For Steve's 40th birthday, Bucky takes him for a weekend away in Niagara Falls. In reflecting on their long and happy years together, Steve confesses that he regrets they never had children. Months later, Bucky finds a young and very pregnant Romani woman with no place to go until her beau comes back from Vietnam. Now that Wanda has joined their family, they get to experience what could have been, knowing that this new domestic bliss cannot last forever.
go back and see how amazing he and the rest of the Barnes family is.

Listen along to the soundtrack!
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4OF4TIBU30VFnSSYzwj7gW
You Send Me

1958

Tomorrow, Steve Rogers would be forty years old. It seemed like an impossible thing that he and Bucky should have known each other over three decades and had spent half that time happily married. Well, as married as two men got.

It had not always been easy but they had been lucky. They lived a quiet life and were considered by most to be respectable. They had a three-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Greenwich Village, which made their home practically a mansion. One bedroom they actually slept in and over the years it had been painted and repainted so many times Bucky joked it was an inch smaller on each side now. One bedroom was where Bucky pretended to sleep but was really a guest room, usually occupied by whatever runaway or starving artist Steve had befriended that week. The third, the largest and the one with the best light, was for Steve's studio and the room was a mess of canvases, brushes, oil paints, and reference photos and sketches taped to every bare surface.

Steve refused to hide their relationship, openly referring to Bucky as his partner or, when he was being cheeky or friendly, his husband. It was easier for him, being an active member of the art scene and being able to spend his days around people like them or at least open minded folks. Bucky still worked at the garage with Lou, Zade, and Kip. All three guys knew about Steve and while Lou was the only one who would directly ask about him, the other two were still real friendly to them both. Bucky didn't really mind. No one talked about their families much at work but Bucky had always felt there was an extra weight in his silence. When Kip had started three years before, Bucky had overheard Lou say to him, "Just two things you need to know about Barnes: he's got a crippled arm and he lives with a guy. You give him grief about either of these things and I'll throw you out on your ass."

Bucky had appreciated it, but he didn't want to push it. It was the same with his extended family, most of whom he hadn't spoken to in years. He told his parents they could tell whatever story they wanted, it didn't matter to him. The immediate Barnes family on the other hand was generally quite accepting. All of his sisters loved Steve, all Bucky' nephews and nieces called him uncle, and the brothers-in-law were a little reluctant to spend time with either he or Steve one-on-one, they were nice enough to them. Bucky's ma had been referring to Steve as her son long before they got together so that had been no adjustment. Pa adored Steve. It had been hard for him to get used to the idea of them being married but he was probably the most supportive one of the bunch. A few years ago when he was drunk, he had told Bucky in a conspiratorial voice that of all his son-in-laws, Steve was his favourite.

In a perfect world, they would live in Brooklyn just down the street from them and his sister Rebecca's family. Steve and Bucky both missed their native Brooklyn, but it was safer, especially the last few years. It happened too often for some young kid to be knocking on their door in the middle of the night with a cracked skull, trying to find a place to hide from the cops. Once whatever unfortunate homosexual was bandaged up and tucked into bed, Bucky and Steve would glance at each other, thinking the same thing but not wanting to throw salt in old wounds.

What if it had been you?

But despite the Great Depression, despite the Second World War, and despite everything else the world threw at them, the scrappy stubborn Steve Rogers had lived long enough to become a middle-aged man. Despite everything, they were getting to grow old together. That was worth celebrating
and celebrating in a big way.

Bucky left work early, borrowing Lou's beautiful 1957 Thunderbird. He drove through the congested streets and parked at the side of their apartment building. He looked up, seeing that Steve's studio window was opened, and he honked twice.

Steve looked out and down, laughing in surprise as he saw the car.

Bucky called out. "You ready to hit the road, punk?"

Steve beamed. "Anywhere you want to go, doll."

***

Crossing the Canadian border is relatively easy near Independence Day as most folks are heading towards the fireworks and not away from them. But for this momentous birthday, Bucky wanted to take him somewhere the only thing that was celebrated was Steve Rogers. So he had whisked him away in a gorgeous car to Niagara Falls where the pair could spend a few days just the two of them in a suite overlooking the legendary falls.

A suite with two beds. He was romantic, but he wasn't stupid. Bucky had learned the safest ways for the two of them to travel. Two beds and double-checking at least once at the front desk to make sure there were two. Two separate non-matching suitcases. Two different toothpastes from competing brands. That was a detail that Bucky was quite proud of. Steve thought this last detail was a little absurd but he had stopped teasing him about it. Mostly.

It was late once they arrived at the hotel and they went straight up to the room. Once they were alone again, Steve opened the great curtains and looked out on the sight with a gasp. Bucky stood behind him, putting his hand on his shoulder.

"I promised you a Canadian honeymoon," he teased.

"You promised me a log cabin if I remember correctly," Steve reminded. "Not that I'm complaining. This is incredible!"

Bucky glanced over at his husband's face. His laugh lines were growing deeper and his blonde hair starting to pepper with white but he looked just as handsome. Maybe even more so. The unlikelihood of his health made the sight of his older self so much more precious. When Steve turned to smile at him, he wondered if he was thinking much the same thing. He had seen him go off to war and not expected him to come home. Yet here they were.

"Should we go get dinner?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Bucky agreed. "I could eat."

***

Occasionally in New York, someone recognized Steve in public. He was a fairly distinct man and his art, while painted quite realistically and traditionally, sometimes irritated heterosexual art critics. A few years before, Steve had debuted a piece which featured a naked man in bed, visible from about nose to elbow. The contour of muscles was considered exceptional and the cascading of the moonlight breathtaking (Bucky memorized good reviews for when Steve was doubting himself). However, what had gotten Steve in trouble was the obvious bruising around his throat and the sheer ecstasy in the man's grin. It had gotten Steve a lot of interviews from local magazines and he had spent most of them calling Senator Joseph McCarthy a traitor to the American people.
The Barnes family was not particularly big fans of that piece, especially when one noticed that the
scarring on one of the shoulders matched Bucky's far too well.

However, Bucky had not been expecting one of these fans in Ontario. They had been only half way
through ordering drinks when a young woman practically pulled up a chair and started asking Steve
questions about the play of erotic domination in establishing agency of the disabled. Or something
like that. Bucky stopped listening after awhile and ate his steak in relative silence, despite Steve's
attempts to engage him in the conversation.

Eventually the art student left after Steve gave her their number and told her to phone them if she was
ever in New York. The bill arrived soon after. Steve smiled at him and Bucky's frustration faded. A
beautiful girl half Steve's age had been dangling on his every word but he only had eyes for him.
There was something to be said about that.

They walked to the falls after, exchanging quiet looks and letting their hands occasionally brush
against the other. The sun was setting now and the waters roared, so loud it felt like there was no one
there but the two of them. Bucky leaned down as if he was trying to say something but instead gave
him a quick peck on the cheek. Steve gave him a gentle push away, smiling.

"I know a little place with a great view and a lot more privacy," Steve offered innocently. "Maybe
you'd like to join me there?"

***

When they traveled, their sex was quiet, gentle. They had learned to whisper into each other's skin,
to tell the other through touch what they needed. They knew each other so well that they barely
needed words anymore beyond the near silent moan of the other's name.

After, Bucky unmade the second bed, throwing a pillow on the ground. Once he had settled in, he
immediately got out of it and slipped into the first with Steve. Steve curled into him, laying his hands
on his chest. Bucky put his arm around him and held him close.

"Sorry I ruined dinner," Steve murmured sleepily.

Bucky teased, "Dessert more than made up for it. Are you happy?"

"Yeah," Steve agreed, "it's been a good night."

"Good. Then I'm happy too."

Bucky snuggled into him and the pair drifted off.

***

The next day was spent as it was often was the first day of their vacations. Bucky slept in and Steve
explored. It was not hard to find each other again as Steve was exactly where Bucky expected him to
be, sketching the onlookers of the falls.

They wandered through the various attractions, including a wax museum that entertained them to no
end. They ate lunch at nearby park and the rest of the afternoon walking through the grounds of an
old estate. As the sky darkened, they returned to the hotel. Bucky was not a great fan of fireworks
and although he had always insisted he could handle them, Steve had always taken great care to
make sure he was safely indoors when they were likely to happen. When they were at home, it
wasn't uncommon for Steve to go with Bucky's ma, sisters and their kids for Fourth of July
celebrations and for all the vets in the family to stay behind playing cards.
Bucky offered to take him to see the show on the other side of the falls but Steve wanted to stay in. When they got back to the room, Steve was surprised to see that Bucky had set up a record player on the desk and he had left an album leaning against it. Bucky had heard Sam Cooke for the first time only a few weeks before and had known instantly that Steve would love him.

He put on the first track and held his hand out to Steve. He grinned and took it, letting Bucky lead him into a dance.

But as what happened any time they danced alone, their hands quickly wandered. The song was barely over before they were naked on the hotel floor. Not the most dignified place for two older married men, but neither of them were caring about their knees right then.

After, they lay in bed together; the sounds of the distant fireworks only quiet applause to their ears.

"Forty," Steve said softly. "I never thought I'd get this old. I'm older than either of my parents ever got to be. It's so strange. It feels like I got away with something, you know? Like fate decided to look the other way and let me live a long life with you. I don't know how I ever got so lucky."

Bucky kissed him gently and they curled into each other's arms, their lips just a breath from the others. His blue eyes were just as fierce and beautiful as they always had been. They still took his breath away.

"I hope it's been a good life so far," Bucky murmured.

Steve brushed his nose against his. "Perfect."

"Really?" Bucky teased. "No regrets?"

Steve's smile faltered slightly. "None."

Bucky frowned. "Try that one again, punk."

Steve sighed deeply and then admitted, "I wish I could have given you a baby."

Bucky's own heart sank in his chest. He had gone through the same mourning ten years before when it had finally occurred to him that he would never get to be a father. It was worth it, a hundred times over, to be with him but that didn't mean it couldn't hurt.

"You would have been a great dad," Bucky said gently.

Steve smiled weakly. "You would have too. I'm sorry, Buck. You planned this nice trip and I'm just bringing us down."

"I asked," Bucky reminded. "I get it, Steve. I do. It's just going to be one of those things, I guess. If things had been different..."

Fifteen years. God, they could have had a teenager by now. Some little spitfire with Steve's need for justice and Bucky's nose. What a glorious nightmare they would have been. How much they would have driven them crazy. How much they would have been loved.

Bucky didn't realize he was crying until Steve wiped his tears away and kissed his cheeks. Bucky cupped his face in his hands and pressed his forehead to his.

Bucky forced himself to smile. "Happy Birthday, Steve. Thanks for sticking with me."

Steve promised softly, "Until the end of the line, Buck."
Fancy Meeting You Here

Chapter Notes

So I did not know until like 2 minutes ago that canonically Bucky's dad is named George but I love him being named after his dad so Jim Barnes it is.

cw: brief conversation about POW/concentration camps in Germany. Nothing graphic.

Of course, they couldn't get away entirely from the Fourth of July. They came home to a family barbeque and a rager of a party at a friend's bar that made both of them feel like a thousand years old the next day. But when Monday rolled around, Bucky was back at work and Steve was back in the studio.

A few nights later, they were invited to the Barnes' place for dinner. Bucky had been expecting Becca's family but it was just his mother and father. After a fairly quiet dinner, Steve helped Ma wash dishes and Pa took Bucky into the alley for a secret smoke. Both of them had mostly quit after Pa's heart attack three years before but they still snuck the odd one together. Both of their spouses knew but were nice enough to reserve their judgment to dirty looks.

After the first few puffs, Buck asked, "How you feeling, Pa?"

He put his hand on his heart and grinned. "Life is good, Buck. I feel good. Me and your Ma are happy. I've got four gorgeous kids who all grew up and married good men. I've got eight grandchildren who are the light of my life. I'm only a few years from retirement now and my pension's looking good. Things are good for the Barnes family and that does my ticker better than anything else."

Bucky smiled in return. "That's great, pa. You had us worried there."

He waved him off. "It'll take more than that to knock me off. I pulled you out here to ask you about your plans in September. Your ma's sister has got some hare brained scheme about doing some sort of family reunion thing and I wanted to run it by you first."

"How far back in family are we going here?" Bucky asked.

"Not too far, but it'll be a bunch of cousins and folks you haven't seen since you were a baby. I don't know how, uh, you'll want to present yourself. Your uncle's just retired from the police force and I don't want..."

Pa let it hang there and Bucky picked it up, "I get it. Why don't I plan for Steve and I to go on a trip or something and when we get invited, we already have plans?"

Pa sighed in relief. "That'd be good. I don't want to make it a scene but I don't want either of you to get hurt, you know? You bring him out when they're expecting to see your wife...well, it might get ugly. Especially with Steve. That boy can't keep his mouth shut to stop from drowning. Never did know when to walk away from a fight unless you dragged him from it."

Ten years ago, Bucky wouldn't have been bothered but he found as he grew older he cared more and
more. He wasn't some sex deviant with a dirty little secret. He was a veteran and a decent man with
reputable profession and happily married to his childhood sweetheart. Why the hell should he be
hiding? He had a good life, one he was proud of, and he owed nothing to anyone but Steve.

Pa seemed to guess what he was thinking. "If you want to go, I'll stand with you both happily. You
got nothing to be ashamed of. I just want you both safe."

And that was what did it. Bucky looked over at his father. He had aged since the heart attack. He
was only sixty-two but he had taken on almost the air of a sage. It had changed him from tough as
nails to nearly soft. He was more vulnerable with his son than he ever had been before. Bucky
wanted to honour that trust in him, honour how much his father loved him.

"Don't worry about it, Dad," Bucky promised. "We'll find something better to do. Maybe we'll do a
road trip out to California. It's only been a year, but I miss our Dodgers something fierce."

Pa grimaced and laughed. "Don't remind me. It might break my heart all over again."

They finished their smokes and went back inside, both trying to ignore the near perfectly matched
looks of disgust at the smell of them.

***

A few things changed about Bucky's Florida plan. The first was that the reunion ended up being at
the beginning of November. The second was that three weeks before Steve had been offered a solo
show in January and needed every minute to work as hard as possible. His new series of portraits
was to feature the Vietnamese wives of American servicemen. In order to do so properly, he had
decided to learn Vietnamese and spent many nights pouring over any book he could find on the
subject.

So when the weekend of the big family reunion finally happened, Bucky was alone at their
apartment while Steve worked down in Queens with a GI's family. Bucky could have gone out with
a friend or something, but most of his friends were shared ones with Steve. He wasn't as great as
socializing as him and didn't know the difference between Manet and Monet never mind all the
modern stuff they talked about. Sometimes he met up with an old military friend for a drink but that
usually got depressing fast. It wasn't a bad thing, being alone, but it was better when it happened by
choice.

Bucky was out on the balcony, indulging in a cigarette, when he heard something in the alley below
him. Being the Village, he assumed it was someone having more fun than him, and being slightly
petty, decided it would be a good time to bring out the trash. If two guys were getting at it behind a
dumpster, they were about to learn why they shouldn't get their dicks out when it was 30 degrees.

Bucky wrapped up the garbage bag and walked down the fire escape with it, the cigarette still
dangling in his mouth. When he got to the ground, he kicked the dumpster to give warning but at
hearing nothing, proceeded to open it up. At seeing what was inside, Bucky dropped the bag and his
cigarette and gave a little scream. The girl hiding inside it screamed back.

Bucky started to apologize and then ask questions but the girl started speaking incredibly quickly in
another language, her hands up in the air and tears running down her face. Quickly, he realized that
he had understood a few words.

Bucky asked, "Romani? Are you Romani? Do you speak German?"

She stilled, her fear turning to panic. He put up his hands and said in shoddy German, "You're safe.
I'm not going to hurt you. I can't speak Romani but I understand a little. Just a bit slower, okay?

She gave a little nod and stammered, "Langsamer."

Slower. He translated mentally. *She does know German.*

Bucky offered his hand and she took it, using his balance to get her out of the trash. He helped her back to her feet and she looked up at him, shivering. Her jacket and boots were soaked through, sticking to her tiny form. If she were twenty, Bucky would have been surprised. Bucky's heart softened. She was just a scared kid.

Bucky pointed to his apartment. "I live just up there. Come get out of the rain."

He tried again in Romani, managing to get out the words "up" and "out." She seemed to understand, grabbing her bag out of the trash and holding it tightly to her chest. She followed him up the fire escape but Bucky made sure to make a show of him leaving the door open and unlocked.

In German, Bucky told her he would run her a bath and lay out clothes for her. He showed that the door locked from the inside and that he would not look. He searched Steve's drawers and found a pair of pants and a shirt that would probably fit her. He asked her if she wanted coffee and she nodded, still holding her bag. Bucky offered to wash what she was wearing but she vehemently shook her head so he let it rest.

Once she had her mug of coffee and was safely in the bath, Bucky started looking for the German dictionary he had carried in the war. He had written a few Romani words in the back, conversational phrases that came up in the area he was stationed in. A few families were attempting to escape and they hid with his unit's encampment for nearly a week before it was safe to move again. He had never figured it might be useful again but he figured it was always good to know how to be friendly.

When the door opened, the girl stepped out in Steve's clothes and a towel around her hair. She handed the mug back to Bucky and he got his first real good look at her. There were two things that became immediately apparent now that she was out of her jacket. A faded line of numbers was tattooed across her forearm, showing that she had likely once been in a concentration camp. Then there was the way her belly hugged against the shirt, her pants just around her hips to accommodate it. She was pregnant and at least halfway along.

Bucky gestured for her to sit on the couch. She did so, sitting as far from him as she could. He sat on a chair across from her, giving her space.

"What's your name?" He asked.

"Wanda."

"My name's James but you can call me Bucky, everyone does," he said kindly. "Where is your family, Wanda?"

She shook her head.

"Did you come to America alone?"

She said quietly in English, "With brother."

Bucky switched as well. "Where is he?"

She shook her head. "Gone. Three years now."
"Have you been alone since then?"

She shrugged and looked away. "No...sometimes."

She looked at him with a determination that reminded him so strongly of Steve. She didn't need Bucky's charity. She would find a way to survive, like she always had. But she wouldn't be the first stray they had ever taken in and...well, Bucky felt responsible. He had brought her in from the cold. He wasn't going to throw her back out.

"How did you end up in my trash?" He asked.

She shrugged. "Cold. Tired. I would find new place in morning. Always new place. For four months, I move. Boyfriend go to MAAG. Family not want me or baby. He come back and then no problem."

"Where did he go?" Bucky asked in confusion.


Bucky was stunned. "He didn't leave you with anything?"

She replied, "Family take, I did not push. If I go to Aid, they take baby and send me back to Germany. I will move. He come back."

Bucky breathed out slowly. Yeah, he saw where she was coming from. Any welfare organization would see her as an illegal unwed mother and ship her out east with no one and nothing. If her Joe did come back, he would never be able to find her.

"You fight in war?" Wanda asked. "For Americans?"

Bucky agreed, "Yeah, in Germany."

She pointed to his damaged hand and he nodded. "A nice souvenir from my two months in a POW camp."

She shuddered and gestured to her tattooed forearm. "Last year of war. Another "souvenir". We were seven when we are freed."

"Your brother? You were twins?"

Wanda nodded, closing her eyes. "Pietro. We have cousin bring us to America. Cousin bring into theft. Pietro...he died. I find boyfriend. Then I find another boyfriend. And another. Then my Victor. Victor is a good man. He will come back."

"And until then?"

Wanda shook her head. "I move."

"Stay here tonight," Bucky offered. "We've got a spare bedroom. Sleep and in the morning we'll figure out what to do."

"Why help?" She asked suspiciously. "I not give what you want. Your wife not like."

"I don't have a wife," Bucky started to explain. "During the war, I-"
clenched in his hands. He managed to get it all on the kitchen table before he noticed Bucky and Wanda.

"Sorry, I didn't know we had a guest," Steve apologized. "Hi, I'm Steve."

Wanda glanced between the two men and her face softened. Though she said nothing aloud, Bucky felt as if she did.

"Hello, Steve. My name is Wanda," she greeted. "Your James ask me to stay tonight in spare bedroom. Okay?"

Steve looked to Bucky in slight amusement. "Of course. Make yourself at home, Wanda. Let us know if you need anything."

Wanda brought her bag into the spare bedroom and closed the door. Bucky looked up to Steve, shrugging apologetically.

Steve kissed him sweetly. "I'm exhausted. Come to bed with me?"

Bucky teased, "I thought you'd never ask."
Bucky usually didn't sleep through the night. His nightmares were no longer specific images or memories. He only knew he had them when he woke up in cold sweat with his heart racing. He would get up, usually drink a glass of water, pace a bit, and then head right back to bed.

This time when he woke up, he was surprised to see Steve wasn't in bed beside him. He went out to the living room and saw a light on in the studio. Since the door was open, Bucky knocked on the door frame so he wouldn't be startled.

Steve was working on the beginnings of a sketch. A young Vietnamese woman sitting on a fire escape, shoeless but wearing a beautifully elegant red dress. Her hair was braided down her front and there was a slight gap in her teeth. She was looking up at a little boy who was posing like a superhero in a comic book. The woman laughed in delight as the child stood in his underwear, hands on his hips, looking as if he could take on the world.

Steve glanced over at him, smiling briefly before going back to work. Bucky kissed the back of his neck. He glanced over and noticed a completed piece drying near the window.

"Can I have a look?" He asked.

Steve sighed. "It's not very good. Go ahead though. Tell me what you think."

Bucky picked it up and brought it closer to the light. Unlike the other pieces he was currently working on, this was a portrait of an old Irish woman. She had a smirk, a punkish little grin that was unmistakably based on Steve's. The other pieces of her face were familiar too and as Bucky studied it, he realized that it was Sarah Rogers. Older than she had ever been, even older than she would be now if she had lived. Bucky felt a strange sense of discomfort the longer he looked at it. Steve had painted Sarah before dozens of times but this was a Sarah he had never seen before. She looked defiantly at the viewer, as if without words telling him to back off.

"Your ma was never that scary," Bucky commented.

"Like I said," he commented, "it's not good."

Steve put down his pencils and turned to face him. Bucky wiped away the smudge of charcoal on his cheek and Steve looked up into his eyes.

"Why her, Buck? I'm usually the one bringing in strays, not you."

Bucky shrugged. "She got to me. I saw how things could have been for you during the war. She's just a kid in love with nowhere to go until her Joe gets home. And that could be a real long time."

"Exactly," Steve said, sounding almost frustrated. "I know you'll want her to stay with us and it wasn't like I was ever going to say no, but you know what we talked about back in July. I just..."

Steve took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. You know I haven't been sleeping well. This just feels different than the usual runaways who stay with us."

"Because she's a girl?" Bucky asked. "Or because she's expecting?"
"Because I don't see how this is going to end well," he admitted. "I can't see some scenario where she isn't deported and that baby ends up in foster care. What are we going to do, Buck? Find some soldier in Saigon and hope he agrees to marry her when he comes home? And when will that be? You were gone two years and that was near the end of the war. If she really has no one and we become that for her and then..."

Steve was shaking by then. Bucky was not entirely sure why he was so upset but he picked him up and brought him back to bed. He wrapped them both in the blankets and held him close like he was sick. Steve buried his face in his shoulder and whispered that he was sorry. Of course they would help. Anything.

He fell asleep a little while later and Bucky stayed beside him, rubbing his back.

***

Being Sunday, Steve went to Mass. He hadn't taken the Eucharist since he and Bucky had consummated their relationship, but he still went most weeks. Father Maloney knew about them but he didn't say anything. He seemed to like Steve's company and was quite polite to him. Bucky thought he was a little intimidated of Mr. Rogers' extensive knowledge of theology and his enthusiasm for the rumoured reforms that the new Pope would bring into the Church.

Wanda woke up shortly after Steve left and started packing her things. Bucky stopped her and brought her into the kitchen for breakfast. As he started explaining his plan, Wanda began to frown.

"You want to find Victor?" Wanda asked in confusion. "He in other country. How?"

"I can call a few people," Bucky explained. "If we can find him, we can get the two of you married. Then the army will let him send his pay to you and you won't have to worry about being sent back to Europe. I'll need you to give me as many details as you can. What's his last name?"

"Shade," she said. "Corporal Victor Shade."

"Okay," Bucky said. "What else do you got? How tall is he? How old is he? What does he look like?"

Wanda did her best to describe him and as she did, her face softened into a sweet smile. He was tall, very slender. Bashful and kind. A little naive but gentle. He was older. Not old. Not as old as Bucky but at least thirty. Fair skin, brown eyes. He was not exactly unique in appearance but her description revealed one important truth: she was very much in love with him.

After they ate, she went back to the guest room to lie down for a while. Bucky went through his book and found a number for a friend at Veteran's Affairs. He spent a good few hours at the phone, finding the next person he could talk to. By the time Steve got home, Bucky had run out of American contacts and was waiting for a dispatcher on the other side of the world to call him back.

Steve looked worn and Bucky was worried he was getting sick. It had been almost five years since he had been really ill in the winter. He had been working too hard, he was clearly stressed, and he was not as young as he once was. If he got sick now, it might land him in the hospital.

Steve went straight into his studio, leaving Bucky to make lunch for all three of them. About a half hour later, Bucky woke up an exhausted Wanda and practically tossed a frantically working Steve over his shoulder and sat them both down for grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup.

All three ate in relative silence, which was unusual. Steve had never been a quiet man and usually was very engaged in getting to know a guest and making them comfortable. Wanda did not seem to
"So," Bucky said. "I got off the phone with a Commander Riley over in Saigon. They're eleven hours ahead of us so it might be pretty late tonight before they hear anything. He thinks he'll be able to track your Joe though. Like I said, there's not a lot of army guys in the city right now so unless he's on leave somewhere, he should be easy to find in the morning."

Wanda smiled, but her exhaustion showed. Bucky suspected now that she was safe, the last few months had caught up with her. He didn't mind. He didn't know how far along she was but he knew pregnancy could wear a girl out fast.

Steve commented, "That's great, Buck. Good detective work."

"Not too hard," Bucky replied. "You never really get out of the army, you know? You always know a guy who knows a guy. Now, Wanda, I'm going to have to go back to work tomorrow. Steve, you going to be around tomorrow? You look dead on your feet, you should take some time off."

Steve shook his head. "Can't. I'll make it a shorter day though. Maybe I can take Wanda over to Becca's place though. She should still have some maternity clothes kicking around, I'm sure she wouldn't mind sharing."

Bucky's chest relaxed slightly. "I think that's a swell idea. You'll like my sister, Wanda. She's a real sweetheart. She might even have some baby clothes too. She keeps everything."

Wanda murmured, "Maybe she not want to give to me."

Steve put his hand on her shoulder. "If she doesn't, we'll go out shopping. You need to be comfortable. It's no trouble. As long as you stay with us, you're family."

She looked at him like she did not quite believe him but she was willing to try. Steve always had a look about him that encouraged trust in him. He was no liar and he kept his promises. That kind of honesty couldn't be hidden, even if he tried.

Steve worked in his studio while Bucky listened to a hockey game on the radio. He drank a few beers with his feet up while Wanda sat nearby, attempting to knit with some old needles and yarn of Steve's. Near the final period, the phone rang. Bucky had been half asleep and stumbled to get it. He leaned against the kitchen wall with the receiver, pleasantly surprised to hear Commander Riley's voice.

"Please hold for Corporal Shade."

Bucky quickly snapped to attention. "I'll hold."

Another voice came on the line. "Sergeant Barnes? This is Corporal Shade. I received a message that Wanda Maximoff is in your care. Is she all right? Is she safe? Can I speak to her?"

"She's right here," Bucky replied. "Just a minute."

He waved Wanda over and she picked up the phone nervously. Within an instant, she started crying happily and spoke in rapid German. Bucky left the kitchen, attempting to give them some privacy. Steve had left his studio, his arms still covered in paint, as he tried to see what was going on.

"You found him?"

Bucky nodded. "She's talking to him now. I think it sounds good. She seems happy."
Steve's chest visibly relaxed. "Good, that's really good."

Wanda called his name and Bucky returned to the kitchen. She handed him the phone and he was greeted once again by Corporal Shade.

"I only have a few more minutes," Shade said, the desperation clear in his voice. "Wanda tells me you are a good man. I really hope she is right. Thank you for finding her. I have been worried for so long. She tells me...she is expecting our baby. I know I will not make it before it is born. If you are willing, I'd like to billet her with you. I'll send whatever funds you want, just please keep her safe. Please believe me when I never wanted to hurt her. I intend to make her my wife and be a father to our child. If I could, I would be there but I can't."

Bucky reassured, "I know, Corporal. She's safe with us. You just make sure you get yourself home in one piece. Let me give you our address. We'll talk soon, okay?"

"Thank you," he sighed. "I do not think I can ever express how grateful I am. You have saved my life, Sergeant Barnes. I hope that is not a foolish thing to say."

Bucky saw Steve hug an excited Wanda, the pair grinning as she recounted the conversation between her and her beau.

Bucky said kindly, "No, I know exactly what you mean. We'll take good care of your girl, Corporal. You just keep yourself safe."

After exchanging details, Commander Riley ended their call. Bucky went back into the living room. He explained to them both what he and Shade had worked out. Wanda embraced him, kissing both his cheeks

"Thank you," she whispered. "I can never repay you."

"I get the sense he'd do the same," Bucky replied kindly. "And you've got us until you get him back. You don't worry about a thing now, okay?"

She nodded and her face looked so young then. After all her terrible luck, he was grateful that he had found her. She had been hurt enough. She needed to just be loved and protected. She needed a family.

He glanced at Steve who was just beaming. His eyes met Bucky's and he knew they were thinking the same thing. Now she had one.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I am that nerd that remembers Vision used the alias Victor Shade once. Whatevs.
Victor sent what he could but Bucky and Steve had already decided they wouldn't charge her rent. They put the money aside for Wanda and her baby. She attempted to help out around the house but she grew tired easily so they encouraged her just to rest and take it easy. They took her to the clinic but the nurse assured them that Wanda was just a little anemic and needed more red meat. She was the one, however, that insisted Wanda needed to see an OBGYN just in case.

On the day of Steve's show, Bucky took Wanda to see the specialist. After an examination, the doctor informed them that the baby had shifted, putting pressure on Wanda's spine. There was more that he explained to Bucky, but he didn't understand much of it other than that it was making her faint and she needed to stay on bed rest.

Wanda was not thrilled with the idea but she only had eight weeks left. She promised Bucky she would agree to the doctor's terms but she wanted to see the art show that night. Bucky reluctantly took her, knowing she would never forgive him otherwise.

Steve had been in dozens of shows by that point in their lives but the solo shows always left Bucky speechless. It was not quite his scene. It was not that the really rich and powerful were the only ones being catered to. But the Beatniks and the avant-garde did sometimes haunt the shows. Steve's portraits were in many ways quite traditional and remarkable on their own by the sheer competence in lighting and framing. But it was always the subjects that made them something truly special. It was his series of veterans of the Second World War that had given him his big break. He had done a similar set a few years before of surgeons who had served in Korea and another in Pearl Harbour with firefighers who had survived that day. He had done a series for the 100th anniversary of the Great Famine, a dreamscape of imagined and lost ancestors inspired by the faces of Irish immigrants living in Brooklyn today.

He had always looked for people who should be broken but who showed in their very eyes that nothing could destroy them. They were not just pretty pictures. They were declarations. When McCarthyism spread through the city and Steve's friends and associates were afraid to be labeled Communists, Steve's work was less subtle. This was part of the period that had caused Bucky's bruised throat to become famous.

In one of the interviews after he unveiled *The Silent Cry*, Steve had said to an interviewer, "My mother told me once that when the whole world tells you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree by the river of truth, and tell the whole world 'No, You Move'. I ain't moving for Senator McCarthy. He can move."

This show was less blatant than some of the others but Steve's anti-war agenda was fairly obvious still. Beautiful Vietnamese women and their families graced the streets of Brooklyn and their handsome Joes in the fantastic streets of Vietnam. Neither setting was shown as perfect. Neither side shown as right. But what was shown, what was so clear, was the depiction of true love across the world and the longing for a home that was just out of reach.

Bucky held Wanda's arm as they walked through the room. They made quite the pair and a few shot them dirty looks, as they were clearly working class folks who could not afford or appreciate such art. These people were usually gone after opening night and replaced with locals who liked to see a good Brooklyn boy doing well and serious art collectors who had no patience for socialites.
While they were touring, Wanda stopped him. She gazed upon a landscape of rolling hills and thick foliage. Entwined within it were the figures of two people from a distance. Just in profile, one could make out that they were naked and the woman was heavily pregnant. His arms were around her protectively, shielding them mostly from the onlookers. Wanda smiled, reaching out first to touch it and then pulling back.

Wanda said, "He ask me one day to stand up so he can draw belly. I laugh but now that I see it...he makes real beauty. You must be proud."

"Very," Bucky agreed.

Wanda put her hand on her belly. "When he born, I think he will be conductor. I feel always like he moves his hands before the music. Swish, swish, you know? He is doing it now. He moves when I am happy. I think he is happy too."

She placed his hand where hers had been and he felt the baby shift beneath his fingers. He had felt it before, but it was magical every time.

After awhile, Bucky took her home. The next day, they hung the picture she had inspired in her bedroom and Steve sat in bed beside her, reading to her as she curled up in bed, giving her baby a fighting chance.

***

Sometimes late at night, Bucky would hear Wanda on the phone with Victor. It would only be a stolen few minutes but it was the only time he ever heard her laughing. It was comforting enough that he could lie back down beside his husband and fall back asleep.

Christmas came along and they bundled Wanda up to bring her over to the Barnes' family home. To everyone else, they had been saying that Wanda was Bucky's niece and she was staying with them while her husband was overseas. Among his actual family, it was a bit more complicated. Everyone told the truth, no problems, but there was the uneasy question of how long this was going to go on for. Presumably, Victor would be finished his deployment at some point but would they really allow a stranger to live with them for potentially years until he came home? If he came home at all? North Vietnam had just invaded Laos. America could become completely entrenched in war. Wanda's child could grow up without a father.

They stayed Christmas Eve in the old house, Bucky and Steve in the attic like when they were small. Almost nostalgically, they kissed and felt each other up under the blankets, giggling when they heard someone creeping around the house.

The next day, the house was bursting with family. Bucky's other sisters immediately loved Wanda and griped with her about late pregnancy. The cousins all played together in every arena of the house with their fathers and their Uncle Steve.

Bucky helped his Ma in the kitchen, both quietly working together. Right before they served dinner, Ma put her hand on his arm and looked up at him with a weary frown.

"Are you and Steve okay?" She asked. "That girl not coming between you two?"

"We're fine," Bucky promised. "He's the one always bringing in strays. Heck, Joan stayed with us longer than she has so far. I think the last show took a bit out of him but he'll perk up. We're going to Florida in March for a week. I think that'll help."

"Do you think you can get away then with the baby?"
Bucky shrugged. "Worse case, we'll take them with us. He'll be old enough then to get on a plane and we can afford a second hotel room."

"Any baby you bring home is one I'll love. You know that, right?"

Bucky shook his head. "Wanda's old enough to be our kid. If you're looking for a grandbaby from us, she might be the closest you're going to get. What's this about, Mama? You worried we'll get baby fever and it'll drive us apart?"

Ma admitted, "Steve and I talk, you know. I'll never be Sarah but I promised her to mother him the best I could. I know he's been pining for a long time. He wants a family. I don't blame him. It's one thing being here with all of us. We love him to pieces. But he wants what he and Sarah had. And it's not too late for him. For either of you. You've got the whole second half of your lives ahead of you."

"What are you saying, Ma?"

She smiled sadly. "I don't know, Buck. But I think you and him better talk. Sooner than later."

After all the festivities, the three of them went home to the Village. Steve helped Wanda settle in for the night and then joined Bucky in bed. Instinctively, he curled up on Bucky's chest and he held him tightly.

"I wish I could have given you a baby," Bucky murmured. "If I'm not enough for you, I get it. If I'm not worth it, I get that too. I just want to hear you say that instead of always worrying you're thinking it."

Steve's breathing grew uneasy for a second and then he said softly, "No. Until the end of the line, remember? Some people just don't get to have children. It's okay, Buck. We'll move past it. Let's just be here for Wanda. She's a good girl."

Bucky smiled weakly. "That she is. Maybe we just skipped the childhood parts with her and got our daughter after all. Then we get to skip right to being grandparents."

Steve chuckled. "Right. And your father always tells me that's the best part."

Neither spoke for a time but the air stayed heavy between them.

"I love you," Bucky admitted, "more than I thought a man could love anybody. You tell me what you want and I'll give it to you. So tell me what you want."

Steve kissed him tenderly and they fell into their old rhythm, keeping quiet as to not wake Wanda up. It was not an answer. Bucky knew what he wanted. What they both wanted. But it was something they both had sacrificed long ago. They had known it wouldn't be easy. It was never easy. But they had been made for each other and neither of them were foolish enough, arrogant enough to reject what had clearly been destined to be.

But they could still mourn together what they had given up for their happily ever after, the life that could have been.

Chapter End Notes

If you can't make Kenzaburō Ōe jokes in your fanfiction, then what are you doing with
your life?
Wanda was miserable. She was sick of bed rest, missed Victor terribly, and was fighting a nesting instinct in a place that wasn't hers. Wanda spent hours rearranging everything in their apartment, only to feel guilty and put it all back. They had gotten her a radio for her room and that helped for a time but her English was not good enough to enjoy most of the shows and she got antsy only listening to music.

So, like many parents in the decades to come, Bucky and Steve broke down and bought their child a television.

Wanda spent hours in front of the set, settled comfortably on the couch. She watched everything but loved Westerns. She had perfected her fake gunshot sound and Steve had brought her every photography book that might strike her fancy. She even started planning a trip to the Badlands for once the baby was born. There were a lot of things that were not going well in her life, but she had Steve, Bucky, and Bonanza and that seemed to help. It also seemed to help her English, peppering her language with slang that seemed very strange coming out of a Romani refugee living in New York City.

Becca visited often then, the two women knitting and gossiping. Bucky and Steve would sit next to them in the evenings, Steve practically sitting on his lap in order for them all to fit on the couch. As long as both women were comfortable with their snuggling, they often cuddled up while watching TV. Everywhere else they had to sit a foot apart. At least in their own home with their family they could be who they were. Two middle-aged men still very much infatuated with each other.

It was during an episode of The Real McCoys that Wanda's water broke. Wanda had been so engrossed, she hadn't noticed her contractions until they became too strong not to. The nineteen year old was oddly calm about the whole thing, allowing Becca to lead her over to the bathroom to get freshened up. The two men on the other hand freaked out and quickly started packing her a bag for the hospital that contained everything from five days worth of underwear to a copy of On the Road which everyone in the household had given up on.

Steve called a cab and helped a bundled up Wanda down the stairs. Bucky was right behind them, bag in tow, as Becca gave him specific instructions on what to tell the doctor so one of them would be allowed in the room with her. During her last pregnancy, even her husband had been kicked out as birth was not considered men's business.

Luckily when they arrived, one of the most senior nurses recognized Steve as both a frequent visitor and as Sarah Rogers' son. Unfortunately, that meant she knew that Steve had no siblings so Steve couldn't lie that Wanda was his niece. So instead Steve said that she was his daughter. Her mother was gone, her husband in Vietnam. And he told a sob story like no other, eventually convincing the nurse to let him stay in the delivery room with Wanda at least until the doctor came.

Bucky sent a telegram to Victor, phoned Becca and his parents, and then waited in a room full of cigar smoking men waiting to hear about their wives. Bucky said something about his best friend's daughter and they looked at him skeptically until he told his own sob story about helping his fellow widower raise a girl on his own. This seemed to gain him some sympathy, especially when a terribly anxious Steve entered the room three hours later. He hesitated before sitting beside Bucky.

"How's our girl?" Bucky asked, trying to sound neutral.
"Okay," Steve said quietly. "She's scared and she's in a lot of pain. But she's okay."

Bucky really wanted to hold his hand but instead gave him a pat on the back. "She's strong. She'll be alright."

"You want to go get some coffee?" Steve asked.

Bucky agreed, following him towards the surely closed cafeteria. Once they were alone in the hallway, Steve started trembling. Bucky held him at arm's length, encouraging him to breathe.

"She's okay," Bucky promised. "She's probably on enough drugs now that she's not feeling a single thing."

"What if they take the baby?" Steve whispered. "She begged me to make sure they didn't take them. We should have gotten her documents, we should have done something. She'll never forgive us. It'll break her heart."

"Excuse me, are you Sergeant James Barnes? They told me you'd be in the maternity ward and no one else there seems to be you."

They both turned to see a telegram boy, holding out a message to Bucky. He tipped him and read it aloud to Steve as the boy scurried away.

*Tell Wanda I love her STOP Tell her I will always love her STOP Tell her I will be home soon STOP I can never repay you STOP*

"It's going to be okay," Bucky promised, handing it to Steve. "I honestly believe that. She's going to be fine and the baby's going to be healthy."

"Steven Rogers?"

Both looked again, this time to see a young nurse beaming at them both.

"Congratulations, Mr. Rogers. You're a grandfather."

***

Bucky had not stopped holding the newborn since the nurse handed him over to him. Steve was still in the recovery suite with Wanda, refusing to leave her side until she woke up from the ether.

Bucky couldn't stop looking at him, studying every little line of his face. He had held every single one of his nieces and nephews when they were infants but he had never seen anything so young and fragile. Only a few weeks ago, this little boy was kicking against his hand whenever Hoss was on screen. Now he was here, alive and breathing, sleeping peacefully in Bucky's arms.

When Wanda finally woke, Bucky brought the baby over to her and she brought her son to her chest for the first time. She sobbed happily, kissing his face again and again, and Steve sat behind her, supporting her back. Wanda said his name aloud for the first time, whispering it in her son's ear like a promise.

Thomas William Pietro Maximoff Shade. A real, true mouthful for a tiny little thing but it seemed regal enough for him. He was the product of true love, after all. A tiny prince like that needed a bold name.

It occurred to Bucky then that he had been awake for over twenty-four hours and needed to get to
work. He kissed them both mother and son and at seeing no one was around, gave Steve a quick peck too.

"Phone me at the shop if you need anything," Bucky insisted. "Anything at all."

Steve promised, "We will. Go get some coffee, granddad."

Bucky grinned. He liked the sound of that.
Steve took an entire month off painting, the longest in all their married life. He was besotted. He wore Tom on his chest with a homemade sling, the baby calming whenever he heard his heartbeat. Wanda slept a lot that first month and as she started getting stronger, Steve started to work again.

When Tom was six weeks old, Wanda announced at breakfast she wanted to finish to high school. Both Steve and Bucky were delighted as she started taking GED prep classes during the day and taking English classes at night. Under real study, she picked up the language quickly. By the time Tom was three months, she was now fluent or at least competent in English, Romani, German, Serbian, and Romanian.

When Bucky suggested she might consider becoming an interpreter, her eyes lit up. She started looking at college programs, pouring over brochures as she bounced Tom on her knee. It wouldn't be easier getting into the field as a woman, but Wanda was tough as nails. She had survived worse than dirty looks and disparaging comments.

The four of them settled into a routine. Steve had started teaching a life drawing class and he and Wanda took the bus together down to the college on Monday and Wednesday nights. Bucky would stay home with Tom and do whatever odd jobs needed to be done while the infant watched from his bassinet. Usually Bucky would read to him because for some reason the boy loved the sound of his voice.

On Easter Sunday, all four of them made their way to the Barnes household. The place was even more chaotic than Christmas and Bucky spent much of it in the background with his dad, sneaking smokes in the back alley and claiming it was one of his sisters' husbands. After dinner and an egg hunt in the park, they returned back to their apartment in the Village, all but Bucky sleeping soundly in the back seat of the cab.

Wanda walked up the stairs first, holding Tom close. Steve and Bucky followed behind, letting their fingers link together for a brief instant. They heard Wanda shriek and ran up to see her kissing a man on their front step. They parted, realizing that Steve and Bucky were staring.

"I tried to phone first," the man apologized, his voice immediately giving him away. "I've been granted leave and given a teaching position at West Point. It's all very sudden, I know, but I came the moment I could."

"Come on inside," Steve greeted. "We want to hear all about it."

***

Tom stayed in Steve and Bucky's room that night but no one really slept. Victor and Wanda's reunion was...enthusiastic. Steve and Bucky spent most of the night in hushed whispers, discussing Corporal Shade, and trying to ignore the sounds of their lovemaking.

Bucky woke in cold sweats to the sound of Tom crying. He picked up the infant and brought him into the kitchen. He hummed to him while he prepared some formula and Tom started to calm down a little.

Bucky felt a kiss on his shoulder and smiled. "You should be sleeping, Stevie."
"Can I hold him?"

Bucky placed Tom in his arms and gave Steve the bottle. Tom gurgled happily, snuggling into Steve while sucking away. The pair sat on the couch together, Steve resting his head on his chest.

"An April wedding will be nice," Steve said quietly. "Neither of them have much family so I thought me and Becca could throw them a wedding luncheon. Maybe just at your church's hall. He'll need to be at the academy in two weeks so maybe we can do it next weekend. I saw her eyeing this really nice blue dress the other day. I think maybe we get it for her and we'll find her a nice pair of shoes."

Bucky replied, "That sounds good. Just nice and simple."

"I want to give her away, if you're okay with that."

Bucky nodded. "Yeah. You are her dad, after all."

Steve chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Are you going to be okay when she leaves?" Bucky asked gently.

In a tender and fragile voice, Steve asked, "Will you?"

Steve already knew the answer. Wanda was part of their family now, practically their daughter and they had seen Tom every day of his little life until now. They had seen how good it could be, having children. From their first breathes to starting college. They had known this wasn't forever and she would only be two hours upstate from them. But she was leaving home. Tom wouldn't be old enough to remember the sound of Steve's heartbeat or Bucky's voice. He would grow up with Victor as his father. And Wanda...well, every child needs their father but she would turn to Victor now when she needed comfort. That was good, that was the way it should be. But Bucky knew it would destroy them both. How could it not?

He didn't answer and Steve did not ask again.

***

Victor and Wanda married on a beautiful Sunday afternoon at the Unitarian Church that Bucky had grown up in. The entire Barnes family was there as well as a few friends and well-wishers. Steve walked Wanda up the aisle in the blue dress she had loved and kissed her cheek before giving her hand to Victor.

Steve spent the ceremony sitting by Bucky's side, holding his hand. If anyone noticed, they said nothing. Becca signed as Wanda's witness, her husband as Victor's, and the preacher announced them man and wife.

As Wanda walked back down the aisle, hand in hand with her new husband, she stopped at the first row, giving both Steve and Bucky a kiss and taking Tom from the crook of Bucky's arm.

The reception was fairly casual. There was dancing, a bit of sneaked alcohol, and lots of good homemade food. Bucky relaxed then, taking his Ma out onto the dance floor while making faces at Pa. Steve dancing with every one of Bucky's sisters and most of his nieces.

Near the end of dinner, Victor and Wanda emerged in their going away outfits. Victor started to lead her towards the door but Wanda let go of his hand and rushed over to Bucky. She embraced him tightly, burying her face into his shoulder.
"Thank you," she whispered.

Bucky kissed her cheek and tearfully murmured, "Go be wonderful."

She let go and joined her husband. The guests whistled and hollered, following them out of the church as they got into Victor's new bright red Chevrolet Impala, loaded with Wanda's few possessions. Steve helped put Tom in his back booster seat and kissed Wanda's cheek. She whispered something into his ear and he lightly blushed. He returned to Bucky's side, putting his arm around his waist.

The party waved them off, wishing them a safe trip and cheering congratulations. Bucky and Steve stood until they were gone from sight and went back inside.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: apparently there were car seats in the 50s but they were just there to make a baby easier to be seen, not to actually do anything.

Also fun fact: my father owns a late 50s Chevy Impala so it makes a cameo here
Once Upon A Dream

Chapter Notes

so, yup, we got bumped up to an E now. Not for this chapter but in like two after this one? I'm bad at math. I'll give you the heads up in case you want to skip it.

Wanda phoned them almost every day. She knew no one and was having trouble making friends with the other wives. About once a month, Steve and Bucky would borrow a car and drive up for a few days to help her around the house. Victor was kind to them but had insinuated the first time that a military academy was not the sort of place homosexuals should make themselves at home. Bucky and Steve thought this was hilarious, considering how many of their gay peers had met during the war. Still, they were discreet as they could be, taking turns on who would sleep on the couch when they came to visit.

It was not the same, but it helped. Wanda always sounded lighter in person than she did on the phone. She wanted them there with her. She loved Victor but he was one person. He could not be her everything, not when he could not understand everything she had been through. The closest person to understanding in her life was Bucky. Even if they rarely talked about the war, it was a comfort to not have to pretend to be okay.

It was late June. Victor was working late at the academy. Steve was inside the Shade's bungalow with a teething Tom. Bucky and Wanda were out on the porch, sharing a beer. Neither of them had ever been much for conversation and enjoyed being in comfortable silence with each other.

But this night, Wanda seemed anxious to talk.

"James, may I ask you something?"

She had started calling him that since she had left the city. He figured Victor thought that the nickname was too familiar but he had never pushed it.

"Go ahead," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"I have met a friend here," she began. "She is a very nice girl from Missouri. My age. She is married to one of the cadets at the academy."

"That's great," Bucky encouraged. "Tell me about her."

Wanda smiled thoughtfully. "Angie is very pretty and she is very gentle. She reminds me of Steve sometimes when she smiles. She is...how do you say, cocky."

Bucky smirked. "Sounds like him."

Wanda looked out to the neighbourhood, to the other bungalows slowly turning off their lights as their families readied for bed.

"She does not belong here," Wanda said quietly. "She belongs in the city."

"She'll adjust," Bucky comforted. "We all get used to things. Hell, I could never imagine leaving
Brooklyn and I'm happy where we are."

Wanda shook her head. "No, Angie is...like you. Like you and like Steve. She is not happy with her husband. He is hard with her and she loves someone else. I am afraid for her. I worry that one day he will really hurt her. She wants to leave but she is very scared. And now...now maybe she can't leave."

Bucky asked quietly, "Should we move inside to talk about this?"

Wanda shivered. "Yes, maybe."

Bucky brought her into the kitchen and poured them both a glass of iced tea from the fridge. She sat at the table beside him, resting her hand on his injured one.

"She met a woman during the war," Wanda explained, "but they lost each other. She is 31 now I think; she was child at end of the war. The woman was older. They wrote for a long time before the woman got married. They loved each other but you understand. The woman married a man and maybe they have children, I do not know. But Angie looks for her for a long time. Then she marries a man because she is growing older and thinks that this is how it must be."

"So what happened?" Bucky asked.

"Two things. Woman gets divorced. She writes to Angie and says to her, come to New York and we will be together. Angie wants to. Her husband is not good man, even after five years. He does not want children so she makes sure she has no children. But now, now she was not so careful."

"She's pregnant," Bucky said.

"Yes," Wanda confirmed. "Her husband does not know. She does not want him to know. She wants to go to New York to be with her love but she cannot go with baby. And it is too late for...I don't know the word in English and she will not get one anyway. I tell her not to, not unless she can get doctor. It is not worth dying for, I see too many women go like this."

Bucky took a deep breath. "That's a lot. Poor thing."

Wanda hesitated. "I think you can help her. You can help her like you helped me."

"What?" Bucky asked in surprise.

Wanda explained, "You take her with you back to New York City. You help her find her love like you helped me. They have baby. No problem."

"I think her husband might have a problem with that," Bucky reminded.

"He will not care once she is gone," Wanda promised, "and he will not find her. You will keep her safe, like you kept me safe."

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck. "Have you talked to her about this?"

"Not yet. She and her husband come for lunch tomorrow. You meet her and then you will see that you can help her. I have no one else I can ask for help, you know this. Victor will not understand and he cannot do anything without risking his career. Please, James. Consider it."

Bucky said, "I'll have to tell Steve."

Wanda agreed, "Yes, tell him. He will understand. I just worry that he is not subtle. He would take
He chuckled. "Like John Wayne. Okay, I'll talk to him."

The front door opened and Victor entered, hanging his hat and jacket. Wanda grinned and went over to greet him, kissing him sweetly. Bucky shook his hand and then excused himself to the living room. The couch was already made up for him as Steve was staying with the baby in the guest room. Bucky snuck past into the spare bedroom where his husband was half asleep, a children's book propped on his belly and Tom snuggled against his chest.

Bucky kissed the top of his head before moving Tom into his crib. Steve shifted, opening his gorgeous blue eyes to see who was there. Forgetting where they were, Bucky leaned in and kissed him tenderly. Steve cupped his face in his hands, pulling him closer into the embrace.

When they parted, Bucky brushed his nose against his.

"How do you feel about bringing home another stray?" Bucky murmured.

Steve raised an eyebrow. "Anyone I know?"

"Not yet," Bucky said, "but you will tomorrow."

***

It turned out that not only were the Martinellis invited for an afternoon barbeque, but most of the block as well. Bucky had not been expecting this. The only time he was around this many heterosexuals was when he was related to them. He and Steve did not have the social graces to be around so many nuclear families and Bucky fought the urge to cling to Wanda the entire party. She was having a rough time of it too, forced to socialize with privileged women who not so subtly mocked her accent behind her back.

But among all these military wives, Angie Martinelli still caught his eye. They had never met before but he knew in an instant that she was the woman he had been looking for. Her smile did remind him a little of Steve's. It made him feel like she had just thought of a witty joke but didn't think he would get it. In her light green summer dress, her eyes practically sparkled. It was a bit too thick for the heat but it was loose around her middle, hiding her baby bump.

She walked to them over and introduced herself. "You must be James and Steven. I'm Angie, Wanda's friend. I've heard a lot about the both of you. All good things, I promise. Which is surprising. For a kid like her, she's got a mouth when she doesn't like a person. You two must be practically saints."

Steve said innocently, "We try our best."

"I bet," Angie chuckled. "I hear you two live in New York City. I grew up there. Queens. Though I hear right away you two are Brooklyn boys, aren't you? You know what they say though, a New Yorker is brothers with a Hoosier if they find each other in France. It's nice to hear that accent again after all this time upstate."

"I bet," Bucky agreed. "I remember when I got back from Germany. Some guy from Hell's Kitchen helped me with my luggage and I nearly kissed him when he said hello."

Angie grinned again. "I bet. I'd do the same."

A man came up behind Angie and put his hand possessively on her shoulder. "Are these two
bothering you, Angela?"

Angie's breath visibly caught but her voice was even. "Nah, just meeting some of Wanda's friends from the city. It's a romantic story, that's all. Sergeant Barnes is a real life hero. He served in Germany. Got a Purple Heart to prove it."

Bucky replied, "She's giving me more credit than I deserve. They were practically giving them away after the war. Pleasure to meet you, Mister..."

"Sergeant Anthony Martinelli," he said, offering his hand. "Thank you for your service, Barnes. Don't let the last name fool you. I'm as American as apple pie. I look forward to serving my country in Vietnam if I am sent."

Bucky shook his hand, looking him straight in the eye. "I hope that opportunity never presents itself, Sergeant. From what Corporal Shade tells me, the country is sitting on a powder keg. I personally would not want to be anywhere near it when it blows."

"I understand that fear, especially with the great evil you faced, but this is a different war. We are experienced now, Sergeant. Our technology, our training, our men. We will go where we are called and we will serve honourably. Gone are the days of drafted boys. Our Army will be run by career soldiers. Dedicated men who have trained their whole lives for their service."

"And for their slaughter," Bucky commented.

Martinelli raised an eyebrow. "I expected patriotism, not pacifism from a distinguished veteran."

"You don't know me," Bucky said, fighting the urge to snarl. "I know me."

Steve put his hand on Bucky's forearm and Bucky apologized, "I'm sorry. Thank you for your dedication to keeping our country safe. Please, excuse me."

Steve steered Bucky away, the pair listening as Martinelli snapped at his wife for socializing with communists. Bucky looked back and Angie's eyes met his for a brief moment. He saw the light bruise starting to form on her shoulder from where her husband grabbed her.

It grew dark and Bucky and Steve packed to head back to New York. A few neighbours were milling around and Victor was distracted enough in his hosting duties that Wanda snuck away to say goodbye to them. Steve took Tom from her arms and covered him with kisses while he giggled.

With no time to talk and with others around them, Bucky hugged Wanda and whispered, "Come visit us next weekend. Bring Angie. We'll see what we can do."
Steve drove up to West Point and brought both women and Tom into the city for the long weekend. Bucky set them up in the spare guest room and brought out a bassinet for Tom to sleep in. Wanda immediately got on the phone with Becca and they started planning all the things they wanted to do for Steve's birthday. Steve followed behind her with Tom, occasionally shouting out that it was also Independence Day and it didn't all have to be about him.

In the happy commotion, Bucky brought Angie out to the fire escape with an ice-cold cola for them both. She breathed in the city air with a smile.

"It's good to be home," she murmured. "This feels right."

He tapped her bottle against hers and took a long drink. She leaned against the railing and sipped at hers slowly. She was wearing one of Wanda's hand-me-down maternity dresses now that she was safely in the city. She looked certainly more comfortable than at the party but she was so slender she wasn't going to be able to hide her condition a lot longer.

"You know, Wanda told me about you," Angie said. "You said you were a good guy. Both you and Steve. I was so pissed at her for telling you but I was kind of grateful too. I'm sort of running out of time here. If I'm...God, this is so stupid."

"Nothing stupid about it," Bucky said, sitting down on the steps. "You've got yourself into a tough situation. You don't have to worry about the hows right now. Just tell me what you want and we'll make it happen."

"Just like that?" She asked skeptically.

He shrugged. "You're not the first runaway we've housed. You know that. You're not even the first lesbian. Or married lesbian. Pregnant married lesbian is a first, but I feel like at that point we're splitting hairs. I'm not saying we're fairy godmothers and we'll make all your problems go away. Nothing's that easy."

Angie asked, "Does this really work? You and Steve? You just get to live your lives like this? Growing old and grey together, no trouble?"

Bucky shrugged. "Like I said, nothing's that easy. We've had to give up some things. There's some family members I haven't spoken to in over a decade. I've gotten the tar kicked out of me, once or twice. But generally, we're lucky. This is a safe place to live, as these things go. We keep our noses clean and people leave us alone. Mostly."

Angie asked, "Do you ever regret it?"

Bucky smiled. "Never. I met Steve when I was eight years old and I've pretty much loved him ever since. I don't believe in much, but I believe he's my soul mate. If there's a God above, I don't want to piss him off by questioning that."

Angie traced lines in the condensation on her bottle. "I was sixteen. Peggy was twenty-four. She kept saying she was way too old for me but I knew what I wanted. Still. We just wrote for the first two years. She was with the army for awhile after the war but the first thing she did as a civilian was take a long train into the city and ask me out on a date. We were together for about a year and a half after that. We lived in the same boarding house and we used to sneak into each other's rooms at night. I kept saying we should get a place together but she wanted to see where she could find work."
first. I was nineteen and I just wanted to be an actress so I was willing to follow her anywhere."

"What happened?" Bucky asked.

Angie swallowed hard. "We got caught. The housemistress phoned my parents and they came and picked me up, dragged me home with them. Peggy went back to England to visit her mum and to get her "head back on straight." When she got there, she met a guy and got married. I started working as a typist for a while. Dated a few girls on the sly. Then I met Anthony. He wasn't a bad guy then. He's not one now, really. He just gets caught up sometimes. He seemed to like me. My family wanted me to marry him and...honestly, if I was never going to see Peggy again, I didn't care who I ended up with. Anthony doesn't want kids so I didn't have to give him any. I just put in my time and hoped that maybe some day I'd be happy. Then about a year ago Peggy wrote me, saying she had gotten divorced and was living in New York. I started writing her back and...well, it was clear she had been missing me just as much as I was missing here. Anthony found one of her letters and he got jealous. That was four months ago. He was angry, we were stupid, and got ourselves knocked up. And when I realized it...well, I figured it was now or never. If I don't leave now, I'm never going to leave him. And maybe I'm a terrible person, but I don't want this baby. I'm fond of it, but it's not mine, you know. It feels like an extra passenger. It's just sort of there and I'm fine with it being there but once it's out in the world...I don't want to be its mother. Does that make me a terrible person?"

Bucky shook his head. "No, Angie, of course that doesn't."

She put her empty bottle down and sat beside him on the step.

"You asked me what I wanted," Angie said, wiping away a silent tear. "I want Peggy. I want what you have. I want to be with the woman I love. So if there's some magic way you can do that, I want that. I want the baby to be born healthy, happy, and grow up with someone who really wants her. I want her to know who I am, I want her to be in my life, and I want to love her but I don't want to be her mother."

Bucky put his arm around her. "We can do that."

"And this part is going to sound real stupid," Angie chuckled. "Real stupid."

"Shoot."

"Would you and Steve consider taking her?"

Bucky's heart stopped. "The baby?"

Angie flushed. "Since I found out I was having her, I kept having dreams about the people who were going to raise her. I had all these hopes for her, the life I wanted for her. And when I saw the two of you last weekend...I don't know. When our eyes met, she kicked me real hard like she was trying to say, "There he is, Angie, there's my dad!" And then a second one for Steve like "and there's my other one!" I told you, it's real stupid, I just thought I'd say something before - look, it's just all the hormones, I'm sorry, you've been real sweet to me and here I go and make a fool out of myself."

"Did you talk to Steve about this?" Bucky managed to ask.

Angie got up to her feet, apologizing, "I shouldn't have said nothing. I'll go make myself scarce. I'm sorry, I'll go."

She ran inside and Bucky stood at the threshold of the apartment in shock. Wanda and Steve stopped what they were doing, watching as Angie ran to the guest room. Wanda handed Tom over to Steve and went after her friend to comfort her.
Steve frowned and looked to Bucky. "Is everything okay?"

Bucky was too stunned to do more than give a halfhearted nod. Steve kissed his shoulder before handing the baby to him.

"I should phone Becca back," he said, "before all of Brooklyn is lighting fireworks in my name instead of Washington's. Do we have any more sodas?"

"I'll get more," Bucky offered. "You got his toys somewhere?"

"Box under the couch. Blanket's in the linen closet."

Bucky tried not to listen in on Angie and Wanda's conversation as he went to get Tom's blanket. He made out a few words but focused instead on the wriggling child in his arms. Once Tom was settled in the living room, Bucky kissed Steve on the forehead and headed out to the store. All the way, his heart threatened to choke him. He had heard her correctly. He knew he had. But she couldn't have meant it. He couldn't have been actually considering it. He needed to stop imagining Steve's face when he found out. He needed to stop thinking of baby names. He needed to focus on one thing: sodas. He would get the drinks and the rest he could worry about later.

Despite his resolve, he found that he could not stop smiling.

***

Peggy Carter was the sort of woman that picked up on the first ring. Steve talked to her first, almost blushing as he twisted the phone cord around his fingers. Bucky was more amused than jealous and teased him about it afterwards.

Of all the romantic ways to reunite, the two women would finally see each other again on Coney Island. Surrounded by the entire Barnes clan. Well, not surrounded, but close enough to make it less a date and more a family outing. The children were already running around getting sick on treats and finding new rides to throw up on. The adults were playing carnival games, most of them attempting to win a prize for their significant other. The vets attempted to best each other at the Strongman only to have Steve nearly break it with a single blow.

As the sun dipped in the sky, everyone was collected to see the fireworks off the pier. Steve squeezed Bucky's hand and he managed to watch the show without flinching too much. When the last spark faded into the river, Bucky found Angie sitting alone on a bench. Bucky sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulder. She rested her head on his shoulder.

"How'd it go, Ang?" Bucky asked.

Angie smiled sadly. "Perfect. That's the problem. It went too damn perfect. I thought a decade apart would make us strangers but it's like nothing's changed. I still love her, Buck. I think I'm always going to love her. She wants me to move in with her. Shack up like old boring married ladies. I told her about the baby. She says she'll support me no matter what but she seemed relieved when I said I was going to give it away. You said nothing's that easy. So what am I missing here? Why is this so hard?"

Bucky said, "You know all the reasons it ain't easy. You know, when Steve and I got together, my dad said to me that we would have to rely on each other more than most married people did. It's a lot of pressure on two people. You fight hard, you love harder. And it's a hell of a gamble. But it's worth it. I love my Pa but if he had made me pick between all of them and Steve, I would have socked him and never spoken to him again even if it broke my heart to do it."
"There's no one in my life," Angie admitted. "No real friends besides Wanda, not much family. I'm really scared, Bucky. I've been dreaming about this for years and now I don't know how I'm going to do any of it. I don't. Not by myself."

"You're not alone. You've got a home with me and Steve if you want it. Don't do it for Peggy. Do it for you. You deserve to be happy. So you come to the city and start your life on your own terms. We'll be your family, all of us."

"I won't be able to see Wanda again," Angie worried. "I can't go back there."

"Let us worry about that," Bucky assured. "Let's just start planning how to get you out, okay? Steve's the smart one, we'll talk it over with him tomorrow. Now, you and me are going to join the rest of that mad crowd over there and go have some burnt cake that Wanda made and a much better back up cake that Becca made. You ready?"

"Yeah. Let's go have some cake."

***

Neither Bucky or Angie slept that night. They sat out on the fire escape, sharing a cola. They talked for hours until dawn started to rise across the city. Exhausted, Angie finally turned to him, smiling as brightly as someone up all night can.

"I'm going to do it," Angie confirmed. "I'm going to leave him. Next weekend. If you're willing, drive up on Friday. I'll have everything ready. I'll just get in the car and go. I'll worry about all the legal stuff later. I'm going to leave him."

Bucky clapped her on the back. "I'm proud of you, Angie. This is going to be real good, you'll see. We're behind you, hundred percent. Why don't you phone your girl and tell her the good news?"

"Just one thing," Angie said, clearing her throat. "I meant what I said before. I've been thinking about it a lot. I didn't think it was right to do all this without figuring out what to do about the baby. I want to give her away. Anthony won't want her and she needs to be with someone who does. I want you and Steve to think about it. I don't know if that's something you want, but that's what I've been thinking. We've got time. But...would you consider it?"

Bucky trembled as he nodded. "Yeah, I'll talk to Steve. We'll figure it out. If not us, we'll find her a good home. Okay?"

Angie smiled in relief. "Thank you, Buck, thank you for everything. I'm going to go phone Peg now. Then I guess we should go get some sleep."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek before running back into the apartment. She was on the phone in a flash and Bucky stumbled back into his room. He snuggled up to Steve who was just starting to wake up.

"Everything okay?" He asked sleepily.

Bucky found it hard not to grin. "Everything's just fine, doll."
Bucky waited anxiously for Steve to return home from West Point. The oven was keeping dinner warm, the champagne was on ice, and the bed was made with crisp clean sheets, flower petals strung a top the duvet, and all needed accessories stored close by. He had dressed in a suit, which was a little tight around his middle now, but he had to admit that he looked good. Not just good for forty-two. Just damn good.

He bolted up when he heard the door open and turned on the record player. Steve entered the room and looked around in amusement.

"Am I having another birthday party so soon?" He teased.

Bucky kissed him sweetly. "Go get cleaned up. It's going to be a romantic night."

"Cleaned up cleaned up?" Steve asked, raising an eyebrow. "Am I dressing fancy or..."

"Just slip into something comfortable," Bucky coaxed. "I'll serve."

Steve went off to the bedroom and Bucky laid out the meal. He was just pouring the champagne as Steve returned in his best black slacks and a blue dress shirt with the first few buttons undone. He had slicked his hair back, showing the white at his temples, which only better highlighted his fair blonde hair.

"You look beautiful," Bucky murmured.

Steve blushed. Bucky loved he could still make him blush.

Bucky pulled out a chair for him and handed him a flute. Steve took a sip and sat, laying a napkin in his lap.

"Ratatouille," Steve said. "How European of you."

"One of the five things I know how to make," Bucky commented. "You've always spoiled me with your cooking."

Steve waved him off. "I've just read a lot of cooking books. When you're stuck in bed, you read absolutely anything."

He gave a little rap on the table with his knuckles. It was habit they both had when they talked about Steve's illness. Ten years without pneumonia, five years without bronchitis. They never wanted to push their luck.
They ate relatively quietly, looking up at the other with a sheepish grin. Once they were done, Bucky put the dishes away and poured them both another glass of champagne.

"So if not my birthday, what are we celebrating?" Steve asked.

Bucky put down his drink and offered his hand. "Come dance with me."

Steve let him lead him into the living room where the record player still spun. They stepped in time together, moving as only those who had learned to dance together could. They gazed into each other's eyes and Bucky remembered, not for the first time, how nervous he had been the night he had told him he loved him. Right before he left for Wisconsin. Right when it seemed like there were only moments left to be together.

Now it felt like they had all the time in the world. Now he felt young.

"There's something I need to ask you," Bucky admitted. "I think I know the answer but I want to hear it from you."

"If you're asking me to marry you, it might be a bit too soon," Steve joked. "Maybe after the Second Vatican Council someone in the church might recognize our relationship but I still wouldn't hold my breath."

"I know," Bucky said, brushing his nose against his. "No symbolic wedding for you. It would be fun though. Nice little party. People might get us presents."

"I don't need anything or anyone but you," Steve assured. "I never have."

"I want to give you everything I can. Is it so bad to dream a little?"

Steve smiled. "No. Nobody can stop anybody from dreaming. What did you need to ask me, Bucky, if you weren't offering to make an honest man of me?"

Bucky swallowed hard. "Will you have a baby with me?"

Steve's smiled faltered. "What?"

"Angie's leaving her husband. She wants her kid to go to a good people and she wants us to raise it. If we want. I told her I'd find them a good home no matter what but her first choice is us. We've got some time to think about it but-"

Steve silenced him with a hungry kiss. Bucky caught his breath and kissed him back, cupping his face in his hands.

"Yes," Steve whispered, happy tears in his eyes. "Yes, I'll have a baby with you."

Overjoyed, Bucky picked him up and brought him into their bedroom. Steve pulled them both onto the bed, laughing as rose petals stuck to his shaving balm.

"You old romantic," Steve said, brushing the stray hair from Bucky's eyes.

Bucky started unbuttoning his shirt. "Well, just because we're not the ones making our kid doesn't mean we don't get to have a little fun."

Steve grinned slyly. "You want to play at baby making?"

Bucky felt a little flustered but carried on. "Well...if you're up for it."
Steve pulled him into a deep kiss and rolled him beneath him.

Bucky laughed. "I guess that's a yes."

"Shut up and get out of those pants," Steve ordered, nipping at his neck.

Bucky sighed happily. "If you insist."

He took off his belt and kicked off his slacks while Steve stripped him of his shirt and tie. He lay entirely naked beneath a fully dressed Steve, hard and vulnerable and waiting for him to make another move.

Steve kissed him again before taking off his own shirt and tossing it aside. Bucky put his hand on his chest, feeling his heart race. His other hand undid his belt and fly, slipping his hand inside. Steve bit his lip and grinded against his hand before standing and taking off the rest of his clothes.

Bucky leaned on his elbow, watching him slowly strip down to his bare skin. Steve looked healthy, healthier than when they had been poor twenty somethings with two cents to rub together. He had filled out, his ribs less noticeable, his skin softer and less likely to bruise. He had always been beautiful and he would never stop being slender and delicate. But he looked less and less like something Bucky could break. He had grown into himself, the age that suited his willful temperament and his profound compassion for all living things. When he stood naked like this, he looked like a piece of fine marble that a sculptor had crafted to make his own political statement. This was beauty, in all its chaotic nature, in all its self-destruction and renewal. He was truly, profoundly alive.

Steve knelt above him, pressing his forehead to his. Bucky kissed him deeply, running his hands through his hair. Steve kissed down his chest, stopping at each mark and scar, before running his tongue up his cock. Bucky shuddered and let him work, licking and sucking until he grew hard. He pulled Steve up into a kiss and fumbled around for the lubricant he had hidden in the bedside table. He squeezed a little on his hand and reached between Steve's legs, only to find that his fingers easily slid into him. Another wave of desire shot through him.

"I thought I'd get a head start," Steve said. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Never," Bucky groaned. "Do you want me to go down on you first or-"

"If you haven't gotten the hint, I want you inside of me. Now."

Bucky still curled his fingers inside of him, coaxing and stretching until he was satisfied that Steve could take him. His husband took Bucky's cock in hand, stroking him until it became too hard to focus on anything else. Bucky pushed his hand aside and rolled him beneath him. Steve wrapped his legs around him and Bucky thrust into him. Steve took himself in hand just to get fully hard and then rested on his elbows, watching Bucky take him. His cock bobbed with each thrust, rubbing against Buck's stomach. Steve arched his back and Bucky kissed down his throat, biting just below his collarbone. Steve shuddered as Bucky sucked the bruise for a moment before taking his nipple into his mouth. Steve cried out and bit down on his own hand, letting Bucky roll his tongue over and over until Steve started panting. He looked at Bucky desperately and Bucky put his own hand over his mouth, letting Steve scream into his palm as he screwed him into the sheets. Steve cried out as Bucky bit into his skin, as his fingers dug into his hip. Steve fisted his own cock, pumping until it was almost purple with need. Bucky looked up to meet his gaze and Steve shuddered, nodding for him to keep going. Bucky gripped him harder and rode his body with abandon. Steve sucked on his fingers, the sound so obscene and so filthy that Bucky faltered, his thrusts losing their timing.
"Stop," Bucky hissed.

Steve let go of his fingers long enough to whisper, "Make me."

Bucky kissed him, crashing his mouth against his until he felt Steve unraveling beneath him, his hand brushing against Bucky's stomach as he jerked himself through his climax. Bucky picked up speed, rutting into him in a desperate attempt to come with him, to hit that bliss together. Steve cried out and Bucky clamped his hand back on his mouth, pushing him into the mattress for a few final thrusts. He kissed Steve as he came, overcome with love for him.

Their eyes met and they both caught their breath.

"Was that alright?" Bucky asked. "That wasn't too rough?"

Steve grinned. "What do you think?"

Bucky smiled in relief. "I think I'm the luckiest man in the world. I love you."

Steve kissed him softly. "I love you too."
Bucky left the engine running as he waited for Angie. It was near midnight and he didn't want to wake anyone up with the sound of the engine turning back over.

Within a few minutes, she was outside with two large suitcases and a duffel bag. Bucky got out of the car and helped her get her things into the back seat. She sat in the front, looking pale as a sheet. She gripped his hand tightly and he waited for her to let go before driving away.

Angie bit her fist, closing her eyes to not cry.

Once they got back on the highway, she started to relax. Bucky turned on the radio and they listened to some conservative talk show about the moral state of the nation. Perhaps they should have been concerned about this man's condemnation of their lives, but at the time it seemed strangely funny. By the time it was over and the music began again, they were both in tears laughing.

By the next commercial break, Angie had closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. Bucky didn't know if she was sleeping or not, but he turned down the music anyways. It was good for her to get some rest.

It was past two in the morning before they got back to the apartment. Bucky brought up the bigger of the two suitcases and the duffel bag, leaving Angie with only the one piece of luggage. They entered the apartment to see two people sitting in their kitchen drinking tea. Across from Steve sat a shockingly beautiful woman on the right side of forty. Bucky would have introduced himself but it was clear she only had eyes for Angie.

Angie ran into her arms and held her tightly. Peggy kissed her forehead before cradling her, protective in a way that resonated with Bucky. It made him like her already.

Peggy's English accent was pleasant and only emphasized the tenderness in her voice. Angie smiled and reassured her she was fine but Peggy seemed to be looking for any sign she might be hurting.

"It's been a very long day," Steve finally said. "I think my poor husband needs to go to bed. Angie, you remember where everything is, right? You two help yourselves to anything you need. Sleep dreams, both of you."

Steve took Bucky's hand and led him back to their bedroom. He kicked off his street clothes and lay in bed naked, too tired to do anything else. Steve tucked him in before lying down beside him and turning off the light.

***

Steve didn't go to Mass that morning and instead made breakfast for all four of them. Bucky tried to help but he shooed him away and forced him into his most comfortable housecoat and slippers.

Angie and Peggy were both up fairly early but had stayed in the guest bedroom until breakfast was ready. Peggy had clearly slept in her clothes but Angie was wearing a nightgown and slippers shockingly close to Bucky's. Once Peggy had her first cup of coffee, she was right down to business.

"So what is the plan for today, gentlemen?" She asked.
Bucky replied, "Today, we keep a low profile. We'll be finding out real quick what sort of man your husband is, Angie. If he's looking for a fight, I want you here. Not that you two can't take care of yourselves but it's good to have some company. Miss Carter, I've heard you work 9 to 5. I think for this week it'd be smart for you both to stay with us. Steve can be with Angie during the day. Once you get settled, well, then you're off to living a long happy life together."

Angie's voice trembled. "And the baby?"

Steve smiled and took Bucky's hand. "We'd be honoured to raise her."

Angie grinned through her tears. "You're serious? Really?"

Bucky beamed. "Yeah, we are."

Peggy sighed in relief and put her arm around Angie. "That's wonderful. We should start considering the legalities of that sooner rather than later. The State of New York won't let two men adopt a child so we'll have to work our way around that."

"What do you suggest?" Steve asked.

Angie explained, "I've been thinking this out the last couple of days. What I'd like to do is write one of you on the birth certificate as her father. Then after she's born, I'll file for divorce saying that I stepped out on Anthony. That way I can be free of him and one of you can be her legal father. The other person wouldn't be able to adopt her too but it could work. What do you think?"

Bucky frowned. "You'd be putting yourself at real risk here, Angie. You could end up with nothing or arrested."

"He's not going to put up a fight," Angie promised. "I know him. If I ask for nothing, he'll give me no trouble. But you'd be putting yourselves at risk too. Some Social Worker might come by and see the two of you living together. And if you ever split up, the other will have no rights to her."

Steve squeezed Bucky's hand harder. "We're not splitting up."

Bucky agreed, "He's right. Still, let's get through the next few days and we'll figure it all out then. You're not due until December, right? We've still got time."

The phone rang and everyone froze. Bucky got up, squeezed Angie's shoulder and answered the call.

"Hello?"

Victor hissed almost silently, "James, is she with you?"

Bucky instructed, "Pretend we're talking about the Yankees. You just say yes or no to things, okay?"

Victor's voice eased. "Berra's doing real swell this season. He can't top last year mind you but you should have heard the crowds last game, Barnes. Thanks for getting me those tickets for my birthday, you're a real pal."

Bucky looked skywards and mouthed a thank you before answering Victor, "She's with me. She's safe. Is he there with you?"

"Yes, yes, but come on, how many guys go eighty-eight error free games? Did any of your Dodgers ever do that? Please."
"How pissed off is he?"

"I know I wasn't thrilled when they sold off Del Greco but I didn't shed any tears, that's for sure. I think I saw it coming."

Bucky asked, "Is she safe? Is he going to come after her?"

"Well, I don't know about that. It's late in the season for a trade, really. My guess is that he'll stay right where he is."

"Okay. Call me when he leaves, will you?"

"Oh, say, James, I'm got Anthony right here with me. He was saying that he and Angie had a bit of a fight and he thinks she ran off. Wanda and I haven't heard from her. She give you a shout at all?"

Bucky said, "Thanks, Victor. I owe you one."

"Well, that's alright then. Give me a call if you do. You know women. She'll come to her senses at some point and come home. I'll talk to you later then. Take care."

Bucky hung up the phone and sat back down at the kitchen table.

"He's at the Shade house right now," Bucky explained. "Victor's covering for us. I don't think he's figured out that you've left for good, Angie. So far he seems to be taking it okay."

Angie rested her head on Peggy's shoulder and closed her eyes. Peggy kissed her forehead before looking back at Bucky and Steve.

"She needs rest," Peggy said. "Do you mind if I stay a little longer?"

"Stay as long as you like," Steve encouraged. "Our home is your home."

The phone rang again. This time Steve answered.

"Hello, Winnie," Steve greeted cheerfully. "Yes, we'd love to come over but we have some guests staying here and I don't want to be rude. Well, hold on a moment."

Steve covered the receiver and looked at the other three. "Would it be okay with everyone if I invited Bucky's parents over for dinner?"

Bucky froze. Since they had moved to the Village, Pa had been in his apartment exactly twice. He was understanding but he was still uncomfortable being in the space. Ma had been over a handful of times more but she had also made it obvious that she preferred Bucky and Steve to visit them in Brooklyn.

"Why don't we go out?" Bucky offered. "We'll meet them at that old diner Pa likes. My treat. I'm sure the ladies wouldn't mind going out, would you two?"

Angie laughed. "As long as we're not going dancing afterwards. I think my feet would just about kill me."

Steve uncovered the phone. "Hello, Winnie? Yes, Bucky just said he'd like to take us all out for dinner. At Mel's? Great. Why don't we say about six or so? Yes, we have two friends staying with us, Angie and Peggy. Angie's from Queens but Peggy's English. Yes. Yes. No, no don't worry about that. We'll pick you up. Bucky still has the car from the shop. We'll see you then. Bye, Winnie, love you too."
Peggy asked skeptically, "That was Bucky's mother? She's...fine with everything."

Steve shrugged. "The woman's known me since I was seven years old. I can't say she was thrilled at first but it's not like Bucky can do any better than me."

Bucky gave him an affectionate shove. "Punk."

"Go get some sleep," Steve offered. "It's only eight, we've got all day."

***

Ma and Pa Barnes had learned a long time ago not to ask too many questions about their son's friends. Neither of them asked Angie or Peggy about their husbands or where they were from. They asked about their thoughts on movies or music or if Peggy had enjoyed Coney Island. Ma shared pregnancy stories with Angie but never asked about the father or what her plans were. As Ma had said once to Bucky, they just now assumed that all their friends were leftist communist homosexuals. It was easier that way than sticking one's foot in their mouth.

They drove back to Brooklyn to drop his family off. Before they got out of the car, his father patted him on the arm and said, "Come see me after work tomorrow. There's something I want to talk to you about, father and son."

"Am I in trouble?" Bucky joked.

"Nothing serious. Just wanted to talk about the Yankees."

Their eyes met and Bucky realized his father had spoken to Victor. Pa waited for him to respond, glancing at Angie before glancing back at him.

"All right," Bucky said. "I'll see you around five thirty."

Bucky drove back to the apartment in silence, letting the other three happily chatter away in the back seat.

Chapter End Notes

I have never researched something as much as the baseball dialogue because seriously dudes I know nothing about baseball. Like nothing. At all.
Bucky walked from the garage to his parents' house. It was late in the afternoon but his mother didn't seem to be home. He called out for both of them and eventually his father answered. He handed him a cigarette and they headed out for the alley. As he lit up, Bucky wondered if he and his child would have a place they went to talk. The fire escape? Maybe, but he'd always worry they'd fall.

Pa took a drag and blew out a long line of smoke. "All right. Tell me what's going on. Your pal Victor told me you're harbouring a runaway. She's no kid either. You've stolen a woman away from her husband, Buck. His baby too. Now Angie seems like a nice young lady and her...friend does too. I try to stay out of these things but I know Victor's scared of me so if he's phoning begging me to talk to you, I know things have got to be bad."

Bucky admitted, "She's a lesbian, Dad. She met the right one a decade and a half ago and she's only getting to be with her now. If you're going to start lecturing me about cheating and the sanctity of marriage, leave it. In the right world, those two would have been hitched years ago. They're taking a big risk to try to make it work. I got lucky with all of you. Folks like us need to stick by each other, be the families we don't have. Victor won't get that. That's okay. The man's his brother in arms and his superior officer. He's got his loyalties and I've got mine. And I know you're going to mention the baby. He doesn't know but he's made it clear he doesn't want kids."

"The two of them going to raise it then?" Pa asked, raising an eyebrow. "They setting up house for real then?"

Bucky flicked the ash off the cigarette. "Actually, she's planning on giving it away. Well...she's uh...Steve and I are going to raise it. As ours."

To Pa's credit, he didn't laugh even though he looked like he wanted to.

"Bucky," he said, trying to keep a straight face. "You two are...um, how do you intend to explain that one away? I think the kid might notice that you two did not exactly make them together."

Bucky explained Angie's plan and as he did, Pa's face softened and the merriment left his eyes. When he was done, Bucky waited nervously for him to respond.

"You're serious?" Pa asked. "You're going to be this kid's father? Both of you?"

Bucky nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, that's what we're going to do."

Pa took a very long drag and tapped his fingers against his knee.

Finally he said, "Well then, I think...I think that's great. Really...this...Jesus, Buck, this is doing my head in. I'm happy though. You two will do just all right, I know it. I know they're always going to be loved and that's not something every kid gets. This is going to be hard though, harder than anything you've ever done, and you're going to have to live with that secret until they're grown"
enough to resent you for it. One day that kid's going to ask where they came from and they might not like the answer."

Bucky shrugged, trying to seem unaffected. "Then we'll deal with that when it comes. Any adoptive parent would have to worry about that."

Pa sighed. "I know you're a stubborn cuss but I know you're a smart man. You always have been. I'm sure you've thought it all through. Steve must be excited. I saw him with Tom. That boy's been itching for a baby in his arms. I guess not many men like you get to do that for their other half. I am happy for you both. I know I'm not sounding like it right now. It's the same as when you two got together. I was happy but I knew how rough it was going to be. This isn't the way I would have picked things for you but you've got to make your own path. I respect that."

"Thanks Dad," Bucky murmured.

"Now then, there's one thing I've got to say about this plan. I think you're making a mistake. If only one of you can be on that birth certificate, it should be you. What are you going to do if something happens to him? The State's not going to recognize you as the kid's father and if you fight it, you're going to end up in jail. But if something happened to you, the kid would be given to me and your ma. Steve would just move in with us, like he would have if you didn't ever come home from Germany. Think about it, really think about it, then you tell me what's the smartest thing you can do for your child."

Bucky was stunned. "You would really do that?"

"Damn right I would. We could raise another kid if we needed to, especially if I've got your stubborn other half doing most of the work. We'd be fine. Granted, I rather you outlive me but it's smarter this way. I'm sure Steve's figured that out too. He's always been clever."

Bucky sighed. "Yeah...yeah I guess it makes sense."

His father hesitated and then said, "I would have thought of them as my grandkid no matter what, Buck. You just tell us what you need and we'll try to do it."

"Are we doing the right thing?" Bucky asked quietly.

Pa leaned back and sighed. "Boy, I've seen the way you look at each other. If the Good Lord had made it possible, you would have more kids than sense by now. But I wasn't much older than you when I became a grandpa. And well...it's going to be tough explaining things to your little guy and everyone else who wonders where they came from. But there's only one question you've got to ask yourself. Do you want this baby?"

Bucky had already dreamed of their child so vividly it felt as if he had already held her. He dreamed of her taking his hand and leading him through their apartment to see her other father in his studio. He dreamed of Steve teaching her to dance in their living room, of her on one of their laps at a ball game. He dreamed of her as if it were already a memory.

"Yea," he admitted, his smile breaking through. "I really do."

Pa nodded, tears in his eyes. "Then this is a good thing, Bucky. Though...let's keep this between us and your Ma for now. Just in case things don't work out. I'm sure they will, but just in case. I love you, son. You're going to be a great father."

"I've had a great one to learn from," Bucky said. "I wouldn't be here right now without you. You've..."
Bucky's voice cracked. "You have loved me even when I gave you every reason to throw me away. You have always been there for me, through everything. I don't think I thank you nearly enough. You're the best man I have ever known and I hope that I can be even a fraction as good a father as you are to me."

Pa hugged him tight. "There are no words for how much I love you and your sisters. You're going to understand that real soon. It's going to hit you like a train. Any real man sticks by his child, no matter what. And you...maybe your life has not been what I wanted it to be. But Buck, I could never have dreamed of a better son or a better friend. I'm so proud of the man you grew up to be."

There was nothing Bucky could say other than to tell his father he loved him but he was too choked up to get the words out. Pa seemed to understand though and patted him on the back before letting go.

"You should get back home," Pa said. "Steve'll be waiting for you. I'll call you tomorrow."

Bucky agreed and said his goodbyes. All the way home, he thought over what his father said. It made sense for him to be the legal father but...but he wanted to have Steve to have that power in the relationship. He wanted him to feel like he could leave without having lost everything. Bucky wanted to say to Steve that everything he had ever had or wanted belonged to Steve, regardless of whether or not they were together. He wanted Steve to know that he was all in. Forever.

And that's how Bucky ended up in a tattoo parlour six blocks from their house. He would come home an hour and a half later, sporting a bandage around his bicep that was mostly hidden beneath his t-shirt. Steve didn't notice, seeming to be upset, and they ate in silence. The girls left for the pictures, leaving the two of them alone.

Their dishes scraped clean, they were forced to look at each other.

Steve sighed. "I've been thinking about the baby. Maybe...maybe it makes more sense if she's yours. I...no one's going to believe that she's mine anyways. That way if I get sick again, then we don't have to worry about you losing her."

"You know, my dad and I talked about that when I told him," Bucky said. "At the time, I thought it was a good idea. And you know, it's probably the smart thing to do. But I only want to add things to your life, not take them away. You want a baby. And I don't ever want you to be afraid to leave because you'll lose her."

Steve frowned. "Buck, why would I ever want to leave?"

Bucky admitted, "I don't know. I just...I just don't want to be the one holding all the cards. I never want you to feel trapped or helpless."

"But what about you? What if you wanted to leave?"

Bucky stood and took off his t-shirt to expose the bandage. Steve looked like he was about to lecture him until Bucky unwrapped it, showing him the design. A small heart with a banner around it, inscribed with the letters SGR.

Bucky felt the back of his neck flush red. "I had a whole speech planned about me giving you my heart but it all seems real stupid now. I just mean that I'm not going anywhere. I trust you with every piece of me. You've got nothing you can take from me because I've already given you everything. And I want to. I want you to feel like you have power over me. I want to kneel before you like the prince you are and give you every gift of me I can."
As Bucky spoke, Steve rose and rewrapped the bandage. Steve tied it off just as Bucky started stammering to a conclusion. Steve's eyes looked up at him with an expression that Bucky could not quite place.

Steve finally asked, "Does it hurt?"

Bucky shook his head and Steve instructed, "Good. Then get in the bedroom, take off your clothes, and sit on the end of the bed. And maybe put a pillow on the floor in front of you. I'll be there in just a few minutes."

Bucky swallowed hard. "I thought I was supposed to be the one kneeling."

Steve smirked. "Well, when I get the matching tattoo you can return the favour. Until then, you have your orders, Sergeant."

Bucky shivered and did as he asked, taking his time as Steve freshened up in the washroom. He returned wearing nothing but one of Bucky's undershirts and rested his knees on the pillow.

Steve kissed his bare thigh and looked up at him. "You're going to wear this one tomorrow at work so try not to get anything on it."

Bucky sighed as Steve kissed up his leg and took his cock into his mouth. He grasped at his hair, pulling him closer to him. Steve relaxed his jaw and Bucky took this as an invitation to thrust into his mouth. Steve's fingers dug into his thighs and Bucky groaned, quickening his motions. Steve hummed against his cock and the feeling shuddered through him.

Bucky pleaded, "Baby, don't stop. Please don't stop."

Steve looked at him almost gleefully and stroked the underside of his shaft with his tongue before continuing. Bucky threw his head back, panting as Steve took him even deeper. Bucky forced himself to sit up to watch Steve's face but it was too much, too intense.

Bucky moaned, "You told me not to mess up that shirt but I'm going to come all over it if we keep going like this. I'll come all over that pretty mouth of yours and I want to get you off first. I'll make it good, I promise."

Steve swallowed and Bucky cried out, pistoning into him. He hit the back of Steve's throat but Steve patted his thigh so Bucky kept going, pounding into his mouth. He was getting close, so close, and then Steve stopped. He withdrew, wiped his mouth, and stood. Then he left the room. Bucky waited. And waited.

Bucky whined, "Are you coming back?"

"Nope."

Bucky stormed out to the bathroom. Steve stood at the sink, brushing his teeth innocently. He rinsed out his mouth and Bucky stood behind him, grasping his hips. He looked into the mirror to see Steve grinning at him.

"Fine you little punk," Bucky grunted.

He spread Steve's legs and bent him forward. The head of his cock brushed against his entrance, warm and soft and ready for him.

"I'm missing all the fun bits," Bucky groaned, nipping at his neck. "You never finger yourself in
"Well next time I'll get myself off in front of you and make you beat off in a sock instead," Steve threatened playfully.

Bucky seated himself in one push, causing Steve to yelp. Bucky put one hand on the counter and the other held just the base of Steve's cock.

"I'll make you beat off in a sock if you're not good," Bucky teased.

Steve moaned as Bucky hammered into him, placing his own hands on the counter. Bucky surrounded him, his body slapping against his almost painfully. Steve jutted forward, his cock unable to move in the near vice of Bucky's hand. Steve started whimpering, trying to rut against his hand but Bucky pulled Steve's arm behind his back. Steve sighed, arching towards him.

Bucky's gut tightened for the second time and he groaned into his skin.

"You okay if I finish now or you want to slink away again?"

Steve moaned, "Yes, keep going. Please. Please."

Bucky jutted forward, his heart skipping a beat. He threw his arm around Steve's chest, holding him close in his final thrusts before spurting deep inside of him. He stayed in that position for only a moment before spinning Steve around and kneeling in front of him.

Steve was not gentle and used Bucky's mouth like he'd use his fist. He spilled into him, gasping, and Bucky drank him down, coaxing him through his climax. He rose to his feet again and Steve brushed his hand against the bandage.

"We should probably go clean up," he said. "We don't want that to get infected."

"Want to take a shower with me?"

"Yes, but no funny business. Last time you ended up with a black eye and I chipped a tooth."

"Steve, I'm in my forties. If I got it up again in the next five minutes, I'd be phoning up your Pope myself to let him know about the miracle."

Steve gave his other arm a smack. "You're terrible."

"Just trying to make your next confession interesting, babe. I think the Father is going to be very excited by this next part."
Over the next week, the four of them developed their plan. Angie would move in with Peggy and they would start to settle into their lives. When the baby was born, both women would stay with Steve and Bucky for a few weeks until Angie was back on her feet and the baby was used to formula.

At first, the guys had offered to stay with them to help out but Angie immediately shook her head. She said firmly, "It's easier for me to leave my baby with her parents and for me to go back to my own home than to have you come into my home and take her away. I know this is what I want and that it's the right thing to do. But when I'm tired and sleep deprived and hormonal, I might not feel that way."

Steve agreed, "I think that's fair...Ang, if you do change your mind-"

She interrupted, "I'm not going to. And that's the last we're talking about it, okay?"

Both men nodded and did not broach the subject again. Angie started spending more time at Peggy's, turning her nesting instinct towards building the home she would have without her child.

***

On Thursday night, Bucky came home from work to see Steve on the phone, wrapping the cord around his fingers anxiously. He barely looked up at Bucky as he entered, enraptured by whatever the other person was saying and only giving the briefest of answers in return.

Bucky took over from the dinner Steve was making, trying not to eavesdrop on the conversation. When Steve finally hung up, he sat down, his hands shaking. Bucky stopped what he was doing and sat down beside him.

"Victor's been detained by the Military Police," Steve said shakily. "He and Anthony got into a fight because he thinks Victor knows where Angie is. If he's lucky, he'll spend three months in their lock up. If not, he might be up to a year in the regular prison system. Wanda's going to find out tomorrow. If I go in with you to work tomorrow, do you think I can borrow a car?"

Steve didn't visit him at work. It was an unspoken rule after the guys in the shop had stared at Steve the whole time and didn't talk to Bucky for a good two hours after he left. It was something that was reserved for emergencies and this felt like one.

Bucky nodded. "Yeah, we've got a Ford for sale right now. It shouldn't be a problem."

Steve sighed. "Thanks, Buck. She's really scared and I don't want her to be alone if she gets bad news."
Bucky shook his head. "When she gets bad news. He struck a superior officer. He's lucky they just arrested him. The question is how bad is it going to be and how pissed is Anthony."

Steve paled. "Do you think Wanda's in danger?"

Bucky shook his head. "Anthony will be held overnight too probably. When you get up there though, try to keep your head down. I don't want him taking a swipe at you either if he thinks we've got Angie."

"I can take care of myself," Steve insisted. "She needs me."

Bucky tried not to smirk. Steve was this much of a papa bear over a grown woman. When their kid was born, he was going to be a one-man army for them.

"Okay," Bucky said. "Should we tell Angie and Peggy?"

Steve answered, "Wanda didn't think we should until we know what's happening. She doesn't want her to get upset. What do you think?"

"I don't know," Bucky admitted. "Maybe phone her when you get up there and have more details."

Steve nodded. "Yeah, I'll do that. You want me to call you at work?"

Bucky considered it but in the end told him not to. It would be rough enough that Steve was coming to the shop at all. Having him phone later would just be another red flag. Steve understood and let it go.

In the early morning they took the streetcar together to Brooklyn. Bucky managed to get Steve in and out with only seeing Lou briefly. Lou said hello but otherwise was fairly quiet. He did not mention it to any of the other guys and Bucky was grateful.

He would spend the rest of the day worried about his family. His strange, mixed up family that seemed to rely on the strength of Steve's heart and Bucky's bull-headed determination to follow him into whatever fight he picked. And this one...this one had the potential to be one they should have stayed out of.

***

Bucky went straight to Angie and Peggy's apartment, only a few blocks away from theirs. Peggy greeted him at the door with a weary smile and invited him inside.

"Angie's resting right now," Peggy explained. "I said I'd wake her up for dinner but I don't think she's sleeping. She's been a bit of a wreck since this morning."

"I don't blame her," he said. "Any news?"

Peggy shook her head. "None. Steve said the hearing would start about two hours ago. They wouldn't let Wanda go and see Victor though. I think this is really serious, James. I'm not sure what I can do."

"Just be there for her," Bucky comforted. "Can I help with dinner?"

"If you'd like to set the table, that would be wonderful. Perhaps you'd like to clean up first though?"

Bucky smirked. "I guess I do still look like a greasy monkey. Just to the left?"

"Yes. Remember to jiggle the handle. I keep meaning to fix it but I'm afraid that I never learned any
plumbing skills at Bletchley."

Bucky said, "Let me look at it first and then I'll set the table. I don't want either of you to get flooded out in the middle of the night."

It was a surprisingly quick task. Peggy was a genius code breaker and one of the smartest people he had ever met. If she had looked at it, she probably would have realized the chain was broken but he didn't blame her for being too nervous to not notice.

When he returned to the dining room, Angie was sitting at the table, wringing her hands. Bucky sat beside her and rubbed her shoulder.

"No news is good news," Bucky promised. "We'll have some dinner, listen to the game on the radio, and we'll have a nice night in."

Angie looked worn. "Yeah...yeah, it'll be fine."

Peggy and Bucky did most of the talking over dinner, mostly about movies. Peggy revealed that when she was considering leaving her husband, she had watched *The Prince and the Showgirl* in theatre about six times. The only movie Bucky had seen that year was *Some Like It Hot* and they both gushed for a time about how attractive Marilyn Monroe was. The conversation seemed to perk Angie up a bit. She loved the pictures and everything to do with Hollywood.

The two women went into the living room and Bucky went to wash dishes in the kitchen. He made out the sound of a telephone ringing but left Peggy to answer it. Not long after, there was a knock at the door and Angie went to investigate. Bucky continued washing until he heard a scream.

He dropped the plate and ran to the front hall to find Anthony grabbing Angie's arm. He pinned it against her back and forced her to face him. Bucky noticed the shiner on his face. Victor had gotten him good.

Bucky shouted, "Let her go!"

Anthony turned to Bucky and snarled, "You. I entrust my wife to you for a few days and you betray me by stealing her away in the middle of the night. You should be ashamed of yourself. A war hero seducing a good woman away into your homosexual lifestyle. I should have known better when she had made friends with that tramp and her half-breed son. And her bastard husband lied to me, his superior officer, to continue the scheme and tried to kill me when the lie failed. I have been betrayed and I will not let that betrayal go lightly."

Bucky insisted, "Let her go and we'll talk about this like men."

"You are no man, Sergeant Barnes, you cock sucking piece of filth. You know what I did to your lover? A few friends of mine will be already at Shade's place now. They know what to do with a punk like that. You've taken what I love most and I'll take what you do, James. I'll take everything."

Angie barked, "For God's sake, Anthony, you don't love me. You're drunk and you're being ridiculous. We can talk about this."

Peggy entered the hall then, pistol in hand. She aimed it at Anthony's head. Angie's husband smirked devilishly.

"Ah, and here she is," Anthony said. "The famous Miss Peggy Carter. The woman who thinks she's man enough to replace me. Make sure you don't break your nail on the trigger, darling, and point it the right way."
Peggy clicked off the safety. "I'd rather not get your blood on my girlfriend but if I have to, I will. So I suggest you start acting reasonably now, Lieutenant."

Anthony dropped Angie to the ground. Peggy passed Bucky the gun and helped Angie to her feet. Bucky stepped in front of them both but Angie forced him to lower the muzzle and told him to put the safety back on.

"You don't love me, Anthony," Angie begged. "You haven't for a long time. But that's not why I'm here. It's always been Peggy. I want to be with someone who really, truly loves me. I want to be with my soul mate. Doesn't everyone deserve that chance? If you really care about me, the kindest thing you can do is to just let me go. Please. Please, I don't want it to end like this."

Anthony glowered at her. "I should never have married you. You want it over? Fine. I'll file for divorce but because of your infidelity. You'll never get a penny from me but I'll keep your secret. I never want to see you again, do you understand? This is your last chance. You go home with me now or stay here and rot in hell."

Angie's voice trembled. "Then I'll go to hell then."

Anthony left, slamming the door behind him.

Peggy put her hand on Bucky's shoulder. "He's bluffing. I talked to Steve five minutes ago. He's okay. He, Wanda, and the baby are all okay."

"Stay with her," Bucky ordered.

Angie pleaded, "Bucky, don't do anything stupid."

Bucky cupped her face in his hands. "It will be alright, I promise. Just stay here for now, okay? I'll be back right back."

Bucky left the apartment and saw Anthony heading into the stairwell. He raced after him, catching up to him after a flight, and throwing him against the wall. Anthony tried to throw him down the stairs but Bucky kneed him hard in the gut and tossed him onto the landing. He stood on his chest as Anthony looked up at him in fear, his head hanging off the edge of the step.

Bucky growled, "You might think I'm some sissy you can intimidate but you can't. You know what I did in the war, Lieutenant? I was a sniper. I was trained to do one thing: find a target and eliminate them. So you keep that in mind, the next time you decide to threaten my family because if you ever so much as look in the direction of my husband again, I will destroy you. I will hunt you down and I will tear you apart."

Anthony stammered, "I'm not afraid of you."

"The piss running down your leg begs to differ. Now get out of here and if you ever come back to this building, you'll be leaving in a body bag."

Bucky removed his foot and Anthony ran, tripping down some of the steps. Bucky went out into the hallway and rode the elevator back up. If the operator noticed his disarray, he was professional enough not to ask.

***

Bucky stayed on the phone with Steve for hours, needing to hear his voice. Steve told him everything between reassurances that all of them were safe. Anthony had sent friends by and they
had thrown rocks through the windows. They were all scared but it was nothing like Bucky had feared. Victor was in military prison for three months and Wanda did not want to be in their house alone for all that time. Steve would bring her and Tom back to New York in the morning and they would all figure it out then.

Bucky wanted so hard to cry but he couldn't. He needed Steve to fall apart. He needed Steve to hold him as he relived it all. Until then, though, he would settle for the comfort of hearing Steve breath.
On the one year anniversary of Bucky finding Wanda in the dumpster, Tom took his first steps. He managed to get three in before swan diving into Steve's arms. The whole household celebrated but later Bucky would come across Wanda crying on the fire escape.

"Three more weeks," she said to him. "If it had been three more weeks, then Victor would have been here to see it."

It was freezing cold but Bucky silently stood outside with her. When she had calmed down, he took her hand and they went back into the living room together.

***

When Victor was released, he asked Bucky out for a drink. They went out to a fairly nice place where the pair shared a bottle of scotch. Victor nursed his glass, letting Bucky fill him in on the months of his child's life he had missed.

After nearly an hour, Victor admitted, "I've been forced to resign from my position. I have been scheduled to return to Saigon in January. This time it will be at least eight months. I am told it is because there is a lack of communications officers but..."

Bucky sighed. "But you're getting punished."

Victor agreed quietly. "Yes. It was hard enough last time but now...I cannot lose almost a year of Tom's life. I cannot be aware from my wife for so long. The war in Vietnam has not even yet begun and I know that it will be a bloody one. I wish I had not done what I did. I lost my temper. I will have to pay for that. It will teach me patience, I suppose."

Bucky asked, "What can I do?"

"I noticed an apartment in your building is for rent. I'd like to move Wanda and Tom in there. She's interested still in translation. Perhaps she can work a little and I'll send my pay home. I owe you so much from before, but..."

Bucky promised, "We'll take care of her and Tom. Don't worry."

Victor took a deep drink and then confessed, "I have not told her. I don't know how."

"You just got to do it," Bucky said. "Wanda's tough, tougher than anyone I've ever met. You just tell her the truth and the two of you will figure it out. She loves you, Victor. That type of love fights through pretty much everything."

Victor smiled weakly. "I have...I have not always been as supportive as I could be about your relationship with Steven. I could learn much from the two of you. Forgive me."

"Victor, we've gotten a lot worse than you being mildly awkward. There's nothing to forgive. Now, let's go back home. You go spend time with your family. You've got six weeks. Get everything in now that you can."
In early December, things had seemed to settle into place. Victor and Wanda had moved in a few floors above Steve and Bucky. They came over every Tuesday night for dinner and Tom often spent two or three afternoons a week with them while his parents went out. Angie was due in two weeks and Steve had gotten the nursery ready for her. Anthony had got to Reno and after paying off the right people, he and Angie were successfully divorced and she went back to using her maiden name. Peggy and Angie celebrated by throwing a party at their place and Steve had gotten far too drunk, claiming he was drinking for two.

Bucky was getting restless, pacing around the apartment, so Steve finally took him on their Florida trip. They flew into Miami and stayed with another gay couple who lived near the beach. Every day they went down to the ocean together and while Steve just got sunburnt and freckled, Bucky started getting a decent tan. He also learned how to surf but he was no good at it compared to Julio who had competed in the amateur circuit for years.

On their second last night in the city, they received a frantic phone call from Peggy. They had just gone to see Ben-Hur and sometime during the chariot race Angie started having contractions. First thing in the morning, they drove to the airport and tried to get an earlier flight home. They waited for hours but eventually a pilot took pity on them and let them ride in the back with the crew. Most of them ribbed Steve for not being there with his wife and he played it up, joking about this being the fifth and that he figured he'd get some golf in first.

Nobody could beat Steve Rogers at pretending to be straight. If there were an Oscar for it, he would have won it every year. It was a damn impressive sight.

They took a cab straight to the hospital where Peggy waited outside for them on a bench, smoking up a storm. At the sight of them, she crushed her cigarette on the garbage bin and tossed it inside. Steve raced, reaching her first and holding her at arm's length.

"How is she?" Steve asked. "Is the baby okay?"

Peggy beamed. "They're both fine and resting. It's a girl. She's seven pounds and rosy. Visiting hours are over but we can see them both first thing in the morning."

A girl. Bucky and Steve both grinned at each other. They had a daughter.

Peggy stayed with them that night, none of them sleeping, and they returned to the hospital at seven am sharp to see Angie and the baby. The nurse looked at them all a little strangely but she allowed all three of them into the maternity room.

Bucky saw Angie first. She looked tired but triumphant, like she had gone the distance in a boxing match. In her arms, she held a tiny bundle. Bucky heard Steve's breath catch and he grasped his hand.

Peggy took the baby from her and held it out to Steve. Steve cradled her so carefully and tears ran down his face. Bucky watched, his own heart soaring. Steve was holding their daughter. Their beautiful, pink and rosy little girl with the most gorgeous lashes he had ever seen. Bucky stood behind him, holding them both in his arms as he gazed upon her.

Angie said, "They put my last name on the form just for now. I didn't know if you had decided yet whose name you wanted on the birth certificate. The nurse has been pestering me but I keep pretending to be asleep. So, which of you is the lucky father? I mean, they're not going to let me give your last name because we're not married but I've got to put one of you down."
Bucky murmured, "I'm okay with it being you, punk."

Steve shook his head. "Your dad's right. It should be you. Just in case."

Bucky looked at his little girl. It shouldn't matter, but it did. He wanted her to be Steve's just as much as his. If she were a Rogers, he was gambling that Steve would survive the next eighteen years. If she were a Barnes, he'd always feel like he stole this away from the love of his life.

It ended up being a romantic decision instead of a logical one. In the end, Bucky would always bet on the bullheaded, persistent nature of his husband. The man never walked away from a fight but he always survived them. Bucky believed in him.

"Put her as Steve's," Bucky said finally. "Write him down as the father."

Not long after, the nurse returned to the room and insisted that Angie fill out the birth certificate. He had forgotten Angie's new last name and felt a little foolish that he had assumed his daughter would go by Martinelli. He had know that Angie had meant to name a girl after her beloved great-aunt so while the lack of alliteration surprised him, it still looked just perfect on paper.

Almost everyone in her life would end up calling her Merry. In family circles, usually Merry Rogers or but when she went to school, she would always go by her legal name: Meredith Sarah Quill.

Chapter End Notes

Legitimately it was realizing that Meredith Quill was the right age to be their kid was what got me to finally start writing this for real. Before it just ended around Wanda and Victor's wedding and it felt sort of flat.
Chapter Notes

This and a few chapters coming up are a bit more skimming through the years until we get the next major plot line.

1960

Merry was not the only baby at Easter that year but she was certainly the one who drew the most attention. For one thing, Bucky kept having to explain her existence to every single family member until Pa finally shut down the conversation, saying he was tired of hearing it. Merry spent the meal on Pa's knee, eating mashed potatoes from the same spoon.

Tom was old enough that he could at least toddle after the other children. Wanda still chased after him, reluctant to let him leave her sight since Victor had returned to Vietnam. The older grandchildren were teenagers now and they talked their Uncle Steve's ear off about colleges and universities, as Steve was the only one in the family who had gone past high school. Bucky stayed with his sisters, particularly the youngest Livy who had just had what she swore was her last child. Both of them were exhausted from having a newborn and at one point Livy fell asleep on his shoulder and he ended up carrying both babies.

Peggy and Angie had been invited but they had declined politely. Peggy's brother was in town and they wanted to have a quiet dinner with him. She was telling him the truth about their relationship and while she thought it might go well enough, she wanted to just be with Angie afterwards. And Angie...well, she had seen Merry quite a few times after she had moved out but she needed a bit of distance. No one blamed her and they all tried to support her the best they could. She was going through a lot. She had gotten everything she had wanted but the road to get there had been rough.

It was too loud and noisy for Bucky to get to talk to Pa. He still hadn't told him of the last minute switch of paternity. He was half-hoping it would never come up but he also felt like he owed it to him. Just in case.

***

From an early age, Merry loved music. Angie said she used to kick whenever Buddy Holly played and that she was half convinced that she was him born again. Merry was a fussy baby for the first half year of her life but she could always be soothed by one of them putting on a record and dancing with her.

Bucky was a terrible singer and Steve not much better. But she still seemed to like the sound of them singing to her. She loved clapping and making funny sounds with her mouth and banging everything with a spoon to hear what sounds it could make. On those days, Bucky typically took over her care. The war had left him deaf in one ear and it wasn't hard to fill the other with cotton to dampen the clacks and clanks of a baby exploring the soundscape of their home.

She did not, however, like fireworks. On Memorial Day, she sobbed the whole train ride home, only finally calming down when Steve held her and started singing her *True Love Ways*. Bucky hummed along and she smiled at him happily.
After they tuck her into bed that night, Steve said, "So, should we start putting money down for a guitar now or..."

Bucky laughed. "Our daughter, the rock star."

"I meant for you to start playing. It's got to be cheaper than buying new records each month so she'll go to sleep."

Bucky lifted up his left hand. "I think that's going to have to be you, doll."

Steve sighed. "Maybe they'll start giving us a loyalty discount at Sam's."

"We can only hope."

***

On the Fourth of July, they didn't bother trying to go to the fireworks and instead had a birthday dinner party for Steve at home. To Bucky's utter shock, both of his parents came and socialized with their friends. Pa stuck mostly to Bucky but he was courteous and kind to everyone he met.

His parents left early in the evening, before the drinking and merriment really got started. Which was a good thing. Bucky was very glad they didn't see their middle-aged son drunkenly reenacting an episode of Bonanza with Wanda.

***

They spent their first Christmas Eve just the three of them. Bucky fell asleep on the couch mid story, Merry curled up on his chest. Even when he wasn't awake, he was protective enough to keep his arms around her.

Steve woke him up for dinner with a soft kiss. Bucky opened his eyes and took him in dreamily. For that was the only thing this could be. A dream. A perfect, wonderful dream that Bucky hoped he'd never stir from.

1961

Merry only went to the shop once during her infancy. She and Steve were both incredibly ill with the flu and in his feverish delirium, he had taken the bus to Brooklyn to beg Bucky to come home and take care of them both.

Bucky quickly and efficiently got them back home and tucked both into bed. He phoned Lou to promise he was coming right back, but his old friend simply laughed.

"You're about to get as sick as they are, pal. I'd rather you be yakking at home than all over that Corvette you're working on. Give everyone a bit of a brandy and try to sleep through it."

Bucky listened to the latter half of the advice and spent the next three days as weak as a kitten. He started getting nervous about going back, worried what they would say about the scene earlier in the week.

And to his surprise, all four of them were gentler with him. They would joke about when their kids were young and tease him about being an old father. Once in awhile, someone even sympathized with Steve for putting up with him.
Bucky would break his good arm later in the year during a nasty fall. Steve told him that he could quit now that he made enough for them both. But Bucky went back to work for two reasons. The first was that he was determined that their Merry was going to go to college and he was going to make sure she could afford it. The second was that he finally felt accepted. Bucky was proud enough to be bisexual but he wasn’t comfortable with a lot of Steve's activist or artist friends. They were nice people but they weren't on the same page. He wanted what he had and they seemed to be determined he should want more.

Maybe he should have. But right then, he was happy spending his days with four men who knew what could have been his deepest, darkest secret and liked him. It was type of openness that had taken him a real long time but something he wanted to hold on to. He just wanted to be in his soft, comfortable life and enjoy it. He didn't want to be a soldier for any cause, even as one as worthy as that.

He tried telling Steve that but Steve didn't understand. Once he saw a fight, he didn't step out of the ring for nothing or no one. It didn't turn into an argument like it might of when they were young. They were both settled in who they were and they didn't expect the other to change. As they grew older, they saw more and more who the other person would have become without the other. These glimpses of the stranger only drew them closer together. The other life, the other life where they were shattered and broken was not worth examining. They had been made to love each other, to balance the other, to save the other. There was no Barnes without Rogers, no Bucky without Steve.
Two women could not exactly get married legally but living together had never been quite enough for either Angie or Peggy. So on a Sunday afternoon in early May, they threw themselves a party that looked an awful lot like a wedding.

It was on the rooftop garden of their apartment building. Peggy and Angie dressed in their best. Neither wore white, joking they had gone through all the trappings last time. A friend played guitar and sang as they walked together up to the pastor. Steve stood by Angie and Peggy's brother stood by her. Bucky walked up the aisle with Merry, the little girl strewing flowers at near random as the guests chuckled. They sat at the front of the audience, Merry on his knee. Not quite understanding what was happening, she spent the ceremony picking petals off flowers.

A friend released his pet pigeons after their vows, letting the birds fly over their heads. Merry put her hands over her ears and started to whimper but Bucky held her tight and kissed the top of her head.

"It's okay, sweetpea," he promised. "They're just being friendly."

Peggy and Angie walked down the makeshift aisle. Angie reached out for Merry and she held both their hands, skipping down as well wishers clapped and hollered.

Steve went to Bucky's side and leaned against his shoulder. Bucky put his arm around him and smiled.

"I think we have the cutest little girl in the world," Steve said.

"She's looking more and more like you," Bucky commented. "The older she gets, the more I pity poor Sarah Rogers for having to raise you."

Steve gave him a light punch. "Hey, I turned out okay. She'll be alright too."

Bucky watched as Angie picked Merry up and covered her with kisses. The girl laughed happily before asking to be put back on the ground.

"I didn't think I could love someone as much as I love her," Bucky admitted. "I just want her to have it better than when we were kids. I want to give her everything."

"I think she's doing just fine, Buck," Steve assured. "She's your girl too. And if there's anything that James Barnes is, it's a survivor. Nothing is going to break her. She's pure carbon. Just like her dad."

They would dance later at the reception; the record player crooning that same album Bucky had bought him four years before. He clasped Steve's hand in his, unable to look away from his piercing blue eyes.

"You were the reason I made it through the war," Bucky admitted. "It wasn't anything about how me. It was just because I had to get home to you. I'm not tough. I'm just selfish. I needed you. I've always needed you."

Steve asked softly, "Buck, what are you so afraid of?"

Bucky couldn't put it into words that wouldn't distress him. He had lived through a war that had
killed off so many of his friends but he had been maimed. It was a price that he could pay happily. But this, what they had was another miracle. He and Steve had been able to live as they were. They were happy. They had a baby. Their family loved them. They were so incredibly lucky. If Bucky had to pay some sort of price for that, he would. He had been waiting for the other shoe to drop for the past twenty years and the tension was only growing stronger. And whatever it was...if something happened to the love of his life or his sweet baby girl, it would destroy him. His heart had always been the ruin of him and in loving his daughter he had grown so vulnerable. He was soft and he could not afford to be soft. He was gentle and he needed to be on guard. He had to protect them from the world that was dead set against them. They could be happy, so happy, but Bucky knew it couldn't last.

Steve squeezed his hand. "It's okay, whatever it is. I've got your back, Barnes. I always have and I always will. I'm not going to let anything happen to you or her. We're in this together, you and me. I promise."

Bucky kissed him, surprising himself with his own boldness. Steve gave a little gasp, stunned that Bucky had been so intimate in front of so many people, even those attending a lesbian wedding.

Bucky pressed his forehead against his. "Let's go home, punk."

***

Bucky woke in the night to hear music. He went out into the living room to see Merry dancing on Steve's feet, the little girl giggling as her father sang along. At seeing Bucky, he picked her up and held her at his hip. Bucky put his arm around him and the three swayed together until Merry fell back asleep.

1963

Steve started his first semester teaching full time at the college. Unlike Bucky, who had spent years trying to minimize their relationship in front of his colleagues, Steve was not so subtle. He never had been, really, but he encouraged his students to examine human physicality and sexuality outside a stagnant heterosexual narrative. Students had to sign a waiver before joining his life drawing classes and when women joined the class, the dean nearly had a heart attack.

After months of begging, Bucky was finally convinced to pose. He was forty-six years old with a bad arm and a gut, but somehow...somehow it was like seeing that sketch of him punching that wall. He looked like him. He looked like a soldier. It wasn't flattering, but the honesty of it meant more.

At the end of the semester, he went to see the students' final gallery display. There were portraits of dozens of people, but Steve had only selected one of Bucky. It was different than how Steve painted him. The artist didn't love him, didn't adore him. But he respected him. He thought he was powerful. And it had been a long time since Bucky had felt like that. Maybe he never had. But he could see in that moment that he was. He was a survivor. He could make it through anything. Whatever fears had grasped him during his new fatherhood and this middle life crisis, none of those mattered. He was James Buchanan Barnes and he was unbreakable.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is really short just to give a few vignettes about their lives until the next story line. I considered just jumping to 1969 but hey I did every year in Punk so why not?

I will probably end up posting the next chapter tonight because my partner is staying up to watch the Ontario election results and it stresses me too much out so I'm just going to write a whole lot of gay stuff instead.

1964

It had taken him awhile, but Steve finally got a matching tattoo. He was much less stoic about it than Bucky had been, at least in his memory, and demanded to be kissed and coddled while it healed.

Bucky didn't mind that too much.

1965

Bucky was petrified all through Merry's first day of school. What if someone called Children's Aid? What if Merry said she had two dads? They had coached her through the lie so many times but she was five years old and didn't think anything was wrong with her parents. But she was smart and she seemed to understand how important it was to say that Steve was her father and Bucky was her uncle.

When she came home that afternoon, Bucky nearly cried. It was okay. Merry Quill was going to go to school just like any other little girl. They were getting away with it. It was going to be okay.

Steve walked Merry and Tom to school and back every day for the next three years. The kids would walk hand in hand, swinging and skipping, in the way that only the dearest friends did. Steve would walk just behind them, smiling.

Sometimes, as they would grow older, Bucky and Steve shared their thoughts about the matter with each other. Maybe one day, those childhood friends would turn and see the other with new eyes. Maybe not, but they crossed their fingers. After all, it had worked out for them just swell.

1966

Bucky was stirring tomato sauce while Merry sat on the counter beside him, telling him all about her day at school and about all her friends' adorable six year old drama.

Out of the blue, she asked, "Where do babies come from?"

Bucky tried not to panic but internally he was screaming. He had not expected this talk for years and had hoped Angie would be the one who got to deal with it.

"Well, um, from adults, sweetpea," Bucky answered. "Mamas carry them in their belly until they're big enough to live on the outside with us."
Merry frowned. "But I don't have a Mama. Did you carry me?"

Bucky laughed. "No, I didn't."

"Did Daddy?"

Bucky shook his head. "No. Your Auntie Angie did."

Merry considered this for a moment and Bucky worried he had stuck his foot in his mouth. It wasn't a secret, not really, but none of them expected this conversation so young. Or this thorough.

Merry said thoughtfully, "That was nice of her."

Bucky smiled in relief. "It sure was, sweetpea."

"I'm going to go read in my room until dinner. Bye, Daddy."

She jumped off the counter and scrambled off. Bucky waited for her to come back and ask more questions but she seemed perfectly content with the answers she had gotten.

1967

On the way home from school, Merry found a starving black kitten and was determined to nurse him back to health and then raise him as her own. Both Steve and Bucky considered insisting she couldn't, but both were also proud. She had seen something that needed help, something that everyone else ignored, and took the responsibility to care for it.

They came in to tuck her in for the night only to already find her fast asleep with the kitten sleeping on her chest.

"She's definitely your daughter," Bucky chuckled. "Always stubborn for the right cause."

Steve rested his head on his shoulder. "God, I hope not. She's going to spend the next decade with shiners if she is."

"I'll teach her how to box," Bucky teased. "Just in case. She's always got Tom, but our little girl doesn't need any boy to save her."

Steve laced his fingers with his. "Everybody needs somebody, Buck. But I do think she's got the makings of a good uppercut."

1968

There was a tension in Greenwich Village that was only growing. It seemed more and more Bucky and Steve had someone on their fire escape, trying to find a safe place to sleep and get stitched up. They tried to keep Merry from finding out, but she had always been a light sleeper. Sometimes she would come out into the living room and help bring ice and bandages, saying something kind and sweet to whatever poor soul was resting on their couch.

Sometimes the police would come, pounding on their door, and Bucky would go out, talk them into leaving, and then return to Steve shaking like a leaf.

Each time, he would say to Steve that they needed to stay out of it. They were in their fifties now and they had a young daughter. They couldn't afford to get caught up in the struggles of their community.

But any time someone knocked at their back door, Bucky was always the first one out of bed and the
first one with a kind word and a cup of coffee. Steve was known as the activist, the man you went to when you needed someone who both spoke loudly and carried a big stick. But when the bar you were at was raided and your life was on the line, you went to James Barnes. He'd stand in front of you like a shield and say to any attacker the words Steve had once said so many years ago.

"No, you move."
Merry was spending the Labour Day weekend with Angie and Peggy so Bucky had no excuse to not take Steve out dancing. The little punk had been pestering him for weeks, promising it would be like the old days. Bucky hadn't taken his husband on a proper date in nearly a decade so he finally agreed to take him to the classiest of gay bars for a night of drinking and dancing. Bucky was not sure either of their livers could handle it, especially with all the young gay men and lesbians thinking that they were "just the sweetest" and paying for all their booze.

Bucky brought Steve out onto the dance floor but the music was different and the couples around them were much less conservative. For better or worse, they were men of their time. Still, they had fun and they ran into friends who had also ventured out for the night. Most of these were men and women about a decade younger, some of whom had stayed with them when they had first come to New York. They all gushed over the pictures of Merry Bucky kept in his wallet and he started to relax. It might not have been his first choice for a night out but it was good to be with like-minded company. It was good to have his arm around Steve's shoulders and flattering to have younger men eye them.

Bucky was quite drunk and leaned on Steve heavily on the way home.

Steve teased, "You didn't use to be such a light weight, love."

Bucky groaned. "That was back when we went dancing every weekend. I haven't been up this late since Merry’s been born. I forgot the clock went past twelve. How are you doing this well?"

"I stopped drinking an hour ago," Steve reminded. "$I knew one of us had to be sober enough to get home. You were so far gone I thought you'd start walking back to Brooklyn and crash at our old place.""

Bucky smiled. "That's always going to be home to me. Brooklyn. I wish Merry could have grown up there. I wish she coulda played on the streets like we did with all her cousins and family. Greenwich is good enough, but it's never going to be home."

Steve said, "I know, but it's safer here. Besides, I don't think we could afford Brooklyn anymore. It's not like when we were kids, Buck."

"Our street is," Bucky insisted. "$I want that for us, Stevie. I want to have a real home for us like my parents gave me, like my sister gave her kids."

"You're the one who never wants to stir the pot," Steve reminded, "$and I'm not going back in the closet. So unless you want to move to San Francisco" -they both shuddered at the thought of the west coast - "$then this is how it's going to have to be."

Buck rested his chin on Steve's head. "$Alright, punk. I've been losing this argument for decades, I know I ain't winning it tonight."

Steve offered, "$We could retire in Miami."

"You'd be red as a tomato all year with your skin. Nah. I've been longer here than anywhere else. You're here, that's all that matters."
"Is it? Are you happy, Buck?" Steve asked. "Really happy?"

Bucky admitted, "I am. I just wish I didn't have to hide it."

"We don't have to here. You don't have to be afraid."

Bucky explained, "That's what I mean. We came here because we were scared. We shouldn't have had to leave. We should have been just respected and appreciated as anyone else in our block. We are hiding, Steve. We've just got more breathing room."

Seeing Steve's fallen face, Bucky immediately apologized, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I didn't mean that. I mean that I wish this, that you and me right here, wasn't a thing people worried about. I wish I could go to a game with the guys and not have to watch everything I said. I wish I could buy a house on our old street and have both of us listed as owners. I wish I could have asked you to marry me and that people would be just thrilled about it."

"You want to be like everybody else?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"There's nothing wrong with being different, Buck. I'm happy, just as things are. I want to keep fighting, I want to keep making things better, but I don't need the rest of the world to condone us because we're just like them. I just want them to accept us for who we really are."

"And I want to have a life that doesn't revolve around the fact I'm attracted to men. I want to have friends that I actually have something in common with, other than we're both queer. I want to take you on a date just to the movies or to a restaurant not have to always go to a bar where the music is too loud, the drinks are terrible, and I'm always worried someone's going to rough us up on the way home. I want what we should have had, Steve, not what we're forced to have."

Steve grew quiet and pulled away from him. "No one's forcing anything on you, Bucky. If this isn't what you want-"

Bucky brought him back into his arms and kissed him hard. Steve moaned against his mouth and grasped at his hair, pulling him down to him. They heard someone talking and they quickly parted.

Bucky put his arm protectively around Steve and they quickened their pace back to the apartment.

When they got in the door, the argument seemed forgotten and both readied for bed quietly. Steve fell asleep first and Bucky laid awake, lying on his side to watch him sleeping. After awhile, Bucky got up, threw on his housecoat, and went upstairs to Wanda's apartment. He hesitated knocking on her door but she opened it before he even could.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"I just needed to talk to someone. Is that okay?"

She agreed and invited him in. She warmed them both a glass of milk and sat out on the fire escape with him. It was a little strange being that much higher up but it still felt right. This was their place.

Bucky had so many things he wanted to ask and say but found he was unable to speak. But as if she knew, she put her hand on his arm and said softly, "He loves you. I do not think you can understand how much he loves you."

Bucky would eventually go back home to find Steve awake and sketching in his studio. Bucky came in to apologize but Steve stopped him, putting his fingers against his lips.
Steve said softly, "I'm sorry. I know what you're saying. I know you're not ashamed of us. I know...I know this isn't what either of us were picturing when we were growing up and I know this isn't how either of us thought we'd raise a kid. I wish I could have given you more. I wish I could have given you better."

Bucky kissed his fingers before bringing them into his mouth. Steve sighed as Bucky sucked them, running his tongue up each charcoal tinted digit until he maneuvered Steve against the wall. Then he dropped to his knees, undid the laces on his pajama bottoms, and lowered them to reveal his half hard cock.

Bucky licked and sucked him sloppily, greedily, moaning as Steve gripped his hair and thrust into him. Steve trembled, gasping his name, pleading his name as Bucky worked him into a desperate, quivering mess.

Steve shuddered as he came, spilling down his throat. He threw his head back, panting, thrusting into his mouth. Steve tried to catch his breath but his lungs only whined. Bucky immediately rose to his feet, wiped his mouth and put his hand on his chest, encouraging him to breathe. Steve looked panicked but he put his hand on top of Bucky's. Bucky pressed his forehead to his and breathed slowly, encouraging Steve to mirror his actions.

When Steve finally recovered, Bucky asked, "Are you okay?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah...yeah, I'm okay."

Bucky cradled him in his arms and Steve nuzzled into him.

"I love you," Bucky murmured. "I don't want to fight anymore. We have a good life, you and me. I am so damned lucky to have you and even luckier you'll put up with my sorry whining ass."

Steve said softly, "We want the same thing, Buck. We're on the same page."

Bucky brought his hand to his mouth and kissed it. "Will you forgive me?"

Steve joked, "If that's how you say sorry, then we should fight more often. We're fine. We were fine before. Nothing's going to tear us apart. You're stuck with me."

Bucky smiled. "I wouldn't have it any other way."
1970

Merry's love of music only grew as she got older. By the time she was nine, she was a fairly talented pianist, practicing every day after school. Her teacher tried to force her to play classical but she loved jazz and loved improvising. Some of it was a racket but some of it was inspired. Now in the fourth grade, she had participated in the school's winter and spring recitals for two years. She was not a child musician who parents could tolerate a performance of. Sometimes Bucky could hear the other parents breathe a sigh of relief when Merry took the stage. She would play some weird things, but it was never painful.

The week before Bucky's birthday, ten-year-old Merry Quill was scheduled to play the closing act of the recital. Proud as anything, Bucky bought tickets for any member of his family who showed a vague interest. The night of her performance, the Barnes family filled up a whole two rows including Angie, Peggy, Wanda, and a now permanently home Victor. Tom was in the recital himself, playing Puck in a somewhat age inappropriate scene selection of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.

After the ups and downs of the evening, finally Merry sat down at the piano. In a very unladylike way, she cracked her knuckles and began to play.

After a night of classical music, their sweet strange daughter decided to play *Space Oddity*. Parents around them looked horrified but Bucky and Steve cheered her on. Merry was not a delicate little girl and she hit the keys like hammers, pounding out with a passion that was a little shocking to see.

At the end, she received a standing ovation. At least, from the two rows that were filled with her family. Steve brought her flowers and she held the bouquet to her chest like it was a beloved doll.

They celebrated at Bucky's parents' place where Ma cooked a big ham for all twelve of them. Merry quickly disposed of her fancy recital dress and returned back in a t-shirt and jeans. She left her red ribbons in her hair and they trailed behind her as she ran after her cousins.

"She's an odd duck," Pa commented, "but she's got a good ear. You think she'll be one of them lady rock stars? A real Janis Joplin?"

"God, I hope not," Bucky laughed. "I'll still love her if she is but I'd like if she live cleaner than all that."

"Me too," he admitted. "Still, she's going to be herself. You got to just love them as they are and hope that's enough to keep them on the right path. I wouldn't worry about her. Merry's got a good heart. There's a lot of our Steve in her. A lot of both of you. There shouldn't be, but there is. It's a little like seeing the two of you small again. It does my heart a lot of good."

Merry ran up and tugged on her grandfather's arm, insisting he play with them. He pretended to roar like a bear and chased after her. She laughed gleefully, blowing her father a kiss before running away.

***

Bucky was happily asleep in bed that Sunday morning. Now that Merry went to Mass with Steve,
Bucky took the opportunity to spread out under the covers and sleep until noon in pure comfort.

He stirred at hearing a thud but ignored it, chalking it up to the cat. As he started to drift off again, he heard Merry scream, "Daddy!"

Bucky leapt out of bed and raced into Merry's bedroom. Steve was slumped against the wall, gasping for breath. He looked up at him, terrified. Bucky took his hand in his and squeezed hard.

Bucky assured, "Just keep breathing. Nice and slow."

"I can't," Steve panicked. "I can't breathe."

Bucky placed his hand on his chest and he felt Steve's heart race, beating erratically. His cheeks were flushed and he was breaking into a cold sweat.

Bucky turned to see their daughter frozen in fear, waiting to see what he would say.

"Merry," he said, attempting a smile. "Dad's just a little sick right now. Can you go get your Aunt Wanda? I just need a little help getting him back to the couch."

Merry ran out of the room and up the fire escape to the Shades' apartment.

Bucky said as calmly as he could, "I'm going to get you to the hospital. Just keep breathing, okay, Stevie? We're going to get you to a doctor."

Wanda raced down into their room and Bucky instructed her to phone for an ambulance. He helped Steve sit up and sat with him, keeping his hand on his chest.

Steve pleaded, "Don't let her watch me die, Buck. I don't want it to be like with my Ma. Don't let her watch."

"You're going to be fine," Bucky promised. "This isn't how Steve Rogers goes."

Steve laid his hand on top of his, shivering. Bucky coached him to breathe and closed his eyes. It would be okay. It would have to be.

***

There wasn't enough room for Bucky in the back of the ambulance so he was forced to follow him to the hospital in a cab. He practically threw his wallet at the driver, desperate to get to Steve as soon as possible. When he made it to the ER, he went right to the counter, breathless and begged, "My friend was just brought here. Steven Rogers. Can I see him?"

The orderly looked around for his chart and then apologized. "They must have taken him back already. Let me have a look around the beds and see if I can find him."

Bucky waited, drumming Space Oddity on the desk, the tune still stuck in his head. Eventually, she came back with an apologetic smile on her face.

"It sounds like he's been brought into the OR already. If you'd like, you can have a seat in the waiting room and I'll make sure someone updates you."

Bucky's heart stopped. "They're operating on him? What's wrong? Is he okay?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't get to see his chart. I promise, I'll have someone update you as soon as possible. Can I get you some coffee? Water?"
Bucky shook his head. "Is there a payphone?"

"Just by the doors there."

"I'm just making a call," he insisted. "I'm not leaving. I want to hear the minute there's anything."

He shoved his change in the payphone and dialed up Wanda. She asked a hundred questions at once but Bucky cut her off. "Wanda, listen. He's in surgery right now. I'm not sure what's going on but I'll be here awhile. Can you phone up Angie and let her know? It's probably better if Merry stays with her just for now. I'll phone you back the minute I know anything. Can you put my girl on the phone for me?"

After a brief silence, Merry's sweet voice asked, "Daddy?"

Bucky smiled. "Hi sweetpea. Dad's with the doctors now. He's okay. I'm not sure what's making him sick but I'm going to stay with him. Will you be okay staying with your Aunties for a little while?"

"How long? When is he going to get better? Can I come see him?"

"Soon," Bucky promised. "I'll phone you tonight and let you know. I love you, Merry and your Dad loves you too, very much. I've got to go now though. Everything's fine. I know it's scary but he's been sick before and he's always gotten better. Okay?"

"Okay. I love you, Daddy. Give Dad a big hug and tell him I love him too."

"I will," Bucky said. "Bye, sweetpea."

Bucky went back to the waiting room and there he waited for nearly six hours. He read every newspaper and magazine, watched highlights of every game on the TV. Eventually, just as he was drifting off, the orderly gently touched his shoulder.

"Sorry," she said. "Mister Rogers has just been moved to the ICU. My shift's just ended so I can take you up there now if you'd like."

She looked as exhausted as he was and knew she just wanted to go home.

"I can find my way," he said. "Thank you for your kindness."

Bucky followed the hall signs and arrived a few flights up. He walked through another waiting area, nodding to other tired and bereaved loved ones, and went up to another desk where a stern looking nurse was typing notes.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm here to see Steven Rogers."

She barely glanced up at him. "Your name?"

"James Barnes, ma'am. I'm his next of kin."

"Your relationship to Mister Rogers?"

Bucky replied, "I'm his friend."

"I'm sorry, Mister Barnes, but only family members can visit in the ICU. I'm afraid that you'll have to make do with a phone call from him when he's ready."

Bucky was stunned. "I've visited him in the hospital before."
Her voice grew cooler. "Then that was against regulations. I am afraid that will not be possible today."

"Can you at least tell me what's wrong?" Bucky asked. "I need to tell his daughter, she's going to be worried sick about him."

"She is welcome to visit on her own," she replied. "But you cannot accompany her."

Bucky insisted, "She's ten. I'm not letting her cross town on the bus by herself to visit her dying father alone. Please, just tell me if he's alright."

"Mister Barnes, I cannot break his confidentiality or hospital policy. I assure you that he is in the best care and that while I appreciate your dedication to your friend, the ICU can only allow direct family visitation."

"No," Bucky refused, tears streaming down his face. "You listen, ma'am. That man in there needs me. I'm all he's got. Decades ago he nearly died in a little room like that and the entire time he thought I'd given up on him. I don't know what's wrong but I don't care. I'll be exposed to anything if it means I can hold his hand. I'm not letting him die alone. So you...you're going to have to just let me on through."

"As I said, only immediate family can-"

"I'm his husband."

The nurse looked at him, somewhat stunned, but quickly recovered. "Whatever your...relationship is, it does not change the facts. I'm sorry, Mister Barnes, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Mister Rogers can contact you regarding his condition if it changes."

Bucky sat back down in his chair. "Then you're going to have to call security to drag me out, miss, because I'm not going. You go tell them to kick a middle-aged disabled vet out on his ass. Go ahead. Go tell them all about me being a pansy too, that might help motivate them. Then when they beat the shit out of me, you can put me in the ICU right beside Steve."

The nurse gave him a dirty look and walked off, presumably to phone security. Another nurse at the desk waited until she was in her office before running over and whispered, "I can't get you in yet but if you come back in an hour at shift change, I'll sneak you in. You should get out of here now though, before security sees you."

"Thank you," Bucky sighed, grasping her hands. "Thank you."

Bucky spent the next hour drinking a coffee incredibly slowly in the cafeteria downstairs. He checked his watch constantly and returned back in exactly an hour and one minute.

The nurse glanced to make sure her supervisor was gone before taking Bucky by the elbow and sneaking him into a private room.

"I can only give you five minutes before they start doing rounds," she warned.

Bucky wasn't listening. All he could see was Steve laid out on the hospital cot, his gown barely covering the massive bandage over his chest and the tube draining out of it. An oxygen mask was tightly affixed to his face. He was clearly unconscious but he still winced at each attempt to breathe.

Bucky sat down beside him, shaking. He put his hand on his, brushing against the IV drip embedded in him.
The nurse said gently, "He had a collapsed lung. The doctor suspects it is has been a slow process rather than a sudden event. They've done a surgical procedure to try to repair the damage."

Bucky asked, "How could this happen?"

She explained, "Usually an injury. Sometimes an illness. Sometimes they just...happen. I saw on his chart that he has asthma. He might not have noticed the initial signs or just assumed it was part of his condition."

"Will he be alright?"

She hesitated. "It depends on how much tissue died. I can't say for sure. He made it through surgery and he's stable right now. He has a decent chance at a full recovery but if the lung suffered a great deal of necrosis, he may lose it. We won't know for a few days at least."

Bucky swallowed hard. "And when will he wake up?"

She admitted, "I don't know. He's still partially under anesthesia, but he went into shock right before the operation. His body is trying to heal, sometimes it needs all its energy to do that."

Bucky whispered, "I can't leave him. Not like this."

She glanced over her shoulder. "You'll have to for now. Call in tomorrow morning around ten and ask for me. My name is Nurse Carter, Linda Carter. Say that you're my brother and you're hoping to take me out to lunch. I'll let you know how he is then."

Bucky smiled weakly. "Carter...well, that's a sign if anything is. Thank you, Nurse."

Linda replied, "You're welcome. I'm sorry about all this, I really am. Steve is very lucky to have you as a life partner. Try to get some sleep, Mister Barnes. We'll talk in the morning."

***

It was almost ten when Bucky got home but he still phoned Angie and Peggy's. Merry had waited up for his call and had fallen asleep on the couch. Bucky told them not to wake her and that he would phone again when she got home from school.

Exhausted, Bucky collapsed into bed, the cat jumping up beside him. The silly thing only ever showed him attention when Steve and Merry were gone but Bucky was real glad to see it. They fell asleep together, Colt purring against his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so originally I was going to try to smuggle MCU’s Claire Temple in there somehow and then realized that one of the original Night Nurses was named Linda Carter and that's hilarious. And since that comic debuted in 1971 and I've been trying to keep people close to their historical ages, I went with her.
Bucky woke up at dawn and watched the clock. The moment he could, he phoned into the hospital and asked for Nurse Carter. Eventually, she was able to answer his call and in a hushed tone was only able to confirm that Steve was still unconscious, but stable. She instructed Bucky to phone again at seven and apologized for having to rush back to work.

And because Bucky knew it was better than sitting around waiting, he went to work too. He stayed at the shop until six, saying nothing to the guys about what had happened but phoning Angie to ask her to drop Merry off at his parents' place.

When his shift was over, he walked to his childhood home, hesitating on the doorstep. It wasn't long until he was supposed to phone Nurse Carter. He had an image of being eight years old, hiding on the staircase as Sarah Rogers told his mother how sick Steve was and how she worried he would die young.

They weren't young anymore, no one could say that. But Steve had a lot of life left in him and Bucky wanted every year he could with him. Bucky had known, even when they were little boys, that Steve's death would destroy him. He had been fighting this day for so long, doing everything he could to keep them both alive. They had been lucky, so incredibly lucky, and his luck was about to run out. All these years later, Bucky felt like he was as helpless as he was then. He was the little boy who would sneak into the Rogers' house and lay down with Steve when he was sick for warmth. The little boy who bundled him up at New Years and kissed him at midnight. They had been so young and Bucky had already loved him so much.

Forty-five years. Almost no one got that long with their soul mate. If he lost Steve tonight...no, it was never going to be enough and if he knew Steve, he knew that his husband wasn't going to go without a fight.

Bucky went inside and Merry ran to him. He picked her up and kissed her forehead.

"What did you learn today?" He asked.

"Space stuff," she answered excitedly. "We talked all about the astronauts. Buzz Aldrin is coming to our school to talk next week and we're all supposed to write questions to ask him. Then in art class, we're making our own cartoons so I'm writing Aunt Peggy as a secret agent and she's going to fight Russians."

Bucky chuckled. "And what you gonna to ask Mister Aldrin?"

Merry shrugged. "I dunno, I got a week."

"That you do, sweetpea," he said, putting her back on the ground. "Alright, go wash up for supper. Where's your grandma and grandpa?"

"Kitchen, I think."

He patted the top of her head and she ran off. He went into the kitchen and saw his mother at the stove and his father nowhere to be seen. Ma gave him a sad smile and hugged him tightly.
"Angie told us all about it," she said. "I didn't want to make a big deal out of it in front of Merry but just know we're praying for him. If you need anything, tell us, okay? Anything at all."

"Thank you," he murmured.

She pulled away and held his face in her hands. "It's going to be okay, Buck. No matter what happens, it's going to be okay."

Bucky glanced at the clock. "I've got to call the hospital. Do you mind if I use your phone?"

"Go ahead, love. Dinner's about ten minutes away."

Bucky phoned again, asking for Nurse Carter, only to be told that she had to leave early and would not be back until tomorrow morning. Bucky thanked the operator and hung up the phone.

"No news?" Ma asked.

Bucky shook his head. "No. I'll try again tomorrow."

"It's not right," she said, stirring the stew more vigorously. "People in this day and age should know better that families all look different. If you were his wife, you'd be sitting there all night. There ought to be laws."

Bucky replied, "There ought to be laws about a lot of things. Where's Pa?"

Ma sighed. "Out in the alley. He thinks I don't know he's smoking like a chimney but I swear I can smell it even from here. You go out and talk to him. I know he'll feel better once he talks to you. He always does."

Bucky went out the back door and indeed found his father on the steps holding a cigarette as it turned to ash. He looked up at Bucky and patted the spot beside him. Bucky sat and Pa handed him the last of his smoke.

"You tell me something," Pa said quietly, "and you tell me the truth because it's all I've been thinking about since I heard about Steve. When Merry was born, who did you mark as her father? Not what you tell people, who does the State of New York think is her father?"

Bucky admitted, "Steve."

Pa rose and paced the alley, eventually kicking over a garbage bin. Bucky went over to him and tried to calm him down but Pa grabbed his shoulder.

Pa said angrily, "If Steve dies, I'll mourn him like he was my own son. We were lucky to have him as long as we did, all things considered, but no one should have to bury their child. But if I lose Merry too...I don't know if I can ever forgive you, Buck. I asked for one thing, one thing, and you didn't do it. Because you loved him? We all loved him, Bucky. We all wanted the best for you both. I asked you, I begged you, and you were arrogant enough to look the other way. If he dies, the State might take her away and we'll never see her again. You'll lose both of them. Don't you think Steve knows that too? Do you want him to die knowing that?"

Bucky was shaking now, but he wasn't sure if it was with fear or anger. His father was so certain. All he wanted in that moment was his father to tell him it was all going to be okay. To just love him.

Instead Pa just sighed and walked away, leaving Bucky alone in the alley. Not long after, Merry came out and sat down on the step. Bucky put out his cigarette, sat beside her, and put his arm
around her shoulders. She leaned against him and he kissed the top of her head.

"Dad's going to be okay, right?" She asked quietly.

"Yeah, sweetpea, he's going to be fine," Bucky promised. "We'll go see him tomorrow again and he'll be just thrilled to see you."

Merry wasn't a crier. She never had been. She had the same stiff upper lip that Steve had, that same piss and vinegar spirit that didn't let her back down or show weakness. But she cried then and it broke Bucky's heart. He brought his daughter into his lap and held her, rubbing her back. He didn't make any more promises or try to get her to calm down. He just let her feel like she was feeling and when she stilled on her own, he brought her back inside.

The four of them ate dinner together in near silence and then they took the bus home. Bucky tucked Merry into bed and went out on the fire escape for another smoke. He wasted it, mostly letting it burn to ash in his fingers, but the action was comforting anyways.

He heard the phone ring and he answered, hoping it was his father. Instead, he heard a very tired Nurse Carter.

"I'm sorry to bother you this late at night, Mister Barnes, but I was called in for a second shift and wanted the opportunity to let you know about Mister Rogers. He has been moved to a private room on the sixth floor. Now that he is out of the ICU, he is cleared for visitors, regardless of whether or not they are related. Visiting hours are four pm to six pm in the evening. Take care."

Bucky thanked her and put the phone back in the cradle. He covered his hand with his mouth to stop from screaming or shouting or crying. He was grateful, so profoundly grateful, that Steve was still stable and that he would get to see him. Bucky would go into work early and pick Merry up at school. They could go see him together. Maybe Wanda could go with them so she could take Merry home if it was too much for her. It would be okay. He knew now, it was going to be okay.

***

At four pm on the dot, Bucky left the elevator, holding both Wanda and Merry's hand. When they were told that only two were allowed in at a time, Wanda kissed them both and sat in the waiting room.

Bucky was so afraid of what they might see but when they entered his room, Steve was awake and talking with a fellow patient in a wheelchair beside him. The other patient smiled and left, giving them both a brief wave.

Steve and Bucky's eyes met and something broke in Bucky's chest. He fought every instinct he had to sweep him into his arms and kiss him, both because of the company around them and because Steve's chest had to hurt something fierce. So he grinned like a devil and Steve beamed at him in return.

"Dad!" Merry cried out, vaulting herself onto the bed beside him. Steve winced as she snuggled into him but his face eased as he hugged her.

Bucky sat beside him and Steve clasped his hand, the IV still painfully sticking out from his skin.

Merry started a long spiel about the last few days, how much she missed him, everything she had learned and done, all the gossip about her childhood friends. Steve spoke to her like she was the only person in the entire world and Bucky's chest ached again, seeing how much Steve truly loved their
daughter. Eventually, Wanda came in, gave Steve a quick hug and kiss, and brought Merry back home.

Bucky and Steve only had an hour together but that seemed like such a gift. Steve touched his face weakly and Bucky kissed his palm.

"How are you feeling?" Bucky asked.

"Like shit," Steve laughed painfully. "You?"

"Like I just saw you come back from the dead."

"Not far from it," Steve admitted. "I saw my mother, Bucky. It was like she was right there beside me. I thought she was waiting for me to go with her."

He wheezed and Bucky helped him sit up and drink some water.

"Nurse says a week until I can go home," Steve managed. "Maybe more. I dunno if we can afford-"

Bucky said, "We can. You need to really fully recover from this because I'm not having you back here for a good few decades at least. You got that, punk?"

Steve smiled. "Love you."

Steve fell back asleep not long after but Bucky sat by his side until he was asked politely to leave. He kissed Steve's cheek and headed to the bus station. When he got home, Wanda, Tom, and Merry were watching TV together. Wanda had made them all dinner and Bucky ate the plate she had set aside for him. Wanda eventually went back upstairs but Tom stayed with Merry until they both fell asleep on the couch. Bucky carried him back upstairs to Wanda, surprised how heavy he had become.

When he returned to his own apartment, Merry was in her own room, kneeling at her bed with her hands clasped in prayer. Bucky smiled and let her be.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for this one taking forever. I pretty much knew how this chapter went even when I first started this story, but ironically enough I went through a thing with my Dad when it came time to write it. Everything’s okay now though so thank you for your patience :)

Make sure to check out the Spotify Playlist for this fic:
https://open.spotify.com/user/yh6a7dy60akgf91fpooyxjr9v0/playlist/4OF4TIBU30VFnSSYzwj7gW

Meredith Quill thanks you in advance!
It was a shock to exactly no one that Steve's recovery was not a quick one. A week after he was moved to the sixth floor, he caught pneumonia. He was miserable, but he was stable (a word that Steve grew to hate) and was slowly recovering. In early May he had to go through another surgery to help stabilize his lung and it was decided that he would remain in hospital until the end of the month to keep monitoring the condition.

No one was happy with this arrangement, most of all Steve. Bucky had helped rig up a contraption so Steve could draw and paint in bed. It seemed to help a little once he was able to work and many of his students actually visited him in hospital. Steve even sweet-talked a nurse into letting him give a lecture in the courtyard. Their friends and at least one of their strange extended family was there every visiting hour. Tom and Merry made a habit of going directly to the hospital after school and doing their homework by Steve's bedside until one of the adults picked them up.

Bucky was not there as much as he would have liked to. Steve would spent a total of two and a half months in the hospital and Bucky had to pay every penny of it out of pocket. It almost felt like the old days when Steve would get sick except Bucky was a few decades older and while he got paid a lot more now it was definitely easier working 60 hour work weeks in his twenties than in his fifties. There were only so many shifts and extra jobs he could take on. They had savings but Bucky refused from the get go to take a single dollar out of Merry's college fund.

In that last week of May, Steve was absolutely done. In his mind, he should have been home a week before. He wanted so badly to leave and Bucky had spent every moment he could with him in order to keep him relatively calm. Sunday at noon, Bucky kept promising, reassuring himself too. He loved Steve but he felt a little like he was trapped with a caged animal. On the Friday of that last weekend, Bucky stayed past visiting hours, hoping that no one would notice him. Eventually at dinner rounds someone spotted him and told him kindly to leave.

Once Bucky had gotten outside, he realized that it was raining heavily and that he had forgotten his umbrella at home. He had also missed his bus and due to construction would have to wait another hour for one. He groaned and went to buy a newspaper. When he got back to the bus shelter, there was a woman sitting alone on the bench, sobbing and shivering. Bucky had never been a man to pester strangers in public but that had changed after Wanda had come into his life. It was that bizarre fatherly instinct that made him hope that if another man came across one of his kids in a state that they would offer them help too.

Bucky asked softly, "Miss, are you alright?"

The woman looked at him and Bucky was a little startled. She was dressed to the nines in an outfit that cost more than he made in a month and wearing better makeup than any of his sisters had worn to their weddings. She was also probably in her early forties at the youngest and very, very pregnant.

At the last detail, Bucky gave a brief glance upwards. God had a sense of humour, sending every distraught expectant mother his way.

The woman broke into harder sobs and shook her head fiercely. Bucky sat down beside her, trying to make out her story through her tears. He took her hand in his and encouraged her to breathe. It was at this point he realized she was also missing her shoes.
"It's okay," he promised, "everything's going to be okay. Take your time."

She shook her head. "No, no, it's not. The baby started moving and I tried to take a cab to the hospital but I...I...I got mugged and then I walked here and it hurts so much. And my husband's in Tokyo, he had to go last minute, and I can't get ahold of him. I don't know anyone in the city, we just moved here, we don't even have staff yet. He was supposed to be back in time, the baby's early, and I'm not ready. I can't, I can't. I just need to get home. I just want to go home."

"Have you gone in to see someone yet?" He asked.

"I don't have anything, they'll throw me out."

"Let's worry about that later," Bucky said. "Right now, we're just going to go in and see a doctor. Okay?"

She shivered and Bucky put his jacket around her shoulders.

"It'll be alright," he promised. "What's your name?"

She sniffled. "Maria."

"Hi, Maria, I'm Bucky. Do you think you can stand up?"

She managed to get off the bench with his help. He got her into the maternity ward and one of the nurses recognized him from when Merry was born. He shook her hand before sitting back down with Maria.

"Do you do this often?" Maria asked, wincing.

Bucky laughed. "More than you'd think. This is where my daughter and my grandson were born."

"You look far too young to be a grandfather," she said.

"It's true. It's sort of a funny story," he explained, pulling out his wallet. "There's my eldest, Wanda, and her boy Tom. Then that's my daughter Merry right there."

"A late in life baby, just like mine. This is my first. I didn't think I was ever going to have one, neither of us did. He's a surprise and he's already very stubborn."

"He's just tough, like his Mama," Bucky assured.

"Would you...would you stay with me, James? I don't know if I can do this alone. You've gone through this three times already."

"I'll stay until they throw me out," he promised. "I just need to phone home to let them know where I am, okay?"

She squeezed his hand tightly. "Okay."

He patted her on the shoulder and asked a nurse if he could use the phone. He called over to his apartment, surprised to have Peggy pick up.

"Hello, Peg," he greeted. "What are you doing over our way?"

"Girls night in," Peggy explained cheerfully. "It's a funny story, I'll have to tell you later, but Ang, Wanda, and I are having a little chat with Merry. I hope you don't mind but she came home from
school with...some questions, shall we say. I figured we would be better equipped to handle it than either you or Steve."

Bucky laughed. "It sounds like it. I'm going to be home late. It's also kind of a funny story. I'm helping out my new friend, Maria. She's new in town, knows no one, and is now in labour. You know, the usual for me."

Peggy chuckled. "Yes, that seems about right. We'll bring Merry home with us tonight then. Call us when you can and we'll pick you up at the hospital. We have the car all weekend for Steve."

Bucky said his goodbyes and looked over to Maria, whose face had gone nearly white. Then she leaned over and passed out. Bucky called for a nurse and rushed back, scooping her off the floor.

One of the nurses checked her pulse. "She's going into shock. We're going to have to bring in your wife right away."

Bucky expected them to ask him to stay but they allowed him to follow along to her examination room. He stood beside her, holding her hand as another nurse looked her over.

"She's hemorrhaging," the second nurse said. "Book an OR right away. Mister Stark, we need to get your wife into surgery to get the baby out."

Maria whimpered and Bucky leaned down. He kissed her forehead and promised, "I'll be right then when you wake up. It's going to be fine."

They rolled her out and Bucky followed until he couldn't. He stood in the hall, his stomach tight. He left another message at Maria's husband's hotel and then went to the waiting room. He sat and closed his eyes, leaning back in his chair. He was exhausted and he wanted nothing more than to be home in his bed. He imagined that Maria felt around the same.

***

Bucky was woken sometime around midnight. He went to the recovery suite and sat by Maria's bedside as she slowly woke up. When she did, the first thing she asked for was her baby. Bucky helped her sit up and she held her son for the first time. She started crying and then winced from the pain. She gave him over to Bucky and he held him close to her, letting her look at his perfect little face.

"C-Section babies are always the most beautiful," the nurse cooed. "I'll leave you two alone with him for now."

Maria looked at her son with utter adoration in her eyes. "Did it feel like this for you? Did it feel like the world was starting over? Like...like nothing you ever did mattered at all until right now? My God...my God, James, he's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. Thank you. Thank you. If you hadn't made me come in....I don't know what would have happened. I owe you both our lives."

"You did all the hard work," he said. "You should be real proud, Maria. Real proud."

The nurse came in and took the baby from his arms and encouraged Maria to rest. Bucky tucked her in and kissed her forehead. He stepped out into the hallway with the nurse.

"Listen," Bucky said. "I'm afraid there's been a bit of a mix up. Mister Stark's away on business, I'm just a friend who stepped in for a while. I'm going to give you my phone number in case anything comes up before he gets home. I'm picking someone up tomorrow so I'll stop by then to check in on her."
She agreed. Bucky looked at his watch and decided it was too late to phone Peggy. He called a cab and went back to his own apartment. He opened the fridge to find that Wanda had made him dinner. He smiled tiredly and ate it cold before going to bed. He was exhausted but he was too excited to really sleep. Steve was coming home.

***

Bucky was woken up early by Angie, who was already getting the apartment ready for the party. By the time he had his shower, Merry had already every record she owned on her bedroom floor, picking music carefully. He stepped around them to give her a kiss on her forehead before heading into the kitchen. Tom was baking up a storm, his dear face covered in batter. Wanda set out some pancakes for Bucky and Tom dashed over to pour some real maple syrup over them.

He was still in his first few bites when Angie already started giving him instructions about what things still needed to be done. Bucky nodded along, trying to eat while agreeing with her. Eventually Peggy rescued him from the conversation and he went to get dressed.

They left early, Bucky hoping to check in on Maria before they picked up Steve. However, when they got to her room they found that she wasn't alone. Nor was she quite the stranger Bucky thought she was.

Peggy asked in shock, "Howard?"

"Peggy? What are you doing here? And who's this?"

Maria explained, "This is James, dear. He saved my life."

Bucky said, "I really didn't."

Howard put his hand on Bucky's shoulder. "I know my wife. She's stubborn enough that she would have bled out on a bench if you didn't drag her inside. I'm just a little thrown. Peggy, I was going to look you up now that I'm back in New York. This guy doesn't look like the one you married. I mean, it's been awhile, but I was pretty sure that guy was Italian or something."

Peggy exchanged a look with Bucky and said, "It's complicated."
"Well, I'm taking you both out for drinks tonight and we'll talk all about it," Howard announced. "I'm in the mood for celebrating. Carter, I remember you being fond of a good Cuban. Will you two join me for a cigar?"

Bucky apologized, "We're actually picking someone up right now and we're headed to a welcome home party right after."

"I'm not taking no for an answer, but I'll take a later," Howard said. "Here's my card, Carter. You give me a ring this week. I want to catch up."

Peggy and Bucky left the room, both looking at each other in confusion.

Bucky asked in surprise, "You know Howard Stark? The Howard Stark?"

"We served in the war together," Peggy explained. "We were quite close afterwards but we fell a little out of touch after I left my husband. I don't have a lot of friends from those days anymore."

"Yeah, I get that," Bucky said. "You going to call him?"

She played with his business card. "Maybe. He...he knew about Angie, way back when. Sometimes
people change their minds and look at things differently. Howard has always been a forward thinker. I'll consider it. Come on, Steve will be waiting for us."

Once they got to his room, Steve was already in a wheelchair waiting for them. He was smiling and chatting with Nurse Carter who had come to see him off. After establishing that she and Peggy were in fact not related, the four of them went down the elevator and towards the main doors. Peggy went ahead to get the car and Nurse Carter wished them well, kissing them both on the cheek.

Steve looked like hell, like Bucky had once again found him mid-fist fight. Bucky helped him into the back seat of the car and sat beside him. Steve curled into him, resting his head on his shoulder. Bucky nuzzled against him and kissed him long and soft. They kissed again, only to be reminded that Peggy was there with them. They didn't pull apart but stuck to cuddling on the drive home.

***

Bucky really didn't get to see Steve much at the party as pretty much everyone they had ever met wanted to see him first. Steve sat in his armchair and so many people went up to talk to him that Bucky felt like he was waiting for an audience with the Pope.

Despite the great variety of company, Bucky was still a little surprised to see his parents enter the room. Ma went straight to Steve but Pa lingered, waiting for Bucky to come up and greet him.

"Can we talk?" Pa asked. "Somewhere a bit more private?"

"I don't think anywhere in my home is private right now," Bucky teased, "but I'm pretty sure Merry's kicked everyone out of her room. She's very particular about people touching her records but she likes her grandpa enough he's probably allowed to sit in there for awhile."

They went to Merry's bedroom and closed the door. Pa sat in the rocking chair and Bucky sat on the edge of the bed.

"What's on your mind?" Bucky asked.

"Buck," Pa said softly, "I wanted to apologize. I know we...listen, I know you and I haven't talked a lot since Steve got sick. I wasn't the most supportive I could have been. I was scared and I was taking that out on you. I don't want you to be sore with me even though I get why you are. So what do I gotta do to make it right?"

Bucky assured, "Dad, you've been there for me all my life. It's okay. We're fine, you and me. I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. I know it worked out but it might not have. I know how much you love Merry and Steve. It's okay."

Pa smiled almost nervously. "Good...then, we won't talk about it anymore. I missed you. You're my best friend, Buck. Never thought I'd said that about my son but it's true. Thanks for putting up with your old man."

"Not old," Bucky laughed. "When you're in triple digits, then you can say you're old. And no putting up with anything. Listen, when Steve gets back on his feet, why don't we go to a ball game like we used to? I know Merry's not really into it but Tom's getting a liking for it. What do you say?"

"I'd like it a lot more if we still had the Dodgers, but the company will make up for the Yankees. I know the boy didn't grow up with a choice but it breaks my heart every time I see him cheering for them. Feels like I failed him."

They both rose and Bucky hugged him. Pa rested his chin on Bucky's shoulder and for the first time
he felt fragile to him. Bucky held him just a little tighter, reluctant to let him go.

"I love you, Dad," Bucky murmured.

"I love you too, Buck," he said. "You turned out alright. You always worry about your kids but I ain't worried about that head on your shoulders. You've always been you and I'm real proud. You should be too. Don't hide the best parts of you, Buck, not for anything in this world."

Pa broke the hug first and patted Bucky on the back. "C'mon, we should get back to the party."

It wasn't the last time they ever spoke. It wasn't even the last time they were alone. They'd have that summer together, taking Tom and his younger cousins to baseball games, Pa teaching Merry how to play the harmonica.

But something felt final in a way that Bucky couldn't explain until Pa died the next Easter. His father had already said goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

Make sure to check out the Spotify Playlist, updated with every new chapter!
https://open.spotify.com/user/yh6a7dy60akgf91fpoyxjr9v0/playlist/4OF4TlBU30VFnSSYzwj7gW
1971

Merry and Steve had both come home with sooty crosses on their foreheads, the two of them in argument about Merry's decision whether or not to start taking communion. Bucky was tired after a long shift but he was making the same soup that Sarah Rogers had made every Ash Wednesday since he had met her. It was basically just rice and chicken stock since no one was supposed to be eating meat and they were too poor for vegetables.

The phone rang and Bucky answered, still half listening to their banter.

"Hello?"

Becca's voice sounded like it was about to shatter. "Bucky...I don't know how to say this so I'm just going to. Pa had a heart attack earlier today. He...he didn't make it."

Bucky fell to the ground, the phone hitting the wall. Steve rushed out and Bucky assumed he asked if he was okay but Bucky could only hear the blood pounding in his ears. He felt like he was going to be sick. He felt like he was dying. He wanted to scream but nothing would come out. He pounded his fists against the floor and Steve picked up the receiver and started speaking with Becca.

Bucky wasn't sure how long he sat there but he knew at some point Steve got him sitting on the edge of their bed. There was a cold wet towel on his neck and a finger of whisky in a glass on the ground beside him.

"What can I do?" Steve asked, so gently it made Bucky crumple.

Bucky whispered, "I need to see him. I need to go home and I need to see him."

"Buck, he's-"

"I know," Bucky snapped, tears running down his face. "I know. I just need to."

Steve sat beside him and put his arm around his waist. Bucky broke into sobs and Steve held him, stroking his back.

Steve murmured, "It was one of the hardest things I ever went through, losing my mother. You were
there for me and I want to be there for you. If you need to see him, we'll go over right now."

"Can you tell Merry?" Bucky pleaded. "I can't but I don't want her not to know. It's not fair. Can
you...can you tell her?"

"I will," Steve promised. "Just give me a minute."

Bucky saw that Steve was silently crying. So they sat together and they cried and they shared that whisky until the soup started burning and Merry ran in to tell them.

Merry's face fell at the two of them and Steve explained what happened. She looked as if she would run away but instead she hopped up on Bucky's lap and hugged him as hard as her little arms could. She cried into his shirt and he ran his fingers through her hair, comforting her the best he could.

Bucky spent the next two days in a fugue state. Steve helped Ma and Rebecca plan the funeral for Saturday. His other two sisters and their families would come into town and they would have a quiet Easter dinner the next day.

The Barnes family had gotten big over the years. Between the four kids, all of them had a spouse, and between all the couples there were ten grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. But of that entire gaggle, Bucky was the oldest and everyone seemed to want him. He had talked to both Livy and Helen twice each day on the phone until they arrived Friday night. He had all his nieces and nephews either phoning him to say that they were coming or phoning to tell him how much they had loved Pa and how much they loved him. He was a little overwhelmed, but he was holding it together. He just had to make it through the weekend. He had taken a week off work and he was planning on taking Steve, Wanda, Tom, and Merry to Miami.

The night before the funeral some friends and family congregated at the Barnes' household. People split into various rooms based on interests and conversations. Bucky found himself escorted away by his brother-in-law Derek and down the street to his and Becca's place. They joined a game of poker with his other two brothers in law and soon Bucky was getting happily drunk with all of them.

Once Bucky was a bit sloshed, the three of them exchanged a glance.

Derek said, "So, Bucky, we hear you're giving the eulogy tomorrow."

Bucky shrugged. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, we've been talking about it and we're not sure it's a great idea. I was wondering if you'd let me give it."

"Sorry, what?"

"Bucky," Rob said, "you've got to understand. This is about Jim. We just want everyone to be comfortable and not to make a scene of things. I know Jim had a big heart and cared about everyone but not everyone is as easy going as he was."

Bucky raised an eyebrow. "Aren't people going to expect his eldest child and only son to give his eulogy? Wouldn't it be weirder if I wasn't up there."

"No, we're not saying you shouldn't be a pallbearer or anything. We were thinking all four of us. I just mean that we don't want people asking a lot of questions about you and what you've been up to. We just want the focus to be on Jim, that's all, and we thought you'd be more comfortable this way. Derek's got a lot of public speaking experience, that's all, and he and your dad were real close."
Bucky looked at his three brothers in laws. Sam looked guilty as sin and the other two looked real determined. They had clearly talked about this for a while and not everyone was in agreement.

Derek said kindly, "We just want Jim to be shown in the best light possible."

And then it hit Bucky like a ton of bricks. "You're worried people are going to figure out I'm queer? That's what you're worried about? You don't want it to seem like the sissy son is the head of the family now? Jesus Christ."

Rob let out a sigh. "Buck, it's not like that, it's-"

Bucky interrupted, "Like hell it's not. Steve was the one who moved in with them when Pa had his accident years ago, none of you. Steve on his part-time illustration salary took care of both on his own. And he was never ashamed of us, never hid us from the world like some kind of secret. He loved Steve like his own son, and honestly better than all of you. My father was proud of who we are and I'm not going to hide in the shadows so one of you can act like you were his most beloved son. You say this is about him? Piss off, all of you. It's your wives who lost their father, they're the ones who need you sitting in the pews holding their hands. You go be good husbands and let me be a good son."

***

Bucky stood at the podium, looking at the near two hundred people who had arrived to pay their respects. He looked down at the front row to his mother. Merry sat beside her and Ma held her tight. Steve sat at the end of the pew beside them both, protectively keeping his hand on Ma's shoulder.

Bucky looked out to the crowd and cleared his throat. "I don't have to tell you a lot about my dad that you don't already know because he'd be proud to tell you about it. He had a great marriage, healthy and happy children and grandchildren, helped start a Union he loved, and grew the finest cherry tomatoes in all of Brooklyn Heights. He wasn't a bragger, but he loved deeply and he loved strongly. And he was kind, so kind it would break your heart to have him at your side. He gave every piece of himself and never expected you to return any of it."

Bucky took a long deep breath. "My father and I were always close. From the minute I could talk, he wanted to know what I had to say. I went to him with everything because I knew he really cared. I wasn't afraid to be scared with him. He never made me feel less for feeling. I was young...it seems like impossibly young when I got drafted to fight in the Second World War A lot of guys talked about their dads, the ones who fought in the Great War, telling them that they would come back as heroes. But my father told me the truth: he was scared for his life and all he wanted to do was come home. That...that meant everything to me. I didn't feel like a coward. I felt like I was human. When I nearly lost my arm in Germany, my father sent me a letter to me in the hospital. Now, I'm not going to read the first half because that's just family stuff, but I want to read you the second."

Bucky took the fading paper from his jacket pocket and unfolded it. His hands trembled as he began to read.

_Buck, I know you're not going to recognize the world you come home to. You're not who you were and that's okay. The world's always going to be changing and you're always going to be changing too. We don't go home from war, we just stop shooting. Now, there's some men that might be feeling like they're lesser when they're missing those pieces of themselves but I say to Hell with them. Men aren't made by how loud they shout or how hard they hit. What defines a man is how well he loves. Not saying that he's perfect with his children or he's never said a rude word to his best girl. I mean that he tries with every piece of himself for all of his life. I mean that he loves deeply and without any condition._
Bucky looked up at the crowd and smiled through his tears. "I carried that letter in my breast pocket until I got back home. I read it again and again, feeling like he was there with me. I kept it, knowing one day he wasn't going to be here anymore and I wanted that piece of his presence. I hope you felt it too because that's what it meant to be in Jim Barnes' world. Deeply and unconditionally, loved. Thank you."

Bucky was barely aware of walking back down the aisle and sitting beside his mother. Ma murmured something to him but he was too stunned to speak. He went to rise as the pallbearers came forth but Steve stood up instead and offered his shoulder. Bucky knew he should yell at him for doing something so physical after his collapsed lung but he was just so grateful to have Steve step into his place.

Merry walked with her grandmother, holding her hand throughout the reception afterwards at the house. Slowly everyone left his childhood home as the sun set. Finally alone, Bucky went out to the alley. He knew his father wasn't going to be there but he was still heartbroken to see only Steve.

Steve held his face in his hands and kissed him tenderly. Bucky held him close and buried his face in his neck. There was so much he wanted to say but he was unable to speak. He just stood there in he and Pa's place, in this strange liminal space where they had always found each other. He thought of all the people he had met in the Village, so many who had been cast aside by those who claimed to love them. He thought of the violence he had seen, the sheer heartbreak and terror. He thought of all those people he had sheltered for a day or night, thinking that he was doing enough.

Bucky had been a blessed son of a bitch to have the father he did and to be able to keep his family while living the life he wanted. It hadn't been easy for his father but he had done everything he could because it was the right thing to do. Because it was the only thing he could do and still call himself a man.

"What are you thinking?" Steve asked.

"I feel like I'm the verge of making a big life decision and I have no idea what it is," Bucky admitted, "but I don't think I'm going to figure it out tonight."

"Then let's go home," Steve said softly. "Let me take care of you."

Bucky murmured, "Okay."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Summary: Bucky finds out his father has died. His brothers in law don't want him to perform the eulogy at his funeral because they're worried people will find out that Bucky is bisexual. He does it anyways and reads a letter his father sent him at the end of the war. It's sad but very sweet.
In the days after his father's funeral, Bucky felt as if something had fundamentally changed in his life. He was starting to think about the future in a way he hadn't before. He had been so focused on surviving, on keeping his family safe, and he realize he wasn't afraid anymore of living his life openly. He was unapologetically himself in a way that he never had allowed himself to be before.

He had never gone to the same social groups or cafes that Steve did but he started attending one, a monthly group of gay and bisexual men in their fifties who liked to go out to games together. Bucky even started watching hockey because he enjoyed their company so much and took Tom along when everyone else brought their kids. Merry continued to be completely uninterested but was getting old enough now that she was interested in going to concerts. Bucky was trying to get an ear for classical music but he spent more than a few nights with Steve and Merry in the nosebleed seats at the orchestra, Bucky usually falling asleep.

Bucky's relationship with his blood family had changed too after the funeral. He went a few months without speaking to Becca but eventually reached out again. It was a quieter Thanksgiving with a few less of the extended family showing up. Ma was grateful, even though they both knew the cause was a growing rift between Bucky and two of his brothers in law. Sam, however, showed up bright and early and even played football with some of the kids on the front lawn. He too, it seemed, had stopped giving a shit about what Derek and Rob had to say.

Bucky's extended mosaic of family had been growing too. Peggy and Howard had become friends again and she was now Tony's godmother. With Howard not been a particularly attentive father and Maria being a busy socialite, Tony was often left with his nanny. The Quill-Carter-Rogers-Barnes family hated that idea so Tony had somehow joined the mob of children in Bucky's life and was incredibly attached to Steve. Whenever Steve went into the room, Tony immediately dropped everything and demanded to be picked up and carried. If Howard thought it was a problem that Tony clearly viewed Steve as his father figure, he seemed to either not care or just not feel like addressing it.

Now that Tom was thirteen, he too was starting to shift who he went to for support. Bucky had always been quite fond of him but Tom sought him out more and more when he needed to think things over. As Tom grew, it seemed as if he and Victor understood each other less and less. Victor and Bucky had talked about it and while Victor was worried, he seemed to understand and tried to encourage his son to be open with him on his own terms.

He hoped by the time Tony was thirteen Howard might do the same.

Of course, Bucky didn't say that to him, not even as they were splitting a beer and a cigarette on the rooftop of Angie and Peggy's building. Howard sometimes called him up when he needed "a guy" to talk to and while Bucky would have infinitely preferred if that guy was Steve, Bucky suspected Howard was jealous of how much Tony already adored him.

Howard was rambling through some sort of business deal that went south and Bucky mostly nodded along, taking more than his share of the smoke. Eventually Howard was excited and hit his shoulder. "I nearly forgot why I wanted to talk to you. A buddy of mine is starting up a newsletter. He's
looking for bisexual folks who are interested in sharing some of their stories. You came up when I was talking about the whole co-parenting thing the four of you got. One story followed another and well, he's just dying to meet you."

"I'm not much of a writer," Bucky insisted.

"Eh, you'll learn. But you've got what he needs and I think it might be a good fit. You've said yourself you're looking for a change. Maybe this is it."

"Did I say that?"

"Well, you said it to Steve who said it to Peggy who said it to me. Close enough. Also, are you still good for Saturday? The nanny says I owe her vacation time and I really can't get away from the office."

"Not a problem," Bucky assured. "You know we love Tony."

"Well, he certainly likes the two of you. He tends to start less house fires when you're around. Make sure Tom and Merry bring their swimsuits this time. Someone's got to be using that pool."

***

Bucky ended up phoning Howard's friend Jordan and spent Saturday afternoon sitting by the pool, pen and notebook on the ground beside his lounger. He would look up every once in awhile to see the kids in the pool, even Tony in a little life preserver while Steve encouraged him to kick.

Jordan had asked him to write an essay about a prevalent issue facing older bisexual men. Bucky initially thought he meant their changing sex life but Jordan wanted something more personal for the first issue for the readers to really understand Bucky and why they wanted to hear what he had to say.

He looked up at the sound of laughter and saw Merry pull Tom into the pool. He sputtered and coughed and chased after her, threatening a splash war. At the ruckus, Steve pulled Tony out and wrangled him out of the life jacket. Tony ran over and demanded to be dried off. Bucky wrapped him up in Tony's favourite towel and Tony made the same happy little sigh as he did whenever he was comforted. Steve came over and picked him up again, still bundled in cotton.

"I'm going to make us lunch," Steve said. "How's the writing going?"

"It's not," Bucky admitted.

Steve leaned down and kissed him. "You'll think of something, just keep at it."

As Steve walked back into the house, Bucky admired his tanned shoulders. Steve was definitely stronger and healthier than he had been in some time. The scars were fading away but they were most obvious when his skin was so dark.

Then suddenly Bucky knew exactly what he had to write about. He grabbed the pen and the notepad, now soggy from Tony's wet feet. He got out the first few lines and then went into the house to find something better to write on.

***

Bucky sat across Jordan at the cafe, waiting nervously as the young man read Bucky's typed essay. Jordan was quiet and Bucky wasn't sure if that was a good thing at first until he realized Jordan was
"Sorry," Jordan apologized, putting down the papers. "I heard about people not being allowed to see their partners in the hospital but your story was just so...intense. And the part when he had pneumonia in his twenties and you promising never to let him be alone in hospital again...Jesus, James, I don't think you realize how good you are. I'd like to publish this and I'd like you to keep writing for us. I don't know if we're going to make it past a month but I want you to tell your stories and share your opinions. Please, it could really make a difference. I can't pay you much but if we pick up, I can try to increase it. What do you say?"

Bucky replied with a soft smile, "I think I'd like that very much."

Chapter End Notes

Baby Tony being involved in all of this was definitely incubated after this amazing series on Tumblr:
http://mamalaz.tumblr.com/tagged/godmother-peggy

The work Bucky becomes a part of is going to be loosely inspired by a real organization started in New York in 1972! You can read about it here:

We're in the end stretch! Well, not really, but I think there's eight chapters left. I think. Maybe less.
1973

The three of them were at breakfast, one Saturday morning in the summer. Bucky was reading the paper, drinking his coffee slowly. He was reluctant to leave the scene, amused more by Merry and Steve's discussion about the novel they were reading together. Bucky had never cared much for Vonnegut but seeing the two people he loved most deep in conversation about something they loved was just about perfect.

"Oh, Buck, I forgot to tell you before. You'll never believe who I got a letter from yesterday," Steve said. "Do you remember Melanie? That girl I used to go with?"

"Of course, I do," Bucky replied, trying to not to let a forty something year jealousy stir in him. "How she's doing?"

"Well, very well. Her husband just retired from the military and they're thinking of moving back home from France. I think she's hoping to catch up on old times. You wouldn't mind it if I wrote her back, would you?"

Bucky lowered his paper slightly, enough to give Steve a glare. Steve gave him a coy smile. They both knew Steve had waited to ask when Merry was there listening. Bucky couldn't exactly say no and make a fuss in front of their impressionable near teenage daughter.

"That would be just fine," Bucky said, kindley as he could. "You say hello to her for me. She was always a real nice girl."

Merry jumped right back into the literary talk and Bucky stuck his tongue out at Steve before returning to the sports section.

***

After lunch, Tom showed up and proposed that he and Merry go see the new James Bond movie. They went along, hand in hand, and they looked again like they were four and five. Merry's laugh was still young, a little girl's even as she grew. Bucky never wanted her to lose that laugh.

Bucky went to clear the dishes and found Steve already at the sink. Bucky stood behind him and kissed his neck. He murmured in his ear, "That was low, asking me about Mel when Merry was right there."

Steve replied quietly, "I'm sorry, love. I just didn't want it to be a big deal."

"It's always going to be a big deal," Bucky said. "She's not just some girl you went out with once or twice. She was in love with you and now she just writes you out of the blue after all these years? I trust you, I do, but it doesn't feel right to me."

Steve turned around to face him. "Are you jealous?"

"Do you blame me?" Bucky asked. "It broke my heart, watching you with her."
"You think I liked how many girls you went with? You don't think I hated that?"

"That was different," Bucky protested. "I wasn't in love with any of them. You would have married her, Steve. You'd have had a dozen kids with her and been happy. The girls I saw had no chance because none of them were you. Melanie was your first choice and if she hadn't dumped you, you'd have never been with me."

Steve lifted Bucky's chin and their eyes met. "Buck, you've been my first choice since we were kids. I just never thought I'd be lucky enough to have you."

Steve kissed him and then reminded, "Besides, she and I were waiting for marriage. We might have fooled around a little, but you were my first and my only. It couldn't have been anyone else."

Bucky smiled sheepishly. "I'm being a bit of an idiot, aren't I?"

Steve teased, "A little, but it's nice to be wanted. I'm flattered that you think anyone would be interested in pursuing me now. I wasn't a looker when I was twenty. I've only gotten worse with age."

Bucky laughed. "I've gone to your lectures. Each time, you've got an entire front row that would leap out of their clothes if you winked at them and that's only gotten worse over the years. You do alright."

"I got more than enough for me at home," Steve said, brushing his nose against his."

"Speaking of which...we've got at least two hours before Merry gets back home..."

It was Steve's turn to look sheepish. "I...I uh took care of things in the shower this morning. I don't think I'd be able to show much enthusiasm."

It was a recent issue, Steve's soft cock. Bucky told him to enjoy himself whenever he could get hard, which was still often enough. But Steve had never had problems before, even when his circulation had been terrible, and he seemed to viewing it as a failing on his part and not just a natural part of growing older.

Bucky kissed down his throat. "Well, that's never stopped us before. We've got the time. I want to unravel you, baby. I want you to be so overworked you can't even speak. I want to make you cry when you come. Will you let me?"

Steve's breath hitched. "Let me go freshen up first?"

Bucky nipped at his ear. "Don't take too long."

Bucky went to the bedroom and undressed, waiting for Steve to return. Steve entered the room and started taking off his clothes. Bucky helped, kissing him softly as he removed each piece for him. Steve did the same for him and once they were both naked, Bucky brought him over to the bed and laid him down. Bucky knelt above him and kissed down his belly until he reached his groin. He hitched one of Steve's ankles over his shoulder and kissed down his thigh. Once he reached his balls, Bucky started slowly licking him, tracing every edge of his sex. Steve sighed happily.

Bucky slicked his fingers and slid one into Steve, starting to work him open. Steve relaxed, moaning at Bucky's attentions to the head of his cock. Bucky slipped in a second finger, scissoring and stroking until he reached his prostate. Steve gasped at the first gentle brush and leaned into his touch. Bucky sucked harder and Steve jolted. Bucky licked every part of him, delving in every crease. Steve shook but made little noise. He was apparently taking Bucky's promise as a challenge. If Steve
was going to cry, Bucky was going to have to give it his all.

Bucky moaned into his skin, "God, I could get off just like this. You look so pretty when I'm eating you out, baby. I want to feel you get wet for me. You're so close. Come for me, baby, come in my mouth. I want to drink you down."

Steve came quietly, his soft cock leaking. Bucky licked him clean, Steve sensitive and shivering. He removed his fingers, just to slick them again before sliding back into him. Steve arched his back and Bucky stroked him, curling and twisting inside of him. Then he dipped his head back down and took him into his mouth, his tongue pushing back his foreskin and licking down his slit.

Steve groaned, thrusting against him, riding his fingers and mouth. His thighs shook and he panted, breaking into a fine sweat. He was gorgeous, vulnerable and glistening. Bucky moved his thumb, pressing against his taint and rubbing it softly. His other hand moved to his hip, gripping hard and holding him down. Bucky took his cock fully into his mouth, licking and sucking. Steve cried out and whispered his name again and again.

Bucky looked up at him and their eyes met. Steve shuddered and threw his head back, clasping at the sheets. Steve trembled and screamed out. He came dry but Bucky still licked his slit, teasing him through his orgasm. Steve panted as Bucky's actions grew further in intensity. Steve gave a pained whine and Bucky stopped.

Steve managed to laugh. "I can...I can do this all day."

Bucky nuzzled into his groin, slowing down just slightly until Steve caught his breath. Then he started again, coaxing Steve into another dry orgasm. By this point, Steve was whimpering and trembling and barely could murmur, "sore."

"Do you want me to-"

Steve whispered, "in me. Need you in me."

Bucky was half-hard and it didn't take more than a few strokes to be ready. He coated himself and moved Steve beneath him. Steve wrapped his thighs around his hips and Bucky slipped into him, groaning at how open Steve was for him. Steve shook, wincing and Bucky cradled the back of his head, holding him close. He pressed his forehead to his as he thrust into him. Steve's cock rubbed against his stomach and Steve moved his hand between them, fingering himself. Bucky heard a near silent cry as Steve came again, his other hand gripping into Bucky's chest. Tears were streaming down Steve's face but he begged Bucky to keep going.

Bucky pounded into him and Steve full out cried, sobbing as he and Bucky brought him to a last, painful and heart wrenching orgasm. Steve shivered, kissing him hard, grasping at his hair, cursing his name and pledging his undying love for him. Bucky soon followed, spilling into him.

Steve clung to him and Bucky rubbed his back and kissed every inch of him he could reach. Steve calmed after awhile and pulled back. He placed his hands on Bucky's chest and looked deep into his eyes.

"I am so in love with you," Steve whispered.

Bucky's heart sang as he kissed him. They stayed that way as long as they could, never wanting to let the other go.

***
The next morning, Steve stayed home from Mass, letting Merry go on her own. Bucky was half way through asking if he was sick when Steve pulled him into the bedroom and begged him to do it all over again.

Chapter End Notes

So the story of why so many chapters are about to go up is this: I'm housesitting right now and made it my goal to finish this fic by the time I go home. So I got to this chapter, am about to write the sex scene, when my cat comes in crying because there were fireworks and they scared him. I cuddle him like a baby for like thirty minutes and then go back to writing. Except now he thinks I'm his hero and has basically followed me around everywhere for two days. I can't write smut in front of my cat, that's weird. So instead I wrote the next few chapters and have finally gotten to backtrack. So...thank my cat I guess?

Also, as I previously mentioned, did a lot of aging sexuality research and holy crap basically older men have a lot easier time at having multiple orgasms? Good for you guys!
Bucky had no idea what a circuit board was, even though Peggy had explained it multiple times. Still, when Tony made his first one, Bucky was proud as anything. He even bragged at the shop about his genius godson, grateful that none of them knew anything about electronics either so they couldn't ask for more details.

Tony spent more time at their place, despite him being technically Peggy's godson. The woman refused to retire and was still working away at whatever secret military project she wasn't allowed to speak about. Angie hated being at home by herself and often went over to Steve and Bucky's apartment, dropping off Tony and taking Merry out for the day.

One day, after returning from another adventure with Angie, Merry was working at the kitchen table on her homework. Bucky was looking over her numbers, despite not being great at math himself and a little distracted. Merry also seemed out of sorts, biting her lip and tapping her pencil against the table.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Bucky finally asked, "So, what sort of things do you two get up to? You and your Aunt Angie, I mean. Or I guess you might call her Mom. That would be okay if you did, you know. That is what she is."

Merry thought about it for a moment, putting her pencil down. "There's stuff I can't talk to you and Dad about," Merry said. "Nothing bad, I promise. Just...it's nice to have another girl to talk to. I don't need a Mom but sometimes it's hard having two fathers. There's stuff you don't get, you know?"

Bucky nodded. "I get it. It's like when Tom comes to me or I think Tony'll go to Steve when he gets older. Sometimes you need another perspective."

"You're not mad, are you?"

Bucky assured, "Of course not, sweetpea. I just get a little in my head sometimes. I'm not really your father, biologically speaking, and I...I guess sometimes I worry you're going to think that over again. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry, Merry, that's my issue and not yours. I'm glad you're close with Angie. I really am. It's what we all wanted when you were born."

Merry took a deep breath and looked down at her homework. "Dad...Angie told me about my father. My real father. We were doing this thing in science class about blood types. Dad's O-, Angie's O+ and I'm A and I can't be with two O parents. That's what she and I have been talking about, some of it at least. I was really mad at first because everyone had been lying but I understand a bit better now. My father wasn't a good guy and Angie couldn't have left him without you both. You didn't have to get involved but you did. You decided I could be your daughter. For you two, I wasn't an accident like I thought I was. You wanted me, even before I was born."

Bucky took her hands in his. "Sweetpea, I'm so sorry we never told you."

Merry started crying and Bucky pushed his chair against hers. He hugged her and she leaned into his chest. At the sound of her sobs, Steve came out of his studio, wiping his charcoaled hands on his apron. Merry glanced briefly at him before crying even harder.
Bucky looked over his shoulder and explained softly, "Angie told her about Anthony."

Steve went as pale as a sheet. "Sweetheart, are you okay?"

Merry managed to nod but Steve couldn't see her. He knelt down beside her and she hugged him tightly.

Merry whispered, "I really thought I looked like you. I thought we had the same blue eyes."

Steve closed his eyes and squeezed her back. "We do, love. That's because you were always supposed to be with us."

Bucky left the two of them to talk and went out to pick up a pizza for dinner. They spent the night on the couch, Merry between them. They watched TV until she finally fell asleep and Bucky carried her to bed. He tucked her in and kissed her forehead. She stirred long enough to say softly, "I love you, Dad."

Bucky smiled. "I love you too, sweetpea. Good night."

He turned out the light and went back to the living room. Steve broke into tears and Bucky did the same. They held each other, cuddling and clinging until they could both breathe again. Merry didn't think any differently of them but they both mourned this loss of innocence. Things had changed, even if their daughter hadn't realized it yet. But she still loved them and there was nothing that could ever make them stop loving her.

So in the end, that was all that mattered.

***

Merry starting high school that year really hadn't sunk in until she asked all four of them over her birthday dinner how much she could spend on her winter formal dress, reminding them that it was only a month and a half away.

"It can be my Christmas and my birthday present for next year," she insisted in a rush, "and I'll get something I can wear again. All the girls are going down to Bloomingdale's next weekend when the holiday break starts and I don't want to look at things that are too expensive because it doesn't make sense to really love something and not get to get it so I just was wondering...I can save up some money. I can get a job now that I'm fourteen so I can pay you back too."

Angie's face fell just a little. "Oh. I was hoping that me and Aunt Peggy could take you and then we could decide together. Well, that will be a lot of fun! Why don't you try on whatever you like and then later in the week we can go back and you can show us the ones you like best. You can do a little fashion show for us. It was already going to be a belated birthday present, so now it will just be a bit more belated."

Angie looked further deflated and Merry said quickly, "That sounds like a great idea. Thank you so much!"

Peggy squeezed Angie's hand under the table. "It's our pleasure, pet. For two bisexual men, your fathers are notoriously bad at shopping."

Bucky couldn't disagree. He was wearing a shirt he had bought before Merry was even born and looked so out of date it could have been considered "vintage."
Merry laughed and the conversation eased in comfortable once more. After dinner, the rest of the family came over for cake and coffee. Peggy had become quite close with Ma after Pa had died and the two of them immediately took the couch and chatted away like old friends. Wanda joined them and the teens went to Merry's room to listen to her new records. Victor was nowhere to be seen but no one asked Wanda as she seemed to not want to offer an answer.

Angie still sat at the kitchen table with Steve, the pair talking quietly over their cups of tea. At seeing Bucky, Angie waved him over to sit with them.

"We were just talking about the dress," Angie said. "Peggy and I don't mind covering it. I'd give her the money in advance but I don't want her to feel like her friends have more money than her. Let her try on whatever she wants, you know? It's important. That's how girls bond."

Bucky asked, "Are you okay, Ang?"

She gave a tired smile. "I'm fine. Just a bit of a shock. I thought she still thought we were cool. We were lucky enough to get that as long as we did.

"She's trying to make friends," Steve said kindly. "Merry's doing well with going to a new school and finding about Anthony. It's healthy for her to spend time with new people her age. We were always worried when she was little that she wouldn't feel comfortable making friends. This is good. It is."

The two kept talking and Bucky excused himself. He went to freshen up, passing Merry's bedroom. The door was just slightly open and he could see her and Tom dancing to her new Bowie album, singing into her hair brushes like they were microphones. He smiled before going to wash his face. When he came back into the living room, he noticed that Wanda was gone. He looked out briefly on the ice-covered fire escape but she was missing from there too.

Bucky had no real reason to be worried but he left and went walked up to her apartment. The door was unlocked and he let himself in.

"Wanda?" He called out.

Wanda was sitting on her sofa, her face in her hands. Bucky walked to her side and put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up, tears in her eyes.

"Oh love," he said softly. "What's wrong?"

Wanda started crying harder and Bucky hugged her tightly. She swore in Romani for a time before saying, "Victor has gone to Vietnam again."

"He's gone a few times," Bucky comforted. "He's always come home. He'll be all right. How long has he been gone? I had no idea. What can I do to help out?"

Wanda said quietly, "I didn't tell you because he didn't tell me. He left before dawn this morning and I found a letter on the kitchen table. I haven't told Tom yet. They fought again last night. I don't want him to think it's his fault."

Bucky was stunned. "He didn't tell you?"

Wanda shook her head. "No. It is like...it is like when an animal slips away to die alone. That is what it feels like. He knows he is about to die and did not want to say goodbye. I don't know...I don't know..."
Wanda burst into tears again and Bucky held her, stroking through her hair. He had no idea how long they were like that until he heard the door open again and turned to see Tom standing in the doorway.

Bucky rose and Tom's face went ash white.

"Where's my father?" He pleaded.

Bucky tried to start, "Tom, I-"

Tom fled. Bucky ran after him, catching him in the hallway. Tom pushed at his chest, wanting Bucky to let him go. Bucky did, putting his hands up.

Tom demanded, "Where is he? Did he leave again?"

"Yeah," Bucky said. "He's gone back overseas."

"When's he coming back?" Tom asked.

"I don't know," Bucky admitted. "I'll try to find out."

Tom muttered, "Don't bother. I don't care. He can rot there, for all I care."

Bucky held Tom's face in his hands. "Tom, I know you're sore with him, but I know you love him. Don't wish what you can't take back. Okay?"

Tom was nearly his height now. He didn't have to look up at Bucky as he once had. But he looked so small and fragile, as if a hard wind would shatter him.

Tom murmured, "Okay."

Bucky patted his cheek and let go. "Go be with your mother. You need each other. If it feels too much, you come to me. You can always come to me. You know that, right?"

Tom nodded. "I will."

"You promise?"

Tom swept him in for a hug. Tom buried his face in Bucky's shoulder and Bucky rubbed his back. Tom didn't cry, but he clung to him fiercely all the same.
1975

Merry's Winter Formal dress was a light shade of blue satin. It was long and loose with a little belt around her waist. Her shoulders were covered with a nearly sheer ruffled fabric and her blonde curls fell down in waves down her back.

She was considered too young to have a serious date but Tom still accompanied her and the rest of her friends, most of who had a beau waiting for them at the dance. Merry had admitted to her parents that she really wasn't interested in dating anyone but was looking forward to a glamorous evening out.

Tom still played the part well though, wearing a matching blue shirt under his white suit. He brought her flowers and they both giggled, playing boyfriend and girlfriend. Wanda took pictures and sniffled, Bucky putting his arm around her. Steve looked like he might cry but he adjusted Merry's hair until it was perfect. The pair took a cab to the school and the three adults watched from the window as they drove away.

Fortunately, they had plans to occupy them. Angie, Peggy, and the Starks were coming over for drinks. It was always a little amusing to see Maria in their apartment as while it was nice place, it was nothing at all like the Stark Manor. Still, she was always very polite and Bucky had an image of her mentioning in her high society circles that she had friends in Greenwich Village in order to stimulate conversation. Still, Maria was a blast with a few shots of bourbon in her and Bucky had always been fond of her company.

Bucky enjoyed himself but he found himself always checking his watch. There was a window he wanted Merry to come home in. Too early and it meant she had no fun. Too late and it meant she had gotten into trouble. As that hour window grew closer, he grew more anxious.

As luck would have it, Merry and Tom came home right before midnight, just at the cut off of that perfect hour. Their guests were on their way out the door, Steve having ordered cabs for everyone. Tom stuck around, even as Wanda encouraged him to come upstairs and get some sleep when he was ready. Tom waited on the couch; even when everyone was gone and even Steve and Merry had gone to bed. Bucky waited, pouring them both a finger of whiskey. Once they were alone, Bucky came and sat beside him. He offered him the glass and Tom held it, never actually taking a drink.

"What's on your mind, Tom?" Bucky asked.

"I...I don't know how to say this," Tom began. "I...I'm..."

Bucky said softly, "You can tell me. Whatever it is. You know that."

"I...I sort of had a date tonight. I wasn't really planning on it being a date. We planned on meeting at the dance but I wasn't sure that's what...I kept an eye on Merry, don't worry, she had a good time. I'm just...a little confused."

Bucky frowned. "About whether or not it was a date?"

"No," Tom clarified. "I know now that's what...that's what he meant."
Bucky murmured, "Oh."

Tom looked at him fearfully. "You're not going to..."

"No," Bucky promised. "I won't even tell Steve. Do you want to talk about it?"

Tom rubbed the back of his neck. "I had been thinking for a bit he might like me. I kinda liked him, I guess. I mean...for awhile, I thought I was like you. You know, I might end up with a guy or a girl and be happy either way. But I figured I'd probably just meet a girl and it wouldn't matter. But anyways, he and I went outside to have a smoke and he just kissed me."

"Did you want him to kiss you?"

"That's the thing I don't know," Tom admitted. "I like Michael, I do. And it wasn't like he forced me or anything like that. I just don't know if I want it to happen again. He asked me out to the movies next weekend. I don't know if I should say no."

Bucky said, "You know, you can like boys and not like every boy. If he's not someone you're interested in, you don't have to date him."

Tom gave a weak smile. "I know. I'm just not sure about him and I want to be sure. I don't want to risk someone seeing us out when I only kind of like him."

"Lots of people go to movies," Bucky assured. "There's nothing wrong with just going on a date. People don't need to know your business and if you're around here, you'll be perfectly fine. And I'll stick around the apartment. You just phone me and I'll come get you if it goes south. That sound okay to you?"

Tom considered this and nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I might do that. Can I let you know?"

"Definitely. Now go to bed before your mother starts worrying about you. We'll talk in the morning. You going to be alright?"

Tom's face softened in relief. "Yeah, I'm alright. Thanks, Buck."

Tom ended up dated Michael for only three weeks before breaking it off with him. Bucky kept his promise and never told Steve. Tom would tell him himself when he started seeing his next beau, Eric. After a month or so, he broke it off with him too and didn't go out with anyone, regardless of gender, for the rest of the year.

***

Victor would leave Vietnam for the last time on April 30. He had spent half of his son's life fighting in another country and it showed, more than it ever had during the war. He was even quieter now, gentler. He formally resigned from his position and began life again as a civilian for the first time in decades.

Bucky had always hoped that when the war was over, Victor could find the same peace that he and his father had before him. But Bucky was not sure that whatever had broken in Victor could ever be repaired. Victor no longer argued with Tom but he was still distant. And while Victor was no bigot, Bucky knew that the revelation of Tom's sexuality would only drive them further apart.

Victor was more possessive of Wanda's time but it was not he didn't want her to see other people but that he needed her by his side. Wanda, however, had spent a great deal of their marriage apart and was trying to adjust to his constant presence. Still, still Victor was trying and he would mend in time.
It would just take much longer than any of them would have wanted.

1976

Steve had known first, even before Merry did. Merry was in love, foolishly head over heels in love. She was always smiling, her cheeks always rosy, and her voice full of song. She seemed to be unaware, just blissful in her first young love. Both he and Steve loved seeing her like this, seeing her so damn happy.

Steve might have figured it out first, but Bucky knew right away who it was. He shared it with Steve and both of them were incredibly excited. They of course agreed not to say anything. Tom and Merry had to figure this one out on their own. It was a difficult transition, from childhood friends to childhood sweethearts. Bucky and Steve knew that all too well.

When Tom came to Bucky to ask for his blessing to ask out Merry, Bucky nearly screeched in response and couldn't say yes fast enough. Not that he was thrilled about his fifteen year old daughter dating anyone, he was so happy it was Tom and not one of the other losers mooning after her. It was maybe a little odd since they were practically family but it seemed to be such a natural fit.

Merry came back from their first date absolutely glowing. She barely noticed her fathers in the living room, singing to herself as went to her bedroom. She played records all night, beautiful cheerful music that filled the house with the same sweetness as her smile. Bucky checked in on her once and saw her lying on her back, holding her pillow to her chest and grinning.

The pair had always been close but now they were inseparable. It was very sweet but it was also becoming a little exhausting. Every thing was so dramatic. They hated being apart, even though they lived in the same building. Every goodbye was like it was their last. And even though Bucky and Steve had started out as being realistic about sexuality and saying they just wanted Merry to be safe, they started insisting that doors always stayed open. Merry insisted they were waiting for now but no parent truly buys that line and Bucky and Steve had already gone through the pregnant teenage daughter phase with Wanda. Doors were staying open.

It was clear to Bucky, in those early days, why Tom had never stuck around with any of his boyfriends too long. It wasn't that Tom wasn't really bisexual or that it was just as phase. It was because, deep down, his heart had always belonged to Merry.

Chapter End Notes

Listen along to Merry's Mixtapes! New tracks added with every update:
https://open.spotify.com/user/yh6a7dy60akgf91fpooyxjr9v0/playlist/4OF4TlBU30VFnSSYzwj7gW
Bucky blamed *Star Wars* for everything that happened next. Now, it was not the movie itself at fault. It was a fine movie and after taking the kids, he planned to go back with Steve to ogle the handsome pilot. It was just the reactions of the two teenagers and seven-year-old Tony afterwards. Tony was immediately on the inaccuracies of the film and insisted to Bucky the whole train ride home on how interstellar space travel would never work. Merry was humming one of the orchestral pieces to herself, writing down what she guessed were the chords on a discarded napkin. And Tom...well, Tom looked out the window, his face stern and hard to read. He had been acting more seriously as of late, the weeks before his high school graduation slipping away. He wasn't even eighteen yet and already he was being pushed to figure out what he was going to do for the rest of his life. And that wasn't easy, not when dating Merry, who while had not pinpointed the exact career she wanted, was planning to go to college to study music and radio broadcasting. Even Tony at age six announced that he was going to MIT and was sure as sugar he was going to get there.

The adults in Tom's life were also not particularly helpful. All of them had stories of struggles, especially Bucky and Steve who had worked at any old job they could during the Depression and the War. Wanda had not tried to guilt him, but it was hard to not feel intimidated by her raising him and going to college, all in her fourth language, when she was not much older than him. Victor had a long and respected military career before becoming a computer supervisor. Even if he were to look further out at the Starks and Angie and Peggy...well, the Starks weren't living in the same class as Tom. Peggy's job was...well, none of them knew exactly what she did but it was certainly high up in central intelligence. Angie had been lucky enough to casually pursue acting, picking up the odd off Broadway production and spending the rest of the time volunteering.

Tom had been a little distant but after the movie, he was almost sullen. Bucky sent him and Merry ahead, dropping off Tony himself at the Stark Manor. He returned to the apartment, only to have Steve standing outside the door, his painted apron giving away that he had been chased away from his current project.

"What's going on?" Bucky asked.

He heard Merry's muffled shouting through the door and Tom's soft voice in response. He looked to Steve, hoping for an explanation.

Steve sighed. "Tom's dropped out of school. He's enlisted in the Navy."

"What?" Bucky demanded. "Let me talk to him, he can't-"

Steve put his hand on Bucky's chest. "Love, he's never been impulsive. Something must have happened. He needs our support right now, whatever it is."

The door opened and Tom left, tears in his eyes, but his mouth firm. He gave them both a nod before heading upstairs. They both went inside, expecting to see Merry, but she was in her bedroom, the
door locked, and Fleetwood Mac blaring through the walls.

Steve knocked on the door and she shouted at them to go away.

"I'm assuming they broke up," Steve commented.

"I think that's a good guess," Bucky agreed.

Steve knocked again and the record stopped. Merry opened the door just slightly. Her eyes were red with tears and she looked angrier than either of them had ever seen her. She looked like she'd rip off their noses if they stayed there too long.

"Yes, we broke up," Merry growled. "Yes, you can go talk to him even though I hate him. Yes, I'm fine. Now, leave me alone."

She slammed the door closed and Steve and Bucky exchanged a worried glance.

Steve cleared his throat. "I'll work on her, you go check in on him?"

"Should I?" Bucky asked. "He did just dump our daughter."

"You're the disabled vet. You're going to make a much stronger argument for going back and finishing high school."

"Fair point," Bucky agreed. "But just so we're clear, we're going to be taking Merry's side in this, right?"

"No shit," Steve replied. "Go on. Go see if he'll talk to you."

Bucky went up to the Shade's apartment. Neither Wanda or Victor were there, still out on a date. Bucky found Tom sitting on the fire escape, a lit cigarette between his fingers. Bucky sat down beside him, taking the cigarette away and smoking it himself.

"You're going to try to talk me out of it, right?" Tom asked bitterly. "Well, don't. I've spent my entire life in this neighbourhood, in this apartment building. The only person I've ever loved is the person everyone expected me to fall in love with. I haven't experienced anything, seen anything, and now I'm supposed to just start my life in this same place with the same people and never actually do anything with my life."

"Does it have to be the military?" Bucky begged. "I would have done anything to not go to Germany or to leave my family. Germany nearly killed me. You've seen my arm and you know the story. I went over with nothing and I came back with nothing."

"It's peace time," Tom assured. "I'll be fine."

"Your father joined in peace time. Now look at the man he is now. There's always another battle. It doesn't matter how the mission starts, it always ends in a fight, Tom. There's still time. You can go finish high school, you've got less than two months left. You can go to the shop with me until you figure things out."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Tom closed his eyes. "Promise not to tell anyone."
Bucky's heart sank. "Tom..."

"Promise not to tell anyone, not even Steve," Tom pleaded.

Bucky agreed, "Okay. I won't."

Tom's voice trembled as he spoke. "Merry and I went to a party a week ago. Some guy hit on me. I didn't know him but I said I was seeing someone and I wasn't interested. He didn't want to take no for an answer. He thought I should be flattered a real man was interested in a...queer like me and he threatened to tell Merry. I didn't care, Merry knows everything. I said something along those lines and...."

Tom had opened his eyes again but he was physically shaking. Bucky held his shoulders and encouraged him to breathe, slowly and deeply.

Tom swallowed hard and then continued, "He said if I didn't blow him, he was going to make Merry do it. I told him to go to hell. I went to get her out of there, but a bunch of his football friends were hanging out by her and her girls. I couldn't get her out without risking one of them hurting her. I panicked. The guy dragged me into the bathroom and I...I did what he wanted. When he was done with me, he said if I ever told anyone, he would kill me and make Merry watch."

Bucky was filled with a rage he had only felt a few times before and each time had led to him committing violence. If his assailant had been in his presence, he might have killed him.

Tom murmured, "I can't go back there, Bucky. I can't say anything to anyone and I can't go to anyone. I need to leave town and I need to do it quick. And I...I can't be with Merry. Not while he's still there. Maybe when he's graduated and gone but not now. I can't risk him hurting her."

"Who is he?" Bucky demanded. "I'll handle it."

"I knew you were going to say that. That's why I can't tell you. Anything you do will get back to her. You know that. I was always going to join the Navy. I've known it for months. But I can't wait anymore. I need to go. I need to get out of here. I'll finish high school later, I promise. I just can't be here right now."

"You should tell Merry," Bucky insisted. "Please. She loves you and I know you love her. Don't break her heart, Tom. Please. She'll understand."

Tom shook his head. "I...I was going to break up with her before I started my tour. I saw what it did to Mama, being an army widow. I couldn't do that to her. I want her to be happy and she will be without me."

Bucky was torn. "Tom..."

"I know," Tom said. "I know. If I tell her, she'll fight for me and she'll lose. It's three years. In three years, I'll just be on reserve duty. I'll have enough for college and I'll figure out by then what I'm doing. Please, Buck. I can't tell her, I can't tell any of them. I just...I just hoped you would understand."

"You're not going to be eighteen for a few months yet," Bucky said quietly. "Did you forge your papers or get Victor to sign them for you?"

"Dad did. He didn't need much convincing."

"When do you ship out?"
Tom admitted, "Monday."

"Monday," Bucky echoed.

Bucky promised, "I'll write to you, if you want me to. That helped me get through all of it, writing back and forth to my Dad and to Steve."

"I'd like that a lot," Tom murmured. "Bucky...Bucky, do you think she'll ever forgive me?"

Bucky confessed, "I don't know. But she's got a big heart. I think...one day, you should tell her. Not to win her back or anything like that. But because she's your best friend and I know you're always going to regret it if you don't. It doesn't have to be now. I think it should be now but you can wait. Just don't wait too long, Tom."

"Three years," Tom promised. "That'll be enough time. Maybe she'll have met someone else and it'll all be fine by then. I hope so. I really do. Buck...I'd like to be alone for a bit before my parents get home. I'm okay. I just...I just need some quiet."

Bucky kissed the top of his head and rose. "I'm so sorry, Tom."

Tom smiled weakly. "Me too."

Bucky went back downstairs. He went to Merry's room but the door was closed. He could hear both her and Steve's voice over the music so he left and went for a long walk around the neighbourhood. He came back with dinner. Merry was still in her room but Steve encouraged her to go in with a few slices of pizza.

The song was just ending and Bucky was hoping she'd stop the record so they could talk. Merry got up and moved the needle back to the groove, starting the seventh track again. She sat back down on her bed and held her pillow to her chest.

"He got it for me for Valentine's Day," Merry said. "He probably already knew he was going to leave me. You know, it's already famous because half of the band was breaking up with the other half. Real romantic, right?"

"Tom doesn't know a lot about music," Bucky said.

"No," Merry sighed, "he doesn't know a lot about a lot of things."

Merry would play that record, specifically the same song, again and again until the vinyl broke. She only left the apartment to buy another copy and the pattern continued all weekend. By the time she went back to school on Monday, she held her head high, her back straight, and said that she had moved on.

And as much as Bucky loved Tom, he really hoped she had.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter summary: Tom breaks up with Merry after sharing that he has dropped out of high school and enlisted in the Navy. Bucky tries to convince him to go back to school and Tom tells him that he was blackmailed into sex at a party in order to protect him and Merry. He was already planning to enlist, he just bumped up his deployment date.
because he needs to get out of town. Merry listens to "The Chain" by Fleetwood Mac a lot. Tom is, for the most part, emotionally okay.

AN: I was not planning at all for this to be the reason Tom leaves town but I always knew he was going to leave for the military. It just sort of came out as I was typing and felt right. I mean, I feel like a piece of garbage, but it also felt honest, you know?
1978

Bucky received a letter every week from Tom. He didn't hide them but he didn't exactly display them proudly. Merry claimed not to care. She even tolerated people talking about him. She just never wanted to hear any mention of the eighteen months they were together and she would glare at anyone who did.

Bucky kept his word and didn't share what Tom had told him. As far as everyone knew, Tom had gone to seek his fame and fortune. Wanda would share the adventures he spoke about in his letters and phone calls. Bucky usually just nodded along at those stories, not discussing what Tom wrote in the ones to him.

Tom had met someone, a deckhand about his age. It was early but it was nice not to be alone. Bucky was glad that he was comfortable dating again but always feared him being discovered. This wasn't the 1940s where everyone was kissing everyone in the army. Tom could be dishonourably discharged and sent home.

He was glad as well because Merry certainly was not waiting around for Tom. She was nearly as bad as Bucky had been when he was pining for Steve. Every week a new beau to take her to the movies or to go dancing. She went to that year's Winter Formal stag and met her second serious boyfriend, Wes. The family generally liked him, except for Tony. Tony just glared at him whenever he tried to speak and typically would just walk out of the room.

Merry took Wes to her Senior Prom and dumped him three days later when she received a college acceptance letter. She had already been invited to attend a few colleges in New York but this was the one she had her heart set on and no one except Angie knew she was applying. Which was why she had her sitting beside her when she told her fathers were she was going.

"Missouri?!!"

Merry explained, "Angie's family is from there. Her niece offered me a place to stay. I want to see more of the country. You're supposed to go away to find yourself, right? Everyone goes to New York. I thought I'd go to Missouri."

Angie offered, "Betty's a real peach. She reached out a few years ago and we've gotten real close. I think it'd be nice if Merry got to see what the American Heartland's like. She'll be back here every summer. Mizzou is good school and she can study both radio and music there. They're giving her a scholarship too, that's what took them so long with all the paperwork."

Merry said, "I won't go if you don't want me to but I'd really like to go. I'm coming back to New York after. This is home. Missouri is just an adventure."

Bucky squeezed Steve's hand and Steve looked a little sick.

"It's...a long way away," Steve said quietly.

Bucky looked to Angie. "And it's not the most progressive place, either."
Angie shrugged. "She's straight. If she bites her tongue, she'll be fine."

Steve retorted, "So she should have to hide everything about her family? She'll be alone, pretending to be someone she's not."

Merry hung her head. "The last year I spent pretending everything was fine. Every single place I've ever been in the Village reminds me of Tom. I just need some time away. I need to make some new memories without him. I need to have someplace that's just mine."

It hurt, but they agreed. The summer went by too quickly and before long, Steve and Bucky were driving Merry halfway across the country. No one spoke much but Merry had enough cassettes for them to fill those silences.

They reached Colombia, Missouri two weeks before the semester started. Angie's niece Betty was a sweet young woman in her early thirties with a roommate with strikingly short hair. The roommate, Joan, gave Bucky a wink upon introduction and he relaxed a little. There was a reason Betty had reached out to her gay aunt. Merry would be right at home here.

Bucky and Steve spent two nights in the city, looking at the campus and helping Merry buy her books. They could have stayed longer but postponing their departure made it only more painful.

It was early on that third day when Bucky and Steve packed up the car and readied to hit the road again. Betty and Joan waited inside the house, giving Merry space to be with her parents.

Merry stood on the curb, looking just like the girl who cried at the pigeons flying at her aunts' wedding. And just like then, Bucky went to comfort her. He hesitated and took off the medallion around his neck and put it in his daughter's hand.

"Your father gave this to me the night before I went to basic in '41 and I've worn it every day since," Bucky said. "I've had to replace the chain a few times but I've held onto your St. Francis of Assisi through a lot of rough nights."

Merry held it against her palm and murmured, "Dad, Dad, you can't give this to me."

"I'm not," Bucky said, putting it around her neck. "It's a loan. You're going to give it back to me when you come home. You just hold on to it for now for me."

Merry touched the medallion, her fingers lingering on the impression of the Saint's face.

"And if I don't come back?"

Bucky assured, "You don't have to but home is always going to be there for you. When you're ready. You're doing the right thing for you, Merry. I am so proud of you. It's not easy, starting over, but it's going to be wonderful."

Merry hugged him tightly and he kissed her forehead. She let go and embraced Steve. He whispered something to her and she nodded. Steve and Bucky got back into the car and Bucky started the engine. He started driving, looking back to see Merry waving.

Steve took his hand and said softly, "We have to leave her for now, Buck."

Bucky admitted, "I don't think I have ever felt so old."

Steve asked, "Will you be okay to drive?"
Bucky nodded. "Yeah. Let's go home, punk."

***

It took them just two days to drive home, neither wanting to prolong the trip. Bucky dropped Steve off at the apartment and went to the shop to return the car. When he returned, he walked into his home to see his living room transformed into a mass of blankets, pillows, candy wrappers, and comic books. Steve was standing in the eye of that cluttered mess, looking down at a pajama-clad Tony holding a bag of corn chips.

"How did he get in here?" Bucky asked.

Steve held up their spare key. "He left it on the kitchen table."

Tony said in a rush, "I told my parents I was with Aunt Peggy. I was going to just stay here for the night to get supplies but I didn't know where to go so I just kinda stayed and I didn't know when you would be back so-

Steve knelt down to face him. "Tony, did you run away from home?"

Tony hung his head and didn't answer.

Bucky said, "I'll call Howard."

"Please don't make me go back," Tony pleaded. "I don't want to go back."

Steve held his shoulders. "Tony, your Mom and Dad are going to be worried sick about you. We're just going to tell them where you are. Then you'll have a nice bath and we'll have something to eat. We'll make up Merry's bed so you don't have to sleep on the floor. It's late so we'll talk about it in the morning."

Tony looked at Bucky hopefully. "You won't send me back?"

Bucky promised. "No, we won't. I'm just going to let them know you're safe."

Tony went along with Steve, holding his hand.

Bucky dialed the Stark Manor and after a conversation with a panicked Jarvis, finally got a hold of Maria.

"Oh thank God," Maria sighed. "I went to pick him up at Peggy's yesterday and she told me she hadn't seen him for days. He's safe? He's okay?"

Bucky assured, "He's fine. He looks like he had quite the party on our floor. We're making him eat some vegetables now and actually go to bed."

Maria sighed deeper. "You must think so poorly of me."

Bucky replied, "No, I don't. It's hard raising any kid, never mind one as smart as Tony. He needs a lot and you can't be expected to give him everything."

"He has everything, more than any other child has."

Bucky explained, "No, I mean...look, he's a little boy with the intellect of a fifty old rocket scientist and none of the emotional development. He feels things so strongly and so intensely and he doesn't have a way to express that other than taking apart motorcycles. Some kids can be really independent
and in a lot of ways, Tony can't be. He needs more attention, more guidance, and if you don't give it
to him, you're going to lose him."

Maria was silent for a long time and finally asked, "What would you do, if you were me? What
would you do to help him?"

Bucky said softly, "I don't know. He's not my son. You know him better than I do. All I know was
that he was really scared and the person he thought could save him was Steve. Steve's the type of
person who puts his heart into everything and gives a person his complete attention. Steve makes a
person feel safe, like he'd step in front of a bullet for you. Tony is an anxious kid and too smart too
soon."

"...are you saying my son doesn't trust me?"

Bucky hesitated and said, "No. I just think he needs a lot more looking after than a lot of kids need
and getting a lot less than most kids do."

"I can't give up my entire life just to be his security blanket," Maria said softly. "I love my son, I truly
do, but I can't...I won't be my mother, putting aside everything and working herself to death for her
children. I won't."

Bucky sat down. "Listen...what do you think about Tony staying with us for awhile? Not too long,
maybe a few weeks until school starts. Just until we figure this all out. I just want him to feel like he's
got a safe place to be."

Maria started crying and Bucky comforted, "You're not a bad mother. Tony is a very special kid and
parenting is really hard. It'll all work out. You say hello to Howard for me and try to get some sleep.
I'll call you in the morning, okay?"

Bucky ended the call just as a freshly washed Tony entered the room, still refusing to let go of
Steve's hand. Bucky made them sandwiches and Tony devoured his, likely since he had lived off
candy and chips for days. After, Steve carried him into Merry's room and tucked him into bed.

Steve flopped onto the couch and Bucky brought them both a beer. They tapped their bottles
together before taking a drink. Bucky told him about his call with Maria and Steve shook his head,
smiling.

"You know, I was looking forward to being empty nesters," Steve chuckled.

Bucky nuzzled into his neck. "It's just two weeks. Then I'll get you all to myself."

Chapter End Notes

After awhile I wondered is it weird for them to have so many different kids running
around their place and then I remembered how many kids my parents took in for months
at a time (not even fostered, just like friends' and family's kids who needed looking after)
and then I was like yep checks out.
It was not, in fact, two weeks. When school began, Tony was brought back home. Two days later, he ran away again, showing up at Steve and Bucky's in the middle of the night. This pattern went on for another three weeks and eventually the four of them sat down to talk it over. At Steve's insistence, Tony would be consulted before they made their final decision, as there was no point trying something if he wasn't going to go along with it.

They talked for hours. There were some shouting, some crying, but eventually they came to a conclusion and Tony was brought in from the other wing of the Manor.

Tony looked at them all around the large dining room table, the Starks facing the Rogers-Barnes. There was an empty chair on each end, one beside Howard and one beside Steve. It had not meant to be a test, but it proved to be one regardless as Tony sat beside Steve and held onto his arm.

Maria looked as if she might start crying again and Howard rubbed her back. Howard had been relatively calm through the whole proceedings but now he looked as if he might crumple too.

Howard asked softly, "Tony...what more can we do? We're trying, we really are. You're breaking your mother's heart every time you go away."

Tony murmured, "I'm sorry, Mom."

Maria reached across the table to touch his hand but it was too broad. She withdrew it and placed it back on her knee.

Steve asked, "Tony, will you tell your parents what you told me on the way here?"

Tony looked a little panicked but Steve encouraged him with a smile. Tony looked down at the table, not meeting anyone's glance as he spoke.

"I don't want to be alone," Tony admitted. "I always feel alone and then when I'm not, everything's too loud. I get nothing or everything. I can't plan how to feel now. I don't like it like this. It hurts. It hurts a lot."

Howard asked, "What do you mean, you can't plan how to feel?"

Steve explained, "Tony does better if you break things down into steps so he knows what his day is going to look like. He also does better if you explain to him how you're feeling so he's not surprised when you react to something he did."

Bucky added, "I've talked to Jarvis and Ellen about it a few times. We've been practicing how to read people's faces so he can learn what a smile or a frown means."

Steve continued, "And it scares him sometimes when he gets upset so we're working on talking about reactions and emotions. It's helping him when he gets anxious."

Howard commented angrily, "You're making it sound like my son's a basket case. Tony is the most brilliant kid I know and you're saying he needs a checklist or he starts throwing tantrums?"
Maria said, "I've seen Jarvis make him lists on school mornings and talk him through it hour by hour. It does seem to help."

"So we'll just do all that," Howard said. "If you're saying Jarvis and Ellen know how to help him, then we'll keep doing that at home until he gets better. We'll take him to a doctor and get him checked out but I'm telling you there's nothing wrong with him."

"There isn't," Steve agreed. "I've been reading a lot about it since Tony first ran away. Tony gets overwhelmed by a lot of things because his brain works different then ours. It's not about changing anything about him. It's just us helping him learn how to navigate in the world."

Maria's face fell. "You...you think he has autism, don't you? That this is my fault? That I just didn't love him enough?"

Bucky interrupted, "Maria, don't go there. There's no such thing as a refrigerator mother. This is entirely genetic. Tony was born this way. Tony just has higher needs than a lot of kids and we want to help you meet them. We can make this work."

Steve looked to Tony. "We've been talking all of us and we'd like to try something. We'll need your help though and you'll need to be a little brave. We want you to go to the school you're going to now so you'll have to stay here during the week. But on the weekends, you'll come stay with Bucky and me. You and I can talk on the phone every night before you go to bed. Your Mom and Dad are going to do the same things we do at home and it won't hurt as much. Can we try that?"

Tony looked to Howard and asked, "Dad, can I?"

Howard looked like he might cry. "I think it's a good idea, but only if you want to."

Tony left Steve's side and hugged his father. Howard pulled him up into his lap and kissed his forehead. Maria took him from him and held her son close, whispering to him how much she loved him.

Steve and Bucky took a cab home that night, Steve bursting into tears the minute the driver left the Manor.

"I don't want to leave him there," Steve confessed. "They don't understand him, Buck. I know they love him, but they're never going to understand him."

"They're going to try," Bucky assured, "and he's always got us. Every weekend and I know he's going to spend every night talking your ear off. Even if they don't do much, you know that Jarvis and Ellen love him and they're doing every thing they can for him. He's going to be all right. I know it will."

Steve laid his head on his shoulder. "I hope you're right."

***

For a few months, it worked until the Holiday season hit and the Starks threw a good dozen parties at their Manor. Tony was expected to show up as the darling genius Maria and Howard loved to brag about. But each time his behaviour grew worse and worse until it just became expected he would throw a tantrum and Howard would pull him from the room and tell him to act his age.

On December 31st at 11:22pm, Bucky received a phone call from a weeping Maria.

"Can you bring Tony home?"
First Bucky thought that Tony had run away again but realized she wanted him to pick him up and bring him to their apartment. Bucky agreed and left, not waking up any of his household. He arrived at the Stark Manor to see an agitated Tony pacing the grand staircase, yelling at Howard as Jarvis and Ellen watched helplessly from below. Bucky could still hear the guests in the ballroom, drinking and dancing.

At the sight of Bucky, Tony stopped screaming. Bucky walked up the staircase to him and put his big pea coat around them both, bringing Tony just into their little bubble. Tony whimpered and Bucky said softly, "It's okay. We're going home now."

"I'm sorry," Tony whispered. "I tried."

"I know," Bucky said. "You're the toughest little guy I know, Tony. If you couldn't do it, no one could. You're safe now. I'm going to get Jarvis and Ellen to pack up some things for you and we'll take a cab back. I just need to talk to your Mom and Dad. Can you wait five minutes?"

Tony hesitated and nodded. Bucky took off his jacket and wrapped it around Tony. He waved Jarvis over and the butler took Tony's hand and led him to his bedroom, Ellen following behind them.

Bucky rose to his feet, looking up to Howard at the first landing of the staircase. Howard was dressed in his finest tux, his hair styled, his face clean-shaven. Bucky was in his rattiest pajamas, had two days of scruff, and had been in such a rush to get out the door he didn't have shoes on.

Howard walked down to him, his hand trembling as they grasped the railing.

Once they reached the same step, Bucky put out his hand and placed it on Howard's shoulder. Howard first went to push it away but instead left his hand on Bucky's.

"I know you love him," Bucky said softly. "This isn't about love. This is about living. You'd need to change every single thing about your life in order to make him comfortable. This way you don't have to. You can build your empire and make a legacy for him. You can pay for his education; give him opportunities that no one else ever could. My job is to make sure he lives long enough to let him experience all of that because if this keeps going, one way or another you're going to lose him. Sometimes...sometimes when we love someone, we have to let them go."

Howard whispered, "Please don't take away my son."

Bucky's heart broke. "Howard...please. Please just let him go. If you ever want to have a relationship with him, a real relationship, let him go."

Tony returned with Jarvis and Ellen, the butler holding a large suitcase and the nanny carrying several toys and teddy bears. They loaded these things into the taxi and waited at the door with Tony, the little boy looking fearfully at his father.

Howard knelt down before his son and hugged him. He whispered something to him before rising and going to Maria's side. Maria blew him a kiss, her legs shaking too much for her to go to him. Tony pretended to catch it and put it on his cheek.

Bucky went to Tony and took his hand in his. Tony kept his eyes forward as they left and said nothing in the taxi ride home. He only spoke again when they returned to the apartment. The lights were all on and Steve waited on the couch. Tony saw him, burst into tears, and ran to him. Steve wrapped him in his arms and Tony spoke rapidly to him, telling him his every trouble.

Bucky went down the hall and saw the light on in Merry's room. He opened the door slightly and saw her among her next semester's textbooks, a champagne glass in hand. She looked up at him and
gave him a little wave.

"I thought you'd be at your party all night," Bucky said. "What are you doing home and studying?"

"New Years is about looking forward," Merry answered. "I don't want to hang out with my drunk high school friends and talk about old times like we're forty. Besides, I'm taking this intro to jazz improvisation class and I just can't get my head around it. You want to listen to *A Love Supreme* with me and try to make sense of it?"

Bucky put on the record, drowning out Tony and Steve's conversation. He laid down on the bed beside his daughter, putting her glass on the nightstand.

After a few minutes, Merry admitted, "I read Tom's letter, right before I went to the party. I know, Dad, about what happened and what he did. I couldn't stop thinking about it and I didn't know which of those assholes, excuse my French, hurt him and I didn't really want to ring in 1979 with them. So I left."

Bucky said quietly, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Merry shook her head. "No, I'm glad you didn't. He was going to break up with me anyways. I would have spent the last year of high school pining after him instead of being pissed off. We both needed time. I just...I just wish I could have been there for him but it wasn't about me. He needed just needed to go. I get that."

Merry held out the letter to Bucky. "You can read it, if you want. I'm sure he wouldn't mind. He writes you often enough that I'm sure none of this is a surprise to you."

Bucky hesitated but he was too curious not to look. It was simple, informative, and devoid of anything that might be construed as romantic. But it was lacking one very important detail: his attacker had threatened Merry. According to this narrative, Merry had never been in any danger. Bucky knew he couldn't tell her and honestly he didn't want to. What would it change except to scare her?

"You going to write him back?" Bucky asked.

Merry confessed, "I don't know."

Bucky fell asleep, only waking when the album ended. He tucked in Merry and turned off the record player. He went out into the living room and saw Tony asleep on the couch, bundled up in his favourite blankets. Bucky kissed his forehead and turned out the lights.

He went into his own bedroom and found Steve under the covers, just drifting off. He curled beside him, kissed his cheek, and went back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

There is a 75% chance there will be actually 31 chapters as this one got away from me.

As someone else with an anxiety disorder, when I watched Iron Man 3 I went "SAME HAT!" So here's a baby Tony with some anxiety, OCD, and a peck of autism. Howard and Maria aren't bad parents but their parenting style just does not computer with our boy.
Chapter Notes

Okay, so I ended up splitting the last chapter but the epilogue has already been written for some time now so next update you'll get both.

Fun fact: the Kinks song that this chapter is named after actually is about Captain America

1979

The first day of the winter semester, Steve started packing up his home studio. He started moving his supplies over to the college, renting out one of the rooms there for his own. He kept a few things in Merry's room, one traveling easel and his preferred charcoals and papers. But within less than a week, the room was transformed from Steve's small study into Tony's bedroom. And just like the previous occupant, it was quickly filled with projects and contraptions that Bucky had no understanding of but was delighted by. Tony had very quickly settled into their lives and into a new routine. Every Wednesday night they would go over to the Stark Manor for dinner and every second weekend he would stay with them. Each occasion made Tony anxious but knowing it wasn't the norm helped him through it.

Merry's second semester went well enough that she was having her first professional performance just around Tony's birthday. All three of them flew out and watched Merry's piano reinterpretation of jazz standards, the Clash's Give 'Em Enough Rope and a few of her original compositions. The venue wasn't large; a local coffee house that had crammed in maybe 75 chairs but each and every one of them was filled. There was one person, who stood at the back, clearly having come in late and not bothered to ask for a seat. Bucky had taken a passing glance at him when deciding whether or not Tony needed a break. There was no reason to think it was the person he thought it was, it was only a passing resemblance and it was dark. He meant to ask Steve to look back but Steve was enraptured, completely taken with Merry's performance. Bucky put the thought aside, gave Tony a pair of foam earplugs and let himself get swept away again.

The moment she finished, Tony immediately stood up and cheered out, applauding loudly. The rest of the room stood as well and Merry's cheeks flushed. Tony ran up with the bouquet of flowers he had personally picked out and presented them to her. She grinned and bent down to receive them. A few in the crowd laughed, taken by Merry's excited younger brother.

Once Merry had greeted the majority of her well-wishers, Steve managed to finally give his daughter a hug. She beamed at him, holding him tight.

"What did you think of the Peterson piece?" She asked. "I think I hit it a little flat."

"It was perfect," Steve assured. "We're so proud of you."

Merry turned to Bucky and asked, "What did you think, Dad?"

Bucky agreed, "I'm a little speechless, honestly. You've got a real gift. That definitely didn't come from me. You free for dinner? We'd love to take you out to celebrate."
"I'd like that very much," Merry said. "There's an Italian place a few blocks from my place that has the best gnocchi in all of Missouri. Let me go and say goodbye to my professor. If this hasn't shown him I understand jazz, I don't know what will."

"Why don't we all meet out front?" Bucky suggested. "I gotta go see a man about a horse."

Steve rolled his eyes as Tony giggled, but he brought the boy outside for some fresh air. Bucky patted Merry on the back before wandering to the back of the hall, looking for the man he had thought he recognized. It was harder to spot him as the venue cleared but Bucky still had little trouble. He was very familiar with that face.

Bucky called out, "Tom?"

Tom snapped to attention and looked over at Bucky. He started to stammer out an explanation and Bucky hugged him tightly. Tom relaxed into his embrace, his face softening as they pulled away.

"What are you doing here?" Bucky asked.

"Merry sent me an invitation," Tom explained. "I didn't know I was getting shore leave until sixteen hours ago so I thought I'd surprise her. I didn't know all of you were going to be here."

"Howard was feeling guilty about missing Tony's birthday," Bucky explained. "I told him it was too much but you know how it is with him. Still, how'd you make it out here? We're nowhere near any shoreline."

"A buddy of mine was heading to Kansas and we split the driving. I've got to get back down to Florida by tomorrow night. We weren't even supposed to be in harbour this long, just an engine needed repairs. I know it's a long way to go just for a concert but I thought if I had the chance, I needed to try."

Bucky tried to asked delicately, "Are you still seeing that guy you mentioned last letter?"

"I'm not here to win her back, Bucky. She's happy and I'm happy too. She's still my best friend, or at least we're getting back to that. That matters a lot more to me."

"Tom?"

They both turned to see Merry, still carrying the flowers Tony had given her. Merry looked like a deer in the headlights, the most stunned he had ever seen his poised and unflappable daughter. She bit her lip and collected herself.

"What a wonderful surprise. We're about to go out to dinner," Merry said evenly. "Would you like to join us?"

Tom replied kindly, "No, I shouldn't impose."

Bucky shot him a look. "We insist."

The three of them joined Steve and Tony outside. Tony saw Tom and grinned, pointing at Tom excitedly.

Tony asked, "He's why you dumped Trent? YES. That guy was a loser, I hated him. Tom! Tom! Are you coming to dinner?"

Merry said curtly, "I'll have you know that Trent dumped me and Tom and I are just friends."
Tony scowled. "Like anyone buys that. You're too pretty to get dumped."

Merry replied, "It's not like it's the first time it's ever happened."

She realized what she said and looked to Tom, immediately trying to apologize but he just laughed and ruffled Tony's hair.

"I've missed you, kid," he said. "You got any projects on the go?"

"Definitely. Uncle Steve, can I borrow your sketchbook back at Cousin Betty's house? I want to draw Tom what I'm working on."

Merry asked, "Do you have a place to stay tonight, Tom?"

"I was planning to just stay at the Y," Tom admitted. "I don't got much with me and it didn't seem worth it to track down a hotel just for a night."

Merry put her hand on his arm. "Then come stay with us. My cousin's house has plenty of room and they've heard so much about you I know they’ll both be really happy to meet you."

Tom hesitated and Bucky shot him a look, trying to psychically convey it's now or never, kid.

Tom finally agreed, "If it's not too much trouble."

"Of course not," Merry said, clearly easing to his company. "It'll be our pleasure."

Dinner was surprisingly comfortable. Tony convinced a waiter to lend him a pen and a stack of napkins and spent a great deal of time sketching out parts of the motorcycle he was rebuilding. Tom listened intently, asking the appropriate questions until their food arrived.

"You must love having him in the shop with you after school," Tom said.

"Sometimes during school," Steve said. "We're getting much better about attending classes but sometimes we get thrown out for being disrespectful to our teachers."

Tony explained, "Uncle Steve read a book about parents taking some of accountability for their children's actions in order for them to feel less blame. And besides, I wouldn't tell them I know more than them unless I actually did."

Bucky tried to hide his smile. Everyone knew Tony was essentially putting in time before he was old enough for college. The boy was too smart for his own good. At least at the shop he was quite polite to the other mechanics. He was learning from them and they had the gumption to tell him off if he was being a pest, which he rarely was.

Bucky winked at Tony and Tony winked back.

The rest of the evening went by easily and soon enough all of them were on their way back to Betty's. Merry was right: both of them were delighted to meet Tom and Bucky suspected because they had heard Merry griping about him on multiple occasions. Bucky and Steve went up to their guest room and Tony showed Tom the boarding room. It was basically an attic with two twin beds that very rarely Betty rented out when she needed extra cash.

Bucky went to bed early, hoping to catch Tom before he left in the morning. He instead was woken in the middle of the night by the sounds of hushed giggles. Concerned that Tony had convinced Tom to conduct an explosive science experiment, Bucky went out into the hall. He walked only a few
paces and noticed the light on in Merry's room. He paused, hearing Tom's voice and Merry's teasing tone, the one she only ever used around him.

Bucky smiled to himself and went back to bed.

1980

Merry had decided to do a summer semester in her first year, making January 1980 the beginning of her third year. At least, that was how Bucky understood it. In his mind he just referred to it as "four semesters down, four to go."

Things were going well in their household. Both Steve and Bucky missed Merry fiercely but she phoned every week and visited on the holidays. And while she had missed Easter last year due to exams, she was determined to come to this one. Both of them thought this was too much but if she was homesick, they weren't going to stop her. It was a long trip for her but they would send her back with enough goodies to feed her for months.

On April 1st, a week before Easter, Merry phoned home. When Bucky picked up, she sighed in relief that it was him. Bucky had glanced at the calendar and prepared himself for a prank. Merry, bless her, didn't have enough malice in her for a decent one but he was curious to see her try.

Of all the things he thought she might pull, he never expected her to whisper, "Dad...will you come get me?"

"Sweetpea, what's wrong?"

"I was going to tell you when I got there but I just...Dad, I really need you. Can you come get me? I made it most of the way there, I'm in Philadelphia right now. I just...I'm just so sick and each time I try getting back on the bus I throw up. Can you come get me? I'm at 30th Street Station."

"I'll be there," Bucky promised. "You go buy yourself some ginger ale and find a comfortable spot to sit. I'll be two and a half hours, three tops. I'll bring some of those chews your father likes when he's sick."

"Is he...is he there?"

"He's just at Mass right now," Bucky said. "Do you want me to wait until he gets back? He might be another hour."

"No. No, just come now. Please. Thank you."

***

Bucky had never driven so fast in his life and if a cop had pulled him over, they probably would have taken his license away. He made his way to 30th Street and found Merry sitting on a crowded bench, a bottle of ginger ale in her hands and an empty one between her feet. She looked up and it was clear she had been crying.

He got her into the car and started driving. She didn't speak to him until they left the city at which point she asked him to turn off at a rest area. She went to the bathrooms, presumably to throw up some more, and returned to the car, shaking like a lamb.

"You poor thing," he said, rubbing her back. "Are you okay to keep going?"
She nodded, still green at the gills. "I just want to be home."

***

They would stop two more times before he finally got her to the apartment. He parked the car, intending to return it when the shop opened on Monday. Merry was so weak he nearly had to carry her up the stairs himself.

He got into the apartment and Steve was pacing anxiously, no doubt scared shitless by Bucky's vague and hurried note. Merry went straight to the bathroom and Steve went in to look after her.

Once she was finally settled, Steve moved her into bed and then called Bucky into her room. Merry was sitting upright, a bucket in her arms. She leaned against the headboard, wincing.

Merry closed her eyes and murmured, "I was going to tell you last week but I was so sick and I just wanted to be home. Is it okay I came home early? My classes are over and my exams are in two weeks. I just wanted to be home."

Bucky said, "I'm going to call Helen. She can be right over-"

"I'm not dying. I'm pregnant."

Steve looked as if she had struck him with lightning. Bucky started laughing. Of course she was. Wasn't this the story of his life?

"How far along are you?"

"Nine weeks. I found out on Thursday."

Bucky asked, "Are you..."

Merry whispered, "I don't know. I know I don't have to keep it; you don't have to give me that talk. I want to talk to Wanda and Angie before I decide anything. Is that okay?"

Bucky assured, "All of it is okay. You just get some rest and focus on feeling better. Do you want me to phone either of them?"

She shook her head. "No, not yet. Tomorrow, I'll do it."

Steve cleared his throat. "Do we...do we know the father?"

"You don't," Merry said quietly. "Just a one-time thing. It was Valentine's Day and I was a little tipsy. I wasn't thinking. I don't think I could find him again even if I wanted to. I'm sorry. I wish I had a better answer."

Bucky sat beside her and kissed her forehead. "It's going to be okay, sweetpea. I promise. You just get some sleep. I'll make that chicken rice soup you like. Maybe without the chicken, just until you're keeping things down again."

Merry started drifting off and Steve moved the bucket to the side of the bed. He helped her to her side and propped her so if she did vomit again, she could not possibly miss.
Angie came over the next morning and spent the entire day with Merry. Steve and Bucky were sent off to work and they returned to Angie's homemade dinner and Wanda drinking tea with them around the kitchen table. After everyone ate, Angie took Tony to her and Peggy's place for the night. Wanda said her goodbyes, kissing Merry's cheek on the way out.

When it was just the three of them, Merry outlined her plan.

"I want to have the baby," Merry announced. "I can do another summer semester at Mizzou and then transfer to a local college for the rest of my credits. I'll pump and that way I can go to classes. By the time I'm finished, the baby will be old enough to go to daycare and then I can work."

Steve smiled. "Sounds like you have it all figured out. Of course, we'll support you. You can come back home and that way you don't have to pay rent. We'll help with babysitting, all of us will."

Bucky asked, "Is this what you want, sweetpea? I know you can make it work, you're a smart girl, but will this make you happy?"

Merry put her hand on her belly. "Yeah...yeah, I think it will. I know it won't be easy but I'm excited too. He's a few years early but I'm glad he's here."

Steve kissed her cheek. "Then we are too. Congratulations, sweetheart. You're going to be amazing. It's going to be tough, but I know you can do it and we've always got your back."

Merry looked to Bucky and he smiled tiredly, "Congratulations, Merry."

She went to bed early, her stomach still rioting. Steve and Bucky stayed up watching TV, neither of them really paying much attention. Eventually, Bucky turned it off and turned to face him.

"There's something I have to tell you, Steve."

"Don't tell me you're pregnant too."

"I was going to talk to you about this after Easter but I think it might have to be dealt with a bit quicker with the baby coming. Ma...Ma had a fall. She's okay but it gave her a fright. I've been visiting her after work and we've been talking about the house. She doesn't want to move out and while she's able enough to live on her own, the place is too much for her. This is her last Easter doing the whole dinner. She hasn't told the girls that yet because she wants to just enjoy it. After...well, she asked if we'd consider buying the house from her. She'd like to stay with us but if that's too much trouble she'll go to Becky's. I think I want to do it. I want to be able to give everyone the best I can and I think this is the way to do it."

"Buck-"

"I know," he said. "I know, it's a lot to ask but Ma's never asked either of us for anything. She wants to live the rest of her life in her home. And with the baby...well, maybe it's easier this way. We could do it over the next few months, take our time. I could start walking to work and Tony already has to take the train to his fancy private school. It's about the same distance to the college as from our place. I want...I want to be able to give everyone the best I can and I think this is the way to do it."

Steve looked as if he might cry. "But this is our home."
"I know," Bucky said, "and we don't have to give it up. We could always rent it out for a little while and give it to Merry when she's ready for her own place. Or if Ma...well, when she passes, we could always sell her house and move back."

"You would do that?" Steve asked in surprise. "You'd sell your childhood home and move back here? For me?"

Bucky murmured, "I'd do anything for you. You should know that by now."

"I think we should do it," Steve said. "I think it's time we went home."

***

It was a busy summer. Merry went back to school in Missouri and finished her summer semester at six months pregnant. Then she packed up her things and flew back to New York. She insisted she'd start her "year abroad" right away and the entire household had to talk her out of it. She was due in mid-November. She could take a few months off.

Merry, being Steve's daughter, took that as a challenge. She reached out to the school paper and started writing an album review column. She played piano everyday, keeping a pillow between the instrument and her growing belly.

Over those months, Steve and Bucky had begun the process of moving their things to Brooklyn and making the place more comfortable for Ma. Bucky renovated Pa's old office as another bedroom, letting Ma live on the main floor so she wouldn't have to do the stairs so often. He was planning out a second bathroom too but he wasn't much of a plumber so it was taking awhile. Steve redecorated under Ma's supervision, who didn't want anything too fancy but was pleased to be able to have her house styled by a famous artist.

Steve had been concerned about Tony transitioning to the new house but Bucky had known right away it was a good fit. Tony adored Ma and loved being a ten-minute walk from the shop. Bucky almost had to drag him back to the Village at night. He was more worried about Merry. There were a lot of changes happening in her life all at once and to walk away from her home in the middle of it seemed like a lot. She seemed to be handling it well. She was always a forward-thinking girl and was focused on the future.

The official move was to happen the last week of October, giving Merry two weeks to nest in her new home before the baby was born. However, on October 20th, Tony was already moved in and was staying at the apartment in just a sleeping bag, too excited for his new room. The piano was moved but there was still the issue of packing up Merry's many records and cassettes and instead of finally sorting them, she just kept buying more.

On that day, Merry was in her favourite record store, picking up a debut tape for her column the minute it was available. She was in line for the register when she started feeling contractions but managed to make the purchase before her water broke. She calmly took the bus back home and spent the trip writing notes on the cover art. Once she got back to the apartment building, she walked up to the Shades' apartment and asked Wanda to get her to the hospital.

Bucky didn't learn she was in labour until an hour after she had checked in. Wanda was fairly busy phoning everyone in the family and the newest apprentice in the shop had been hogging the line fighting with his girlfriend. Bucky dropped everything and rushed over.

Everyone else was already there. Angie was in the room with Merry and Peggy was sitting outside with Tony. Wanda and Steve were standing nearby, speaking in low whispers over paper cups of
"I've called your mother but she is visiting your sister in Boston right now. Victor is in Albany for a meeting but he should be back tomorrow morning. I think that is everyone. Is there anyone else I should be phoning?"

Bucky chuckled. "If you've told my mother, then the rest of my family already knows. Have you got a hold of Tom?"

Wanda hesitated. "He and Merry are...complicated right now. They were doing well but he was very upset she waited so long to tell him about the baby. I don't want to make things more difficult and I don't know if I can reach him. There are so many of us here right now and..."

Wanda admitted, "It's been difficult. I love Merry as if she were my sister but Tom is my son and I love him more than anything. I want them to both be happy and it hurts to see them like this. He loves her and I know she loves him."

"I think Merry would want him to know," Bucky said.

Wanda nodded. "I think so too. I will go try."

Wanda left and Bucky went to Steve. He kissed his cheek and asked, "How you doing, punk?"

Steve sighed. "Okay. I haven't seen her yet. They're only letting one person in at a time and she doesn't want Angie to leave her. The doctor says she's doing well but it's slow. It could be hours yet."

Bucky reminded, "Angie's gone through this before and we don't have the same equipment. She's gotta to be a lot more comforting than we could be."

Steve sighed again. "Yeah...yeah, I guess so."

"Listen, there's no point in all of us just standing around haunting the place. There's a diner down the street. Why don't you take everyone out for a quick lunch? I already ate at the shop. I'll come grab you if anything changes."

Steve murmured, "I don't want to leave her."

"It's going to be a long night," Bucky said. "Go on, we'll be fine."

It took Steve a lot more convincing but eventually they all left, leaving Bucky in the waiting room. He skimmed through a magazine and maybe an hour later, he felt Angie's hand on his shoulder.

Angie said softly, "She wants to see you."

Bucky followed her into the room and the nurse shooed Angie out. Bucky sat down beside Merry, the poor girl in obvious pain and her hair already plastered to her face in sweat. She started crying and Bucky put his arm around her shoulders. He turned down the boombox she had brought with her, not wanting to hear this latest rocker screaming in his ear.

"What if he's too small?" Merry asked, desperation in her voice. "He's too early. I can't do this, Dad, I don't know how to keep him safe."

Bucky assured, "He's coming now because he's ready to come now. You're doing just fine and you're not doing this alone. You've got all of us like you've always had and you always will. This is
the worst part. It'll get better from here. All you have to do is keep going. That's the secret to being a good parent, Merry. When it hurts, you keep going."

Merry winced and sobbed again. Bucky held her for a moment and whispered, "Oh sweetpea, if I could do this for you I would."

Eventually he traded places with Angie and went back to the waiting room to find Steve and the others. He sat beside his husband and took his hand in his.

***

Peter James Quill was born late that night and everyone only got a glimpse before being sent home. Bucky and Steve returned the moment they were allowed to and spent the afternoon with Merry, who was practically glowing with love for her new son. She held him like he was the entire universe and he was so quiet whenever she held him, as if he already trusted her with his life.

On the second day of Peter's life, Bucky and Steve visited her again at the hospital. She was to be discharged the next day but they wanted to be there every moment they could. Merry was constantly receiving visitors and while they tired her out, she still appreciated their company.

Near the end of visiting hours, an unexpected guest entered the room, still clad in his naval uniform. Tom took off his hat and entered, nodding at both Steve and Bucky.

Merry smiled. "Hi."

Tom grinned. "Hi."

Merry offered Peter to him and Tom brought him to his chest. Tom closed his eyes and cradled him so gently and tenderly that Bucky almost forgot that he wasn't the father.

Tom asked, "Can I talk to you alone for a minute?"

Merry nodded. "Okay."

Tom handed Peter to Steve and the three of them were shooed from the room. Still, Steve and Bucky stood just outside the door, peaking through the window.

Merry asked Tom, "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at sea until the end of your service. I didn't think I see you for months yet."

Tom admitted, "I did a lot of begging and I'll have to report in Hamburg in twelve hours so I pretty much have to go right to the airport after this. But I needed to see you. I hope that's okay."

Merry beamed. "I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you so much."

Tom smiled. "I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you so much."

Tom smiled. "Me too. I'm sorry I'm late."

Merry laughed. "Well, he's early so I think we can blame Peter for that."

Tom's smile faltered a little. "I don't have a lot of time, but there's something I want to say to you and I think if I don't say it now, I won't."

Merry frowned. "Tom, is everything okay?"

"Merry... I know Peter's not mine, but I don't care. We both know that blood doesn't make a family, love does. I'm going to love Peter as part of my family, whether or not you and I are together. But I
want to be with you and I want to be his father. I'm just sorry I missed the first two days and I swear to you that if you say yes, I'll never miss another."

Tom knelt in front of her. Steve nearly shrieked and Bucky covered his mouth with his hand. Tom took out a ring from his pocket and held it out in offering to her.

Tom looked deep into her eyes. "Merry, you've been my best friend since I've even known what a friend was. I would not be any way shape or form the man I am without you. I was made to love you. I know that now. I should have always known that because it's the only truth in my life that matters. You're not my soul mate. You're my soul. So...Meredith Sarah Quill, will you marry me?"

Merry pulled him to his feet and kissed him hard. He slipped the ring onto her finger and Steve pulled Bucky away from the door, giving them privacy.

"Go buy a bottle of champagne," Steve whispered. "I'll stay here and act surprised."

Bucky gave him a quick peck and handed Peter over to him. Bucky practically skipped down the hallway, humming that infernal U2 racket to himself. His daughter was getting married to her childhood sweetheart, the boy that Bucky loved as his own. Her son was healthy, happy, and asleep in his other grandfather's arms. Everything in his life was nothing less than beautiful.

***

All five of them would end up moving into Bucky's childhood home, six if one counted Tom's impending arrival and seven if one counted the cat. Four generations under one roof, from 80 to 8 days old, all back where they belonged. Brooklyn. It made sense. This had been Bucky's wish for so long but it was still heartbreaking leaving their apartment. They needed more space for the family, Ma needed more support, and it was closer to everyone's jobs and schools. It was just...Steve and Bucky had lived there for decades. It was their place, their home. It was the place that the kids had grown up in. It was the scene of so much of their lives and now they were walking away from it.

Still, when Bucky stood out in that same old alleyway, Peter bundled to his chest, something in his heart softened. His grandson looked up at him and Bucky knew this was the right choice. This would be his place, him and Peter, just as it had been with him and Pa. This was where Peter was going to grow up and one day would mean to him what it had meant for Bucky. He was going to get the chance to be part of this same legacy and part of a new one. Steve and Bucky returning home was less a journey of nostalgia but one of revolution. They had left in exile and now they were returning with pride. They were no longer hiding, no longer afraid.

He hoped Peter would be proud of that one day too.

Peter stirred and yawned. Bucky leaned down and kissed his little face.

Bucky murmured, "Welcome home."
Epilogue

1988

Bucky hadn't been able to sleep the night before Steve's seventieth birthday. It was a combination of it being far too hot in their room, excitement for the party, and enjoying the last few hours of him being sixty-nine. He ended up sleeping in past ten and only being woken up by two children bouncing on his bed.

"Granddad!" Victoria cheered. "Granddad! Uncle Tony's home!"

Peter said just as gleefully, "He made fireworks for us!"

That got Bucky out of bed real quick. He scooped both of them up and carried them down the stairs to the kitchen. There, Wanda, Tom, and Ma were busily working away on a truly massive cake and several amazing pies. The Shades did most of the work but Ma supplied advice from her rocking chair and continued working on her baby blanket for the newest incoming Quill.

In the living room, Tony was talking rapidly with Merry, waving around one of the fireworks. Bucky took this and the bag from him, ruffling his hair before moving onwards. Victor was on the couch, having a few glasses of wine with Angie as they worked on a crossword together. Peggy was giving Tony's college friend Rhodey a friendly but stern talking to which probably entailed her demanding what his intentions were with her much younger godson.

Victoria and Peter ran ahead outside and Bucky finally saw Steve on his knees in the front garden. Steve got up, wincing slightly. Bucky gave him a kiss and both grandchildren made the appropriate disgusted sounds.

"Why are you working?" Bucky asked.

"Why are you still in your pajamas?" Steve countered. "We're going to have nearly two dozen people show up for lunch. I don't want to show off my husband in his rattiest boxers."

Bucky whispered in his ear, "How do you look so good after last night? My thighs feel like I joined the Pony Express."

"Then shouldn't I be complaining as I did all the riding?"

Bucky grinned as he pulled away. "I should go shower. See you later, cowboy."

***

Lunch was a busy affair and spilled right into the street. So many friends, family, and neighbours showed up for the party and Bucky had trouble keeping track of them all. He lost Steve again and again in the crowd but Peter stuck to him like glue, squeezing onto Bucky's hand like he was a rope in a storm. The entire time, Peter kept his headphones on and his Walkman as close as a security blanket.
He finally saw Steve talking to an elderly woman who looked vaguely familiar. She smiled at Bucky and he instantly recognized her.

"Melanie!" He greeted. "How the hell are you? Steve told me you might be in town but I wasn't sure you'd make it. It's good to see you."

Bucky kissed her cheek and she replied, "You look just as handsome as ever, Bucky. I hope you don't mind that I brought my youngest granddaughter along. I said I'd show her the old neighbourhood. Gamora, this is my old friend Bucky. And this must be your grandson, Peter, right?"

"Gamora," Bucky commented. "A little...unusual."

Gamora answered, tiredly, as if she heard this too often. "My parents are missionaries. Baptist missionaries."

"Gotcha," Bucky said sympathetically. "Peter, you okay to say hello?"

Bucky glanced down and saw that Peter was blushing. His grandson couldn't take his eyes off Gamora and he was obviously trying not to stammer. Peter simply smiled and said a quiet, "Hi."

Gamora said back just as sheepishly, "Hi."

Bucky knew that look on Peter's face. It was the same that was on his face in 1925 when he first saw Steve. Peter had just seen the love of his life for the first time and even though he was too young to know what it meant, he was both transfixed and shattered.

Bucky tried to keep up with Melanie and Steve's conversation but he was too amused by Peter's stunned expression. He tapped on Peter's headphones and his grandson took them off.

Bucky encouraged, "Go talk to her."

Peter frowned and Bucky promised, "I'm right here. Go ahead."

Peter put his headphones around his neck and went over to Gamora. She smiled at him and Peter smiled back nervously.

Victoria ran up and tugged on Bucky's sleeve and he picked her up.

"I'm hungry," she insisted.

"Well, let's go get you something to eat then, love," Bucky said. "You want six hamburgers or eight?"

She giggled as he carried her away. He looked briefly over his shoulder to see Peter sitting on the sidewalk with Gamora, her listening to his latest mix tape. The two kids chatted, laughing, and Peter beamed back at him.

There is a strange feeling, seeing the next generation step into one's footsteps. It struck him more now than it had with Merry, maybe because Peter was so close to the boy he had once been. He couldn't reflect on it long, not with Victoria demanding to be given Pepsi Free and Doritos. He turned his attention to his youngest grandchild and to the house that held all his loved ones and memories. He carried her up the steps and into the kitchen. He handed Victoria over to Merry and grabbed a new bag of fireworks away from Tony.

"There's a reason they don't build wooden houses anymore, kid," Bucky chastised. "I don't want you
burning down the place to show off to your new pal."

Tony scowled. "You never let me have any fun."

"I didn't say we weren't going to set them off," Bucky conspired. "We're just going to wait until all the Catholics have left Mass and set them off in their parking lot."

Tony's eyes widen in excitement and he raced off to find Rhodey. Bucky laughed and went back outside to call Steve in for lunch.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've ever been quite so emotional finishing a fic. Thank you everyone for your kindness and support. I truly appreciate all of you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!