -- (2) Put my needs over others. Always.

3. (1) Self-hating -- (2) Fucking hate myself.

4. (1) Compulsive -- (2) No self control. Used to lie in wait for hours on end. Can’t fucking control most basic impulses now.
5. (1) Cruel -- (2) [blank]

6. (1) Self destructive -- (2) Drink too much. Volunteer to deploy x4. Don’t care if I live or die.

7. (1) Weak -- (2) Can’t handle anything anymore. Run away from EVERYTHING.

8. (1) Disloyal -- (2) Cheating shitbag.


11. (1) Afraid -- (2) Of everything.

12. (1) [illegible] (2) Slut
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

April

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, pitchforkcentral86, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

WARNINGS AT THE END

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
BAGHDAD WALTZ

AN IRAQ WAR LOVE STORY IN THREE MOVEMENTS

BY DREADNOUGHT
April 10

Despite the fact that Bucky is now 31 years old, sliding his AA homework across the table to Hank makes him feel like a transposition of those numbers, fraught with that same evaluative anxiety, the sureness that he has failed to reach even the fringes of the standard. He’s sure he’s not even blowing this one out of proportion, because he’s barely been able to budge on this assignment, no matter how doggedly he drills down on it.

Hank lays his hand on Bucky’s resentment worksheet and pulls it toward himself.

“Before I look at this, you had your first DBT group this week, right?”

“Yeah.”

Hank’s gray brows rise, and Bucky purses his lips as he trails over the past few days, where that day and this day and all the days sandwiched in-between have melded into one long, uninflected drag. He’s drifted from one meeting to the next, one appointment to the other, every step mapped out in chicken scratch on the refrigerator calendar. He traces them backward to that dreary afternoon, the one where he bought a pack of smokes on the way home because it was the only thing he could do to keep himself from going to the back of the bodega to pick out a bottle of wine.

“The class was fine. But after, this chick followed me out and we talked. She said I’m probably borderline, whatever the hell that is. She said people who get fucked up by their parents and then can’t do relationships or handle emotions. I don’t know.” He shrugs. “I don’t know. It was me and a bunch of women. Like, all women, even the therapists, which was awkward as fuck. She said that a lot of the women in class have been—”

She was not one for euphemisms. Raped or molested, some of us both, some raped by men like you. Grunts, she meant, but the implication about him personally was so fucked up that he turned and limped away mid-sentence. Ended up in Madison Square Park, Christ knows how. He can’t even remember walking there.

“Having me there is really triggering, I guess, and they’ve written me off as a piece of shit already. But whatever. I got a big binder, and they gave me some worksheets with skills I can use, since I’ll miss a couple weeks for my surgery.”

Hank glances down below the table, where Bucky’s right leg is stretched straight, marred hand resting on his thigh. His knee is in full revolt, a near constant flare of pain, staging one last “fuck you” party before he gets the whole thing replaced on the 16th. He wouldn’t have considered it if not for the CT scan ortho took this month, starring two pieces of shrapnel that had migrated so far from where they benignly sat in 2008 that the doc called in three students to show them. They couldn’t believe that he could walk on it at all, that he wasn’t in serious pain. And Bucky told them that he was in serious pain, almost all the time, his knee, his foot, his hips and back to compensate for both injuries, and they all looked at him, perplexed, and asked why he hadn’t been in to see them earlier. Why he skipped his last two appointments. He shrugged, because the answer was that he forgot that he had the option to not be in pain, and he was pretty sure that was not a good response to have.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll get the chance to use all sorts of skills with your mother helping you recuperate,” Hank says with a crooked smile.
Bucky rolls his eyes. “Oh, Jesus. Yeah. We’ll see.”

“Speaking of your mother,” Hank pushes his glasses down his nose and holds the resentments worksheet in front of his face. He glances over what Bucky has written and eyes him over top of his frames. “Are you sure this is all you resent? Just these three things?”

Bucky pushes his hand through his hair. It’s a wall he can’t seem to punch through, one of unknown construction and purpose. Winnie. Religion. Wanting to fuck men. That can’t be it. Those can’t be the only things in the world he resents. He’s tried to think of other things. Other people. He’s tried to write down various names, people he knows, just to see if he might resent them. But that wall comes up, and his pen comes down hard, scribbling out the name, dashing out the possibility that there’s any other person in the world to really hate except his mother, which seems more and more like bullshit the longer he entertains it — especially when the only person he actually hates is himself.

“Have you done your journaling?” Hank asks.

“I just keep staring at a blank page. Or I start and it always comes back to these three things.”

Hank pushes his glasses back up his nose and relaxes in his chair. He looks out over the cafe, which is packed wall-to-wall with bedraggled homos. It’s been drizzling heavily all week, building a wall of moisture you have to squint your eyes and flinch against, never quite clearing and never quite raining. It’s a terrible day to be out.

A terrible day to be moving.

“What about Steve?”

Bucky jerks his head up. “What about him?”

“You must resent him.”

Bucky gives a shallow snort. “How could I? After everything I did?”

“What about historically?” Hank tries. “Surely he must have pissed you off at some point.”

When Bucky slides a comb through his memories, he comes up with dozens of things that Steve has done to piss him off. Dozens. More. But he spreads those things out in his mind, sifts through them, swipes away the little things. The silly habits. The nail and cuticle biting. The neurotic punctuality too extreme even for the Army. The way he has to clean the kitchen after every single fucking use. No dish left in the sink. Ever. Or else. The little things that Bucky always used to groan and gag at, how he’d have to bat at Steve’s hand before he gnawed his fingers to the bone, Jesus, and Bucky thought he had anxiety problems.

Of course, he would give anything for all of those problems to be in his life again. All of them, 24 hours a day.

What’s left is difficult to see clearly. It’s old stuff, caked in thick rust. If he turns it in his mind, he might be able to discern its shape. See its echo in their history. He picks up a chunk of it, the smaller one. He thinks he doesn’t know what this one is, but when he dusts it off, he finds something very familiar.

“When he dumped me. That pissed me off. Not this time, but when I was in Afghanistan. That was bad. I don’t think I deserved that.”

“Now, remember, resentments aren’t about what the other person did wrong to us. It’s about what
we did. They’re about us. How did you contribute to that situation?”

God damn it, he hates this part. Especially today, when he’s about to walk into the house that his fucking flaws built for him. He shifts his leg and grimaces.

“I left. I ran. I was afraid. He asked to move in with me, I signed up for active duty. I was scared.”

“Of what?”

“Just…” Bucky jerks his head. It’s a twitch. A shudder. “The thought of it, just thinking about it now, makes me—”

“What?” Hank’s brow arches.

He folds his arms over a tight lump curling in his stomach. “Too close,” Bucky blurts. “It was too much. I couldn’t stand him loving me like that.”

“Do you think any of your flaws were playing out? Some of your real flaws?”

“Self-hate,” he says, because it’s easy. He has yet to find a resentment that he can’t tie to it. “I’m a piece of shit, so I don’t deserve his love. Plus, you can’t trust someone who has such shit taste in friends or whatever the fuck we were.”

“‘Friends or whatever the fuck you were,’” Hank echoes. “I think the word you’re looking for is ‘boyfriends’ or ‘partners.’”

Bucky snorts and shakes his head. “It wasn’t fucking junior high. And we weren’t you and Howard with your little fucking gay-ass family.”

Bucky picks at the innards of the crispy top of his poppyseed muffin while Hank shifts in his seat. He has been eating the soft parts first, bottom-up, working his way through it and talking at it when he can’t talk to Hank. He focuses on the pinch of his left thumb and index finger, at the way the two still strain to work well together, their meeting even more unsteady as heat climbs up his neck and into his ears.

“I resent him for being straight. For being able to be straight, if he wants to be. I always wanted that, and no matter how hard I tried — and I fucking tried — I could never do it. I hate that he can do that. That he gets to have that life whenever he wants.”

He frowns and pops a piece of muffin in his mouth. He chews it with disproportionate vigor, entirely unnecessary, jaw ticking from the force of it.

“And I resent Sharon. I hate her. I fucking hate her. Just for existing. For being a woman. For being someone he loves. For being pretty and smart and for not putting up with my shit. I would give anything to be her. Like, that sounds weird, but if I’m gonna want to fuck dudes, at least I could be a woman.” He looks up quickly and holds out his hand to Hank. “I’m not like Rikki, I don’t think I’m a woman. I don’t feel like I’m in the wrong body like that or whatever. But it just sucks. I just wanna be straight.”

Hank dips his head and shakes it in a slow, weary way. Bucky keeps going, his gut clenching tighter with every word, and he pushes his plate aside as that sick feeling saturates him.

“And I hate what they have, because I think they still have it, even if they’re supposedly not together anymore. They must have something. And I’m jealous of that. So fucking jealous. Even though Steve and I are nothing, not even talking, and I think he probably actually hates me now, I’m still so
jealous. I told him I wished he would go back to her, be a family with her and Ethan, but I would die if that happened. I would fucking die.”

“Do you resent Ethan?”

The question comes out nonchalantly, as he’s scraping foam out of the inside edge of his mug with a wooden stir stick, like it’s not the most fucked up question ever to be uttered in the course of their Stepwork.

“How the hell could I resent a baby?”

“But do you?”

Bucky fumbles a half-born answer, which makes him wonder for a moment of soundless terror if he actually does resent Ethan. It would put him on par with nobody, not even the biggest shit bags he can name on one gnarled hand, because no adult bears true resentment for a baby. There’s no way. There’s no goddamn way.

“Think about your character traits that are contributing to your resentment of Sharon and Steve and Ethan,” Hank says. “You’re doing the workbook I gave you, right?”

“I have it.” He’s even meant to look at it.

“I think it’s better for you than the other stuff out there. Even the Big Book stuff. I think the language is better for you.”

Must be pretty bad — he must be pretty bad — if he needs a special workbook with special, soft language to get him through this process without completely vapor locking. Because he can’t handle terms like “defects of character” and requires gentle words like “character likes and dislikes” from a special workbook written by pansy-ass social workers like Scott.

“Oh, and here’s one more to help you along.”

Hank reaches into his briefcase, pulls a stapled packet from it, and slides it across the table to Bucky.

“What’s this?”

“Questions to help you with your Fourth Step. I recommend that you go through all of them.”

Bucky scans through the list, 155 items’ worth, and a wry smile pulls at his mouth.

“Do I use sex as a punishment or reward? How old was I when I started masturbating? Did I see or hear my parents fucking? What the fuck kind of questions are these?”

Hank gives a small chuckle. “I can’t say I’m shocked by the ones you’re cherry picking. They’re designed to get at your resentments, fears, guilt, remorse, shame, and assets. The categories we’re gonna do for your moral inventory.”

He is cherry picking. Most of them aren’t about sex. There are others that he doesn’t dare say out loud because even glancing over them is enough to send his pulse through the coffered ceiling. Did he resent his friends? Did he feel like he was “bad?” Did he have bad experiences at Sunday school or summer camp? And some of these things, he just doesn’t know. Things he thinks he really should know but doesn’t. Was he wanted at birth? What kind of relationship did his parents have with their parents?
Bucky stacks it atop the crinkled pages of his old worksheets and slips them into his blue folder. He glances out the window, out into the street, to the passers-by hunched under their umbrellas and upturned collars in the waning daylight.

“I should head home,” he tells Hank. “He should be gone by the time I get there.”

Hank folds his arms on the table and watches Bucky pack his things for a few moments. His fingers fidget along the ribbed cuff of his forest green sweater.

“We could grab dinner first,” Hank offers. “Go to the Center. I think they’re having a movie night tonight.”

Bucky snags his cane from where it’s propped up against the table and leverages himself to his feet. “No, thanks. I just...” He pauses, teeth coming down on his lip. “I just wanna see what’s left.”

He doesn’t. He definitely doesn’t want to see how empty the place is going to look with Steve’s stuff cleared out. He doesn’t want to go there ever again. He would love to just slap a few boards on the door and windows, call the whole place condemned. Unlivable. Haunted by the ghost of what could have been a real life.

“Want me to go with you?”

Bucky shoulders his bag and looks down at Hank’s blue eyes, bright behind their clear frames, the enthusiastic lean of his body, the smile on his lips, effortfully warm. He must be pretty fucking worried.

“Nah. Thanks, though.”

A shadow passes over Hank’s face, and he deflates a little. He nods to Bucky’s plate. “Don’t forget your muffin top. It’s the best part.”

Bucky grabs it and takes a bite of it. It’s crisp and should be delicious. But all he can taste is grit, and he puts the rest back down on the plate.

“Too nervous?”

Bucky nods.

“You taking a cab?”

He shakes his head. “I should take the train while I can before I’m laid up on the couch for God knows how long. With my mother.”

Hank stands. “I’ll walk you to the station.”

— — —

The train takes forever, thank God, and it’s dark by the time he gets back to Windsor Terrace. Bucky has to drag himself down the sidewalk, skimming the residential side streets and avoiding Prospect Park West all together to stay clear of the bodegas. The quiet gives his thoughts too much dead air to flail in, so he tries to fill that air with damp cigarettes and tracing over his plans for tonight. Go in, don’t look, eyes to the floor, grab clothes from the bedroom, take a shower, don’t look, go to the bedroom, close the door, shoot Hank a check-in text, watch TV, go to sleep. Deal with everything else in the morning. He walks it through almost a dozen more times, rehearsing it, muttering it under his breath, committing to it, until he’s standing at the bottom of the stairs to the building, and it’s too
soon, and this is not okay, and it will never be okay, and he chokes on that bitter pill as he makes his way up the stairs.

At the door, Bucky fumbles for his keys, which he threw in his bag, which he *never* throws in his bag because he always puts them in his right pocket. And he limps down the hallway, shaking his head, pining acutely for his room and his bed, thinking he might screw the shower altogether, getting ready to close his eyes until he gets there, to ignore the empty spaces where the rest of his life should be, and he unlocks the front door, and the kitchen light is on—

Steve.

Steve is standing in the kitchen.

He looks caught mid-stride, trying to beat a hasty retreat before this exact situation happened. His green duffle bag his hoisted over his back, assault pack dangling from his hand, both stuffed to the brim. His eyes are wide, lips parted like he’s mid-sentence, too. And Bucky’s brain is a record skipping, one of Steve’s old Led Zeppelins, their first album, so well-loved that it’s shitty and scratched, stuck on that aching melody, oh-oh, I can’t quit you baby, except he has no fucking choice now. Fuck.

Steve adjusts his grip on his assault pack, fist tightening around the strap.

“Movers were late. I’m going now.”

Bucky lays his cane against the kitchen table and drops his bag on the linoleum. He straightens his spine and squares his jaw.

“Fine.”

Bucky’s gut lurches.

Steve steps forward, his first couple steps hesitant before his confidence finds him. He walks toward Bucky and, for a breathless moment, he thinks Steve might stop and— and what, he’s not certain. Maybe just stop. Maybe just stand here and exist and let Bucky look at him and try to carve him into his memory, because he didn’t know last time would be the last time.

But he doesn’t stop. He angles his body and cuts around, bumping Bucky with his duffel in a way that’s most assuredly accidental but feels like a blow all the same.

“Sorry,” he mumbles as he passes. He doesn’t look back.

And then he’s out the door. And then he’s gone.

Silence gapes in his wake, filling the chasms that used to have furniture and clothes and stuff. Just stuff. Little things. Things that are gone now that Bucky didn’t remember were Steve’s, even the very obvious things. Things he tallies dully as he wanders from room to room. The West Point mug that peeked out from behind the coffeemaker. The UVA sweatshirt that draped over the kitchen chair, the one still there with the rest of the dining set that’s not Bucky’s. Everything in the living room is gone except for some DVDs and the Xbox and games that Bucky can’t play anymore. And Steve’s room is just scraped up plank wood floor and a couple of dust bunnies where the dresser and bed used to be. At his feet, just beyond the threshold, is a small pile. Bucky’s things. Things Steve borrowed. A couple of pens. A roll of scotch tape. The Leatherman Bucky bought at the PX in Baghdad when he lost his good one somewhere in Sadr City, God damn it.

There are three books that Bucky lent Steve over the months they lived together, well-loved ones
with worn covers and rounded corners. *The Blind Watchmaker. The Lives of a Cell. Flowers for Algernon.* Bucky opens each one and flips from cover to cover; all of them are dogeared only a couple of pages in. He flips again, slowly, hoping that maybe something will fall out of them. A note, a letter, something. Anything. Anything more than *Movers were late, I’m going now. Sorry. I’m coming with movers, I don’t want you there. I’m safe, I have a place to stay, that’s all I have to say to you.*

Nothing.

He leaves the books and the Leatherman and the junk. He turns off the lights and passes the emptiness. Goes to his room. Shuts the door. He leans back heavily against it, closing his eyes against a riptide of regret. He’s dreamed up a thousand different endings that were better than the one he gave them, desperate fantasies of a man whose creativity is the width of one relationship, one doomed to die over and over again.

He should just forget. He should just forget they ever happened. Lock them in the vault with his horrible things, his unspeakable things, the secrets that have been corroding his insides for as long as he’s kept them. He should throw them in there to rot with the rest of it.

Bucky opens his eyes and glances at his desk, at his notebooks and pencil case haphazardly stacked in one corner. He should *really* do his work. This is the time to work. When the wound is raw. Just sit down and write anything, just to get his thoughts on paper. He can sort it later, circle and underline and transfer to tidy columns and worksheets. He can write about how much he fucking hates Steve. Hates him for pulling the plug on them while Bucky was in Afghanistan, his first deployment ever, a freshly pinned Sergeant leading a fire team of men, sleeping and shitting in half-frozen, gravelly mountain dirt. And, God, he was fucking *scared,* so scared that he was going to fuck up and get his men killed, and when Operation Anaconda was all over, after 72 straight hours of combat and clearing caves and spider holes and killing men for the first time in his life — and not just men, fuck, it wasn’t just men — and a shit show of *crashing motherfucking helicopters,* he was a barely-contained threadbare mess, keeping it together only because his men and leaders needed him to, and all he wanted to do was make it to a phone and hear Steve’s voice, even if he couldn’t say what he wanted to because the lines weren’t secure and people were crawling up his ass to call home next. And what he got when he finally heard that voice was *This isn’t working, it hasn’t been working, I can’t keep doing this,* and he heard that shit in front of his guys and they fucking *knew* his heart had just been destroyed, they must have, because when he pushed past them to get the fuck out of there, to get outside and get some goddamn air, they looked at him with tilted heads and heavy eyes and muffled *shits* and *sorry, mans,* because they knew he had someone back home. And he clenched his teeth and fingers through it until he could get outside, into the dark, alone, where he pressed his hands to his eyes and cried, silent except for the barest whispers of the breath he strained to control. And Specialist Ross followed him out and patted his shaking shoulders and said *She’s a bitch anyway, fuck her,* which made him cry harder, like the little faggot he is and always was, a little boy playing a man, and he couldn’t hold back his sounds anymore.

But he earned that, didn’t he? He created the conditions for that. He didn’t have to be in Afghanistan at all. He could have been home helping Steve with his ma while she was dying and— she was already dead when he called home, wasn’t she? He could have stayed with Steve, and he could have been a supportive… whatever the fuck. Jesus, why can’t he even *think* the word?

He frowns, ditches his cane by the door, and limps to the desk. It’s time to square up to this old goddamn boomerang, the one that keeps cracking him in the back of the head every time he flings it at his problems.

He sits and pulls his notebook toward him, the one in which he writes his meandering, angry,
despondent, and bitter freeform entries and tries to distill something meaningful from them. He fiddles open the pencil bag and pulls a maroon pen, and the fine point of it hovers over the top line until he finds a place to start, picking up the chain and following its links.

I run because I’m afraid of getting close. Because if I get close to someone, I have to be honest, and if I’m honest with them, I will get hurt. It’s happened before, it’ll happen again. Drinking and fucking are safer than talking. Don’t need honesty or closeness for either. Don’t want to feel. Don’t want to talk. Don’t want to remember. Just want to drink. Just want to fuck. Too easy. Just go somewhere else. My body’s a broken fucking garbage dump anyway, who gives a fuck. At least I don’t get hurt. I’ve chased a million fucks and never gotten hurt. I trusted one person and had my entire life ruined.

But if I don’t get close, I can’t have relationships. And I want those. Sometimes I want closeness so bad I would do anything for it, real closeness, but I also can’t fucking stand the thought of it. Just thinking about it makes my stomach turn.

Drinking and fucking to run is dishonest. Running is dishonest. Avoiding is dishonest. If you want relationships, you have to approach. You have to be honest. If you want relationships, you have to be willing to get hurt. Really, really fucking hurt and that’s

Bucky stops. That’s where the chain ends, where the link breaks off before it can curve into a neat loop. His mind stretches, empty, brows drawn, pen tapping slowly. He doesn’t know. He has to be willing to reveal his heart, unlock his vaults—and he grips into his thigh and puts down the pen to press his hand to his racing heart. He then pushes back his chair and takes wide-eyed breaths until he feels a steady march beneath his palm.

He rises and steadies himself, and walks to the center of the room before stopping. The echo of his uneven footsteps dies. Then silence. Silent room. Silent living room and kitchen and bathroom and far away bedroom. He has filled his life with so many things, people and wars and booze and selves, things that have been taken, destroyed, and abandoned. And it strikes him that he has so very little that he could lose now.

And something opens in him then, like a thin blade of light through a crack in a cellar door, because there is also so very much that he has survived. Somehow, he has lived through every horror that life has dealt him, whether he asked for it or not. And maybe he hasn’t always picked the best means to get through, but God damn it, he has fucking lived. And if he can survive all that, maybe he can find a way to do this, too.

Bucky sighs and pushes his hands through his hair. It’s long. Too long. As long as it was when the Army barber buzzed it off at basic the summer between junior and senior year of high school. Jesus, he almost teared up as he watched the pieces of it fall to the floor, because it was smooth and glorious then. Now it just feels like a mess.

He can feel himself losing steam fast, and he owes Hank a text, but he sits back down at his desk and takes the pen again. He presses the tip to the paper, after the Really, really fucking hurt and that’s... corners of his mouth alert, bites down on his lip, and finishes the sentence.

... a risk I just I might have to take.
April 23

“We stepped into the room. There was an IED. It went off. I woke up. I stood up.”

Steve pauses. His stomach sours. He presses on fast, running through fire toward the only exit he can reach, the one at the end of this horrible story. He squeezes his eyes shut tighter.

“I stood up. I saw people around a body. I saw— it was my platoon sergeant.” He swallows. “I went over to him. They patched him up. The helicopter came. We went to Baghdad. I passed out.”

Steve opens his eyes sucks in a deep and painfully necessary breath, because he’s tried to hold it through the dust and the blood and all the other smells of that day. It’s the wrong choice, because the fullness of his lungs makes his stomach feel compact and crushed, and he slumps a little, folding his arms over his belly.

Bruce is giving him a look, his mouth twisted up in a little smile that would be encouraging if it wasn’t accompanied by eyes that are squinting. Almost wincing.

“So,” Bruce says, scratching his temple, “that was very succinct.”

Steve looks at the rug between his feet.

“Maybe you could tell me, in your own words, the rationale behind imaginal exposure,” Bruce says. “Why we do it. I know it’s your first time, and I know we just went over the reasons, but I wanna make sure we’re on the same page.”

Steve smooths his hands over his kneecaps. “To talk about what happened. So that my brain can put the story in order.”

“That’s one reason.”

“So that if I do it over and over, I don’t react to the memory as strongly.”

Bruce nods. “And that’s why it’s important for you to include as much detail as possible. Moment by moment. Exactly what happened. External details. Sights, sounds, tastes, textures, smells. Internal details. Bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions. The more vivid, the better. That’s how you reconstruct the memory. That’s how you consolidate it and put it to rest. File it away like it’s a regular memory and not one that runs your entire life.” He tilts his head. “Make sense?”

Does it make sense? Do the words slot together and form clauses and sentences that make semantic sense? Can he use the crumbs of his remaining intellect to comprehend what Bruce is telling him? Yes. It all makes good intellectual, abstract sense. It makes sense in the way that cancer makes sense. Of course the processes can be understood. Of course there is a twisted elegance to it.

But below the neck, there is revolt. Abject fucking rejection. Total visceral upheaval.

Bruce re-crosses his legs and checks the audio recorder to make sure the light is still on. “Think you could try again with some more detail?”

Steve straightens his posture and tries to nod, but his neck is so stiff against his efforts that his chin doesn’t dip a single degree. He blinks a few times and wrings out a sound of assent from the back of his throat.

“And start with when you wake up. That was the point we agreed on last time.”
He closes his eyes again and tries to relax into the cushions. He’ll breathe. Just breathe. He doesn’t have to rush into anything. Not when he already feels sick. Just. Breathe. For. A. Minute. Giant number one. Giant number two. Giant number three. Giant number two. Giant number one.

Okay.

“What are your SUDs from 0 to 100?” Bruce asks.

“50. I woke up. Opened my eyes.”

“Try to stay in the present tense.”

Steve sighs. “I open my eyes. I’m swaying. I’m being carried by two of my men, Specialist Mack and PFC Rumlow. I’m— there’s blood running down my throat. My nose is broken. My face is broken. I can only see out of one eye.” He touches his left eye, feels around the bone, the place where they grafted metal to reconstruct his orbital floor. He never touches it. Not deliberately. “I feel sick.”

He shifts, pulling his arms tight into himself, and keeps going.

“I tell them to put me down. I think I’m gonna— be sick. And there’s so much blood, I can feel it on my face, taste it.” Steve cringes at what he tastes now, different from blood, not metal. Sour. Wet. He swallows, there’s so much of it.

“They put me down. There are sounds, people and chaos, but I can’t really hear. I hear static. And I remembered what happened— and I remember what happened, and I— grab Mack and I need to know where— my— platoon sergeant is. Because he was in front of me. And I know he’s— he must be hurt. So I ask for him. I say his name. But Mack doesn’t know his name. I say it over and over and over and he looks at me like I’m fucking insane—”

Steve swallows the saliva in his mouth and takes a deep and loud breath. He can see what’s coming over the horizon of his memory, and he stalls to try to calm his nausea.

“I’m outside the building, and I’m looking around, and I’m dizzy and I can barely see, and everything is hazy, but I see,” he says, halting when he sees it, just like he halted then, “a group of people—” He can feel the room start to shift, and a sheen of sweat breaks at his hairline. “A bunch of people around a body. And one of them is my doc. And Foggy. And some other medic. I can’t remember his name. And I know— I know who it is.” He clears his throat, choking back the thickness there. “And I see these legs, and they’re covered in blood, shredded by shrapnel, all these little pieces, a couple of huge pieces of rebar and these chunks— and there’s just so much blood—and his— his groin— there’s just this mess— just bloody bandages, and Foggy is holding down this dressing and he is covered in blood, his hands— they’re covered in so much blood—”

Steve gags and clamps his hand over his mouth.

“Are you gonna vomit?” Bruce asks.

“Maybe.” Steve’s voice is trembling with his fingers.

Bruce swivels around and grabs a garbage can from under his desk, then rests it within Steve’s reach.

“Just in case.” He smiles. “You’re doing great. Keep going whenever you’re ready.”

Steve blinks at him for a few moments, then closes his eyes again.
“Oh, what are your SUDs?”

“50.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. There’s blood.” He tries to keep the memory at arm’s length, but the image comes smashing back, along with the nausea, like he never paused at all. “And Foggy, he looks scared but like he’s trying hard not to be. And— Doc is working on an arm, and this arm, this arm—it’s barely an arm. It’s like hanging by a bone and some muscles, and he’s packing it and packing it—and it’s—” He gags again, abruptly, and he pulls the garbage can between his legs, because he’s not sure what else might come out the next time.

“And then I—I already know who it is. I know it’s Bucky, even before I see his face. Because I know his body. I know it. But still, I can’t look—but I do—and—and I see it—I see his face, and he looks so—”

Steve gags again, once, then twice, and his eyes go wide as he doubles over that little government garbage can and vomits into it. It’s violent, loud and painful, his whole body convulsing with the force of it, the Indian food he ate at lunch with Matt, never thinking that this was how this session was going to go.

“Oh God,” he groans, just barely suppressing the urge to gag and maybe puke even more. He grips the garbage can hard, trying to focus on the sensation of the plastic lip digging into his flesh. He’s starting to lose control of his breath, and his vision is getting splotchy and his head so light, and it drops lower and lower until it’s almost touching the rim of the garbage can. But the sight of his sick makes him gag again, and he closes his eyes so he doesn’t have to look at it. But it’s for nothing, because then the smell hits him, and he’s definitely going to hurl again if he doesn’t get this can as far away from him as he can. He pushes it away, weakly, and Bruce reaches forward and takes it.

“You done?”

Steve hesitates, because he’s not sure if he is. He can’t tell. But he nods, because he just wants the fucking thing away from his face. Bruce stands, casually, unperturbed by it, and opens the door to the hall. He sets the can right outside and makes a quick phone call. Can I get EMS up here to get my garbage? It’s in the hall. Thanks.

Steve hears the creaking of his chair over the sound of his own breath, which is still coming faster than he can keep up with it, shallow and steady. He keeps his head low between his legs to try to keep the blood in it, but his face and hands are still fuzzy and tingling, his heart is working frantically, his chest tight like a corset.

“The fuck—is happening—?” His voice is barely a whisper, pushed out between gasps. He wonders if he even speaks it at all until Bruce answers a few delayed seconds later.

“Have you ever had something like this happen before?”

Steve lolls his head in a boneless ‘no.’ He’s been acutely anxious before. He’s had to leaveleaveleaveleaverightfuckingnow. Restaurants. Stores. The one time he tried to take the train. But he’s never felt anything like this.

“What’s going on for you right now?” Bruce asks.

“Can’t breathe. Chest is tight. Heart is racing. Dizzy. Tingling.” He sits up a little and looks at Bruce,
his eyes wide as a terrifying thought crashes through his consciousness. He clutches his hand over his chest. “Am I having—a heart attack—?”

Bruce makes a sound. “I think it’s just some bad anxiety. You’re okay. Here. Let’s breathe together and try to get things slowed down.”


“Feeling better?” Bruce asks after they run through a few in sync.

Steve pulls in a deep, controlled breath and releases it. “I guess. Was that a panic attack?”

“Probably. But you’re doing a really good job, so…” Bruce pauses, fingers tapping on his lap. “I say let’s keep going.”

Steve’s face contorts. “Keep going? Are you fucking kidding me? After that?”

Bruce nods with an easy shrug. “This is part of the process for some people sometimes. Your body is having a strong physical reaction, which means you’re really doing a good job of engaging with the memory. I think it would be just playing into avoidance to stop the exposure.” He turns over his hand, palm up, and gestures toward Steve. “What do you think?”

Steve huffs. Unbelievable. Un-fucking-believable. What would it take for them to stop? An actual heart attack?

“You really think that’s gonna help? To do that again? To give me a—whatever the hell that was? A panic attack?”

“Well, I think we should pull you back a little bit. Have you tell the story with your eyes open. Stay in the present tense like you were.”

Steve shakes his head. There is a part of him — a logical, wise part — that knows this is the right thing to do. It tells him to stay. To calm down. To muster that over-controlled lieutenant he used to be back at West Point and at the Pentagon. The one who came to Iraq and had his shit together for a while, until Antoine Triplett’s headless corpse fell on his lap and sparked a chain of events that led to this moment, puking in his therapist’s office over the memory of Bucky’s mangled body. So many bodies running his life now. That’s why he’s here, isn’t he? To take his life back from that?

“Fine. Let’s just fucking do this,” Steve says.

Bruce reaches over to his desk and starts the audio recorder. Steve’s not even sure when it was stopped. Christ, he hopes it was before all the vomiting.

“Okay. Ready. Go ahead and start where you left off. What are your SUDs?”

“50.” Steve sits up straight, stiff-backed, tense and vigilant. “I go over to them. Doc asks me some questions. I don’t remember them. I kneel. I… take his—”

The image lights up his brain, Bucky’s hand, the missing finger, that bloody stump, Maximoff handing him the finger later, how he couldn’t figure out what it was, remembering that finger, its history, their history, everything—and the sickness is back in full force, slugging into his gut like a fist, and so he skips that part. Pretends there is no hand that he’s holding, no bloody stump. No
history. His gaze drifts to the photo on the wall, some generic picture of an emerald evergreen forest, maybe something in Oregon or Northern California, and he tries to remember what happened next. Was it his lung? Could he not breathe then? Was that when Parker had to stick him with that needle? That huge fucking thing? And God, the look on Bucky’s face, how he couldn’t breathe, or was it—

“Steve?”

Bruce’s brows are raised.

“Um, then Foggy says—” Steve’s brain skips. What the fuck does Foggy say? He runs his finger over his brow. “I think he says it’s bad. He can’t stop it. The bleeding. It’s bad. And his hands are covered—” Steve holds out his hands and remembers Foggy’s so clearly, pale and covered, covered in Bucky’s blood. Covered. Soaking up the sleeves of his ACU coat. “And Doc lifts the dressings, and blood just gushes out, like a river, and he tells— Sergeant Barnes that he has to put hemostatic dressing in it, pack it in the wound, because his femoral artery was—”

Steve unbuttons the cuffs of his shirt and shoves them up his forearms. He’s sweating again, nausea surging, and he tries to breathe it back slowly. He drags his palms over the fabric of the couch.

“And Doc tells him to get ready, that it’s gonna hurt, and I tell him to give him more morphine. I—” Steve frowns as he remembers. “I order him to. But he refuses, and I’m fucking furious at him for it. Because I know how much it’s going to hurt. And— Sergeant Barnes, he knows, too. I can see it in his face—”

Steve folds his arms over his stomach again and pulls them in tight, bending at the waist.

“And Parker tells him it’s going to hurt, that it’ll save his life— and I finish wrapping his finger up with gauze and grab his hand with both of mine— and—” He grinds his teeth and grips his kneecaps tight. “It’s— and then Parker shoves the dressing in, and Bucky— he just screams—”

He sees everything suddenly and with blazing clarity — the taut arc of Bucky’s body — the sound of his voice — that terrible sound, that agony, unlike anything he’s ever, ever heard in his life — the grip of his bloody fingers in Steve’s own — the tears that streamed down his face — the quiver of his lip — it’s all there, all of it, it’s in his ears and eyes and muscles and under his skin and it’s twisting up from his guts, squeezing out of them, making its way up from his stomach, up his esophagus, and he scans the room in panic and scrambles up from the couch and over to a second garbage can he spots next to the door.

He drops down to his knees in front of it and doesn’t try to hold back this time. He lets himself go, because he’s angry and utterly disgusted, full of horrified energy he can’t put anywhere but this fucking garbage can.

Steve vomits up everything that’s left in him, going several rounds until he’s dry heaving, retching up nothing every time the image swings by for another pass. It swings and swings like a pendulum, plowing him over and over, and, God, why won’t it fucking stop? God damn it, he has to think of something else. Think of something. Anything. Anything. Think of the state capitals. Albany. Hartford. Trenton. Boston. Baltimore? Is that the capital of Maryland? No. Fuck. God, why did he pick this fucking task? He’s a fucking idiot now, after all. A brain-dead fucking moron. Because he got fucking blown up and his face got fucking broken and his brain got smashed up into mush by Bucky’s head and he took the brunt of it, didn’t he? Jesus fucking Christ, what is the capital of Virginia? Richmond? Raleigh. Columbia—

“Are you okay?” Bruce reaches toward him with a kleenex in hand.
Steve pulls in and releases a breath, sour with stomach acid, and spits out some of the taste. He slowly sits back on his heels and takes the kleenex. He’s glad to cover some of the puke after he’s done wiping his mouth.

“I’m gonna get some water.”

He stands, using the wall to brace himself. His legs are stiff and starting to go numb. How long has he been on his knees with his head in the garbage can?

“Mind grabbing that on the way out?” Bruce asks. He’s already at his desk, phone in hand again, probably putting in another call to housekeeping to come clean up his mess.

Steve sets his puke outside and ghosts down the hall. He’s not sure where the drinking fountain is. Or the bathroom. He can’t even remember. He finds one a few doors down, bends at the sink, rinses the puke out, and drinks water by the handful. He makes the mistake of catching his reflection in the mirror and looks away immediately, teeth clenching, because the whites of his eyes are pink with burst blood vessels. And it’s Landstuhl again, looking in the mirror at his purple then green then yellow face and his red eye and blown pupil, and that is where Steve draws his motherfucking line.

He marches back to Bruce’s office and closes the door firmly behind him. He stays standing and grabs his coat from the hook on the adjacent wall.

“We’re done.”

Bruce sits up sharply, moving to the edge of his chair. “Whoa, wait. Done-done? Or just done with imaginals for today?”

“Fucking done.” Steve slashes out his hand in front of him. “With this shit. For today.”

He surprises himself with the last part. Utterly shocks himself. He was sure when he walked through the door that he was done with this entire treatment forever.

“Okay, I get that.” Bruce relaxes a little, shoulders slumping beneath his heavy cardigan. “This has been a rough session for you. But I think it would be very counterproductive for you to leave before we get a chance to process everything. I think that’s gonna help a lot.”

Steve clutches his coat tight in his hand. If the thing had life, he would have choked it out of it. “I can stay for fifteen minutes. Then I have to go to JFK to catch a plane. I have a conference. Two things on my exposure hierarchy. So I’m not done with this treatment, but I am done with this shit.” He drives his finger hard toward the floor.

“I hear you.” Bruce gestures back to the couch. “Fifteen minutes.”

Steve crosses the room like he’s broaching his execution, and he barely lets himself sink into the cushions.

“So, maybe it’s obvious, but how was that for you?”

“Fucking awful.”

“How did it feel for you, emotionally?”

“Shitty.”

Bruce waits, and when Steve doesn’t offer anything more than a cold stare, he replies.
One thing I noticed is that you had a really powerful physical reaction, but you didn’t seem to be very—” Bruce steels his fingers together and presses them to his lips as he thinks. “Emotionally connected to the memory, at least in some ways. It was intense, yes, but it was all these physical emotions like disgust and revulsion. Except toward the end, when you were angry about your doc not giving your platoon sergeant morphine. And it seems like there might have been something else there, too, but I can’t put my finger on it. What do you make of that?”

“I vomited at the time. The first time I threw up. My injury made me do it. It triggered some autonomic reflex that makes you puke. And I swallowed a lot of blood. And the rest of it—” Steve shrugs. “It was a lot of blood. It was gruesome. The scene. It was just… gruesome. Really bloody.”

Bruce nods, but there’s a soft skepticism to it. “So, just gruesome? Just gross? Just a gross body that’s disgusting? That’s all?”

The description is jarring, and Steve’s lip curls up. “He’s not just a fucking body. No. That’s—” He shakes his head. “No. That’s insulting.”

“I’m sorry I was off the mark. That’s just how I was hearing you describe it, as this disgust response from a gruesome scene. You weren’t describing any other emotions like fear or sadness or compassion or concern, but I’m wondering if those were there at the time.”

Steve crosses his arms, hugging his jacket to his chest, and shrugs.

“And your SUDs were always reported as 50.” Bruce raises his eyebrows. “Is that really true?”

Steve swallows, Adam’s apple sliding up the length of his unshaven neck. He looks to the window, out to the blue sky, a sky like that pristine October day in Khalidiya, before the dust blotted out the sun. He’s not sure how long he looks out it before he speaks next.

“I should have gone in first,” Steve says. “To clear the room. I don’t know why I just let him go first.”

“What’s the protocol in a situation like that? Is it typical for a platoon leader to lead in a room clearing situation?”

Steve continues looking out the window as he talks. “Not really, but it didn’t even cross my mind. It should have at least been an option that I considered. But I just let him take the lead, and he got hit. I just let him. I didn’t do shit. That was our entire deployment. He was always a better leader than I was. A better soldier. I was second fiddle to him, and I was okay with that. I looked up to him, and he taught me a lot. Every day, I learned something from him about being a soldier and a leader. I don’t know if he knew that.

“But it wasn’t my job to follow him. I was supposed to lead, and I didn’t that day. I failed. And he’s really fucked up now because of it.” He looks down at his lap. “I fucked him up really bad. I really did.”

“Do you still talk with him?”

“No.” Steve looks up at Bruce. “I have to go.”

Bruce glances at the clock on the wall. “It’s only been five minutes.”

Steve stands, making sure he draws himself to his full height. “I’m going to go now.”

Bruce slides out of his chair and plucks the recorder from off his desk. Instead of turning it off, he
“I’m gonna say this very loud and clear, and I wanna make sure you listen to this for your homework — you might not want to come back next week. Sessions three and four are tough for a lot of people, and avoidance can be strong between those sessions. But remember, there’s a dose-response effect here. So the more you listen to your imaginal exposure between sessions, the faster you’re going to get better. If you catch yourself wanting to cancel or no-show your appointment next week, come anyway. Call me. Don’t just not show up. Re-read the rationale for the treatment. Remind yourself of why you’re here.

“You’ve done really great work today. And you’ve demonstrated that you can revisit the memory. It was uncomfortable, but you did it. And remember, the memory of the event is not the event itself. That’s already happened. You’ve already lived through the worst of it. It can’t get any worse. It can only get better. And if you keep with this, if you do the work, if you come to sessions and are diligent about your homework, you will very likely see improvement in your symptoms. If you don’t come back to treatment, well, things may not get much better.”

Bruce flips off the recorder and offers it back to Steve with a smile. “Listen to that last part especially. If you need a pep talk, please call me. And I’ll see you next Friday, same time. Right?”

Steve takes the recorder and slips it into the pocket of his khakis. “Sure.”

Two hours later, Steve is pacing in the loading zone outside JFK. He’s been trying to force himself through the sliding glass doors, trying as many different strategies as his overwhelmed brain could muster, which amounts to breathing, breathing, and breathing. And even though the breathing has kept him from a repeat of Bruce’s office, it hasn’t gotten him in the building. And he doesn’t know what to do, because his flight leaves in just a little over an hour, and he’s still gotta clear TSA with a couple ounces of shrapnel in his body, and he doesn’t have a uniform and fancy Ranger Tab and Airborne patch to smooth the way for him this time. And God damn it, if he can’t even get in the door, how the fuck is he supposed to get onto the plane? And how the fuck is he supposed to go to a convention center and network? Not to mention that he looks like a strung-out junkie now after puking his guts out or, at the very best, spectacularly hungover. Neither makes for anything close to a desirable first impression.

His brain flairs and sparks, and no solutions explode out the other side of the noise. Except one. He can’t even assign a judgment to it, whether it’s a good thing or a bad one. It’s just the only thing that he can think to do that he hasn’t already done, and as the phone rings on the other end he keeps pacing, senses dialed through the skyline, until he hears her voice pick up on the other end.

“This is Dr. Van Dyne.”


“Steve.” Her voice warms out of its serious professional register. “How are you? How’s PE going?”

“Terrible. It’s awful. I just— I just came from it. And I’m supposed to fly to DC to go to a conference now, and I can’t. I don’t think I can do it. I’m just—”

He stops at a large cement pillar and leans up against it, letting his weekend bag slide down his arm and onto the ground.

“I’m outside the airport. I’ve been outside here for an hour, and I keep trying to go inside, but every
time I do, I get so— I’m so fucking— And my boss arranged this special trip for me to come to DC, and I’ve been trying to breathe, but my session was so _fucked up_, Hope. I had a panic attack, and I’ve never had one before, and I thought I was having a heart attack— and I must look fucking _insane_ right now — Jesus fucking Christ — and then — and then I was puking right in the middle of session, in this goddamn garbage can — two goddamn garbage cans — and it was just fucking _awful_ and embarrassing and humiliating. And my boss wants me to meet all these bigwig people at this conference, like I’m going to make connections with them or something, like who the fuck would want to connect with me, because I am a fucking _hot mess_, and I’m fucked up and I fucking hate Bruce, that fucking prick— and _fuck_, it’s Ethan’s first _birthday_ this weekend, but I don’t know how to tell Matt that I just can’t fucking do the things he wants me to do, because I’m too fucked up to go to this conference— And I know — I just fucking _know_ — if I get on that plane I’m going to have a fucking panic attack or I’ll throw up in front of everyone, right in the aisle, and they’ll have to land the plane, and I fucking don’t ever want to do that shit with Bruce _ever_ again. And Sharon is having all her friends over and they’re all going to think I’m a dirtbag, and I look like a strung out fucking junkie because I blew all the blood vessels in my fucking eyeballs from puking so hard, and Matt is going to be so disappointed in me, because I can never meet his expectations, I don’t know why he even has them in the first place, and God _damn it_— _Fuck_— I just—”

“Steve. Breathe. Just breathe. That’s the only thing you need to do right now. All that other stuff can wait.”

He sucks in a breath between his clenched teeth, ducking his head to try to preserve some small illusion that he’s not experiencing what he’s experiencing right now. Maybe he’s just a guy who’s really early to the airport, talking to his wife or something, or wrapping up a conversation with the office, something moderately stressful that he just has to get out of the way before his flight. A relaxing flight to some relaxing destination, perhaps.

“It was so bad,” he whispers.

“What session was that?” she asks.

Steve pauses to recall. “Three.”

She makes a small sound of affirmation. “Yeah, the first few sessions can be tough, and you experience a lot of stuff through your body. Sometimes people with your history feel things very strongly in their bodies because they’re always trying so hard to control their emotions, and that energy has to go somewhere. And maybe you’re not ready to feel those emotions yet, so this is what’s happening. But, Steve, the treatment is really effective for a lot of people. I’m telling you, I never would have recommended it if I didn’t believe in it so strongly, and for you in particular. You wanted to feel emotions again, this is going to help you with that, if you let it. And it’s learning theory. You’re already learning something new—”

He snarls. “That if I try to talk about it, it’s the worst fucking thing ever?”

“No. That you can talk about it, and it sucks, but you can do it. It’s just some vomit. So what?” Hope says casually. He can almost see her shrugging one of her shoulders up toward the edge of her bob. “Before we got you on prazosin, you were waking up from nightmares about this stuff, gagging and throwing up all the time. This isn’t going to go away because you stop treatment.”

Steve scoffs and shakes his head. He kicks lightly at his bag, some piece of shit he got on the cheap that looks on the cheap. “Don’t gimme that ‘only way out is through’ crap.”

“Why not?” she says. “It’s true. It’s the literal truth. That’s like saying ‘the only way to cure a life-threatening infection is with antibiotics.’ Yeah, it is. Your PTSD is a wound. It’s been untreated for a
long time, and it’s infected and gangrenous. It needs debriding before it can heal. That’s what this is. So what if you’ve gotta puke in Bruce’s office? He’s been doing this work for 15 years. You think you’re the only one?” Hope pauses and lets the dead air stretch. “Seriously. What was his reaction?”

His reaction was a remarkably un-Bruce-Banner-like laxity, as if puking was a step in the protocol he simply forgot to mention. Steve rubs the back of his neck.

“He didn’t look surprised. He had two garbage cans.”

“Vomiting isn’t common in PE, as far as I understand it, but some people are pukey. You’re a pukey guy. It just happens. It’s how you’re processing this stuff. Your body needs to go through this. So buy a box of emesis bags off eBay or Amazon or at a medical supply store or whatever, if you don’t want to use the garbage can. Or excuse yourself to go to the bathroom. But please don’t stop going to treatment.”

Her voice is pleading, sincerely so, in a way that he rarely hears because she’s so fond of granting him such broad autonomy. She has few requests of him, but this is one. It makes it very difficult to ignore.

“He said the same thing,” Steve murmurs.

“Because this is when people try to ghost. They use their discomfort as an excuse to stop treatment, not remembering that living with PTSD is much more uncomfortable than what they experienced in session. You’re condensing some of that discomfort in the service of getting better. And so it’s one of those things where you—”

There’s a little noise on her end. A couple knocks and then some muffled exchange of words in her very professional tone, which she carries back into her first few words back with him. But it fades quickly into that pleading again, stronger than before, like he’s speaking to a completely bare Hope Van Dyne, the one he might be friends with, if they weren’t doctor and patient.

“Listen, Steve. I have a warm handoff. Stick with treatment, whether it’s PE or something else. Please don’t drop out completely. Okay?”

“Okay.” It starts as an acknowledgment. A reflexive echo of her last word. But he continues, because he owes her more. He owes her assurance. He thinks, perhaps, he might be able to offer some. For now, at least. “I won’t.”

“As for the conference, do you really, really have to go? Is it absolutely essential?”

“No.”

“Will your friend understand? Can you call and tell him the truth?”

Steve hesitates. He thinks of Matt’s face. His smile. The times when he doesn’t smile. Can he handle those latter times? Could he survive Matt’s disappointment, the full force of it, whatever that might look like?

“Yes.”

“Go be with your son. Drive, if you have to.”

“Okay.”

“Try to have a good time.”
“Okay.”

“I’ll see you next month for our med check. Okay?”

“Okay.”

They say their goodbyes. He drags it out because he doesn’t want to let her go. And he disliked Bruce at the beginning of their conversation, but he dislikes him extra hard now, if only because he’s not Hope. He can’t dislike him for any rational reason, so he makes up fake ones.

Steve slips his cell back into his pocket and sags against the pillar. He watches the bustling travelers, dull-eyed and envious at their ease. He weakly tries to talk himself into going to the conference still, because maybe the drive will give him some time to decompress. But he will be a wreck by then. He just knows it. And he’ll need every ounce of energy he can muster to not scream at Ethan and Sharon and not kick the doors or punch the wall or throw things, which is truly the sorriest state of truth he’s faced in his entire adult life. So fuck the international law community, because Steve Rogers needs his strength to make it through feeding the goddamn baby without screaming.

Jesus.

A sound rips his attention from his thoughts — the thumpa-thumpa-thumpa of a helicopter. A big one, some mammoth corporate thing. He wrenches his eyes shut, because no, no, no, he has to be done with this today, God damn it.

And he’s mostly able to shove it back with his mental tricks, save for a wayward image, a wholly unexpected one, Bucky on the medevac, Steve sitting next to him, holding his hand, and Steve wants to say it — and Bucky tells him no. He tells him no. He’d better not. He doesn’t wanna hear it. He better not dare.

Steve shakes his head, snatches his bag from the ground. He’ll go back to treatment, all right, even though it’s the worst. Because he just needs to put that fucker behind him, once and for all. Put that broken, miserable man behind him with that fucked up, miserable memory of him.

He frowns, clenches his jaw tight, and walks back toward the parking garage.

April 26

“Oh, my Lord. Who is that? What is that?”

Bucky sighs and glances up from his notebook, where he’s been writing about how much he resents the Army. Resents the doctors at Landstuhl and Walter Reed for doing shoddy work on his knee. For leaving so much metal in his body. For doing a shitty graft job on his dick, leaving him with almost nothing — a disgusting, ugly nothing to boot. How he resents Sergeant Jefferson for recruiting him for the Rangers in ’04 and resents Sergeant Brookline for convincing him to go to sniper school in ’05. How he resents his recruiter in Brooklyn for letting him be an infantryman in the first place with a near perfect ASVAB score. What kind of moron lets someone like that sign up to be a fucking enlisted grunt? His resentments are vivid and alive amid a screaming background of pain, a whump-whump-whump that he can’t squirm away from and that the ibuprofen can barely touch.

Winnie gasps from the other side of the couch. “What is it doing?”
“You know if you listen and watch a movie quietly, generally the plot and character details unveil themselves,” Bucky grumbles.

“Oh, hush.” She waves her hand at him. “Just let me be.”

Bucky is smiling a little when he looks down at his work and finishes his entry: *and I joined so I had an excuse not to be who I was (someone who wants to fuck men). Character traits: Self-hateful, dishonest, avoidant.*

They’ve been doing this for the past four days since he’s been home from the hospital. Him on the chaise end of his new sectional couch, teeth clenched, tense with discomfort. His knee is so swollen that to bend it feels like he might burst it open and spill out its contents, and Winnie is bustling about, nursing him, trying to keep him iced and elevated and walking and PTing and fed and hydrated and, to the extent that he will allow it, medicated. More than once, when his pain and irritation and other gnarly Fourth Step emotions have crested in ugly waves, she’s dropped his DBT binder on his lap and told him to use it.

And he tries. He pulls out the distress tolerance worksheet he got before his surgery with suggestions for how to distract himself. There are so many choices that sometimes he can only stare at the sheet, paralyzed by them, which he supposes is a form of distraction in itself. Should he try an activity? Should he use some mental trick like counting to 10 or counting colors? Should he try distracting himself using intense sensation? It’s his favorite category, because it includes squeezing things really hard and holding ice cubes in his hand and listening to very loud music. It also includes fucking, hilariously enough.

Oh, he wishes. He would do anything for a blowjob right now. *Anything.* A really long one. Even if his dick is utterly hideous, even if he’s beyond mortified by it, he would pay someone to close their eyes and deal with it. It’s the only kind of blow job he could ever imagine for himself from now on. A business transaction. So that’s what he vaguely fantasizes about in the background of his recovery, amid the whump-whump of his knee and the whump-whump of testosterone in his veins, now that he’s resigned himself to taking it again, if only to maybe avoid another misery-driven close call with Discount Liquors. Some random dude could suck his dick while he thinks about better times, maybe, because sometimes Steve would suck his dick *forever.* Lie between his legs, blow him for what seemed like an hour, slow and indulgent, impossible to tell who it was really for, because he loved to suck it and would get off on just doing that, rub one out real quick after swallowing Bucky’s load, maybe not even making it to the end sometimes, if Steve could wring enough dirty sounds out of him. Sometimes Steve would keep him on the edge for twenty minutes, listen to him, perfectly attuned, slip a finger or two in his ass, practically torture him until he was a writhing mess, begging for him to go faster or fuck his fingers in deeper or something, anything, Jesus—

“What’s this place again?” Winnie asks, nodding at the TV.

Bucky shudders and shakes his head. “Dagoba. How have you not seen *any* of the Star Wars movies in your life? How is that possible? How old are you again?”

“Your age plus 22.”

“That’s so young. I can’t imagine getting married so young.” He turns the page in his notebook and runs the side of his hand along the length of the spine to flatten it. It’s another page on his resentments list, a blank one reserved for Hank. “Or ever,” he mutters.

“Well, the choice was kind of made for me when you were born.” Winnie is still looking at the screen, but her eyes are unfocused now, glazing over like a flash-freezing hazel lake.
Bucky tilts his head, brows drawn sharply together. “Wait — are you saying I was an accident?”

“Yep.”

Bucky snags his blue folder from the couch cushion next to him and pulls out the stapled packet of questions Hank gave him last month, the packet he’s been largely avoiding, excusing into the future for some better time that never seems to come. “That’s actually related to a question on here. One of the family questions. Was I wanted as a child.”

“I wanted you.”

It’s a heavy and determined I, a lone sequoia in a wasteland, and Bucky closes his notebook hard.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Winnie is preoccupied with her hands now, suddenly, picking at her short nails. “For a while there, I was pretty sure it was just gonna be us.”

Bucky stares at her, lips pressed tightly.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Do you really wanna know?”

“Yes.”

The answer leaves his mouth before he can consider it, instantly, reflexively, and Winnie’s face is as surprised as his own surely must be. She pauses the movie.

“We just started dating,” she says. “Very casually. Met in a bar. He just got to Fort Hood. Just got his wings. Or rotors. Whatever. He made it very clear up front that he never, ever wanted children. From the very first date, he made sure I knew that. Which is a highly presumptuous thing to say, of course.”

“Never?”

She drops into a deeper register and, with it, an eerily accurate George Barnes prosody and cadence. “‘Never, ever, Winnie. Never. So don’t get any ideas.’ And I was okay with that, because I didn’t have any fantasies about family, either. Mine was pretty terrible. I didn’t have any idyllic picture I was trying to recreate or anything.” She pauses, and one corner of her mouth quirks in an odd way. “But we were dumb, thought it would be fine, and I told him, and he freaked out.”

Bucky’s stomach spasms, and he presses his palm over where his heart has begun a manic sprint in his chest. “What do you mean ‘freaked out?’”

Winnie heaves a shrug. “He just had trouble with it.”

“‘Well, he said ‘I can’t. I can’t be a dad. I can’t do it. I will wreck that kid if I get near it. I can’t do it. You’re both better off without me.’ And I called bullshit on him — oh Lord, so hard — but he was adamant, so that was that. And I would never have an abortion back in those days.’”

Bucky can feel the edges of his consciousness start to grey out, like a wall of water coming up between them, rushing in to drown out the things she’s saying. That George Barnes is a man who ran, who made up lame excuses to not be a father, who said that he would wreck his kid—
He grabs the edge of the ice pack covering his right knee. Grabs it hard. The blurred edges sharpen. The thoughts fall away. All that’s left is the cold biting into his skin.

Somehow, he pulls sound from his throat. “And then what?”

Winnie tilts her head back and rests it on the couch cushions. When she speaks, her voice is as thin as his. “Then I went to my mama to see if she would help, and she called me a whore and told me I was on my own.”

“Jesus.”

Winnie fiddles with the band of her watch, clasping and unclasping it, lips pursed.

“That was the worst part of it all,” she says. “I wasn’t too surprised some hot shit pilot I barely knew knocked me up and left me. Tale as old as time, right there. But I never expected my mother to turn her back on her own grandchild, no matter how much she and I didn’t get along. That was awful. And I knew the Army would kick me out as soon as my maternity leave was over, because I wouldn’t have anyone to care for you if I got deployed. And I was scared to go to my church, for obvious reasons.” She holds out her hand palm-up, and looks into it. “One little slip, and everyone disappeared. Poof. Sorry, kiddo, you’re on your own. Shoulda thought harder before you decided to have sex those couple times.”

Winnie chuckles, and it’s dry at first. But the bitterness burns off quickly, and she smiles over at him, wistful. She shifts position, folding her legs underneath her body so she can angle herself toward him.

“So, I accepted that we were gonna be on our own, and I spent my pregnancy planning our life. Just us chickens. What that would look like. How I’d support us. If I’d go back to school to be an NP. Where we’d live. I thought maybe California. The coast. Santa Barbara. Santa Cruz. I always wanted to go there. Maybe I would wear linen or something. Learn how to paint. Have a garden. A little house for us. Eat sprouts and hemp seeds or whatever people in California eat. Have an orange tree.”

She reaches out and touches her hand to the cushion between them. “I imagined you growing up there, being a little surfer baby, long hair, tan, living on the beach, laid back, happy, having an easy life.”

The image is stunningly sweet, and for a few very long moments, Bucky is entranced by it. He’s been to the California coast on leave after a round of training at NTC. He’s seen those little houses with their citrus trees. He’s seen those surfer children with their long hair and board shorts and calm demeanors and easy lives. He could see Winnie in linen with an easel, her paintings on the wall, a sunroom where she could get good light, and they could have tomato plants and zucchini, and maybe he would learn how to meditate. Maybe he would be content right now. Maybe he would even let himself be who he is.

“I got the long hair part, but that’s about it,” Bucky says with a thin laugh. “Sorry to disappoint.”

Winnie props her head in her hand and regards him with soft eyes. “Nothing to be sorry about. Things just would have been very different. I think we would have had a nice little life together.”

They look at each other, and it feels like the most intimate moment they’ve had in, God, Bucky doesn’t even know how long. His body begins to stiffen and recoil as soon as he realizes it, even as he strains against his own resistance, but he’s saved by her gaze shifting to the rug. Her smile flattens.
“Your dad came back when you were a month old. He said, ‘I wanna do the right thing. I wanna try.’ And I said, ‘you’re either gonna be here or you’re not. Either be a man or run away. But pick one and stick with it. No flitting in and out of our life. I don’t care which one you choose, because we’ll be fine with or without you.’”

Bucky’s eyes widen as he works to construct that scene in his mind. And when he does, it’s all just too fucking much. The knowledge that his parents weren’t even together when he was born. That they barely knew each other. That they didn’t love each other. That his father didn’t even fucking want him. That his grandmother was cruel and left his mother to fend for herself with only him growing inside her. Abandoned. Alone. That his father ran away because he was scared—

“I don’t wanna talk about this anymore,” he breathes, drawing up his better leg and curling in on himself.

“Okay,” Winnie says gently, “but it’s important for you to know that he came back and chose to stay, and he asked me to marry him. He did the right thing in the end.”

“What kind of asshole ditches a pregnant woman? What the fuck was wrong with him?”

Winnie tilts her head, squinting a little, like she’s trying to read something small across the room. “He wasn’t an asshole. I think he just needed time to work through some things before he was ready to be a dad.”

Bucky scoffs. She was planning a whole other life for them. Just the two of them. And if George hadn’t come back... there would be no Kentucky. No booze. No Army. No deployments. No Alex or Steve or Thor or anyone who came before or after.

Things could have been different.

“And I’m glad he came back,” she says, “because we wouldn’t have Rikki if he didn’t. And you wouldn’t be the man you are without him.”

He could have been different.

She slides over, closing the distance between them, and lays her hand on his thigh above where the ice pack ends. She gives it a pat. His chest and stomach tighten.

“You know you can talk to me, right?” she says. “About that stuff for AA.”

Bucky clenches his teeth as she gives his thigh a squeeze just above his knee, which is surging with fresh pain.

“You can talk to me about anything. Now, in the past, anything. Things that happened overseas. Before that.” Her voice gets very quiet. Almost inaudible. “What happened back at Campbell—”

“Will you just shut the fuck up?”

Silence soaks into the room, and the only sound is his breath as he struggles to calm it, as he counts all the blue things in the room. His AA folder. The case of the Empire Strikes Back Blu-ray. The rug Winnie helped him pick out, because he’s garbage at decorating and just doesn’t care enough to do it right. The dark blue fabric of the couch she insisted that he buy, even though it was a thousand dollars more than he ever imagined he would pay for a couch. Winnie came over two days before his surgery was scheduled and gasped, horrified, at the sight of what Steve left behind. She dragged him to Macy’s right then. Didn’t even take off her shoes.
Bucky swallows as he trails to the blue of her jeans. “I’m sorry. I— that was shitty of me.”

Winnie’s only answer is to pat his leg again. Jesus Christ.

“My higher power in AA is Truth,” he continues, “and I’m really fucking trying to use all these fucking skills but…” He shakes his head and looks at where her hand is resting on his leg, and he takes her by the forearm and moves it to the cushion next to him. “I’m tapped out. My knee hurts. And I’m fucking done.”

He lets her go and pulls his arms in, crossing them tight over the thin material of his long sleeved t-shirt. Winnie gathers her hands loosely on her lap and nods.

“Can I get some ibuprofen?”

Winnie scooches to the edge of the cushion and rises to her feet. She eyes him closely as she passes by on her way to the kitchen, steps heavy on the wood floor. She pauses in the doorway and presses her hand to the wall.

“You know you can take something stronger, if you need it. I can tell you’re in a lot of pain. I have it with me.”

Bucky grimaces. He can see the Vicodin in his mind’s eye, an untouched pile of fat, white pills in an orange bottle, wedged at the bottom of her purse. He hears them when she puts her bag down in the kitchen. When she picks it up to leave. When she digs through it for her phone or reading glasses or pocketbook. He hears them and imagines their possibilities, only some of which involve the alleviation of physical pain.

“Look, I know you’re just trying to help, but you’re not. I don’t even want them in the apartment.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Bucky waves her off with stiff fingers. “Hank and Wanda are coming over at five, remember.”

“Right. I’ll make myself scarce.”

She does just that, ducking into the kitchen. The cupboard squeaks open and dishware clinks. He thinks he hears her sigh, but it could just be the rush from the tap as she fills a glass with water. He focuses on the trail of other sounds. The smack of the fridge seal. The crinkling of plastic. He imagines the weary droop of her mouth as she once more corrects her orbit around him, one more changestep in a perpetual march through this nebulous Recovery they all wax optimistic about, something that is simultaneously a destination and also their current location. Just when he thinks he’s got the steps down, the rhythm changes, or a boulder gets thrown in his path, or, like today, entire stretches of road get washed out.

How can that George Barnes be the George Barnes who spent countless nights in the garage, patiently teaching him cars and motorcycles? Who brought home Casey despite Winnie’s waffling? Who called him James when nobody else did, who understood him, made space for him to be himself until that self became something shameful that needed to be hidden? Because if he didn’t tuck it away in the dark, there would be consequences. And no matter what, he couldn’t lose his father’s love. He couldn’t risk ending up on the other side of that. How could those two men be the same?

They can’t be. They just can’t. And so Bucky closes his eyes and tries to go back to where he was this morning, when George was always a good man and a predictable man. And his parents met at
work and not in some sleazy Killeen bar, and they dated for at least a year before they got married, and maybe he was conceived on the wedding night, or maybe it was even a little bit of a shotgun wedding, he could handle that. But they loved each other and they were both excited for him to be born and they planned his nursery and picked out his crib and toys together at a nice baby store and they laughed and gushed about all of the cute things there. And it was normal and it was good.

Bucky opens his eyes when Winnie walks through the doorway. She sets a plate of muenster cheese and Triscuits and pills on the cushion next to him.

“How you doin’?”

“Okay,” he mutters.

“Made you a snack.” She reaches toward him with the glass of water in her left hand. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Bucky says, taking it from her. He pauses for a moment on the cusp of his offer, reading her face, the wrinkles in the corners of her eyes, the creases between her brows, the warmth that’s a little guarded now. “You can stay this time. If you want. I mean, it’s an AA meeting. With three people. Four, if you wanna sit in. So it’s not gonna be very exciting, but—”

“I’d like that,” she says, dropping back down on the couch and rattling the crackers on the ceramic. “I’d love to meet Wanda.”

Bucky scrapes the pills up from the edge of the plate and chases them down with some water. He takes a few extra gulps to cool his throat, even though it’ll mean peeing soon, which’ll mean getting up soon, which’ll mean more pain soon. So, fuck it, he drains the whole glass, because he might as well piss a lot, if he’s gonna do it at all.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and reaches forward to set the glass on the coffee table. “I think they have a group. For families. Hank told me about it. Al-Anon or something. You should maybe go to that. Learn how to deal with me better.”

“Deal with you, huh?” Winnie curls up on the couch again, facing him like she was before, as compact as someone of her size can get. Companionable and conspiratorial like a teenage girl. “You think that would help you? If I did that?”

Bucky shrugs. “Can’t hurt.”

He can feel her gaze tracking over the lines of him, head to toe, over the fall of his clothes, the scars creeping up from his collar, spilling out his sleeves and in the gap between where his pants don’t quite reach his ankle socks.

“Eat your crackers.”

He takes one of the Triscuits, focus keen on his movements, brows flat and tense, tracking the flexion of his grip, the placement of his fingertips, the angle of his hand, the rotation of his wrist. If he watches, it’s smoother. More precise. His food is more likely to make it to his mouth rather than back onto the plate or worse. He watches himself with the interest of a man learning the task of ingestion for the first time.

“Have some,” he insists between chews.

She plucks one from the plate and smiles. “These are my favorite.”

“Me, too.”
“Oh? I thought you were a cheddar man.”


“Oh my God, I thought you meant my other other son.” Winnie falls quiet, dipping her head and looking down at her lap. She shakes it in a slow, lugubrious way and lets out a shaking breath.

“What do you mean, other other son?”

“I meant… Jeremy. Your twin brother. I wanted to tell you earlier, but I…”

Bucky’s mouth falls open. “Twin brother?”

Winnie lifts her head and barks out a laugh, hand coming down to clap her thigh. “I’m joking, baby! Lighten up!”

There’s a moment of whiteness, maybe a space that panic or rage would otherwise fill. But she’s laughing at him, at his dumbstruck, unhinged jaw and his indignant resistance to her lightness. And the whiteness is dissolved by an ease that Bucky doesn’t push back against, because easy feels good right now, like relief, and he’s smiling in spite of himself. And a few moments later, the crackers are rattling with his laughter, too.

April 30

Steve’s phone is vibrating again, deep in the pocket of his gym shorts. And like the three other times it has vibrated since his two o’clock therapy appointment was scheduled, Steve ignores it. His hands are busy, anyway, full of groceries and working the sticky lock of his front door, which finally cracks open to a cramped configuration of furniture. It’s everything he can fit in the shoebox-sized studio he’s renting for more than 50% of his paycheck, a deal he managed to swing only because his credit has somehow remained superb, though probably not for much longer. Bed. The crib and changing table set they picked out together in Park Slope. Dresser. TV on top. A smaller coffee table and new loveseat he had to purchase with a new credit card, because there was no room for his full-size couch. He had to put that and the rest of everything else in storage, even though it goddamn near gutted him to do it. He stood in the old apartment for over an hour, frozen, movers twiddling their thumbs and spitting Skoal juice into empty plastic soda bottles while he agonized over whether to just leave it all and walk away. It took one of the movers poking his elbow and saying hey buddy, we moving or what? for him to jolt out of it, wild-eyed, and snap at him to just take everything and never fucking touch him again.

He kicks the door shut behind him and maneuvers himself through the tight maze of furnishings, scowling as his phone vibrates again, this time with a blast of texts, because God damn, can’t he just get some goddamn peace on a Friday night? And he’s cursing again now, because he forgot to lock the fucking door, God knows how, so he drops the grocery bags on the floor and stomps back, flips the knob lock, the deadbolt, and chain lock, and returns, snatches the bags, and makes his way to the narrowest kitchen that has ever been constructed — so narrow that the oven door can barely be opened all the way. Not that he uses it much anyway. He eats the same thing every meal of every day, one easily prepped on the stovetop, each meal’s macros perfectly calculated for maximum muscle growth and maximum fat cutting, now that he’s back in the gym and tapering down his runs
with Matt.

He tried to stop them all together. He really just wants to be alone.

Of course, Matt saw what he was doing, and he followed him to the gym. *I'm sure Elektra won't mind,* he said with a smirk, and nobody can stop Matt Murdock from doing anything; only a fool would even think to try. And so they lift together, mostly in silence, because Steve’s mind is a deafening hive of terrible memories now, and his attention is captive most days — most minutes — in the swarm of them. Memories of his last session with Bruce. Memories of clearing his things from the apartment. Of seeing Bucky there, lean and guarded, all friable angles. Memories of the night Steve packed his things and left, how catastrophically it all ended, and every act of idiotic love before that, all tossed into a hungry void, all for nothing. And an energy quickens inside of him, vicious and hot, and he tries to put it into his bench press and his squat and his deadlift, but more days than not it sticks to him like boiling wax, and doors shut a little too hard, and keys clack a little too loud, and the groove between his brow cuts a little too deep, and his tone hits a little too sharp. And today, the groceries come down firm on the shelves and get tossed where he can get away with it, and his cell gets thrown at the bed, unchecked, as he passes by on the way to the bathroom.

Steve showers, movements brusque and efficient, until he passes his hand over his thigh and stops, stupidly, to look at the spray of tightly knotted scars there. It’s usually nothing. Many of the things that have been *things* this past week are usually nothing. Helicopters. Peanut butter. And, Jesus Christ, this is something now, too, and his vision starts to splotch ominously around the edges as his stomach rolls, and he closes his eyes tight and drops into a crouch, back against the shower tiles, and he channels every bit of his focus into fighting himself.

But he’s tired of it. He is so, so tired. His fortress walls are in velocious decay, and he can’t sustain the energy to fortify them anymore, because he’s been doing it from the moment he startled awake, gasping for air at three in the morning, to this moment now. And so he turns his back on his crumbling walls and lets himself go, like he did in Bruce’s office, falling into the core of the horror, of Khalidiya, of Bucky screaming in the dirt, because it’s easier to get on his hands and knees and hurl gym water down the drain than it is to resist or feel any actual feelings about what happened— But oh, isn’t that a thought that he’ll blast into the hastiest oblivion he can, because fuck Bucky Barnes and feeling anything for him except the anger that he has goddamn well earned for being a selfish, lying, alcoholic who— God, just *stop.* Stop.

When he’s done, he stands, bracing himself against the lingering dizziness, and counts his breaths to prevent it from happening again, from thinking anything else but numbers while he slowly finishes washing. He dries off and wraps the towel around his hips, brushes his teeth, and checks himself in the mirror. Flexes his biceps and pecs and shoulders and back. Pinches the thin bits of fat he hunts around his middle, frowning. Not good enough. Gotta do better. Gotta do better at everything.

Steve slips on his West Point sweats and a t-shirt and pads to the kitchen. He tosses down a tall glass of water and swings by the fridge to snag an Old Rasputin from the four-pack he plans to knock himself out with, along with a double dose of prazosin. He knows there’s a risk he could end up face-planted on the floor from a precipitous drop in blood pressure, if he wakes up to pee in the middle of the night, but it’s a risk he’s glad to assume if it means one night where he doesn’t scream, gasp, or gag himself awake two or three times because of some body haunting him in some terrible state of injury or death — Bucky ripped apart in Khalidiya, Bucky overdosed in the hospital, Trip’s headless body on his lap, his mother’s vacated corpse drowning in white bedding. Maybe beer will help make it stop. Or if it doesn’t, maybe if he drinks enough of it, maybe he just won’t give a shit. Maybe he’ll give a little nod to the bodies. *Hello, Trip. Sorry I killed you. Sorry I fucked up. Sorry I was the worst platoon leader in the brigade. Sorry I joined the Army in the first place. Hey, Ma. Sorry I spent most of your last year on Earth fucking my boyfriend across town while you were*

On his way to the loveseat, he snags his phone from the bed — four missed calls, all from the VA. Three voicemails. Four texts from Sharon, two of them photos. He drops onto the couch with a groan and drains half of his beer in a few greedy gulps. It’s the only way he can collect enough courage to hear what Bruce has to say, to face his failure, the lesser humiliation of skipping out on the kind of humiliation that happened last week.

He presses the phone to his ear and listens and drinks.

_Hey Steve, it’s Bruce. Just checking in to see if everything is okay and to see if you wanted to reschedule the appointment that we had scheduled for two today. Give me a call when you get this so we can check in and touch bases. I hope to hear from you soon._

He deletes it and moves to the next.

_Hey, Steve, Bruce again. Just calling again to check in and follow up about your appointment today. I know last week was a difficult session for you, and I wanted to talk with you about how you’re feeling about things. Remember that this is the time when your desire to avoid is gonna be really strong, so that’s perfectly normal. But this is also the time when it’s really important to keep up your momentum with sessions and homework, so maybe give me a call when you get this and we can reschedule and check in about how everything is going. Okay. Hope you’re well. Have a good weekend and hope to talk soon._

Delete.

He swallows the rest of his beer.

_Steve, it’s Hope. Bruce called and told me that you no-showed to your PE session today, so I wanted to check and see how you’re doing. I know your last session was really rough, and I know it must be hard for you to go back after that. But remember what we’ve talked about. Remind yourself of why you’re doing all of this. And have a little faith in yourself. You’ve done a lot of really hard things in your life, and this isn’t even close to the hardest, even if it feels like it right now because of a bunch of other things going on. I know you can do this. Call me, okay? Or, better yet, call Bruce. And make sure you’re staying in touch with people who can give you some support. Matt, Sharon, people who understand. Keep them in the loop. Don’t shut them out. I know how you get. Anyway, if you get this before five, gimme a call back. Otherwise, I hope we can chat on Monday. Take care._

Steve hangs up. His hands sag and drop onto his lap, empty bottle in one, phone in the other. Five o’clock has long come and gone, leaving the room dim and shadowed. The words of his therapists circle in his mind, their messages threaded together in a discordant cyclone of disappointment that compels him to his feet and back to the fridge for another beer. And this one feels wrong as he starts on it mid-stride, because it feels like the kind of beer that Bucky might drink, the kind drunk not to sleep but to chase away life. But maybe it’s not so bad, because he feels a little lighter when he drops onto the loveseat and starts flipping through his messages.

*E decided he wanted to try feeding himself*

The next text is a picture of Ethan sitting in his high chair with a rubber-coated purple spoon in his little fist. He’s pointing it in the general direction of a bowl of sweet potatoes, mouth open and undoubtedly mid-babble, because he is an unremitting stream of noise.
The final text is a picture of him again, face covered — *covered* — in sweet potatoes. Surely not one bite of it made it into his mouth, though some of it did catch on the bottom edge of his lower lip, boldly defying gravity. His hands are clapped together, both still clean, spoon clutched between them, and he’s grinning. He’s got a fifth tooth erupting now, and it— how long has it been? Damn, did he miss it earlier? How long has it— Did he not—

“Damn it.”

Steve lets his head fall back against the cushion. He takes a drink. He turns his phone horizontally and starts flipping through photos from Ethan’s birthday. Several of Ethan on the floor with a few presents, playing with the wrapping paper. A couple of Ethan standing, grabbing onto Halima’s leg while she shows him a toy and Sharon looks on with a flat expression. One of a few other women, fellow officers from the Pentagon, all of them holding mimosas and smiling in the thin way that female officers learn to do. Or maybe they just know what he did to Sharon, which would explain the sub-zero treatment from the moment they met. Fine by him. He was more than fine with sitting in the corner alone, watching, scanning, playing his part when he needed to, whenever Ethan cruised or crawled over to him, maybe showing him something or, strangely, when he tried to give him a present. It was an act of generosity that Steve could barely grasp and so sat, face drawn in a look of dull incomprehension, while Ethan stood there and tried to open the gift on his lap, saying *baba* and tearing into the paper with his little fingers, his head tilting from one side to another as he narrated in gibberish, blah-blah- *baba*, blah-blah-blah- *baba*.

And it suddenly felt so intensely private, something he didn’t want any of the others to see except maybe for Sharon, but not even her, and everyone was staring at Ethan, and who the fuck were they, why were they even there, what business did they have, because they’re not family, and the party wasn’t for them, and everything got hot and small and ominous, and so he stood and grabbed Ethan and the present and marched through their dumb looks and uneasy laughs and shut both of them in Ethan’s room and sat on the floor and watched him open the gift and played with him until Sharon came in and he told her to tell everyone to go the fuck home. And she crossed her arms and looked at him for a while and sighed and then agreed, but only after telling him that they deserve a chance to say goodbye to the baby, and so he said “fine” like he didn’t care, and he didn’t, and so she took the baby away from him. And he stayed there on the floor until they left, tracing over the patterns in the rug with his finger and listening through the door as they talked about “he” and “him” in hushed voices while the baby whined. And it was just fucking fine.

Steve brings the rest of the beers out and sets them on the coffee table. He flips through more pictures — flip and drink and flip and drink. Ethan and Ethan and Ethan, all photos from Sharon, getting younger and younger with every increasingly careless flick of his finger. He stops around the time he was born, maybe a few weeks old, and pounds nearly an entire bottle, because Jesus *Christ*, he was so *small*. He was so small, and everything was so bad. He was so early. He cried so much. Sharon cried. And Steve... he doesn’t remember. He doesn’t remember what he did. How he felt. All he remembers is—

Oh, but there’s one more picture. One he forgot about completely. One that’s maybe a few flips away from the birth of his son.

It’s strange, because when Natasha first showed it to him at Bragg, it felt like she had manually pushed it into his chest cavity, forced it through his skin and muscle and ribs with a slow, unstoppable fist. He could barely look at it without something inside collapsing, some wall or boundary or rational thought. Bucky always found a way to infiltrate him, even asleep in a months-old photo.
But tonight there is no collapse. There is no infiltration into his heart. There is only the bitter aftertaste of their ending and the question of whether or not he should just delete the photo from his phone. He even brings up the prompt. Flirts heavily with the idea. Floats his finger over the button. Wouldn’t it feel good to do it? To jettison the past? To send them away like a paper lantern into the sky?

But before he gets the chance, the screen goes bright and a name appears, one that makes him scramble upright and set his bottle on the table.

Eyes wide, he takes a deep breath and takes the call.

———

“Sorry about earlier.”

Bucky settles onto the chaise and clicks off the TV, then pulls all his energy into his vocal chords to keep them from misfiring. From telling Steve it’s fine to call me drunk, no problem, don’t apologize, I love you, please let me see you.

The first call ripped him from sleep, with Steve slurring on the other end, rambling about someone calling him, that he didn’t know what to say, and something Bucky couldn’t even understand because he was already panicking, hearing the booze in Steve’s voice and craving it very acutely in his own. And he told Steve he couldn’t talk and ended the call, swearing into the dark, because he’d been waiting for Steve to call him since motherfucking February, so of course Steve would call drunk and of course Bucky would hang up on him reflexively. And so he called Hank like a good sponsee and blabbed about it all and begged for a distraction to keep him strong, and who could sleep after that, so then it was just him and hours of late night Food Network and his PT exercises and biting his lip raw while his horrible imagination cooked up everything from Ethan having cancer to Steve finding out where his father is.

And now Steve is sober. And now Steve is sorry.

“Is everything okay?” Bucky asks.

“I got a call earlier. Couldn't believe it when I saw his name pop up, but it was Peter Parker. He’s living in Queens, I guess”

Bucky blinks. “Parker? Wait, you still have his number?”

“You don’t?”

Bucky flinches. He doesn’t have any numbers. Not one. Not a single man he mentored or led in his entire career. They’re all in some SIM card that he traded in with his old phone last year before fucking off to Carle Place to kill himself.

He checks his watch. 05/01 - 01:22.

Last year to the day.

“I mean, they’re still our soldiers, right? What if they needed something? What if something happens to someone and calls need to be made?” Steve pauses and pushes out a sigh through his nose. “I don’t know…”

Bucky fidgets with the fabric of his sleep pants, concentrating on the brush of cotton over the pads of his fingertips. “What did he want?”
“He has something he wants to show us. I think it’s some pictures or a video or something.”

“Pictures of what?”

“Deployment. I think.”

It hits him like a kick to the sternum, knocking the breath and thoughts from him. A tempest of images, more blinding than any sandstorm, erupts in his brain. Moments and moments and moments of Parker pointing his camera, keeping a history of them, mundane and grim and brilliant and raw, artifacts Bucky never thought twice of, because he never planned to see them curated. Never wanted to. Ever.

Steve’s voice thins. “He wants to show us together. It seemed really important to him.”

Bucky manages a hollow sound.

“I told him it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Really? Because I’m pretty sure you hate me, so I don’t know how that’s gonna work.”

“I don’t hate you. God, I—”

Steve stumbles, and there’s a rustling sound on his end. The thumps of footsteps on hard flooring. The running of a tap. The rhythmic pulse of water hastily downed.

“I just think we should do this for him,” Steve says after. “I think we should put our shit aside and be civil and do it.”

Bucky pulls the phone from his ear and sets it on his lap. He scrubs his hands over his face and then holds them there, covering the sharp, downward twist of his mouth and the gathering of his brows. He scrambles for some dumb DBT tool to make this proposition more tolerable but can only grasp air. It’s only the tinny sound of his name cutting through the dead space that pulls him out of it and gets him back on the line.

“Why were you drinking?” he asks quietly.

Steve takes a long time to answer. Bucky can imagine him maybe staring down his cuticles, thinking about gnawing them. Maybe staring at the wall, his mind an empty field.

“Things have been bad.”

Bucky clutches the couch cushion. “Bad how?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

The reply is whip-fast and just as painful. He’s got no right to it, surely, just like Steve had no right to call him drunk and expect anything out of him. But, Jesus, it hurts all the same.

“Don’t be like me, Steve. Drinking to make shit go away is a dark fucking road to go down. And it doesn’t work. And that’s all I’ll say.”

And there it is, the sound of straight teeth biting through nail, always the left hand because it’s the one least likely to be noticed when he chews them down to the flesh.

Bucky sighs.
“We probably need to do it here. I had surgery, so I’m not super mobile right now.”

The biting abruptly stops. When Steve speaks, it’s with anxious urgency. “Surgery? What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Got my knee replaced.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky looks down at his leg, stretched out on the chaise, and even though he can’t see it, he knows what’s underneath the near-warm ice pack and his pants — another scar running vertically up from tibia to quadricep, swollen tissue, and bruising, more painful ugly painted on a canvas of hideousness.

“I gotta go,” Bucky tells him.

“Oh. Okay.”

“Guess I’ll see you then.”

“Yeah.”

They’re both silent for a few moments, neither touching their fingers to their screens, the clock timing their call ticking the seconds away. He’s not sure if he’s first, in the end, but Bucky thinks he might be. And, of course, as soon as he builds the courage to manage it, he’s swearing, because they forgot to set a date for this shit.

But that’s a problem for future Bucky and Steve to hash out, because right now, he can barely keep his eyes open, and exhaustion is on him like a sodden blanket.

And so when he painstakingly maneuvers himself to his feet, crutches to the light to turn it off, arranges his stiff body back down on the couch, and pulls his blanket up to his shoulders, he waits for that cloud of relief to return and drag him back into sleep. There’s no emergency. He’s not drunk right now. He’s got his problems and resources and Steve has his, and in the realm of the hypothetical, that should be comfort enough.

Still, there is a hollow ache in his chest, a place that dully thrums with the pain of knowing that Steve is wherever he is — Jesus, how could he not even ask that? — and he’s alone and hurting, and they’re nothing. Still nothing. They’ve been nothing for two months, maybe longer, he can’t even say. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t even know what it is to be something. Can’t even distinguish it from nothing. Can’t distinguish a mere fuck from the kindling of real love. Can’t distinguish an act of friendship from a gesture of romantic commitment. Can’t distinguish a dangerous person from a trustworthy one. A friend from a sociopath. A good parent from a bad one. The only thing everything made sense has abandoned him, driving forward, carrying on its wars without him. Friend and enemy and everything in-between, all the parameters lined up just-so, a dimension where even the gray space felt clear, somehow.

He’s not sure how all his wires got crossed. He’s not sure he wants to know.

And, fuck, Parker. How the fuck is he supposed to meet Parker like this? It’s been fifteen months, and he looks like a starving wild man. And what the fuck are they going to talk about? What the fuck is he going to show them? How the fuck is he going to be a platoon sergeant again, even just for an hour or two? Jesus Christ, how the fuck is he going to be in the room with Steve and not have it be
Bucky checks his phone. It’s nearly three. He throws off the blanket with a growl and hoists himself
to his feet, where he feels around for his crutches and hobbles his way to the bathroom in the ambient
glow from the street outside. There he closes one eye, flips on the light, and hunts around the
medicine cabinet for the age-old blister pack of benadryl he knows he has stashed somewhere. Sure
enough, he finds it wedged behind that bottle of pepto that Steve left behind, and he pops out two
and swallows them dry. He thinks to check his calendar on the way back to the couch but frankly
doesn’t give a shit if he has plans later. Fuck his plans. Fuck the LGBT center. Fuck AA. Fuck
Hank. Fuck Winnie. Fuck everyone. Today he is going to sleep. And the whole world can just
fucking deal with it.

He settles back on the couch. Props up his leg on a pillow. Grumbles and shifts until he’s vaguely
comfortable. He runs through the list of skills from some of DBT’s bajillion acronyms, something to
distract himself until the benadryl consumes him. Yeah, yeah, the Wise Mind ACCEPTS. Well,
maybe he doesn’t want to accept shit right now. Maybe he wants to wallow in how fucked up things
are. Is there an acronym for that? No? Okay, maybe he can IMPROVE. Sure, whatever. Imagery.
Imagine a happy time and imagine yourself in it. Play out the time in your mind again.

His memory stretches before him like a road, one he must travel an awful long time before he finds a
time he was truly happy. A time when there was a real live wire running from his face to his heart to
his gut, when joy permeated through him and filled him with lightness. He travels in staggering
leaps, forward and back through years, glancing past the regular times, dashing past terrible times.
He slows as he approaches a scene he hasn’t visited for years.

July 2001. Leading Steve up the stairs to the roof of the apartment, both of them laughing, Steve a
little tipsy from splitting a bottle of prosecco. And Bucky griped at him to keep his eyes closed, for
fuck’s sake, it’s a surprise, because it’s hard to surprise someone like this when their birthday is on
the Fourth of July and the whole country has to be outside eating hotdogs and watching things blow
up in the sky, so he had to be extra creative and wait until July 8th, when Steve thought that maybe
he forgot his birthday altogether. And when he got Steve out on the roof, he scanned it to make sure
nobody was around, closed the door tight and pulled him by the hand, and he had him stop near the
western edge, facing Red Hook Channel, and adjusted him bit by bit, rotating him, saying just a little
more, no, okay, there, hold on, as if it wasn’t just an excuse to touch him, to feel the warm bulk of
his shoulder muscles in his grip, to slide his hands over his chest as he pushed his torso just a smidge,
and Steve would smile and say oh, like this? and he would move the opposite way, and Bucky
would laugh or tsk and correct him, even though there was no right way. And when he was done
with his arbitrary adjustments, Bucky stepped back and saw him in the soft glow of the string lights
that he hung earlier that day while Steve was at work, and there were no words for the sensation in
his chest, the pressure expanding inside him, desperate to rip through his skin and explode out into
the universe, something so devastating that he had to press his hand over it, swallow it down, pretend
he wasn’t on the knife’s edge of losing his composure over nothing. Over just the sight of him. And
then he took a breath and stepped over to his boombox, where he had a Led Zeppelin mix cued up,
even though Steve might bitch about it being “soulless” because it was a CD, but Bucky couldn’t
sneak the record player away without Steve having an aneurysm. And he started it with track one,
with I Can’t Quit You Baby anyway, even though he was scared, because it was the God’s honest
truth, something he struggled to speak but sometimes tried to say with his body, and he even failed at
that almost every time, because he’s always been shit at cutting through all the layers of ancient pain
that kept him from relaxing into their love. But maybe this was a way he could show Steve how he
felt. Maybe he could let Robert Plant do the talking for him.
And when he pressed play, Steve opened his eyes, because he just couldn’t fucking help himself. And when Bucky approached, he tried to speak, tried to say what did you— what is this—but Bucky pressed two fingers to his parted lips and then grabbed Steve’s wrists to guide his hands to his shoulders. And he laid his hands on Steve’s waist, because he didn’t know how to slow dance any other way, didn’t know who should do what when it’s two guys, so he did his best, cheeks flushing even though he rehearsed it five hundred times in his head. And he looked over Steve’s shoulder to make sure nobody had come through the door while he was distracted by the glow of the lights on Steve’s face; the lean perfection of his body; the jackhammering of his own heart; the skittering chaos of his own thoughts as he worried that he was fucking it all up, that someone would open the door and see them, and, deeper than that, that it was too fucking much, that he wouldn’t be able to handle it, that he would fly apart from the closeness, because he was barely even buzzed and sobering fast. And they began to sway in the slow, stiff way that very young teenagers do, and Bucky couldn’t even look at Steve, even though he felt Steve’s eyes on him, which only heated him more, God, it was so hot that night, and he kept watching the door, breaths shallow, mind reeling, until Steve’s arms encircled him as he slid in close — so close, Jesus.... And Bucky’s whole body went stiff as the music began to sound very far away. But then Steve rested his head against Bucky’s, gently, and he said it’s okay, and Steve ran his broad hands over his back, and they were slow and soft and grounding, and Bucky slid his hands around Steve’s middle, over the symmetrical musculature curving into his spine, bringing Steve toward him, each inch terrifying and euphoric, and they swayed like that, bodies pressed together, his own body settling, calming in Steve’s embrace, and there was a lightness that began kindling inside of him, something he couldn’t even swallow back because it was too insistent, something that needed to flourish after too long in the darkness, and so he closed his eyes and let it.

And it felt like an eternity, God knows how many tracks, and then You Shook Me came on, and Bucky pulled back a little, enough to see that Steve wanted the same thing that he did, and Bucky checked the door one more time and then kissed him, slow and deep, until they were delirious from it, clutching at each other, choked off groans coming from both of them. And Bucky broke away from the kiss, even though Steve’s mouth tried to follow him, and he said close your eyes, whispered it, and Steve let out a shuddering breath and did what he was told. And Bucky stepped back, and Steve’s hands slipped away, but he kept reaching a little, holding the empty space, and Bucky walked to the shitty, rusted table that everyone in the building used and grabbed one of the cupcakes he made earlier — vanilla with blue frosting and painstakingly iced Happy B Day in red. And he walked back to Steve, to his sagging shoulders and flushed face and hard-on, and he touched his finger to Steve’s kiss-swollen lower lip and coaxed his jaw open, and Steve moved, tried to take his finger in his mouth, and Bucky intercepted him with the cupcake, landing it directly in his path, and Steve gasped, eyes flying open, and he grabbed Bucky’s wrist and pulled it back but it was too late, because his upper lip was already covered with frosting. And he stared, utterly incredulous, mouth agape, as Bucky grinned and brimmed over with laughter, and Steve pulled Bucky’s wrist forward and took a very large and very messy bite, barely even able to chew it, and pulled Bucky’s wrist harder, then took his shoulder, and Bucky squawked as Steve came for him, mumbling c’mon, don’t you wanna kiss me anymore? And after a few seconds of outraged half-hearted squirming, Bucky let Steve catch him, let him kiss him, let him smear frosting all over his face, and Bucky said mmm, you’re so sweet, and they kissed some more and ate cupcakes and Steve opened Bucky’s present to him — Pablo Neruda’s Canto General. And after that, Bucky sucked Steve’s cock, taking his time, giving it every fragment of his focus and energy, and for maybe the first time since they started fooling around the year before, Bucky wasn’t trying to be the best cock sucker in the five boroughs, and he wasn’t only half there, just trying to get it over with. He was trying to show Steve all those things that he couldn’t say, to channel that pressure in his chest, crude as it might be to do it on his knees like the whore he’s always been instead of with words like a decent person. And Steve watched Bucky do it and pet his hair, freshly cut for drill, and breathed God, I love you, so much. So much...
Bucky squeezes his eyes shut even tighter, but he still can’t quite short circuit the next parts, where Steve came in his open mouth, on his tongue, because Bucky knew he loved to see that shit, and Steve moaned so loud that Bucky was certain someone heard it through an open window and was gonna burst through the door and see what the fuck they were up to, and Bucky’s heart kicked into a frenzy, and he said they had go now, and he left Steve standing there with his dick out while he yanked the lights and packed everything up as fast as he could — boombox, cupcakes, everything he could gather in his hands and awkwardly squeeze under his arms and drape around his shoulders — while every nightmare scenario of their discovery whipped around his brain. And he could still taste come in his mouth as he descended the stairs back to his apartment, muttering fuck, fuck, fuck under his breath, because there was no mistaking that sound, and what if Mrs. Griffith heard them? What would she think? What if Mr. Walsh heard them? His son’s a grunt, and maybe he knew Sergeant Z or McConnell, maybe he went to school with them, it’s such a small fucking world in the infantry, and if they found out— And he was standing in the middle of the kitchen, his hands trembling, when Steve opened the door, and Bucky’s whole body jerked at the sound of it, and Steve closed the door and stood there, lips pressed, brows drawn tightly, until he spoke, until he said thank you for everything, and it was really nice, and it meant a lot to me, and then I think I’m gonna go home. And Bucky knew — he knew — he fucked up. He knew Steve had had it with the secrets and the hiding, the overreacting and the rejection, and Bucky tried at least a dozen times to tell him what happened, all the things that made him this way, but every time he was too drunk or not drunk enough or just too fucking scared and ashamed. Because it was always more than just the fear of getting caught by the Army, and Steve fucking knew it. He had to. And he begged Steve not to go. Hugged him and begged him, the goddamn lights still hanging off of him, and after a pause that seemed to stretch an eon, Steve drew in a long, weary sigh and tossed his book on the kitchen table and hugged him back. And Bucky squeezed him and whispered I’m sorry and I love you and I’ll do better, even though he never really did. He never really could.

Bucky groans. Funny how he forgot about that last part, though maybe not surprising. His skill at amputating large swathes of his own history is astounding at times, but the benadryl is taking the edge off a bit, so he can’t even find it very distressing. And as the fog of sleep finally begins to drag him under, Bucky starts to hum, a little off key, as he remembers low summer lights on a handsome face, warm hands, a tender touch, and in the dark, alone, he holds himself.

— — —

Steve spends most of May first hungover. He wakes up at 11:30, queasy and parched and reeling from a migraine, shuffles to the bathroom to piss and take a sumatriptan, drinks two glasses of water, and crawls back into bed for another hour until the hammering behind his left eye dulls to a meager throb. He then chances a dry piece of sprouted wheat toast and manages to keep it down, by some sort of odd quirk of cosmic humor, because of course he wouldn’t hurl when all the rest of the world does and instead loses his meals to mere images ripped out of time and crammed into the present like misfiled folders in a too-tight cabinet.

And as he sits cross-legged on his little loveseat and chews tiny bites of an over-ripe banana that’s been close to fermenting on the counter, one small piece of that realization rips him from the droning din of his waning headache:

They’re just images.

Images. Cross-sections of a very bad day that no longer exists. Bruce has told him that in dozens of ways, probably, each way sliding over him without permeation, sinking into his mind but never his heart. It’s only a memory of the event, not the event itself. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Bucky already got blown up—
And those images come, the worst ones, as they always do, and the queasiness re-asserts itself predictably. Steve folds the peel over the half-eaten banana and sets it on the coffee table, mouth twisting sharply. He’s getting just about sick of this shit. Sick of Bucky’s blown up body running his life. Sick of Bucky running his life. Daytime, nighttime, it’s Bucky all the time, Bucky in Khalidiya, Bucky in the hospital, Bucky coming back from fucking some other guy, Bucky begging him not to go, Bucky’s drinking problem, Bucky’s problems with intimacy, Bucky’s problems with being gay, Bucky’s manipulations, Bucky’s shit, all the time, for 15 goddamn years. And it’s one thing to opt into Bucky Barnes’ life, to choose him as a friend or a lover, but it’s another to have him trailing like a malignant shadow, never giving Steve peace, infiltrating his dreams and terrorizing his waking hours. And to stop that—

God. To stop that, Steve needs to do the thing he wants least to do in this entire world. He’s got to scrape up every crumb of faith he has left and pile it all into this thing that Hope tells him will make him better, the thing Bruce says will make the memory of Khalidiya just like any other bad memory he has — painful, but one he can take out and put away on his terms. And isn’t that all Steve has ever wanted in this world? When cancer crashed in and out of his mother’s body for ten years, when they were never sure how much home health service was going to be covered by insurance, when he never knew if Bucky was going to be a sweet lover or wild lover or a numb, dead-eyed lover, when his brain smashed and scraped against the inside of his skull, obliterating everything that made him special, didn’t Steve just want control? Isn’t that all he’s ever wanted?

And so he decides to take it.

He showers and shaves. Puts on comfortable clothes. Stuff he doesn’t mind getting dirty. Then he goes out to his car and grabs the folder and audio recorder Bruce gave him last session, the ones he hasn’t touched since then, snags a pen and a large bottle of water, and brings everything into the bathroom. He stands in the doorway for a few moments, unsure at first of how to set everything up, then puts a folded towel on the floor for cushioning and sits on it, leaning back against the wall underneath the towel rack. The bathroom is so small; his knees are almost touching the vanity. But the toilet is right there if he needs it, and like Hope said, it’s just some vomit. So what?

Steve tilts his head back, resting for a moment. Breathing. Giant number one. Giant number two. The numbers fade and then he’s just breathing, and his mind floats to Ethan with a face covered in sweet potato, his smile, and he wants to love that baby. So very badly. More than he wants to let go of Bucky or get back control. That’s why he’s doing this. That’s why he’s here on the bathroom floor. That’s why he’s going to listen to a recording of himself talking about Bucky getting blown up, over and over, listen to himself hurl into Bruce’s garbage cans, over and over and over, as many times as it takes for all this shit to stop.

He swallows and pulls his SUDs record sheet from his folder. Writes the date and records his SUDs at 50.

Then he grabs the recorder, takes one more very deep breath, and presses play.
Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Homophobic language, vomiting, graphic descriptions of combat injuries

Notes:

DBT: Dialectical Behavioral Therapy - A skills-based psychotherapy which was developed to assist with individuals who have difficulties with emotion regulation, interpersonal relationships, and high risk behaviors such as substance use and self-harm. It was created specifically for individuals with borderline personality disorder (see below), but it is utilized for many other types of disorders and concerns.
Borderline: This is a reference to Borderline Personality Disorder. This is a personality structure characterized by difficulties with regulating emotions, problems with self-concept, problematic relationship patterns, and high risk behaviors. It is a highly stigmatized disorder, even within the mental health community. This is a great short overview of BPD from a BPD advocacy organization, if you want to learn more.

12 Step Workbook: The Hazelden Betty Ford non-profit has a series of 12-step workbooks that people can use that are more structured, if they have problems with more freeform work like Bucky does

Operation Anaconda: This was the first major ground operation in Afghanistan after 9/11. The mission was to clear the Shahi-Kot Valley, which was a Taliban and Al-Qaeda stronghold in the Paktika Province. Infantry units from the 101st Airborne (the 187th Infantry Regiment, which Bucky was part of) and the 10th Mountain Division (87th Infantry Regiment) were supported by special operators from Task Force K-Bar (Thor's old unit) and other special operations units in clearing the valley within the span of four days. During the operation, two American Chinook personnel transport helicopters were shot down and other helicopters were badly damaged because of hostile conditions in the valley.

SUDS: Subjective Units of Distress - A rating of one's distress from 0 to 100, with 0 being no distress at all and 100 being the worst distress imaginable

ASVAB: Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery - a computerized test of your abilities (or something) in multiple domains. Here's an overview of the test, brought to you by the U.S. Army

NTC: National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California - Located in the middle of nowhere, California, this Mojave desert training base is used for practicing combat operations Middle East. (You may remember it from the beginning of the fic - or not!)

Fort Campbell, Kentucky: Where Bucky and his family were stationed when George died, right before moving to New York in 1992

Al-Anon: A 12-Step organization for loved ones of alcoholics

Old Rasputin: A strong-ass beer (9% ABV)

Closing your eye: Closing one eye when you turn on the light helps preserve your night vision! Try it at home!

DBT Skills: Here is a link to DBT Skills and Acronyms. "Wise Mind" is basically the balanced integration of emotional and rational components of the self

I Can't Quit You Baby - The Bucky and Steve Theme Song, Basically

You Shook Me

Drill: Bucky was slated to leave the next day for National Guard drill for two weeks as part of his one weekend a month/two weeks a year obligation

Prolonged exposure: This is a top tier evidence-based treatment for PTSD. It consists of two components - imaginal exposure (retelling the memory of the traumatic event in session and listening to the recording as homework) and in vivo exposure, where you gradually expose yourself to feared and avoided situations. In both cases, the purpose
is to reduce avoidance and basically teach the brain and nervous system that the memory of the traumatic event and trauma reminders in the world are NOT the same as the traumatic event itself. Steve's physical reaction to exposure here in this chapter is quite atypical but not unheard of. I have conceptualized it based on his history and his way of coping with emotions, which is extreme suppression and somatization (turning emotions into physical symptoms like nausea/vomiting).
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

May

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, pitchforkcentral86, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

WARNINGS AT THE END

********** IMPORTANT NOTE: This chapter comes with a companion fic featuring Bucky and Steve, which is meant to be read AFTER the chapter. Link at the end!
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Glossary of Terms:

Dustoff: A medical evacuation by military helicopter, usually a Blackhawk

High-speed, low-drag: Someone who is proficient, skilled

Re-up(ped): to re-enlist in the military; sign on for another x number of years. Bucky did this in Iraq shortly before getting blown up.

Reclass: When people reenlist, they sometimes have the option of reclassing, which is to get another job. There are other circumstances in which people might reclass, but this is one of the more common.

MI: Military intelligence

75th: The 75th Ranger Regiment is the active duty Army Ranger unit that operates out of Fort Benning, GA. Bucky was previously part of this unit when he made Ranger after his second deployment (invasion of Iraq in 2003).
ACU: Army Combat Uniform

Indirect fire alarm: Sounded like this on a lot of bases in Iraq and Afghanistan

Ring knocker: A derogatory term for someone who went to one of the U.S. military service academies, but especially refers to someone from West Point

CLP: A lubricant used for guns

See the end of the chapter for more notes
BAGHDAD WALTZ

AN IRAQ WAR LOVE STORY IN THREE MOVEMENTS

BY DREADNOUGHT
“Then I vomit. And I walk over, and Doc asks me some questions. I mess at least one of them up. And I look at the docs and Foggy, I look up and down, and they’re patching him up. And I kneel and I take his hand. And then I see him start to struggle to breathe.”

“What are your SUDs?” Bruce asks.

“30. I tell Parker. Parker sticks him with a needle and he can breathe again. And—”

“Okay, I’m gonna just…” There’s a cheap thwacking sound, Bruce tapping his pen against his leg. “Yeah, I’m gonna stop you there. Do you hear what you’re doing right now?”

Steve opens his eyes, frowning. “I’m telling the story.”

“You’re police reporting it. Fact A, Fact B. There’s no emotion. And not even any vomit.”

“Guess I’m cured,” Steve says, his voice a thin, flat line, one as tightly strung as his spine.

“You’re grazing over the surface. You’re holding back. Do you feel that?”

Steve grips into the meat of his thighs. There’s an edge, one that plunges somewhere that all the puke and missed sessions and police reports have kept him from pitching himself into. Today he’s been slicing alongside it, ramrod straight, a stiff breeze away from toppling over it. And he knows it. He goddamn well knows it. And he’s trying to keep his gimbals oriented. He has to, because most of the sickness seems to have been wrung out of him through night after night on his bathroom floor, listening and gagging and hurling and gagging and listening and hurling and listening, until he was just listening and gagging and listening, and then mostly just listening with a shitty, sour stomach.

And now he is Steve the dispassionate lieutenant providing an after-action review of a mission that went south, just the facts, Sir. A mannequin of stiff West Point decorum stitched together with gossamer threads.

And so he is holding back, corseted from the inside, and if he so much as releases a full breath of air from his lungs—

“Steve?”

He nods.

Bruce twirls a pair of glasses between his thumb and forefinger. Was he wearing them earlier? Steve doesn’t even remember. Bruce doesn’t even wear glasses. Or does he? Fuck.

“What do you think is going on?” Bruce asks.

“I’m gonna lose it.”

Steve’s eyes widen at the unexpected shape of his words, at the cock of Bruce’s head as he receives them.

“‘Lose it’? What does that mean?”
Steve makes the move to shrug, but when his body resists him, he tilts his chin instead.

“You know what you’re doing if you don’t let yourself feel, right? If those emotions are there and you’re pushing them away.”

Steve eyes the mountains of papers on Bruce’s desk. “Avoiding.”

“Yeah. You got it.” Bruce gives a tight, twitching smile.

“I need water.”

Bruce jostles in his chair, swiveling toward the door and back. “Right now?”

Steve stands, unfolding like a piston, and brushes past a now slack-mouthed Bruce. He leaves the door open behind him and strides down the hall, and he blows past the drinking fountain and takes a sharp left two doors down, slamming his way into the empty stairwell. There he breathes, lungs tight, hands pressed to his chest, air scraping a rough sound out of his throat that echoes above and below. He doesn’t let it brim over, doesn’t let it become panic, because he knows he’s not dying, even if he feels like he might, even if a dark little corner of his battered brain is pretty sure he’s about to go into Bruce’s office and die from whatever feelings about Bucky he’s been choking back and stuffing into his guts since 2008.

Steve takes hold of the railings on either side of the stairway. The metal is cold, and it grounds his focus on the stretch of stairs before him. His foot hovers off the edge of the top step, and he could take it. He could drop down one and then the other, slide his hands down and down and down until he got to the first floor. Walk right out. Go home. Get ready for tomorrow. Whatever that means. He’s instructed himself to do it with the stiff-lipped determination of someone who knows, but he really has no fucking clue.

He shifts his weight into his right hip, and he dips the toe of his black Oxford down. There’s a lazy intrusion, a reminder that last week’s session wasn’t so bad. He only vomited once. In the bathroom. Immediately after session. He ran to it, eyes welling by the time he got there; he was so relieved. It took every ounce of his self-discipline, ratcheted as tightly as his fists could squeeze, for 90 straight minutes of hell. But he made it, and his stringent effort kept him mostly checked out during session, kept all of this at bay, this terrible unknown, and now he doesn’t even have that anymore. He has nothing now. Just the plunge.

He bends his left knee. He drops. There’s a rush of relief, like the blunted ecstasy of puking his guts out after denying himself. He can’t remember anything like it — Jesus, this must be what passes for pleasure now, it’s been so damn long. And he’s about to take his next step, but then he remembers his bag, sitting on the floor next to Bruce’s couch. His laptop. His work. The things he must do this weekend because this fucking therapy, this goddamn thing tomorrow, is all he can think about.

Shit.

He straightens his leg.

He’s queasy when he sits back on Bruce’s couch. It’s an odd sort of sickness, one commingled with anticipation, the kind of thrill he got the first time he was screamed out the side door of a C-130 at 1,250 feet. He perches on the edge of the cushion and rests his forearms on his knees.

“Better?”

“No.”
Bruce has the earpiece of his glasses in his mouth now, skimming along his teeth.

Steve exhales slowly through his nose and closes his eyes. He ducks his head and picks up the barest hint of dirt, the vaguest tang of metal, and the scene paints itself, the edges first, the browns and the flashes of digital camouflage in his periphery, the distant cracks of M4 rounds and shouting men, all overlaid with a thin blanket of static. And then the worst parts fill in, Specialist what’s-his-name from first platoon kneeling by a pair of legs, lean and strong, sculpted from years of heavy infantry load-bearing and diligent honing in the gym, their perfect, pale flesh penetrated and chipped and torn away by a grab bag of shrapnel — ball bearings and screws and bolts and rebar. Foggy, eyes wide with panic, covered to the cuffs in blood that won’t stop. Parker, who won’t give any more morphine, because he can’t, and even though he must have a good reason, Steve can’t comprehend or accept it, he literally cannot, and so he glares — he even snarls — and he’s so angry, but mostly he’s just—

“Before you start again, what are your SUDs?” Bruce asks.

Steve clenches his jaw and drags it to the side, grinding his molars. He slips inward, dips below the surface of his skin for a moment. Takes stock of the looseness of his bones and the heat of his flesh and the spastic current of his nerves and gives it all a crude number.

“80.”

“Good. Great. Whenever you’re ready.”

Steve gathers his hands between his legs, weaving his fingers together tight. “Doc tells Bucky that he has to do something that’s gonna hurt, but that he has to do it to save his life.”

He sees Parker bent over his med bag, pulling out packs of hemostatic bandages, his mouth pressed in a hard line, dirty sweat dripping off his chin, glancing over to eye the soaked dressings underneath Foggy’s palms, glancing over to Bucky’s wretched face, his pain—

“And we all fucking know what he has to do. Bucky knows. I know. And we know it’s going to be horrible, and all I can think to do is wrap his finger up, not saying anything, like a fucking idiot.”

Steve shakes his head. “I can’t believe I’m using that time for that. I should have been comforting him. I should have said something. Why didn’t I fucking say something? I should have told him—”

Steve’s teeth grind again, audibly, like the slow crunch of a shell beneath a boot, and his right leg begins to bounce.

“I wrap his— this bloody stump, I wrap it, like an idiot, because I’m too fucking scared to say anything in front of the men. I’m a fucking coward, but I grab his hand tight, because I know it’s going to be really bad, and he’s scared — he’s scared. I can see it. I know what scared looks like. He’s pale, and his eyes are far away, and he’s just...” He gestures vaguely to his own mouth as he remembers Bucky’s lip, which he tried so hard to steel, but it trembled. “I haven’t seen him scared since—”

Tuesday, September 11th.

“And when Doc shoves the dressing into his body and he screams, it’s—” Steve curls in on himself, his empty stomach filling with bile. “It’s the worst fucking sound I have ever heard in my life, and he’s grabbing me so hard, and I’m— I’m tearing up, because I can’t stand to see him in pain, and he never lets me see him like this, not this fucking raw, never this naked, and it’s— awful.
“And when it’s over, he sags, and he’s just— He’s crying, but he’s not making any sound, he’s going into shock, and he’s cold and pale and—”

Steve clenches his jaw and shakes his head again, but he can barely move it. It’s so full, his cheeks, his forehead, his temples. He plants his elbows on his thighs and presses his palms to his head, gripping it like a vise.

“—And I can’t do anything. I can’t help him, I can’t comfort him, I can’t save him. I can’t fucking save him. There’s nothing I can do, nothing, and I am so fucking terrified, because he could die, he could die, and there’s nothing I can do, I’m just helpless and I’m scared. I am so fucking scared.”

He makes a sound, a low one that might pass for a growl. He doesn’t even know what he’s talking about. He doesn’t know what day, what year, what lifetime, what Bucky. The edge is right there, just beyond the tips of his toes, and he’s not sure if that sound means he’s going to throw up or cry or scream or collapse into unrecoverable silence.

“You’re doing great,” Bruce tells him, as if he doesn’t care which thing gets ripped from him. So long as it’s something. So long as he doesn’t languish in this unfinished moment, this breathless gap of safety. “Keep going.”

Steve’s hands crush tighter around his skull. “I can’t.”

“You can.”

“And then he— Sergeant Wilson comes over, and Bucky sees his— he sees his groin, this mess of bloody bandages, and he didn’t notice it before, he was so out of it. Fuck. Fuck.”

Steve pushes out a breath between his teeth. His legs shake, rattling his entire body.

“He sees the bandages and he’s panicking, and he’s just— he’s fucking hysterical, and I’m holding him down, but he’s reaching for his dick with his left arm, this fucking… gutted left arm, just gutted and packed with dressings, Wilson barely has anywhere to grab to hold him down. Fuck.”

Steve swallows and lets go of his head with his right hand. He holds it out and flexes it around the ghost of another hand, his grip both tender and desperate.

“He’s so cold, and he’s pale, and Kaplan! That’s his fucking name. That other medic. He’s trying to put in an IV, because it’s— what’s that shock where you lose too much fluid? Hypo-what, God, I don’t fucking remember, but it’s that one, and Bucky’s just— he’s a mess, and I can’t help him, because I’m just a brainless fucking useless, worthless fucking idiot. And Barton comes over and tells him to shut up and let everyone help him, thank God—”

“What are your SUDs?”

“95. And I’m calling for Ward, because where is this fucking dustoff, Jesus fucking Christ, and I’m confused, and I don’t even know what’s going on with the mission, not that I actually give a fuck.”

Steve stops, eyebrows furrowing, and shakes his head. “No, wait, I think that was before Barton got there, because Barton tells us that the dustoff is inbound in a couple minutes, and all I can think is thank God, thank fucking God. And Bucky, he says that same thing under his breath, I can barely hear it, but he closes his eyes and he says it. And I tell him that he’s going to be okay, because I don’t know what else to say, I just want him to feel better. I’m so glad, and I just want him to feel better. I just want him to be okay, and I just want to feel like I’m doing something good, and he— he tells me that he’s not going to be okay, and... “

Steve cringes hard as something tries to break out of him, something violent and terrible, something
worse than all the vomit he’s ever given in service of this motherfucking thankless endeavor. It fights him, and he bites back harder, but it cracks through, a single sob that he chokes at the quick.

“And it fucking breaks my heart, because I know he’s right.”

Steve stops, but not because this is where they stopped last week. He stops because behind his eyelids, the rest of the scene continues to unfold, a reel of film he can’t pause, stuck in a role he can’t quit. And he’s there next to Bucky’s litter, squinting through the dust the Blackhawk kicks up, carrying the IV bag because it’s the only thing they’d let him do, because he was such a useless, broken, braindead fucking waste of space. And Bucky is there, and his eyes are closed, and he’s muttering something under his breath, and the litter bearers have to hold down the blanket they’ve draped over his middle because the rotor wash is trying to tear it away, one more fucking indignity on top of so many, and Kaplan tries to take the IV bag from him, says Sir, Sir, hey! You gotta let go, has to yank it from his grip, and they take Bucky away—

Bruce gives a little hum. “Wow, okay, that was really different from—”

“Doc says something. Parker. He bends over and he says something to Bucky. I don’t know what, but it makes him smile, and I think Bucky says ‘bullshit,’ but I’m not sure, because I’m a few feet back. I can’t hear a fucking thing. Just static and rotors. And when I’m about to board, fucking Maximoff flags me down and brings me this thing. And it takes me so fucking long, because my brain is mush, to figure out that it’s Bucky’s fucking finger, his severed fucking finger and— and do they know what that finger means to me? Do they have any fucking clue? None of them know. Maximoff doesn’t know. He just looks back and says he’s going to pray for me and Sergeant Barnes or some fucking shit. When I get on the bird and I tell the medics about it, they look at me like I brought them a golden fucking ticket, they both smile, like they’re excited about it, and I almost don’t wanna hand it to them. I almost just wanna keep it, I wanna— I wanna put it in my pocket, hide it from them, because— they don’t know that I’ve had that finger in my mouth and wrapped around my cock and pressed over my— my heart. Nobody knows that I know what he sounds like when he comes and I’ve held him while he sleeps and that I— the first time I kissed him was in the kitchen, just this little— they don’t know that when I kiss him he— it’s like he’s starving but he’s— they don’t know how much I kiss him, and they don’t know that his voice is my favorite sound on this fucking Earth and that I— I made this tape recording of him before he went to Afghanistan — just in case, just in fucking case — and he was just saying some shit, it was just over the phone, the quality was shit and they don’t know that I still have the tape— that I couldn’t throw it away even though I tried — I fucking tried twice. And none of those people know that I’ve washed pulverized people and World Trade Center off of him in the shower because he couldn’t— because he was too fucking up to do it himself. Nobody, nobody has any fucking idea that the man I’m sitting next to on the floor of that helicopter is a man I love—”

There’s that cheap plastic sound again, on the floor this time, and the creak of Bruce’s chair.

“And I take his hand in mine, like back on the ground…”

He has something he wants to say, something he has to say, for all the times he never said it, for all the close calls they had downrange, when all he could do was clench his jaw and search frantically down the line of men for that familiar silhouette or listen in the dark for Bucky’s voice over the radio. He has to say it for all the years he smelled some man in the office or at the Academy or at a bar and lay awake that night wondering where Bucky was, if he was deployed, if he was dead or alive. He has to say it for those two horrific days in September, those miserable hours and minutes that swallowed him like a creature, suffocating him with fear and grief—

“And it’s like 9/11 again, when you almost die and I want to move in together. And I just want you
to be mine. I just want to have a life with you, just a simple fucking life.”

Steve sucks in a sharp, vocal breath and shoves the heels of his palms against his welling eyes.

“And all I want to do is tell you that I love you, because you almost died, just like you almost died in those fucking towers. And even when you almost die you still won’t let me love you, you fucking asshole. You selfish motherfucker. You heartless fucking motherfucker. Fuck you. Fuck you.”

Steve cries for a long time. Sobs so hard that it scares him, because maybe this is the kind of crying you don’t come back from. The kind that never stops. But the cliff face is sheer and the plunge is depthless, and there’s no grip he can scramble for, no thread of control dangling within his reach. So he resigns himself to being obliterated by whatever this is. He can’t even name it. There’s no name for pain like this.

—

But it does slow, eventually. Somewhere around the time that he becomes cognizant that he’s been wiping snot off his face with the backs of his hands and that this is not an appropriate thing for adults to do.

“Gross,” he mutters, scowling and sniffling and appraising the mess across his knuckles.

Bruce tips a box of tissues toward him. He’s trying for neutral on his face, tightening his lips into an artificial purse, but there’s no way he can fully suppress whatever is trying to animate its way out of him. Steve doesn’t care to guess what it might be.

“Thanks.”

He pulls several and wipes off his face and hands. He tries to remember the last time he let this happen. Back in Bucky’s truck at Bragg? Was that the last time he really cried? When Bucky said he was going back to New York and leaving him behind? Has he really not cried since January 2009?

“Sorry,” Steve says. “That was a lot.”

“Oh, shit, what are your SUDS?” Bruce asks, scrambling for the recording form he set aside.

Steve puffs out a breath. “God, I don’t know. 30.”

“Now that I actually believe. And you don’t ever have to apologize for feeling emotions. That’s the whole point of this.” Bruce swivels around and lays all his paperwork on his desk, then turns back around. He crosses his legs and folds his hands on his lap around that plastic pen, and all that crunched up restraint starts to burst at its seams, his eyes going wide, eyebrows arching high, mouth cracking into a half-clamped smile.

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“Okay, I definitely want to debrief all of that, and I’m sorry, but I’m now very confused about the nature of your relationship with your platoon sergeant.”

Steve laughs, which kicks off his crying again. He can only imagine how abjectly bizarre today’s session must have been for Bruce. Wrapped around his cock, Jesus fucking Christ.

“We’ve known each other for almost twenty years. We were best friends. We were, I think, together for a couple years before I joined the Army.” Steve snorts and sags back against the cushions. “I don’t know what ‘together’ even means, though. I don’t know anything anymore. He was fucking around on me. He’s a fucking liar. A fucking drunk and a pathological liar. But he did some crazy HR magic to get me assigned to his unit when they lost their PL. So that’s how we got reunited for
He goes to say the next part, and it sticks to the slick of his mouth. He’s said it before. To Hope. To Matt. But never before has it been in such ugly company, yet one more link in a chain of failures.

“Then I cheated on my fiancee with him. Ethan’s mother. Fucked that all up. One of the best things that ever happened to me, completely ruined. All for a man who fucking cheated on me again, this time with some filthy rich Scandinavian special forces guy with a huge dick. How the hell do you top that? What chance did I have? I don’t know if I ever had one.”

He shrugs and wipes his eyes.

“We were so fucked up. So fucking fucked up together. Sometimes I don’t know if any of it was good. I just don’t know.”

Bruce’s eyes narrow, and he swivels a little in his chair, back and forth, appraising Steve as he continues crying in silence.

“Why do you think you’re crying so much, if he’s such an asshole and it was all so awful?” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t buy that,” Bruce says. He bites down on the end of his pen, muffling the end of his sentence with plastic and his odd nerves.

Steve closes his eyes and covers them with his hands. He knows exactly why he’s crying, because it’s the reason he’s shed every tear he’s ever shed for Bucky Barnes.

“I love him.”

His mouth twists. His words thicken.

“I wish I could stop. I just wanna move on with my life. I just wanna forget about him.” Steve’s hands drop onto his lap, and he tilts his head to the ceiling with a wavering smile. “Jesus. I can’t believe it.”

“What?”

“I feel sad. Really, really sad. I cannot fucking believe it.”

Bruce chuckles. “Well, this is what happens when you stop turning all your emotions into vomit. What else was different today, emotionally?”

“I really felt—” Steve pulls a loose hand over his heart. “It was so horrific, seeing him like that. He was so strong on that deployment. So capable. So in control. Perfect at what he did.”

Steve touches the inseam of his khakis. He watches the fabric slide between his fingertips.

“And he was so beautiful,” he adds softly. “When we were together…”

He pauses and glances up at Bruce’s curious face, then back down at his pants. He feels his face warm and works the fabric rougher.

“I used to worship his body, every inch of it, every chance I got. And to see him like that, naked and hurt and vulnerable and scared… it was so horrible. And I couldn’t ever tell anyone about that. They could never know. They would never understand what that’s like, to see someone they’ve f— been
with hundreds of times, someone whose body they knew every single part of, and then it’s just—
ripped to pieces, that beautiful body you knew like your own, and you know that person is never
going to be the same. They’re never going back. And he knew it. I could see it in his eyes. He knew.
I tried to comfort him, but he knew it was over.” His voice flattens. “He knew he was gonna do what
he did.”

“Which is?”

“Completely fucking implode. OD on alcohol in some shitty fucking Holiday Inn on Long Island,
code in the fucking ambulance, which only came to get him because he drunk texted the wrong
person after disappearing of the fucking grid for a month. Motherfucker.”

Steve crushes his tissue in his fist. But his rage breaks like a wave on a rock and spills out its fragile
insides.

“I was so scared. That he would die. I didn’t remember being so scared back then, I was just— I was
in shock, or, I don’t know. Maybe it was my TBI or something. But I don’t know what I’d do if he
died. I couldn’t... God.”

Steve grabs more tissues from the box and wipes the tears that keep coming out of him.

“He’s almost died so many times. It’s like he fucking lives for it. I hate it. I feel like I’m just waiting
for it to happen with my hands tied behind my back and my mouth taped shut. We’re all just waiting.
And he rejects my love over and over and over. I’m fucking sick of it.”

“So, why won’t he let you? Do you know?” Bruce asks.

“He hates being gay. He thinks the love between two men is disgusting. Two men can fuck, but two
men loving each other? That’s gross to him. Some garbage like that. God knows where he learned
it.” He cuts his hand through the air. “Everything we did was a secret. And even behind closed
doors, he had a wall up ninety percent of the time. The rest of the time, I wonder if he was drunk and
forgot he was supposed to think we were an abomination.”

back to how angry I am at him. I don’t like it. I don’t like being angry.”

“Because you also love him,” Bruce reminds him. “I bet that makes it tough.”

Steve gazes out the window, out to the heavy cloud cover. It doesn’t bode well for tomorrow. Maybe
this is their new thing, meeting in the rain.

“I feel like this memory is basically our whole relationship,” he murmurs. “Bucky in agony, me
trying to save him but not being able to do anything real. I’m completely helpless. I just keep trying
and trying, but nothing I do is good enough. He just keeps suffering. And when I just want to love
him, when I want to comfort and love him, share my heart with him, he won’t ever let me.”

There’s a stretch of silence. In it, Steve’s thoughts meander to tomorrow. He tries to channel them to
mundane things like Bucky’s apartment and wonders what the place looks like now. If he has a new
couch. If he replaced the furniture in Steve’s old room. If he got a roommate. He always hated living
alone.

“You seem like you were a pretty emotional guy, before all this.”

Steve has to dig into the dirt for that one, trowel around the ancient past before Bucky and his ma
razed him to the foundation and the Army built him into something different.
“It depends,” he says. “Growing up, I had to keep it locked down. Everything had to be right. Tidy. Good. Me most of all.”

Bruce points his pen over his shoulder. “So, put the big, scary things — big, scary emotions — in boxes and stuff them in the back of the closet.”

“Exactly. And never, ever take them out. Because there’s never a good time.”

They share a smile. Then Steve’s fades.

“But I always told people I loved them. I always showed my affection, emotionally, physically, because you never know when you might lose someone. And I’m a romantic. Maybe I’m a little uptight, but I’ve always been loving. I was a loving child. I was loving to my partners. I wanted a family. I know Sharon didn’t really want kids, and I thought I was okay with that, but I always wanted to be a dad. And I was going to be a loving father who always said ‘I love you’ and always meant it and always showed it. God.”

Steve takes a deep breath.

“And I wanted to have a family with Bucky, back when I was young and stupid. Probably dodged a bullet there. I don’t know if he has what it takes to be a good parent, he’s just so unstable. But I didn’t know that at the time. Maybe I wouldn’t let myself see it. He’d get moody or laugh at me when I brought it up.”

Out the window, he trails a plane as it passes by on its descent into LaGuardia, and the room falls quiet, save for the dull clacking of his index fingernail as he chews on it. Bucky would usually get quiet about it. Dead silent. The laughter only came later, if Steve pressed him too hard, the C’mon, you can’t be fucking serious laugh or the Yeah, we’ll be just like the fucking Cleavers laugh.

Steve sighs and yanks his hand away from his mouth, clasping it tightly in the other on his lap.

“I think he was actually really hurt,” he says, “because he didn’t see himself having that kind of future as a gay person. That’s one way he copes, I guess. He laughs things off while he fucking dies inside.”

Steve shakes his head. “I’m sorry. I’m just blabbing now. This is bringing up a lot.”

“No, that’s how this stuff works. One thing links to another and another. And you’re picking up some themes between things, too.”

“I’m really nervous about tomorrow. With Bucky and Parker.”

“Oh, yeah. I almost forgot. After this stuff, tomorrow should be a cakewalk.” Bruce cranes his head up to look at the clock overhead. “Well, since you came late, we’re just about out of time, and we gotta assign you some in vivo homework.”

Steve makes to laugh, but it comes out as a weak huff of air.

“Doc, I’m probably gonna do half my list tomorrow, whether I like it or not.”

May 15

When Steve gets off the F train in Park Slope, his nerves are so frayed that he stands outside the
station on the sidewalk for ten minutes and lets the sun soak into him while he breathes. The subway ride wasn’t quite the hell he was expecting when he put it on his exposure hierarchy, but it was hell enough to make him regret his choice to stack this task upon the mess that awaits him twelve blocks away. The clouds lifted overnight, an unexpected twist, and he imagines it must be only because Peter Parker is involved, thank God. He’s the one person who could lure him to Bucky’s, maybe because if there was no Peter Parker, there might not be a Bucky to dread visiting. Not a living one, anyway. He’s probably leaving Bucky in the lurch to field Parker alone, because he’s definitely going to be late for their 1:00 meeting, but it’s better than the possibility of having to field Bucky alone because Parker mistimes the train from Queens.

Not that he will mistime it. Not for this. He’s too fresh out of the Army to biff a meeting with his former chain of command. He will be at least ten minutes early and will walk up and down the block or stand awkwardly on the corner a few doors down until exactly 1300, because his watch — and he wears a watch, as all good medics do — will still be set to military time.

Steve groans. He should get moving.

He cuts his way through the Saturday Park Slope crowd, dodging strollers and three-unit families and dogs and lollygagging window shoppers and sandwich boards. He passes by Rikki and Daisy’s street and makes sure he does not pass by the baby store.

At 1:03, his phone buzzes.

Where are you??? He’s here

Be there soon

Hurry up

“Shit,” Steve breathes, and he cuts across to a residential side street where he can pick up his stride and make real headway. He imagines the two of them, standing in the kitchen, Parker stammering as Bucky glibly denigrates himself for being scarred or disabled—

God, will Bucky even be standing? Can he even walk after his surgery? Fuck. Jesus fuck. He did not think this through.

Steve starts to jog.

After a delay to check his phone because he’s completely forgotten where to turn, he finally lands at the front stairs at 1:09. Bucky buzzes him into the building without a greeting, and the apartment door is ajar when he reaches it. He pushes it open slowly while rapping his knuckles on the wood, his heart hammering, and it swings open the rest of the way to reveal Bucky on the other side.

“Hey, Steve,” he says, and it’s a good thing that his back is turned to wherever Parker might be, because the streak of ire on his face is so incongruent with the levity in his tone that it’s impressive he can bear the two together.

But he looks better. Better than the last time they met in this kitchen. Winnie — Steve presumes — was obviously feeding him during his recovery, filling him out from gaunt to merely lean. His clothes fit well. Really well. And he cut his hair, a lot of it, and pushed it back with product. He even shaved. It’s more effort than Steve has seen him make for anything since he’s been out of the Army.

“Hey.”

Bucky’s eyes flicker down Steve’s body and then back up to his face again. It’s fast, though a little
too slow to be furtive, and the hard line between his brows softens incrementally. He limps back, still leaning heavily on his old cane, and makes way for Steve to come in.

Just beyond Bucky’s shoulder, Parker stands, and he gives Steve a small wave.

“Hey, Sir,” he says.

“Steve,” Bucky corrects. He points to himself. “Jamie. We’re real people now, Parker.”

Steve closes the door behind him and follows Bucky’s gesture toward the living room. It’s fully furnished and decorated, nicer even than when he lived here, and he has a feeling that this was Winnie’s doing, too. It feels homey, and it might even be comfortable if he weren’t crawling out of his skin.

Steve offers his hand to Parker. He has to look down; he forgot how short Parker is, how spry and wiry.

“How you been, Peter?”

“Good. Real good. You?”

There’s more hard New York working class in Parker’s voice now, the kind that washes out in the Army, the kind that threatens to draw out Steve’s own.

“Fine. Thanks.”

“You want something to drink, Parker?” Bucky asks. He’s in the doorway, leaning heavily against it, jaw tight, poorly containing a wince.

“I’m good.”

“Sit down,” Steve says, motioning to the chaise. There’s a Bucky-sized spot on it where the microfiber fabric has been pushed against its grain with the force of many barely controlled falls.

Bucky shoots him a glare and rights himself, ditching his cane against the entertainment center as he steps into the room. They all exchange looks while silence thickens around them.

“Somebody fucking sit down, already.” Bucky says it through a rigid smile, one that wavers around the edges, and he jerks his head toward the couch.

Parker spins and takes a seat on the far edge, because of course he does. Not that Steve could blame him. He wouldn’t want to be crammed on a couch between his former platoon sergeant and platoon leader, either.

Bucky catches his gaze and holds it, cold and unyielding, and he is apparently not going to drop this fucking bone until Steve plants his ass on the sofa, which he does, next to Parker.

But instead of taking the chaise, like he’s supposed to, Bucky drops down right next to him, so close that Steve’s stomach leaps into his throat at the brush of Bucky’s good knee against his. Steve jerks away, a new reflex that’s been trained into him, apparently, one that he angles away from to attend to Parker.

“So, what have you been up to since you’ve been out?” Steve asks.

Parker presses his palms together and rubs them together as he talks. “Just finished my bachelor’s.”
“Not surprised, Mister High-Speed, Low-Drag,” Bucky says.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” Parker is quick to tell him. “I’m looking at grad school, actually. A bachelor’s doesn’t get you much these days. Not in medical, anyway. Not the kind of stuff I wanna do.”

Bucky regards his own body, his scarred hands, turning them over on his lap, studying them. Steve’s gut clenches as his own hands tighten around his kneecaps.

“That’s good,” Bucky says softly. “You got a real gift.”

Parker flushes. “I don’t know about a gift, but I like it a lot. I’m applying to PA schools — which I wanted to talk to you about — but first I thought you might wanna see something I put together.”

Parker leans over the arm of the couch and rummages around, mumbling and shifting and digging deeper into whatever it is he’s digging through. His jeans slip down his hips a little, exposing the band of his underwear, and Steve glances away because, God, even though he must be nearly 25, he still looks like a kid. And it’s almost impossible now to imagine this same fidgeting kid bent over Bucky’s body, stuffing him with dressings, saving his life.

When Parker comes back up, he’s got a blue plastic jewel case with a disk inside. He holds it out to Steve, then, perhaps with slow remembrance that this isn’t Steve’s house, not Steve’s things, he thrusts it toward Bucky, then swiftly retracts his hand and jumps to his feet to walk it to the entertainment center himself.

Next to him, Bucky stiffens. “Wait, what is it?” he asks.

“Oh, yeah!” Parker smiles. “So, I reached out to all the guys and asked for everyone’s pictures and videos from deployment, and I put everything on a disk and I’m sending copies to everyone.” He points it at Steve. “I’ll have one for you, too. I just— I have to burn another batch. You live in the city, right?”

“Wash Heights, yeah.”

“Wash Heights?” Bucky echoes. “Jesus.”

Steve isn’t sure what the Jesus is for. Maybe it’s ‘Jesus, could you have moved any further away.’ Maybe it’s ‘Jesus, you live on Manhattan Island, who would have ever thought a jilted Brooklynite could be driven to such desperation.’ Probably not that one. Bucky’s not self-aware enough for that.

Parker seems to catch the surprise in Bucky’s voice, the dismayed lean away from Steve. “You two still hang out?”

Steve locks eyes with Bucky, and it’s a plea for a lie — or, at the very least, a plea for silence.

“I’m working in the city,” Steve says, still holding Bucky’s grudging attention. “Long hours. I go to DC most weekends to see my son.”

“Yeah, and I’m really busy, too,” Bucky adds. “Lots of stuff to do. Tough to get together, even in the same city.”

They blink and disengage and check Parker for any signs of bullshit detection in his wide brown eyes and fidgeting hands.

“Cool,” Parker says, then makes a fleeting, strained face at his own remark, then turns quickly back
to the entertainment center.

Next to him, Bucky’s shoulders slump forward.

The quiet balloons again, pressurizing the space until Steve slices into it with whatever questions he can cobble together. God knows Bucky isn’t fucking helping.

“You still hear from anyone?” Steve asks.

Parker pivots from his crouching position. He begins counting out on one hand. “Wilson went to SF selection but washed out. Hurt his shoulder. He’s gonna try again next cycle. Luis got out and went back to the Bay Area. He’s going to school. Reyes got out and went to work for his dad in LA. Maximoff PCS’d to Drum, poor guy, Ward re-upped and reclassed to MI, Mack is at Benning with the 75th—”

“Holy shit, he went Ranger?” Bucky looks to Steve. “Did you know about that? Did he say anything to you?”

Steve keeps his eyes forward, chin high. “I advocated for him to go to Ranger school.”

And he fucked up big time. The Rangers are personal for Bucky, and he completely forgot to tell him about Mack. Completely fucking forgot. And when Bucky answers, the disappointment, the hurt, is gut-slugging.

“You should have said something.”

“Sorry.”

Parker fiddles by the TV with renewed enthusiasm, whatever he’s doing down there. Anything to keep himself out of their line of fire, Steve supposes.

“Hey, you ever hear from Jones?” Bucky asks.

The name grabs Steve by the throat and tears him out of the conversation. He’s barely spared a single waking thought for Jones since he left Bucky. He’s worked to push him out of his mind as fast as he could, whenever he could, push his body off of— Did Melinda give Jones his number? Did she even see it? Did he get it and just not—

“... didn’t return my texts or anything,” Parker says. “He didn’t accept my friend request on Facebook either. It’s kind of weird. But maybe he just wants to be done with the military. I get it. The last time I heard from him is when he heard you got— kicked out.” Parker looks over his shoulder to Steve.

Bucky snorts, shaking his head. “So, did everyone know why?”

Steve turns his head, slowly, like maybe if he does it slowly enough, Parker won’t catch the full force of his disbelief that Bucky, of all people, would voluntarily drag that particular subject into this room at this moment.

“Yeah. I think so,” Parker says. “Jones knew, so... I don’t know how. I never told anyone why. I doubt Wilson did. Could’a been Rumlow or Lieutenant Sitwell or something.”

Jones knew. If Jones knew, then a lot of people knew. And even though Steve has insisted to himself that he’s fine with it, that he is secure enough with himself to accept whatever fallout came from that particular discharge disposition, the thought of all of those soldiers thinking that he’s gay electrifies
him with something he’s too embarrassed to put a name to.

“So the whole fucking brigade knew,” Bucky says. “Jesus Christ.”

The room goes stark silent again. Bucky’s hands steeple in front of his mouth, and he’s a million miles away. Parker stares at the rug while sweat gathers between Steve’s shoulder blades. This whole goddamn thing is falling apart, and he should be containing it, and he is absolutely failing. He scrambles for his internal controls, tries to pull the seams of his Lieutenant Rogers suit back together, grabbing onto his thighs so that he doesn’t start running his palms across them.

“You can get back in, apparently.” Parker says to Steve, suddenly and a little too loudly. “For that discharge. Did you know that?”


Parker stammers in monosyllables, then finally rolls out with, ”I mean, like what?”

“Did anyone say anything about me?”

“What— what kind of thing? People said lots of things.”

Bucky’s jaw ticks. His body is tense, like a stick about to snap, his breath shallow. He shakes his head a little.

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“I mean, people missed you,” Parker continues, stringing words together hurriedly. “They wondered how you were doing, and a few of the guys tried to get a hold of you, but they couldn’t—”

“Just forget it. Let’s just watch this fucking thing already.” Bucky falls back against the cushion like a mannequin, stiff and distracted.

“Sure. Yeah. Sorry.” Parker pries open the case and crouches down again by the entertainment center to load it into the Blu-Ray player and turn everything on. “The first part is really edited. But then the rest is video clips and some pictures.”

Steve forces himself to lean back, too, to assume a position of enjoyment. Next to him, Bucky takes a few deep, whisper-quiet breaths through his nose, their shoulders brushing at the peak of each inhale. Steve decides to take a few of his own, to calm his manic heart, falling into easy sync with Bucky. He smells good.

“Okay, here we go.”

Parker takes a seat cross-legged on the rug. Steve fields competing urges to stay where he is or move over, out of Bucky’s perimeter of palpable dread, which is only enervating his own. Neither urge wins.

The screen splits. A fidgeting Catholic school Britney Spears on one half — a fidgeting ACU-clad Wade Wilson on the other. The school bell rings on one side — the incoming alarm blares on the other, along with the indirect fire alarm shouting *Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!*

Steve’s stomach flutters as adrenaline hits his bloodstream, and he sits up, slides to the edge of the cushion, and braces himself.
Next to him, Bucky does the same, except he’s smiling — the kind of wild, irrepressible smile that he gets when a bullet scrapes his kevlar or when an A-10 Warthog lays utter waste to the enemy. The kind Steve never learned to get, because maybe he wasn’t in long enough, or maybe because he never touched death enough times.

And then the opening notes of *...Baby One More Time* drop, and a collection of about fifteen soldiers do a shot-by-shot re-creation of the video. They use the tight spaces between sandbag walls as their hallway, and the camera gets all the pouty close-ups of Wilson as Britney, who milks it with every ounce of his considerable charm. They assemble an impressive ensemble of backup dancers, including Luis, Maximoff, even Parker, as well as an assortment of faces from the rest of the company, and execute the video with their uniform t-shirts tied at the midriff. Parker in particular pulls several complicated dance moves, which earn expletives from Bucky and a slew of commentary on how this must be the best deployment lip sync production that was ever filmed to date and that they should put it up on YouTube ASAP, if they haven’t already. Parker ducks his head and mumbles something about something. Steve loses the words. Because Wilson makes eyes at his oblivious love interest, Trip, and that is when everything fuzzes and dulls.

Bucky falls silent. Steve breathes and thinks of giant numbers.

The next video is the inside of a Humvee, shot from the back seat. There is a pair of mystery legs on the turret, probably Reyes’ or Rumlow’s, Mack in the front passenger seat, Dugan in the back with Parker, Maximoff driving, concentrating intensely on the road while Dugan is trying to talk to him. Maximoff, above all things, hated driving such a big vehicle and didn’t learn to drive any vehicle until he joined the Army. Thus, Dugan’s strategy was to make him do it as often as possible to get him good at it. Everyone in the vehicle is asking him about the Soviet Union, which they know Maximoff knows nothing about since it collapsed when he was only a year old. Did they drive on the left side of the road? Did they always hang their toilet paper the under way? Did they even have toilet paper? At what age do the women become babushkas? And does it happen all at once or is it gradual?

It’s sweet. Maximoff is a sweet kid.

The next clip is short, but exceptional. It’s a long-distance, covert, shaky shot of Barton outside the command trailer, laughing at something Morita deadpans. Not just a chuckle, but a full-on, throw-the-head-back guffaw to the sky that becomes a double-over and then a literal fucking knee slap.

“Guess the fucker isn’t a robot after all,” Bucky murmurs.

Steve swallows. He wonders if anyone has said the same about himself.

The next video is shot from the ground, a group of soldiers camped out close to their vehicles at sunset, probably after a long day of patrols. They’re going through their gear, drinking water, and the camera pans down the line of vehicles to catch a shot of a soldier making his way down from vehicle to vehicle.

It’s Bucky. He stops at the next group over and starts talking to the men, and the camera pans back to Trip — Jesus Christ, Trip again — who raises his brows and jerks his head upward to the towering figure of Steve, now looming over their little circle. Parker stammers a greeting and lowers the camera, and Steve invites him to keep filming and asks how they’re doing.

It’s surreal to see himself in uniform again, loaded up with body armor and ammo and his weapons, solid and imposing. But what he also sees is a man with a kind face, a man who loves what he is doing and who loves the men he is doing it with, and the relief that washes over him is sublime. He didn’t realize he’d had any doubts until this moment.
In the middle of the men’s responses, Bucky’s voice interrupts, and the camera pans to him as his steps crunch toward them.

From the looks of him — his build, his alertness, the joy with which he greets Steve — it must be in the middle of their deployment. Steve misremembered how handsome he was; somehow, he didn’t remember enough. He forgot how sharp his jaw was with a clean shave, how brilliant his smile was when he was actually happy, how commanding and warm he could be at the same time.

And Bucky says, *Okay, it’s time for all the good little grunts to eat their chow so they can grow up big and strong,* and the camera catches a shot of Steve’s face as he looks at Bucky and smiles—

“I’m—” Bucky slides to the edge of the couch. “I gotta—”

He pushes himself up, balancing on his left leg, and limps for the doorway. He passes through it, steps heavy on the linoleum in the kitchen, and there’s a rustle of something, the snap of the lock, and the crack of the door as he tears it open.

“—Get something.” He slams the door behind him.

It happens so fast — so shockingly fast for someone who is so functionally impaired — that Steve and Parker sit in silence for several seconds before either utters a word.

“This was a bad idea,” Parker finally says.

Parker’s voice orients him, and if there was ever a time today to be Lieutenant Rogers, this is it.

“No, you’re fine. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

But Parker is already crawling across the floor to the TV. Turning it off. Ejecting the disk from the player. “I should have thought it through. I thought he’d like it. I didn’t even think about… I mean, I know it’s hard to watch because of Trip—”

And then Parker turns around, his expression dawning with horror. “Oh, shit, I didn’t even think about that. With you. Oh my god, Sir, I’m so sorry.”

For all of Parker’s intelligence, this is the first time Steve fully internalizes how incredibly, blessedly dense he is.

“Peter, it’s fine. Really. We shouldn’t pretend he didn’t exist.”

“I swear, didn’t know it would upset Sergeant Barnes so much. Or you. I didn’t even— think.”

“I’m fine. And don’t worry about him. He’s fine, too. He’s just taking a break.”

Steve rises and offers Parker a hand to help him to his feet. “Just relax. I’ll go check on him, okay?”

Parker lets himself be pulled up with another apology. Steve gives him a pat on the shoulder and grabs Bucky’s cane on the way out.

— — —

Bucky was hoping that he wouldn’t need the smokes to get him through today. They were a safety net, a last-ditch failsafe in case some shit like this happened and he needed to bail and put some kind of drug — and *not* alcohol, not this week — in his body. He hasn’t bought a pack since last month, and he really didn’t want to clean up all nice with the eleventh hour haircut from the Korean salon and the half-paralyzed hours spent picking out cologne and clothes at motherfucking
Bloomingdale’s, just to smell like an ashtray on top of it.

But he needs this. Right now, this feels like the best, most necessary cigarette he’s ever smoked in his life.

Behind him, coming down the hallway, are the steady thuds of someone approaching. He’d know those steps anywhere. Their cadence. The way they sound on the floorboards of this building.

So when the door groans open behind him, he doesn’t turn. He tries to stand taller, taking some of his weight off of the railing on the landing where he stands. He blows the smoke away from Steve when he stops beside him.

Steve holds out his cane. Bucky looks at it, remembers it and everything else, and sighs.

“I know,” Steve murmurs.

Bucky eyes him, to see if he does know, because Bucky isn’t even sure if he knows. The only thing he’s sure of is that he couldn’t watch that video for one more second, and there is no skill in seventeen DBT binders that could have kept him in that room.

He takes the thing from Steve and rests it against the railing. “Thanks.” He takes a drag off his cigarette and exhales through his nose. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

They stand in silence. Bucky sinks into himself, touches all of his senses, glances to the side, becomes acutely attuned to the minutia of the man next to him, all the little things his anxiety wouldn’t show him earlier. The slope of his nose. The ever-so-slight flexing of his hands. The thick cords of his neck. The solidness of him. It’s all so familiar — all details he’s wanted to bury himself in for almost 90 straight days — that he has to grab the railing with his worse hand to stop himself from leaning into it.

He takes a steadying breath and speaks.

“I don’t even know who that guy was. I don’t know how I could be him and be me, too.” Bucky says it slowly, carefully, because he wants it to count. With Steve, every single word matters now. “Did it feel that way for you?”

Steve opens his mouth and closes it again. Then he squares his jaw and looks straight out to the street, out at nothing. “I think we’ve all changed. We’ve had to.”

Bucky’s head droops, and he takes another greedy drag. Serves him right to hope for an actual moment of frankness, for Steve to drop this tight-ass ring knocker act he’s been pulling since he walked in the door. It’s clearly not making Parker feel comfortable. Neither of them are, really. Even Bucky’s best behavior hasn’t been good enough by a long shot. The kid looks like he’d rather be on shit burning detail than sitting here with them.

Steve looks over at him and then follows his line of sight to the fresh chalk flowers on the walkway.

“What did Parker say to you when you were about to get loaded on the Blackhawk? He leaned down and said something to you.”

Bucky blinks, and he has to claw through piles and piles of memory, because there have been so many soldiers, so many helicopters, so many horrors and slivers of humanity slipped between them. He finds the one Steve is talking about, though. And he smirks.
“He told me he was the one who drew the cock and balls all over the latrines. The ones I showed you. Which is total bullshit, because it was obviously a Wade Wilson job.”

His mouth flattens. Details continue filling in before and after, the agony, the blood, the humiliation, the panic, and he stoops, bending his healing knee as much as he can, electrifying himself with pain, to scrape his cigarette out on the stair. “Why the hell are you thinking about all that, anyway?”

There’s a pause, and then, “I just keep remembering it. I just wanted to know what he said that made you smile.”

“Fucked up thing to remember.”

Bucky grabs the railing and pulls himself upright with a bitten groan. He closes his eyes and takes a moment to gather his focus and his wits and whatever else he can marshal to try to salvage this shit show. What would a wise mind do now — not that he’s got one, but hypothetically? He feels around his pocket for his phone and pulls it out. He smartened up and took pictures of all his worksheets from group, and as he scrolls through them, he finds a distress tolerance acronym and reminds himself that any shitty emotion that he’s feeling now because of Steve Rogers or that dumb fucking video is nothing compared to getting his dick blown off in Khalidiya. The comparison is so jarring it almost, almost makes him laugh.

“We should go back inside. Parker probably thinks he broke me.”

He grabs his cane and leads the way.

—

It’s not really a surprise when Parker tells them that he has to head out, but not before asking Steve for a letter of recommendation for PA school. Steve offered him one back at Bragg, apparently, but that doesn’t stop Bucky from pointing out that he knows Parker’s performance better, has known him for longer, and have the slight advantage of being able to speak very personally to Parker’s skill as a combat medic.

He’s not even sure why he’s fighting for it so hard; he should just let Steve write the fucking thing. After all, West Point, Pentagon, Human Rights Watch credentials will look slightly better than almost-graduated-CUNY, knuckle dragging, child murdering, over-sexed, alcoholic pervert credentials. But in the end, Parker asks for a letter from both of them, probably just to get them off his back, and they shake his hand goodbye and Bucky is really, truly very sorry to see him go, and not only because his departure means that he’s left alone in the kitchen with Steve.

“So...”

Bucky scrambles for the rest. Wildly machetes his way through all of the impossible things he cannot say, things about the past, about what he wants, about what he wishes he had done differently, about how he feels. If he grasps onto any of those branches, he might lose the very tenuous thing that has started growing between them again. Whatever this is. This whisper-thin thing.

Steve touches the back of the chair at the small dining set he bought them. His gaze flits around the room, to the cupboards, the floor, the fridge, sometimes landing on Bucky and then very quickly dashing away.

“You want some coffee or— pretzels or something?” Bucky offers. “I have some mustard. I think.”

“Um—”
“Or I have water.” Bucky glances over his shoulder, toward the fridge, and tries to remember what he has in the drawer. “Or I think I have stuff for sandwiches.” He turns back, eyebrows drawn.

“Wait, are you still a vegetarian or whatever?”

Steve offers a small smile. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Then I guess I could…”

Bucky bites his lip. Shit, does he have any good cheese left? Fuck it, he’ll go to the store. He’ll go to fucking Whole Foods to get it, if he has to.

Bread. Does he even have any bread?

“I’ll make you a grilled cheese or something.” He’ll find a way.

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

Bucky can see Steve breathing. See him working to slow it and to not be seen doing it. Steve reaches over to the salt and pepper shakers on the table and straightens them, flattens his broad hand against them and pushes them parallel to the table edge. He starts to straighten the sizeable pile of unopened mail beside it before pulling his hand away like it grazed something hot. He curls his fingers into a fist and drops it to his side.

He draws to his full height.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

Bucky waves vaguely toward it. What a fucking thing to ask permission for. He doesn’t miss the glance Steve steals into his old room, which has nothing in it. Absolutely nothing. Bucky hears him pee and wash his hands, and Bucky taps an impatient rhythm on the corner of the table while he waits nearly another minute for him to come out.

And when he finally does, Bucky turns to him and opens his mouth to invite him for coffee, because it’s the only thing he can think of, that maybe he just doesn’t want to be here anymore, but Steve cuts in first.

“I should go.” He stops in front of Bucky but doesn’t look at him. He trains his gaze to the wainscotting, tracks it toward the door.

“You don’t have to. If you don’t want. I mean, you can. But I don’t have anything until six.”

Bucky debates whether he should say he’s going to a meeting, whether it would work in his favor, showcase his dedication, or just remind Steve that he’s a drunk.

“I think I’m gonna go,” Steve says to the floor.

Bucky nods, much longer than he needs to. “Okay.”

Neither of them move.

“You fixed the bathroom door,” Steve says, and he looks up now, his eyes meeting Bucky’s, and it’s been so long since they’ve looked at each other without anger or irritation that now it’s Bucky who has to glance away.

“Yeah, I used CLP.”
He catches the smile that curls one corner of Steve’s mouth.

“Does everything, huh?”

Bucky huffs a laugh. “Pretty much.”

Steve gives a smile, one that goes as quickly as it comes, and blinks, jaw working back and forth, breath quickening.

“Well—”

And then Steve thrusts out his hand. He thrusts out his right fucking hand, right between them.

Bucky’s face drops. His own hand is frozen, save for the twitching of his fingertips, his mind a white blanket of incredulity. Steve looks at him, cheeks and ears flushing pink.

And Bucky tries to lift his hand, tries to fight the leaden weight of it, but his stomach clenches so tight that he grabs a fistful of his shirt instead. He shakes his head — thinks he does, anyway — though the room barely moves.

Steve releases a quick breath, and his hand falls. He takes a half-step forward, and Bucky snaps his attention to him, because maybe this is something else—

But Steve stops. And just like the good soldier he’s been playing all day, he does a smooth sixty degree pivot and cuts straight for the door.

There’s no shoulder check this time. No apology. Just the quiet, perfectly civilized exit of a West Point-groomed, Pentagon-seasoned infantry officer who started paying the bills at age ten.

Bucky waits for the door to the building to open and close. And he waits for the buzzer, just in case, because what if. He’s not sure how long he stands, waiting, but the ache of his knee rips him back to a cold, sober reality, where the guy never turns back around and rings the fucking bell. He drags one of the kitchen chairs over to the window, the one that opens out into the weird, functionless alley wedged into their building. He pushes it open, grabs his pack of cigarettes, and lights one up. He leans on the ledge as he smokes and eyes the collection of abandoned things just outside. The beer cans and the armless Barbie and the broken nightstand.

Bucky thinks about Iraq and smokes through his six o’clock meeting, until he’s just about sick from both.

— — —

May 20

“Proud of you, Jammers.”

Next to him, Rikki smiles, and Bucky feels the gut-dropping sensation of relief, the kind so slow and long in coming that he didn’t even realize it had been building. Of everyone at this table, he’s been watching Rikki the closest tonight. She came to the Chips and Cake meeting with Daisy and Winnie and clapped when they announced all of the different chips, and he’s pretty sure she was clapping for him when he limped up to the front to get his from Paisley, of all the motherfuckers, who, har-har-har, still thinks that Ethan is his kid. And when he came to sit back down, she smiled at him, but not like Daisy smiled, because Daisy smiled with her teeth, and Winnie patted his hand on one side and Hank patted his shoulder on the other. And Bucky spent most of the rest of the meeting thinking about her, wondering if he should worry, because what if they never get better? What if even this
doesn’t fix them?

But now she’s smiling with her teeth, even though he can’t quite muster his, not in a genuine way, and hasn’t been able to in a very long time.

“Thanks,” he says.

He looks down at his plate as he says it, at the pile of obscenely expensive pasta he’s been picking at during the gaps in his worry. The place is ridiculous — white table cloths, cornish goddamn hens on the menu. It’s the kind of place a guy like Hank picks because he thinks it’s a reward for middle class folks to eat fancy. He’s lucky Bucky wanted to look decent in front of the gays tonight, because they were all fucking judging him, and he wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction of thinking he’s not only an asshole but also a slob. Not tonight.

Rikki asks him about his meetings, where he goes in Brooklyn, how he likes it, and he does his best to infuse his words with the bright enthusiasm of someone who cares very much about his sobriety. But he’s quite frankly sick of the act — and it feels more like an act tonight than it has in months — and he wonders quietly if it’s normal to feel so deflated with a shiny, fresh chip in his pocket.

Bucky catches something in his right ear, remarkable considering his hearing in it is mostly blown to shit. Maybe it’s the repeated use of the word “alcoholic” by his mother, which might as well be his own name, and his attention drifts away from Rikki to catch her mid-sentence in rapt, low, serious conversation with Hank.

“— have a sponsor. We meet a couple times a week. We’re the same age and her son is about his, too. It’s almost uncanny.” She dabs the corner of her mouth with her napkin. “He’s in jail right now. It’s very sad. She won’t bail him out, though. She did it for years, apparently, and then just had enough.”

Hank nods, his mouth full of food. “That’s great,” he says around it. “Good for you.”

“It’s a little bit odd for me to—”

“Wait, what the fuck? You have a sponsor?” Bucky interrupts, leaning forward to address Winnie on the other side of Hank.

He turns to Rikki, who must also hear how fucking absurd it sounds to have a sponsor for some bullshit family support group, but she’s looking down at her hands, jaw tense, lips thin.

“I don’t get it,” Bucky says to Winnie. “What are you trying to abstain from? What, exactly, are you quitting?”

“Well…” Winnie looks to Hank, apparently since she can’t answer one simple question herself. “I’m not sure how to explain it.”

Hank turns to him. There’s a smile on his face, one of his smug ones, the kind that comes when he’s about to school Bucky on dubious AA wisdom or gay history or whatever old man truth he can lord over anyone who will tolerate it.

“Al-Anon is for people who love alcoholics. It helps people like your mother get their lives back so that they don’t spend them cleaning up their children’s urine and vomit and messes after their benders. In other words, they stop enabling you, which helps you take responsibility for your actions. So it’s good for everyone.”

Bucky’s face heats as the memory of that morning unfurls. Waking up in Steve’s bedding because he
pissed his own, hooked up to a drip, dressed in only his underwear because Hank and Winnie had to clean him up—

“Well,” Winnie injects quickly, “it's really just nice for me to talk to someone. I want to be the best mother I can be for you.”

Bucky huffs. “Wow.”

“The meetings are good.”

*Daisy*. And if Daisy, certainly Rikki, too. Bucky can easily imagine the three of them now, sitting in a room with a bunch of pearl-clutching mothers and siblings and partners, bitching about how horrible their alcoholics are, how selfish, how fucked up, how hopeless. Maybe they’ve even talked about him. Shared their horror stories. Maybe they’ve even gotten chips of their own — for what, he can’t even imagine. He can’t imagine what they would have to celebrate.

He buries his fork in his pasta and leaves it there.

“Well, the next time I go on a bender, don’t worry. I won’t bother any of you. I’ll clean up my own piss and puke and mess and give myself my own fucking IV fluids. You won’t even fucking know it happened. And if you don’t hear from me for a fucking month, don’t even bother fucking coming to check on me. Wouldn’t want to *enable* me by calling a fucking ambulance or something if I’m minutes from death.”

Winnie shushes him, then has the gall to look sorry about it, and Rikki looks to the tables on either side of them and sinks into her chair.

“Are you planning a bender?” Hank asks coolly.

“No!”

Hank goes back to eating. Winnie looks into her alfredo. Rikki picks at her nail polish. Daisy meets his gaze, unflinching, and so he talks at her.

“No, you know what? This is good to know. I’m glad you’re taking care of yourselves.”

“You don’t have to be sarcastic,” she says. “We’re trying to help you, too.”

“Yeah, I can see that. This is really super helpful right now. Such a thoughtful celebration of my sobriety. Hey, yeah, congrats, and also, by the way, fuck you. Love Ma and Rikki and, of course, Daisy.” He juts his hand at her. “Can’t forget Daisy. This Al-Anon shit was probably your idea, wasn’t it?”

Winnie presses her forearms into the table, bearing her weight on them. “It was *your* idea, Jamie. You encouraged me to look into it. Remember?”

“Yeah, but you weren’t supposed to become a militant fucking *evangelist* about it — not that you know any other fucking way to be.”

Bucky sits back heavily and grabs his napkin off his lap. He wads it up and throws it on the table next to his plate.

“See, I expect Hank to be a fucking asshole with his tough love, pseudo-paternal bullshit. I just can’t believe I’m gonna get the same thing from all of you now, too.”
Daisy’s face gets soft. *Soft.* “If you think that drawing healthy boundaries with you is being a ‘fucking asshole,’ maybe that’s something you need to talk about with Hank. Because those are not the same thing.”

He opens his mouth, because God, he’s got some things he’d really, really love to say to her. Things he’d wanted to say to her for a long time. How she’s a stuck up, interloping, fake-peacekeeping bitch and how she should just mind her own fucking business and how she doesn’t know shit about this family and should stop pretending like she’s part of it. How she needs to stop whispering in Rikki’s ear, talking shit about him, poisoning her against him, preaching about ‘healthy boundaries’ — which is just codespeak for everyone turning their backs on him. He knows the language by now.

But he plays the tape forward. He sees the place that outburst goes, and it’s one that he and Rikki would never be able to come back from. He knows which side she would land on, and it’s not his. He doesn’t even know how much of his own bullshit he actually believes.

So he shuts his mouth and takes a deep breath. Then another. He pushes his chair out from the table with his good leg, which takes two rough shoves, and scoops his cane off the floor.

“You know what, I need to go home. I’m really angry, and I’m fucking hurt, and I don’t want to say any more shitty things that I’ll regret.”

Bucky stands and works his way out from between his chair and Rikki’s. Several diners at surrounding tables watch him and murmur, and some don’t even have the decency to look away when he catches them doing it.

“I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t wait around for any replies. He limps for the door as fast as he can and bee-lines for the corner once he’s out. The cabs are shit in this part of town at this time on a weeknight, so he’ll need the best odds he can get. He begins scanning the streets for anything yellow, and it’s almost like DBT, looking for blue things, counting objects, something to pull him out of his reeling mind and his awful thoughts about how he can’t seem to stop driving his family away, no matter how hard he tries not to.

“Are you seeing Scott this week?”

Hank’s voice is not a surprise. He’s followed Bucky out of coffee shops and restaurants and the LGBT Center enough times, and Bucky has needed it. He’s needed someone to care like that, for all the times he’s never gotten caring like that in the past because he’s never been so fucking weak before.

No, tonight the real surprise is the creep of irritation tensing Bucky’s muscles as he turns around to face him. The uncontained sigh that precedes his words.

“Tomorrow. Why?”

“Because I think you have some stuff to talk about with him. Like whatever is going on underneath all of this.” He wags a loose hand at Bucky.

“Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?” Bucky’s eyes narrow. “Wait, are you dumping me? Again?”

“No. I’m just saying that I think you need to start taking your therapy more seriously. Really try harder to get to the core of it.” Hank slips his hands into the pockets of his khakis and looks down at the sidewalk. “I’ve been wanting to say it for a while, but I know you’ve been trying really hard. I just think some of this stuff is beyond the scope of our work.”
Bucky purses his lips as he sifts through the muck of Hank’s unusual diplomacy. “So you’re saying that I’m so fucked up that not even the Steps can touch my actual problems.”

“I just think you need to get really honest with yourself and dig deep. If you really believe in Truth as your higher power, you gotta stop running from it. I think that’s why our work doesn’t seem to really go anywhere.”

“What do you mean? I’m doing all my fucking worksheets and fucking lists and my stupid writing.”

Hank’s hands come out of his pockets, and they’re out in front of him, gently halting.

“I know you are. And I think you’re starting to learn your patterns and your flaws, but I don’t think you’re gaining any real understanding of where they’re coming from. You’ve got the ‘what,’ but you don’t have the ‘why.’ You’re still holding onto your secrets, so you can’t gain any real insight. And so you’re just gonna stay stuck.”

Bucky turns away, back to the street. He makes all the motions of looking for a cab but could easily miss a dozen, courtesy of Hank’s curbside home-fucking-truth-telling.

“I’m sorry. I was gonna talk about this with you on Saturday, but—”

“But you thought a random street corner at night was a better place,” Bucky snaps. “When I’m already really upset.”

“You’re right,” Hank admits. “Bad call on my part. Maybe we should also talk more about Al-Anon when we meet on Saturday. I think you might be misunderstanding what it’s about.”

Bucky snorts. “Yeah, you were a real big help with that. You don’t have to be such a fucking asshole all the time, you know. I know it’s your thing, but…”

But this is bigger than Hank’s mistimed personality quirk. This is Goodbye Jamie and Thor and Hank and Winnie and Steve and rehab and the Holiday Inn and jail and the USS Percocet and Steve and Walter Reed and Landstuhl and Khalidiya and Steve and Baghdad and three more deployments and 9/11 and Alex and Steve and Dad and the park and the basement and Jesus and camp and school and Winnie and Casey — every link in the slow-rolling chain reaction that led him to that bender and that mess three months ago.

This is him working so hard to scrape together these meager days, against almost two decades of drinking, all for Hank to smear the dirty fringes of his miserable history across the dinner table in front of the only two people left in his life who love him.

Bucky looks over his shoulder at Hank, brow furrowed.

“Why did you have to say that? Why did you have to bring all that up? We were supposed to be celebrating all of this 90 days stuff, but you had to bring up what a drunken fuckup I am in front of my family?”

He looks back to the street. The headlights of the oncoming cars blur, and when he speaks again, his voice is so thick that he almost chokes on it.

“My family used to be really proud of me, Hank. I know you can’t possibly imagine that, but they were. And I just wanted them to be proud of me tonight. I know it’s just bullshit now, just a fucking piece of aluminum, but it was something.”

Bucky drags the back of his hand across his eyes and then holds it out to the street. He stretches his
“Fingers out as far as they’ll go and takes an unsteady step off the curb.

“Jamie, I’m sorry.”

“Please leave me alone. I just want to go home.”

Bucky swears at a cab that passes him by. It’s occupied, but he just can’t stand to be here anymore. Can’t stand that Hank is still nearby, talking on the damn phone now. He steps further out into the street, between the parked cars, and holds up his hand as high as he can.

“I called you a car,” Hank says.

Bucky clenches his teeth. “I can call my own fucking car. I know how to use a car service.”

“Well, you aren’t doing it, so I called one for you. They’ll be here in five minutes. Now, I’m going back inside.”

Bucky lets his arm drop. He shakes his head, resigned.

“I really am sorry for bringing that up. It was a shit thing to say. And I’m proud of you,” Hank says, voice fading. “I hope you know that.”

Bucky keeps his eyes on the street.

The car comes and takes him back to Brooklyn. He gets dropped off at the closest bodega to home, buys another pack of cigarettes and a Cherry Coke, and limps home in the dark.

He chain smokes in the kitchen, leaning out that window, him and Barbie and the beer cans and the other unwanted things, until well after midnight.

— — —

May 21

“This is Scott.”

“Hey, Scott. It’s Jamie Barnes.”

“Hey! Are we still on for 9:30?”

“Nope! I’m cancelling.”

“Is everything okay?”

Bucky glances at the life size statue of Captain Morgan next to him, planting his foot victoriously on a barrel of rum. He smiles and gives The Captain a hearty pat on the knee.

“Everything is great. Really great. I’m gonna have a really good day. Many really good days, I think.”

“Well, at least you’re cancelling for a good cause. What’s the occasion?”

Bucky starts limping down the sidewalk, down toward the Coney Island Car Wash, where there’s hardly anyone around this early in the morning.

“Well, I’m gonna get hammered. Really, really fucking hammered. For days, at least. Maybe a week.
And I’m gonna jerk off to a lot of hardcore gay porn. Huge dicks. Fuck and sucks. Anal trains. Facials. Real deep throating. Rim jobs. Fisting. Good, hard pounding. Lots of loud moaning and dirty talk. You know, the kind of shit I only watch when I’m wasted. Also, incidentally, the only time I’ll ever touch my shredded little dick unless I have to. I also have some stuff I could shove up my ass, too. We’ll see. It’s been so long since I’ve been fucked, I don’t even remember what it feels like. How fucking sad is that.”

Bucky stops at the edge of the sidewalk, heart pounding so fast that he presses his palm over it. The only sound on the line is his own breathing, rapid and loud over the silence. He looks up at the moody clouds rolling in from the ocean, feels the first few droplets of the storm hitting his face. He’s got time. It’s okay. It’s okay. He purses his lips to slow his breath and hopes Scott misses the *Fuck* that slips its way out, too.

Scott lets out a long breath on his end, as well. “Okay. What happened?”

Bucky coughs out a laugh. “Oh, the usual. Let’s see —

“Steve — God knows why I let myself love him, because it’s like bleeding a piece of fucking granite — he can barely stand being around me now. Can’t even sit next to me without flinching away. Won’t stay in my presence one second longer than he absolutely has to. Tried to shake my fucking hand. Like, is this some fucking joke? Jesus Christ, we used to fuck almost every day. We slept in the same fucking bed for nine months, and now he wants a fucking handshake? Like we’re the same thing as him and Peter fucking Parker? Maybe not even that, because at least he looked a little sad to see Parker leave. And what do I get? The goddamn West Point treatment. I would have been fine with *anything* else. A normal fucking conversation. Hell, I would have just sat in the room with him, if he just stayed. Just sat with him. Fucking *nothing* would have been better than what he gave me. Yeah, of course I had my little fucking fantasies about Parker leaving and Steve— I don’t know. A fucking hug. A fucking— I don’t know. Other things.”

He’s too embarrassed to say them.

“But then I *also* found out that all my soldiers probably know that I’m a fag because I lived with him for all of ten minutes back at Fort Bragg, and apparently the only legacy he’s left behind is being the brigade homo, which is a fucking laugh and a half.”

Bucky turns and limps back toward Best Buy Liquors, toward the three Captain Morgan statues outside, and he really wishes he brought his cane today because, God, everything hurts.

“I’m also just— completely incapable now. Like, fucking useless. Like, what the fuck do I even do with my life? What the fuck am I *doing*? I’m an unemployed loser who still fucking gimps around in pain, all the fucking time. This surgery was supposed to make things better, but everything still hurts and my foot is still fucked up, and everything else is still fucking up, so what was the point? And my family is completely done with my shit and is pretty much abandoning me. And I don’t feel like talking to Hank right now.

“So, you know. The usual. So I’m going to drink, because I’m done feeling like shit, I’m done being in pain, and this DBT crap just isn’t good enough right now.”

“But you got your chip this week. That’s a really big accomplishment, and you should be proud of yourself. Are you sure you wanna start your clock over after all your hard work?”

Scott is working it, all right, all his doofy, earnest school-boy charm. Too bad Bucky spent his very last fuck at dinner last night.
“Proud? For white knuckling it for three months? Yeah, turns out I’m still a broken, miserable, lonely, pathetic piece of shit — thank you, Step 4 — so I don’t even know why I’m not drinking. Maybe I thought I could fix myself and get Steve back, but that doesn’t seem like it’s gonna happen this century. And if someone like him can’t accept me, then what fucking chance do I have with anyone else?”

There’s a pause on Scott’s end. And then: “Are you sure you don’t wanna come in? It seems like you’ve really got a lot on your mind.”

“I’m not fucking coming in, Scott.”

“Okay, I got it,” Scott replies quickly. “Well, I appreciate you being so open and letting me know what’s going on with you.”

Bucky shakes his head. He looks at the sidewalk, at the stains on the concrete, the gum and the oil and drinks and probably piss, who knows. This is a liquor store.

“I wonder if maybe I need to radically accept that I’m just ruined. At my core. Fundamentally ruined, whether I drink or not.”

Scott seems to chew on that one for a while.

“‘Ruined’ is a really strong word. And very… precise.”

“It’s true. Some things just can’t be fixed. I can’t go back to how I was before I got fucked up.”

“Are you talking before you got blown up, or are you talking about something before the Army?” Scott pauses and then adds, very carefully, “Maybe some of that other stuff?”

“I don’t know.”

He does.

Bucky clenches his jaw and jerks his head to the side with a wince, a tic of revulsion and betrayal and something more, something he shoves away as hard as he can.

“I just don’t see the point anymore. At this rate, I’m probably just gonna pull an Edgar Allan Poe or a Hemingway in the end, anyway. Die drunk in some gutter. Hopefully not in Baltimore, but never say never. Suck start my SIG Sauer, if that doesn’t pan out. Why go on suffering until I get there? So, I’m going now.”

Bucky pulls his phone from his ear, but his thumb hovers over the End button, because Scott is yelling for him to wait, and even though the front doors are opening right now, and he’s so close, he swears under his breath and puts the phone back to his ear.

“What?”

“I said the Hemingway part — are you going to be able to stay safe?”

“If you’re asking if I’m planning on shooting myself right now, I’m not. So don’t try to send the police to my apartment or anything. I mean it.” Bucky gives a hollow chuckle. “And even if I was gonna off myself, nobody would try to sue you. Don’t worry.”

Bucky thinks he hears something like Oh my God on the other end, muffled beneath a hand or spoken with the receiver tipped up to the ceiling. Bucky knows the tricks because he’s used them on
hundreds of calls with his chain of command. Too bad Scott sucks at it.

“So, you never gave your guns to your sister to hang on to,” Scott says.

Bucky rolls his eyes, even as he feels the barest nigglng of guilt for not following through with his promise. “Look, I’m not gonna kill myself. I just wanted to let you know that I won’t be in today because I’m relapsing. I might make it to group next week. I don’t know. I’ll have to see what my schedule looks like.”

There’s another stretch where nobody speaks. Bucky looks into the window of the liquor store, expansive and empty, waiting for him.

“I think maybe you need to look at your radical acceptance handout again,” Scott says. “Read it more carefully. I don’t think it means what you think it does.”

“Wow, I wish more people this week would tell me that I don’t understand what things mean. It feels really good.” Bucky snorts and shakes his head. “I made E-7 at age 26, Scott. Not that you have a fucking clue what that entails, but it means that I don’t need to be condescended to all the time.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. But I do think you should read it again. It’s actually really helpful. Can I reschedule you for same time next Friday?”


Bucky hangs up and turns off his phone. He’ll have to turn it on again to get a car back home, but he just wants some goddamn peace while he shops.

Not that he really needs it. He limps in and leaves with a case of Smirnoff 21 less than ten minutes later. It’s bafflingly easy. And so he has to wait another twenty minutes on the corner for his car to come take him back to Windsor Terrace, but he doesn’t care, because this is one of the best parts. The planning. The anticipation. By the time the car gets there, he’s almost giddy with it.

He sits in the back seat with his arm around the box, running his dead finger over the corner of it while he half-assedly chats with the driver. He’s mostly skimming through all the possible things he could do today, over the next however many days it takes him to drink all this. It doesn’t really matter what he ends up doing, he supposes, or the order he does it in, so long as he’s drunk while he’s doing it. So long as it doesn’t involve drunk dialing or texting or emailing Steve or his family or friends or Hank or Scott or Thor or getting behind the wheel or leaving the apartment in any way. It entertains him all the way home to imagine the permutations of his debauchery.

Bucky nods and grins the cabbie away with a twenty dollar tip and hoists his box of booze into the building. He fumbles with his keys at the door to his apartment and flips all the locks as soon as he gets inside. And then he’s got a kitchen knife in hand, and he’s cutting open the tape, and he runs his fingers over the twelve shiny red caps, and he’s got a bottle, and Oh Lord, as Winnie might say, it’s beautiful, the red label elegant and familiar, and he twists off the top and takes a few deep, burning chugs and — Jesus God — he can’t remember ever being this thirsty for fermented corn.

He brings the bottle to his room and sips on it as he changes into something more comfortable, because he’s got nobody to impress and, who is he kidding, he hasn’t impressed anyone since 2008. His disgusting body is already more tolerable with the buzz careening into his periphery, and he feels his tiny cock stir just a little when he eyes his laptop on his desk, but he’s not quite drunk enough for that. Not just yet.

Bucky tips the bottle up and takes several long drinks.
He eyes the clock. It’s almost eleven. He could order delivery. Maybe a pizza, a huge fucking pizza, because he might be too obliterated to do it later, but he doesn’t want to slow his drunk, but he should probably eat something, or he’s gonna be in trouble, but it’s been so long since he’s been drunk that he should really just savor it this first day without a bunch of grease in his belly, right, like really feel it. He stands in the middle of his bedroom swigging on the bottle trying to make up his mind but he doesn’t need to rush it because it’s a beautiful day to be alive and drunk in the borough of Brooklyn so he lets himself get pretty fucking drunk and wanders around the apartment with the bottle in his hand reveling in the joyful buoyancy of numb teeth and dulled pain and twinkling euphoria and he gets drunk enough to decide that he wants that giant pizza after all and when it comes he brings it into the living room and eats it while he watches back-to-back episodes of Unwrapped and its so fucking gooood he has five slices and he’s so full when he’s done and oops he got some on his shirt oh well and he goes to the kitchen to make himself some dessert a big-ass screwdriver in a big-ass glass about ohhhh half a fifth or so with some OJ and he drinks it and watches more TV and it goes down so smooth sooo smooth and then it’s all gone and then the room starts to get very very very off and sideways and dimming and very bad and oh fuck that was half a fifth and he’s already wasted as fuck and holy shit oh God and he has to get up this is very bad and he slams against the entryway to the kitchen and fuck oh boy fuck how many fucking drinks is that total it’s too too too too many oh yeah he is a fucking idiot because this is very bad and he is getting drunker and way drunker by the minute and he is going to die fucking seriously no shit actually die if he doesn’t get rid of some of this stuff now and he weaves to the bathroom checks hard against the door limps to the toilet bends over and shoves his fingers down his throat but that is the second funniest thing of the week next to Steve being Uncle Sam’s pet homo because his gag reflex died along with his stupid little boyhood and welp that fucking sucked but then he gags just fine and out it comes — everything — all the pizza and vodka it’s fucking awful and it’s so much too much and it’s everywhere God everywhere and even when there’s nothing left he remembers and remembers and retches some more and how the fuck all that horror even got out he doesn’t know but it’s awful and he drinks some more to make it go the fuck back to the hole it crawled out of, slower, and with a full sleeve of saltines.

And that’s how Bucky spends the first day of his bender.

Bucky smarts up the second day, wakes up in his bed, almost like normal except it’s almost noon, still tipsy. He limps to the kitchen and drinks a couple glasses of water, eats more crackers, takes four ibuprofen, goes into the bathroom, tries not to yak as he cleans up yesterday’s mess, showers off the booze sweat, takes a couple drinks off the third bottle to smooth the edges. He checks his phone and laptop for any drunk texts or emails and just finds a couple missed calls from Hank and a text asking where he is but fuck him and fuck their meeting and he almost texts back some smartass remark about falling off the wagon and getting run over by the wheels and trampled by some horses blah blah blah but he settles with sorry everything is fine talk to you later n and he turns off his phone and entertains hiding it from himself but sets it on the nightstand instead. He eats a couple slices of old pizza and sits on the chaise and watches Barefoot Contessa and then drinks more and lays his hand on his junk and drinks and then puts his hand down his pants and touches himself through his underwear while he watches whatever the fuck cooking show like it matters and he brings the bottle and his sad little boner into his room and pulls up porn on his laptop and shoves a lubed up hand into his underwear and jerks it to none of the shit he described to Scott and he goes slow because drunk jerking is his favorite jerking God he barely knows any other way to fuck or get off but drunk but he’s gotta speed up because he’s starting to fuzz out. So he fast forwards to the part where they’re about to come and squirms and makes the miserable sounds of a disinhibited drunk who would give any tangible or intangible thing on this planet to be the guy getting fucked right now but has to make due with his messed up hand and can’t even pretend because he was too lazy to prep and is too
drunk to fuck and jerk himself anyway and they come and he comes and it’s been a while so there’s a lot even though he’s only got one nut so it’s actually kind of impressive.

He wipes his hand on his underwear and gets under the sheet and peels the nasty things off and throws them across the room and slumps against the headboard and drinks while the porn goes on to another scene and another and he tries to rub another one out but then then and then he loses track and there are cigarettes and something else and another bottle and something and something something something something more and something—

Two days later he wakes up face down on the bed. He’s twisted at a wicked angle, one arm pinned underneath him. His knee is blazing with pain, and oh Jesus, he is really far too sober if he’s in this much pain, and what the fuck happened? He pushes himself up, squinting against the godawful fucking laser beams of sunlight searing into his brain, and his stomach roils. He rolls off the bed and stumbles his way through the obstacle course of things as he makes his way to the bathroom — clothes, the plates on the floor, the glasses of something, the empty bottles, the chair in the middle of the kitchen, and everything lurches and he’s not gonna make it so he leans over the sink to hurl but it’s just morning bile. He drinks a glass of water, pulls OJ from the fridge, the two liter of ginger ale, and sloshes some of both in a big Army mug that he got when he re-upped the first time. It’s chipped on one edge and some of the logo is starting to go, but it’s been with him for six years, longer than any friend or lover, and he tops the thing off with the rest of the seventh bottle. He limps back to his room and finds the reason why he didn’t have anything in him to vomit this morning. He threw up in bed, next to his pillow, down the side of the mattress, all over the floor. It’s bits of cracker and a fucking fuckton of vodka. Jesus, what a fucking mess.

Bucky curls his nose when the smell hits him, and he yanks the bedding off, throws it on the floor over the puddle, lets it soak, and carries the whole mess to the far corner of the room where he can fucking deal with it whenever the fuck. What’s left is the smooth water resistant mattress cover, the one he got for this very purpose and not piss, as Hank accused him of earlier. He’s puked in bed enough times — fortunately not choked to death on it yet — that the investment seemed worth it. Which is sad but c’est la fucking life of a binge drinking drunk.

He chugs the rest of the glass because who needs to think about what a horrible drunken failure they are while being a drunken failure or some other drunken logic, and he should wash because he smells like second hand booze and cigarette butts but oh well and he mixes himself another drink, about half and half, and downs ibuprofen for his crushing pain and thinks about eating some food but meanders into the living room to watch TV and drinks and jerks off on the couch and drinks and gets up to piss and drinks and jerks off more and drinks and smokes and drinks more and something something something something and wakes up violently on the shower floor choking pummeled by freezing ice water and he coughs and throws up vodka and bile until it hurts and turns pink and he hauls himself up he’s shaking so fucking hard he can barely dress himself but he does and he sips water slowly cradling the cup with both his fucked up hands and then lays on the couch on his side and tries to distract himself with Semi-Homemade and manages to fall asleep.

And when he wakes up, it’s dark. And he lies on his back while the light-stained ceiling spins, trying not to throw up again, though throw up what, he’s not sure, and he should probably stop. This is where he should probably get off the train. He can’t hold his liquor for shit anymore, his body revolting in ways it never, ever has before, and maybe he’s soaked it in vodka one too many times. Maybe he’s finally killed his stomach and liver. Maybe he’s bent himself on one too many benders. Maybe his insides are just as fucked as his outsides, his guts just as fucked as his mind, ruined and dirty and used up, through and through, and he’s unlovable unfuckable unfixable, Amen, the holy trinity of hopelessness, so he circles back to this getting off the train business, because what the fuck will he even do when he does? What the fuck will he be going back to? People who can barely tolerate him, the few left in his life who will even do that, no fucking purpose, a vault overfilled with
horrible things, horrible, horrible things, and the hinges are rusted and flaking away and what is he going to do? He can’t even imagine it. Can’t even fucking imagine. And the thought of facing it alone — because he is utterly alone, he knows that now — fills his face and his eyes and his throat and he’s not fucking doing this, he’s not gonna cry like a little sissy faggot, not tonight, not when he has at least four bottles of booze in the kitchen waiting to unplug him from his fucked up thoughts and miserable body and pathetic weepiness.

He makes his way slowly off the couch and trips on some shit he left on the floor, nearly face plants but catches himself hard against the wall and he curses and hits the light in the living room and kitchen and the place is a fucking disaster and it only makes him move faster to the box so he can stop caring about what an appalling state it’s in and holy shit there are only two bottles left, how the fuck can there only be two bottles left? What fucking day is it? How much did he waste by puking or spilling like a fucking idiot? What if he runs out? How the fuck is he gonna go to the store? Maybe he could pay someone to go maybe. But this can’t be how much he has left. Cannot fucking be. But fuck.

Bucky opens the second-to-somehow-fucking-last bottle and takes a drink. Jesus, he cannot drink it straight right now, fuck that, and he goes to the medicine cabinet to take a long pull off of Steve’s Pepto and eats crackers over the sink while he drinks a 50/50 vodka/ginger ale fuck, Jesus, his stomach oh God more ginger ale and more vodka and then things start to feel okay a little better than and he moves back to the living room and sits down and turns on the TV and it’s all infomercials this late but his mind is with Steve in the kitchen before his dumb fucking idiotic handshake and God how the fuck does he get hotter every fucking month Jesus Christ his chest his neck, and all the shit Bucky said no to before all the fantasies the imaginings and the what ifs after Parker leaves — stuff comes to him and he drinks and starts to touch himself and then it’s Steve standing in the hallway and it’s what are you doing and you don’t know how to do love you feel it but you don’t know how to do it whatever the fuck that means and that leads to the duffel and the sidewalk and please I love you please don’t leave me I’ll do whatever you want and you have all these fucking people who love you so fucking many how fucking lucky you are what a lucky boy you are and then goodbye Jamie and bender, oh look a bender and he drinks himself fifty fucking leagues deeper into this one as fast as he can but he can’t lose it no more losing it keep it in Barnes don’t waste any you wasteful fucker fucking fucker fuckface and then more and TV but this couch but but oh fuck Steve on this couch his leg and thigh and cock his hard cock anywhere god anywhere in his mouth in his ass fuck —

Okay bring the booze put the bottle down and — bag the bag in the closet that’s right okay light light okay then the closet and — where the fuck is it why did I have to bury it in the fucking back — oh shit whoa watch out don’t fall dumbass — Okay turn on the lamp turn off the big light okay — oh my god this bag it’s been so long this shit is so fucking expired oh well who fucking cares oh man oh god I’m just gonna — Fuck okay stop you can jerk it later God which one — it’s been a while — okay both why not and lube oh good the good shit yes okay I’ve got plenty — Okay bye bye bag — alright okay lie down relax turn off the light take this off and this and these fuck — okay lie down relax Steve think about Steve — Steve touching me his hands are warm and he’s touching me he’s touching my chest my stomach yeah — and he’s moving down and down and he doesn’t care he doesn’t care he’s fine with it he’s fine with it he doesn’t care what it looks like he doesn’t care that it’s gross and messed up he’s — ugh — Jesus God — fuck — okay — never mind— fuck — Okay where’s the fucking lube okay — right side — okay — Steve is behind me he’s putting lube on his finger yeah he asks — no he whispers — and asks if I want him to put it in — oh yeah— oh my god yeah — please — and I pull my knee in and I’m fucking open and he teases me first — circles around — breathing in my ear and I say — please oh my God please— and he pushes in and — oh my God — oh my God it feels so good — but I want his cock so bad and I beg him for it and he says okay and so — um — ok where the fuck did I put it — is this it — yeah this is it okay — hold on — why is this fucking cap not opening — oh wait there it goes — oh shit that’s a lot — okay and
Bucky wakes up, groaning in the light. Even from behind his eyelids, it’s too fucking much, but there’s nothing to bury his face in. No cushion. No blanket. Just the smooth plastic coating of his mattress cover, apparently, and something feels wrong and as his senses slog their way back online he realizes that it’s because he’s in only his underwear — his damp underwear — and he shifts and feels that oh-too-familiar sensation, and that’s all it takes for his nervous system to crackle alive with sheer fucking panic, and he bolts upright, heart jackhammering, eyes wide. And his brain is so drenched in old liquor that it takes an absurdly long time for him to put the pieces of some sort of story together. Well, there aren’t really too many pieces. There’s an open laptop with lube smeared over the screen, keys, and case, an overturned, leaking bottle of said lube, and a pair of glistening
dildos strewn around him, and he shifts and yeah, that explains it.

As Bucky snorts, he feels something in his nose. He thumbs at it, digging inside his nostril, and comes out with a small piece of cracker. He stares at it for a moment, stunned, and in a situation like this, in the face — or nose — of such drunken absurdity, there is nothing else he can do but laugh. He pulls a kleenex from the box next to his bed and blows his nose, just in case there’s more, and drops it and the cracker into the trash next to the bed.

His amusement plunges rapidly as nausea barrels over him. He lowers himself back on the bed and rolls onto his side, curling as tight as he can fold himself, closing his eyes, swallowing back the caustic pressure crawling up his esophagus, willing himself to not throw up any more. God, he’s so fucking sick of it. He’s puked more times in the past however many days than he has in the past— fuck. A year. Holy shit. He OD’d on May first last year and spent the two months before that throwing up in the trash can in Prospect Park and barfing in the bathroom at the Holiday Inn in Carle Place. But it was never this bad. He was never this bad at drinking before. It’s a goddamn shame.

At least he finished the case, maybe the first tangible goal he’s been able to accomplish since he got blown up. What did all his NCO evaluations say he had? Grit? Stick-to-itiveness? That’s the stuff.

When the worst of the barrage passes, Bucky eyes his laptop with mounting dread, sits up slowly — God, oh God, his fucking head — and pulls the thing onto his lap. He fuck-ups his password twice, fingers slipping over the keys, and he grabs another tissue to wipe some of the lube away, but it just smears more. When he finally gets in, it’s tabs of porn, porn, and more porn, which he closes with a scowl, one tab for a search on ‘blood in vomit,’ and one tab of a recipe for Ina Garten’s blueberry crumb cake that he’ll never make. But when he opens his email and checks his sent box, he doesn’t find anything from the past— Jesus Christ, he was drinking for seven days. Seven days. And there’s not even some half-composed, aborted attempts languishing in his drafts folder.

“Thank God. Thank you, thank you.”

His focus shifts to the mess beyond his mattress, and he dimly wonders if his phone is somewhere amid the pile of puke sheets in the corner — and there’s the nausea again — or the clothes strewn everywhere or the come-crusted underwear tossed about or the disaster that lies beyond the doorway to the living room. He becomes acutely aware of his need to piss, and he slides off the mattress, cringing at how wrecked his ass feels after drunk-fucking himself after nearly two years of no dick. With the big cock, apparently, because he just couldn’t fucking help himself.

He’s unsteady on his feet, stiff and aching, his knee still swollen, and he hobbles to the door and the living room is just—

Bucky stops, leaning against the doorway, in part because he needs to negotiate a path through the mess but mostly because the mess is utterly disgusting. The floor, the couch, they’re littered with bottles, socks, glasses and mugs coated in dried flecks of orange pulp, plates of partially eaten pizza in various stages of decay, cracker crumbs everywhere, a couple of wadded up paper towels he’s pretty sure he used to clean up both pizza sauce and come, though in what order, he’s not sure, and there are stains on the couch cushions that could be anything, and he’s not sure he wants to get close enough to find out. Miraculously, there is no vomit, but the smell is still rank, a nauseating cross between sweaty taint and rotten food. He gags and clamps his hand over his nose and mouth.

He keeps his hand there and works his way through the minefield, sliding things to the side with his bad foot to clear a path. The kitchen is slightly better, and he is also shocked that he doesn’t find any puke anywhere. Not even in the sink.

The bathroom is also a mess, bath towels on the floor, medicine cabinet open, Pepto and ibuprofen
and Tums all open on the counter, but he seems to have done a fair job cleaning up the worst parts after that first unfortunate day. He stands in front of the toilet now, and he looks down at himself, at his stark bareness, at the stretches of marred limbs, the thin, gross fabric shielding him from the worst of it, and he mentally detaches himself as he starts to push down the band of his underwear — until he’s yanked back into his body by the yanking of his pubes by the dried load — loads? — of come he shot into his drawers, because he’s so ashamed of his own dick that he can’t even bear to pull it out when he’s wasted. He gasps and curses and then squeezes his eyes shut as he touches it with his thumb and dead finger and pisses in the general direction of water, aiming by sound as he presses his hand to the wall to lean into it. He shakes it when he’s done, the little bit that's there is to shake — Jesus, he hates this part the most, why does he do this? — but he can’t stomach pulling his nasty underwear back on, so he pushes them to the floor and steps out of them carefully, looking down at his own feet, balancing himself on the wall.

And then he’s naked. And it’s there. It’s just there. And he’s there. He’s not somewhere else. Somehow, he’s still here, and he’s looking down at it. Even with his recently, ridiculously hopefully trimmed pubes, it’s still shockingly small. Not much more than a head and the tiniest bit of shaft — and what a fucking ugly head it is. He chews his lip as he touches his finger to it, traces the large chunk gouged out of one side, the flecks where the docs fished out shrapnel. He takes the mangled head between his thumb and forefinger and pulls it out, stretching the shaft to its meager maximum length, revealing, among other horrors, the circumferential scar where the two ends were Frankensteined together after losing the whole fucking middle to some shitty Army reconstructive urologist who made some shitty cavalier decision, probably to get some shitty journal article out of it. It’s the cleanest scar of the lot. The rest of the scars are the typical insurgent trail mix medley that pattern the rest of his limbs. Jesus, it’s so scarred, so damaged, that he almost can’t stop looking at it now. It’s a marvel. A disgusting, terrible marvel.

He eyes the Leatherman he left on the shelf from when he CLP’d the door hinges, and he grabs it before he can think too hard about it, fumbles it from the case, and holds the ruler part up to his dick, pressing it against his pubic bone. And he knew it would be bad, but he wasn’t ready for this number, or the one he gets when he stretches it out again to calculate his maximum wood.

He lets it go. It retracts, shrinking up like a mollusk into a battered shell.

1.75 inches. 2.75 inches.

He swallows the saliva pooling in his mouth.

But—

It’s his. This is his dick. This is just what he has now. He can piss with it. He can come with it. It performs all the basic physiological functions that it’s supposed to. And in that moment, a weird, fucked-up relief washes through his entire body. All the fighting he’s done, all the kicking and screaming and raging against it— he doesn’t have to do it anymore. He can drop it like a boulder. Because there is nothing that he can do about it. Absolutely nothing.

So he might as well claim it, because it’s his anyway, and it’s been his all along. And he might as well choose now to start telling himself the truth.

But that doesn’t mean he has to like it.

“Gross.”

He curls up his lip as he puts his Leatherman back into its case. In the shower, he washes away the come and the lube and the cigarettes and booze sweat and bits of cracker undoubtedly lodged in his
days’ worth of scruff — he hasn’t dared to look at himself in the mirror. He washes his Frankendick with his actual hand, ugh, and that’s quite enough touching for one day. After, Bucky wraps a towel around his waist and brushes his teeth and tries to tackle some of the mess. As he goes, he takes a long drink of Pepto but stops, abruptly and with a choked off gasp, when he realizes he’s about to finish off the bottle. He caps it carefully and puts it back in the medicine cabinet, back in its original place, just the right angle, just the way he left it. Then Bucky downs a few Tums and ibuprofen with a scooped hand of water.

He makes his way back to his room, with a pit stop in the kitchen for what he thinks is going to be two large glasses of water but ends up being only a half glass, followed by a couple minutes of dry heaving over the sink. Back in his room, he roots around his dresser for clean clothes. All his comfy ones are on the floor, covered in God knows what, so he has to wear jeans and a sweater, like he’s going somewhere special instead of facing the dreck of his relapse.

He looks around his room, head pounding as he takes in the wreckage. There’s so much, he’s not sure where to start. Maybe he should tackle the sanitary hazards first. The dildos. The barf. The rotting food. God, he should just throw out all of his bedding. It’s gross. It’s old. He could use something new. A ‘fresh start’ would be a little too cliche, but he’s had that stuff since Bragg. Maybe it deserved to be barfed on.

Okay, dildos, barf, food, open the windows, get some fresh air—

Fuck. And then there’s the couch. The rug. The floors. The counters. Everything else.

Fuck it. He is hiring somebody. He’s picking up the big stuff, and he is gonna look somebody up to come deep clean his apartment. While he is away. And he is leaving an enormous tip.

He eventually finds his phone underneath his sex bag while putting away his dildos. It’s completely out of battery, and when he plugs it in, he sits on the cleanest part of the couch, powers it up, and checks the damage from the past week. The first thing that pops up is the notification and worried voicemail from Scott about their missed appointment this morning, which draws a sharp curse from Bucky, and he’s calling him back before he can even put his words into a coherent configuration. Thank God he catches Scott before the police show up for a welfare check, which Scott admits to strongly considering, and they reschedule for Monday morning, first thing. He is, however, on thin ice with his DBT group. One more miss, and he’s out. Fine, fine, he says, fucking fine. He’ll be there with bells on.

Next it’s the texts, including a long exchange with Quill, of all people, from day three. The lamest of small talk. How’s it going in NYC dude? Great great how r you. What are you up to. Living the dream old. Old what? Typo nothing. You working yet? Nope fuckn relaxing living the dream in BK. Right on. Coming to town next month can I crash with you for a couple days? Sure no prob. Sweet! I’ll text with the deets later.

Bucky groans and goes through the rest of his messages to see if he made any other dumb commitments to people he barely talks to. He finds a text from Winnie from two days ago, saying I love you blah blah blah I’m here for you when you’re ready to reach out for help, God, shut the fuck up. And then one from Hank with the same shit except without the fluff, and fuck you, too. Nothing from Rikki or Daisy.

He checks Steve’s name. There is not one but three messages, all from yesterday.

11:23

Have you started on your letter for Parker?
I’ve never written one of these before. How do you organize it?

I hope you’re doing okay

Bucky slumps against the cushions and runs his hand through his hair. His jaw pops as he works it to the side, and he tries to think of what he might say, anything, but his mind is a dead vacuum, and the nausea reasserts itself with a vengeance.

He can’t right now. He just can’t. He puts the phone down to finish charging and goes to take more Tums and try drink more water, and what he really needs is maybe a little food, maybe the driest toast ever toasted, God, but he also needs to clean, and he can’t leave to get toast and come back to this fucking mess. So he grabs a garbage bag and scoops up the trash and old pizza and bottles and his 90 day chip and anything he just doesn’t want to see ever again and fills four bags, with the bedding included, gagging and dry heaving and sick as fuck the whole fucking time but never once hurling. He fills a laundry bag for the fluff-and-fold and sets it by the door and collects the dirty dishes in some semblance of order on the counter. Slowly, the apartment starts to look like a livable space again, and it starts to smell less like a bathhouse dumpster. And he finds a cleaning service that claims to specialize in nasty-ass jobs like this, and he makes up a story about his ex-roommate trashing the place before he left and how he’s disabled and he really can’t give the place the attention it needs — and the last part is the God’s honest truth, because he can’t scrub anything for shit with his grip — and they are oh-so-sympathetic and quote him a rate he can’t even say is fair or unfair. He’ll throw any amount of money at this fucking mess, at this point. They can even come over first thing tomorrow morning. It’s much more than he deserves.

Bucky leaves his phone when he puts on his sunglasses and heads out his first meal of the day at 6 pm. He makes it down to Terrace Bagels and gets a plain with light butter and a banana, and he eats it there, excruciatingly slowly, each bite hard fought, mostly unwanted. He distracts himself with watching a mother feed her baby little bites of omelette, until he loses his appetite completely.

The next time he checks his phone, it’s dark. Quiet. Quiet in his head. In the living room. In the building. On the street outside. He pulls up Steve’s texts.

Have you started on your letter for Parker?

I’ve never written one of these before. How do you organize it?

I hope you’re doing okay

“Fuck.”

He takes a deep breath, puts his thumbs to the screen, and starts typing.
Warnings: Descriptions of gore, homophobic language, ableist language, misogynistic language, references to suicide, detailed depictions of extreme alcohol use, brief reference to adverse childhood sexual experiences, vomit
Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, pitchforkcentral86, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

WARNINGS AT THE END

Glossary of Terms:

FAP: The Army Family Advocacy Program offers services to help families better function amid the stressors of military life. One of their functions is to handle investigations for domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect.

Ghillie suit (pronounced like "gill"): a suit designed to camouflage a sniper, often in a natural environment. Here's an Army Ranger wearing one

TDY: Temporary Duty

TRICARE: The medical insurance that service members, military dependents, and retirees are covered under.

Spence: The Spence School is a private all girls K-12 school on the Upper East Side

Lieutenant Dan Choi: If you’d like to read more, here is a recent article on him

Plebe: A first year student at West Point

FTX: Field training exercise

PLDC: Primary Leadership Development Course - A leadership course E-4s (Specialist or Corporal, depending on how unlucky the soldier is) go to as they prepare to attain the rank of E-5 (Sergeant)

OBL: Osama bin Laden

75th: The 75th Ranger Regiment out of Fort Benning, GA.

PCS: Permanent Change of Station - To move from one base to another permanently

First Captain: The highest ranking student at West Point, a position occupied during one's senior year. This is a very prestigious position earned through a rigorous selection process that involves liaising between students and faculty, managing student affairs,
and other leadership duties.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
BAGHDAD WALTZ

AN IRAQ WAR LOVE STORY IN THREE MOVEMENTS

BY DREADNOUGHT
Bucky doesn’t realize he’s stalled out until he’s yanked from his thoughts by the insistent nudge of a New Yorker who talks with his elbows instead of his words. He knocks his weight against Bucky hard enough to pitch him off of his balance, which is tenuous even when he’s not face-planted in some dark corner of his mind. And by the time Bucky scrapes together a retort about the dude’s fucking milk-related emergency, better call 911, the guy is already at the cash, bitching about the $5 credit card minimum and, Jesus, just pick up a pack of Trident, you stupid fuck.

He eyes the cooler, the wall of milk and half-and-half and yogurt and sour cream and, just beyond that, beer, row after row of amber glass and shiny cans, local microbrews and corporate swill. Maybe on another day, he might be fantasizing about a drunken vacation from the fragments of conversation that have been möbius stripping around his head since he wandered out of Rikki’s apartment yesterday. Something to blot out the ugly mess that she dragged into the kitchen, redact everything back into the empty space of forgetfulness, that thing he does, that magic power of his to erase the things he cannot bear, to banish them so far from his consciousness that his own childhood became a moth-eaten sieve, unrecognizable even to his own sister.

“Don’t you remember—”

“How do you not remember—”

Fucking Hank. He just couldn’t let it go. Just couldn’t let him move on. He invited Bucky to his apartment — which was in The Village and not in uppity-Uptown — and sat him down with a blank sheet of paper and stared at him above the rims of his glasses until he could write down one thing he resented about his dad. Which meant that he stared for a long goddamn time, because Bucky didn’t put a single word down. Wouldn’t, at first. Refused on principle. Said it was stupid and unnecessary and rude to resent the dead and did Hank resent Howard? Of course not. This backfired spectacularly, because Hank apparently resents Howard ferociously for stroking out, and he insisted that Bucky must resent his father at least a little bit for leaving him with Winnie. And even as Bucky felt something unraveling inside his gut, a pressure he hasn’t yet dared to name, even as he took up his pen and pressed the ballpoint to the page, he still couldn’t. He just couldn’t.

Bucky startles when his phone buzzes, and he crams his hand into his front pocket to fish it out, hoping — as he’s taken to doing — that it’s Steve’s name he finds.

Can u get me some pop tarts - cherry

Bucky sighs out a breath.

Ok

And that thing in his gut, that slithering thing, it didn’t go back to sleep after he crammed that blank sheet back in his folder. It stirred the whole way back to Brooklyn, displacing half the dinner Quill made, subsiding only briefly when he rubbed one out in the shower and then again just before bed. And it curled open as he lay awake, still adjusting to the sounds of another person in the apartment, the creak of the floorboards, the trips to the kitchen and bathroom, sounds of a man who can’t tolerate the dark and quiet. And when he went to Rikki’s the next day to help her make quinoa salad for some yuppie Park Slope block party, he just had to open his big fucking mouth and ask her about Dad. What she remembered about him. What she thought about him. Did she like him? Did she
fucking like him? Was she afraid? What kind of questions are those? Where the fuck did they come from? But he asked them, and when they compared notes, it was like Bucky was raised on a completely different planet.

“Dad was never—”

“—you didn’t hear it? I guess you were drugged up—”

He jerks his head, a sharp, cringing tick. Two women wedge themselves behind him to get to some beans, way too goddamn close, and he starts down a side aisle, his limp extra heavy with compounded stiffness from his hips and back, aching from years of jumping out of planes and trucks and APCs and lying prone, unmoving, for hundreds and hundreds of hours. And he’s got no cane to offset him, because it’s been long enough and he just shouldn’t fucking need it anymore so he’s not gonna use it, so there.

“—didn’t you wonder why she took us—”

“—it was only a matter of time—”

Only a matter of time? Only a matter of fucking time? Well, that’s not how George Barnes is supposed to work. He’s supposed to be better than that. He’s supposed to be—

And 2% and some foo foo ground coffee like hazelnut or st

Bucky blinks.

_They don’t have that here_

Maybe they do. He doesn’t remember. He can’t remember anything.

“Wow. You really don’t remember any of that?”

No— it’s not that Bucky couldn’t remember. All it took was for Rikki to say the words, like an invocation, and it was all right there. The screaming. The crashing. The stomach-clenching, heart-pounding fear. The violent smashing of that man against George Barnes the protector, the patient, caring father, the best dad in the world, the man who died all because his son was a stupid little faggot. And it was too much. It was all too fucking much.

Ok just 2 mt dew

:P

_Lol don’t judge. U know u_

Bucky scowls.

_Fuck you_

:D

He slides his phone back in his pocket and gapes as he strains to map the store in his mind, his own bodega, his regular haunt for eight months, his grocery store and drugstore and temptor. The map has fuzzed-out patches where food should be, and now the checkout girl is looking at him funny, because yeah, he’s been standing and hobbling around and buying nothing for probably twenty minutes. He checks his watch. No— thirty.
So he wanders, because a bodega without Pop Tarts is a bodega that doesn’t exist. He weaves up and down the aisles until he finds them and spends another few minutes looking over each box, checking and rechecking the frosting colors, just to make sure he’s not losing it, before he texts Quill back.

*No cherry, only strawberry*

*Ugh ok just fruit loops*

Once Bucky’s favorite until he ate it at the onset of the worst flu of his life, even sight of the box is enough to turn his stomach. He shoves the cereal under his left arm and limps back to the cold case for the Dew. By the time he gets to the cash, he realizes that he has no idea why he even came here in the first place, and then he remembers that he didn’t get Quill’s milk, so he curses and leaves the line to snag a half gallon and plant himself again at the ass end behind a young couple that won’t stop goddamn touching each other. By the time he pushes open the door and steps out onto the sidewalk, he’s so thankful to be out of that place that he doesn’t even mind that it’s 81 degrees and he’s dressed for 50.

But the walk home does nothing to clear his head. He overshoots his own street. He replays that night. The yelling. The crash. How Winnie slammed into his room with Rikki in tow and pulled his covers off and said *I’m so sorry, baby, I’m so sorry,* as she coaxed him out of bed, because he was a paralyzed, terrified fucking wreck and had to be carried to the car like the goddamn baby she called him, while he yelled and screamed and called her a bitch and a cunt, and where the fuck was she taking *his kids,* and Bucky’s not sure what would have happened if she wasn’t carrying him, because when they got in the car and screeched out of the driveway, he pounded on the hood like a madman, like he didn’t give a fuck if the neighbors saw it all this time, if FAP got called again and the social worker came over again and asked about what happens when daddy gets mad, and Bucky didn’t know if he could pull it off again, because the lady barely bought it last time — which was just because he threw a glass, it was nothing, it wasn’t even *at* anybody — and once may be unsubstantiated but twice is a pattern or something like that, he probably shouldn’t have been listening, anyway.

Bucky puts the groceries away to the sounds of Quill in the living room playing Battlefield on XBox. He catches glimpses of it as he hobbles around, opening cupboards he can’t remember the purpose of opening, shoving things into places he’ll probably forget later. Quill is cross-legged on the couch — Bucky’s thoroughly deep-cleaned couch, good as new, not even a whiff of a relapse to be smelled — narrating enthusiastically as he blows away Russians in the kind of urban desert landscape they’ve both expended actual lives in.

At least, Bucky assumes so. Quill has never talked about Fallujah. Even in residential, he only spoke around in the obscurest sense, enough to generate generic, therapist-placating stuck points like “If I’d been a better blah blah, I could have prevented blah blah.” And surely no corpsman embedded with First Marines during the deadliest battle of the Iraq War gets by without cracking off some kill shots, so Bucky is pretty confident in his assumption. But it’s all he’s really got.

“Hey, man,” Quill greets. He stares intently at the screen, mashing buttons as he moves down a road with his unit, popping off rounds between a revolver and a sniper rifle, the visible parts of his arms covered with thick layers of shredded fabric strips.

Bucky steps into the living room. “Are you running down the street in a ghillie suit?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Ridiculous.”
“Ridiculously fun. You got one of those in your closet somewhere?” Quill’s tongue slides between his teeth, and he twists the controller sharply to the side, like a kid who hasn’t yet learned that controllers don’t work that way.

Bucky snorts. “Where the fuck do you think I was working? The forests of Ramadi?”

Quill looks up at him, brows rising.

“I got your cereal and your gross drinks.”

Bucky steps forward and holds out one of Quill’s Dews toward him.

“Sweet. Thanks.”

Quill takes it from him, cracks it open, and chugs half the bottle while Bucky watches, oddly captivated and mildly disgusted, until the pull from his bedroom is too strong and the old wires that definitely shouldn’t be firing start to spark, as they have been so often lately. And then he’s moving again, gait steady for once, until the chaotic sounds of the game fade and Quill calls out behind him.

“You okay?”

“I’m gonna lie down.”

“Okay. Hey, I was gonna order Chinese. Want something?”

Bucky shakes his head. His foot hits the pine planks of his floor, gaze drifting to the laptop sitting on his nightstand. His blood begins to thrum. “I’m good.”

The game starts again. The staccato clacks of semi automatic fire burst into the room. “I’m gonna get you something.”

“Then why fucking ask me?”

He shuts the door behind him. Slams it, if he’s being honest. The sound throws him back into the hornet’s nest of ugly memories that he’s been trying to kick away for the past three days, echoing back a decade of slamming doors, and he presses his better ear to the wood to make sure Quill is occupied before making his way to the window and pulling the blinds. Then he’s pushing his pants off and climbing on the bed, leaning against the headboard, laptop propped on the pillow next to him, and he’s on the same site, typing in the same search, pulling up the same scene, lubing up his fucked up hand and jerking himself to the same shit, replaying it over and over because it’s taking so fucking long, because his dick is so sore, but he won’t stop until he rubs this one out, grimacing, squirming, fighting for it — fighting against himself — with every ounce of concentration he can muster, while his miserable memories fight their way into the fringes of his consciousness, and, God, what he wouldn’t give to be able to crank up the volume, to drown it out with grunts and moans and “fuck yeahs” and “oh, shits” and “fuck me harders,” but he has to listen for Quill, the nosey motherfucker, so he jerks himself faster and tries to imagine himself getting fucked— which doesn’t work, because who would want to fuck such a pathetic piece of shit, a limp, frightened child whose mommy has to carry him around like an infant, so he imagines himself doing the fucking — fucking into that cocky brunette’s tight ass — he’d fuck that smug little smirk right off his face, that’s for sure — God, it’s been so fucking long— and he tightens his fist as much as he can, wraps his other hand around it to make it tighter, and he turns up the sound just a little, because fuck Quill, who cares if he comes in, let him see — and the ridiculous porn sounds and some mental gymnastics and the faint memory of feeling powerful and competent and desirable gets him there, but just barely. And when he comes, it’s hardly satisfying, teeth clenched, snarling and angry.
Bucky pulls a hand towel from his nightstand and cleans himself up with careless, rough motions, slams his laptop shut, and crams his miserable dick back into his underwear. He sits as his breathing settles. As his frustration cools. And it’s going fine, he’s settling a little, he can relax maybe—

But then just outside the door, Quill shouts, and he presses his hand to his chest, heart fluttering beneath it, and everything is tight, a crushing trap for George Barnes’s ghost to wreak havoc in, and he swipes his phone off the nightstand and calls the seventh number on his Favorites list.

“Hello, you’ve reached the voicemail box of Scott Lang, Mental Health Treatment Coordinator at the VA New York Harbor Health Care System. If this is a mental health emergency, please hang up and dial 1-800-273-8255 and press 1 to reach the Veterans Crisis Line. That number again is 1-800-273-8255 and press 1 to reach the Veterans Crisis Line. Otherwise, please leave a detailed message and I will get back to you as soon as I can during normal business hours. Thank you and have a great day!”

At the sound of the tone, Bucky stutters, fingers tightening around the thick case that has kept his screen from cracking after about a dozen drops a week.

“It’s Jamie Barnes. I need to come in. Call me. Thanks.”

He lets his arm drop onto the bed. At least blowing his load siphoned a tiny bit of the muscle tension from him. It usually does. The room is dim and unsettlingly quiet, and what a fucking pointless endeavor, like most of his endeavors, because none of it helps for long. None of it. None of it. There’s nowhere to shove any of this. No hole to bury it in. No lie to craft it into. It’s naked and irrefutable, and why is this happening now? He didn’t fucking ask for this — oh, but yes he did. He literally did, because he’s a stupid, masochistic idiot.

He gathers himself together. Puts on pants. Opens his laptop and clears away the porn, though what’s the point, because he’s just gonna be on there again tonight. Opens the blinds. Smooths over the bedding and puts away his stuff. By the time he’s done, it almost looks like the room of someone who’s not floundering in existential despair.

Quill doesn’t look up when he steps back into the living room.

“Can’t sleep?”

“I have to go to the city.”

“Why?” His brows furrow, and he smashes the control pad violently. Onscreen, his character takes several brutal, fatal hits. “Oh, no, no, no, no! Ah, no!” Quill throws down his controller on the cushion next to him.

“Appointment.”

“Want a ride? I’m bored. And dead.”

“With what?”

“Don’t you have a car or something? I still have my license.” He smiles and takes a heavy swig from his Mountain Dew.

Bucky considers it. The thought of hobbling down to the station, sweating his nut off, then spending 30 minutes in a hot tube underground is aversive enough to offset his immediate rejection of the idea of Quill grinning behind the wheel of his truck.
“Fine.”

It takes nearly twenty minutes to find Bucky’s Tundra. He can’t keep track of the goddamn thing, Rikki moves it so much for street cleaning and errands. They trek all the way down to Park Slope and back before finding it on 16th — he swore it was on 17th, swore it. Quill gives a leaping whistle as they approach, and Bucky does a walk-around to check the tires and watch his scowling face in the shiny black paint as he scans for dents.

“Didn’t leave much room, did they?” Quill observes as he follows. The fuckers on either side have barely left any space for them to go back or forward. “You’re gonna have to be my ground guide for this one.”

Bucky reaches for the chrome handle of the driver’s side door, gripping it reflexively and then releasing it. He keeps walking, skimming his fingers along the body. “Do you even know how to drive a truck?”

“Sure. My fifth foster dad had one. I aggressively borrowed it.”

“‘Aggressively borrowed,’ huh?” He eyes Quill as he swings the door open.

Quill extends his hand and motions with it. “Gimme your keys.”

Bucky fishes into his pocket and pulls them — keys for the truck, two for the apartment, one for Winnie’s, one for the kitchen at the LGBT center. He swings his arm for a warm up throw to get the arc right and then lets them go, and his damn dead finger doesn’t move out of the way until a half-second too late, so the arc goes high. Quill makes an earnest dive for them but misses by a hair.

“Sorry.”

Quill snatches them from the ground and brandishes them with a grin, and Bucky spends the next five minutes standing in view of various mirrors, inching Quill out of the spot, shouting and waving and using all the old signals he learned when he was a private, until they’re in the clear and barreling for the 278.

“—Don’t dig trucks, right?”

Bucky pulls himself from the steady, hypnotic stream of buildings and people passing by outside, glaring across the cab. “What?”

“You know New York chicks aren’t into trucks, right?” Quill glances over at him. “They’re gonna think you’re some stupid redneck.”

Bucky snorts weakly and looks back out the window. “Like I give a fuck.”

“I mean, unless you’re into redneck chicks. I’m sure there are some here. This’ll be like a magnet for them or something. Maybe you got a taste for that when you were at Fort Garbage Dump back in Bumfuck, Nowhere.”

Bucky presses his forehead to the glass. How many women has he had in this truck? In the very seat he’s in right now? Sergeant Baltazar. The girl from Huske. The girl from Mash House. Whatever girl he could be seen taking somewhere to do whatever whenever it had been too long since the last. And Natasha, God, who sat in this truck a lot, who came home with him more nights than he ever intended her to, who slept in his bed, who put up with his temperamental cock and his fitful sleep for much, much longer than he deserved. And he tried, didn’t he? He really did. They both did. He wanted it so bad.
“Chicks are into guys with a story. They eat it up. My buddy got both legs and an arm blown off. He got a really hot wife. That’s after he got blown up. She didn’t care. And he definitely didn’t have this.” Quill’s arm moves around, and Bucky catches the tail end of a hand-wave around his own face. “You got the face, at least. That buddy was pretty much ugly. Even before the IED. Ugly mug. Just the way God made him. The shrapnel made it worse.”

“What the fuck is this?”

Quill taps his fingers on the wheel. “You got blown up a long time ago, man. It’s time to put yourself out there. You’re way better looking than my pal with one arm. No reason you shouldn’t have a hot girlfriend to take care of you.” He cranes his head as they pass a sign for the 478 juncture. “Hey, what bridge?”

“Manhattan. I don’t need a hot girlfriend to take care of me. I can take care of myself.” He wishes he sounded more sure of that.

“I know, man, I know. You just don’t seem happy.”

“I’m not. And it’s fine.”

The truck falls quiet, save for the roll of old tires over the early summer concrete. After a couple of minutes, Quill switches on the radio, and the cab fills with Terry Gross’s voice as she interviews an Iranian journalist.

“Nope.” Quill drives his fist into the power button. The sound cuts out. “Had enough of that for one lifetime.”

Bucky doesn’t have the energy to explain that there’s a difference between Persians and Arabs and Shia and Sunni Muslims and every other thing that he’s assuming is the same about completely different people. He prefers the staticky hum of the road and the drone of his worries now. What if Scott can’t see him? What if he’s not even there today? What is he even going to say? How is Scott even going to help—

“So, no girlfriend?” Quill asks.

“Why are you so obsessed with this chick thing? You trying to fucking come on to me or something?”

“What? No! Why would I do that? I’m not a f— gay.”

Bucky clenches his fingers. He swallows.

“The only chicks I’m hanging out with are the chicks in my therapy group,” Bucky mutters.

“For PTSD?”

“I don’t— I don’t even know. One of the women in group said I’m borderline something. I don’t know what that means.”

Quill’s right brow rises. “You shouldn’t let a random girl from group tell you what’s wrong with you. Pretty sure that’s your therapist’s job.”

“I know. I should ask him. They talk about it in group sometimes, and it sounds like me, but maybe I don’t wanna know. You know?” They hit the bridge, and he takes in the perfectly spaced flashes of suspension cables as they pass by. “I think a bunch of bad stuff is about to happen. It started before
you got here. Stuff has just been leaking out. I can’t stop it anymore. I kinda think I’m fucked.”

“What kind of stuff?”

Bucky chews the words for a few moments before pushing them out. “Childhood stuff.”

Quill nods in a slow, serious way. “Rough?”

“No. I had it easy. I just—” Bucky looks down at where his hands are gathered on his lap.

“Yeah, childhood stuff is… tough.”

Quill goes quiet but his mouth is open, working, straining to add one more thing, which he finally does when they get well on the other side of the bridge.

“I was gonna kill my foster dad. Literally. I fantasized about it all the time. Planned it, moment by moment. I was gonna smash his head in with a crowbar while he was passed out in the garage.”

“Did you?” Bucky asks, and he’s only half joking.

“Nah. Took the truck instead. Never went back. He didn’t press charges. Didn’t come after me. He was smart.” Quill looks over, and his smile is flitting. “So, therapy is good. Better than grand theft auto.”

Bucky meets Quill’s green eyes, but the contact lasts only for a moment before Quill looks away, back to the road ahead. His jaw ticks, and he seems to find something interesting over the center divide while Bucky briefly entertains what might drive teenage Quill to nearly beat a man to death in his sleep. He decides it’s best not to turn too many stones in that particular garden.

“Guess so,” Bucky says simply, then returns to staring out the window.

— —

He makes Quill drop him off. Argues with him about it for five precious minutes that he could be stalking Scott’s office and ditches mid-sentence, leaving Quill outside the main entrance until he must take the hint and drive off, at some point. Bucky’s glad that Quill isn’t there to see Bernie’s face when she tells him that he doesn’t have an appointment scheduled. And he’s glad Quill’s not here with him in the waiting room on standby in case Scott has any cancellations or free spots in his schedule. He’s less glad for Quill’s absence when his legs start to shake and his brain revolts and replays fragments of December 2nd 1991 over and over, each iteration clearer and somehow more incomprehensible than the last as the pieces fill molecule by molecule. He could use Quill’s presence, the solid, goofy heft of him. Even though he might be just as fucked up, somehow, together, they feel very sane.

It’s nearly 16:30 when Scott pops his head in, and Bucky’s sure he’s gonna tell him to go kick rocks, but he must look some kind of horrible, because he doesn’t, and Bucky can’t remember ever feeling so relieved to be limping down the hall toward Scott’s shitty office.

“Bernie’s back,” Bucky says, stopping in the middle of the room while Scott closes the door behind them.

“Yeah, they found someone else to fill in at polytrauma for a while,” Scott says, taking a seat at his desk. He glances at the clock and then back over at Bucky’s face. “So, what’s up?”

Of course he wants to go home. Probably to see his little goober kid. Fuck. He shouldn’t have come.
Why is he even here, anyway? Because he’s crazy. Because of Rikki. Because—

“I don’t know what’s real. I don’t remember things. Or— some things have happened, and it’s like they happened to someone else. Like, that can’t be me. But I know it was me.”

Scott’s eyes widen incrementally as he nods.

“I see— like a movie of me, a kid who looked like me, and stuff is happening to him, but I don’t feel it. Or I feel things I definitely shouldn’t feel. Like it’s fucked up that I feel them. I don’t know. It’s really, really fucked up. I’m really confused.”

“Okay. Yeah, that does sound confusing. Do you wanna sit down?”

“And my dad— He did bad things. It’s like I can’t— I know he did them, I see it in my memory, but I just can’t accept it. You know?”

Scott gestures to the chair next to his desk. “What do you mean by bad things?”

Bucky eyes the other chair, the cushy, comfy-looking one in the corner with the matching ottoman and side table instead of the hard, plastic-upholstered one next to Scott he usually favors.

“Can I sit here?” He points to it.

Scott sputters and gestures an enthusiastic hand. “Yes! Of course. That’s why it’s there.”

Bucky approaches it with caution. It’s a move he can’t undo. Once he sits in the real therapy chair, that’s it. This is real. This isn’t just Bucky putting up with some doof trying to cover his ass to prevent another at-risk veteran from falling through the cracks. If he sits in that chair, this is therapy. And if it’s therapy, who the fuck knows what will come out.

He stops and touches the arm, where the upholstery is thin. “He had a temper,” Bucky says softly.

Scott makes a small sound. “What does ‘temper’ mean?”


“Did he yell and scream at you?”

“No. He was the best dad ever.”

“Did he yell and scream at your mother?”

Bucky drags his fingernail over the seam in the upholstery, and instead of turning around to sit in the chair, he bends his knees, cringing, and lowers himself to sit on the ottoman. He braces his hands next to him, because this isn’t the right way. But he finds the seam on the fabric again and touches it, focuses his attention on it, counts the threads out to the edge until he gets to sixteen, then comes back again.

“Pretty much always at her,” Bucky finally says.

“But it could have been you, right? The threat was there. If he yelled at her, maybe it’s possible that he’d yell at you?”

Bucky’s right shoulder hitches a bit. He’s not sure if Scott can see it from where he’s sitting.

“Did your dad ever hit her?”
Bucky throws a glare back. Scott is unusually stiff, perched on the edge of his seat, as strained as his words are casual.

_Didn’t you hear it didn’t you wonder why it was only a matter of time—_

“Rikki said he threw a vase at her. She said it’s why she took us away.”

“Did he throw things a lot?”

“It wasn’t a vase,” Bucky says. He cups his hands together. “It’s more like a weird bowl thing. She always had them around. I don’t know why.” Bowls and plates that never saw the dinner table. That never held anything edible, if anything at all. “But he was loving. He was good. He loved us. He was affectionate and loving and good. He was the best. He loved me. He loved us.”

“Sure. And he was also violent. I imagine it was hard to know when it was going to be which. It must have been confusing.”

Scott swallows. His words are thin. “He wasn’t violent.”

Scott makes another sound, and there’s a deep gulf of silence before he finally responds with, “Okay.”

“He worked a lot. He was stressed.”

“You said your mom took you away? What was going on?”

Bucky clears his throat. “Shit. Just a bunch of shit. They got into a fight. It was my fault.”

“You think it’s your fault that they fought or that your mom took you?”

He pulls his arms in, to put something against the welling discomfort in his belly, the sour boil that always seems to be rolling there now but is worse and worse these days, worse when he’s reminded of everything he’s done, everything he is, every wound he’s carved, every chaotic reaction he’s catalyzed.

“Everything. I told them I was— gay. I mean, that was just part of it, but— I guess he screamed at me then.”

“When he found out?”

Bucky shakes his head. His finger finds the threads again.

“He cried when he found out. He screamed because I wouldn’t tell him what was going on. Screamed and— threw another fucking bowl against the wall. This little blue chachki bowl with marbles in it. Fucking marbles everywhere. So stupid. All these fucking bowls. Got me to talk, that’s for sure.”

Bucky looks to the far wall, next to Scott’s book shelf, and he imagines an explosion of glass, the rain of marbles, the scattering across the room, under every piece of furniture, between their feet, the you better fucking tell me right now what the fuck happened what the fuck is going on God damn it, the crushing pain in his chest, like getting the breath kicked out of him all over again, the humiliation of crying like a little fucking sissy, knowing he couldn’t say what really happened, so he just told the first story that fit the evidence, anything to make it stop—

“He was just worried about me,” Bucky mutters. He bites down on his lip. Chews it. “He wasn’t
very good at handling his emotions. Winnie says we’re the same.”

“Do you scream and throw things?” Scott asks.

Bucky looks to the window, still working his lip. He remembers the Army, the NCO shouting theatrics that weren’t all theatrics, especially not toward the end. He remembers his mother’s face.

“I yell sometimes. I get really mean.”

“How did he die? The actual cause?”

“Mechanical failure. He landed it the best he could.”

“He flew a helicopter, right?”

“Blackhawk. Almost everyone else survived. Only one other guy died, I think. He fell out.” Bucky shoves his index finger into the flesh of the ottoman next to him. “But he wouldn’t have volunteered for TDY to go on that mission if I hadn’t caused all that trouble. He wouldn’t have gone if they hadn’t fought. So it’s my fault he’s dead.”

Scott’s chair creaks as he shifts. “You lost me there.”

“What did he have left? His kids were gone. His wife was gone. Might as well fuck off to Missouri for three weeks. What else was he supposed to do?”

“So, there’s no chance he would have volunteered for that mission if you hadn’t left home?”

Bucky’s urge to respond is immediate, and it’s to say “No chance,” but it’s just not fucking true, because he has no idea what his dad would have done. He’s beginning to wonder if he knows anything at all about George Barnes.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think you’re looking for reasons to blame yourself for his death because it fits with your story that you’re bad, and because a bad thing happened, you must have caused it?”

“I don’t know.”

Bucky glances over his shoulder. Scott has his elbows planted on the armrests of his chair, fingers tented in front of his chin. He slips into a smile as soon as Bucky makes eye contact, but it’s effortful. He’s clearly working through his next steps in this minefield.

“What did your mom do when you came out?” Scott asks.

Bucky shifts, canting his body a little so he doesn’t have to crane his head all the way around to look at him. “She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t cry. She stood there by the doorway while my dad cried. Her hand over her mouth. Silent. Just— stone fucking silent.”

Scott purses his lips. “How did that feel?”


“Why do you think your dad was crying?”

“Realized how pathetic I was, I guess. Made him sad. So he cried. Probably fucking ashamed. I
don’t know. It wasn’t a fucking Taster’s Choice moment or some shit. Those aren’t actually fucking real.”

Scott swivels in his chair and looks away for a moment, down to where all the imaginary marbles would probably still be rolling along the cheap, low-pile carpet. “Do you really think he was ashamed of you?”

Something about the way Scott says it, the certainty with which Bucky knows he would not be ashamed of his own son for being gay, or ashamed for the other awful things Bucky did and let happen to him, the kindness there, the understanding, the softness… it fills him with sharp, edgy heat that he can’t squirm away from.

“I’m done talking about this,” Bucky says, and he rises from the ottoman and lets himself drop into its matching chair. It would be a relief if it didn’t feel like his insides were actively trying to invert him.

Scott gives a weak smile. “Are you sure? What about that other stuff you were talking about when you first got here? About feeling like things happened to someone else, not connecting emotionally to it? I think—”

“You wanna know what porn I actually watch?” Bucky interjects. “I mean, I watch the hardcore shit I told you about, but you wanna know what really gets me off?”

Scott takes a few moments to answer, and for a second, Bucky is convinced that he’s gonna give him the brushoff, that he’s gonna tell him to keep going, keep talking about George, follow that vein all the way to the heart. But he doesn’t.

“Maybe?”

“Two guys. They go on a date. Eat dinner or something. Then they take turns sucking each other off. Then they fuck missionary style and they—” Bucky feels his face begin to heat. He has to shove the word through a full-body recoil. “Hold each other after. It’s literally the gayest shit ever. And it’s almost impossible to find.”

Scott is without words.


Scott’s eyebrows climb.

“No, it’s not what you think. I fucking wish. Not with that guy. I mean just… generally. No, Quill’s super straight. I don’t know if he’s— he might not like— I think he almost said ‘fag’ in the truck on the way here, so. I dunno. I didn’t tell him. But he doesn’t drink. So, that’s good, right?”

“So you’re nervous about coming out to him? Did he correct himself? You said ‘almost.’”

“I don’t wanna talk about fucking coming out, so drop it.”

“Okay. Any urges to relapse?”

Bucky shakes his head. “That last one was completely pointless. Nothing got solved. Nobody gave a shit. And it was just a big fucking mess of garbage and puke to clean up after. My new doc told me I’m on my way to fatty liver disease and cirrhosis, if I keep it up. And he ordered a scope and breath test thingy and said I have an ulcer and H. pylori, which is probably why I’ve lost so much weight
and was throwing up blood. So, that’s not stressful.”

Scott gives some reply, something gently placating, like blah blah that’s a lot on your plate blah blah, which is lost to Bucky’s recollection of his new doctor’s entirely opposite tact. The guy is young, an ultra-salty, ex-military dude, one who hasn’t even been out long enough to lose the haircut, who told him with the bluntness of a man who’s stuffed guts back into too many people that he needs to get his shit together, go to PT and OT for his hands, arm, back, hips, knee, the works—“use your Tricare,” he insisted—and lay off the booze, take his meds, get some exercise, spend time with friends, get a hobby, and go back to work. And when Bucky walked away from the pharmacy with a brown paper bag full of Wellbutrin, naltrexone, and amoxicillin, he couldn’t even say how the guy got him to agree to it all. The fight for the antidepressants was only five minutes, after the doc told him he’s depressed and assured him that the Wellbutrin wouldn’t kill his hard-won boners and would help him not smoke, too. And naltrexone for booze cravings? The real question is why nobody prescribed it for him earlier.


Scott blinks and looks to the door. “Um, I mean, I don’t know why not. Do you have a bachelor’s degree?”

“Do I really need one to check people in to their medical appointments? Is it really that hard?”

“No, definitely not. It could just make it easier to get hired. But you have a 10-point preference, and you could get VRA’d into the position. It’s basically a non-competitive appointment.”

Bucky frowns. “I don’t know what any of that means.”

Scott jots something down on one of the neon sticky notes next to his computer. “Lemme do some digging around for you between now and next week. In the meantime, go on USA Jobs and try to find the position. You’ll need a resume to upload.” He swivels around back to Bucky. “Do you have one?”

“No.” Bucky grips the arms of the chair.

“Well, that’s a good place to start, wouldn’t you say?”

“What the fuck am I supposed to put on it? Eliminated threats from great distances with high proficiency?”

“Didn’t they give you a class before you left the Army?”

Bucky scoffs. He very dimly remembers sitting in a room at the Soldier Support Center with a bunch of other guys, sky fucking high on Percocet, bullshitting his way through talks about interviews, resumes, and translating his laundry list of grunt skills into real person skills. He can’t recall a single viable detail.

“Just do the best you can. I’ll see what I can find out. But I do think getting a job would be a good idea.” Scott turns back to his computer and clicks through his chart. “Are you still going to DBT?”

“Yep. We started interpersonal effectiveness stuff.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Finding balance. I’ve been really out of balance. For as long as I can remember. Maybe my whole
life. Everything is all bad or all good. All right or all wrong. I’m all mistrusting, never open. All self-hating, never accepting. It was so easy in the Army, you know?”

“Yeah, people with black and white thinking do really well in the service. The hierarchy, the rules, it’s very structured.” Scott turns back around and crosses his ankle over his knee.

Bucky’s leg starts to bounce. “I’ve been thinking about it with Steve. I’ve been— we’ve been talking a little over text. Since Parker.” He breathes out a sharp laugh. “It’s so fucking stupid, he’s been texting me about this letter of rec, like he actually needs help writing it. He was, like, the valedictorian of West Point. And the head student, too. First What’s-It-Fuck, I can’t remember. Anyway, he doesn’t need help with a stupid letter. But he’s been texting me about it, and I’m glad, but I wanna ask him out for coffee. I wanna see him. I wanna— I don’t know. I miss him. But I fucked things up so bad. I don’t know if I can fix it.”

“So what do you want to tell him? Anything in particular?”

The thought of just getting Steve on the phone is too improbable to even properly consider, let alone getting him in a chair across from him at Cafe Lumiere. But it hasn’t stopped Bucky from planning their meeting all the same, with the vague detachment that one plans their own funeral decades in the future.

“I don’t know yet. I don’t even know if he’ll say yes. I just… want him to know that I care about him. That I’m sorry for being so selfish. That I’m trying to change. I don’t know what else.” Bucky’s gaze flits down to his boots. “I feel like I need to say something substantial.”

“Like what?”

“How I feel. Whatever that is. I gotta stop being a fucking coward.”

Scott grunts out a sound of acknowledgement. “I’m really impressed with the work you’re doing. You had a relapse, but you got back on track. You’re going to meetings. Meeting with Hank. And now you’re trying to act based on your values, not just reacting to everything all the time.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“And you’re talking about really important stuff, like your dad. Just a few months ago, you said you weren’t gonna talk to me about anything.”

“Well, I don’t know if I can stop this. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t terrified of what’s gonna happen if I keep talking.”

Bucky taps a steady beat on his knee cap with his dead finger, falling in time with the clock. He knows Scott is watching it tick, just out of the corner of his eye, he can feel it, but—

“Do you know why I don’t remember stuff? I don’t think I hit my head that much downrange.”

A pensive ridge forms between Scott’s brows. “Sometimes people forget because some things are too painful. Children learn to dissociate when they can’t escape stressful or traumatic situations—”

Bucky cringes and waves both hands in front of his face. “Okay, okay. Never mind. I don’t wanna know.” He shifts his weight to the edge of his seat then pushes himself up, using the arm rests for leverage.

Scott locks eyes with him, and he seems to make an astute calculation about the futility of pushing, because he gives a compressed little sigh and swivels around to yank his ID card from his keyboard.
“Any thoughts of suicide?” he asks.

“No.”

Scott stands and pushes his chair in toward his desk. “Great. So, will I see you Friday?”

“Yep.”

Bucky gets ushered unceremoniously into the hallway. Scott fumbles the keys from his pocket and locks the door behind them.

“Sorry to rush you out. I’m supposed to pick up Cassie at 5.”

Bucky checks his watch. 16:56. “Where?”

“Spence.”

“Is that close?”

Scott chuckles thinly. “Uh, not really.”

“Shit, you should have told me.”

Bucky shoos him off. “No, go. Don’t wanna piss off the ex.”

“Okay. All right. See you Friday.” Scott takes off at a fast walk, which slips into a shuffle and jog to the elevator banks.

He almost stops Scott to thank him but restrains himself. It’d be for himself more than anything, and it’s not what Scott needs now. He’ll make sure he knows next time.

Bucky stands in the hallway a couple minutes before following. And even though he’s a shitbag for eating up Scott’s time and causing a fight between him and his ex wife, he also feels something else, something maybe not-bad. He’s not sure what to name it precisely, but he thinks it’s because now at least one other person knows one of his carefully tended secrets. That his dad wasn’t perfect. That he was a normal person who— did bad and good things.

And it feels like shit. And he still doesn’t really believe it. And the memory of it, the screaming-crashing-pounding-clenching-crushing-crying is awful, and he would do anything to annihilate it from his mind forever, but he can’t. So he does what all good Rangers are taught to do when they’re starving and cornered and exhausted and hopeless: he embraces the suck. He does an about-face into it, opens his arms, and lets himself fall. He puts one foot out and then the other in front of it, heavy on the left, tender on the right, pained but alive, and makes his way home.

— — —

June 18

Steve settles into his place against the wall, far enough from the other distant gate watchers but close enough that he’ll be able to board with his group efficiently when its called. He tried leaning against one of the pillars the last couple of times, but they’re too close to the garbage cans. Too many people
sliding into his personal space with their trash, disrupting his thoughts, spiking his adrenaline.

The agent gets on the mic and announces pre-boarding. His phone dings, a response from Sharon at last.

*What? Why?*

Steve holds his breath as he types his response.

*I thought you could use a break*

*I can’t just leave him there*

He frowns. The assumption is a little insulting. But then, Sharon would prefer not to have Ethan spend one extra moment longer with Halima, so of course she wouldn’t like this idea. Maybe it’s a bad one.

*I called her a couple weeks ago and asked if she could keep him until tomorrow. She said she’s happy to. I told her it’s a special occasion*

*It’s not*

*Are you mad?*

There’s a painfully long pause before the typing bubble emerges again, then—

*I wish you’d asked*

The agent announces boarding for active duty military and people with disabilities.

He sighs. He types.

*Sorry. I wanted it to be a surprise. I wanted you to have a night to be a grownup.*

*I thought we could go to a movie or something*

At the gate, the energy of the crowd surges and swarms as the first boarding group is called, and he stoops down to shoulder his bag.

*You mean a movie with real people in it? Like not cartoons or dogs or other animals or musical numbers and no muppets?*

*Definitely no muppets*

*Maybe something where they don’t speak English*

*7th grade reading level required. Long grainy weird shots of empty rooms. No exposition. Don’t know what’s happening or what the characters’ names are until the movie is half way over*

*No kids in the theater*

*Something so artsy and obscure that there will hardly even be any ADULTS in the theater*

*That sounds kind of amazing*

*Maybe we could grab dinner too*
Okay. Sorry for overreacting

I should have told you sooner. Should have asked

It’s fine I obviously need to chill the f out

You can say fuck you know

Fuck. Guess I can pick you up then. If you want

Sure. Thanks. 1820 on American

Great. See you then

A tiny smile twitches at the corner of his mouth. But before Steve turns off his phone to board, he flips to the message he received three days ago, the one that remains unanswered, the one he has stared at with a vacant mind and fretted over with a frantic one.

Hey - want to grab coffee or something this weekend?

So many times he’s put his fingers to the keyboard to respond, but every time his brain and heart have fallen into disagreement or stark silence. And so he’s left it untouched, an ongoing casualty of confusion and indecision, because coffee is never just coffee, and if he agrees to coffee, what else is he agreeing to? What would it mean? What would it say? What would he say? Each question dovetails into more and into more, until he’s a paralyzed mess of overthought.

He attempts to respond now, his fingers hovering over the keys. He distantly remembers the ease with which his words used to come for Bucky, but nothing comes now. Not one thought, not one ripple of an emotion. There’s only a stretch of emptiness once bursting with texture, and its absence should probably be distressing, but he can’t seem to find that feeling, either. And so he turns off his phone with a thin breath and hauls his bag to the gate.

—

The flight is bumpy and just shy of 90 minutes. Steve spends nearly every one of them with his eyes closed, hands clenched on the armrests at his window seat, tuning into as many of Robert Plant’s words as he can focus on as he shuffles through his Led Zeppelin-loaded iPod. He’s on Physical Graffiti now, leaping his way through the album on shuffle. He’s had to skip two songs already — “Trampled Underfoot” and “Kashmir” — because they were featured on the crudely titled “Led Zeppelin Fuck Mix” Bucky made for them back in 2000. He tried to listen to both, but they made his stomach churn even more than the rolling of the plane. Or maybe it wasn’t his stomach. Steve can’t even tell anymore. He can’t tell his stomach from his heart from his leg these days; it all feels the same and there only seem to be two settings — numb and pain. But the memory visited him, pinging his senses just as vividly and viscerally as the man next to him wiping his nose with his fingers and then touching the tray table and every other reachable surface.

Bucky had just pulled Steve’s shirt off, mussed his hair, kissed him hard, with teeth, and then he walked to his desk, backwards, swaying and smiling, and grabbed the CD from atop his medical microbiology textbook. He stuck his finger through the center of the disk and gave it a spin, then walked it to the boombox and popped it in. He blasted “Four Sticks” and surged back to Steve, energy feral, and pushed him toward the bed, one hand on his cock, mouth at his ear, nipping, licking, growling—

And it is a damn shame, because he loves “Four Sticks.” “Trampled Underfoot.” “Kashmir.” Why “Kashmir”? He loves every song on that mix and loves, loves to fuck — to come — to “When the
Levee Breaks,” and now they’re all ruined. Maybe forever.

Maybe the bitterness will never stop. Maybe he’ll never be able to think Bucky’s name without a spasm of betrayal.

Sharon meets him at the terminal. She’s already in a pink wrap dress, one she hasn’t worn since.... Steve can’t remember. No surprise there, but it seems legitimately like it might have been a long time. Did she go home to change? Did she bring it to work, plan to wear it even before his message?

She greets him with a full hug, and from the smell of her, the fresh, floral notes of soap and shampoo, she definitely did not come from a Pentagon shower.

“You look nice,” he says as he pulls away, then shifts his bag up higher on his shoulder.

Sharon gives a self-conscious smile and passes her hand down the front of her dress. “I feel like a wreck, but I’m glad it doesn’t show. It’s nice to pick you up.”

He usually takes a cab, mostly because Sharon is so anxious to get home for Ethan’s dinner. And to send Halima packing. He usually rolls in around seven and cleans up the kitchen before Sharon has him give Ethan a bath. It feels distinctly like an assignment — mandatory bonding activity number sixteen: bathing your child. Excellent for imaginative play, exploring acoustics and vocal projections, learning the physical properties of liquids, et cetera. Except as of about a month ago, Ethan won’t even think of getting in the bath unless someone else is in there with him, so bathing your child becomes bathing with your child, which means sitting in a bathtub with too little water with a toddler who is by turns ecstatic and tearfully cranky and perpetually terrified of the drain. Steve has learned to sit on that side of the tub, to block the whole thing from sight and try to buy them some time to stealthily get him clean and play him out so he’ll sleep. And even then he sometimes hears him wake Sharon for a feeding, so he lies in the dark on the couch, listening while she murmurs to him and sings and rocks him, and sometimes he slips out from his makeshift bed and sneaks across the wood-patterned linoleum and finds them both conked out in the gliding chair, the baby — does he even still count as a baby? — still clutching her breast with his tiny hand, and Steve feels like an astronaut, orbiting his own life behind vacuum-sealed glass. Sometimes he even feels like an intruder, like he shouldn’t even be seeing it at all. And in those moments, affection for them feels like a perversion, so he goes back to the couch and buries his head in the blankets and waits for the sun to come up.

Sharon takes a few steps toward the door to the parking lot then hesitates, looking over at him.

“This is okay, right?”

“What?”

“This. Tonight.”

“I’m— I don’t know what—”

“I just… I don’t like to leave him.” She reaches across her chest and clasps her upper arm. She looks to the door.

Stevesuppresses a sigh. “I know. Don’t you think you could use it, though?”

“What if he has a rough night?”

“I think she can handle it.”

This isn’t the right thing to say. It’s never right to remind Sharon of Halima’s competence or youth or
how much Ethan adores her. Things that might comfort another mother only seem to distress her more. Frankly, he’s never been able to sort it all out.

“But if you want to pick him up, we can,” he adds. He tries to smile.

She seems to consider it seriously, but she shakes off whatever fantasy she was entertaining and curls both hands at her sides. “No. No, it’s fine. I need to kind of have a life, I guess. At some point. Right?”

Steve nods, as if he has anything authoritative to say on the subject of having a life. “Did you find a movie?”

They start walking.

“There’s one called I Am Love. It’s in Italian and Russian. Maybe we could grab Ethiopian before? I’m really hungry. Adams was in rare form today, and I didn’t get lunch.”

“Sounds like typical form to me. Dinner before sounds good. Maybe not Ethiopian, though.”

It’s too much like last time she picked him up here. September 2008. Ethiopian. And then—

“But.”

They get Thai. It’s not as good as the place in Windsor Terrace. The tofu is too creamy and the coconut water smells like feet, but the conversation is good. Light. Easy. It’s only when Sharon calls Halima to check in that things lurch southward. Steve can hear Ethan crying from all the way across the table, the kind of crying he does when he’s too tired.

She glances at him, mouth flattened into a worried line. God, just let it go. Please just let it go.

“Are you sure?”

Halima seems sure, maybe really sure, because when Sharon hangs up, she doesn’t insist that they go pick him up. She picks at her panang curry for a few minutes of distracted silence before seeming to resign herself to the evening and an order of mango sticky rice, and by the time they get to the E Street Cinema, she’s barely checking her phone at all, just enough to give one last check of her messages and put the thing on silent.

The theater is packed. Their seats are close. The movie feels loud and intense, and Steve squirms his way through it, keenly aware of her stiffening next to him every time Tilda Swinton has extraordinarily sensual, art house sex with her lover instead of her husband. Every time her daughter talks about how beautiful her female love interest is. When they show a clip of Philadelphia, of Tom Hanks’s gay sickness and Denzel Washington’s straight witness of it, watching it in the distant, helpless, discomfited way someone watches a bird flop around with a broken wing.

It’s not an entirely good movie for them.

In the car on the way back to Sharon’s apartment, the silence is heavy with their past.

And so when the question comes out of the dark, on their way down the 395, it hits like an undodgeable blow to the head.

“Do you even like women?”

Steve jolts from the lulling beauty of the passing DC architecture. “What?”
“Romantically. Do you still like women?”

“Why are you asking?”

Her hands flex and loosen around the steering wheel.

“Just am.”

Does he like women? Does he like anyone? When did he last have an erection that wasn’t on a circadian timer? When was the last time he had a sexual thought that wasn’t some impulsive memory, completely cerebral, unplugged from his body?

“I like women,” he assumes.

“But you like men also?”

He shifts in his seat, pressing himself tight against his door. There’s so much more room to strain now that she’s traded in the Civic for a CRV. “Is this really something we need to talk about right now?”

Quiet comes again and clings until they hit the Arlington city limits, when Sharon ventures into conversation again with an odd self-consciousness, a skip in a record he can’t ignore because the rhythm is so strange.

“I started dating. Online. Did I tell you?”

He shakes his head, then remembers the darkness. “No.”

“Yeah. Either guys don’t want someone with a kid or they’re just your run-of-the-mill creeps.” She snorts. “Well, there was one guy I liked. From work. He was okay with it, but he deployed. And I just can’t. I can’t.”

Can’t. Just can’t. Too much. He was too much.

She looks over at him. “Have you?”

“I’m too fucked up to date.”

“You’re not fucked up.”

Steve huffs. Shakes his head anyway. He can’t help it.

“You’re so hard on yourself.”

He feels her hand, gently, on his leg. It’s just a pat and then it’s gone, innocuous enough. Friendly. But the touch, the warmth, lingers there, seeps into his skin, deep into the dense fibers of his too-tense muscles.

How long has it been since he’s been touched, since anyone’s touch has burned its way through him?

“That movie though.” She hesitates, pulling in an unsteady breath through her nose. “It’s been a long time.”

They might as well be sharing the same brain, because he knows the scene she’s thinking of. Not the overwrought pussy-eating scene in the grass, the one that would have possibly been sexy if not for
all the weird, heavy-handed cuts to bees pollinating flowers. No, she means the first one. Where they 
stand in the middle of the messy room. Where the guy takes off Tilda Swinton’s sandals one by one. 
Her pants. Her shirt and jewelry. And he kisses her. And he pushes off her bra, pushes it down the 
length of her whole body, onto the floor with her underwear, and he takes off his clothes and they 
embrace and kiss and— yeah, they have sex after, but that’s not even it. It was their presence, the 
pendulous way their calm swung — crashed — into passion. No music. Just breath and saliva and 
silence.

“How long has it been?”

Steve looks over in time to catch her lip coming out from between her teeth. “Since last time.”

It takes his broken brain several more seconds to finish the sentence: —we were together.

“Wow,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, ‘wow’ is right.”

She turns onto the ramp down to the parking garage and pulls into her spot. She shuts the car off, but 
neither of them move. She doesn’t take her hands off the wheel.

“I just— sometimes I really miss it. I almost forgot what it’s like.”

A sound works its way from Steve’s throat as the memory of that last time together asserts itself. He 
pushes against it, feet flat on the floor mat, along with everything that went along with it. All his 
fuckups. The cascade of them that led to this moment.

“Lieutenant Ainsworth, sometimes she— she gets with her ex because it’s easy. She trusts him. They 
know each other. You know.”

And with those words, all thought grinds to a halt, all images evaporate, all worries, all 
recriminations, it all goes, leaving him reeling in the empty space left behind.

She’s gazing out the window, out across the span of neighboring cars, her hands now tight on her 
lap, fidgeting.

“Is that what you want?” he asks.

She gives an uneasy smile. It’s not too dim to see the flush flooding her pale cheeks. “I don’t know. 
It seems really— inappropriate. To just ask.”

“I would. If you want.”

Sharon turns to him, her eyes as wide as his own feel as his offer sinks in. “Really?”

He swallows. He can’t trace it to anything inside of him; there’s no dangling tether leading back to 
some kindling desire, but he finds no particular resistance to it, either.

“If you want.”

Her eyebrows climb.

“Do you want?”

He shrugs. “Sure.”
She stares at him, searching his face for what, he’s not sure. Doubt? She probably won’t find it. He’d have to feel something to have that. The only thing he doubts, vaguely, is his own body. His dick’s reliability record hasn’t exactly been stellar. But if Sharon wants to feel good, well, he doesn’t need his dick for that.

“I’m sure.”

He reaches over, across the center console. It’s a sluggish movement, stuttered, and he lays his palm on her leg, just on her knee, on the place where her dress ends and her skin begins. She looks down at his hand, lips parted, and covers it with her own. She gives it a squeeze.

“Okay.”

—

The walk up to the apartment is short and wordless, punctuated by the jangling of Sharon’s keys and the creaking leather of Steve’s bag on his shoulder. Inside, she checks her phone and calls Halima from the kitchen while Steve takes his toiletry bag to the half bathroom. His movements are tight, precise, as he flosses and brushes and finger-combs his hair into a more pleasing shape.

He rolls back his shoulders and looks in the mirror. Squares his jaw. There are dark, unflattering circles under his eyes, but aside from that, he looks okay. At the very, very bottom of his bag, he finds a travel size bottle of Armani Code shaving balm. It’s old, but he squeezes a pea’s worth out, works it around his fingertips, and rubs it down the sides of his neck and along his jaw—

What the hell is he even doing? She’s obviously interested, and now he just smells desperate.

He swears and pulls a couple feet of toilet paper from the roll, and tries to wipe some of the stuff off, a supremely stupid move, because it shreds against his stubble— fuck, he needs to shave if he’s going to—

Steve swears again, strips off his shirt and undershirt, drapes them both over the towel rack, and shaves. Fast. It’s no miracle he doesn’t nick himself, maybe the one thing he can be grateful to the Army for in this moment. He certainly can’t thank it for the abysmal sleep he’s gotten the past three days, so bad that he could barely make it to work an hour late, let alone spare five minutes for a shave. Thank God for Matt — thank God —or he would be sleeping on Sharon’s couch permanently right now.

He scrambles himself back together starting with his undershirt, but then he thinks better of it and shucks it off. It just makes him look thicker, and not in a good way. He gives his maroon button-down a sniff, which reeks like he’s been nervous in it for hours, but his other shirts are folded in his bag, and he won’t be able to wear them now without obsessing about the wrinkles. So he slips the shirt back on and buttons it up, and it looks good even if it smells… not great, because at least he got this one tailored so it skims along his waist and fits him just right in the shoulders. And if he rolls the sleeves up his forearms, it doesn’t look like he just barreled in from the office like a complete tool.

He gives himself one last look and turns, and as soon as his hand touches the doorknob, he fervently hopes that Sharon isn’t in the bedroom with her panties in her hand, then he hopes she’s not in there at all, that she’s still distracted in kitchen, that maybe she’s forgotten about the whole thing — though, why, how awful, because he offered, as casually as he would offer to make French toast for breakfast tomorrow. But the kitchen is empty and so is the living room, and he finds her sitting on the edge of the bed with her hands braced on the edge of the mattress. She’s got something wadded in her hand, fabric, something small, and she rises stiffly when she sees him and greets him with a fleeting smile and no eye contact and heads to her en suite bathroom.
Steve stands in the middle of the room. His head dulls and fills with gauzy whiteness as he makes out the sounds of water running, toilet flushing, more water running, silence, clicking. He can’t interpret any of it and what the fuck is he even doing? What are they doing? What the—

The door opens.

And she’s there.

Her hair is different. Smoother. The waves are tighter and more pronounced. Her dress is still wrapped around her, cinching her waist, flaring gently, skimming over the curves that didn’t used to be there. She stops within lazy reach.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

She smiles at him, fully this time, and pulls at the thin, silver bracelet on her left wrist, the one she got from her father when she graduated from UVA. God, that man must hate him now, he almost can’t bear the thought of it.

“I don’t know how to start this,” she says.

Steve’s hands flex at his sides. “What do you want?”

“It’s not just about what I want. I don’t want this to just be for me. I don’t wanna do it, if it’s just for me.” She takes another step, closing the distance between them. She brushes her fingers against his left hip. “What do you want?”

His shrug is reflexive. He can’t even say if it’s honest, because like in the car, there’s not a single thought to guide him toward truth. Desire is a stranger whose face he has forgotten.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t even know.”

“Do you want this? I need to know.”

“I think so. Yeah.” He thinks.

Sharon flattens both hands on his hips and she slides them around, slowly, each inch careful, each inch bringing her body closer to his own, until her breasts touch his chest and her hands settle on the his ass — just settle, like she’s not sure where to put them yet, and when she angles her head up, her lips find his jaw, but it feels incidental, like that just happens to be the piece of real estate her lips are nearest.

He stops her. Nudges her back, just a little. He has to see her first, really see her, has to look in her eyes, has to find the thing he knows is in his own — that tiny glint of terror — and he finds it ghosting just behind the nerves and excitement. Steve wants to ease it, somehow, even if he’s not sure if he can ease his own, and he takes her face in his hands and kisses her softly. He kisses her like that, over and over, like he’s forgotten anything else he can do with his mouth. And maybe he has. Maybe he’s stalling. Maybe he’s stuck in a loop like this, and this is just going to crash and burn, maybe this is a mistake, maybe nothing will ever be normal again, maybe he’s doomed to be—

“Hey…”

He opens his eyes, and it takes him whole, stretched out seconds, to realize that they’re not kissing anymore. Sharon brushes her thumb over his jaw.
“Where are you?”

“Sorry.”

“Are you sure you wanna do this?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’ve gotta be here with me, because I’m nervous enough already without getting—” She pauses. “No feedback.”

Steve sighs and tucks her hair behind her ears. “I’m sorry.” He kisses her pursed lips. “I’m so sorry.”

He tears himself away from the doubt gallivanting in his mind, until it’s just the press of her mouth against his, the weight of her hands on his ass, the long slope of her neck and shoulders beneath his palms. He focuses, flexing down to just these things, and as his senses wake up, he can feel all the places their bodies touch, lips, fingers, torso, and she opens her mouth, tests it against his, tentative at first, a request she’s not sure he’ll answer, maybe—

But, oh, when her hands clench his ass and she pulls him toward her, hard, so hard that it almost jerks him off balance, oh God, he wants it. He opens his mouth and meets her tongue with his and lets her know that he fucking wants it. He wants her. And when he does, it’s like a catapult launching, cutting through all the fucking muppets and night feedings and worries about the nanny, leaving behind a woman who is famished, greedy, grasping, sucking in breath through her nose as they kiss, groaning as she yanks his hips into hers, grinds her body against his cock — Jesus, he’s so hard already, how — and he has to get this goddamn dress off of her, holy shit, how the hell do these ties work again? He’s squirreled his way through a wrap dress more than once, but it’s been too long, and while he fumbles at her waist, she helps him, pulls the strings, and he separates the fabric of her dress blind, but he can’t stay blind, because he has to see what he’s touching, the warmth of her skin, the places he doesn’t dare touch yet because this is already so far beyond what he ever thought he’d ever do again—

But Steve pulls back and spreads the fabric of her dress, lips parting, and he can’t stop the breath that forces its way out of him.

“Oh, wow…”

Her breasts are spilling from her too-small, black lace bra, one barely big enough to cover the edges of her nipples. It’s an old one, she wore it before— it’s not even close— And Steve’s thoughts white out as he lays his hands on them and gives them a gentle squeeze.

“Can I get the light?”

He can’t stop touching, can’t stop palming the weight of her tits, watching them move, watching them gather and fall, while his cock twitches hard against his fly.

“Hey.”

Steve glances up. “Huh?”

“The light.”

And Sharon is stepping away, and his hands are empty, and she’s crossing the room, dress billowing behind her. She clicks on the lamp that sits atop the dresser, adjusting the three-way switch to the middle brightness. The room goes dim when she hits the overhead light and closes the door on her
way back to him.

“This just feels better,” she tells him as her hands find their way back to his ass. She kneads it, drawing in a deep breath. “Is that okay?”

Steve nods. He’d rather see every inch of her, naked and fully lit, a map for his fingers and mouth and tongue and whatever else, and the wanting startles him, amazes him, and the feel of her fingers digging into his muscles, the insistence that he draw closer— he dips his head to kiss her, hard, and she opens to him, clutching, and he cups her breasts again — God damn, he can barely get his hands around them — but when he circles around her back to unclasp her bra, her mouth leaves his.

“Don’t.” There’s an edge to her voice as she grabs his wrists and pulls him away.

“Really?”

She presses a kiss to the heel of his palm, glancing up at him through her eyelashes. Without another word, she guides him between her legs.

Steve’s breath stutters. Her panties are soaked, and she presses her hand over his and holds it tightly to her, then grabs onto his shoulder. With her other hand, she pulls his head down for a kiss, whimpering. He can’t help but return a sound, one that she swallows and echoes as she begins to move against him. His dick strains in his khakis, which he never thought would be too tight when he bought them, but alas, here they are, and he reaches down with his unoccupied hand to adjust himself, grunting in relief, maybe— or maybe it’s the way she presses two of his fingers, curves them in beneath the damp fabric of her underwear—

“Oh my God, lemme…” he breathes.

Sharon chokes off a breath. “Let you what?”

“Lemme eat your pussy.”

He slides his fingertip over the smooth edge of one of her lips, so close to the inside of her— She pushes her hips into his touch, and he can see himself between her thighs, eating her out, drowning in her pussy, God, he used to joke about wanting to die that way, death by pussy, but he almost meant it. He said he’d live every day there, if he could—

“Please,” he begs.

She grips her fingers into his shoulder and nods.

There’s less demand when their mouths meet again. The kiss is slow, maybe a little hesitant, the same as his hand as he pulls away and lifts it to his face, kiss breaking. The smell of her arousal is heady, and he sucks it off his fingertips, eyes drifting closed as she starts rubbing his cock through his pants, and he’s got way, way too many clothes on, they both do, and he hitches his hips forward and she gets the picture and mercifully unbuttons and zips him while he works on his shirt.

Between the two of them, he’s naked in less than a minute, and her hands are on him, gliding over his chest, his abs, his arms, her touch smooth and eager, and he stops her to shrug her out of her dress so he can do the same, so they can remember each other, learn the new parts, the new curves and softness that weren’t there before, the new marks of hardship, and they kiss and touch their way to the bed, where he lays her out on the diagonal of their — her — king mattress, the only way two very tall people can do this.

He crawls on the bed, between her legs, spreading them as he moves, and she stops him as reaches
her underwear to pull it off, holding it in place.

“I didn’t shave all the way... I didn’t know.”

“I don’t care.”

Sharon lets go of her panties, and her hand falls to the mattress, gathering and releasing the comforter. He scans her face, trying to get a read, but she’s looking to the end of the mattress, beyond it, off toward the bathroom.

He stops.

“Hey.”

And her eyes are on him, blinking and bright. “Yeah?”

“You okay?”

She gathers her hands over her stomach and bends her knees, drawing them up with him still between them. “Yeah. I just— It’s been a while.”

He puts his hands on her legs and glides down her thighs, until he reaches the wet mess of her panties, and they maneuver around to get her out of them so he can toss them in the general direction of the hamper. He settles back between her legs, on his stomach, stifling a groan as his cock drags across the bed, as he kisses his way up the inside of her thighs, until he reaches their apex, swallowing, breath quickening—

Sharon sits up on her elbows. “Are you sure you don’t just wanna... do it?”

Steve meets her gaze with his own, and he holds it firm, captures it, as he dips his head and licks his way up her pussy, slowly, inch by inch, until her eyes and head roll back with a throaty sigh.

“I wanna do this,” he states when he gets to the edge of her clit, then touches it with the flat of his tongue, softly.

“Okay, yeah... yeah...” She falls back on the bed and spreads her legs for him.

He hooks his arms under her thighs and pulls her close, pulls her pussy to his face, her gasp hitting the eggshell white of the ceiling as he nuzzles her glistening lips, laves and kisses them, and he loses himself in the scent of her, in the way she moves against his mouth, and he dips his fingers just inside her, just to get them wet, and touches the parts he can’t lick and suck and take in his mouth, and it’s so fucking much for his addled brain to manage that half his vocabulary leaves him, but he tries anyway.

“God, you’re so good,” he murmurs against her. “You taste so good...”

Steve pushes himself into the mattress, anything to take some of the pressure off his straining dick. He feels for her clit with his finger and finds it, and it firms under his touch as he rubs it gently and works his mouth over the rest of her, and Sharon’s hand comes down on the back of his head and her hips tilt toward him, and he’s teasing, he knows it, she gets impatient, and he has to come up for breath because she’s cramming his face into her, but he’d gladly suffocate, gladly die crushed like this.

Sharon lifts her head from the pillow, loosening her hold on him. “Hey...”
Steve blinks up at her, brows rising.

“Hm?”

“Can you just—”

The pieces click together slowly as he slogs through to her meaning. *Stop fucking around and suck my clit* isn’t exactly in her lexicon, but he reads her loud and clear.

“Yeah. Yeah, sorry.”

He smirks up at her, wolfish, and descends on her clit with his whole mouth. She moans, grabbing at the comforter, and presses herself into his face again, and he gives his whole body to pleasing her, working her with his tongue, hearing the little sounds she makes and adjusting to make sure she’s squirming and whimpering and grabbing just the right way, and he digs his hands into her thighs, muscles tensing, flexing, as he grinds himself harder against the bed.

“Wait.”

Steve lifts his head again.

She holds her arms out to him, beckons him with her hands. “C’mere.”

He pushes himself up and licks a path up her belly to her tits, licks her nipples through the lace, and she grabs his face, cups it in her hands, and pulls him down for a kiss, and he tastes like pussy, he must, it’s all over him, and she’s still kissing him, Jesus, but she wraps her arms and legs around him and sighs into his mouth. His cock is so close, the head one half-thrust away from sinking into her, and he keeps his hips locked tight while they kiss, and it’s pure torture, it’s the whole entire Benning Phase of Ranger School condensed into this one moment, and he feels sweat start to pool at his temples from the strain of his effort. But she pulls him in with her legs, and he tries to resist it — he really tries — but she clutches and squeezes until he’s sliding, wet heat sucking him in, and it’s been so long since he’s had his dick inside someone that he almost forgot the sensation, the mind-bending perfection of it, and his eyes close and he buries his face in her neck, groaning, as he sinks in all the way, until he can’t go in anymore and he stops.

“Do you have anything?”

Sharon throws her arm toward the nightstand and pries it open with her fingertips. He’s got a good half foot of reach on her, so he stretches as far as he can, still inside her, and snatches the box of condoms edged up toward the front, maybe strategically. The box shakes. She takes it from him with drawn brows and reads.

“Shit. These are expired. Really expired.”

She turns the date to him. November. 2007.

A smile tugs at Steve’s mouth. “Is that the same box from before?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Yeah, unless you want another kid, probably shouldn’t tempt fate.”

“Oh my God, no.” Her arm flops over and she lets the box thud to the floor. She looks at him, sighing, and smoothing her thumb over his lower lip. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs. “I wasn’t planning on this. Are you gonna come?”
Steve shakes his head. “Not yet.”

“Then stay for a minute.”

Sharon winds her arms around his neck and draws him close, dark eyes searching his, and to say that she looks beautiful would be to say that Iraq was warm in the summer — something that doesn’t even qualify as an understatement because it’s not even in the same genus. The way she’s looking at him, through all the fear and squared edges and layers of horror that separate him from everyone else, the way she’s wrapped around him, clenching him — she’s the core of the Earth.

She nuzzles her nose to his. Around his hips, her legs loosen and tighten, urging him, and he pulses with her, just a little, it feels so fucking good, so tight, and he recaptures her mouth, roiling, burning, and her hands come down on his ass with a slap, groping and frantic and he’s— fuck— he’s gotta—

With a growl, he pulls out. Sharon grabs him by the shoulders and pushes him, cheeks flushed, legs untangling, spreading.

“Make me come,” she tells him, breathless.

Steve scrambles down her body and goes down on her pussy like he’s starving for it. He wets his middle and index fingers with spit and fucks them into her while he suck on her clit and works it with his tongue, while she whimpers and moves against him, and he’s so hard, so painfully hard, and it’s like the worst itch he’s ever had in his life, it’s been so long since he’s come, so he thrusts against the mattress because he has to do something. And then she has a fistful of his hair and she’s panting, her breasts heaving, and she’s shoving his face into her pussy again and grinding against him, saying don’t stop— don’t stop— don’t stop— don’t stop— don’t stop— and so he doesn’t fucking dare, not until she’s crying out, arching her back, and he keeps going through it all — his mouth, his hands, everything — until she trembles out a long breath and her body sags—

And then he’s got his free hand on her tits, the one that’s not still inside her, and all it takes is the lacy heaviness of it in his hand, the echo of her pleasure in his mind, the slick of her pussy clenched around his fingers, and he’s shoving his hips against the bed until it almost fucking hurts, until that itch explodes into ecstasy, and then he’s moaning into her thigh and coming and coming, spreading his fingers wide so he doesn’t crush her breast, the one act of coordination he can manage while his mind and body incinerate.

As soon as his words find him again, Steve is apologizing.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

Sharon drops her hand lightly on his head. “For what?”

“I just came all over your comforter.”

She breathes a laugh. “Oh, please. Small price to pay.”

“I’ll clean it up.”

“Babe, relax.” She runs her fingers through his hair, backward against the grain, then the right way.

“C’mon, you just— It was really sexy.”

He flexes his left hand gently, cupping her breast again.

She takes him by the wrist and guides his hand to her ribcage. He used to be able to make out each rib when they were like this, back in her marathon days. Now there’s only a juncture where her ribs
meet the rest of her, the rounded edge where bone slopes down to soft flesh, and he curves his hand around that ridge and settles there. He pulls his fingers out of her and rests his head on her hip, and she lets go of his wrist and starts playing with his hair again while he trails wet circles around her belly button.

“You don’t like that anymore?” he asks.

“It’s— fine. It’s just not the same.” She sighs. “I can’t wait to get my body back. My boobs are wrecked. I feel like a loose sack.”

Steve tilts his head to gaze at her, past her Cesarean scar, over the new soft curve of her stomach. “I think you’re sexy. Your tits are amazing.”

She shushes him with a chuckle. “Well, you’re easy to please. And you haven’t changed. You still look incredible.”

Steve rolls onto his back and bends his knee to the ceiling. He gestures to the peppering of shrapnel scars along his thigh.

“Well, I got all this.”

There’s a whisper of sound as she lifts her head from the mattress. Her voice is subdued. “Oh, babe... Come here.”

Sharon holds out her arm to the side, beckoning him to her, and he removes himself from between her legs to join her. They rearrange themselves the right way on the mattress, and she sits up on her elbow and grazes her fingertips over the big scar. The bolt scar, the one he didn’t even feel until what’s-her-name — Bowman? Bronson? — hit it with her hand in the Blackhawk.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t even see it earlier. Is that from when you...”

“Yeah.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. Just looks gnarly and causes problems at the airport.”

She cups his cheek and turns his face to hers. She kisses him, sweetly, softly, then settles against him, head on his chest, arm around his waist. He pulls her in close, wraps his arms around her, slides his leg over hers, feeling the tiny, prickly hairs of a couple days without a shave. God, he’s missed this more than anything, just this, the thing that comes after, the thing that Bucky—

He grimaces and presses his lips to the top of her head, and Sharon settles into his embrace with a slow exhale.

“Can you believe we have a kid?”

There’s an incredulous laugh just behind her words, but it doesn’t spill out behind them, so the question hangs in the room alone. It might even be a serious one.

“No.”

“Are you ready for him for a whole week?”

Steve tenses. No, he absolutely is not ready to watch a fifteen-month-old for a whole week with no support while Sharon goes to Fort Bragg for training, of all the horrible places. The reversal would
be funny if he wasn’t abjectly fucking terrified.

“Are you?” he counters.

“No. I’ll never get used to it. And he’s a lot harder to watch now. He gets into everything.”

“Hardly anything to get into at my place. Fortunately.”

Nails tickle down the back of his arm, and he shivers and pulls her closer.

“You’re sure your work is okay with it?” she asks.

“Matt’s letting me work from home,” he murmurs into her hair. “I hardly have anything to do anyway, since we’re wrapping a paper. I think he just gives me work to make me feel useful, anyway.”

“I doubt that.” Sharon tilts her head up and brushes her lips against his chin. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom real quick, okay?”

She extricates herself from him and slides to the edge of the bed, and as she pads to the bathroom it’s night in the desert, the kind of bleak, knife-sharp cold that makes the heat of day seem like it couldn’t possibly have ever happened. Thoughts — the shitty kind — crowd around, looking for any weak spots to take root, because they shouldn’t have done this and this is just going to complicate everything and it was a horrible suggestion and he didn’t have to offer and why can’t things just go back to the way they—

She turns on the water so he can’t hear her pee, of all courtesies, that’s a new one, and when she comes back, her hair is neat, and she’s wearing the silky lavender robe that’s always hanging on the door, the one she never wears except when she’s feeling fat. And when she joins him in bed again, he hisses and yelps when she touches her cold fingertips to his sides, and they’re both laughing and kissing and pulling each other close again, the way they were before. He spreads his legs to invite one of hers to slide between them, and he hitches his hips forward, pressing his dick against her thigh. The fabric of her robe is smooth under his palm, catching in little places where he didn’t even know he had calluses.

It’s just— it’s really, really nice, and thoughts come again. Not shitty thoughts this time, but another kind, delicate ones, peeking out unfledged from one of the ill-used sections of his mind, the place where he used to consider things like love and relationships and the future, and there’s a word, a maybe… And then there’s a what if…. He doesn’t dare pull on those words to see what trails behind them, because they could collect into a sentence or even a fully formed idea, something like, maybe this could be something or maybe they could—

“You seem like you’re doing better,” she says.

“How?”

“You just do.”

Steve makes a small sound.

Sharon gives his chest a light scratch. “I’m proud of you. You’re working so hard. I can’t imagine how hard it’s been.”

“I have a lot of work to do.”
“Still.”

He might not spend his sessions with his head in the garbage can, but it’s still hour after hour talking in excruciating detail about the worst days of his deployment. They talk about Trip now—the thump on the Humvee floor, the warm wetness on his face, the taste of blood, the weight of the body, the smells, the numbness, confusion, shock, horror, the look on everyone’s face, on Bucky’s face, the way he pulled his sleeve over the heel of his hand and— the tenderness—

“Thank you. I really enjoyed that,” Sharon says against his shoulder. Her finger plays around his nipple, just along the edge.

He kisses her forehead. “Me too.”

Steve slides his hand up her leg, until it brushes the silky hem of her robe. He takes a deep breath through his nose, pulling in the scent of the room, an amalgam of women’s body products, old fabric softener, pussy, his sweat. He licks the corner of his mouth, and he’s slipping back again, back into the memory, back between her legs, maybe with his dick this time—maybe next time he’s here, he could run out and get some condoms—yeah—God, he could fuck her, be inside her again—

He thrusts his stiffening cock against her thigh and slips his hand under her robe.

“We should have adult night more often,” he murmurs, gently kneading the smooth curve of her ass.

Her fingertip pauses, and she lays her hand down flat on his chest, pressing against him, and she lifts her head from his shoulder to gaze down at him and—

“You know I care about you. So much. And I don’t want you to feel used.”

“I don’t feel used.” He gives her an easy smile. “I mean, you can use me if you want—”

“Steve, we can’t do this again. I think we should just leave it at this. At this one time.”

She’s frowning. And everything stops. The pulse of his cock against her leg. The rush of blood that was filling him back up. The glide of his touch over her. His breath.

“Ah.”

“And I know...”

He tries to reply with a sound, but his throat is so dry that it comes out as a stuttered creak.

“I know you tend to get... really close. And I love that about you. You’re a really sweet, caring person. But—”

But... Right. This is where he did this all wrong. This is where reality and the tiny strings of words don’t line up, where he—Yeah, this is where he just—needs to—okay. Okay.

Steve unfolds himself, straightens his legs, rolls onto his back. He’s careful as he moves, as he pulls his arm out from under her, trying not to catch her hair on his watch band.

Sharon rolls onto her back and sits up on both elbows. A crease settles on her brow as she follows his movements. “I wasn’t asking you to leave.”

“I know. It’s fine.”

“Then why are you leaving?”
He stalls in the middle of the room, where everything goes blank for heartbeats and heartbeats—God, why now?

“Steve.”

“I should get dressed.”

Underwear.

They’re on the nightstand side of the bed. He cringes as he puts them back on, because he’s been wearing them all day and he would do anything for a long shower and clean, clean clothes right now, but he can’t use her bathroom now and he cannot — he will not — walk out of this room naked.

“All I meant is that we shouldn’t be the exes who hook up all the time,” Sharon explains gently. “That won’t work for me. And I don’t think it’s good for us.”

Steve snatches his khakis and shirt from the floor and clutches them to himself.

“Actually, I think you meant that I have a tendency to get over-attached, and you don’t want me to get any ideas. And you’re right. You’re absolutely right.” He shakes his head, smiling a little, because he is an idiot. He really is. “I do get that way. I do get ideas. You know me too well. And—yeah.” He eyes the door. “Yeah. I’m gonna go to bed.”

“I wish it were that easy to change things. I do. But it’s not. I’m sorry.”

He has to look at her then, has to, and, Jesus, she’s frowning, like she has something to be sorry for, like they didn’t go into this with a crystal clear agreement of what this was, like she should feel bad because he can’t compartmentalize anything, like she should be sorry because this can’t fix what he did to her — what he did to them — when he was in Iraq—

“No, I’m sorry,” he says. “This is my fault. I fucked up. I’m the one who fucked everything up.”

“You really don’t have to leave right now.”

“No, I do.”

Steve walks to the side of the bed and leans down, planting his knee on the mattress for support. He gives her one more kiss — a last kiss, God, he can’t do this anymore, he cannot — then straightens himself and turns to leave

“I really wish you’d stay.”

It’s a final plea, quiet but, like everything with Sharon, sincere. He never has to second-guess her. Never has to wonder if she’s lying. There’s no black hole where her past should be. There’s no questioning her intentions or having to decipher seven layers of code. He forgot how easy it could be to communicate, what it could feel like to know someone. What it could really feel like, in his heart, to know.

He clears his throat.

“It’s fine. I’m just tired. Goodnight.”

It’s terrible. It comes out stilted and taut and as disingenuous as she is earnest. But she knows not to pursue him now, because she knows him. So she gives him a “Goodnight” in return, and he can tell
she’s aiming for carefully neutral, but not even rockstar civil affairs officer Captain Carter can poker face her way through this parting. And so it’s a little on the heavy side, tired or disappointed or sad, he can’t distinguish what’s just behind her stoic Southern control.

He stoops down for his socks on his way to the door, crouching and snagging them with his fingertips and adding them to the ball of embarrassment he has collected against his belly. Behind him, Sharon drags in a long breath and settles back on the mattress.

The living room feels cool and vast as he makes his way to the couch. His bed. She’s already got the pillow, sheets, and blanket out for him, even though he knows where they are. Still a guest, even after one year and— and— he tries to hold it in his head but has to count on his fingers when he can’t.

One year. Nine months. One year and nine months since he— since everything.

He closes the blinds, changes into new underwear, sweatpants, and a well-worn West Point Crew Team t-shirt Sharon excavated last time he was here. Then he makes up his bed and heads to the half-bath to wash off his face, brush his teeth again, and pop in his retainer, because it’s Friday. When he makes his way to the kitchen, he can hear Sharon’s voice through her closed door — he’s not sure when she closed it — and she’s talking to Halima, it’s so late, but everything seems fine, he thinks it’s fine, but he’s not moving, he’s standing in the middle of the kitchen, frozen on the linoleum, blank, empty. And he has to think himself into movement, command himself forward to the cupboard for a glass, then to the Brita, and he downs two ice cold glasses of water and takes another back to the living room and hits the lights and tries to settle.

Dread hits hard and pools in his stomach as he pulls the blanket over him and— oh God, he forgot to clean up Sharon’s comforter, and now she’s lying in a bed stained with his come. He curls onto his side and presses his head into the couch cushion with a groan.

This was a mistake. Wasn’t it? Was it? No, the mistake was thinking he could even do this, an error of self-ignorance, of living so long disembodied, alienated from his own skin and his own dick, and if he’d known that blowing his load and— No, it wasn’t even that. If he’d known this whole thing would cut a path into his heart and defibrillate it from whatever circuit of deadness it’s been in since he got back—

He had no idea.

Steve shifts onto his back, presses the heels of his hands to his eyes and grimaces, because he could be in there right now with her, that could be his bed, if he hadn’t fucked it all up, with his greed, his weak heart, and scenes from that mild June night flash and flash — screaming at Sitwell, wandering around the FOB after, feeling like a piece of shit for it, ending up at Bucky’s trailer like a pathetic stray, begging for scraps of comfort, taking them, taking Bucky’s mouth, his arms, pulling off his clothes — his stupid argyle socks — taking his cock, his ass, his rare, unguarded affection, his sweetness— taking it all without a thought of what it would mean, what it would cost, and the thread of time yanks him back further, back to the fight three days prior, to Bucky’s vitriol, shit-talking Sharon, shitting on the life they built, accusing him of playing gay and cutting out when things got tough, then another cut to the day after, that horrible, unforgettable cut, every sense assaulted and shocked and, God, he should be there with them, he should be there right now, did Jones ever get his number? Did Melinda ever get his note, or did it blow away in the wind, or maybe she just threw it in the trash, or maybe something terrible happened to Jones, or maybe he’s okay, maybe he’s in school, but he should be there, he should call his men, he should be there for them, all of them, but he left them so he could be with Bucky, fucked Sharon over so he could be with Bucky, and now—

Steve sits up abruptly and snatches his phone off of the coffee table. He opens his messages, fingers
Hey - want to grab coffee or something next weekend?

Does he want coffee? Does he want fucking coffee? Steve clenches his teeth and—

No I don’t want to grab coffee. How DARE you fucking ask me this now! Where the fuck were you all those times I wanted you to be there, when I was ready for you, waiting for you, when I fucking NEEDED you, when I had nothing except a bag of fucking ashes and you were GONE, and then when I gave up EVERYTHING for you, my fiancee, my career, then you ran off to get fucked by your ex because he had a BIGGER DICK?? And now you fucking want COFFEE because now its convenient for you, because you’re feeling better now? Well fucking good for you. I’m just sitting here in a flaming pile of my fucking ruined life while you get your shit together and ask me for motherfucking coffee you fucking ASSHOLE. FUCK YOU

Steve tosses the phone down by his feet and flops back on the cushions. He heaves a deep breath and tries to halt the frenzied stream of images and thoughts. This is his bedtime routine now, stretched over the course of hours, worries and memories and tossing, God knows how many it’ll be tonight.

No position feels good for more than a few minutes and so he shifts and shifts, sighing, the leather cushions groaning, he fucking hates this couch, why did she get rid of the old one, who buys a couch made of dead skin? Who wants to sit on that to relax? To sleep? He can’t stop thinking about it. And how is the refrigerator so loud, how can anyone sleep with the noise? Why didn’t he bring earplugs? Was it always this loud?

He sits up again and grabs his phone and reads over his message again, cringing.

“Jesus...”

He deletes everything he wrote and starts again. He cannot leave an empty space for some late night fit of pent rage to accidentally explode its way to Brooklyn.

Let me check and see if I’ll be in town

He presses Send this time.

Even though it’s 2:43 am, the typing bubble shows up on Bucky’s end, and it stays up for several minutes until it finally yields:

Sounds good. Can’t sleep?

He shakes his head. The last thing he trusts himself to do is have a rational conversation with anyone right now.

Im fine. Going to sleep now.

Ok. Hope you sleep well

Thanks

You too

He turns the phone off and sets it on the coffee table. It takes him another 30 minutes to forget that Bucky is thinking about him right now and another 20 minutes after that to stop feeling confused and
vaguely angry about it. It’s so distressingly familiar and discordant with the easy exhilaration of tonight that when his very-late-night thoughts inevitably drift back to Antoine Triplett’s severed head and lifeless body, it’s almost a relief.

— — —

June 27th

“Did you decide what you wanted?”

Bucky looks up from the display case, wild-eyed and, no, he absolutely has not decided, hasn’t read a single label or taken in the details of a single breakfast item. He looks over his shoulder, to the line of three bitchy-looking dudes behind him, and the creases of his palms moisten. He passes his gaze once more over the muffins and scones, and his attention is caught by the thump of the door as it swings open, and Jesus fucking no, why does he have to be early? Because he’s Steve Rogers. It’s self-explanatory and completely obnoxious and shit, shit, shit—

Bucky stands, ramrod straight, like a startled jackrabbit, a move sudden enough to catch Steve’s attention. Damn it, he should have gotten here fifteen minutes earlier. He should have a table already. Are there even any tables? He scans but can’t take in anything. Just men and more men and a few women and there are a couple empty spaces between them and, Jesus, what if they’re taken by the time they get their order, and what if they have no place to sit, and they’ll have to stand around, and should they just go somewhere else? Yes. Definitely. Or maybe they should cancel the whole fucking thing, because maybe he’s sick — yeah, he does feel a little sick, something in his stomach, but then, when doesn’t he feel something in his stomach, and oh God, Steve nodded, nod back, now smile, you moron. And now he’s standing at the back of the line. Jesus Christ.

Bucky waves him up, and the pissy dudes start to sour even more, curling up their lips at the nerve— until they get a look at the slab of hotness Bucky is beckoning, and Bucky watches them watch Steve pass by, watches their eyes rake across the expanse of his shoulders, down the taper of his waist, and down to his ass; yeah, get a good look, fellas.

“Hey,” Steve says, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his chinos, those broad shoulders hunching high with a goofy “aw, shucks” shrug of a kid half his size and age, shit, it’s his birthday next week —

“Hey.”

“Did you know what you wanted?” the cashier asks again, unmoved by Steve’s arrival because Bucky is pretty sure that he’s the only straight dude who works here. Must have slipped through somehow.

Bucky gapes up at the menu. “I— no.”

“What kind of tea do you have?” Steve asks.

The guy points, and Steve glances only for a handful of moments before choosing.

“I’ll have the Tea of Inquiry.”

“Tea of Inquiry?” Bucky mouths, squinting, and the cashier is ringing it up, unfazed, like it’s a real thing.

“It’s green tea,” Steve says, pulling his wallet from his back pocket.
“No, no, I got this.” Bucky flips his fingers toward Steve’s beat up billfold and turns to the cashier. “I’ll have that, too. I could use some inquiry, I guess.” Really, he could just use something, anything, to ease this transaction along.

“Anything else?”

Bucky looks at Steve, for the first time since he walked in, he really looks. Steve is gazing at the display case, maybe a little longingly, the bags under his eyes now just a thick brush of shadow. His angles are sharp and deliberate.

Steve shakes his head. “I’m good.”

“You sure?” Bucky asks. “Anything you want.”

“I’m good. Thank you.”

Bucky pays and they wait for their tea sets — because apparently tea comes in sets here — down by the espresso machine. Questions crowd in Bucky’s mouth and none of them make it out before Paul spots them and makes his approach — Paul, who never, ever talks to him when they see each other here, but whatever. There’s a first for everything, and thank God he chooses now, because this gentlemanly cordial act is wrecking him.

“Hey,” Paul says to him, stopping just shy of his bad arm. “Decided to sit out the parade?”

“What parade?” Bucky steps back and makes some distance, leaning against a low wall that surrounds the seating area. He bends his right knee to take the weight off, grunting in relief.

Paul chuckles. “I know, you hate it. But I thought you might actually go this year. You know. Given your background.”

“My background?”

“Well, you know who the Grand Marshal is, right? One of them, anyway.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow.

“Lieutenant Dan Choi.”

“Oh my God, really?”

“It’s true.”

They both fix their attention on Steve, who is electric with enthusiasm. Paul does his own tour of visual appraisal, a little more stealthily than all the fuckers waiting in line at the register, except with a leisurely detour at Steve’s bicep as it strains the fabric of his polo shirt.

“Who’s Dan Choi?” Bucky says.

“Who’s Dan Choi?” Steve echoes. “He went to West Point. He’s an infantry officer and an Arabic linguist who was kicked out under ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.’”

“Oh, right. That asshole. And, wow, you’re basically twins, huh? Maybe you can be the Grand Marshal next year.”

Steve’s full lips part wider as Bucky turns back to Paul.

“Yeah, my idea of fun isn’t standing around with a bunch of voyeuristic lollygaggers, watching Dan-fucking-Choi parading around like getting kicked out of the Army for being gay is something to be
Bucky’s voice rises. “I mean, have a little fucking self-restraint. Don’t like the policy? Ranger the fuck up and deal with it. Stop being a selfish piece of shit, wait for your service obligation to be up, and get out with a little fucking dignity. But no, they wanna bitch and cry, and everyone is supposed to feel sorry for them. But, you know, fuck it. Who needs restraint or dignity when you can be high queen of the fag parade in New York City, right? Here’s your reward for abandoning your men. Hope you’re fucking happy now that you left them without a platoon leader next time they go downrange.”

He watches it dump out of his mouth, disembodied, like witnessing a car slow-motion tumbling into a canyon, end over end. He turns to Paul, because he cannot look at Steve, he cannot, and although he sees distant disapproval in Paul’s brown eyes, the kind that old gays like Hank get when the young ones don’t toe the line, Paul is a diplomat first before anything else.

“Don’s pissed about the coffee,” Paul says, just a few degrees warmer than cool, then takes a small sip from his own coffee.

Bucky snorts softly, but he can feel sweat collecting in his pits and clinging his shirt to his back. “Good. I did everyone a favor by throwing it in the trash.”

“I know, I know. It’s just that we’ve been serving Folgers since we opened.”

“Listen, if he wants to jump into a time machine and go back to nineteen dickety-two and buy some more, he’s welcome to.” Bucky jabs a finger in Paul’s direction. “Because I guarantee, that’s how old that shit was. This is Manhattan. It’s 2010. We can’t serve Folgers. It’s absurd. You know how many people thanked me? You know how many half-full cups I didn’t find last week?”

Paul scratches at the underside of his beard. “I’m sure a lot. It’s just— He’s a donor. A big one.”

“Well, he needs to learn a little fucking non-attachment and distress tolerance. It’s coffee, for fuck’s sake. Time to stop living in the ‘90s. That goes for a lot of people in that place,” Bucky grumbles.

He shifts his weight and sneaks a glance at Steve, who is transfixed by a spot on the floor near the bus bin, his eyes glazed, listless, his brows not even drawn. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Well, it’s not so easy for some, you know?” Paul replies. “We lost a lot of people, and it’s still hard for some folks. Sometimes it shows up in places you don’t expect. Like Folgers.”

Paul looks to Steve then, takes him in with slow, self-indulgent curiosity. “And, sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Paul.”

He holds his hand out to Steve, and there’s a dreadful lag before Steve realizes the hand is for him, and he stiffens, apologizes, and goes at it like a harpoon into a jellyfish.

“Steve.”

Paul’s eyes brighten, and his smile broadens with them. “Have I seen you around the Center?”

“The Center?”

“The LGBT Center,” Bucky offers, and isn’t this a moment, where Steve is the one fumbling over all the gay stuff while Bucky is in cahoots with one of the nobles.

Steve shakes his head. “Oh, uh— no.”
Paul takes a conspicuous step closer to Steve. “Well, you should come by. We’re showing Milk on Saturday. We’ll have discussion after. Refreshments. Not-Folgers coffee, apparently.”

Steve gives a light huff, something that might have turned into a laugh on another day, and he looks away again, follows the length of the runner mat to the door. “I would, but I’ll have my son that weekend. He’ll probably just talk the whole time.”

“He talks?” Bucky says.

Paul smiles again, this one deflated as whatever fantasies he was entertaining collapse in the light of Steve’s fatherhood. “Ah, okay. They do that, I guess.” He tilts his chin to Bucky. “Will I see you later?”

“Probably.”

He goes in for yet another cringe-worthy and entirely unnecessary handshake with Steve before trying and failing to slip out of the building, getting roped into some other dire conversation by hot leather jacket guy’s boyfriend.

Bucky pulls himself from the wall and joins Steve at the bar, into the bow-tight space surrounding him, where Aiden the Espresso God is setting up their teas on wicker trays, each with a clay pot and matching tiny cups. Aiden takes flagrant note of hands when he reaches for his tray, looking away too fast and wishing them an extra loud good day as they walk away. Bucky takes the lead after Steve clearly won’t, and just as he feared, there are only two tables to choose from when they get to the floor, both deep in the middle of the room.

“Paul’s on the board,” Bucky tells him as they walk. “Big muckety-muck at the Center. You wouldn’t know it, though. He’s pretty low key about it. And he’s an alcoholic. Probably shouldn’t say that, but... oh well. Lotta gay alcoholics. Go figure.”

Steve doesn’t respond. Bucky presses his lips together.

“I make coffee for meetings. You have to do Service to stop being so self-absorbed, which I obviously need, so I go early and do coffee and refreshments and stay late and clean up.”

Bucky looks to Steve’s face, watching for any signs of dissent or approval or agreement, quietly hoping for a twinge between his eyebrows, maybe, or at the corner of his mouth, something that says, No, not you, you’re not self-absorbed, you don’t need that. But he finds nothing but flat surfaces and then — a nod. Yeah, he’s nodding. Great.

At the table, Bucky narrowly crowds out Steve for the seat they both want, throwing his elbow out a little and edging him aside with his shoulder. Steve stands tableside while Bucky grabs the edges for support and drops gracelessly into the seat, staking his claim with no satisfaction aside from a very fractional diminishment of the waves of anxiety pummeling his insides.

He stays like that, gripping the tabletop tight, breathing, and after a few moments, Steve circles around to the opposite chair, pulls it out, and seats himself, steady but stiff. Steve casts a look over both shoulders, enough to reflexively mark both doors and probably trace messy but serviceable routes of egress and probably get a rough body count and tag the community table and the wrought iron lamp and heavy glass carafes as defensive and offensive implements, accordingly. There’s a few dudes in here who could throw down okay in a pinch, and Elizabeth, too, for the imaginary bullshit nothingness that will never happen — but who knows, right? Their broken-ass brains seem to still think it will — and say something. Just say something—
“How’s Ethan?”

Steve frowns. Stares. Seems to consider the question far beyond what’s required to respond.

“How’s Ethan?”

Steve frowns. Stares. Seems to consider the question far beyond what’s required to respond.

“Fine.”

“Do you have pictures?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky’s heel begins to bounce, and he gives a sharp, effortful smile. “Can I see them?”

There’s a pause, one that doesn’t last too long, thank God, and then Steve’s arching his back and reaching into the front pocket of his pants and pulling his phone. He unlocks it and hands it over. Doesn’t even pull up anything specific. Just opens his photos and lets Bucky scroll.

Ethan — mid-dance, maybe? Hard to tell. Maybe just flailing around. Do toddlers dance? Ethan playing with bubbles. Ethan eating some banana. Ethan running in a diaper. Ethan passed out asleep on the couch. Ethan grinning in the bathtub. A picture of a bulk label of some walnuts halves and pieces from Whole Foods. Ethan standing next to Sharon’s lap while she holds a chicken. A fucking chicken. And he’s petting it. Ethan petting a goat. Ethan petting a lamb, clearly his favorite, from the look of delight as his hand touches its fleece. Sharon, looking tall and pretty and composed, holding Ethan in front of a sign that says “Farm Sanctuary.” Ethan zonked out in a car seat. He looks happy. In every picture, he looks sweet and happy, with their blond hair and Sharon’s dark eyes, but he looks like Steve, no doubt in the world that is a fucking Rogers kid, and they look happy.

Bucky offers the phone back Steve, smiling in defiance of his own tenacious, shameful, spite.

“He’s really cute. What does he do now? I don’t even know what babies do. No clue.”

Steve takes his phone and swipes his thumb repeatedly across the screen, studying it seriously as he talks.

“Walks a lot. Almost runs. Talks. Quite a lot, actually. In English and Arabic. I think he’s up to almost 50 or 60 words.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s — yeah. For fourteen months, it’s a lot.”

“How’s Sharon?”

“Leaving the Army.”

“Good for her. Fuck the Army. How’s work?”

Steve lays his phone face-down on the table. “Listen, we don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?”

“This.” Steve gestures between the two of them. “This congenial back and forth. Like nothing’s happened.”

Steve falls quiet. His gaze drifts to the carpet, to the trail of spilled coffee leading to another table, maybe a table he’d rather be sitting at. Maybe he’d just rather—
“Maybe we should just fuck. You know?”

Bucky sluggishly orients to the question, incomprehension giving way to alarming clarity, like fog burning off in the sun. He blinks through it.

“Just fuck.”

Steve’s looking at him now, eyes wide.

“Just fuck. You know,” Bucky repeats.

Steve’s Adam’s apple jumps.

Bucky lets out a quick breath. “Yeah. Yeah, sure. Let’s just clear off the table, bend me over, let’s just fuck right here. Right now. These guys won’t mind. They’ll probably watch the whole thing. Take pictures. Hang it on the wall. Call it art.”

He scoffs, harder, and shakes his head. He flattens his trembling hands over his stomach, against the angry queasiness digging in there.

“Y’know— I mean— I don’t get it, Steve. Do you wanna shake my hand, or do you wanna fuck? You’ve gotta make up your mind. ‘Cause you either want me, or you don’t. You can’t just fuck around with me. You gotta make up your fucking mind.”

Steve’s jaw slides — scrapes, like gravel, a menacing, shudder-inducing sound.

“I’ve gotta make up my fucking mind? I’m the one who’s gotta decide?” And now it’s Steve’s turn to shake his head. “Wow.”

He sits forward suddenly, all power and intensity, forearms edging up precariously close to his hot clay teapot. Bucky’s not even sure he’d notice if he was leaning into it, if he was swimming in boiling tea.

“You know, after all this time, I can’t believe you think I’m the indecisive one. That I can’t make up my mind. After how long I wanted you, after how much I tried to give you love, begged you to take it from me, begged you, and you were just—” Steve steals a quick look around, then re-engages, his words muttered. “Wanting me one minute, shoving me away the next, begging for closeness— but I guess it wasn’t really closeness, was it? It was just sex. Right? Is that all it was? Is that all you wanted from me? Did you even love me? Did you ever want love from me? I don’t know. I don’t even know.”

Steve sits back again, and Bucky drags his palms over his thighs and eyes the pair of twinks who walk through the door holding hands, and who the hell would dare fucking hold hands at— who could hold hands, it’s so fucking hot in here— and he looks back to Steve, who crosses and uncrosses his arms, like he can’t decide if he wants to be small or big, contained or wild—

“And then you ran off to wherever,” Steve continues, “whenever I wanted to love you, you ran. Afghanistan, New York. Whenever I wanted to have a life with you, silly as I was to want that, fucking… funny or pathetic as you thought I was for wanting that. And when I wasn’t good enough or hard enough or big enough — or I maybe didn’t treat you like shit enough, I don’t know, then you ran off to fuck other guys—”

Steve stops here, abruptly, looking off to the far wall, and his face— Bucky forgot. He forgot the slope of Steve’s nose, the curves of his lips, the jut of his chin, the times he’s traced that profile with his fingertip or his mouth— and Steve is looking at the art now. It’s all cocks this month — photos
upon photos of cocks, cocks, cocks. Flaccid and hard and freshly jerked and dribbling come and huge and average and small and even a trans dude’s cock, or whatever it’s called. None of the cocks are fucked up and broken and gross like Bucky’s — he looked, he hoped, kind of hoped, maybe, and he fucking looked, just in case — and now Steve is looking at them, or maybe he’s not—

“And when I finally decided I had enough, when I put up with this hot and cold shit and your cheating, apparently, Jesus Christ, for years and, finally, when I finally said I’m done— I’m the one with the commitment issues?”

Bucky bites the inside of his lip, gnaws hard on the place he’s been gnawing since last night, and tries to follow Steve’s gaze. What is he looking at? Which cock? The really big, hard one? The one wrapped in a fist—

“In the immortal words of Bucky Barnes,” Steve says, “that is laugh-and-a-fucking-half. Except that it’s not.”

Steve goes after his tea now. He grabs the handle — so thin in his tight-knuckled grip that Bucky’s sure that he’ll snap it — and tips the pot. Tea drips all over the tray as he pours, but he keeps going anyway, talking as the pool grows.

“You forgot how to be loving. You forgot how to give. You used to know. I was so drawn to you, as a friend, and I know you have a really sweet—” He grimaces and shakes his head. “This sweetness— this thing that I—”

Steve puts the teapot down and stares at the puddle, pursing his lips. When he speaks again, all the bitterness is gone, leaving behind a thin, fragile veil of despondency.

“You’re so caught up in your pain that you can’t open your heart to anyone. Maybe you’ve never been able to. Certainly not to me. I’ve only wanted to understand you. And know you. And love you. And you’ve never let me.”

Steve clenches his jaw. Shakes his head.

“I’m not the one who’s ever needed to decide, Bucky. Once I knew, I knew. It was you. Always you. And I know you’ve got stuff. I can’t even imagine what it is. I really— I literally can’t. I’ve tried, but it’s pointless. I want you to tell me. Or I wanted you to, because now I don’t even know if we’re friends anymore. I just don’t know.”

Steve looks up, finally, and that’s it. It’s too much truth. It’s too much rawness. Too much spilled fucking tea and heat and he can feel all the bacteria eating deeper into his ulcers and there are too many people in this hot, small, cock-filled room. So Bucky pushes his chair out, and of course the fucker behind him is as close as the fucker who parked behind his truck back in Brooklyn, and he looks like a gimping jackass when he hobbles through the sea of too-close tables and carelessly spread legs and tossed man-bags, and he can feel Steve’s eyes on him and everyone else’s as he checks at least four people in various body parts with his hip and arm and ass before he makes it to the bathrooms — which are all occupied by gay guys preening and poofing their pompadours or doing their makeup or whatever. And when Bucky finally gets inside, he leans over the sink and breathes and breathes and breathes and splashes cold water on his face and cups some in his mouth and painstakingly convinces himself that he’s not having a heart attack and he comes close to convincing himself that he’s okay and that he’s going to be even more okay if he has more water and more air and he’s okay he’s okay he’s okay.

Okay.
He pees. Washes his hands. Splashes more water on his face and dries it with a rough paper towel. He’s not sure how long he’s gone, but he grabs two waters from the espresso bar on the way back, and when he gets to the tableside, Steve straightens from where he’s slouched in his seat. A small pile of napkins has been thrown over the puddle and is soaked through. The cup is still full.

He holds one of the waters out to Steve, who takes it from him not too carefully, and his fingers brush Bucky’s pinky and the side of his hand.

“Thanks.” Steve takes a sip and puts the glass down on the narrow space between their tea trays.

Bucky grabs the back of his chair, steadying himself as he sits. It isn’t quite enough to keep the water from spilling over the edge of the glass and down his hand. He mutters a curse and takes a drink, then another, then more, gulping until he’s drained the whole thing. He cups the empty mason jar in his hands, because at least it’s cool, and it give him something to ground himself while his words collect and ignite and become irrepressible, and then he’s saying it — he’s saying it, even though his ears are incomprehensibly hot and his legs are bouncing and he can’t turn his head to tally everyone who sees and hears and knows he’s saying it— he’s saying it—

“I love you. I fucking love you. I’ll stand on this fucking table right now and shout it in front of all these motherfuckers, I don’t care. I love you.”

Bucky licks his lips. Swallows. Tries to take a drink from his empty glass.

Steve’s jaw tightens, ticks along his sideburns, and his shoulders pulse up and down as he breathes. He presses his fingers to the soggy pile of napkins on his tray and wipes along the wicker, cleaning around the pot, around the cup, pressing into all the little crannies where Tea of Inquiry might have leached.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” His voice is strained so tight that Bucky can barely make it out.

Bucky lifts his glass once more before remembering that there’s nothing in it. He sets it on the table next to Steve’s. “You don’t have to say anything. I just— I wanna prove it to you. So.”

“And what if I don’t want that?”

“You don’t?”

Steve’s hand stops sopping up tea, just for a moment, before going through the slow motions of folding the stack of wet, shredding napkins in half. The fine bones of his hand slide under raised veins.

“Do you really not have feelings for me?” Bucky says.

“It’s not that simple.”

“I’m working on myself. With Hank. And Scott. I don’t know what my problem is. Depression, PTSD, someone said it’s a personality disorder, this— I dunno. Maybe I’m just a drunk. But I’m working on stuff. That stuff. The stuff you wonder about, I think. Stuff from before we even met.”

Steve looks up. He pats down the pile of napkins and his fidgeting hand goes below the table to join his other one.

Bucky continues.
“It’s really scary, though. Really, really fucking scary. I’ve never looked at it before. Ever. Sometimes I don’t even know exactly what it is. That’s how good I’ve been at hiding from it. But I want to show you the person I think I can be. It’s just one of the scariest things I’ve ever done in my entire life.”

It’s excruciatingly difficult to interpret the look on Steve’s face — intense, interested, but lacking in the softness that would herald forgiveness or the coldness that would signal rejection. It’s that unbearable middle place.

“I don’t know,” Steve says. “I don’t know. You really, really hurt me. So many fucking times.” His mouth quirks to the side. “I just don’t know.”

“I’m sorry. I am. I know it’s not enough to say it, but I am.”

Steve doesn’t reply. Bucky pulls his lip between his teeth and bites.

“Do you love me?” he asks.

The tension in Steve’s face cracks hard, like river ice. “Jesus. You can’t just ask that.”

“Do you?”

“Of course I do. It’s not like that just stops.”

“Okay.” Bucky nods and gnaws his lip a little more and mouths okay a few more times. He touches the edge of his empty teacup. “Did you actually think I was gonna say yes to your proposition?”

Steve looks away. Back to the dicks again. “I don’t know.“

“Unbelievable.” It truly is. “You don’t do casual, emotionless fucks, Steve. You know better than that.”

“Oh, right. That’s your department.”

It’s meant as a dig, but it barely grazes him. Steve’s tired now — or, at the very least, lost in thought. Lost in the wall of dicks.

“So if you didn’t really think I was gonna take you up on your offer, what are you doing here?” Bucky asks.

“I will say, I really don’t know what I’m doing here, of all places.” Steve tears himself away from the art and looks at Bucky dead-on. “This is really something.”

“You’re drinking tea with a bunch of homos. What does it look like?”

Bucky doesn’t know much about tea and hasn’t had it since he left Iraq. But when he lifts the lid of the pot, he’s pretty sure what he’s got is disastrously over-brewed.

“Is there rice in here?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you some hippie now? A farm-sanctuary-going, rice-tea-drinking, tofu-eating, chicken-petting hippie?”

Steve smiles a little. “Maybe. I guess.”
Bucky smiles back, and he pours half a cup, doing better than Steve at losing marginally less of it to his tray. He sets down the pot and looks into the dark liquid.

“Did you wanna see me?” he asks quietly.

“Yes,” Steve says. There’s no hesitation.

“Do you want a muffin?”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Doesn’t fit my macros.”

Bucky rolls his eyes — halfheartedly, because he lived by the macro game, too, once upon a time. It’s not usually a great sign with Steve, like the sharp angles. But it’s better than a case of vodka, he supposes.

“Oh, boy. Well, I’m gonna get one. I’m starving.”

He rises to his feet, muscles and ligaments and every other connective tissue screaming, and he stretches his arms overhead. He doesn’t miss the careless way Steve eyes the place where he can feel the air conditioning on his belly.

“Can I take these trays out of the way?” Bucky asks as he drops out of the stretch. He offers his hand, palm up.

“Yeah, sure. Need help?”

“Yeah, sure. Need help?”

“Nope.”

Bucky takes the trays and dumps them off at the espresso bar, then circles to the register to snag the last poppyseed muffin. He glances back to the table and catches Steve watching him, and Steve looks away fast, looks to the dicks, then away from them, too, down to his tea pot, to his tiny cup of tea, which he takes between his thumb and forefinger and throws back like a shot glass. Bucky scans the room, and there seems to be at least one person checking Steve out at any given time, so they’ve probably been doing it all along— shit. He’ll undoubtedly be hearing about it later.

He takes a deep breath and heads back to the table with the muffin, clutching the plate hard so there are no pastry-related embarrassments.

“Sure you don’t want just a bite?” Bucky says as he settles back in his seat. He nudges the plate toward Steve. “It’s poppyseed. It’s really good. There’s no meat in it.”

Steve looks between the muffin and Bucky’s face, then pulls the entire top of the muffin off and takes a bite out of it.

“Jesus, take half of it!”

Steve smirks through his chewing. “I guess I’m hungry.”

“God, you took the best part, too,” Bucky grumbles, but he can’t keep a longsuffering grin from pulling at his lips.

“It’s really good.”
“I told you.”

Bucky unwraps the rest of the muffin, all the soft parts left behind, and they eat in silence. It seems companionable, at first, but the muffin top disappears fast, and then Steve is staring at the lacquered grains of wood on the table, distant again, just like at the espresso bar.

“What’s on your mind?” Bucky asks.

Steve touches his fingers together on the tabletop, and he starts picking at his left middle finger. His pinky and ring fingers have already been worked over, nails chewed as far as they can be, cuticles torn away. He’ll keep moving inward toward his thumb but won’t do the index until he’s all out of options.

“Do you really think that about me?” Steve asks. “About getting out? Do you think I’m a selfish piece of shit?”

God damn it.

“No.”

“Do you think I abandoned them?”

“C’mon, Steve—”

His hands ball. “I mean it. Those things you said — they’re true, right? I abandoned them. They’re going to Afghanistan next month. Did you know that?”

“How do you know?”

“Sitwell.”

Bucky shakes his head. Fucking Shitwell. “Doesn’t matter.”

“I should be going with them.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” Bucky states. He pushes the muffin plate aside, along with his teapot and cup.

It’s like Trip all over, something about it, watching Steve like this— his face contorted with the shame of survival, the shame of deficiency, somehow, it’s like that day with Trip, God, that’s coming up on the 24th, and Trip is dead, and his body— and Steve is staggered, wide-eyed and unmoored and covered in—

“I think about them all the time. Now that I’m working on things with Bruce, I can think about it— And I feel terrible. It keeps me up. All night sometimes. I feel like I let them down—”

“Steve, you got blown up.”

“I know, but—”

“You got blown up and you got f*cked up. Bad. You would have been no good to them. And nobody would have dared to pull you, because you would have been just good enough to skate by, because you’re really great at faking good. And you would have f*cked up on a mission, somewhere, somehow. And your f*ck-up might have gotten your guys killed.” Bucky presses his hand into the table. “And you might have gotten yourself killed. And then your kid wouldn’t have a dad.”
Steve exhales sharply.

Bucky sags, and a choice lays itself before him — one where he can start down the road he knows he’s supposed to take now, the one where he’s honest, where he lays open his— whatever. The thing he’s so fucking terrified of showing to someone else that he’s not even sure where it lives anymore.

But Steve wants it, for some unfathomable reason, so he tries.

“Yeah... I was pissed when you got out. I was. Especially because you said it was for me. Because that’s a stupid reason to trash your career.”

He hesitates. Shifts in his chair. Bends his stiff knee.

“But— I was relieved,” Bucky continues, “because I didn’t want you to go back. I didn’t want anything to happen to you. If you went back— I’d be so fucking worried, I wouldn’t be able to stand it. I just wanted you to be safe. I hate the thought of you being in, anyway. I never wanted you to join.”

Steve frowns. “Never? Really? Not even before?”

“No. I always hated the idea.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want you to die, dumbass. Jesus.”

Bucky gathers his hands on the tabletop and pulls down the sleeves of his shirt over the tops of his hands. They’re already so stretched out from it, but if he pulls in his elbows, he can get the hem a few more inches down.

“And I shouldn’t have said that about Choi in front of you,” Bucky says. “I’m sorry.”

“Did you mean it, though? At least some of it?”

“I just—” Bucky sighs forcefully. “There are bigger things than your dick. Bigger things than your fucking ‘gay identity’ or whatever the fuck. Bigger than love for you boyfriend or partner. Whoever. You know? Like the mission. Your men.”

Bucky points across the table. “You, Lieutenant Rogers, are different. You needed a med board and you never would have gotten one until everything went really tits up. But, God, if you’re gay and joined and you knew the policy, you take the fucking hit. You just do. It’s a sacrifice. We all sacrifice things. Some of us more than others, but... don’t act like you’re a goddamn hero for getting booted out because you broke the rules. Choi didn’t fucking rip the system. He fucked over his men. There are real consequences to his actions. I hope he knows that. I hope he thinks about that. This is not something to celebrate. You wanna change the law? Fine. Fuckin’ gay march on DC. I don’t give a shit. But don’t you fucking dare wear that uniform. You lost the right when you abandoned your men and your duty.”

Steve’s eyes are blown wide, and they’d been widening with slow mounting something since he started explaining— Shit, this was a mistake. He shouldn’t have said anything. Why can’t he just keep his goddamn mouth shut?

“Not you, Steve,” he clarifies, and he edges his hand toward the center of the table. “I don’t mean you. You earned your uniform. This is not about you.”
Bucky glances over at the tea he poured earlier, dryer and more defeated by the second. He reaches over, grabs the cup, gives a tentative sniff, and takes his first sip.

“This stuff’s not too bad.”

Steve nods in agreement, but he’s back to picking his fingers again, far off in the face, deep in some spiral of remorse for a crime that’s not even in the rulebooks.

“Steve.”

His head snaps up with a small sound.

“You made the right choice to get out,” Bucky tells him. “Whatever reason you did it— doesn’t matter. It was the right thing to do. I mean that. As your platoon sergeant, I mean that. You can trust that. Okay?”

Steve nods, and he’s blinking, fast, like he’s got a lash in his eye or something, only—

“Hey...”

Bucky reaches across the table, slow and halting, and he touches Steve’s watch.

They both look at the place where they meet, looking at Bucky’s war-torn fingers as they skim along the silicon band, the same Luminox he had before it got blown or cut off, he’s not sure which. They ordered it together in Steve’s trailer, because he still had that piece of shit he probably bought back when he was a Plebe. Let’s get you a real watch, he had said, and Bucky bought it before Steve could balk, told him he got a really good deal on it, even though he didn’t, and when that haji motherfucker hit their vehicle and sent Steve and Ward flying on the fucking road, the fucking thing was completely unscratched after, and even after Khalidiya it still looks—

Steve turns his hand. Opens it. Everything feels tight and small again, and there’s not enough room in his lungs to suck in the air he needs, so they work faster and faster while Steve stares at his own empty palm, waiting, and there are people everywhere, every table now, and he’ll feel it, every ugly, disrupted surface of skin, but he needs this now, Steve fucking needs this, he needs to be loved, and this is the time for him to prove that he can do love, he can fucking do it, he can fucking do this, even though it feels like his heart is going to rip out of his chest cavity and he’ll lose his muffin half on the carpet, Jesus fucking Christ, just fucking do it, Barnes.

He closes his eyes. Murmurs, “My God,” under his breath. Does it.

When he opens his eyes, his hand is on Steve’s, lightly, and there’s no movement between them, only Steve’s wide eyes and slack mouth and glances to Bucky that Bucky can’t return because his face is burning so hot that he’s genuinely scared of it getting any hotter. Christ, his hand is so fucking up, he wishes Steve would just take the whole thing, swallow it in both of his like an enthusiastic businessman, envelop him, hide him, but he doesn’t. He just bears it gently, motionless, and maybe he needs Bucky to go first, so he does, he flexes, just a little, skims his fingertips over the smooth, fleshy curve of Steve’s palm, then traces them along the first line he finds, following it toward his index finger—

Steve takes it then, hard, fully, grasps it with the fearful desperation of a man about to slip away, and Bucky dares to look at him then, and he’s blinking again, eyes red, and none of it falls but it’s there, brimming, open and naked as the thing that’s happening between them.

Bucky takes a deep breath and chases it with an urgent sip of tea, draining the cup.
“Thank you,” Steve whispers.

Bucky offers a weak smile. Shakes his head. Gives Steve’s hand a squeeze. It’s all he can do. He hopes, maybe this time, that his best is enough.

———

“You’re gonna take the train?”

Bucky slides on the pair of Ray-Bans that have been dangling from his shirt collar for the past two hours. He pushes the sleeves of his shirt half way up his forearms, then tugs them back down again with a scowl. It’s a black cotton waffle knit, the kind New Yorkers wear in the dead of winter under everything else and live to regret the moment they step indoors. He seems to have acquired an aesthetic somewhere in the last decade, dark on dark, colors that flood his paleness and streamline him into a tall, lean spire of vague discomfort.

“Yeah,” Steve replies.

“Wow. That’s a hoof.”

“It’s okay. It’s on my exposure hierarchy.”

Bucky smiles and sucks in a breath between his teeth. “Yeah, I remember those days. How’s all that stuff going?”

Steve shrugs and squints across the street at a pair of young men walking shoulder to shoulder, laughing. They’re covered in rainbows. Arm bands. Tank tops. A dash of face paint.

“Sucks. But it works.” He looks back at Bucky, who is following those same men with a sour, tight mouth.

“I’m glad,” Bucky says to him. He almost looks it, his expression warming by forced degrees. “I’m glad you found something that works.”

“How about you?” Steve asks

“AA’s okay. Kinda slow, but that’s because therapy’s going slow. Hank won’t let me move forward until I talk about a bunch of shit with— I dunno. Somebody. Probably Scott. There’s all this really fucked up stuff....”

Bucky trails off, his jaw shifting around that stuff he won’t say. He pulls his lip in between his teeth, like back in the cafe, and gnaws on it for a few moments, intensely, gaze locked on the concrete by Steve’s feet.

“I dunno.” Bucky says it suddenly, clearly, his head snapping up. “Group is good. I’m learning a lot. Trying to get better at relationship stuff. Emotion stuff. Values. Priorities. You know. I’m supposed to be mindful all the time, but I’m awful at it.”

“You okay?” Steve says.

“Yeah! Why?”

He’s not okay. His lip is in his mouth again not one moment later, arms coming to fold over his chest before he aborts the movement and lets them fall stiffly to his sides.

“Did you wanna maybe grab lunch? Dinner? Whatever?” Bucky’s voice wavers, the edges of his
mouth flirt in and out of a smile. “I know it’s a weird time. I have a meeting at six, though. There’s a vegan place around here that’s really good. Better than Candle 79, I heard. It’s kind of fancy, though. I dunno.” This time Bucky does cross his arms, tightly, and looks down the casual length of his body. “Guess I’m not dressed right.”

Steve glances away. He can’t bear the glimmer in Bucky’s eyes just behind the self-effacement, that speck of hopefulness, that gambler’s itch that keeps him upping the bets today. When would it stop? If he keeps saying yes, what would happen? They’ve already met for coffee. Shared a muffin. Confessed their love. Held hands. Would they kiss? Would they end up back at Steve’s apartment? Would they fuck? Would they throw down and fuck out all the awkwardness and hurt and anger and everything else?

Steve shakes his head.

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Busy?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky scratches at the nape of his neck. “Okay. Well, maybe I’ll go set up early. Bum around. Don can yell at me about the coffee not tasting like shit.”

They square up to each other, like two cowboys fixing to draw pistols. This is the part where they say goodbye, he supposes, the part they failed at so spectacularly last time, when the empathic part of Steve’s brain decided to switch offline and leave him with his hand jabbed out between them, abandoned to his idiocy.

“I’m sorry about the handshake last time,” he says. “It was a reflex. A bad one.”

“It’s okay.” Bucky waves him off. “We could do it this time, if you want. I’m prepared.”

“Okay.”

Steve sticks out his hand. Bucky begins to offer his before retracting it slightly.

“My handshakes aren’t very good anymore, though. Just to warn you. I mean, they’re not as bad as Paul’s, but…” He curls his damaged fingers into a loose fist and stretches them out again, extending slowly toward Steve.

Steve grasps his hand and goes easy, like he’s cradling a sand dollar, and Bucky’s hand softens in kind, until it’s barely a handshake at all and it’s just hands together, holding. On the street. In front of anyone.

“Thanks for meeting me. It was good to see you,” Bucky says.

“You too.”

Something like contentment flickers on Bucky’s lips, but his shoulders are tightening, head tilting incrementally as he interrupts his own attempts to scan around. He keeps himself grounded. Stiff, but grounded—

—Until he tugs his hand away, pulling it to his stomach, head jerking, twisting at the waist as he surveys the street around him, the passers-by preoccupied with their own conversations, who couldn’t care less about two more men touching in one of the gayest neighborhoods in New York. It
would be a fascinating study in paranoia if it wasn’t such a tired blast from the past.

“Maybe we can meet up next month,” Steve says, searching for something to bring Bucky back to the moment, out of the spell of worry that has swept him away from them.

Bucky orients back, swiftly. His cheeks and ears are flushed. “For your birthday?”

“I’ll be busy. But later, yeah, maybe.”

“Okay. Yeah.” Bucky claps him on the shoulder then, once, and with surprising force. “Fuck — you’re about to be thirty! You’re about to officially be fucking old, my friend. Expect me to tease you mercilessly between now and then.”

Steve smiles. “Good. I will.”

They say their final goodbyes, which are drawn out and spoken half-way turned and heading in opposite directions. Bucky’s limp is pronounced, every step clearly made with great discomfort. Despite Bucky’s prodigious skill in acting out his emotional pain through self-destruction, he’d be dead before he’d let Steve know he was physically hurting. God knows why he ditched his cane.

But even still, he looks good. He looks good limping away. He looks good limping toward. He looks good frowning and smiling, confessing and lying. He looks good hemming in a sea of cocks and hawing on the free streets of Chelsea. He looks good professing his love. Anywhere. He looks good talking about that— thing—

Steve shakes his head sharply. The 23rd street station is just across the street, and he makes the light just in time. He’s lucky to catch the 1 right away, which will take him all the way to 168th street, 18 stops down the line, up to the nosebleed section of Manhattan Island. He’s even luckier to get a seat, one of the two-seaters near the back of the car. He doesn’t even care — he sits and takes up space.

He spreads his legs wide. He tries to look serious and large. He just wants to be alone. He just wants to think.

And think he does. Around Lincoln Center, his mind starts to twist like an overgrown vine. He pulls himself out of it, violently, with the wide-eyed terror that a parent yanks their child from the path of an oncoming car. But images continue to re-emerge, saturating into his consciousness so insidiously that he doesn’t realize they’ve consumed him until he’s shifting in his seat, moving strategically against the rush of blood to his dick, positioning himself so that it’s not obvious what’s happening, that he’s got an obscene subway boner by the time they reach Columbia Station, the kind that only perverts and teenagers get. All he can picture is Bucky’s crass suggestion earlier — bending him over that table and fucking him, everyone watching, just like he said, all the men, all the cocks, everyone and everything — and he just needs to think about work, think about Matt — no, definitely not Matt — think about Maria, the line between Maria’s eyebrows, Maria angry, briefing Maria without being prepared — or think about Ethan and how stressful it’ll be, what the hell is he going to do, how does Sharon think he’s competent enough to do this, and some birthday present, happy birthday, here’s the gift of anxious parenting — not like other birthdays, God, that birthday on the roof, getting his— think about work, making dinner, maybe that tempeh thing he’s been thinking about, even though the last batch he bought was moldy or something, and maybe he is a chicken-petting, tofu-eating hippie, maybe Bucky’s right, and maybe Bucky would tell him to eat something else—

He manages to avoid traumatizing anyone on the way off the train, and he makes the walk home with his head low, hands balled in his pockets, thoughts carefully trained to all of the things he has to do to prepare for Ethan’s arrival next week. Crib. He needs a new crib. He’ll work his way out of the small one. He’s smart enough. Dextrous and adventurous and unaware of his mortality enough.
Maybe one that converts into a bed. More diapers. Crib. Diapers. Crib. Toys. He needs more toys. Crib. God, lots more books. He maxed out the MasterCard. He’ll have to see if he’s got something left on the Visa. He has just enough left in his checking account to make groceries and the electric bill and gas and he could probably squeeze one book out of there but Jesus, what a horrible, horrible calculation, how did this even happen—?

Scratch that. Scratch it all. He just needs to breathe. Breathe and think of nothing. No — breathe and think of breathing. And he imagines Bruce’s voice on his recordings, the nervous string that ties his words together into the shape that’s gotten him this far, further than he ever thought — breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold. And he breathes and breathes as he walks, and maybe Bucky breathes like this, maybe that’s why he had to leave, maybe that’s what he did in the bathroom, how he was able to go and come back and say — what he said — even though Steve suggested that they — what the fuck was he thinking? Just fuck? Since when? Since when does he just fuck anyone? Even though he’d give anything for it, for that superpower, to be able to detach the part of his brain where the feelings live, where the history lives, to be Bucky Barnes and fuck his way through life — fuck God knows how many people, it could be a dozen — without attachments, without love, without complications. If he and Bucky could just fuck, just crash together and fuck, just sweep aside everything and get it all out, all the pent up everything, just shut up and do it, right there in front of everyone, and it would be so wrong and so fucked up, but Steve would give anything to get his hands on him, to fuck the filthiest sounds out of him, moans so loud that they’d fill the whole room, because it’d be dead quiet, everyone watching —

Steve fumbles around in his pocket for his keys and he has to — he has to — dig deeper, he has to sweep the edge of his dick with his fingertips, even though he’s just about inside, he has to touch it, because it’s been throbbing for the better part of an hour. And when he fishes the keys out, there are so many more of them than he ever remembered there being — work keys and Sharon keys and Matt keys and Bucky keys. He finally finds the right one and he’s in, slamming the door shut behind him, locking it, and he’s stripping out of his clothes, shoes kicked off, pants hopped out of one leg at a time, socks and underwear gone.

His hand on his dick is like a blast of air conditioning on a sweltering day, and he strokes himself a few times just to work off the edge of the pressure, so he can relax enough to settle onto the mattress and be an adult about it. Pitching a tent in the subway like a kid, God — He digs around for the lube in the nightstand, fishes through a pile of Jimmy Carter’s book, some PowerPoint printouts, his glasses case, an old GQ, a Men’s Health, an abandoned book of Sudoku puzzles. He finds some shoved so far back in the drawer that it practically carbon dates the last time he jerked off, probably some time in early April, from the dates on the magazines. He doesn’t even think he came.

He looks up at the ceiling, stroking slowly, gazing at the speckles and chips and lazy patching, and his thoughts teeter on the edge of that same twisting path, because he could stop now. He’s got enough control. He could take a shower, let his hard-on deflate, try to read something. Pretend he never thought about Bucky’s ass or his cock or how it would feel to fuck in public, how it might start, like maybe they would be holding hands like they were, but Bucky’s hand would get lighter, featherlight, maybe it would skim up the inside of his forearm, slowly, and he’d bite his lip, maybe stand up, walk around the table to where he’s sitting—

Steve’s eyes slide closed, and he feels for the lube and squeezes a little too much into his hand, and it’s kinda cold, but it’s fine, because Bucky would stare down at him, and he’d unhook his sunglasses from his collar and set them on the table, and he’d move in close, and Steve would shift in his chair, open his legs so Bucky could get between them, so he could run his hand through Steve’s hair, grab a fistful of it and tilt his head up, so he could meet his eyes, so Steve could see the hunger burning there, see them darken with desire, and he could reach out for the waist of Bucky’s black jeans, grab him by the belt loops, pull him close, so close that he could rest his chin on his stomach,
so close that all he’d have to do is edge the hem of Bucky’s shirt up and he’d be able to see it — that pale flash of skin, that place just above the band of his underwear, and he could press his lips to it, push up his shirt and kiss him there, see him flinch, because he’s always been a little ticklish, but it also makes his breath get tight, especially when he trails the path that leads from his belly button down, along the dusting of hair that he saw just for a moment— did he mean it? Did he know he was doing it? He was always such a tease, always knew exactly how to drive Steve crazy when they were out, get him thinking about what he wanted to do when they got home, because they could never — but it didn’t matter, because it made it that much hotter when they got back. He’d obsess for hours about a strip of skin, about a hand in a back pocket, about the silhouette of his cock in a too-tight pair of pants stretched just the right way, he always knew — and Steve would be kissing his stomach, hands on his hips, and Bucky would huff and grab his hair again, harder this time, yank his head back, clench his teeth, and he’d say, I want you to suck my cock, and Steve would touch the button of his jeans but Bucky would pull his hair again and say Get on your knees, so all these homos can see what a dirty cocksucker you are—

Steve grunts, passing his hand over his cock faster. And, yeah, he’d do what Bucky said, he’d drop down from the chair, onto the floor, onto his knees, and there wouldn’t be any crumbs or old napkins or stir sticks or muffin wrappers. Just clean carpet and Bucky’s boots and Bucky’s legs and his groin, right in his face, and Steve would press his hand to it through his jeans, feel how hard he is, run the heel of his palm over the length of him, the full length of him, because he’d be fine, everything would be fine, and Steve would sigh and close his eyes and hold him by the hips and nuzzle his whole dick, his balls, all of him, and thank God, thank fucking God that it was all just a terrible nightmare. And then maybe Steve would cast a look to the side and the guy at the next table would be watching, maybe the guy with the awful handshake, he’d be sitting back in his chair with his hand on his upper thigh, close to his crotch, the way guys do when they wanna sneak a touch but they don’t want anyone to know, maybe a quick brush with the thumb. He’d be watching. Definitely.

And Steve would unbutton and unzip Bucky’s pants — he’d be wearing the black Calvin Kleins, the ones that cling to him everywhere — and all he’d have to do is pull the waistband down, and his cock would spring loose, and Bucky would hold Steve’s head and move his hips and drag his perfect dick across his cheek, toward his lips, slowly, and he’d say You want this in your mouth? You wanna suck it—

“Fuck…” Steve shifts, thrusting his hips into his jerking hand. Yeah, he wants to suck it, he’d let his mouth fall open, say Yeah, I wanna, and Bucky would loosen his grip and Steve would take the head in his mouth and it’s been so long, he’s wanted it for so long, he’s such a dirty cocksucker, Bucky’s so right, he’d suck it, suck a little further down each time, looking up at him, one hand clutching his ass, the other on his own dick, rubbing himself through his pants, sucking more and more each time until he could take the whole thing, until he was almost gagging on it, and he’d finally loosen up so Bucky could fuck his face, so Bucky could look down and see him take it all the way. Steve could see him, see his head drop back, hear him groan, hear his name, over and over, feel his hands stroking his head, and he’d want Bucky’s come so bad, in his mouth— no — down his throat— so he would wait for his breath to get short, for his thrusts to get quicker, for him to say Oh God, oh my God, oh my God, and he’d make sure he came just right, moaning, and he wouldn’t care how loud he was, no neighbors to worry about now, so it’d be the kind of moan that would make everyone’s dick ache, and he’d shoot his load deep, Steve’s face flush against his body, and he’d smell so good, nobody else smells like him — nobody — and he’d look so fucking hot, he always looks so hot when he comes, with his mouth open, brows gathered, his neck tight, his body a beautiful, taut bow of intensity, but his hands would be soft, he’d be petting Steve’s head as he started to drift back down, and he’d watch while Steve let his dick slip out of his mouth— he’d be gentle about it, hold it, make sure he licked off every bit of come, and Bucky would run his thumb over his lower lip and say Such a sweet mouth, maybe you could show me—
Steve takes his hand off his dick and slides both his hands down his thighs, pushing out an unsteady breath. He’s already so close, but he can’t come yet. There’s so much more he wants to do, so many old fucks — excellent, spectacular fucks — that he wants to relive, combine, too many to choose from, almost, it’s just been so long, he’s not even sure how he’ll choose—

He closes his eyes tighter and gathers both hands over his cock. He pinches just below the head for a few long seconds to keep himself calm, and it costs him some wood, but it’s worth it to buy himself more time. He goes easy on himself as he sinks back into the scene, back into the cafe, whatever the hell it’s named, because he’s pretty sure it’s not actually called Le Grande Café Homo like in Bucky’s text, and he’d be on his knees— no, he’d be getting up from his knees, and he would stand up tall, so their height difference feels big, even though it’s really not, but he’d want Bucky to have to tilt his chin up to look him in the eye, and he would take that chin, hold it between his thumb and finger, run the pad of his thumb over the cleft, feel the little bit of stubble there Bucky sometimes can’t reach when he shaves— no, he’d have even more stubble, his whole face, he looks so sexy with it, and Steve would lean in to kiss him but he’d tilt his head to the side instead, expose the vulnerable column of his neck, and he’d kiss him there, and maybe Bucky’s hand would wander while he did it, down his torso, down to his cock, and he’d touch him through his pants while Steve kissed him and sucked a mark into his skin, the kind he’d never let him leave — because what would Sergeant such-and-such say, as if he’d know a man did it — and he would press Bucky’s hand to his hard-on and say You feel that? And Bucky would say Yeah I feel it, God you’re so big, so hard, and Steve would say What do you want me to do with it? And Bucky would tighten his grip on it, and his teeth would come down on his lip, and he’d say I want you to fuck me, I want you to bend me over and fuck me, right here.

Steve’s breathing kicks up, and he starts jerking his cock again in earnest as he imagines things shifting, how he would grab Bucky by the upper arms and turn him, push him up against the nearest table, pull down his pants, grab Bucky’s tight ass through the thin fabric of his underwear, God he misses that ass, he’d yank those briefs down, whip out his cock, and rub it against him, and he’d say You want this? And Bucky would say, Yeah, put it in me, I need you so bad, and Steve would— they would need lube and— maybe… one of the guys at the other tables would have some in his bag, and he would be like, Here, you can use this, but only— Steve furrows his brow, but then the corner of his mouth quirks up a little — and the guy would say, You can only use it if my boyfriend and I can watch you fuck him, front row seats, and he’d point to a table right next to theirs, and Steve would look at both of them, and they’re cute, really cute, maybe 19 or 20, he remembers them from earlier, and he can imagine them watching, and then he imagines them jerking off while they watch — no, maybe jerking each other off, how hot that would be, so he’d tell them that if they watch they have to touch each other, and the guy would call him a pervert but he’d be smiling, and he’d agree and give him the lube and take a seat right there, him and his hot boyfriend, the one who reminds him of Bucky, cocky in the jaw but soft in the eyes.

And Steve would take the lube and put it all over himself. He’d take a lot, as much as he could slather on, but he’s waited so long to fuck Bucky he can barely stand the prep, can barely keep his hand steady on himself— and he hastily pours more lube onto his own hand and makes a channel with his right one, something he can slide his cock into, imagine it’s Bucky’s ass, imagine he’s got him pressed up against the table, braced over it, shirt hiked hip a little, pants pulled down to expose his whole ass, and he’d get real close and tell him, Spread your legs, spread for me, and Bucky would, he would tilt his ass out, open up for him, and Bucky would say Fuck me, I want you so bad, I need you, and Steve would guide his dick up to his hole, right up to the edge of it, and he’d look around the room, to the two guys in the front row unzipping each other’s shorts, to the guy from the LGBT center, trying not to watch but still watching out of the corner of his eye, to the ones exchanging furtive looks, to the cocks on the wall, all of them thick and hard, and he’d push up into Bucky’s ass — oh, he does it now, and it’s so tight — and Bucky would groan, he’d go slow, he
knows to go slow, to add more lube and go in and out and be slow about it, because it’ll be worth it, and he’d fuck in further with every thrust, just like when he was blowing him, just like he’s fucking up into his fist — God, it’s so tight—

And Bucky would growl and tell him to hurry up already, because he’s an impatient son of a bitch, and Steve would say, Yeah? You want me to fuck you hard? And Bucky would say, Yeah, give it to me, and he’d goad him on while Steve grabbed his shoulder and shoved his hips forward as hard as Bucky could take it, and he lets himself go, lets himself make any noises that happen, no matter how unbridled and animalistic they sound, moves his hand as fast and firm as he can without any regard for coming — he’s chasing it now, he can fucking feel it just on the horizon, and he wants it now, so fucking bad — and he thinks of all the people who’d be watching, all the faces of the onlookers, the two guys with their cocks out, jerking each other off, the guy with the beard, Paul, that’s his name, he’d have his hand on his dick now, through his pants, and the whole place — everyone would be watching them now, they’d all be touching themselves, they couldn’t help it, some of them totally shameless, just whipping their dicks out, some of them in secret, but they could not help it, because that’s how hot it would be, Steve knows they look hot together when they fuck, he fucking knows it, he would film it if he could, watch it a thousand times, blow his load to it a million times — and Bucky would be moaning, his head dipped, and he’d be grabbing the table, white-knuckled, and he’d be hard again, leaking, so turned on that he’d be so close to coming again, grabbing his cock, jerking himself off so fast, desperate, and Steve would say I wanna see you come, all these fuckers wanna see you come, too —

And Bucky would give a rough shout, and his ass would clench tight and he’d be coming, all over the table — Steve groans, he’s so close, so, so close — and Bucky would crane his head back, look over his shoulder at Steve, and his voice would be strained, like he could barely get the words out, he’d still be trying to catch his breath, but he’d say, Kiss me — and — oh God, Steve would kiss him, and — and —

Steve comes with a moan, long and loud and almost incredulous at the feeling being ripped from him, like a hundred years of dammed up water bursting through a pinhole, and he jerks himself through it while he holds that image in his mind — the two of them, kissing, Bucky fully there, wanting it, asking for it, craving it, everyone else gone now, until it’s just them. Just them.

He opens his eyes as his orgasm ebb. His cock is still in his hand, a slow dribble of come still leaking out of it, his stomach splattered with it. He releases his dick and lets his arm flop to the bed. The room is dim in the late afternoon light that filters in through a pair of small windows, which open just enough to get an air conditioner through. An air conditioner he doesn’t have because he left his with Bucky. Because he lives in a goddamn basement now.

Steve sighs and wills himself not to chase that dangling thread, because it’s become his new part time occupation to berate himself, and he is plain goddamn tired. Literally and figuratively exhausted by it. And he is covered in come and feeling not very horrible about it, even though he’s in such a state from raunchy fantasies about his ex, and it’s fine. The thing with Sharon, this, it’s — it’s something. It’s something. After being half-dead since 2009, this is something close to life, isn’t it?

He looks down at the mess that’s drying along the muscles he’s been so fastidiously sculpting since he began working with Bruce. It’s getting gross, so he slides off the bed and walks to the bathroom to wash. He opts for a shower. A long one. He stands under the spray and closes his eyes as it pounds against his chest. He and Bucky would sometimes do this after, because Bucky wasn’t often one for sitting still, didn’t like to bask too long, didn’t want to wait to see what would happen if they stopped fucking, stopped talking, stopped moving, so Steve would pull out and they would lie there, and he could probably count the seconds on two hands before Bucky would squirm away, twist around, tell a joke, playfully nip at him, go to the kitchen for a snack, or, God, maybe to drink, who
knows now. But sometimes he’d say C’mon, you beautiful, filthy man, and he’d take him by the hand, and they’d cram into Bucky’s small shower, and they would laugh and Bucky would lather him up and shampoo his hair, even though he didn’t need it at all, and Bucky would kiss him and sometimes they’d mess around some more but most of the time they wouldn’t. It was just sweet. It was Bucky being sweet. And right now, as the water echoes off the stained grout shower tiles, Steve longs for it. Steve longs for him.

He towel-dries his hair and slips on some underwear, a thin t-shirt, and a pair of black Umbro shorts that have been kicking around his wardrobe since at least 1997. The longing corrodes his attention, brittles it like rust, until he can’t hold it to anything — not to cleaning up the bathroom, tidying the kitchen, putting away his laundry, making a protein shake. Again and again it returns to an envelope, one stuffed in a book that’s stuffed in a box, and he can see hasty scrawls, penned by red flashlight, the creases from being folded and unfolded at least a hundred times, and he has to have it. He has to find it and hold it and he has to do it now.

Steve doesn’t have to search long at all, and it’s not just because his apartment is barely 400 square feet. It’s because it’s in the first place he looks, right under the bed, in a long plastic Rubbermaid storage container with a bunch of other old books he doesn’t have shelf space for — Canto General, fat and crisp and barely read, barely even flipped through except for this, to hold two envelopes of opposite stature. He lies down on the bed, on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, and pulls the thicker envelope first, setting the book aside.

The envelope is sloppily addressed to S. G. Rogers, C/o Sarah Rogers of Brooklyn, New York. There’s no return address and $1.02 of postage, about $.68 more than the weight of its contents. Steve runs his finger along the edge of it, over the worn corners, the torn pieces where he ripped it open. He knew it was from Bucky when he saw it sitting on the sideboard by the door, because nobody does their G’s quite like that. He let it sit for nearly two weeks before he opened it, he was still so bitter. And then he read it, and he sat after, his jaw slack, and he read it again, and again, and again, and then he called, and it was mostly just Bucky complaining because he was so stressed out about his deployment packing list, but he sounded so happy to hear his voice, and Steve stopped him in the middle of it and said I got your letter, and it was just Oh God, I was so tired, can you believe that bullshit, sending us out to the field? like it was nothing, and Steve let him have it, but he knew what it meant, and he never could let the letter go, even after everything.

He pulls the paper from the envelope — four folded sheets of lined paper, torn haphazardly from a green Army notebook, the kind they both carried downrange. He touches his nose to the sheets and sniffs. He always does it, because maybe he’ll pick up some scant trace of Bucky, that piquant warmth that stirs and roots him. But all he smells is old, bleached pulp. He unfolds it and surveys the first page, the ballpoint scrawled at an odd cant, like it was written cramped up in a fighting position or shielding it from looky-loos in a too-crowded CP, somewhere an infantryman shouldn’t be writing his secret boyfriend during FTX.

There’s no “Dear Steve.” In fact, there’s no mention of Steve at all. Just an explosion of words in hasty black ink.

It’s pitch fucking dark and it smells like dead leaves and I can’t fucking sleep I haven’t slept for three fucking days and I hate Fort Campbell so so much I hope this place is a pile of smoldering ashes when we get back, like some fucking meteor selectively wipes it off the face of the planet or something. If that happens I’ll praise Jesus every single day and go to church every day for the rest of my life with my MOTHER. I don’t know what to do except write you. I’m sorry. This is the dumbest time for FTX. I GET IT, train to fight blah blah fuck you, I went to PLDC, I read the manual, watch me jerk off to it in my sleep, yawn. But I don’t know how this is helping us. Everyone is just scared. These kids couldn’t find Afghanistan on a map if you pointed to it. They say they
wanna go “get some” and say they’re gonna kill OBL personally but they’re scared. The old men act all fucking tough but they don’t know shit. They barely did shit in Desert Storm. This is nothing like before. They’re scared too. I know that being in the woods in fucking godforsaken fucking Kentucky isn’t gonna help any of us. We’re not going to the goddamn woods, I’m pretty sure of that. Probably some mountains. Guess I don’t know much about Afg either but I’m trying to read about it. I’m going stir crazy. I have to talk to someone. I don’t trust anyone here. This place. This fucking PLACE.

I’m sorry. This is fucking stupid. I can’t believe I’m back here. What a fucking nightmare. I should have told you. I’m sorry Im such a fucking coward. I requested a transfer to the 75th practically the second I got here and then again last month but my chain of command are a bunch of cocksuckers and I hate every one of them. I’ll have to wait until they fucking expend on this deployment or PCS out of this shithole (lucky bastards). At least maybe I can get to Ranger school when we get back so I can get my tab and get qualified so when these fuckers go I’ll be ready to get the fuck out of here ASAP. God, maybe I’ll just bite it over there and get sent back one way or another. Who knows. I’d just go to Walter Reed or some shit or back to NY in a fucking box I’m sorry I know that’s morbid but god I fucking hate it here. I miss you.

This place is making me crazy and anxious and I don’t know how I’m tired. I don’t know what that even means anymore. I just wish you were here. I wish I was with you in bed and we could close the curtains and hide but the sun would never go down. I don’t think the sun will ever fucking come up here. I’m still waiting. But I love you. I love you. And I’m fucking tired and this smell but it’s okay. I’m sorry. For everything. I’ll call soon.

Steve takes a deep breath. It ends there. There’s no Bucky, Jamie, BB, or JB. No identifiable information of any kind. Just a full stop and some smudges of dirt. He’s not even sure if it’s dirt or oil from his fingers or the places where his cheek touched the paper too many times, if something like that can happen — Christ, he is a sentimental creature sometimes, but he has done it. He did it even at West Point, once, after he made First Captain and felt more alone than he ever had in the three years since he got there.

He didn’t dare pull out the other envelope back at the Academy, even though he had it with him, slipped between the pages of a carefully placed bible in his locker. It was a risk, he knew it. If anyone found it— well, they probably wouldn’t, since nobody really messes with a man’s bible at a military college. But even if they did, they couldn’t really say much about it. There’s nothing explicitly gay about it, even though it is easily the gayest thing Steve has in his possession. He pulls it out now, and it’s the same format as the letter — same address, no return, excess postage, postmarked just a few days after the letter.

Inside is a single photo of Bucky. He’s dressed in his battle dress uniform pants with a skin-tight brown t-shirt tucked into them, his arms thick with new muscles for the Ranger Qualification Course he was so desperate to flee to so he could get the hell out of Campbell. He’s sitting in a chair, leaning back, hands in his pockets, looking into the camera. His eyes are piercing but somehow also unguarded, mouth relaxed but not quite smiling. His hair, for once, is Army regulation-short. He looks raw. Stunning. So unconscionably sexy that it might as well have been pornographic, Steve jerked off to him so much like this. He handles the photo carefully now, the edges blunted from eight years of holding and looking. He’s not sure if he should still have it, but it’s one of the few things he would grab in a fire, clutch to his chest, shield with both hands. He can’t bear the thought of losing
this or the letter. They’re Bucky. This is Bucky. He doesn’t ever want to forget.

He gives himself a few more moments to be with his friend, to let his heart tremble and sink. Then he puts the photo and letter back in their envelopes — carefully, like an archivist with crumbling ancient artifacts — puts them back in their book, lays the book back in the Rubbermaid, and shoves it all back under the bed. Then he picks up his phone, sits on the edge of the bed, and dials.

It rings. And rings. It goes to voicemail. He clears his throat.

“Hey, Hope. It’s Steve Rogers. I know it’s been a long time. I know I missed my last appointment. I’m sorry.” He swallows and fingers the smooth hem of his shorts. “But I really need to come in. I’m really, really confused. And I just— I really need to talk to you. I don’t think Bruce can help me with this one. So. It’s not— I’m not gonna kill myself or anything, so it’s not an emergency, but if I could see you this week, that would be great. Yeah. Thank you.”

Steve hangs up. And then he sits, silent except for the nagging hitch of his breath, phone twisting in his hands, while the sun goes down.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Racist, ableist, and homophobic language, explicit sexual content, references to domestic violence

Notes:

75th: The 75th Ranger Regiment out of Fort Benning, GA. The Army Rangers are an elite light infantry airborne unit and part of U.S. Special Operations. Bucky ended up joining them when he got home in 2004 from his second deployment with the 101st (the 2003 invasion of Iraq). At this point when he wrote this letter (winter 2002), Bucky could have requested a transfer to the regiment without going to Ranger school first, and then he could have been sent to the appropriate training after his transfer. Or he could have gone to Ranger School from Campbell and gotten assigned there after. Both choices depend on command approval.

TRICARE: Bucky's doc is telling him to seek care outside the VA using his Army retiree benefits, because he may get more comprehensive care. At this time in history, the VA typically did not offer certain complementary/alternative medicine services such as massage therapy and acupuncture for patients.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Bucky revisits the past. Steve learns about parenting.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, pitchforkcentral86, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

WARNINGS AT THE END

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Glossary of Terms:

TDY: Temporary duty

CDC: Child Development Center - an Army day care center

E-7: Sergeant First Class

Use or lose leave: Soldiers at that time could not carry more than 75 days of leave into the next fiscal year, so they would have to use that leave or else lose the excess. The number is now 60 days.

Route clearance: A patrol that clears a route of improvised explosive devices using special vehicles

Alhamdulilla: roughly translated into "praise be to Allah/God"

Hundred-mile-an-hour tape: Duct tape

Prazosin: an Alpha-1 blocker that also works well for some people to prevent nightmares

See the end of the chapter for more notes
July 3, 2010

“I sent you the number of the hotel, right?”

Steve slips a hand into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He navigates to the long string of texts from Sharon sent over the past day, which include every imaginable detail about her family vacation and subsequent TDY. The address in South Carolina, the hotel at Bragg, the flight numbers, rental car company, on-site emergency contact numbers, the numbers for her parents, as if he didn’t still have Harry and Amanda buried in his contacts list. They were almost his parents, too.

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. God, I hate Myrtle Beach, but you know Daddy.”

She gazes down at Ethan and gives him a gentle bounce in her arms. He’s conked out, drooling on her shoulder, exhausted from the flight from DC this morning and the trip into the city. She’s been stalling by the security screening at JFK for the last 20 minutes, double and triple checking everything, dredging up old threads of conversation that have long gone stale.

A migraine brews just behind Steve’s right eye.

“Maybe I should just bring him,” Sharon says. “I know you’ve got work. Maybe I can get him into the CDC at Bragg.”

“Matt gave me the week off. And I think that would defeat the purpose of having a baby-free vacation. Plus, you can’t just drop him off at the CDC at the last minute. You’re not even registered.”

“I don’t need a baby-free vacation in the first place. And Myrtle Beach is not vacation.”

Myrtle Beach is where the Carters bought a 2 million dollar spare house on the Golden Mile — though to call it a “house” is a misnomer, because it’s a property. They stayed there for a week one summer, just the two of them, at first. It was the biggest home Steve had ever been in. Six bedrooms. Four baths. A pool and a gazebo and a putting green and private beach access. Her parents joined them later, and Harry took him to The Dunes Club, even though he’d never played real golf before, and Harry extolled the virtues of Reaganomics while ordering them both a steady stream of gin and tonics. They ended their day vehemently, drunkenly arguing about the capital gains tax, after which Harry clapped him on the back and said, “I like you. I like a stubborn motherfucker.” He buttoned up real proper in front of the women, like a good Southern gentleman, and they rarely agreed on anything publicly or privately, but, God, Steve was fond of him.

“Catch up on your sleep,” Steve says, tilting his chin to Ethan. “At the very least.”

“Aren’t you absolutely sure?”

A frown settles on Steve’s mouth. “Do you want me to change my mind?”

“No. I just…” Sharon presses her cheek to Ethan’s head, and her gaze drifts toward the floor. “I haven’t left him in a really long time. So. I’m just…”

“I’ll take care of him.”
She looks up, startled. “Oh, I know you will. Daddy’s gonna take such good care of you,” she murmurs into Ethan’s hair.

The Daddy versus Baba battle has been quietly waging between Sharon and Halima for at least the past few weeks, in Steve’s estimation. It’s a covert operation that Steve is playing Switzerland in, because he couldn’t care less what Ethan calls him, at this point. He just doesn’t want his kid to be a confused mess while his mother and nanny duke it out.

“You’d better go, if you wanna make your flight,” Steve says.

Sharon looks down at Steve’s empty left hand, then his right, eyes blowing wide with horror. “Oh God, do you have Lucy?”

“Yes. In the car.”

“Please do not lose her. Do not leave her anywhere. Check everywhere before you go, because he’s always dropping her. We should have bought another one, but we’re stupid, so we’re screwed if something happens to her.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Sharon sucks in and releases a very long breath. She didn’t bother with mascara or anything else today, not even something to cover the outbreak of acne on her chin, and her hair is pulled back in a small ponytail that can barely hold because of a new cut that she hasn’t shown him. She bounces Ethan a few times, halfheartedly, lips pressed together, brows drawn. He doesn’t stir.

“Hey, baby. Wake up,” she says. She repeats herself, louder, bouncing him more firmly, until his fingers flex and he lifts his head from her shoulder, eyes heavy, a delicate thread of drool forming between his mouth and Sharon’s shirt.

“Mama’s gonna go bye-bye for a little while, okay? I’ll be back really soon. You’re gonna stay with Daddy. See Daddy?” Sharon points to Steve and looks between him and Ethan. “Look!”

Sluggishly, Ethan glances at him, then he turns back to Sharon and pats her face and says, “Mama.”

Great.

Sharon kisses the palm of his hand and kisses his cheek and his head and his cheek again and says, “Oh, I love you, baby, I love you so much. Be good for your daddy,” her voice thick with the tears that are going to start any moment now. He’s starting to remember this from last time, back in Windsor Terrace. God, what month was that? Winnie was there and Bucky was there — Jesus, how long ago?

“Okay, you gotta take him.”

She passes him over like he’s an assault pack, eyes glistening, mouth set firm, only looking as much as she needs to in order not to drop him. Ethan is already squirming the second the handoff is complete, twisting around to look at her, to reach for her.

“Mama.”

“Mama’s gotta go,” she tells him, hard insistence overlaid on a quivering foundation. She stoops down to grab her carry on bag and shoulders it.

Ethan’s reaching grows more demanding, and he begins to whimper and say her name. Steve
shushes him and tries to turn so that he doesn’t have to fight him. He wants him to see her go. They should say a proper goodbye. He read it on the internet.

But all of the good attachment strategies ring like bullshit when Ethan starts crying and Sharon starts crying, when she presses her hand over her mouth and mutters, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry” behind it. And what she really needs is to get her shit together and just say bye-bye and that she loves him and that she’s going to be back soon, because that’s what she’s supposed to goddamn do, but she’s as much of a mess as Ethan is, and so she walks away, fast, hands over her face, leaving Steve with a toddler who’s now kicking him in the gut and throwing himself back and pushing himself away and screaming. And all he can do is say “Mama’s coming back soon, she loves you, she’ll be back soon,” because what the hell else is there to say?

It’s a total motherfucking disaster.

July 4th

Brass Monkey is playing in the bodega on Lexington. It’s loud — almost so loud that Bucky can’t hear the popping static of his own thoughts. He’s not sure how these Uppity-Uptowners are letting the guy get away with it, because usually they can’t tolerate anything more stimulating than Yo-Yo Ma without yipping like terriers. There’s not much room for contemplation in front of the cold case tonight, not with Rikki squeezing herself around the huddlers, her massive purse poised like a battering ram. He finds the Cokes and grabs a cherry one, then holds his breath to the front counter.

“And a pack of Marlboro Lights.”

Bucky focuses his attention on extracting a lime green Bic from a perfectly aligned column of them. He knocks down both lighters adjacent to it, cursing, and the clerk — a young guy with a patchy beard — scrambles to help him with them.

“One of these?” the guy asks. He plucks the hot pink one and sets it next to Bucky’s Coke.

“Yeah, sure,” Bucky replies, eyeballing it and then the cashier’s impassive face.

Rikki’s long arm snakes alongside him, and she drops a pack of watermelon Extra next to his pack of smokes. “And this.”

Bucky pays the man $16, and they stash everything in Rikki’s purse. It’s still at least 85 degrees on the street, and the city is keeping the air locked tight in place like a wall, holding all the smell and taste from a long, busy Sunday. He scans around for a place to stop, but nothing seems good. There are people everywhere. They might just have to press back against a building and hope they don’t incur too many upturned noses. Not that he cares, but he knows Rikki does. She is cursed with giving a fuck about many things, it seems.

“Thanks for coming with me tonight,” Bucky says, taking a right on 79th heading toward the river.

“Sure.”

Bucky stops next to a hoity-toity boutique store that’s closed and reaches out his hand for his Marlboros and lighter. Rikki gives them over and leans back against the building. She eyes his movements closely and beckons for the pack when he struggles with the goddamn pull tab.
Desperation gets the best of him, and he hands them over before he tears into them with his teeth like an animal. She pulls the foil and coaxes out the first one for him and, yeah, so he reneged on his commitment to stop this disgusting habit. But if he can’t make an exception for doing double ex duty and holding it together the whole time, he can’t make an exception for anything.

“Would have been really awkward to bring the new best friend to meet the old one,” Bucky says, joining Rikki in an easy lean against the warm cement.

Rikki tilts her head. “I didn’t know Quill was your best friend now.”

Bucky’s hands stutter on their way to lighting his smoke. They’ve never said as much — what adults actually do? — but it’s quickly become their truth. He and Sam barely speak anymore. What’s there to talk about? Bucky doesn’t want to hear about the Army that was taken from him, and his own life is an embarrassment he doesn’t want to share with a man who already has more than his share of burdens downrange. Sam only knew him in his prime, such that it was, when he could at least convey competence and composure. He’s never known Jamie the sissy or Jamie the teenager with a double life that would make Jesus puke, and he’s not keen on acquainting him deeply with Jamie the unemployed has-been. And so what can they say to each other? What do they have left?

“I… guess I didn’t, either.” Bucky hands the Bic back to Rikki. “But I guess he is. Steve apparently doesn’t want the job.”

“Fuck Steve.”

Rikki’s mantra is muffled, and it’s not until Bucky hears the click and sees the flame out of the corner of his eye that he grasps why. He sputters.

“You’re smoking now? Since when?”

Rikki finishes her first drag, the ginger kind that people who rarely inhale anything but oxygen take, and blows it out quickly. “Shhh. I don’t. You tell Daisy, I’ll kill you.”

“She’ll smell it on you. They always do.”

“I’ll tell her you were chain smoking around me. Chew some of that watermelon gum. Perfect alibi.”

Bucky shakes his head and smokes while the Uptown din swallows them. Images and fragments from the evening crest and break like whitecaps. Sam winking at Rikki but not at him; Natasha’s glance at Bucky, furtive and hawk-sharp when Sam dropped their engagement news; the hyperbolic horror on Sam’s face when he realized they were eating at a vegan restaurant; the longing burrowing into Bucky’s belly as he smiled his way through it all, hand bunched tight in his napkin.

“So, that was your fake girlfriend, huh? The one you had before you deployed.”

There’s a sharp smile in Rikki’s voice, one that Bucky doesn’t return. He looks down to the pavement between his black Sambas. It’s a choice point, one of those moments he and Hank talk about, one of those places he always veers left when he should veer right, toward the truth — or in his case, capital-T Truth.

He pauses at the fork, surveys the paths ahead. The left one terminates neatly with one word but the right branches into a tangled network of memory and old pain, thorny vines that he cringes away from. But like Hank said, there has to be some reason he hasn’t drowned in his own puke or blown his brains out yet, and maybe it’s so he can do something different, like say no, Natasha was real, yes, something happened in Kentucky, yes, he’s fucking terrified, and so he holds his breath, points his toe to the right, and steps into the unknown.
“She wasn’t fake.”

He can feel the challenge gathering in Rikki’s spine, straightening her. “You called her your beard. I remember very clearly. We were in my room. I remember the conversation.”

He shakes his head. “We were together. Like for real.”

“Like for real-real?”

Bucky nods as he takes a deep pull off his smoke.

“Why would you lie about that?”

Oh, why does he lie about anything? Most of his life has been a lie of commission or omission, lies so cunning they outwit even him.

“Why would I not lie?” Bucky says. “Imagine if I’d told you. What would you have thought?”

“No, no, it wasn’t like that. You were passing it off like some big gay ruse. You said this gorgeous woman was your beard and you tried to sleep with her but couldn’t keep it up without thinking about guys.”

She’s facing him now, shoulder pressed up against the building. “I remember.”

He gives a tense shrug. “I dunno. Maybe if I acted like it was a fun game we played together, it’s not so horrible. So shitty of me.”

Bucky will never forget her face as the realization percolated through her, as she hind-sighted through every conversation, every promise, every kiss, every orgasm. He sees it at the oddest times, a shadow in his periphery he can’t shake.

“She didn’t know I was gay. Not til the end. I really screwed her over.”

Rikki flicks her cigarette. She’s not even smoking it; it’s just an accessory, something to busy her fingers while she bores into him with her interest.

“Were you leading her on?” she asks.

“No, not—things just happened. Things between us—just worked. For quite a while. It just happened. It was weird. And I wanted it to work. I really, really did. I thought maybe—something had changed in me, but… it caught up. Deployment, bad shit after, my—the way I am, everything. Everything caught up. But it was serious. And I broke her heart. It was bad.”

He swallows as the next part sinks into him, like a stone dropping to the bottom of a lake.

“It was one of the most serious relationships I’ve ever been in.”

He was done getting fucked. Fucking done. Maybe it was only a matter of time, given what a drunk, reckless, cock-starving mess he was after Iraq Part Two. He was stupid. Careless. Probably deserved it. But still, he wasn’t prepared for it. Who is? But he was done getting fucked and he was done with going to Raleigh and maybe he was just goddamn done with men altogether. And so when Natasha found the barstool next to his at Paddy’s, because she was also an E-7 drinking alone after a shit deployment, maybe he was ready for her. When she challenged him to a game of darts and won, even though he was really trying, maybe it was a genuine smile on his face. Maybe it was the first time he experienced anything close to joy since he got back. It certainly felt like it. And after he won
the rematch, they kissed in the parking lot and she asked him on a real date and it was good. She felt good. And he didn’t question it. For once, he didn’t question anything. He didn’t fucking dare.

“Okay, but how did you do it?” Rikki asks. “Like, literally, how did you do it? Did you just think about dongs the whole time?”

Bucky barely rolls his eyes. “Yes. I just thought about floating, disembodied penises. So hot.”

“You know what I mean.”

He takes one last drag off his cigarette and crushes the butt under his shoe. Rikki does the same with hers but steps lightly, like it’s a bug she’s afraid to squish. His mouth twitches.

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Oh.”

Rikki picks at the nail polish on her left pinky, frowning. An exhale passes softly through Bucky’s nostrils.

“Look, I was super fucked up when we met. She had stuff, too. We understood each other. That’s what mattered. It just couldn’t hold.”

Rikki nods slowly. A few beats of silence pass.

“You did try to text her when you just about died in Long Island. I guess you don’t do that for someone who was just your beard.”

Long Island. His jaw sags. “How do you know that?”

“You texted everything to Daisy instead. You don’t remember?”

“No.” He hesitates. It’s never smart to poke around the crime scene of a bender, especially one you don’t remember, especially one involving drunk texting, but Rikki’s head is tilted very far to the side and, God damn it, he cannot help himself. “What did I say?”

“It was pretty vulgar, so be thankful that it didn’t go to her. But I think the theme was regret and then a bunch of self pity about being gay and broken. I was scared and furious when I read it, though, so my memory isn’t great.”

There’s still an echo of that fury stringing her words together tight, and Bucky’s stomach twists. Although he barely remembers anything from that entire week, he remembers Rikki. He remembers her yelling. Crying. Her running mascara. He remembers his own agony through hers.

“Maybe it’s best we both don’t remember that one.”

In the dim light, there’s a struggle on Rikki’s face between fondness and frustration, one pulling up her lips, the other dragging down her brows.

“You know,” she says, her eyes meeting his, “I think tonight is one of the first time I’ve heard you refer to yourself as gay. Casually.”

“Why deny it? It’s true. I’m 31. It’s only getting worse. Being out of the Army is making it worse.”

She snorts. “You make it sound like a disease.”
It’s no use engaging, because they’ve been down this road a thousand times. Rikki reiterates the gay agenda, Bucky balks, stalemate ensues, Bucky quietly berates himself for not being a better homo, the kind Hank is trying to train him to be.

“I liked being with her,” he says instead, leveraging himself off the wall to get them moving down the sidewalk again. “I liked being close to her. It felt calm. I could actually relax. I didn’t know what that was like, to not feel like I was gonna get— fucking eaten. You know?”

They stop at the corner of 79th and 3rd, pausing for a moment and allowing a box car to pass before walking on the red.

“What do you mean, get eaten?” Rikki asks when they get to the other side.

“Can you gimme my Coke?”

“No. Tell me what you mean.”

“Just— I dunno. I dunno. Like a baby antelope, you know?”

Rikki’s mouth is firmly set, but her eyes are wide. Thank God her whole stupefied face disappears when they move out from the reach of the nearest street light.

Bucky huffs.

“Just— never mind.”

It’s too hot to entertain embarrassment. Too hot for Bucky to care about who sees his arms, who looks at them instead of his face, who makes up whatever story about why he looks like he’s been through the business end of a wood chipper. It’s New York City — who gives a shit? He slows and steps off to the side and works off his long sleeve shirt, grunting, revealing a tight, sweat-soaked black T underneath. He can see another battle Rikki’s fighting, this one to look and not look, to acknowledge him and ignore him, because she hasn’t seen him since Walter Reed— since the days of bandages and wound vacs— or maybe she saw everything in Long Island, he can’t remember if he had blankets. God, he was so high. He thinks Steve was there.

He gives her his shirt and thrusts his hand to her, palm up.

“Now give me my fucking Coke.”

She takes his nasty clothing, shoves it in her monster purse, and exchanges it for his drink. It’s already kind of warm but it’s incredible, cloyingly sweet, the signature soda of his early recovery, and he asks for his Marlboros and smokes another one fast and in dead silence. Rikki doesn’t fidget. Doesn’t check her phone. She stares into the street, barely blinking, and Bucky’s mind is far away, mostly, except right along the edges, where something else creeps in— jaunty music, the sound of spinning, of rings, the rumble of a laugh in a beanbag chair, the warmth of a hairy leg next to his, the surge of excitement, the breathless interludes of—

Bucky shakes his head sharply, shivering, and they start moving again.

“Are you seeing a therapist?” Rikki asks, breaking their silence. “A real one?”

*I’ll see a therapist.*

“Yeah. He’s an idiot, but he means well. Kinda hot. Like in a dorky dad way.”
“Good. Because you really need help.”

Bucky’s laugh hits the air like a firecracker. “No shit.”

Rikki does not laugh.

The sidewalk gets more crowded as the block numbers get smaller. More couples out and about, groups of friends, the occasional squealing kid shoving food in its face. Nobody pays his shredded arms much mind, stricken, if anything at all, by his sister’s unusual height. They walk in a tighter formation, preoccupied by their own thoughts, until Rikki — emissary of Winnie Buchanan — launches into the obligatory mother talk as they near 64th street.

“Have you talked to Mom lately?”

“No. Why?”

“Because she said she’s sent you about 15 texts in the last couple weeks, and you haven’t even bothered to respond to one.”

Bucky scoffs as they enter the intersection. He lands hard on his right foot and winces as pain ricochets up his leg and hip and back. He’s gonna be a total wreck tomorrow. Maybe Quill can drive him to a meeting in Brooklyn. He’s gonna need one. Maybe three. With any luck, he’ll be hauling his own broken ass around soon.

“So what?”

He sneaks a glance over to Rikki. Her jaw is locked tight, and it ticks where her hair is tucked behind her ear, all the loose little hairs that have fallen out of her messy summer bun.

“Do you realize that Mom is the only one who’s been there for you, no matter what? When I couldn’t be, when Steve couldn’t, when Hank couldn’t, when the rest of us had to walk away, she stayed. She’s always done her best. And you treat her like shit. You call her a cunt. You never call or text her back. You act like she ruined your life, which is bullshit, because you need to take responsibility for yourself, at some point.”

“I know.”

“We’re people,” she says, gesturing toward him, long fingers graceful. “We fuck up. Cut her a break. She loves you. And you love her. I wish you’d just stop fighting it already.”

Bucky’s first impulse is to lob his sister a big, fat ‘fuck you,’ especially for resurrecting the cunt comment. And maybe a month or two ago, that’s where this conversation would have ended. But he’s supposed to be better than that now — or more skilled, anyway. And even though he can only remember half of a DBT acronym for interpersonal effectiveness right now, it’s probably better than ‘fuck you.’

“You know I love you. And I get it. We only have each other, whatever. I get it. And I’ve been a real prick to her. And I regret that.”

He presses extra close to Rikki and bites his tongue as they pass a large family that’s taking up the entire sidewalk. Tourists, obviously, no sense of how to column up for common decency. Probably from Jersey. When they’re out of earshot, he continues.

“But you don’t know fucking shit about me and Ma. Not the real shit, the deep fucking shit we’ve got. I barely know it. I’ve blamed her for all sorts of stuff that’s not her fault, or stuff she’s really
repented for, which isn’t right, I know. But there is some real deep shit we gotta work out one of these days. When I get my act together enough to be able to face it.

“So I’ll own my bad behavior, but I’m not gonna fucking make kumbaya with her just to make you happy. We’re gonna throw down at some point. And we’ll see after that.”

Bucky takes a deep breath and pushes it out slowly, deliberately, while Rikki takes time to formulate her response. Not too shabby for a Winnie conversation. He’s done way worse with way less.

“Fine,” Rikki says, and maybe she’s been practicing something of her own, because her words are even and reasonable. “Then just go out to brunch with her once a month. Call her on the weekends. Don’t call her names to her face. Be a decent human until your big WWE smackdown or whatever. Can you at least do that? It’s the bare minimum you could do to not be a piece of shit son.”

Bucky considers it. Honestly, not just to shut Rikki up. He could call. They could hit Miriam once in a while. And she does try. There are even more texts than Rikki knows about in iMessage, all unanswered, and they’ve been burning a slow hole through his conscience for months. He could stop being a total piece of shit son. For both of them.

“Yeah, I guess can do that.”

Rikki gasps, and her hand clasps hard around his forearm, his worse one, his really gross one, stopping them in the middle of the sidewalk. Bucky startles and pulls back, but she has him so tight, so enthralled by whatever idea has taken her, that she doesn’t even comprehend what she’s done. She doesn’t even care.

“Oh my God, I know this has fuck-all to do with anything, but do you wanna take the gondola?” she asks.

He’s locked onto where she is clamped around him, her hand so big and his arm so pathetically small, and she doesn’t even care. It’s like his old arm. Like nothing at all. He glances at her face, at her thousand watt smile, oblivious, and even though he’s just soaked his shirt with at least another cup of sweat, he finds himself answering with a flitting, improbable smile of his own.

“Yes.”

“We could catch the F,” she says.

“You wanna take the tram over to take the train back? That’s like 20 stops to get home.”

Rikki shrugs and releases him. “Got somewhere else better to be?”

Bucky hasn’t ridden the Roosevelt Island Tram since before active duty. The last time was with Steve when he was 20, because even though he’d lived in New York his entire life, he’d never done it, which shocked Bucky to the core. It was one of the first things his dad did with them when they visited the city for the first time, so he assumed every New Yorker had done it, like visiting Central Park or taking the Staten Island Ferry to do a driveby of the Statue of Liberty — which Steve hadn’t done either, because why the hell would you ever go to Staten Island? Which was not even the point! What an idiot.

“You gonna call Yankee Doodle for his birthday?” Rikki asks when they confirm that they’re oriented in the right direction.

“Yeah.”
As they walk, Bucky ghosts his right hand over the place Rikki touched, feeling what she felt — the seams from the grafts, the smooth glide of scar tissue, the gaping depressions where tissue is just gone.

“Maybe you should call Hank first so he can talk some sense into you.”

“He knows better when it comes to Steve.”

This is a lie, because Hank is always challenging him about Steve. Why he wants him so badly. What he means. What it would mean if they couldn’t be together. Bucky hates it for how desperate and pathetic it makes him seem, how single-minded. Obsessive. Because he is. He’s desperate to make this work, his self-esteem pathetically entangled in a positive outcome.

“I’m gonna do something for his birthday. Something big. I gotta make a move. Now or never.”

“You’re so stupid.” There’s a crinkle of a wrapper, and Rikki pops a piece of Extra in her mouth.

“This isn’t a rom-com. You can’t just do some grand gesture and expect everything to be better. Not with your history.”

“I have an idea,” Bucky tells her, as if that should be enough to satisfy her. It might be, if she knew what it was. Or maybe her eyes would roll right out of her head, or maybe she would just call him a fucking moron.

“I just hope you... keep it together when it doesn’t go as planned.”

“I’m not gonna go on a bender. Don’t worry. And it’s gonna be good, anyway. I know it.”

“We’ll see.”

They pass the sign for 60th, and Bucky’s chest tightens. “And can we just avoid 57th? And maybe a couple blocks around it.”

“Why?”

Why? Yes, Jesus, why is he panicking again?

“There’s just someone I really, really don’t want to run into around there.”

Rikki snaps her gum. There’s a wry smirk in her voice. “Is it a very-big-dick someone, by chance?”

He can’t stop the groan that escapes him. Is there one single person in his social circle who doesn't know about Thor’s dick?

“Maybe.”

For Bucky, Thor Odinson is now synonymous with one thing. One image: scrambling around his room, naked, scooping up his clothes, ass full of lube, high on poppers, humiliated, horror sinking deeper by the second as he realizes what they were and had been all along, what a fool he’d been, everything he’d given up for nothing—

“He was a piece of shit,” Bucky says.

“Really?”

They stop at another red light. They’re getting close. Bucky wonders how business is going. The guy sure knew what he was doing, smart enough to know where he wasn’t smart and with enough
savvy to find people to fill in the gaps. He’s probably doing great and that’s… good.

“No. He was a good guy. I was a fucking idiot. Subtitle of my entire love life.”

There’s a soft jangle of thin metal bracelets as Rikki brings her arm around his shoulders. She pulls him in against her body with a soft squeeze. It’s so unexpected, something they just don’t do as siblings, that it takes Bucky several moments to attempt to relax into it, and just barely. He lifts his hand and lays it in the middle of her back, where the muscles slope inward toward her spine.

“You are an idiot, but you’re a good guy, too. You don’t have to keep going back to the same man over and over again and having it fail. He’s not the only person in the world who can love you.”

Bucky stands, mouth open, wordless, while his answer works its way up slowly from his gut. When it finally comes out, it’s barely a murmur.

“But what if he’s the only one I want to love me?”

Rikki sighs and gives his shoulder a firm slap, jarringly discordant with the softness of the hold, something one grunt might give another, and releases him. “C’mon, let’s go be children and ride the gondola.”

Bucky nods and lets her lead the way.

—

They catch the F on Roosevelt Island after a tram ride crammed with kids. It didn’t matter, because it was still as wonderful as he remembered — the city lights, the smooth rock of the car, the quiet it filled him with. It was just the same as it was last time he rode, and he was so relieved. So relieved for the quiet.

All that left him, maybe somewhere around Rockefeller Center, when the train started to load up and people started nudging his knees and sliding in close. He yanks at his sleeves and looks over at the copy of David Foster Wallace’s Consider the Lobster Rikki pulled from her purse somewhere earlier on the line, Bucky’s not sure when. Back when he was fine with the quiet.

What would they talk about, anyway? His thoughts are no good, his mind a vacuum filling with garbage thoughts he’s been batting away all night — since Khalidiya — hell, since Bragg. Hurt over Sam, over what they used to be, how close they were — and it’s so hard for Bucky to make real friends, and now what? They’re nothing? And what the fuck was their friendship? What kind of friends do that with each other? Can he not have friends without making it physical? History— fuck, his history is… not good. Is that why things are weird now? Is that why Sam barely looked at him or talked to him? Does he regret it? Are things gonna get fucked up with Quill, like he fucks things up with everybody? Like he fucked it up with Sam and Steve and Jack—

And God, did he fuck things up with Natasha. Was that pity he saw tonight? Does she feel sorry for him? Poor Jamie, fucking broken, left behind while everyone marches forward and gets a life without him, because they don’t need him for anything and never did, just like his men and just like the Army. And Natasha gets someone who can be a real man for her, one who doesn’t need her horror or sympathy, someone easy who can take care of her, because she deserves it, and he couldn’t do it. And maybe he couldn’t stay in the Army, and maybe he couldn’t keep it together for her and give them the life they wanted, but God damn it, he didn’t want to get left with nothing while the two of them go live their happily ever after with Uncle Fucking Sam to officiate. And maybe it’s bitter and shitty of him, but Jesus, it fucking hurts.
Bucky works himself into a stupor of aching rumination by the time he gets off at 15th and Prospect Park. The air feels fresh and cooler in Brooklyn, and it pulls him out of it on the walk home. His limp is heavy and painful now, so when he finally gets to his building, he plops down on the stoop and sits. He just... sits.

He needs to call Hank.

The line rings. He knows by the fourth that he’s going to voicemail, and on most nights he’d be relieved not to check in live, but he frowns and props his head in his hand as he leaves his message.

“Hey. I know you’re probably sleeping, because you’re a million years old and it’s a Sunday, but I just got back from dinner with Sam and Natasha. Rikki went with. It was great.”


“Actually it wasn’t that great at all. It went okay, but it brought up a lot of shit for me. It really kind of took me off guard. It’s like— just when I think I’ve found all my shit, I unearth another shit mine, and it’s like, Jesus Christ, how much more is there? I’m not gonna drink or anything but... I’ve got a lot of fucking amends to make. But we knew that already. I just got home, and I’m gonna see if Quill is back. Maybe we can hang out. I probably won’t see you tomorrow ‘cause I’m gonna do two or three meetings here, so I’ll see you on Wednesday because of my thing with Karen on Tuesday. Happy Fourth. Bye.”

He hangs up and immediately goes to his contacts. He’s gotta do this part while he’s got some courage to surf on, and he still hasn’t put Steve back in his Favorites. The line rings twice and goes to voicemail, and Steve’s very succinct message plays.

“This is Steve Rogers. Leave a message.”

It beeps, but Bucky is frozen on the edge of a greeting he didn’t get to give, and what is he supposed to say now? He can’t just say “Happy Birthday.” He can’t invite him like this. He had this thing planned out. Shit—

He hangs up. Shit.

Can’t talk right now. Just got Ethan to sleep. Finally

Bucky leans back with a huff, head turned up to the green maple tree overhanging the stoop, cement stair digging into his back. His phone dings again.

I can text though

Bucky is terrible at synchronous texting. Slow. Clumsy. Impatient. But he takes his time, does it right. He has to make a good impression. This is all part of it.

How’s E doing?

Not a fan of all the noise

Join the club, kiddo. Had to send Quill to Toy Story 3 so he didn’t freak out

Grizzled veteran alone at a kids movie...

Oh no I didn’t even think of that D: He is less grizzled without the gnarly beard tho

I don’t really remember much of his face, to be honest
He looks like a dude. A chubby dude

Ah now I remember

Bucky smiles. Steve seems like he’s in a good mood tonight. This is a good night to ask. He takes a deep breath and pushes forward.

Happy 30th Birthday!!!!!! You have crossed the threshold into oldness officially

Wow. Yeah, I can really feel it

Aren’t you glad I’ve been preparing you for it?

It has not been obnoxious at all :)

Anything planned?

Just hanging with Ethan

Bucky lets go of his phone, leaving it to balance on his thigh. He steeps his fingers and brings them to his lips, like in a prayer that no god he knows would ever answer. Maybe he shouldn’t ask, but he wants it so bad. He’d get in a cab right now. In an hour. Four hours. Any hours, he’d do it. If Steve wanted it, he’d do it. All he has to do is say something. He should use some DBT acronym but he just can’t right now. It’s all so fucking stupid he can barely stand it. So he types the thing he wants to say, as simply as he can. His thumb trembles as he presses Send.

I could maybe come over. If you want.

The typing bubble starts, then stops. Then starts, then stops. It then disappears entirely, keeping Bucky fixed to the screen and chewing his lip for nearly a minute before it re-emerges and culminates with—

My place is really small. It’s been kind of stressful

Bucky’s not sure what “it” means, but he knows a boundary when he sees one. He replies.

Ok

It’s just been a long time

Jesus. Yes. It has.

I just don’t want to add any new variables right now. That’s all.

Bucky nods shallowly to himself. He starts to spiral about what “right now” means, whether it’s now-now or a day-now a week-now or a longer-now, but really, it’s now or fucking never. Just like he told Rikki. And he won’t know unless he asks. So he does.

Gotcha. Well how about next Sunday? Let’s do something

What did you have in mind?

I want to do something for your birthday. In Brooklyn

Bucky turns his phone screen-down on his lap. “Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.” It dings quickly.
What time?

“All right.” Bucky flexes his hands and keeps going.

Is 2030 too late? I know you have to work the next day

It should be okay

Something’s wrong. Bucky can’t quite put his dead finger on it, but the texts are coming slower. Everything is stiffer. He slows down, too, more out of fear that he’ll biff his spelling so bad that not even autocorrect can save it.

Is that ok? You seem apprehensive

I am. A little. If I’m being honest

“Fuck.”

Down the street, a string of firecrackers pops, snatching his attention violently, snapping his head in its direction. Fucking stupid pricks. It’s not even kids, just some piss-beer-drinking, artisan pickle-making, hipster fuckfaces who got lost on their way to Williamsburg. Bucky’s leg starts to bounce as he types, throat clenched, heart racing. He doesn’t even care how pathetic he sounds.

I wish I could talk to you. I know it’s selfish.

About what?

It’s fine. I’m just being weird

He puts his phone down again and holds his face in both hands, groaning. This is a fucking mess. He was fine. Better than fine — he had a goddamn date. He should have ended the conversation minutes ago. Now it’s all fucked and weird and awkward.

And now the phone is ringing, and it’s Steve. No, no, no. God damn it.

He picks up.

“Hey. I’m sorry. Let’s just hang up. I’m sorry. I’m being weird. Like I said.”

“It’s fine. I can talk for a minute.” Steve’s voice is quiet and distinctly distorted.

“Are you in the bathroom?” Bucky asks.

“It’s the only place I can talk.”

Bucky pictures it for a moment, even though he doesn’t know the size or layout. Probably something very small, stall shower, old fixtures — or maybe new but cheap, like many remodeled city apartments. Bucky’s not stupid; he knows about how much Steve brings home after taxes. Is he standing? Leaning over the sink? Looking in the mirror? Sitting on the toilet seat?

“I’m sorry. Happy birthday. That’s the most important thing to say.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Bucky rushes the next part. “You don’t have to come over next Sunday, if it’s too much. I get it.”
“No, I— want to. I’m just tired tonight. That’s all. What did you have in mind?”

Bucky knows ‘tired tonight.’ He’s been ‘tired tonight’ a lot in his life, usually when he just wants to drop the subject. “It’s a surprise.”

“Ah, well, I do love surprises.” There’s a smile in Steve’s voice. Maybe just a small one, but its presence staggers Bucky with relief.

“I think you’ll like it.”

“Okay.” There’s a pause. “I’m sorry, but I gotta go. I know that wasn’t much of anything, but it’s been hell getting him to sleep. It’s been rough in general. So I’m gonna try to catch some zzz’s too.”

Bucky nods, frowning in spite of himself. “I’m so sorry it’s been rough. Thank you for calling. It’s really good to hear you.”

“You too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll see you next Sunday at 8:30. Your place.”

“Okay.” His place.

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Bucky waits for Steve to end it, and he does, after a few moments of quiet. But he swears he hears Steve breathing. He tries not to read too much into it, because it could be anything. It could be a mistake. But it could be something.

The black screen hits him hard. Harder than it should, for what just happened. Didn’t he just win? Didn’t he just get exactly what he wanted, beyond all odds? This is a cause to celebrate, but it’s the doubts that possess him. Doubts about what he’s doing, what he’s planning— And what about what Rikki said, about him being an idiot, about being fucked up— should he even be planning anything? And his doubts are edging up against the longing that’s been growing in him ever since his appointment with Scott, the thing that wants what he should have had with Steve before 9/11, if he’d only allowed it. What he could have had, if he hadn’t been so impatient. What he almost had with Natasha, if only it had stuck. If his nature hadn’t won. If she hadn’t insisted that he stop, that he let it go. She made the choice for him, and he’s still not sure how he should feel. He still doesn’t know why it makes him want to cry, even now, sitting on the steps on the Fourth of July, three years later. Of all the things in his pathetic life, this. This. What is this? What is this? Her first words to him all day, because he had orchestrated a life of busyness — meetings, bullshit, collateral duties for Shen and Morita and Barton and even Sousa, he didn’t care. Out of the apartment before 0430, home after dark, busyness so intense that it became like oxygen. Without it, panic. The day she caught him, her toenails were painted, and she never painted them, she never signed leases, she never used just the pill, she never did a lot of things she did with him, and her face — her face — her utterly unreadable interrogator face as she showed him rows and rows of pictures, thumbnail size images of men with huge cocks in hand; men on their backs, spreading their ass cheeks, showing off their perfectly waxed holes; hard, spent dicks jutting out at come-dripping faces; men, shaved and muscular, fucking ecstatically in an assortment of positions, all links he forgot to clear from his browsing history on their shared computer because he was fucking drunk and fucking stupid. He couldn’t blame her. It probably autofilled when she typed something else into the search bar, and she was
probably desperate to find any clue as to why they barely had sex in a month, why most of the times they tried his dick failed or he couldn’t keep it together and he had to stop and stumble out of bed and go to the bathroom and run the sink or shower so she wouldn’t hear him and why was it bad again why was he fucked up again it made no sense because everything was fine for so fucking long — hell it was good, so good that he dared to hope and thought maybe he was like Steve now, maybe a late bloomer, or maybe shitty deployments and shitty men will turn you that way, maybe people can change, that’s how he got the whole idea in his head in the first place.

And she asked again. What is this? What the fuck is this? And— he just had to see, it’s the only reason he was looking, he had to know if anything would do it for him, even the old stuff, but it was for nothing, he couldn’t come, couldn’t even keep it up, and he told her that, like a fucking honest idiot, because only idiots tell the truth, and then she asked the question. The question. And he thought about it. He wondered if it was a lie to say that he was attracted to her, because he wasn’t attracted to anybody anymore, like all the wiring got stripped out of him somewhere between Ramadi and Raleigh and Fayetteville, but in his gut, in his heart, he knew the answer. And he wasn’t like Steve. He never was. He never would be. He was an anxious little gay boy playing GI Joe to escape his own softness, His weakness. And he nodded. He couldn’t look at her face but he could hear her voice constrict when she asked how long he knew, if he just realized it in the six months they’d been together, and he shook his head because it had been nearly two decades, and she wanted a number, and he could only say it was years, but it was enough to crack her, because she never painted her toenails and never signed leases and never trusted anyone but, God, she trusted him, what a stupid mistake, and what was he trying to do? Was he just an asshole? Was he looking for someone to throw off the scent so he could play gay in the shadows? And it was— no— because he never once cheated on her, ever, because he wanted this so bad, and it was working and he doesn’t know why it stopped and he said he would get therapy, that he had a plan, and she said she was glad — though she hardly seemed it through the anger and tears, Christ, he never saw her cry before, not once — because she said he was traumatized from deployment and checked the doors too much and slept too little and said he was depressed and drank too much— which was ridiculous and beside the point because he meant therapy for them, that he was going to go to therapy to work on himself to become normal.

She paused then, and her brow got tight, like he was speaking in Farsi, and there was only dense dreadful quiet and her dawning confusion and rows of cocks and fucks, and he chewed his lip and started talking, slow, careful, about how he’s been thinking, how he was reading online, how he found this website, this psychologist, and it was like everything on the site was written about him, how he’s probably like this because of stuff that happened when he was a kid, how someone—and he couldn’t say it, but stuff happened, and his relationship with his dad—but the website was him, and he had so much use or lose leave that he could go to California for a month and find this guy and maybe he could help and fix him and then this would never be a problem again. And as he spoke, he thought he was being clear and doing a good job, but she didn’t even look angry after a while, just… he couldn’t name it but it was almost like horror, and she asked to see the website, demanded that he show her, and he hesitated, he was actually scared, but he moved toward the table like a man on route clearance, like any move could trigger a pressure plate and be his last, and he x’d out of the porn with a scowl and pulled up the page, and he stood over her, gnawing on the inside of his cheek, while she clicked through the site, her jaw ticking, green eyes scanning. And after what could have been an hour of him sweating, his sniper hands trembling, she closed the laptop and pushed it away from her and called it disgusting pseudoscience and said she could never be with him if he— destroyed himself, that was the word, what a laugh, little late for that, that was the fucking problem, and she insisted that nobody can make you gay—

But maybe somebody did, he said. Maybe somebody fucking did.

It was the first time he told anybody, just barely, but she understood and she got quiet, and he wiped
his eyes, tired and hopeless, because he never wanted to be this way. And she stood up and took a step toward him and put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed, but she looked at the floor, face drawn, lips pressed, and they stood like that until his phone rang with a call from Shen, fretting about Nelson’s PT test, because the last thing they needed before deployment was a chapter, and Bucky assured him he’d be there for his make-up, pushing, sitting, and running alongside him, even though it’s fucking Dugan’s goddamn motherfucking job. And Natasha went for a walk and Bucky went to the bar and got blackout drunk and woke up in his truck and packed his shit and moved onto Sam’s couch and sometimes he still wonders what would have happened if he went to California.

He smokes a distracted cigarette and drops the butt into an overfilled trash can from the neighboring building. He can see light through his bedroom window, probably coming from the living room. Thank God. Tonight is not a good night to be alone.

—

Quill’s head jerks up as Bucky walks through the door. He’s lying on the couch, facing the door, TV tuned to a low drone, legs crossed, hands knitted tight over his belly.

“Hey, dude.”

“Hey.”

Bucky drops his keys in the junk bowl on the table — or the not-so-junky bowl, since there’s hardly anything in it now, thanks to Quill sifting through it — and steps into the living room entryway.

“How was dinner?”

“Good. How was the movie?”

“So good. I cried a little.”

“Just a little?” Bucky raises an eyebrow.

“Well, there were lots of kids, so I didn’t want to be a scary old crying man.” Quill’s smiling mouth twists into a frown as he sniffs, nose curling. “Wait, have you been smoking?”

“Maybe.”

“You dumbass, that’s so bad for you! Give them to me.” He holds out one hand and motions with it.

Bucky leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest, and Quill shifts his weight, propping himself up on his elbow. He gestures again.

“Seriously,” Quill says.

Bucky’s eyes narrow. “Why are you being such a weirdo?”

Quill is on his feet, and it slipped Bucky’s mind that he can be as tall as Steve when he’s not slouching beneath the weight of his own hampered esteem. He thrusts his big hand out, sharply, like a spade.

“Give them to me.”

Bucky draws back a little, shifting onto the heels of his sneakers. He unfolds his arms and makes a slow move for his front pocket. “You’re serious.”
“Dead serious.”

Bucky breathes a long, irritated sigh through his nose and crams his hand into his jeans to draw out his pack of Marlboros and his little lighter. He slaps them into Quill’s waiting palm.

“I’m just trying not to drink. That’s all.”

Quill brushes past him and flips on the light in the kitchen. He drops the hot pink Bic in the garbage, opens the pack of smokes, and starts pulling them out by twos and threes, breaking them at the filter letting them drop into the can.

“Bad night?” Quill asks.

Bucky shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Wanna watch Toy Story? The first one?” Quill glances back at him, smiling dimly as he continues destroying Bucky’s 15 perfectly good cigarettes. He looks pale and poorly stitched together, and maybe Bucky should have brought him with. He’s not sure which one would have been worse.

“Sure. We can watch it.”

Bucky’s phone dings, and shifts his aching hips as he works it out of his pocket. His eyes go unstoppably wide when he sees who it is.

“Mom?” Quill asks.

Goodnight. Thanks for calling. Sorry again I couldn’t talk

“Rikki,” Bucky tells him, schooling his face back to an impassive expression. “Just gimme a sec.”

No worries. Sorry you had to be alone on your birthday.

I’m not alone

Quill finishes with the smokes and returns to the living room to fiddle around with the entertainment center, leaving Bucky in the kitchen.

Not alone. He hopes at least Sharon called. They’re probably still friends or something, right? Not just co-parents or whatever the word is for what they do. And Steve still has Matt Murdick. Hopefully. Bucky always sucked at making good friends, but Steve wasn’t ever very good at it, either. But, hell, he made friends with fucking Sitwell, maybe that shit stain called. Maybe Steve got good at friends somewhere along the way. Bucky types.

No I guess not

It was nice of you to offer to come over. Really.

The period at the end feels heavy. Almost apologetic. Bucky hastens his response.

I understand

Okay

Should he say more? More assurances? He gets it, even if it hurts, even if it shouldn’t hurt, because he just wants to be there, even if he has no right to be. He wants to be on Steve’s couch tonight. Watch Toy Story with Steve and Ethan — how fucking nuts would that be? It’s almost
inconceivable, and the idea stirs a sensation that’s either giddiness or terror, he can’t place it—

Goodnight

Okay. That’s it. He nods. He types.

Goodnight

“You ready for this?”

Bucky turns on his axis, a multi-step pivot, then limps into the living room where Quill is already on the couch. He turns off his phone on the way and sets it on the coffee table before dropping down on the chaise.

“You don’t have to put your hand on my leg though. I should be okay,” Quill tells him with a smirk.

Bucky snorts. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“You didn’t like it?”

Adrenaline floods him, even though he didn’t like it— he didn’t dislike it, either, because it had nothing to do with that, because it wasn’t about that. It was about Quill fraying with anxiety and needing someone to do something, and he didn’t know what else to do. But his brain still scrambles for a retort, maybe something shitty, something to throw him off, because the guy is oddly perceptive sometimes, disconcertingly deep at irregular intervals, and Bucky can’t handle any more fraught conversations tonight. Especially not the potentially friendship-ending kind.

But he doesn’t say anything shitty. Quill looks genuinely hurt, for some reason, and he’s had a real bad night. Bucky gets it now. The cigarette thing — it’s a hangup that a Navy corpsman might get when he can’t save his Marines during the deadliest battle of the Iraq War. Can’t save them, so he’s gotta save some broke-ass sergeant from his own stupidity.

Bucky sighs quietly. “It was fine. I was kidding.”

“Okay.” Quill’s edges soften, but only for a moment, when a new idea lights him up. “Oh, you want popcorn? Put some meat on those bones?”

Bucky pokes along his ribcage. “With popcorn, huh?”

“I got the extra butter kind.”

“You sound like my ma.”

Quill jumps up and clomps to the kitchen. “I like your ma.”

“Great. You can have her.”

“She gives good hugs. She’s warm and fluffy, like a biscuit,” Quill calls over the sound of cellophane wrapper.

“If you say so,” Bucky says, bending some of the stiffness out his bad knee — which is now supposed to be his good knee — with a wince. He hopes his new PT guy doesn’t suck, because TRICARE is going to be paying up the ass for him.

The microwave beeps as Quill punches in the cook time. “Honestly, I’ll take anyone who’s not locking me in the basement or calling me a no-good freeloading bastard.”
Well, that’s about the fastest way to right-size Bucky’s current reality as an adult child of an obnoxious mother. He tugs at his sleeve, curling his hand in tight and pulling the fabric over his knuckles.

“No. She’ll just call you some stupid Southern names, probably, and try to feed you some crappy Texas food. Text you endless streams of dumb shit. Boat loads of cat pictures.”

Quill pops his head in the doorway. “Aww. I want cat pictures.”

“I know. I’m a shitty son.”

“I don’t know about that, but you should be nice to her. Or I will steal her. And I can be pretty charming, so, I’ll probably succeed.”

Quill deals him a smile, one far more charming than his own — boyish, sweet, the kind Winnie would definitely want to be on the other end of an orange tabby picture. Not the sneer of irritation from Bucky because he can’t see past his 20th century bitterness to enjoy Oscar’s adorable face.

“Yeah, well, I told you she collects strays, so you’ll have to fight some other litter mates for her,” Bucky says.

“Like who?”

The corner of Bucky’s mouth twitches. “Steve.”

“Oh, I can totally fight him.” Quill stands a bit taller, shoulders rolling back. He’s built like an interlocking opposite of Steve, light in the pecs and thick in the gut.

“I mean, yeah, you can try.”

Quill puffs an affronted breath. “He’s not so tough.”

“He would wipe the fucking floor with you. I’m sorry.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Yeah-huh. He would kick your ass.”

Bucky’s biting his lip now, and for once today it’s not from anxiety. It’s a ridiculous feeling — truly, he feels foolish, heady and sailing, and he thrusts his jaw forward to lock his smile down.

“Bring him over here some time. We’ll see about that. We’ll arm wrestle.” Quill jabs his finger toward the kitchen table, the one Steve bought from Ikea. “Right here.”

“You’re living in a dream, Quill. He could bench press you with one arm.”

“He’s not that big.” He looks down at his own bicep and flexes, filling the armhole of his green t-shirt with doughy muscle. “I’m pretty big.”

“You haven’t seen him lately. He’s huge. He’s been lifting. He lifts like five days a week,” Bucky estimates based on what he saw at Cafe Lumiére.

From the thickness of his arms, the span of his shoulders, the curves of his pecs, the pop of his ass, and the sharpness of all his angles, he must be working hard. Real hard. He’s always been peerless at any gym he walks into, massive, lean, a guy who wears his workout gear on the almost-too-tight side, just like he wore all his uniforms, always pushing the seams to their limits. It was torture to lift
with him downrange, torture for Bucky to keep himself distracted and to keep himself from getting too distracted. When Steve is sweaty and the noises he makes, he’s just— Christ, Bucky curated a congressional library’s worth of unsexy thoughts for that deployment.

“So he’s a stupid meathead who lives at the gym,” Quill states.

Bucky gives a dry laugh. “Yeah, his IQ’s like 160, and I’m not even exaggerating. And he doesn’t even eat meat. He’s that jacked and doesn’t even eat chicken. Just slams blocks of tofu.”

Quill pulls a face. “Tofu? What the hell for?”

“It’s a long story, but he’s not curling bottles of Mountain Dew all day, that’s for sure. He drinks kombucha.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Something that tastes like fermented garbage juice, but it’s really good for you. I dunno why he likes it.” Bucky’s mouth twists as he recalls the sip he took once. Once and never, ever again. “But what I’m getting at is that his body is a machine that would crush yours in any test of strength or endurance. So it’s not worth arguing anymore.”

Not that he can even remember what they’re arguing about.

Quill chuffs. “Whatever.”

He turns and disappears into the kitchen.

The briefing Quill got on Steve is that he used to live here and moved to be closer to his job. Steve is Bucky’s longtime friend and platoon leader from Iraq Part Three and got blown up with him and that’s all, folks. They don’t talk much because, wow, Steve is just so busy these days living the big Manhattan life, working in the Empire State Building doing his fancy pants humanitarian something something, Quill probably loses the thread around there, and that’s just fine. Quill is mainly preoccupied with whether Steve is still “batshit crazy,” or “ready-to-fistfight-Frank-Castle-over-a-cheese-plate crazy,” as if this is a scale Bucky is supposed to understand and be able to rate him on. Quill’s observations about Steve were upsetting back at residential but his questions now are discomfiting, because Bucky’s not sure how to answer them. He really has no idea how Steve is really doing psychologically.

After a minute or so, Bucky trails the sounds of the microwave beeping, the bag opening, and kernels spilling into the huge metal mixing bowl he inherited from Winnie. Quill starts belting out a rendition of “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” but with an exaggerated gravelly quality horrible enough to bring Louis Armstrong back from the dead just to put a stop to it.

“You got a frieeeeeend in me…”

“You got a friend in me.

“You got a frieeeeeend in me…”

“You got a friend in me.

“You got a frieeeeeend in—”

“I’m pretty sure there are more words than that,” Bucky says, eyeing Quill as he hits the kitchen light with his elbow, popcorn and Mountain Dew in his hands.
“I know, but I can’t remember them.”

Quill plops down on the sofa and sets the bowl between them.

“Thanks.”

Quill cracks open his soda and takes a long chug, punctuating the end with a refreshed sigh. No wonder he only manages to fall asleep when the sun starts to come up.

“All right, let’s do it, friend.” He pauses and then, “You got a friend—”

“Quill.”

“Sorry. Sorry.”

Quill futzes with the remotes so that Bucky doesn’t have to, cueing up the DVD. The opening plays — fuck, “You’ve Got a Fucking Friend in Me” plays, and Quill starts singing again, and an odd sensation settles in Bucky’s gut. It seizes him for a few moments, alarm cranking on orange alert, but it’s really a lightness, an ease, like back on the gondola. How strange to feel it now in his living room, with Peter Quill, after such a shitty day. How strange to be scared about feeling good.

“Aren’t you gonna sing it?” Quill asks.

Bucky looks at Quill, at his lopsided grin, the contented lean of his body into the cushions, his ubiquitous Mountain Dew in hand, and he smiles.

He sings it.

______________________________________________________________

July 7th

“I don’t know what else to say. You obviously don’t like it. I’ve obviously disappointed you.”

“You haven’t disappointed me. It’s not about disappointment.”

“Then what is it about?”

“I just—”

Hope pauses. Steve doesn’t miss the tiny pinching at the corners of her eyes or the fatigue settling on her precisely groomed brows. He can’t ignore the slow-seeping attrition. It feels like a deep bleed, the insidious kind that kills you before you know you’re dying. It feels like a fight.

“You just told me that you love Sharon, but she doesn’t want to be with you. You also just told me you love Bucky, and that he loves you back. But he’s—”

Steve’s fingers clench into the armrests of his chair. “He’s what?”

A whisper of air passes through Hope’s nostrils, too soft to be a sigh but more pointed than a regular breath. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve spots Ethan palpating along the hard spines of Hope’s book collection. He stops at Kaufman’s Clinical Neurology for Psychiatrists and smacks it repeatedly, squealing. He looks over his shoulder, back to Steve, babbling a fragmented mix of part-
words arced high at the end like a question. Steve frowns.

“You fill in the blank,” Hope insists. “You tell me why you’re here and not back with him right now, bygones be bygones.”

“If Sharon asked me, I’d go down to the courthouse and marry her. Today.” He points his finger between himself and Ethan, then southward, toward wherever Sharon may be, forming three corners of a triangle. “The three of us? We’d be a family. We’d be happy. I swear to God, I’d do it. In a heartbeat.”

“See, that’s what I don’t understand. How can you feel that way and also say you want to be with Bucky?”

Ethan decides very spontaneously that he’s had enough of medical texts and totters back over to Steve. He has Lucy clamped tight under his arm—God, the thing could use a long soak in a bucket of bleach and ten cycles through the wash. It’s starting to get visibly dirty, and he can barely fathom the bacteria, but he’s terrified of doing anything to it, lest he commit some cardinal sin of parenting he can’t undo. He’s ill-equipped to adequately comfort even the smallest of boo-boos, let alone field catastrophic losses like the ruin of Lucy the Farm Sanctuary Lamb. He’d have to be a special brand of monster to do her in by way of his compulsive idiocy, but sometimes he’s almost willing to take the risk.

Ethan stops at his side and offers Lucy to him, says “Baba? Baba? Baba?” And so it’s Hope and Ethan, demanding, blank spaces outstretched before him waiting for him to fill. Steve shifts in his seat, flexes his muscles, anything to burn through some of the energy knotting tighter as the seconds grind by.

“Because Sharon’s not gonna leave me. She’s not gonna go f—” He cuts himself off over Ethan’s continued pleas for his attention. “She won’t screw somebody else because they have a better dick or because I’m having a rough time or because she doesn’t know how to communicate her feelings.”

Hope turns up her palm. “But how do you know? She could have left you at any time. For anything. Anyone could leave you for any reason at all, including Sharon. She’s a human with free will.”

“Baba!”

With a low growl, Steve picks up Ethan and sets him on his lap, but he’s moving immediately, squirming out of his grip, repeating “No!” in a language he never should have taught him, one that makes the other veterans nervous and angry. Steve lets out another exasperated sound and guides him back to the floor, where he takes off for the other side of the room again.

“Look, I felt secure with Sharon. Once I got over the terror. Once I realized that relationships don’t have to be chaos. All I want is to feel something like stability. Not like I’m just waiting for the next disaster. Or wondering when I’m not gonna be good enough anymore.”

“But Sharon said that she doesn’t want to be with you, so now you’re back to deciding whether to ask for love from a man who clearly can’t give it to you the way you want it. And you’re wondering why you’re afraid. And I’m just confused as to why you’re so confused about this whole thing.”

Steve presses his palms to his temples. “You’re making my head explode.”

Hope gives a smile, a tight, thin one that stops at her high cheekbones. She crosses her long legs tight at the knee, her bare shin a sharp slope down to her pointy slip-on flats. Ethan catches her interest then, pulling it to a low table across the room that holds a lamp and a piece of office decor, two deep
bronze interlocking rectangles that Steve has always admired. He’s pictured it in his apartment — the old apartment, or maybe some better apartment, any other apartment except the basement room he lives in now. He’s imagined it arranged with other items of decor. The Hopper painting he hasn’t bothered hanging. An old clock, perhaps. Items that have no function other than to make his space more livable.

Hope watches his kid cruise around her table, talking to himself in a chopped salad of barely intelligible English and Arabic and utter nonsense, and her smile widens fully.

“He’s really cute,” she tells him.

“Yep.”

“Can I be frank with you?”

“Sure.”

“I think if you start things back up with Bucky, you’re going to crash and burn again, just like you always have—”

“Hey! Get away from there!”

Steve launches to his feet and crosses the office in three long strides. Hope’s assurance of “It’s fine, really,” is dim in the background of the blue-hot energy that’s been throttling through him ever since this stupid conversation started twenty minutes ago. Ethan startles away from the links he was about to knock over, pulling his hands into his belly, gasping, eyes wide. He takes a poorly-planted step and he’s falling, but Steve catches him by the armpits and scoops him up fast, wringing a sharp yelp from him.

He’s stiff in Steve’s grip, unbending and silent as a piece of driftwood as Steve tries to settle him on his lap. Ethan doesn’t lean or reach or crumple, and Steve’s gut clenches. He pulls him close and murmurs “I’m sorry, I’m sorry” and rubs his back until he starts to whimper and finally relax, slumping against Steve with a high whine that makes his molars ache. Steve tries harder to comfort him, a futile endeavor, and then Ethan is bawling in earnest, red-faced and wailing.

“So, you’re saying we’re fucked,” Steve says.

She takes a while to answer, her attention tuned keenly to the mess of Steve’s ineptitude melting down on his lap. Until today, she’s never not been the cool, poised doc. The Ivy-pedigreed expert who somehow landed herself at the VA like some Teach for America gig that never ended. She’s always been Hope Van Dyne the immaculately coiffed Manhattanite, never this thing she is now, soft and unguarded. Maybe this is Hope the mother. Or maybe just Hope the woman. Hope the woman having a crappy day dealing with Steve the crappy dad.

“Something big would have to change for there to be any chance for you two.” She glances up, eyes meeting his. “Wouldn’t you say?”

It’s such a simple distillation, such a profane statement of the obvious, that he can only huff.

Hope sits back in her chair and folds her hands on her lap. She makes a small sound. “You’re really angry with me, aren’t you?”

“Well, for once, you’re really not helping.”

Steve loosens his hold on Ethan when he realizes how tight he’s got him, when he feels tiny fingers
prying at his own. He apologizes again.

“Okay. Well, I’ll say this — Bucky’s got a lot of trauma, and that’s only the stuff we know about. He’s an addict. And I’m guessing there could be some personality factors at play. His efforts are heartfelt, and he’s certainly trying, but he’s also dysregulated and self-destructive and interpersonally unskilled. Would you say that’s accurate?”

There isn’t much nail on Steve’s right thumb, but he bites at what’s left of it. It’s a grim picture, and it’s only the keywords for the Cliff’s Notes. Self-destructive addict. Interpersonally unskilled. A lie-blackened past that Steve has never looked upon, one he says he wants to see, and he does, but will he ever? He can still feel the warm shadow of Bucky’s hand in his own, the trifle he gave him, maybe a prelude to something different, maybe an audition for an audition — but as earth-shattering as it was for Bucky, as it was for them, what does it really weigh? What does it really mean? What if it’s just more nothing? Just more words that are tied to air?

“How’s this, Steve?”

He lays his hand on Ethan’s leg and gives it a pat. “Yeah. It’s accurate.”

Hope gives a shallow nod. “So, first and foremost, he’s got a lot to work on in his own therapy. And if you would ever, ever have any chance of making it together, if that’s actually something you want, I think you would absolutely need couples therapy. Because this carousel is going to keep going around forever unless you do something very different.”

“He’d never agree to that.”

He’d never agree because it’s something that Steve would give almost anything for, if he dared to hope for it. It’s something that could maybe fix them, something that could reach inside the infected wound of their relationship — whatever relationship they have left — and debride it, just like Bruce says about his PTSD. They’ve tried to start over again and again, bandaging over the same filthy injury, never stopping to think that they need a hell of a lot more than field dressings and hundred-mile-an-hour tape and some wishful thinking.

Ethan’s crying has slowed to some sniffling and quavering breaths. The squirming starts again, but Steve doesn’t want to let him go. He wants him close. But like so many moments since Sharon dropped Ethan off, everything between them is wrong, and Steve lets him slide off his lap and touch down on the floor. He toddles over to where Lucy is collecting more germs on Hope’s rug and spreads his feet wide, bending with the unsteady deliberation of a very old man, and he collects her and brings her to Hope. He rests his hand on her naked calf and holds Lucy up to her and says “Oosey, oosey,” and Hope says, “For me?” and takes it from him.

And as soon as she does, Ethan reaches for Lucy and cries out, indignant.

“You can’t ever tell what the hell he wants,” Steve mutters, sinking into his chair. “I never know. It’s so frustrating.”

Hope shrugs with the tilt of her head, bob glancing the sharp edge of her clavicle that peeks out from beneath the thick straps of her dress. She passes Lucy back to Ethan’s eager hands. “It’s just that age. You have to make your best guess until their mouths catch up to their brains.”

Steve scratches his palms over his face with a groan. “I can’t believe I’m even considering this. After everything he’s done. I must be crazy.” He lets his hands fall, head shaking, looking to her with wide-eyed incredulity. “Truly. I have no self preservation. I must like something about getting my heart fucking destroyed by him.”
She lets him sit with his self-assessment for a little while, as it percolates through him like rain through thirsty soil. Until they feel like the truest thoughts he’s ever had.

“I’m sorry. I feel like I’ve been a bit unprofessional today,” she says softly.

It’s genuinely confusing, but she’s not looking at his face to see how baffled he is by her comment. She’s back to watching Ethan babble with Lucy over by her books again, her tense lips twitching when he touches each one and says “book, book, book.” It’s a reflection of the one damn thing Steve does right for that kid, book book books all over the place. Steve doesn’t even know how much he understands.

“I just feel protective of you,” she continues. “I want you to be happy. And I want Bucky to be happy, believe it or not. And I think there could be a way for you two to make it work, if you wanted. But you would need to work. And it would have to be together. Preferably with an expert who really knows how to work with traumatized couples.”

“Traumatized couples. Jesus.” Steve scoffs and shakes his head. “You don’t have to apologize. You’re right. I wanted you to tell me that everything’s gonna be fine if I just love him enough. But I know that’s not how it works. That’s how children think. I should know better. It’s never worked before.”

Hope gives him a wistful look. “If only love were enough.”

When Steve checks on Ethan, he’s gone quiet and contemplative, staring at the books as if he can suddenly discern their titles.

“It makes no sense. I shouldn’t be like this. Loving someone who’s been so hurtful to me. Feeling so — far from him…”

Ethan drops into a squat then, face drawn in intense concentration.

“He’s taking a shit.” Steve un-crosses his legs and plants his palms on his lap with a decisive slap. “I’m gonna go.”

He rises to his feet and stoops to grab his black backpack from the floor. He had no idea what to get; everything was hideous and mom-marketed, as if fathers never need to change shitty diapers or tote around snacks and security lambs and extra clothes and bandaids and sanitizing wipes in front of men who have killed on the battlefield.

Hope stands as well and tugs down the hem of her dress. “I saw in your chart that it was your birthday on the Fourth.”

“Yep.”

“Did you do anything fun?”

“Nope. I’m— Bucky is planning something. On the eleventh. I don’t know what. It’s a surprise.”

One of Hope’s eyebrows climbs. “Mysterious.”

“Something like that.” The thought of it flips Steve’s stomach, though he still can’t tell what kind of flip it is.

When he’s done, presumably, Ethan leverages himself up using the bookshelf and looks to Steve as he approaches. He holds both arms up, reaching fully, unreservedly, one hand full of Lucy and the
other open, his small baby fingers fanned wide. A knot of anxiety explodes open in Steve’s chest, saturating him with relief, because thank God he still wants him. Steve settles him into his grasp, and one of Ethan’s arms comes around his neck.

“Poopies,” Ethan tells him.

“Yeah, you made poopies.”

Hope does a double-take from the appointment card she’s filling out for him. “Wow, he knows a lot of words.”

“Yep.”

“Have you started talking about potty stuff yet?”

“Nope.”

“You might make that your next book.”

“Maybe.”

She hands him her business card with July 28th written on the back. It’s the precise kind of block lettering a pilot or an engineer might have, nothing like the artful, flourishing strokes one would expect from someone who comes in her packaging. He crams it in his back pocket and gives himself a 50% probability that he’ll remember it’s there before these pants hit the fluff-and-fold.

Steve stops at the door. He looks to Ethan then and turns back around, pointing to his therapist. “Say ‘bye-bye, Hope.’”

Never one to pass up an opportunity to say hi or bye to anybody — literally anybody, as many times as humanly possible — Ethan holds out his hand and wags it at Hope. “Bye-bye!”

Hope waves and says “bye-bye!” flapping her hand back at the baby with a smile that might qualify as goofy if she wasn’t also wearing pearls and $500 shoes.

“Bye, Steve,” she adds. “And Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“There’s a changing table in the single stall bathroom down the hall.”

“Thanks.”

“See you on the 28th.”

“Yep.”

“Bye-bye!” Ethan repeats, waving over Steve’s shoulder.

“Bye-bye!”

Steve hangs a very relieved left and makes his way down the crowded hall. Ethan shifts in his arms and begins his routine, throwing out a lemon-bright “Hi!” to every passing nurse and doc and veteran and spouse and weary-looking adult child. Steve is still not accustomed to the attention it brings, the radical way this child warps the space around him. Even the sourest faces untwist, frowns dissolving in the light of Ethan’s enthusiasm for this one syllable and, Alhamdulilla, he’s not doing it in Arabic.
Steve already feels a galaxy away from most of the other veterans here, even more so today with a toddler plastered to his chest. He’s seen kids here before but always with their mothers. He’s never once seen himself in the other men.

The door is locked. Of course. Steve presses himself back against the wall and scans down both sides of the hallway. He could try to chance the one in the waiting area, which may have a table in it. Maybe. Despite having been in there at least a half dozen times, he has no recollection of what’s in it. He’s usually so stressed out when he comes here that he’s lucky to find his parked car before midnight, let alone remember whether there’s a goddamn Koala Care changing station in some latrine stall he’s never been in.

“Baba.”

“What?”

“Poopies.”

“I know. Just gimme a minute. We gotta wait.”

Jesus, it’s probably some ancient old man in there trying to squeeze out piss through his ancient prostate. An intense woman — the spinster daughter of the ancient guy in the bathroom, Steve arbitrarily decides — stops to fawn over Ethan, cooing, asking if this is his little girl. No, Steve brought a kidnapped child to a federal building. And then the usual — how old is she — oh, he, my, how embarrassing; Steve dressed him in green today — what’s his name, goo-goo, gaa-gaa, blah blah blah. Ethan loves her shiny cat necklace, says “dog!” and gets promptly corrected by her.

Then she takes him by the forearm and she squeezes, flops his hand around and makes stupid baby noises. Ethan frowns and tries to squirm away, and it’s like a spark in a hydrogen tank, and Steve is pulling Ethan from her and they’re gone. They’re gone before he can even string his thoughts together or identify an emotion or give a SUDS rating. They are gone. They’re in the waiting room. They’re in the corridor. They’re outside, where it’s “Hi!” to the bus and “Hi!” to the robins and “Hi!” to the too-young double-amputee in the wheelchair.

“Poopies.”

“I know. We’re gonna go to the car.” It’ll be fine. Once they get to the car. Once his heart stops trying to crack through his ribcage.

“Car?”

“Car. Yeah.”

“Car?”

“Yep.”

“Mama?”

“No. Baba’s car.” God, why did they teach him that? Is he going to go to school on career day and say “this tall white guy is my baba, the minimally employed NGO worker”?

Not that he’ll be the only kid in DC who calls his father Baba, not by a long shot, but it has to stop. He needs to be a normal kid, and Steve might have fucked him up beyond repair already. He is not a dad who yells. He is not a dad who reads all the books and articles and executes the tasks of fathering with the rigor of a scientist but cannot seem to wring a drop of spontaneous connection
from his anxious heart.

He was smart enough to make a note of where he parked today, so it only takes him a few minutes to track down the car. It’s ten thousand degrees inside, which has the effect of making the shitty diaper smell ten thousand times worse, but at least Ethan is cooperative.

When he’s done, he takes Ethan and backtracks to a garbage can he miraculously remembers passing and dumps the diaper. Ethan starts fussing on the way to the car, a low grade warble that must be the heat. Or maybe he misses Sharon. He said her name. Maybe he just wants her and he wasn’t talking about her car at all. How stupid to think he was talking about a car. Of course he wants her. He probably has no idea what’s going on, why he’s been dumped in New York with his incompetent, scary father in a one-room basement—

Steve swallows through the tightness in his throat, jaw clenched. Stupid. So stupid. How the fuck did this happen? How the fuck did he let any of this happen?

Back at the car, he ghosts through the motions of turning it on to get the air going and strapping Ethan into his car seat. His body slows to a stop on the back driver’s side, one leg twisted and hanging out the door, hands loose on his lap, eyes fixed on Ethan but blind to him. It’s a mess, like building a shack on quicksand, scrambling to lift one side just when he’s saved another from sinking, never finding solid footing. Two steps forward, one sucker punch off the whole goddamn walkway back. If he’s getting better, like Bruce says he is, why does everything feel more fucked up than ever?

“Baba.”

Steve reorients, focusing in on Ethan’s wide-eyed, inquisitive face.

“Hm?”

“Baba.”

“What?”

Ethan grins, slowly.

“Hi.”

And then Steve is crying.

He presses his hand over his mouth and wrenches his eyes shut but it’s nothing. There’s nothing he can do to stop it. There’s nothing he can do for this or for anything else, not anything, and so he melts down in the cramped back seat of his shitty Corolla in the VA parking lot in front of his 14-month-old son.

People pass. One guy squeezes by to get to the passenger side of the next vehicle, almost tripping on Steve’s leg. Steve tells the asshole to watch it, or tries to, but it comes out like blubbering nonsense, like Ethan trying to communicate anything more complex than shitting himself.

And then Ethan’s voice registers through the sound of his own pathetic weeping, and then he starts in with a whimper that explodes into full-on waterworks faster than Steve can process what’s happening, his little mouth downturned at an almost comically sad angle. It’s so sweet and completely terrible, and Steve unbuckles him from his carseat.

“Oh no, don’t cry…. Please don’t....”
Steve gathers him in his arms and holds him, and Ethan clings to him and cries into his shoulder, which makes Steve cry harder, which makes Ethan more upset, which makes Steve feel worse, creating a recursive feedback loop of sobbing that goes and goes until it physically hurts.

Eventually, things do slow and quiet down, until the only sounds are their breaths hitching over the AC. He can feel Ethan’s little baby fingers digging into him. The dampness soaking his shirt. Steve rubs his back and breathes his own way back to control.

Ethan lifts his head. His face is blotchy and wet with snot and tears, just like Steve’s undoubtedly is. There’s a tiny quiver in his lower lip, one that Steve touches with his thumb before brushing his fine, white-blond hair off his forehead.

“Wanna go to Baba’s?”

Ethan looks over to his seat, to Lucy, and he reaches for her. When Steve hands her to him, he squeezes her tight and yelps “Baba!” into her fleece.

Steve clears his throat and guides the nasty thing away from Ethan’s mouth.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

—

By nightfall, Steve is fucking exhausted.

Ethan already tapped out an hour ago, in the middle of the third reading of *Goodnight Moon*, which never takes less than eight minutes each iteration because every page is a full-blown discussion — as much discussion as a grown man can have with a baby — about each animal, the same babbling discourse they’ve had at least two dozen times before without fail. He finds himself feeling immense sympathy for his ma, because he was Ethan, begging and begging for her to read it to him, and she always did, but Jesus, she must have been ready to throw it in the trash and light the whole thing on fire by the time he turned two.

His exhaustion is matched only by his restlessness, and he sits on the couch in silence, legs bouncing, dressed in his Umbros and a t-shirt, because it’s just too hot for anything else. And what would the high school pseudo-jock who bought these shorts think about his life now? His life in the basement doing lackey work for professionals with actual jobs because his brain is too defective to tolerate anything more stimulating than copy editing on most days? His brain, which he used to take for granted by letting people smash into it for a sport he couldn’t give two fucks about but only played for his ma, for acceptances to schools he never matriculated into because he didn’t care, because why couldn’t he live an uncomplicated life selling books and reading, because he wasn’t going to learn anything worth knowing at college among the herds of lazy, entitled sheep. But, oh, if he didn’t become king of the sheep at America’s premier sheep academy, hilarious. Just hilarious. Sixteen-year-old Steve would be ashamed of the man he became out of spite and hurt.

But perhaps he wouldn’t be ashamed of all of it. At least he’s making an honest living doing good in the world — or helping Matt do good, anyway. And young Steve would be pleased with the dad part, though he never, ever could have imagined the circumstances under which it happened. What would he think of Sharon? And what would he think of the Bucky thing — did he ever see that coming? And is it here again? Is that what this feeling is, this restlessness, this raw grinding between his nerves?

His fingers tap against his bare thigh, along the high hem of his shorts. They really are too small and probably belong in the trash fire with *Goodnight Moon*, but he just can’t bear to toss them out. He
taps his leg and spirals through his conversation with Hope, God, he usually likes it when she’s right, she usually is, and he’s so jacked up off his axis most of the time that he needs her to be, because how else is he going to get his life in order? And maybe she’s still right. Maybe she’s got Bucky pegged perfectly. Maybe she’s reading their future clearly. Maybe if Steve lets himself relax, lets himself trust this burgeoning thing that’s trying to happen between them, this new thing Bucky is trying to sell him, they’re just gonna crash and burn in a fireball of dysfunction, just like they always have.

But then... maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe it doesn’t even fucking matter. Maybe Hope is right and it doesn’t even matter because he’s on the couch right now, crawling out of his skin, and the most preoccupying, essential thought in his mind is how hot Bucky looks wearing Ray-Bans.

Screw it.

Steve grabs his phone from the cushion next to him and shoots off the text before he has too much time to reconsider.

What are you doing?

Bucky’s texts are slow. They used to be painful because of how dextrous he always was, how fast he could type, how precisely and easily he executed all of his sober movements. But tonight the pain comes from the mismatch between Steve’s cranked up system and the torturous stagnation of that goddamn typing bubble.

Just finished a meeting. So gay. Too gay for words really

In the city?

Yep

Wanna come over?

This response is almost instant.

Yes

Steve looks to the bed, to Ethan sprawled out atop his comforter. He is out cold with no signs of waking anytime soon. Steve types.

It can only be for a few mins though. E is sleeping. Like really brief

I’d love to

God, is this crazy? This is crazy.

If it’s too much trouble it’s totally okay. It’s a ways uptown. 168th st on the 1 or A/C. Around 17 or 18 stops from Chelsea. Don’t know where you are

The bubble stays on screen so long this time that he begins to expect a retraction, maybe some of Bucky’s own wisdom — or Hank’s or Scott’s — kicking in to intercept this madness. And maybe it’s for the best. Maybe this is just too—

No its great. I definitely want to come. And yeah I’m in the heart of Fagopoulos right now

Steve rolls his eyes, relief cresting just below the irritation, and texts his address. Then:
Steve sucks in a breath, very quietly, and pushes both hands through his hair. “Okay,” he mouths. “Okay, okay.”

And now he waits, burning time by scanning and fretting over the mess of toys and dishes and books and clothes that ruptured through the apartment over the course of the evening, virtually unnoticed as it was occurring but now almost unbearable to see in its entirety. He’s always tried to tidy as he goes with Ethan but remains perplexed by the law-defying way that the mess outpaces the cleanup no matter how meticulous he is. But he can’t give up, because if this is his best, what would anything less look like? Unfathomable. How he’ll sleep with the apartment like this, he’s not sure.

He needs a much less distressing distraction right now.

Steve spots the New York Times Magazine on the coffee table. He’s been trying to read it every week — even just half the articles — with only marginal success. And now he’s amassed a small stack of them, dog-eared, crinkled from his sweaty hands, and he grabs the top one from the stack and the HRW pen lying next to the pile and crosses his legs. He keeps his phone resting on one knee and balances the magazine on the other and folds it open to the crossword.

*Pleasure seeker*. Nine letters.

Steve taps his pen against his temple. Playboy. Nope. Hedonist. No. What else? What else? He bites the cap, sinks his teeth into ridges that have been well-imprinted by his canines already. What else…? Glutton. Nope. Shit.

Fuck it. Next.

*Ideal*. Seven letters. Fourth is an a.

Steve tortures himself, rakes over the folds of his weary brain, scribbling words in the margin, none of which work. Epitome? Classic? Supreme? Fantasy? How can there be so many that fit so terribly?

Fucking fuck.

*I’m here. I think?*

Steve tosses the magazine and pen on the cushion next to him and bolts to his feet. *Shit* — how is he gonna open the door? He sneaks to it, feet making sticky sounds on the fake wood floor, and turns the deadbolts slowly and evenly, checking over his shoulder when anything clicks above the sound of an angry whisper. No, this door is not getting open quietly. It’s heavy, the seal smacks every time, and this was the dumbest idea he’s come up with in his adult life, but Bucky knew there was risk, and if Ethan wakes up, he wakes up, and fuck it.

Steve turns the handle and tears the door open.

Ethan’s head moves to the other side. His hand twitches, but there’s no fussing, no real signs of awakening. Apparently all it takes is one bonkers day with *Baba* in Manhattan and Ethan will sleep through an incoming alarm.

And on the other side of the gate, Bucky.

Steve steps outside and pulls the door shut, not all the way, enough for one of them to hear inside.
Steve presses his index finger to his lips and then hikes his thumb over his shoulder.

Bucky nods and gives a thumbs-up.

And now he has to decide if they should cram together near the door or if he should meet Bucky out on the sidewalk and risk missing Ethan waking up. And leaving his kid totally alone while he’s on the block chatting it up with his pal, oblivious— Steve points over to where he is, apologetically, and Bucky maneuvers through the gate and joins him.

They situate themselves on opposite sides of the door, facing each other. There’s bit of light from the floor above, enough for Steve to make out the fine curve of Bucky’s mouth and the hard edge of his jaw and the overcast skies that his eyes become at night — eyes that take a journey all the way down Steve’s body, down to his bare feet, and then back up again.

“Hey,” Steve says, keeping his voice just above a whisper.

“How was your meeting?”

“It was chips and cake, so I got cake.”

Steve doesn’t know what that means, but there’s something deeply familiar about this. The roughness to the edges of Bucky’s voice when he has to keep it low, like the grit of the ground below them as they sat against a HMMWV tire, shoulders pressed together, words hushed in the dark, talking about the day’s mission, planning for the next one.

“Strawberry something with whipped cream,” Bucky continues. “Chiffon, I think.”

“Fancy.”

“The gays don’t play around with their cake. There’s no grocery store shit. Ted’s what’s-he-called made it.”

“Boyfriend?” Steve offers.

“Husband. Fake gay-married husband. Whatever.” Bucky looks out toward the sidewalk and pulls his lower lip into his mouth, just for a moment, just enough to wet it, enough for it to catch the light and glisten. “It was all very classy.” He turns back. Cocks his head. “How are you?”

“Okay.”

“How’s Ethan?”

There’s a way that Bucky’s lips press together when he’s caught between a smile and neutrality, when he’s open, when he’s asked a question or feeling hopeful. It’s almost a pout without any of the attitude, bowed gently, sensual, and he’s got that look now and it’s—

“Good.”

“What’d you do today?”

He can’t—

“Therapy.”
Steve’s hands twitch at his sides. His pulse flutters as the pout breaks into a smile, electric even in the dark.

“Ooh. How’d it go?”

Steve swallows.

“Fine.”

The smile dims a little, and there’s quiet between them, charging by the second, and Bucky glances over his shoulder, up and down the street, his movements stiff. Then he bites that lip. He bites it and —

“This is a pretty quiet neighborhood—”

It’s only one step and Steve is there, left hand on Bucky’s shoulder, the other on his neck, and Bucky’s head snaps back, surprise in his stormy eyes, and Steve kisses him, kisses a sound out of him, a little grunt, kisses closed-mouth but with everything he has, every second of mounted anticipation, every atom of bridled hunger, one kiss, urgent, pulling in breath through his nose, then another, just a handful of heart-pounding seconds, but God, he needs to so bad.

And then he breaks away, just as Bucky’s hands begin to find his waist, as the shock seems to burn off and he starts to respond, and Steve lowers his head with a long, unsteady sigh, still clinging tight. He rasps his thumb over the stubble on Bucky’s neck, fingers grazing over the short hair at his nape.

It takes real effort to step away, and Bucky’s touch leaves him as soon as he starts. But Steve can barely let go, trailing his fingers down Bucky’s arms, Jesus, he must be burning up in that shirt. Maybe that’s why. Must be blasting pheromones all over the goddamn place.

“I should get back inside.”

Upstairs, the lights from the upstairs unit click off, leaving them in near darkness, save for the low ambient light from the street and the lamp from Steve’s apartment.

Steve cranes his neck to look through the crack in the door, and he spies two baby feet, as still as when he left.

“Got a real hair-trigger there, huh?”

Steve orients back to Bucky, confused, and Bucky gives a single nod toward Steve’s middle, eyebrows rising.

Of course. There’s absolutely nothing that these tiny shorts can hide, and yeah, okay, so perhaps he’s a little excitable. Steve reflexively angles himself away.

“Oh, shut up.”

He bends a little and pulls the fabric out, adjusting himself so he’s at least more comfortable while sporting full wood. But he turns back to Bucky, because it would be silly to suddenly develop self-consciousness with a man who’s seen his erect penis literally hundreds of times.

“Is that why you wanted me to come over?”

Steve shrugs. Shakes his head. He searches what he can see of Bucky’s face for something positive. Happiness. Excitement. Desire. There’s no sign of any of that. There’s something bigger eclipsing it,
if it’s even there at all.

“No. I don’t know. I just wanted to see you.”

Bucky’s eyes lock on his, then skip down to his dick before returning.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

Bucky reaches out and brushes hesitant fingers down the side of Steve’s hip. Steve shivers, and Bucky tracks his own featherlight movements, expression thoughtful.

And then Bucky pulls back his hand, curling it into a loose fist.

“I’ll see you Sunday,” he whispers, turning to leave.

And as he walks away, every impulse that thrums within Steve tells him stop this, to invite Bucky inside and wring dirty words from him and throw him on the bed and crawl between his legs and kiss him and grind against him until they’re both dizzy from it.

But he’s got a baby on the bed, so he can’t, they can’t. But he can’t let this happen, either.

“Wait.”

Bucky freezes with one foot on the sidewalk. He looks back over his shoulder.

“Hm?”

“Just— one sec.”

There’s a very long pause, like in their messaging, and once again Steve has no idea what the outcome is going to be. But Bucky turns, carefully, and in the street light, his mouth — his beautiful, expressive mouth — is in the shape of Mona Lisa’s.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asks. “Did I do something wrong?”

Bucky considers the question as he walks, brows gathering. His limp seems better today. It’s almost difficult to tell which leg he favors.

“I don’t think I’m cut out for this,” Bucky states when he gets back to the door.

Steve blinks. “Cut out for what?”

Bucky waits for a couple to pass with their dog before he answers, trailing them closely, tensing, performing nonchalance poorly.

“I just want too much,” he murmurs after. “Way too much.”

“Yeah, I can’t—” Steve shakes his head and folds his arms. “I told you it’d just be a few minutes.”

“I know. I knew that. It just… feels like shit.”

There’s no argument from Steve, not really, because this does feel like shit. But this is what adults with restraint do when they have things like kids and troubled histories and serious baggage to work out.
“Well, you said you wanted things to be different, so this is maybe what that looks like,” Steve says. “I don’t know.”

Bucky takes a half step forward, shoulders squaring, energy gathering around him palpably.

“Can I just have one thing more? Just a little?”

“Like, out here?”

Bucky nods.

Steve nods, too.

Bucky keeps his approach and stretches out his hand until it’s flat on Steve’s chest, and Steve’s arms drop to his sides as Bucky pushes him back, back, until his shoulder blades hit the building hard, punching a gasp from him. Steve’s adjusting to the low light now, and in it, Bucky’s eyes are dark steel, determined, and when he kisses, his mouth is pliant, but it demands an answer from Steve, demands the same grasping hands, the same shuddering breaths, and Steve gives them. He parts his lips and tastes Bucky’s tongue, presses against Bucky’s hands as they clutch at his chest, braces himself as Bucky shoves his hips forward. Steve grabs his ass and pulls him in, and he feels how hard Bucky is, the way he is now, and he moans.

“Is he sleeping?” Bucky breathes between kisses.

Steve nods and recaptures Bucky’s lips, and then he feels it— Bucky’s hand between them, cupping around the length of his cock, and he groans into Bucky’s mouth, gripping his shoulders tight.

Bucky breaks the kiss and takes a small step back, shushing Steve as he does— God, he’s so loud, he knows, but he can’t help it — and they both watch Bucky caress and squeeze him, Bucky pushing into his chest with his other hand, keeping him pinned against the wall, jaw slack, gray eyes glazed.

“I love these. Always have. Don’t ever get rid of them.” Bucky’s voice is raw as he gives him long strokes over the sleek fabric of his shorts.

Steve nods again and rocks his hips. “Are you gonna…?”

“Am I gonna finish you? Here?” Bucky gives a low chuckle as he traces around the head of Steve’s cock through the thin material. “With your baby on the other side of the door? Are you crazy?”

“Well, then fucking stop it,” Steve mutters, weakly, even as he thrusts into Bucky’s fingers.

“Okay. I’ll leave you alone.”

Bucky gives his cockhead one more long swipe with his thumb and withdraws his hand. The weight lifts from Steve’s torso as Bucky stops bearing down so hard. He doesn’t let go, though, merely rests there, easy, palm curved over his pectoral.

“You’re a real asshole,” Steve says, sagging, grip on Bucky loosening.

Bucky lays his free hand over his own groin and pushes against it, grimacing. “Hey, you’re not the only one suffering.”

“You started this.”

“Oh, excuse me, Mr. Can-you-just-come-over-for-a-minute-so-I-can-ambush-kiss-you, I’m pretty
“At least you get to jerk off when you get home.” Steve casts a quick glance at the door. “I get to sleep in a studio with my kid and pretend that I’ve only had one boner in my whole life.”

“One shot, one kill, Hooah.”

“I did shoot at the expert level.”

“I’ve seen a lot of your work. It’s good. Mostly tasted it, actually.” Bucky lifts his fingers to his face, the ones he was using to fondle Steve’s dick. He smells his thumb and licks it. “You do taste like you make good kids. A+ premium grade stuff.”

“What a— weird thing to say. And I didn’t even come!” Steve emphasizes, struggling to keep quiet.

“Well, you got *something* going on down there.”

Steve takes Bucky by the wrist and pulls his hand off his chest. He grabs the other wrist and strong-arms him, pushing against him, walking him back, while Bucky braces against him with a grin.

“*Something* was going on because you were jerking me off. *Half way* off.”

“Shhh.” Bucky leans in hard, effortfully, even though he’s no match for Steve. “Well, you shouldn’t have worn those skimpy little shorts and had such a big boner. I couldn’t help myself.”

“Oh, I think that’s called victim-blaming. And it’s very wrong.”

“Yes, you’re such a poor, innocent victim, calling me over for a late night two-second smooch, no warning, no chance to kiss you back. And then you get the world’s biggest hard-on from it and wave it at me and are all ‘oh, I gotta go now.’ And *I’m* the evil one?”

“Very evil. And I did not *wave* it at you.”

They both smile and relax against each other, and Steve loosens his grip enough to let Bucky slowly slip through his fingers. They stay close, even though they should really stop this. He should have put a stop to this a while ago.

“I still can’t believe you have a kid,” Bucky muses. “That’s so cool.”

Steve nods incrementally. Some days, he still can’t believe it, either. “He’s… a lot, but yeah. I think it’s good.”

“Yeah. Maybe next time.”

“What?”

Bucky shrugs one shoulder.

“You wanna see him?” Steve gestures toward the door.

“I dunno.” Bucky looks to the welcome mat, lips pursing. “Yeah.”

All Steve has to do is push the door a little and point Bucky toward the bed, and the kid is still out like a light with Lucy flopped down next to him. Steve squints to make sure he’s still breathing, which he is, belly-deep, somehow unfazed by any of the indecent adult shenanigans transpiring outside.
Bucky touches his fingers to his mouth. “Oh my God,” he murmurs, eyes crinkled at the corners. “Oh my God, Steve…”

It’s one of the most genuine displays of awe Steve has seen from Bucky, a man who keeps his sweetness buried beneath so many strata of sarcasm and distance that sometimes they both seem to forget it’s even there. And all for the tiny person drooling a small pond on Steve’s comforter.

Bucky’s hand drifts back to his side, and he watches Ethan sleep for a few more rapt moments before turning back to Steve.

“I guess should go. For real. But maybe next time?”

“I didn’t know you were so into kids.”

“I’m not.” Bucky tilts his head toward the apartment. “Just this one.”

Some very old gear in Steve’s psyche grinds. Grinding to life, grinding against another gear, grinding to a halt, it’s impossible to say. Like so many things today, it’s confusing and jarring, and Steve treats it like he’s treated all those other things — by throwing a blanket of neglect over it and redirecting his attention anywhere else.

“Ohay. Next time.”

Bucky takes a step forward and kisses him, intense but soft, cupping his face with both hands. He lingers for a moment after to gaze and ghost his lips over Steve’s so lightly that Steve doesn’t even know what to call it, inching back when Steve chases him for more, two mouths achingly close, joined only by the breath they share. Steve watches him walk away and returns the wave Bucky gives him from the sidewalk. He watches him until he can’t watch anymore, until there’s nothing to watch except the lazy weeknight street, and then he’s alone again.

Well, not entirely alone.

Steve works the door shut and secures both locks as quietly as he can. Ethan stirs, legs shifting, eyebrows gathering, and Steve is fully prepared for a night time meltdown, the kind that Sharon gets and extinguishes with “boobies,” which is beyond Steve’s capacity because Sharon didn’t even leave him with any milk this time. And it wouldn’t even be about that anyway — what could Ethan want from him? Comfort? Does Steve even offer that for him? He’s still not sure. He’s not sure if there could ever be enough items of proof to convince him that his son wants him.

The moving stops, meltdown averted, and Steve sifts carefully through his dresser for sleep clothes and creeps to the bathroom to change. His underwear and Umbros are a mess and get a one-way ticket to the laundry basket, because Bucky really does know what he’s doing. God, he’s missed that. He’s missed a man who knows exactly how to handle his dick, exactly where to touch him, exactly what to say and just how to turn his voice — even his smallest sounds — into an implement of arousal. And God damn it, it is a First World injustice of the first degree that Steve cannot rub one out right now with Bucky’s sighs still in his ears and the mess he helped make still sticking to his cock.

But as he cleans himself up, washes his face, and brushes his teeth, Steve remembers the other part of this. The part Hope tried to instill in him today. Bucky is still a cheater, the depth and scope of which is still not at all clear. He’s still a liar, something he has committed to historically with an almost pathological flair, blocking Steve from his entire life prior to New York save for the bits about his father the pilot who died at Campbell and That Is It. Bucky is still an alcoholic, “interpersonally unskilled,” deeply imprinted from God knows what traumas, and really, who knows how willing to
actually change, if change means being honest and shining light in the dark places he’s always kept
Steve from, no matter how much he’s begged to see them.

And tonight was indeed a Bucky move. He’s incapable of coming over just for a brief conversation
and a kiss. There has to be more. There can’t be intimacy without someone’s dick getting involved,
because somewhere something got those two things terminally confused for Bucky but, of course, he
won’t say when or how. Because that would be honesty, and that would be helpful.

They are still just as fucked up as they were earlier today and yesterday and six months ago and three
years ago. This doesn’t change anything.

This doesn’t change anything.

Steve repeats it to himself as he moves quietly through the apartment, tidying up from the day,
because he just can’t wait until tomorrow. He repeats it extra hard every time he remembers the taste
of Bucky’s mouth or the smell of him — Jesus, Steve would crawl under his shirt and live there for
the rest of his life and just smell him — and he repeats it when his dick starts twitching
back to life because no, they are still so fucked up. So, so fucked up. And it doesn’t really sink in
until he reminds himself — really reminds himself — why he’s living in this shitty little basement
unit in the first place. Because he was struggling, depressed, traumatized, alone, and instead of being
compassionate, Bucky just wanted to fuck, because he didn’t know what else to do, apparently, and
when Steve couldn’t do that because he was so damaged, Bucky went off and fucked some perfect,
big dick special forces motherfucker in his big fancy-ass penthouse instead of staying and being a
decent human being. And what a fucking asshole. Who abandons the person they love when they need
them the most because they just need to get some dick?

Steve stops at the foot of the bed and clenches and releases his jaw, then his fists, and wills himself to
breathe. This isn’t great, because it couldn’t have been all Bucky’s fault. He’s not a monster. He was
struggling, too. Steve was shut down. He could have reached out more. Maybe he drove Bucky
away. Maybe. Who knows.

He looks at Ethan, and this isn’t good for him, either. Steve needs to be here, not fucked up in his
head about his ex. His very sexy, charming, endearing, lying, cheating, mysterious ex.

Now he needs to make a decision, because every bit of anxious dad in him tells him that he should
wake Ethan up and put him in his crib, because that is where babies are safest. But he’s sleeping
right now, and he looks very sweet and… Steve really wants to lie down next to him, and he’s never
really— The wanting is strange. But he wants it now, powerfully, and he’s almost positive that he
won’t roll over on him, he sleeps so light anyway, and he took extra prazosin tonight so he shouldn’t
have nightmares, and parents in other countries sleep with their kids all the time and the human race
hasn’t died out, so maybe he’ll just…

Steve pads over to the side of the bed that has a little more room on it and carefully lays down on his
side facing Ethan, keeping his arms in tight against his own chest. Ethan’s hands and feet are
twitching, flexing — what is he dreaming about? Something good? Something that happened? God,
Steve hopes he’s not dreaming about today, because what a mess.

Well, after the VA wasn’t so bad. Steve sat Ethan on his lap, and they shared a smoothie and a
banana with peanut butter, and Ethan did give him Lucy for a few minutes and he meant it, and it
was gross but it was definitely intended for him. And Ethan was in high spirits. He’s easygoing,
curious, expressive. Steve should be thankful. He’s got a good one. Of all the ways for this to
happen—

It doesn’t matter how it happened. It doesn’t matter.
Steve watches him sleep. Dream. Slip back into some other stage of sleep, he can’t remember them all from the psych class he aced back at the Academy. He thinks back to Bucky’s comment, crass as it was, that this human could come from something so insubstantial, and Bucky could grasp the magnitude more than most. He was the bio guy, a lifetime ago. When he took it all very seriously, he would talk for hours and with his hands about how miraculous life was, truly, what an immense fluke that it all came together, that an organism could catapult into existence from two cells merging. Where some saw cheap ease in smashing two random people together to make a human, Bucky saw an orchestration of evolution so improbable that it was mind-blowing.

“And then your mother made you out of food,” he would say. “She used her body to make your body out of food. It’s un-fucking-believable.”

Un-fucking-believable.

And in that moment, Ethan farts.

It’s just a small one, just a little baby toot, it barely even stirs him, and Steve’s not sure if it’s the juxtaposition with the whole miracle of life thing or if it’s just because it’s utterly adorable, but he presses his lips together tight, snorting, clamping his hand over his mouth, and he’s gonna wake this kid up if he doesn’t do something quick, so he rolls onto his stomach and presses his face into his pillow and laughs.

He laughs until he’s shaking with it, harder every time it plays in his mind again. Every time he thinks about how absurd he is, so lost in his own bullshit all the time, and then this— God, is this parenting? And then he laughs harder, because he really, really needs it. He’s needed a good laugh since 2008.

When it’s safe, he lifts his head to find Ethan awake, barely, bleary and blinking slowly. Steve greets him softly and shushes him when he fusses a little, mumbling "Baba" and some other things Steve can’t understand. He clicks off the bedside lamp, and in the dark, Steve lays his hand on Ethan’s chest, just tries it to see — is it too heavy? Too close? Is this okay?

The fussing stops and Ethan quiets, and he’s breathing, and it— it seems okay. And after a couple of minutes, Steve listens in the dark, and he’s back to sleep, little baby belly rising and falling, and... this is okay. They are okay.

And right now, nothing else in the entire world matters.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Implied sexual assault, implied childhood sexual abuse, discussion of gay reparative therapy, internalized homophobia

Notes/Additional Terms:

Reparative therapy: Bucky was referring the services of Joseph Nicolosi, a psychologist who pioneered a popular form of reparative therapy and practiced in California. My
understanding of his practice and philosophy is this - Nicolosi observed that many of his clients who had unwanted same-sex attractions also had histories of childhood abuse (he latched on especially to those who experienced sexual abuse, especially those perpetrated by males) and strained parental relationships, especially with their fathers. He posited that this same-sex attraction was not a normal natural variation in orientation but was a problem of masculinity because of these processes, and he essentially kept people in therapy for a long time (sorry, Bucky) to work them through their unwanted attraction, help them to find masculinity outside of gay relationships/sexuality, and ultimately be straight.

This is all couched within the nice-sounding "client choice" argument, though it's clearly homophobic in nature. It also deeply misunderstands what other scientists in the field propose about the nature of the higher rates of childhood abuse among LGB individuals relative to heterosexual individuals, which is that it's targeted AT them because of their differences, in some cases because of gender-nonconforming behavior. This was observed in a seminal study of siblings raised in the same household, where children who grew up to be LGB were more likely to be maltreated relative to their siblings who grew up to be heterosexual. Same parents, same households. So Nicolosi basically said, hey, this abuse CAUSED you to be gay, not the other way around, while basically everyone else in the actual scientific community says, yeah, you were more likely to be abused in various ways BECAUSE you were showing burgeoning signs of being gay. Science can't prove either, because ethics, but you can decide which one is more likely to be true.

Crosswords: Pleasure seeker (9 letters) - bon vivant; ideal (seven letters, fourth is an 'a') - paragon
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Steve gets a surprise. Things take a turn for Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Follow me on Tumblr and now on TWITTER I GUESS for additional Baghdad Waltz content. Also, consider subscribing to the Spent Brass series on Ao3, which includes BW side stories of characterological importance that didn’t make it into the fic for various reasons that I still wanted to share with you.

Thank you to infinity and beyond to my beta, pitchforkcentral86, who is a true Princess of Power. If not for her, this fic would be trash. I literally could not do this without her.

And a very special thanks to KissMissSangBang for the stunning, heart-shredding art for this fic. I die every time I look at it.

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An important note regarding the subject of childhood sexual abuse (CSA):

As of this posting, I have probably spent a tremendous amount of time over the past year researching the subject of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) from multiple perspectives -- first hand testimonials from survivor/victims, academic research on countless facets of CSA, literature by helping professionals for survivors/victims of CSA, and literature for helping professionals to assist these populations. I’ve tried to educate myself as thoroughly as possible, because I know how sensitive this subject is, and I know how many people have been personally impacted by it.

That said, I’ve spent at least as much time thinking about how I’m going to represent CSA with realism and respect in this fic, and I’ve also discussed the subject at great length with my beta and consulted on CSA with trusted individuals in the trauma treatment field. In addition to common themes portrayed elsewhere, I also feel very compelled in this fic to consider the “bedroom ghosts” of CSA and some of the very complex feelings that survivors/victims can have for the people who abused them. These experiences are often not talked about in part because of their paradoxical qualities and the deep shame they can bring.

I have done a bit of a literature review of the CSA tag in the Stucky fandom, and of the relatively few fics that cover CSA in depth, I have rarely -- if ever -- seen these particular experiences touched on. However, in my review of the accounts of real survivors/victims, as well as the resources geared toward survivors/victims, I have seen these themes and experiences emerge over and over again. And so in the coming chapters, there are experiences that I want to portray that may seem strange or possibly even offensive, if taken out of context. But I assure you, they have been very carefully selected and are representative of very real experiences of some individuals who have experienced CSA.
If this is a particularly sensitive subject for you, I encourage you to look at the warnings for each chapter moving forward. I won’t be recommending parts to skip, because this is such an important part of Bucky’s story as a person and will be of such increasing importance moving forward that to skip it would be to skip his development as a person. However, I can warn about any descriptions or sensitive situations so that readers with certain triggers can prepare themselves before reading (if you choose to continue reading).

In future chapters, when I have room, I will post military terms up front, as I realize (only 35 chapters in) that it’s probably more helpful to you that way.

WARNINGS AT THE END

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
BAGHDAD WALTZ
AN IRAQ WAR LOVE STORY IN THREE MOVEMENTS
BY DREADNOUGHT
July 11, 2010

The kitchen is a disaster by the time Quill moseys in from the living room. The counter, the minuscule space that Bucky actually has to work with, is scattered with the implements of baking — the muffin tin he had to buy new and has nowhere to store now, Winnie’s mixing bowl, bags of flour and sugar, baking soda and powder, buttermilk, the dwindling carton of eggs he’s about ready to launch against the wall, and the cupcake liners he hasn’t been brave enough to open because he suspects that separating them will disintegrate the last iota of his patience.

“Jesus holy mother of Christ, Sly Dog.” Quill pauses in the entryway, hair mussed — one side flattened, the other flared wildly — from a long morning spent in bed.

Bucky grunts, easing egg number five from the cardboard.

“You… Wow. Need help?”

“No.”

Quill sides up to him, surveying his progress. The smell of sweaty, restless sleep follows him, one that saturates Bucky’s own sheets more nights these days than he’d ever admit to anyone. The appraisal does not help Bucky hit the edge of the Pyrex bowl just right, with the angle and velocity that probably only engineers can calculate and strike just right. He should just give it up and call Rikki. She always had soft hands.

“Who’s this for again?”

Bucky thwacks the egg against the glass. “A friend.”

The wiggle of Quill’s eyebrows is almost audible. “Your lady friend?”

He works his fingers into the cracked seam of the egg and parts them as carefully as he can. The yolk and gross, gelatinous clear part drop into the bowl, along with two pieces of shell.

“Fucking God damn it.”

Bucky really, really did not intend to lie. He didn’t intend to do anything about it. The person coming over this evening was to remain genderless until some abstract future necessity required him to be named. But Quill, relentlessly persistent fucker that he is, turned their trip to Target into an hour long interrogation, where Bucky couldn’t hunt for a goddamn Tupperware or a muffin tin or a new string of lights without twenty accompanying questions — what’s their name and where are they from and why haven’t I met them and who the hell are they, and saying it was a girl was all Bucky could do to shut him up. But rather than shut him up, it earned Bucky a punch in the shoulder and an “oooh, I knew it, you sly dog,” and it launched a new series of questions that Bucky had to distract from with a trip to the video section. And now they own the entire Terminator collection on Blu-Ray, even the really bad ones. But it was worth it.

“What time is she coming over?”

Bucky grabs the fork off the microwave and slips it into the bowl. She will not be coming over at all, if he can’t get his fucking shit together.
“20:30.”

Quill fidgets his way over to the flour bag, rolling it closed. He nods to the sugar. “You done with this stuff?”

“Yes. And I got you a really cool place with a hammock in the room. So that’ll be fun.”

“Does it have a bed?”

Bucky works the fork carefully around the yolk, chasing the shell toward the rim of the bowl. “A king.”

Quill flings open the cupboard and shoves the sugar and flour inside. He slams it closed, like he slams most of the doors he encounters.

“You know, you don’t have to send me away for the night. I can just stay in my room.”

There’s a twang in his voice that’s pitiful, and it’s not the first time regret has scrambled Bucky’s insides over this. But Bucky has mentally projected out too many ill-fated versions of this evening, the ones where maybe Steve wants to come inside, maybe he wants to fool around, like maybe... make out, Bucky can finish what he started Wednesday, who knows... maybe he wants to stay over, and Quill finds them, inevitably in the middle of something super fucking gay, and it’s all over. And so he gets to sleep in a hammock in a bougie boutique hotel downtown, all expenses paid by Brooklyn’s most incompetent homo.

“Won’t it be fun?” Bucky grabs the lip of the bowl tight and angles it while his right hand strains to keep the shell on its trajectory.

“How long will you be up there?”


The shell slips, just as he’s about to nail it up against the edge of the bowl. He swears as all the energy of effort plunges out of him. It doesn’t help to have Quill monitoring him, breathing over his shoulder, dense and immediate.

“Is she cute?”

“Yes.”

“What’s her name again?” Quill is even closer now, voice hot in Bucky’s ear.

Bucky squirms away. “Why so many questions?”

Quill takes the hint and moves back. He turns to the table and busies himself with the cupcake liners, seeming to spare no thought for the effort — hell, seeming to give no actual effort at all to the task. “Because we’re friends, and I’m curious about your life.”

“Look, I’ll tell you more later. I just— shit is tentative. Really fucking tentative.”

“No.”

“How long will you be up there?”


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“Look, I’ll tell you more later. I just— shit is tentative. Really fucking tentative.”

“Don’t wanna jinx it?”
“Exactly.”

Bucky’s just about got the first piece, pressing it through the clear of the egg white with the last tong of his fork. The shell wobbles but holds there, and he eases it up the side of the bowl, and he’s almost got it free—

And the slime sucks it back in.

“Fuck. Fucking fucker!” Bucky stabs the yolk, bleeding out deep orange-yellow that consumes the contents of the bowl like a fog.

He growls and dumps the whole mess into the sink. The egg splashes up the metal sides, where the tiny pieces of asshole shell finally decide they want to stick to something. He tosses the bowl and fork in after.

“Fucking bullshit.”

“Whoa! Calm down.”

Bucky wheels around, his useless hands clenched, nails biting into his palms. The place is a fucking pigsty, mail scattered across the table, shoes heaped in a pile in front the door. He can’t crack a fucking egg — how will he wrap Steve’s present? How will he hang the lights? How does he fucking function at all?

“Just lemme crack your eggs, man. How many you need?”

Bucky hears rustling, the recipe he printed when he brought Winnie a reuben on Thursday.

Bucky moves to intercept, reaching for the paper. “Don’t.”

Quill keeps the recipe away, playing the obnoxious older brother Bucky never had or was. “Why? She’s not gonna know if I help.”

“Because I should fucking be able to make fucking cupcakes by myself! That’s why!”

There’s nothing dignified about the way Bucky snatches the paper from Quill’s hands. It slips from his grip and drifts to the floor, landing halfway across the linoleum. Bending down for it is agony, like so many of his movements lately.

The kitchen is silent, save for the plunking of water dripping from the faucet. It’s gotta be turned just-so, just so many degrees to make it stop. Calling the super to get it fixed feels like a defeat somehow.

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“I get it,” Quill says.

“It’s fucking bullshit.”

“I know.”

Bucky examines the list of ingredients. Just two eggs stand between him and the vanilla cupcakes he’s been trying to bake for an hour-and-a-half.

“I mean, just look at it like delegating. Like, hey, Petty Officer Quill, crack me two eggs, and there better not be any goddamn shell in there!’ And I’ll totally be like ‘Yes, Sergeant First Class Barnes! Hooah or whatever!’”

Quill’s green eyes are idiot-wide, as if it’s just that easy to abandon his self-respect over two eggs.
But—it’s just two eggs. How long is he going to implode over two chicken periods? Thanks to Daisy for that piece of vegan feminist shock trivia.

“You don’t say the whole thing,” Bucky says. “It’s just Sergeant. And don’t call me that.”

“Gotcha. Two eggs?”

“Yes.” He fingers the pages of the recipe and adds, “Then beat them with the mixer.”

“Will do!”

Bucky steps back and lets Quill work—cracking the eggs, one after the other, shell-free and gloat-free, then giving them both a quick beating with Rikki’s hand mixer until they’re pulverized.

“Add the sugar.”

“Roger.”

Bucky directs him on the rest, working down the recipe step by step, swallowing his pride gulp by gulp until they have a bowl of golden batter, which Quill dips his finger into and licks off with a hum of delight.

“Are you gonna eat them all tonight?”

“Yes, we’re gonna eat…” Bucky scans to the bottom of the first page. “15 cupcakes.”

“Can I have one when they’re done?”

“You can have most. I just need six.”

“She likes cupcakes, huh? She a big girl? You like big girls?” Quill gives a wink that he’s meant to decipher, some code of heterosexuality he never learned.

“Just... “ Bucky lays the recipe on the mail stack. “Can you help me with something else?”

Quill brightens, prying forgotten. “Yes!”

“Good. Come with me.”

It’s already 8:40 by the time Steve reaches the front door. Bucky understood, being an adopted Brooklynite, that the F stands for “fucked,” especially when it comes to Sundays. Steve was able to catch the G at Hoyt-Shermerhorn, and now all he needs to do is Just come in and head to the roof. Door’s open :) He swallows and then swallows again when the first time doesn’t dislodge the clinging tightness. He swallows as he cranes his head up, itching for a clue to what awaits him but only finding a checkerboard of windows. Bucky’s is dark. He touches his throat, smoothing his fingers over the hard thrum of his pulse, and pushes the exterior door. It’s tacky in the summer months, squeaking against him, and he mounts the staircase that he’s only climbed a few times before, only to investigate, never to enjoy the roof the way he did when he was young, with his ma and the hammock, the barbecue, the moments of community that felt stolen from cancer. And with Bucky, before, they came to the roof so seldom. The birthday that went so wrong. The morning they watched Manhattan burn.
Perhaps it’s dread that’s echoing in him now, that pauses him at the door to the roof, hand on the knob. He retracts it and checks himself. His sleeves are rolled three times precisely, all his buttons are nestled in their correct holes. His hair feels in place, his belt is buckled, tongue tucked, fly zipped. When he’s out of checks to check, there’s nothing left but to meet what Bucky’s got planned for him on the other side.

He turns the knob. Pushes. Steps.

It’s dark. Ahead of him, the city glows orange in the distance. It’s only when he looks to the right that he sees a well-lit corner of the roof, just ahead of the waning daylight — lights strung on four poles, creating a rectangle of light with Bucky in the middle, watching Steve as he approaches. He stands tall in dark colors, legs spread in a narrow ‘V,’ hands clasped behind him, angular and sturdy.

Steve stops shy of him. There’s a small table a few feet away, with a speaker, an iPod, and a plate of blue frosted cupcakes.

“Hi.”

His eyes are flitting, active, searching Steve’s face as he awaits a response.

“Hey.”

It feels… familiar. Steve looks to the table again.

Bucky trails his gaze back over his shoulder to where Steve is stuck on the same skip, long cords of his neck shifting. He’s wearing something, some cologne, Steve is terrible with identifying smells but it’s something warm and clean that he feels in his gut and in his dick.

And then Bucky is ambling away, and he only has to bend down and touch the iPod once and then a rich, wailing voice pitches into the thick night air:

*Ooooooohhhhh-hhhhhhhhoohhhhh, I can’t quit you baby…..* 

The guitars drop, heavy and soulful, and Bucky returns in his cloud of dizzying scent, luminous, smiling, in the early stages of a reach, Steve can see his hands twitching for it.

But it’s not enough — his smell, the hopeful curve of his mouth, the tentative brush of fingertips across Steve’s forearm — none of it is enough to soothe the thing that’s unearthing inch by inch with every note that Robert Plant sings, scraping its way out from underneath what he thought was acceptance or forgiveness, because he was fine with it, for all these years, it really was just fine—

But maybe it was just denial. Perhaps he just threw the last time into the pile with all the rest of Bucky’s problems with them. All the retracted gestures, the aborted ‘I love yous,’ the small abandonments, the unkept promises, each just a trifle until they’re massed into a mountain of disappointment.

No, this isn’t disappointment. This is pain. This fucking *hurts.*

Steve cuts past Bucky, brushing shoulders with him as he passes.

“Wait, what—”

At the table, Steve yanks the cable from the iPod. It’s the fastest way to make it stop, a deathstroke to this tone deaf gesture. In the quiet, he can hear the cars humming down Prospect Park West. And if he listens very closely, he can hear Bucky breathing, fast.
Steve returns to him, and it’s like returning to another person entirely, this one wide eyed, hands splayed at his sides, like a scared rabbit trying to freeze its way out of capture.

Steve shakes his head. He attempts to, anyway. He can barely move, either, it seems.

“No.”

No goddamn way this is happening again. No way you’re leaving me here with my dick hanging out. No fucking way. These ‘no’s’ burgeon in his mind, one after the next with exponential velocity — but he couldn’t possibly utter them with Bucky looking away like that, toward the city, his mouth working soundlessly, Adam’s apple sliding, brows drawing tight. Bucky chokes out a noise, like a cough, blinking fast.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says.

Bucky nods incrementally.

Steve isn’t usually the guy to bolt, but tonight he can’t help but sneak a glance through the darkness, towards the door. He could leave Bucky standing here, gaping like a beached fish, drowning in his own inconsiderate choices. The image leaves a gritty, bitter taste in his mouth and a thrill of dark satisfaction in his gut. But just beyond the perimeter of the rectangle, he spots a red canopied porch swing flanked by two little tables, and another image enters his mind.

“Do you want to sit?” Steve asks.

Bucky makes frantic eye contact. “But—”

There’s nothing that comes after. Nothing except more floundering, Bucky’s attention yanks to his shoes, to the door, to the darkness.

Steve reaches for Bucky, takes him by the wrist, and leads him to the swing.

The swing doesn’t squeak or groan when they sit on it. It’s either new or well-loved by someone in the building, maybe the yoga lady upstairs or the young couple across the hall, if they even still live there. Bucky keeps his distance. Keeps quiet. But his energy seems to settle as Steve takes in all of his efforts. The strings of lights, hung in symmetrical parabolas; the precise angles of the rectangle; the cupcakes, each blue top iced with some writing or design he can’t quite discern from here. He thinks he might see a heart.

Next to him, Bucky’s hands slide together on his lap.

“I’m sorry. I really thought you would like it.”

Steve opens his mouth. On his short list of replies are: ‘How the fuck could you think that?’; ‘Wow’; and ‘Jesus Christ.’ But his vocal chords fail to coordinate with his brain, and so he remains silent.

Bucky shakes his head in a slow, resigned way. “I just wanted it to be good this time. I wanted to not fuck it up.”

“I know. I just— That was so bad for me.”

Bucky is incredulous, and that satisfaction warms in Steve’s gut again as the pieces slide together. As Steve’s hurt fully penetrates him.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I fucked this up so— Fuck… Fuck.”
Steve lays his hand on Bucky’s leg, next to Bucky’s own fidgeting hands. He flinches at his touch, beneath the worn denim of his black jeans. Did he always flinch?

“It’s okay.”

Bucky lets out a single burst of bone-dry laughter. “No, it’s not. This was a colossal fucking misfire. Like… unparalleled. What a fucking disaster.”

There’s an ancient impulse to further assuage Bucky’s guilt, to overcorrect his own hurt into oblivion. It’s a well-practiced move, an artifact of heartsick, lovestruck teenage Steve, the one who chased Bucky’s magnetism like an addict, who laid at his feet, begging for scraps of affection, any kiss that didn’t lead to a fuck, any spontaneous contact, any words of endearment, a dewy-eyed romantic who would contort himself into any painful shape to rationalize and excuse his boyfriend’s bad behavior.

**Boyfriend.** Yet another flight of teenage fancy, he’s learned in retrospect.

But he’s not a teenager anymore. He’s old. Bucky told him. And so Steve doesn’t bless his mess. Instead, Steve looks to the plate of cupcakes, arranged in three painstaking columns of two.

“Did you make these?”

Bucky gives another humorless chuckle. “Spent twenty minutes trying to crack two fucking eggs before Quill had to bail me out.”

Steve shrugs. “Eggs are hard.”

“Are they, though?”

“Did you decorate them?”

“Yeah. Want one?”

“Sure.”

Steve holds the swing steady while Bucky pushes himself up from it, grunting. He makes worrisome, labored strides and he comes back with two cakes and two rainbow striped napkins. Bucky hands him the one with “Hap B Day” written in white icing. He keeps the one with the heart.

“That’s my finest creation,” Bucky says, pointing to Steve’s. “And these are not supposed to be gay napkins. They’re coincidentally gayish.”

Steve peels the liner away, and the sweet scent of vanilla hits him. “My favorite.”

“I know.”

Steve takes a bite. The cake is perfectly moist, the buttercream rich and smooth. Thank God it’s not cream cheese. He might not have been able to mask his disappointment. He makes a sound of approval.

“This is really good,” Steve says through his chewing.

“Good. I was worried they’d be dry.”

Steve shakes his head and takes another bite. He waits to talk until he’s chewed and swallowed most of it, less for politeness than for his own selfish desire to enjoy the euphoric explosion of fluffy,
creamy sweetness in his mouth.

“I’m excited about Parker,” Steve continues.

Bucky straightens his legs, rocking the swing back. “Oh my God, yeah. Stony Brook, huh?”

Steve follows his momentum, brushing a crumb off of his chinos as his own legs stretch. “I guess it’s one of the best PA schools in the country.”

“Wow. Right here on Long Island.”

“This is not Long Island.”

“It’s not Lawn Island? Then what is it?”

It’s a very old gag, circa seventh grade, when Bucky was trying out Steve and Steve was trying out Bucky. They toss the routine back and forth as they rock together.

“Brooklyn.” Steve pops his B hard and pushes his o’s out with his lower lip. He stuffs the rest of his cupcake in his mouth.

“And what’s the thing called that you put junk in? You pull it out, got a handle? Slides out?” Bucky mimes it.

“A draw,” Steve mumbles.

There’s a wide smile in Bucky’s voice now. “Right. I forgot. What do you like to drink in the—”

“No, I’m not saying that word. I’m not Linda Richman.” Steve swallows his bite and nods to the cupcake still sitting on Bucky’s lap. “You’re not gonna eat yours?”

Bucky shakes his head and offers it.

“You don’t want it?”

“My stomach is too fucked up right now. Maybe later.”

Steve takes the cake but tilts the frosting in his direction. “Sure you don’t want a little?”

Bucky’s eyebrow climbs, but then he scrapes his finger along the side of the piled frosting, scooping off a large gob. He locks his eyes on Steve as he takes his finger in his mouth, sucking it off from root to tip.

Steve’s breath stutters.

“Mm, you actually got a little…” Bucky motions to the corner of his own mouth.

Steve hesitates, then swipes his finger across his cheek. “Here?”

Bucky shakes his head. Steve wipes his finger along his hairline.

“Here?”

“No.”

He passes his hand lightly over his chin. “How about now?”
Bucky smiles. “You’re a dork. Are you really doing this?”

“Doing what? I’m just trying to get the frosting off my face.”

Bucky bites his lip and regards him steadily. He’s remarkably handsome tonight, even distraught, even in failure, his beauty is steadfast. Bucky lifts his hand and touches his index finger to the corner of Steve’s mouth, pulling away with a hint of blue. He licks it off.

“Got it,” he says, voice low.

Steve swallows again. He sets the cupcake on the side table.

Bucky brushes his thumb over Steve’s lower lip and cups his jaw. There’s deliberation to his movements, a layer of thoughtfulness cushioning them, and when he leans in, it’s with a hesitation that Steve doesn’t rush to meet. There’s something so endearing about it, he wants to enjoy it in its final moments, the seconds before their mouths join, before their desire sparks to life and consumes them. He wants to drink this in. And he does, breathlessly.

And then they kiss.

It’s nothing like Wednesday. Neither is barreling forward, blowing off steam or proving some point that will never be spoken between them. They kiss lazily, without tongue, hands venturing into safe places — Steve the curve of Bucky’s knee, Bucky holding Steve’s face. He can’t remember the last time kissing felt this real between them, this cloudless. There’s been so much Percocet and numbness and self-protective evasion, but this — Bucky’s crackling nerves feel like life. And Steve wants more of that. He parts his lips and tests his tongue against Bucky’s mouth, and Bucky’s hand slips around to the back of his neck as he opens and lets him in, his own tongue sliding against Steve’s, hot, eager, and Steve shifts, arm along the back of the seat, leaning in close as Bucky leans back, his left hand smoothing up Bucky’s thigh. Noises start to come out of both of them, a grunt as Bucky pulls Steve’s hair, heavy breaths as they fall into a deep fucking rhythm with their mouths, the kind that gets Steve’s dick straining hard in his pants — it feels like it’s been forever, he knows it hasn’t, but it feels like an eternity since he’s touched or been touched, and Steve is highly conscious of his choice to run his thumb along the crotch of Bucky’s jeans, against his balls — or, God, he supposes there’s just one now — he’s never laid his hand anywhere close since before Khalidiya, he’s been too scared. And when Bucky stiffens, Steve begins to pull back, but then he feels Bucky moving, shifting his hips closer as their kissing continues, and Steve traces over Bucky’s groin, lightly, trailing up toward his dick, he just wants to feel it, he wants to sink into the sound Bucky makes when he takes it in his hand— and Bucky gives him something, finally, lays his hand flat on him and pushes, gives him something to grind against, and it’s like a ripcord, Steve arching against him, fisting his shirt, whimpering as Bucky sucks on his tongue, moans echoing from deep in his chest. Bucky shifts Steve’s cock away from the sharp teeth of his fly and kneads at it with his palm, and Steve’s legs fall open as their kissing falters, he can barely reciprocate with Bucky working him like this, he’s clumsy, all need, thrusting into Bucky’s hand, pushing the swing back and back while Bucky mouths along his jaw and neck. He cradles the back of Bucky’s head with one hand, drawing him closer, his own head falling to the
side, sighing.

“‘You’re so fucking sexy…’ Bucky grazes his lips over Steve’s cheek, pausing at the tender flesh of his earlobe. ‘I’ve been thinking about this since Wednesday.’

Steve’s hand tightens in his hair; his words tremble out of him. ‘Me too....’

“I wanna blow you.”

The first and last rooftop blow job he ever received has tangled itself into a thick network of memory over the years. Almost anything can trigger it — a view of the city at the right time of night from the right kind of height; any mention of Pablo Neruda; certainly that motherfucking song; the smell of whatever shampoo Bucky used— God, it was Herbal Essences, wasn’t it, because he would be in the shower, washing his hair, shouting out “oh yes, yes, yes, yes!!” and Steve would laugh every goddamn time, no matter how tired or cranky he was, no matter how old it got—

That entire network lights up now, every tendril circuiting to the next, lighting up with the pain of Bucky’s effort, the pain of Bucky’s affection, the pain of how heartfelt it all was, the pain of how intensely sexy it was, how obscenely hot he looked on his knees, sucking down Steve’s cock — and then the pain of how everything was stricken like set pieces at the end of a play, the audience still in their seats, Steve’s dick not even soft yet. All because of Bucky’s shame over who they were and Bucky’s shame over everything he had done to express his love, like Steve was nothing and they were nothing. And then Steve was alone, and a part of him has felt alone ever fucking since.

“You sure you wanna do that?” Steve asks now, because there would be no coming back from a repeat.

Bucky looks to the roof door. The natural light has long since died in the West, leaving them in solitude and in relative shadow. But the risk of discovery is tangible still, and they’re not stupid fucking kids anymore.

There’s a long pause, and Bucky takes him by the chin with one hand, his grip firm, expression serious.

“I’m so sorry for what I did last time.”

Steve blinks. It’s utterly disarming. Breathtakingly genuine. Impossible to refuse. He nods what little he can in Bucky’s hold.

“I want to do this.” One corner of Bucky’s mouth quirks up. “I really do.”

“Okay.”

They kiss. Bucky works him up a little more— just a few enthusiastic squeezes, a little tongue, a needy sound from the back of his throat. Bucky then tosses one of the swing’s decorative pillows on the rooftop at Steve’s feet, urges Steve to part his legs, and situates the pillow between them, kneeling slowly and not without a deep wince.

He lays his hands on Steve’s knees, and a current of excitement follows Bucky’s hands as they slide up his thighs.

“Just don’t get bored and start swinging, or I’ll be flat on my face.”

Steve chuckles and undoes his belt and unbuttons and unzips his pants. “I don’t think this is gonna take very long.”
“No? You’re not gonna make me work it?”

Bucky pushes Steve’s hands out of the way and pulls down the band of his briefs to get to his dick, and his mouth falls open a little.

“Oh, man.”

“What?”

“Just...“

Bucky shakes his head and makes a small sound. He wraps his hand around the base of Steve’s leaking cock and tilts it toward his mouth. He gazes at it, gives the head a long, slow swirl with his tongue — Jesus, this is not gonna take long, holy fuck — then takes the whole thing in his mouth in one slow dip.

Steve leans back with a huff as Bucky’s mouth steals any hope of coherent thought. He watches, captivated — he wants this seared into his colander brain, because Bucky in the act of sex is a gift. The high cut of his cheeks as he bobs on Steve’s cock, the slick sound of his lips as they slide up and down over a sheath of his saliva, the warm, undulating pressure of his tongue against the underside of Steve’s shaft— Fuck— He chokes back the moans that try to edge out of him with every pass of Bucky’s wet mouth, he swallows them, keeps them from the open air, can’t help but think about what they’re doing, what an outsider would see if they could, he reels thinking of how fucking hot they must look, Bucky clutching at his own dick the way he is now, rubbing it while he has a cock crammed in his mouth — and Steve can’t help it — he groans and lays a hand on Bucky’s head, follows his quickening pace, oh, they’d see just how good Bucky can suck it, so deep that Steve can feel his cockhead sliding down the back of his throat—

“Oh fuck— fuck—"

Bucky hums around him and pulls almost all the way off, then sucks him all the way down again, and again and again, and Steve is squirming, legs shifting, trying with the fraying threads of his restraint not to shove up into Bucky’s mouth or swing the chair back, and as his fingers tighten in Bucky’s hair and his breathing becomes panting and every instinct in his body tells him harder, faster — God — oh God — Bucky takes his mouth off his dick and wraps his hand around it and jerks him, hard, and even though he moves unsteady, he moves, and Bucky opens up and that’s it, Steve is coming— coming — coming into Bucky’s mouth and onto his swollen lips, his cry muffled into his forearm, with Bucky’s eyes locked on his, heavy lidded, intense, hungry.

Steve’s hands drop to his sides and he sags, boneless, into the thick cushion of the swing. Bucky swallows and licks the come from his lips, which nudges a thick glob of it down his chin — Christ, Steve’s going to jerk off to this for the next month — and Bucky catches the errant come with the back of his finger and sucks it off, then laves at the slow dribble still leaking from Steve’s softening dick. It’s fascinating, always has been, how Bucky can be erotic and sweet, blisteringly sexy and movingly warm by turns, sometimes confusing ones. Shocking ones. Upsetting ones.

Bucky tucks Steve back into his underwear, careful, but he’s quick to his feet after, planting his hands on Steve’s thighs and leveraging himself, grunting, while Steve buttons, buckles, and zips himself back up.

Longing surges in Steve, powerfully, and he takes Bucky by the waist and pulls him close, half way onto his lap. He needs it now, something solid to lay on the rawness, but Bucky flinches, bracing against him.
Steve loosens his hold. “Sorry.”

Bucky settles next to him, his movements guarded. He wipes at his chin again with his knuckles. “It’s just my hip. My back. It’s all a mess lately. I don’t know why.”

Shifting his weight, he faces Bucky as much as he can and glides his hand up Bucky’s thigh. There’s an unquelled need that his own pleasure didn’t consume, compounded in magnitude by having almost felt him after so long. He aches to know more.

“That was so good,” Steve says.

Bucky smirks. “Good.”

“I want you to feel good. I want to get you off.”

Steve wants it in the concrete, charged way he wants to be able to sleep through the night and wants his upstairs neighbors to stop slamming the headboard when they fuck at all hours. Steve’s fingers edge toward Bucky’s crotch again, and he brushes his mouth against Bucky’s stubbled cheek. “I want you…”

“I know.” Bucky stops Steve’s wandering hand and guides it back down toward his knee. “I just... I’m not ready for that.”

Steve sighs and plants his hand firmly where Bucky placed it. It’s been so long that Steve isn’t sure if he remembers what Bucky really looks or sounds like when he comes. Whether he closes his eyes or just draws his brows in tightly. Whether he throws his head back or drops it low or buries his face in a pillow or in the crook of his arm. Whether he makes one sound or cries out to the beat of his orgasm. He’s constructed something from memory, some composite crafted from the span of years, hopefully not one tainted by any commercial spoofs. But the temporal distance is so vast that he can’t distinguish the hyperreal landscape of his mind from the truth anymore.

“I have a real gift for you, too,” Bucky tells him, tracing his fingers over the long bones on the back of Steve’s hand. “Downstairs. Not just cupcakes and a BJ.”

“I mean, this would have been more than enough. I think this will be a gift that keeps on giving. If you get my meaning.”

“Sometimes I forget what a perv you are. I don’t know how.”

Steve snorts but doesn’t deny it. “Do you want your cupcake now?”

Bucky nods.

Steve bends toward the side table and snags it. The heart is admirably symmetrical, with a little flourish at the vertex which could pass for purposeful, if Bucky didn’t mean for it to be. Bucky’s hand leaves him as he focuses on peels back the crimped edges of the liner, pensive, brows flattened, and a joyful act of anticipation becomes a feat of skill.

“There’s a reason I am the way I am. Afraid of getting caught.”

Steve’s stomach clenches. This is one of those precipice-of-real-truth moments, isn’t it? The kind he’s hoped so hard for but hasn’t actually thought through to actualization because it’s so improbable, like winning the Powerball jackpot or going to Space Camp.

“I just figured it was from the Army. That’s what you told me.”
Bucky’s mouth twists.

“The second we moved to Campbell from Bragg, it was like I had a scarlet F on my forehead. I was 10, and everyone pegged me right away. From day one. I have no idea how they knew. I barely knew. It was the first time anyone called me a faggot. Fag, homo, fairy, queer, fudge packer, you know, the standard variants. It was relentless. ‘Hope you die of AIDS, faggot.’ That was a favorite. Little fucking Ryan White got AIDS, so even kids could get AIDS, though I don’t think he got it from being a fag. Someone spread the rumor that I had it, so that was fun. Nobody wanted to work with me. Teachers had to make people work with me. I had to bribe a girl with candy every day just to let me sit next to her on the bus. And I’ll tell you what — those fucking kids never got tired of it. For two fucking years. It was remarkable, really. And it wasn’t just kids either. I heard grownups say stuff about me at church. Just a few times, but it really stuck with me.”

“Jesus.” Steve dips his head and rests his chin on Bucky’s shoulder, hand tightening on his leg. “Did your parents know what was going on?”

Bucky stiffens beneath his touch. “Not really. They knew I didn’t have friends at school, but they didn’t know why. The kids were good at doing it when teachers weren’t around. Some teachers maybe knew but didn’t care. It was the South and the Army, so, you know. I did have one friend. He really— he was the only good thing I had the whole time. When shit was bad at school and shit was bad— he was…”

Bucky drifts, lips parted. Seconds slip by.

“...But he wasn’t in my grade,” he finally says.

It’s moments like these that Steve feels most ineffectual, when Bucky is stiff and detached, emotionally catatonic but breakable, and every instinct in Steve’s body, every movement of his heart, compels him to act, to inquire, to reach, to hold tight. And he’d do it all if he knew it wouldn’t fail, like it has so many times before, culminating in Bucky’s withdrawal and shutdown — or worse, an attack, either with words or with sex, sometimes both. Fuck, sometimes all four in chaotic sequence.

So Steve holds fast with his hand on his knee and his chin on his shoulder, still and easy, his own self denied. “I’m glad you had him.”

Bucky collects a small dollop of cupcake frosting on the tip of his finger and tastes it, and his finger lingers there, hovering, just on the edge of his mouth, as he stares off into the distance, toward Manhattan.

“I got the shit beaten out of me. I was twelve. It was in this park, right by our house on base. I just remember that… rotten leaf smell, and I was just laying there, trying not to choke on my own blood, and it was so clear, like you’d think it’d be really loud in the neighborhood on a Friday night, but it was just the cold, dead leaves rustling and the stars, and I was like… I could see my house, like it was just over there, just up this little hill, and all the lights were still on, and I was like, man, if I could just roll up this fucking hill, I could get there, but I was so fucking wrecked, all these broken ribs, my face, my jaw all— just broken, just blood, and so I like… I got up and like— I swayed around, hurled, and it was like, nope, no way, and then I laid back down and I tried to will my dad to look outside, like maybe if he just checks something in the back yard, like, cleans the grill at eleven o’clock at night in November, maybe he’ll see me, ‘cause I know they’re up, because I was supposed to be home already, and I was just like, please, please, please, please, please, come outside, just— I’m right here. And I’d get up on all fours and crawl a little, until I was so woozy I had to stop, and I’d lay down again and go back to wishing— and I eventually— I just... crawled through my back yard, fucking— groaning, gagging, and— blood dripping— all over the fucking place— and I had to paw on the sliding glass door like a fucking dog just to get them to hear me and— finally— it’s my
fucking dad, and he’s still in his BDUs, and he sees me—and he—he grabs me, like he just—
grabs me, and I cry out, because everything is fucking agony, and he lets go, he backs up so fast, 
like, he’s halfway across the room in a second, and my ma comes, and she sees me and she’s like, oh 
my god, oh my god, baby, blah blah blah, but she’s real gentle, she’s so careful, but my dad starts 
going ape shit, he’s screaming, he’s going ballistic, like what the fuck happened, who the fuck did 
this, what the fuck happened to you, what the fuck is going on, he’s having a fucking meltdown, total 
thermonuclear meltdown, like, hyperventilating, grabbing his head, screaming what the fuck is going 
on, what the fuck is happening?! And it’s like, Jesus Christ, who the fuck does that? Who the fuck 
yells at their kid like that? I just wanted him to—comfort me—I’d been wanting it, more than 
anything I’d ever wanted, for the past—who the fuck knows how long I was crawling home, all I 
wanted was my dad to comfort me after—”

Silence.

Steve doesn’t move. Steve doesn’t breathe.

Bucky continues.

“And—I’m remembering all this stuff now, that maybe this was just the way he was a lot of the 
time, like—this was who he was, this screaming maniac... And why did I expect anything different 
that night? I dunno. So stupid.”

Steve worries the crease in Bucky’s jeans, just behind his knee, rubbing the material between his 
fingers. He has to say something. The information demands it. The awfulness of the situation 
demands it. But the paths between the lobes of his injured, addled brain are hazy, relaying nothing 
but thick noise, so he speaks from the rock-heavy thing in his gut that he doesn’t know the name of 
yet.

“I’m so sorry. That’s fucking awful.”

Bucky takes a small bite of cake. He makes a sour face, folds the liner back around it, and sets it on 
the side table. “Shit happens.”

“It’s not ‘shit happens.’”

Despite Steve’s efforts, Bucky collapses more — folding his arms, shrugging Steve’s chin off of his 
shoulder, crossing his legs tight at the knee. Steve locks down all urges to touch him more, to brush 
back the piece of hair that’s fallen forward from where he gelled it back, to press their bodies 
together, to grab onto him and never—God, he couldn’t, not after that.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“I’m trying.”

Steve caresses Bucky’s leg. He’s careful, stays low, watches him closely. “I know.”

“I want to be with you.” Bucky’s voice is thin. Half-swallowed. “This whole thing, I was gonna ask 
you. I was gonna play the song, we were gonna dance, I was gonna cram a cupcake in your face, we 
were gonna kiss, and I was gonna ask if you wanted to—”

Bucky looks over, helplessly, searching for the words in Steve’s eyes.

“Try again,” Bucky says.

Try again. It’s where this has all been leading, hasn’t it? Ever since the coffee shop. Maybe ever
since Parker. Ever since Bucky put on cologne and got a haircut and stopped drinking. And yet, Steve can’t ignore the surprise shuddering through him, smashing into the story of a boy who was viciously tormented and savagely beaten, a boy who, after all that, asked him for gum. For fucking *gum*. Like it was nothing.

“I’m just— really overwhelmed right now,” Steve tells him.

Bucky chews on his lip.

“I’m not saying ‘no.’ I’m just saying I don’t know right now. I need more time.”

“I’m changing. I’m working really hard.”

“I know.”

Steve drops headlong into one sliver of the story, Bucky lying in the quiet, breeze rustling the dead leaves, so alone, his small body broken, the light from home beckoning him from just over the hill crest... He has to hold him now. He has to hold him *now*, because no one could. *He has to.*

“What do you wanna swing?”

Bucky tilts his head. Steve lays his arm along the back of the seat again, opening himself, and he waits, hoping.

Bucky does not collapse. He does not disappear or attack. Instead, he unfolds himself, and he gets so close so fast that Steve has to suppress a flinch of surprise and steady the swaying of the chair. He’s slow to settle then, like he’s grinding through layers of his own friction just to get to Steve, but he gets heavier and warmer the longer they sit, until he feels so vividly present and stubbornly alive that Steve keeps gripping him tighter to make sure it’s real.

They rock together in silence.

By the time Bucky escorts Steve down the hall to the front door, he’s ready for this entire shit show to come to an end. Tonight was as close to a bust as you can get without actually busting, saved — if anyone could call it that — by a quick and dirty suck job and some actually nauseating honesty. He’s not sure what’s worse — the fact that he said it or the fact that Steve barely reacted. Bucky has imagined, in various states of panic, all sorts of ways this might go down, but tonight’s scenario was so far from any of these permutations that it might as well have taken place on Mars. He doesn’t know what to make of any of it, and now he just wants this night to fucking be done yesterday so he can crash face down in bed and maybe hump the mattress for a while.

They’re just about to reach the door, where he can release Steve back into the world, when the thing bursts open from the outside. And there’s only one person Bucky knows who throws open every door like it’s done him wrong.

Bucky freezes.

Quill freezes.

Steve continues forward a couple steps, delayed in registering the sheer degree to which they are fucked now. Quill’s wide eyes dart between them.

“What are you doing here?” Bucky asks.
“Hey, Steve.”

Steve blinks. “Hi, Quill.”

Quill’s attention lands on Bucky. His heart clips into a gallop.

“Just picking up my iPod. I forgot.”

And that’s it. He cuts around them, sliding against the wall, his backpack dragging against the wainscoting. Bucky spins and watches him enter the apartment through the door they left open. He closes it softly behind him.


“Are you okay?”

Bucky doesn’t try to mask the fear he knows is on his face. God, they are fucked. He is fucked. “No, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later. Sorry.”

“Okay….”

Bucky follows Quill at a frenzied clip, wood floor protesting beneath his steps. He yanks open the door and slams it behind him, and Quill startles from the fridge. Outside, he hears the heavy wooden thud of Steve leaving.

And Bucky has every intention to lay into him, to scream, to ask him what the fuck he’s doing here when he was explicitly told to stay the fuck away— but how the fuck is he supposed to do that when the guy’s wrist-deep in a bag of shredded cheddar cheese?

“So. The cupcakes.”

Bucky clamps his hands together. “What about the fucking cupcakes? Why the fuck couldn’t you just stay at the hotel?”

Quill’s jaw yaws slowly to the side. “Were those for Steve the whole time?”

Bucky grabs the back of the dining chair, and the room starts to tilt, and maybe he should just… sit… down… more of a controlled fall, really, and he buries his hands in his hair and narrows his focus on the sole task of not lopsiding onto the floor. It’s probably fair and expected, since all he’s had to eat today is a load of come and a couple bites of cupcake.

“You could have just told me. Kinda insulted you didn’t.” Quill zips the cheese bag up and tosses it onto the counter. “Like, kinda really insulted.”

Bucky barks out a laugh. “You’re fucking insulted.”

“Yeah! We’ve been friends for a year. It’s kind of an important piece of information.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s—”

Quill falters, licking little bits of cheese off his fingertips as he strains to possibly justify why Bucky’s sexual proclivities are any of his goddamn business.

“Well, you lied to me. You straight up lied about tonight.”
Bucky chances an upright position, his head still reeling. Yes, Bucky Barnes is a liar. Water is wet. Chili mac is the best MRE. Quill should know all these things. And yet—

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have.”

Quill looks to the ceiling, tongue pushing out the inside of his scruffy cheek. “Wow. So you’re like —”

“Yep.”

“But... you’re a Ranger.”

Bucky snarls. “So what?”

“I mean, it’s totally fine! It’s cool.”

It’s like a blade slicing through his entire history, cutting through the gravity of every second of suffering that his gayness, his softness, his girliness, has brought him. His pulse thrums, and he curls his hands hard around his kneecaps.

“No, it’s not ‘cool,’ Quill. It’s the bane of my fucking existence. It’s destroyed my whole fucking life. So, no, it’s actually not fucking ‘cool.’”

“Jeez. Sorry.”

Bucky stands and pushes the chair in. God, he’s gotta pick up the shit on the roof. Put the lights away. The cupcakes. The stupid fucking speaker. Stupid stupid idea.

“I’m gonna clean up. You gonna help or what?”

Bucky takes the lead into the hallway and up the stairs. Quill’s steps are so different from Steve’s. Distant, heavier, even despite their close size as men, syncopated by constant distraction.

“I’ve never had a gay friend before.”

Bucky glares over his shoulder. “Will you shut up? God. Just announce it to the whole fucking building.”

Quill shrinks back. “Sorry,” he mouths.

Bucky keeps climbing.

“I’m sure you’ve had one. You just didn’t know it. I mean, you’ve had one this whole time.”

“So, wait, is Steve your—” Quill drops his voice down to a theater whisper. “Boyfriend?”

“Remember what I said about it being really tentative? I wasn’t shitting about that.”

Quill chuckles. “Well, now I get all that other stuff from before.”

“What stuff?”

“He’s so big and strong! He’ll kick your ass!’ Jesus Christ.”

“Oh, cram it.”

Bucky stops at the second floor landing. They still have one more flight to go before they reach the
roof, but he’s fading fast. He can’t remember the last time he climbed so many stairs in one day, each one a reminder of how idiotic and hurtful it is to expect anything. Rikki was right. God, he hates it when she’s right. He grips the railing tight. Pops the question.

“So... you’re okay with living here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? You gonna try to do me?”

Trying to do Peter Quill would be a fool’s errand. He has considered it before, purely as an experiment in thought, and the experiment failed because Quill is a bottom, like in his soul. A total, raging bottom. Bucky can read these things the way crones in fantasy novels read tiny bones. And although Bucky is a highly capable top and does like to give a good plowing, when the mood strikes, he’s hardly equipped for that work anymore.

And there’s also the matter of Quill being unambiguously straight. But that’s beside the point.

“Sorry, but you’re not my type,” Bucky says.

“Is it because I’m fat?” Quill lays his hand over his stomach, brows drawn.

“It’s because your breath smells like Mountain Dew.”

“Does not!”

“It does. Truly.”

On the roof, they eat the rest of the cupcakes, dismantle Bucky’s misguided efforts to reproduce a miserable night for Steve, and put everything back the way they found it this morning. Quill goes back to his bougie hotel with his iPod to stay out the rest of the night, and Bucky washes all the sweat and bad decisions off with a long, lukewarm shower. It’s harder to shake Kentucky. The things he disclosed to Steve. The many things he didn’t. But if he stands under the water long enough, if he makes himself go far away, if he tries and he tries, that finally seems to wash away, too.

The heat of this summer has managed to burn off several layers of his self-disgust, quite possibly for good. It wasn’t some grand personal growth movement or some profit of soul-searching. It was just plain necessity. So when he settles on top of his comforter to check his messages and read from his Big Book, he does it in a t-shirt and shorts, almost like a normal person. He can look at himself now and not feel completely sickened. Just... ugh. It is a monumental leap on the measuring stick of self-loathing.

He finds texts from two recipients — one from Quill telling him that he made it and that maybe he could get used to this hammock thing. It’s a put-on, he obviously hates the place, but Bucky paid for it and he’s gonna stay. Bucky texts a Maybe we can get one for your room! and then moves on to Steve’s message.

It’s a picture of the cover of the book Bucky got him — Audie Murphy’s To Hell and Back — staged alongside the card Bucky tucked inside the front cover.

“For an old man — The tale of the grunt’s grunt.

With love, Bucky”

The text reads:
Thank you so much. For everything. For the cupcakes. For your... other gift. For the truth. I’m so sorry that happened to you. I just needed time to process it. I’m sorry if I was weird about it. It was a lot. My brain’s a piece of shit and I’m not always tracking.

Bucky sits back against the pillows he’s got propped against the headboard. He crosses his legs at the ankles, and one corner of his mouth twitches up. He types.

I get it. It is a lot. And yeah I’m sure the BJ didn’t help.

Ha no. Guess not. Seriously though, I’ve always just wanted to know. I felt like there was always something, and I’m so glad you told me. And I get it. It makes sense to me. It really does.

Bucky heaves a breath. Choice point.

Well thanks for listening. I’m okay now. It happened a long time ago.

Any time. I mean it. I can talk with you more later if you want.

Thanks. It was so good to see you tonight.

You too.

The typing bubble pops up again, and Bucky can tell it’s gonna be more about the thing, or about trust or some shit. He knows it. Because Steve has to be Steve about everything and beat the horse into the ground and through the core of the Earth. But it’s over. It’s done. He said it. He did his duty. And now they can move on. Bucky types the next part as fast as he can manage, before Steve can finish.

I’ll be thinking of you later.

The bubble stops. Bucky presses his lips together and waits.

Okay.

A few more seconds pass.

Oh.

Bucky smiles.

Well maybe not TOO much later.

Wow.

A few more seconds pass.

Thinking about what?

Bucky shifts his hips. He debates how much to say. How far to go. He hasn’t really done this before. Not sober. He doesn’t know the rules, if there are any. But why beat too far around the bush? Steve is still a confirmed perv, after all these years.

Quill’s not home. I was thinking of fucking myself.

Jesus. Really?
Bucky runs his hand over his dick, to take some of the mounting pressure off. He eyes his nightstand and slides off the bed.

*With what?*

Oh, with what indeed? Bucky opens the *draw* and surveys his supplies. The Big One. The more modest seven-incher. A weird prostate massager thing he bought while wasted and hasn’t taken out of the box yet. Ass lube and jerk off lube. A bed towel and a jerk off towel. Two boxes of condoms. He pulls the bed towel, the ass lube, the seven-incher, and the condoms.

Bucky snaps a picture of the cock and sends it. He lays down the towel on the bed and tears open the condom packet with his teeth and works it over the head and shaft of it, because if he has to clean one more fucking thing today he’ll scream.

*Oh my god*

*That’s about how big you are, right?*

Okay, he’s overshooting a little, but a bit of generosity won’t hurt. Bucky slides his shorts off — he’s already so hard, just from this — and he squeezes his cock over his underwear and settles on the bed on his back. He flips off the light.

Steve replies.

*Uh dont know but this is really hot*

*Are you hard?*

*Completely*

*Are you home?*

*Yeah*

*Are you gonna jerk off while I fuck myself?*

*Oh my god yeah*

Bucky’s cock jumps at that, and he pushes down his underwear and kicks them off so he can start touching himself in earnest. He pours a little lube on the head of his dick and starts stroking, keeping it off his fingertips as much as he can.

*Good. Are you naked?*

There’s a pause before Steve responds.

*I am now*

Oh fuck, he can imagine it, now that he’s seen Steve’s bed. He fills in the details of Steve’s body, his broad shoulders, his glorious chest, his abs, his cock — his perfectly average, delicious cock — his powerful thighs — he’d sit on that cock and ride him so hard — but he doesn’t even know if he can do that anymore. Not with his knee. God, what a depressing thought. But he shakes it off and types.

*Are you touching yourself?*

*Yeah*
How bad do you wanna fuck me?

Oh my god so bad. So bad. I think about it all the time

Bucky swears and points the light from his phone toward the cock. He lubes it up in the faint glow from the screen and types again.

I’m gonna need both hands so I can slide this in my ass. Im gonna imagine its you

Yes.

Bucky lays on his side and hitches his left leg up. He presses the cock to his hole and takes a deep breath, pressing it in while he breathes out. It’s been a while. Maybe he should have prepped. Done the whole shebang. Taken his time. Pavlovian something. He can’t do any of this with Quill in the apartment, and the fucker is always here. But oh well. Too late now. He takes it in slowly, pulling out and working it in a little more, re-lubing, breathing, pushing.

His phone dings.

I’d fuck you from behind

Great minds, right? Bucky gives one final exhale and pushes the cock in to the hilt, groaning. He lets it rest. Lets himself adjust. Wipes his hands off and messages back.

I love it when you’re behind me. When you’re pressed against my back. Sweaty grunting in my ear. I love the sounds of you fucking me

Oh my god holy shit

Bucky snorts. It’s almost too easy to rile him up. He rolls onto his forearms and knees, ass in the air. This should work. He tries a few angles, tests his weight and balance on his shoulder and the side of his face, tries his left hand on his dick and his right hand on his ass, then the reverse. His phone is noticeably silent. He switches twice. Does a quick trial of both. Yeah, definitely left back, right front.

His phone dings.

Keep talking I wanna know everything. I just had to cool a bit or I was gonna come

Bucky wipes his hands again and types.

I’m on my knees. Ass in the air. I’m gonna fuck and jerk myself while I think about you plowing me. You can text me if you want. let me know what you wanna do to me

Jesus fuck okay

Bucky puts his phone within view. It takes a while to get into a rhythm like this. He really can’t fuck and jerk well at the same time, it’s way too much coordination for him now, pathetic as it is, so he focuses on the fucking part, working the cock while he works through his memories. There are so many to choose from. Steve is an excellent fuck, he watches everything, he learned Bucky’s body, the good spots, the dynamite spots, the nope spots, when to go faster, harder, slower, knowing when Bucky would crave it and be frustrated by it, he could see almost everything except maybe what was really happening—

I wanna fuck you so hard

Yeah, hard, he drives the cock into his ass as hard as his fucked up arm and this shitty angle will let
him, pulling out and driving in again— Fuck, Steve’s ass would look *so* amazing as he’s fucking into him—

*I wanna hear you moan my name*

Oh, he *does* moan. He moans as he drags the curve of the cock over his sweet spot again and again, rocking his hips to meet it. He moans Steve’s name, eyes sliding back, free hand clutching his pillow—

*I wanna feel your tight ass*

He lubes up his hand, brings it to his dick, and starts jerking hard. Oh, God, it feels *so good*—

*Gonna pull out and come all over you*

— And then it’s summer hot and he’s back *there* and they’re alone, he made it so, and Bucky’s watching, fists in the sheets, heart racing, frozen, and he’s never before— he’s never ever— and he’s— it’s warm and splatters on his chest—

Shoving the cock in hard, Bucky cries out, dumping two days’ worth of come onto the towel. He jerks himself until his dick stops pulsing and the strangled sounds stop coming out of him. When he’s done, he’s on autopilot, pushing himself up onto unsteady forearms, dragging the cock out, and wiping his ass with one corner of the come-stained bed towel. He wraps the cock in it, wipes the lube off his hands, drops the bundle on the floor, pulls on his underwear, and rolls on his side.

The screen on his phone goes black.

The whole room goes black.

It’s so quiet. Just like after, when he was alone again.

It’s all very fresh still. Untarnished by the years, vivid, crystalline, like the first time Steve kissed him or the gelatinous, slippery feel of a toddler’s smashed brains in his hands. It still flashes, fresh and blindingly alive, and when it flashes— he’s not supposed to— he— knows how fucking *fucked up* it is but— he burns when it does. He still fucking *burns*.

Bucky curls in on himself, arms clutched tight to his chest.

His phone dings. He jumps at the sound.

*Wow…. That was amazing*

He groans. Presses his hands to his face. Fuck. *Fuck.* *Fuck.*

Stop. Just stop. Pull the fuck *together*.

He grabs his phone and types.

*Yeah. Did you come?*

*Oh yeah. You?*

*Yeah. Did you make a mess?*

*Hold on*
The wait gives him the chance to settle, to steady his hands and breath. He rolls onto his back and fluffs his pillow up from where he crushed it in his pleasure.

Everything’s good and fine. It’s Steve. Steve Steve Steve Steve—

Ding.

It’s—a picture of—holy shit—

Bucky’s jaw drops, heart breaking into a dead sprint.

Jeeeesus you can’t send things like that!

Sorry!

It’s a great picture. It would have probably been even better if Bucky hadn’t sucked him off earlier. He’s mostly tripping over the fact that Steve sent it at all, though nobody would be able to tell it was him — just an anonymous, immaculately sculpted set of abs dashed with come.

I meant that you definitely can send and please do so I can have stuff to jerk off to later

Ok good. You have a code on your phone right?

Of course. And I’m not keeping any of this on my phone don’t worry. Its going on my laptop in a very deeply hidden file. Daisy showed me

Maybe you can show me. I don’t need Ethan looking through my camera roll one day and seeing a dildo

Yeah, God forbid he knew that his dad loves cock. Down his throat.

Don’t worry I’ll get you hooked up with your own spank folder

Thanks

They exchange a few more texts. Like the shower, it washes away the fucked up stuff, leaving him tired but as close to content as he could probably be after a day like today. The texts are fun. Light. Easy.

And then Steve has to go and say this:

I wish I could be there with you. I’d hold you.

I’d hold you while you sleep. Until you wake up. I would try to make up for every moment you ever felt alone.

“Jesus Christ.”

Bucky presses his palm to his forehead. Disgust ruptures inside of him, charged by panic, the same that rips through him every time Steve gazes at him or asks for his fucking truth or wants to ’make love.’

Fucking—God, fucking asshole. Why—

His fingers tremble when he types.
You should probably get some rest

Steve doesn’t respond. There’s no bubble indicating that he’s trying. Bucky’s stomach churns. His foot bounces. When he can’t stand the wait any longer, he writes the only thing he can that’s not a lie or won’t rip his fucking guts out. He’s not sure if he can survive another evisceration tonight.

That’s very nice to say. Happy birthday

Bucky hugs the phone to his chest and holds down the power button with his thumb.

“I’m sorry.”

The room goes dark.

________________________

July 27th

After the roof, things are different. Bucky’s days drag while Steve works. Steve is very dutiful about it, never texting during the day — Jesus, never even checking his phone — except during his breaks.

And, well, is Bucky so terrible if he wants Steve to have something to enjoy when he does check? Is he so terrible to write something like Looking at my hidden folder, really enjoying your photography or I wish I had your cock in my mouth right now?

He didn’t think so. Until Steve told him to stop. Because he takes breaks with Matt and doesn’t want to have coffee break or lunchtime boners in front of him — which is stupid, because it’s not like the guy’s gonna notice. But whatever. So Bucky busies himself during the day with trying to be an adult. Checking USAJOBS for the three applications he submitted earlier in the month. Browsing around the Hunter College course catalogue, wondering how badly he would crash and burn if he ditched the job thing and tried to finish his last semester of his bachelor’s. The Brooklyn Vet Center position looks fairly promising. GS-5, $40k a year, checking vets in to their appointments, fielding their entitled whining, travel vouchers, shit like that. He just needs to do something besides watch movies and listen to Quill play video games and jerk off while he thinks about all the terrible things he wants to do to Steve. He spends an inordinate amount of time these days thinking about his ass, about grabbing it, stroking it, licking it, eating it, sticking his fingers in it. He knows that’s a big November Golf, restricted area, trespassers will be shot on sight. So he keeps those particular fantasies to himself.

They started texting every night. And at the beginning, it really was just chatting. Very civilized. Easy stuff. How are you? Doing jack shit. How about you? But then, someone (Steve) just had to bring cock into it. It was a record-scratching 120-degree conversational whiplash, which went from Steve’s, I really wish you were here, to Bucky’s very coy, Oh yeah, why’s that? and then to Steve’s Because I can’t stop thinking about you riding my cock. And then Bucky’s hand was in his pants, because yeah, that would be amazing, and they were texting and jerking, but it got complicated, because he couldn’t ride the cock on the hardwood floor because his goddamn knee hurt like a fucking bitch even just simulating the mechanics of it, and then Steve wanted him to call, begged to hear his voice, begged, and how could he resist, so Bucky grabbed his ear buds and started fingering himself, mostly because he was scared of Quill somehow bursting through the locked door and catching him with a giant cock up his ass, and they muddled their way through, barely even saying anything, it was hot enough just to hear Steve breathing, and Bucky could imagine him there, inside, and he maybe got a little loud and had to bury his face in his pillow so Quill wouldn’t hear, as if he could hear over Call of Duty, and Steve got real worked up from that, cursing, narrating how hard he was, he even put the phone down there so Bucky could hear him jerking it, obviously with a whole lot of lube, and it was so fucking good. Jesus— they didn’t even do this when they were together.
Yet despite their enthusiasm, they’ve both managed to find some excuse to not meet in person. Steve has to get up early the next day, Bucky has Quill, Steve’s apartment is small and crappy, the neighbors are having a party, Steve needs to go to DC, and on and on. And they’re both doing it, and Bucky hasn’t exactly minded. They’ve phone sexed their way into places that are patently terrifying for Bucky to imagine in real life. The worst was when Steve brought up sucking his cock over text one night, his cautious flirtation with the idea giving way to a wild enthusiasm that decimated Bucky’s wood completely. But Bucky kept that to himself and kept the filthy talk going with the detached, calculated precision of a sex line operator, just because Steve was getting off on it so hard. Such a slut. It was too easy.

And right now Bucky is in Manhattan, doing what he’s been delaying since 2009, anticipating his joy when he can tell his VA docs to cram it next time they harass him about not going to physical therapy. And, oh, is he going to make Uncle Sam pay through every orifice for it. The waiting room barely has anyone in it, as posh places tend to lean, but even still, Bucky’s nerves are zinging like it’s a full house. It could be the past-peak Lululemon lady, who projects more sound than a drunken fire team, blarging nonstop at a super good looking black dude and a miniature Lassie dog sitting at her feet. He forgets the breed. It’s definitely one of those uppity New York dogs that gets to go wherever the fuck it wants.

Lululemon crouches down next to the dog and pets its head, says “Hello, Beanie-Boo! How’s my sweet little girl? You are just the fuzziest!”

To Beanie-Boo’s credit, she’s very dignified about the whole thing. She looks the lady in the eyes in the sincere way that dogs do, doesn’t get over excited by her ridiculous tone, smiles a little—

Bucky’s stomach grinds, and he buries his face in the People he found on the table next to him and tries to get the scoop on LiLo’s countdown to jail. Gurl’s a hawt mess, as Paisley would say. He track fragments of the conversation, not because he wants to but because they impose it upon him. Her husband is going to Denmark, for business, oh, he’s wanted to move there but it’s so dreary, and what of her vitamin D, but they do eat a lot of fish, don’t they, all those omega-3’s. And hot guy says, yep, uh-huh, gotta keep track of that, gotta get some sunshine, and he must “uh-huh” gently aging women like her for a living, because she keeps going and going, and there’s a little bitty tap at his knee and—

It’s Beanie-Boo. She’s gazing up at him with shiny brown eyes, politely expectant, pleasantly hopeful. She presses her muzzle to his shin, not even a nudge, a press, a lean— he twists away.

“Marcy.”

She perks up at the guy’s voice, ears pert, and trots over to him. He opens up the door to the back room where the receptionists sit, and someone calls her name from inside. There’s a rattle, things rolling around in a tin, and she goes running.

The guy comes back out, and once he’s got Bucky locked in his sights, he hastens his approach. He is huge, gotta be pushing 6’5”, finely goateed, dressed head-to-toe in dark athletic clothes like Bucky is. Bucky has to crane his head back just to get a good look at him.

“Are you Mr. Barnes?”

This is the guy. His guy. Perhaps God doesn’t hate fags after all.

Bucky smiles, pushes himself up to his feet, and tries to look capable.

“Jamie.”
His guy — Luke Cage, what kind of fucking name — takes him back to an exam room, which is an exam room in name only. The lighting is dimmable, the decor more closely resembling a spa than anything. Pine wood floor — or a hell of a linoleum replication of one. Pneumatically adjustable table with a maple wood frame. Upholstery in pleasing earth tones. Bamboo venetian blinds. Plants. A fountain.

“You’re sure TRICARE pays for this?” Bucky asks, toeing off his shoes.

“Don’t worry. You won’t get any surprise bills in the mail.”

Luke watches him closely, and Bucky’s right shoe feels extra hard to wedge off, his balance extra difficult to maintain as he does it, his left hand extra slippery on the table.

“So, there’s no ‘pretty fountain fee’ or ‘fancy table surcharge’?”

“I actually believe in providing good care to veterans in a nice environment. Without hidden fancy table surcharges.”

Being a very grateful veteran and all, Bucky only rolls his eyes half way.

“I wanna take a look at your gait. Bend you around a little.” His left eyebrow may be a little raised. “Sound good?”

Okay, is he flirting? Or is he as earnest as his stupid dog? Could be a twitch. And why can’t Bucky tell the difference anymore?

“Bend me around all you want, doc.”

“I’m not a doc.” Luke nods to his legs. “You got shorts under there?”

And just like that, the question of “is-he-or-isn’t-he” is wildly derailed by the much more urgent question of how Bucky is going to sidestep the task of revealing his shredded up legs to this guy. Lying would be fastest, but that would mean that he possibly came down here for nothing, because he’s pretty sure Luke needs to get angles with his protractor thingy to plan treatment and needs bare legs to get good angles. God damn it.

“Yep.”

Luke waits. He is a man of more than just aesthetic virtues. When Bucky finally girds himself, he hooks his thumbs into his waistband and pushes it down — over his tiny dick, down his hips and thighs, then he breaks through one last clot of terror and lets them drop past the hem of his shorts and onto the floor. He steps out, slowly, leaning back against the table, one foot and then another, Luke surveying his every move.

“It’s a term of endearment, if a veteran calls you ‘doc.’ You should just let him do it.” Bucky hands him his pants.

A glimmer of amusement flashes in Luke’s brown eyes as he folds Bucky’s pants, which he does with the paced reverence of a Buddhist monk, before setting them on a small bench.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Now turn around and put your hands on the table.”

Bucky snorts.

He turns and braces his hands flat on the tabletop. Luke moves up behind him, presses a warm hand
on the small of his back, and urges him to step forward, until his thighs bump the edge of the upholstery.

Bucky cracks out a laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I’m ready.”

—

“Good. Okay, now back again.”

Bucky rotates around and walks the length of the floor while Luke observes, eyeing the strikes of his heels, the cant of his hips, the lurch of his torso. Bucky tracks his staggering form in the mirror that runs alongside him, startled, though perhaps he shouldn’t be, by how ridiculously off kilter he looks.

“Does your hip hurt on your right step?” Luke asks when Bucky reaches the wall.

“Yeah.”

Luke motions him over to the middle of the room where he stands, a room that could double as a dance studio if not for all the gimps hobbling around it. Luke offered to take him to a smaller room, save him the embarrassment, but Bucky’s self-consciousness has grown so exhausting that the offer was waved away. If he can’t be a shredded up cripple at the physical therapist’s office, where can he be one? Nobody really looks for long. Bucky stares the longest, steals glimpses of himself at any angle he can. There’s only one crappy mirror in the apartment, and it doesn’t go below mid-chest. He never gets to see his full self, and maybe it’s for the best, because he looks like shit. Not even just the scars, but the entire shape of him. Where the fuck did he go? Where did his ass go?

Luke flips through the paperwork Bucky scribbled out in the waiting room. “You broke your pelvis, you said?”

“Yeah, but it was just a hairline. My back hurts worse than anything now. And hips. I dunno. It’s all garbage now.”

“Well, I wanna stretch you out. Work on your knee and hip mobility.”

Bucky gives him a super stealth once-over while his mind takes yet another swan dive into the gutter. The guy’s distracted and doesn’t posture or pay any mind. He’s not like Thor; he doesn’t know quite how hot he is.

“And I’m gonna give you some strengthening exercises for your core and lower back.”

He used to do 106 sit-ups in two minutes.

“Cool.”

“Okay.” Luke makes a grim-faced note at the bottom of the second page and then tucks the clipboard under his massive arm. “Lemme show you a couple things, and then we’ll end with some stretching.”

Bucky shamelessly enjoys watching Luke model a bunch of dumbly named exercises. The bird-dog. The Superman. The bridge - AKA the ass clench or the sky-hump. His clothes are tight enough for Bucky to watch the play of every honed muscle beneath, from his traps all the way down to his
incredible ass, but Bucky is a very good boy and does not ogle his dick once. Of course, it’s all fun and games until Bucky has to reproduce the exercises under scrutiny and in plain view of the other gimps, when he has to thrust his pelvis toward the ceiling and reveal with unconcealable clarity how very little he’s packing.

So it’s a relief when Luke gives him an “attaboy,” as if he did something of merit, and leads him down the hall to stretch him out, ha-ha, God, he’s really just ready for a nap. And when they reach the entryway of the next room, turns out he might get his chance, because there’s a mattress on the floor, or— some kind of thick mat, covered in a fitted sheet— but it’s in the middle of the floor, just sitting there, in a room decorated with more plants, two paper floor lamps, and an upholstered table pressed up against the wall.

“You can come in.”

Bucky steps through the threshold and freezes. Luke closes the door behind him.

The room contracts, swelters, like the too-full underbelly of a Bradley in the summer.

“Go ahead and take your shoes off and lie down.”


“Everything okay?”

It’s fine, so he swings his right leg forward and stalks the thing at a wide angle. It’s easy on his ass when he sits on the edge of the mattress— mat so he can peel off his shoes. He lines them up along the far edge of the whatever-the-fuck-it-is.

Luke lays Bucky’s folded pants on a small table and presses the button on some oval-shaped pod perched on the edge of it. A thin stream of steam drifts out. Jesus.

“I think you’d benefit from some shiatsu.”

Bucky plants his socked feet on the floor and gathers his arms around his bent knees. “What’s that?”

“It’s a form of bodywork that involves a lot of stretching. I think it’ll be good for your alignment. Help with your mobility.” Luke motions to the mat.

Bucky hesitates, peering over his shoulder. In the dim light, the sheets look lavender. Maybe it’s just the smell of the room.

“Is that okay?”

His bald head cocks at a soft angle, a Scott Lang angle, a doofy dumbass social worker angle, and Bucky unfolds himself decisively.

“It’s fine.”

He drags his ass to the middle of the mat and stretches out, legs pressed together, arms folded over his middle. He eyes Luke as he draws closer, circling around the perimeter. He’s Himalayan from this angle. Looming.

Luke drops down to one knee at Bucky’s left side. Bucky lifts his head, eyes widening.
Luke’s hands on him are like fresh kindling on a struggling fire, lighting him, senses igniting. He takes Bucky by the wrists and guides his stiff arms to his sides, then touches his hand to Bucky’s thigh and gives it a pat.

“Relax.”

Just relax. Just pretend you don’t want your pants. Just pretend this is fine. Just pretend you don’t need your pants that are right over there. Just relax. It’s fine.

Luke lays both hands on his leg and pushes inward rhythmically, hands parallel and moving slowly down — push, push, push, push. The leg barely budges, and it’s a little embarrassing. Bucky knows it’s supposed to be rocking. It’s supposed to be loose and easy. He closes his eyes tight and tries to picture a block of Jello.

“She doesn’t bite. If you’re scared of dogs.”

Bucky’s eyes crack open. “Huh?”

“Marcy. She’s a certified therapy dog. I take her to visit kids in the hospital. Nursing homes. People in hospice. She’s very gentle.”

Bucky heaves a tense breath and closes his eyes again. Jello Jello Jello. A shiny block of Jello. Definitely not like baby brains. Definitely not like shiny dog eyes. God, that fucking dog. His insides quiver, and he blurts out the next part as if it’s a reasonable rejoinder.

“Guy I knew died from rabies”

Luke gives a small grunt. “Well, she definitely doesn’t have rabies. Here, spread your legs a little more.” He gives Bucky’s thigh another gentle tap.


“Is this a fucking massage or some shit?” Bucky spits.

For a second, everything stops.

“Yeah, it is. Am I making you uncomfortable?”

Bucky’s hands curl tight. “No.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.”

And so he doesn’t. He cups the underside of Bucky’s calf in his huge hand and guides his leg up, slowly, knee bending toward the ceiling that Bucky is staring at. He can feel the waxy resistance inside his own body, the alien thing working to force him out. Perhaps it’s for the best to not be here for this.

He opens his mouth. He has no fucking idea what’s going to come out. He’s hijacked. He watches his words unfold.

“He got it from palling around with one of those mangy local dogs. The really sweet, hungry ones. It
was a miserable fucking death.”

“Yikes.” Luke pulls his leg out again, straightening it, and then pushes it back in toward his body. “Okay. Relax your hip a little.”

“So then we had to round up all these fucking dogs and cats that were running around the COP. All of them. Whether they had it or not.”

Shut up.

“And all these grunts playing Rin Tin Tin, thinking they’re gonna bring them back to the States to be their fucking pets—”

_Shut up._

“I’ve never seen so many grown men cry. It was too hard for them.”

_Shut up—_

“But it had to be done.”


Bucky follows the curve of a lamp-cast shadow as it arcs toward the door. His leg goes straight and bent.

“She’s a good girl. She loves Milk-Bones. The little ones. And peanut butter. You give her peanut butter, she’ll be your friend for life.”

Straight and bent. Straight and bent.

“How you doing?”

“_Fine._”

“You in pain?”

Bucky shakes his head.

Luke raises an eyebrow. “No?”

“No. Jesus. I’m fucking _fine._”

And then Luke takes him by the calf with both hands and pushes in Bucky’s leg, bending him, then angles his bent leg outward before pulling him back, straightening him, moving his hip joint in a circular motion, around and around, and Bucky’s fingers claw at the fitted sheet, heart racing, the air thickening, and _fuck—_

“Still doing okay?”

Bucky manages some kind of noise.

“Was that a yes or a no?”

He croaks out a yes. It’s _fine—_

And then Luke stops rotating, and his hands leave for a moment, and it seems like maybe it’s finally,
finally over, thank God. But then Luke shifts his posture, moves on his knees, moves closer, fuck, fuck, he probably should have brought some poppers for this shit, and then Luke’s got his hand on his knee and he’s bending his leg and he’s— he’s rotating his bent leg outward, pushing it down toward the mat, opening him— and he’s got his other hand on Bucky’s opposite hip, pinning him down, stretching his inner thigh, opening, pinning— and something is coming out of him and he’s trying to go away he’s trying to get the fuck out of here but he can’t, he can’t, he can’t, why— oh God and it’s slipping through his clenched teeth a sound like a whine he can’t stop oh God— and Luke’s voice something something okay and then his touch is gone the weight is gone but— it’s too late no no oh God it’s too late the something is crawling up it’s bursting out and he’s on his side curled up shaking and shaking mewling like a creature and Luke goes and sits away cross-legged hands in front of his mouth and he watches.

He clutches his head, clutches himself, it goes and goes, and he can’t make it stop and he can’t leave and can’t stop and can’t watch so he lives it and lives it and lives it, and there’s no thought no story no image no memory, just trembling inescapable panic with no root, fire with no match.

He burns.

He burns until it smolders, and he’s tingling fingers and clenched teeth and aching jaw and ragged breaths and there’s a heavy hip and leg and side and shoulder and there’s a nose and cheeks and rolling sick stomach and quaking heart.

Face in his hands, he chokes out words.

“What did you do?”

Silence. A very deep breath.

“Sometimes... people can have powerful reactions to bodywork.”

“You didn’t— fucking tell me that would happen—”

“I didn’t know that would happen for you. I’m sorry.” He moves, smooth hands sliding over knees. He stops. “Hold on. Just— I’ll be right back.”

He leaves. There’s nothing and nothing except heaving frantic air and silence.

Then a sound. The door. Open and closed. He doesn’t look but he hears solid feet coming. A jangle. Rustling. He stays clutched hard, curled, gasping again, quavering again.

“I can give you a referral, if you want to talk to someone.”

A referral.

He peers through his fingers. Luke, cross-legged on the floor with a plastic cup of water. A soft, sweet face.

The dog.

He sobs.

______________

Matt spins his chair back and forth, head lolling, as they listen to one of the worst calls Steve has ever sat in on. Liesl is giving a talk in London on women’s rights, a recapitulation of the 2010 World
Report. It’s always a harrowing subject, but comprehending genital mutilation on a personal scale is almost impossible, let alone the scale in which it’s conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan. It’s nauseating, and Steve hasn’t identified the most disgusting part — that nearly fifty percent of surveyed girls have been ‘circumcised’ or that Kurdish government physicians claim that the practice doesn’t make a difference in quality of life.

But as bad as it is, Matt said, the least they can do is listen, because those women and girls have to live it. And that’s why they’re doing this and not jamming on their own nearly-overdue update to Maria. Sometimes the work they do is about bearing witness.

Steve fucking hates to bear witness.

It’s almost 14:30 when his phone rumbles in his pocket. He’d usually leave it, but he’s desperate for any respite from this, any excuse, even a telemarketer would do. When he digs his phone out of his pocket and sees the name, there’s a skip in his comprehension before he launches out of his chair and excuses himself into the hallway, holding out a pointless finger to Matt. Bucky never calls, not without a text first.

Steve covers his hand over his exposed ear to blot out the flurry of excitement coming from the conference room.

“Hello?”

“Can you pick me up?”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” Bucky’s voice sounds like it’s been dragged down a gravel road for three klicks.

Steve’s hand tightens around his phone. “Where are you?”

Bucky tells him that he’s at some physical therapy place in Kips Bay — or is it Murray Hill…? He can’t get the name of it right. Something Performance. Or Performance Something. There’s some muffled, brusque exchange on Bucky’s end, and no, the place is called PEAK Rehabilitation. Kips Bay. He’s got his truck. Bucky tells him to hurry.

Steve’s stomach has climbed up into his mouth by this point, and it’s effortless to ask Matt for the rest of the day off. Matt waves him out the door, easy but concerned, and follows his exit with such intense attention, however Steve can describe it, that he can feel it lingering with him the whole elevator ride down.

Steve is lucky enough to snag a cab dumping off some tourists right at the front door, and even though it’s only a mile, every fucking light and UPS truck and construction crew is conspiring to slow them. He sits in the back, tapping impatient fingers on his thighs, anxiously scanning the route ahead, disdain for the cabbie growing deeper with every side street he doesn’t veer down because, Jesus, that one could have shaved a couple of minutes, or that one could, or that one could. And when they finally roll up to the place, Bucky is pacing the sidewalk in a black long sleeve t-shirt and black Adidas training pants, halting as soon as Steve throws open the back door of the cab.

There’s only fleeting eye contact, just the barest acknowledgment of presence, and then Bucky is off, outpacing him unexpectedly, leaving Steve jogging to catch up.

“Are you okay?”

“Let’s just get the fuck out of here.”
“Wait— what happened?”

Bucky works his way to the sidewalk’s edge, casts a sharp glance over his shoulder, and cuts into the street. An oncoming Lexus brakes hard for him but he’s unstoppable, jaywalking his way to the kitty-corner Icon parking garage. Steve waves the Lexus along and crosses after, joining Bucky’s side again as he’s skirting along the narrow walkway that flanks the driveway to the garage.

Bucky takes great interest in his wallet while the attendant runs off for his truck. Scraps of paper need inspecting. Bills are out of sequence. Credit cards are facing in opposing directions. He occupies himself until his immense Tundra roars down the ramp and parks in front of them, and it strikes Steve very suddenly that he doesn’t even know whether Bucky has a license and, if so, how long he’s had it. But Bucky makes a straight line for the passenger side now, leaving Steve to climb his way into the driver’s seat.

And it is actually a climb. Or, perhaps a hoist or a mount, like whatever one does to a large animal, or the most preposterously overpowered civilian vehicle invented. Steve makes an effort to adjust his mirrors and seat, it’s still a Toyota, thank God, so he knows the basics, but it’s all fumbled and disrupted by the hum of raw energy coming from the passenger seat, the pressure intensifying from the attendants, watching, waiting for them to leave.

He buckles up, puts the monster in drive, and presses the accelerator. The truck pitches forward, growling to life. A HMMWV would be easier to handle.

“Fuck.” He tosses a hasty look over to Bucky. “Sorry. It’s been a while.”

Bucky’s hand is tight on the side door grip, but he says nothing.

Steve creeps along the ramp toward the exit, checking the mirrors, minding the clearance, chanting a stream of shitshitshitshitshits when an incoming Escalade just barely brushes past them, lights flashing. Bucky blasts the air conditioning and fades into the upholstery while Steve concentrates on the simple task of not killing any pedestrians or scraping up against any other vehicles. It’s only when they make it safely onto FDR Drive that Steve can feel the cool air on his knuckles and feet. The traffic is crawling, and he doesn’t know what bridge to take— or if he should maybe take the tunnel.

He glances over, because Bucky would know. He always knows these things. Whether to take the Manhattan or the Brooklyn Bridge. Whether to self-park or do valet. How much to tip. How to barter. He just knows.

But right now... his sleeve has snot on it. He thinks that’s what it is.

Steve reaches out across the center console and rests his hand gently on Bucky’s thigh. “Hey—”

“Don’t touch me.”

Bucky flattens himself up against the door, legs pressing tightly together, like he could mold himself into the material and sink right through it, if he just pushed hard enough.

Steve draws his hand back and wraps it tightly around the steering wheel. He stares ahead, heart pounding, thoughts collapsing, channeling all of his attention and energy into his foot, pushing on the accelerator as carefully as he can. But the goddamn thing still lunges forward every time he touches it and slams to a halt every time he ghosts over the brake. Bucky latches onto the oh-shit handle and keeps his wide eyes trained out the window, out onto the water as they crawl over the Manhattan Bridge. Certainly the wrong bridge, in the end. Neither of them says another word until after their
wheels touch down in Brooklyn.

“Can you please tell me what happened?”

“No.”

Well. Okay.

They exit Prospect Expressway, and a strange, gauzy sensation washes over Steve as they roll down the tree-lined streets of Windsor Terrace in Bucky’s truck. It’s like time folding back on itself, like any moment maybe they’ll talk about what to watch tonight or what to have for dinner, if Steve should cook while Bucky sits at the kitchen table and talks up a streak about the weirdos at AA, and after they eat, maybe they’ll relax on the couch or in bed — maybe together, so Steve could hear him breathing, hear him drifting off into sleep, maybe—

“Just drop me off.” Bucky’s already got his fingers on the door handle when they turn down 17th Street, forward momentum gathering as they near his building. “You can park it anywhere. I’ll pay for your cab back. Keep the key. I don’t care.”

Steve radically slows their approach. “I’m not gonna just leave you alone.”

“I don’t want you around.”

God, it’s— he knows it’s a risk to push, but none of this makes sense. And he can’t leave Bucky alone. He won’t. So he pushes. Steve sets his jaw, drives real slow, and pushes.

“Why did you call me?”

Bucky gives a stuttered, one-shoulder shrug. “Quill’s in fucking Westchester, for some fucking reason.”

“What about your ma?”

“I don’t know. Why would I call her anyway?”

There’s a car pulling up fast on their bumper. Steve diverts his attention from the rear view mirror.

“What about Rikki? Daisy? Hank?”

“What do you fucking want me to say?” Bucky scowls deeply and perches on the edge of the seat. All it would take is for the truck to stop, and he’d be out. He’d land hard, he wouldn’t give a shit. He’d dive straight out of this conversation.

The Chevy behind him beeps. Steve ramps his efforts up, desperate logic coming at a rapid clip.

“If you don’t want me around, if you just needed a ride across the bridge, then why not call someone else? Why not take a cab?”

“Maybe I fucking should have.”

“No. You wanted me to pick you up,” Steve insists, palm landing hard on the steering wheel. “You wanted me. Why can’t you just admit that?”

Apparently, Bucky can’t just admit that. He can only sit immobilized in his own stubborn silence while the Chevy goes bananas on its horn behind them.
“Let me help you,” Steve says. “Just let me be with you. Please.”

He expects resistance. He expects deliberation. He expects more of a fight. What he gets is a sigh. What he gets is one word, blanched and defeated.

“Fine.”

But he’ll take it.

“Oh, I’m gonna drop you off, and I’m gonna park. Wait for me.”

Bucky doesn’t dive out in front of the apartment. He’s slow, movements painful, burdened. Steve launches off as soon as the door slams, delighting the Chevy, and he drives around and around looking for a spot big enough for this abomination, so many times that he’s lost count, sweating, swearing, cursing its inventor, and nearly ready to abandon it in the middle of the street before he finds something two blocks down. He runs home — to Bucky’s home — in 90 degree heat, sure that Bucky has gone inside already. But he finds him sitting on the stoop, arms draped over his knees, staring out into the street.

Inside, Bucky heads straight to the bathroom, leaving Steve standing on the welcome mat. He pees. It’s odd to say, one of the oddest things Steve has been relieved about, probably, but… it sounds like he’s doing it standing up, there’s a way things echo now the way they never used to — and time has to unfold again, become a straight line with them at the razor’s edge, because this is not then and they cannot go back.

After, Bucky runs the sink for a long time. There’s a little splashing, maybe he’s washing his face, Steve can’t tell. He’s dry when he comes to the kitchen and drinks a tall glass of tap water over the sink.

“I’m gonna lie down,” he says, setting his glass on the counter. His shoulders are hunched high, like a marionette pulled too tight. “You can stay or go.”

Steve sits on the edge of the kitchen table, folding his arms loosely. “When’s Quill coming back?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“I’ll stay.”

Bucky gives no reply, only turns and shuffles away. Steve follows him into the living room but stops when Bucky passes through the threshold of his bedroom and closes the door behind him.

He locks it.

Steve staggers in incomprehension for a few moments as he stares down a solid wood wall of defense. He wasn’t — he had no idea he was someone who —

He listens to the rustling, the squeak of hardwood yielding under weight, then the blunted whump of a body falling into a bed, a grunt from that body as it hits and rolls, the woosh of sheets, just the sheets, it’s too hot for anything else —

And then there’s nothing.

He snaps out of it. Surveys the space around him. He’s seen some of it before but was so nervous when Parker was here that he didn’t internalize it. The new couch. The rug. The sizable collection of action movies and video games. A stand holding a worn pack of Most Wanted Iraqi playing cards.
the DIA cooked up. So many new things. Pieces of Quill. He must have spent a hundred exiled
hours hunched over his laptop in his office in the S-3, scouring apartment listings — while Bucky
was in rehab and residential, his platoon moved on without him — searching for the perfect place for
them. And this one was too expensive, he really couldn’t afford it for long on his savings, but it was
perfect — first floor, hard wood floors, railroad layout, in case Bucky wanted privacy, nice
neighborhood, close to Rikki and Daisy and the bodega and the train and the fluff-and-fold and the
movie theater and the decent bagel place — it was a little old and a little expensive, but this place was
theirs, and he fucking loved it, and all he ever wanted was a nice little place for them — and now
some another man lives in his room and Bucky is locked in his and even though it’s scorching
outside, Steve can’t stay here. He’s gotta move. He’s gotta do something.

So he takes the keys, leaves as quietly as he can, and he walks.

He starts down 17th toward Prospect Park West and blows past it, steps purposeful but truly aimless,
he has no idea where he’s going except downward into the black void of worry and regret. He pieces
together enough wherewithal to hang a right on 8th to avoid the 7th Avenue clusterfuck and walks
and thinks and clenches his jaw, circling and circling like a vulture around the remains of what they
used to be, what they could have been, what he wanted for them. But when he lifts his head to cross
12th street, he spots a familiar blue awning on the opposite side of the street — God, it’s been so
long since he’s been to Ladybird, not since Bucky’s early recovery days, when all he wanted to eat
was sugar-covered fat and more sugar-covered fat, when he was adorably fluffy in a way Steve had
never seen him. Bucky called it “gay-fat,” but Steve was just so relieved to see him with some
weight on his body, because he was so terrifyingly thin in that hospital bed on Long Island, so fragile
— and so Steve found Ladybird on a walk one day, one of his many walks to clear the static in his
head, and why didn’t he think of this sooner?

He crosses the street and ducks into the bakery, hoping for their chocolate pecan pie but only finding
summer varieties. They’ve got a berries and cream and a mixed fruit tart, but when he spots the
banana chocolate cream, that’s the one. The crust is golden, with cream stacked in a high chocolatey
mountain and flecked with chocolate shavings. It might not be Winnie’s banana pudding, but he’s
never gotten the recipe out of her, anyway. Neither of them have. He can only think of one
circumstance under which that might happen, and it’s so far fetched now, so laden with old pain, that
he slams the door on it like he’s had to do so many times, tamping down his wishful idiocy before it
can bury him.

And they can’t just have pie, of course, so he calls in an order to Ghang Thai, picking the poor
server’s brain relentlessly about what to order for Bucky. Something not too spicy. Not too greasy.
Not too hard to eat. He has to get it right. She checks with the kitchen. She names a dozen different
things until he hears the right one, and he says yes, he doesn’t even care how much it costs, he just
says yes. By the time he gets back to Bucky’s, the pie is getting warm and the Thai is getting cold,
but it’s fine, because Bucky is still in his room, so it all goes in the fridge anyway.

And he does try to settle. He really does. He only straightens the DVDs. And the pillows. And then
the rug. And the magnets on the fridge because they’re dashed about so chaotically. But he’s making
too much noise, and this isn’t about how much nervous energy he needs to burn off. This is about
Bucky having a shitty day for reasons he refuses to disclose and Bucky needing to rest, and so Steve
plops himself down on the chaise and sits.

He checks his phone, and thank God he has some texts to occupy him, something in his queue he
missed earlier, maybe when he was listening to stories of women getting their clitorises cut off to
appease male sexual insecurity. It’s from — shit, it’s from Barton — oh wait, Clint. They’re supposed
to use their real people names now. Of all the ghosts of the 107th to drift into his life, this was not
one he expected. Not after the parting they had. Oh wait, Clint. They’re supposed to use their real people names now. Of all the ghosts of the 107th to drift into his life, this was not
one he expected. Not after the parting they had. After how disappointed he was in Steve for sucking
his platoon sergeant’s cock on deployment and sleeping in his bed at Bragg and kissing him while exercising every fiber of restraint to not grind against him, even though he was so hard, because he knew how lucky he was to be on top of him, because Bucky hardly ever let him be on top — God, it’s what he always wanted, so bad —

Steve scowls away the memory and opens the first picture. It’s a photo of the “Welcome to Colorado” sign and a message:


There are two more pictures — one of a log home with a healthy green lawn, nestled in a thick patch of trees, and one of a river and, beyond that, a breathtaking expanse of rolling green mountains. Steve looks up “Meredith” on Google Maps and finds an unincorporated community so small that it has a post office and one store and that is it.

He pokes around the map, zooming in, calculating its distance from civilization. He looks up listings for other log homes buried in the mountains. He digs up an old fantasy he kindled so long ago, one he put away because it was stupid, laughable, elderly, but it could work in a log home, a quiet place, the creaks of cicadas, the wails of coyotes, the whisper of a stream, clean air, a well-lit room he could paint in, what did he want to do? Write essays? About fucking what? Who gives a shit what he has to say, but he’d find some way to make money. Maybe he could brush up on his Arabic, do some freelance translation, and Bucky—he was going to put his microbiology skills to use, make cheese, they were going to have goats, or they were going to brew craft beer, bad idea now, all of it. He has his disability pay. They would be okay. They could get a loan from the VA for a house. He could brew some kombucha. They could have a garden. He heard kale does well pretty much anywhere, it’s almost impossible to kill, maybe some root vegetables. Bucky probably knows about that stuff from his plant class, whatever the word is, God—it’s on the tip of his tongue. Right on the tip. Fuck. They’d be okay in a log house. They might even be happy.

It’s nearly 7:00 when the latch on the door flips and Bucky emerges from his room. He’s changed into cotton sleep pants and a t-shirt and—Jesus—he’s reaching for his bloody groin—and he closes his eyes and shakes his head—he can shake it away, he can do it—giant number one, giant number two—

“Fuck. Sorry.”

Steve opens his eyes and Bucky is gone, back in his room, and Steve rises to follow him.

“You don’t have to change.”

“Yeah, I do. It’s fucking disgusting, obviously.”

Steve stops at the threshold, at the sight of Bucky working off his t-shirt, movements jerky and rushed as he yanks it over his head, exposing the smooth, pale skin of his back, the band of his Calvin Klein underwear—

Steve averts his gaze. The room is a mess, but fresh — dirty clothes scattered on the floor; clean
clothes piled on the dresser; an open journal and pens out on the desk next to an untidy stack of papers.

Bucky spots Steve and his entire body jolts. “Holy— gimme some fucking privacy. Jesus.” His surprise gives way and he frowns, clutching his discarded shirt to his body. “God.”

“Sorry.” Steve takes several uneven steps back into the living room. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to —”

Bucky slams the door shut. Steve steps up to it, apologizing through it. Jesus, he is fucking this up fantastically. How is he fucking everything up so badly today?

“I’m sorry. I just— I haven’t seen it in a long time. I was just surprised. It’s not— I was just surprised.”

There’s rustling. The dresser drawer squeaking open and closed. More soft sounds, fabric brushing and straining over a wounded body.

The door cracks open, and Bucky startles again at his proximity, muttering “Jesus, back off,” driving Steve’s retreat to the couch, where he sits a little off center, close enough if Bucky wants closeness, far enough if he wants distance. Bucky works his long sleeves down — he shouldn’t have to wear them, it’s so warm in here, the air always sucked in the living room — and Bucky drops down on the chaise, arms pulled in, knees bent.

Steve has lost count of how many minutes they’ve spent in silence and awkwardness today. He feels the need to sneak a look at Bucky, as if it’s wrong to see his lip so bitten that the skin is raw. Or that it’s wrong to see his eyes pink from exhaustion or something else he dare not think was going on while he was out here screwing around on Google Maps.

“I’m sorry about your arm, it was just— I’m sorry.”

A huff escapes Bucky. He shakes his head, forearms folding in on each other, pretzeling over his chest. “It’s— whatever. It’s fine. Stop apologizing.”

Steve’s mouth twists. And now that he and Bucky are here on the couch, he’s being dragged backward through time again, skipping where everything seemed to fold in on itself but didn’t, back to the Bridge and back before. Back to Bucky in the truck, to him sinking into the door and flinching away and before that, dashing into the street and pacing the sidewalk, and maybe now that he’s rested—

“Now can you please tell me what happened?”

Bucky’s head snaps around, bloodshot eyes flashing.

“Look, I don’t have to tell you every fucking thing about my fucking life! I get to have secrets. I get to have some fucking privacy, and it doesn’t make me a bad person or a liar or whatever bullshit you think it makes me. This is fucking mine and it’s not yours, so you’re just gonna have to fucking deal with it and fucking drop it, or else get the fuck out of here and leave me the fuck alone like I fucking asked you to in the first place.”

Steve stares, heart slamming against his sternum, lungs seized, spine rigid, muscles spring-loaded, coiled and ready— the fuck, the fuck, the fucking fuck—

But Bucky only folds in tighter, becoming smaller, shoulders heaving as he breathes. He’s going after his lip with renewed fervor, chewing it, brows drawn.
Okay. Well… okay. Fuck.

Steve taps on his knee, taps on the cushion, like he’s trying to telegraph some understanding into the man next to him, some assurance, something that would crack open this— whatever that’s happening right now. Something to breach this invisible wall he keeps breaking himself over. At least in Iraq, they knew what the IEDs looked like. Even buried beneath the road, you could see the way the ground sloped around it, the way the road trash gathered, the way some asshole with a cell phone would loom in the distance. But what are the clues now? Where’s the dip in the earth? The asshole with the trigger? The garbage?

Maybe… this is just one of those things that Steve needs to let go. For now. If there’s one thing he learned about being a pathetically underpowered staff officer at the Pentagon, it’s that sometimes you just need to know when to step back, shut up, and put something in your pocket for later. Even if you have no idea what you’re putting in your pocket because your goddamn worthless brain hurts from worrying so hard.


“Good,” Bucky mutters into the hem of his sleeve.

“Can I do anything to help?”

Bucky touches the side of his hand to his lip. It comes away with a deep crimson smear of blood.

“Shit. Something for this, I guess.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Steve rises and heads to the kitchen. He snags the first paper product he sees — the roll of paper towels, the select-a-size kind decorated with lemons — and he pulls two small sheets, returns to Bucky, and stands over him while he tends to himself.

“Thanks.”

Bucky presses the towel to his lip, pulling it away occasionally to check the flow, and it’s impossible now to defend against the image of him at twelve, blood dripping everywhere, choking on it, pawing at the door like a dog—

Bucky looks up at him. “What’s wrong?”

One. Two. Two by Four Creek. The mountains. The green lawn.

“Barton say ‘hi.’”

“Barton? How the fuck did you hear from him?”

Steve drops back on the couch, hands Bucky his phone, and directs him to the texts. The pictures. He tells him about Meredith, about Frying Pan River and the tiny general store and the post office.

Bucky appraises them, frowning, and gives his phone back. “It’s not good. Quill talked about doing that in Alaska. He’s gonna go slink off and become a crazy veteran hermit with fifty fucking guns and booby traps all over the place.”

“Well, maybe not.”

Steve twists his phone in his hands, passing his fingers over the black, rubbery edges of the case,
turning, turning, turning it between his legs. His thoughts bounce back and forth between Fort Bragg and Windsor Terrace and Meredith, leaping across states and time, imagining Barton’s future alone, wondering what went wrong with his wife—he seemed happy with this one, like maybe he could settle, like maybe she was a match for his odd, half-step-off dead-panned humor, so bleak that it’s barely alive, his twitches, his burns. What if Barton’s present is Steve’s future, what if none of this ever goes anywhere, if this is all hopeless, if his log home is a homestead for one, with maybe a visitor once in a while, maybe Ethan in the summers—Ethan can help him swipe aphids off of the Swiss chard, pull weeds, listen for the coyotes, maybe they can draw or paint together—oh God, what if he doesn’t like art or nature, what if he only likes technology, what if he can’t tolerate silence, what if he’s—

“I need to go to a meeting tonight. Bad. I won’t be able to relax unless I do.”

Steve orients to Bucky’s voice, which barely carries across the cushions. “I can take you.”

“There’s one in Park Slope at 20:00 that’s like 90 percent lesbians. That’ll be good.” Bucky pauses, then hastens to clarify. “I’m not crashing a lesbian meeting or anything. It’s just Dyke Slope.”

Steve nods. He casts a glance at Bucky’s room, imagines his bed just beyond the wall, imagines him alone in the dark, curled in on himself like he was in the truck, like he is now, and his chest tightens.

“I can stay here tonight, if you want.”

Bucky abruptly shifts his whole body, moving perpendicular to the length of the chaise, knees bent, so that his feet face Steve. He repositions one of the back cushions behind him and leans stiffly into it.

“What about work?”

“I’ll call out. I have some sick time.” Steve shrugs with a nonchalance he hopes looks sincere. He’s probably just about burned through Matt’s good graces; he’s not sure what’s on the other side of them.

Bucky’s torn up mouth works around the idea, lips twisting and tensing. His gaze rakes a trail from his room to the couch and over Steve’s body in a sharp, cagey way, lingering on Steve’s hands and his crotch before darting away.

“If you don’t mind the couch.”

It’s a deep, strong statement, and maybe Steve should have expected it, but he’s blindsided, and it crashes all the way through his heart, crushing his gently budding hope that maybe this ice would thaw a little. Maybe he’d be able to touch him, to hold him, or just—God, just be in the same room with him. Listen to him fall asleep. Hear him breathe. Feel the dip in the mattress that his body creates, feel the space he occupies in the universe.

But that’s not what Bucky needs. And what Steve needs... well.

Steve pats the cushion next to him. He forces a smile. “It is comfy.”

“It is.”

“And I picked up Ghang Thai.”

Bucky’s brow softens. “Really?”
“I got you mango duck salad.”

“God, sounds amazing.”

“And I got you a chocolate banana cream pie from Ladybird.”

Bucky’s head droops then, in the slow way it did on the plane from Germany to Kuwait — how he drifted off almost as soon as they were airborne, even though it was so goddamn loud, how the hell he slept — how he wasn’t terrified — Steve couldn’t understand — he watched him almost the whole time, out like a light while the others tittered, nerves crackling, or bullshat to smooth out the energy—

But now he’s got his hands pressed over his eyes, bloody paper towel bunched under his thumb, and he takes a few tremulous breaths, pushing forward his jaw to fight the quiver in his chin, and it’s just a pie, for Christ’s sake, or did he fuck that up, too?

“Is that okay?” Steve asks.

Bucky nods. He nods and keeps nodding, and the trembling gets worse and he’s grimacing and breathing, and maybe Steve shouldn’t be watching him, maybe he should go— get him something, or just go away entirely, he’s clearly not helping anything.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No.” Bucky rubs his eyes with the edges of his palms, fingers flared. “Sorry.... I just need a minute.”

“Okay.”

It’s too much to keep watching and wondering what crisis is unfolding behind his hands and his eyes and his layers of calcified fortifications. So Steve returns to Meredith and to Barton’s house. He zooms in and scrolls around. There’s a little slope on the lawn. Snow peas might do okay there, but they might need a lot of sun. He should really read up on this.

“It does look cozy, though,” Bucky says. “I can see the appeal.”

Bucky is peering at him over the tops of his knees, sniffling. Steve looks back down at the screen and zooms to the window at the apex of the structure.

“Yeah. The attic would make a good studio.”

It’s selfish. He’s always wanted one. A quiet place he could retreat to, but one where he could still hear the bustle of others below. His— family, his whoever, his kid, his kids— and they could come up sometimes and be with him, he’s always wanted to share it, he imagined sitting, painting — Bucky coming up behind him, kissing his neck, running his hand through his hair, touching his lips to his ear, saying “I love you,” he always imagined... someone, another one, pulling at his leg, wanting to be on his lap, and all he can see now is Ethan with Lucy, holding her out to him— and then, God, Bucky with—

He feels it then — jabbing pressure at the side of his thigh, along the hem of his dress pants. He looks down and sees Bucky’s bare feet poking at him, his right foot profoundly but neatly scarred, his left dotted with the same well-healed, pale shrapnel wounds that pepper his hands.

“What are you doing?”
“My toes are cold.”

Bucky blots his still-bleeding lip, but just behind the paper towel, something hopeful flickers. He’s on the brink of something, breath stilled, waiting.

Steve clicks off his screen and lifts his leg a little. Bucky edges his feet forward, burrowing into the narrow gap between thigh and cushion. The next breath he takes is long and slow, the kind that sinks into the bone, and he wiggles his toes and settles back against the pillow propping him up.

“What?” Bucky whispers.

And there is no log house. There is no homestead. There is no Vermont or Colorado or goats or cheese or beer or well-lit rooms or kids or well-tended gardens. That’s not Bucky and never was and probably never will be. Because the real Bucky can’t even handle a banana cream pie. How could he possibly tolerate the love it would take to make that kind of life?

Bucky gives him a smile.

And so Steve swallows hard, relaxes his thigh, and leans into him.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS: Detailed account of the aftermath of the physical attack of a child, brief recollection of childhood sexual abuse, depiction of significant traumatic stress reaction with a sexual trigger, references to killing of animals, homophobic slurs, references to severe bullying, ableist language

Notes:

Petty Officer: A noncommissioned officer in the Navy

BDUs: Battle Dress Uniform

Linda Richman: The Olds among you may remember her from Coffee Talk

Ryan White: An American boy with hemophilia who was diagnosed with AIDS in 1984 at age 13. He died in 1990 from a respiratory tract infection and was integral in helping shift the perception of AIDS as a disease that only afflicted gay men.

Audie Murphy: One of the most decorated soldiers in World War II. Murphy also admitted to struggling profoundly with PTSD. Murphy notably tried to manage his symptoms with sleeping pills, to which he became addicted, and he also developed an addiction to gambling and other high-adrenaline activities, perhaps to try to replicate the high of combat. He was also a prolific actor who played himself in the film version of his wartime autobiography (To Hell and Back), which is quite a feat considering how traumatized he was by his wartime experiences.

November Golf: A no-go (for the letters 'n' and 'g'). A common rating on soldiering
tasks/inspection items, which are often rated "Go" or "No-go." It is obviously more work to say "November Golf" than to say "no-go," but people still do it with great frequency. Here are some more military phrases that are actually harder to say than their actual meaning.

GS-5: This is the federal civilian pay scale (General Schedule), the scale by which most federal employees are classified for pay purposes. Each job description in the federal government should have an associated pay grade. GS-5 is a common pay grade for an entry level Medical Support Assistant and may pay more or less depending on where the job is located (i.e., a GS-5 in NYC would get paid more than a GS-5 in Bumfuck, Nebraska because the cost of living is higher in NYC).

Bradley (Fighting Vehicle): An armored vehicle which moves on tracks, similar to a tank, that can also serve as a personnel carrier for infantrymen or cavalry scouts. It has no air conditioning.

COP: Combat Outpost

Most Wanted Iraqi Playing Cards: Playing cards with the faces of high value targets created and distributed by intelligence agencies during the initial incursion into Iraq in 2003.

S-3: The office responsible for training and operations planning for the battalion. Steve was sent here after he was removed from his platoon leader duties as he was being chaptered out of the Army for Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

Drop one's letter: To resign one's commission as an officer, basically to quit the Army, which officers can do at any point after they have fulfilled their initial service obligation.

Dyke Slope: Park Slope has affectionately been known as "Dyke Slope" due to the number of lesbians who have historically lived in the neighborhood. Word on the street is that this has changed in recent years, due to the neighborhood being overrun by straight people and their baby carriages.

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