tell me how to breathe in and feel no hurt
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/15826482.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Rape/Non-Con
Category: M/M
Fandom: The Avengers (Marvel Movies), Captain America (Movies)
Relationship: James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers, Peggy Carter/Natasha Romanov
Character: James "Bucky" Barnes, Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson (Marvel), Natasha Romanov (Marvel), Peggy Carter, Tony Stark, Pepper Potts, Brock Rumlow, Alexander Pierce, Wanda Maximoff, Scott Lang, Carol Danvers, Maria Hill, Arnim Zola, Nick Fury, Phil Coulson, Ava Starr
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe, Slow Burn, Angst, Past Abuse, Hurt/Comfort, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Recovery, Protective Steve Rogers
Series: Part 1 of tell me how to breathe in and feel no hurt
Stats: Published: 2018-08-28 Completed: 2019-07-21 Chapters: 33/33 Words: 198073

tell me how to breathe in and feel no hurt
by Cafelesbian

Summary

Steve looks over; the guy is standing in the darkness, and when he steps forward Steve’s breath catches in his throat. A few inches shorter than Steve, dark hair falling flat and limp around his high cheekbones, eyes permanently flickering between blue and green and grey and framed by long eyelashes, sharp and bright even in the gray, artificial lighting, only one arm, pulled protectively around himself.

“Bucky?” he whispers incredulously.

or Bucky is a hooker who stumbled into prostitution in desperation and Steve is an achingly lonely artist who has spent four years missing his high school sweetheart and maybe they never stopped loving each other.

Notes

hi hello i haven't posted fic in literal years and i started this randomly when i got the idea and sent it to a friend and he told me to post it so here we are ladies and gays! please please please please heed the tags because there are elements of rape in here and it's not described in especially graphic detail but it is there so just be careful and obviously come to me if you have any concerns or want to know anything specific i'm on tumblr @ cafelesbian if u wanna say hi or whatever
Winter, 2012

New York is cold in November.

No shit, Bucky thinks bitterly, pulls his thin jacket around his thinner figure. But this year feels worse, sharp, bitter air stinging his eyes and face and making him feel fragile and brittle. He hasn’t been inside all day and he wishes distantly that some rich customer would come along and lead him home to a warm, private apartment with like, insulated sheets. Maybe someone who was into bath or shower sex. He doesn’t care. He just wants to go inside.

So he stays out for a bit, propping himself against a wall in an alley, a typical spot he’ll loiter at if he’s desperate for the cash. The Upper West Side yields the most customers, a balance between rich closeted businessmen and desperate junkie partiers. Both assholes, both reliable. So Bucky waits, stomach turning, half hoping no one shows up and he can go crash with a friend and sleep and wash off the grime that clings to him, the hands that were all over him today that he can still feel crawling on his skin.

Less than ten minutes later, though, someone shows up. The guy who approaches him is in a thick Canada Goose coat and totes an expensive bag, and Bucky knows as soon as he sees him that he’s not getting to go to his apartment. This is one of those married with kids types, the kind of asshole who works in investment banking in the day then goes to fuck some homeless, one armed prostitute before heading back to his wife.

He knows this guy, Bucky realizes as he gets closer, he actually has seen the inside of his home more than once. This guy paid him two hundred a few weeks ago. I wanna rough you up, he had snarled, like a character out of a bad porn film, and he had done it, and Bucky put up with it all while staring blankly at a photo of his wife and son while he did it, tears glittering in his eyes. Charmer.

“Hi,” the man says now, smirks at him, backs him further into the wall. Bucky shudders.

“Hey.” He simpers, tries not to tense when the guy takes Bucky’s chin in his hand.

“You busy?” The guy asks, but he isn’t really asking.

“That depends,” Bucky answers, and forces a smirk, “are you asking me for something?”


“Twenty,” he says quietly, grabs the guy’s hand and pulls him into an alley. The guy is rough; he pushes Bucky to his knees, undoes his belt, fucks into his throat. Bucky shuts his eyes, bobs his head in the guys lap, and it’s over in a few minutes, the man coming down his throat, then pulls Bucky up as he redoes his fly.

“Oh, god, baby,” the guy says, grabs his ass, and Bucky kisses his neck, hopes it’ll earn him a few extra dollars. “So fuckin’ hot for me, huh?”
“Yeah,” Bucky replies, his throat raw, tears burning behind his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” the guy corrects, squeezes his ass, and Bucky winces.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he replies again, and tries not to get sick all over that expensive coat.

“Make it up to me next time, you hot little whore,” the guy whispers, and presses a twenty into Bucky’s palm. “Maybe a little punishment’s necessary.”

He plays along, his stomach turning. “I’ll be good for you,” he murmurs.

“I know.” The guy kisses him, sloppy and hard, and pats his cheek before stepping aside and leaving. Bucky stands there, shivering for several seconds, before swallowing a sob and pocketing the twenty, weeping quietly for a few beats before he takes a shaky breath and walks quickly out of the small, dark alley.

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It’s been like this for so long it isn’t worth wishing for something different. Find as many lonely, pained, more-often-than-not-angry people as he can and let them pay to get him to do whatever the fuck they want. Some of them he knows, has standing dates with. Some of them he doesn’t, and they scope him out from one of the areas he’ll typically hang about looking sultry during late hours. It really doesn’t matter. They’re interchangeable and predictable- they all want the same thing and they’re all gone once they get what they want, leaving Bucky breathless and reeling. Sometimes they check if he’s okay with what they wanna do. Usually they don’t. Sometimes they do it even if he tells them no. He’s used to it. He’s learned exactly how to pick himself up afterwards, how to numb the bruising and lingering fear and disgust so it’s all white noise and check out for a while so he doesn’t think, doesn’t feel, because he thinks it might kill him if he does.

He thinks about trying to pick up someone else, but he’s freezing and nauseous and hardly anyone is out on a night this cold. He thinks then about maybe finding one of his friend’s places, the other people who hang around hidden alleys in Manhattan and give each other water and condoms and whatever else. But he’s exhausted, so Bucky slumps down and leans his head against a wall, hugs his knees to his chest.

He’s so tired.

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Steve Rogers is a block away from his apartment when some guy darts out of nowhere.

He’s walking home from an opening of an exhibit he’s featured in at the Whitney, a stupid move because it’s literally below freezing, but he’d left feeling restless and unbalanced, and it was only about fifteen blocks from his apartment. The congratulations and pats on the back and glasses of champagne left him feeling uncomfortable, tense in his own skin, and despite his pride at his work he feels exhausted and drained. He left with a quick hug to his friends and a handshake to some of his sponsors and few fake smiles and as he walks home, hands stuffed determinedly in his pockets, he’s left with a stark hollowness, his mind somewhere else.

So when the man blocks his path, he startles more than he might otherwise. The guy is tall and thin and probably pretty drugged up, holding a brick and waving it hysterically.

“Gimme your fuckin’ wallet,” he slurs, and Steve raises his hands. He’s disoriented and he’s tired, and he’s moments away from just handing it over.
“Look, man, just- relax-” And then the guy hurls the brick and misses Steve by a couple inches. He ducks and raises his arms over his head, fear finally setting in.

“Jesus Christ!” he yells, the collision of cinder on tar resonating heavily in the empty winter air, and the guy screams, a slew of obscenities, and Steve staggers back.

“Hey!” Someone yells, just as Steve is preparing to defend himself, and the guy looks around then takes off, his drug fueled paranoia sending him running. Steve takes a breath and brushes himself off, turns to thank the person.

He looks over; a guy is standing in the darkness, and when he steps forward Steve’s breath catches in his throat. A few inches shorter than Steve, dark hair falling flat and limp around his high cheekbones, eyes permanently flickering between blue and green and gray framed by long eyelashes, sharp and bright even in the gray, artificial lighting, only one arm, pulled protectively around himself.

“Bucky?” He whispers incredulously, and takes in the man in front of him. Bucky is so frighteningly thin, his cheeks hollow and his figure small, made smaller by his arm wrapped around his stomach. His hair is longer and stringy, falling around his cheeks and framing his face dully. Most disturbing, though, are his eyes, hollow and afraid, staring at Steve in horror.

This isn’t the person he knows. The person he knew.

“Oh, my god,” Steve says blankly, disbelief ringing in his tone.

And then Bucky takes off down the alley before Steve can even process what’s going on and Steve sprints after him on pure instinct. It might have been an equal competition once but malnourished, exhausted, one-armed Bucky can’t outrun Steve, and he catches him in a few strides.

“Bucky!” Steve yells again, and grabs his shoulder. Bucky jumps away, raises his arm in self defense, a terrified motion that makes Steve pull back.

“Bucky, it’s—it’s me,” Steve whispers, his words shattering the air because god, what is he supposed to say to Bucky? The last time they’d seen each other hadn’t even been a proper goodbye, all shouted fragments of sentences and frantic dressing and horrified looks, and Steve sees eternities between the teenagers who had once been so in love and the men who stare, confused and frozen and very scared, at each other in the alleyway.

Bucky shrinks in on himself, his eyes darting around, like he’s bracing himself for something. “I know,” he says finally, his voice dry and barely above a whisper. “I should— I’m gonna go.”

“Bucky, no—WAIT!” Steve yells, panicked, and Bucky cowers. “Just—wait, please.”

Bucky flinches again, and Steve steps back, alarmed. “Hey, it’s okay,” he says gently. “Bucky, are you—are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Steve,” he snaps, but his voice quivers. Hearing his name roll off Bucky’s tongue strikes Steve, an avalanche of heartbreak hitting him at the word. The more he stares, the worse off Bucky appears. His jacket is flimsy and wearing too thin, pathetic in the freezing air. His eyes are sunken in, gaunt and miserable, dark circles prominent and worrying. He’s got bruises on his neck and his face, and Steve bites back a gasp of horror.

“Where are you living?” Steve asks calmly. Bucky’s eyes flash.

“It doesn’t matter,” he whispers, his voice trembling from the cold. Steve swallows. He’s passed
plenty of hookers on this corner, has handed money to homeless people here before but… Bucky. Seeing him in this place, in this state, shocks Steve in a way he can’t articulate.

What the hell happened? Steve wants to ask, but he takes a breath and gets control over his words, biting back anguish.

“Come back to my house,” Steve says, “please, Bucky. You shouldn’t be out here in this weather.”

Bucky sighs and rubs his neck, looking so small and just drained. “It’s a block away,” Steve adds, his voice rising to a plea, “you’re gonna freeze out here.”

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” Steve thinks, dread splitting him open.

“Okay,” Bucky says, and for a moment, Steve can’t believe it. His eyes are still cast downward, making him look somehow younger. “It’s twenty for a blowjob, fifty for sex, a hundred if you want me to stay over.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, and for a moment, Steve can’t believe it. His eyes are still cast downward, making him look somehow younger. “It’s twenty for a blowjob, fifty for sex, a hundred if you want me to stay over.”

Steve blinks. “What?” he blanches, and then, in horror, “I—I didn’t mean—I don’t want to—Buck, no. God, is that—is that what you’ve been doing?”

Shame floods Bucky’s face, and he shrinks further away. “I’m sorry,” he says softly, his voice terrified. Steve stands there, absolutely stunned, then swallows his own feelings and steps toward him. He doesn’t have time to process this, not when Bucky looks like he might pass out any second.

“Bucky,” he says, very quietly, “please come back to my apartment. I’ve got a spare room, we don’t even have to talk if you don’t want.”

Bucky stays silent, his eyes flickering to Steve’s face, distrusting. “Hey,” Steve coaxes, “if it’s—if it’s alright, I’m gonna put my jacket around your shoulders.”

Steve pulls off his down coat and wraps it around him, wincing at the cold, and leads him with extreme care out of that narrow alley and down the block. Bucky shivers but doesn’t run again, and Steve is surprised that he lets him lead him into his building, even into the elevator, completely submissive, and panic is growing in Steve every second that Bucky isn’t talking, isn’t even looking at him, expression utterly blank, almost ghostlike. Steve wonders if maybe he’s in shock.

As they’re going up, passing each floor, Bucky’s head snaps towards him—finally, a reaction. “Steve,” he says, and his voice is hoarse and panicky, “I shouldn’t—you don’t have to do this—”

“You’re my—” Steve begins, and then stops, because he doesn’t know what Bucky is to him anymore. The shock of seeing him, four years after their last interaction, homeless and a prostitute and feet away from Steve’s building, is starting to hit him, and anxiety surges through his chest as it’s starting to occur to him he doesn’t have the slightest idea what to do. “It’s no problem,” Steve finishes lamely, and Bucky stares down.

“Here,” he says quietly, and hands Steve his jacket. His hand is shaking, and Steve takes it back without a word.

His own hands shaking slightly, Steve reaches for the keys in his jacket pocket and unlocks the door. At the flick of his light switch, Steve sees Bucky’s eyes widen and his shoulders tense, his vision darting around the apartment. Steve’s living room stretches, wide and furnished, between the wall and the kitchen, a shiny island table in the middle of the room with an expensive alcohol tray perched in the center. Clear glass doors reveal his balcony, a wooden deck with a hot tub in the corner and a view of Central Park, white lights still glittering around it at the darkest hours of the
morning. Down one hallway is Steve’s bedroom, the door pulled mostly shut, and two other closed
doors that would open into the main bathroom and the first spare bedroom.

It’s a lot, and guilt tugs uncomfortably in Steve’s chest.

Bucky stands there beside him, scanning the room, his arm crossed protectively across his chest.
He’s scared, Steve realizes, he doesn’t trust him. The thought makes his skin crawl.

“Look, um—” Steve clears his throat, sets his coat down on the armchair, “if you wanna go to bed,
or shower, or eat—you should make yourself comfortable.”

Bucky fixes his gaze on Steve, bites his lip. “Can I—” he starts, and swallows. “Can I take a
shower?”

Relieved, Steve nods. “Yeah, of course.” He busies himself opening the linen closet, grabbing
Bucky the softest towel. “Here, um—I can grab you pajamas…” Bucky nods, lowering his chin.
Steve hurries into his bedroom, digging through his drawers for a soft pair of sweatpants and a tee,
half convinced Bucky will have vanished by the time he gets out. When he comes back, Bucky is
standing in the very same spot.

“To turn it on you gotta push the biggest button on top,” Steve tells him. Bucky nods again, then
takes a few steps towards Steve. He reaches out to take the clothes from him, hesitating like he’s
waiting for Steve to pull it away.

“Thank you,” Bucky mumbles, and steps past him. Steve waits until he hears the water running,
then sinks onto his couch and buries his face again, a shaky sob rising in his chest, unhinged with
grief and worry.

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Bucky thinks he’s imagining it when Steve follows him down that alley.

He doesn’t know why he felt like he needed to protect whoever was getting chased by some
druggie—one armed, starving, twenty-year-old prostitute hardly constituted a good fighter. It was
stupid to get involved, but he did. And then it turned out he was saving fucking Steve Rogers, the
boy he’d met at five years old, the love of his stupid sixteen year old self’s life, the absurdly
famous, ridiculously rich artist. The universe is nothing if not cruel and ironic.

He wanted to take off, but he didn’t stand a chance, not when he hadn’t eaten in fifteen hours and
might be coming down with hypothermia. And Steve led him back to his goddamn penthouse over
Central Park, and Bucky didn’t say no because Steve didn’t ask.

No one asked.

He steps into Steve’s shower and hits the button he’d been told, realizing that underneath it is a
touchscreen, asking for temperature and water pressure. He blinks a few times, surprised, then sets
it on the highest for both and exhales, a small, relieved sound.

He doesn’t know why Steve invited him back. Maybe he felt bad. Probably, he felt bad, because he
said he didn’t want sex and he can’t think of why else he would ask him. Bucky thought at first he
might be lying; some guys like to bring him home and act like they aren’t going to sleep with him,
then send him into the bedroom or bathroom to do whatever they asked until they could come in
and—

Bucky flinches, turns the heat down a bit.
But Steve seemed genuinely, uncomfortably shocked when Bucky told him the prices.

Bucky rubs Steve’s lavender bodywash into his shoulders, shuts his eyes tight for several long seconds. Steve isn’t like that, he tells himself, then corrects himself, wasn’t like that. He’s not gonna hurt you.

He can’t stop trembling though, even warming up, and he can’t tell if it’s pure shock or fear or embarrassment. It’s been almost four years since he’s seen Steve. He has no idea what he’s like now, if he’s the kind of guy to pay for sex. He’d been prepared to go home with him, prepared for the reality that maybe Steve had become the same rich jackses he sees every day. Just seeing him seemed so far from reality, the idea that he’d hardened in that way could hardly shock him anymore. God knows Bucky isn’t the same person he had been.

He can’t picture it, though.

Bucky pulls on Steve’s shirt and boxers and sweats, the fabric soft and familiar. It stirs something in him, some memory of a seventeen year old Bucky Barnes wearing clothes that belong to Steve Rogers, safe and content and laughing, completely naive and carefree.

Bucky shakes his head. That kid is dead, and so is any relationship he might’ve once had with Steve.

He’ll sleep over, and he’ll leave before Steve wakes up. And he’ll never come ten blocks within seventy second street as long as he lives.

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When Bucky heads into the living room, Steve is sitting on a couch with his head in his hands. He looks up at him, gives him a weary smile.

“Um,” Bucky starts, quietly and timidly, “if—if you don’t want anything, I might go to bed. Or, I can leave—”

“No,” Steve says quickly, “you should go to bed, here.” He strides over and opens the door directly across from them, a guest room that’s bigger than any apartment Bucky has stayed in in four years. The queen bed sits under another big window, a few drawers and shelves on either side of the room, and Bucky’s head aches with exhaustion.

“Look, Bucky,” Steve begins gently, “um… if you need anything else…”

“Why are you doing this?” Bucky blurts out. “I can’t—I don’t have anything to give you—” Except sex, a voice in his head reminds him nastily, but Steve already turned him down.

Steve sighs, his eyes softening with sadness. Several pregnant seconds pass, Bucky clutching at the hem of Steve’s shirt worriedly.

“It’s been four years, Buck,” Steve finally whispers. “I don’t—I still—I wanna help, if I can.”

Bucky looks away. “Thanks, Steve, but I’m doing fine.” The lie burns on his tongue, its sentiment laughable, and Steve thinks so too; his face softens into pitying skepticism.

“I’ll talk to you in the morning,” Steve says. He lowers his gaze, takes a breath, and Bucky knows what he’s thinking. They have no idea how to talk anymore—it’s been four years and Steve is just. A total goddamn stranger. Where they’d once been impossibly close there are miles and lifetimes between them, and Bucky feels his inadequacy and worthlessness burning inside him as he looks at
where Steve is and where he is. Bucky has no reason to trust him, not when it’s been so long.

Still, Steve’s eyes and voice and cautiousness make something flicker in Bucky’s chest, rusted and forgotten. He’s stupid for being sentimental, for hesitating even a second when he saw Steve. That was all it fucking took, him dropping his guard for a few moments, for him to make this pathetic, naive decision.

Steve shuts the door gently behind him, and Bucky watches the handle for what must be a few minutes, thinking about how he didn’t thank him, and trying to work out why Steve would ever, ever want him there.

When he curls into Steve’s oversized, warm bed, he dreams of soft hands and chaste kisses and bright blue eyes that spark something forgotten in him.

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Steve doesn’t sleep. He doesn’t even try.

He almost wants to wait outside Bucky’s room, but it feels too invasive, and when he thinks about the things Bucky must have gone through given what he’s been doing, he leaves quickly.

Fuck. Tears prick Steve’s eyes as he undresses, replays in his head their interactions. Bucky, small and thin and terrified and bruised, his head a million miles away, offering Steve a blowjob for twenty dollars. Bucky, on the street, selling sex to perverts to use him and discard him and god knows what else. It’s almost unbearable to picture, and Steve swallows a sob.

The defeat, the resignation in his voice sends another chill through Steve. *Twenty for a blowjob, fifty for sex.* As if that’s what Steve wanted from him, as if he thought Steve would ever, ever use him like that.

*You don’t know what’s happened to him,* Steve reminds himself, sickened, *you don’t know if people have hurt him. Of course he isn’t going to trust you.*

He couldn’t tell if it was exhaustion or fear or sickness or even drugs, but Bucky wasn’t himself. His eyes were so blank, his whole face thin and gaunt as bone, that Steve almost couldn’t see the person he used to be.

Burying his face in his hands, Steve takes in another sharp breath. They hadn’t seen each other in almost four years. Four years that Steve had spent meticulously, purposefully burying in work and parties and hookups so that the heartbreaking and the intensity and the fucking love he’d had for Bucky didn’t consume him, because if he thought about it too hard it threatened to explode in his chest and kill him.

And now he’s here, and Steve doesn’t have a fucking clue what to do.

It keeps him up all night, staring blankly through burning eyes at the ceiling, running over the last hour a million more times in his head and trying to find clarity in any of it. It’s after three when he slips into a restless, fitful sleep, Bucky’s scared, sad eyes still sharp in his mind.

**Chapter End Notes**

*It’s a bit short but I wanted to establish things! Leave kudos and comments if you feel*
like it goodbye pals i'll be back next week if you wanna hmu on tumblr i'm cafelesbian
where i don't rlly post about fic stuff but if you wanna ask qs i'm happy to answer love
u all
They had met when they were kids. Bay Ridge, 1997, when Steve was six and Bucky was five and they lived across the street from each other and played with wooden swords and slept in tents in their backyards and drew pictures together. They went to the same school and flitted around the same friend groups for the next ten years, but they didn’t really need other friends because Bucky was all Steve ever really cared about.

Seven and nine years old, when a drunk driver left Bucky’s arm mangled and dangerous, and Steve sat in his hospital room holding his other hand and knew that Bucky was still perfect. He’d already loved him in a way that he couldn’t understand.

Twelve and thirteen years old, food from bodegas and living off microwave dinners because neither of their parents would provide, riding bicycles to Coney Island to try and slip onto a ride for free, staying over at the other’s house when the anger and hostility in their own homes bubbled, explosive and loud and terrifying, because they found peace in each other.

Fourteen and fifteen, Steve had kissed him, sitting on Bucky’s rooftop. The softness and lightness and electricity of it overwhelmed them, especially when Bucky kissed him back. They had been in love, so fucking in love, the sheer force of their love bigger and brighter than anything Steve could have ever possibly imagined. They had just been Steve&Bucky, attached at the hip and the hands and the hearts, a whirlwind of kisses and whispered proclamations of love and exhilarated firsts, and for three years things were just. As close to perfect as Steve could have ever hoped for.

Seventeen and just after Steve’s nineteenth, fresh out of high school with no plans except for each other, everything changed. Bucky’s dad caught them one night, pressed up against each other, kissing and so close that the lines between their bodies were blurred, and hatred and venom had exploded out of him so fiercely that it seemed to shatter the air. He moved towards them and instinctively, Steve moved in front of Bucky to protect him, but it didn’t fucking matter. He pulled a shotgun on Steve and Bucky screamed at him to get out, and Steve waited outside, horrified and crying as he listened to the two of them inside.

It took Steve’s father literally dragging him off the porch for him to leave. He thought he’d hear from Bucky the next day, or the day after that, and when four days went by with silence, he resorted to knocking on the door.

“Please just let me know he’s okay,” Steve remembers begging Bucky’s mom, near hysterical, and she’d sighed and pursed her lips.

“He’s alive, and he’s fine. But you’re never going to see him again.” With a final look of disgust, she’d shut the door on him.
And that had been it. Steve’s parents kicked him out when they learned what happened. He couch surfed for a few months, he’d sobbed to his friends who had been heartbroken for him. In his grief fueled haze, he drank too much and left poor Sam and Natasha to pick up the pieces while he collapsed, until he was able to pull himself out of it enough to function a little bit.

With no plans for college and no money, he kept drawing, the only thing he really had left anymore. He’d sit in Central Park and do portraits or paintings for people, and his big break came when Tony Stark, billionaire and philanthropist extraordinaire, happened upon him, and bought a portrait for his girlfriend and then bought Steve lunch, asked him about himself.

“Look, kid,” he’d said, after hearing the condensed version of Steve’s last horrific year, while Steve sat nervously across from him. “Clearly, you could use some help. And since you got some talent, I wanna help you out. Come work for me in the Stark Industries aesthetics department- I’ll get you an apartment, great benefits- get back on your feet, okay?”

“Why?” Steve had asked him, bewildered, and Tony sighed.

“I don’t know- you seem good? I’m trying to be a better person? Stories about asshole dads hit close to home? Who cares- take the damn job.”

So he had, and designing and doing commissions for Tony Stark had been interesting and challenging and helped distract him from the constant, overwhelming, excruciating pain of missing and worrying about Bucky. From there, he branched out, doing commissions and then his own work, and (mostly thanks to Tony’s endless networking) he started getting attention—his work featured in exhibits, until he realized that somehow, he’d built a successful art career. He bought a penthouse. He won some awards.

It didn’t matter, because for four years all he could think about was Bucky. He tried to find him in every way he could think, even got Tony to work on it. Nothing.

And then Bucky was there, and he knew the constant worrying and wondering about where he was was right. Bucky was suffering. And Steve wasn’t there.

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Bucky means to wake up early and get the hell out. But Steve’s bed is comfortable, more comfortable than anywhere he’s slept in as long as he can remember, and the apartment is so warm and he isn’t waking up next to some guy who’s going to want to fuck him again or something worse, so he sleeps in. When he wakes up, Steve is awake and in the kitchen, pans clattering loudly, and Bucky debates whether or not to join him or just wait until he’s gone and then slip out.

Eventually, he gets up and treads into the kitchen, stomach turning with anxiety. Steve is standing with his back to him but turns quickly, his eyes wide. Bucky bites his lip.

“Hi,” Steve says, tentative and careful.

“Hi,” Bucky replies, lowering his gaze. Steve drums his fingers against the counter, a restless movement that sets Bucky on edge. He has no idea what to say to Steve, so confused and ashamed and drowning in his useless fucking nostalgia for a time when he could have said anything to him, a time where Steve wasn’t a stranger.

“Are you hungry?” Steve asks finally. Anxiety lingers under his otherwise cool tone, and it serves to confuse Bucky more because he has no goddamn idea what Steve wants from him or why he’s doing this, and he wants to run, far away from Steve and the softness in his eyes that feels foreign
and all the things he reminds him of, to retreat back into his horrible, familiar, predictable reality where he can turn his brain off and numb himself and not be flooded with emotions.

“You don’t have to do this,” Bucky replies after a moment, not meeting his gaze. “It was… nice of you to let me sleep over, but you don’t owe me anything.” Steve doesn’t respond, and when Bucky looks up his eyes are sad and confused.

“Bucky,” he says quietly, “I—I wanna help you.”

Defensiveness flares in his chest, irrational and unjustified. “I don’t want your pity,” he replies, his voice hardening. Steve bites his lip.

“It’s not—it’s not pity, Buck—” The nickname lodges a pit in Bucky’s stomach, “—I just want to be there for you.”

“Why?” Bucky snaps, “It’s been four years, Steve, you said it yourself.”

Steve scrubs a hand over his face, tired. “I know. But that doesn’t mean I don’t wanna help you, and- god, Bucky, if I’d known the situation you were in—”

“That’s pity,” Bucky cuts him off sharply. “I’m fine, Steve.”

“When was the last time you ate, Bucky?” Steve asks desperately. “Where are you living? Where are those- where are those bruises from?”

Bucky shudders, lifts his hand to cover one of the bruises Steve is staring at. His head echoes hollowly with the memory of it, a guy from the week before who wanted it rough, as he put it, which really meant kick the shit out of him, and Steve probably knows that, or can at least guess.

“What do you want from me?” he whispers, his voice nearly cracking. Steve looks down again.

“I still care about you.” The words are hard to say and hard to hear, and Bucky shuts his eyes. NO YOU DON’T, he wants to yell, I’M NOT FUCKING WORTH CARING ABOUT. But he doesn’t. “I want to not send you out in the street to freeze and starve and—” Steve breaks off, swallowing the last words, but Bucky can guess.

Bucky swallows thickly, hesitant and distrusting. “You don’t need to do this, Steve,” he mumbles, “I don’t— I’m doing fine, I can figure it out.”

Steve leans against the counter, his face doubtful. “It’s your choice, Bucky. But I hope you stay.”

Bucky pinches the bridge of his nose like it’ll silence the nasty, endless inner monologue, reminding him that he’s not fucking good enough for this, for Steve, that the thought that he’s
worth anything more than a body to be used, over and over and over, is a pathetic lie.

But also, it’s so cold, and he doesn’t want to go out and go home with some stranger who he doesn’t trust and just take it from them or sleep outside, and Steve is looking at him with such gentleness that it makes him want to cry.

“Um—” Bucky coughs, runs his hand through his hair, “If—if you really don’t mind, I’ll stay for a night or two.” His cheeks flush, inadequacy and humiliation slamming him, surprising himself by accepting. Maybe he’s finally broken some desperation barrier, imposing on Steve like this. Maybe he’s worse at handling things than he thought he was, but the thought of going back out tonight fills him with dread.

“Okay.” Steve exhales, a smile spreading across his face. “Okay, that’s—that’s great.”

He feels sorry for you, Bucky chastises himself immediately, you’re just some charity case. And then, paranoid, Maybe he’s gonna call the cops maybe he doesn’t want you in his neighborhood why would he-

Bucky swallows, forces the thought to the back of his mind.

“Do you, uh—” Bucky gestures vaguely, glances around, “do you want me to do anything?” It’s a laughable offer, and Steve shakes his head.

“No, no, sit down.” Anxiety rushing through his chest, Bucky does. “I was gonna make eggs, you want some?”

“Thanks,” Bucky says, voice small, nods. Steve’s face floods with obvious relief, and he turns away and busies himself with the frying pan as Bucky squints, surveying his apartment.

Steve’s place is huge, the apartment wrapping around the perimeter of the building and connecting back. The kitchen branches off from what he guesses is a living room; a marble kitchen island and stainless steel fridge sit parallel to a huge couch, directly under a massive window. It’s mostly exposed brick framing the living room and framing the window, with furnished dark wood floors—only one of the kitchen walls is plaster, the partially visible area hidden mostly by cupboards and the stove, and it’s painted red. The view is spectacular—Central Park stretches out in front of them, framed by other skyscrapers and a silver winter haze, sprawling and untouched. A small door opens into a balcony that Bucky thinks must snake around the whole building too. Bucky realizes he hasn’t even seen most of the apartment, a whole section hidden by corners and doorways, and he wonders vaguely how much this place cost. More money than Steve had ever dreamed of in his life, probably. The thought fills him with a strange mixture of wonder and disappointment.

“Have some coffee,” Steve says, and before Bucky can even reply he sets a mug in front of him. Bucky gives him a small smile, sips it quickly.

A splash of cream and two spoonfuls of sugar. That’s how he drank it when they were teenagers, how he still likes it. His chest aches.

“How long have you lived here?” Bucky asks, tentative, like he’s testing Steve out. Steve glances at him, almost surprised.

“Uh, about two years? Yeah,” Steve answers, awkward. Bucky bites his lip again, looks around.

“It’s nice.”

“Thanks,” Steve replies, and seems almost self conscious. Bucky gets it- Steve is the kind of
wealthy that the two of them had once mocked relentlessly, so much richer than any normal person could fathom, his money laid out in front of them in the shape of an absurd penthouse. It’s weird to see.

He doesn’t blame him for it. He just feels out of place.

Bucky turns his attention to Steve, his mind clearer than it had been the night before as he marks the differences. Steve was always tall and muscular, but he’s bigger, more commanding than Bucky had ever remembered him being, the lines of his muscles more distinct. His jaw is a little sharper, his face matured into something unmistakably adult, and the stubble is heavier than Bucky has ever seen it. His hair is shorter, loose and unkempt from sleep. Bucky remembers running his hand through it when it looked like that when they were younger, and his throat closes up.

“Do you, um, do you wanna watch a movie?” Steve says suddenly. Bewildered, Bucky blinks.

“Sorry?”

“I just- it’s freezing, and we could get some blankets and snacks and watch movies.” Steve shrugs, desperation in his eyes. Bucky can tell he’s grasping for something from him but Steve isn’t ready to talk yet which. Fine. Bucky isn’t either.

“Um. Okay. Yeah, what the hell.” A smile tugs at Bucky’s lips momentarily, amused by Steve’s frantic suggestion. Steve smiles back, weary but genuine.

“Okay, great.” Steve places the plate in front of him, a pile of eggs and four pieces of toast, and pretends not to be watching Bucky. Bucky pretends not to notice right back, but eats everything on the plate, the lack of meals in the last several days hitting him overwhelmingly.

“You want anything else?” Steve says. His hands move in small, anxious circles. Bucky shakes his head, standing up to carry his plate to the dishwasher, but Steve grabs it from him before he can take a step.

“Thanks, Steve,” he says, and bites his lip.

“Course,” Steve replies gently, and a knot forms in Bucky’s chest, anxiety washing over him.

Steve drops the dishes in the sink and then heads to the couch, sinks casually into the corner as he clicks on the tv. Bucky follows uncomfortably, settling on the opposite side of the couch and curling his legs underneath him, almost a wall between him and Steve. Steve’s eyes don’t flit towards Bucky as he scrolls through the movie selection, determinedly watching the screen and working his jaw tersely.

It puts Bucky on edge, but he doesn’t say anything. Logically, he knows Steve isn’t the type of person for explosive anger or loud, violent outbursts but just. Bucky’s seen guys get like this before, and it scares him.

*Look what you did, you stupid little bitch-*

Steve, though, turns to him kindly, and Bucky relaxes fractionally, jerks himself out of his own mind. “You seen the new Men in Black movie?” he asks, a half smile ghosting his face.

“Uh—” Bucky laughs, a nervous, breathy sound, but a laugh. “Nope, you?”

“Nah.” Steve smiles warmly, and heat rushes to Bucky’s cheeks. “What do you say?”
“Yeah,” Bucky answers, not really caring. Steve nods absently, purchases the movie on demand as Bucky watches him closely, his knees still tucked protectively against his chest.

Neither Steve or Bucky really watch the movie, both carefully observing the other as subtly as possible, which isn’t really subtly at all but they’re both. Really fucking freaked out.

Steve, for his part, is horrified at the shell of a person Bucky is, the lifelessness in his eyes and tension in how he holds himself and quiver in his voice when he talks. Even now, perched as far away from Steve as possible on the couch, Steve can tell he’s scared, his arm braced around his knees like he’s expecting Steve to—fuck—hit him or something. He thinks about what people must have done to him for Bucky to end up like this, and the thought makes him so angry his vision blurs, abstract hatred searing through him.

He’s gotta call Sam, who’s clarity and thoughtfulness and psychology degree will tell Steve what to do, but he doesn’t wanna leave Bucky alone. What he wants is to reach over and take his hand, to see the trust and comfort in Bucky’s eyes that had once been reserved for him and hold him and let him talk about what happened, let Steve take care of him the way he once had, but Bucky seems so far gone that Steve wonders if his Bucky is even in there, or if trauma and terror has changed him permanently.

Not your Bucky, Steve snaps to himself. But he wonders if he loves Bucky again just from seeing him.

He wonders if he ever stopped.

The movie finishes and it occurs to Steve that he can’t remember a thing that happened, completely distracted and overwhelmed by Bucky, who turns to him and gazes at him through wide, guarded eyes.

“Wasn’t bad,” Bucky says quietly. Steve casts him a small smile.

“First one was better,” he replies, and to his relief Bucky smiles, relaxes slightly against the couch.

“Definitely.” He glances at Steve and they hold eye contact for a few moments too long, the intensity and longing and history between them unspoken and tangible, and Steve is the first one to clear his throat and look away.

“We could go back and watch the first two,” Bucky offers timidly. Surprised but delighted that he asked, Steve nods.

“I can make some popcorn,” he agrees. Bucky smiles again, and warmth and fondness floods Steve’s chest as he stands up and heads to the kitchen, busying himself with the microwave.

The next few hours are a quiet, strained haze as they try to pretend everything is normal, swallowing the discomfort and confusion as they both steal glances at one another. By the time they’ve watched the entire trilogy, Steve feels lethargic and exhausted, late afternoon winter light seeping through his windowed walls not energizing him any more. Steve stretches and Bucky makes himself smaller, a tiny movement that Steve pretends not to notice but that sets off alarm bells in his head.

“You, uh—” Steve yawns, “—you hungry?”

Bucky pushes his hair out of his face shrugging, “Yeah,” he says, in the same soft, careful voice, “yeah, I could eat.”
“We could—we could walk down the block to this diner, if you want? Or we could order—it’s really anything you want.” He wants to stress that it’s Bucky’s choice, that he should feel comfortable to ask for things and want things, because the longer he watches him the more afraid he grows that it’s been a long time since anyone has cared about what Bucky wants.

“Yeah.” Bucky nods again, nervous. “That sounds great.”

“Okay.” Steve tries to smile reassuringly but he’s exhausted and worried and it looks more like a grimace. “You can borrow a coat—”

“I don’t need to borrow a coat,” Bucky says quickly, defensive.

“It’s not a problem, Bucky, it’s fuckin’ freezing.” Steve pushes back and Bucky looks down, his face unreadable. But when Steve hands him the coat he takes it, following him out into the elevator.

Steve tries to straddle the line between sticking close to Bucky and giving him space, which ends with their arms brushing too many times and both of them jumping away.

It breaks his heart a little bit.

The diner is just a short walk, but the cold nips at their faces and it’s a relief to be inside again. Steve chooses a booth for them tucked into the corner, and they’re brought menus and water and Steve can’t take his eyes off of Bucky, desperately wanting him to be happy. Or content. Or not fucking terrified.

“What’s good here?” Bucky asks, after a few excruciating minutes. It surprises Steve when he talks first, his timidness seeming crippling, but he tries not to let it show.

“Great french toast,” Steve replies, with a half grin, and Bucky snorts.

“At eight pm?” he replies dryly. Steve raises his eyebrows.

“You got a problem?” he teases, and a reluctant smile spreads across Bucky’s face. If it takes Steve’s breath away, well, that doesn’t matter much to anyone

Bucky gets soup, the cheapest thing on the menu. Steve bites his lip and doesn’t say anything. They talk some, politely and deliberately, long, thick silences between them that they fill with too-long sips of water and bites of food, until a girl comes up to them, nervous and beaming.

“Um, excuse me—I’m so sorry to bother you, but you’re Steve Rogers right?”

It’s rare that Steve gets recognized, but it does happen. His art, sure. He’s walked past dozens of people wearing it on a tee shirt or a poster of his work pasted onto New York City walls and not gotten a second glance. But the occasional art student will spot him and hurry up, stammering and thrilled.

Usually, he doesn’t mind, and he’ll talk to them for a few minutes or take a picture, but Bucky is watching him, something unrecognizable on his face, and Steve really, really does not want to entertain her.

“Oh- yeah, yeah. Hi.” He tilts his head, biting back impatience.

The girl goes on for a few moments about how she’s getting a BFA at NYU, how she’s been studying his work and he’s an inspiration, and Steve nods and thanks her warmly.
“Could I possibly trouble you for a photo?” she asks, beaming in the adoring way he hasn’t ever really understood. Steve’s eyes flicker to Bucky, who’s watching them intently with a mixture of amusement and discomfort.

“Yeah, sure,” Steve agrees quickly, and she fumbles with her phone to take a few selfies, and then she’s telling them to have a great night, thank you so much I can’t wait to see what you do next and she leaves, and Steve feels a little bit repulsed at himself.

“You’re properly famous now,” Bucky remarks, his voice even, but Steve can tell he’s not being honest. He sighs, runs a hand through his hair.

“Only to art students,” he jokes half heartedly, and Bucky smiles, but it’s tense and tight lipped and not at all genuine.

“I’ve seen some of your stuff,” Bucky tells him, stabbing at his french toast, “it’s really, really good. Not that you need me to say that, obviously.”

“You’ve seen my stuff?” Steve asks, heat flooding his cheeks. “Why- why didn’t you ever reach out?”

As if he hadn’t expected Steve to ask, Bucky’s face falls, color draining from his cheeks. He swallows, and Steve says nothing, watching him expectantly.

“What would I have said, Steve?” Bucky says in a small voice. “I mean, it’s not like we exactly went down similar roads.” Bitterness creeps into Bucky’s voice- he doesn’t look at Steve.

“What the hell does that mean?” Steve replies, heated, almost angry, but Bucky flinches so hard that it drains immediately, replaced with horrible guilt. “Hey—hey, Bucky,” he says, gentle, and Bucky’s eyes flit to him, distrusting but fractionally calmer.

“I would have been happy to hear from you,” Steve adds softly. Bucky bites his lip, rakes his hand through his hair.

“I couldn’t stand you seeing me like this, Steve. Not knowing how well you were doing.” There’s a tremor to his voice, a horrible mix of insecurity and guilt and humiliation and grief, and Steve is so frustrated that he wants to scream, not at Bucky but at every fucking force in the world that pulled them apart in the first place.

“Bucky, I—you—you never stopped mattering to me.” Steve’s voice is full of exhaustion and buried heartbreak, the truth of it deflating him. Bucky never, never stopped mattering him, not for four years.

Bucky inhales sharply. He’s got no idea how to react, and Steve knows maybe he should have waited, like, a full twenty four hours before he dragged up the past in all it’s glorious pain, but fuck, it’s hard for him too. But Bucky doesn’t answer, because the waitress stops and asks if they want the check.

Steve nods, and they’re silent.

***

The walk home is quiet, the air thick with emotion and all the unresolved, unspoken history between them. Bucky is reeling, terrified that Steve meant it when he said Bucky still mattered and terrified he didn’t mean it and terrified because Steve is going to want to know why Bucky is doing what he does and he doesn’t even know where to begin because god, it’s Steve and he’s never been
able to lie to him but he can’t be honest either. His head hurts and he’s so sad, crippled with how small and insignificant and worthless he feels, even with all of Steve’s patience.

Steve doesn’t say anything until they’re in his elevator, the few feet in between them feeling massive and empty all at once. “Feel free to shower or take a bath or watch tv if you want, um, you’re totally welcome to anything.”

“Thank you,” Bucky mumbles, his voice barely breaking a whisper. Steve nods, and the bell shrills as the door opens into his hallway and they’re quiet again.

“I might shower, if that’s okay,” Bucky tells him. Steve winces at something Bucky can’t place.

“Of course.” He sounds exhausted, but his voice still lilts with kindness. “Tell me if you need anything else, yeah?”

“Steve?” Bucky says without thinking, and Steve turns to him, eyes big and concerned. “I didn’t know what to say,” Bucky says in a rush, “if I called you. There’s just—so, so much has happened since I saw you and I just—” Bucky swallows, bites down on the inside of his cheek until pain forces him to release. “—Even just thinking about explaining it to you was impossible.” It’s probably the closest to the truth he’ll ever get.

Steve is quiet for a few long moments, his face serious and impossible to read. “You, um—you don’t owe me an explanation, Buck. It’s fine.”

Bucky shucks his head, a quick movement to clear his mind. “Goodnight, Steve,” he says softly, and looks away as he heads back into his room.

Chapter End Notes

if you leave a comment you will make my night/day!

next update will most likely be next weekend! i'm gonna try to do a weekly update but i've got college apps and stuff so it might be tough this fall but i have about 20k written so

say hi on tumblr @ cafelesbian if you want! until next week my friends
three

Chapter Notes

what's up i think i said i'd update on the weekend but it was ready and i'm impatient so here we are.

!!!!!!!TRIGGER WARNING for this chapter especially descriptions of rape and it's aftermath, not an especially vivid or graphic depiction but it does go heavily into PTSD as well as danger related to prostitution and also serious religion-related homophobia!!!!!!! please please be careful and feel free to comment or message me on my tumblr cafelesbian if you need more details

this chapter is really long i hope yall dont mind as always thank you for the comments you're all amazing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve leaves Bucky a hoodie and more pajamas outside of his room, then changes his mind and grabs a few more pairs of jeans and sweaters and tees and leaves a pile of clothing outside of his room. He can’t tell if it’s too imposing or not straightforward enough, but he’s so tired that trying to figure out what Bucky needs is a monumental task that he can’t even begin to think about.

Steve collapses onto his bed and pulls out his phone, blanching briefly at the fact that it’s only nine thirty before dialing Sam.

Sam and Bucky weren’t quite friends; Steve and Sam had played high school soccer together, growing close as teenagers, and though they’d been perfectly friendly Sam had much less of an attachment to Bucky than Steve or Natasha. They’d run in the same circles but it wasn’t a close relationship, and right now Steve needs an unbiased opinion.

It’s why he’s avoiding calling Nat. She and Bucky had been best friends; when he disappeared, the shock and terror that consumed Steve hit her too; for months, they’d waited by Bucky’s house together, horrified that he had just up and vanished. After about a year, she and Steve had stopped looking together as much; she was in college and he got his job with Tony and the permanent disappointment that seemed to follow when they couldn’t find him was pushing both of them to the breaking point, but just as the pain and loss and fear followed and numbed Steve, he knew it had her as well.

They hadn’t spoken about him in months, the underlying shared problem in their friendship that bubbled just below the surface, tentative. Her reaction when she finds out, he knows, will be the same numb disbelief. He knows he’s betraying her by not telling, but the bigger, scarier betrayal would be telling and and forcing Bucky into that position.

That’s what he thinks. He’s got no fucking clue.

“Pick up, pick up,” he mutters, and on the third ring, Sam does.

“Hey,” Sam says, “what’s up?”
Steve takes a sharp breath, propping himself up against his headboard as it occurs to him he has no plan for what to tell him. “I have… a situation,” he says after a moment.

“Okay…what is it?”

Steve swallows thickly. “Bucky’s in my house,” he says finally, his voice caught.

“Bucky? High school Bucky?” Sam asks, and Steve hears the astonishment and confusion in his voice.

“What other Bucky?” Steve snaps, then sighs. “Sorry. It’s just… a lot is happening.”

“Are you guys together?” Sam asks calmly. Steve huffs out a bitter laugh.

“Definitely not.” He takes another sharp breath, rubs a hand over his face. “Sam, he’s like—he’s a prostitute—,” Steve hisses, “—and he’s homeless I think, and I think someone—or some people—have hurt him. It’s really bad.” His voice cracks, and Sam is silent on the other end.

“Fuck”—he finally answers softly, “—how’d you know?”

“I was walking home and I fucking found him last night—well actually, I almost got jumped—” Sam snorts, “—and he came around the corner. And I told him to come back to my place.”

Sam takes a sharp breath.

“And he did?” He asks, surprised.

“I don’t really think he thought he had a choice,” Steve replies, guilt creeping up in his voice. “I mean—shit, Sam, he’s so scared.”

“Scared of you?” Sam asks seriously. Steve’s stomach drops unpleasantly.

“Of everything.” Steve whispers darkly. “He’s—he’s calmed down a bit since last night but he’s just—just jumping at everything and he’s so quiet—”

“Yeah,” Sam says, his voice sad but unsurprised. “Prostitution is the job most likely to cause PTSD, I think.”

“What do I do?” Steve pleads, desperate. “How would a therapist handle this, man?”

“Are you asking me as a psych major, or as your friend?” Sam says with forced humor.

“I don’t know. Psych, I guess.”

“Well,” Sam says thoughtfully, and Steve can picture his eyes narrowing, “Has he talked to you about anything that’s happened to him?”

“No,” Steve sighs.

“Yeah,” Sam says softly, “I wouldn’t think so.” A heavy pause. “Well, look Steve. You don’t wanna push him to talk because that’ll make him nervous. I think just see what you can do for him to make him more comfortable—it’s not gonna be easy for him to trust anyone quickly, but if you make it clear that you wanna help him and you’re not gonna take advantage of him, it shouldn’t make it worse. But don’t patronize him either- let him know he’s got control over things. And don’t—yell or make any big motions—anger is bad, as a general rule if you think someone’s been abused.”
The word *abused* in relation to Bucky leaves him momentarily choked with horror. “I wouldn’t do that,” Steve whispers. But as he says it, a wave of blinding anger floods him as he thinks about the faceless, nameless people who have hurt him, who’ve done this to him, the hatred nauseating and unsettling.

“I know,” Sam reassures him, apologetic. “Hey, I’m meeting someone and they just got here, can I call you back? I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t worry,” Steve insists, permanently grateful for him. “Sorry to interrupt, man, thanks for everything.”

“Wait, Steve—“ he can hear Sam hesitating, chewing over an uncomfortable question. “Does Nat know?”

“No,” Steve admits. Sam’s silent, judgemental disapproval is obvious and it serves to irritate him further. “I wanna make sure he’s okay first. I don’t wanna shock him.”

“That’s probably—probably smart. Fuck, I don’t know, man. She’s gonna wanna know though.” The confusion and deflation in Sam’s voice mirrors Steve’s, and he leans his head back with a slow, frustrated, broken exhale. Some shuffling on Sam’s end, then a quick “I’m so sorry, Steve, I’ll call you later, okay? Breathe. It’s gonna be alright.”

“Yeah.” The phone clicks off and Steve buries his face in his hands again, then stands up and crosses his apartment to his private gym where he hits the punching bag until his arms are shaking.

***

Steve used to smoke for about nine months, the time between when he first gave up on ever seeing Bucky again and when he started working for Tony. He quit three years ago, and since then he’s smoked twice, two moments in his life where everything had felt unbearable.

The first was the night he’d learned of his mother’s death. He’d been in a cab home from his first major exhibit, where he’d sold five pieces and made about thirty five grand, and he’d gotten a call from his mom’s lawyer on the way home telling him that she’d died, a sudden heart attack. It had been two years since he had even spoken her, the last thing she’d said to him being *I won’t have my son being a faggot in my house,* and the nothingness that filled him at hearing she’d died had been worse than if he’d been flooded with grief. He got out of the cab into a torrential rainstorm and bought a packet of cigarettes at a deli and smoked one with unsteady hands underneath the deli’s awning and tried to swallow the pain and regret and anger that stirred underneath an overwhelming numbness.

The second was the night he moved into his penthouse. Half packed boxes and takeout littered the floor and the house’s four thousand square feet had been an endless stretch of emptiness, so silent and impersonal that Steve suddenly wanted, in a very Jay Gatsby fashion, to invite everyone he knew over just to hear and see something instead of the reminder that he was alone.

Instead, he dug the same cigarette carton out of a small box beside his bed and smoked it on the balcony, his eyes dully raking over Central Park and it’s twinkling, mocking lights before he went back inside and drank until the muted tones of his living room ran into each other, the apartment spinning.

Now, Steve lights up a cigarette from that same box on his balcony and takes another drag. Still sweltering from working out, he lets the cold air nip his skin unprotected, breathes in the smoke and the winter air and tries to calm down. Both times before this, he had wished Bucky was with
him. The irony of it makes him huff out a bitter laugh.

“Steve?” he hears behind him, and he spins around. Bucky stands behind him, wrapped in Steve’s oversized sweater, his hair bouncy around his face, biting his lip.


“You smoke.” It’s not really a question but it lilts with disappointment, and Steve grimaces.

“No,” Steve says defensively. Bucky’s eyes flit to the cigarette than back to him, skeptical. “It’s not—I don’t smoke, it’s not a regular thing, only—only occasionally.”

“When you’re stressed?” Bucky asks quietly. With a shrug, Steve stamps the cigarette out.

“I guess.”

“Am I stressing you out?” Bucky’s voice is so small and Steve hates himself.

“No,” he says quickly, “it’s not you, I promise.”

“Are you sure?” Bucky presses. Steve nods sadly.

“I’m sure.” Steve stuffs his hands in his pockets and looks up towards the starless sky like he’s expecting to see something as Bucky watches him, looking so tired.

“Are you okay, Buck?” Steve finally asks. Bucky shuts his eyes and slumps sideways against the doorway, a definitive ‘no’.

“Are you okay?” is what Bucky comes back with, and Steve can almost see his walls shoot up, protective and isolating.

“I asked first,” Steve replies. A hollow smile ghosts Bucky’s face for a moment, then his entire body seems to draw back, defeated.

“I’ve… had a lot happen,” Bucky replies finally, his eyes downcast, and his voice is more broken than Steve could ever have imagined, breathy and trembling and fragile.

“Like what?” Steve whispers. Bucky swallows and looks up, his eyes shining, and a tear falls down his cheek.

“I don’t—I can’t—I don’t wanna—” Bucky chokes out, and guilt slamming him, Steve shakes his head quickly.

“Okay, okay, hey Buck—” Gently, Steve touches his shoulders, his hands steady but careful. “—it’s okay, you don’t have to say anything, yeah?” Bucky stares at him and blinks then nods, a relieved motion, and the pain that cuts through Steve’s chest is almost worse than anything he’s ever felt.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says, “I’m sorry, Bucky.”

“It’s not you,” Bucky answers, and his voice is laced with bitterness. He’s still crying, so Steve reaches up slowly to brush away a tear. Bucky flinches, and he pulls back immediately.

“Sorry,” Steve whispers, and Bucky shakes his head. He takes a few breaths and furiously brings his hand to his eyes to dry his face, exhausted.
“Bucky,” Steve says, his voice impossibly gentle, “Bucky, I’ve missed you so much.”

And god, that hurts Bucky to hear. He closes his eyes and shrinks back, resistant.

“I don’t think I’m really worth missing,” Bucky tells him, his voice a dark mix of misery and matter-of-fact blankness. God, he’s not—he’s some worthless, pathetic whore who’s only use to anyone has been for them to fuck and discard. He’s been smashed and put back together so many times that nothing works right anymore; so much of him is gone that whoever Steve misses is dead, replaced by this thing that no one seems to care much about what he wants or doesn’t want. He’s something for people to buy and do whatever they want with, no matter what he says, and Steve isn’t able to get that.

“That’s not true,” Steve says firmly, his voice thick. “It’s not—”

“Steve!” Bucky snaps, then pulls away, afraid. When Steve doesn’t move towards him, just stands staring at him through horrified eyes, Bucky swallows. “I’m not the same, okay? I have nothing to offer you. I’m just used.” His voice cracks on the last word— he spits it out with bitterness and disgust at himself, and Steve’s eyes glisten.

“I’m never gonna believe that, Bucky,” Steve says, soft and shocked. Bucky shuts his eyes.

“I’m going to bed,” he mumbles, and leaves Steve standing there in the cold air.

***

For a while, Bucky waits, his back pressed against the headboard and knees pulled to his chest, half expecting Steve to burst in. Obviously, he doesn’t. It’s not rational fear but it’s real, paralyzing and awful, filling up his lungs until he’s so scared he can’t move or think properly, fear that years of being silenced and hurt and reduced to nothing and lashed out at if he did something wrong had instilled in him so deep that it doesn’t even feel like fear anymore, just instinct and protection.

When Steve doesn’t come, not even to talk, Bucky lays back and shuts his eyes, fatigue slamming him suddenly.

And then he’s asleep and rough hands push him down, weight heavy on top of him, and Bucky is screaming for him to stop and there’s vicious snarling, I fucking paid for this, the fuck do you mean stop? You owe me, and there’s pain everywhere—

—and then he’s gasping, and he isn’t alone but he’s not trapped anymore; Steve kneels next to him, the door flung open, hands raised.

“It’s okay, Bucky, it’s me,” Steve is saying frantically, “just—just breathe, okay?” His breath trapped, Buck chokes out a sob, buries his face in his hand, panicky and meek.

“Bucky,” Steve says, his voice soft and even, “Bucky, is it okay if I put my arms around your shoulders?” Shaking, Bucky manages to nod.

He tenses at first while Steve pulls him in, shuddering, tears running down his face, and then collapses against him inadvertently. Steve’s arms are steady and strong around his trembling figure, comforting, and he’s able to breathe after a moment, and suddenly he’s starved for the safety and comfort Steve is offering and he presses his face against his shoulder and he cries and cries.

Steve barely moves; he stays there with Bucky, pulls him into his side, circles his fingertips gently over his back and lets him sob, swallowing tears himself and not saying anything to him until he’s
quiet, just weak shudders and whimpers against Steve’s shoulder as he rocks slightly.

“I’m gonna get you a glass of water, okay?” Steve tells him, and Bucky lifts his head and nods quickly. “Do you need anything else? I can get you some toast or tea or something-”

“No, thank you,” Bucky whispers hoarsely. Steve nods and, instinctually, moves to press a kiss to his forehead but catches himself, because fuck, that’s just what he needs.

Steve walks to the kitchen and takes several moments to take a few deep breaths and swallow the grief that digs into his chest before filling a glass with shaking hands. He forces himself to stay calm for Bucky’s sake and when he walks back to the room Bucky is slumped against the headboard, his knees braced against his chest, looking smaller than Steve has ever seen him.

“Here,” Steve says in a small voice, and sits on the edge of the bed. He’s relieved when Bucky drinks it and sets it down, but then he looks away from him again.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky whispers. Steve blinks.

“For what?” he asks, incredulous. Bucky swallows.

“I woke you up.”

“I was up already,” Steve says truthfully, bites back the horror that had risen in his chest and the sound of Bucky screaming, still shaken.

“Thanks,” Bucky says softly after a moment.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Steve replies, but Bucky shakes his head.

“Yeah I do.” They’re silent for several beats; Steve doesn’t know whether to stay or go, so he asks.

“Do you want me to stay? It’s okay with me no matter what,” he adds quickly. Bucky’s red rimmed eyes flicker to him, guarded.

“Would you stay? If—if you don’t mind.” Bucky says timidly. Surprised but gratified, Steve nods firmly.

“Of course.” The bed is big enough for both of them to lie down and not be too close, but Steve still perches on the side, hesitant. They don’t speak; Steve tries not to focus on Bucky so much that he makes him uneasy but not to ignore him, which results in him casting side glances at Bucky as he lies on his side, facing Steve, curls his body into the shape of a question mark.

And god, he knows it’s the wrong time but Steve is struck by how beautiful he looks, tear stained skin glowing in the faint moonlight, hair mussed around his face, figure delicate and petite. Steve swallows thickly, reminded of them in high school, of how many nights he spent watching Bucky like this.

He stays even once Bucky’s breathing is deep and even, just in case he wakes up again, and eventually Steve slumps asleep beside him, unintentional, his heart aching like never before.

***

Bucky wakes up early and does a double take. Steve is next to him, slumped half upright against the headboard, legs swung over the bed like he had fallen asleep sitting up. Confused and half alarmed, Bucky stares at him, and when he remembers the night before he buries his face in his
pillow, cheeks warm.

God Steve is just. So fucking good, excruciatingly gentle and patient and warm, and Bucky just feels repulsed by himself, the knowledge that he doesn’t deserve to be treated that way slamming him, screaming at him that he’s unworthy. He wants to recoil from that kind of care- it’s just so fucking foreign and Bucky’s so infected inside, all poison and broken pieces and fears.

But Steve was there, and Steve had held him, his arms secure and patient, hadn’t tried to kiss him or anything else, but pulled him in with calm, safe hands and let Bucky sob against him with no hesitation. It’s the first time in years anyone has treated him like that and god, the fear and addiction that swells in him is overwhelming. He sort of wants to curl into Steve’s arms for the rest of his life and weep and tell him every awful thing anyone has done to him and listen to Steve’s soft, soothing words and be enveloped in his strength and he sort of wants to run the fuck away and never let Steve see him be vulnerable ever again, and both feelings leave him nauseous and exhausted.

Steve stirs next to him, rubs his eyes. “Hey,” he says, voice raspy with sleep, “how are you?”

“I’m okay,” Bucky says softly, “you?”

There’s a desperation in Steve’s eyes that Bucky can’t quite place. “Okay,” Steve says, and smiles tiredly, then yawns and stretches. “I think I’m gonna make some breakfast, but you should sleep as long as you want.”

“I’ll help,” Bucky says quickly, “you shouldn’t like, wait on me.”

Steve rolls his eyes, but it’s not malicious. “Buck, I don’t care.” But Bucky gets up anyway, following him into the kitchen.

“Want pancakes?” Steve asks, and a small smile splits across Bucky’s face.

“Okay,” he says, “yeah.”

Bucky hovers back while Steve pulls out ingredients, so he beckons him forward. “Crack the eggs for me?” Steve asks, so Bucky does, a delicate tap against the counter.

Steve keeps his gaze as subtly trained on Bucky as he can, and a familiar breathlessness strikes him. God, Bucky’s just soft, careful and gentle in all his movements, and Steve’s heart swells. It’s the kind of gentleness he wishes he could wrap himself in, sweet and entirely unique, just some beautiful, simple way Bucky has of smoothing out the world, making everything appear a little softer around the edges. He’s been like that forever, as long as Steve has known him, and the fact that even after everything, Bucky’s still tender and graceful against the harsh backdrop of the world is unbelievable.

Steve swallows, returns to mixing the batter. Distracted by Bucky, he circles it too hard and the mixer slips and he sprays flecks of it everywhere, drops landing on his counter and spritzing the two of them.

“Shit!” Steve gasps, but Bucky is laughing so he is too, wiping his hand over his own forehead with a grin.

“Here,” Bucky says softly, still biting back laughter, and he brushes a paper towel over Steve’s cheek. Breath hitching, Steve stares at him.

“You got… a bit there.” He gestures to Bucky’s nose and almost reaches up to get it before
catching himself, then he’s glad he did- Bucky rubs it quickly, his eyes softening.

“Steve?” Bucky says suddenly, and Steve pauses and glances down at him. Abruptly, Bucky throws his arm around Steve’s neck in a sudden, tight hug, his face pressed into Steve’s neck. Stunned, Steve takes a few moments to gather his bearings and hugs him back, does so with immense care and enthusiasm, his arms strong around Bucky’s waist.

It’s the embrace that should have happened as soon as they saw each other, a desperate, shy comfort flooding them. He opens his arms and wraps them around Bucky and they stumble, both shaking a little, as Bucky hugs him back. It’s too much, this unbelievable emotion, Bucky in his arms again, the curve of his body and the hitch of his breath so much the same even though he’s transformed almost beyond recognition, and it floods Steve, holding him like this, the vastness of what it does to his world. He doesn’t want to let go. Then Bucky pulls away and turns back to the counter, his cheeks flushed. Steve is grappling for the right things to say, for anything that isn’t I’ve missed you I’ve missed you I’ve missed you when someone knocks against his door, long beats splitting through the air between them.

Bucky pales, his eyes fearful. “It’s okay,” Steve reassures him, “Whoever it is, I’m gonna go tell them to leave. It’s probably just the wrong apartment anyway.” Usually, he has to let people in from the lobby, so he’s wary when he pulls open the door.

It’s Natasha; she leans against his doorframe holding an iced coffee, her hair pulled out of her face. “Oh good, you’re here,” she says, in lieu of a hello, “I left my gym bag here the other day and Peggy and I are going to see her parents today, and there’s no way I’m going up there without being able to escape to a gym.” She pauses for a long, intentional sip. “It cool if I grab it?”

“Um—” Steve coughs, blocks the door, “I can get it.” Natasha frowns. “Can I just come in, Rogers? Damn, who raised you?” She pushes past him and into the open kitchen.

Steve watches the two of them see each other in slow motion. Nat stops cold in her path, her face stricken and serious, inhales sharply as she stares at Bucky, takes him in. Shock and anxiety fill Bucky’s face as he shrinks back, unsure of what to do, and Steve puts himself between them.

“What the fuck,” Natasha deadpans, and then before Steve or Bucky can say anything, pushes Steve aside to fling her arms around Bucky’s neck. Bucky shields himself half heartedly at first but after a moment, hugs her back, his chin tucked into her shoulder. There’s a relief, a comfort that spreads across Bucky’s face that Steve hasn’t seen yet; his face glows with fondness as he leans against her, taking in a deep breath.

It stirs something not unlike jealousy in Steve. It’s not—he’s not jealous of Nat; if anything, he’s relieved that Bucky looks the happiest he’s seen so far. He just sort of wishes, awful as it is, that he could have been the one to elicit that in him.

“Where the hell have you been?” Nat says to him, horribly choked up as she pulls away. She places her hands on either side of his face like she’s observing him, her face a cross between absolute joy and stark disbelief and still-unfounded anger. “God, you’re skinny, where’d you go?”

“It’s a long story,” Bucky says in a small, hoarse, voice. His eyes flit to Steve as he watches them intently, dropping to the floor again when their eyes meet briefly. Steve bites his lip hard.

“You better tell me,” Nat snaps, but there’s no hostility in her voice. “Fuck, I’ve missed you,” she whispers, and hugs him again.
“It’s not—it’s not for right now,” Bucky murmurs, and gives her a smile that’s laced with fatigue. Natasha inhales shakily, closes her eyes.

“How long has this been going on?” she demands suddenly, spinning to face Steve. “I mean, were you two ever gonna call me?”

“We aren’t—I—Bucky’s only been here for a couple of days,” Steve explains vaguely. Natasha narrows her eyes and Steve holds her gaze until her jaw sets, the realization that something isn’t right setting in.

“Jesus Christ, I’m glad to see you. Oh, my god. Holy shit,” Natasha says softly, and pushes Bucky’s hair gently off of his face. “Oh, shit”—her phone rings and cuts shrilly through the apartment, and she sighs.

“Hi, babe—yeah, I know, sorry, I’m on my way- I’ll be there in five, sorry.” Nat hangs up and looks between them regrettably. “Peggy’s waiting for me in the car, I- shit, maybe I should tell her to go—”

“Don’t,” Bucky tells her, his voice nervous, “it’s fine, we can talk when you get back.”

Natasha sets her jaw and stares at him. “You have to promise me that,” she says seriously. Bucky nods, his eyes dropping. “I promise,” he says. Nat closes her eyes and takes a deep breath before she winds her arms around his neck again, tight as ever.

“I’ll see you soon, then,” she says, her voice trembling, and Bucky nods, his eyes dropping. Nat closes her eyes and takes a deep breath before she winds her arms around his neck again, tight as ever.

“Did you tell her?” Bucky whispers finally. “That I was here.”

“No,” Steve says immediately, “no, I wouldn’t, Buck, I promise.” Bucky Shut his eyes and nods rhythmically, his breath trapped.

“It’s okay, it’s fine,” Bucky insists through gritted teeth. Steve swallows and says nothing as Bucky inhales sharply, his face blank, his lip quivering with the effort of holding it together.

“God,” Bucky grits out, “I just—I really didn’t want her to see me.” Bucky’s voice is saturated in self hatred and it twists brutally into Steve’s gut.

“Bucky,” Steve says, very quietly. Bucky lifts his eyes timidly. “You don’t have to be scared of—of us, you know? We all care about you and we’re all happy to see you.” It sounds flat and impersonal, but Steve needs him to hear it, laid out as obvious as possible. People still care about him, no matter what he might think.

Bucky looks down again and swallows hard. “I can’t just come back into your lives like nothing happened,” he says slowly. Steve realizes he’s gripping the side of the counter so hard his knuckles are white, his nails scratching desperately into the marble, and Steve guides his hand tentatively, carefully away. He expects Bucky to pull his hand away but instead, he drops it limply, which is somehow worse.
“I know,” Steve tells him gently, “but—but you could come back with the—uh—acknowledgement that things happened.”

For just a moment, hope sparks in Bucky’s eyes. But it retreats, like he’s not allowing it, replaced with the same guarded sadness. “We should cook these,” he mumbles, and Steve swallows his discouragement.

With well-hidden worry, Steve slaps a ball of pancake mix onto the pan, and Bucky seems to relax slightly. “You know,” Steve says casually, “I was gonna go look for a shirt to wear to this party that I’m supposed to go to next week.” It’s something Tony’s planning, which means hundreds of people, all absurdly rich or famous or working on some new life changing invention, and hours of mingling and overwhelming wealth and luxury thrust into his face. “If you want to, we could go shopping today.”

Bucky doesn’t answer right away, and Steve is about to insist that he shouldn’t feel like he has to say yes, but then he remarks, “So you’ve finally accepted that you need someone’s help with fashion.” His lips turn up into a small, shy smile, and Steve grins, relief washing over him.

“Jerk,” he replies, mock defensive, and flicks Bucky with some flour, which makes him laugh and jump back. Brushing it away, Bucky feels warmth flood his cheeks, unprompted, and he coughs to cover it up.

They find themselves with a stack of pancakes far too tall for the two of them to finish, so they eat about half of it and store the rest under a plastic wrap. “You wanna go in a bit?” Steve asks him, and Bucky says yes and that’s how he finds himself in a towncar forty minutes later, wearing Steve’s jeans that probably cost more than anywhere he’s ever lived, staring out the window, held still by a sudden slew of memories.

When Bucky was seventeen and his dad caught him and Steve together, he had known it was gonna be bad. He just had no idea how awful it would get, how the punishment would drag on for months and eventually, by extension, to today.

Get out of here, he yelled, panicked, to Steve, because the terror that his dad was literally going to kill Steve had him gripped and after hesitation, even with a goddamn gun in his face, Steve finally did. And everything fell apart.

Bucky was prepared for his dad to hit him, scream at him, tell him he wasn’t going to have a fag son. It didn’t surprise him, even if it left him trembling in his childhood bedroom, head throbbing, dread suffocating him. It surprised him, though, when his dad dragged him out of bed at two in the morning and told him to get in the car and, driven him, in a haze of fear, for four hours into the middle of fucking nowhere, a stretch of land populated with dark cabins and dead grass and a church, and shoved him out of the passenger seat.

It was a ‘religious retreat’, they’d said, but Bucky knew what conversion camp was and nausea set in, heavy in his stomach, as he turned to his dad and begged him not to do it. He ignored it. He left.

The next four months were a haze of terror and rage and disgust. They started by just talking to him, spending hours pulling him apart, berating him, until Bucky was stiff and quivering in a chair and so disgusted with himself that he couldn’t see his reflection without a wave of sickness washing over him. Do you think losing your arm had something to do with your sexual confusion? Do you think since you’re incomplete on the outside, you act damaged on the inside? That boy your father told us about, did he attack you? Did he take advantage of your vulnerability? And when Bucky glared back at them defiantly, snapped that no, none of that was true, they started to attack. You’re diseased, you’re unnatural, deviant, sick, damaged, you’re never going to live a
normal life if you don’t change.

He thought about Steve every fucking second, terrified for him, wanting to see him, to collapse into his arms and have him erase their words, evil and brutal, to wash him clean of the vileness that clung to him.

Then they started to drug him, and for the first time in his life, Bucky wanted to die. It was injections, a form of torture that Bucky hadn’t known really existed but couldn’t fathom how it could possibly be legal; they put him in a chair and played porn, stuck him with a goddamn needle every time they showed men, until Bucky was convulsing, vomiting into the basket they’d place there every day, too terrified to eat or drink. You see, James, this is sick and unnatural. He stopped being able to keep food down at all, and within weeks he had shrunk down to near skin and bones, weak and pale and scared, sobbing every time they pushed him into that small, dark room.

He stopped resisting the self hatred then and shrunk in on himself, not wanting to be looked at or talked to or exist at all. He still thought about Steve, his chest bursting with missing him, but it was tinged with the question of why Steve could’ve ever loved him, this pathetic, damaged, incomplete half-person who spent every second being told he was worthless or to pray to change or on his knees retching.

There was an exorcism, but he doesn’t remember it. There was shouting and he thinks he was screaming or sobbing or both but he isn’t sure, but he regained consciousness afterwards, his body shuddering uncontrollably, another girl there gently handing him a cup of water, understanding pity in her eyes.

There were other teenagers there, their faces terrified, the same haunted, sick look permanently ghosting their eyes.

He started saying that he had changed after about two months, desperate and beaten and reduced to a shred of himself and wanting to go home, to see Steve, even though by that point every part of him was screaming that Steve wouldn’t love him, never did. They saw through it, pushed back at him. I think you’re lying, I think you just want to go back to your deviant lifestyle. So he repeated it, the words hollow and bitter, I see what I was doing was wrong, I’ve finally accepted Jesus, spitting out what they wanted to hear no matter how sick it made him feel, and finally they let him go.

Both his parents came to get him, his dad’s face stoic and his mother’s ashamed, and Bucky didn’t speak to them, not for the car ride home and not once they were in his small, small house and not as he stared across at Steve’s apartment, heart pounding in his throat.

“He’s gone,” his dad snarled, “he’s not ever coming back here.”

The realization that Steve was gone was slow and suffocating, the acceptance heavy and leaving him hollowed out in grief. He doesn’t know what he expected—there was no way they were going to just pick up where they left off, but he was just gone, and the missing him intertwined with the throbbing worry for what happened to him and the conviction that somehow, it was his fault and Steve would be disgusted by him if he saw him again anyway, and it left him breathlessly horrified, gasping for a reprieve from the pain of his nightmarish few months. He left his house and his neighborhood and decided that if he didn’t starve to death or get killed on the street, he was never going back there, not to his parents who had cast him out to be pulled apart until he was a shattered, half living thing, and not to the place that served as an aching, taunting reminder that he’d lost everything he had.

(He didn’t go to Natasha or Sam or any of their friends. The shame of what had happened to him, what he would seem to them stopped him, even if they meant maybe finding Steve. The reality of Steve seeing him was beginning to dawn on him, and it left him so sickened with himself that he
wanted to rip his skin off or collapse into dust just to stop being suffocated by his own worthlessness and vileness.)

So he lived on the street, or in different shelters. It was cold and he was hungry and exhausted and paralyzed by sadness and scared every day, but it was his only choice.

A guy came up to him one night and asked him how much.

“How much what?” Bucky had whispered hoarsely.

He raised his eyebrows. “For a fuck,” he’d said, his voice rough and unconcerned, and Bucky had been so bewildered that he’d almost laughed with the pure shock.

“I don’t—I’m not, um—I think you have the wrong person,” he stammered, and the guy left.

But then it got colder and shelters got scarcer and Bucky had gone days without eating, and he thought about what he’d said, how much, and it seemed like easy money even though the thought of it made his throat close up and his breathing stop, and eventually he tried it.

He stood in an empty parking lot somewhere in Brooklyn that he didn’t know. An older guy, late thirties or forties, stood across from him, drunk and impatient, and dread unlike he had ever felt filled Bucky’s lungs.

“How old are you?” The guy had asked. Bucky swallowed, a spike of fear running through his veins.

“Twenty—twenty three,” he stuttered.

“Bullshit,” the guy said, but smirked. He took a step towards Bucky, brought his lips close to Bucky’s neck, and his breath was hot and bitter with the taste of alcohol. “You can’t be more than what nineteen? Twenty?”

“Seventeen,” Bucky whispered, suddenly biting back tears. The man laughed.

“Alright, I won’t tell, baby.” He forced Bucky further against the wall, his back pressed into it, and Bucky tried to swallow the fear that was surging violently through him. The man pushed in after him, and suddenly Bucky felt the alley close in on him, the air saturated with danger, and nausea slammed him.

“Actually I—I don’t want to—” Bucky stammered, breathless, trying to push back against him and the man didn’t move. “Look- look, I—I—I don’t need this, I don’t want this—”

“The fuck you don’t,” he replied roughly, “don’t worry, baby, you’ll get your money.”

“No, I don’t want you to pay me just—just—just let me go,” Bucky whimpered, his voice panicky and frantic, “please—”

The guy ignored him, pushed him back, his head slamming against the brick wall, and Bucky struggled. He could hear himself saying a string of pleas, crying, his breath trapped as the guy undid his fly and flipped him around, and Bucky was sobbing and screaming until his hand clamped over Bucky’s mouth, rough and unforgiving. Paralyzed with terror and exhausted, the little fight he could hope to put up died before he could even begin to defend himself.

He didn’t stand a chance.
“Shut the fuck up! Stupid whore,” the man snarled, and Bucky gasped, terrified, against his skin.

What he did to Bucky ripped him apart, stunned him into such horror, disgust that he wasn't fully there, he was above it, watching what this older man did to him, ignoring him writhing, begging with his hand on his mouth, squeezing against his face. Bucky was crying but it didn’t come from his throat, he heard it from somewhere else, mixing with horrified gasps and subdued screams, his body numb and hyper-aware of the pain that split him open, crippled with grief and loss and horror. He whispered things in Bucky’s ear the whole time, *mm fucking tight little whore you like that, princess?* his words wrapping themselves around him and squeezing the air out.

He didn’t know how long he was against that wall, how he was still standing, or maybe he wasn’t and he was just pressed too tight against the building to fall and when the man finally, finally got off of him he was too afraid to move. He pulled his hand from Bucky’s face and he gasped inadvertently, spit and tears running down his face. The guy said something that Bucky didn’t hear because white noise was buzzing around him, and somehow, shock made him pull up his jeans before collapsing to his knees.

“You earned it,” the man taunted, and threw a couple of twenties at him. “See you around.” And he rounded the corner and walked off as he did his belt up, and Bucky kneeled in that parking lot and rocked himself back and forth, hyperventilating and sobbing hysterically, until he finally got sick and then gained enough breath back to stand up on shaking, lead filled legs and stumble out of there.

In a haze of desperation and fear and helplessness, Bucky did it again the next week, trembled through a blowjob for a different guy who pushed him roughly to his knees in an alley for twenty dollars. He stopped saying yes or no because nobody asked, so when someone wanted to tie him up and hit him and be aggressive, people who got off on seeing him hurt, he let them, even if he choked out weak sobs through it or begged them to stop or if it hurt so much he became light headed and left shaking, nearly convulsing with sickness.

He thought if he didn’t say no, people couldn’t hurt him as much. It wasn’t true. There were a lot of ways to say no, Bucky realized. They just didn’t seem to matter coming from him.

It wasn’t always an attack. Sometimes it was just some lonely person who would ask Bucky to come home with them for a night, who’d fuck him all slow and sweet and whisper someone else’s name in his ear and that was better but still left him feeling a little emptier and a little more vile than before each time, especially when someone asked him to stay over and held him from behind like he wasn’t allowed to leave, and Bucky tried to fall asleep while feeling suffocated and claustrophobic. A lot of his regulars were like that, far more common than the people who got off on hurting him.

It was just that there was no determining who was okay and who was violent or sadistic, and eventually the lines blurred. People who paid for someone else’s body all saw him as something to use, no matter how they chose to use it. And people who got off on degrading or beating or dehumanizing him definitely didn’t care if it was consensual or not.

So Bucky didn’t try to convince people he liked it, not when it didn’t matter to them.

He thought about Steve still, all the time, but it was with the foreign memory of a time when sex had been a good thing, a time when what he said and wanted and didn’t want mattered, and the pain of it threatened split him open. He thought about Steve and he thought about the disgust Steve would feel upon seeing him, seeing how much he’s let people do to him, that he’s just an object, dirty and tattered and disregarded, and hatred towards himself simmered hot under his skin.
After the first few months, Bucky had become friends with a couple of other people in sex work. This was how he met Wanda, a girl who worked at a strip club near where Bucky generally skulked around for customers, when some drunk jackass cornered her on the street and Bucky stepped in and pretended to know her.

Wanda was beautiful and, like Bucky, had been broken just a little too often that it was starting to show, with long red hair cascading to her waist and big, tired eyes that she smudged in dark makeup to hide her exhaustion. She lived in an apartment by her job where a few other people crashed too; Scott, a hacker who committed occasional robberies, Peter and Gamora, a couple who might have been assassins or bank robbers or something else (Bucky isn’t sure. He asked them once and Peter laughed and said “you don’t wanna know, kid.”), a couple of others who would come and go, an apparent open door policy at Wanda’s place. He stayed with her for a long time, relieved to have a bed and more relieved, when dragging himself home after a particularly awful night or an especially violent customer, to have people there to hand him an ice pack and a cup of tea. He and Wanda grew especially close, the common trauma of being used over and over again by different men with absolutely no regard for what they wanted uniting them in a protective, damaged bond.

The thing about staying in one location, though, is that regular customers catch onto that when they’re seeking him out in the same place. So when Bucky said no to a guy who he’d gone home with before, because he had been waiting by Wanda’s apartment where Bucky typically picked someone up as he was coming back from somewhere else, he pulled a gun on him, pulled him into the back of a car, driven somewhere and forced himself down Bucky’s throat and into him for two hours, and then driven him back to the apartment. “Sweet dreams,” he’d said menacingly, squeezing Bucky’s thigh and spinning the pistol between them like something out of a horror movie, and so Bucky made it upstairs on trembling legs and spent the next couple of hours knelt in front of the toilet, shuddering with repulsion, sobbing in the minutes he wasn’t dry heaving, as Wanda and Scott hovered gently around and tried to coax what was wrong out of him.

He didn’t stay there much longer, terrified of him coming back, of him hurting the others who lived there too. He moved around, crashing mostly at Wanda’s or a cheap hotel room or sleeping outside the nights he wasn’t staying with a customer. People still hurt him, smirked when he was a cowering, tearful mess and forced him under them roughly, ignored him when he froze up and retreated at their touch, left him shaking violently, his arm braced pathetically in front of himself. It didn’t matter anymore. He didn’t try to stop people anymore because no one ever did, but he couldn’t ever get good at pretending to enjoy it when someone slammed into him without asking, hit him across the face for making a sound, forced him to endure the sick things they were into just because he was there, just because they could. Some people really liked to hurt him. He tries not to think about those ones.

Two years after the last time he had seen Steve, Bucky passed a newstand featuring a magazine with his face and nearly fainted. TWENTY ONE YEAR OLD STEVE ROGERS TAKING THE ART WORLD BY STORM, Paper had advertised, and it struck Bucky with a unique, quiet pain, the kind of aching that presents itself only when you think of how differently things could have gone. Of course Steve was a famous artist. It’s what he earned, what he deserved, even though seeing him made Bucky feel even more inadequate, even more subhuman than he already had. It confirmed what he knew—he was nothing, and Steve would know that if he saw him. So he didn’t try to find him, he didn’t go into his exhibit at the Whitney when it opened, he didn’t cry himself to sleep on the nights that he thought about excruciatingly gentle touches and kisses that set off flickering lights behind Bucky’s eyes and a time when someone looked at him like he was something, like he was everything, he didn’t feel the dull rhythm or a stranger thrusting into him and wish for familiar safe arms to wrap him up and not let anyone hurt him again.
And a year and a half later, and there he was, and it scared Bucky in a new way.

“Buck?” Steve says softly, and Bucky snaps his head around from where he’s been staring blankly out the window. “We’re here.”

“Oh.” Bucky clears his throat, nodding as he steps out behind Steve. They’re at some fancy men’s boutique in the West Village that makes Bucky want to retreat right back into himself, but Steve strides in like he’s been there a hundred times, which he probably has, and so Bucky follows him.

“You okay?” Steve says quietly to him. Bucky’s jaw is tight, his whole body tense, so Steve touches his wrist very lightly. “We can go home if—”

“It’s fine,” Bucky tells him quickly, and pushes the door open. Steve casts him a long look but heads in, and Bucky trails after him.

“What do you think?” Steve asks him, and holds up a button down, striped red and green. Bucky raises an eyebrow, amused, and Steve scowls good naturedly.

“Bad colors,” Bucky tells him, “you’ll look like a Christmas tree.”

“It’s a Christmas party,” Steve defends himself.

“This one’s better.” Bucky pulls a shirt from the opposite wall, solid red with a thick green stripe down the center, framing silver buttons. “It’s still festive but like, better.”

“Didn’t realize you were a fashion expert, Barnes,” Steve grumbles teasingly, but takes it and adds, “you’re right, this is better.”

They pull a few more shirts out, laughing about how absurd some of the prints are, and Steve grabs a leopard print pair of jeans just to make Bucky laugh. “Grab stuff,” Steve tells him after a few minutes, “try stuff on.”

“You aren’t buying me clothes,” Bucky replies immediately, “god, it’s not Pretty Woman, Steve.”

Unrelenting, Steve rolls his eyes and snatches up a sweater that he tosses to Bucky. “You’re helping me—”

“I’m staying in your house—”

“Bucky,” Steve cuts him off, “I’ve got more money than I’ll ever be able to spend in my entire life. Please, let me buy you a couple shirts. It would be one of the few things I actually wanna spend money on.”

Bucky chews his lip uncomfortably, wishing he didn’t feel entirely like a charity case. He knows Steve isn’t gonna let up and he doesn’t have the energy to fight him, so he grabs the lavender pullover Steve is holding and, to humor him, a few more clothing items off of different racks. The satisfied smile that spreads over Steve’s face makes him roll his eyes and blush.

Steve buys all of them for him, and other things from four more stores they end up at. Bucky thanks him through nervous, mumbled words, a strange mix of gratitude and inadequacy pulsing through his lungs.

Chapter End Notes
depending on what my schedule over the next few days looks like i might update again
sunday but if not definitely by next weekend

subtle ask but i love reading your comments so much and they truly make my entire
day so if you wanna leave one it will make me want to update sooner ;)

love you all hmu on cafelesbian tumblr and send me a message about this fic or cute
girls or ur day idc i love u all thank you for reading pals
It’s been dark for an hour by the time they’re heading home, the back of the car stuffed with shopping bags. Bucky’s wearing a new hat, his cheeks flushed from the cold, and Steve can’t take his eyes off of him.

He still loves Bucky. God, he loves him so much it steals his breath away, the vastness of his useless fucking love. He wonders, watching Bucky watch snowflakes melt against the glass, how he could have ever convinced himself he didn’t need it. He thinks he realized it earlier, watching Bucky laugh at a stupid joke Steve had made, lines crinkling around his eyes, his smile splitting over his face and making everything else around him fuzzy, irrelevant, and Steve had wanted to vanish into that moment. But maybe he knew as soon as he saw him in that alley. It doesn’t matter. He just stares at him and knows that he loves him, that he never stopped, that he never will.

And it’s just. God, he doesn’t know what to do, how to get Bucky to trust him, to feel safe, to stay. Tell me what happened to you, Steve wants to whisper, tell me what people did to you to make you so scared. Let me hold your hand, let me hug you, let me make sure no one ever hurts you again.

The car slows to a stop and Steve gathers the bags in his arms before they head inside. When they’re in his apartment Bucky turns to him, eyes cast down.

“I can—I can put the bags in my room?” He says it like a question, like he’s asking Steve for permission.

“And of course—here, I have a few.” He carries the bags that belong to Bucky down the hallway and sets them down in his doorframe.

“Thanks,” Bucky whispers, “I—thank you for everything.”

“It’s not a problem,” Steve says gently, “I like having you here.” Bucky doesn’t meet his eyes, but he swallows thickly.

His hair falls loosely in his face, light catching on his cheeks, and Steve wants to kiss him, wants to kiss him and pull him against his chest and relearn every curve of Bucky’s body, and feeling of his skin underneath Steve’s fingertips. He won’t. No matter how much he wants to, not even if he thinks Bucky starts to feel the same, Steve refuses to be the one to initiate anything. Not if there’s a chance Bucky will feel used by him.

“Can I take a shower?” Bucky asks softly. Steve swallows, runs his fingers through his hair.

“Yeah, you—you don’t have to ask,” he says. Bucky nods absently.
Steve keeps needing to remind himself that it will take time for Bucky to be comfortable again, to be the way he’d been four years ago. If ever. It doesn’t stop it from sickening him at how empty, how subdued he looks.

“I’m gonna be in the living room,” Steve tells him. “I’m gonna order dinner, any requests?”

“Whatever you want,” Bucky says quickly, just like Steve had expected.

“Wrong answer.” Steve gives him a smile, chastises himself when Bucky pales and looks at him through wide, worried eyes. “I mean—whatever you want, Buck.”

“Um… Indian food?” Bucky asks, and reaches up to rub his neck, a movement loaded with anxiety. Steve nods and smiles warmly.

“On it.” He leaves Bucky to shower and orders, the knowledge that he remembers Bucky’s favorite dishes twisting in his gut, and waits until he hears the water running to check his phone for the first time all day.

Sixty seven texts from Natasha. He doesn’t read through them, just calls her with a resigned sigh, and she answers on the first ring.

“Can you talk right now?” she asks.

“Hello to you too,” Steve answers tiredly, leaning back on his couch.

“What the fuck, Steve? What’s he doing there? How long have you guys been back together? I mean—I mean where was he? Why does he look like hell?” She’s yelling, rattling off questions before Steve can even begin to answer them, and he grimaces as he waits for her to finish.

“Hi, Steve,” he hears quietly in the background, amused.

“Hi, Peggy,” he replies, and hears Natasha scoff.

“Steve,” she says seriously.

“He—we aren’t back together,” Steve says, lowers his voice just in case. “Nat, I was walking the other night and I just literally fucking bumped into him on the street because he’s—” Steve drops his voice to a whisper, “—he’s a goddamn hooker, and I think he’s like, living on the street or some shitty apartment, and he’ll barely look at me or talk to me and I just know some awful shit happened to him but he won’t tell me what.” Tears prick Steve’s eyes and he takes a breath, calms himself. On the other line, Nat and Peggy are silent.


“Yeah,” he says bitterly.

“That’s—oh, God, he froze up at first when I hugged him, I—” Nat breaks off; Steve pictures her face, horrified and disbelieving. “But—but he’ll be okay now, right? He’s staying with you and he knows we’re here for him—”

“I don’t know,” Steve says grimly, “he’s staying with me until it stops snowing, at least, but he doesn’t wanna accept help, you know?”

“Have you told anyone else?” Peggy asks. She and Bucky have never met; Natasha and her started dating shortly into their freshman year college, just months after he vanished, so she knows the
story. Steve can imagine her arms tight around Natasha now, trying to keep her worry at bay.

“Just Sam, ’cause I wanted a... fucking...psych major opinion on what to do,” Steve says, and scrubs a hand over his face. “God, I don’t know how to help him.”

“Steve?” Nat says carefully, “Steve do you still love him?”

He had known she would ask; they haven’t talked about Bucky in ages, but she isn’t stupid; in almost four years, Steve hasn’t dated anyone for longer than a month. She’d been there for the years they were together, she’d known how fucking in love they’d been. Steve is silent; he just sighs shakily.

The water stops, and Steve sits up. “I gotta go,” he says, “I’ll text you.” He hangs up before she can say goodbye, just as Bucky is coming out. His damp hair is pulled up out of his face, and fondness stirs in Steve’s chest despite himself.

He considers it a victory when Bucky sits beside him, even if he leans back and pulls his knees against his chest.

“How are your parents?” Bucky asks in a small voice. Steve blinks and tenses, but takes it as a good sign; Bucky’s acknowledging the past, he’s willing to talk, at least to some extent.

“I wouldn’t know,” Steve says, bitterness creeping into his voice, “haven’t seen them in three years.” Bucky hums in response, a non committal, neutral reply. “Actually that isn’t, um, totally true.” Steve pauses and presses his index fingers to the bridge of his nose, screwing his eyes shut. “Uh, my mom died? About two years back.” It surprises him, that saying it lodges a lump in his throat, guilt numbing his limbs all at once.

Bucky’s eyes widen, his face horrified. “Oh, Steve,” he says, “Oh, god, I’m sorry.”

Steve nods and rakes his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, I mean—I hadn’t talked to her in more than a year,” he replies, like that makes it okay.

“That doesn’t mean it wasn’t terrible for you,” Bucky says, voice gentle. Steve looks up at him with a sad, surprised smile, suddenly intensely relieved. He’s never talked to anyone about this, not Nat or Sam or Tony, since every time he’s thought about it guilt has crept up, nauseating and vicious, in his throat. Bucky, though, looks at him through understanding, forgiving eyes that remind him of a time when he was able to tell him everything, words pouring out with no fear of judgement, and he feels that shocking freedom pulsing through the air between them as Bucky sits, beside him, quietly supportive.

“I didn’t go to the funeral,” he whispers, guilt bleeding into his voice. “I didn’t go and I mean—I could’ve paid for it, God knows my dad didn’t have the money—” Steve breaks off before his voice can crack, but Bucky already knows.

Very tentatively, he places his hand lightly behind Steve’s neck. It sends a ripple of electricity through him. “You shouldn’t be mad at yourself for that,” Bucky says, and it’s the strongest Steve has heard his voice since he got there. “I mean—well—did they kick you out?” Bucky immediately winces at how forward the question was, but Steve doesn’t mind, and he gives him an exhausted, joyless smile.

“Yeah,” he says, voice flat. Bucky swallows and nods, his eyes darkening.

“Then you don’t owe them anything,” Bucky says sharply, his hand still warm on Steve’s back. Not quite convinced, Steve gives him a skeptical look but doesn’t argue. It’s the first reprieve he’s
had of this horrible, gnawing guilt since it happens, settling over him, blanketing him in sudden relief. Bucky doesn’t think he’s a terrible person.

“Did, uh—” Steve coughs, “—did your parents…” He trails off as Bucky’s face falls, his jaw going slack.

Bucky blinks, rapid and frantic, then changes the subject. “You got any wine?” He asks, a sharp rejection of the question, and Steve decides to drop it. He laughs dryly, looking up at Bucky.

“You can’t even drink yet.” Bucky’s twenty first birthday isn’t for another two months, the date preserved over time in Steve’s mind with all of his other knowledge about Bucky, his favorite colors and movies and drinks, the curve of his back under Steve’s fingers, how much sugar he puts in his coffee and the type of shampoo he uses and how to calm him down when he’s overwhelmed. Bucky snorts.

“Never stopped me before. Or you, if I remember correctly.” Bucky grins despite himself and it makes Steve smile too, a rare warmth heavy between them.

“Red?” Steve asks with a partial smirk, and Bucky nods smugly. Steve pours them each a glass then decides not to put the bottle away after all. It’s that kind of a night. Bucky watches him the whole time, not lifting his eyes from Steve as he pours it and hands it over, then takes the glass from him and twirls the stem as if he’s inspecting it before raising his eyes to Steve’s. Something heavy and miserable crosses over his face, but it’s gone before Steve can place it.

“Cheers,” Steve says dryly, and Bucky raises the glass absently before tossing it back and swigging half of it. Steve would be impressed if it didn’t make him so worried.

“Conversion camp,” Bucky says, bitterly and so softly Steve almost misses it.

“What…?”

“That was how my parents handled it.” Bucky is glaring at the ground, his eyes glassy, and he takes another long sip. Steve feels cold all over as he processes it; conversion camp. Nausea washes over him at the implications of it, and he shuts his eyes briefly. Prayer, electroshock therapy, fucking emotional and physical abuse, god know what else. He’s heard the stories, but it had seemed foreign, some horror story that kids living in the deep south might experience, but never him, never Bucky. As he thinks it over, he feels incredibly stupid for not having realized it before—of course that’s why Bucky just disappeared for months. Fuck, he had just assumed that he was living with an uncle or grandparents somewhere without electricity—the thought of conversion therapy had seemed so abstract that it hadn’t even occurred to him.

Conversion camp and the trauma that inflicted, back home to parents who’d hung him out to dry, leaving home and living on the streets and turning to sex work. It makes sense as an awful, twisted sequence of events, and Steve feels so heartbroken and so fucking guilty thinking about it all, a vague, broken understanding starting to take shape in his mind.

He takes a drink of wine.

“I’m so sorry, Buck,” he whispers, his voice hoarse. “I didn’t know—”

“I know,” Bucky replies. He’s still staring at the ground, his hand trembling as he sets down the now empty glass. His voice is frighteningly small. Steve takes a breath and then reaches towards him, lays his hand lightly over Bucky’s, testing if it’s okay. Bucky doesn’t pull away, and then he brushes his thumb against Steve’s fingers so Steve squeezes it, light but secure.
“God,” Steve mutters, “I should’ve figured-”

“Don’t do that, Steve, it’s not like—it’s not like it was the obvious explanation. Don’t beat yourself up about it.” Bucky’s voice quivers and Steve keeps his hand held in his own, warm and comfortable.

Steve feels sixteen again, unimaginable love washing over him, light pouring from Bucky like he couldn’t be more wonderful. It hurts in a unique way.

“Let’s talk about something else,” Bucky says, swallowing thickly, and Steve decides not to push it. “How’s Natasha?”

Surprised, Steve clears his throat. His hand is still holding Bucky’s and he decides that until Bucky lets go, he certainly won’t. It’s a strange emotion, loaded with history and pain and tenderness and fear, a fragile comfort shared between them that Steve doesn’t want to break.

“She’s… she’s good,” Steve answers, “she graduates NYU this year and she wants to go to law school.” Bucky nods, impressed.

“Is Peggy her girlfriend?” As Bucky speaks, he refills his glass, then reaches over to refill Steve’s. Steve doesn’t stop him.

“Yep. She’s great, you’d- you’d like her.”

“And Sam?”

“Good. Graduates Columbia with a social work degree this spring.”

The doorbell buzzes, signaling the end of the conversation and the end of their hands clasping each other’s. Steve untangles his fingers from Bucky’s with reluctance before he stands up to answer and pay, then spreads the food out on the coffee table in front of them.

“What do you say we eat this and watch reality TV for the rest of the night?” Steve asks with a grin, and Bucky smiles, a soft, innocent thing that makes Steve’s breath catch.

“Sounds good to me.”

They watch The Bachelorette and share samosas for two hours, and after a while the bottle has been emptied and the food is gone and the blonde girl onscreen is choosing the douchey guy Steve and Bucky were rooting against. He turns to share his dismay and realizes Bucky is asleep, face half pushed into the couch, curled up into the shape of a question mark.

Right. Bucky’s always been a lightweight. Steve smiles tiredly, gathers up the empty containers and dumps them into the recycling, turns off the TV. And then he brings an extra pillow and blanket to the couch.

Bucky murmurs something, slurred and incoherent, when Steve props his head up slightly on another pillow, but then he’s asleep again, tugging at the blanket Steve brought him. Steve watches him, dizzy with infatuation, for a few moments, then leaves him quickly to shower and grab even more pillows.

He sets himself up on the other couch, not wanting to leave Bucky in case of another nightmare but giving him space. He doesn’t expect it, but he’s asleep within minutes.

***
Bucky wakes up the next morning and can’t remember where he is. He’s snuggled under a down comforter and wakes to sunlight streaming in, and after a few moments of disconcerted looking around he realizes he’s still in Steve’s living room. He startles once again when his gaze rests on Steve, still asleep on the other couch, hair grazing his forehead loosely. His face is calm and still and it seems to Bucky like the light bends around him, like he’s glowing golden, and for a few moments Bucky’s chest aches with love, sudden and familiar and spreading quickly through him in a rush, leaving him confused and afraid.

It’s just. Steve is something else. Steve is so goddamn good, so gentle and patient and warm and funny and kind and Bucky can’t help that his ex is the best person alive, can’t help that it’s starting to occur to him that he never stopped loving Steve and as of right now he doesn’t know when he will. It ripples mockingly in his chest, stupid worthless slut he’s never gonna love you again you’re too fucking damaged, and Bucky closes his eyes and wants to disappear in on himself because he knows it’s true but it doesn’t stop his heart from racing impatiently every time Steve looks at him.

So Bucky gets up first, and makes coffee because he can’t stand that Steve’s been the one to do everything. He also does the dishes and he’s impressed by the fact that Steve sleeps through it, and it occurs to him that he must be exhausted and that’s Bucky’s fault.

Steve wakes up a few minutes later, when Bucky is pouring the coffee, and his stomach lurches as he realizes he should have asked. “Hey,” Steve mumbles, sitting up and rubbing his face.

“Hi,” Bucky says nervously, and then in a rush, “sorry I’m using your stuff—”

Steve cocks his head then shrugs. “It’s fine, Buck,” he says easily, “thanks for making coffee.” It’s such a small acknowledgement but Bucky’s shoulders sag with relief, and he nods quickly.

“I’m not—I’m not hurting your work, am I?” Bucky asks, timid. Guilt tugs unpleasantly in his chest, suffocating dread that he’s been a burden on Steve, done nothing but take from him and inconvenience him. Steve stands and heads to the kitchen, stands close to Bucky as he pours his coffee.

“What? No! No.” Steve takes a long sip, running his hands through his hair. “No, I’m just working on a couple projects and I make my own hours, so…”

“What, um—” Bucky starts, and swallows another swig of coffee. “What are you working on?”

Steve hesitates. “I’ve got an exhibit coming up in January at Moma,” he starts, “which is like, the main thing, and then I’ve got a couple individual commissions, and I’m working on some stuff for Stark.” Bucky whistles.


Steve snorts. “Yep. He’s actually—he’s the one who hired me in the first place ‘cause—’cause after my parents kicked me out, um—I was doing some portraits in Central Park and he came by, offered me a job.” The absurdity of it isn’t lost on Steve, who cocks his head, eyebrows raised as he swigs his coffee.

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky laughs, and hoists himself up onto the counter. “What’s he like?”

Steve considers this. “Weird. He tries for the eccentric billionaire thing. Nice but in a bit of a sardonic way. Generous, though.” Bucky nods, impressed. For a moment, he forgets about his own inadequacy and is wrapped up in pride for Steve.
“Look at you,” he says, and Steve casts him a skeptical look, self conscious. “Can I see it? The stuff you’re working on.”

Steve stares at him, surprised. “Yeah,” he says, “yeah, sure, uh—I can show you now?”

Bucky smiles and nods, then follows Steve down the hallway. He catches a glimpse of what must be an in-home gym room just before Steve turns into the studio.

It’s the biggest room in the house, three windows framing it in sunlight. Clearly, it’s an expensive studio, well furnished with different canvases and paint brushes and scrolls of paper propped everywhere, a massive graphic design tablet leaning against one wall. Bucky scans the room and studies Steve’s pieces, most of them unfinished, breathless. They range, precise, lifelike paintings of people or cities or moments that pulse, lifelike, and animated, intentional images that must be meant for some kind of campaign and drawings, harsh, fierce lines connected vividly, some of them faces or settings and some of them things Bucky can’t tell, beautiful in a bit of a claustrophobic way.

He turns to Steve, who’s looking at him expectantly, hopefully, and Bucky loves him, loves him, loves him, the rawness of it flooding him.

“These are- these are fuckin’ incredible, Steve,” he says, and gulps. Steve smiles, his eyes shining, and leans against the wall.

“Thanks, Buck,” he replies, and Bucky gives him a small smile and then turns away.

***

It’s cold enough that they stay in all day; Steve shows him the rest of the house and they decide to play monopoly (Bucky wins) and by the time it’s done it’s already evening to they make pasta and eat at the counter, and Steve suggests they continue their film festival so they watch Minority Report while drinking hot chocolate. Bucky sits close to Steve, their shoulders pressed against each other, and he’s grateful for the fact that Steve doesn’t move or try to kiss him or grab his thigh, and maybe he should have been more careful around him, it’s just that Steve makes him feel. Really fucking safe. And that can’t be said about anyone else in the world.

Towards the end of the movie, when Tom Cruise is confronting Max Von Sydow on a rooftop, Bucky drops his head against Steve’s shoulder, a completely inadvertent, exhausted motion. He pulls back immediately and Steve turns to him, his face gentle.

“I don’t mind,” he says, his voice impossibly soft, so Bucky leans back against him and closes his eyes and warmth spreads in his chest all the way through his body.

They both sleep in the living room again.

“Steve?” Bucky whispers from the couch much later that night. He’s not even sure he’s still awake until Steve shifts onto his stomach and peers at him from the other couch.

“Yeah?”

Half wishing he hadn’t answered, Bucky closes his eyes. “Do you, um—how—how long—when are you gonna want me to leave?” He spits it out, hating himself. He really, really doesn’t want to.

Steve is silent for a few moments. “Bucky,” he says quietly, “if you want to go I don’t wanna like, keep you here. But, um—you can stay as long as you want. It can be a long term thing, if you want it to. I really—I really like you being here.”
Bucky swallows thickly, a strange mix of relief and fear washing over him.

He’s just not used to mattering, is all.

“It’s actually—I’ve been so fucking lonely this whole time, Buck, and now you’re here and it’s just- I love being with you. So if you stay for a while, that’s fine by me.” Tears push past Bucky’s eyes and he swallows again, glad for the darkness.

“Thank you, Steve,” he whispers, the effort to stop his voice from cracking futile.

“You don’t have to thank me, Buck,” Steve says softly.

“Goodnight,” Bucky whispers again, once his voice is under control.

“‘Night, Bucky.”

***

So Bucky stays for three more weeks.

The sleeping together in the living room becomes a bit of a thing. They’ll either sleep on opposite couches or on the ground together, a pile of down comforters and pillows spilling over the floor with more than enough room between them. Some days, Steve works on his art and Bucky stays with him sometimes, reading or scribbling furiously in a notebook, secure with the fact that Steve will turn to him with his warm, genuine smile every so often to remind him that he's there. Some days, they’ll go out and see a movie or grocery shop or to a museum and come home laughing the way they had back when they were younger, ease and comfort pulsing between them. It’s not always, but the longer Bucky stays, the more he relaxes into Steve being around him. Steve’s careful and never pushes him on talking, always hesitates for permission before touching him (which happens more and more frequently and excites and scares and confuses Bucky. Often, Steve will touch his arm, guide him gently through a crowd, or he’ll lean against Steve on the subway or their hands will brush and hesitate there for several seconds. He doesn’t know what it means but it’s the first time anyone has touched him with a shred of gentleness in ages).

He just fucking loves Steve, the feeling of it obvious and both foreign and familiar, pulsing underneath all of the parts of him that are scared and smashed up and bruised. He loves Steve and he hadn’t even known that was possible and it's both the clearest and most confusing thing he’s ever felt. He knows he loves him but he doesn’t know what it means to love him, can’t wrap his head about the fact that he both wants Steve to kiss him and feels a shudder of anxiety at the thought of it.

He’s texted Wanda and Scott to let them know he’s alright, increasingly frantic texts mounting once he’d finally checked his phone. He doesn’t tell them where he is. Wanda knows a little about Steve but he’s not ready to open that floodgate with her, especially since he doesn’t know when Steve is going to get sick of him.

He sees Sam, just once for lunch with Steve because he’s holed himself up to study for term finals. It’s easier than he had expected. Sam is casual and doesn’t push Bucky on anything, leads the conversation so it flows lightly and without pressure or expectation.

He talks to Nat. Not talks-talks, but they walk through Central Park together and he gives her vague, ingenuine explanations and she cries and so does he, and she tells him to never disappear again and he swallows and says he won’t. She and Peggy come to Steve’s for dinner a few times and the four of them chat like everything’s okay, like Bucky’s a part of this instead of this
worthless, pathetic person who can’t properly function.

Even Bucky forgets sometimes, and then some memory will slam him, reverberating through him and leaving him nauseous and disgusted with himself and scared and he feels so worthless he wants to tear his own skin off. Because no matter how long he plays house with Steve and lives in this fantasy that maybe Steve won’t want him to leave eventually, he knows from his core that he’s not meant for this kind of life and undeserving of it, disgusting and used and hollowed out from all the people who have touched him with cruelty and left him ghosted with the reminders.

(He hasn’t told Steve almost anything else. He knows that once Steve knows the things he’s had to do, the things people have done to him, the image of Bucky that he’s created will shatter and he’ll see the fractured, dirtied thing he’s become and he won’t want him in his house, won’t want to see him or touch him, and he dreads that more than anything else.)

Steve, for his part, loves Bucky so much that everything else seems to pale in comparison, unimportant and little in the face of his love for Bucky. As days go by and Bucky slowly, tentatively opens up, talking more and smiling more and making the occasional witty joke that Steve’s accustomed to from him, his love swells and wraps itself around him, leaving him breathless and infatuated and a little bit heartbroken. Because even if Bucky’s not as silent and timid as he’d been the night Steve picked him up, he’s not better, not really, not when he still startles and flinches at sudden contact and still doesn’t know that it’s okay to ask for things and doesn’t eat enough and shrinks in on himself almost permanently.

And there are nightmares. It happens twice more, and now that they’re sleeping in the same room Steve is able to catch it. The first time, Bucky starts mumbling frantically and then, clearly, whimpers “No don’t please don’t please please please,” and Steve doesn’t have time to unpack the horror of that sentence because he shakes him awake instead.

“Buck, hey, it’s me, it’s Steve, you’re okay, you’re safe,” he whispers, and helps him sit up, and Bucky doesn’t push him off that time but leans into his arms, trembling uncontrollably, and neither of them say a word but Steve holds him close until he falls back asleep, then gently pushes his hair from his face and shifts the pillow underneath him and then goes into the gym and bloodies his knuckles with the punching bag.

The second time is different. Steve wakes up to Bucky crying, awake and sitting up and it startles him. He isn’t sobbing hysterically or convulsing, just quiet little hiccups that he’s trying desperately to silence, his face buried in his hand.

“Buck, hey, it’s Steve, you’re okay, you’re safe,” he whispers, and helps him sit up, and Bucky doesn’t push him off that time but leans into his arms, trembling uncontrollably, and neither of them say a word but Steve holds him close until he falls back asleep, then gently pushes his hair from his face and shifts the pillow underneath him and then goes into the gym and bloodies his knuckles with the punching bag.

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“Buck?“ Steve whispers, and Bucky turns towards him with a jump, his eyes wildly afraid. “Hey, Bucky, you okay?“ Stupid fucking question, he scolds himself, especially when Bucky nods frantically.

“Y-yeah, I’m—I’m sorry, I didn’t—didn’t wanna wake you up,” he chokes out, and Steve pushes himself out of bed and sits next to him.

“Don’t be sorry,” he says, “you um- you don’t have to tell me what’s wrong. Obviously- obviously you can but- but if you don’t want to just let me stay with you so you aren’t alone and sad.” Bucky swallows tearfully and nods, and it surprises Steve when he reaches for his hand and squeezes it tightly, locking their fingers together.

Steve squeezes back, and moves closer to him, and when Bucky drops his head onto Steve’s shoulder relief and heartbreak jolt through him.

“You’re okay,” Steve murmurs, because Bucky is still choking out weak sobs, trying with olympic
effort to keep them in, “it’s okay, I’m right here, I’ll stay here with you. It’s gonna be okay, Buck.” He drops Bucky’s hand to wrap an arm around him, rubbing his back gently.

Bucky’s sobs subside into smaller sniffles after a few minutes and finally he stops crying but he’s still leaning against Steve, so Steve keeps rubbing his back. “You must think I’m so pathetic,” Bucky says hoarsely, after several moments of silence. Steve inhales sharply, tensing a little.

“I don’t think that at all, Buck,” Steve says firmly.

“I do,” Bucky whispers bitterly, and Steve can feel him trembling. “I’m sorry—I’m sorry I’m so tiring—”

“Don’t say that,” Steve whispers, gentle but firm, “you’re not tiring.”

“Right,” Bucky chokes out. Steve sighs, keeps rubbing his shoulder.

“You being here is the best thing that’s happened to me in months, Bucky,” Steve murmurs, and every logical bone in his body is screaming for him to stop but he needs Bucky to know that he matters. “You’re not tiring, okay? You’re hurting, and you aren’t alone ever, because I’m gonna be here for you. That’s what I want, to be able to take care of you.” Shut UP Steve snaps to himself, before you say you love him.

Bucky stays very, very quiet. “Okay,” he whispers after what feels like a lifetime, and Steve inhales deeply, relieved.

A few more minutes of silence stretch by, and Steve makes no move to leave him since Bucky seems to be calming down and he certainly isn’t pushing him, not wanting to rock the boat. Bucky takes a shaky breath eventually, not moving from where he’s pressed against Steve’s side.

“There’ve—” Bucky gasps, like the words grate against his throat, “there’ve been some—some people who—” he pauses with a thick gulp—Steve can feel how hard he’s shaking, how desperately he’s trying to control his voice, “there’ve been some people who hurt me,” Bucky spits out after a moment, his chest heaving with the effort of it. “And—and—and sometimes I get, like, dreams about it.” Steve feels him tense and brace against him, and he swallows hard to control his own reaction.

It’s not even a surprise, but hearing Bucky acknowledging it, hearing how small and scared and broken his voice becomes slams him, leaves him frozen. Fuck. Hot, sudden, violent anger flashes in the forefront of his mind, followed by fierce protectiveness and then sadness, deeper heartbreak than he’s felt in a long time, a mix of emotions that leave him without air and scrambling for what to say. 

Tell me what they did to you, Steve wants to plead, even though he can guess. Tell me how often, and who it was, and where I can find them and rip their limbs off. He doesn’t say any of those things- Steve bites back the nausea that rises in his throat and takes a deep breath. React later, support Bucky right now.

“I’m so sorry, Bucky,” he says softly, “you know- you know you didn’t deserve that, right?” Bucky shrugs, noncommittal and silent, shutting down the conversation. “You don’t have to—to tell me more,” Steve continues, pushing back the worry and anger and fear from his voice, “but—but Bucky I’m here, okay? I’m here for you and I’m not gonna leave and you’re safe here, okay?” It comes out jumbled and frantic and ineloquent and Steve feels utterly deflated.

Bucky says nothing; he pulls closer to him and buries his face in Steve’s shoulder. “Okay,” he
whispers finally in a quiet, quiet voice, and Steve could cry with relief.

Neither of them want to pull away, so they fall asleep like that.

On Thanksgiving, it’s been about three weeks since Bucky’s been staying with him, and they order Chinese food and spread out a picnic blanket in the living room and open a bottle of champagne. Both of them had forgotten it was coming up until Steve saw a reminder for the Macy’s parade and checked his calendar. He hadn’t celebrated for three years and when he asked Bucky what he usually did, he’d blanched and then raised an eyebrow.

“Go home and see my parents and give them big hugs and we all cut a turkey and talk about why we’re thankful for each other,” Bucky said dryly, and Steve snorted.

“Wanna do something this year?” Steve asked, and Bucky shrugged and said yes and then it rolled around and neither of them knew how to start a full Thanksgiving meal.

It ends up being perfect, though, and they sit with their shoulders touching looking out the windows over frost-covered Central Park, flutes of champagne in both their hands.

“Hey Steve?” Bucky says, and Steve glances over, their faces almost touching.

“Hm?”

“I’m thankful for you this year,” he tells him cheekily, and raises his glass, and Steve smiles and mimics it, touching the cups lightly and letting the sound ring softly through the room.

“I’m thankful for you too,” he says with a laugh, and Bucky smiles, warm, and Steve wants to kiss him so badly that he has to bite his own lip to stop himself.

The thing is, he thinks Bucky might love him back, can tell from the lingering touches and the glorious warmth in his smile and the shared glances that there’s something there. They’d been in love for years and years, after all, and Steve’s not an idiot, he knows those things don’t just vanish.

But Bucky has a world of trauma that Steve still knows nothing about, and Steve refuses to make the assumption that he’s ready for a relationship. Not after everything, not until he trusts Steve enough to tell him what’s happened, not if there’s any chance at all that Steve would be forcing it on him. If it happens, it has to come from Bucky, and that’s what Steve tells himself every time longing pulses through him.

Chapter End Notes

leave a comment and i’ll be very very happy ;)

hmu on tumblr at cafelesbian see you all in about a week xx
The first day of December, Steve bursts in from a morning run while Bucky is just getting up. “Hey,” he says, and grins warmly, “do you wanna go see Book of Mormon on broadway tonight? Stark just offered me his tickets, something came up for him.”

Bucky looks up. “Sure,” he answers with a smile, “that sounds fun.”

He’s been staying with Steve almost a month and Bucky is grappling with the trust and hope that’s blooming in his chest, unrestrained and both welcome and terrifying. He’s so in love with Steve it hurts and at this point he’s given up trying to push it down, instead balancing it with the knowledge that there’s no way Steve feels the same which isn’t hard; the longer he stays with Steve and lets himself feel secure and safe, the harsher his own endless internal monologue becomes: you’re worthless you don’t deserve him he feels sorry for you and that’s why he’s letting you stay here you stupid slut all you’re good for is sex and that’s why you let people use you the way they do and if Steve knew the things you’ve done if Steve knew how filthy and used and damaged you are he’d see it too. It wraps itself around him, it keeps him up at night, white noise in his head in the backdrop of all the other awful, horrifying images that play over and over in his head when he can’t sleep.

Bucky almost tells him sometimes, almost whispers to Steve the things that have happened to him. He comes close but then his throat swells shut with the shame and horror of it and the white noise picks up again, reminding him he’s some stupid whore you deserved it you know that’s what you get for sucking dick for a living and so he doesn’t. People have hurt me, he told Steve, but in the light of day he’d stared at his thin, tired, sad face and thought that he wasn’t even justified in saying that. People hurt him, but he was the one who put himself in those situations, he was the one who was pathetic enough that he couldn’t stop people from taking whatever they wanted from him. It’s his fault that people didn’t listen, and if he told Steve about the times guys had done things to him without his permission, he’s sure that Steve would see that too and want him gone, want him out of the beautiful, uncomplicated life he’d made for himself that had no room for Bucky’s mountains of emotional baggage. Let alone ever love him, not when he’s been reduced to this hollowed out, exhausted person who other people have taken turns with so many times that he can’t ever be what Steve deserves.

He shoves the terror and self disgust that follow him everywhere to the back of his mind and constantly begs the universe not to let Steve find out the truth about him.

And so far it’s worked, and so that evening they go to the show together and leave laughing hysterically, breathless with joy. The crowd filters out shoving past each other, and it surprises Bucky when Steve grabs his hand, locks their fingers together so they don’t lose one another.

“Sorry,” Steve says a moment later, swallowing and dropping Bucky’s hand, “sorry I didn’t mean to—”
He doesn’t finish because Bucky slides his fingers back in between Steve’s, heart pounding in his throat, and Steve gives his hand a squeeze and for a few moments, Bucky feels perfectly grounded.

The next day when they go out grocery shopping, Steve brushes his fingers against Bucky’s, waiting, asking for permission. Bucky bites his lip, cheeks warm, and locks their hands together again, and that’s the beginning of that.

***

“You’re holding hands?” Sam asks Steve incredulously, later that week while they’re on a run. Steve shrugs.

“Yeah.”

“And you aren’t dating,” Sam confirms, eyebrows raised. “I mean, are you just, like, completely oblivious, man?”

Steve sighs, runs his hand tiredly his hair. “It’s not like we aren’t—it’s not like we don’t have feelings for each other. Or at least”—he sucks in a self conscious breath of air, frustrated. “—at least I have feelings for him.” Sam watches him for a moment, and just as Steve is trying to decide what to say next, cuts in.

“But you don’t want to accidentally push him into something he doesn’t want.” Sam frowns. “I mean yeah, that’s the right call. I’m not sure the acting-like-a-couple without actually being a couple is gonna work for long to be completely honest, Steve.”

“What would you do?” Steve asks desperately. Sam grimaces.

“This is above my pay grade, dude.” A pause. “I do think he’s gotta see someone though. As soon as possible.”

Steve laughs bitterly. He can picture Bucky’s immediate rejection of the idea, opposition so intense it wouldn’t surprise him if he took off the minute anyone floated the idea. “You wanna suggest that to him?” Sam grimaces.

“Steve, I say this as your best friend with a lot of love, but you two are dysfunctional.” Sam slows his pace then steps in front of Steve, claps his hand on his shoulder. “Get your shit together, and talk about what’s going on between you. Let Bucky lead the conversation if you need to.”

“Four years of psychology school at work,” Steve grumbles, and breaks into a jog again.

“You know I’m right!” Sam calls, and Steve ignores him pointedly.

***

Bucky gets sick the next week. Steve notices when he wakes up, cheeks flushed unnaturally and a thin layer of sweat breaking over his forehead.

“You feelin’ okay, Buck?” Steve asks, concerned.

“Yeah, fine,” Bucky rasps. Steve frowns and touches his forehead, guilt rising in his chest when Bucky winces as he raises his hand.

"S-sorry,” he says, “sorry, I just want to check.” Bucky swallows and nods and Steve feels his skin, burning with fever. “Jesus, Buck, you’re burning up.”
“It’s fine, Steve,” Bucky says with an eye roll. Pursing his lips, Steve shakes his head.

“Bucky, you look like hell.” Steve tells him, “lie down, I’ll make you some tea and orange juice and stuff to eat. I’m just working here today so it’s not problem.”

Bucky sighs, and he almost protests but he’s aching all over and his throat is burning so he nods, grateful. “Thanks, mom,” he mutters, and Steve grins.

Bucky’s glad for Steve though, because an hour later he’s lying in bed half conscious and shivering with a piercing headache and he’s relieved to not be alone. He mostly sleeps, wakes up when Steve brings him toast and aspirin and asks five, six times if he’s sure he’s okay and if there’s anything else he needs.

“You know I’m a grown ass man,” Bucky mumbles, when Steve checks on him for the fourth time or so. “I can take care of myself when I’m sick.”

“Yeah, Buck, but you don’t have to,” Steve tells him, and Bucky passes out for another couple hours.

He’s basically house ridden for the next three days, alternating between sleeping on the couch and bed throughout the day. Steve makes him soup and tea despite feeble arguments that he doesn’t need it and they watch a couple more movies (the first two Terminators. They’ve decided to watch every single good apocalypse and sci fi movie ever made). Steve takes care of him and Bucky lets him, because he’s too tired to argue and because god, it feels nice to be cared for.

The fever has almost broken by the third night, and Bucky’s aslee in the guest room and he’s dreaming but it’s real and it’s awful.

Brock Rumlow’s apartment. A guy he’s blown a couple of times in alleyways and who’s fucked him in his car but he hasn’t gone home with him, and Bucky knows better than to let guys pull him back to their house but he really needs the money.

“In here.” Rumlow grabs his hips roughly and pulls him towards the bedroom and Bucky’s stomach lurches but he goes with him.


“What uh—” Bucky swallows again, takes a breath, forces a smirk. “—what do you want me to do?”

Rumlow doesn’t answer; Bucky watches as he searches through his drawer, and when he emerges holding cuffs and a belt and a small black piece of fabric, loud, frantic warning bells go off in Bucky’s head.

“Hey, um I—I don’t—I don’t do that,” Bucky says carefully, his mouth dry. Brock lets out something between a laugh and a snarl and steps towards him.

“You do what I fucking tell you, I’m the one paying.”

Bucky swallows. “No I really—why don’t you just fuck me instead?” His voice wavers with desperation. Brock laughs, pitiless.

“Don’t worry, you desperate little slut, I will.”
“Please—” Bucky croaks out, voice cracking, and Brock hits him across the face so hard stars explode in his vision. He pulls his hair, jerking his head back, and stuffs the gag into his mouth, looks down with his expression caught between a sneer and a smirk at Bucky’s terrified, tear-streaked face.

“You’re gonna make me punish you, huh?”

Bucky wakes with a gasp, Steve’s hands already gentle on his back and his shoulders, helping him sit up. “It’s okay, you’re okay, it’s just a bad dream,” Steve is saying, his voice soft and lulling, and Bucky shivers and closes his eyes. “You okay, Buck?”

Shaken, Bucky nods mutely. His eyes are screwed shut in an effort not to cry, the sob swelling in his throat threatening to betray him. Steve is so careful next to him, his hands light and gentle, and he puts an arm slowly around Bucky. Silent, Bucky leans into him to let him know it’s okay.

“Would you stay?” Bucky whispers, once he has enough control over his voice. He feels Steve exhale.

“Of course.” Steve doesn’t move.

“You can—you can lie down if you want,” Bucky tells him, swallowing. He feels Steve shift slightly, his arms still strong around Bucky’s shoulders.

“Oh okay,” Steve says quietly, and he lays next to Bucky with several inches between them. Bucky swallows; he’s still shaking, trying to get control over it. Steve reaches excruciatingly slowly to run a hand down his arm.

“You gonna be able to sleep?” Steve asks gently. Bucky shrugs and then sighs, turning onto his back to stare at the ceiling, eyes glassy.

“Probably not,” he admits after a few moments.

“Wanna watch TV?” Steve asks, a half smile playing on his lips. Bucky turns back onto his side and laughs, a quiet, nervous sound.

“Sure.”

Steve reaches for the remote on the bedside table and clicks the TV on. A quick scroll through channels gives them Titanic, just beginning on AMC, and with a grin Steve settles on that, smirking at the way Bucky perks up next to him.

(It had been one of their favorites in high school, and even though neither of them mention that it stays in the back of their consciousness the whole time).

He’s not thinking about it, but after a few minutes Bucky leans absently against Steve, head resting lightly against his chest when Steve puts a tentative arm back around him. When he drifts into sleep Jack and Rose are spinning around the stewage party and Steve is gently running his fingers up and down his shoulder, and he feels calmer than he has in a while.

***

Bucky’s fever is gone the next evening, so they walk out to a ramen restaurant. It’s dark by the time they head home, walking past the alleyway that Steve had met Bucky in, and a few other people hover there. It’s not especially unusual—Steve has passed plenty of homeless people and addicts and prostitutes there—but one figure steps out, blocking their path, and Steve tenses.
“Holy shit, it’s you,” the man says to Bucky. He’s drunk, still holding an empty can of beer, his eyes narrowed into mocking slits. “I thought I spotted you there, baby. Where’ve you been? I was looking for you the other day.”

Steve turns quickly to Bucky and fear churns in his stomach; Bucky’s face has gone sheet white, his eyes wide and terrified, making himself smaller. Steve steps in front of him.

“Alright, man, get lost,” he says, his voice calm but low and threatening. The guy looks at him, eyes narrowed, then sneers over his shoulder at Bucky.

“How much is this guy paying you? I’ll double it, princess.”

Behind him, Bucky whimpers softly, something that sounds like no. Steve’s vision shudders with violence.

“Get out of here,” Steve snarls, with a viciousness that rarely claws its way into his voice. When the man doesn’t move, Steve shoves him against the wall. His neck snaps back—he drops the beer can and pushes against Steve.

“Jesus Christ, fuckin’ psycho! I’m going, he’s not worth it anyway.” The man casts a final glower at Bucky before wrestling himself out of Steve’s grip and staggering away.

Steve swings around to gage Bucky’s reaction and his heart jumps into his throat. Bucky is half doubled over, his hand clamped over his mouth like he’s trying to stifle a scream. Steve reaches towards him before his knees can buckle, and he collapses against his side, shaking almost hysterically.

“Bucky, it’s okay.” Steve whispers, pushing the panic out of his voice, “Bucky, we’re almost home, okay? Just lean against me, you’re okay, you’re safe.” Bucky doesn’t respond, near paralyzed with fear. “Buck,” Steve says, his voice gentle and shaking, “it’s me, it’s Steve, and I’m here and you’re okay, yeah?”

Bucky gasps, manages a nod. His eyes are screwed shut, every muscle coiled tight with terror, and horrified heartbreak rushes through Steve in a chill.

“We’re gonna get home,” Steve repeats, and when his voice comes out breathless and trapped it surprises him how close to tears he is. “Come on, love, you’re doing so good.”

Steve curls a tentative arm around Bucky’s shoulders, and with gentle pressure manages to lead him down the block and into his buildings. It feels terribly familiar to that first night, Steve frozen with his own disbelief at how broken Bucky appears and Bucky blank and unresponsive and trembling. Steve gets a real look at his face once they’re in the elevator, and he has to bite back a gasp. Bucky’s eyes are red and tear filled but he’s silent, not sobbing or even hiccuping breathlessly. He stares blankly ahead, his face hollow and bleak and devastated all at once. It’s as if he’s come unraveled—he’s both holding himself up with tremendous strength and shattering right in front of Steve, his body withholding, diminished.

Steve remembers Sam telling him once about dissociation, that sometimes when anxiety or trauma becomes too much a person can check out, retreating into the parts of their mind that are impermeable. Steve wonders vaguely if that’s what he’s witnessing.

“Bucky,” he mumbles, his voice anguished. Buck seems to suddenly snap out of it, his eyes lifting to meet Steve’s and he crumbles again, leaning against the wall.

“I’m sorry, Steve, I didn’t mean to—” Bucky is sobbing, tripping over the words, and Steve seizes
up in confusion and worry again.

“Buck—what—” The elevator doors drag open and Steve places a hand gently on his back to coax him into the apartment and he can’t tell if Bucky registers the touch.

“Do you want me to go?” Bucky chokes out. It takes several seconds for the question to sink in; Steve stares at him, astonished, chewing over the words to try to make sense of them.

“What?” he responds blankly. “I—go? No—no, Bucky why would—why would I want you to go?” he stutters out in confusion. It occurs to Steve finally that Bucky’s in the throws of a severe panic attack, so intensely trapped in his head that it impresses him that Bucky is still standing, and he manages to steer him towards the couch and get him to sit.

When they’d been kids, he had seen Bucky work himself into anxiety attacks, going too long without sleeping to study or panicking about how his family would afford their rent or turning up at Steve’s doors in tears because his dad had staggered home, drunk and in an irrational rage. It had been easier then; Bucky usually would have thrown himself into Steve’s arms and Steve had known to stay with him, holding onto him so tightly the lines between their bodies would blur, and that would usually be enough to calm him down. Right now, though, Bucky is practically recoiling from Steve’s hand and he’s not about to put his arms around him, so Steve gets him a glass of water and sits beside him, relief washing over him when Bucky takes the glass with trembling hands and drinks it.

“Buck,” Steve finally murmurs, his voice careful, “why would I ask you to leave?”

For a moment, he’s afraid Bucky might start crying again. Slowly, Bucky reaches out and sets the glass down on Steve’s coffee table, shuts his eyes. He takes a shaky breath and runs his hand over his face, and he looks so young and so tired.

“Now you’ve seen, right?” Bucky spits out bitterly. Steve blinks. “You’ve seen now that I’m just—that every day I—I let guys like that do whatever they fucking want with me. Why the fuck would you want someone like that around, Steve?” Tears spring again in Bucky’s eyes but he keeps his gaze lowered in an attempt to hide it.

Steve is utterly stunned, a wave of despair pulsing through him. “Bucky,” he says, so softly. When he doesn’t continue, Bucky looks up, his eyes glassy and scared.

“Bucky,” Steve whispers again, and shakes his head to snap himself out of it. Reeling as he grasps desperately for the right thing to say, Steve talks until he can’t stop. “Bucky, I—what you’ve had to do isn’t your fault—” He swallows. “I’m never gonna—gonna think less of you for something like that and I—” Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. “Buck, I know people hurt you,” he whispers, the words raking against his throat. “And you need to know that isn’t your fault if—if guys like that did something or—or hurt you, and I’m never gonna—” Another gasp. Steve feels Bucky’s fear and desperation deep in his stomach, an ache that spreads through his whole body and makes him so sad that it claws at his lungs. “You didn’t let them do—do things. If they did something to you then that’s on them.” His voice wavers with devastation and conviction, begging Bucky to believe him.

Reaching up to furiously brush away tears, Bucky exhales miserably. “I can’t understand why you keep me around,” Bucky says, and his voice is soaked in heartbreak and shame. “I don’t—I’m not worth shit, Steve.” He tries to bark out a laugh but it comes out more as a sob.

“You are so wonderful, Buck,” Steve says desperately. A rush of pain floods him at Bucky’s own warped sense of self, disgust written all over his face, and he wonders how he could possibly be so
wrong, how he could ever, ever see people hurting him and using him without his permission as a reflection on him, but he guesses that’s textbook trauma. It’s just unfair, so fucking heartwrenching and infuriating that someone could do this to him, tear him apart like that and leave him with nothing poisoned memories and a world of self blame, self hatred.

Steve blinks back tears, continuing in a rush, “Bucky, you’re so strong and good and incredible, and I—” A sharp inhale. “—I hate that anyone could make you think you’re not, I hate so much that people hurt you because you—you never, ever, ever fucking deserved that.” His voice rises, firm and intense and barely controlled, and Bucky is staring at him through skeptical, teary green eyes. “And none of it is your fault, and none of it is ever gonna make me stop loving you or think less of you.”

The words are out before Steve can even process it, and sudden panic jolts through him as he realizes what he’s done. He was being stupid and selfish and honest, the slew of beautiful truths he’s trying to convince Bucky of having swept up his own useless, unconditional love, and it had felt so natural and so intensely real that he hadn’t been mincing his words carefully enough to catch it. His consciousness is a sudden blur of No no no you idiot what did you do that’s gonna scare him, and Steve retracts with worry, but when he looks back at Bucky he doesn’t appear to have registered the weight of what Steve has just done, or at least doesn’t seem disturbed by it. He slumps against Steve’s side with a shudder, his shoulders shaking again with sobs, and Steve wraps a tentative arm around his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky whispers again, in between hiccups. Steve swallows.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for,” Steve murmurs, so sadly. Bucky shrugs, pulling away from him again.

“’M gonna wash up,” Bucky mumbles. Steve nods as Bucky stands, bleary and exhausted, and then disappears into the bathroom.

For a few reckless moments, Steve seriously considers heading back out and finding that guy and breaking his fucking nose.

Instead, he places his head in his palms and sobs quietly for Bucky, for what he’s been through and what he’s lost.

***

Bucky turns the water on in a sudden haze, checked out and lethargic, his eyes glassy and the air thick as he undresses and steps into too-hot water.

Jack Rollins. The name echoes hollowly in his head, ugly memories erupting in sharp images in his brain. Steve doesn’t know yet, not that Rollins falls high on the list of the worst people Bucky’s encountered, responsible for the trail of bruises Bucky had had when he first arrived at Steve’s and others that Steve hadn’t seen. I decide when you’re fucking done, Bucky hears him say, feels the burn of alcohol down his throat. Rollins had always liked that, tipping his head back and pouring it down for him, getting him drunk enough that he wouldn’t fight back, wouldn’t say no. Not that it mattered to him anyway.

“Fuck!” Bucky whispers out loud at the memory, and slams his fist down onto the wall in sudden, explosive, desperate rage and grief. He feels suddenly and intensely dirty and he wishes he could rip his skin off to stop feeling Rollins’ hands, and he rakes his nails against his neck and stomach like he can scrape the feeling of it off of him. Bucky realizes he’s shaking violently again and gasps sharply, breathing in the steam. Slowly, he straightens up from where he’s curled in on
himself and takes another deep, uneven breath.

By the time he’s rubbed his skin raw with bodywash, breathing in the scent and feeling of being clean like it’s some kind of drug, Bucky feels like he’s gained enough control over himself to face Steve again. He dries off in a soft towel and pulls on pajamas and steps into the hallway.

Marginally calmer, Bucky comes back into the living room to find Steve sitting in the same spot, sitting up alertly when he comes in. Bucky gives him a broken smile that Steve tries return.

“Steve?” Bucky says quietly. He bites his lip; Steve can see him swallowing back tears, and he sighs shakily. “You’re a really good person.” He doesn’t know how else to put it, even though it doesn’t even come close to the truth. Understatement of Bucky’s life. Steve is the best person who’s ever existed, he’s pretty sure. It feels unimaginable to him that someone could look at Bucky and the way he’s let people treat him and not take off in disgust, but Steve has.

He’ll never, ever get it, but gratitude sits heavily in his stomach.

Steve blinks, then gives him another soft smile. “Takes one to know one, Buck,” he replies.

Bucky gives him a small, soft smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, his brain immediately rejecting the sentiment, and lies down on their sprawling mountain of cushions and comforters, his back to Steve.

For his part, Steve swallows, feeling horribly unhelpful, and leaves to take a shower. When he comes back Bucky is either asleep or pretending to be, his shoulders still tense and guarded, and Steve wants to reach out to rub his back but decides against it.

He lies down on the other side of the floor with a few feet between them and stares at Bucky’s back, wishing he knew what to do.

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Forever preparing for the worst, Bucky wakes up utterly convinced Steve is going to want him gone. It’s stopped snowing and he’s long overstayed his welcome and now Steve has seen exactly what he does, exactly how much he lets himself be degraded and pushed around and does absolutely nothing about it.

His panic intensifies when he looks around to see Steve isn’t there. Steve had gotten rid of Rollins because he was *good*, because he felt bad about leaving Bucky there, defenseless and helpless as he is, but now he’s fine and Steve doesn’t want to fight his battles. Of course he won’t want to see him, of course he’s tired of how fucking fragile Bucky’s become, disgusted by what he does. Bucky doesn’t blame him. He’d leave himself too, in a heartbeat, much quicker than Steve has with his stubbornness and patience and refusal to see Bucky as he really is until he couldn’t ignore the glaring truth of it anymore.

Bucky pulls his knees to his chest and rests his forehead against them. He feels hollow and small, ashamed of the problems he’s dragged into Steve’s life and achingly empty at what he’s going to lose and stupid for ever letting himself think he could fit into this life with Steve, stupid for thinking he deserved it.

“Bucky?” Steve’s voice, tentative and patient. Bucky snaps his head up. Steve is standing beside the kitchen island in a tank top and sweats, forehead actually glistening with perspiration, just out of the gym. “You okay?”

“Seriously?” Bucky says, disbelief creeping into his voice. “Seriously, Steve, I ruined your night
and almost got you into a fistfight and you’re worried about my feelings?”

Steve blinks. “Of course,” he says, a little surprised. Bucky feels suddenly and tremendously stupid for jumping to conclusions, but it’s a small tug under the overwhelming relief that Steve isn’t kicking him out.

“Hey,” Steve says gently, and Bucky realizes he’s spiraling into his head again, ugly thoughts swallowing him. He sits up and blinks.

“Sorry,” he says automatically. “Just—sorry. I’m good now.”

“Are you sure?” As Steve watches him carefully, Bucky stands and meets him at the counter.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and bites his lip. “I mean—last night—I didn’t mean to freak out, it just startled me and—”

“Buck. You don’t need to apologize for that.” Steve smiles sadly, raising his hand to Bucky’s shoulder and hesitating for permission. Bucky nods, and Steve gives him a soft squeeze. “Do you wanna talk about—”

“No,” Bucky cuts in sharply, and then sighs. “Sorry I didn’t mean—he’s just an asshole.” Bucky swallows the bitterness that rises with the words and Steve relents, understanding. “I can’t believe you almost got yourself beat up,” Bucky adds, his tone light and a little forced.

“Old habits die hard,” Steve jokes, and Bucky laughs, really laughs.

“Remember when you fought that guy on your soccer team for calling us fags?” Bucky says, a genuine smile splitting across his face. Steve laughs and nods, an almost fond look in his eyes.

“Gilmore Hodge,” he says, shaking his head at the memory. “I got him pretty good, though.” Bucky snorts. “I remember I covered your whole face in ice packs and it was still swollen for a week,” he points out, and Steve grins sheepishly.

“Never said anything again though, did he?” Steve smirks, and Bucky rolls his eyes. An uncomfortable weight settles then, the reliving of their relationship raw and painful and awkward, leaving them both feeling like they violated something.

But it jogs Bucky’s splintered memory of the night before, Steve’s voice sad and desperate, none of it is gonna make me stop loving you shocking Bucky into something between hope and panic.

“What?” Steve asks, worried, seeing Bucky’s face change. Bucky blinks a few times and stares at Steve’s kind, concerned face, trying to work out what he meant by that.

Bucky shakes his head quickly. “Nothing,” he says quietly, and perches himself on one of Steve’s stools at the counter. “Have you had breakfast?”

“No, I was gonna make eggs…” And so Bucky tucks the thought away to overthink in private, last night’s ache leaving him too drained to address it now.

Chapter End Notes
leave a comment if u wanna make me smile also it is a VERY good incentive to update faster ;)

come say hi on my tumblr cafelesbian see you all soon
six

Chapter Notes

hey hello excuse any typos i havent forced my friend to edit this one yet but please enjoy i think you will ;) usual warnings apply

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky’s discretion lasts about a day and a half, the words looping in his head. *None of it is gonna make me stop loving you,* he hears, over and over, and it’s a nice change from some of the things that usually replay in his brain but it’s wearing him down after only thirty six hours to not know what he meant, if he meant anything. Maybe he was just being nice, maybe he meant it platonically. Bucky mulls over it so many times the meanings all become entangled, and it keeps boiling down to the fact that Steve might still love him but that seems absurd.

It actually keeps him up that night, lying on the floor next to Steve, watching his eyelashes flutter delicately against his skin. He’s so beautiful that Bucky stares at him and actually thinks *how did the universe create him?*, his breath caught in astonishment at Steve.

*How did he ever love you?* Bucky’s brain says to him, mocking and vicious, *and how could you think he’d ever love you now?*

Bucky swallows and knows that it’s the truth. Even if somehow, Steve did still love him, he hadn’t even scratched the surface of Bucky’s disfunction, hadn’t seen what a colossal, glorious disaster he really was. He couldn’t hide it forever.

Well, maybe he could, provided they didn’t run into any more of Bucky’s psychotic ex patrons. He just didn’t want to lie to Steve. He’s still straddling the line of how much to share with him, of which is worse: the constant lying and burying of the awful truths of his last four years, or Steve’s inevitable repulsion when he finds out. Both options leave him feeling sick and hollowed out inside.

*Let’s say he does love you,* Bucky thinks, trying to rationalize, *even though he doesn’t.* That would open up the floodgates for another slew of problems that Bucky wouldn’t even begin to know how to address. Bucky swallows and tries to think if he *wants* a relationship, pretending for a minute that what he wants matters.

*I want to hold your hand and fall asleep close to you like this and be in your arms all the time and I even want to kiss you,* he thinks, *and I want there to never be another day I don’t see you.* It terrifies him to think like that. The future has been such an abstract concept for so long, so unsteady and unreliable and Bucky’s used to living day by day, second by second, trying not to have to sleep outside. He knows that at one point, forever with Steve had seemed like a given, can even remember how hopeful and exciting that had felt, but it’s hard to picture forever when he’s still convinced Steve is going to get sick of him and tell him to leave any time.

Still, when he closes his eyes and tries, really tries, to conjure up an image of a few years down the road, Steve is there.

He guesses that means he wants a relationship with Steve. It’s when his thoughts shift to sex that it
all comes to a screeching halt, his stomach lurching. If Steve loved him, if they were in a relationship, wouldn’t that have to mean sex? That’s the expectation, that’s literally the only thing Bucky would have to give him, and the thought brings a flood of anxiety, freezing him up.

Bucky swallows and turns over, shutting his eyes tightly.

But he wakes up the next morning still wondering what Steve had meant. And Steve has a meeting for a potential new huge project, so Bucky has all day to think about it.

He gets groceries, a little annoyed that Steve had insisted on leaving one of his credit cards but deciding to use it on something that at least he knows Steve needs, and then he gets lunch with Natasha.

He loves being around Nat- she’s all confident laughter and easy conversation and immediate comfort, and it gives him a sad little reminder of how much he’s missed over the last few years. She meets him at a cafe near Columbus Circle and for a few minutes they catch up politely about their week, until Nat frowns and gives him a pointed look.

“You good, Barnes?” she asks, her tone light.

“Yeah,” Bucky tries to reassure her, “just… just thinking.”

“Care to elaborate?” Nat stabs her salad and raises her eyebrows, good naturedly pressing. Bucky debates whether or not to confide in her- if there’s anyone he can ask about Steve, it’s Nat, but on the other hand, explaining the whole context of the night to her and asking her for relationship help feels too pathetic, so he shrugs.

“Nothing specific, just… I don’t know, boring stuff,” Bucky answers lamely. Natasha casts him a long look, then bites her lip.

“You know you can talk to me, Bucky,” she says, with uncharacteristic softness, “like, anytime, about anything?”

Sure, Bucky thinks, but he feels a rush of love for Natasha. “Thanks, Nat,” he says softly, and squeezes her shoulder, and she smiles warmly.

Still, when Bucky gets home he feels weighed down by familiar and irrational dread and anxiety, and he steps onto Steve’s balcony for a gasp of air, pulling on a sweater as he does. Bucky’s been standing, leaning against the wall and staring stoically out at Central Park for a few minutes when he hears Steve come in.

“Buck?”

“I’m out here!” Bucky calls, and a few moments later Steve joins him.


“Don’t suppose you could put on a sweater,” he quips with a half smile, and Steve nudges him in mock irritation. “How’d it go?”

“Good.” Steve smiles, satisfaction glinting behind his eyes. “They want me do some paintings for the Game of Thrones set.”

“Hey!” Bucky laughs, genuinely excited. “Steve! That’s so fuckin’ great, congrats!” Steve grins, runs a hand through his hair.
“Thanks,” he says, with rare pride in his voice. It makes Bucky so happy to see—Steve’s worked so incredibly hard for so long, and there’s no better person who could have this success. Pride and delight swells in Bucky’s chest, and he admires Steve for a moment, taking in his happiness.

It’s fleeting, as it occurs to Bucky that there’s no room for him in this beautiful, impressive life he’s built. Bucky’s eyes drop and he takes in a nervous breath of air, feeling suddenly and horribly out of place.

“You okay?” Steve says, concern lacing his voice as he sees Bucky’s face fall. Bucky sighs, turns his eyes back up to Steve.

Fuck it, Bucky thinks, and before he can overthink, blurts out “What did you mean when you said you still loved me?”

As impulsive statements often go, hot regret slams him as he anticipates Steve’s response. Bucky waits for him to laugh or recoil or worse, kind stuttering to avoid hurting his feelings. Instinctually, he braces himself physically, but catches it before he can flinch.

Oh god you fucked up he didn’t want you out before but he will now—

Steve finally sighs, his eyes softening, the blue in them striking. “I meant what it sounded like,” he whispers. “Buck, I’ve always loved you in every way you can love someone.”

Bucky stands, stunned into silence. “Oh,” he says, because his mind has gone fuzzy in confusion, and Steve immediately winces.

“I don’t—I obviously—I hope it goes without saying that I don’t want—I mean, uh—I don’t expect you to—to change or do anything I just—” Steve’s cheeks are warm, his face anxious and a little guilty, and it finally sinks in. Steve loves him. Steve’s seen the mess he’s become and still says he loves him. It sparks a wildfire in Bucky’s heart, shock and love and glowing hope and thrill and fear all pulsing through him at once as he stares, lost for words, at the man he’s loved so much since he was a child who’s saying he loves him too. It feels so undeserved that Bucky almost wants to believe it’s a lie, but Steve’s face is clear and his voice is raw and real and some untarnished part of Bucky knows he’s telling the truth.

“I love you too, you know,” Bucky replies, laughing nervously. Steve’s eyes go wide, and Bucky can’t tell if it’s excitement or worry.

“Really?” Steve whispers, and Bucky snorts.

“Really.”

Steve takes a breath, his chest heaving with it. “Look, Buck, I really, really don’t want you to say it because you feel like you have to, okay? I wasn’t even- I didn’t wanna tell you because I never, ever want to pressure you—”


Steve stares at him with a breathless, beautiful smile. Bucky bites his lip and smiles back, love bursting in his chest, as light as air. He takes a step towards Steve. There are a few inches between them and Steve’s breath hitches as Bucky tilts his head up towards him.

“Buck—”

“Sh,” Bucky says.
“You don’t have to—”

“I know,” Bucky whispers. He places his hand, shaking slightly with anticipation, on the side of Steve’s face, and pushes himself onto his toes to close the gap between them.

It’s a kiss so light that they’re almost just brushing their lips together, but electricity erupts in the air around them, dizzying and perfectly overwhelming, so gentle that it sets off lights behind Bucky’s eyes. Steve places his trembling hands in the small of Bucky’s back, responding slowly like he’s scared he’ll hurt him. His skin, his stomach, his lips most of all, fizzle like a popped bottle of champagne, his mind a frantic haze of SteveSteveSteve, and Steve just pulls him impossibly close like he’s something precious and fragile.

Bucky pulls away with flushed cheeks to see Steve looking at him in awe, his face lifted and glowing with love. Bucky takes a deep breath, love filling his lungs and swelling inside him until he almost can’t bear it.

“Are you okay?” Steve asks, so softly.

Bucky nods, swallowing hard. “Yeah,” he says truthfully. He is—his mind feels a little haywire, thoughts fuzzy—it’s stirred more emotions than he can bear, nostalgia and love and joy clashing against the anxiety and resistance that feels heavy in his stomach. It’s more good than bad, he thinks. It’s just new, it’s this new and familiar feeling to associate with a kiss, warmth and care and tenderness, raking against the feelings he’s connected to kissing over the last few years, and he’s overwhelmed by all that hits him, an avalanche of every emotion in the book. Tears suddenly build and spring behind Bucky’s eyes, and Steve looks horrified.

“Oh, god, Buck, I’m so sorry—”

“No,” Bucky stops him, and he means it. “I’m not—I’m not crying because—” a hiccup, and he brushes away a tear, “—I just feel so much right now. It’s not you, Steve, it’s not even—I don’t feel bad, exactly”—Bucky grasps frantically for the words.

“Overwhelmed,” Steve suggests, and Bucky nods. Craving closeness, craving comfort, Bucky throws his arm tightly around Steve’s neck. Steve freezes, unsure.

“You can hug me back, punk,” Bucky whispers, and Steve wraps his arms so tightly around Bucky that he stumbles back a few steps.

“I love you so much,” Steve says, his voice thick with emotion, Bucky’s face still buried in his shoulder. “I love you, Buck, but I don’t—we don’t have to do that, if it makes you feel bad.”

Bucky sighs, closes his eyes. “Maybe not now,” he says timidly, and he feels Steve nod.

“Of course.” And when Bucky pulls away, Steve holds his hand and squeezes and Bucky feels a rush of clarity. Carefully, he lifts their intertwined hands up to Steve’s face, his knuckles brushing Steve’s lips. Steve watches him very carefully, and when Bucky gives him a small nod he kisses his fingers, kisses the back of his hand, and for maybe a half second Bucky feels less than disgusted with himself.

“You’re so perfect,” Steve says softly, and heat rushes to Bucky’s cheeks.

“Okay.” Bucky laughs, and Steve’s smile leaves him staring in wonder, and things feel briefly and completely okay.

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Things don’t change much, but there’s a shift. It upends the world and rewrites the colors of the sunset and sends shockwaves reverberating through everything Steve thought he knew, but in terms of actual, tangible changers, there’s very few.

It presents itself slowly over the next week, apparent in Steve and Bucky’s interactions. They never go further than a quick kiss on the mouth, and Steve always, always waits for Bucky to initiate anything, but there’s a tenderness and closeness and affection that they’ve swapped in for the former tentative politeness. Bucky sticks closer to him than before—he’ll lean against him during a movie and let Steve wrap his arms around him and pull him close, or peck a good morning kiss against his cheek, or they’ll fall asleep with their hands clasped, one laying on top of the other. They talk and laugh in the same ways but there’s something underneath it, some shameless flirting mixed with immeasurable warmth and love in the way they speak to one another, something that was maybe there before but Steve and Bucky had been looking past it.

It feels like coming home and like bursting into some foreign place all at once. It’s familiar and comfortable and safe and Steve can remember down to the molecules how wonderful it had been when they’d been naïve and in love, can feel himself rediscovering that joy that had been buried under years of pain. And, simultaneously, Steve feels like the world has exploded into all new colors, like when Bucky kissed him, a floodgate had burst, the empty caverns inside him had crumbled into dust and the space had just been Bucky and the quiver of his breath and the thrum of his fingertips and the steady brush of his lips.

But for every beautiful moment that takes his breath away, there’s a brutal, crushing reality check that reminds Steve there’s still something very wrong, underlying and unspoken and feeling like searing poison every time Steve sees evidence, written there all over Bucky every time there’s some trigger. Like when they’re on the subway, and some guy shoves inadvertently against Bucky and he seizes up, his fingers clawing unconsciously at Steve’s shirt and Steve has to remind him to breathe, and Steve can’t shake the nausea that comes from it for the rest of the day. Like Bucky, whimpering incoherently at night until Steve shakes him out of it, burying his face in Steve’s shoulder and not telling him what the dream was. Like the fact that they haven’t gone further than a quick, chaste kiss on the lips.

It’s why they haven’t talked about it, haven’t put a label on exactly what it is that’s going on between them. Steve guesses they’re dating, but he’s extremely aware of the things that two people who are dating would do that they are definitively not doing. The only one that bothers him is that Bucky still hasn’t told him what’s going on, not really. Steve only pushes him to talk once and it goes spectacularly wrong.

They’re both asleep, half slumped over on the couch having crashed in the middle of a movie. Bucky’s head is nestled into Steve’s neck and Steve’s face is half buried in Bucky’s hair, his arm still pulled protectively around his waist, and Steve wakes up with a start when Bucky starts mumbling, unaware and unconscious, against his shoulder.

“Don’t—don’t, no, no Alexander, please no, please don’t—”

“But,” Steve says, alarmed, and shakes him gently by the shoulder, “Bucky, wake up, it’s just a dream—”

Bucky snaps his head up from Steve’s shoulder, his eyes huge and terrified, and shoves Steve away. “Don’t fucking touch me!” he snarls, his arm raised in front of him, and Steve jumps off the couch, horrified.

“Bucky, it’s—it’s just me, alright, it’s Steve, we’re in the apartment, you’re okay,” Steve manages, his voice unsteady. Bucky considers him with scared eyes for a few moments then blinks.
“Steve,” he says hoarsely, and then slumps back, runs his hand down his face. “Fuck.” His voice cracking slightly, Bucky takes in a sharp, short breath and shrinks back.

“It’s okay, baby,” Steve says softly, and baby is new but it slips out before Steve can think about it, this loving term of comfort that he has called Bucky a million times but not since they’ve been back together. Bucky doesn’t flinch, though, so Steve relaxes. “Can I…?” He raises his hand carefully, and Bucky looks at him for a moment, then inhales sharply again.

“Just—just give me a second,” he whispers, and then “I’m sorry.” A wave of sickness hits Steve, his heart breaking as fast as it ever has.

“Don’t be sorry,” Steve says. “I’m gonna get you some water.” Bucky nods, so Steve hurries to the kitchen and fills a glass, hands it carefully to Bucky.

“Thank you,” Bucky whispers, and then moves over to make space for Steve. He sits with a few inches between them as Bucky downs the glass and sets it down, his hand shaking.

It’s Bucky who closes the space between them, moving so he can lean against Steve, looking intensely vulnerable. Steve swallows and puts an arm slowly around him, runs his hand gently through Bucky’s hair. They stay like that in silence for a few minutes, Steve forcing back horror and distress, and finally Steve forces himself to talk.

“Bucky?”

“Yeah?”

“Um—” He swallows thickly, “who’s Alexander?”

Bucky sits up so fast Steve actually jumps. His face is stricken, terrified. “What?” he snaps, his voice caught. Steve bites his lip.

“You, uh… you were saying some stuff and you… you said the name Alexander,” Steve keeps his voice as even as he can, studying Bucky’s face. He grits his teeth and looks up, blinking rapidly, then looks back to Steve.

“No one,” he says, his voice hard. “Forget it.”

“Bucky, you can tell me—”

“I said forget it, Steve!” Bucky yells, jumping to his feet. Steve startles, lifts his hands in a reflexive defense, his surprise replaced immediately with fear when Bucky stumbles back and then collapses to his knees, buries his face in his hand. Steve sits there stunned for a moment until he realizes Bucky is sobbing, whimpering incoherently.

“Bucky,” he says, panicked. Bucky looks up with a terrified face.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry I didn’t mean to yell at you I’ll be—I’ll do whatever you want, please don’t be mad—” Strangled gasps punctuate Bucky’s plea and Steve scrambles to kneel in front of him, lifts his own shaking hand to pull Bucky’s from his face.

“Look at me, Buck, breathe.” Steve says, his voice small. Bucky chokes out a sob and shakes his head, frozen in fear, and Steve swallows and shuts his eyes.

“I’m not mad, Bucky,” he whispers. It takes Bucky a few moments to look up, his eyes glassy, still worryingly reserved.
“But I yelled at you,” Bucky whispers, his voice on the verge of breaking. Steve swallows the
aching knowledge that this is an indicator of something much, much worse that someone, or more
than one person, had done to him for raising his voice and touches Bucky’s hand lightly, squeezes
it when he doesn’t pull away.

“You’re allowed to yell at me,” Steve tells him, rough heartbreak in his voice. “It’s—everyone
snaps sometimes, it isn’t a big deal.”

Bucky shakes his head like he’s disagreeing, his face still screwed in the effort not to cry. Steve has
to swallow a sob too. He can see Bucky just shattering, coming undone while he watches
helplessly, and Steve thinks vaguely that it’s so intensely wrong that something so precious should
look like this.

“Can I put my arms around you?”

Before Steve can, Bucky throws his arm around Steve’s neck, presses his face into Steve’s
shoulders, and Steve holds him so close while he cries and runs his hand up his back and whispers
“It’s okay, it’s okay, you’re okay, I love you,” and later, once exhaustion slams Bucky and he falls
asleep next to Steve, Steve stares at the ceiling and allows himself to cry, desperately and quietly.

***

The next morning, when they wake up next to each other, Bucky looks at him through troubled,
anxious eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, and presses a kiss into Steve’s neck, shuddering. It puts Steve on edge,
the way Bucky is apologizing and kissing him at the same time, like they’re part of each other, and
with horrible worry in his chest Steve stops him by sitting up and kissing his forehead gently.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Steve tells him, firm and loving. Bucky nods, closing his eyes but
relaxing, and leans against Steve’s shoulder and it all leaves Steve with a sense of dread about what
Bucky’s hiding worse than any he’s ever had.

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A couple of days later they walk through Central Park after breakfast, hands clasped, scarves and
hats pulled on tightly. There’s a thin layer of frost covering everything and the world feels still,
patient and calm as Bucky and Steve move through it together, undisrupted and untouchable.

Steve can’t take his eyes off of Bucky’s face, Bucky’s lips. He’s still replaying that first kiss over
and over again. Bucky’s eyes, determined and gentle, his hand soft against Steve’s cheek, pulling
him in. The curve of Bucky’s waist under his own hands, hesitant and grazing his shirt. The
electricity that pulsed through the air, its pressure soft around them, flooding Steve with a rush that
he had forgotten. The aching familiarity of Bucky’s lips and hands and hips, permanent as anything
in Steve’s memory, waiting to be undusted and rediscovered.

Steve wants to ask what exactly it is that they’re doing here, but he’s wary of pushing Bucky away
so he doesn’t.

It doesn’t stop him from staring, though, from casting Bucky looks of such unadulterated love that
he doubts it could be concealed even if he tried.

“Take a picture, Rogers, it’ll last longer,” Bucky finally teases, his tone light, and Steve laughs,
then drops Bucky’s hand and mimes photographing him. Bucky rolls his eyes good naturedly and
takes his hand again, and Steve thinks for what must be the billionth time that morning that he
loves Bucky more than he could ever possibly express, more than anyone could begin to understand.

They head into a coffee shop and buy lattes and scones and sit facing each other, tucked into a small table by the window. Bucky takes a long sip, his eyes trained expectantly on Steve, who holds his gaze as long as he can without smirking.

“What?” Steve asks him finally, half grinning. Bucky bites his lip and glances down then back up again.

“Are we gonna hash this out?” Bucky finally says bluntly, raising his eyebrows through another sip. Steve snorts.

“That’s how you wanna phrase it?” Steve replies, but he can’t conceal the overwhelming relief that Bucky wants to talk about it too.

“Yep,” Bucky says, casting Steve a smile that doesn’t quite mask his obvious anxiety. Steve leans back in his chair, bouncing his leg.

“So is this gonna be like a define the relationship kind of talk?” Steve doesn’t miss the way Bucky inhales sharply, dropping his gaze, but it’s short lived. With a resigned grimace, he lifts his eyes to meet Steve’s again.

“Better get it over with, right?” Bucky sighs. Steve bites his lip.

“If you really don’t want to—”

“No,” Bucky interrupts, scrubs his hand tiredly over his face. “No it isn’t that. It’s just like—I haven’t had this talk with anyone since you when we were kids.” Bucky looks down again, squares his jaw. “I don’t know what to do, Steve.” He swallows, making himself smaller and shrinking away from Steve. “I’m so fucked up I don’t know if it’s possible for me to be in—to be in a relationship.”

Pain stabs Steve sharply at the sentiment, and he reaches across the table to close the space between them, turning Bucky’s hand over and running his fingers lightly over his palm. “You’re not fucked up,” Steve whispers, and Bucky huffs out a humorless laugh. “You’re not, Buck.” Bucky turns his gaze back on Steve, doubtful and noncommittal.

“But—” Steve continues with a sharp breath, “but if you don’t want… anything between us, that’s—that’s obviously okay.” Bucky sighs and leans back in his chair, his fingers twitching to take Steve’s hand. “I’m not, like—I don’t expect—”

“Steve,” Bucky sighs with a tired smile, “It’s not—I don’t not want us to be, like, together. I mean, the last few days when we’ve been… kind of… couple-ish—” Steve laughs, and Bucky’s mouth twitches into smile, “—it’s made me—you make me feel really okay, in a way I haven’t really had in a while.”

“So do you,” Steve whispers, and a self conscious smile flickers over Bucky’s face.

“I don’t think I can be what you want,” Bucky whispers, his gaze falling. Steve inhales sadly.

“I just want you,” Steve says desperately, and Bucky cocks his head skeptically.
“You haven’t even seen the scope of my emotional baggage,” Bucky mutters, a sad resignation settling over his face. Steve swallows.

“You can show me,” he says, soft and hopeful. “I’m hardly a virgin to emotional baggage, Buck, it’s not like I’ve been doing so hot.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow. “I think we’ve got different ideas of baggage, Rogers,” he tells him. “My shit could scare you off pretty fucking fast.”

“Try me,” Steve replies without a moment of hesitation. Bucky bites his lip, and Steve knows without even having to think about it that Bucky isn’t going to be sharing anything in the middle of a restaurant. He also know that anything Bucky could possibly say wouldn’t be enough to scare him away. It’s over. Bucky is it, the most impossibly beautiful, startlingly exquisite creature in the world, perfect in every way a person can be in his eyes. Steve doesn’t know how he could have possibly forgotten the helpless, unconditional, stubborn love that burns in his chest every second, how it’s bigger and clearer than anything else. He stares at Bucky ten, twenty times a day and wonders how he ever had a life without him, how he had woken up every morning without his smell on the pillow next to him, without his fingers brushing sweetly against Steve’s arm, and then gotten up to face a world that fell flat, colorless and stale, without Bucky there to make it spark and explode and bleed into gorgeous vibrance. “There’s nothing in the whole world you could say that would make me wanna leave, Buck.” And then, recalling a phrase they’d exchanged when they were kids that Steve can’t believe he hadn’t said yet, he adds “end of the line, right?”

Bucky grins despite himself, shaking his head. “Jesus,” he says, laughing softly, and then squeezes Steve’s hand. Bucky takes another deep breath, working his jaw against crying. “I love you a lot, you know,” he says softly. Contentment and joy flood Steve, leaving him wordless.

“Likewise,” Steve replies with a smile. Bucky exhales through his teeth, eyes glittering, and Steve hates that, hates the permanent sadness that ghosts his eyes even when he’s smiling, wants to fix it through a million gentle touches and beautiful words and impossibly close embraces.

He knows better, though.

“What if—” Bucky begins, and his voice is small, “—what if I can’t—can’t tell you everything? At least—for a while?”

“That’s okay,” Steve answers, “I’m not gonna like, force you to talk.” He’d say anything, agree to anything for Bucky. Steve can tell he’s overwhelmed, so he squeezes his hand again. “You wanna walk?” he suggests, and Bucky nods. So Steve puts an arm gently around his shoulder, tosses out their empty cups. As they step out, Bucky hugs his arm around Steve’s waist and sighs.

“Steve—” he starts, his voice quivering, “—I’m kind of just a major fucking imposition on your life. I don’t get—” A gulp of air, a few quick blinks, “—I don’t get why you think I’m worth all this.”

And it doesn’t surprise him anymore, but the way Bucky talks about himself, impersonal and unforgiving, is a new wound in Steve’s heart every time he hears it. “Buck,” he says softly. “You’re not an imposition on my life, you are my life.”

Bucky huffs out a laugh. “Bit dramatic, don’t you think?” he jokes wearily, but Steve isn’t having it. He stops walking and turns to Bucky. “Can I…?” he asks, lifting his hand, and when Bucky nods he cups his face softly, thumbs his cheek. Bucky’s cheeks deepen in color and he looks away.

“No,” he says simply, “no. You’re the most important person in the world to me.” Bucky’s eyes
soften, his expression caught between disbelief and love and sadness. Pushing up in his toes, he kisses Steve very lightly, his eyelashes fluttering airily against his cheek.

He’s dreamlike, angelic in his beautiful tenderness.

“I’m scared,” Bucky admits softly, a moment after pulling away. Steve takes a shuddery breath. “Not of you,” Bucky adds with a half smirk. “Before you get into your noble, apologetic, way-too-polite shtick.”

“Fair enough,” Steve laughs.

“I love you,” Bucky continues, his words quickening as his anxiety builds. “I just—I’m not gonna ever be good enough for you, Steve. I know you’re gonna say it’s not true, but it is.” Hearing the matter-of-fact bitterness to his tone burns, poisonous and awful.

“Okay well—not to blow your mind…but it’s not true,” Steve answers unhelpfully. It gets a laugh out of Bucky. “You aren’t gonna convince me not to love you,” Steve says firmly. “Ever.”

“I’m pretty fucked up,” Bucky insists, “it isn’t gonna be the same as it was, Steve. I don’t wanna disappoint you.” His voice cracks, desperate and broken. Another shock of pain hits Steve.

“You couldn’t ever disappoint me,” Steve replies softly. “I don’t want some replication of how we were in high school. I just want you, and any… baggage that you might have. But also… if you don’t want to be together because it isn’t what you want, you can tell me to fuck off and I won’t argue.” Bucky snorts. “I just wanna make sure you know that you’re perfect to me. No matter what.”

“Love, Actually?” Bucky tries to joke.

“Buck,” Steve says seriously. Bucky bites his lip and leans against Steve, pulling his arm tighter around his waist.

“I know you’re not pressuring me,” Bucky tells him, his voice half muffled in Steve’s coat, “you only told me seven hundred times.”

“It’s important that you know.” Steve smiles, runs his hand down Bucky’s back.

“Okay,” Bucky says quietly, his face still buried in Steve’s shoulder. “Let’s try.”

“Really?” Steve says, pulling away to look at Bucky’s face, hope springing in him.

“It’s already what we’re doing, right? And I don’t—I don’t wanna stop.”

“Me neither.” Steve laughs incredulously and kisses his forehead, love glowing inside him and around him. “I love you so much, Bucky.”

Bucky hugs him, his arm tight around Steve’s neck, and for a few moments Steve can lose himself in the simplicity of the moment, can forget about the web of complications and pain and just breathe, memorize the feeling of loving Bucky and pretend it’s all that matters.
ok there might not be a chapter next week because i have an insane amount of things to do but if not next sunday then two weeks at the very latest xxx

come say hi on tumblr im cafelesbian u can message me about the fic or about your day or favorite tv show i love all of you

ALSO can i just say how overwhelmed i am by the comments you leave it truly makes my whole entire day i can't thank you guys enough i love them so so so much and they always make me want to sit down and write the rest of this so thanks my loves keep them coming i’ll see you all soon!
Chapter Notes

hi guys sorry for the long wait i have had MANY things happening in my life mostly good but it's been hard for me to find literally any time to write! anyway i really hope you like this one xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brooklyn, 2006

Steve is standing outside his best friend’s house, pizza box in hand and blood running down his lip. He rings Bucky’s doorbell and braces himself for the inevitable chiding that will come, Bucky’s permanent exasperation with him for the impulsivity with which Steve faces the world.

To be fair, it’s not like he’s some aggressive, angry teenager who picks fights for no reason. It’s just that it isn’t in Steve’s nature to see a situation and not get involved, and his involvements tend to end with a physical confrontation. Still, it’s been over a year since he last dragged himself to Bucky’s with a shiner and a bloody nose, so he’s hoping that might soften the blow.

It doesn’t. Bucky swings the door open with a grin that immediately dissipates when he takes in Steve- split lip, black eye, still wincing. “What the hell happened to you?” he demands, and drags Steve in by the arm.

“I brought pizza,” Steve offers lamely, and Bucky scoffs.

“I see.” He pauses and drops Steve’s arm, turning quickly to his fridge. “I also see that you look like Rocky. What did you do?”

“How do you know I did something?” Steve asks, offended, “What if I was just some innocent victim?”

Bucky snorts, turning back to him with an ice pack and a handful of paper towel. “Yeah, I’m sure you were just minding your own business and got mugged.” His exasperation softens when he all but shoves Steve into a chair and dabs the ice pack against his face, his hands careful and delicate, sending a chill running through Steve that has to do with more than the ice. “Hold the paper towel against your lip,” he instructs, and Steve does.

“What would I do if your mom didn’t teach you this?” Steve asks, with a grin that hurts his face, and Bucky rolls his eyes.

“What happened?” he grumbles. Steve sighs and pushes his hand gently away, the ice stinging.

“I was just on the train and this guy was yelling at some girl and then he started like, groping her, so I told him to fuck off.” Steve winces when Bucky presses the ice against his eye again, and Bucky shoots him a pointed, irritated look. “He started it,” Steve adds, “he pushed me first.”

“You’re a child,” Bucky informs him, and finally lifts the ice from Steve’s throbbing eye. “You’re gonna have to put that one back on later.”
“I didn’t hit him back,” Steve tells him, defensive, “he shoved me, then I shoved him, then he did that—” he gestures dramatically to his face, “-and I got off before I hit him back. You should be proud.”

Bucky shakes his head and bites back the amused smirk that tugs at his lips. “Look at you, making a responsible, non-impulsive decisions,” Bucky says brashly. Steve laughs.

“Pizza?” he suggests, changing the subject. Bucky rolls his eyes again, but gives him a reluctant smile.

“Yeah, but let’s go up to the roof, it’s nice out.”

Steve grabs the pizza and drinks and rubs his sore jaw. “I have zero sympathy for you, just so you know,” Bucky tells him, with a shake of his head that only the long-suffering can achieve, and Steve shrugs.

“Even though I bought you dinner?” he pouts.

“You’re an idiot,” Bucky says decidedly, for what must be the tenth time that week. “C’mon, punk, I’m starving.”

So Steve heads ladder the the roof, balancing the pizza box half under his chin and half propped on one of the rungs as he pushes the opening up. Early summer is settling softly over New York, casting Brooklyn in various tones of gold and orange that strike the sides of buildings in sharp, shimmery light, leaving a sensitive haze over the whole city, especially their quiet neighborhood. Steve smiles, the first whispers of warm weather leaving him with a calmness.

“Move, I’m holding on with one damn arm here,” Bucky calls from below, and Steve glares at him with mock annoyance before he hurries up.

“Need a hand?” Steve asks him, with a self satisfied grin.

“I actually hate you,” Bucky replies, but he laughs anyway and pulls himself up.

And the New York City skyline suddenly seems dull and underwhelming when Bucky smiles at him.

The thing about being in love with your best friend, Steve has learned, is that there’s no reprieve. He sees Bucky every day for most of the day—they take the subway to school and share classes and spend the afternoons holed up in each other’s rooms or in the park doing homework—so he’s never not thinking about that fact that he’s utterly and pathetically in love with his best friend. And God, it’s hard to ignore. When they’d been younger, Steve could pretend he wasn’t interested in guys because he’d never known about it—he had loved Bucky because Bucky was his best friend—nothing more, nothing underlying. It hadn’t even occurred to him until the end of middle school that it might be something else, and then the moment he’d thought about it, he was finished.

And yeah, maybe they were kids, just done with their first year of high school. But also, something in Steve knew, as simply as he knew anything, that Bucky was it. There was no one else like him, no possible best friend or potential crush or partner that could compare. It was just Bucky, and Steve loved him. It wasn’t complicated to him.

But it was to everyone else, which is why he has barely told anyone else. Sam and Natasha got it out of him a few weeks ago, and they have been sweet about it, but it isn’t enough. Never his parents, never Bucky.

The other thing about being in love with your best friend is it gives you a lot of time to imagine
how you could tell them. Steve has pictured a million different scenarios where he told him, sprung it casually or earnestly or even tearfully, but it always fell short. He couldn’t stand the possibility that Bucky might stop looking at him with that trust and admiration and comfort that they’d shared since they were five and six. He’d spend the rest of his life pining quietly if that was the other option.

It didn’t stop Steve from testing the waters, though, trying to figure out if maybe, possibly, Bucky could like him back. It’s why, between bites of pizza, Steve casually says “The girl on the subway today asked me to get coffee with her.”

Steve watches him carefully, scanning for any signs of a reaction. Bucky’s eyes drop a fraction, but a moment later he’s raising an eyebrow and looking at Steve, sipping cherry coke with a smirk. “Yeah? You got a hot date, Rogers?”

Steve laughs. “Nah, I said I couldn’t.” Bucky’s eyebrows lift again, this time unintentional. “Yeah come?” he asks, his tone cool and even. Steve shrugs.

“What if, uh—what if I told you I like someone else?” And this is new, this is territory that Steve hasn’t yet ventured into with Bucky, but his heart is racing as he watches him and he wants, he needs some sort of indication of whether he should try to move on fruitlessly or just keep following his best friend in lovestruck adoration.

Bucky chokes on his drink.

“How come?” he responds, with genuine surprise. “Is it Nat?”

Steve blinks. “What?” he blanches, and then, incredulously, “Nat? God, no. I mean—I mean she’s great, but—no.”

Bucky watches him, his eyes neutral and trained seriously on Steve, sending heat rushing to his cheeks. “Who is she?” he asks, sounding only mildly interested. Steve bites his lip and considers this, then decides, ‘fuck it’, if he fought a guy five or six years older than him on the G train he can answer Bucky’s question.

“Would you, uh, would you freak out if I told you it wasn’t a girl?” Steve says finally, and looks down. His heart is in his throat, racing so fast he wonders how he’s still breathing properly. It’s a new kind of fear, waiting to see Bucky’s response to this, and he feels more guarded than he’s ever felt in front of him.

Bucky is quiet for several painstaking moments. “You’re gay?” he says finally, his voice calm.

Steve scratches the back of his neck, intensely uncomfortable in his skin. “I think I’m bi, actually,” he mumbles, and drops his gaze again. While he’s trying to formulate the next question in a way that isn’t ‘do you hate me’ or ‘do you think I’m a freak’, Bucky cuts in.

“Steve, I don’t care.” He laughs, and when Steve looks up he’s smiling, his whole face glowing. “I’m gay,” he adds, and just. Okay. Of all the replies he’d been waiting for, that hadn’t been on his radar.

Anticipatory, wild hope spikes through him, and in his sudden surge of bravery Steve blurts out, in one breath, “And I think you’re the person I like.”

The moments that follow are breathless and paralyzing and seem to stretch on for eternities as Steve watches Bucky’s eyes go wide, his face go slack with shock.
“You like me?” Bucky whispers. Steve swallows, terrified in a way he’s never been, but there’s no going back now.

“I kind of love you, actually,” he mumbles, in a voice that doesn’t feel like his own. Bucky’s big, gorgeous, blue and green and grey and constantly flickering eyes go even wider, his mouth actually dropping open from surprise, and Steve considers pitching himself off the roof.

But then Bucky’s face splits into the most ridiculously radiant smile Steve has ever seen. “I kinda love you too,” Bucky says, his voice trembling, and now it’s Steve’s turn to stare, gaping.

“Seriously?” is all he can say, and then he realizes how lame that sounds, but it doesn’t matter because Bucky is staring at him with such elation and thrill that lights up his whole face in a way that makes Steve think he couldn’t formulate anything more coherent if he needed to.

“Seriously, stupid,” Bucky says, but he’s laughing like Steve’s never seen before and he’s so, so stunned with joy.

“Can I kiss you?” Steve blurts out. Bucky’s breath lilts. He nods, so Steve sits up and, excruciatingly slow, reaches out to cup Bucky’s face like he’s seen in movies. His skin is so soft it aches, and Steve wants to touch him like this forever. He thinks, immediately, about trying to put this moment into art, the gold-peach light and the shadows of Bucky’s eyelashes and the light compression of his cheeks under Steve’s hands that are trembling could never touch him with anything but tenderness, but he doesn’t think he could ever do it justice.

It’s Bucky who surges forwards, crashing their lips together, and suddenly, Steve thinks vaguely, suddenly all the poetry he’s ever read makes sense, suddenly he sees why the world was ever created in the first place, why cities were built and wars were fought and forests sprouted. Because he and Bucky needed to have this kiss. It was the single driving force of the universe, this kiss, the way Bucky’s pushing desperately against him, the way Steve’s hands tangle in Bucky’s short hair so he can pull him even closer. The air is static and alive, and Steve thinks that New York City could be burning around them but he wouldn’t know, not with Bucky’s lips against him, intoxicating and drowning him and sweeter than honey.

When they pull apart for a gasp of air, life feels different, like everything has stopped moving frenetically and just settled, and Steve thinks they may have just solved every problem facing the world.

Bucky’s hand is pressed gently against the back of Steve’s neck, and he’s giggling, the noise sweeter than anything Steve has ever heard. “Your lip is swollen and gross,” is the first thing he says, grinning like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever thought of, and Steve bursts out laughing.

“Fuck off,” he says fondly, and kisses Bucky again, coming undone in the feeling of Bucky’s laughter against his lips.

When Steve breaks away, it’s only to mumble, “Wanna be my boyfriend?” (smooth, he thinks, but he doesn’t care), and to wait for Bucky to grin and reply “I guess I’ll try it,” and then they’re laughing and he goes back to kissing Bucky, needing it like he needs air.

***

And so they do try, and it’s as clumsy and nervous and uncharted as it was when they were fourteen and fifteen.

In some ways, it’s the most natural thing in the world, falling in love again. Some days feel like
they could almost be pulled from 2006, when they’d been sickeningly happy teenagers who just fit, their lives and hands and hearts intertwined so tightly that no one could remember them ever being apart. Those days, Steve wakes up with Bucky’s head on his chest and he almost forgets the pain that’s lying just under the surface there in his glowing, overwhelming love, in the rose tinted glasses that tell him that eventually, everything will be okay. They can make breakfast together and go out holding hands to see a movie or visit a museum or get lunch and they’re like every other couple in the city with their shared private smiles and their tunnel vision for each other, or they can stay home and stick close to each other all day and fall asleep in front of a movie or, on the occasional days that one of them goes out alone, they can text every five minutes until they’re together again, and it’s easy, it’s real, it’s exactly what they had imagined when they were kids dreaming about the future together.

Other days, it’s harder than Steve ever imagined it could be. Not loving Bucky—that’s always easy, easier than anything—but trying to get through to him, trying to say the right thing, be what he needs, when Steve has no idea what that is. Those are usually the days after Bucky wakes up from a flashback or nightmare or whatever they are (Steve doesn’t know. Bucky still won’t talk about it), and even when Steve holds him and strokes his hair and whispers to him until he calms down, the fear and disgust and sadness not leaving his face for hours. Other days, it’s Bucky flinching when Steve touches his side and whimpered pleas in the middle of the night that Steve can only imagine the context of and asking Bucky about the scar on his right shoulder that he almost always keeps covered only for him to shrug and look away.

Mostly, it’s a lot of in-betweens as they try to find the balance of how to be a couple again with the new complications that they’d never had to face before. Moments of breathless love and giddy joy and moments of devastating heartbreak and flashing irritation and the dismay at issues that arise like roadblocks, unprecedented and unexpected. There are a lot of those. Neither Steve or Bucky is keen to admit that it’s been a whole four years that left endless opportunities for changes neither of them had even registered as significant.

It isn’t all bad—sometimes it’s just random and startling and a little awkward, nervous and unnatural as the two of them try to remember it’s okay not to be completely in sync right away. One of such moments comes one night when they’re lying on the couch, Bucky leaning against Steve’s chest and Steve’s arm flung easily over Bucky’s shoulders, his other hand holding a pint of ice cream that they’re eating out of.

“I’m sorry that you’re always paying for literally everything,” Bucky says quietly, breaking the comfortable silence. Steve frowns, kisses the side of Bucky’s head lightly.

“Why are you sorry?” Steve asks, “If you weren’t here it would just be sitting there not being used on stuff we like to do and stuff you deserve.” He feels like he’s stressing that a lot lately—Bucky deserves love and gentleness and pleasure, deserves to feel happy. So far it’s been to no avail.

Bucky shrugs, lifting his arm to hold Steve’s hand where it’s grazing his chest. “I don’t know,” he says, “I wish I could do something for you.”

Steve feels his heart break a little bit with helplessness, an emotion he’s become very familiar with. “You do,” he insists, “you make me happier than anyone in the whole world.”

“Something concrete, Nicholas Sparks,” Bucky quips, and Steve laughs despite himself. Steve can hear a small smile lilting in his tone. “Just like, you’re buying everything, That’s gotta be annoying.” He hesitates, like he’s testing Steve, waiting for him to express irritation at it.

“Buck,” Steve sighs, “at the risk of sounding like a bit of an asshole, I haven’t thought about money in a really long time. Which is a very weird feeling, since like, I used to not have two dimes
to rub together, but— you know. It’s not an issue.” A little sickened with himself, Steve shifts. Sensing this, Bucky runs his thumb along Steve’s hand, a small, loving motion. “So being able to spend it on someone I love, it’s not only not a problem, but like— it’s a good feeling, to finally not just be a rich jackass sitting on money I’m not gonna use.” He pauses, leaning further back into the cushions. “Please don’t ever feel bad about that, okay? It’s not something we have to worry about.”

Bucky is quiet for a moment, and Steve knows he’s going over it in his head, looking for the loopholes where he can blame himself. Another pang of sadness hits him at the thought.

“Okay,” Bucky replies softly. “You aren’t a rich jackass, by the way. You’re more like a rich, sweet, handsome bisexual prince. You’re like Jay Gatsby.”

Steve bursts out laughing at that. “Gatsby?” he replies, mock offended. “That materialistic, huh?”

Bucky laughs. “Besides that.”

“That make you Nick Carraway?” Steve teases. Bucky snorts and buries himself further into Steve’s arms.

“I guess Richard Gere in Pretty Woman would’ve been the better comparison,” Bucky replies dryly, and Steve isn’t sure whether to laugh or be horrified.

“You’re something else, Barnes,” he says finally.

“Love you,” Bucky replies, and Steve convinces himself that the problem has been resolved.

***

“Do you still write?” Steve asks Bucky one day out of nowhere, when they’re standing in the middle of a farmer’s market, waiting in line for sugar donuts. It’s not completely random—when they’d been in high school, that had been his plan—Bucky’d had pages of poems and short stories and random, half developed ideas and Steve had read them all and marveled at his brilliant, uniquely gifted boyfriend. They were going to get an apartment and Steve would have his art and Bucky would have his writing and for kids who had been given absolutely no support in the way of college and their future from parents or school administrators, that had seemed like a solid plan. Honestly, Steve can’t believe he’d been able to muster a successful art career up with absolutely no kind of higher education to show for it.

He’d gotten lucky. Bucky hadn’t.

Bucky’s arm is wrapped around Steve’s waist, his chin resting on his shoulder, and when Steve asks this he looks up, raises his eyebrows. “It’d be ridiculous, right?” he replies quietly, a kind of resigned sadness in his voice.

“Of course it wouldn’t,” Steve replies seriously, and, as he usually does at Steve’s indignant, insistent tone, Bucky rolls his eyes fondly. “Also, you seriously just avoided that question.”

Bucky sighs. “I mean, occasionally I’ll write something rushed and like, incoherent. I don’t know. But yeah, I got a couple of weird journals.”

“Good,” Steve replies, “cause you’re amazing.”

“I was amazing,” Bucky corrects him, “not anymore.”

“You wouldn’t know, Rogers,” he pushes back, little humor in his tone. Steve cocks his head.

“You don’t have to put yourself down all the time,” Steve says softly, and Bucky lowers his gaze.

“Old habits,” he replies, weakly but with a tone of finality. Steve sighs and presses a kiss to the top of his head.

“I’m gonna get you to see yourself how I see you,” Steve whispers.

Bucky bites his lip and doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t want to disappoint.

***

But Steve is kidding himself to think that everything is just okay because they’re a couple again, and the reminders are a brutal reality check. One such moment of harsh realization comes one morning when Bucky knocks a pitcher over in the kitchen and it shatters and he watches Bucky’s face go pale and contort into fear before he immediately drops down to clean it.

“Bucky!” he startles without thinking, a concerned reaction to Bucky touching the shards of glass with his bare hand, but Bucky absolutely withers.

“I’m sorry, Steve, I’m—I’m really really sorry, I’ll clean it up, just please—” he stammers, panicky and meek, and Steve takes a deep breath, reorients himself.

“Baby,” he says carefully, “you’re okay, it’s not a big deal. Just—just step back, okay?” And Bucky does immediately, still looking terrified. Steve realizes, stunned, that Bucky has started crying, terrified, whimpery little sobs that he tries to swallow back on.

(Steve knows, right away, that someone hurt him for this. He knows it without even needing to question it, but he doesn’t ask who. He doesn’t want to frighten Bucky any more, he tells himself, but he might be too afraid of the answer, of what someone could have done to him to send him to hysterical pieces over a broken pitcher.)

So Steve walks around the kitchen island to a few feet from where Bucky is standing, tense and guarded and afraid and crying. “It’s okay,” he says again, trying to calm himself down too, and outstretches his hand. Bucky stares, cautious and wary, before taking it with a trembling hand.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky murmurs, ashamed. Steve swallows.

“Can I hug you?” When Bucky nods, Steve holds Bucky’s still shaking body against his, running his hand slowly up and down Bucky’s arm. Bucky sobs against his shirt.

“It’s really okay, Buck,” he tells him, his voice firm but so loving. “I think I got that at IKEA for like, six dollars.” Bucky laughs, shaky and tearful, but a laugh nonetheless.

“Thanks,” Bucky whispers, “I’ll clean it up.”

“Thanks for what?” Steve asks, sort of dreading the answer.

“Not being mad,” Bucky says in a small, small voice. Steve winces for what must be the millionth time at how normal Bucky makes that sound.

“Bucky?” he says gently. “Uh—I get the feeling that— someone’s made you feel like—like you should feel, like, really horribly guilty about things like that and—and—and they’re wrong.” Steve falters as Bucky’s eyes go wide, then his face darkens, then goes completely blank. He pushes
away from Steve and opens the cupboard to grab a broom.

“Let me—” Steve tries desperately, and Bucky looks back to him.

“It’s fine,” he says sharply. Steve bites his lip, then reaches in to get the dustpan and crouches down, holds it while Bucky sweeps it in.

*I’m sorry,* he hopes it conveys, *I love you.*

Bucky gives him a small, sad smile and then, once Steve dumps it in the garbage bin, leans his head against his shoulder.

*It’s okay. I love you too.*

***

For Bucky, it feels like a test. It feels like waiting.

He’s not exactly sure what for—probably for Steve to get tired, to realize what he really is. No matter how many times Steve says he loves him, whispers beautiful things that Bucky knows he doesn’t deserve to hear, it doesn’t change Bucky’s own knowledge that Steve will run out of patience eventually. It’s inevitable.

He still feels like a broken mess of a person, but now he has something to lose because with Steve it’s the happiest and most on edge he’s been in so long. It terrifies him and it gives him hope and then the hope terrifies him even more, a vicious attack from his own mind.

For four years the world has been spinning so fast that Bucky could barely take breath, just hold on and keep his guard up because everything was a threat, every second was just about doing whatever it took to make it to the next day and on some days, whatever it took to not get hurt. Or not get hurt more.

And Steve, with his permanent gentleness and and love and protection, has slowed it to a stop. *Steve is safe,* and Bucky had forgotten feeling safe and now he’s become addicted to it. Some nights he lays in Steve’s arms, listening to his steady, rhythmic breathing and memorizing the feeling of being safe.

Except it’s always fleeting because everything in Bucky’s life is, and it’s followed by a reminder of his reality. Reliving a horrific moment, crashing and explosive and so real that when Bucky pulls himself out of it, he sometimes can’t remember where he is or he’s stifling a scream. A horrible, sickening sensation, hands on him that weren’t given permission. Or just long hours of vast, overwhelming sadness that couldn’t be tied to anything, or anxiety bubbling, hot under his skin, leaving him restless and scared. And the permanent self loathing, never far from him, reminding him every minute that he’s not good enough, he’s never going to be good enough.

But. There are the moments that are free from those feelings too. Moments where he’s with Steve, moments where they’re laughing breathlessly or quietly sitting leaning against one another or chatting about something small and unimportant, moments that could have been plucked from sixteen year old Bucky’s life, unapologetically happy and unafraid. Those are the moments that he’s utterly terrified to lose.

And so, the part of his mind that’s poisonous and untrustworthy starts to test Steve, push him to admit that Bucky’s an unwelcome inconvenience. When he asks Steve about money, Steve’s insistence that he doesn’t mind eases Bucky’s mind slightly.
But when the nagging insistence that he doesn’t deserve Steve rears its head again, he goes further.

“Do you—” he swallows; his mouth goes dry. “Do you think I’m a slut?”

Bucky whispers it with his head lying against Steve’s chest in Steve’s bed one night, anxiety pulsing through him. He isn’t even sure why—it’s one of those questions that he’s thought about asking over and over but hasn’t worked up the courage, and then suddenly was able to spit it out. He doesn’t know if he’s looking for gentle validation or for Steve to pull away in disgust like he’s convinced he inevitably will, and Bucky isn’t sure which motivation is worse.


Ashamed, Bucky shifts so Steve can’t see his face, his eyes downcast. “‘Cause I kind of am,” he mumbles, a kind of sick dread settling over him. He still hasn’t really talked about his career of choice with Steve, unable to say more than a couple words without falling apart usually, but still, he hadn’t expected such disgust at himself to rise so quickly when he was just talking vaguely, not going into specifics.

Specifics would undoubtedly be the quickest way to shatter Steve’s image of him, rip off the bandaid before Bucky needs him even more than he already does. But he can’t talk about it without his throat swelling shut and without getting pulled so far into his own mind that he can’t feel his body or can’t breathe normally, and he really, really doesn’t want Steve to know about how diminished and degraded and pathetic he’s been so. Not an option.

“Bucky,” Steve says, his voice caught, “you’re not—you’re not a slut. That’s not—it’s a bad concept, anyway, but you—you’re not—Buck, you’re perfect.”

Bucky prickles, frustrated at Steve for pretending, guilty for the heartbreak that crackles in Steve’s voice. “So it doesn’t bother you,” he mutters, “the stuff I did.” He pushes himself off Steve’s chest and sits up, rubbing his hand over his face.

“No,” Steve says simply, sitting up with him. He places a gentle hand on Bucky’s shoulder and rubs lightly. “Buck—” Steve swallows. “Buck, you told me that—that people hurt you. And that would never, ever make me think something less about you. And it especially doesn’t reflect on you. Okay?”

Bucky swallows the bitterness in his mouth, the screaming, vile disgust that sizzles hot under his skin. “When I think about the things I did—” he whispers, and all the air has vanished from his lungs, “—I get—I’m pretty fucking disgusted. At me. For—for being—for letting people—” he’s stuttering now, his breathing short, tears pushing their way into his voice. He feels so dirty his skin writhe. “—And so I just—it wouldn’t surprise me, if you were too.”

“Bucky,” Steve whispers, his voice anguished. “Bucky, no.” Bucky rests his forehead on Steve’s shoulder, too tired to argue, wracked in shame. Steve, in response, wraps a secure arm around Bucky. Steve holds him with such love and selflessness that for a moment, it succeeds in making him feel less disgusting, and he shuts his eyes.

“Baby,” Steve says sadly, “I wish you could see yourself clearly.” Bucky stays silent, feeling Steve’s fingers pull lightly across his shoulders in soft, tentative circles. “Bucky, tell me what happened to you,” he whispers, his voice so soft.

Bucky pulls away, and Steve retracts his hand. “I told you,” he says shortly, not looking up.
“You didn’t tell me everything,” Steve counters, his voice still unbearably gentle. “You—you barely told me anything, love.” Bucky bites his lip, rolling his eyes.

“We’d be here for the next fucking five years if I told you everything,” he snaps finally, and Steve sighs. Bucky sinks back, deflated, all hostility gone.

“Steve,” he says quietly, his voice such a stark contrast to what it had been moments ago that Steve snaps his head up. “If I—when I tell you, you’ll be the first person I ever tell. I just- god, it’s really fucking hard.” He swallows, fear lingering in his eyes when he glances back at Steve, the words sticking slightly in his throat.

Steve locks his fingers with Bucky’s then kisses his knuckles, soft and slow and loving. “I shouldn’t have sprang it on you,” he says, guilt tugging at his voice. “I’m sorry, Buck.”

Bucky leans against him again, his eyes closed. “I’m sorry I’m so fucked up,” he replies, feeling very empty all of a sudden. Steve turns his head and kisses the top of Bucky’s.

“Well I don’t exactly have everything together,” he replies, huffing out a laugh, “so we can be a bit of a mess together.”

Bucky could point out that they have different ideas for what constitute being a mess, but he doesn’t. He breathes in the feeling of being taken care of and tries to memorize it down to the molecules until it’s the only thing that surrounds him. When he thinks about what it’s going to feel like to lose this, his heart caves in on itself.

Chapter End Notes

so between now and mid november updates might be slightly slower than usual because i’m finishing college apps, so please bear with me if it’s every other week instead of every week for a little while.

your comments are so lovely and kind i actually kind of can’t believe it, they always make me want to write more and faster sdjhsdkghfdg thank you for them and please know how happy they make me

say hi on tumblr if you want i’m @cafelesbian, i’ll see you sometime in the next 2 weeks loves!
The next day, Steve has to meet with Tony about a new proposition and Bucky has planned to meet Wanda, since it’s been over a month since he’s seen her and she’d told him she was getting worried, so Steve is up and Bucky’s in the shower when the doorbell buzzes. Half ready to go and half still shaking drowsiness, he groggily holds the microphone and asks who’s there.

“Your favorite employer,” cuts Tony’s voice, “I was close and I thought I’d stop by before we get brunch.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” Steve grumbles, but buzzes him in anyway. A minute later, Tony raps on his inside door and he opens it to see him standing there, already dressed in a suit that probably cost more than Steve’s car to tailor, making Steve’s jeans and flannel feel incredibly drab.

“I see you’re ready,” Tony comments, and Steve scowls.

“I’m not supposed to meet you for half an hour.”

“It’s a twenty minute commute, Rogers.” But he smiles and claps him on the shoulder. “How are you doin’, kid?”

“Good,” Steve answers truthfully. “You, uh, want water or anything?”

Before Tony answers, Bucky strides in pulling his damp hair out of his face. He stops when he spots Tony, tensing up and then, upon the realization who he is, blinking a few times.

“Well,” Tony says with a smirk, and irritation flares in Steve’s chest at the flippancy with which he obviously views this. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.”


Tony squints, thinking, then his eyes go wide. “Bucky?” he asks, turning back to Steve, and Steve nods, biting his lip. “Jesus, and here I thought I walked in on another one night stand.”

“Tony,” Steve snaps, his eyes flitting to Bucky, who falters, hurt twitching briefly across his face before he purses his lips.

“No, I mean—hey, kid.” He sticks his hand out and Bucky shakes it, tentative. “Shit, Rogers here enlisted me for months to try to track you down.” Steve grits his teeth. “It’s good to finally meet you. Kinda feels like I’m the one meeting a celebrity.” Bucky is still regarding him warily, eyes wide, and Steve sort of wants to smack Tony in the back of the head for his ever-present lack of a filter or consideration of what he says or ability to read a situation, but also he’s so permanently, hyper-aware of Bucky, his brain whirring every minute to make sure he’s okay and maybe he’s overreacting.

It’s just the idea of Bucky being uncomfortable, being distressed or anxious or less than happy for even a minute is too much for him to bear and he hates even the thought of it. So maybe he should take it easy on Tony but also, Tony’s a bit of a dick, even if Steve loves him.
He settles for an irritated grimace.

“Yeah, uh—” Bucky is still so put off and if he wasn’t wildly tense about what Tony was going to do to put his foot in his mouth next, Steve might have laughed. “—you’re um—congrats. On, uh—your technology is sweet.” Despite himself, an amused grin twitches over Steve’s face. Tony raises an eyebrow, smug.

“Your boyfriend’s got good taste, Rogers,” Tony says with his usual swagger, and when his back is turned Bucky shoots Steve a horrified look and mouths *what the fuck?* Steve coughs to cover the laugh.

“Um,” Bucky blinks, gathers himself, “I should… take off I guess.” He bounces nervously for a moment, then crosses the room and kisses Steve quickly on the cheek, sending a thrum of electricity through him.

“I’ll see you later, babe,” Steve tells him, as Bucky turns to Tony.

“Nice to meet you,” he says with a half smile, and Tony gives him a nod.

“I assume I’ll be seeing you again,” he tells Bucky with a half dismissive smile, and Bucky nods awkwardly before casting another glance at Steve and shutting the door gently behind him.

As soon as he’s gone, Tony whistles lowly. “Gotta say, wasn’t expecting that, Rogers.”

Steve bristles, immediately defensive. “Expecting what?” he snaps, and snags his coat off of the rack.

“To walk in on you and find out your new boy toy that—”

“Don’t call him that,” Steve snarls, familiar, unfaltering protectiveness rearing its head and Tony takes a step back, apologetic, but continues.

“—may I point out, you’ve dropped *everything* for, is your high school boyfriend who pulled off the world’s most depressing disappearing act. Sorta feels like I just found Madeline McCann.”

“Who?” Steve blanches, momentarily caught off guard. Tony rolls his eyes, waves a dismissive hand.

“That famous missing person case you don’t—you know what, never mind, that’s beside the point. Let’s go. I’m starving.” Tony hovers by the door while Steve locks up, irritation still tugging at him, and Tony must notice.

“Steve,” he says calmly. “I’m kidding. I’m very happy for you and *One hundred twenty seven hours.*”

“Jesus Christ, Tony! He’s got a name!” Steve snaps, and Tony grimaces.

“Okay, okay! Last one, I swear.” Tony steps ahead of Steve in the elevator. “How’d you find him, anyway?”

Steve hesitates, debating how much information he wants Tony to have. He actually considers, for a brief moment, confiding in him. However brash and overbearing and obnoxious, he always had good intentions but more importantly, the man had dealt with more than his fair share of post traumatic stress disorder. After a stint in captivity before he’d manufactured some kind of ridiculous weapon to break himself out, Steve knew the vague, glossed over version of Tony’s
history—nightmares and constant triggers and jumpy defensiveness, an unfortunately similar pattern to what he’s seeing in Bucky. It occurs to Steve that until Bucky’s ready, Tony could probably give him the best idea of what’s really going on with him, the least sensationalized and sugar coated picture so that at least Steve could have a slightly better grasp on what he’s dealing with.

And then he thinks about it for a moment more and he feels like a colossal dick for trying to pry into Tony’s trauma for his own gain and for considering spilling Bucky’s past without his permission and for even trying to compare the two wildly different, both horrendous situations they both went through, and he decides against it with hard conviction.

“Uh… ran into him,” Steve says absently, punching in the lobby button. “Just like, on the street.”

Tony raises his eyebrows. “No kidding,” he says, and Steve waits for the snarky comment but gets none. “That’s good, Steve,” he says, and it sounds genuine. Steve smiles tiredly.

“Oh… ran into him,” Steve says absently, punching in the lobby button. “Just like, on the street.”

Tony raises his eyebrows. “No kidding,” he says, and Steve waits for the snarky comment but gets none. “That’s good, Steve,” he says, and it sounds genuine. Steve smiles tiredly.

“Yeah,” he replies as the doors pull open. Tony strides out, ignoring the widened eyes of onlookers. Steve snorts- he forgets every time they go out that his C or D list status is nothing compared with arguably the most powerful business man in America.

“Not stopping for fans?” he mutters quietly, once they’re outside, and Tony glowers.

“Let’s just get to Sarabeth’s,” he snaps, and Steve grins.

“So what’s this new business proposal anyway?” Steve asks him, stuffing his hands in his pockets and bracing against the sharp, chilled air. Sliding on his sunglasses (it’s December and cloudy, Steve thinks with exasperated amusement, but doesn’t comment), Tony huffs out a sigh.

“Less of a proposal and more of a commission request,” he says, and Steve raises an eyebrow. “Well, I guess it is a proposal after all.” He turns to Steve with a genuine smile that lacks sarcasm or cynicism, a rare sight with Tony. “Congratulate me, I’m getting married this spring.”

“No way! You proposed to Pepper?” Steve claps him on the back, a thrilled smile splitting across his face. Tony shrugs, but he looks too pleased with himself to hide it, and he grins reluctantly. “That’s so great, Tony, congrats!”

“Well,” Tony replies tersely with a cough, shedding his brief moment of vulnerability, “if I want her to forgive me for proposing as I was getting out of a meeting, I need a kickass wedding gift, so you might be doing some paintings that you will be generously overpaid for.”

Steve grins. “I’ll do it for free if it means I get to see you cry at the wedding,” he goads, just to see the reaction, and not unpredictably, Tony scowls and flips him off.

“Not happening.” Tony swings the restaurant door open with a flourish, gives the hostess a quick nod before sitting down. “And by the way, speaking of free, SI just developed one of the most complex prosthetics ever, if your boyfriend wants to be a test subject.” Tony smirks at the blatant surprise on Steve’s face.

“I’m… wow. Intrigued,” Steve stammers, thoroughly shocked at the suddenness of the offer, “Really?”

“I feel a bit bad about our introduction,” Tony admits, and Steve rolls his eyes. “But yeah- they’re still in testing but… they’re great. Not to boast.”

“You would never,” Steve replies dryly. But he mulls it over with tentative hope for the rest of the
Bucky, meanwhile, meets Wanda further downtown at a tiny cafe they frequented on the occasional days they both had enough money for an actual meal. He arrives first and leans against the wall and when he spots her, a distinct blur of red hair and a red coat and a smile that radiates from all the way down the block, he’s hit with the startling realization of how much he’s missed her and how guilty he feels for having gone so long without talking to her.

You know you’ve had your own problems, a vague voice somewhere in his consciousness that sounds suspiciously like Steve’s says, and Bucky ignores that. He should have been there, should have checked up on her, but then Wanda reaches him and hugs him for a full minute and Bucky decides okay, she isn’t mad.

“You look good,” is the first thing she says, stepping back to look him over and smiling, “you look healthy.”

“That’s gotta be a first,” Bucky replies wearily, but he smiles. “It’s good to see you. You hungry?”

“God, yes.” Wanda falls into stride beside him as they head into the cafe, tossing her hair. “You know, I thought you might’ve died or something, and someone was impersonating you. Never disappear on me for that long again.”

She’s half joking, her tone light, but it still strikes Bucky with guilt all the same. He worried her, stressed her out, all because he’s been playing the part he doesn’t deserve of a rich boyfriend while she’s still struggling. He hasn’t even told her about being back with Steve and he’s kind of dreading it, his anxiety spiking every time he’s reminded that he needs to, even though he knows she’ll react with nothing but happiness.

For the first thirty or so minutes, it’s just casual small talk and polite, scripted questions; Wanda talks about her two jobs, one a barista and the other at her club, gives Bucky the reassurance that Scott and Peter and all of their other friends are doing alright. It’s easy for Bucky to avoid explaining his situation, only needing to pepper in a understanding words every few sentences, and by the time Wanda has finished talking, the dread of telling her has intensified and permeated into Bucky’s lungs, the anxiety unbearable.

So when Wanda turns to him seriously and asks “Where’ve you been, anyway?” in a voice laced with concern, Bucky’s heart races viciously,

He can’t think of how to even begin to describe who Steve is to him, what he’s done to Bucky’s world, so he finally settles on telling her “I’ve been staying with someone.”

Wanda’s eyebrows shoot up, skeptical and protective. “Someone?” she repeats, “As in, like, an arrangement?”

“No exactly,” Bucky says, after a long pause. “It’s— he’s someone I know, from a while ago. We were, um, a couple in high school, we—I’ve mentioned him, I think.” Vaguely, and without specifics. “And then maybe like, seven weeks ago, I ran into him and um. Yeah. I’ve been crashing there. We’re sort of—-Well, yeah we are a couple but not like—it isn’t a sex thing.” Bucky says it in one rushed breath, the words tripping over each other. Wanda regards him quietly with her wide, thoughtful eyes, and Bucky waits with bated breath until she smiles, beaming.

“Bucky,” she says, genuine happiness springing in her voice, “that’s so fucking great. God, I’m so
happy for you.”

Relief releases itself through Bucky like coils coming undone, tension dissipating. He hates that no matter how sure he was that of course, Wanda would be sweet and thrilled and supportive, he’d been waiting for a blow.

It’s how his life feels a lot of the time, just bracing himself for the impending, inevitable collapse.

“Thanks,” he replies quietly, and squeezes her hand. “He wants to meet you, you’ve gotta—”

“Oh, god, of course I wanna meet him!” Wanda interrupts, and it makes Bucky laugh. “But he’s good? He’s sweet?”

“The sweetest,” Bucky says truthfully, with a grin, and Wanda absolutely beams.

“That’s just—that’s so great, Bucky,” Wanda repeats, tucking her hair behind her ear. “I’m so glad, it’s really what you deserve.”

And Bucky’s chest tightens with resistance to that idea, but he keeps it quiet.

He tells her about Steve for a while longer. She knows that Bucky had a high school boyfriend and that they got split up by his parents, but he tells her how they met and what Steve is like, and it’s a few hours later when they’re leaving, the vicious chill of New York in full force as they head outside.

“Shit, it’s cold,” Wanda mutters, then turns to Bucky. “So the thirteenth for dinner?”

“Yeah,” Bucky confirms, “I’ll make sure Steve’s free, but he hasn’t said he’s got anything yet.”

“Perfect.” Wanda hugs him, her chin nestled into his shoulder. “I’ll see you soon. I love you. Take it easy, Bucky.”

“You too,” he says earnestly, “and Wanda, if there’s anything you need—”

Wanda smirks. “Just because you’ve got a rich boyfriend now doesn’t mean I’m your charity case.” Bucky blanches with guilt, and she quickly adds. “Kidding. Thanks, babe. I’m good, though, I promise.” And then, when she sees the visible hurt on Bucky’s face, she says softly, “Bucky, you don’t need to feel guilty about this, okay? If there’s anyone who deserves to live out Pretty Woman in real life, it’s you. Let yourself be happy for once. No one deserves it more than you.”

And even though Bucky laughs and promises he’ll see her again soon, it doesn’t stop the doubt from crawling like venom through his insides, leaving him achingly sad. He just feels like an imposter in Steve’s world and a traitor in hers, in his world really, like he’s the last person to deserve this absurd stroke of divine intervention. The guilt claws at him, insistent and mocking, you know what you really are and you can’t keep pretending you belong here, and Bucky swallows the thoughts like medicine, unwanted and addictive.

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When Bucky comes home Steve is already back, typing at the counter, so Bucky pecks him on the cheek and wraps an arm around him from behind. “What’s up?” he asks, and Steve smiles and places his hand on Bucky’s forearm gently.

“Hi, baby,” Steve says warmly, “not much, emailing the Game of Thrones people.” Bucky laughs. “How was Wanda?” He shuts the laptop and gestures for Bucky to sit beside him so he does, his
hand still light against Steve’s arm just for the contact.

“Good,” Bucky says truthfully, “she, uh, she wants to meet you.” Steve’s eyes light up at that, a smile splitting across his face, glowing in the way only Steve can manage.

“Really? I wanna meet her too.”

“You’re in luck,” Bucky says absently, resting his head against Steve’s shoulder, pushes back the exhausting, constant self doubt that’s been burning in his chest since he left her. “How ‘bout you, how was Stark? What’d he want?”

Steve places his arm around Bucky’s shoulders, protective and secure. “Pretty good. He got engaged so he wants to commission some stuff for Pepper.” Bucky blinks, and Steve adds “The fiance.”

“Ah. Well hey!” Bucky lifts his chin from Steve’s shoulder to grin. “That’s great, Steve!” Steve smiles, modest and dismissive of himself.

“He pays well,” is all Steve adds, and Bucky snorts.

“He think I’m an idiot?” Bucky asks, wincing at the memory of earlier that morning, the aghastness that had been written all over his face when he’d walked into Steve’s kitchen to find Tony Stark there. Steve squeezes his shoulder.

“Buck,” he chastises, in the semi-disappointed way he always does when Bucky makes even the slightest self-deprecating comment. “No, he doesn’t think you’re an idiot. Believe me, he’s seen weirder.” Bucky rolls his eyes.

“Hey,” Steve says, before Bucky can think of a clever, good-naturedly snippy comeback, “that, uh—that thing Tony said earlier? The uh—the one night stand comment?”

Bucky sighs, because of course Steve would bring that up. He’d focused intensely and purposefully on not thinking about that all day, the inadequacy that swelled in him when he remembered it poisonous and nauseating and he isn’t even sure exactly why, if it’s just because Steve’s been with other people who can—and have—given him more than Bucky can, or the tangible, undeniable reminder that him being there is preventing Steve from living his life no matter how many times Steve insists it’s not true. Bucky runs his hand through his hair tiredly, bites his lip.

“Yeah?” Bucky replies, his voice smaller than he’d hoped. Steve takes his hand, curling his fingers slowly, fingertips light on Bucky’s knuckles.

“I just—I didn’t want you to think I was like, not telling you ‘cause like—I don’t know if you know that—” Steve’s flustered, so Bucky sighs again and touches the side of Steve’s face gently, thumbing over his cheek.

“Steve,” he says, with a small smile, “you were allowed to hook up with people. It’s not a big deal.” Bucky almost adds that he most definitely outnumbers Steve in a body count, but decides against it, really not wanting to see the look on Steve’s face.

“I know,” Steve says quickly, and lifts his hand to meet Bucky’s on his cheek. “I know, I just—we haven’t talked a whole lot about that because like—the last couple of years have been complicated for me, relationship-wise.”

Bucky’s eyebrows pull together in concern. “Care to elaborate?” he says dryly, but it’s gentle.
Steve frowns, drumming his fingers against the countertop.

“I just—” Steve swallows. “I wasn’t in a good place, emotionally speaking, when I lost you and my parents kicked me out.” He laughs dryly. “Obviously. But then, like, I started working for Tony and I still wasn’t… so good?” Bucky bites his lip, an awful sadness tugging at his chest at the thought of Steve, emotionally wrecked and facing the world utterly alone.

“Just like—” Steve runs a hand through his hair, visibly uncomfortable, and Bucky brushes his fingertips against the scruff on his face, loving and achingly soft. “—when I was crashing mainly with Sam and Nat, I was so fucking miserable, and I was drinking a lot, but not enough to like, inconvenience them and their families. But then I got my own place, and for a few months I would go to these parties that Tony sometimes threw, and I’d hook up with someone and pretend it was you.”

“God,” Bucky whispers sadly, and Steve grimaces.

Anyway, I wasn’t, like, an alcoholic,” Steve clarifies. “But I wasn’t… drinking responsibly either. But once I started getting like, attention for my work and stuff, I stopped ’cause of publicity and ’cause I thought it was shitty of me to be sleeping with people and then not remember their names the next morning? But, uh, then I kept doing it sober. Which felt shittier, but like—” Steve swallows thickly. “—I don’t think I’ve told you how alone I was, Buck.”

The words shatter Bucky, the idea of Steve so lost and heartbroken, barely an adult and trying to bury a slew of horrors and trauma from teenagehood in one night stands and alcohol and work, lonely and empty. Their lives, even in the four years they’d been apart, had still been intertwined in the cosmic misery the world had been so intent in imprinting on them, their separate pain parallel, a sick reflection of each other. Permanently star crossed lovers, and the universe mocked them for it.

“Steve,” Bucky whispers, “Steve, I’m so sorry.”

Steve shakes his head, insistent. “No, no- look, the only reason that I didn’t tell you was because I just- I hated that I used people like that, you know? But- I mean, the reason I never had a relationship longer than a month was because all these people were just faceless, nameless rich guys or girls from a party or an exhibit and they meant nothing to me, and that made me feel even more like a douchebag.” Bucky’s lips upturn into a small, sad smile- he tilts his head so his forehead rests against Steve’s, a gentle pressure.

“You’re not a douchebag,” Bucky tells him, pointed and matter-of-fact but full of love. Bucky could point out that he’s had more than enough experiences with people who really knew what it meant to use someone, that Steve doesn’t even come close, but he doesn’t say that. “Steve, you’re really fuckin’ hard on yourself, you know that?”

“You’re one to talk,” Steve replies weakly, but there’s a relief heavy in his voice. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not like I expected you to be celibate,” Bucky replies. “Steve, I love you so much, you know that? You’re just… you’re just the best person ever.” He pulls away and presses his face into the crook of Steve’s neck, smiling when Steve pulls his fingers gently through Bucky’s hair.

“I’d beg to differ,” Steve answers, and Bucky shakes his head. “Oh! Wait!” At the sudden urgency in Steve’s voice, Bucky glances up.

“Tony wanted me to ask you if you want to try this prosthetic that Stark Industries just finished? I mean obviously, if you’re good, you shouldn’t, but if that is something you’re interested in, he says
it’s like, top of the line and you can be one of the people who tries it out first.”

“Seriously?” Bucky replies, bewildered. “I mean— I mean is he for real?” Steve nods, his face splitting into a grin. “Yeah, if- if that’s serious, totally.” The dangerous mix of hope and excitement pulses through Bucky, but he’s so stunned by the idea of Tony Stark offering him a prosthetic and by the look of joy on Steve’s face that he doesn’t immediately reject it.

Steve kisses Bucky’s temple, and Bucky leans against him and for the time being, feels whole and safe and content.

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Neither of them expect the call from Tony two days later, asking if they wanna go through with it. “If he wants to come in this week, it’s all ready. We’ve got great doctors in, your pal could get scanned and if it’s all good, we could have the prosthetic ready next week.”

Steve relays this enthusiastically to Bucky over breakfast. His eyes go wide and shocked and he nods, and that’s how they end up in Tony Stark’s medical building that afternoon, sitting across from him in a suave, polished office as he animatedly explains the process. Since it’s not technically on the market yet, they skip the usual long wait and expenses and preparation process, and Tony gets Bucky the paperwork within a few days of their conversation, and the whole thing happens much faster than Steve expects it normally would have.

Not that he’s complaining, obviously, when Bucky is so enthusiastic about it.

“It’s moving pretty fast because we’re trying to get this off the ground and into the field as soon as possible, so if you want, Bucky, we’ll scan your right arm today, and then we’ve got a machine that’ll manufacture it out of new combination came up with, a mix of carbon fiber and pyro glass, mainly with a couple other elements—it’s much more durable than the usual metal used, and it’s much easier to sculpt so it looks like an arm—it’s kinda like those Greek sculptures, or something. The reason we’re so proud of it, though, is because we’ve figured out a way to attach it to the other nerves in your limb—your shoulder, in your case—so that you can pick up any pressure on it, not just the basics like when you bump it against something. And it works almost exactly like a real arm—it’s the same shape and everything, and it should last much longer than the average prosthetic. So what we found is that you don’t have to take it off—you can, obviously, but it’s waterproof and what we hope is that it’s natural enough that you won’t really need to for anything else.” Intensely focused, Tony has dropped his usual swagger to explain it. When he’s done Bucky grins.

“Awesome, let’s do it.” He sounds so genuinely excited, and fondness blooms in Steve’s chest.

“And it’s safe, obviously?” Steve adds. Tony rolls his eyes.

“You think I’m gonna put your boyfriend and the twenty four other people who’re testing this out in a situation that’s dangerous? Jesus, Steve, a little faith.” Tony rolls his eyes, waving a dismissive hand, and Steve relaxes. “C’mon, the scan will take fifteen minutes or so.”

Steve should know by now that Stark Industries has never failed with something like this, but when they return the next week and Tony shows them the completed prosthetic, he’s astonished at the detail of it. Besides the white marble color, it perfectly matches Bucky’s other arm down to the size of the hand and the curve of the bicep. He turns to gage Bucky’s reaction with a grin and finds him speechless, his eyes wide, mouth slightly open as he stares at it.

“That’s—” Bucky begins, and falls short, turning to Tony with an incredulous grin. “Holy shit,” he
says finally, and Steve laughs and Tony winks.

“No problem, kid. C’mon, Banner will get it on.”

Banner turns out to be the doctor, a friendly, subdued middle aged guy named Bruce who Tony informs them is absolutely worshipped in the medical field. He attaches it within minutes, fitting it onto Bucky’s shoulder so smoothly that it looks perfectly natural.

“What'd ya think?” Tony asks from across the room, where he’s standing next to Steve who’s gazing, entranced, at the look on Bucky’s face. Bucky looks to him in beautiful astonishment, his face lifted in excitement, and Steve is so in love.

“It’s just—I don’t even know what- wow, fuck, thank you, thank you both so much.” Bucky runs the new hand through his hair, overwhelmed, and then pulls it back to observe it with a new look of awe.

“Glad it’s good, kid,” Bruce says, and claps him on the shoulder.

“Steve,” Tony says, “go give his hand a squeeze, or whatever kids in love do these days.”

So Steve does, crossing the room to meet Bucky, who lifts his hand to touch the side of Steve’s face. It’s smooth against his skin, and Steve brings his own hand to gently touch Bucky’s and runs fingers over the back of it. Bucky gasps.

“I—okay, wow, I can feel that—”

“I told you,” Tony laments, but he’s beaming and Steve casts him a look of total gratitude, and then Bucky throws both arms around Steve’s neck and buries his face in his shoulder in overwhelmed happiness, and Steve holds him back and smiles against his cheek.

Later that night, lying in Steve’s bed, Bucky turns over so he’s facing Steve. Very slowly, he brings his fingers lightly to Steve’s chest and trails across his tee shirt I LOVE YOU, and Steve has never seen anyone so beautiful.

LOVE YOU MORE, Steve writes with his own fingers, onto Bucky’s new arm, and Bucky smiles and kisses him, and Steve thinks vaguely that everything is going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

hi babes sorry for the wait it’s been very hectic but the good news is there will be a chapter next week, maybe even sooner if y’all tell me you want it because it’s already mostly written so i hope you liked this feel free to leave a comment of love/support/annoyance/hate/telling me about your day i love hearing from yall so much

also I KNOW the prosthetic stuff is not at all scientifically accurate but i didn't wanna spend a ton of time on the actual process when it would just slow down the plot so please bear with me for that thanks pals

ps enjoy it while they’re happy for 5 seconds :)

as always hmu on tumblr where i am cafelesbian see you very soon
There’s a catch. Bucky should know at this point that there’s always a catch, that he is a person permitted a finite amount of happiness and when he takes more than his allotted ration of joy, it catches up to him. Good things are fleeting and short lived, and the older he gets, they’re fewer and farther between. It happened the first time with Steve, it happened with Wanda, and it’s happening again but he’s too wrapped up in naivety and the feeling of being cared for that he forgets to wait for the universe to pull the rug out from under him. He should know better.

He should know, but he doesn’t, because he is so goddamn happy with Steve that he lets his guard down just long enough to forget his real worth and his real place, and so the world decides to remind him in its favorite way- a subtle, insignificant moment that to anyone else would pass and be forgotten but to Bucky, worms itself into his mind like a parasite and reminds him that he isn’t enough for this, for Steve. Or maybe it isn’t the universe’s fault, maybe it’s just Bucky and his inability to accept the few good things that fall into his lap for fear of this loss all over again, maybe he’s not built to be functional and he’s looking for an excuse to scamper back to his constant berating of himself, maybe the only things he knows how to accept are pain and pity and reminders that he’s nothing a worthless little slut take it bitch you’re MINE.

Whether it’s him or divine intervention or some notorious combination of the two, it only takes a whisper of an indication that Bucky is not, in fact, enough for Steve before the conviction burns hot under his skin, hissing to him to do better or to leave.

This not-unfamiliar but always gut-wrenching idea makes its way back into the forefront of Bucky’s mind one night a few days after he gets the prosthetic when the two of them go out to dinner with Peggy and Natasha. It’s lovely, for most of the night- they sit inside, couples facing each other in a dimly lit restaurant, chat enthusiastically about new movies and the relief of the election being over and Nat and Peggy preparing to graduate and moving in together and which breed of dog they should adopt once they do, and absolutely nothing feels out of place for about an hour.

But then, just before they leave, once Peggy and Nat have already gotten their cab home, Bucky slips away to the bathroom and when he comes back, Steve is standing by the bar and talking to a man. He’s tall and attractive, and Bucky can’t make out the conversation but Steve says something and the guy laughs and touches him on the shoulder, and Bucky’s stomach clutches.

“—really should catch up, get dinner—” the guy is saying, smiling at Steve, and Bucky swallows. He’s standing slightly behind Steve, who hasn’t seen him yet, not wanting to interrupt. Steve straightens up, clears his throat.

“Yeah, um—I’m actually—I’m with someone right now,” Steve says, and the man’s eyes flicker to
Bucky. Steve turns around and, upon seeing him, smiles.

“Yeah, good timing,” Steve jokes uncomfortably, and tugs an arm around Bucky’s waist. The guy looks Bucky over the same way a million other people have done to him, and his mouth twists into a smirk.

“Right. Nice to meet you,” he says dismissively. “Well, Steve, the offer stands. Give me a call anytime.”

Every one of Bucky’s muscles constrict at that; he feels untethered, like he’s falling suddenly, violent inadequacy pulsing through him.

Steve tenses, his face darkening. “Don’t hold your breath,” he says coldly. The guy raises his hands, apologetic.

“Woah, I didn’t mean anything by it, man—” But Steve turns around, ignoring him, and then they’re outside.

“Who’s he?” Bucky asks hoarsely, as nonchalantly as possible. Steve runs a hand through his hair.

“Just some jackass. We went out a couple times last year.” He says it like it shouldn’t matter, like it doesn’t bring what little self esteem Bucky had at the moment crashing around him.

‘Went out.’ He knows what that meant, even though Steve wouldn’t have said it.

And Bucky’s goddamn defective mind latches onto it and twists it into a catalyst for his own self doubt. If you don’t let him fuck you, he’s gonna get bored, Bucky tells himself cruelly, he gave that up for you, he gave everything up for you and you won’t even give him the one thing you’re good for? What the fuck is wrong with you?

It’s a twenty minute subway ride home (he doesn’t know when he started thinking of Steve’s as home, only that he doesn’t want anywhere else to ever be home again), and it’s more than enough time for Bucky to work the flicker of paranoia into indisputable fact: that he isn’t giving Steve enough. He feels selfish and awful for having not realized it before— he’s living at Steve’s, wearing clothes and eating food and enjoying luxuries that were paid for by Steve, and all he’s brought is a slew of emotional baggage and tedious anxiety and neediness. And he isn’t even putting out, he isn’t giving Steve the one thing he does have to offer, and he feels colossally selfish that he hadn’t really thought about it before tonight. In his head, the fleeting look on Steve’s face has twisted into bitterness and jealousy, and of course he isn’t asking Bucky for it because he’s too selfless and he would never, but it shouldn’t have taken him until now to realize that Steve is a twenty two year old man and it has to bother him.

Bucky swallows and resolves to fix it.

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Bucky’s quiet on the way home, and Steve notices but doesn’t press him on it; he figures it’s just been a long day.

“You think we should get a dog?” he asks once they’re on the subway, only mildly joking. Bucky blinks, distracted.

“Yeah,” he muses with a half smile, but he looks a million miles away. Steve frowns, tilts his head.

“You okay?”
“What? Yeah—yeah.” Bucky shakes his head and leans against Steve, his face half hidden in his shoulder. “Just tired.”

Steve squeezes his hand. “Okay,” he relents, and they stay comfortably quiet for the remainder of the commute home, and soon they’re tucked back into the privacy and warmth of Steve’s place, hanging up their jackets.

“I’m gonna get some water, you want a glass?” Steve asks Bucky, and he shakes his head.

“Thanks,” he mumbles, and Steve smiles with a warmth that’s reserved purely for him and fills a cup.

While Steve is standing at the counter, Bucky comes to join him, wrapping his arm around Steve’s shoulders. The house is still dark, the only light glowing dimly from the light above the oven, leaving the whole room in tones of gray and their faces mostly shadows. Steve wraps his arms around Bucky’s waist and Bucky kisses him with a fervor that’s new, an intensity they hadn’t yet arrived yet. It surprises Steve so much that he loses his balance slightly, smiling vaguely into it and kissing him back, his hand pushing gently through Bucky’s hair.

“Buck,” Steve murmurs, and he isn’t sure if it’s hesitation and nervousness or excitement and love or just the reminder that he’s there, that this lovely, heavenly, impossibly perfect person is somehow in his arms.

“Sh,” Bucky replies, his lips close to Steve’s ear, and something about it that Steve can’t quite place feels off, almost unnatural, but he doesn’t think anything of it. Then he kisses Steve again, his palm cupping Steve’s face, his lips slightly open so their tongues graze, and an alarm goes off in Steve’s head, something is wrong.

“Buck—” he says again, but this time it’s concern, and again, Bucky shakes his head.

“It’s okay, Steve,” he replies, his voice soft and raspy and performative, and before Steve can reply Bucky drops to his knees so suddenly that Steve freezes up, his hand shaking and brushing over Steve’s stomach and then to unbutton his jeans, lips parted slightly in a pout, eyes glazed as he bends his head so his forehead rests slightly against Steve’s hips.

“Bucky,” Steve says, panicked and frozen, “Bucky—don’t—Buck, stop.”

At the unusual harshness of Steve’s voice, Bucky flinches and pulls back, lifting scared eyes to meet Steve’s.

“It’s okay,” he repeats, in a breathy, trembling voice that sounds anything but okay, “please, Steve, just let me do this for you. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

And Steve feels like he’s been pulled roughly apart at the edges, violent, dull fear coursing through him.

“No,” Steve repeats, his voice grating, and Bucky pulls back, muted fear vanishing to reveal unhinged terror. Steve takes a sharp breath and scrubs a hand down his face in an attempt to calm down, to figure out something to say that doesn’t pour kerosine on this already flammable situation, and before he can muster anything of the type Bucky speaks.

“Steve, I’m sorry.” His voice is dull and quiet and trembling, the sultry, superficial act gone. He takes a ragged breath. “I thought—I thought—I thought you’d want this.” And Bucky looks so unimaginably vulnerable, just young and terrified and so, so hurt, and Steve feels his heart collapse in on itself all over again.
“Bucky,” he chokes out finally. “It’s not—forget what I want. I really, really doubt this is what you want.”

The panicky shame on Bucky’s face morphs momentarily into confusion. “What?” he replies, like it’s a concept unheard of, and Steve manages to stop himself from wincing too obviously.

He hates that Bucky’s still kneeling there, like he’s waiting for Steve to change his mind and fucking grind against his face or something, so he sits wearily beside him. Bucky slumps backwards.

“Buck,” Steve finally whispers, his voice hoarse, “baby, you’re shaking, you’re not yourself, that isn’t- that isn’t how it should be.”

Bucky stares blankly at him for a few seconds. Then he starts sobbing breathlessly, shoulders heaving, hand limp at his side, and it hurts Steve as much as anything.

“It’s okay,” he whispers, even though the knowledge that it’s very decidedly not okay is making him dizzy with distress. “Buck, it’s okay.”

It’s hard, holding Bucky while they’re both kneeling on the floor, but Steve wraps his arms around him anyway and lets Bucky lean heavily against him. He cries for a long time so Steve just stays, rubbing circles over his back with all the tenderness and love in the world, and doesn’t look at him until Bucky pulls away and wipes a hand over his eyes.

“Do you wanna take a bath?” Steve blurts out without thinking, and when Bucky lifts his red rimmed, confused eyes to meet Steve’s, he stammers “I mean, like, with clothes, or whatever, just- would that be something you’d want right now?”

Bucky stares a moment longer than laughs, a pitiful, breathless gasp, but a laugh nonetheless. “Yeah, okay,” he hiccups, and Steve stands up and helps him to his feet. Lightheaded, Bucky sways slightly upon getting up and Steve reaches out to steady him, one hand light on his waist and the other on his shoulder.

“Wait, baby,” Steve murmurs, “c’mere.” He pulls Bucky in again to a proper hug, one hand tangled gently in his hair and the other curling softly around his waist, and Bucky buries his face in Steve’s shoulder.

“I love you,” Steve whispers, lips grazing his ear, and kisses the side of his head. Bucky answers with a small, frantic grasp at Steve’s shirt, pulling him closer and keeping him there, and Steve understands.

Steve places a tentative arm around Bucky’s waist to walk down the hallway, relaxing into it when Bucky leans unmistakably into him. “I’m gonna start the water,” Steve says softly, “and then I’m just gonna change into sweats real quick—”

“Wait.” Bucky bites his lip, squeezing Steve’s arm quickly. “Don’t. Boxers and a tee shirt are fine if- if you don’t mind.”

Steve pauses, not wanting to test the limits after what he’d just witnessed, but Bucky sounds clear-headed and sure so he just nods. “Okay,” he says quietly, returning the squeeze.

Steve starts the water and strips hesitantly out of just his jeans and socks, then, once it’s deep enough, steps into the water while Bucky does the same. The tub is big enough for the two of them to sit comfortably without even touching, but Bucky still positions himself between Steve’s legs and leans back against him, his head resting against Steve’s shoulder, and it provides Steve with
such a rush of relief that he kisses Bucky lightly on the cheek. For a few minutes, it’s quiet, the two of them just looking out Steve’s bathroom window out on the glittering white and blue and purple lights of Manhattan.

“Do you want me to do your hair?” Steve asks finally without really thinking, flooded by the memory of them in this exact position in a much smaller bathroom five years ago, fingers combing through each other’s hair like it was the most intimate, tender thing they could imagine.

“Yeah,” Bucky replies in a small voice, “that sounds nice.” And Steve didn’t realize how much he had been hoping for Bucky to say yes. Outstretching an arm to the sink, Steve snatches a clean cup and then fills it.

“Tilt your head back?” Steve murmurs. Bucky does, and Steve over-turns the cup slowly, running his fingers gently through his damp hair.

“The first time—” Bucky swallows as Steve is starting to work shampoo into his hair, takes a sharp breath “—the first time I ever got paid to—to do that I was seventeen.”

And Steve freezes, his breath caught, his hands suddenly still in Bucky’s hair. “Would you keep doing that?” Bucky mumbles, and without a word, Steve does.

“I got back from uh—converting, and I was at my parents’ house for maybe six hours before I took off, because I didn’t think through living on the street, you know, I just—I just needed to get away from them. And within like, a month, um—I was out of money and some guy came up to me and—and asked me ‘how much’.”

Steve’s mouth has gone dry—he’s still rinsing the last of the shampoo out, focused intensely on getting it right like if he gets distracted, Bucky will stop. As much as he dreads hearing it, knows it’s going to make him sick to hear, he needs him to talk.

“And at first I got all shocked by that but then—but then—” Buckychoes out something between a gasp and sob, “—then like, a week later, um… I really needed- needed the money, so I—I went into an alley with this guy—”

Bucky stops and swallows hard, turning his head so it’s half pressed against Steve’s shirt with a deep, horrified shudder. “Sorry,” he whispers with a small sob, and Steve shakes his head.

“Take your time, baby, it’s okay,” he says, so softly. Bucky shivers with the effort of not crying, but then gasps tearfully and weeps softly for a few moments while Steve holds him.

“I went into the alley,” he whispers, “and I—I knew what he wanted but… then I got freaked out and—” Bucky stops then, and absolutely crumbles in Steve’s arms, breaking down in awful, brutal tears that seem to ripple through Steve and pull his lungs inwards, swallowing him whole. He doesn’t know what to say so he doesn’t say anything, doesn’t do anything but hold Bucky like it’s all he was put on this earth to do.

“I told him to stop,” Bucky chokes out, in such a small voice Steve nearly misses it. “I mean—fuck, it was four years ago and I can—I can still remember what his laugh sounded like, and what his cologne smelled like.” Bucky dissolves into another burst of sobbing, still pressed up against Steve like he’s trying to make himself as small as possible.

And Steve had long known, had been expecting to hear it, but nothing could have prepared him for the sheer, physical sickness that rips through him when Bucky says it, the violent mix of guilt and anguish and rage it evokes from some part of him he hadn’t been aware of. I’m so sorry, is all
Steve can think to say, the words falling flat and inadequate on his lips. He rocks slightly and
unintentionally, Bucky still withering in his arms. He doesn’t realize he’s crying too until he
exhales shakily and his breath seizes up, a sob pressing against his lungs that he swallows. It’s not
his pain and it cannot be Bucky’s job to comfort him now.

“That was how I first got into it, I guess,” Bucky says miserably, “even after that I did it again.
Obviously.” Bucky breaks off for a sharp gasp, dropping his head against Steve’s shoulder in
exhaustion.

“Buck,” Steve manages, “Oh, Bucky.” He feels Bucky shiver against him, exhale tearfully against
his shirt. “How many times—” Steve begins, his voice hoarse, “how many times was it—was it
like that?”

Bucky swallows thickly. “Like what?”

The word ‘rape’ feels too jarring and crude, so he whispers, “How many times did—did people not
stop?”

Bucky tenses in his arms, flinching hard. When he doesn’t answer, Steve is about to take it back, to
apologize for asking, but then Bucky closes his eyes and whispers “I don’t know.”

“What?” Steve replies in horror, all the air sucked out of his lungs. Bucky presses his palms to his
eyes, breathing slow and ragged.

“There were a lot of people,” Bucky mumbles, “some of them were worse than others. Some of
them—some of them were really, really bad.”

Steve screws his eyes shut, willing himself to hold it together, forcing down the uncontrollable
anger that’s ripping through him. “How many people did that to you, Buck?” he says softly.

“I don’t know,” Bucky repeats desperately, “at—at—at some point, it stopped mattering because I
stopped telling anyone ‘no’. Because people just fucking did it no matter what.”

Steve can’t stop a small, broken sob from escaping his lungs. “I’m so sorry, Bucky,” he whispers,
horrified. Bucky swallows and pushes himself closer into Steve’s chest.

“Not—not—not everyone was like that,” Bucky mutters, after maybe a minutes of silence. “Some
people just wanted a normal—a normal one night stand, or whatever.” He sucks in another gulp of
air, shaky and terrified. “Just… some people—” his voice breaks desperately again, biting into
Steve’s chest and ripping into his heart all over again. “—some people were so fucking bad Steve,
they—they—” And he’s crying again, the dulled, suppressed aches of trauma raw and brutal again,
leaving him shaking and panicky and unraveled in Steve’s arms again.

“It’s okay, baby, I’m right here, you’re okay,” Steve murmurs, as soothingly as he can when fear
and dread is coiling inside him, impossibly tight. He kisses the top of Bucky’s head, strokes his
hair with aching softness for a few fragile minutes.

“There was this—this guy, his name was um, Brock Rumlow.” Bucky closes his eyes, his face
anguished and contorted in distress. “He um—he—I went back to his place one time which was—
which was stupid.” A brief, ragged sob. “He—he was one of those guys who was into really
fucked up stuff, like—like—like hardcore BDSM stuff, I guess—” His face is hidden in Steve’s
shoulder, words half slurred, but Steve can hear the tremor in his voice and a kind of numb
sickness settles over him.

“I—I told him I didn’t do that stuff, but—but he didn’t listen. You know, obviously.” Bucky forces
out a laugh that comes out more as a whimper, and Steve runs his hand up and down Bucky’s back gently. “And he—he made me thank him after, he told me I liked it.” He breaks down into sobbing once more, slumping against Steve, who pulls him in a little closer and bites his lip, white noise crescendoing in his ears, overwhelmed with the heartbreak and rage that crashes over him.

“Oh god, Buck,” Steve breathes, voice quivering. “Oh baby. Oh, Buck, I’m sorry, I’m so so sorry.” Bucky makes himself smaller, pulling his knees to his chest and turning sideways so he can press his face in Steve’s neck so he’s facing towards the window.

“I don’t know, there were—I mean, there were other people like him. Once some guy—I don’t- I don’t even know his name—he—he—he pulled a gun on me and told me if I didn’t get in his car and—and do what he said he would…” Bucky shudders, clinging to Steve, who holds him a little closer and swallows the sickness that claws at his throat. “The uh—the worst one was this—” Bucky pauses and swallows, trembling so hard that Steve can feel it everywhere he’s touching him. “This guy named Alexander.”

Bucky’s breathing seems to constrict with terror at the name, his hand tightening against Steve’s side in fear. He whimpers, a quiet, broken thing that spreads hurt like poison into Steve’s veins.

Bucky looks so small and too fragile, broken in a way that someone so soft should never took.

“Bucky, you don’t have to do this,” Steve murmurs, pressing a soft kiss to his temple. Bucky shakes his head frantically.

“I wanna get it out,” he mumbles, voice muffled by Steve’s shoulder. Steve swallows and nods, works his fingers softly through Bucky’s hair.

“Okay,” Steve replies, “I’m right here.”

Alexander, Steve thinks, savage, vicious hatred searing through him, Rumlow. Everyone else who hurt him. I’m going to fucking make them pay.

“The first—the first time I met him, he, um, he asked me to come back to his apartment. And- and it was pretty—just a normal arrangement and—and—and he asked me to come back.” Bucky swallows with a sharp gasp, bringing a hand to his face. Steve circles his fingertips gently across Bucky’s back, listening silently.

“And I did, because—because he hadn’t done anything that time. Except- except—except this time —” Bucky breaks off, sobbing thickly, “this time he gave me a glass of wine and I—I drank it ’cause I just wasn’t thinking. And, um—he’d put something in it.”

Steve shuts his eyes, dull horror sinking in again. Bucky shivers, tensing and pulling his knees tight against him, protective and closed off.

“Then I woke up, uh—” Bucky stops, exhales tearfully, “he’d—he’d done stuff. I, um, I woke up on his bed, naked and it just—it just hurt.” Bucky’s still crying, but now he recoils like he’s waiting for Steve to react, to shame him. Sickened for Bucky and lost for words in his paralyzing grief, Steve goes back to rubbing soothing circles over his back, dull relief registering when Bucky relaxes ever so slightly. “I tried to—to leave but he was there and—and—and he stopped me and he told me he wanted me to come back in a week.” For the first time since he’s started talking, Bucky turns to meet Steve’s eyes. He looks so utterly ruined, his face tear stained and cheeks flushed, a hollow, terrified sheen in his eyes.

“You didn’t go back,” Steve whispers, his throat dry. Tears springing in Bucky’s eyes again, he
looks away. “Bucky, why—”

“He took pictures,” Bucky says in a small, small voice. When Steve realizes what he means his breath hitches and he’s reeling again, horror surging through him when he’d thought it couldn’t possibly get worse.

“No,” he croaks out. Bucky lowers his gaze again, mortified.

“He told me—he told me if I didn’t come back and do what—what he wanted he’d post them on those… on some fucking porn site,” Bucky spits out, in a voice saturated in disgust and misery. A wave of violent nausea slams Steve. “So I did.” His face crumbles again as he tries and fails to suppress a sob, and Steve pulls him close again.

“He was—it was months and I’d just—I went over there even though I knew what I was getting into—” Bucky’s voice cracks, “He—he was a really—a really fucking angry, violent person.” He swallows thickly. “I told him not to, I told him no every fucking time and he fucking laughed, Steve, or kicked the shit out of me—” Bucky sobs, breathless and hysterical, words slurring against one another. “I—I—I said no, I d-don’t want it he—he said I wanted it and I l-loved it but I laughed, I h-hated it so much.” Then he slumps against Steve and clings to him, fingers grasping desperately at his shirt as Steve holds him so close and tries not to let Bucky feel how he’s trembling. He doesn’t realize he’s crying again until a tear runs down his face and lands on Bucky’s shoulder, and all he can think is no no no this did not happen, not to Bucky. The unfathomable hate someone would need to see him, soft and precious and perfect as he is and try to destroy that, take advantage of that they had felt so impossibly cruel and anger is pulsing through Steve’s blood like never before, an untapped rage threatening to burst.

It’s matched only by the blanketing, horrific sadness he feels, the desperate and vain desire to hold Bucky with such fervor and love and protection that all of this hurt vanishes. It’s worse than anything Steve has ever felt, seeing him like this, and the disgusting unfairness of it threatens to make him start crying again.

“Oh Buck,” he whispers, his throat dry, “oh baby. I’m so sorry that happened to you, I- fuck, I’m sorry.”

Bucky swallows and draws a ragged breath, straightening up a little so his full weight isn’t pressed against Steve anymore.

“It, um—it got so bad that I—I stopped anyway,” Bucky mumbles, exhausted resignation heavy in his voice. “I didn’t care if he posted it. Maybe he did, it’s been a few months since I’ve seen him. I just—I couldn’t—” his voice breaks, and Bucky leans his head against Steve again.

Wordlessly, Steve holds him with equal ferocity and softness, combs his fingers rhythmically through Bucky’s damp hair. He’s still shivering slightly, and Steve vaguely thinks that Bucky has never felt so small in his arms before, so horribly vulnerable and defeated. Steve’s trying to figure out what he can possibly say, but words arise and dissipate in his brain before he can even think them over, the slow, terrible reality swimming in his mind and making him unable to think clearly under the stupor of grief and rage.

“I can leave,” Bucky whispers, so quietly Steve barely hears it and once he does, it takes him another minute to register.

“What are you talking about?” Steve replies, lost. Bucky sits up, running a hand down his face.

“I know I’m disgusting,” he replies hollowly, “You don’t have to stay, I wouldn’t want to either.”
Panic jolts Steve out of his lethargic misery, horrified at Bucky’s implication. “Bucky,” he says, his voice wavering frantically, “Buck, please look at me.”

Bucky lifts his gaze, his eyes empty and miserable. Steve swallows, raising his hand to touch Bucky’s cheek softly, brushing away a tear.

“I love you,” Steve says fiercely, his voice cracking, “I love you more than anything. You’re not disgusting.” Steve swallows a sob and Bucky stares at him, skeptical and afraid. “Bucky, you got hurt. How- how could you think that I’d leave after that?”

Bucky’s eyes shimmer with shame and exhaustion. “‘Cause now you know,” he says in a small voice, “that I’m pathetic and I—I let people do that—”

“You didn’t let people do anything,” Steve interrupts shakily. “It wasn’t—it wasn’t your fault, Bucky. None of it was your fault.” Bucky gazes stoically back at him, and then throws his arms around Steve’s neck, shoulders shaking with sobs again.

“You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met,” Steve mumbles against his neck. Bucky shakes his head, not lifting it from Steve’s shoulder. “Buck?” Bucky looks up with a gulp of air, his expression ruined.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Steve murmurs, running a hand over Bucky’s hair again. “Okay? I won’t—you’re not gonna get hurt again.”

Bucky exhales tearfully and slumps against Steve’s chest, half in his lap. “Thanks, Steve,” he says softly, the words loaded.

And there’s so much Steve wants to say but the sentiments are just lost fragments of emotion that he can’t articulate, that would land unhelpful and inconsequential in the face of the trauma Bucky’s still reeling from, so he presses a kiss to the top of Bucky’s head and stares glassily out at the hollow lights of Manhattan, weighed down by a dread and sadness like none he’s ever felt.

Chapter End Notes

not gonna promise a chapter next weekend bc i’m in the musical at my school and i’ve got rehearsals every day till the show next week AND im still finishing my last early application but if i really get it together i’ll post one but if not, 2 weeks for sure

thank you for reading, your comments make my whole life so please never stop. see you soon, in the meantime im always on tumblr @cafelesbian if you wanna say hi
Steve doesn’t sleep for hours. Bucky crashes as soon as they’re in bed, curled brokenly into Steve’s side with his head on Steve’s chest, drained and defeated, and Steve lays beside him with his arms snug and protective around Bucky and listens to his slow, deep breathing and quietly sobs.

People just fucking did it no matter what. The words ring, hollow and poisonous in Steve’s mind, echoing dully along with the other things he’d said. I told him no every fucking time. He took pictures. He made me thank him.

And then underneath that, a sharp spiral of guilt that slashes it’s way through Steve’s consciousness. You should have waited. Steve’s own voice, vicious with regret. You should have gone back home and you would have been there when he got back and then he wouldn’t have run away and then he wouldn’t have ever gotten hurt like this. Because he’d been stupid and selfish and hadn’t even bothered to think that Bucky would come back and then he’d been alone.

The longer he thinks, the more unbearable it gets.

At three am, when it’s become clear that Steve will not be sleeping anytime soon, he slowly untangles himself from Bucky’s arms, careful not to wake him, and grabs his laptop from beside the bed. He brushes Bucky’s hair gently from his face and shifts so that the screen is facing away from him, staring blankly at his desktop until he shakes his head and opens google.

Brock Rumlow he types, with trembling hands.

He scrolls stoically for a moment before he sees Manhattan, NY and clicks on the Facebook page that’s linked.

The Brock Rumlow he’s looking at had dark hair and a hard face and eyes that flash viciously in every picture of him, or maybe Steve is just imagining that. He’s a fucking cop, Steve learns, disgusted, and he’s older than him and Bucky and his precinct is a fifteen minute subway ride from Steve’s apartment.

You can’t go find and beat up a cop at his workplace, the logical part of Steve’s brain tells him, but at the moment he doesn’t fucking care. He just wants to find this one piece of shit and make him pay, because if he can’t track down every single person who hurt Bucky at least this one lowlife is right here. It’s a kind of hatred that Steve has never, ever experienced before, looking at this man, a kind of rage that makes the world around him feel slow and explosive, a thick fog of
loathing that clouds Steve’s vision and doesn’t let up.

He slams the computer shut, then changes his mind and reopens it. Partner abused, he types, wincing. The first link that comes up reads If your partner was sexually abused and he thinks that fits pretty fucking well, so he bites his lip and clicks it.

It’s all information about what being abused does to someone, what kind of behaviors or responses or symptoms might come out of it, and then a couple of generic sentences about how to support them. Steve exhales through his teeth, tearful and desperate and just fed up. He fucking knows this. He wants to know how to fix it.

He scrolls for maybe another half hour, clicking restlessly on a few more links like a Psychology Today page will have an answer, then slumps over, defeated. He closes his laptop once more and stares emptily at the wall, runs his fingers through Bucky’s hair a few more times, then changes his mind and stands up again, grasping for his phone with unsteady fingers. He heads quietly into the hallway, casting a look behind him to make sure Bucky’s still asleep, and then pulls the door softly shut behind him.

Leaning tiredly against the wall, Steve shakily taps out a text to Sam, asking if he has a moment to talk. Sam calls him less than a minute, and Steve feels a rush of gratitude.

“Hey,” he answers in a low voice.

“Hey,” Sam replies. “What’s up?”

“Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nah, can’t sleep,” he answers. Steve exhales, suddenly overwhelmingly tired and crushed, and Sam hears the quiver in his breath. “Steve? You okay?”

“I um—I talked to Bucky,” Steve says, an exhausted tremor in his voice. “He told me… some stuff, it’s—fuck, it’s bad.”

“Shit,” Sam breathes. “What, um—what’d he tell you?”

Steve’s mouth goes dry. “His—he—” The words dissolve, blocking his throat with ash. “Some guys raped him,” he grits out, “more than one. More than once. The same people—” Steve feels split down the middle; the black hole in his chest caves in again and splinters him into torn off pieces of grief and venom, and he doubles over and breaks off, choking out a furious strangled sob.

“Steve, Steve,” Sam says, frantic. “Take a deep breath, okay?” He does, straightening up and sinking back against the wall, tries to ground himself in whatever fragments of clarity he has left. “You with me?”

“Yeah,” Steve manages.


“I don’t know what to do,” Steve whispers. Sam is silent on the other end for a few seconds.

“You’re—you’re doing what you can, I think,” Sam finally says. “You’re supporting him and loving him and listen, Steve, I think it’s a good sign he told you. It means he’s trusting you more, and the more he can open up and process the better, but man, neither of you can handle all of this on your own. He’s gotta see a professional.”
“Yeah, you wanna be the one to suggest that to him?” Steve mumbles bitterly. Sam sighs.

“I know,” he says quietly. “But like—that’s the best advice I can give right now. I’m so sorry, man.”

“Yeah, well, I might go murder a cop in midtown,” Steve mutters. The hate in his voice startles him.

“What?”

“I found one of the guys online.” Steve realizes he’s gripping the phone so tightly his hand has started to ache, and he lets go slightly. “He’s a cop. His name’s Rumlow and I’m going to kick his ass.” It’s a furious babble, nonsensical and insane, but Steve is so far from caring anymore.

“Steve,” Sam says seriously, “listen to me. You can’t do anything about that. It’s not gonna help you and it’s really not gonna help Bucky, and this—people like that aren’t people you wanna get involved with.”

Steve runs his hand through his hair, suddenly and intensely unsteady with exhaustion. “You’re right,” he admits, and closes his eyes, worn out. “Thanks, Sam.”

“Of course. I can keep talking, if you want—”

“Nah, thanks man.” Grateful as he is to Sam, the conversation isn’t making him feel any better, and he doesn’t want to keep Sam up or leave Bucky for much longer. “I’ll talk to you later. Thanks again.”

“It’s gonna be okay, Steve,” Sam says. “Text me, alright?”

“Yeah. G’night,” Steve says, and hangs up, so tired.

Then he stares at his screen blankly for a moment and debates calling Natasha, purely because he knows that she would encourage him to go beat the shit out of Brock Rumlow. She’d probably join him.

Instead, he lies down next to Bucky and falls into a restless, unhappy sleep.

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When Bucky wakes up, it’s to Steve’s hand running gently up his back. He’s sitting up next to Bucky on his laptop, mug of coffee in his other hand, and he doesn’t notice Bucky’s awake until he turns over and touches Steve lightly on the side.

“Hey,” Steve says quietly, shutting the laptop and setting the coffee beside him on the nightstand. He reaches out to stroke Bucky’s hair softly and Bucky props himself on his elbow then sits up, leans against the headboard.

“Hey,” he croaks out, voice weary. Steve wraps an arm around Bucky, safe and protective, and Bucky leans against him with an exhausted sigh.

Steve doesn’t hate him. Steve knows what’s happened to him, at least the bulk of it, and he doesn’t think Bucky is this disgusting, worthless slut that everyone else saw him as, made him into with their vicious names and hands like weapons and cold eyes that raked over him like he was a thing to assess how easily they could use him. He hadn’t been prepared for the relief it would bring, but Bucky feels like he’s exhaled, like the poison of keeping it his own private, shameful, dirty thing
has ebbed away, at least a little. He hadn’t realized how heavily he was carrying this secret, the paranoia of Steve finding out and hating him irrational but overwhelming, constantly throbbing like a warning. But he knew and Bucky could never have imagined the catharsis of telling him, of releasing that secret pain and shame that he had clutched to his chest for so many years just to feel it burn and fester inside him.

Steve loves him. Steve thinks it wasn’t his fault.

No one’s ever told him that it wasn’t his fault before. It rings untrue and harsh as Bucky’s mind takes it and twists it and works against him, but there’s a sort of hollow, weary relief inside him, a sad, shattered comfort he hadn’t expected.

Just. Every time he’d pictured telling someone about this, Steve or Wanda or any of his other friends, the response had always seemed inevitably the same, repulsion that Bucky would lower himself like that, would put himself in that situation to be victimized and used and then have the audacity to complain, that he’d gotten what was coming to him and it was his own fault. All things people had said to him, had snarled into his ear as he whimpered out a breathless no or twisted frantically away to no avail. If they paid him, they as good as owned him, and that made it all okay.

But now there’s even one single person on Earth who doesn’t see it that way, the most important person, and Bucky clings to that like something precious.

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It’s over the coming days and weeks that Steve begins to understand the full extent of Bucky’s trauma, the way it stretches across every aspect of life, taints everything in stale, constant terror. He learns more in fragments, in thoughtless details, pinpricks of horrible moments that Bucky reveals hesitantly and tearfully and with words that quiver and shatter, breaking Steve’s heart all over again.

_They’re in the kitchen._ It’s evening and they’re doing dishes and Steve looks up to see Bucky staring off, eyes glassy and unfocused, empty glass trembling in his hand.

“Buck? Baby?” Steve straightens up and Bucky blinks and swallows, glancing towards him.

“What’s wrong?”

Bucky shakes his head quickly. “Sorry. Just—remembering something.” Steve stays quiet, gives him the space to talk without pushing him, and Bucky takes it.

“Do you, uh—do you remember when I broke that glass a few weeks ago?”

“Uh—yeah.”

Bucky swallows thickly, blinking back frustrated tears. “Well, um—the same kinda thing h-happened with- with Alexander. I—I was leaving and I knocked—” Bucky exhales, lifting his hand to stifle a sob, fighting tears ferociously. “I knocked this glass lamp. It—it was really expensive.” Gasping, Bucky swipes a furious hand across his cheek. Steve bites his lip, dread pulling itself taut in his chest. “And he—he hit me and he—he—he told me to kneel in it—” Bucky chokes out a small sob and Steve draws a sharp, horrified breath. “And h-he picked up the biggest piece and he—um—” With a ragged gasp Bucky breaks off, lowers his head and sobs. Steve sets down the plate he’s holding and rubs Bucky’s shoulder with soft pressure for a few moments until he shakes his head and takes another shallow breath.
“He made me, um, suck him off while he—he cut it against my shoulder.” Something breaks in Bucky while he says it, crumbling into tears again as Steve bites back a gasp, sickened and anguished. “He said because that was his and—and he paid for it, it—it was only fair that—that I paid him back by letting him do whatever he wanted. And—and—and I needed to be—to be punished.” Bucky sobs again, so ashamed that he feels lightheaded. He still has the scar, ugly and jagged, a reminder of how bad he is.

Steve pulls Bucky in and lets him cry against his shoulder, cradling him as softly as he can, runs his hands through his hair like gentle fingertips and delicate kisses and beautiful words will make a difference. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I love you, it’s okay, you never ever deserved that. Bucky can’t make himself believe it.

They’re coming out of a movie theater. The sky is dark, Manhattan illuminated by cloudy streetlights and fluorescent signs and gritty headlights that always feel a little suffocating. Bucky’s holding his hand tightly and Steve is thinking about how moving out of Brooklyn was a stupid decision on his part, and then he’s distracted as shouting arises behind them, some guy taking off in the crowd and his friend running after him, yelling “Brock! Brock wait up!”

Steve doesn’t give it a second thought, keeps walking, but stops when he realizes Bucky is frozen in place, eyes glazed and terrified as he stares, stunned and breathless, at the place where they had been running a moment ago.

“Baby?” Steve says, concern pulsing through him, and then realizes Brock. “Buck,” he murmurs, “Buck it’s okay, it’s just some guy, it’s not him, alright?” Bucky blinks glassily and nods, still fearful, and Steve swallows and wraps a protective arm around his shoulders, steering them out of the crowd into an open space on a sidestreet.

“Breathe, baby, it’s alright,” Steve says softly, and Bucky does, nodding and screwing his eyes shut.

“Sorry,” he grits out after a moment, pressing his face into Steve’s coat for a brief moment. “Sorry, it’s stupid—”

“No, it isn’t, love,” Steve says, and Bucky just nods. An ambulance passes, making Bucky’s face flicker in red and blue light for a moment and then back to the soft gray of Manhattan, and he still looks so scared. Steve’s gut twists with the awfulness of it.

“It’s okay,” Steve repeats, “let’s just go home.”

They’re in bed. Or they were, but then Steve stirs and reaches for Bucky and, upon realizing that he’s grasping at empty air, sits up in a panic. The hallway light is on, its orange glow striking Steve awake, and he gets up hazily and treads into the living room.

Bucky’s there, sitting on the floor and leaning against the couch gazing stoically into the fireplace, which crackles feebly. He jumps upon seeing Steve, swallowing.

“Hey,” Steve murmurs, “you okay?”

“Yeah,” Bucky replies hoarsely, “sorry.” Even with his tentative trust for Steve growing, he’s still doing that all the time, apologizing for nothing like he’s trying to taper some unfounded anger in Steve before it even reveals itself.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Steve answers, the constant reminder no less heartbreaking with its frequency. Bucky shrugs halfheartedly. “What’s up?” Steve asks gently, settling carefully next to
“Couldn’t sleep,” he says. Steve reaches slowly for his hand and when Bucky doesn’t pull away, takes and and circles his thumb lightly over Bucky’s knuckles. Bucky exhales, breath quivering.

“What’s up?” Steve asks, voice gentle. Bucky shrugs, frustrated and nonchalant.

“Just thinking too hard, I guess,” he replies, resting his head on Steve’s shoulder. Steve squeezes his hand.

“Care to elaborate?”

Bucky sighs, shuts his eyes. “I don’t know. I mean—I think talking to you about…this stuff is probably a good thing, in—in most ways. But it means I have to actually think about it.” He huffs out a humorless, tired laugh. “And I’ve basically tried to just not think about it for four years so now it’s like… I don’t know. It’s just… not fucking fun to think about.”

Steve swallows, running his hand down Bucky’s arm. “Yeah,” he says, voice wrecked, “I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s not your fault,” Bucky mumbles, burrowing closer to Steve.

“Yeah,” Steve repeats absently, and kisses the top of his head, and they stay there until the fire is just smoldering, blackened logs.

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“Buck?” Steve begins one evening. They’re lying on the couch, Bucky’s head on his chest and arms tight around his middle as Steve runs his fingers absently through his hair. Bucky is almost completely calmed down from an earlier panic attack, when Steve had said, idiotically, “Come to bed, sweetheart,” not thinking about his choice of words or pet name, and watched Bucky go pale, body curling in on himself, hands shaking. Steve immediately kneeled below him and murmured, “I’m so sorry, Buck, I just meant—I’m sorry, love, not that, I promise,” and, when Bucky nodded, taken his hands and kissed his knuckles and eventually, laid down on the couch with him and held him. He still feels guilty.

“Mm?”

Bucky lifts his head.

“Have you thought about talking to someone?” Steve keeps his voice even and careful, but there’s a desperation underlying. Defensiveness pricking him, Bucky sits up.

“Talking to someone?” he repeats flatly. Steve nods, running a hand through his hair.

“Yeah, like a therapist?” Steve keeps the question so intently nonchalant that it somehow stings more than if he had come out and requested it, like if he pushes it too hard Bucky will retreat.

Which, okay. Maybe true, but his false indifference isn’t better.

“A shrink,” Bucky says. “Yeah, probably not.”

“Why?” Steve presses him, desperation creeping its way into his voice. Bristling, Bucky turns his gaze away from Steve.

“I don’t need to pay someone to tell me that letting scumbags fuck me for fifty dollars screwed me
up,” Bucky snaps, hoping the harshness of the words will jar Steve enough that he’ll drop it, even though it leaves him feeling hollow and stunned. Shutting his eyes, Bucky shakes the sudden frigidity and stands up, his back to Steve so he doesn’t need to see the shock and heartbreak on his face.

“Buck,” Steve says, a moment later, “it’s not- it’s about processing and—and recovering—”

Defensiveness and resistance has been quivering violently inside Bucky since Steve mentioned it and now it snaps, something deep within Bucky’s chest insisting this is wrong, you’re wrong and bad and disgusting and you’re never gonna be fixed so why bother trying. Bucky runs a hand down his face miserably.

“Yeah. Recovering.” Bucky huffs out a bitter laugh, the paranoid, angry, terrified part of his brain in control now. He turns to Steve now, his eyes still soft and concerned and patient, daring him to convince him that he’s not worth this, that there’s no fucking recovering when you’ve been this damaged. “C’mon, Steve, don’t kid yourself. I’m a little past that.”

“Bucky, you’ve gotten hurt.” Steve pushes back with the same patience but a new fierceness and desperation crescendoing in his voice, like if he believes it strongly enough, Bucky will believe it too.

“So fucking what?” Bucky snaps, and his mind feels haywire and wrong, metal against metal as he argues with Steve. “You think it’s gonna fucking fix me?” Steve swallows, and Bucky can see him struggling to stay patient, can anticipate Steve’s irritation, even anger, but his own anger, pushed back and internalized, is coming uncoiled even though Steve had nothing to do with it in the first place. He’s pushing Steve to see how long it’ll take him to push back, to drop his never ending patience and give up on Bucky. Bucky lifts his chin and glares defensively, half terrified that Steve might snap, really snap, the same way other guys had when he’d yelled back at them, and even with the knowledge that Steve would never, ever put a hand on him like that, Bucky takes a step back.

“You know I don’t think you need to be fixed, Buck,” Steve says, defeation in his voice. “It’s not about like… changing you, it’s—fuck, you’re in pain, Bucky, and it kills me to see you like this.” Steve chokes out the last few words, his face crumbling into desperation, and all of Bucky’s vague and unfounded anger turns suddenly inward, guilt that he had done this to Steve pressing unrelentingly into his lungs and leaving him feeling suffocated.

“Please, Bucky,” Steve adds, despondent, “I love you so much, and I’m here for you and I’ll be here for you always. But I—I really think that talking to someone who… knows this stuff would be good for you.”

Bucky swallows thickly, looking away. “Are you gonna kick me out if I don’t?” he snarks, but the harshness is lost in the sadness and exhaustion and hopelessness that shudders through him in a shockwave every time he tries to talk about this. He regrets it immediately, but it’s made worse by the incredulous, aching pain that flashes across Steve’s face.

“No,” he whispers, “I—are you kidding?”

“I know,” Bucky mumbles quickly, backpedaling as fast as he can, “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.”

Steve swallows. “It’s okay,” he says. And then, much softer, “I’m never gonna—” he breaks off, rubbing a hand over his face. “Buck, as far as I’m concerned this is our home. I wouldn’t—there’s nothing that you have to do to be here.”
Guilt and self loathing snakes itself around Bucky’s lungs and squeezes inward. “I know,” he repeats in a small voice. “You aren’t—you didn’t do anything to make me feel like that,” he adds, desperate to shift Steve’s self blame off of himself.

“What did?” Steve asks, so quietly. Bucky sighs, shrinking in on himself.

“I don’t know,” he whispers. And when Steve stays silent, looking at him with that mix of sadness and love and confusion in his eyes, Bucky adds brusquely “I feel like every good thing has like, an expiration date.” He swallows. “This included. I feel like you won’t want to—to deal with… all this.” He gestures vaguely and miserably to himself. “Sorry,” he mutters on an exhale.

Sorrow flashes quickly over Steve’s face, but then he shakes his head firmly. “Never,” he replies, and he sounds so sure. “There’s literally nothing on earth that could make me not want to be with you.”

And Bucky feels so needy, so overly sensitive when tears spring in his eyes, weak relief ebbing against the snarling doubt in his gut. “Okay,” he mumbles, gulping. Steve reaches out his hand and Bucky pushes it aside, throwing his arms around Steve’s neck instead and they collapse against each other.

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For Steve’s part, every time he sees Bucky sad like this, he listens and then holds him and trails feather light kisses over his skin and whispers the softest words of reassurance that he can muster, and every time he’s left a little emptier and more heartbroken than the last time. He’d somehow convinced himself that even though it isn’t fine now, it will be, that if he just loved Bucky enough he could ease the pain through gentleness and tenderness and care to undo the horror he’d gone through, that it hadn’t been so unbelievably bad that it was something they couldn’t fix together.

He just feels colossally stupid, the thought that maybe it hadn’t been that bad lingering in his mind like a taunt, vicious guilt flaring every time he’s drawn back to it. Not that bad. Bucky had been abused and assaulted, had been fucking raped by more than one person on more than one occasion. Of course it was fucking bad. Of course Steve couldn’t love away years of trauma and conviction that he wasn’t worthy of love or gentleness or care.

And underneath the guilt and the grief there’s rage, stirring impatient and insistent and rising thunderously when Steve thinks about the people who’d done this to him, hissing and twisting and spiraling in a chaotic, almost unhinged rage that won’t let up, that chips away at him in vain with absolutely nowhere to go.

***

A few days later, while on a jog with Sam, the conversation is still gnawing unpleasantly at Steve, his desperate desire for Bucky to just be okay leaving him in a permanent state of anxiety. He complains about it after about three miles as they slow their pace, burying his face periodically in his hands and talking animatedly, the vague, universal frustration that he’s repressed over the last few weeks coming loose.

“I just don’t get it, he needs help so bad and he won’t go see someone—” Steve is saying, after about ten minutes of expressing uninhibited rage at the faceless guys who’d hurt Bucky, describing what he wanted to do to them while Sam nodded and grimaced. At this, though, Sam scoffs.

“What?” Steve says, breaking off mid sentence to swing around and look at him. Sam raises his
“Nothing,” Sam says carefully. “I mean—look, Steve, I hate the situation you’re in, I hate that Bucky went through that shit. It’s all awful and I can’t imagine how you’re both feeling. And I obviously think he should see a therapist about PTSD. But do you hear yourself?” When Steve blanches, he sighs.

“You don’t get it? Do you remember when you guys first split up? You were a mess, dude, you were drinking and not sleeping and barely functioning until Stark hired you.”

“I know,” Steve replies, defensive, “what does that have to do—?”

“Man, me and Natasha must’ve told you a hundred times to go see a therapist,” Sam tells him pointedly. “And you wouldn’t. And—I’m not trying to invalidate you, I hope you know that- but what Bucky’s dealing with is a whole different plane of issues. Like—to say the least, it’s harder to talk about.” Steve shrugs—he wouldn’t argue with that. “And you don’t get why he doesn’t wanna go talk to a stranger about how he was abused by a dozen different guys? Think about it for two seconds, man, it might make a little more sense.”

So Steve does, and a vague understanding clears in his mind. He thinks about his own aversion to therapy, the way he had recoiled with disgust at the idea of bearing his soul to a stranger, untethered and vulnerable and asking for judgement. And how for Bucky, that’s amplified a million times in ways Steve can’t even begin to understand, and he feels like he’s shaking on the inside.

“Goddamnit,” Steve whispers, and pinches the bridge of his nose. Sam squeezes his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Sam says, his voice sad and reassuring. “I wish I had better advice, Steve. You guys are in such a bad position.”

Steve nods and swallows, turning his eyes up to the bleak winter sky, too heartbroken to say much more.

***

Steve wakes up that night to Bucky trembling against him, nearly convulsing, his face screwed up in fear, mumbling frantically and incoherently. “Hey, hey,” he murmurs soothingly, shaking Bucky’s shoulder gently. And when Bucky doesn’t reply, louder, “Buck, you’re okay, babe.”

Bucky wakes with a gasp, startling and jerking up, disoriented and scared. Steve pushes himself up, his hand gentle against Bucky’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” he repeats gently, and he watches recognition flash across Bucky’s face before he slumps against the headboard, defeated.

“C’mere,” Steve mumbles, reaching out to pull Bucky close to him. He can still feel how hard Bucky’s shaking, his eyes twitching and darting around like he’s scanning for a threat, and Steve repeats sadly “It’s okay, baby, I got you.”

They don’t talk about it until the next morning. They’re sitting next to each other at the counter and Bucky is stirring sugar into his coffee in a frantic, almost panicky motion.

“You know what it’s like?” he says. “Having those dreams, or flashbacks or whatever they are.”

Steve touches his wrist lightly to stop him, runs his fingertips down his arm. “What?” he asks softly.
Bucky swallows, his mouth pulled into a thin, pained line. “Do you remember being a little kid, and lying awake in bed being scared of the dark, thinking something’s gonna come out and grab you, and even though you know it’s probably not you can’t sleep or move or stop thinking about it? And it’s just—it just paralyzed you?”

Steve bites his lip and nods. “Yeah. I always thought like, a robber was gonna break into my house,” he says, and then realizes that was a stupid fucking comment. Bucky lets out a small laugh anyway.

“That’s kinda what it feels like, when I think about this now. At least the fear part. I know no one’s here but like… they just feel so fucking real when I’m dreaming, or when I see someone who looks like them—” Bucky shudders hard, his eyes screwed shut. “God, it feels like they’re there.” Steve squeezes his hand and doesn’t let go.

Later that day, Steve thinks back to being a child, lying awake utterly paralyzed with fear about someone breaking in, his heart racing, breath trapped, some vague abstract idea of a thief with a mask and a bag strung over his shoulder the most terrifying thing imaginable, somehow convinced they’d burst in any second. Trying to calm himself down but failing, even with the knowledge that what he was scared of was nearly impossible, terrified of what it could do to him.

It’s not really understanding what Bucky feels at all. But it’s as close as he’s ever come.

Chapter End Notes

i’m 90% sure i’ll be able to update next week, but if not then in the next 2 weeks

as always your comments are my absolute most favorite things on earth and always make me wanna write more, thank you so much and feel free to keep them coming

sujkfhdsg

say hi on tumblr @cafelesbian goodbye my friends
The morning of December nineteenth, Steve gets a text from Tony reminding him of a party he’s having that weekend. He reads it while he’s in the kitchen with Bucky, who’s propped on the countertop reading off a recipe for lemon ricotta pancakes as Steve attempts them over the skillet.

It’s one of those beautiful, precious moments where they’re both okay, they’re just normal guys in their early twenties, giddily and breathlessly in love, where things are easy and painless and uncomplicated in the ways they deserve but that the universe grants them rarely.

“What?” Bucky asks him, as Steve frowns at the message, distracted.

“Hm? Oh, nothing.” He sets it down, turning back to Bucky. “I forgot Stark’s having a Christmas party this week.” Dismissive, he cracks an egg into the mixing bowl.

“When?” Bucky replies, and then, “Babe, shell.” Steve grins sheepishly and fishes out the eggshell with a fork.

“Saturday, I think. I’ve gone the last few years, it’s always a big scene.” Steve pauses briefly, adding “I don’t suppose you wanna be my date?”

Bucky raises an eyebrow, reaches forward to brush some batter off of Steve’s chin. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Steve replies, “of course.” He cocks his head, a slight, encouraging smile twitching at his mouth, leaning a little closer to Bucky.

“Alright,” Bucky says after a moment, shrugging. Steve blinks.

“Really?” Steve grins, reaching up to lightly push a loose strand of hair from Bucky’s face.

Bucky rolls his eyes fondly. “Yeah. You need someone to stop you from fist fighting whatever CEOs Stark invites.”

Steve bursts out laughing, raising himself up to press a quick kiss to Bucky’s lips, and everything is okay.

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So they go. Steve wears the green and red shirt that they’d bought in one of those early, early days
together and Bucky teases him about it, declaring his relief that he hadn’t bought the other one, and
Steve puts up with it with some grumbling in the cab ride there. But then they pull up in front of
Tony’s building, centered on fifty-seventh street’s Billionaire’s Row, and Bucky is slammed with
horrible anxiety at the realization of just how out of place he is here.

“You okay?” Steve asks, nervous, as they get out of the car. Bucky links his arm around Steve’s
waist, exhaling heavily as Steve drapes his over Bucky’s shoulders, leaning closely against him.

“Yeah,” Bucky tells him, “yeah, I’m good.” He swallows, changes the subject. “Who’s gonna be
here? Anyone you know?”

“Um, maybe a couple people.” Steve pauses to nod at the doorman as they duck out of the chilling
December air, shivering at the warmth. “Bruce will probably be there, he and Tony are tight…
mostly corporate people. Tony’s fiance, obviously.”

“What’s the star factor?” Bucky asks as Steve punches the elevator buttons. “Besides you,
obviously.” Steve snorts, shakes his head.

“Usually pretty good, last year Thor was there.” He raises his eyebrows, grins as Bucky tilts his
head.

“The actor? The hot one?”

Steve scowls playfully, shakes his head again in mock disdain. “Watch it,” he says, and Bucky
laughs. “How many Thors are there?”

Bucky winks, nervousness ebbing away slightly. “I probably won’t leave you for him,” he
announces, making Steve roll his eyes again.

“Good to know.”

The elevator doors pull open and Steve squeezes Bucky’s hand quickly as they step out and
directly into Tony’s apartment. He owns the top four floors of this building, Steve had said, eleven
thousand square feet stretching across it making it less like a place to live and more like a small
hotel. Bucky glances around the massive living room and he gets it, the almost disgusting wealth
that Tony lives in. Marble that covers the floors and walls and ceilings has been decked out in
glittering white lights and wreaths and mistletoe and Christmas trees that punctuate the bright
white, weaving in between huge plush couches and coffee tables covered with hors d’oeuvres and
champagne flutes. The entire outer wall, though, is glass, and endless window of sliding doors that
open up to the highest level of a balcony.

“Didn’t realize what a dump your place was,” Bucky mutters to Steve, who laughs.

“Sorry to disappoint.” He grins at Bucky, who’s still scanning the crowd, tightening his arm
around Steve instinctually as he looks around this room of impressive people, beautiful and
wealthy and successful, and his heart slams against his ribcage like they can look at him and see
through the facade that Steve’s letting him put on, his constant, tugging, nauseating inadequacy
amplified.

“Champagne?” Steve asks, sounding weary, and relief simmers in Bucky’s chest at the realization
that Steve is a little uncomfortable too. They’re in this together, the way it’s always been, the way
it should be, and he relaxes at the knowledge that while he’s tucked into Steve’s side then no one
will do anything.

“Please,” Bucky answers, and a caterer seems to materialize beside them, handing them glasses and
smiling and taking their coats, and Bucky exchanges a quick look with Steve that says *Jesus Christ*, before sipping the drink that undoubtedly cost more than his entire outfit.

For the first forty-five minutes or so, everything is fine and Bucky relaxes, even enjoys it. He sticks close to Steve, twirling the champagne flute nervously between his fingers and trying to remember the names of everyone he greets. Steve, it turns out, knows a fair amount of people, various friends from the art world or who he’s met through Tony or admirers of his work which always makes pride swell in Bucky’s chest. It’s a flurry of introductions and small talk, easy enough to get through with Steve’s arm still curled protectively around his waist, and Bucky feels like he can exhale again.

And then he loses his breath all over again, when someone behind them shouts “Steve!” His heart gives out before he even turns around.

The room collapses in on itself in one excruciatingly slow moment. Bucky’s breath hitches and then traps itself in his lungs, cold fear coiling through him in a surreal, nightmarish fashion as he tries, disbelievingly, to stop seeing Alexander Pierce. *This isn’t real,* Bucky thinks, vaguely and numbly, *he isn’t here stop it stop it this isn’t happening.*

But he doesn’t vanish, not as he reaches out to shake Steve’s hand and not as he flashes him a grin and not when his eyes flicker to Bucky and then his face contorts, shock to confusion to mockery and Bucky can’t take his eyes off of him as he looks him over. Steve’s voice and Alexander’s voice and the Christmas music and the drunken background chatter grind against each other in a screeching, chaotic white noise that Bucky can feel, pressing against him and swallowing him whole, and Bucky is frozen, his arms and legs and heart all having ceased to function as he stands in front of Alexander.

“It’s been a while, how are you?” he’s saying to Steve, and his voice sets off a siren for Bucky, nausea washing over him. And then, a few moments late, the realization that he’s speaking to Steve like he knows him, that they’ve met, sends dread and horrified confusion through him like shockwaves, and he can’t really process that because it feels like the ground is giving out under him.

“—alright, how’s your family?” Steve says, and Bucky wants to shake his head or get the fuck away except he can’t move. And then as Pierce is answering, the realization crashes against him and leaves him so incredulous that he almost laughs, that he’d only told Steve his first name and Steve has no idea who he’s talking to. Bitter disbelief strikes him, pulses through him until he feels brittle, stuck, his mind a broken loop of disbelief that threatens to split him open.

The conversation remains a frantic, petrifying hum that doesn’t permeate Bucky’s brain until Pierce raises his voice, drilling his eyes into Bucky and asking “I haven’t met your date?”

Bucky flinches. His voice is a sharp, bitter spiral through Bucky’s chest, taunting and diminishing and all Bucky can do is stare.

“Oh, this is my partner, Bucky,” Steve says, and the warmth in his voice is another spear through Bucky’s heart that burns for all the opposite reasons.

“Bucky,” Pierce repeats, his name twisted and sharp in Pierce’s mouth. “Nice to meet you.” A sharp ripple of horror shoots through him—he’d always gone by James to the guys who paid him. Pierce’s smirk, the way he spits out Bucky’s name like it’s something to be ashamed of feels like he’s ripped him open and Bucky can’t breathe. He doesn’t say anything back, can’t do anything but make himself nod, a motion that makes Pierce narrow his eyes so slightly that only Bucky can see the sneer.
“We’re gonna grab a drink,” Steve says, still blissfully unaware. “Talk to you later.” And Pierce plasters on the friendly smile again, gives them a nod while Steve turns away, gently pulling Bucky with him.

“God, I hate that guy,” Steve mutters, once they’re out of earshot, “I worked with him about a year ago because his bank funded this gallery I was doing, he’s such a prick.”

And god, the ironic cruelty of it sends nausea surging through Bucky, the universe having seemingly turned all of its mocking to him in this absurdly vicious turn of events. He wonders vaguely what the odds are and thinks that they must be astronomical, for Steve and Alexander to know each other, to have worked together at the same time Bucky had first met him. Bucky is shaking, convulsing on the inside but unable to break, the mix of horror and astonished disbelief leaving him frozen in crystalized misery, and he might laugh if he could remember how to breathe.

“Buck?” Steve says when Bucky doesn’t answer. “You okay?”

Bucky swallows as Steve’s voice shatters the shock like ice, falling to pieces around him, the room coming back in splintered bits of noise and motion. “Yeah,” he mumbles, “gotta go to the bathroom.” He untucks himself from Steve’s side and makes for the hallway before Steve can reply, stumbling into Tony’s bathroom and fumbling with the lock.

Alone, Bucky’s knees buckle underneath him; he sinks to his knees and buries his face in his hands, drawing a ragged gasp, and he’s shaking so hard and he can’t stop. He leans over the toilet and throws up. He curls into himself, body drawn tight, and cries. The world drifts by in disconnected, foreboding slow motion—Bucky’s heart slams against his chest and matches the thud of Christmas music, insistent through the door. He feels unwound, disbelief and horror burning him, too shaken and stunned to properly think or process. The universe saw him and twisted fate in the cruelest way he could think of, and all Bucky can think, in shattered consciousness, is that he’d been stupid to think he was safe, he was free of this. Something in him caves in, an achingly familiar darkness washing over him, a violent tremble that refuses to subside.

Okay you aren’t gonna do this you can’t just stay in here take a breath pull yourself together or you’re giving him exactly what he wants you can’t do this not here.

He splashes water on his face two, three times and rinses his mouth out and takes in a gulp of air, his lungs quivering with the effort of it, and all he can think is that he needs to find Steve right now. Once Bucky thinks he’s gotten enough control over himself to walk and push through the crowd outside, he opens the door with trembling hands and steps into the hallway on legs that still feel like they’re going to give out.

He shouldn’t have. He should have stayed locked in there until he vanished into air and silence because Pierce is waiting, leaning nonchalantly against the wall. Shock and terror snap him so he’s standing upright, protective, breath caught in his throat. Terror pulses through him again, acute and refined and screaming at him to move and paralyzing him all at once. Pierce smirks, pushing himself off the wall and looking Bucky over.

“Bucky,” he drawls, “I thought it was James.”

The walls squeeze in, horrifically claustrophobic, something out of a nightmare, and Bucky draws another short breath and shakes his head, a small, helpless this isn’t happening this can’t be happening please let this end.

The hallway is so long and so empty. He realizes vaguely that he can hear the music still, Baby, It’s Cold Outside echoing, muted and slowed down, and it almost makes him laugh at the
absurdity of it and god, he’s scared and god, he wants to be sick.

“It’s been a while,” Pierce continues, and steps forward, backing Bucky against the wall. His legs, arms, everything numb, he moves back. “What happened to our arrangement? Rogers paying you more?”

“Stop,” Bucky hears himself whimper. Pierce laughs.

“I didn’t have him pegged as the type. I’m a little impressed.” He steps closer and Bucky can’t back up anymore, and fear sparks through him so vividly he goes a little dizzy. This isn’t happening. Alexander Pierce does not have him pressed against a wall right now with absolutely no one around to bear witness, he is not going to do this to Bucky. It’s a nightmare, it’s a dream and Bucky’s going to wake up in bed next to Steve who will hold him as long as he needs him to until he stops feeling like he’s lost control over his limbs.

But it’s not, and he doesn’t.

STOP, Bucky’s brain screams, an explosion of fear, but he can’t get his mouth to shape around the word and he doesn’t say anything at all.

And then Pierce squeezes his stomach so hard Bucky cries out, brushes fingers over his cheek, and familiar terror uncoils itself in Bucky’s stomach and chest and head as he seizes up, croaking out a breathless sob.

—no no no no stop it get off of me—

“I liked you better without the arm,” Alexander tells him, voice lilting with mockery. “Rogers pay for that?” Bucky realizes he must be crying because a tear lands on Pierce’s wrist but he can’t feel it, didn’t ever register when it started. Pierce laughs, wipes it roughly against Bucky’s cheek.

“Stop,” Bucky hears himself hiss through clenched teeth, louder and trembling. Pierce’s smirk contorts into a snarl.

“I don’t think so, Bucky.” There’s alcohol on his breath, bitter and disgusting, as he leans closer to Bucky’s face. “You owe me a couple months worth of sessions. You didn’t forget what I have, did you? Think Rogers wants to know what a fucking slut you are?” He laughs, words scraping like sandpaper in Bucky’s mind, so terrible Bucky’s vision whites out with horror. “Or does he already know, and gets off on that too?”

Bucky sobs, every nerve in his body burnt out with terror. Alexander laughs.

“Get in the bathroom,” Alexander hisses, squeezing the back of Bucky’s neck like he’s just —fuck—a pet or a prop or something, and the thing in Bucky that had refused to break finally does, overwhelmed dread and disgust pushing him over the edge. He wrenches himself out of Pierce’s grip, brings his foot hard against his shin. Pierce lets out a shocked snarl, jumping back, and Bucky shoves him aside and bolts down the hallway, pushes through a crowd of wasted socialites and throws open Tony’s sliding balcony door just because it’s in his way, finally doubling over in the freezing air. A sob tears itself out of his throat and he feels so lightheaded, almost delirious, every single cell in his body overworked and oversensitive.

Then there’s a hazy, half muted voice and a hand on his back and he jumps away, skin crawling, whipping around to scream “Don’t touch me!”

“Buck! What—okay, fuck, I’m sorry—”
A weak shudder of relief pushes its way through Bucky’s lungs at the sight of Steve, who raises his hands and stares at him, terrible fear in his eyes as he takes Bucky in. “Bucky,” he says, calmer, voice shaky, “talk to me, what’s wrong?”

The complete realization of everything that’s just happened spirals violently and suddenly in Bucky’s mind, and he takes a breath to try to speak but then he’s just crying, so fucking overwhelmed that he can’t get a word out, throwing himself against Steve who holds him, terrified. “Baby, please, tell me what’s happening?” Steve’s voice rises with terror and god, Bucky wants to, but it takes him five or six shuddering breaths to be able to even croak out a word.

“Pierce,” he finally gasps, and Steve’s eyes narrow.

“What? Did he say something—”

“Steve, that’s him, fuck—Alexander—” Then he’s shaking and crying all over again, and Steve stares at him with terrified confusion until it clicks. His whole face drops, shocked, and then darkens with horror and denial and Bucky can feel his hands shaking against his back.

“No,” Steve whispers, and all Bucky can do is nod, miserable and helpless. “Oh, my god. Oh, my god, Bucky—I’m—Jesus Christ, I’m so fucking sorry, I—he—oh, my god.” Then panic seems to jolt him again, and Steve startles and grates out, “Did he do something to you just now?” in a voice that sounds moments away from breaking.

“No,” Bucky manages, “he tried. I pushed him off.” He’s trembling all over again and Steve is pulling him in, so achingly soft and gentle, whispering “it’s okay, I’ve got you, it’s okay.”

“I’m gonna kill him,” Steve spits. At that, Bucky snaps his head up, gripping Steve’s arms desperately.

“No,” he tells him, “Steve, you can’t, he’s—you don’t know him, you don’t know what he’s like—” Bucky stammers, crying, tripping over the words with the fierce desperation of it, and Steve’s eyes cloud with soft sadness and worry again, ferocity gone.

“Okay,” he whispers, breathless and panicky, “okay, Buck, I won’t. Let’s just—let’s get inside, here—” Wrapping a protective arm across Bucky’s shoulders, Steve guides him carefully down a set of stairs so they’re on the lower level of the balcony, then punches in a code and pulls Bucky inside a room that’s dark and quiet and split off from the rest of the party.

“Tony’s studio,” Steve explains quietly, “I was doing something for him here a little while ago so I know the code. No one will come in here.”

Numbly grateful, Bucky nods. “Sit, babe,” Steve says, so softly, gesturing vaguely to a couch. “I’m gonna get you some water.” While Steve crosses the room and flicks on a dimmed orange light, Bucky collapses into the couch. A moment later, Steve returns, hands him a glass of water that Bucky downs in one gulp.

“Sorry,” Bucky says, soft and shaky. Steve runs his hand gently over Bucky’s back and he shudders briefly at the contact, then relaxes.

“For what?” Steve whispers, voice so sad, and Bucky shrugs.

“I don’t know,” he mumbles. “I ruined your night.”

“No,” Steve whispers, voice caught roughly in his throat. “No, you didn’t. You shouldn’t even think that.” Bucky doesn’t respond, just buries his face into his palms, sickened exhaustion rolling
through him, tumultuous and relentless as a hurricane.

“Did he do anything to you?” Steve asks again, and Bucky can hear the controlled fear and anger, simmering under the obvious concern. He shakes his head.

“Not really.”

“Not really?” Steve presses. Bucky inhales, the effort of it threatening to snap him in half.

“I came out of the bathroom and he was there, and he pushed me up against the wall, and then I kicked him in the shin and left,” Bucky says dully, fear shuddering through him like weak shockwaves. Steve exhales next to him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, so quietly, “I didn’t know, Buck—”

“Steve,” Bucky mumbles, “I know you didn’t know. It’s not your fault.” He’s so drained, so hollow all of a sudden that he can hear blood pulsing in his head, and he thinks it might be shock but it’s hurting his head to think about.

“I should’ve—” Steve starts, and Bucky snaps his head up finally.

“No,” he says hollowly. “There isn’t anything you should’ve done because you didn’t know. It doesn’t help anyone if you beat yourself up.” Steve stares at him, eyes wide and heartbroken, and then nods.

“Okay,” he says softly. Bucky slumps against him with a scared, tearful exhale, overcome with fatigue, and yeah, he’s definitely in shock, having shoved the events of the last twenty minutes into the part of his brain that’s numb and untouchable, and that means he’ll feel it double later but he doesn’t care, not anymore, he just wants to go home and sleep until he can feel his body again, until tremors stop shaking him like electroshocks.

“Let’s go home,” Steve whispers. At the softness of his voice, the gentleness of his arm around Bucky, Bucky breaks again, everything in him clenching and refusing to let go, tears pricking his eyes again and it hurts, everything just fucking hurts.

“Yeah,” Bucky mumbles. Steve fits his other arm around Bucky, holding him close against his chest, silent and protective, for a few more moments.

“I’m gonna go upstairs and get our coats. I’ll be right back, baby, we can get out from down here too,” Steve explains, and he’s hesitant to leave so Bucky nods.

“Oh, he says. Steve swallows then kisses Bucky’s forehead, casts him a long, worried look.

“I’ll be right back,” Steve repeats, and Bucky nods again. “Okay,” Steve says, more to himself, and stands up, heads up the staircase inside, Bucky watching him bleakly.

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Steve makes it upstairs even though he can’t really see where he’s going, his vision flickering between Bucky’s terrified, tear-streaked face and Pierce smiling at them and a lot of just white light everywhere, horrible disbelief constricting his lungs.

He knew him. Every time Bucky had mentioned him Steve had pictured some faceless, cruel scumbag and wished savagely that he could find him and make him pay and the whole time, the whole fucking time it had been the billionaire asshole who he’d known, who he’d worked with,
taken money from, gone to dinner with. Steve feels so sick, overly intoxicated, unable to hold a coherent thought or get his vision to stop flickering. He knew him, he knew him during the same time he’d been using Bucky, might have seen him the same days that he had gone home and done that to him.

It’s a little too much to bear. It’s way too fucking much, and Steve needs to sit down and breathe and think, but more importantly, he needs to get back to Bucky and hold him and never, ever stop holding him.

He says something vaguely to a caterer about needing to go, and a moment later the coats are thrust into his arms and he’s turning back. A group has formed in the hallway ahead of him that leads to the studio, so Steve decides to go back through the balcony, throwing the coats over his shoulder before shoving open the sliding door. As he rounds the corner, he pauses at the sight of someone else. Then, upon the realization of who it is, Steve stops, frozen in his tracks by some outside force.

Pierce is smoking, gazing through narrowed eyes out into the skyline punctuated by skyscrapers. He turns, eyebrows raised, then plastered on a smile.

“Steve,” he says casually, “you want a cigarette?”

Steve stares at him, numbness crawling through his veins, a horrified rage hovering around him but not quite setting in yet. “No,” he manages through stunned shock, and Pierce shrugs.

“Good, it’s a bad habit.” He takes another drag and Steve takes a ragged breath, tries to get his lungs and his brain to unstick themselves so he can say something, do anything, but he’s left frozen.

“I know what you did,” Steve finally spits out in a strangled voice, hands shaking with the weight of it. Pierce turns to him, completely apathetic, mild interest flickering in his eyes like he’s deciding if he should give Steve the time of day.

“Sorry?” he says finally, feigning confusion. Steve’s stomach tightens, disgust crawling through him like something alive.

“To Bucky,” he grits out, “you’re fucking sick.” It’s all he can muster, words rising in his throat and then dissolving, his concentration too burnt out to get out anything else. Pierce raises an eyebrow.

“You can’t talk much. Didn’t realize he made party calls. Was it just for a quickie in the bathroom, or did you organize a PR relationship? Because I wouldn’t have gone with a prostitute for that but, hey.” Something between a smirk and a sneer twists across Pierce’s face, poisonous.

“What?” Steve chokes out on a gasp, not really internalizing what he’s suggesting but trapped, pulled in now and unable to back away.

“Oh, please, Steve,” Pierce scoffs, his voice dripping with condescension. “You might be successful, but even you can’t possibly afford whatever you’re paying him to be a full time partner.” Steve takes a breath, suddenly unable to speak, unable to reply in pure, absolute disbelief of what he’s saying.

“Listen,” Pierce continues, tossing aside the end of his cigarette, “I’ve fucked him too. I get the appeal.” And Steve’s eyes must go wide, or his mouth opens in a small, sharp, disgusted whimper, because Pierce smirks. “He’s a good one, I know. Cries every goddamn time but that’s almost the
best part.” And Pierce literally fucking winks at Steve because it’s a fucking joke to him, what he did, and Steve has gone absolutely still with horror.

“Or is it the begging?” Pierce continues, and then, his voice high and exaggerated, “Please don’t, please stop, Alexander. Like he’s not some little whore who wants everything he gets.”

Steve knows he’s just goading him, mocking him, wanting to see him break but he’s too trapped in this stupor of shocked disgust to even draw a proper breath. “Shut up,” he tries to growl, but his voice is reduced to a hoarse, pleading gasp and it only edges him on.

“I mean, you’ve had him suck you off, haven’t you? Can be a bit lazy if you don’t push him, but he gets there with enough…encouragement” His lips curl back into a revolting sneer. “Yeah, he’s very pretty when his lips are all wet and his eyes are damp and—”

Violent, searing rage overtakes the sickened shock and Steve moves, breaks out of his momentary frozen shock and he isn’t planning or thinking but he wants to hurt him ruin him make him pay. One moment he’s pathetically and horrifyingly entranced and gaping and the next he’s standing over Pierce, coats tossed aside, his hand sore and the punch reverberating up his arm, unhinged with hatred. And maybe he should be scared, that he’s squaring off on a balcony forty floors up with a rapist, but he stares at Pierce and all he can think of is Bucky, and the hollow, exhausted sheen in his eyes that first night they’d found each other, and the terror on his face when he had talked about Pierce, and the quiver of fear in his breath whenever anyone shoved too close to him or touched him suddenly, and the way his whole body trembled against Steve’s during a nightmare and there’s no room for fear when this rage burns through him like acid that Pierce had been the one to do that to him.

“Shut up!” Steve screams, his voice crescendoing into hysterical fury that vibrates against every skyscraper in New York, dark and overwhelming and tangible as any weapon. With a vicious, almost primal growl, Steve drags him back up by his shirt. “Shut your fucking mouth don’t you ever talk about him.” Steve slams him against the wall, knocking down a plant that shatters beside them, and he isn’t in control, he’s just fueled by a venomous, spearing hate that surges through his bloodstream and crackles in every breath he takes.

Pierce gasps, a satisfying, pathetic sound, and Steve revels it for a moment like it’s one billionth as bad as the things he did to Bucky, and then Pierce’s fist collides upwards with his jaw and Steve chokes, stumbling back and into the brick wall as stars explode behind his eyes. When his vision spirals back hazily, Pierce stands across from him, spitting and snarling, the picture of vileness. Steve feels a stab of bitter satisfaction when he sees the blood ebbing down his face, his nose covered in it.

He hopes it’s broken. He hopes his neck is next.

“You—“ Pierce gasps, and inhales desperately, “you’re a fucking sociopath.”

“I don’t know why I’m not throwing you off this roof, you piece of shit,” Steve spits, and the words are vicious and violently dark and nothing he would ever have thought he could say until he’d seen the way Pierce and every other guy had torn up Bucky, until this impossible, unimaginable cruelty had become a reality. “You don’t ever fucking talk to him again, you don’t touch him, you don’t look at him or come within a hundred feet of him or I’ll break your neck, you sick fuck, I swear to God.”

Pierce’s eyes flash almost psychotically, and for a moment he’s truly and unquestionably terrifying, blood dripping down his face and lips pulled back into a foul snarl like a villain plucked from a bad horror movie. “I’ll ruin you,” Pierce shouts, spitting the threat like it holds any weight at all. “Your
career is over.”

“You do that!” Steve shouts, and hysterical loathing and adrenaline make him bark out a laugh. “Do that, Alexander! Explain to the whole world how I hit you because you’re a sadistic, pathetic, closeted, perverted piece of shit who cheats on his wife by raping a twenty year old! I’m sure my career will be the one that ends!”

Steve revels in the way his eyes narrow into bitter disgust, but then Pierce laughs, really laughs, the sound mocking and splitting sharply through the air and Steve tenses, ready to lunge at him again.

“Raped him? Jesus Christ, Rogers, you’re one of those PC liberals who thinks everything is a crime? You don’t get raped when your career is getting fucked for a living. Whatever he says anyone did to him he had coming. He signed up for it and he got paid, and now he’s trying to win sympathy points.”

“Did you fall in love with a prostitute, Steve?” He drawls, horrifyingly gleeful in a way that sends a violent chill spiraling through Steve’s whole body. “I thought everyone knew not to do that, but apparently not. He doesn’t love you. You’re nothing but a career opportunity for a slut like that.”

Steve’s face contorts into defensive rage again, as Pierce continues, “it’s better if you let him know he’s nothing but a worthless, faggot whore. Easier for everyone.”

And the only thing that stops Steve from surging towards him and trying to dislocate his jaw again is the knowledge that Bucky is one floor down from him and right now, Steve needs to be reminding him the opposite of what Pierce is spitting, cruel and untrue, that he’s loved and beautiful and so strong, Steve needs to be holding him, whispering beautiful, soothing truths until they replace every ugly thing Pierce and the faceless, worthless people like him had convinced Bucky of. And with that realization, Steve shakes his head in disgust and glowers at Pierce.

“Fuck you,” he spits, “believe whatever you want. I don’t give a shit what you think and neither does Bucky. But you don’t ever come near him again or I will kill you.” In that moment, it’s not in the least an exaggeration. Steve picks up the coats, turns his back to him, then changes his mind. “And tell your wife and kids. Better that they find out what an animal you are from you rather than the police when they knock down your door. Lawyer up, you piece of shit.”

He heads back in, sickening hatred still pulsing through his bloodstream like heroin, but awful satisfaction mixed in with it, and then he isn’t thinking about Pierce at all, but he’s moving towards the love of his life like everything depends on it, desperate sadness clawing its way back into the forefront of his mind.

Chapter End Notes

god i wasn't sure about this one but here you go, next update will be sometime in the next 2 weeks

your comments are my absolute joy to read i truly cannot say how lovely you are and how happy they make me feel and they make me wanna write so much faster, never ever stop my loves, i'm at @cafelesbian on tumblr if you need anything at all!
**twelve**

Chapter Notes

hello! sorry this one was a bit of a wait, i've been quite busy and also i've been trying to finalize the rest of this plot I have a decent outline but it's not set in stone yet and it's much easier to write when i know where it's going yfm

same trigger warnings apply and esp bc this chapter contains flashbacks that aren't graphing but might be disturbing please keep that in mind

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky looks up as Steve re-enters, eyes wide and guarded. He’s in the same spot that he’d been sitting the few minutes before when Steve left, and as Steve gets closer he stands so suddenly that Steve spins around to make sure no one followed him.

“What the hell happened?” Bucky gasps. Steve reaches up to touch own his face and finds blood staining his fingers, his cheek cut open where Pierce’s ring had scraped it. He swallows as Bukcy’s eyes cloud with devastation.

“Steve, no,” he whispers, and Steve exhales brokenly.

“It wasn’t—I ran into him,” he answers carefully, and Bucky’s face crumbles again, eyes darkening.

“You ran into him,” he repeats flatly. And then, furious, “what were you thinking? Are you kidding me?”

“Bucky—”

“No!” Bucky’s eyes shimmer with a glassy anger. “God, Steve, you don’t know him, okay, I do, he—he owns a fucking gun, what if- what if he’d had it? He’s not just some dumb asshole in the middle of the street you can pick a fight with—” Bucky grits his teeth, breaking off to take a sharp breath. “—Steve, you could’ve gotten really fucking hurt,” Bucky whispers, voice finally cracking.

“Buck,” Steve says, horrible guilt rushing through him. “Hey, look at me.” Steve reaches out to gently cup his face, pausing for permission, Bucky’s eyes flickering with uncertainty. “I’m sorry,” he says, soft and serious, “I didn’t think, I went back outside and he was there and he started talking and it just—it happened. I should’ve listened to you, I’m sorry.”

Bucky takes a long, shaky breath, shits his eyes. “You don’t know him,” he repeats, and there’s a fear in his voice Steve hasn’t heard, twisting painfully in his chest. “He’s not just—he’s not normal, Steve, he’s a fucking sadist.”

“I know.” Steve swallows thickly. The terror on Bucky’s face is such that he has to push down the urge to go back up there and hit Pierce a couple more times. “I’m sorry.”

“You can’t put yourself in danger because of me,” Bucky says, his voice hard behind the breathless fear, “Steve, please.”
“I know,” Steve repeats softly. “I’m so sorry, Buck. I should’ve listened to you. I won’t… do that ever again, okay?”

Bucky nods, but before he can say anything else, the door at the top of the stairs opens, hazy white light spilling down. Bucky stiffens—his hands are on Steve’s arms and his grip tightens, breath hitching, and Steve tenses too, stepping in front of Bucky.

“Is someone down here?” Tony yells, annoyed, and Steve relaxes marginally. Bucky’s still frozen and Steve gives his shoulder a squeeze of reassurance.

“Tony,” he calls, “yeah, it’s just me and Bucky.”

The door slams shut and Tony trods down the stairs. “What are you—” he begins, and then he sees them and takes stock of the situation—Steve, standing in front with cut on his face and the beginning of a black eye and Bucky, behind him looking like a deer in headlights, and he stops in his tracks.

“Did you hit him?” Tony demands harshly, stepping towards Bucky, shoulders thrown back, and Bucky flinches and Steve practically throws Tony back, blocking him.

“Jesus, Tony! No!” Steve takes a sharp breath, bites down hard on his lip. “Look,” he says, straining his voice to keep it in control, “we’re leaving now anyway. I’ll explain later.” Tony hesitates, eyes flitting with concern between the two of them. “Please,” Steve adds, desperate, willing Tony to leave.

Tony finally bites his lip, staring at them for another moment. “Okay,” he replies flatly, “um- just get home safe.” He shifts his weight uncomfortably and then gives them a quick nod, turns quickly to go upstairs.

Bucky stares after him, gaze empty and stature unsteady, almost like he might sway and collapse. Steve places his arm around Bucky, protectiveness burning in his chest. “Let’s go home, baby,” Steve murmurs, and leads Bucky through the long, dark studios to the exit, tucked into a corner in the biggest room. It opens into an empty hallway and the elevator, and as Steve hits the button he tenses up, begging the universe to let the elevator be empty. As they wait, he steals a look at Bucky, who’s staring at the ground with blank, obvious shock, face pale and expression wavering, almost flickering between presentness and some other, quieter place. The word dissociation comes to mind, something Sam had explained to him ages ago, and he hadn’t really gotten it then but he does now.

The arrival of the elevator startles them both, but it’s empty and so they take it downstairs. It feels like it’s going too fast, or maybe the blood in Steve’s head is rushing too quickly, but everything feels shaky and unstable like he can’t get a breath. When they get outside a minute later, the air is freezing and stale, almost vibrating with urgency and chaos, except maybe it’s all in Steve’s head.

The car ride home stretches, moving in slow motion like through syrup. Bucky leans against Steve, presses against his shoulder and stares stoically out the window with the same hollow, resigned brokenness in his eyes that had been there that first night he’d seen him in the alley. Steve doesn’t feel much better, a sharp, hard pain surging through him horribly, colors and lights moving too quickly past his eyes, blurring together in a harsh, chaotic smear. He wants to talk but he doesn’t know what to say and he becomes vaguely aware of how much his eye hurts and then he’s thinking about Pierce again, about how much he had hurt Bucky over and over, a million times worse that what he’d done to Steve, and rage quivers, taut in his chest again.

Steve and Alexander had met about a year and a half earlier, courtesy of Tony. Alexander’s bank
had been one of the sponsors for a gallery and Tony had suggested Steve, and it had been right at
the beginning of Steve’s career really taking off and he had, of course, said yes. He doesn’t
remember exactly how Tony and Pierce knew each other -he thinks vaguely that Pierce’s bank
might be the one that dealt with all of SI’s finances, but he isn’t sure- but he’d seen Alexander
again a couple of times since then, at the gallery opening and at a congratulatory dinner for Tony
on some incredible science feat, and Steve had developed a bitter distaste for him, the kind of
obnoxious superiority that he dragged with him everywhere he went, his apparent disregard for
anyone who wasn’t immediately benefiting him.

He hadn’t had a clue.

*Cries every goddamn time, but that’s almost the best part*, Steve hears, nausea and disgust
slamming him, and he wants to punch Pierce all over again. The knowledge that people like him,
with sickness and violence pulsing through their veins instead of blood, had done that to Bucky,
had taken advantage of someone soft and precious and vibrant and *good* as him, had felt the need to
destroy that is so beyond him, and he feels sick and heartbroken all over again.

And then he’s thinking about the threat he made to Pierce, the impulsivity of it when he has no
idea if Bucky will even think about pressing charges, has no idea how that would even begin. He’d
just wanted to scare him, to shake him out of his entitled protection from ever facing consequences
from hurting Bucky -and god knows who else- the way he had, hadn’t thought about the actual
process or toll it might take. But god, he wants him to pay.

So when the driver pulls up in front of his building, it doesn’t feel like they should already be
there. He thrusts two twenty dollar bills forward through the slot even though it was a seventeen
dollar ride and steps out onto the sidewalk, grasping for Bucky’s hand as he does, gripping onto it
as they get through the lobby, and then they’re in the elevator and Bucky sinks against him, stays
that way until the doors pull open and they get into the apartment.

Bucky goes immediately to the freezer. He pulls out an ice pack and turns, gesturing vaguely for
Steve to come over, and presses it lightly to the side of Steve’s face where the broken blood vessels
have started to darken. He touches Steve’s other cheek lightly and releases a sudden, shuddery
breath, folding in on himself.

“He hurt you,” Bucky says, voice trembling with a striking hardness behind it. *Have you seen what
he did to you?* Steve wants to ask, but he bites it back.

“I’m fine,” Steve tells him, pushing his fingers gently through Bucky’s hair. Bucky’s jaw tightens,
quivering like he’s throwing all of his effort into not crying. He looks like he might reply, maybe
argue, but instead he shuts his eyes and wraps his arms lightly around Steve’s neck, Steve pulling
him in firmly, and there’s a tentative, fragile comfort there as they hold on to each other for a
moment, swaying a little unintentionally, an unfocused, uneasy pressure pushing into both of them.

Bucky pulls away. “I’m gonna take a shower,” he mumbles, and Steve nods.

“I love you, Buck,” he blurs out, because it’s the only thing he can think to say, the only sentiment
that forms clearly through his thoughts, still reeling and breaking like shattered china.

Bucky looks at him, a weary, defeated sadness all over his face. “I love you too, Steve,” he replies,
and holds his gaze. There’s still an empty, scared glaze in his eyes that breaks Steve’s heart.

While Bucky’s in the shower, Steve busies himself by logging onto Grubhub and ordering seventy
dollars worth of food, fries and pancakes and milkshakes and waffles for no reason other than that
he wants to give Bucky something to focus on, wants to have something to give him. When that’s
done, he kind of paces uselessly around the kitchen until the food arrives, then spreads it all out on
the coffee table and wonders what the fuck the point of this was.

And god, he still can’t think straight through Pierce’s threats and taunts still running through his
brain, the spiraling paranoia that Bucky won’t be okay after this, his hand and eye throbbing. He
wants to call Nat, or Sam, but he thinks that as soon as they pick up the phone he’ll start crying and
he’s really not ready for that. So he waits, restless, trying to clear his head enough that he can have
a coherent conversation.

Bucky comes out thirty or so minutes later, clad in an oversized shirt and sweatpants. He looks
small, god, he looks small, his face pale and exhausted and still wrecked, arms crossed over his
chest. He stares at Steve’s ridiculous display of food and chokes out a small, forced laugh.

“You didn’t have to—”

“I know,” Steve answers, shrugs. “I’m just hungry, and I figured you were.”

Bucky looks like he might say something but then he purses his lips, nods. Sitting tentatively next
to Steve, he takes a few fries, his eyes still dull, expression lifeless. Steve opens his mouth, but
upon realizing he has no idea what to say, closes it. The only light strikes in pinpricks off of their
Christmas tree, underwhelmingly decorated a week before by the two of them one cold afternoon.
The red light glowing off of it feels claustrophobic and foreboding.

A moment later Bucky curls, diminished, against Steve’s side, legs draped over his lap and face
buried in his shoulder. Relieved by the contact, Steve wraps his arm around Bucky’s middle, runs
his hand up and down Bucky’s back. He’s mostly still, quiet all but short, shallow breaths, and
every so often a deep shudder will come over him and Steve clings a little more tightly to him.

“How hard did you hit him?” he asks quietly after several minutes. Steve’s a little stunned by the
question.

“Hard. I think I broke his nose.”

“Good,” Bucky replies shortly.

And then he starts sobbing, breathless and gripped by it, rocking through his whole body as he
holds onto Steve.

“Baby,” Steve mumbles, sad and breathless, “what can I do for you?” Bucky wrestles his breath
under control with a few sharp, short gasps, face still buried in the crook of Steve’s neck as he cries
and cries, and Steve holds onto him, the ache of Bucky’s sobs and brutal, tangible fear rushing
through him, filling his chest with ice water.

“Nothing,” Bucky croaks out after a few long moments, “nothing—can you just—um— He lifts
his head from Steve’s shoulder, drags the back of his hand over his face, a devastated mess of tears
and emptiness. “Can you just stay like this? And like—” Bucky pauses, screws his eyes shut. “—
and like, if—when you’re just doing this, that—that helps me feel not, um, disgusting.”

Steve exhales softly. “Yeah,” he breathes, “I’m not going anywhere.”

There’s a long stretch of weighted silence after Bucky drops his head back against Steve’s
shoulder. He’s exhausted in a way that shakes him from the inside, all the anxiety and terror and
anger and grief of the night having bled him dry. The shock is coming down, he thinks, a dull,
sickened realization coming over him, and in between the flickers of the night are images that
Bucky had shoved away; Pierce’s hands on him where they weren’t allowed, I know you want this,
sluts like you always want it, disgusting little whore, bruises all over his face and stomach and legs, a painting of Pierce and his wife and kids that had hung over his bed like a sick detail from a Lifetime movie, the nauseating, thick smell of Balvenie whiskey. Pain, so unbearable Bucky couldn’t be sure it was real, twisting nightmarishly inside him and around him and not fucking stopping.

His vision has gone white and he’s shaking, and he shuts his eyes like it’ll stop it.

“What are you thinking, Buck?” Steve murmurs, that broken worry creeping back into his voice.

Bucky’s thinking about all of that when Steve asks him, the memories unfocused and grainy like a poor recording playing too fast, nauseating and painful.

“He made me watch it once,” Bucky says finally, in a voice that feels strangely dull, hollowed out into something entirely unlike his. “A video he took. Because I asked him why he was doing it.”

He thinks back to that night, to the dark sneer that had flickered across Pierce’s face when he choked out why are you doing this to me? still kneeling on his living room floor, dark, throbbing bruises all over his side and stomach, hurting so much that when he tried to stand his vision whitened out. He’d opened his laptop and showed it, and the disgust at himself that had washed over Bucky had burned so intensely and he’d cried, small, defeated, ashamed sobs. You’re doing this to yourself, Pierce had snapped, and tossed him a twenty, patted his cheek roughly. “He said I should know how much of a whore I was being.” He laughs darkly. Above him, Steve is very still, watching him stoically. He expels a small, breathless gasp at that, tensing up.

“God,” Steve says, and his voice is strangled and warped. Yeah, Bucky thinks, vague and disattached, sums it up.

“I hate him so much,” Bucky whispers. His voice has gone very quiet and very unsteady, but the truth of it burns him almost sickeningly. Until now, he’s never thought, really thought about what Pierce and Rumlow and that first guy when he was fucking seventeen and all of those other angry, violent men had done to him, has never spared a moment to grasp the magnitude of his hatred for them. He knew he hated Pierce, obviously, but he’d never thought about it the way he has right now, concentrated and hard as a diamond and pulsing through him urgently.

“I know. Me too,” Steve says, his voice harder than Bucky has ever heard it. He forces himself to lift his eyes to Steve’s and his eyes are dark, almost frightening, a focused, sharp rage in them that Bucky has never, ever seen there before. His gaze flickers over the bruises, dark and glaring and collecting over Steve’s eye, and he feels it too, that same electric, horrible anger that Pierce had done that.

There’s something different about hating a person for hurting someone you love. Bucky’s hated Pierce for months for what he’d done to him, an underlying current that’s thrummed under his skin and spiked nauseatingly on the days where he’d had to face him, flickering across his mind several times a day in a vague, hazy, nightmarish fugue. He’d hated him for so long it had become a part of him, twisted in with his own hatred of himself and turbulent, oppressive sadness that swept over every day of his life and anxiety that shot walls up around him to minimize how much he got hurt.

But it’s different when it comes to Steve, uncluttered by the other factors that clash agonizingly in his chest. It’s sharp and singular and easy to grasp when it’s not buried under a slew of other terrible things, trembling inside him with equal anguish and protectiveness and loathing, the thought that someone had done that to Steve. He guesses it must be the same for Steve, that that must be the force behind the brutal, electric hatred in his eyes.

Bucky takes another shaky breath, pressing closer against Steve’s chest. He’s gotten control over
the trembling of his body but he can still feel it on the inside, a panicked, insistent hum that refuses to let up, refuses to let him calm down, pressing into him, hot and oppressive and unrelenting.

“Can we get in bed?” he mumbles finally, just to hear something other than the crescendoing white noise in his head. Steve nods.

“Of course.” Bucky shifts his legs off of his lap, and Steve pulls him up with one hand, piles the half eaten containers of food on top of one another with the other. He keeps a hand steady on Bucky’s waist even just heading down the hallway, a small, loving thing that makes Bucky want to burst into tears all over again.

Bucky collapses in the bed while Steve changes quickly. By the time he settles next to Bucky, drapes an arm over him, an unsteady, restless sleep has already started to take him, and he hears Steve whisper “I love you so much,” from somewhere far away and unreachable.

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The third time he’s ever met Alexander. After he’d threatened him with the photos, before he had gotten really brutal in the kind of way that mimicked a villain out of a student-made horror film.

But after that day, after the way he had touched Bucky and felt like he was clawing him apart, vicious and dangerous and so violently that Bucky had blacked out from the pain, he’s starting to see it. And the only concrete thought he can grasp is that he needs to go, tearing through his semi consciousness frantically, through the shaky, tearful gasps he was letting out as he dressed with hands that he couldn’t feel and stumbled out of the bedroom, towards the exit.

Alexander is there, in the kitchen, because of course he is. Bucky tenses but makes for the door all the same, heart slamming against his ribs so urgently that his vision swims a little.

“I didn’t tell you to leave,” Pierce says, and Bucky freezes up, braces himself as much as he can and turns around. He can feel violent, nauseous tremors tearing through him- his body hasn’t quite responded yet, shockwaves still shuddering emptily through him. The sickness, and disgust, and paralyzing fear and dread there but still frozen from shock, untouched. It will come, when Bucky gets out of there, alone, and shatters like ice into himself, but his brain hasn’t retrieved it yet.

He needs to get out. It’s the only coherent thought he can form in between the spiraling pain and the half conscious state he’s still in, and he thinks fleetingly that fear alone must be keeping him standing right now.

“What do you want?” he snarls, a horrible quiver of desperation oscillating through the words. Pierce is standing at his counter, unconcerned, pouring himself a glass of whisky. He sets it down with a sharp smack against the marble that makes Bucky wince a little too hard to conceal.

“James,” he drawls, striding towards him. Bucky tenses, pushing back against the door, and the fear that shoots through him dulls the urgent, immediate need to get the hell away. Maybe they’re the same. He can’t tell, he just wants to be far, far away from here, from Alexander. A scream claws its way up his throat and dies, and Bucky is delirious with horror, every muscle in his body stunned.

“I like you,” he hisses in Bucky’s ear, his breath hot, unsettling, making Bucky’s breath hitch miserably. His hand is tight on Bucky’s wrist, pinned against the door. “You’re fun. You’re not gonna tell anyone. And—” he pauses, tucking a limp strand of Bucky’s hair behind his ear. Bucky has gone absolutely still—even breathing feels dangerous, feels like Pierce is going to take it and
twist it against him until he suffocates. “—I know I can count on you now. You stop showing up, you get to be a slut for the entire internet, not just me.”

“Fuck you,” Bucky spits out in a terrified breath, and turns for the door. And then, so fast he doesn’t even register what’s happening until it’s over, Alexander pulls him back, nails digging against his neck, cutting off his air, shoves him down so he’s on his knees, stunned by terror and dizziness and shock.

He pulls Bucky’s head up by the hair so he’s staring into his eyes and Bucky gasps. “You don’t talk to me like that,” Alexander snarls, and slaps him. Bucky’s head snaps to the side, eyes glazed and empty, unable to pull the room back into clear vision, and he’s scared, so fucking scared but it’s a numb, untouched fear, pulled from somewhere deep inside him. This is new, Bucky thinks wildly, through fragmented consciousness, this is another level of dangerous and he realizes vaguely that this man could do anything to him, powerful enough to get away with whatever he wants. The thought doesn’t register, not past the hazy, disbelieving fog that’s clouded over Bucky’s mind, as he realizes what exactly he’s gotten himself into, dread crashing violently in his chest.

“You’re just a fucking whore, you know that? You’re some worthless piece of shit who gets fucked for a living, so that’s what you’re gonna do, and if not, I’ll have you in jail with people who’ll fuck you without payment, understand?”

Steve pulls him out of that one, shaking him awake frantically with a couple of mumbled it’s okay you’re okay sit up babys. They don’t talk about it; there’s nothing to say—it’s not unexpected by either of them and Bucky doesn’t feel like reliving it, but he can feel Steve’s heartbeat racing when he lays his head back against his chest, and his blood feels like it’s rushing too fast and too thick through his veins, and he grits his teeth and focuses on that instead of crying. Everything around him feels splintered and fragile as toppling china, and no matter how long he stays there, telling himself it’s fine, everything’s fine, he can’t get his body to relax.

He doesn’t know how much longer he lays there, listening to Steve’s heart rate slow itself back to normal pace, feeling Steve’s fingertips trace over his back, gradually feels the world stop spinning so violently quickly. “Steve?” he mumbles timidly, after a while.

“Yeah?” Steve answers immediately. Guilt pulls at Bucky’s stomach—he must have been just waiting, refusing to sleep on the off chance that Bucky was still up, and he feels colossally selfish and needy.

“Just seeing if you were still up.”

Steve gives him a soft squeeze, his fingers brushing over the spot on his hips where Pierce had grabbed him. There’s bruising there from his grip and Bucky winces and huffs out a quiet gasp, making Steve sit up.

“What—”

“Not you,” Bucky answers tiredly, “just a bruise.” Steve’s eyes flicker to Bucky’s waist—he must have been just waiting, refusing to sleep on the off chance that Bucky was still up, and he feels colossally selfish and needy.

“Just seeing if you were still up.”

Steve gives him a soft squeeze, his fingers brushing over the spot on his hips where Pierce had grabbed him. There’s bruising there from his grip and Bucky winces and huffs out a quiet gasp, making Steve sit up.

“What—”

“Not you,” Bucky answers tiredly, “just a bruise.” Steve’s eyes flicker to Bucky’s waist, hesitating, and Bucky, too lethargic to argue, lifts his shirt just enough to show him. Wild panic lights up in Steve’s eyes.

“You said he didn’t do anything,” Steve breathes, frantic. Bucky stares warily at him, touching Steve’s arm gently.

“I said he tried,” Bucky replies flatly. “Steve, it’s nothing, look at your fucking face.” It’s ironic, in a way, the two of them sporting complementary bruises from the same psychopath, only Steve’s is
a testament to how selfless and stubbornly brave he was and Bucky’s was a reminder of how fucking weak he’d been, continued to be.

He thinks for the millionth time that night how much he doesn’t deserve Steve, and his chest feels like it’s collapsing in on itself again.

“Steve,” he adds, his stomach twisting at the anguished look on his face. “It doesn’t matter, I barely noticed it.” A lie. He had stared at it in the shower, raked his fingers over it like he could somehow cover it up, hating it, hating what it meant, another reminder from Pierce that someone else called the shots on his body. Steve finally looks back at Bucky, eyes glassy.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sounding so guilty, and it hurts so much to hear.

Bucky tries to answer but he’s choking up again, his throat constricting and he really, really doesn’t want to cry again, doesn’t have the energy for the emotional labor that takes. He brushes his fingers against Steve’s face, slumps against his chest, and when Steve wraps his arms around Bucky’s shoulders and stomach he comes undone anyway.

Chapter End Notes

ik this one is a lot of filler/reactions i’m sorry about that i had more plot before but it didn't feel right to gloss over a lot of the emotional fallback from the last chapter so i hope that came through

every time i write steve's pov i listen to nfwmb by hozier listen if you don't know it and you'll see what i mean

also god guys last week every single comment was like "I HATE PIERCE I'M GONNA KILL THAT MOTHERFUCKER" like hard same akjhfsd they were amazing to read and made me so happy so if you feel like leaving another one/a new one if you haven't you guys should know that they make my week and i reread them about 50 times a day

ok ! so i find out about early decision for my top college this week and i'm absolutely freaking out so i would say it will probably be 2 weeks to the next chapter but i will try for sooner, love you all
thirteen

Chapter Notes

same warnings as usual apply xxx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve wakes up to someone pounding on his front door. His first thought, wild and panicked, is that it’s Pierce and he should grab a baseball bat or lamp. His second thought is that if it is, he should get it before Bucky wakes up, and he scrambles out of bed, throwing the sheets off and untangling himself from Bucky as quickly as possible.

He peers through the peephole, and it turns out not to be Pierce or a pair of cops coming after him for aggravated assault, but Tony. His hair is a little disheveled, the bags under his eyes are more pronounced than usual, but when Steve answers he throws his shoulders back and narrows his eyes.

“Hi, Steve,” he says, his voice tight. “Glad you’re alive, since you didn’t answer the thirty calls I left you. Care to explain?” He pauses for affect. “Alexander already told me his side, so I’m just curious as to why you would fistfight the CEO of Principle Trust Banking?” His voice rises, aggravated and dramatic, and Steve doesn’t have the energy to be defensive.

“Tony,” he says wearily, “keep it down.”

“Oh, keep it down? Are you kidding me?” Tony’s yelling now, and Steve grits his teeth and shuts the apartment door so they’re standing in the hallway, raising his hands defensively before Tony can launch into another irate monologue.

“What’d he tell you?” Steve asks shortly. Tony stares at him.

“That you came out onto the balcony, drunk, and went after him,” Tony says hotly. “Got the attention of half the party, by the way. I don’t know what the fuck you were thinking—”

Steve barks out a laugh. “That’s rich,” he snarls, all of last night’s depleted rage rushing back. “You believed him?”

“Not until you took off and didn’t call me!” Tony responds, aggravated. “What the hell happened, Steve? Because if you don’t have a reasonable explanation you’re gonna have a lawsuit on your hands—”

“No, I’m not,” Steve snaps.

“What makes you so sure?” Tony’s eyes narrow into furious slits—he’s obviously had a stressful night—and he clenches and unclenches his fists. “This has something to do with Barnes, right? Because last time, you and Alexander seemed fine—”

“Tony,” Steve hisses, but Tony continues.

“—I know he’s your high school sweetheart, Steve, but god, ever since he showed up you’ve been so goddamn weird, and hard to reach and now you’re fist fighting sponsors at a party? What is up
with him because there’s something very weird—"

And something in Steve breaks, a desperation that’s been simmering for weeks explodes with such suddenness that it scares him. “What’s up with him? What’s up is that Alexander Pierce fucking raped and abused and blackmailed Bucky for months, Tony, and that’s why I went for him, and that’s why we left the party. That’s what’s up.” Tears spring to Steve’s eyes, burning furiously, and he presses his face into his hands. Chest heaving, Steve feels small and untethered, and when he looks up again Tony is staring at him with blank shock on his face.

“He—Alexander—Bucky—what?” Tony says blankly, with a confused shake of his head. Steve draws a ragged gasp and shuts his eyes again, swallowing hard.

“Bucky was… when he came here, he was on the street, and he needed money and so he got into sex work.” Steve winces slightly, Tony’s eyes going wide. “And it was guys who were… really fucking evil.” Steve spits it out with disgust, familiar, protective anger spiking through him once again. “And Pierce was one of them.”

A serious, troubled look crosses Tony’s face and he swallows. “Steve,” he says, shaken, “are you sure—?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Steve snaps. Then he swallows and scrubs a hand over his face. “Sorry. I’m just—” A sob forces its way out of Steve’s chest, a mix of exhaustion and anger and grief, surprising both him and Tony.

“Okay,” Tony says, with a slight note of discomfort. “Okay, Steve… hey…” He rubs a tentative hand over Steve’s shoulder as Steve pinches the bridge of his nose, gives a brief shake of his head.

“Can I come in for a second?” Tony asks, clear nervousness flickering across his face. Steve isn’t surprised; Tony’s possibly the least emotionally available person he knows, hardly his first choice in such an psychological crisis, but he’s here now and there’s genuine worry all over his face, so Steve nods and pushes the door back open.

“Coffee?” Steve asks absently after a moment, and Tony shakes his head. They settle on the couch, Tony’s eyes darting around worriedly.

“So Bucky was a prostitute,” he says, “and he got… attacked by Alexander.” Steve nods, suddenly quite numb. “Fuck,” Tony Breathes, and casts Steve a long look. “Steve I—I didn’t know.”

“I know,” Steve answers dully, rubbing his temple. “Me neither, till last night. I mean I knew—that he got… hurt, and what he was doing, and that there was a guy named Alexander. But not that it was him.” He feels that same heavy anger thudding against his chest, in rhythm with his heartbeat, and he has the desperate urge to go slam his punching bag until his arms are shaking and he’s seeing stars.

Tony stares solemnly at him and finally sighs, eyebrows raised in tired shock. “Fuck,” he repeats, and pinches the bridge of his nose. “That’s—Jesus.” All Steve can do is nod bitterly.

“What are you guys gonna do?” Tony asks him after a heavy pause. Steve glances up again, and he’s a little shocked by how worried Tony looks.

“I don’t know,” Steve says hollowly. “You mean, legally?”

“Legally, emotionally… I mean, is he seeing a shrink?”

Unreasonable irritation flares in Steve’s chest at the callousness of the question. “No,” he says
shortly. “It’s not… that easy, you know,” he adds, defensiveness pricking him.

Tony’s face darkens. “I actually know a thing or two about trauma,” he snarks, and guilt rushes hotly through Steve.

“I’m sorry,” he says, right away, scrubbing his hands over his eyes, frustrated and exhausted “shit, Tony, sorry-”

“It’s okay.” Tony waves a hand, dismissive and understanding. “I get the position you’re in, kid.” Sighing again, Tony taps his fingers against the arm of the sofa, face falling into concentrated concern. “He should see a therapist, Steve,” Tony says a minute later, voice softer.

“I know,” Steve replies, and has to control his voice. “I’m trying. He’s not… that into it.” To put it mildly. Tony nods, grave.

“Yeah, sounds about right.” Unpleasantness flickers deeply across Tony’s face, undoubtedly sparked by memories of his own trauma, and Steve feels terrible for dragging it up. A moment later, though, Tony clears his throat and looks up again, expression neutral.

“What about legally?” he asks, changing the subject. Steve leans back against the cushion, tilting his head back so he’s staring at the ceiling.

“I don’t know. I mean—god, I wanna see Pierce go down. But I’m not—I can’t see Bucky going for that.” Steve drops his head forward into his hands, then winches when his fingers push against the bruise. “He’s scared. I’ve never seen him look as scared as last night.” Throbbing headache damned, Steve buries his face in his hands once more.

Tony watches, quiet and sad. “I’m sorry, Steve,” he says, uncharacteristically soft. Steve swallows and grimaces.

“You didn’t know,” he replies tiredly.

“Look, Steve—if Bucky does wanna press charges, or-” Tony shifts, scratches his neck uncomfortably, “-I can find some great lawyers in a second, I can recommend psychologists, I… whatever.”

Steve looks up, giving him a small smile. “Always philanthrophising, huh?” he jokes weakly. Tony smiles begrudgingly.

“I feel—” he clears his throat, “—very bad about the stuff I said. Especially last night. But mainly, you’re important to me, and Bucky’s important to you, and rapists should all burn in hell, so, yeah.” Steve casts him a small, tired smile, gratitude swelling weakly in his chest. Whatever else could be said about him, Tony was supportive as anyone, clearly willing and desperate to help, and in that moment Steve had never been more glad to know him.

“Thank you, Tony,” he says, swallowing. Tony nods quickly, bites his lip, and then claps Steve on the shoulder again. His face is still troubled, and Steve can feel the obviousness of his guilt and worry.

“Would you, uh—let him know I’m sorry? About last night.”

“Yeah.” Steve takes a deep breath, suddenly a little sorry for Tony. “You didn’t know, man, it’s okay.”

“Still.” Tony grimaces and Steve nods once more, and a long, heavy pause hangs in the air. Finally,
Tony looks straight at Steve, his expression deeply serious. “Is there anything else you guys need right now?”


“Yeah,” Tony says vaguely, “don’t mention it. Um-” He stands, straightening his coat awkwardly. “I am now gonna go see what I’m supposed to do to get SI out of our contract with his bank.”

Steve almost pipes up that he shouldn’t do all that, he doesn’t need to, but he thinks it over for half a second and decides that it is, in fact, necessary. That rage prickles through him, static and alive and charged as electricity, at the idea that Pierce had made Bucky suffer so much, had ruined his life with his violence and sick selfishness, and he would get away with it, would keep his business empire and money and reputation while Bucky was killing himself trying to put himself back together. Disgust weighs in his chest, hardened and hot, and he bites it down as he turns back to Tony and nods.

“Thanks,” he says, “that’s—thanks, Tony.”

Tony nods once. “Take care, kid,” he says, “and look, if you guys need anything… obviously, give me a call.” Steve swallows hard and nods.

Tony paces reluctantly across the room, turning back to Steve once more before he pulls the door closed. Steve sinks his head back into his hands, tries to get his breathing under control, but before he even opens his eyes again he’s interrupted.

“Steve.” He startles and jerks around. Bucky stands in the frame of the hallway, leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, diminished and protective.

“Buck,” he says weakly, “hey, c’mere.” Bucky does, joining him on the couch. Steve puts a gentle arm around him, running a hand up his side, waiting for Bucky to say anything at all. He wonders, briefly and frantically, how long he had been up and if he had overheard anything -his apartment is notorious for the way it carries sound- and Bucky answers it a moment later.

“You talked to Tony.” It’s not exactly a question, but Bucky hesitates for confirmation. Steve nods, bites his lip.

“I’m sorry,” he begins, “it—” But Bucky shakes his head, cuts him off by laying his hand gently over Steve’s chest.

“It’s okay,” Bucky says, “I get it, Steve. You don’t have to apologize.” His voice is raspy, but strong and affirming. Steve still isn’t convinced.

“No, it’s—it wasn’t my information to tell—” Steve starts, but then Bucky shakes his head again, more firmly.

“I understand,” he says. He gives Steve a tiny, battered smile. “Steve, it’s not like—I mean, you look like you just went up against Apollo Creed blindfolded, and you had to explain that. And also, um—” Bucky bites his lip, curls and uncurls his fingers nervously. “—I know it’s not easy on you. So I understand.”

Steve watches him for a few long moments before tucking a loose strand of hair behind Bucky’s ear, gratitude washing over him. “Okay,” he says quietly, “thanks, Buck.”

Bucky leans heavily against Steve, dropping his head on his shoulder, and releases a tense breath. Steve hugs him from the side, fingers curling lightly around his waist, brushes a kiss against his
“How are you feeling?” Steve asks. Bucky huffs out a miserable laugh.

“Like I just went to the home of a billionaire, ran into a guy who terrorized me for nine months and then watched him beat up my boyfriend,” Bucky replies. Steve grimaces.

“I wouldn’t say ‘beat up’,” he replies lamely. It gets a feeble, reluctant laugh out of Bucky.

“God,” he mumbles, and stares up at the ceiling with an anguished expression. Steve watches him carefully, placing a hand gently in the small of his back. Bucky still looks so small and shaken to his core, bone deep exhaustion obvious on his face, eyes glazed and empty.

“Buck,” Steve whispers, not knowing what else to say. Bucky swallows and shakes his head, quick and purposeful, and then leans against Steve again.

“You could press charges,” Steve says, with a failed attempt at nonchalance. Bucky glances up at Steve, blinking a few times.

“You’re kidding,” Bucky says flatly. Steve rests his hand lightly on Bucky’s shoulder, holding his gaze seriously.

“I’m not,” Steve replies calmly. “He should pay, Buck.” His voice hardens, and he swallows the bitter rage that wells in his chest.

Bucky, though, is not having any of it. He pulls sharply away from Steve, slumping forward and diverting his gaze, his face hard and pained.

“No,” he snaps, “no offense, Steve, but you have no idea what you’re talking about.” A tremor pushes its way through Bucky’s voice. “That’ll never happen.”

Steve exhales heavily, leaning forward to touch Bucky’s shoulder. “Babe,” he says gently, “Bucky, he hurt you. He broke the law.” Bucky shakes his head, frantic and insistent, then presses his face into his palms.

“What do you think would happen if I did that?” Bucky finally says in a small voice. “You think the police wanna investigate him? You think a jury or judge is gonna take my side against a billionaire bank CEO?” Bucky’s real hand is trembling, and he clenches it into a fist. “Steve he’s luckier than us, he’s richer—he always wins.” Anger burns viciously in Bucky’s voice and then fizzes out into horrible sadness, his face stricken and miserable. It tugs heavily and sickeningly in Steve’s chest.

“You’re telling the truth,” he says, voice soft. Bucky shakes his head again, tears welling in his eyes, cheeks flushed as he stares forward absently. He brings his hands back over his face again, and worry spikes sharply in Steve’s stomach. He wraps a gentle arm around Bucky’s shoulder and circles his thumb slowly on his cheek as Bucky draws a couple of ragged breaths and finally lowers his hands, and when he looks up his eyes are rimmed red, helpless and ruined.

“Hey,” Steve whispers, and kisses his temple lightly, “Buck, you don’t have to. No matter what you do, he won’t hurt you ever again.” Bucky shudders. “So if you don’t want to, we won’t. But… just know it’s an option, alright?” Steve keeps circling his thumb and fingertips steadily, keeps pressing soft kisses into his hair and cheek and he feels him relax a little against him.

“I can’t,” Bucky says breathily, “I’m sorry—”
“Don’t be,” Steve says. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want.” Bucky hugs him tightly around his middle, and Steve holds him back and the discussion falls short.

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Steve doesn’t bring up pressing charges again over the next few days, acutely conscious of pushing it on him too hard. It doesn’t leave his mind, especially not seeing how badly Pierce had scared him. He lies awake next to Bucky, absently rubbing his back, and reads through articles upon simplified articles on how to press charges, how investigations into rape cases work, what the process is typically like. He wants to see Pierce pay, but more than that he wants to see Bucky be okay, so he keeps the fantasy of it to himself for now.

Christmas comes fast and sudden in the midst of the million other things Steve and Bucky are trying to balance, surprising both of them. “What’d you do last year?” Bucky asks Steve, the night of the twenty fourth while they’re trying to cook a stir fry, a half decent Christmas Eve meal that had seemed manageable at the time.

“Went to Sam’s on Christmas Eve and then slept in and pretended it wasn’t Christmas on the actual day,” Steve answers, and Bucky wraps a tight arm around him from behind, nuzzles gently against his shoulder. “You?”

Bucky gives a short, noncommittal shrug that Steve sees right through. “Not anything as nice as this,” he replies, and Steve turns around, brushing a loose strand of hair from his face.

“Hey, Buck?”

“Hm?”

“All I want for Christmas is you.”

It earns him a light swat on the arm and an eye roll, but then Bucky grins begrudgingly, and finally laughs and Steve can swear with absolute certainty that no one has ever seen anything more exquisitely beautiful.

***

Christmas day itself is quiet and private and tentatively happy. Nat and Peggy have gone to visit Nat’s family and Sam has gone down to Virginia to see his, and Wanda spends it with her new boyfriend (a British guy who, even after she insists a hundred times is absolutely wonderful, Bucky refuses to trust), so they hole up under their tree and exchange presents. Steve had gotten Bucky a couple of sweaters and a new laptop and a framed, beautifully lettered print of his favorite poem, and Bucky got him a beautiful heavy, monogrammed faux leather sketchbook and some shirts and a camera, (it had taken a couple of weeks of Steve insisting to a very hesitant Bucky that there wasn’t anything wrong with the fact that technically, it was Steve’s money. As far as Steve saw it, everything he had was Bucky’s, money or clothing or his whole heart and all the blood it pumped through his body).

They fall asleep under the tree that night, Steve leaning against a mountain of pillows and Bucky leaning against him, their hands clasped, a soft pressure in the push and pull between their fingers. Even in the ease and joy of the day, the troubled unhappiness that’s been more pronounced ever since the party seems to twitch across Bucky’s face constantly, and he can tell from the small, shallow breaths that Bucky lets out against his chest that the memories are as present as ever, coiled poisonously in his chest. He catches the moment Bucky slips into sleep, his short breathy exhales replaced by deep, peaceful, even breaths, and he curls unconsciously closer against Steve.
Steve loves him so much it hurts, pressing deeply against his lungs and surging through him in explosive electricity, obvious and clear, as much a part of the universe’s purposeful, endless rhythm as the starlit sky or the tug of the ocean. He holds Bucky tight that night and, as sleep starts to sweep over him, wishes desperately for a way to ease the constant pain that hangs over Bucky, unfair and unrelenting.

***

The thing is, even with a few quiet days and sporadic moments of joy and laughter, Bucky is still reeling from the party. Steve can tell how badly seeing Pierce had shaken him, how deep of a shift it caused- he’s a little quieter, he flinches a little more at sudden noises, he’ll occasionally get a clouded, far off look on his face, his eyes darkening, and Steve will know he’s thinking something very troubling.

Most obvious, though, are the nightmares and flashbacks that Pierce seems to have shaken loose in him. They’re been fairly frequent before, often enough to the point that Steve has started making sure there’s always a glass of water beside the bed, has learned how to shake him gently out of it when Bucky starts mumbling frantic, panicky sentences or when he starts jerking agitatedly out of Steve’s arms. He’s gotten used to the usual flicker of terror and disorientation across his face followed by the resigned sorrow. It doesn’t get easier, but it’s less startling.

But since that night they’ve gotten worse and more frequent, and it rips grief through Steve like a violent current to watch it happen. One night a few days after Christmas he wakes Steve up screaming, a terrified, strangled cry. Steve bolts awake, turning wildly to him and he realizes Bucky is already up and on his knees, hands over his face, shaking his head, his whole body trembling violently.

“Bucky,” Steve chokes out, his voice catching. “Buck, breathe, you’re alright, it’s alright.” Bucky still doesn’t lift his face from his hands, doesn’t relax in the slightest, and icy panic surges through Steve’s chest.

“Buck,” Steve says, desperation oscillating through his voice, “baby, it’s Steve, I’m right here, you’re safe, just tell me what you need.” It takes another moment or so for Bucky to look up, and when he does he watches Steve through terrified, distrusting eyes, all his muscles coiled to tension. Steve keeps talking him through it, not even hearing what he’s saying, just a desperate monologue of it’s okay you’re safe. He doesn’t touch him, though, not when he’s barely present, not until Bucky slumps forward and presses himself against Steve’s chest. He makes himself very small and Steve cradles him. After several long, harsh minutes, Bucky pulls himself away and climbs off the bed.

“Um—” Bucky swallows, rubbing his neck, eyes trained downward, “—I’m gonna take a shower.”

“Buck,” Steve says, wincing, “baby, it’s three in the morning.”

Bucky’s eyes flicker up and back down, glassy and unfocused. “Yeah, I just really need to,” he mumbles.

Sharp, helpless pain wells in Steve’s chest. “Okay,” he whispers, “can I do anything?”

Bucky shakes his head quickly. It feels horribly similar to that first night at Steve’s house, when Bucky couldn’t even look at him or do anything without asking for permission. “I’ll be fast.”

“Take your time,” Steve says softly. Bucky disappears quickly into the bathroom. Steve waits until he hears the water start, then bends his head forward into his hands and sobs.
Steve texts Sam that next morning. *Suggestions for how to help with pretty severe flashbacks?* He hesitates, and then adds *you can start billing me for all the questions.*

He gets an immediate response. *some type of pressure, like an ice cube or a stress ball, something to grip onto. talk to him, remind him who you are, ask him to describe where he really is.* Steve reads it and internalizes it and starts to reply, but Sam beats him to it.

*you guys can’t keep doing this man. Neither of you can cope with this alone.*

*I know,* is all Steve can write back. He slumps against the counter, drawing a hard breath.

His phone buzzes again. *i love you man. You gotta take care of yourself too, steve.* A pause, and then *that’ll be 500 dollars.*

Steve laughs wearily and taps out a thank you, all while the desperation that weighs sickeningly in his stomach grows heavier.

***

The breaking point for Bucky comes on New Year’s Day. They’d spent the night before at Nat and Peggy’s, Sam joining the four of them as well, and they didn’t get back home until after four so they’d slept through the morning. The rest of the day was sort of lethargic and comfortable, and they’d gone out in the evening for Chinese food and then returned back and curled up on the couch.

Steve flicks lazily through channels, Bucky snuggled into his side, and then Steve pauses on *Groundhog Day,* casting him a grin. And Bucky shouldn’t have reacted, except the last time he saw that movie was at Pierce’s, blaring in the background—

—*and he’s on his knees and it feels like he’s been there for hours, his thighs and back aching. Pierce has a hand roughly in his hair, yanking it back every so often to remind Bucky he’s in control, like he could ever fucking forget. He thrusts shallowly and lazily into Bucky’s mouth, and he can’t breathe and he hates it, hates everything about the way he’s being touched, the way every piece of him feels like it’s being ripped away but he can’t move or scream or cry. Pierce finishes himself off, and when he pulls out of his mouth Bucky gasps and choke out a sob, and it feels like he’s rotting from the inside, like he’s being smashed to pieces over and over again with every one of Alexander’s motions.*

“You—you already did what you wanted, just let me go—” Bucky is pleading, sobbing really, and he knows by now there isn’t really a point but he’s so scared and he’s crying with no control over it, starting and not stopping. Pierce hits him, and he doesn’t say anything else, not when Pierce drags him up and shoves him back onto the couch on his stomach—

—and he’s silent but sob push through him and shake his body, and his hand is pinned only it isn’t, it’s over his face and he’s curled in on himself on his knees. “Bucky, breathe, it’s Steve and you’re in our living room and we were just gonna watch something,” he hears, in a voice that’s even and kind and definitely doesn’t belong to Pierce. He doesn’t look up quite yet but he draws in a sharp gasp of air that prickles harshly in his lungs, and he hears Steve say “that’s it, baby, in and out,” and he spirals back to reality.

Bucky finally, finally manages to lift his head, to uncurl himself from where he’s braced in on himself, his vision swimming violently, and he feels a startling and sudden wave of sickness. He
pushes himself up on weak legs and staggers the few yards to the bathroom, where he sinks back to his knees before getting very sick, and his throat stings and Bucky feels broken in a million different ways. He’s crying but he barely notices, tremors shuddering through him and feeling like seismic waves, and even once he’s finished he can’t stop dry heaving. After several long moments he becomes intensely and horribly aware of how repulsive he looks, how repulsive he is, and so it doesn’t surprise him in the least that Steve kneels a few feet away, not touching him. He can’t even bring himself to meet Steve’s eyes, unable to see the disgust and resentment there. Steve stands without saying anything, and Bucky shuts his eyes, lowering his head as he prepares for him to leave. He hears the sink run for a moment, and Steve shuffling with something in the cabinet, but then he kneels back down.

“Buck,” Steve says, so quietly, “here.” Bucky looks up just enough to see that Steve is holding out a glass of water in one hand and two Aspirin capsules in the other. Bucky takes it and downs them, then chugs the water.

“Careful, baby, slow down,” Steve whispers. Bucky presses his back to the wall, anxiety refusing to let up, not allowing himself to believe that Steve could really be staying with him after that display of impossible patheticness. He lowers his gaze again, trembling and braced for the rejection, his mind haywire and shrieking with white noise.

“Buck, can I touch you?” Steve asks, so softly it hurts. At that, Bucky manages to look up, eyes burning with tears still.

“What, you want to, after that?” he croaks out. Steve’s face nearly collapses, he looks so sad. He reaches out very slowly to brush a limp strand of hair away, fingertips gentle, and Bucky folds in on himself like a ragdoll, crying all over again, and then Steve pulls him into his arms.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay, I got you, I love you.” Steve murmurs. Bucky is half in his lap, his face pressed into Steve’s shoulder and arms tucked between his and Steve’s body so his fingers graze Steve’s chest as Steve winds his arms around Bucky’s middle. Steve kisses the top of his head, smoothes his hand over Bucky’s hair, and Bucky’s panic drains fractionally as he realizes Steve isn’t mad.

“Sorry,” Bucky whimpers, when he gets enough control over his voice. He still can’t bring himself to look up.

“Don’t be sorry,” Steve replies gently, pushing his fingers gently through Bucky’s hair. Bucky swallows and lifts his head from Steve’s shoulder, releasing his grip on Steve’s shirt to rub his hand over his face. He’s shaken, quivering and sick and humiliated, and there’s an irrational dread still pulsing through him, vicious anxiety mixed with bone deep sorrow and it makes Bucky’s skin crawl.

He figures he owes Steve an explanation, so he exhales shallowly and leans the side of his head against Steve’s shoulder again. “That movie,” he starts, and then swallows again. “Um, it was just—it was an… association thing, there was—there was a time at Pierce’s—” he breaks off and grits his teeth, and Steve understands. Steve exhales a small, hard breath and then kisses Bucky’s forehead, and if he’s grossed out by the fact that Bucky’s cold with panicky sweat he doesn’t show it.

“I’m gonna take a shower, I think.” Bucky says faintly. He feels suddenly and intensely unclean and debased, like something inside him is rotting that he can scrub away under scalding water, shoved away like hidden pieces of broken glass. Steve nods, eyes wide and sad and understanding.

“Okay.” Steve swallows and nods. Bucky shifts off of his lap so he’s kneeling beside him, and it
strikes him that he doesn’t want Steve to leave, not even just to go to another room, not even for a minute.

“Steve?” he says, and feels very small. “Would you stay? Just, um—get in with me, maybe tee shirts and boxers?”

Steve’s eyes are so soft. “Of course,” he says, and pushes himself off the floor, extending a hand to help Bucky up. Steve actually gets the shower started, as Bucky brushes his teeth furiously and gulps down another glass of water and tries to get his breathing under somewhat reasonable control, but he waits for Bucky to step in. After Bucky strips off just his sweats, Steve does the same and then steps under the spray with him, one hand on Bucky’s shoulder and one on his waist, steady and gentle. The heat spreads over him, calming and slow and almost cathartic in the solidness of it, the way it drags him almost immediately back to the present, tangible and undeniably real.

Bucky takes another several deep, ragged breaths. His eyes have been closed the whole time, squeezed shut in defense, but he lets himself open them now, blinking rapidly until his vision clears. They’d both showered about an hour ago, the purpose of doing now being purely for Bucky’s paranoid desire to strip clean the layer of vileness that he can feel pricking his skin all over. But if it bothers Steve he doesn’t show it. Steve touches him with that infinite gentleness he always has, touches him like there’s nothing shameful or dirty about him, chaste and careful. After a while, Bucky just gives in and leans against Steve, letting him wrap his arms around him, hold him so impossibly close under the water and steam that Steve is the only thing that’s real, and even when he shivers violently Steve keeps the two of them steady.

Once they’re out of the shower and changed into dry pajamas, they crawl into bed, buried and protected under the massive weighted blanket Steve had bought a few weeks earlier. Bucky lies against Steve’s chest, eyes closed, feeling the soft hum of Steve’s heartbeat against his cheek. He’s got one hand rubbing circles over Bucky’s back and the other resting lightly against his cheek, smoothing his thumb over Bucky’s cheekbone with such thoughtless comfort. Bucky’s still not used to this kind of gentleness, to being touched like it matters how he feels, like he’s something irrefutably precious. Being taken care of, loved like this feels so terrifyingly fleeting, like the universe will flip on a dime and Steve will be gone, and so he holds on to him, and he thinks if he were to let go of Steve right now he might sink through the floor.

He feels safe, and that’s what feels shockingly out of sync with reality. Steve is the only person in the world who can make him feel this way, can soothe the constant terrified caution pounding in Bucky’s chest and head all the time with the trace of his fingertips and the soft hum of his reassurances, and it overwhelms Bucky with how protected it makes him feel.

He realizes he’s crying as he thinks about it, small, barely noticeable tears that spill over onto Steve’s shirt. “Hey,” Steve says, soft and worried, “what is it, baby?”

Bucky swallows, brushes his eyes furiously. “Sorry,” he mumbles, “it’s not—it’s dumb, it isn’t anything. Just, um—you make me feel really safe, and that’s just… a lot.” He exhales sharply, closing his eyes again. “So yeah, nothing’s actually wrong, just uh… thank you for always making me feel, like, loved and not worthless.” Bucky clings on to Steve’s shirt, exhausted and irrationally sad even without any real reason, wanting to vanish into the steady warmth of Steve’s arms and the gentle, unyielding pattern of Steve’s fingers circling carefully over his skin.

Steve doesn’t say anything for a few moments, and Bucky is suddenly afraid he’d said something wrong. “Bucky,” he whispers, a slight strain on his voice, “baby. You shouldn’t ever, ever feel worthless, or unsafe, or unloved.”
For some reason, the words land uncomfortably, coiling undeservedly in his stomach. “Yeah, well…” Bucky trails off lamely, bites the inside of his cheek. Steve is very quiet.

“I just…” Bucky begins, his voice tight, and he doesn’t know exactly what he’s planning to say, “I just think, sometimes, that things would be easier if I wasn’t here. Like, for everyone.” Heat rushes to his cheeks, heart racing, but it feels important to explain that to Steve. It’s a mixture of reassurance that he knows he’s a burden, an inconvenience on the lives of everyone he loves, and a quiet, broken revelation, fearfully pushing it on him like a test of what he’s going to say, how much he can put up with.

Steve sits up, startled, and it makes Bucky sit up too, straightening his back. “Bucky, you don’t really believe that, right?” he says, voice caught breathlessly in throat. Anxiety surging through him, Bucky shrugs noncommittally.

“Buck, look at me.” Steve brings his hand back to Bucky’s cheek, tilting his chin up a little so their eyes meet. Steve’s are wide and worried and glassy, and it makes Bucky’s chest ache to see him look so sad.

“Bucky, I need you,” Steve says frantically, “nothing would be easier without you, okay? And Nat and Peggy and Sam and Wanda, we all need you so much.” Steve’s voice breaks, “You gotta know that baby, because my life without you was just pointless and lonely and nothing really mattered, and now that I’m with you everything—everything fits, Buck, it’s like I don’t even have to try to make things make sense. Us finding each other, that was the best thing that could possibly happen to me.” Bucky stares at him, heat rushing to his cheeks, feeling intensely exposed suddenly, so unworthy in the aching tenderness of Steve’s words. “And—and I’m so sorry that people made you think you’re unlovable or— or anything less than you are which—which is just perfect, baby. How you are is just—it’s exactly as you’re supposed to be, Buck, you’re enough.” Bucky swallows hard. He's not used to feeling needed by anyone, even though he’s sure he had with Steve back in high school, but it’s been long buried and forgotten now, and Steve sitting there beside him, staring at him with so much furiously bright love and grief in his eyes is almost unbearable. The idea of anyone needing him feels so improbable that it’s not even worth thinking about, something to be tossed aside without a spare moment for consideration. Except Steve had said it with such total, wrecked conviction that Bucky wonders if there’s anything in the world that could challenge him and win.

Steve needs him, and Steve didn’t spend every waking moment wondering how much better his life could be without Bucky. For those moments, Bucky allows himself to believe it, clings onto those words that his fucking dysfunctional brain is trying to tear away from him, and tries to believe that Pierce and Rumlow and every single person who ever made him feel worthless a hundred thousand times was wrong.

“I love you,” Bucky says finally, timid and breathless as he grips Steve’s hand. Steve kisses Bucky’s fingertips, kisses his knuckles and the back of his hand, and the startling softness of it makes him want to start crying again.

Bucky loves him. Bucky loves him more in that moment than anyone has loved anything in all of time. He wants to curl against Steve and into Steve’s arms and lie there forever, feeling suddenly sure that if they lay there tangled against one another for years and years until the city crumbled and chaos brought the world crashing down, Steve’s arms around him would be enough to protect them from any carnage that raged outside.

“I’ll do therapy,” Bucky chokes out suddenly, lifting his eyes to meet Steve.

Steve blinks. “What?” he says, breath caught like he’s afraid to believe it. Bucky bites his lip and
nods frantically.

“I’ll see a therapist, Steve,” he says, and the words feel dangerous but he doesn’t care, he’s made up his mind. Steve still looks cautious and tentative, his face stoic as he watches Bucky.

“Buck, I—I think—I mean, that’s amazing, as long as it’s what you—”

“It is,” Bucky mumbles, and then, in a much smaller voice “I can’t keep feeling like this.” The words land heavily between them, truthful and pathetic. But Bucky doesn’t care.

A brief, uneasy silence stretches between them. “Bucky,” Steve says, “Buck, look at me.” Bucky does. Steve places on the side of Bucky’s face and Bucky rests his cheek against Steve’s palm, exhausted. “You won’t feel this way forever. I promise.”

Bucky nods, suddenly too drained to speak. He feels Steve’s hands pressing safely against him, feels the mattress shift under their weight and feels air drag in and out of his lungs, and he tries to let himself believe it. He leans back against Steve, and when sleep finally drifts over him those are the words echoing through his head.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading guys sorry it was a wait -- i've been v busy lately (but i got into my dream college ayeeeee) but now that i'm on break for a bit i will hopefully be able to bang out another one faster

love to everyone and THANK YOU for your comments, i wish there was a way to sufficiently express how happy they make me ahhhhh

come say hi on tumble im @cafelesbian, see you all sometime in the next 2 weeks. Happy holidays!!!!
The thing is, Bucky really, really, really does not want to do anything resembling therapy. He agreed for Steve, because Steve wanted so much for him to be better, and the relief, the hope that had lit up Steve’s face when he’d said it had felt so worth it at the time. But the more he thinks about it, actually imagines what it would mean to sit down in front of a stranger and talk about the things that happened to him, the more his brain twists and screams that it’s a bad idea.

Still, he’d agreed, and he doesn’t think he could bear to disappoint Steve by panicking and walking it back. So the very next morning, when Steve brings it up carefully, Bucky grimaces and nods.

“You don’t have to,” Steve reminds him, placing his hands steadily on both sides of Bucky’s face.

“I know.” Bucky closes his eyes. His head hurts. “But I will.”

Steve pulls him in a little closer, moving one hand to the small of his back. “I’m proud of you,” he says, and kisses the top of his head.

Bucky loves that.

“You’ve got awfully low standards,” he grumbles, but there’s no hostility in it.


“I’m gonna text Tony and see if he has a recommendation for where to start… finding someone good,” Steve says, pulling away to look at Bucky’s face. Bucky nods blankly.

“Wait—” Bucky grabs his shoulder briefly, worry washing quickly over him. “Therapy is expensive—”

Steve raises an eyebrow, exasperated. “We aren’t really doing this again, right?” he says, gently indignant. “Bucky, I’m not exaggerating when I say there’s literally nothing more important in the world we could buy. Also, I could probably get you on my health insurance, since it’s self employed…”

“Steve,” Bucky grits out, not really knowing what he’s going to say. Steve cups his face lightly.

“Buck, c’mon. We’ve gone over this a billion times. You know if money was a problem we wouldn’t do it like this, okay?” Steve brushes his thumb over Bucky’s cheek, reassuring, promising. Bucky relents.

“Okay,” he says quietly. Nausea tugs suddenly at him, familiar, cruel anxiety building in his chest. Steve has so much fucking hope that this will work, such belief that Bucky will recover, whatever the hell that means. Bucky is so scared of letting him down, of Steve’s inevitable realization that Bucky’s been broken and squeezed back together and shattered all over again too many times for
anyone to fix. Sigmund fucking Freud couldn’t unfuck his brain and body if he crawled out of the grave to do it.

But he doesn’t stop him when Steve writes Tony a text reading *can i get those therapist recs?* and clarifies it with Bucky before hitting send. He feels drained already and they haven’t even fucking started. Still standing in the middle of the kitchen, Bucky leans his head on Steve’s shoulder, feeling impossibly needy but Steve doesn’t hesitate for a moment to hold him tightly against his chest.

To Bucky’s dismay, Tony responds in under a minute. *Northeast Medical Center’s Program for anxiety and traumatic stress studies has really great trauma specialists. It’s in columbus circle* he writes. Steve holds the phone but they read it together, the words swimming in Bucky’s vision.

“Okay, that’s good.” Steve sounds terribly encouraged in a way that sends irrational guilt spiking through Bucky. “That’s great.”

Bucky nods absently, his mouth dry. “Can we look it up?” he says timidly, and Steve nods enthusiastically.

They settle on the couch, Bucky leaning into Steve with his computer on his lap. Steve has an arm around Bucky’s waist, his chin resting on top of Bucky’s head, and as Bucky starts to type he realizes his hands are shaking so badly that it takes him a few tries to get the words spelled right. As he furiously hits ‘delete’, he wonders if Steve can tell. Judging by the gentle way he squeezes Bucky’s elbow, he can.

He scrolls briefly through the website, acutely aware of Steve reading everything next to him. Words like “post traumatic stress disorder” and “assault victims” pop out and make him feel dizzy— he can never, ever think of himself like that. Real victims fought back, didn’t put themselves in the very positions that caused the explosion. Even thinking about himself seeking treatment feels like a slap in the face to people who deserved that help.

But he doesn’t say that to Steve, doesn’t feel like listening to the inevitable, untruthful insistence that it wasn’t his fault.

Bucky hovers the mouse over ‘our team’, which feels like strange phrasing for a group of therapists, then clicks it. It’s a list of names, and he clicks them for a dropdown description of their work, scanning it— one man does work with veterans, one woman treats phobias, one substance abuse- the list goes on.

Eventually, he clicks the name *Jennifer Rineer, Ph.D.*, leaning closer against Steve as he reads her description. She went to Tufts undergrad, NYU for graduate school, but it doesn’t make much of a difference to Bucky. But then he reads *Dr. Rineer specializes in treating anxiety, depression and complex post traumatic stress disorder related to sexual abuse and trauma. She’s worked extensively with patients from a range of backgrounds on strategy building for managing life after a traumatic event and uses a combination of techniques-*

Bucky has gone very still. Beside him, Steve pulls him closer and rubs his arm lightly.


“I guess she’s as good as we’re gonna get.” Biting hard on his lip, Bucky taps down on the mousepad absently. “Okay,” he says blankly, and he isn’t sure what exactly he’s agreeing to.

“Do you wanna email her?” Steve asks quietly. A sharp rush of blood surges to Bucky’s head and
he shuts his eyes, grits his teeth with frustration at how scared he is of just beginning this, let alone actually going through with it.

“Buck,” Steve says gently, when he doesn’t answer right away. “She’s not gonna judge you-”

“I know that,” Bucky snaps, even though he doesn’t. Then he sighs. “Sorry. You’re right, let’s get this over with.”

Steve gazes at him for a moment with wide, worried eyes. “No one is forcing you, babe,” he murmurs. Bucky breaks his stare away.

“I know,” he replies shortly, “but if she’s gonna help fix some of the shit that’s wrong with me-”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Steve says firmly, fingertips brushing over Bucky’s cheek with a fierce, insistent softness. “You got hurt, Buck. That doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you.”

“You know what I mean,” Bucky mumbles, cheeks hot. He leans his head briefly against Steve’s shoulder, burying his face in his tee shirt for a few beats and then looks up again, slightly braver. “Okay. Okay, I’ll email her.”

So he copies the address and, with slightly shaking fingers, begins to type out the email.

Hi Dr. Rineer,

My name is Bucky Barnes, and I’m emailing about possibly scheduling a meeting with you. I got a referral to your clinic from a friend, and when I read your bio I felt like your specializations matched my current situation.

At that, Bucky exhales hard, chest heaving with just the effort of writing it. Steve’s fingers curl tightly and protectively around his arm, and Bucky stares blankly at the screen for a moment before shaking his head and continuing.

I don’t know if you have any availability coming up, but if so I would really like to meet with you. Thank you so much, and I hope this wasn’t an inconvenience.

Best,
Bucky

He hovers the mouse over send. His mind feels oddly blank, just pressure building inside it, thoughts unfocused, and he’s got no idea why this small, insignificant task feels so enormously hard. Bitterly frustrated with himself, Bucky curls his fingers into a fist and releases it, and then, before he can think about it at all, hits send.

A shiver goes through him as he stares forward. Steve pulls him close, kissing the top of his head.

“I’m really proud of you,” Steve says quietly, for the second time that morning. Bucky shuts his eyes and holds on to him for a moment.

“Hey,” Steve says, pulling back, “in or out for breakfast?” He gives a tired grin and Bucky smiles back despite himself.

“Out,” he decides, and when Steve kisses him on the forehead and then moves to get up, something like relief settles in his chest.
When she responds, it’s just over an hour later, and they’re walking home from the diner. The notification startles him, and he stops walking as he reads it over. Steve has an arm around Bucky’s waist and he stops too, squeezing him a little closer with a concerned look.

“She responded,” Bucky says flatly.

“What’d she say?”

“Hi Bucky, I’m glad you emailed me. I do have availability this week- would Friday at noon work for you? Looking forward to meeting with you, Jennifer Rineer.” Bucky’s voice feels hollow reading it out, and he looks up to Steve to gage his reaction.

“That’s great, Buck,” Steve says seriously. “That’s really, really good.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says absently. “Friday.” Three days from now. Cold anxiety coils in his chest, vague, horrible dread that he can’t understand settling.

“Yeah,” Steve says carefully. “Is that okay?”

“I guess it’s gotta be,” Bucky answers, drawing a sharp breath. “Okay. Okay, Friday.” He responds before he can lose his nerve, confirming it, and even when Steve wraps both arms around him and pulls him in safely, he feels like he’s shivering.

“Will you come with me?” Bucky asks, a slight tremor in his voice. He feels needy, endlessly so, but Steve doesn’t care.

“Of course.” Steve gives him a smile so soft and reassuring that it almost makes Bucky believe things will be okay. In lieu of a thank you, Bucky pushes up on his toes and kisses Steve lightly on the lips.

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By Friday, Bucky is a wreck. Not crying or panicky, but silent, dread pumping through him so fast he feels lightheaded, completely convinced this was a mistake.

He doesn’t say much all morning, and Steve gets it. He knows there’s not much to be said so he doesn’t, and Bucky’s grateful for that. Shortly after they wake up, while they’re in the kitchen drinking coffee (Bucky’s not sure why he took it- the last thing he needs is more anxiety, and his mug shakes every time he lifts it), Steve pushes his fingers lightly through Bucky’s hair.

“How are you feeling?” he asks quietly. Bucky gives him a weary look with no hostility.

“Never better,” he replies coyly. Steve bites his lip and Bucky shrugs, touches his shoulder.

“It’s whatever. I just wanna get it over with.”

Steve nods. “Anything I can do?”

“Just be your charming self.”

But by the time they arrive, he has no more energy for sarcasm, and he’s panicking, his chest tight with worry. It’s a giant, expensive Manhattan building, and the elevator up reminds him of the one in Pierce’s building which does absolutely nothing to help, but he doesn’t tell Steve that. The ride feels almost similar; him, staring up with glazed eyes, wanting desperately not to be there.
But it isn’t the same, and he’s reminded of that by Steve’s arm wrapped protectively around his waist, by the knowledge, however hard to believe, that this is safe. That he isn’t going to get hurt. Still, when the doors pull open and they head to the waiting room, Bucky’s heart slams violently against his chest and his breath feels tight and constricted and he doesn’t want to be there.

There’s a small gray couch when they enter, so they sit. It’s empty, which Bucky guesses is a relief but also feels eerie and foreboding, but he’s probably just projecting. Bucky bounces his leg furiously, jaw tight, thinking desperately about how bad of an idea this was. He’s pinching the skin on his wrist tightly with his prosthetic, digging his fingers in, but he doesn’t realize it until Steve catches his hand lightly.

“Don’t do that, baby,” he mumbles, and runs his thumb over Bucky’s wrist. His eyes flit down to Bucky’s leg, now pumping up and down furiously quickly, then back up to Bucky’s face. Irrational irritation flares sharply in Bucky’s chest that Steve hadn’t touched his leg to stop it, and he almost wants to snap that he isn’t fucking fragile, and then a split second later he pictures his own reaction if Steve had suddenly grabbed his thigh and he wants to cry at the reminder of how fucking damaged he is.

“You okay, love?” Steve says quietly. Intensely exhausted, Bucky shrugs and lays his head onto Steve’s shoulder. He’s only there for a moment, because the hallway door swings open then and Bucky sits up quickly.

Two women are walking down the hallway, and Bucky eyes them wearily trying to figure out which one he’s waiting for, if either. It’s easy to tell in a moment; one is practically a girl, no older than Bucky and Steve, her shoulders slumped in achingly familiar exhaustion. Her eyes sweep over Steve and Bucky and she acknowledges them with a quick grimace, eyes averted. The other woman, Bucky assumes, is Dr. Rineer. She’s shorter, no more than 5’2”. She’s very pretty and very put together, a light purple button down blouse tucked into jeans, dark, wavy hair to her shoulders. She’s probably in her early forties, dark caramel skin starting to pull by her eyes and nose, and when she smiles at the two of them Bucky finds something oddly warm and comforting about it.

She says goodbye to the girl, touching her shoulder briefly, and then she heads towards them. “Bucky?” She says, her eyes darting between them, and Bucky nods quickly. “I’m Jennifer.” Bucky shakes her hand quickly and Steve follows.

“This is my—um—partner, Steve.” He’s never sure how exactly to introduce Steve—‘boyfriend’ feels too flippant, and anything that could accurately describe what Steve is to him and what he’s done for him transcends an introduction, but Jennifer gets the idea. She smiles warmly at Steve.

“I’m glad you guys came in today. Here, let’s head to my office…” she waves for them to follow, and Bucky reaches for Steve’s hand as they walk down the hallway. Before turning into what Bucky assumes is her office, Jennifer pauses and turns around.

“Bucky, Steve, would you two mind if I talked to Bucky alone for a minute first?” Cold paranoia shoots through Bucky- he feels suddenly like a child caught breaking the rules, about to be scolded- he wonders, panicked, if he shouldn’t have brought Steve without telling her.

But like, he isn’t going to say no. So he nods tersely and feels Steve squeeze his hand, and as he follows Jennifer in Steve casts him a warm, reassuring glance.

Bucky had been expecting all sharp fluorescent lights and yellow notepads, and the room takes him by surprise. It’s almost more of a living room; a lavender plush couch sits opposite a light orange armchair, separated by a coffee table covered in different trinkets, stress balls and magnets
and a sand garden. Two windows take up most of the wall beside, opening into the back garden and casting the room in startlingly bright natural light. The other wall is almost entirely bookshelves and Bucky catches a few of the titles- *1Q84* to *East of Eden* to something titled *The Heart of Trauma*. There’s even a coffee maker stacked atop a mini fridge, and Bucky feels fractionally less terrified than he had a moment ago.

“Have a seat,” Jennifer says, gesturing openly, so Bucky perches himself on the edge of the couch. He starts wringing his hands again, a frantic tapping motion against his knee, one he notices he’s doing only vaguely.

“I do this whenever a patient brings a partner or friend to a meeting,” Jennifer explains, “I just wanted to check if there’s anything you don’t want to to discuss in front of Steve, so I don’t bring anything up that you weren’t comfortable sharing.”

“Oh.” Bucky’s not sure why he’s so surprised- it makes sense, after all, that she’d check with people before accidentally opening the floodgates for some incredibly sensitive issue when the other person hadn’t known. Still, paranoia had been pulling him in a million other directions for what it could’ve been, and he’s embarrassingly relieved that had been her only question. “No, yeah, um—yeah, Steve knows basically everything, um… yeah, I wanted him here.”

Jennifer nods, gives him a small smile. “Alright, that’s good. I just wanted to be sure. Do you want him to come in while we start?”

Bucky realizes that the question could’ve been asked in a hundred thousand different ways that sounded condescending or judging, but she’d somehow avoided that, and he’s intensely appreciative.

“If that’s okay?”

“Oh course.” Jennifer strides back to the door, pulls it open, and beckons Steve in quickly. A moment later, he rushes in, giving Bucky a quick smile. His shoulders are tense, hands thrust into the pockets of his jacket, and it occurs to Bucky that he’s nervous too.

Steve sits beside him so they’re close but not touching, a few inches between them that feel enormous. Bucky wants to lean against him but it feels unprofessional, whatever that means in this scenario, so he settles for shifting his weight towards the arm of the chair. Jennifer looks carefully between them, then down into the notebook on her lap, then up again. The silence is excruciating.

“So Bucky,” she starts finally, glancing encouragingly at him, “would you mind telling me why you’re here? As in, what you hope to get out of therapy?” When Bucky blinks, bewildered, she casts him a reassuring smile. “It’s not a trick question, I promise. Just… when you decided to come see me today, what were you hoping I could help you with?”

Bucky coughs, and his fingers twitch instinctively towards Steve’s. He’s not sure if they’re supposed to hold hands, so he crosses his arm over his stomach nervously, and he realizes they’re both still waiting for an answer.

“Uh… I’m not-” A brief pause. Bucky bites his lip and Steve touches his arm lightly. “Sorry.” He swallows. “Um, yeah I… I guess some stuff happened to me that kinda- it’s sometimes hard for me to function normally? Like I get these um—these flashbacks, I guess, and nightmares, and they can be brought on by stuff that shouldn’t be able to do that to me and- and I sometimes can’t deal with, um- with being touched? In certain ways and… and by certain people and I’m sad, and scared like, a lot of the time.” Bucky draws a sharp breath. He hadn’t meant to say that much, hadn’t even been thinking of it before he started talking, but the words had rushed out, out of his control and frantic,
and all of it was true. He resists the urge to lean against Steve, instead reaching across himself to rub his own shoulder.

“That sounds awful,” Jennifer says, but it’s not patronizing, it’s understanding and open and eases Bucky’s tension a little. He nods uncomfortably, releasing a heavy breath. “And so you want to find a way to tackle these flashbacks and this sadness and anxiety, and maybe get to a point where you’re comfortable with some amount of physical contact?”

Bucky swallows. “Yeah,” he says weakly, “that’d be good.”

Jennifer nods thoughtfully. “Do you mind if I explain my typical approach to helping patients who’ve experienced a trauma? It might give you somewhat of an idea of how we might work on some of those issues.” Bucky nods. “Some therapists like to focus on one method of treatment, which can be very effective. But when I see patients individually, I usually approach it with a combination of methods. I try to help patients focus on processing—so understanding and unpacking the trauma and the feelings associated with it.” She pauses, giving Bucky and Steve a moment to confirm they’re following with a nod. “Redefining the things they’ve come to associate with trauma. So, for a lot of people, if you’ve gone through a traumatic event, objects and sensations that were there might still have a strong association. It can be a song, a taste, a texture, almost anything. And it can seem like something that shouldn’t have stayed in your memory, but they can often be common triggers for people. So I think it’s important to know them, to understand they’re triggers, and to find strategies for what to do when you might encounter them.”

“Oh,” Bucky says quietly. Something like relief sparks weakly in his chest, very small but undeniably present. He feels almost justified in his horrible patheticness, his hatred of certain colognes and whiskies, the way he’d snapped because of a movie a few nights ago, his panic at being touched roughly or unexpectedly—knowing there’s an explanation behind it, knowing something caused it other than his own inability to cope feels calming in a horrible way. “I—um—I didn’t really know that was, like, legitimate.”

Jennifer nods again. “A lot of people don’t realize how common it is. But it can be very distressing.” Bucky nods miserably.

“And also, I of course focus a lot on helping patients build strategies for triggers and flashbacks or nightmares, or moments of distress and dissociation. It’s easy to feel like these things dominate your lives, and knowing how to handle them when they arise can make a huge difference.” Jennifer crosses her legs and gazes across at the two of them. “What do you think of all of that?”

“Um—” Bucky says, for what must be the hundredth time in that five minutes, “that sounds good to me.”

Jennifer smiles warmly again. “Bucky,” she says, voice careful and encouraging, “I know from the email you sent and from a few of the things you’ve said here that you’ve experienced a trauma. Would you mind telling me about what it is that happened?”

Bucky knew it had to be coming, but the question fills him with sudden, violent misery. His throat constricts almost immediately; breathing becomes harder, nausea churns in his stomach, and his face must change, because Steve inches closer to him and squeezes his hand gently, eyes soft and sad.

“Yeah,” he manages, “just, um—” Bucky swallows hard, inhaling and exhaling sharply, flexing his fingers against Steve’s. “Okay.”

He gives her the abridged, watered down version of his last four years. He explains briefly how he
and Steve had met, that they’d been together in high school, how they’d gotten separated by his
dad. He tells her he’d been sent to conversion camp, (Steve adds quickly that he’d taken off before
his parents could think of conversion therapy) which had done nothing but make him hate himself
and when he’s gotten back, he’d run away. The whole time, his voice has been his quivering like a
plucked too-taut rope, but when he gets to the point of explaining his first time getting paid for sex
it finally breaks, and Steve moves closer to rub a hand over his back.

“It’s alright,” Jennifer says reassuringly, and passes him a tissue box. “Take your time, Bucky.”

It takes a moment for him to regain clarity, but he tells her through trembling words broken up by
small sobs how he’d followed him into the alley, how he’d panicked and said no, how the guy
hadn’t listened. He tells her it happened “like that” (he can’t bring the word ‘rape’ to his lips) more
than once, by more than one person. He talks briefly about living with Wanda and then about his
decision to move out, about bouncing around from hotel room to street to friend’s apartment to the
bedroom of some stranger, and in the vaguest, broadest strokes about some of the other people
who’d felt entitled to his body, about Rumlow and Pierce, giving her explanations that barely
scratch the surface of the horror that it had been, that still claws icily into his chest at the
memories. He cries, and he doesn’t even have the energy to be humiliated, too gripped with panic
and exhaustion at reliving it all. Jennifer mostly just lets him talk, listening, making an occasional
note on her clipboard and nodding encouragingly. When he’s finally done, Bucky’s not sure if he’s
supposed to say more or if he’d talked for too long, but he takes a couple of deep, shuddering
breaths. Steve holds Bucky’s hand with both of his- Bucky’s fingers intertwine with one and the
other cups around the back of Bucky’s hand, fingertips brushing over his knuckles, quiet and
loving and grounding. It occurs to Bucky that he probably wouldn’t have gotten through it without
him there.

Jennifer doesn’t say anything until Bucky gets control over his breathing and crying. Bucky catches
her eyes flitting to Steve, assessing the relationship, he supposes, but Steve keeps his focus
completely on Bucky until Jennifer speaks up.

“Bucky,” she says kindly, “I’m so sorry you had to experience all that.” Bucky swallows
uncomfortably. “What you went through was awful, and the feelings it’s left you with are
completely expected after multiple severely traumatic events.”

It doesn’t quite register right away, and Bucky has to let the meaning land properly. Bucky had
half expected her to grimace and tell him she’s sorry, but it’s not the right situation for her to
handle, brush him off to some other therapist to have to pretend his total inability to cope wasn’t a
reflection of his own pathetism. But she’s fixes him with a look of total genuinity, and
acceptance, and it sends a shudder of relief through him, makes him think for a second that maybe
he’s not beyond repair.

“Oh,” Bucky manages weakly. “Um…” he trails off lamely, rubs the back of his hand quickly
under his eyes.

“We’re almost out of time and I’ve got another patient coming in after this,” Jennifer says
apologetically, “but can we make another appointment? I really do want to work with you on
approaching these feelings and processing the trauma in a way that helps you feel in control.”

“Okay- okay.” Bucky stammers, as Steve nods, absent and encouraging.

“Does this time next week work for you?” When Bucky nods, she pencils him into her notebook,
and thanks him, and they thank her, and the whole thing feels very fast and dizzying and before he
knows it he’s standing outside in the empty hallway and it’s just Steve next to him.
“What’d you think?” Steve asks softly. Bucky lifts his gaze to meet Steve’s eyes, and, not knowing what he’s going to say, opens his mouth. And then something tugs at the knot in his chest and it comes immediately and suddenly unraveled and he’s crying for no reason other than that he’s absolutely overwhelmed and utterly exhausted. He leans against Steve and Steve holds on to him, rubbing up and down his arm soothingly, and it feels like they stay like that for ages but it’s really only a few minutes, until Bucky grasps control of his voice.

“Sorry.” He chokes out a weak, delirious laugh. “Um, I don’t know what that was—”

“Don’t be sorry, baby.” Steve pulls the sleeve of his sweater up over his palm and brushes it lightly across Bucky’s cheek, and it makes them both smile, small and worn out.

“It was good. I think. I—um—I like her.”

“Me too,” Steve says softly. Bucky realizes they’re by the elevator already, and Steve punches in the button while he’s talking before turning his gaze back on Bucky, soft as ever. “You did so good, Buck. You’re so fuckin’ brave.”

“Yeah, sure.” Bucky leans his head into Steve’s shoulder instinctually. It hadn’t felt brave, sobbing for an hour about having the shit kicked out of him, letting people force themselves on him and in him and not doing anything to stop it. It just felt sickening and draining, and left him with a pulsing headache and horrible tightness in his chest.

“I mean it,” Steve says firmly. He’s playing gently with Bucky’s hair, tugging his fingers lightly through it, and Bucky’s very glad for the touch all of a sudden. “Bucky, I know that must’ve been impossible. I’m so proud of you for doing it. You should be so proud of yourself.”

He isn’t. Too tired to disagree, Bucky closes his eyes briefly as they step into the elevator.

“Thank you for coming with me,” Bucky mumbles, opening his eyes. He swallows. “I love you, Steve.”

“I love you more than anything, Buck.” Steve takes his hand as they walk out of the elevator and out onto the street, into the bitterly cold Manhattan air where pinpricks of snow have started to fall, dissolving once they reach the pavement. Bucky presses closer to Steve, shivering, but he doesn’t think it’s the cold.

Chapter End Notes

okay okay important inquiry: as you’ve probably seen there was no shortage of typos in the last chapter and i went over and smoothed it out but i basically suck at proofreading for myself and the person who was doing it for me can't anymore. SO if any of you are interested in maybe letting me send you chapters before i post them and reading through catching typos/awkward lines/glaring errors send me a message on tumblr @cafelesbian, i can't offer to pay you or anything but i can offer my undying appreciation and an eternal friendship and also a slightly earlier date or time to read the chapters, so if that's something you wanna do dm me there ;)

thank you all for reading, and thank you for your comments and messages (i got the most beautiful message about this from a reader on tumblr this weekend that got me a little choked up), reading them is literally sometimes my favorite part of my day you
all are sooooo wonderful

see you all in the next two weeks my friends !
Therapy, it turns out, is not actually the worst thing Bucky has ever experienced. Which says almost nothing, considering his last four years. His point being, though, that the next several weeks of sessions aren’t nothing.

He goes alone that second week, leaving Steve at home to work, giving him a quick kiss and promising to call if he needs anything. As he’s waiting, violent self-consciousness squeezes itself around his throat and doesn’t let go, and he’s left with burning humiliation about the way he’d broken down last week, crashing against the fear of doing it again.

But if Jennifer’s holding onto judgement, she’s impressively good at hiding it. She meets him in the waiting room with a warm, genuine grin and beckons him in, and it’s marginally calming. Bucky follows her in and sits, reaching absently for the stress ball and squeezing it before they even start talking.

“How’d you feel this week, Bucky?” she asks, flashing him a quick smile.

Bucky considers that brutally complicated question. “About the same as usual,” he finally answers, which is the truth.

“What’s usual?”

God, he really hadn’t wanted her to ask that.

“Um—” Bucky swallows thickly; there really doesn’t seem to be a point in lying. “I don’t know. Sad? Nervous all the time?”

“Nervous?” Jennifer is watching him very carefully, and Bucky feels terribly vulnerable.

“I mean—anxious… Fuck, I don’t know, scared.” He feels shame flush him, hot and frustratingly heavy, but Jennifer nods, understanding.

“When you say that—anxious, scared, sad—do you know what it’s connected to? Or is it just a general, overlying feeling?”

Bucky is pumping the stress ball in his fingers without even realizing it. He has to think about that for a few moments, about what this permanent, tumultuous unhappiness is tethered to.

“I don’t know,” he says eventually, in a voice that doesn’t feel like his. “I mean, the um—anxiety, or whatever, and the being scared—a lot of that is related to feeling like… some of that stuff that—um, that happened to me is gonna happen again, I guess.” Bucky swallows, runs his hand through
his hair. Wildly and irrationally, he almost expects a dismissive, exasperated response, so when Jennifer nods like she understands it catches him off guard.

“Is that something that you worry about a lot? Having to go through some of those things again?”

Bucky bites his lip and thinks about how to answer that, his thoughts grinding unpleasantly. “I mean, I know that, like, logically nothing is probably gonna happen. But it’s like… everywhere I go, everyone I see or who touches me… it feels like a threat.” Bucky swallows. “Which is so dumb, because it’s not, and I know it’s not. Like sometimes Steve will touch my arm or whatever, and I know he’s not gonna, um, do anything to me. Obviously. But I’ll still jump. And it’s like that all the time. And I don’t know what’s wrong with me because I know the difference between Steve or a friend and… you know. Other people.” Bucky’s heart is racing violently when he stops speaking; he’d just been rambling, an uncontrolled burst of anxiety so intense he can still feel it vibrating tersely.

“Bucky, you said you don’t know what’s wrong with you for having that response.” She pauses for confirmation; Bucky gives her something between a nod and a shrug. “There’s nothing wrong with you for that. The reaction you’re describing is one of the most common reactions for people who experienced a trauma. You went through more than one extremely traumatic event, and what being hurt taught your body is that unexpected touch means danger and pain, and knowing that literally warned you when there was a threat to help you survive. So now, even though you know that Steve or your friends have no intention of hurting you, your brain still sends signals to your body that there’s a threat, and that’s why you jump—because you’re used to unexpected touch meaning pain.” Jennifer watches him through kind eyes as Bucky pulls his sweater over his palms and bites his lip. What she’s saying makes sense, so much he feels stupid for not having thought of it before. Still, the words she uses—trauma, hurt, danger—trigger the cruel, insistent voice in his head that grinds and erupts, telling him he’s not a victim, not really.

He pushes that aside and nods absently. “I still feel like I should be able to get it together by now,” he says, and it almost surprises him when his voice barely breaks a whisper.

“I know,” Jennifer says kindly, “but you deserve to be patient with yourself. There’s no reason for your body to have unlearned that association so fast.”

After the session, once Bucky has muddled through describing a bit more what the flashbacks and nightmares and fleeting moments of impossible terror feel like, that statement is what he remembers the most. He repeats it like a mantra and tries so, so hard to internalize it.

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When he gets home, the lights are off, and the apartment seems empty. “Steve?” he calls out.

A moment later, from the studio: “Hey, babe, in here!”

Bucky dumps his bag on the couch and heads in. Steve is an artist cliche pulled out of any indie film; he’s perched on a stool in a tank top, staring intensely at a sprawling canvas, various shades of paint smeared over his face. Next to him, sitting atop another chair, his laptop is open and playing an old episode of *The Office*, painfully out of place with the serenity and concentration of the rest of the room.

The whole picture makes Bucky smile.

Steve looks up, face splitting into a huge grin. “Hey,” he says, pausing the episode. “How was it?”
Bucky walks over and Steve moves the computer, gesturing for him to sit. He does, leaning lightly against Steve’s shoulder. “It was fine,” he says, closing his eyes briefly. “Tiring.”

Steve places a gentle hand on his back, the pressure soft and safe. “Feeling okay?” he asks. Bucky nods and closes his eyes, letting himself rest briefly against Steve. He relaxes into the electrifying warmth of Steve’s skin against his cheek, the dizzying gentleness of Steve’s hand on his back. Steve’s other hand is held hovering in the air, his fingers stained blue and red and every shade in between, and Bucky reaches out to intwine his own fingers absently with them so the colors stain his fingertips and knuckles. Steve laughs, and Bucky glances up, then traces his thumb lightly under each of Steve’s eyes and over his cheekbones, a stripe of light blue.

“How dare you,” Steve gasps, mock upset, before doing the same to Bucky, a formless red stain on his cheek. Then Steve dots his other cheek softly with one finger, a collection of small cherry colored circles, and leans back to look at him.

“That’s gotta be the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever painted,” Steve teases, his voice saturated in such warmth and love that Bucky bites his lip. He’s staring at Bucky with such fondness that his face glows, like he can’t believe what he’s seeing.

“God, shut up,” Bucky says, and rolls his eyes because the tenderness in Steve’s face is almost too much to bear.

Steve shakes his head, and then, with his clean hand, grabs his phone from the table. He gets a picture before Bucky realizes it where he’s half laughing, half smirking and rolling his eyes, and when he catches onto what Steve is doing he scowls and pushes it away, making Steve laugh.

“Oh, no photographing of the art?” Steve teases, and looks very pleased with himself for thinking of that.

Bucky scoffs good-naturedly. “Proud of that one, huh?”

“Very.” Steve sets the phone down and places his hand on one side of Bucky’s face, tracing his jawline lightly, and Bucky is putty in his hands in the best way.

“You’re an idiot,” Bucky tells him, with absolutely no annoyance. Then he kisses Steve harder than he’s kissed him since he was seventeen, and Steve kisses him back with such fierce delicateness that it knocks the air from his lungs, and when they pull back a dozen shades of purple stain their skin.

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“Can you tell me a little about your relationship with Steve?” Jennifer asks during their third session. Bucky’s finding her easier to talk to than he could ever have expected, and by this meeting the near-unbearable anxiety that had gripped him and not let go has ebbed into mild nerves. This question, though, surprises him a bit.

“I’m pretty sure,” Bucky tells her, his voice low and soft. “I don’t know how it started. I just know that it hasn’t changed. We’re always there for each other.”

Jennifer smiles, but there’s a concern in her eyes. “You said you were sure. Is it different now?”

“Yeah, uh–yeah.” Bucky nods, and then he realizes that he’s never said it before. “Yeah, um, Steve is basically the best thing that ever happened to me. He’s my favorite person, it’s like–even on the worst days, things feel a little less hard with him there, you know? And that’s how it was in high school, too. Back when we were teenagers, I was so sure we were gonna get married. I couldn’t even imagine any other future. And it was the same for him.” That hurts to admit; hindsight is cruel and ironic.

“Yeah, but there’s a concerned focus in her eyes. “You said you were sure. Is it different now?”

“I don’t know. It’s just different.” Bucky’s voice is low and soft. “We’ve grown up together, and we’ve been through so much. But it’s still the same, you know?”
Bucky should’ve known she’d ask. He leans back and bites his lip while he thinks over his answer. “Everything about both of us is different now. Especially me.” He swallows, gaze dropping. “I love Steve so much. Even more than when we were kids, if that’s possible. I really, really, really love him, and he loves me. But, um, I think he loves me more than he should?”

“What do you mean?” It’s not judgement, just curiosity and intent concern.

Bucky’s chest tightens. “It’s hard to think about the future like that anymore,” he says quietly. “Steve loves me, but I don’t– I think he underestimated how much he can deal with.” His throat swells; the pressure in his head threatens tears. “I think he’ll get tired of putting up with this. And he doesn’t really get that.”

Jennifer hesitates for just a moment. “You said you know he loves you,” she says, “is there any real reason you have to believe that that will change?”

Bucky heaves a frustrated sigh, blinks rapidly against the tears. “Yeah,” he says, voice hardening, “because not even the best, most patient person in the world would want to keep this up.”

“What do you mean when you say ‘keep this up?’”

Bucky closes his eyes briefly, forces them back open and when he talks again, his voice quivers. “Everything,” he says shortly. “Waking up every other night because I can’t handle flashbacks alone, the fact that I’ll get set off by the most inconsequential things, not having sex, all of it.” Annoyed at himself, Bucky brushes his palm over his eyes furiously.

“Has Steve ever done anything to make you feel bad about any of those things?” Jennifer asks seriously. Bucky swallows and grounds himself with a sharp breath.

“No,” he says hoarsely. “No, he hasn’t at all. But I can’t see how he could do it for much longer. I think it’s a fucking miracle he’s lasted this long already.”

Jennifer shifts and crosses her legs. “Have you always felt like that with Steve? In high school, did you feel like you were waiting for him to move on?”

Bucky blinks hard. “No,” he says, after a moment. Jennifer watches him for a moment to see if he’s gonna go on, and when he doesn’t, she leans forward slightly.

“I think it’s possible that the low self esteem you feel is a result of the trauma you experienced. It’s very, very common for people to have warped perceptions of themselves after a trauma, and feeling unworthy of respect, or love, can be part of that.” She pauses. Self-disgust claws its way into Bucky’s chest, rearing its ugly head in the face of what she’s saying, and Bucky bites down hard on his lip.

“But when that’s the case, it’s very important to try and take a step back for an accurate perception of the situation. You have no evidence that Steve wants to end things between you.” She pauses, and Bucky realizes she’s waiting for a response; he gives a small shake of his head. “You have to remember that the way you see yourself a lot of the time isn’t how other people see you. Can I suggest something?”

“Please,” Bucky responds, gesturing broadly.

“The next time you have a negative thought about yourself, I want you to ask yourself a couple of questions. I want you to first see if you have any evidence to support that thought, like I just asked you. Then I want you to see what evidence you have against it, and think about what you’d say to someone else you know if they were talking about themselves that way.” As she’s talking, Bucky
has to suppress an eyeroll. It all feels very kitschy and predictable, plucked straight from the script of some NBC drama.

As if she can read his thoughts, Jennifer smiles. “I know. But try it. It doesn’t work for everyone, but if you can have that as an effective tool, it can be helpful.”

“Okay,” Bucky agrees, with a half-smile. “I’ll try.”

For the rest of the session, Jennifer asks him a little more about the source of those kinds of thoughts, what they usually tethered themselves too, and Bucky answers truthfully and with difficulty: the feeling that he was disgusting, untouchable, and worthless, but with fewer crude words. She tells him again the inaccuracies of what he’s saying, the ways that the things that happened to him shaped those thoughts, and he nods, feeling kind of disattached from the room and the moment. When Bucky leaves, he feels exhausted more than anything else.

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Bucky turns twenty-one on the last Wednesday of the month, a date he’d basically ignored for the last three birthdays. Steve is Steve, so he shouldn’t be surprised when, a week and a half before the twenty first, he’s already planning.

“What do you want to do on your birthday?” Steve asks casually as they fold laundry in the bedroom, illuminated by the warm glow of the table lamp beside the bed and the hazy, frenetic city lights outside. Bucky sits on the bed with his legs crossed; Steve is a few feet away, leaning off the bed to grab some more unfolded clothing, and Bucky looks up from the shirt he’s folding, fixing Steve with a weary look.

“Oh, god,” he says vaguely, “I was hoping you forgot.”

“Why?” Steve asks, and he sounds so sad that it makes Bucky wince. He crosses the bed to where Steve is sitting, nuzzling his chin against Steve’s shoulder.

“I haven’t even acknowledged my birthday for three years. Seriously, the last time I celebrated was when we went bowling for my seventeenth.”

A pained, almost guilty look flashes across Steve’s face, but he shakes it off. “Buck,” he says, turning so he can push stray hair away from Bucky’s face, “c’mon. We gotta do something. Even if you and I just go out to dinner. It’s your twenty-first.”

“That it is,” Bucky murmurs vaguely, stalling. Steve raises an eyebrow and cocks his head in his very annoying but very cute trademarked you-aren't-avoiding-this-one look and Bucky sighs. “I don’t know. We can just have dinner here. Sam and Wanda and Peggy and Nat can come over.”

Steve grins, looking so genuinely happy that it feels worth it to Bucky. “It’s a plan.”

And that’s how Bucky finds himself surrounded by some very wonderful people on his birthday, all of them standing around the counter with him, faces lit up in the honey golden glow of cheap birthday candles. Steve is behind him, his arms thrown around his shoulders so he’s holding him in closely, and Bucky reaches up to hold Steve’s hand against his own chest.

“Make a wish,” Steve murmurs, laughing in his ear. Bucky rolls his eyes but laughs, and when he blows the candles out he wishes for happiness for all of the people around him, and he wishes it for himself.

***
Bucky liked Jennifer right away, but he learns to trust her, and that feels a million times more important. Week after week, he feels his discomfort thawing, disclosing the most personal, horrible, terrifying things to her, chipping away at his reservations like ice. After that first session, after his summary of the dime store horror movie of his last four years, giving her details had been excruciating. He never wanted to talk about the past except in vague, unfocused statements, afraid of breaking down or giving her too much information or both, but the concerns fade a little with the growing understanding that she’s not viewing this the same way Bucky is, or even that Steve or Sam or Nat is. She’s impartial, she’s heard it all before, and she’s got enough experience to not make him feel pitied or patronized.

So it becomes easier. He tells her when the flashbacks are bad and what exactly they are, cries through recollecting some horrible night in Pierce’s apartment or in some leering alleyway, and she helps him pick it apart (process it, she’d say, and so would Sam). There are techniques, strategies she gives him to deal with when he’s so overwhelmed it suffocates him. Some of them work, and some of them don’t.

The thing is, it doesn’t feel like he’s making progress in the larger sense. He even says this to her; while Jennifer tells him it’s normal, that trying to tackle the effects of literal years of trauma isn’t going to happen in a few weeks, Bucky still can’t shake the paranoid chill that’s telling him it’s his fault that he isn’t better, that he won’t ever be.

***

A week after Bucky’s birthday, Tony calls Steve at about six am, waking him. Steve fumbles for his phone and blinks groggily as Bucky groans and mutters something about Steve stealing the blankets before rolling back over. Steve sits up and squints at the caller ID, then decides it must be important and takes the call, climbing out of bed.

“Why are you awake?” Steve rasps, yawning. He casts a quick glance back at Bucky, who’s already back to sleep, then shuts the bedroom door behind him.

“I never sleep,” Tony says dryly. “Sorry to wake you. Who has their phone on full volume while they’re asleep, though?”

Steve rolls his eyes, rubbing a hand over his face. “What’s up?” he asks, and he tries not to sound too impatient.

“Yeah, um–SI officially severed our partnership with Principle Trust. We’re issuing a statement about it later this morning, but I wanted you guys to know.”

Steve’s half-conscious brain takes several long moments to process this information. “Oh,” he says, a little shocked. “I–wow. Tony, thank you.”

Tony sighs; Steve pictures him running a hand wearily through his hair as he does so. “Yeah, I mean–I’m not gonna stay in business with some psychopath. So…” He trails off. “How are you guys? How’s Bucky?”

Steve glances at the shut door and bites his lip. “He’s hanging in there.”

Tony gives a small, resigned hum of acknowledgement. “How are you?”

“How are you?” Steve swallows thickly. “What, uh–how’d you get out of the contract?”

“God, I don’t know, ask my legal team.” Steve gets the feeling that Tony is being vaguer than he could be, not wanting to admit how difficult of a task it had been; there’s no way, after all, that he
didn’t know the technicalities of it. But he lets it go.

“I did, however, have a call with Pierce,” Tony continues.

Steve takes a sharp breath. “How’d that go?” he asks darkly.

“Not stellar. He swears like a twelve-year-old who just discovered the word ‘fuck.’” Tony’s brushing it off again, his tone light, but there’s a weariness behind it, and Steve can tell he’s holding back again.

“What?” Steve presses.

Tony pauses. “He asked if it was because of you. I don’t know if you know this, but he’s not such a fan of you, Rogers—”

“What’d he say, Tony?” Steve asks through gritted teeth.

There’s a long, weighted silence on the other end. “He said you were a liar, and you had problems with violence—which is ironic, if you ask me—and that once a lawsuit came out against you, I’d regret taking your side. Typical dime-store movie villain psychotic rambling.” Tony’s voice drips with sarcasm, but there’s a tightness behind it, a troubled note that Steve doesn’t miss.

“Do you think he meant it?” Steve asks, glancing back towards the bedroom and lowering his voice just in case.

“No,” Tony answers immediately, and Steve believes him. “I don’t think he’s gonna sue you because I don’t think he wants to stir the pot anymore. Whatever you said freaked him out.” Tony pauses.

Steve waits. “But?”

Tony hesitates long enough that Steve can tell he’s trying to think of how to put whatever he’s about to say.

Finally, he says, “But if Bucky does decide to press charges, I’d be prepared for a storm. He’s not gonna get taken down easily.” Deflated, Steve slumps forward. “That doesn’t mean I don’t think he should go after Pierce, or that he’s got a good chance of winning. Just...tread lightly with him.”

Steve nods grimly, then upon remembering Tony can’t see him, mumbles, “Yeah.”

“Look, I gotta go,” Tony says, apologetic, “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Thanks for the heads up, Tony,” Steve says gratefully. “And thank you for doing all this.”

“Don’t mention it,” Tony says gruffly. “Take care, Steve. We’ll talk later.” Then the line clicks off, and the unbroken, intense silence of the early winter morning feels almost tangible.

***

Just like Tony had predicted, the article announcing SI’s split from Pierce’s bank comes out around nine o’clock. Steve reads it over Bucky’s shoulder, arms wrapped around him from behind as they lean over the laptop propped on the kitchen counter. Stark Industries and Principle Trust Banking to sever partnership, the New York Times claims, and when Bucky clicks it, it links to an article on the business page with a centered photo of Tony and Pierce at some conference from the year before.
InSteve’s arms, Bucky tenses. Steve kisses the top of his head and reaches to scroll quickly past it.

In a sudden move, Stark Industries has decided to cut their professional ties with Principle Trust Banking, the primary handler for all of the company’s business related finances. Just a month ago, Stark Industries’ CEO Tony Stark, when speaking at a conference for small business owners, encouraged smaller businesses to use Principle Trust for their own accounts in response to a question about handling finances.

A Stark Industries representative told the New York Times, “The change is in response to professional differences and our belief that Stark Industries would benefit from other partnerships.”

A Principle Trust representative could not be reached for comments.

When Steve stops reading, Bucky shuts the computer slowly. He presses back against Steve, tilting his head up so he fits his head in the crook of Steve’s neck, and exhales a shuddering, tired breath. Steve takes Bucky’s hands and brings them up so their arms are aligned and he’s holding them against Bucky’s chest, as close to him as possible. The air around them feels stale and tight, shifting heavily with each movement, tainted by something unwanted.

“Why do you think Pierce isn’t going after him?” Bucky asks finally, sounding drained.

Steve bites his lip. “I think he’s scared,” he answers finally, and it’s the truth.

Bucky snorts humorlessly. “Of what?”

“Of you,” Steve says, frowning at the obviousness of it. Bucky turns, untangling himself from Steve’s arms, leaning back on the counter and eyeing him wearily.

“Hilarious,” Bucky says flatly.

Steve knits his eyebrows together. “I’m not kidding,” he replies seriously. Bucky blinks incredulously. “Buck,” Steve continues, shaking his head, “you could take him down, you know. That’s why he isn’t going after me and Tony. ‘Cause he doesn’t wanna rock the boat.”

Steve watches Bucky’s face flicker between disbelief and anxiety, and after a moment he shuts his eyes.

“Steve, I love you so much, but that’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said.” Bucky braces his fingers tightly against the counter, a motion that’s rigid with anxiety. “He’s not fucking scared of me.”

Steve touches Bucky’s wrist, guides his hand gently from where he’s gripping the counter so tight his knuckles have gone white. “I’m just saying, if it was me—”

“Okay, well, it’s not you,” Bucky snaps, “because you aren’t a piece of shit who gets off on fucking guys who won’t fight back.” Pain sweeps over Bucky’s face, and Steve hesitates a few moments while Bucky closes his eyes, shakes his head quickly. After a moment, he takes Bucky’s hand. Bucky curls his fingers around Steve’s, letting him know it’s okay, and then swallows and takes a hard breath.

“He’s not worried because even if I said something, everyone would still believe him.” Bucky’s eyes are very dark and very far away.

“Not if there’s proof,” Steve says carefully. Bucky’s eyes dart nervously to meet Steve’s, skeptical
and guarded.

“There isn’t. It’s been months.”

Steve draws in a heavy breath and places his hands lightly on either side of Bucky’s waist, runs his fingertips in slow circles. “You said he has photos,” Steve reminds him quietly.

Bucky stares at him, blank shock in his eyes. His hands are resting on Steve’s bicep but he lets go and crosses his arms over his chest, swallowing hard.

“He does,” Bucky says finally, his expression darkening, his features hardening. He lifts his eyes silently, almost daring Steve to follow it up with another question.

And Steve takes it. “That’s proof,” Steve says, his eyebrows lifting with concern. Bucky looks away; his gaze goes somewhere else entirely, eyes glazing over a little the way they do when something drags him too far into his own head, and then he takes a heavy breath and screws his eyes shut.

“No way,” Bucky hisses, strangled and miserable. He shakes his head frantically, anguished, and Steve backs off.

“Buck,” Steve says quietly, “baby.” He waits to touch him, drawing back. Bucky’s whole stature has tightened, lips pursed and jaw set.

“Look,” Steve begins carefully, “you know it’s one hundred percent your choice. And whatever you do- I mean- Buck, I get it if you never wanna face him again and deal with all the shit that reporting him would involve, and… go back to it in that way. I promise I’m with you whatever you choose.” He pauses, studying Bucky’s face carefully. He’s looking a little past Steve, deep, profound unhappiness all over his face that fills Steve with a helplessness that grows wildly and quickly in his chest.

“But I think you have a really good shot at bringing that asshole down,” Steve adds, voice hardening, “so that’s—you know. That’s what I think. But you call the shots here.”

Bucky stares at him and bites his lip. Then he averts his gaze, bitterness sweeping over his face.

“I never fucking call the shots,” Bucky mutters, “that’s why I’m in this situation.” He turns away from Steve and then rethinks it, looking back with an anguished, resigned grimace. “He’s gonna keep getting away with whatever he fucking wants.” Bucky’s voice hardens to slate; his eyes flash.

Then he’s out the door before Steve can reply to that, mumbling that he’s going for a walk, and the hollow slam of the door behind him follows Steve for the rest of the day.

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These kinds of questions are what therapy is for, Bucky assumes, so he brings it up that next session with Jennifer.

“Steve, um…” Bucky reaches across himself and rubs his elbow, uncomfortable suddenly. “Steve wants me to press charges against one of the—against Alexander.” He’s told her the majority of what happened, sick history with Pierce included, but it still feels impossible to bring it up without feeling vile for even talking about it.

Raising her eyebrows, Jennifer considers this. “Do you want to do that?” she asks him.
“I don’t know what I want.” When Jennifer waits for him to elaborate, Bucky says, “I mean, I hate him. I hate him so much. But I’d never win a case against him in a million years.”

“How come?” Jennifer presses.

Unreasonable, untraceable annoyance flares in Bucky’s chest. “Because no one’s gonna believe someone like him raped a hooker,” he snaps, a shockwave shuddering through him. Then he bites his lip and pinches the bridge of his nose, grimly exhausted.

“You know,” Jennifer says, “that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you use the word ‘rape’ to describe what happened to you.” Even as she repeats it now, Bucky winces.

“Yeah,” he mutters, “well.” Hot paranoia spirals in him suddenly, like she’s gonna correct him on it. Rubbing a hand down his face, Bucky finally looks back up.

“Do you know why it’s difficult for you to say?” Jennifer asks.

Astonishingly, Bucky finds his voice, forces the words out hoarsely. “Cause I don’t always feel like that’s what it was. I mean, I obviously—I didn’t want—but like, I still put myself out there, I still met with people even when I knew what they were going to do, and I said no and—and I got paid—that doesn’t seem fair, to say that, when there are people out there who got really hurt, and fought back—” Bucky’s voice cracks, somewhere between a sudden gasp and sob.

“Bucky,” Jennifer says, her voice kind and serious, “you were seventeen when you got into sex work. If a seventeen year old came up to you and told you the story that you told me at our first meeting, would you tell them it was their fault, that they shouldn’t have gotten into that position in the first place?”

Bucky hesitates to consider the question, blinking back tears, almost stunned by the suddenness of it. “No,” he finally says shakily. Jennifer raises an eyebrow.

“So why is it different for you?”

“It’s just- it’s-” Bucky’s brain stalls and sputters like a damaged engine, and he finally shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says finally, sadness in his chest heavy enough to sink ships.

“So do you think you could be looking at it with a warped perception?”

Bucky shuts his eyes, his brain pushing up against the idea, the sharp, hard insistence that it’s him who’s wrong, who’s the one at fault present as ever. “All the other times, anyway,” he says finally, “like Pierce. And Rumlow. And—people who—I went there knowing what they were gonna do and it still fucking hurt, and I don’t—I didn’t have to go back. It was my fault a little bit.”

Tears run down Bucky’s face, quiet and uncontrollable. Jennifer is silent for a few moments. “Bucky,” she says finally, “look at me. I want you to hear this. It wasn’t your fault. Alexander Pierce is an incredibly powerful man who was blackmailing you. Brock Rumlow is a cop. They were abusing you, and it’s the same reason most people in abusive relationships don’t break it off immediately. You weren’t treated the way you deserved to be since you were seventeen, since even before you met any of these people, when you were left by your parents at a camp designed to make you hate yourself. The treatment that you put up with for all four years all affected your reactions to people, Bucky. You were hurt, and that became your norm for a long time, the way it does with anyone in a prolonged abusive situation.”

Everything she’s saying feels like a little too much, too fast to process, rupturing through his thoughts like strobe lights, and Bucky can barely grasp it. “The first time…” he says faintly, “The
first time I ever didn’t go to Pierce’s, um—I was scared he was gonna… I don’t know. Know where I was, or something.” He remembers that day, the day he’d decided, fuck it, let him post all the pictures and videos he wanted, he couldn’t ever go back there again. He’d half-dragged himself to Wanda’s from Alexander’s, bruised all over his stomach and neck and legs with two blackened eyes and his throat raw from crying and other things, and it had taken him an hour of begging to convince her not to call the cops. Bucky, I don’t know who did this, but you can’t go back there. Ever, she had said, horrified, while she pressed an ice pack softly to his face. Promise me. You could’ve been killed. And the next week, when he usually would have been over there, he stayed at Wanda’s, watching the clock and shaking uncontrollably, half-convinced Alexander was going to break down the door.

Jennifer nods encouragingly. “The only people with any blame were the ones who hurt you. You were doing what you thought you had to do to avoid even more pain, but you never should have felt the need to do that in the first place.”

The way she explains it feels like it’s shaken loose some permanent, stone-heavy guilt that Bucky had walked around with for the last four years, so simple that he should have been able to figure it out but momentous in what it opens up. Hearing it laid out like that, logical and matter-of-fact, gives him the first shred of belief that he hadn’t been the one at fault, that he was justified in the pain and misery that they had carved, bone-deep, into him. His breath quivers hard as he exhales, and all he can do is nod, numb.

“I don’t know what to do,” Bucky manages, when he gets his voice back. “About Pierce, I mean.”

“I can’t tell you a definite choice, because there are good things and bad things about whatever you do. If you try to get charges pressed against him, it won’t be easy. It could take a long time, and it could end in a way that’s not fair. You have to be prepared for that possibility. But it could also get this terrible man to face the consequences. And you’ll have a strong support system through it. But you have to think about yourself more than anything, and what you feel like you can handle right now emotionally, and whether it’s worth going through how emotionally taxing a trial would be. You’re the priority here, Bucky. It’s not about what anyone else wants. And you don’t need to decide right away; you should think about it and talk about it a lot before you make a choice.”

Bucky replays the conversation on a loop all the way home, trying to figure out what the fuck he can handle emotionally and what it will do to him if Pierce doesn’t get charged and how he’ll feel if he doesn’t try.

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“I want him to pay,” Bucky whispers in bed that night. His hand is splayed over Steve’s chest and when he speaks, his fingers curl in anxiously, something between venom and terror shooting through him. He’s been thinking about it all day, his mind bouncing rapidly between wanting to do it and not wanting to ever go within a mile of Alexander Pierce again, and it’s the only conclusion he can come to.

Steve watches him carefully through wide, understanding eyes. “Just—” Bucky swallows, his mouth dry. “I’m scared that I’ll kill myself going through everything all over again to…whoever—lawyers or police or whatever—and then nothing will fucking happen.”

Steve hesitates; Bucky glances up and can see the gears turning in his head, eyes narrowed in concentration as he thinks. After a moment he sighs, brings his hand gently over Bucky’s hair.

“I know,” Steve murmurs finally. “I don’t know, Buck. But even if… that happened, it wouldn’t be for nothing. He’d still have to face the consequences- his marriage, his career, I mean… I really
think you have more power here than you know.”

Bucky exhales, sharp and drawn out, and shuts his eyes. The idea of him having power over Alexander is so absurd that he laughs bitterly, disgust as cold and sharp as ice shooting through him. Steve is the most wonderful person in the world but he still doesn’t get it, that it never worked like that for Bucky.

“Nobody would believe me,” Bucky says quietly. “The cops probably wouldn’t even investigate.”

“Yes, they would,” Steve replies firmly, like it’s a fact, “and there’s evidence.” Bucky winces at that reminder but shoves the thought far away for the time being.

“Brock Rumlow’s a cop,” Bucky mutters darkly, the reminder sharp and unwanted. It’s part of the universe’s spectacularly cruel plan, methodically tying together each facet of Bucky’s life so he’s left with a wrecked pile of ugly complications, intertwined too tightly to smooth out even one of them.

Steve exhales through his teeth, controlled hatred sweeping across his face. “Yeah,” he says tightly. And then, so sadly, “God, these fucking people, Buck, I’m so sorry.”


“Okay,” Steve whispers. “Think as long as you need, Buck.”

Bucky falls asleep to the soft tap of the rain on the window, the safe brush of Steve’s hand against his back and the tangled embrace of their bodies, and for a precious moment all he can feel is him and Steve. The world outside can wait.

Chapter End Notes

ok so looking at the outline i have i'm guessing this'll be anywhere from 100-130k when done, hope u guys don't mind it being that long lmao

as always, thank you for all the comments and messages you've left reading them makes my heart SO FULL and gives me so much encouragement so really, thank you from the bottom of my heart

hoping to post one next week bc i've got a pretty loose schedule this week but if not, see you in 2 weeks, come talk to me about bucky and steve or your favorite tv show or what you did today on tumblr @cafelesbian i love hearing from you guys ! lots of love xxx
What therapy brings out in full force is the anger, and Bucky hasn’t been prepared for that in the slightest. For the last four years it has laid dormant, buried under the raging grief and disgust and self-hatred and fear that always burns at the surface of his consciousness. Still, when Jennifer even broaches the idea that everything wasn’t all his fault in a way that Bucky starts to believe it, it claws its way out, spitting and violent from years of being pushed aside. It slams him sometimes, thinking about how fucking cruel those people had been, leaving him breathless. One night he’s washing his face and a sudden, unprompted surge of rage slams him, so sudden and blinding that he has to clutch the edges of the sink until his knuckles turn white to stay steady.

He tells Jennifer this, worried about how it’s actually affecting his psyche. “It’s not that I wasn’t like, angry before,” he explains, “but lately it’s just way more than it’s ever been and I don’t—” Bucky digs his nails into his palm, breath catching. “I’m worried about what it’s gonna do to me.”

“Well,” Jennifer says calmly, “what do you mean by that?”

“I mean, it can’t be healthy, hating people as much as I kind of do right now.” Bucky feels a small twist of guilt. “And it isn’t like, replacing the other bad stuff I feel. It’s just there also.”

“It can be exhausting to walk around carrying anger. But it’s important to recognize that it serves a purpose. You spent years in an environment that was telling you- well, what would you say you were being told? Literally, or just the messages that were being reinforced by your surroundings.”

Bucky’s fingers flex tightly around the stress ball. “That, um—” He clears his throat. “That everything people did to me was my fault. That I wanted it. That—that I was disgusting, for letting people do that.” The words burn his throat and taste bitter in his mouth.

Her eyes soft, Jennifer nods. “Right, Bucky. These completely false beliefs were from an echochamber of everything you were hearing and the ways that abuse was warping your perspective.” Bucky flinches, wondering briefly if he’ll ever get used to the word ‘abuse’ in relation to what happened to him. “So you were angry, rightfully, because the people you’re talking about had no right to hurt you. But that anger was being invalidated and suppressed, because the only explanation you thought there was evidence for was that you were somehow to blame. And now that you’re away from the people who were reinforcing this idea and in an environment where you’re allowed to feel the truth—which is that none of what happened was your fault—all of that fury that you didn’t allow yourself to feel is coming free. And I know it’s not an easy feeling, but it’s an important sign that you’re recognizing that it’s okay to blame and hate the people who hurt
you, because they're the ones at fault.”

Bucky swallows hard. His mind races through a series of images: Pierce and Rollins and Rumlow and all the faceless, temporary men who had ignored the word “no” even when he’d screamed it, and that rage heaves in his chest like something alive.

***

Steve watches this process unfold, and it rises to a breaking point one night after dinner. They’re unloading the dishwasher and a dull, troubled anger has clouded Bucky’s eyes. Steve is just about to ask what’s up when Bucky turns away from him, plate in hand, and slams it against the counter without a word.

And okay, Steve had not been expecting that. He jumps back and gasps audibly as Bucky swings back around to him, trance broken, pulling his hands against his chest like he’s trying to retract it. He goes pale, face starkly terrified, and for a minute the both of them are silent: Steve taken aback and a little unsure how to react and Bucky making himself as small as possible, still looking a little like he can’t believe what he just did.

Steve almost reaches out to him, then stops himself at the last second. It occurs to him that somewhere in there Bucky still thinks he’s about to get hit. He’s actually bracing himself for it, arms pulled over his chest in defense, eyes shut, and horror flickers in Steve’s chest.

“Hey,” he finally says softly. That gets Bucky to look up and, to Steve’s relief, recognition fills his eyes and he relaxes marginally. “Buck, breathe. It’s okay.” Bucky takes a sharp breath that’s more like a gasp, but his shoulders drop and a little color ebbs back into his cheeks, and something selfish in Steve fills him with intense gratitude that at least Bucky isn’t afraid of him.

Steve shifts his gaze from Bucky’s face to the splintered pile of porcelain on the floor beside him. “You okay?” Steve asks carefully. Bucky shuts his eyes and nods, swallowing hard.

“Sorry,” he says shakily, “I don’t, um—I didn’t mean to—I was just thinking about something and…” He trails off, gazing miserably back down. Steve bites his lip and reaches out to touch Bucky’s shoulder, hesitating for a nod or headshake. “You’re not mad?” Bucky asks hoarsely. It sends a spiral of anguish straight to Steve’s heart.

“Baby, no.” At that, Bucky swallows again and then leans briefly against Steve, swaying a little as he holds on to him. After a moment Steve whispers, “Thinking about...?”

Steve expects him to brush it off and not answer, but he still says it to make sure Bucky knows he can talk if he needs to. It surprises him when Bucky pulls away and pushes his hair from his face, looking suddenly defeated.

“I’m just angry, and I was thinking about him, and this one time when he—he thought I wasn’t trying hard enough to—to—” A hard swallow, a couple of pained blinks against tears, “to make it good for him and he got mad. He was drinking and he, um—was yelling and then he slammed the glass on the ground where—I was kneeling just ‘cause—he knew it’d get me, that he was that in control, so if he did that it’d scare me.” Grief and bitterness twist in his voice, sharp enough to cut diamond. Anger pushes back against Steve, spitting and hot as a wildfire, and he gets it under control with a deep breath.

“Piece of shit,” Steve mutters, disgusted. He swallows again. “Did it make you feel better?” Bucky blinks, and Steve nods at the broken place, a tired half-smile pulling at his lips.
“Oh.” Bucky huffs out an exhausted, sad laugh. “Actually, a little. Yeah.”

That’s all Steve needs to hear. As far as he’s concerned, Bucky could douse the apartment in gasoline and set it ablaze if it made him feel better for even a minute. Wordlessly, Steve pulls another plate out of the dishwasher and holds it out. Bucky doesn’t take it.

He choke out a small, breathless whisper of a laugh. “Yeah, no thanks. I’m not breaking your cutlery—”

“Ours,” Steve cuts in, and smiles. “You said it made you feel better. You’ve got a right to be fucking furious, babe. Go ahead.” Bucky takes it from him, but there’s hesitation written all over his face, so Steve adds, “We can go to Target this week and replace them.”

“Okay,” Bucky says reluctantly. He’s waiting, though, like he doesn’t trust himself.

“You can yell, if you want. It might help,” Steve suggests.

Bucky looks back at him and bites his lip. “Yeah?” he takes a breath, chest heaving with the effort and God, it’s brutal to see the way that even now, Bucky has to put up a fight to even begin to allow himself to let go of some of this pain. Bucky nods, face screwed up in concentration, then he takes in a breath and raises the plate and slams it against the counter only slightly lighter than before.

Steve grins; it’s bizarrely cathartic to watch this. Bucky looks up again, a little surprised, and when Steve holds out another one he takes it without waiting.

“I hate him!” Bucky shouts this time, voice crescendoing towards hysteria. “I hate all of them they fucked me up so bad I wish Alexander Pierce were dead he should never have done that to me!”

It’s punctuated by the scraping sound of shattering ceramic as Steve hands them over, protective love and pride and heartbreak all washing over him. He picks up a sixth plate to give him, but Bucky braces his hands on the side of the counter and leans over, shoulders and arms shaking, gripped with weak sobs. Then he leans against Steve, lets him wrap both arms around him tightly until he stops feeling him trembling.

“Sorry,” Bucky says faintly, burying his face momentarily into Steve’s shirt.

“No apologizing,” Steve replies firmly, running his fingers through Bucky’s hair. Bucky shivers and tucks himself closer to Steve.

“ Weirdly, um—that helped,” Bucky mumbles tiredly.

Steve kisses his forehead. “Good.”

They stay like that for a long time, tangled in a dizzying, aching close hug. Finally, Bucky pulls away and looks right at Steve. In his eyes is a hatred Steve’s never seen there before, vicious and diamond-hard. “I want him to pay,” he says shakily. “Does that make me a bad person? That I-I want him to feel, like, even one millionth as bad as he made me feel.”

Steve sighs, tilting his head down to touch his forehead to Bucky’s. “Never,” he says quietly. “Of course you want him to pay. He doesn’t deserve anything.” Steve has to strain his voice to keep it calm, spitting out the last word through gritted teeth.

Bucky stares down at the pile of shattered plates and doesn’t answer.

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That next morning, while Bucky’s still asleep, Steve slips out of bed and into the kitchen to do a little research. He leans over the counter and opens his laptop, hesitating a moment before typing Rumlow’s full name into the search bar. He’s beyond worrying about consequences; he’s gotta find this asshole and make him pay for what he did to Bucky, cop or not. No one in the world is allowed to hurt Bucky like that.

The results, though, make him stop cold. The first headline from the New York Post, in it’s true sensationalized fashion, reads Scumbag Manhattan Cop Arrested for Domestic Violence Against Pregnant Wife, postmarked from three weeks ago. Steve blinks a couple of times then clicks it frantically.

An NYPD officer was arrested at his home Thursday night following a 911 call from neighbors who said they heard screaming from his house. Brock Rumlow, 38, is now in custody and is being charged with aggravated battery assault against his pregnant wife, among other charges. He was denied bail last week, and will remain in custody until the trial. Lawyers say he could face up to forty years. Rumlow’s wife, whose lawyers requested she not be named, reported that it wasn’t the first time her husband has been violent to her—

Steve stops reading and takes a moment to collect himself. Dull satisfaction ripples through him, and then it’s just relief flooring him, some intense, unexpected surge of conviction that maybe justice isn’t dead.

It lasts approximately six seconds, and then he’s thinking about Rumlow’s wife, what she’d had to go through for this to happen. He wonders, vaguely, if Rumlow was just the type of person who hurt whatever was closest to him no matter who or what it was. The list probably went on, besides her and Bucky. He’d suddenly be willing to bet that Pierce had a track record, too.

“Hey,” Bucky says groggily, snapping Steve back to the present and giving him a sleepy, half-smile. Steve’s eyes flit from the article to Bucky’s face, and Bucky looks him over, gaging the tension in his shoulders and stress creases on his face, and frowns. “What’s wrong?”


Steve watches Bucky’s face carefully as he reads it. His eyebrows knit together at the headline, and then he scrolls down. Steve thinks maybe he should have warned Bucky, because his eyes go wide at the mugshot, his breath catching for a moment. Than he purses his lips and scrolls past it, scanning the text quickly. Bucky’s face flickers from terse and guarded, to surprised, to something between pain and relief. Once he’s done reading, he doesn’t say anything for a few long moments, just stares forward, expression blank. Steve can’t read his face.

Bucky takes a heavy breath, his shoulders lifting. “Good,” he says, voice hard and breathless. “I hope he rots in there.”

“Me too,” Steve says quietly.

Bucky reaches absently and takes Steve’s hand; his skin is cold. “I think,” Bucky begins, in a very small voice, “I think I do wanna report him. Pierce. Try to—I don’t know. Get him to pay.”

Bucky’s fingers tighten around his hand, reluctance written obviously on his face, but when his eyes flicker to meet Steve’s, he looks certain.

Steve doesn’t answer right away. He lets go of Bucky’s hand and hugs him from the side, pressing a kiss to his shoulder, and then Bucky turns and winds his arms around Steve’s neck, his face
pressed against Steve’s shoulder.

“Okay,” Steve replies simply, and finds that his voice is thick and choked up. “Okay, Buck. I’m so proud of you.”

“We should probably, um, ask Jennifer what to expect. She told me she’s seen people who decided to report…”

Steve nods, vigorous and encouraging. “You’re seeing her Friday, right? And I mean— you don’t have to rush, you can wait as long—”

Bucky cuts him off by throwing his arms around Steve again. “I know,” he mumbles.

“Okay,” Steve says again. The hope that flares in his chest is dangerous and vicious, but he lets it burn there.

***

The next time they discuss it is that night, late in the evening while they’re in bed watching Breaking Bad on the laptop. A ripple of worry comes over Steve when he glances down at Bucky and finds he looks numb, his whole face stricken with a kind of focused emptiness that tells Steve there’s something on his mind. Steve pauses the show and gives his shoulder a squeeze.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks quietly. Bucky lets his head drop against Steve’s shoulder, closes his eyes.

“I just had an idea,” he says flatly. “I really, really don’t wanna do it. But it might be enough to get an investigation.” Steve’s breath catches; he gives Bucky a slight raise of his eyebrows. Bucky tugs absently at the string of Steve’s hoodie, his shoulders and back going taut.

“Scott knows how to hack people.” Reluctance flickers over Bucky’s face and he pauses for a moment.

“Oh. Oh.” Steve catches on a moment late, stunned by the suggestion. “Oh, wow. And you think…?”

“He could get Pierce,” Bucky finishes grimly. In that moment, in the washed out white light of the TV and the lights peering in from the tops of neighboring buildings, Steve can see the toll of the last four years almost as clearly as he could see it months ago, that night that Bucky had walked back into his life looking hollowed out and almost unrecognizable. Circles under his eyes are made harsher in the foreboding darkness, his cheekbones look thin and worn in, and he’s pulled in on himself, figure made small. Bucky isn’t fragile; he’s strong in a way Steve can’t even begin to comprehend, that astonishes him every day. But in that moment he looks diminished and breakable in a way that traps Steve’s breath in his throat.

“As evidence,” Steve says, his voice brittle. Bucky nods once. “Do you think—are you sure it wouldn’t be…too much? To handle at once?”

Bucky pauses with anxious thoughtfulness. “I’ve seen them already,” he says tightly. “If there’s an investigation, I’ll have to see them again anyway. I’d rather get it over with.”

Steve considers this, still worried. “I don’t know if we could use it in court if it’s hacked—”

“Right.” Bucky cuts in quickly, “but if we showed it to the cops, and that was enough to get them to investigate him…”
“...and then they found it on a search warrant,” Steve finishes. Bucky nods stoically. Shutting his eyes, Steve thinks this over. He’s seen the numbers, knows that the majority of reported sexual assault cases don’t even get looked into. Especially considering Pierce’s standing, the odds are stacked against them without some kind of solid proof. “It’s up to you, babe,” he says finally, “if that’s really something you’re okay with, you’re right, it could be helpful.” Silence hangs in the air, stretching and compressing the longer Steve waits for Bucky to respond.

“I don’t want you to see it.” Bucky says, after a moment. His voice is a tight coil of shame and Steve hates it.

“I know,” Steve says quietly. “And if you don’t, then I won’t. But also, I don’t care. I mean—not—not I don’t care, obviously. I just mean no matter how bad it is, it wouldn’t make me... you know...not love you more than anything in the world.”

Bucky doesn’t smile. His gaze drops, lips pursed. “The thing is...I also don’t want, um—to look at them by myself. But I can’t ask you to do that” —Bucky’s breath is starting to get short again, panicked inhales punctuating his words— “I can’t ask you to look at them because it’s bad, Steve, it’s so bad—”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Steve is so glad in that moment that Bucky is letting him hold him. He pulls him in closer and runs his hand over Bucky’s hair, kisses the top of his head. “This is about you, Buck. If you want me there so you don’t have to see it alone, I’ll be right there and I’ll be okay. I can handle that. And if you don’t want me to see it, I won’t and I’ll be there for you afterwards. But the only thing I want you to think about right now is how to make this the easiest for you.”

Bucky closes his eyes and nods quickly, a tight tremor to his breathing. “Okay,” he says, his voice just a notch too high. “Okay. I’ll, um—I’ll call him tomorrow.”

The tone of finality in Bucky’s voice tells Steve the conversation is over. He nods, kissing Bucky’s forehead, and pulls his body closer to him as he clicks unpause just a fraction too hard.

***

Scott Lang agrees to help after a fifteen-minute phone call with Bucky. He’d asked for Pierce’s personal email—something about sending a virus that would give him access to the computer—and doesn’t ask too many questions, which both of them appreciate. He’s got a vague sense of what Bucky had gone through, had been there for the aftermath of some of it, but he doesn’t know much about this particular guy and Bucky seems fine to keep it that way.

When he comes over, though, it occurs to Steve that he truly has no idea what he’s about to be assisting with. He’s maybe in his early thirties, a tall, lanky, happy go lucky guy who lopes when he walks like he’s always headed somewhere important. He’s a family friend of Wanda’s from childhood, Steve learns from Bucky, and had known her when she was in elementary school and he was starting high school, and they’d lost touch for a while but reconnected one night at a bar. She’d needed a roommate to help cover the rent and he’d just gotten finished a two year prison sentence for hacking his own insurance agency, and when Bucky had met her they had been living together. He’d since moved out and in with his girlfriend, but they’d stayed friends, and when Bucky had called him Scott had basically dropped everything to see him.

“Great place, man!” is the first thing Scott ever says to Steve, with a surprised gape around the front room. Thrown off, Steve smiles and stammers a thank you, and then Bucky pushes past him and Scott envelopes him in a hug. “God, Buck, it’s been so long—wow, you look really good.”

Bucky grins, looking, to Steve’s intense relief, slightly more relaxed. “Missed you, too, Scotty.”
They play catch up for a few minutes, with Bucky introducing the two of them. He’s squeezing Steve’s hand and Steve could have felt his discomfort from a mile away, tension vibrating in every one of his muscles, a slight edge to his voice, but he keeps it together.

“So, um—” Scott says eventually, “I actually already got into his laptop. He opened that email really fast. The guy really wanted to know about a new golf resort, apparently.” Despite everything about their situation, it gets a laugh out of Bucky and Steve. Scott grins. “Billionaires are morons. But yeah, anyway, I’m onto his desktop now, so once I set it up you should be able to see whatever you need on there. I changed the settings so any password-protected folders are disabled, too.”

Bucky shudders, his fingers going slack and uncurling from around Steve’s hand. “Thanks, Scott,” he manages, a terrified edge to his voice. Steve echoes it absently, his focus entirely on Bucky.

Scott gazes at the two of them, looking somber in a way that suggests to Steve he has a better idea of what this is for than he’d let on. “No problem.” He crosses the room, sitting on the couch to pull out a laptop, taps importantly at the keyboard for a moment. Steve stands with Bucky and, when Bucky leans against him, places a hand gently on his back, circling his fingers lightly.

Scott watches them for a moment, calculating the situation. “You know,” he says, setting the computer on the coffee table and standing, “if you guys don’t need me, I might head down out to that coffee shop down the block? I’d kill for a cappuccino.”

Steve feels a sudden, intense rush of affection for Scott Lang. “It’s great,” he says halfheartedly, “get their ginger scone.”

Scott nods and claps him on the shoulder, heading for the door. “Call me when you’re done, I’ll get it all disabled. Take your time, I’ve got other work to do.”

“Thank you so much, man,” Bucky says weakly.

Scott smiles warmly. “See you criminals soon.” He shoots each of them a finger gun and lets the door fall shut behind him, and the silence that settles over the apartment is heavy and unsettling.

Steve turns to Bucky, who’s staring intently at the ground. “You don’t need to do this,” he reminds him softly, placing a hand on each of his shoulders.

Bucky lifts his head to look at Steve, his eyes hollow. “Yeah, I do. Let’s get this over with.” He starts towards the couch then turns back. “Steve,” he says, voice caught, “you don’t have to do this either. They’re bad. They’re fucking disturbing.” His eyes flash, pained and defensive.

“Bucky,” Steve says quietly, “tell me what you need right now. I’m with you, one hundred percent. If you’re uncomfortable with me seeing it, just tell me how I can be there for you. But I don’t want you to worry about me right now.”

“I know,” Bucky says, with a hard little breath. “I just- I want you to be prepared.”

“Baby,” Steve breathes. “What would make this easiest for you?”

Bucky’s mouth pulls into a tight little line, his eyes falling momentarily shut. “I think if you’re with me, for this. Even- you know. Seeing it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Bucky’s voice quivers but he sounds sure. Steve hesitates, wanting to know beyond a doubt that it’s okay. This is Bucky showing him the most private, violating thing that’s ever
happened to him. There’s no room for assumption here.


“Yeah,” he answers, his voice stronger. “I- I think that would make it easier.” Steve believes him.

“Okay,” Steve answers, nodding rapidly. “Okay, baby. If you’re absolutely sure.”

Bucky stares at him stoically, then crosses the room again to wrap his arms tightly around Steve. Steve holds him back for a few beats, until Bucky peels himself away and grabs his hand.

They settle on the couch, a few inches between them. They talked it over the night before: they’d plug in a USB, Bucky would open the folder, copy the entire thing onto the drive as fast as possible, and it would be over. Still, Steve’s heart is hammering in his throat, electric dread pulsing through him, and beside him Bucky is shaking. Steve reaches again for his hand and Bucky squeezes it back until his knuckles go white.

“Okay,” Bucky says shakily, half to himself. Then he flips the laptop open.

It looks like a normal desktop, save for a small box of code in the upper right corner. Pierce has an obnoxious amount of folders, and Steve is tempted momentarily to dig through all of them and see what else they could use against him. He glances at Bucky, who’s gone very pale, his lips pursed.

“It’s labeled something else,” Bucky finally grits out, “obviously.” Steve nods. Fingers trembling, Bucky takes a breath and clicks through one of the folders, something labeled 2012 that ends up being nothing but documents.

When three more come up empty, Steve starts to wonder if maybe he’d gotten rid of it. The anticipation is awful; his heart is beating so fast he starts to think it might give out, and Bucky’s breath is shallow and terrified. “You can slow down, baby, it’s okay,” Steve says desperately, and Bucky swallows and nods but keeps clicking.

The fifth folder is labeled  *PTB Tax Returns March-September* and by the time Bucky opens it, Steve has almost completely stopped watching the screen and started watching Bucky, rubbing his back gently. But as soon as Bucky’s breath twists into a strangled, ruined gasp and his eyes widen, horrified, Steve knows.

“Okay, okay, baby, breathe,” he says immediately, and as soon as he turns to the screen he disregards his own advice.

Steve expected it to be bad. He’s heard Bucky describe things that sound straight out of a horror story, has listened to him cry and scream and felt terror vibrating off of his skin, electric and frantic. He thought he’d had as good an idea as he could of how bad it was, and he knew the pictures would hurt but he thought he was prepared.

A million years of warning could not have prepared him to see them. Bucky’s unconscious and on his stomach, his wrist pinned behind his back, dark bruises scattered indiscriminately over his arm and back, Pierce’s hand on his throat, forcing him down, limp and lifeless as a ragdoll. There are dozens of photos, a serial-killer level number of sick image upon sick image. Steve can feel his legs and arms go numb, an automatic chill running through him and seizing his muscles. He needs to keep it together for Bucky, he knows that, but horror has taken hold of his consciousness and stopped him from talking or moving or breathing. His mind grasps onto the thought *ohgodohgodohgod this can’t be real*, and nothing else processes, so when Bucky’s breathing constricts and he stands up very suddenly, shaking Steve’s arm off and pacing across the room,
Steve can’t make himself react.

Bucky needs him right now, he’s able to process that, except he feels physically ill and he can’t lose it in front of Bucky, not when he’s the one who needs comforting. Steve gets enough control over his body to stand on shaking legs, but nausea slams him as he does and stars pop behind his eyes.

“I’ll be right back,” he hears himself say faintly. “Just—just give me one minute, Buck. One minute, I promise.” Somehow, he makes his legs work long enough to get him to the bathroom, not flicking the light on before he sinks to his knees and dry heaves until he gets sick, and then he isn’t vomiting anymore but he’s crying, uncontrollable, anguished, furious tears running down his face.

One minute, he’d said, and it’s been about forty seconds, so Steve pushes himself up again and rinses his mouth out with water until it feels semi-acceptable. He starts to head out, bracing himself. Then he stops, turning, and punches the wall so hard that he gasps and doubles over, clutching his hand, but he doesn’t care because the searing, white hot pain that blinds him means he doesn’t have to see those images for a second.

When he makes it back out, Bucky is sitting back on the couch. The laptop is shut and Bucky’s head is down, chin tucked against his chest, terribly vulnerable and small and just broken, but when he hears Steve he looks up again, eyes blank.

“Are you mad?” Bucky asks in a small, violently quivering voice.

“Of course I’m mad,” Steve grits out, scrubbing a hand over his face. It hits him half a second too late that the question had been are you mad at me? Bucky’s eyes go wide, a panicked sheen glossing over them, and then his face crumbles into shame. Steve startles.

“Oh, god. Oh, Buck, no, no, no. Not at you. Baby—” Panicked, Steve shakes his head rapidly as he makes his way from the hallway to the couch, giving Bucky a few feet of space just in case when he sits. “Bucky, no, god, it didn’t even cross my mind that I could be mad at you for a single second, okay? I’m just—I’m furious at him. Only him.”

The terror drains slowly from Bucky’s face. He nods blankly and then presses his hands over his face, muffling a sob. Steve moves towards him, aching to touch him, but he’s careful not to. Bucky rocks a little, shaking his head at nothing, face covered still, and Steve just stays next to him, not touching him and not leaving him, and eventually he realizes tears have been running down his own cheeks for some time.

When he can’t bear it anymore, Steve reaches out to place his hand between them. Bucky watches him, tentative, but then takes it. A moment later, he collapses into Steve’s arms, face buried in his chest. Steve would have let him stay there forever if he thought it could bring him any relief at all, but Bucky is crying so hard it scares him, sobs racking his body and making him shudder, and Steve is worried he might make himself sick.

“Baby, breathe, you gotta breathe, Bucky, okay?” He whispers, voice gentle and trembling. He rubs his back and his arm and he can feel Bucky struggling to get control over it and eventually he does, somewhat, slowing the hyperventilating to ragged, deep gasps. “There you go, baby, you’re so good, you’re so strong, Buck, I got you. You’re doing so, so good.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says meekly. And okay, Steve had been wrong when he’d thought his heart couldn’t possibly break any more.

“Oh baby, no. Buck” —Steve straightens up, pulling Bucky closer against his chest— “Buck, no.
Look at me. You have nothing to be sorry for. It wasn’t your fault, you didn’t do anything wrong, okay?

“No, but-but—” Bucky breaks off into a small sob, “I’m also sorry that you had to look at that, I-I shouldn’t have asked that of you.”

Guilt shoots through Steve. “Oh, god, Buck, no. I offered, you didn’t like—pressure me. I’m so sorry about…that, Bucky, I should’ve been here right after.”

“Don’t be,” Bucky says shakily. “You are here.”

They stay pressed closely against each other like that for a long time. Steve clings to Bucky so tightly he can feel him trembling, can feel his breath quivering as his lungs struggle to support it. Bucky cries quietly for a while and then just leans against Steve quietly, defeated and exhausted and so sad that Steve can feel it in the air, piercing straight through him like something physical. After an eternity, Bucky sits up and rubs his eyes. “We should tell Scott we’re done.”

“Okay.” Steve stays close to Bucky as he dials Scott, tells him briefly he can head back up. Then he hangs up and leans back against Steve, eyes falling shut.

“I’m really, really proud of you,” Steve tells him, his voice strained with the effort of keeping himself together. Bucky grips his hand very tightly in response.

Scott shows up a few minutes later. He can sense the fragility of the situation but doesn’t press them, just finishes erasing Pierce’s desktop and packs it up. He brought them both plum scones, and he gives Bucky a tight, protective hug as he leaves and Steve decides he likes Scott Lang immensely.

“Hey,” Bucky says quietly, “I might call Jennifer.”

Relief sweeps over Steve; Jennifer will know what to say. “Okay, great,” he says, “take your time, babe, I’m gonna work out.” He gestures vaguely to the workout room and Bucky nods.

“Steve,” he says suddenly. Steve turns to him and he crosses the room, putting his arms around Steve’s shoulders. There’s a strong steadiness in the gentle pressure of Bucky’s arms, and Steve wants to collapse into it. He hugs Bucky around the waist and they hold onto each other for a brief, desperate moment.

“I love you,” Bucky whispers when he pulls away.

“I love you, too,” Steve breathes. Bucky gives him a sad smile, then kisses him lightly on the cheek and heads into the bedroom, leaving Steve to stand there, weighed down by the tremendous heaviness of his sorrow and rage and love.

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Jennifer, God bless her, answers the phone. She’s reassured Bucky a hundred times that he could call her at any point he felt he needed to talk, but he still feels like he’s burdening her terrifically when she answers, even though she insists it’s fine.

He half expects her to be mad, to berate him for being irresponsible enough to think he could look at those or confront him about not telling her. She isn’t. She listens to him tell her what happened and how seeing it had splintered him inside and left him reeling. Bucky feels split still, his mind flipping from a kind of aching, shell-shocked emptiness to nauseating, suffocating fear and sadness, lurching from one to the other and dragging him along.
“I don’t know why—I thought I could handle it more. It was a bad idea.” Exhaustion sweeping over him, Bucky lets his eyes fall shut. His brain feels dull and shadowy, unable to work coherently.

“You were thinking about the smartest way to approach this in terms of reporting it,” Jennifer reminds him. “Those images were a stark reminder of a very, very traumatic event. Anyone would have been distressed by them. Maybe it wasn’t the best way you could have tackled seeing them, but it’s normal to want to use what you had against him.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, his breathing still rapid and uneven, “thank you.”

“How are you feeling now?” Jennifer had already reminded him that the sickened, immediate response he’d had had been a panic attack, hyperventilating and dissociating and all, and Bucky’s coming down from it now to a raging headache and sadness so big it feels uncontainable.


“How did he react?”

Bucky takes a long breath. “He was upset. He got sick, too. I feel…really, really bad that I made him feel that way.”

“You didn’t make him feel that way,” Jennifer says firmly. “He’s upset because he doesn’t want to see you in pain, not because you did something—”

“I know, but it’s just another way that I hurt him. Like, I’m afraid it scarred him.” Bucky’s voice breaks, and he puts his hand over his mouth to suppress a sob.

Jennifer pauses. “Bucky, Steve loves you. I’m sure it hurts him to watch you feeling like this, but it’s not because of something you did. It’s part of what we’ve talked about: you thinking that Steve views you as an inconvenience that he has to handle, as opposed to how he actually views you, his partner, who he loves. And I’m sure you’re right, it was painful and distressing for him to see, as much as it would have been for anyone. But his reaction came from his worry and love for you.”

Bucky hates himself so much for needing that reminder but it calms him down a little bit. “I expected him to like—I don’t know. Hate me, after seeing that.”

“And he doesn’t.” She’s not exactly asking, but Bucky gives her confirmation anyway.

“No.” He grimaces and swallows. “I just—it made me feel disgusting.” Even repeating that now, Bucky’s mouth goes dry.

“I know,” Jennifer says, her voice soft and understanding. “But you need to remember that it doesn’t reflect anything about you. Alexander was taking advantage of you and using this to shame and intimidate you. It’s one of the most common abuse tactics there is because it’s very effective in twisting the reality and turning the blame on the person who got hurt. It wasn’t your fault. I want you to repeat that.”

Bucky inhales sharply. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“That’s right. He used that to try and keep control over you, and he’s the only person who should be disgusted with themself. Using his abuse as a way to make you feel bad about yourself was his way of shifting the responsibility to make you feel like you were deserving of that treatment. Which was absolutely a lie.” Jennifer is calm but firm, and the conviction with which she says it
reminds Bucky that she’s right, calms him down a bit.

He stays on the phone a few minutes longer. Jennifer talks him through the tidal waves of panic that keep crashing over him until he has control over his body and isn’t shaking, and before she hangs up she insists that he can call later if he still needs to talk. Bucky stays there for a few minutes, breathing and replaying the things she’d said, and then goes out to see Steve.

Steve is in the workout room, pounding the punching bag so tightly that it startles Bucky for a moment. He’s so focused that he doesn’t notice Bucky for immediately, his eyes trained darkly on the bag, punches unrelenting.

“Steve,” Bucky says softly from the doorway. Steve stops hitting, swinging to face him, and his face changes immediately, focused rage smoothing into concerned softness as soon as he sees Bucky. Bucky swallows thickly at that.

“Hi,” Steve says, breathing hard as he tosses aside the gloves. “How are you, babe?”


Deep, intense relief floods Steve's face. “Good,” he says firmly. “I’m so glad.”

“Steve,” Bucky says, voice quivering. “Thank you.” Steve raises an eyebrow like he’s questioning it, like he doesn’t know the magnitude of what he’s done for Bucky. “For today. For everything.”

Very softly, Steve brushes his fingertips over Bucky’s cheek. “You don’t have to thank me. We’re partners. It’s what we do.”

Bucky sighs and moves to wrap his arms around Steve’s neck but Steve stops him with a hesitant hand on his shoulder.

“I’m kinda gross right now-”

“I don’t care.” Bucky folds his arms tightly around Steve, who laughs and hugs him back, kissing his neck and hair and shoulder.

“What do you say we order in and watch a movie?” Steve suggests quietly, still holding Bucky. He nods in response, his gratitude and love for Steve gripping him, permanent and soft.

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They order Thai food and end up watching Aliens, of all things, and Bucky falls asleep against Steve twenty minutes in. Steve is glad. He mutes it as soon as he realizes, thankfully before an alien claws its way out of anyone’s stomach, and pulls the blanket up around Bucky’s shoulder.

Steve watches Bucky sleep next to him for a few moments, face half-buried in Steve’s shirt, clinging to his side a little too tightly for it to be okay. A sudden rush of sadness fills Steve’s lungs, knocking away his breath, as it occurs to him just how preventable it all could have been.

Since they’d been six and seven years old, Steve had wanted to protect Bucky even when he hadn’t needed protecting. Before he could even understand how the world worked, he hadn’t wanted it to get to Bucky, couldn’t bear the thought of anything subduing his brilliant grin that could have knocked half of New York breathless or the light of the fucking universe in Bucky’s glass blue eyes or his laugh that Steve could swear set off a hundred private bolts of lighting in his stomach. It was why he’d glared at anyone who looked at Bucky the wrong way after the amputation, why
he’d gotten suspended fistfighting the prick on his soccer team who’d called them faggots, why he’d braced himself in front of the pistol that Bucky’s dad had held at them that horrible night. He can remember one afternoon a few months after they’d started dating in high school, standing with Bucky as they waited for a bus as it snowed, and feeling Bucky shiver next to him and wanting, fiercely and irrationally, to sweep him up and protect him from even the chill.

Steve thinks, all of a sudden, of the first time they’d had sex. Bucky was sixteen and he was seventeen, and they’d talked about it for a few weeks with the kind of fervor and anticipation only lovestruck teenagers can. Steve borrowed his parents car, an El Camino that they’d owned since before he was born and could probably have fallen to pieces with a good enough kick, telling them he was going to some soccer tournament, and then he and Bucky had driven up to Montauk. They spent that day at the beach, then found a hotel that had seen better days and didn’t check their IDs and they checked into a cheap room feeling more grown up than any other couple in the world.

Steve remembers that night so well, remembers the pale pink and orange glow of the sunset washing over Bucky’s face, the creak of the bedsprings. Bucky had been wearing a soft light blue shirt; Steve remembers fumbling to pull it off and Bucky laughing at him, and being sure in that moment that he was looking at the most extraordinary sight the world had ever conjured up. Bucky had elbowed him at one point in the ribs by mistake, and Steve had needed to peel the tab off of the off-brand lube they’d picked up at a gas station with his teeth because he couldn’t pull it, and they had laughed so much that Steve thought the happiness that filled that tiny room could have saved the world.

Bucky had kissed him that night like it was the first and last time they’d ever kiss, straddling Steve’s waist, arm thrown tightly around his neck, and Steve had gripped his hips and back and face like he was looking for something, or maybe like he’d already found it. They were so close that Steve could feel Bucky’s rapid heartbeat pressed against his own, and if Bucky had stopped kissing him, stopped holding onto him, Steve is sure he’d have ceased to exist. Are you nervous? Steve had whispered, and Bucky had grinned and said no without needing to think about it.

Tell me if- it hurts, or whatever, I don’t wanna fuck it up, Steve had stammered. Bucky had cocked his head and replied You trying to turn me on there, Rogers? and then kissed him again through another fit of laughter.

Steve swallows hard, looking down again at Bucky. Sleeping against Steve’s chest, he looks exactly like he had in high school, save for the longer hair, the soft light smoothing over the few changes of the years. Maybe that’s why he’d remembered that night, all of a sudden. He feels half-delirious with exhaustion and sorrow, wine drunk on the chaos of the day and his useless, endless love for Bucky.

But even with the hazy, electric spiral of his thoughts, that protectiveness is there, clear and sharp as it’s ever been. The last thing Steve thinks, as sleep slips over him, is that he won’t ever let go of it as long as they live.

Chapter End Notes

omg shoutout to the person a few weeks back who predicted Scott coming back fo help hack them.......you were right

your comments and kudos’ and messages are my lifeblood thank you all for existing
i'll see you all in 1-2 weeks my friends
Chapter Notes

hello my friends i hope you're doing well on this fine wednesday night
tw for flashbacks to rape, feelings of self-blame and extremely brief suicidal feelings
a million thank yous to Cia for her spectacular editing of this chapter also !! enjoy

Jennifer tells them what to expect. She’s seen patients go through reporting abuse a million times, so she explains the process of speaking to a detective, filing the report, waiting for the decision for an investigation and then, if one happens, potential charges. The whole thing stretches out in front of him, intimidating and daunting, and Bucky tries to stare it in the face without cowering.

“You’re allowed to have someone there for support,” she tells Bucky. Steve had come in with him that day and is sitting close to him, holding his hand. At that, he nods vigorously, then pauses, like he jumped the gun and was waiting for Bucky to decide.

Bucky gives him a small, sad smile. “You coming along for the ride?” he says weakly. Steve squeezes his hand and nods again.

“I think that’s a good decision. It really can make all the difference,” Jennifer adds, giving them a small, approving smile. “Have you thought about when you’re gonna go in yet?”

“No. Um—I’ll call tonight.” The thought of it sends a sharp wave of anxiety rolling over him.

“I think you’re making the right choice here, Bucky. It’s an incredibly brave thing that you’re doing.” It couldn’t feel further from that, but Bucky doesn’t say it. “Do you mind if we chat one-on-one, for the rest of the time?” She and Bucky turn to Steve, who nods right away, and gives him a smile while he leaves.

The door creaks shut, and Jennifer fixes her gaze on Bucky. “So, how are you feeling about this?”


“That’s normal,” Jennifer replies, sounding completely unsurprised. “Do you know what exactly the fear is connected to?”

“I mean”—Bucky swallows hard—“it’s hard for me to talk about this sh-stuff even with Steve, or you. And the police haven’t exactly been a goddamn security net for me in the past.” Bucky pauses, bitterness seeping into his blood. “But mostly it’s that I think it isn’t going to make a difference anyway.”

“Bucky,” Jennifer says thoughtfully, “I’m just wondering, if that’s what you think, why did you make the decision to report it anyway?”

Bucky lowers his gaze, makes himself smaller. “I saw this article last week. Steve found it. This guy who was one of the guys who...did weird shit with me—” Jennifer tilts her head. Bucky
swallows. “Who raped me.” It tastes bitter in his mouth. Jennifer’s big on that, on calling the abuse what it was so that he isn’t giving them the power to keep the blame on him. “Brock Rumlow, the um, the cop… He got arrested a few weeks ago, ‘cause he attacked his pregnant wife. And I guess I thought—you know, if he could really get caught then maybe…” Bucky trails off, the reasoning sounding suddenly flimsy and childish.

“That makes perfect sense,” Jennifer says supportively. “It’s very often that people decide to come forward about abuse because of stories about other survivors.”

Survivors. That word lands heavily and feels undeserved, the idea that his situation was even comparable to poor pregnant woman in an abusive marriage absurd. Uncertainty flashes across Bucky’s face again. Jennifer reads it, gesturing for him to respond.

Bucky sighs, reaching up to rub his neck. “Survivors?” he says wearily. “You don’t think that’s, like, a false equivalency?”

Jennifer’s eyebrows lift. “What do you mean?”

Bucky shifts, uncomfortable. “I mean- it’s not like it’s the same thing. She was in an abusive relationship and having a baby and I was sleeping around for a living.”

Jennifer leans forward, her eyes full of sincerity. “The abuse you went through wasn’t less traumatic because you were in sex work. You weren’t—and you aren’t—any less deserving of justice and respect than anyone else who was assaulted, Bucky.”

Bucky swallows hard. It’s easier to accept than it would have been a few months before, but it still comes with an automatic, intense rejection of the idea that Bucky has to fight against. It wasn’t my fault, he repeats to himself, for the seven hundredth time that week. Taking a deep breath, he changes the subject.

“I still—I just feel like no one’s gonna believe that he did that. People know who he is, his whole public image is big business and family man; it’s the kind of thing people are going to call an attention grab—” Bucky’s voice becomes frantic, and Jennifer leans forward.

“Bucky, take a deep breath. Let’s look at this from an objective viewpoint. You’re telling the truth, you have evidence, you have people to corroborate what you’re saying. I’ll be very surprised if it doesn’t at least get an investigation.”

Bucky exhales shakily. “Yeah,” he says vaguely, “you’re right.” And she is, but he can’t shake the conviction that it’s going to backfire.

They talk for the last few minutes about how to handle talking about the things he went through to a stranger, various strategies and such. Jennifer promises him it will be okay and asks him to let her know when it gets scheduled for, then call her once it’s through. Out in the waiting room, Steve’s sitting, reading through something on his phone. He stands and smiles, giving Jennifer a wave and Bucky a quick kiss on the cheek.

“You wanna get brunch?” Steve asks. Tucking himself into Steve’s side as they head out, Bucky nods.

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Bucky calls the precinct. The phone call feels like fragments, the minutes going by too fast for him to catch a breath, but they end up telling him to come in on Tuesday afternoon.
And Monday comes. It’s one of those quiet days where they both have nowhere to be. Usually, they’ll take a walk together or head out for a meal and then stay in Steve’s studio while he does his art and Bucky writes. He’s started again very slowly, largely with the encouragement of Jennifer, and he likes it, finds it strangely cathartic. Most of it is reflective, streams of consciousness that mirror whatever is racing too fast through his mind that day, or fragments of longer stories he no longer has the confidence in himself to write. Being there with Steve, though, in their shared quietness and total comfort, Bucky feels perfectly safe.

The night before they’re meant to go in, while Bucky is throwing all of his effort into not spiraling into complete panic, the sky opens up into a torrential rainstorm. “Guess we’re ordering,” Steve comments with a shrug. “Vietnamese?”

So they order, and over-tip the delivery guy who braved the downpour outside. Steve can sense Bucky’s mounting anxiety from across the room, so he leaves him the space to talk while they eat. Bucky doesn’t go for it. He’s somewhere else entirely, eyes glazed over with a dull, muted panic, so Steve decides to distract him.

After they’ve eaten, Steve grabs Bucky’s hand and pulls him into the living room. Bucky throws his legs over the couch, sipping bubble tea and watching Steve with mild interest. Shooting him a grin, Steve scrolls through his music library and selects a couple of songs.

“C’mere.” Steve holds out a hand dramatically, beckoning him over. Bucky rolls his eyes goodnaturedly.

“You can’t dance,” he tells Steve, but he takes his hand and gets up all the same.

“You haven’t danced with me in four years,” Steve replies, feigning offense. Bucky smirks at him, then wraps his prosthetic arm gently around Steve’s neck, slides their fingers together with the care and precision and delicateness of a first kiss, leaving Steve breathless with love in the same way. Steve pulls him in closer, sliding a tentative arm around his waist then tightening it when Bucky presses in against him.

“Alright, let’s see these new skills you gained,” Bucky teases. Steve raises his eyebrows, shifting his weight from either foot until they’re swaying half in tempo.

“Impressive,” Bucky says dryly.

“Shut up,” Steve retorts. Bucky laughs and buries his face into the crook of Steve’s neck, pressing a kiss there. In the background, music lilts gently through the air, Adele soulfully declaring, *I could hold you for a million years to make you feel my love*. Bucky looks up a moment later and then kisses him, so softly it sends an electric thrum running down Steve’s spine.

“I like this song,” Bucky says absently, a couple of moments later, “good choice.” Steve smiles and holds onto him, bringing their clasped hands back to align with their shoulders. He can feel Bucky breathing, slow and shallow against his chest, and the light is throwing the shadows of his eyelashes into long, fluttering, thin lines on his cheekbones. If this moment was preserved, filed away like one of his paintings in a museum for people hundreds of years from now to look upon, Steve thinks they’d get it. They wouldn’t hear the steadfast beat of the rain on his windows, or breathe in the scent of lavender that clings to Bucky’s skin, or feel the electric quiver that pulses lightly through Steve in all the places he and Bucky are touching, but they could look at the two of them, close against each other, and understand the love there was something rare, bright and obvious, big enough to rival mountains, soft enough to quiet storms.

The next song begins, and Bucky pulls away and raises an eyebrow. “Really? Coldplay?”
“This is a great song, c’mon,” Steve replies defensively.

“Who are you?” Bucky shakes his head, and Steve grins then lifts his arm to twirl Bucky, pulling him back in with surprising grace. Love, don’t let me go-Bucky laughs, dropping his head back, flushed cheeks and bright eyes and uncorrupted joy swallowing the otherwise permanent trace of unhappiness that hovers over him. Steve loves it when he looks like that. He clutches to that moment, holding it tight against his chest, refusing to let it be touched or tainted by anything that’s coming.

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Even with all the preparation, all the support from Steve and Jennifer and Sam and Wanda and literally all of his friends, terror still constricts Bucky when the moment comes to go inside the precinct. He’s sitting in the passenger seat of Steve’s car, white knuckling the arms of the seat, and thinking about just how truly awful of a plan this was.

It’s a million different reasons, each of them pressing into his brain, ice-cold and startling—the idea that it’s just filled with another couple dozen Brock Rumlows, the seemingly increasing likeliness that the whole thing will lead nowhere, the dread that shoots through his veins at the thought of explaining what Pierce had done to him to a cop, for them to decide if it’s even worth a second look.

More than anything, though, is the fact that he’s throat-deep in conviction that he won’t be believed, that they’ll take one look at him and his past and label the story as a lie or, worst of all, see it as his fault. Between Jennifer and Steve repeating it a hundred times and his own constant, back-breaking work to unlearn the only mantra he’s had for four years, you’re wrong and disgusting and bad it’s all your fault if you get hurt you deserve everything you get, he can almost accept it, can almost believe that he really wasn’t to blame. But this newfound forgiveness of himself is unsteady and fragile and flickering. He still wakes up some nights, bolting awake drenched in sweat and choking on his own self-disgust, even if the next morning he can grasp onto the shaky framework of the idea that he didn’t cause it. Nothing, Bucky figures, will shatter the little progress he’s made in this area like a condescending, impatient comment from a detective to imply that he’d wanted it.

Paranoia spirals violently through his chest. He’d been so afraid to go see Jennifer that first meeting, but underneath the gut-twisting anxiety, he’d at least had the knowledge that it was her job to be on his side. The police had no obligation to give him the time of day.

The reminders aren’t helping either. Bucky stares up at the NYPD sign, dark and imposing, and his mind heaves him back a few months at the image.

Rumlow, backing him against a wall. He hasn’t seen him since that last time at his house, when he’d left sickened and shattered to bits and hurting everywhere and intending to never, get anywhere near Rumlow again. He knows where Bucky tends to loiter, though; it’s where most of the married, closeted guys tend to get their fix and where they had first met, and it hadn’t taken him long to come looking.

“Missed you, princess,” he sneers. Bucky presses his back against the brick, trying to mask the fact that he’s trembling all over and fear is rushing thickly through his bloodstream, building in his throat and chest so he can’t breathe.

“What do you want?” Bucky says, the breathless terror obvious. Rumlow smirks, looking almost inconvenienced, like they should be past this.
“C’mon, you gonna make me beg?”

“I’m off the clock,” Bucky says, a hard, petrified edge to his voice. He’s already half-gone, though, knowing it’s not going to deter Rumlow, his brain disconnecting from what’s about to happen.

“Yeah?” his voice rises, high and mocking. All of a sudden, he presses himself against Bucky so hard that he can’t even struggle, gripping Bucky’s throat. Bucky gasps, shuts his eyes. “Here’s your options, then. You get in my car and let me do what I wanna do with you and then I let you go let as many other fags fuck you as you want. Or, you don’t come with me, I arrest you for prostitution, do what I wanna do with you, and then take you to down to the prison. Either way, I get what I want.” He lets go of Bucky, a horrible, satisfied smirk splitting over his face. Bucky drops his head against his chest, a sob shuddering silently through him, desperate tears spilling over his lashes.

“That’s what I thought.” He shoves Bucky roughly towards the car and then opens the door and pushes him in the back, and as soon as he’s touching him Bucky can feel the walls caving in, the air thick and poisonous, until he isn’t there anymore, his mind is somewhere disattached and far away. He thinks he’s sobbing but it could be coming from anywhere, and Rumlow is tearing him open, hissing in his ear, “Fuck, that’s good, you like that, baby? Dirty slut, hot fucking whore, you want this so bad—” Bucky can’t even call it sex, just using his body to get off. Somewhere in his mind, the realization forms that no matter how many people do this, he’ll never get used to being made into something so un-human, lifeless and submissive and existing solely for the brief pleasure of other men who can’t even begin to consider what he wants, who get to go home and not think about him and not spend the rest of their lives terrified of it happening again, they don’t stumble back to whatever home they have that night and think about putting a final end to it only to pass out for a few restless hours of sleep and wake up into another nightmare.

“Bucky,” Steve whispers, and as Bucky lurches back to the present he realizes he’s bent over, face in his hands. He takes a sharp breath and straightens up, shaking his head frantically.

“It’s fine,” he grits out, furious at his own fragility. Then, as if Steve knows what he’s talking about: “He’s already fucking in jail, how am I still having to think about him?”

Steve blinks. Then, gently, “Wait… you mean…Rumlow?” Bucky nods, pressing his nails into his palm. Very lightly, Steve brushes his fingers over Bucky’s until he uncurls his fist. Bucky takes his hand instinctually.

“I just—it’s not even his precinct, he isn’t fucking here but—” Bucky breaks off, breathless.

Steve is circling his thumb lightly over his hand, a motion so small that Bucky can put all of his focus onto it and let it ground him. “Buck, it makes sense that you’d be—I don’t know, thinking about him here. All the connections…” Steve trails off sadly, clears his throat. “I just mean—you shouldn’t ever feel bad about something reminding you.”

Feeble relief shudders Bucky, and he leans across the space between the seats to rest his head on Steve’s shoulder. “Just give me a minute,” he says quietly. Steve drapes an arm over Bucky’s shoulders and kisses the top of his head.

“Take your time, we’re early.” Steve’s right; they have an appointment for thirty minutes from now. Steve had suggested arriving early, and Bucky resented at the idea that he was going to need time and coddling before he even walked into the fucking building, but he’d known Steve was right. He feels intensely pathetic right now, furious at the knowledge that all it had taken was a flicker of a reminder to send him spiraling, confidence slipping away like sifting sand.
“Sorry,” Bucky mutters, half to himself.

“Don’t be,” Steve says. Bucky wonders if he’s tired of repeating that.

It takes ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, but Bucky manages to claw himself back towards having control over his breathing and pushes through the poisonous fog of memories. He uses a couple of breathing exercises Jennifer had suggested, things that he’d suppressed a scoff at before but that end up helping anyway. When he feels his muscles become unrusted, he sits up. Steve brushes a thumb over his cheek, pushing back loose hair, and looks at him with such gentleness and care that it knocks Bucky’s breath away momentarily.

“Okay,” he says quietly. “I’m ready.”

A frantic hum of white noise swells in Bucky’s head as he gets out of the car and heads into the building. A thick, ominous fog has taken shape, making it hard to breathe. He makes it, though, through the endless walk from the car to the front desk, and gives his name, and the woman who he’d spoken to on the phone meets them there and leads them towards a private interview room.

The detective Bucky speaks to is Carol Danvers, and he decides he got lucky- as far as cops go, she’s about as good as they get. She strides into the room with such a confidence that tells Bucky immediately that no one is fucking with her, but then she smiles warmly and it puts him at ease, as much as possible with the bloodcurdling anxiety that’s still racing through him.

“James, right? I’m Detective Danvers.” She sticks out a hand and glances between them. Bucky winces, the name stirring something sickening in him, clenching hard in his chest as he hears the voices every single man who’d called him James over the last four years, taunting or dripping with repulsive desire or hissed like a threat. Next to him, Steve senses it and stiffens, his hand curling protectively where it had been gently rubbing small circles. Still, Bucky doesn’t bother correcting her. The last thing he wants is to do any more explaining than he has to.

“Hi,” he says hoarsely, taking her hand. “Thanks for making the time.”

“Thanks for coming in,” she replies briskly. Her eyes flit to Steve, who stands quickly and reaches out a hand.

“I’m Steve.” He shakes Danvers’ hand too, as she flashes him a quick, professional smile.

“So are you staying for the statement?” She addresses Steve, but she’s really asking Bucky, an eyebrow raised at him. Bucky nods. “Okay, great. So, is it okay with you if we record the interview? We could get it transcribed, but it takes longer.”

“Yeah, uh—recorded is fine.” Jennifer had told him this already.

Danvers smiles. “Great.” As she sets up the camera, Bucky taps his leg, an absent, frantic motion, and wrings his hands in small, insistent circles. Steve reaches across his lap to squeeze his hand, and Bucky shifts so their clasped hands fall between the seat.

“Ready?” Danvers says kindly.

Bucky takes a shaky, painful breath. “Yeah.”

She gives him a quick nod, then turns on the camera.

It starts with a few basic questions: full name, age, contact information, things that are easy because Bucky doesn’t have to think. He senses the tone change, though, before Danvers even
begins asking the questions he’d come here to answer. She straightens up in her seat, fixing Bucky with a serious, almost apologetic gaze.

“Okay. So I know you’re here today because you told us on the phone that Alexander Pierce attacked you. Can you start from the beginning and tell me how you met?” She gauges Bucky’s spiked anxiety, and her face softens. “If you need to take a break, just let me know.”

“Thanks.” Bucky’s mouth has gone dry. He becomes suddenly and intensely focused on the loose thread coming off his sweater, twisting it around his index finger tight enough that it hurts. He swallows, takes a sharp breath. “Okay.”

She asks him how and when they met. Bucky hates thinking back to it; it had been a freezing, brittle night a year before and he had been hanging around a bar, one of those underground gay clubs with prostitutes and glory holes and every drug known to man that paid the cops a couple hundred bucks a month to look the other way. Alexander had walked in, harshly out of place in the sickening neon lights, the fluorescence making the lines on his face look harder and angrier. Bucky had eyed him from a distance; it tended to be the older businessmen who paid him the most, who found the missing arm kind of dangerous and exotic. He’d been right. Pierce had walked up to him within ten minutes, and he had gone home with him and that first night had been almost typical. Danvers had asked for as much detail as possible, so he gives it.

Then she asks about the really bad things. His whole body wrenches back with resistance, his chest pressing in against his lungs, stomach lurching, but he tightens his hand around Steve’s and so he tells her about that second meeting. Danvers’ eyebrows raise when he mentions the photos, shame writhing violently in his stomach as he does. Steve is holding onto his hand so tightly he can feel the slight pulse in his fingers and so intently, a controlled desperation obvious in his grip. He’s watching Bucky with horrified, agonized eyes like he’s hearing the story for the first time and it sends irrational guilt spiraling through him all over again.

“Do you think he still has these somewhere?” she asks gently. Bucky has to swallow four times before he gets enough moisture in his mouth to answer.

“He does. And also—I have… some copies of them.” His voice quivers rapidly. At that, Danvers’ eyes go wide. Steve, remembering suddenly that he has the USB drive, fumbles to get it from his jacket pocket and slide it across the table. Bucky doesn’t miss the way his hands shake.

She takes the hard drive and turns it over in her hand. “That’s going to be very helpful for the investigation. Thank you for bringing that in, guys.” She pauses; Bucky can see her thought process, the gears turning in her brain as she starts to question the legitimacy of it. “How did you get this?” She asks, covering up the brief moment of skepticism.

Bucky had prepared for that one. “One time when I was over there, he left his laptop open, and I emailed them to myself. Just, you know, in case.” His voice shakes slightly with the lie, and he feels Steve’s fingers stiffen against his. There’s a flash in Danvers’ eyes that tells Bucky she doesn’t believe it, but he might just be paranoid.

“Thanks, James. That was smart.” Her eyes dart back and forth quickly, but she leaves it there. “I can review these alone after we’re done here, if that’s what you want.” Dread turns over and over in Bucky’s stomach at the thought of that, and his grip on Steve’s hand constricts.

“Okay,” he says, and he has to strain his voice to break a whisper. “It’s um—as a warning… they’re pretty graphic.” Cold, panicky shame breaks over him. Sensing it, Steve slips his thumb to Bucky’s wrist and circles it back and forth in lieu of a hug.
“That’s okay,” she says, warmth softening her voice. “I’ve seen a lot of graphic scenes. I promise it’s not something I think about past the use of it as evidence, and it’s really not something I remember.”

Right, Bucky thinks, but he wants to move on so he nods.

Describe it in detail, Danvers had said. It’s all a blur of colors and pain, each time with Pierce, fusing into one gaping, abstract dark hole that stretches around him for miles, the dates overlapping and indistinguishable. In tears, he rattles off the worst things Pierce ever did to him, describes his apartment so his story is corroborable, narrows down the dates as close as possible to when each story had happened. Talking about it for so long, so matter-of-factly drags the energy from his body screaming, leaving him raw and worn to nothingness. By the time he’s done, and Danvers has no more follow up questions, Bucky is so exhausted that even keeping his head lifted feels like an olympic task.

She says a few things to wrap up, but Bucky honestly doesn’t hear them. The white noise is back and crescendoing to a breaking point and leaving him with a splitting headache. He catches the words update you and search warrant and take some time so he nods absently.

Danvers stands. “I’m gonna go enter all this into evidence. You two can take a minute, if you need. I’ll be right back.” She turns to the camera. “Interview concluded.” She clicks it off, the noise tremendous in that small, quiet room, and gives them each a small nod before strutting out, the door swinging heavily behind her.

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They stay sitting for a few minutes, the room in perfect, eerie stillness. Steve shifts the chair closer and wraps both arms around Bucky, relieved to hold him after the agonizing two hours of pulling back when all he’d wanted was to pull him close and shelter him from the memories so terrible they permeated time. Bucky leans against him, exhausted and resigned and weighed down by grief, and cries quietly into his shirt.

The worst is over, Steve wants to say, and he almost does until he realizes it isn’t not even close. The worst is still coming no matter how this goes, whether the detective calls and tells him that sorry, there won’t be an investigation into the man who spent the last year finding every single way to abuse and control you, or whether he does get arrested and Bucky has to spend the next god knows how many months preparing to face him in a crowded courtroom.

A rush of sudden, furious anguish jolts through Steve, and he clamps down against a scream at the unfairness of it. Bucky’s been raped and beaten, abused and made to believe he was nothing, brutalized and tortured and hurt in every way Steve can think of. And now this, now the universe is going to put him through the relentless pain of waiting for the other shoe to drop. The sickening disgust almost blinds Steve.

Instead, what he says is “You did so good, baby. I’m so proud of you.” There’s little else to say. He knows it and Bucky knows it, and all he can do is try to stop the already devastating wreckage from cutting any further into Bucky by wrapping himself around him and refusing to move for any threat that comes their way.

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Bucky has gained some level of clear-headedness back by later that night. He and Steve made stir fry and ate at the counter and they’re doing the last few days worth of laundry when Bucky’s phone rings, the shrill startling him. He’s sitting on top of the dryer, legs hanging over the side, the
phone beside him and when he checks the unlisted number he knows it’s Danvers.

Bucky clutches it for a moment, breath held. Without a word, Steve knows. He drops the pile of clean shirts he’s holding and gives Bucky a small, supportive nod. Bucky takes a breath and answers, setting it to speaker.

“Hello?”

“James?” Bucky winces—maybe he should’ve corrected her after all—but swallows it back.

“Yeah, hi, detective,” he replies, keeping his voice even.

“Hi. I’m so glad you picked up.” She pauses, a brief rustle of static filling the silence. “So I know it’s a bit late and I won’t keep you, but I wanted to tell you that we will be investigating Alexander Pierce. It takes longer to decide for some cases, but the evidence you brought us was more than enough…” She goes on, but Bucky doesn’t hear her. He lets his head drop back, eyes lifting to the ceiling, overwhelmed equally by relief and immediate, newfound anxiety that coil around him so quickly his breath catches.

Steve pulls him back to the present right away, placing one hand lightly on his cheek and laying the other over Bucky’s hand. Bucky swallows harshly, meeting his gaze. Desperate, wild hope is written all over Steve’s face.

He manages to catch the last of what Danvers says. “… going with a few other officers to search his house tomorrow morning, and depending on that we’ll try and move forward with arresting him.” The prospect sends a dangerous shudder through Bucky.

“Thank you,” Bucky says shakily, “that’s really… thanks, Detective Danvers.”

“Or course,” she says briskly. “Listen, I’ve got to finish something up first, but I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know. Take care, James.”

Bucky is still holding the phone up when she hangs up, and doesn’t realize it until Steve lowers his hand gently. A sort of breathless anticipation comes over him, terrible hope that he shoves back instantly, not letting himself go there.

“Bucky,” Steve whispers, “that’s so great.” The same tentative relief is bright and obvious in Steve’s eyes. Bucky stares at him, unable to respond.

He doesn’t know what to say, so he winds his arms around Steve’s neck and falls against his chest. Bucky holds onto him with a desperation that threads through his veins and pulls him closer, closer, closer to Steve, grasping at him, straddling Steve’s hips, wishing any space between them to dissolve. Steve holds him back with such fierce protection that he lifts him off of the dryer, and Bucky comes undone in his arms. He leans his head against Steve’s shoulder, exhaling with a shudder, exhaustion sweeping over him.

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Alexander Pierce hasn’t been sleeping well.

It’s been like that since the bank lost Stark Industries. Steve fucking Rogers, the smug, childish little asshole, was the one to blame for that. His immaturity and jealousy and lies had cost them their biggest client, and now Alexander was left to pick up the pieces. That’s what he’d told his wife, when she’d woken up at three in the morning to find him in the kitchen, pouring himself a very well deserved glass of bourbon—it was just career stress.
But it was more than that, no matter how much he tried to ignore the insistent panic crawling under his skin. It was what Rogers had said that night—lawyer up. It wasn’t true, it couldn’t be true. James, or Bucky, or whatever the hell his name really was—Alexander couldn’t care less—wasn’t going to press charges. He couldn’t, anyway, because Alexander hadn’t done anything wrong. The stupid whore had brought it on himself when he started letting people fuck him for a living—there’s no such thing as rape when you’re doing that. Not to mention the photos, tucked safely away in a folder on his desktop to ensure he’d never come out with some lies for attention and money. He’d combed through them the same night as the party, just to be sure he had some leverage if Rogers and James decided to capitalize on this, so he could put that stupid slut back in his place. Yes, it would be fine, Alexander reminds himself. Expending his energy on worrying about a couple of sensitive, pathetic children like Rogers and James was a waste, and he wasn’t going to let them damage any more of his work than they already had by letting their lies and empty threats affect his focus.

It’s eight thirty on Wednesday morning. Martha is still asleep and his youngest daughter has just left for school. In a few minutes, he’s going to go to work, and keep cleaning up the mess that Rogers and Stark and fucking James had left for him, and it was going to be fine.

There’s a pounding at the door. Alexander tenses and straightens up (another fucking side effect of Rogers threatening him—he’d never have worried about what this was before he’d been attacked). Then another knock.

“NYPD, open up!”

Chapter End Notes

i really just be throwing in random marvel characters when i realize i forgot to plan who it was you guys should see my nots for the next few chapters but anyway! i hope you liked this one

another billion thank yous to everyone who leaves a nice comment they give me so much motivation to write its unreal i love u all sm

hmu on tumblr @cafelesbian for all your fic and not-fic related questions

also guys !!!!! my lovely friend Cia who proofread this chapter for me literally made a playlist for this fic and it's made my whole entire life so i'm linking it so you can all enjoy this beauty here

until next time!
The next morning is the worst waiting game Bucky has ever experienced. All night is, really. He falls into a restless sleep for a few hours around midnight and wakes up heaving back a scream, seized by panic but unable to remember the dream that caused it. Steve bolts awake and calms him down with soothing murmurs and the soft trace of his fingertips and Bucky leans against him, burying his face into the crook of his neck and shivering against him until exhaustion drags him under again.

In the morning, Bucky wakes up alone. He can hear Steve moving around the kitchen, pacing and making coffee and putting away plates, presumably to distract himself from waiting. Bucky heads out to find him leaning over his laptop, a taut, anxious quality to his face. When he sees Bucky, the worried creases deepen.

“You look terrible.” Steve says apologetically. His voice is laden with compassion and worry and the startled bluntness of it gets a surprised laugh out of Bucky.

“You’ve looked better,” Bucky replies. Steve blinks and then huffs out a relieved laugh, holding open his arms. Bucky crosses the room and falls against him, winding his arms tightly around Steve’s neck then burying his face briefly against his shoulder. Steve’s arms are steady and secure, hands gentle circling over Bucky’s back. **Safe.**

“You feeling okay?” Steve asks. Too worn out to come back with a quip, Bucky shrugs.

“I’ve been checking if there’s been any news or anything, anyone calling from his building to report…” Steve trails off, a glint of guilt flashing across his face. He’s viewing it so differently from Bucky; to him, Pierce’s downfall is a given, something clean and straightforward and calling for celebration. For Bucky, it’s just more of the same thing he’s always been through; waiting and hoping, only to get slashed back down. It feels inevitable that it will backfire. Pierce gets away with fucking everything and why this should be different Bucky doesn’t know. Steve gets that, understands to a point Bucky’s scared refusal to expect good news. He just doesn’t get how gravely it will tear Bucky down if this fails.

“Danvers will call,” is all Bucky says. Steve places a hand on the side of his face and strokes his thumb over Bucky’s cheek and just nods.

The call comes at nine-thirty, while Bucky and Steve are in the middle making breakfast. The shrill ring cuts through the air, sharp and intentional, making both of them jump with the anticipation of it. Bucky stares down, a ringing in his head beginning and swelling to an apex,
sharp, jagged anxiety cutting straight through him. It rings for an eternity, until he slams his thumb down to accept it, his hands shaking so hard he has to do it more than once.

“Hello?” he says hoarsely.

He hears Danvers take a breath. “Hi, are you busy?”

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They arrested him.

The story Bucky and Steve are told is that they’d arrived at his house an hour ago, blazing the search warrant. He almost hadn’t let them in, Danvers said, had stood there glowering and telling them they didn’t have the right, but he’d given up pretty quickly once they’d shown him the paper and reminded him they could charge him with obstruction for not letting them in. He’d wanted to know what it was about.

“I think you’ve got a fairly good idea,” Carol had replied, and when he hears that Bucky decides he likes her tremendously.

His wife had been there. That bit twists guilt viciously into Bucky’s gut. He knew Pierce was married, had a family, and suddenly the thought that he was knowingly tearing them apart braces in on him horrifically. Apparently, she’d been just waking up to her apartment being picked apart by police officers, her husband furious.

Mainly, they’d needed access to his computer.

“Absolutely not,” he’d snarled, and then Danvers had asked if he wanted to add resisting arrest to the growing list of charges and she’d taken the laptop, the warrant having covered that too.

“We were able to find the images,” she says once she finishes, her voice softening. “And that was enough to arrest him. My partner and I are gonna question him, but he’s not talking until his lawyer gets here.”

Bucky opens his mouth but realizes he can’t speak. Instead, he slumps back against the counter, a shudder coming over him, chilling him to his bone and not letting up. He brings his hand over his mouth, muffling a strangled gasp, and when he lets out a breath he starts crying quietly on the exhale, shocked, relieved, utterly terrified sobs. Steve touches him carefully, brushing his fingers over Bucky’s arm and then his cheek to sweep away tears, so much love and warmth in his touch. Danvers gives them time. He can hear her shuffling on the other end, mumbling inaudibly to someone else in the background, patient in a way that suggests this isn’t the first time she’s heard this reaction. Bucky is intensely grateful for that.

He manages to get it under control fairly soon, swallowing hard and taking a couple of deep, grounding breaths and holding onto Steve with such firmness that he might have been afraid of being torn away. “Sorry,” he says softly. Steve’s fingers curl in against his back, his grasp safe and firm.

“That’s absolutely fine,” she replies. “You alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.” Bucky swallows thickly, dropping his head against Steve’s shoulder.

“There are a couple of other things I wanted to give you a heads up on,” Danvers says carefully. “The first thing is that the prosecutor is going to wanna talk to you at some point, probably today. We have three days to charge him, so she’s going to be right on top of that. I know the lawyer
assigned to your case—her name’s Maria Hill, she’s a great lawyer, she’s worked on a lot of cases like this.” What, Bucky thinks, rape cases, or cases where the victim is a hundred thousand times less likely to be believed, or cases where the defendant is sadistic? “She should be reviewing the case right now.”

Some lawyer, a stranger, pouring over the details of Bucky’s torment and plucking out the best pieces to build a case. A wave of nausea washes over him.

“The second thing,” she continues, a tightness in her voice, “is that there’s going to be a fair amount of media coverage on this case. There are already reports coming out that Pierce was arrested. Right now, they’ve got no way of knowing what he was arrested for, and definitely no way of knowing what your involvement is, but as soon as the charges are filed it’s gonna be a different story. That’s if his lawyer doesn’t make any statements before that. Personally, I doubt he will, but we don’t know.” He hears her swallow and then ask, “Is Steve there?”

“Yeah.” Steve coughs. “Hi, Detective.”

“Hi. This seemed like something you should both be especially careful of, since you’ve got a recognizable name, Steve. Once the charges come out, you can expect some reporters reaching out to you. You shouldn’t talk to them. I can’t stop you, obviously, but while the evidence is being gathered, it’s never good for the case. And be prepared for that- it can be overwhelming. I don’t know what the lawyer is going to recommend you do, but I strongly suggest not talking to anyone until you’ve heard from her.”

Steve clears his throat. “Good to know. Got it.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, a chilling numbness coming over him at the sheer reality of this, the chaos of what he’s hearing. Anxiety sizzles under his skin at the thought of reporters prying into their lives, tearing down Steve and his credibility because of what Bucky had done. It comes in tidal waves, too much to even imagine processing all at once, so he absorbs the shock without feeling it, storing what she said away to hit later.

“Thanks for the heads, Detective,” Steve says, giving Bucky’s hand a squeeze.

“Course. I’m gonna go, I’ll keep you updated on whatever else happens. Take care, guys.”

“Thank you,” Bucky forces himself to say. When she hangs up, a long silence fills the apartment. Weighted and massive enough to stretch over all of New York. Bucky closes his eyes and lets his head drop forward. Where the satisfaction should be there’s just a black hole of doubt and fear, swallowing every other emotion into its endless abyss. Without him having to say, Steve understands, and holds him close from behind, kissing his hair and the back of his neck and his shoulders until Bucky has been built back up into enough of a person to look at him.

“It’s such good news,” Steve murmurs, his chin nestled into Bucky’s shoulder. “I know it’s scary, but it’s really good. You’re so brave, Buck.”

He doesn’t feel brave. He feels like a person who’s just gotten a father and husband arrested and dragged the person he loves into a media frenzy of speculation and scandal.

He can’t stand to shatter the hope for Steve though. The least he can do is leave him with that for as long as he can until the truth of it becomes too hard to avoid. So he nods and sighs and allows himself the moment in Steve’s arms, the soft brush of his lips against Bucky’s cheek, his eyelashes grazing his cheek, before the turmoil begins.
They arrested him, Bucky texts Jennifer, not elaborating because he’s having a hard time getting enough control over his hands to type the message. She’ll call later, he knows, but right now everything feels a little too hazy around the edges to imagine discussing it with anyone.

While they wait, pouring over the few, information-scarce articles that have been released, and wondering when the lawyer will call, their friends find out. Tony reaches out first, having learned about it as soon as the news of the arrest broke. He calls Steve a few minutes after they get off the phone with Carol.

“I don’t have to answer,” Steve tells Bucky.

They haven’t moved from the couch; Bucky’s curled into Steve’s side feeling very, very small, heart slamming against his ribs. “No, you should. See what he knows.”

Steve nods, pressing a kiss to his forehead before answering. “Hi, Tony.”

“Steve, hey. I just saw.” He pauses pointedly. “How are you? How’s Bucky?”

“We’re alright.” Exhaustion grates Steve’s voice. “Just waiting on more information.”

“Yeah. I’m getting a bunch of requests to comment, people asking if I knew and that’s why we split with his bank. Most people think it’s tax fraud or something, right now.”

“Yeah, well.” Steve’s face darkens briefly, eyes narrowing to hard slits.

“I’m assuming the lawyer doesn’t want anything getting out so I shouldn’t answer, right?”

“Yeah, well.” Steve’s face darkens briefly, eyes narrowing to hard slits.

“I’m assuming the lawyer doesn’t want anything getting out so I shouldn’t answer, right?”

“She, uh, hasn’t called yet. But yeah, don’t say anything,” Steve answers after a moment.

“Thanks, Tony,” Bucky adds, his throat dry.

“Yeah,” Tony says gruffly, “don’t mention it. I’m gonna go, Pepper needs something, but uh… you guys call if there’s anything I can do, okay? Also, wait. I’m not a lawyer, so you might wanna listen to the prosecutor on this one first, but if Pierce’s lawyer reaches out, don’t talk to him. That guy’s a freak. And if you ignore my free legal counsel here, be careful what you say to him.”

“Why?” Steve asks. “Who is he?”

“This guy, Arnim Zola, represents all the rich creeps in New York—not me, obviously—but he’s the worst. So watch out for him.” A muffled voice on the other end, and then Tony shouts, “Sorry, babe, coming!”

“Thanks, man,” Steve says.

“Yeah,” Bucky adds, drained.

“No problem. Take care and I’ll talk to you later, okay?” The line goes dead.

There’s a thoughtful silence. Then Steve glances down at Bucky, the corner of his lips twitching up. “Did you get the feeling he was just calling to make sure we knew he was up-to-date on the whole thing?”

And despite everything, Bucky laughs.
The prosecutor reaches out an hour later. Even though he’d spent the whole morning waiting for her to call, hearing I’m the lawyer prosecuting Alexander Pierce, I was hoping we could talk sends an electric bolt of anxiety straight through him. The conversation is brief and professional and she asks him to come in. That’s why somehow, forty-five minutes later, somehow, Bucky finds himself on the way to the district attorney’s office with Steve beside him, heart hammering in his chest.

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Maria Hill’s office is a tiny room crammed into the corner of a midtown high-rise, bright white walls and harsh white lighting and only one window, haphazardly cut off-center in one of the walls not helping the claustrophobia of it. Maria is leaning over her desk, furiously highlighting something. Bucky raps his knuckles lightly against the door, already jutted open, and she glances up, recognition flashing over her face.

“Bucky, hi.” She smiles and stands up to meet them. Bucky had corrected her on the phone—James wasn’t going to work in the long term. “And Steve. Thanks for coming over.” She’d told them over the phone that if Bucky would find it easier to talk by bringing someone, he was welcome to. Steve is glad he let him come. He hates to think of Bucky going through this alone.

They get through the introductions quickly and formally, the circumstances of the meeting leaving a bitter taint over it. Steve likes Maria, though. With her sleek brown hair pulled into a ponytail, no makeup, sharp features, navy blue pantsuit, and pumps, she gives off the impression that she knows exactly what she’s doing at any given moment.

“Okay,” Maria says, and she glances down at her desk again. “So, I’ve looked through everything I’ve gotten so far. I read your police statement, I saw the evidence that the police gathered, and I watched his interview. He’s claiming it’s all a lie, and his lawyer’s not answering anything, so there isn’t gonna be a confession.”

“The first step here is usually to work out a plea deal where he’d serve sufficient jail time. But—” Maria pauses and glances up, apologetic, “-honestly, in this case, I seriously doubt he’ll go for it. He’s rich, he’s got a lawyer who’s going to advise him against it, and for the charges he’d be facing, even a plea deal would probably mean spending the rest of his life in prison. I’m going to float it to his lawyer, but I’m positive it’ll be a no.”

“What, um—” Bucky’s voice is thin and soft, “what charges would the plea deal be for?”

Maria glances down again. “I was thinking I’d offer him rape in the first degree and coercion in the second degree: so, the blackmail. If he pleads guilty to that, he’d be looking at twenty-five to forty years. The reason he’s gonna say no to that, though, is because that’s probably the rest of his life.” A small, primal ripple of satisfaction sears through Steve at the thought of Pierce rotting away in a jail cell. He steals a glance at Bucky, who’s listening to Maria with a mix of hope and fear shimmering in his eyes.

“So assuming he says no to that, what would you try to charge him with?” Steve asks. Bucky squeezes his hand, a small, private, thank you. Steve squeezes back.

“So in that case, I’m going to charge him with predatory sexual assault, second-degree coercion, and facilitating a sex offense with a controlled substance.” She bites her lip, a flicker of regretful discomfort in her eyes. “Predatory sexual assault is a class A two felony, meaning it’s more serious than most sex offenses. With all of those, he’s facing probably thirty-five to life in prison if he’s convicted.”

“Predatory sexual assault?” Bucky asks timidly, a tremor threading through his voice. He’s drawn
back, eyes stretched wide with anxiety, and Steve can feel the fear burning on his skin. He clasps his hand tighter around Bucky’s, hoping to keep him steady.

“It’s the most serious sex crimes charge. It’s used basically if an assault is especially violent, or if the person has committed multiple assaults.”

*Especially violent.* Steve’s insides twist into a contracting knot, heavy with disgust and anger. Bucky’s eyes flit down, something like shame flooding his face. Steve realizes he’s rejecting the statement, can almost see the gears in his head turning to belittle him as much as possible, self-blame obvious in his expression. Steve is visited by a sudden, fierce urge to pull Bucky close to him or to punch a hole through the cheap plaster of the wall. He fights them both down and ends up swallowing.

“There is one other option that I wanted to make sure you’re aware of.” Maria looks directly at Bucky, almost apologetic. “There’s a decent chance that when I suggest the terms of a plea deal, Zola—his lawyer, sorry—will come back with a monetary offer. Straight to you, in order for the charges to be dropped. Is there any number that you’d consider worth letting the case go for?”

“Um—” Bucky shifts in his chair, caught off guard. Steve barely, by a fraction of an enraged second, manages to bite back *absolutely not,* stopping himself only so he isn’t turning himself into the controlling, overpowering boyfriend. Still, it sends a thrum of fury through him. There’s no amount of money in the world that could fix a fragment of what Pierce did.

“I don’t think so,” Bucky says, and there’s something fearful in his voice that Steve can’t place.

Maria nods, quick and professional. “That’s what I thought. I had to check, though, in case that was something you wanted.” She pauses, laying her hands purposefully down on the desk. “Look,” Maria says kindly, “I know that this is really hard to talk about. I’m sorry for having to ask you to dredge this all back up. I really appreciate you coming in today; it’s really helpful to me while I build the case against him.”

“Yeah, of course. Um—thank you,” Bucky replies nervously.

“You’re very welcome.” Maria leans back and clicks her pen. “Honestly, there’s not much else I need from you right now. Assuming it goes to trial, and you’re comfortable with it, Bucky, we may be meeting a lot more.” She hesitates, glancing at Steve. “I might need to interview you too, Steve, depending on the case we’d be making. We aren’t there yet, though.”

Steve nods intently. He steals another glance at Bucky, who’s gone very pale. Maria looks between them, accustomed apologeticness clear on her face.

“You should go home,” she says, a gentle note in her voice. “I’m going to speak to Zola. I’ll contact you when I have information about the hearing. You can be present there, but of course, you don’t have to.”

The goodbyes are quick and polite; they both thank Maria again, she smiles and promises to be in touch. When they head outside, dazed, into the cold, stale city air, the chill hurts. When Bucky tucks himself under Steve’s arm and Steve can feel him trembling, that hurts more.

***

The full capacity of the day’s emotional intensity doesn’t hit Bucky until night. He’s in the bathroom, splashing water over his face post-shower, almost ready to sleep. Steve is outside; he can hear him in the bedroom opening and closing drawers as he puts away clothes. He can’t
pinpoint the moment he feels himself plunge, just that it happens, and then Bucky is falling, reeling through images and sounds too fast to catch a breath.

All at once, he’s hearing Carol warn them about what this case is going to do to Steve’s career. He’s hearing Maria explain the months ahead of them building a case. He’s seeing Pierce’s wife, startled and horrified and confused, he’s picturing their children, one of them still in grade school, having to be told their father is a predator, their family torn apart at the hands of a worthless fucking whore, you belong to me, understand? He sees the police, pouring over degrading, disgusting pictures of him, wondering how someone like him could claim rape. He’s feeling Alexander all over him, on top of him and inside him and hurting fucking everywhere; he’s staggering to the sink in his bathroom after Pierce has finished with him, terrified of what he’ll do if he leaves a spot smeared with blood. He’s pleading, desperate, terrified gasps, no no no stop don’t do this.

Bucky doesn’t know when he hits the ground, only that once he comes back, he’s on his knees, curled in on himself, face hidden, rocking back and forth. Someone is touching him and he doesn’t want that, he doesn’t want to be used.

“No,” Bucky whimpers faintly, with no fight left in him. To his surprise, the hand on his back retracts. His head hurts and he can’t look up. Noise rushes through his brain, thick and overwhelming, and he wants it to stop.

“Buck, you’re okay, I’m not gonna touch you. You’re safe, okay? You’re in our apartment. Bucky, look at me, it’s Steve. I’m right here and I’m not gonna let anything happen to you, okay?”

“Steve,” he mumbles, dazed and detached. Steve is safe, he knows, he’s just having a hard time remembering exactly why. He still doesn’t want to be touched.

“You’re okay,” Buck repeats, his voice small and far away and thin.

“No, Buck, you’re good. We’re at home, we’re in the bathroom, you were in here and we were getting ready for bed and then, um— I heard a crash and then you were…saying some stuff and so I came in, but I’m not gonna touch you, baby, it’s okay. Take a breath, Buck.” Steve’s voice is even and soft. Where the world had flown apart before, it comes back in fragments; the soft warm light of the bathroom, the solidness of the tiles under him, glimpses of the sink and tub through his fingers. He lowers his hands slowly, presses them flat on the ground.

“A crash,” Bucky repeats, his voice small and far away and thin.

“Yeah, it was just a mug—”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says automatically, abrupt, frantic panic rising.

“Sh, no, it’s fine, it didn’t even break, don’t worry.” Steve shifts beside him; Bucky swallows hard. “Buck, I think you’re dissociating, baby. Can you, um—can we try some of the things Jennifer suggested?”

Which would be great, if he could pull even one of those things out of his wrecked brain. Steve must see something flash across his face, helplessness or desperation or confusion, because he adds, “Like describing things in the room.”

Bucky takes a shuddery, exhausted breath. There’s a thick whirring noise in his head that keeps swelling and waning, and it’s making it hard to think about anything for too long.

“We’re on the floor in the bathroom,” he whispers finally. “It’s, um—it’s vinyl. It’s light gray tiles, it’s cold.” The last realization surprises him, suddenly becoming aware of the chill under his
fingers. “We’re next to the sink. It’s marble, it’s got silver faucets. Our toothbrushes are on top of it in a mug with a heart on it. We got it at Chelsea Market.” Bucky swallows again, feeling himself become unthawed, the glass-hard tightness in his chest coming untied. He takes a breath, having to force it out of his lungs, and closes his eyes. He counts to ten as the room springs completely back into focus and he’s able to wrestle his thoughts back under control and into their battered metal lockbox where he wants them to stay. After a few more breaths, he reaches clumsily for Steve, hand catching around his forearm. Steve reaches out to steady him carefully, running his fingers over Bucky’s wrist, careful not to touch his side or stomach or anywhere too startling.

“What triggered it, Buck?” Steve asks sadly.

Bucky half-shrugs, looking down. “I don’t know. Nothing, everything, take your pick.” He’s still trembling, a deep shudder at his core, a small quiver outside. “I was just thinking about all of it, just—talking to cops and lawyers, the pictures, remembering things with him—all of it.” Bucky half expects a surge of fear or disgust, but all he feels is exhaustion, deep and permanent, dragging itself along every inch of him. “Can we get on the couch?” he says softly. The bed feels too starkly in concordance with what’s haunting him right now.

“Yeah.” Steve squeezes his hand and then stands, helping him up. Standing, Bucky falls into Steve’s arms, fragile relief sweeping over him as Steve keeps an arm secure around his shoulders and guides him gently out into the living room.

Bucky is shivering uncontrollably. He doesn’t realize it until he’s kneeling on the sofa and Steve hands him a sweatshirt and he pulls it around his shoulders.

“Thank you,” he whispers, gratitude flooding him and pushing tears behind his eyes again. Without a word, Steve sits beside him and holds him, one hand running over his hair, the other over his back, so safe it almost breaks him. Bucky wraps both arms around his middle and holds on.

“I’m sorry I’m doing this to you,” Bucky says shakily, when he works up the nerve.

“What do you mean?” Panic pushes its way into Steve’s voice as he pulls back from where his face is half-buried in Bucky’s hair so he can look at him. Sighing, Bucky reaches up to run his thumb along Steve’s jaw, sad and apologetic.

“Just—how exhausting I am to deal with, the time you’re putting into doing this legal stuff with me and the fact that it’s gonna have fallback for you in the public, and your career—” Thick guilt fills Bucky’s lungs. “I never—I never wanted to make you give up so much for me, Steve.”

Steve listens, astonishment clouding his face. “You don’t really think that, right? That you made me need to give things up?”

Bucky shrugs, feeling very small. “You had a life before I came here, you know. And now—God, you’ve put so much time into this just so I wouldn’t be alone, and you heard her, reporters are gonna be prodding into your life now—” He swallows hard, then, before he can think, chokes out “Should I just take the money?” If he offers it?” The idea’s been simmering ever since Maria brought it up. Accepting it would be the least Bucky could do for Steve, save him the trouble of going through a trial, let it get wrapped up quietly without becoming a big story.

“What?” Steve looks shocked. “No, Bucky, that’s not- Buck.” Steve closes his eyes and swallows. “Bucky, what he did- that’s not- there’s no amount of money that could—”

“I know,” Bucky cuts him off, voice rising desperately. “But it’d be easier for everyone, Steve, and then there isn’t a whole publicity storm and I wouldn’t be, like- living off of your money—"
Steve shakes his head firmly. “You know that’s not what you’re doing—"

“Steve,” Bucky says, anguished, “This isn’t just my life, it’s yours too—"

“Bucky, you’re the most important thing in my life,” Steve says intently, a grief-filled tremor twisting through his voice. “I don’t care about the media, I don’t care what anyone says, I love you—"

“But you shouldn’t have to spend so much time—I don’t know, helping me ‘cause I’m so fucked up.” Bucky pulls away and leans into the corner of the couch, panicked heat rushing to his cheeks.

“You aren’t fucked up.” Steve whispers. Tears glaze his eyes.

Bucky chokes out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, I am—"

“Bucky, you’re hurting. That’s all. It’s not your fault, remember?” Steve’s voice is so frantic and filled with concern that it hurts, spearing through Bucky’s chest.

Somewhere, logically, Bucky does know. But right now the slew of pain is clouding his ability to think clearly about anything, and he almost wants Steve to yell or something just so he doesn’t have to drag himself through the brutal process of convincing himself that he isn’t worthless, except, of course, he doesn’t really want that and, of course, Steve won’t. He doesn’t know. His thoughts jumble and dissolve, nonsensical and rapid like something is shaking his brain. He’s just so tired and the guilt is heavier than he’s ever felt it before, blanketing his mind and his lungs and sucking everything from him.

“Sorry,” Bucky whispers, a sob rising, “I don’t know what—I feel so fucking bad right now.” The admission hurts, threaded with fatigue, and it’s all Bucky can manage without collapsing completely.

The sadness in Steve’s face threatens to split him open. “Oh, baby. Don’t be sorry. Can I…?” Steve gestures vaguely in between them, and Bucky nods. He crosses the space separating them and entwines his arms around Bucky so his back is braced half-upright against the headboard and Bucky is curled up against his chest, secure and safe.

“I got you, baby. It’s okay to feel bad.” Steve pauses, running his hand up and down Bucky’s spine. “I love you, okay? You’re good, it’s all gonna be fine.”

And Bucky is just so fucking grateful for Steve at that moment. He sees the unhinged, incoherent disarray of Bucky’s thoughts, and knows right away what he needs. He doesn’t monologue about why he shouldn’t be sad, he doesn’t try to force him to talk, he doesn’t try to kiss him. It’s always been there between him and Steve: the ability to know exactly how much is enough in any given moment, and right now Steve gives Bucky what he needs: quiet gentleness and unyielding comfort, letting him feel safe and small and loved enough that it dulls the pain enough for him to drift off in Steve’s arms.

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Steve stays up that night on purpose, wanting to be able to shake Bucky awake at the first signs of a bad dream. There’s something hollow and ghostly in Bucky’s face even once he falls asleep, a weariness that goes beyond exhaustion and can’t be fixed with a few hours of rest. He’s fought so long and so hard just to minimize the pain that at this point, Bucky’s panicked, guilt-ridden words crash against Steve again, filling him with grief. He’s so lost when it comes to convincing Bucky of how much he loves him besides repeating whispered, gentle truths and holding him as close as
he can in arms that refuse to ever let go. It doesn’t seem to matter how fiercely or frequently he practically begs Bucky to believe that he isn’t a burden. As soon as he starts to think that Bucky’s view of himself is finally clearing up he yanks the rug right out from under Steve with some horrible, distorted comment about himself said with such meekness and resignation that Steve has to fight back tears.

Bucky had never hated himself before. During high school, he’d had stretches of anxiety, times when Steve had held onto him in his twin bed and whispered that everything would be okay, pained at the thought of Bucky being anything less than perfectly happy. But it had never, ever been this; he’d never said he wasn’t good enough for Steve, never doubted the amount of love and care he should have. The thought sets vicious, anguished rage ablaze in Steve, that it hadn’t been enough for Pierce and Rumlow and all those monsters to torture him, prowl for something to hurt just because they could and decide on Bucky, but they’d needed to completely strip away his identity until he was left shaken and subdued and throat deep in self-hatred.

I love you, I love you, I love you. It’s the only thing Steve can muster clearly in those moments when Bucky is coming undone in his arms, carrying more pain and fear than anyone should ever feel and sobbing because someone who should never have touched him made him think he was worthless. And it’s never enough. No matter how much he wants to, he can’t love away the cruelty that’s twisted Bucky’s entire world view and taken everything from him, his safety and his privacy and his own fucking sense of self, gone because some evil, evil people had felt entitled to what wasn’t theirs.

I never wanted to make you give up so much for me. Steve’s breath catches tightly, hating that statement. Bucky should never have to think he was anything less than the fucking universe and every galaxy within it to Steve. Those entire four years -through the time when he’d been bouncing between Sam’s and Nat’s, too miserable and terrified to make it out of bed in the morning; through the months when he’d been living in a tiny, desolate apartment, drinking until he saw stars most nights just so he didn’t have to feel the loneliness that swallowed him whole; through his ascension to sudden, startling fame, shoved into a crowd of people swamped with wealth he couldn’t imagine until he became one of them; the only thing he had ever wanted was to turn around and find Bucky Barnes there, to let him fall into his arms and never let him go. And now that he has him, nothing else can even begin to matter. Bucky is the most important thing and the only important thing, and Steve hates that he can’t see that with every piece of him.

Against his chest, Bucky stirs. Steve sits up, alert, prepared to wake him. He doesn’t have to, though; Bucky stays asleep, pulling closer to him. In Steve’s chest, an urgent spark of hope flares. It’s going to be okay. It has to. Pierce will get what’s coming for him and Bucky will recover and they’ll have a beautiful life together and no one can threaten that.

He doesn’t know that one mile away, Maria Hill is submitting her charges, and three miles away, Alexander Pierce is glowering at the wall of a jail cell and waiting for revenge.

Chapter End Notes

the amount of legal articles i've read over the last couple weeks if someone looked at my search history i swear to god they'd think i have to appear in court

alright idk about the next update because i'm going on a trip with my family this week and then the week after is my birthday and i have some plans but i'm gonna try, also
there are 2 potential endings and i'm trying to decide between them they aren't that different but yeah anyway i think i said it'd be 100-130k words could be longer idk hope you aren't too tired of me yet

also guys? your comments? i read them about 7 times a day seriously i cannot overstate how beautiful they are and how they make me feel love u all so much

say hi on tumblr @cafelesbian until next time kiddos
Between Maria informing him that the charges have been filed and the first court hearing, Bucky packs in a meeting with Jennifer. He’s kept her up-to-date following all of the meetings and charges, but he hasn’t seen her since everything has happened, so he heads into her office that afternoon with lead-heavy anxiety in his stomach.

He summarizes the last few days for her as simply and painlessly as possible—most of it, she already knows, but he wants her to be fully caught up. When he’s done, Jennifer nods compassionately. “That’s a lot to go through in a few days, Bucky,” she says. “How’s the stress level?”

Bucky closes his eyes. “Bad,” he says wearily, “I’m just drained. And overwhelmed and just—all these detectives and lawyers seeing—seeing this stuff about me”—he swallows, mouth dry—“I just feel so dirty knowing people are picking over all of this and knowing everything that I did—”

“All these detectives and lawyers seeing—seeing this stuff about me”—he swallows, mouth dry—“I just feel so dirty knowing people are picking over all of this and knowing everything that I did—”

“All this evidence of serious abuse, and thinking anything other than that Pierce was sick for doing it. They aren’t going to use their job to judge a survivor.”

Hearing it helps, if only slightly. Jennifer says it so matter-of-factly that for the time being, Bucky can sort of believe her. “Okay,” he says, with a hard breath, and he closes his eyes for a moment. “Okay. Thank you.” He doesn’t want to think about it anymore.

“So how are you feeling about the hearing?” Jennifer asks him.

Bucky bites his lip. “Scared,” he says truthfully, “really scared.”

She nods, understanding. “That’s extremely normal. Do you know what it’s connected to?”

“No,” Jennifer says carefully, “Bucky, I’m glad you’re able to know that in reality, you had no responsibility for what happened. It’s so important that while this case is going forward, you have that understanding that it wasn’t your fault.” She pauses for emphasis. “For everyone else, I can tell you that there’s absolutely no way the detectives or prosecutors are looking at this evidence of serious abuse, and thinking anything other than that Pierce was sick for doing it. They aren’t going to use their job to judge a survivor.”

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“Seeing an abuser is one of the hardest things,” Jennifer says, validating him. “If you don’t want to go through having to see him, you don’t have to go to the hearing. No one would blame you.”

“I know,” Bucky replies, not meeting her eyes, and he does. It’s just him, an aggravating throttle in his chest, telling him if he can’t face Pierce for half an hour in a courtroom, he doesn’t deserve to be pressing charges. “I just—I want to be there. I feel like I should. And… I kind of feel like I need to see what he says.”

A thoughtful nod from Jennifer. “Just don’t let this be something you’re doing to prove a point to anyone. It’s going to feel overwhelming when you see him, and so it’s not something you should prepare for lightly. I’m not saying you shouldn’t go—I just want you to be absolutely sure that you’re doing something that you’re ready for, and for you.”

Fifteen blocks away, Steve is sitting in the kitchen with Nat and Sam. They’re sitting around the counter, listening to Steve give them a rundown of the legal battles, down to Pierce’s scumbag lawyer and the expected not guilty plea. Nat’s got a hand on his shoulder, squeezing every so often when he starts to choke up, and Sam is watching him with kind, apologetic eyes.

“I don’t know,” Steve is saying, a hollowness in his voice, “I’ve never hated anyone this much. And those other guys, Rumlow and all those assholes—I’ve never wanted anyone dead before, but the people who did this shit to Bucky…” He trails off darkly.

“He’s not gonna press charges against anyone else, is he?” Nat asks gently.

Steve shakes his head. “There’s no evidence. Rumlow’s already facing charges from his wife—”

“He’s married?” Sam cuts in, detestful.

Steve nods bitterly. “—and the other guys, it was mostly one-time attacks, so he doesn’t even know their names, or people who he’s got no proof—” Steve’s voice breaks. “It is so, unbelievably fucked up.”

“Jesus,” Sam says softly.

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. “I should’ve just—” he starts, but Sam stops him before he can even finish with a sharp, intent stare.

“Done what, Steve? Known, somehow, that this was happening?” He pauses, sympathetic. Steve waits. “It’s not your fault, Steve. When Bucky says it was his fault, you tell him that’s not true because you’re right, it’s not—it’s Pierce’s. You can’t blame yourself for the things that this awful, evil guy did. There was nothing you could possibly have done.” Nat nods along.

Steve thinks about this a lot. And in a lot of ways, most of the time, he knows that realistically, there was absolutely no reason for him to have known. It doesn’t stop the guilt though, the disgust that while he’d been making tens of thousands of dollars on fucking paintings, Bucky had been where he’d been. The nights he’s lain awake, replaying every awful thing Bucky has had to experience and thought about the things he could have done to prevent it—if he’d just stayed in his parents house a few more months so he could have been there when Bucky got back, if he had searched a little harder, if he hadn’t left Bucky’s porch that last night they had been together—a constant, grating list of ways he could have saved Bucky the pain. Sometimes the guilt threatens to swallow him whole.

But at the end of the day these impossible hypotheticals aren’t helpful, not to him and definitely not
to Bucky. There’s only one person responsible, and for Steve to blame himself was as useless and false as for Bucky to do the same.

It helps to remember that, to repeat it to himself when the guilt starts to seep into his lungs. It doesn’t always make it uncoil itself, relieve the furiousness at himself for not having tried harder to get to Bucky before he’d been diminished to submissive, terrified pieces, but even when the guilt sticks, the knowledge is solid and irrefutable and he finds peace in that, that it truly wasn’t his fault.

God, he wishes Bucky could understand the same thing. The self-blame he feels is a writhing, throbbing mass that scratches at him from inside and never, ever lets up, and even with consistent, tactful reminders from Jennifer. From Steve’s view, every time Bucky is able to beat it down and see clearly through the distortion, the mass heaves, biding its time, and when it sees the opportunity, comes back twice as strong and with a vengeance.

“Steve?” Nat says quietly.

Steve shakes his head, snapping back to present. “I know,” he says, voice rough, “I know it wasn’t my fault. But…you know.” Nat’s eyes flash with a pain that suggests she knows exactly what he means.

“You have to remember that, man,” Sam says, and reaches across the counter to squeeze his arm. “Especially now, with all the shit that’s gonna come with a legal battle.”

“I know,” Steve answers, giving him a weak smile. “Thanks, guys.”

They stay for a while more, sitting in the pale winter lighting of Steve’s kitchen. Steve takes the concern and comfort they’re offering and once they’re gone, finds himself calm again, braced for the storm that’s coming.

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Friday morning comes fast, racing and turbulent as wind, and Bucky finds himself next to Steve at the courthouse.

Jennifer has given him every possible reminder. Do the breathing exercises we’ve gone over. Remember that seeing him again will be distressing and you’re going to feel anxious. Ground yourself, ask Steve to talk to you to distract you if you need it, don’t force yourself to stay there if you’re starting to panic. Remember, he and his lawyers are going to try and intimidate, discredit, dismiss you. What you’re doing is incredibly brave and that’s terrifying to them. Nothing they say is true in the slightest. All of it is kind of blurred and daunting, the reminders slipping from his mind before he can recall them, flimsy and paper thin. He’s having a hard time recalling what Jennifer said because honestly, he can’t remember what Steve begged him to cram down for breakfast an hour before or what exactly he’s supposed to be doing here.

The courthouse is loud and sickeningly lit, full of a thick fog of clashing, paralyzing emotions—a young woman, sobbing while her husband holds onto her, a lawyer with slicked-back hair high-fiving his paralegal, a junkie with hollowed out, haunted eyes staring at nothing while his young lawyer monologues to him in vain, talking with her hands. It’s withering and claustrophobic and Bucky is hit with a desperate urge to just run: to take Steve’s hand and book it out of there, somewhere where the air isn’t stale and suffocating and where he isn’t waiting for Alexander Pierce to come and knock away the shred of bravery he has with one look.

Steve can tell he’s gone, gripped by terror and horrific anticipation, and because Steve is perfect,
he leans close and mumbles, “Come on over here, baby,” and leads him with an arm around his
shoulder to a bench tucked into the corner.

Steve doesn’t say anything for a little while. He rubs Bucky’s back with one hand, circling it softly,
and holds Bucky’s hand with the other. Bucky focuses on breathing, forcing the flat air through his
lungs, counting to five, exhaling. He does this for a minute or so, until the nauseating spin of his
surroundings slows to a halt. He flexes and tightens his fingers, shaking away the stiffness of his
body, then lifts his eyes to Steve to see his face full of worry and love.

“Fuck this,” Bucky says weakly.

Steve forces a breathy laugh. “Yeah,” Steve agrees, and runs his knuckles lightly over Bucky’s
cheek. He breathes out heavily at the touch. “You don’t have to do this,” he says gently, for the
fifth time that morning.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and exhales shakily. Around them, the air fizzes and thrums with the frantic
noise. “But I kinda do.” He hopes Steve gets it, because he can’t articulate it right now, but not
going would be confirmation that he can’t do this. If he can’t face a courtroom where he doesn’t
even have to speak, he can forget about a trial. He needs, more than almost anything, to know he
isn’t that weak, that Alexander Pierce didn’t beat him so far into submission that he can’t bear to
look at him across a room for twenty minutes.

“I love you,” Steve reminds him quietly.

“I love you, too,” Bucky breathes. Steve wraps an arm around his waist and tugs him in so Bucky
can rest his head on Steve’s shoulder and for a while, that’s how they stay, in their haven of a
courtroom bench, shielded from the restlessness around them. Fifteen minutes before trial, Steve
sits up and gives Bucky’s hand a squeeze.

“You ready?” Steve asks.

Bucky takes a long breath. “Yeah.” Steve’s fingers tightens around his hand as he pushes the door
open.

The overly drawn out buildup to entering feels a bit pathetic, considering Pierce isn’t in there yet.
It’s almost empty, populated by a few reporters waiting with mild interest, the one or two court-
watchers with nowhere else in the world to be, and Carol Danvers and her partner sitting towards
the front, conversing quietly. She turns and spots them, gives a wave, and Steve and Bucky slip
into the row behind them.

“How are you guys?” she says, giving each of them a quick smile. “This is my partner Detective
Nick Fury, by the way.” The man next to her, a tall black man with an intelligent face and an
eyepatch, nods and sticks his hand out.

“Fury,” Steve says, with a forced laugh, “I bet the guys you arrest love that.” Carol purses her lips
to prevent smiling and Nick raises an amused, unimpressed eyebrow. Bucky nudges Steve’s leg
with his foot, a silent stop talking now. Steve nudges back.

“Nice to meet you,” Bucky cuts in, and shakes his hand. “Thanks for everything,” he adds, breath
catching.

“You, too.” Nick gives them a small smile. “And don’t mention it.” He grips Steve’s hand too,
giving him a once over, before turning back to Carol.

“Do you think he changed his name to be a detective?” Steve mutters. Bucky knows he’s trying to
take his mind off of their current situation, but he has to choke back a laugh.

It wears off immediately, when the doors swing open heavily again and Pierce’s wife enters. Bucky recognizes her from pictures: platinum blonde hair past her shoulders, pale skin smoothed over by expensive facials and premature botox, cold blue eyes. She’s gotta be twenty or thirty years younger than Pierce; she looks like a forty-year-old trying very hard to look twenty. She spots Bucky right away, her face clouding with recognition and then, abruptly, with loathing. Bucky draws in on himself, guilt slamming him.

“Is that…?” Steve whispers.

Bucky nods. Steve drapes a protective arm over his shoulders, casting her a cold, warning look.

“Ignore her,” Steve mumbles, “she’s angry because her husband’s a piece of shit. It’s not you.” There’s a fierce insistence in Steve’s voice, but Bucky’s chest tightens miserably as she glares at him and stalks to sit behind the defense table. “You okay?” Steve asks softly, circling his fingers absently over Bucky’s shoulder.

“Fantastic,” Bucky answers dryly, panic swelling in his chest.

Steve stops circling and gives his shoulder a squeeze. “If you wanna leave—”


More people file in over the next few minutes: a few more reporters, Maria, giving them a brief hello (Bucky can feel the journalists in the room turn their attention over there while they shake hands, a hum of intrigue vibrating to life. It makes his skin crawl), a couple of guys in suits who he assumes are part of Pierce’s legal team or PR team or whatever. Five minutes before the hearing is scheduled to start, the door swings open and he comes in, trailed by a cop and his lawyer, a small, pinched middle-aged man who puffs his chest out, drunk on his own importance.

Bucky hates his body’s reaction; the moment he sees Pierce he seizes up, the terror that pulses through him automatic and learned. There’s something more monstrous about his appearance here; this skin looks gray and paper thin, vicious, angry lines making his face appear sunken in and older. Bucky inhales so sharply and unsteadily that Steve draws his hand away, worried about scaring him. Pierce scans the courtroom coldly, a dark, vicious fog coming over his face when his eyes land on Steve, then contorting into tight, repressed hate when he sees Bucky. Bucky draws in on himself and shrinks back, bumping against Steve, who touches his shoulder to steady him as Pierce heads up towards the table.

As he passes Bucky, Pierce grazes his palm against his shoulder. It’s not long enough or harsh enough for anyone else to see, not even Steve, but it’s purposeful and demeaning and it knocks the air from Bucky’s lungs. *I still own you, it says I still call the shots.* He rears away, hysterical dread coiling around him, his skin searing at the trivial pressure. Bucky leans forward, pressing his face into his hands, nauseating fear slamming him.

“Buck,” Steve whispers, calm but urgent, soft enough that only Bucky hears, “hey, baby, breathe. It’s okay. He’s not gonna hurt you again, I promise.” It’s enough to coax Bucky’s head from his hands. When he looks up Pierce is watching them, his smirk enough to tell Bucky he’d gotten the reaction he was hoping for. It sends another wave of terrified shame over him.

“He touched me,” Bucky gasps, aware of how intensely weak he sounds.
“What?” Steve hisses, lurching up to look at him. Bucky grabs his hand instinctively, squeezing until he can feel something. Swallowing, Steve places his free arm tentatively around Bucky’s shoulders and pulls him in. When Bucky looks up Steve’s jaw is tight, mouth curled into a snarl. Bucky can tell he’s physically forcing down the urge to cross the courtroom and hit him.

Instead, Steve runs his hand in small, controlled circles between Bucky’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers, “God, Buck. Tell me what I can do right now.”

Bucky shakes his head. He’s trembling, shockwaves of fear rushing over him. Something tears in him, the same thing that’s torn every time by everyone who’s touched him without permission, but he doesn’t know how to explain that to Steve in that small, small courtroom. As discreetly as he can, he leans into Steve’s side and lets out a petrified, shuddering breath against his chest, praying that the reporters and Pierce aren’t watching this. He can see the headlines, CEO’s accuser has courtroom breakdown, splattered on the front of the New York Post with a grainy photo of the moment, but he doesn’t have the strength to hold himself up and he needs to be touched by someone who isn’t trying to hurt him.

He’s jolted out of the ever-constricting panic when the judge comes in and a wave of motion comes over the crowd. “All rise,” the bailiff calls, and Bucky misses the middle of what he says because a hum of panicked white noise is starting up again in his head, but he pulls himself back to hear “...presided over by the honorable Phil Coulson, the court is now in session.”

Still reeling from Pierce, skin burning where his hand had been, it takes Bucky several long, awful moments to get his full focus back. Next to him, Steve is staring anxiously at him, still holding his hand, the courtroom forgotten. Bucky gives a flick of his head, tries to tell him it’s fine, but it’s hard to be convincing when he can’t exactly remember how to breathe properly and Steve doesn’t argue. Introductions are happening somewhere in the background, Maria and Zola standing respectively, but it doesn’t permeate Bucky’s consciousness.

Worried, Steve’s eyes flit to the door, then back to Bucky, questioning. At that, Bucky shakes his head firmly, and instead shifts so he’s tucked closer into Steve’s side. With a resigned sigh, Steve brushes a kiss against his forehead and doesn’t argue.

“So if I’m correct, Ms. Hill, I believe the state is charging the defendant with predatory sexual assault, facilitation of a sex offense with a controlled substance, and second degree coercion?” The judge is saying, and it sends Bucky’s stomach into tighter knots.

“That’s correct, your honor,” Maria replies calmly.

Coulson peers down at her, then over to the defense table. Bucky isn’t looking, but he can feel Pierce staring at him, the hatred tangible, crackling like electricity through the air. He turns his head away and closes his eyes so he doesn’t have to meet his gaze. Steve, though, glares back at him. Unflinching, diamond-hard hatred turns Steve’s features sharp, holding his gaze until Pierce turns away with disgust.

“How do you plead to these charges, Mr. Pierce?” Coulson asks.

Bucky turns to watch him answer, biting the inside of his cheek.

Pierce stands and clears his throat. “Not guilty on all counts, your honor.” His voice reeks of arrogance.

Something inside him collapses at that. Pierce spent night after night finding as many ways to hurt Bucky as he could, cracking him open and pulling away the rusted pieces until there was nothing
left, convincing him even when he thought he couldn’t lose anything more that nothing he had or did belonged to himself, not his body or his wants or the poisonous air he was dragging through his lungs. And still, he can stand ten feet away from him, gazing up with cold persuasion, and insist calmly it was a lie. Even now, when he isn’t touching him or screaming at him, he’s still taking from him, bleeding him dry of his credibility and security in his truth. Beside him, Steve makes a disgusted noise.

“Okay,” Coulson says, “then the trial is set for July tenth of this year. I’m setting bail at a hundred thousand dollars. Hearing adjourned.”

And with the hard smack of the gavel it’s over, a rush of kinetic air going through the room and setting everyone into motion. It takes Bucky a moment to remember exactly how to move, and Steve waits while he gets motion back in his arms and legs. Pierce’s wife strides past them in a hurry with one of the other lawyers, presumably to pay their pocket-change bail with the court so Pierce can leave from here. Bucky jumps slightly when he realizes Maria has slipped into the bench beside them, pushing her hair out of her face.

“How are you doing?” she asks quietly.

“Alright,” Bucky responds, voice thin and brittle.

“I know how hard it is to be here,” she says, and Bucky can’t help thinking sure. “Today went pretty much exactly how we expected, which is a good thing.” The courtroom is filtering out, filled now by only a couple of security guards and the few ambitious reporters who want a quote from Maria. She shoots them a glare. “I’m going to start building the case now. We’ve got a few months, but the sooner I start, the stronger it’ll be.”

“Thank you,” Bucky says, voice soft. She smiles.

“Course. All I need from you right now is to not talk to any reporters and not take anything he says to heart.” She winces apologetically, like she knows how terrible that advice is, but goes on. “I’m gonna need to talk to both of you at some point while I’m building the case, but just try to take care of yourselves for right now.”

“Okay. Thanks, Maria,” Bucky repeats tightly, while Steve nods and echoes, “sounds good, thank you.”

“Take care, you guys. I’ll be in touch soon, and of course, you have my number if anything case related comes up.” She casts them an empathetic look before standing and heading out, fixing the lingering reporters with a cold stare and leaving Steve and Bucky in perfect silence to process what’s just unfolded.

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By the time they get outside, Steve’s body is aching for crisp cold air and a run. He’s holding hands with Bucky, focused entirely on getting the hell away from this courtroom, but the universe has other ideas. Outside, a couple of yards down from them, there’s a small cluster of reporters huddled around Zola and Pierce, with his wife standing slightly behind him. To Steve’s dismay, Bucky pauses and watches them, horrifyingly entranced. Steve stops to look back at him, worried, then follows his line of sight to the group.

While Bucky watches them, Steve watches Bucky. He’s gone so still and pale that he looks porcelain, his eyes clear glass as he stares forward. It’s how he looked all through the hearing, after Alexander Pierce put his fucking hands on him and Steve had to remind himself why it was a bad
idea to kill a man in the middle of a public hearing. It scares him.

“Let’s go home, baby,” Steve says, almost pleading. Bucky doesn’t even hear him. “Buck. You don’t need to put yourself through this.” He gestures to the group. Finally, Bucky seems to hear him. He nods but doesn’t look away. The group has started to fall away, Zola having finished. Pierce’s wife has started walking, not looking back at her husband. She steps into a waiting car and it takes off without him, while he makes his way down the stairs and gets into the next one. Lovely. Steve chokes out a resentful laugh.

“Let’s go home,” he repeats gently. It seems to get through that time. Bucky turns to him and Steve pulls him close, arm gentle around his shoulder while Bucky slumps into him, hugs him from the side. Steve flags down the cab and when they get in, Bucky leans against his shoulder and squeezes his hand.

***

Zola’s fucking press conference is all over the news before Steve and Bucky even make it home. Anyone who’s been paying any attention to it—namely, their friends but also, everyone in the business or legal world and anyone scrolling through CNN mildly intrigued by the headlines—will have seen it. Steve doesn’t want to watch. In his mind, it’s not worth the time to watch Pierce and his treacherous, detestable team carve out smug little lies.

Evidently, though, Bucky doesn’t share this line of thought. As soon as they get home he gets his laptop and searches for it, fingers beating frantically against the mousepad.

Steve comes up behind him and lightly rubs his shoulders, his back, brushes aside his hair. “Buck,” he says quietly, “don’t. It’s not gonna make anything better.”

Bucky turns to him, pained weariness all over his face. He looks suddenly, excruciatingly fragile, like a whisper could put him over the edge and send him spiraling to ragged bits.

Bucky, with his honey sweet smile and eyes with the light of every single star in the galaxy and softness that bends the universe around him, should never look so violently worn out. It sends a jagged crack through Steve’s heart to see.

Bucky sighs finally, leaning back into Steve, letting his head fall against his shoulder. “We might as well know,” he replies flatly.

Steve swallows. “Okay,” he answers, too tired to argue and pretend he knows what the fuck he’s talking about. “Are you sure you wanna see it?”

Bucky bites his lip. “Yeah,” he says, “I wanna know.”

So Steve nods and folds his arms around Bucky from behind. Locking their fingers in front of him, Bucky bites his lip and hits play on the first video.

It picks up a few moments after Zola has started talking. He’s mid-sentence, face screwed up in focus. Pierce and his wife and a few other men are standing behind him, staring stoically at the camera. He’s holding his wife coldly from about a foot away, both of them lock jawed and tense.

“—Mr. Pierce and his family are the targets of a cruel and bizarre lie designed to attack his reputation as a titan of the business world. We are confident that the justice system will prove that this is a baseless accusation coming from James Barnes, cooked up by him and Steve Rogers as a ploy for attention—”
They used his name. The rage that sparks off in Steve is explosive, the combination of the fact that these scumbags had the audacity to even say Bucky’s name after protecting the man who had done what he’d done to him, and the knowledge that even now, Pierce was still violating him every way he could, targeting his fucking privacy.

“Fuck!” Steve snaps, and lets go of Bucky, turning around and raking his hands through his hair. Bucky flinches violently and presses himself back against the counter, diminished and submissive. Icy guilt rushes through Steve immediately, and he lowers his hands slowly.

“Shit, Buck, I didn’t mean to-” he begins, but Bucky is already shaking his head.

“It’s not you,” he says, a harsh tremble to his voice. “Steve, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know they’d— they’d bring you into it like that—”

“No, no, no. Bucky, that’s not—I don’t care what they say about me. I’m already- I just don’t want them to do that to you. It’s not fair.”

Bucky’s face falls, eyes shining with something between grief and love. He reaches out, takes Steve’s hands with both of his, and holds on, a terrified desperation pulsing in his grip. Slowly, Steve lifts Bucky’s hands to his face and kisses his fingertips.

“Buck, I’m so sorry,” he whispers. He’s not sure what for, exactly; Steve knows he didn’t do it. For the world and every awful person in it, this universe that never deserved Bucky, that’s treated the precious thing they created like a ragdoll and still won’t let up, even now.

Back on the computer, a reporter is shouting, with thinly veiled resentment, “What do you have to say about the reports that there’s photographic evidence of the assaults, Mr. Pierce?”

Zola ignores her, turning to leave, but Pierce stops him, stepping into the forefront for the first time. “Of course, the police have to take reports like this seriously. However, in this case the accuser can’t be believed, and quite honestly, what’s more worrying than a couple of lies is the affect this might have on my wife and children, so if you could-”

Unphased, the reporter calls out, “So you’re telling us the photographs don’t exist?”

“No,” he says, anger starting to uncoil on his face- eyes narrowed, lines creasing. “They don’t.”

A different reporter yells, “What do you have to say to your accuser?”

His calm, sympathetic exterior has started to devolve into a snarl, but he pulls it back together by a thread. “I’d ask him if this attention ploy is worth it, considering what he’s doing for real victims by perpetuating stereotypes about people who lie about rape. And I’d ask him to think about what he’s doing to my family.”

The rage that spears through Steve is poisonous down to his bloodstream, burning away at him. He actually has to hold himself back from putting a fist into his computer screen; what stops him is the knowledge that nothing could be worse for Bucky than that explosive, violent rage.

And that isn’t who he is, he isn’t a person whose anger sparks wildly, unpredictable as repressed lightning. But his hatred for this man, this monster, this person who forced Bucky down and imprinted pain upon him just because he could and picked apart what was left of him, this fucking criminal who scoured the earth for all the cruelty he could gather and then turned it all on the person Steve loves more than anyone or anything in the world, it was changing him.

He shuts the laptop with such stifled rage that his hands shake. “Bucky,” he says, so quietly, “look
Bucky lifts his head slightly. His eyes have a kind of dull, horrified sheen in them, almost expectant of pain, just resigned and used up.

“He gets away with everything,” Bucky hisses, his voice small. “He’s gonna win.”

“No,” Steve says hoarsely, “not this time.”

“Why shouldn’t he?” Bucky whispers, voice heavy with defeation.

“Because you’re telling the truth,” Steve replies hotly.

Bucky’s eyes flash with a million pinpricks of emotion, but they all end on doubtful and scared. It surprises Steve when he winds his arms tightly around his neck and exhales a fragile, quivering breath. Steve holds him back, their bodies clicking easily into place, arms and torsos, chin and shoulders, aligned perfectly. When they pull apart, Bucky shuts the computer a fraction too hard.

***

Steve wakes up alone, in the middle of the night. He stirs and reaches for Bucky but finds himself grasping at air and sheets, and the worry that sparks is enough to jar him awake. Steve throws off the covers and Shrugs on a sweatshirt and treads out into the living room. To his immense relief, Bucky is there, but a moment longer of looking at him and the relief gives way to panic. Bucky is kneeling in front of the fireplace, arms wrapped around himself, glazed, empty eyes staring forward at nothing as he rocks vaguely back and forth. The fire has dwindled into smouldering, splintered logs, and Steve wonders how long he’s been there.

“Oh, Buck.” Heartbroken, Steve rushes to kneel beside him, debating whether a hand on his back is helpful or not. Bucky answers it for him, swallowing and collapsing against him, thighs giving out so he’s slumped against Steve.

“Nightmare?” Steve murmurs, wrapping both arms around him.

To his surprise, Bucky shakes his head. “No, um—his older kids put out a statement, or-or-or a PR person for them did.” His voice cracks. “Steve, I fucked up, I’m gonna ruin their lives—"

Pierce’s evil fucking statement got to him. A lightning bolt of nausea hits Steve.

Steve realizes Bucky’s holding his phone, fingers tensed around it, the screen glowing dully. He reaches over gently, and takes it, Bucky’s fingers uncurling. “Can I see?”

Bucky nods.

Steve looks down. Open on the screen is an article titled In wake of not guilty plea, Principle Trust CEO’s Alexander Pierce’s children put out statement. Always a good sign. Steve bites down on his cheek.

This week, public allegations against our father have been put forward, resulting in criminal charges. In light of this happening, the three of us have been approached and frankly, harrassed by countless people asking for our opinions.

We, of course, stand with our father. With our knowledge of the situation, we know that the claims against him are false and baseless—he has never been anything but generous, decent, and caring towards everyone he’s met. We trust the court will know this too. During this stressful and
traumatic time, we ask for privacy, especially Evangeline.

Thank you,
Alexander Harper Pierce, Jr.
Claire Lydia Pierce
Evangeline Willow Pierce

Steve finds himself glowering at the screen. Traumatic time. Rationally, he’s had enough experience with public imaging to know that the three kids who’d signed it hadn’t even touched the letter; it drips with the language of lawyers and publicists. It doesn’t stop him from thinking trust fund brats who have no idea what pain means.

“One of them is just a kid,” Bucky whispers, “she’s in like, eighth grade.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, when he gets control over his voice, “she is. And you’re preventing her from living in a house with a rapist.” He regrets the harshness of it, especially when Bucky winces on the word, but he doesn’t pull away.

“Not to them.” Bucky swallows hard. Voice quivering, he says “I just don’t want to hurt other people, I just wanna be good.”

“Bucky, you’re the best person I know,” Steve says, voice thick with grief. “You’re so, so good.”

Bucky makes a noise from the back of his throat that might have been protest or might have been acceptance. He unravels in Steve’s arms then, falling against him, letting Steve harbor some of his weight. Steve can feel him crying, twitching with shaky, breathless gulps, tears spilling over silently. I love you, Steve wants to say, I wish I could tear everyone who did this to you to shreds. I wish more than anything you weren’t in this pain.

They stay that way until the fire gives out and the logs collapse into blackened ash, holding each other like it will stop the rest of the world from spinning out into chaos.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading i hope you're all still invested haha, love you all

everyone who leaves a comment: please know i read them, i kid you not, twenty times a day esp when i need writing motivation so thank you i love you allll

hmu on tumblr, see you somewhere around 2 weeks babes
twenty

Chapter Notes

here's almost 8000 words for your monday evening hope you enjoy lmao thanks to Cia for her insanely helpful last minute comments and edits again

TWs!!!!!!!:
at the end of this chapter there's flashbacks/dissociation so keep that in mind please please please there's also some victim blaming/self blame but it's not drawn out take care of yourselves though

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next several days, Bucky and Steve do what they can to adjust to the landslide opening up beneath them, taking down the normalcy they had just regained.

The media storm rattles them. Steve doesn’t realize how rapidly the public view of it all is growing until the next morning, when he has to stop avoiding making a statement and he goes online to read what’s being said.

Steve hadn’t planned on releasing a statement, but publications flooded his manager for a quote and, while Clint is as patient as they come, eventually even he grew tired of fighting off reporters and asked Steve to say something. Anything.

Steve’s not famous enough to need a team of publicists and managers and agents controlling his every move, and he’s grateful for that. For the most part, it’s just him. He’s seen how stars are told how to dress, what to post on social media, where and when to be seen and who to be seen with, and that existence seems unsustainable. He’s got Clint, the agent he’d hired when his work started getting sold and Tony told him to hire someone to handle it, and their situation is perfect. Steve lives his life the same way he would have otherwise, and Clint handles sales of his work and lets him know what career options come up and, if there’s something big like an exhibit, helps him advertise. It’s why when Bucky had come back into his life, Clint hadn’t cared, had barely known until long after they were already living together. So when he posted the occasional photo with Bucky, no one paid much attention, besides a handful of the people who kept up with him and noted he was dating someone. No scandals, no speculation, and no harassment about the relationship—nothing more unusual than some hopeful art student leaving a comment about how sweet they looked.

This is different. Within a matter of hours of the first hearing, the media had done a deep dive into Steve and Bucky’s life and come up with handfuls of information, only half of it true. Papers like CNN and the Times covered it carefully, conscious of not jumping to conclusions or becoming exploitative- mentions in the last paragraph of articles stating “the accuser appears to be romantically involved with artist Steve Rogers, who could not be reached for comment” and the likes, but nothing with a glaring focus on Bucky and Steve.

The tabloids had already started to circle like vultures, taking what they could find and running wild. After Clint tells him news outlets are banging down his door for a quote, Steve makes the mistake of googling the case. By then, the New York Post has already plastered a grainy photo of
them leaving the courthouse onto their website, emboldened with the always-clever Rogers that! Steve Rogers seen leaving Pierce hearing hand-in-hand with accuser. What does the renowned artist have to do with this case? Steve thinks wearily that some intern had gotten a hard-on at their own pun. Probably a promotion too.

And Steve doesn’t care what is said about him. Being even slightly famous has numbed him to the wild and sensationalized thoughts of everyone else; meaningless opinions glance off him, sometimes good for a laugh but never hovering. But the thought of reporters and greedy followers commenting about Bucky, picking apart what he’d gone through for a half-baked theory, makes his skin crawl. Nobody gets to exploit him, not after he’s already put up with more pain than anyone should ever have to even imagine. No one.

While he’s scanning the Post, reading about their theories that he owes Pierce money and the trial is a way out of that, it hits him that there hasn’t been a mention that Bucky had been a prostitute. No one knows yet. The fear in his stomach grows colder and heavier.

Steve knows that Bucky doesn’t need to be shielded; he’s much, much stronger than anyone Steve has ever met. It doesn’t stop him from wanting to put himself between Bucky and anything that wants to harm him, the gigantic, terrifying, looming threats like Alexander Pierce or the smallest pinpricks of inconvenience. He wants to stare it all in the face until it backs the fuck off, or slash it down if it doesn’t. And he doesn’t want people who have no idea what desperation and suffering mean to sit there, reading one-dimensional news stories and judging Bucky for the horrors he’d endured. No one can try to shame him for that. Steve won’t let them.

As he’s trying to figure out exactly how to stop every newspaper in America from figuring that out, Bucky comes in. Wordlessly, he holds onto Steve from behind, propping his chin onto Steve’s shoulder, and smiles when Steve turns to kiss his cheek absently.

“What’s that?” Bucky asks a minute later, unimpressed.

Hiding it, he figures, is pointless. Steve grimaces and gestures loosely to the article. Bucky reads it, and then Steve feels him sigh shakily against him, his arms clasping tighter around his stomach.

“Shit,” he says, under his breath. Steve bites his lip.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, insistent. “It’s just…speculation.”

“But it’s about you,” Bucky says, and the fierceness in his voice catches Steve off-guard. “And you don’t have anything to do with this.”

Steve turns around, winding his arms around Bucky’s waist. “Hey. I don’t care about that. People are gonna say whatever. The most important thing to me is that they aren’t going after you. Then I’ll have a problem.”

Bucky grimaces. “You’ve got so much to lose, Steve, your whole career—”

“I’m not worried,” Steve says, and he means it. “Besides, anyone who’s gonna side with him doesn’t get to buy art from me.” Bucky doesn’t laugh. “Buck, I’m serious. It’s just tabloids. It’s nothing. You’re way more important to me than all that.”

Bucky’s eyes are soft and sad. He leans his head against Steve’s shoulder and stares at the screen for a moment longer. Then a genuine, surprised smile tugs at his lips.

Steve cocks his head. “What?”
Bucky hesitates, then smirks. “Rogers that,” he says. “God, I wish I’d come up with that one.”

Steve stares at him, then bursts out laughing. “It doesn’t even make sense,” he points out, grinning, and Bucky breaks into laughter too.

“They should’ve gone with ‘Rogers-gate’, if that’s the angle they’re taking.” Bucky tilts his head, cocks an eyebrow proudly, and Steve feigns repulsion.

“That doesn’t even rhyme, Barnes, do better…” Steve shakes his head with incredulous adoration, and then they’re both laughing so hard it fills their chests and stomachs, shoulders shaking, breathless gasps of joy, no longer at the ridiculousness of the headlines but because they can, because it’s been weeks since they’ve laughed like this and it’s shining and incandescent, weightless in the face of the sludging, hissing strains that they’re dealing with. When they finally get their breath, Bucky smiles, something bright and sad in it, and stands on tiptoes to kiss Steve softly. “See if they’re hiring for their puns,” Steve quips, once they break apart.

Bucky elbows him good-naturedly and draws himself into Steve’s side so Steve’s arm falls over his shoulders. Reality comes over them brusquely, crashing around their ears and making them sober up.

“Listen,” Steve says, wincing, “Clint is asking me to put out a statement. It doesn’t have to be—I mean, it can be whatever. Just tell me what you want me to say, publicly.”

Bucky frowns, eyes dropping a fraction. “Steve, you should choose. It’s your career.”

The lightness to his tone is cut by something sharp and worn that Steve can’t place. “It’s about you,” Steve says gently, “I’m just here to be there for you and fuck up anyone who bothers you.” A fond huff from Bucky. “Seriously though, babe.”

Bucky sighs, placing a soft hand on Steve’s cheek. “Steve, say what you want. I fully trust your ability to say something that doesn’t totally throw the case off-course.”

Steve knits his eyebrows together, concerned. “You should be in control here, though. I mean, the only thing that matters to me here is that you’re okay.” An almost guilty twitch comes over Bucky’s face—there it is, that self-resentment Steve hates so much—but he lets him continue. “Look, I’ll say ‘my boyfriend is the best person on Earth and anyone who says otherwise can fuck right off to hell’”—a blush and eye roll—“or I’ll say we aren’t gonna comment on it right now, or that New York should reconsider their laws on the electric chair—”

Bucky laughs darkly. “Yeah, do that one.”

Without missing a beat, Steve taps in Hi Clint, release, ‘Send Alexander Pierce to the electric chair.’ Best, Steve. It earns him another breathy, bitter laugh and a shove with no hostility.


And that makes Steve glow, a bottle of champagne popped open in his chest. He begins typing. I’m not speaking publicly about this right now since it’s a very personal issue, but my partner, who I love very, very, very much, is right now making the incredibly important and brave decision to hold a criminal accountable. I’m with him one hundred percent. Please don’t reach out to him or me about this. Thank you, Steve.

Bucky reads it over his shoulder, his grasp on Steve growing tighter. “Yeah,” he says once he’s finished, “that’s good.” A pause. “I love you so much.” Bucky leans gently and briefly against him, long enough for Steve to kiss him on the forehead and then hit send. Clint will read it over
and make the language more professional, a little less hotly emotional.

“I love you,” Steve answers quietly, and it occurs once again to him that none of this, nothing else really matters outside of the two of them. Everything important is right there with him.

***

But things are hard.

The hearing and the beginning of a winding, endless trial shakes both of them, but it rocks Bucky to his core. Steve sees it over the next few days, the effects of it uncurling like charred paper. Steve has to basically beg him to stop reading obsessively on it and watching the press talk about it and allowing the sharp, cruel blade of the public’s opinions to slice him open.

He agrees after a particularly awful interview with Alexander on Fox News, where Alexander sits across from an interviewer with a receding hairline and nasally voice on the same couch that he raped Bucky on more times than he can count. He talks in long, digressive phrases about how hard this is for him, how he’s worried about all the other people who are going to be affected by this, how his family and employees and “the people who really have to go through this awful experience are being made a mockery of by James Barnes,” and the reporter laps it up and makes a few comments about how people who fake accusations are the real criminals. Bucky ends up on his knees in the bathroom, dry-heaving and breathlessly sobbing as Steve holds his hair back and rubs his shoulders.

That becomes more frequent. The constant conversation ebbing around it forces everything to the forefront of Bucky’s brain, where it splits open—horrific thought upon horrific thought upon horrific thought—leaving him shattered and volatile. He pales and rears away from any unexpected touch or noise. Talking about the case sends terror flaring in his eyes and voice, leaves him stricken and shaking uncontrollably and in tears, or with anger as rigid and heavy as a mountain that he turns in on himself with shame and harshness that breaks Steve’s heart. More often than not, Steve wakes up in the middle of the night to Bucky screaming or thrashing desperately, covered in panicky sweat and trembling, and calms him as best he can with soft hands and whispered reassurances that it’s gonna be alright.

Steve believes that, despite everything. It’s just that right now, Bucky is in the center of a widening gyre and all Steve can do is cling to him tight enough that it doesn’t swallow him whole. Bucky’s trying so, so hard, working overtime to achieve some sense of control, but Steve can see how tired he is of trying to claw his way up the spiraling fear and pain that threatens to pull him under. This stuff is always one step forward, two steps back, Sam had told Steve a while ago, and he’s starting to see what he means now.

***

About a week past the hearing, on a cold afternoon, Bucky has gone to see Jennifer and Steve is trying to paint. He’s supposed to turn some paintings in to a gallery next week and he’s one short, but he can’t focus long enough to get anything except harsh, abstract pencil lines out onto the canvas. He’s trying to do an image of a street corner in the rain but he can’t get himself to figure out the lighting, or the proportions, which is annoying him because he’s done a hundred paintings like this one before. So when the doorbell cuts through the eerily-still silence, it’s a welcome distraction. He tosses aside the pencil and heads to check.

“Hello?” Steve says wearily, through the front door speaker.

“Steve?” A woman’s voice, quiet and hesitant. “Hi, it’s Wanda—”
“Oh, hey, Wanda. One sec—” He holds down for a few moments to unlock the door, scrubbing a tired hand over his face as he waits. He pulls open his door to meet her out in the hallway, and a minute later the elevator doors drag open and she comes in, cheeks pink and eyes bright from the cold.

“Hi.” Wanda gives him a quick, one armed hug. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to just show up, but I was around here—”

“No, no, you’re good. Bucky’s not here, but you should come in, you want some coffee or something?” Steve offers, happy to have her. He likes Wanda—she’s sweet and funny and she’s been there for Bucky through and through, which, in his book, is worth more than almost anything else.

Wanda glances in, considering it. “That’d be great, actually, yeah. Thanks.” She follows him in and hangs her coat, perching on a stool by the counter while Steve gets the coffee going. “Where’s Bucky?”

“Therapy,” Steve answers, and sets out the mugs. “He should be back in like forty-five.” Wanda knows all about Jennifer, and, to Steve’s delight and Bucky’s relief, has been fiercely, determinedly supportive.

“I just wanted to come see you guys,” Wanda says, her voice strained. “I saw, um—that press conference at the court. I’ve been meaning to drop by and check in.”

At the memory, Steve exhales, low and frustrated. “Yeah,” he says flatly, “can you believe it?” Wanda takes a long swallow of coffee. “No,” she says, a hard edge to her voice. “What a piece of shit.” A pregnant pause, then, softly, “How was the actual hearing?”

Running a hand through his hair, Steve pushes back the bitterness, threatening to spill over with bladed edges. “I mean, he’s getting charged,” he says finally, “but it wasn’t great. He’s out on bail and they’re just gonna tell a million fucking lies.” The anger rears its head, pulling his voice taut.

Wanda nods absently. For a long time, silence drips over them, thick as honey. Then she shifts. “I feel like”—a hard swallow, a pained twitch of her head—“I should have done something. Back when—” Wanda smooths her hand over her long hair, trying to compose herself. “Back after we lived together, there was—I knew something terrible—I mean, he’d show up at my place every couple weeks just... just so messed up, so scared and crying and with his face all bruised up—” She pinches the bridge of her nose and swallows, breathless. Sadness drags Steve’s heart back into his stomach at the thought. “It was always on Wednesdays. And I knew it had to—after a few times, I knew it was the same guy, probably, who was doing that to him. But I should’ve—the first time, I should’ve made him tell me. And then maybe...” She lets it trail off, leaving them with the abstract, untouchable possibility.

Watching her, the helpless guilt all over her face, Steve feels an aching companionship. Unsure, he reaches out to give her hand a tentative squeeze. “It’s not your fault,” he says quietly, echoing what he’s been told by Bucky and Sam and Nat when his thoughts start to loop endlessly into should-haves and if-onlys. “You didn’t know. It wasn’t anyone’s fault but Pierce’s.”

Wanda swallows, holds tight to Steve’s hand. With her free palm, she brushes tears away before she can start to really cry. “I know,” she says finally. “But still.”

And God, does Steve understand.
Wanda watches him through sad, thoughtful eyes. “Hey,” she says seriously, “um—thank you, Steve. For talking right now, but also just... I haven’t seen Bucky like this. Ever.” She pauses, tight sadness pulling across her face again. “I’ve known him for three years—he’s my best friend, but I’ve never seen him happy. I’ve never even seen him doing okay, and the fact that now he’s—I mean, I know things aren’t easy for him. But compared to how he was doing before... it’s amazing to see him like this. You know, better.”

Steve’s chest swells with something undefinable; grief, guilt, sorrow and something like relief, hope, pride. Words to answer her stick in his throat, and he has to swallow a few times to form his lips around them. “It’s the same for me,” Steve says thickly. “He really—I was kind of a mess, before.”

Wanda smiles, something tragic in it. “Good,” she says quietly, “you guys deserve it.”

Wanda stays to have dinner with them. As the three of them flit around the kitchen, shuffling around silverware and arguing over recipe proportions, 80s music soft in the background, (“Really, Steve? Right Here Waiting?”), Steve steps back and watches the three of them from above: Bucky and Wanda, trying to toss cut vegetables into one another’s mouths, Bucky and himself, spinning around the kitchen to the music, uncoordinated while Wanda laughs at them, the gentle ease of the push and pull between all of them. They all deserve it, Steve thinks, that happiness, the relief from the clenching, trembling pain. They’ll get it. He’s sure of it.

***

Maria calls Bucky about a week after the hearing, saying she’s still compiling all the evidence they have and deciding what to use, and if it’s alright with him, she’d really like to talk to him a bit more. Steve, too. She offered for them to come in again or suggested she could come there, which they all agree is the better choice. She comes on a bright, cold morning and sits down with them, Steve and Bucky on the couch across from her, papers and computer spread out on the coffee table, daunting.

“I’m sure you’ve seen that he’s got no problem speaking publicly,” Maria says, a note of disgust in her voice, “I don’t know how much you’ve watched or read, but I’d seriously suggest you don’t give him the time of day. It’s damage control, but fortunately for us, the more lies he tells, the deeper hole he digs for himself when everything is presented.”

“Um,” Steve begins, “why, though? What’s his angle, if he knows that it’s all bullshit—sorry—Maria gives a dismissive wave of her hand—“—but seriously. He knows he’s lying, and there’s proof. What’s he hoping for?” There’s a thin edge to Steve’s voice, a blade that’s cut so many times it’s gone blunt and dull with familiarity.

Maria grimaces. “I’m not sure. I’ve never argued against his lawyer before, but his reputation is that he’s got no problem making cases extremely public. I think he wants to get control of the narrative while the public attention is still focused on it.” She pauses, an unpleasantness coming over her face. “I also think he wants to be as imposing as possible. I’m really sorry, but there’s nothing I can do to stop him from saying those things.” And she sounds genuinely apologetic.

“It’s okay,” Bucky replies. He just feels burnt out. Steve nods along sadly.

Maria grimaces regrettably and clears her throat. “In these kinds of cases, the defense tends to go for one of two arguments: either the defendant never met the accuser and has no idea what they’re talking about, or they did meet, they did have sex, but it was consensual. Now because of the evidence against him, I’m almost certain Zola and Pierce are going to go for the latter.” Bucky winces and digs his nails into his palm. Beside him, Steve lets out a hard, short breath.
“Our strongest piece of evidence against him is those files.” Maria is trying so, so hard to be sensitive, but a striking flash of pain and fear jars Bucky anyway. “It’s going to be very hard for them to spin those, so I’m guessing they’re going to try to prevent them from being shown in evidence.”

“Being shown?” Bucky echoes unsteadily, breath catching. He barely registers when Steve takes his hand.

Maria’s eyes drop momentarily. “In situations like this one,” she says carefully, “when there’s graphic evidence, it can be helpful for jurors to see to help them make a decision.”

Help them make a decision. Like the horror of them will stun people into a guilty verdict. Like seeing Bucky tied up, unconscious, degraded, so damaged and hurt that he was beyond repair would elicit anything other than disgust.

Bucky shuts his eyes, chest clamping tighter and tighter until his lungs are screaming and he has to choke in a ragged gasp of air. Steve moves in immediately, placing his hand high on Bucky’s back, circling soft patterns until Bucky’s chest opens up again and air pushes through again.

“Sorry,” Bucky says, voice soft and high, “sorry, I’m sorry.” He hates himself for inconveniencing her, hates that she’s seeing this ugly weakness, how he’s too pathetic to make it through a single conversation about his abuse without breaking down.

No, says the unusually compassionate voice in his head that’s been trained by Jennifer. That’s what it is. Abuse. So it’s normal for that to be hard to talk about. Maria has seen people in similar situations. She knows how indescribably awful it is to relive or think about, she gets that the memories of what those pictures held and the thought of them being splattered across the evidence pages for some jurors to see sends fear coiling, clenching in him.

“It’s okay, Buck,” Steve whispers, something pained in his voice.

“You okay?” Maria says patiently, “If you need to take a break—”

“No,” Bucky insists. “No, sorry.” Steve squeezes his hand.

“It’s okay,” she says gently, and it sounds genuine. “I understand the opposition, Bucky. I’ve seen a lot of cases like this—it’s normal to not want something private and upsetting used as evidence.” A brief pause. “But,” Maria continues, and Steve shifts closer to Bucky when his breath snags again in his throat, “we’re talking about bringing a criminal to justice. That evidence is the most solid thing we have to convince a jury of what a monster he is.”

It’s the same thing everyone has said when unbearable panic erupts at the thought of other people seeing those photos: it’s a reflection on him, not you, he’s the only one that anyone will judge. But Bucky knows that’s not true. If Pierce was the one who should be ashamed of those, he wouldn’t have kept them on his laptop and dangled them over Bucky’s head to strike him down into something less than a human. Slut, worthless piece of shit, pathetic little whore, nothing but a half-good fuck, he’d screamed at Bucky, so many times the words had carved themselves on the inside of his chest until he couldn’t remember being anything else. That’s what those photos said.

It wasn’t my fault, it wasn’t my fault, it wasn’t my fault, Bucky tells himself for the millionth time.

“It’s still a long way away,” Maria says, “the jury won’t even be picked until right before the trial, so there’s time to figure it all out. I’m not gonna do anything with it that I don’t get the ‘okay’ first from you, alright?”
“Alright,” Bucky says, mouth dry, wishing he could give her a better answer. “Thank you.”

“So, listen,” Maria says. “Right now, Zola is gathering anything he can possibly use to cast doubt over the idea that Alexander did anything. That’s gonna include anything he can use against either of you or anyone else with potential connections to the case- if it’s out there, we have to assume it can be brought up in court. That means if there’s anything I don’t know that you think could be brought up, you need to tell me. It’s fine, we just don’t want to be thrown off by it.”

Bucky scrubs a hand over his face, slow, heavy dread dawning on him. They’re going to have a fucking field day with his old job. Maria already knows that from the report though, so it surprises him when Steve clears his throat. “Yeah,” he says, and Bucky and Maria turn to look at him. “Uh, me and Pierce had a fairly recent…altercation.”

The Christmas party. It feels like an eternity ago. The dread intensifies.

“An altercation,” Maria repeats with a slow, resigned nod. “Okay. Tell me what happened.”

Steve sighs. Sensing his guilt, Bucky leans over to rub his shoulder, a firm, silent it’s not your fault.

“Okay, um... Well, in December, Bucky and I went to a Christmas party, and he—Pierce—he was there. And I’d met him the year before for a work thing, but I didn’t know—Bucky had told me about him, but I didn’t realize that it was him. And when we figured that out, um, a little later, I ran into him out on the balcony and we- and I hit him.” Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. “So, yeah. That’s probably not ideal.”

Maria runs a hand through her hair but maintains her composure. “It could be worse. Thank you for telling me. You have no idea how many times I’ve told clients that same thing and had them promise there’s nothing for the other side to drop a bomb in court.” She pauses, types something. “Where was the party?”

“Tony Stark’s house,” Steve says, after a brief hesitation. “Billionaire’s row.”

“And he can confirm you being there?”

“Yeah.”

“Can he back up your story?” Maria presses. Steve and Bucky nod. “Okay. I’m just asking because that’s definitely something they’ll bring up, and probably spin to make it look you’ve got something out for him. If other people can confirm what you’re saying, though, it looks much better for us.”

Bucky swallows. “Also, uh—” A shiver goes through him, freezing and painful. “That night, the reason why Steve went after him, um—he had tried to…” He trails off with a sharp breath. “And I got away from him, but that’s why Steve hit him.”

He steals a look at Steve, whose face has softened, watching Bucky through horribly sad eyes. Steve takes his hand, and he leans instinctually closer.

“He tried to attack you?” Maria says carefully, eyebrows raised. Bucky nods. All the air has rushed from his chest, leaving it tight and heavy as stone.

“After I saw him, I went to the bathroom. Um, when I came out...he was there, and he pushed me against the wall, and tried to…” Bucky takes a shaky breath, tears starting to push their way into his voice. It’s just a fucking memory, the terror as useless and wasteful as a fear of ghosts, but
the flashes of that night loom and whirl in his head the same way he imagines being haunted feels. “But, um, I was able to push him off.”

Maria leans forward, her eyes dark and sharp with focus. “Bucky, I’m so sorry to ask you to relive this, but can you remember anything more specific? Anything he said, what exactly he tried to do?”

Bucky remembers everything, Pierce’s hand on his stomach and throat, the hallway turning and turning, kaleidoscopic—Did you forget what I have? Think Rogers wants to know what a fucking slut you are?

“I came out of the bathroom,” Bucky says softly, “and he was there. He thought—I told him my name was James, and he said, um, ‘I thought it was James.’” Bucky shivers. Steve squeezes his hand. “Then he asked if—if” —a sharp, shattering breath— “if Steve was um, paying more.” He winces. Steve sucks in a breath; Bucky has never told him exactly what happened that night. “And I told him—I told him to stop, and he kinda pushed me against the wall and, um, grabbed my stomach and touched my neck and cheek, and—” Bucky swallows, his chest constricting wildly. “He told me to get in the bathroom ‘cause—‘cause, um, he had…” Bucky breaks off and covers his face. “Sorry,” he whispers.

“It’s okay,” Maria says patiently.

Steve goes back to rubbing Bucky’s back, slow and safe, and it only takes a few moments to get him to sit up. “Sorry,” Bucky says again, hoarsely. Maria shakes her head dismissively. “Um. He said he still had the-the pictures, and he… basically, he asked if I wanted Steve to see them.” Bucky refuses to lift his eyes from the carpet, but he can feel the horror coming from Steve anyway. Steve exhales, a small, punched-out breath. “Then, I kicked him and, um, left. And that’s when I told Steve.”

Maria nods, compassionate. “Thank you,” she says, “That’s helpful.” Bucky swallows and nods, panicked humiliation stirring in his chest still. He’s relieved she’s letting it lie.

“Steve,” Maria says, turning to him, “I’ll probably need to talk you about that, and how much you knew him at some point.” It’s not an accusation and it’s not unkind.

“That’s fine,” Steve says. His voice is tight, like he’s forgotten how to form the words. His shoulders are hunched forward a little, eyebrows creased with anger and distress. Heart slamming against his throat, Bucky touches him again on the shoulder, getting Steve to look back again. His whole face softens immediately, reminding Bucky the anger isn’t towards him, and Bucky relaxes. He gives Steve’s shoulder another light squeeze, I’m sorry and I love you and It’s alright all at once. Steve’s shoulders go slack again, and he leans back, twitching the corner of his mouth upwards at Bucky, loving.

“Bucky,” Maria says lightly, turning to him, “is there anyone you told about Alexander while the assaults were going on? Anyone who can confirm that this had been happening?”

“No,” Bucky says, too quietly. “I didn’t—um—I didn’t give anyone his name or information or anything.” Wanda and Scott had begged him, but Bucky had been paralyzed with shame and with the utter conviction that if he told anyone, Pierce would know and he would punish him.

“Is there anyone that you talked to or saw after one of the events you reported? Even if you didn’t talk to them about what happened.”

Throat dry, Bucky whispers, “Yeah. A couple of my friends, um—I’d end up at their house, sometimes, right afterwards.”
“Do you think they’d mind if I talked to them?”

Bucky blinks rapidly a few times. “No,” he says tightly, “I’m sure that’s fine. It’s, um, Scott Lang and Wanda Maximoff. I’ll give you their numbers.”

“Great. Thank you so much.” Maria looks over her papers briskly. “I think I’ve got everything I need from you right now. There’s some time between now and closer to the trial when I just need to build a case, so I might need to ask a few things here and there, but overall I think I’ve got most of it now. Thank you so much for talking. I know it’s not easy.” She closes her notebook with a sharp, crisp snap. “Obviously, reach out with any questions or anything, but if not, I’ll be in touch.”

They thank her and walk her out with another handshake and tight smile, waiting for the door to pull shut behind her. Too exhausted to cry, Bucky folds his arms around Steve and tries to vanish into the strong pressure of his grip. Steve holds him for a long time. The silence is heavy and full. Once Bucky breaks away, he thinks a lifetime might have passed.

***

“Buck,” Steve whispers that night, his voice unsteady.

They’re lying together on the couch, bodies pulled close, limbs tangled. Bucky’s face is tucked into Steve’s shoulder, so he lifts it to look.

“Yeah?”

Steve bites his lip; in the flickering shadows, Bucky sees sad uncertainty wash over his face. “Why didn’t you tell me he said those things?” Steve asks finally. “At the party.”

Bucky tenses.

“I’m not mad,” Steve adds immediately. “Nothing like that, baby. Just…you could’ve told me. You didn’t have to keep it to yourself.”

Bucky lowers his eyes again. “I know,” he says, voice small. “I just—I kind of believed him?” A pang of nausea. Steve’s hands go still where they’d been running up Bucky’s back. “And I just couldn’t—I didn’t want you to see me… that way.”

“Bucky, I would never”—Steve’s voice is so wounded.

Bucky squeezes his arm. “I know,” Bucky mumbles, “and I know it’s not true. I just”—a shudder — “didn’t wanna say that stuff. And I didn’t want you to hear it.”

Steve goes back to running his hands up and down. “None of it is true,” he whispers fiercely, “I swear, Buck.”

Bucky buries his face against Steve’s shoulder again and allows himself to believe him.

***

The next few weeks spiral and oscillate, unstable but tentatively, cautiously okay. Pierce keeps himself out of the news under the guise of “being there for my family.” The news, at least mentioning Bucky or Steve directly, begins to slow to a stop. The fear is still there, cold and unrelenting and mocking, shaking him awake every other night or knocking the air from his lungs at an unexpected jostle on the subway or a glimpse of someone who looks like an attacker. It still prickles under Bucky’s skin more viciously than usual, jumping at the chance to remind him of the
mess he’s made.

But even with the caustic, raw pain, their life traspes forward. Their fragments of shattered glass that they’ve been able to piece into a glistening mosaic of a life together stay as beautiful and rough around the edges as it had before, defined by their mornings together in the softly lit studio and nights tangled up against each other gently. Winter begins to thaw away, its heavy chill clinging to New York as long as it can, but vanishing in favor of weightless, cool spring nights that Steve and Bucky spend with their hands and arms clumsily intertwined on the balcony, eating pasta or sipping rosé or just watching the lights beneath them and around them flicker and wane. Bucky keeps going to therapy, forcing himself to accept the impossible, incredible truth that he wasn’t to blame and trying to learn how to stop carrying the thick, forever constricting pain.

One of such early spring days is a particularly good one. They have a picnic—they haven’t done that in years, and it feels special and sacred—in Central Park. Bucky lets Steve read a couple of pages of something he’s written that could maybe, one day become a novel, and Steve gushes until Bucky kisses him to make him stop. They talk about getting a dog and argue over names and breeds. On the way home, stop at a theater and see a bad romcom that they quote the rest of the walk back to Steve’s.

Much later, in bed, feeling whole and content, Bucky leans in and kisses him. He lays a hand on Steve’s chest, fingers curling in, Steve’s center of gravity pulling all of him close. Steve responds softly, one hand on the side of his face, the other combing slowly through his hair, kisses slow and careful.

All Bucky can think is that this is good. Steve’s hands are warm and precise in their movements, pausing for permission even just to graze Bucky’s arm or cheek, excruciatingly careful in his touch, letting Bucky set the pace. Because he feels safe and because he wants this closeness, he parts his lips more and kisses Steve with a little more fervor, feeling colors leap where their skin is touching.

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“Buck,” Steve says raspily, hesitant.

Bucky nods. “It’s okay. This is what I want, Steve,” he means it in that moment, though he isn’t exactly sure what ‘this’ is, if it’s kissing or anything else. Everything is pleasantly hazy.

Steve raises an eyebrow to ask are you sure? Bucky nods again, and so does Steve, and Steve leans slowly back in to kiss him.

And it is good. Steve leans over him, hand still gentle against his face and in his hair, propping himself up with one hand so he isn’t putting weight on Bucky, and they’re kissing faster and a little bit frantic. Bucky has one arm around Steve’s neck and the other on his chest, their heartbeats in breathless rhythm, and it’s good until it starts not to be. Bucky ignores the uncertainty that starts to tug at him, quiet enough to push down at first but building until it’s shrieking, grating, unmistakable fear.

Abruptly and heavily, before he can even decide what to do, panic slams him, and suddenly it’s not just Steve touching him. It’s the moment before the bad things happen, when Bucky’s mind begins to slip away from him and he has to make the choice, to roll over and take it or to try and stop the ball he’s sent rolling. His brain flickers in static, panicky strobe lights, the images changing and bleeding into one another, horrifically alive. It’s Pierce, it’s Rumlow, it’s Rollins, it’s that first man who ever taught him, at seventeen, that no didn’t matter. It’s sleazy guys that kids are warned to stay away from, in dark alleys with alcohol on their breath and rough, cruel hands, it’s put-together middle class guys with nice haircuts and nuclear families who no one would ever suspect. Bucky has met all of them and none of them cared what he wanted and once he knows this, he swallows the word no when it presses, poisonous, into his throat. They’re leaning over him like Steve had a
moment ago except it’s not at all like Steve because it hurts so fucking much where they’re touching him, and he doesn’t want this he doesn’t he doesn’t he’s so scared and there’s no one to listen and no one to hear him scream. No. It forces its way out in terrified sobs and through desperate writhing and anguished, stunned gasps, and they ignore that too, sometimes it edges them on, and so when Bucky says no, he doesn’t expect anything to happen.

Except it does. Steve pulls away before he has to say a word, withdrawing at Bucky’s terrified stillness and trapped breath and suddenly limp arms, scrambling back to give him space. Bucky pushes himself up and gasps at the touch and gasps at it being taken away, finding his knees pulled against his chest, protective. He feels suddenly, startlingly untethered, his body reeling through some dark, empty place and hauling his mind with it, all of his cells undoing themselves in his terror stricken stupor. He thinks he’s rocking back and forth when he begins to come back, head nodding up and down blankly, eyes unfocused. Colors begin to stop running into each other, focusing weakly, the pounding in his head beginning to fade. Bucky buries his head in his hands.

The fear is still there, the kind of panic he can feel coursing through his veins, and he reaches to grip onto the sheets to remind himself where he is.

“Buck, I’m so sorry—oh, God, did I hurt you?” Steve is saying frantically.

He’s okay. He’s with Steve, in their home, and he’s okay.

As he catches his breath, Bucky manages a shake of his head. “No,” he croaks out when he can speak, “no, Steve, it wasn’t you. I swear.” A ragged, anguished gulp. “I just—I thought I could—it was good, I was fine and then I just—it’s like I wasn’t even here anymore.”

“Baby,” Steve murmurs, “it’s alright. You’re alright. I’m not gonna do anything that you don’t want, ever, ever.” He really, really wants Bucky to know that.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky whispers, shame and guilt rising like fog in his stomach, “I wanted to kiss you, I don’t know why—”

“Baby, it’s okay. It’s okay, it’s okay,” Steve repeats softly, and moves closer to him, his hands hesitant, hovering anxiously beside his face. Bucky gives him a small nod and Steve touches his cheek, pushing aside wild stray hairs. “You never, ever have to be sorry for not wanting to do something.” His thumb grazes Bucky’s cheekbone, spectacularly gentle, eyes wide and full of desperate sincerity.

The panic throbbing in Bucky’s chest begins to dull. His heart is still slamming too fast against his ribs, and he tries to calm it with deep breaths. After a moment, he lets Steve pull him tight against his chest, cradled, and that grounds him more than anything.

“I know you weren’t gonna hurt me,” Bucky says in a small, small voice. His heartbeat has slowed almost back to normal, but it spikes again now. “I know that. I trust you. Just all of a sudden…” He lets the end of the sentence hang, menacing, in the air. He’s not sure exactly what happened all of a sudden, just that half a second had torn him from kissing Steve and thrust him under the people who sized him down and raked him open with their hands. Abruptly, he lets out a sob and covers his face, a mix of not-quite calmed fear and immense frustration with himself. Steve reaches forward and pulls his hands back, squeezing.

“I know, Buck,” Steve says, his voice shattered. “It’s alright, baby.” A quiet, still beat. “Look at me, Buck.” Bucky lifts tearful, glassy eyes to Steve’s face. “You never have to feel bad about—about changing your mind, or wanting to stop something or…whatever. I just want you to feel safe, ’cause that’s what you deserve, okay?”
Bucky looks away, a hard wince coming over him. “I’m scared I’ll never be ready,” he admits shakily. “What if every time—what if every time we do try to do anything I freak out like that?” What he’s really asking, his own selfishness making his chest ache, is if I can never have sex with you, will you still love me?

God, he wishes he could give Steve something.

Stop it, Steve doesn’t see you like that, you’re NOT just a body to him, you’re not, you’re not—

As if he can hear Bucky’s desperate attempts to calm himself down, Steve murmurs, “Then we’ll take it really, really slow. And if we never…get back to that point, that’s okay. I love you, Buck. End of the line, right, babe?”

Bucky choke out a pathetic attempt at a laugh, but his heart rate has started to settle down. “It’s not like—Steve, I want that with you. I just…” He lets the words trail to nothingness.

“I know,” Steve whispers instead, and runs his hand through Bucky’s hair. “Whatever you need, however long you need, even if it’s never—that’s okay, baby. I just want you with me. Everything else is just… background stuff.”

_Bucky swallows hard, overwhelmed by the love between them. By the love that Steve has for him, that he doesn’t know if he’ll ever believe he deserves. He closes his eyes and tucks himself against Steve, resting his head on Steve’s chest, arms around his stomach. Steve circles Bucky’s back with his fingers and strokes his hair, and Bucky wants to cry again. “Steve?” _

“Yeah?”

“You do make me feel safe.” He pauses and lets his eyelids flutter shut, Steve’s heartbeat thrumming against his cheek. “I always feel safe with you. Always.”

Safe. Steve really likes the way that word sounds. It eases the horror that had flickered in his chest when a sheet of terrified submission had come over Bucky’s face, like Steve would have kept going.

“Good.” Steve’s voice swells with choked up emotion. “You’re always safe with me, I promise.”

Bucky breathes in slowly, cool air dragging through his lungs. Steve’s shirt smells like cinnamon and mint, which shouldn’t mix but does, and it feels like warmth. It feels like coming undone only to have someone there beside you, holding you so tightly so that you don’t go to irreparable pieces. Steve does that, holds him so close that there’s no room for the fear and hate and misery to come crashing down on him. And it doesn’t. They stay, sheltered, the two of them, no one and nothing else able to rupture them.

Safe.
okay 1) if you're not from new york/don't know the new york post well, please watch john mulaney talking about them in new in town on netflix and you'll see why i'm constantly using them as an example for a bad paper and 2) remember when i said this was gonna be 120k will definitely be longer than that i'm struggling to figure out how to do this ending but yeah buckle in kiddos we got a ways to go

love you all very much especially when you leave comments ngl i sometimes write them down in my journal to look at them i really can't stress how much they mean to me

see you in 1-2ish weeks guys! i'm cafelesbian on tumblr if you have fic comments and qs, life questions, remarks on how hot brie larson is as carol danvers you know how it is
The Pierce household has started to disintegrate from the top down.

The rift between Alexander and Martha has split into a gaping, roaring cavern. They scream or they don’t speak at all, the stretches of icy silence punctuated by periods of viciousness so intense the pillars of the penthouse threaten to cave in. It started as soon as the hearing ended and escalated wildly from there.

(You’re not going to let me sleep in my own bed, the bed that I PAID FOR, in MY HOUSE THAT I PAID FOR—

You know what, Alexander, take it! Sleep there, I don’t need to sleep where you were fucking that whore—

How fucking dare you—

I’ve seen the pictures, you lying shit, you must think I’m stupid. Was it worth it? A one armed hooker fag? Did raping that lowlife make you feel like a man instead of the queer, pathetic liar that you are?

So then leave, you stupid bitch—

Maybe I will, see what all your little shareholders and clients and jurors say then, see what the public thinks of your wife leaving—

And letting who pay for your life? For our children—our own fucking children—you try it alone…)

And on and on and on, until she slams the door, until he shatters the glass in his hand, until whatever downstairs neighbor has the unfortunate job of meekly asking them to quiet down, if they don’t mind, our children are sleeping, knocks timidly.

Alex Jr. and Claire switch off weeks to be home. He’s a senior at Georgetown, she a junior at Princeton, and they spend the days they don’t have classes home, trying to shield Evangeline. He doesn’t notice the charges, four Amtraks a week, and they doubt he’d care if he did.

Alex looks up to his father, his namesake, beyond all reason. The physical resemblance is stark and uncanny, same ice blue eyes, same sharp jawline, same glossy blonde hair his father once had, and the demeanor is the same too. Alex bears the same indignant rage as his father at the notion that he’d done anything wrong, that some former prostitute fag had the audacity to smear his name. At college, he announces to anyone who would listen that the accusations were “absolute bullshit, a jealous attention grab, lies from the biased media.” He keeps returning home to be sure his family
was keeping it together alright in the face of this struggle, and when his dad sits down with him and pours him a glass of whiskey, he rolls back his shoulders at the chance to talk to him, hotly abusing “those lying fucking pussies” for the sneer of agreement it got from his dad.

Claire feels it differently. She feels it like seismic waves rippling through her life, tearing apart everything she had by the seams. With an arrest warrant, everything was gone—her family unit, her reputation, the trust of her friends and boyfriend. Her mother is deteriorating. When Claire is home, her mom is either holed up in the guest room, refusing to get up, or pacing about frantically, blowing ten thousand dollars on a shopping trip, talking to her daughter with disgust about either her husband or the boy he cheated with.

Cheated, she calls it. Not raped. As far as her mother is concerned, the guy accusing him—James, Claire knows now—had as much of a role as her husband. Claire thinks about James a lot. One of Steve Rogers’ paintings was hanging in her off campus apartment, purchased by her dad when they worked together for an exhibit, but she couldn’t look at it without a tidal wave of guilt washing over her, so she put it away. James is younger than she and her brother.

There is something so sick about that.

Claire tried to ask her dad the first night she came back, begged for the real story, desperate to believe it really was a mistake or a lie. The brutal defensiveness he’d put on immediately, the rage at the accusation, had set the dreaded confirmation heavily in her chest. There was no denying it. She hasn’t seen the pictures and she never, ever wants to, but the reports that they exist are too plausible to ignore. She keeps coming home to make sure Evangeline isn’t living in a battleground, though she’s more afraid of the idea of her little sister living in a house alone with her father at this point. When she and Alex both have classes, she bends over backwards to make sure Evangeline can spend the night at a friend’s, the job her mother could be doing if she’d get out of bed. Most of the parents give her a half-pitying, half-resentful look. They always say yes, though. The private school parents all wanna be a hero, and what could be more appealing than harboring the young daughter of an unraveling accused rapist? She doesn’t speak to her dad anymore, when she’s home. He barely notices. She cancels her France trip and moves home at the end of the year.

Alexander drinks like he’s trying to drown himself from inside. Lividity and desperation and cold, infuriating fear send him seething, teetering on the edge of explosion. “I’m gonna fucking kill that lying little slut,” he snarls to Zola, one of the nights he comes over to talk strategy. He tips back the last of his fourth whiskey glass in that sitting. “I’ll fuck him tied up with his scumbag boyfriend watching if I have to, to put him in his place.”

Zola coughs out a tense laugh. “I get it, Alex. You can’t let anyone hear you say that, though. Last thing we need is a private exaggeration getting blown out of proportion in this PC era.”

“I don’t give a shit,” he replies, words slurred, bloodshot, cruel eyes narrowing. “He’s just some piece of shit lowlife whore. No one’s gonna believe him.”

“Right,” Zola says nervously. “Well, let’s make sure it stays that way. We need to really emphasize that he’s a hooker, so if Hill gets the evidence through, it’ll make sense that it was… consensual.”

Alexander’s face twists into a disgusted snarl, cold dread curling in his chest, somewhere under the hatred and the buzz of his drink. “Those pictures don’t get into evidence. The story isn’t that it was fucking consensual, it’s that we never met. Otherwise what am I paying you for?”

Zola works his jaw. “Alex, with all goddamn due respect, if you’re so worried about it getting into evidence, why keep pictures of you fucking an unconscious twenty year old—”
Alexander slams his hand down onto the coffee table. It’s so hard and furious that it sends papers flying, the empty whiskey glass trembling, a gust of air into Zola’s face. “I didn’t rape that worthless little pussy!” he screams, his eyes stretched wide and crazed and full of daggers. It makes Zola jump half a mile in his seat. He’s seen Alexander enraged and seething before, but he’s never felt threatened by him until right now. The man in front of him has completely unraveled, the rage tangible, hot and pulsing in the air. It sets his teeth on edge.

Alexander draws in a ragged, enraged gasp. “I didn’t put a fucking hand on him. The pictures don’t exist. The first time I ever met him was December when his violent, unstable boyfriend, or whatever the hell they’re calling it, attacked me. That is all anyone needs to know. James Barnes is a fucking nobody. If you can’t get everyone to believe he’s a lying, attention seeking, good-for-nothing slut, then tell me, so I can get a lawyer who isn’t completely incompetent.” Alexander leans back and heaves, like the eruption took it out of him. His lips are pulled back into a rageful, disgusted sneer, almost primal, like blood could drip down his face. The dim light in the room cuts his eyes like glass, fills them with fire and smoke.

Arnim Zola has defended a lot of guilty, wealthy people before. Most of them have tried to make it a little less obvious.

“Alexander,” he says, as calmly as he can, pushing his glasses up his face and shaking the tension out of his shoulders. “Listen to me. I’m working on it with the evidence. It’s not gonna be easy. The only reasoning I can really use to argue its inadmissability is that it’s too prejudicial for jurors to look at—meaning basically, too disturbing, and Hill is gonna be very intent on getting it in... To be very honest, Coulson wasn’t the ideal judge for this case, but there’s still a chance he sides with us on this one. If—and I mean if—he doesn’t, that doesn’t mean the case is lost. It can easily be argued that it was agreed on, maybe a predetermined kink—” Alexander’s eyes flare with rage again. Zola holds up a hand. “I’m just saying, if it comes to that. There’s no other evidence to support Barnes’s claim.”

Alexander says nothing. He reaches for the bottle again, knuckles white against it.

“The PR you’ve been doing has been great,” Zola goes on, stroking his ego. “We’ve got to keep up the sympathetic, family man view. That means that what you just did, you never do in front of anyone but me, alright?”

He thinks he’s calmed him down. Alexander stares apathetically at him, tossing back another swig of whiskey. “Just fucking handle it,” Alexander snaps. He slams the glass back down on the table, and the sound of it rocking back and forth, a pendulum, threatens to shake the room. Zola grits his teeth and bends his head over the papers, and wills for Alexander will keep it together.

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Mid-April, Steve gets an interesting text from Tony. He wakes up to it, reads it in bed next to Bucky, still pressed into his side, hair spilling over Steve’s chest.

Hey man—we gotta get a drink soon. Been crazy busy with SI and wedding planning—how r u? Thought you might wanna know that I heard from a guy who works with him that good old Alex is really losing it—not talking to his wife, screaming at employees, pissed drunk all day, the works. Always classy. His bank’s stock has really taken a dive too. Hope that karma brought you and B some satisfaction. See u soon

Steve reads it three times. The satisfaction cuts like a blunt knife. Too little, too late. Pierce needs to pay, not watch his multi-billion dollar company lose a few clients or sleep in a separate room from his wife, the same wife who was still publicly supporting him, the same wife who had
glowered at Bucky like she was the victim, like he’d been a willing fucking side piece or something. Steve wants him behind bars, drying out without his four hundred dollar bottles of whiskey, his name stained and then forgotten. He exhales through his teeth a little too sharply, because Bucky stirs and then lifts his head, blinking.

“You good?” he says groggily, not quite lucid.

Steve’s lips twitch into an amused smile. “Perfect. Don’t wake up on my account.”

But Bucky’s already sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “No, what’s up?” he says, voice still a little raspy with sleep. He twists his hair into a quick ponytail (Steve loves watching him do that, likes how he bites his lip and looks straight up every time. God, he’s in love.) then lays back next to Steve, resting his head against his shoulder. Steve looks away for a moment, then back at Bucky, softening his gaze.

“Tony says Pierce is losing it,” Steve says after a moment.

Bucky snaps his head up, eyes sharp, thrown into alertness. “Losing it?” he repeats, a slight strain in his voice, a snag of breathlessness.

“His words,” Steve replies, “I guess his marriage is falling apart” —Bucky scoffs— “his bank’s losing clients, he’s drinking a lot—”

“That’s new,” Bucky says darkly, a ripple of pain coming over his face. “A certifiable alcoholic drinking a lot? Alert the press.”

Steve and nods grimly. “Yeah, well. Maybe more than usual. I don’t know.” Steve sighs.

Bucky rubs his eyes again and then leans back into Steve. “Maybe alcohol poisoning will do its thing,” Bucky says flatly.

“Drunken driving accident,” Steve adds helpfully.

Bucky huffs out something like a laugh. “Do you believe it?” Bucky says quietly. His fingers circle absently over Steve’s chest, pinching the fabric of his shirt.

Steve recognizes immediately the dangerous desire of wanting to know more, even with the knowledge that whatever it is will hurt. It creeps up on Steve all the time now and keeps him looking for updates about Pierce in the news. “Yeah,” Steve says truthfully, and pauses for a nod before laying his hand over Bucky’s.

Bucky’s eyes drop. “He didn’t seem like he was losing it during that interview.” Disbelief and resignation stand behind Bucky’s voice. Steve hates it. It’s the same inability to believe anything could bring down Alexander that Bucky had had when he’d first reported it, the feeling that he was bulletproof, looming, too powerful to lose anything.

“He wouldn’t, though,” Steve points out. “Reputation.”

When Pierce went radio silent after his two weeks of nothing but public appearances and interviews, it set Steve on edge. It was somehow worse than seeing him on three different channels, blustering insistently about what a victim he and his family were. At least then, Steve had some illusion of being able to keep tabs on what his next move was. He’s got no idea now, besides this questionably credible text, what Pierce is up to. He doesn’t like that.

Steve still can’t get why, with his total disregard for human decency, Pierce hadn’t dropped the
detail that Bucky was a sex worker in one of those interviews, smug and casual, to let the media pick it up and twist and contort it themselves. The only reason he can come up with is case integrity, but it shocks him that Pierce—or even Zola, based on what Tony’s said about him—would concern himself with that. It’s making Steve uneasy.

“Yeah,” Bucky says vaguely. He sounds unconvinced.

Steve bites his lip. The air feels dangerous and sharp, thin shadows slicing like knives or ghosts, waiting to leap out and cut them down. He tries to chalk it up to paranoia and exhaustion, the trepidation lingers, leaving his head feeling sluggish and overwrought.

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“Hey, Steve?” Bucky says that night, a little timidly. They’re in the bathroom, nearly ready for bed; Bucky’s applying toothpaste, Steve’s rubbing his still-damp hair with a towel. Steve glances up and begins to fold the towel.

“Yeah?” He gives Bucky a small, reassuring smile.

Bucky swallows, frustrated by how hard it is to ask. “Um, would you maybe wanna come in with me to see Jennifer tomorrow?”

Steve looks a little surprised. “Yeah, ‘course,” he replies earnestly, and moves a little closer to Bucky. Concern passes over his face. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says quickly, giving him a grateful smile and a light squeeze with his prosthetic. “Yeah, it is. I just, um—” This is the part that really feels hard, demeaning, to say. “I thought it might help, a little, for both of us, if we could, uh… talk about that—about last week, when we were kissing and, um.” A pause. Saying anything else feels unbearable. “Just, to make that stuff really transparent, ‘cause we haven’t really talked about it a lot and I don’t think me or you really know how to bring it up alone, and um, I mentioned it to her last time and I just think it’d be easiest to talk about with someone, for me at least, you know?” Anxiety rushes unpleasantly through Bucky, leaving him breathless. He feels like somehow, inevitably, he’s said something wrong, like Steve will be angry or hurt that he feels like he needs his therapist there to talk a relationship issue through.

But it’s probably paranoia. Ask yourself if there’s evidence to support that, Jennifer keeps telling him, when he has thoughts like this, then try to list the evidence against it.

Before Bucky can begin that list, Steve makes it futile by reaching out to thumb Bucky’s cheek. “Yeah,” he says, and his voice is almost relieved. “Absolutely, Buck. I think that’d be good.”

Relief spills open in Bucky’s chest. “Thanks,” he says softly, and wraps his arms around Steve. Steve pulls him close, rests his chin on the top of Bucky’s head. Bucky feels him exhale, quiet and content.

He feels small, but not in the way he had been used to, diminished and shrunken and silenced. He feels, right now, safe and taken care of and loved, a shield thrown up between the two of them and the rest of the world, protecting them.

“Thank you,” Steve replies. Bucky can’t see his face, but he hears a smile lilting in his voice.

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Bucky is anxious the next morning.
It’s worse than usual, and it’s probably because of what he has to talk about with Steve there. It’s been a little over a week since that night, and there’s been a ripple of uncertainty between them since then. Steve is being too careful, too polite with him; he hasn’t initiated a kiss or touched Bucky without double checking to the point that it’s starting to feel patronizing. He saw Jennifer just a couple of days after it happened, and struggled to articulate what it was that was keeping him on edge.

Eventually, they had been able to define the things about it that were distressing him. The first was the persisting, irrational panic that Steve would be disappointed, even angry, if he waited and waited and put up with Bucky’s shit and they never had sex.

When Bucky had told her that, Jennifer had raised an eyebrow. “I think that’s coming from a warped view of yourself, Bucky. Steve doesn’t think of your relationship as a precursor to sex. You don’t owe him that for being there for you through recovery, and he doesn’t think you do, as far as everything I know about your relationship says.”

“I know,” Bucky replied. He’d been biting his nails and had scraped them down to raw skin, so he shoved his hand in the pocket of his sweater. “I know he doesn’t think like that. And he told me he doesn’t care if we—if that’s something we do. I just—” He took a breath. “The other night, I thought I could handle making out, but I couldn’t. And if—if one day, I think I’m ready to have sex and—and that happens again, I just—he’d have a right to be pissed. I mean, I can’t even give him that one thing.”

Jennifer watched him, quizzical and intent. “The language you’re using right now: ‘he’d have a right to be pissed’, ‘giving him’ something—sex isn’t something you owe anyone, Bucky. No one is entitled to that from you, not even Steve, no matter what.”

Bucky blinked rapidly, fighting tears. “Okay,” he said softly, because he knew she was right and that was something he was trying desperately to remember, working his brain overtime to burn that in as fact, but it was so fucking easy to forget.

“Will you say that back to me, right now?” Jennifer asked kindly.

Bucky closed his eyes. “I don’t owe anybody sex. No one is—no one is entitled to that from me, and the people who thought they were were abusive, and that wasn’t my fault.”

Which led him nicely into the second thing that had been gnawing at him for a few days: the fear that he’d never get to a point where sex could be something healthy and safe and good, something for him.

“What did it feel like, when this happened the other night? What were you thinking?” Jennifer had asked.

Bucky lifted his shoulders, somewhere between a shiver and a shrug. “At first it was fine, you know? It was all good, and then I, um, I started to get anxious, but I didn’t say anything right away, and then I just—it all hit me really fast, and um—it wasn’t like flashbacks usually are, where it felt like I was going through one thing again, but I just thought that—I just felt panic. Like, I don’t know, I knew Steve wasn’t going to do anything but it still—I still felt like—” Bucky broke off. The next words choked him momentarily, but he managed to grit out “—like I was about to get raped again.” He scrubbed a hand down his face, jarred by how it felt to say aloud.

“That must have been terrifying,” Jennifer said gently. Bucky choked in a gulp of air.

“It—it was. But that’s part of what’s making me feel so bad about it now. Because Steve wasn’t
doing anything wrong, and he was perfect once he realized what was happening, but I know” —
Bucky swallowed, his voice growing thick with emotion— “I know he’s beating himself up about
it now. And he’s barely touched me or kissed me since then, and I know that he’s just trying to be
careful, and I appreciate that so much but…I don’t know. I wanna just…make sure we’re okay,
with this stuff, but it’s hard to talk about, for me, without feeling, like, pretty pathetic and
disgusting.”

That was the last: was the worry that Steve would forever blame himself if something similar ever
happened again. Bucky hates that a lot. He knows Steve, with his fierce protectiveness and self
sacrificial intensity is kicking himself for ever being the thing that scares Bucky. For all the pain
it’s caused him, for all the fear that it’s still causing him, Bucky can remember what it was like
when sex was something safe and thrilling and holy with the passion of it, and even if he can’t
imagine it right now, he wants that with Steve, someday. It hadn’t felt like a possibility until very
recently, through some of the things he’s been discussing with Jennifer, reclaiming and redefining
the things that he’s come to associate with terror and pain.

“Bucky,” Jennifer began patiently, “you aren’t pathetic or disgusting for having distress around
talking about sex after it’s been a source of trauma for so long. It isn’t easy to change the context of
something that’s been associated with pain for years.” Bucky nods vaguely along with her, biting
down on his lip. “And your worry about Steve, I think, is symbolic of how strong your relationship
is. I’m sure he’s being extra conscious of not triggering you by accident, but I do think it would be
beneficial for you two to talk about where you both are, in terms of your relationship moving
forward, and potentially being more prepared with boundaries or communication for if there’s a
next time something like this comes up. I’d be happy to help, if you like.”

And so that’s how he finds himself back on her couch with Steve, blood rushing hot and fast in his
head, feeling vile for even talking about sex. They’re both giving Bucky the space to start, so he
clears his throat.

“Yeah,” Bucky says awkwardly, and lets out a taut breath. “Yeah, so. The other night when we
were kissing, and it was, um, a little more than we usually did, and then I just… totally freaked
out…I guess I wanted to talk about it, but, um, I’m really bad at bringing that kind of stuff up, so I
thought if we could do it here…”

Steve nods vigorously. “Yeah, of course,” he replies, with an encouraging little squeeze.

“Bucky, do you wanna start by saying what we were talking about last session?” Jennifer asks.

Starting to feel vaguely dizzy, Bucky nods. “Right.” Even though he’s holding Steve’s hand,
clasp—it desperately, Bucky avoids looking at him. “Steve, you know none of this is you, right?
It’s not like you’ve said or done anything to make me think this, but, um—” He draws a panicky
breath. “Sometimes, I think that—I feel like, if I’m not…” Bucky’s jaw twitches with the effort of
not crying, “…giving you something to stick around, eventually, you’re gonna be fed up. And I
know it’s partially just paranoia, but, um, it’s just really intense sometimes, that feeling.”

Steve’s eyes have gone glassy and heartbroken. “No, never,” he says insistently. “Bucky, um— it’s
not—sex isn’t something I think about you giving me to—” Steve winces and inhales sharply.
“What, um—why?” It’s not accusatory, just hurt and desperate to know. “Babe, why is that how
you feel and mostly, what can I do to make you see that I’m not gonna leave?”

The dread that Bucky had felt that Steve would blame himself hardens and crystallizes at the guilt
in his voice. “It’s not you,” he replies, exhaustion sweeping over him. “I promise it’s not anything
you’re doing. Just, um, it’s really hard—” Bucky bites his lip, forcing back tears. He steals a quick
look at Jennifer, who nods encouragingly. “It’s really hard to remember that—” He exhales,
frustrated. This is hard to say. “Sometimes, it still feels like sex is the only thing I’m worth anything for.” Shame sits heavily behind the words, making him twist his hand away from Steve and dig his nails into his palm.

Steve lets out a small, wounded breath like he’s been hit. “Bucky, that’s not—”

“Steve,” Jennifer says kindly, “let him explain first.”

Steve nods. “Sorry,” he says quickly.

Jennifer waves a forgiving hand.

“It’s okay,” Bucky says hoarsely, and takes his hand again. Steve squeezes. “Anyway, um… I’m, uh, figuring out that that’s not true, but it’s just hard to remember sometimes, you know? And it sometimes just… you’ve given up so much for me, it’s like, um... I wish that you—that we could have that, at least.”

“Buck…” Steve swallows, blinks hard. He looks like he might cry. “I don’t think of us like that. You know that, right? That I’m not marking days, like, waiting for us to get to a point where it’s something we do again.” Steve sounds so desperate.

“I know,” Bucky says. He feels punctured. “I know. But it’s still—it is something I want, for us. At some point. ‘Cause I trust you so much, and I love you. And I know that you aren’t ever gonna—gonna force me into anything, and you’re so careful and you do make me feel safe, and okay around all of this. Just… these past couple days I’ve been thinking that, um, if we do, someday, try having sex, or—or even if it’s something like the other night, when we’re kissing and, um, I make you stop… Will you be disappointed? If you think we can have that, but we can’t?”

“No,” Steve whispers right away. “God, no, Bucky, I promise. No matter what, I’m with you.”

Jennifer has stepped back and is mostly just watching them right now. Bucky and Steve are looking at each other, holding both hands, scared to let go.

Bucky closes his eyes. Tears push over his eyelashes. “Okay,” he says breathlessly, fatigue coming over him. “Sometimes, like I said, um—it’s really hard for me to remember that, um— that I’m not in a place where that’s something I owe people, so even though you’re always so good, and I know you’ll never hurt me like that, it still fucks with my head a little. But I don’t want you to think it’s you making me feel like that.”

Steve drops his eyes for a moment. “What else can I do, to make that easier for you?” he asks again, softly. “In general and also if—if something similar happens again.”

Bucky manages a small, tearful smile. “You already do so much. When you, um, like when you just talk to me during that, and remind me that it’s okay, you know? And then, like you did the other night, and basically every time I have a flashback or whatever, when you just check if I’m okay and then hug me, or rub my back, that helps a lot. Like, um, a while back, there was that time —” Bucky tries to swallow, bites the inside of his cheek. “—that time, um, I was gonna blow you —” His cheeks flush. Steve circles his thumb over Bucky’s knuckles, a reminder that it’s okay.

“And, after that, you kinda just held me, and let me talk, and that helped so much. And same thing, with the other night.” He pauses, tightens his grip on Steve’s hands. “But I’m okay when you just touch me, or take my hand, and when you initiate kisses. I mean… you don’t have to totally pull back, you know? You’ve been kind of reserved with the things that we’ve been doing… you know, the, um, not-sexual things… you don’t have to be as careful as you’re being right now. It actually, uh… I know it’s not what you’re thinking at all, but it starts to feel a little patronizing, when you’re
checking for like, every single time you brush against me. I know you’re doing it because you wanna be totally sure, and, um, I know sometimes I do need that, but not literally all the time, you know? It’s a good thing when we touch.” Bucky’s rushing, nervous and incoherent, cheeks hot. Steve nods along like he’s making total sense.

Steve hesitates; Bucky can see him painstakingly selecting his words. “You know I’d never hurt you, Buck,” he says finally, pained. “And I’d never—I never meant for it to be patronizing I’m really sorry about that, but I don’t want to ever accidentally do something that—that reminds you…” He trails off, his face tight with grief.

“I know,” Bucky says quickly, his throat growing thick, “And you’re always—you’re so good with that Steve. I’m so thankful for how you always make sure. But you aren’t gonna trigger me by taking my hand or putting an arm around me.”

Steve nods. “You promise you’ll tell me if I do though, right?” he says, something breathy and afraid in the words. “Like the other night, um… you didn’t say anything, and, uh…” Steve works his jaw back and forth, gritting his teeth against tears. Bucky feels sudden, hot shame. “You know I’m not gonna be mad, if we’re kissing or anything, and you tell me to stop? I mean, you can always say that.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky whispers.

Steve snaps his eyes back up, shaking his head vigorously. “No, no, god, no, I didn’t mean—I don’t want you to be sorry. Seriously, it’s so okay. I just want you to feel comfortable enough to say no to anything. And… I know I can’t grasp how hard it is for you, and I swear I’m not just making it about me…” Steve flinches, looking suddenly guilty.

“Okay,” he says, with a half hearted smile for Jennifer. “Yeah, all I was gonna say was, um, it scared me, the other night, Buck. You looked… You looked really scared and I just—I never want to make you feel like that. That’s why, um, I’ve been reserved with touching, since then. I just want you to know, a hundred percent, I’m not gonna…take advantage.” Something heavy drags in Steve’s voice, grief worn like seaside rocks, weathered and exhausted.

Bucky takes this all in and nods. Guilt stirs, and sorrow, but what he feels, overwhelmingly, is relief. Steve’s not angry, and he’d never look at Bucky the way all of those other people had. He’s there with him, always, and will meet him wherever he is, and Bucky allows himself to believe all of that. They’re just taking their time, stumbling through this relationship with tentative feet and clasped hands, and figuring it out means mistakes. The guilt and shame begin to ebb away.

“I know,” he says finally, “I didn’t, um, tell you to stop that night because I was just… I felt like I should have been fine, ‘cause I love you and I trust you so much, and I thought… it just happened so fast, like I was there with you and then I wasn’t, you know?” Steve’s eyes are so soft. He nods, devastated apologies clouding his face.

“Usually, I don’t feel like I need you to stop, though. I’ve never really had you hold my hand, or hug me, and gotten panicked about that. And when it feels like I do, I’m usually pretty out of it. Fucking dissociation,” he adds, trying for a joke. None of the three of them find it funny. “I hear you, though. And I’m sorry.” Steve opens his mouth to protest, but Bucky cuts him off. “No, I am. I’ll tell you, when I feel like being touched is too much. But you can’t blame yourself for that, okay? I know that you aren’t gonna do anything to me. Really.” He exhares, lungs shaking with the
effort of it. Steve is watching him with intent, focused warmth.

“Okay,” Steve finally answers quietly. “Okay. I need you to believe me when I say that wherever you are is good for me, okay? Even if it’s years before we do anything like that, or months, or never. The most important thing to me is that you know that you can decide where we are with that, and we can talk about it.”

“I do,” Bucky whispers, and manages a smile. Steve smiles back and squeezes his hand again gently. I love you, it says, and Bucky leans his head against Steve’s shoulder. I love you too.

“The longer you two are together, and figuring out what needs you both have, there are going to be moments of miscommunication and discomfort. That’s part of all relationships.” Jennifer gives them a smile. “The way you two are talking right now is so important, and it’s really a testament to how healthy your relationship is. Moving forward, figuring out boundaries and talking about what you’re ready for is really important, and I’m glad that you were both so willing to be honest today.” She looks between them. “You two are already so good about this, but the most important thing is that you keep letting each other know how you’re feeling, what you’re both comfortable or uncomfortable with, and how you can make sure you’re in a place where you both feel secure in the physical and emotional parts of your relationship. And I think you’re already doing a really good job of it.”

“I think we can do that,” Steve says with a weak laugh, turning to Bucky. He pulls even closer to Steve, grateful for everything about him.

“Yeah.” Bucky’s voice quivers with so much trust and hope and love, but he lets it overwhelm him for that moment.

When they get back into the empty waiting room a few minutes later, Steve pulls Bucky into a hug. His arms fit securely around Bucky’s hips and Bucky presses his face into his shoulder and he’s hit by such intense relief that he comes unraveled, clinging on to Steve, stunned he’s still able to hold himself up.

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They go home and, that night, order in and rent Ghost. Bucky’s lying against Steve, head resting predictably on his shoulder, eyelids growing heavy as the credits roll, both of them too tired to reach for the remote.

“Bucky?” Steve whispers after several moments, checking if he’s up.

“Hm? Yeah?”

“Thank you for today,” Steve says, his voice full of warmth. That gets Bucky to lift his head from Steve’s shoulder.

“What do you mean?”

“Thanks for trusting me.” Steve says it with a small, gentle smile. “I think it was really good we did that. I’m really proud of you.” The softness in it unwinds Bucky.

“Thanks for being there with me.” Bucky reaches up and holds Steve’s face with both hands. “It helped to talk about, a lot.”

“Good. Me too, baby,” Steve whispers, and turns his head to kiss Bucky’s fingertips. When Bucky leans up to kiss him, fingers tangling in Steve’s hair, soft and chaste as can be, he feels safe and
whole, like clear water, like the word *home*.

***

Ten weeks before the trial, and Alexander gets a call from Zola earlier in the morning than he’s used to.

“Yeah,” he answers gruffly, rasping from exhaustion and the lack of a drink so far in the day.

“Morning, Alex,” Zola replies, in his pinched, joyless voice. “Does the name Brock Rumlow ring any bells?”

“No,” Alexander answers, annoyed at the interruption. “What’s this about?”

“He’s an ex-cop. Apparently, he’s got information about Barnes that can help you. I’m meeting with him today.”

“I don’t know him,” Alexander snaps. “What does say he knows?”

“Well—” Zola coughs, “I only talked to him for a few minutes on the phone. But, he says he’s seen Barnes on the street before. He could potentially testify against him, help destroy his credibility.” Zola’s enthused by the idea, delight thrumming through his words.

Alexander thinks this over. “What’s he want?” he asks finally, skeptical. “Money?”

“Shorter sentence,” Zola answers after a moment. “He just got twenty years.”

“Christ,” Alexander hisses, “and that’s who you want convincing the jury for me? A fucking convict?”

“He still used to be a cop. The charges he’s in for have nothing to do with his career, Alex. If he knows something that highlights that Barnes used to be a whore, we can use that no matter who he is. I’m meeting with him today to see if he’ll be any good.”

It could be good, Alexander reasons, to have someone else backing up the fact that James was nothing more than a lying worthless little slut. “Fine,” he says tightly, “Let me know what he says.”

“Of course,” Zola answers, “talk soon, Alex.” When he hangs up, a smirk ghosts Alexander’s face.

Things, he thinks, will work out just fine.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter will probably be next week bc i already have a good chunk of it written, so hopefully I'll finish it in the next few days and it'll be up then! thank you to every single one of you for your lovely lovely comments, i absolutely adore them

i'm on tumblr @cafelesbian if you have any qs or anything, fic related or not xxx
Steve’s gallery opening happens early May. It’s part of a small, limited showing at the Museum of Modern Art, a gallery featuring him and four other artists under thirty, all of them rather important names in the visual art world.

He’s nervous. He isn’t usually, before these things, but it’s his first one since he’s been with Bucky. That isn’t the reason he’s nervous—he loves the idea of being there with Bucky, having him there to hold hands with and laugh at the slightly sickening way critics and buyers will prowl the exhibit. Most of the pieces he’s showing are, at least tangentially, inspired by Bucky anyway; a street corner in a blizzard, the same one where they’d found each other those few months ago, his silhouette against fogged, bright glass, sunlight glittering against it, steam rising up from a mug of tea next to him from a photo Steve had taken, fingers and hands entangled, stained with paint, that could belong to anyone but that Steve knows belong to them. He’s prouder of them than he usually is. Bucky had looked at all of them prior to his submitting them and said probably twenty times how stunning they were, and Steve had rolled his eyes and said something about having the best inspiration possible. Bucky’s presence there is a comfort.

What’s making him nervous is the publicness of it. As far as gallery openings go, this one has been fairly anticipated, already written up in a couple of magazines as something to see in New York this spring. So the timing of a public, press filled opening, weeks after their names have been splashed all over every newspaper in New York, isn’t optimal. Steve doubts that too many people will be there with that in mind, but if anyone brings it up, especially to Bucky, Steve doesn’t think he’ll be able to hold it together. He is so beyond done watching people exploit and violate Bucky.

Little by little, Steve can feel anger slipping out of his control. The last few weeks have been bad. Watching lies ricochet off everyone, Pierce and the business and media people who fawned over him and unbelievably enraged, self aggrandizing people in tabloids or online who felt the inexplicable, disgusting need to insert their opinions. Steve is kind of shocked there’s been as much attention around it as there has. Even with fewer news stories as time since the case broke drags on, there’s still constant discussion around it, plus the few random blogs or newspapers who throw in an “update” with a quote from the lawyers or a low quality photo of Alexander leaving his building with a dark look on his face. Everyone in his life has told him to stop reading about it, and for the most part, he does. But then, every so often, he’ll spiral into an hour-long deep-dive, catching up on the things he’s missed, and then, so he doesn’t go out of his mind, go for a run until his body feels like it’s going to give out or go after his punching bag with primal aggression. He’s gotten more use out of that in the last two months than in the two years he’s owned it.

It’s a strange time for him. In the clearest, most obvious sense, he’s happier than he’s ever been. Steve has spent four years feeling numb, utterly untethered from his life, watching time wear away with no ability or interest in slowing it down or making it mean something. When Bucky stumbled out of that alley and back into Steve’s life, it shook him awake and burnt away the apathy that had been dragging him under, and everything felt raw and sacred again. Now, he wakes up every morning next to the love of his life and feels a landslide of precious emotion at that alone. Bucky didn’t just illuminate the world for him, he made it vivid and iridescent. Steve could look at him, in the moments when he was grinning and laughing and luminous from the inside out, or when he was terrified and meek and in tears, his colors muted and running, or anything in between; the love it would prompt in Steve was enough to power cities. It’s so much to feel and Steve is addicted to
the way it feels to love Bucky.

Then there’s the pain and horror and anger, though, and it comes in seismic tremors and vines that squeeze him and refuse to let go, and that’s relatively new too. Sometimes it’s preferable to the callous, detached misery that had been all the feeling he had allotted himself back before he saw Bucky again. It’s the most he’s felt since he first lost Bucky, when he’d been so broken that he drank himself into a glazed stupor that lasted for four years. Everything he feels, he feels it in startlingly vibrant colors and thrumming with an electric current. But that means the awful things come like that too. So when it comes time for the gallery opening, Steve can’t shake the conviction that Alexander Pierce’s venom will make its way in somehow. The night before, stress is heavy on his shoulders, a dull soreness everywhere that he can’t pinpoint.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asks him gently, as they’re going to bed. His hand splays lightly over Steve’s chest, that small comfort enough to calm him down for a moment.

“Yeah.” Steve smiles and pecks a kiss to the side of his forehead. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just stressed about tomorrow.”

“How come? You’re gonna be great.” Bucky sits up, fixing him with a concerned gaze. Steve frowns.

“Lately, I just don’t feel like hanging around anyone but you,” Steve says, which is the truth. Bucky and their small, closely intertwined group of friends are everyone in the world he wants to give the time of day to.

Bucky laughs at that. “C’mon, Monet. You should be proud of this. I know you’re already the most renowned artist of all time and whatnot, but this alone is a huge deal.” He sounds so hopeful, and Steve absolutely refuses to shatter that with his own paranoia.

“Sure,” he replies dryly, “but yeah, it’ll be fine. As long as everyone gets to see that I have the best date.”

Bucky rolls his eyes fondly, then lays his head on Steve’s chest. “I love you,” he says quietly, “and I’m proud of you, and you’re gonna be amazing tomorrow, like you always are.”

“I love you,” Steve murmurs back. And like he always does, Bucky makes it okay.

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The gallery goes smoothly.

Actually, it goes more than smoothly. No one says anything about Pierce, not even in passing, and Steve gets flooded with compliments on his work. Bucky is next to him the whole time, arm around his waist, face glowing with I-told-you-so laced pride, whispering things to make him smile when Steve starts to tense up at the endless, relentless conversations.

Much later, though, once he’s already in bed with Bucky, who’s long asleep, Steve is lying awake, kept up by some untraceable distress that won’t let up. It’s that same dread that has locked itself into his chest for the last few weeks that he’d chalked up to work stress, worrying about the opening, having to watch Pierce get in front of a camera every few weeks or days and spread lies that drip with poison, but right now it’s tethered to nothing. Steve feels clausrophobic, the air around him too thick, throat swollen shut. He sits up and takes a couple of breaths, but it doesn’t help. Something has twisted open in him and it feels dark and massive, too big to tame right now.

“Steve?” Bucky says, very, very softly.
He twists his head around; Bucky’s rubbing his eyes, propped up on an elbow, worried. “Hey,” Steve mumbles, and coughs, “Sorry, baby, did I wake you?”

Bucky blinks, then pushes himself up. “Are you okay?” He touches Steve’s shoulder carefully.

“Yeah,” Steve says, a hollow ringing in the word. “Yeah, I’m just… I don’t know.” He swallows thickly. He can’t say anything that isn’t awful, making it about his fucking feelings when Bucky’s the one who really suffered. Guilt stabs at him.

And Bucky hears the desperation writhing underneath his voice. Silently, he leans close and wraps both arms around Steve’s neck so that Steve can lean into him. Steve takes a sharp, precarious breath and then hugs him back, tightly, and then he’s crying, pouring himself out in Bucky’s arms, and Bucky lets him without saying a word. His fingers brush lightly through Steve’s hair a few times, or down the back of his neck, but he just lets him hold on and come undone until Steve chokes in a breath and gets control over it.

Steve lifts his head up, pulls one arm away from Bucky to rub his face. “Sorry,” he says shakily, with a breath that might have been a laugh; even he can’t tell.

Bucky watches him. His eyes are clear as water, the darkness making them a dark blue-grey that makes Steve think of the sky after it rains. They’re full of worry and love and mostly, of understanding. “Yeah, c’mon, I’ve never woken you up in the middle of the night to cry before,” Bucky says after a moment, his mouth twitching up. Steve really does laugh at that, a small noise of breathlessness and relief. Bucky touches Steve’s cheek; his fingers shake a little. “What’s going on?” he asks quietly.

Steve sighs, the effort of it momentous. “Ever just felt, like, so overwhelmed you thought the world was ending?”

“A couple of times,” Bucky replies.

Steve coughs out a laugh again, relaxing. “Yeah. It’s just, like, I couldn’t sleep, and then I just felt fucking everything, all at once.” Steve exhales on the last word, scrubbing a hand over his face. Bucky leans in again, and presses a kiss against Steve’s shoulder, then reaches for his hand. For a few unbroken moments, the silence feels heavy enough to sink ships.

“Steve,” Bucky says finally, a little meekly, “it might be good for you to talk to someone, about all this.”

“Talk to someone?” Steve repeats blankly. Bucky touches his shoulder and looks down.

“I think,” Bucky begins, and starts rubbing Steve’s shoulders, “that it’s possible I’m not the only one in this relationship who needs to be in therapy.” He gives Steve a sad little smile.

Steve regards him, surprised by the suggestion, eyes wide. He doesn’t shut it down, though.

“Baby,” Bucky continues softly, “you’re under a ton of stress with all of this. You’re getting attacked in the media too, as much as you don’t want to admit it. And, um, even more than just… case stuff, you’ve got… some unprocessed stuff, what with your family and everything. I know you’re gonna say you’re fine, but there’s no way that all of this is easy on you. It’s okay for you to have support, too.”

Steve looks down, into Bucky’s eyes. This person he loves with more fervor than all the galaxies could ever contain looks back up at him, such softness in his face, such care and hope.
And Steve finally sees, clearly, how deep he’s in with everything. He lets himself take stock of the backbreaking stress of all of this, the relentless quicksand tug of the anger he’s carrying, the anxiety that he’s channeling into running and boxing until his body hurts, and he knows that Bucky is right.

“Okay,” he says, half resignation and half relief.

Bucky’s eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Right now, it feels right. He’s so exhausted that his brain can’t make itself take the obvious solution and twist it into something unreasonable, when all he has to do is accept it. “Yeah. I think you’re probably right with that.” He breaks through the fatigue to give Bucky a smile that drips with grief.

“Seriously?” Bucky says, an incredulous look flitting over his face. “Just like that?”

“I mean… I’ll think about it first. But yeah.” Steve laughs again, suddenly delirious. “I think it’s a good idea. Sam’s been saying it forever.”

Bucky nods, like he can’t believe it. “Okay,” he whispers. “Good. Fuck, Steve, I’m glad. Okay. I love you.”

And that’s that.

***

Steve gets Dr. Henry Yin’s name from Sam, who took a class from him a few years back. When he tells him he’s thinking about therapy, Sam does a double take.

“You’re kidding,” he says, incredulous. When Steve shrugs, he adds, “No, I mean, I think that’s so great. I just can’t believe it. I spent two years trying to get you to go to therapy, and then Bucky suggests it once and all of a sudden you can’t wait.” There’s nothing snarky or bitter, though; he’s genuinely glad for Steve.

“Yeah, well, to be fair, back when you were telling me to, I basically didn’t care what happened to my life, and now I do. And, um, it’s a possibility that some of the stuff that happened with my family, and when I first moved out, needs some psychological processing.”

Sam’s face softens into something fond and lingering of regret. “Good,” he says, a slight catch to his voice. “Good. I’m proud of you, man. Took you long enough.”

They’re sitting in a cafe; Bucky’s nearly done with a therapy session, and they’re waiting for him to get dinner.

Sam reaches across and squeezes his shoulder. “You doing okay?” he adds quietly. “I’ve seen the shit he’s been saying on the news. What a scumbag.” Sam’s face darkens with the same furious protection Steve’s grown used to; he loves Bucky endlessly too.

“Yeah,” Steve says, voice scraping against something hard. “Well. That’s part of it. He’s getting in my head, a little. It’s been…a lot.” Sam, of all the people in the world, can understand how badly the anger and fear has clawed into Steve’s life and started to poison him. Him and Nat, they saw it full force when he lost Bucky and got kicked out.

“You aren’t gonna track him down and slip cyanide into his drink?” Sam asks, half-serious.
The question is light, but the reminder of what Pierce did to Bucky makes Steve’s stomach turn. “We’ll see,” he mutters darkly. Sam gives another concerned squeeze of his arm, and lets it lay.

***

Dr. Henry Yin turns out to be quite enjoyable. Bucky goes with Steve to meet him, since it’s a million times easier for Steve to talk with him there, and stays in with him for half the session. The office is in the ground floor of his apartment, in a flat right off West Fourth Street that Steve likes right away. It’s a little similar to Jennifer’s—all plush couches and calming colors and a coffee table with different stress balls—and what settles Steve the most is the framed photo of Dr. Yin and his husband in the corner. It takes off the second of gut-twisting anxiety that he’s suppressing disgust at him and Bucky holding hands.

“Steve, yeah? I’m Henry.” He’s tall and friendly, all warm grins and enthused handshakes. “And Bucky, right? C’mon in.”

The email Steve had been vague, something like: “I’m under some stress, and I’ve been through some rough patches before this, and I think it might help to talk about it in therapy.” He didn’t feel like trying to condense it into an email.

“Tell me a little about why you came in today, Steve,” Henry starts.

So Steve does. He goes through the family history and his high school relationship with Bucky (who, the whole time, sits quietly next to him and runs the hand that isn’t holding Steve’s up and down his arm, reassuring) and the fallout after that. He skips over Bucky’s side of the story, acutely aware of not making that about him. The thought that he was going to therapy to talk about the way Bucky’s trauma was affecting him already made him feel like the worst person on earth, even though everyone under the sun, Bucky especially, had reassured him that a) that wasn’t the only reason and b) he had no shortage of things that needed processing that had nothing to do with Pierce or the trial or any of that.

When he’s given as in-depth a summary as Henry’s going to get during their first meeting, Henry leans back and regards him. “That’s a lot to have gone through, Steve,” he says seriously. It almost makes him laugh, the bizarreness of hearing that while he’s sitting next to Bucky, but he manages not to. “And it would completely make sense that that’s impacting your day to day, when it’s something that you’ve let sit for a while.”

Steve nods. He isn’t sure what else to say.

“Would you wanna talk one-on-one for the last few minutes? Just for a final check-in?” Henry looks carefully between them.

Before Steve can think that one over, Bucky squeezes his hand. “You should.” He gives Steve an encouraging little smile that Steve returns. So much love floods him.

“Well?” he says, glancing from Bucky to Henry. “Yeah. Thanks.” Bucky smiles again and gives Henry a quick goodbye, and Steve watches him leave, waiting for the door to click behind him.

Henry fixes his attention onto Steve, eyebrows lifting. “I try to always talk to the person I’m seeing alone for the first meeting, in case there’s anything they weren’t comfortable sharing,” Henry says easily, “and even if not, I think it’s good to get to talk to just my patient.”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees, nodding like he knows what he’s talking about, and clears his throat. “Yeah. Uh, there’s not anything that I’m not telling Bucky, or anything.” A quick glance back towards the
door. “We’re good. We’re great. Getting to be with him again is the best thing that’s happened to me since everything with our families.”

It’s all true. Still, Henry picks up the underlying hesitation in his voice as he tries to figure out how to explain the rest of why he’s here. “That’s great,” Henry says, genuinely glad for him. “Is there anything, though, that you want to talk about relating to your relationship?”

So Steve tells him, as much of it as he can without going into the details that make his throat constrict with anger or send him into tears, and he explains the situation they’re in now: the trial, the anxiety it’s bringing them both, the rage that snaps him every time some stranger in the news insinuates that Bucky’s lying or Alexander Pierce has the gall to show his face in public and smirk at a camera and spin some awful thing for tabloids to spread. When he’s talking, it occurs to Steve that he hadn’t realized how badly he needed to lay all this out, how massively relieving it is to say it aloud. When he’s done, there’s a shaky lightness to his shoulders that hadn’t been there before.

“That’s awful,” Henry replies quietly, when he realizes he’s done. “It’s no wonder you’re under stress, Steve. That’s an incredibly difficult situation.” A pause, and then, as if he can hear what Steve’s preparing to say, “And I can tell from the way you’re talking about this how much you love Bucky, and how badly you want to take care of him while he goes through this. But that doesn’t mean that it’s not painful or difficult for you, too.”

Steve exhales. “I know,” he says, voice growing tight, “but still.”

“I understand the reaction. Watching a person you love in pain is awful; there’s no way around that. And when it leads to helpless feelings when you can’t do more, or anger on their behalf, those are legitimate stressors. It’s not selfish to need to react to what you’re going through.”

The relief splits Steve’s chest open in a way he hadn’t expected. He’s been holding onto that, the helplessness that resurfaced every time Bucky spun into panic and all he could do was hold him and whisper to him, the guilt that there wasn’t anything else he could, and then the guilt that, in the face of Bucky’s ravaging, unimaginable suffering, he was focusing on how it made him feel. He hadn’t even realized it, until now, but it rears through him with an intensity that shakes him.

He makes a second appointment for three weeks from then.

It feels like a good start. It feels, for the first time in a while, like he can begin to untangle the knots inside that he’s trained himself to ignore for four years, and he feels ridiculous for not having done it sooner. All the years he numbed himself from the inside out, brushing off Sam and Nat’s suggestions, letting this pain fester and sit, and it had finally caught up again. Probably, it was because Bucky came along and, with one look, he sent the walls Steve had shot up around him and in him crumbling to nothing, and everything he’d stopped himself from feeling came crashing down with them.

“What is it?” Bucky asks once they leave make it outside, watching him carefully. He’s tucked under Steve’s arm, fading light bouncing off store windows and turning their skin amber.

Steve looks down at him. “Nothing,” he says truthfully, and smiles. “I think that was good, though. And I love you.”

Joy spreads over Bucky’s face. “I love you too,” he says, with a grin, then pushes up on tiptoes to kiss Steve, stumbling a bit. Steve steadys him with one hand and kisses back, laughing into it.

He and Bucky, like this: that’s all there ever needs to be.
***

Jokingly, Steve texts Sam later, *wow, I think therapy mightve been a good idea. Who couldve guessed?*

*youre an asshole*, Sam replies immediately. Then, a moment later, *really, though? It was good?*

*yeah. felt good to talk. Thanks for all your help, man*

*i’m gonna make bucky ask you everything i ever want you to do from now on* Sam replies.

Steve can’t really argue with that.

***

A few days later, they see Maria again. That’s when things start to turn.

“*Hi,*” Maria says briskly, and gives them a warm smile, “*thanks for having me.*”

“Thanks for coming,” Bucky replies. “*How are you?*”

“I’m alright.” She looks tired, but she flashes him a warm smile. “*You guys?*”

“*Good,*” Bucky says quickly, a little too late, while Steve nods vaguely. Once they’ve brushed over the formalities and given her a cup of coffee and settled in the living room, Maria pulls out a laptop and a binder, and just the sight of them brings a hard edge into the room that they all feel immediately.

“So,” Maria begins, and she puts her hair up, all business, “*it’s been a while. There’s two months until the trial begins, which means there’s about one month before preparing gets intense. There were a couple of things I wanted to update you on, and then a couple more questions—*” She flips through her folder, distracted. Anxiety rising, Bucky waits. “*Okay. Sorry.*” She blinks and looks back up.

“So, like I was saying, in about two weeks things will really pick up. We’re still gathering evidence, so a little more time would be ideal, but it’s amazing the strings that rich defendants can pull.*” She purses her lips, then shakes it off. “*In about a month, I have to give over a list of witnesses and compiled evidence that can be used against him.*” She pauses; Bucky’s stomach flips over unpleasantly. “*I’m nearly done with that, I think. What we’ve got is a solid case.*” Another pause, tension stretching, ready to snap. “*Have you thought about what we talked about last time?*”

“*Yeah,*” Bucky says, his voice thin, “*yeah, I have. Um, you can go ahead, and try to get it submitted.*” It feels wrong, the words thick and tasting like metal, but he presses back against that resistance. *This is the best way to get him.* It doesn’t stop disgust from burning in his throat, the words rising on his tongue like acid—*slut, disgusting, wanted it.* Bucky takes a sharp breath and wills them down, trying to remember what Jennifer says, what Steve says, what everyone who’s heard him talk about it so far has said. It wasn’t his fault. Those thoughts were internalized from when he was surrounded by people who were abusing him, who wanted to make him think less of himself so that he’d be more likely to accept the way he was being treated.

Steve begins to circle his fingertips over Bucky’s open palm. He takes another breath, calmer.

“*Are you sure?*” Maria says calmly, “*I know it’s not an easy choice.*”
“Yeah,” Bucky says weakly, a little more life in his voice. “Yeah. It’s, um, the strongest evidence, right? So…” He lets it trail off.

Maria nods. “Okay,” she says, “okay. Thank you, Bucky. It’s going to be effective against him.”

Bucky nods and tries to swallow.

“What…” Steve clears his throat. “What other evidence are you gonna present?”

Maria raises a finger—hold on—and leafs through the binder. “Besides what we just talked about, a lot of it is circumstantial, but that doesn’t mean it’s pointless. We’ve got video footage from every Wednesday in the time frame you reported of him leaving work during times that line up with what you told the police.” She’s addressing Bucky, so he makes himself nod. “Photographs of his apartment that line up with your description in the initial report. Um…” She turns the page thoughtfully, raps her nails against it. “I tried to get footage from his building, but they don’t save it this long… A couple of texts from Wanda and Scott from the dates you reported that match the reports”—that one jars Bucky, awful guilt burning through him at the thought of them, neck-deep in worry for him, him barely noticing—“and Carol ordered a DNA test on parts of his apartment that I’m still waiting on. Even if that doesn’t pan out, we still have proof that you were there. And then”—another page flip—“obviously, the entire first police report you made. That’s where we are right now.

“So, that’s the next thing I wanted to bring up.” Maria looks up again, her eyes sharp and bright with focus. “In a lot of these cases, it’s a short witness list, because usually, it’s two people telling different stories and there are very few outsiders who can prove anything. A lot of it is based on how either side appears to the jury, since there aren’t a lot of solid witnesses to account for the events.” A pause, to make sure they’re following. They are. “So, what that means, is that these cases rely a lot on character witnesses. I’ve got no doubt Pierce’s team will have at least one of those—probably the wife, maybe one of his older kids. We’ll know once we get their witness list. Character witnesses tend to be more important for the defendants, since they’re trying to undo damage to their reputation in the jurors’ eyes, so I don’t think we’ll use one. These cases tend to have a fifty-fifty chance of the defendant testifying. For this one, though, I’d say it’s more than likely that Pierce will take the stand. He’s a public figure, and he knows how to spin a narrative, so I doubt he’ll pass up on the chance to talk in front of a jury.”

The information all hits like a bad high, buzzing too quickly and frantically for him to keep up with, overwhelming and nauseating. He inhales sharply and nods along with her, waiting for what she’s about to say.

“That leaves witnesses for our side. Mainly, we want people who can corroborate the accusations against Pierce, one way or another,” Maria continues. “I talked to Wanda and Scott. They were both lovely, by the way, and so helpful. Right now, I don’t think I’m going to ask either of them to testify. Since they haven’t met Pierce, I don’t think it would appear as sold proof against him in court.” Bucky wonders what they said. “However—” Maria leans forward. “I also got a call this week from a former secretary who used to work at Pierce’s headquarters. She’s twenty-nine, and she worked for him three years ago. She says”—Maria’s eyes drop for a fraction of a second as she draws a breath—“that she was sexually assaulted by him, in his office. She quit right after. She has emails of her talking to a friend about it. She’s willing to testify against him.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve mutters, disgusted. Bucky closes his eyes. Slow, heavy sickness comes over him. Alexander Pierce has hurt someone else that way. Maybe more than one other person. Someone else has faced him alone, leering and too powerful and larger than life, too cruel to fight back against, and felt that same paralyzing, vile terror constrict their lungs and heart and head. It
leaves him stricken with terrible compassion.

Maria gives Bucky a small, encouraging smile. “She actually told me to thank you, for bringing charges against him. Her words. She said that she wishes it hadn’t taken someone so long, and she didn’t feel like she could ever say anything until she learned that she wasn’t the only person he hurt. And she’s so sorry you went through it.”

Bucky tries to take that in, but it feels impossible, too much—like flickering images, gone too fast for him to get a glimpse. The words skim across the surface of his consciousness but don’t break it, hauled back by the crippling, screaming reality of everything he believes. He can’t take in, after all of this, that someone else could see what he was doing as something worth thanking. This woman, who had gone into a real, legal job and come out with this horrible secret, shouldn’t be thanking him.

(There it is again, the self-blame. No matter how much he tries to fight it, it’s still entangled with everything in his head and his life, so much that extracting it still feels, at times, impossible.)

“What’s her name?” Bucky says softly. It’s all he can think to say. Steve’s hand has gone still, and it’s just holding Bucky’s, patient and waiting.

“Ava,” Maria answers.

Bucky nods vaguely. This woman is somewhere out there in the world right now, her entire life altered by what Pierce did, existing and dealing with it every day. He hopes so badly she’s okay now. The thought feels almost selfish; if she got through it, I can too.

“Wow,” he finally says, throat dry, “that’s really. Um.” It’s really a lot of things, none of which he can form the words for.

“I can give her a message, if you want. You’ll meet her at the trial, I’m sure, but if you want me to say anything, I’m happy to.”

“Would you just, um… Would you tell her I’m so sorry, too? And thank her.”

“Of course,” Maria answers. Bucky steals a look at Steve; he’s watching him with wide, bright, sorrowful eyes, his expression aching. “Bucky,” Maria says after a pause, voice lilting with a tentative question, “how would you feel about testifying?”

It’s not a shock. It’s not even a surprise, but the question still sends sparks of alarm going off in his chest, wincing against the idea. He takes a breath that grates against his throat. “Yeah,” Bucky says weakly, “I mean, it’s already gone this far, right?”

Maria nods and grimaces sympathetically. “I wanna be really transparent with you about what to expect. It’s gonna be straining, if you do it. I’ll ask you questions, obviously, for your side of the story, but Zola’s gonna get to cross examine you and it’s not—the cross examination is never easy. Their entire goal is to discredit you in the jurors’ eyes, which means that they can be pretty brutal. Obviously, we’d do a lot of preparation beforehand. The questions are usually pretty easy to predict, and you’ll have answers prepared, but it can be very overwhelming.”

The questions are predictable enough to taste—how are we supposed to believe you didn’t consent and then change your mind after to decide it was assault, Mr. Barnes? With the number of people you were servicing in a day, how are you sure your allegations against the defendant aren’t misplaced?—but the thought of them still sends a freezing rush of terror through him. Bucky considers this blankly, dull dread coursing through him, but the answer remains the same.
If he doesn’t do this, Pierce will win. Something in his core knows that beyond any doubt.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, breath hitching, “yeah, I’ll do it.”

“Thank you,” Maria says sincerely. “That’s great, Bucky. We can start preparing for it in the next few weeks; we’re gonna want about a month before the trial to get it air-tight. You’ll be great.”

“Okay,” Bucky replies shakily. “Okay, sounds good.” Steve’s shifts his hand to Bucky’s back, the touch light. Bucky shifts his weight closer to Steve.

“As for the other next steps,” Maria starts, and sifts once again through the binder, “We should get the witness and evidence list from Zola in about three weeks, which will give us time to prepare, and there’s some final bits we’re following up for our evidence, but we’re in good shape right now.” She looks up and half smiles. “I know this is so hard. Keep taking care of yourselves, don’t watch the interviews he does, give yourselves space to relax and take a break from everything.”

When she’s gone and Bucky can let out a breath that quivers through all of him, unwinding his whole body, all he feels is daunted and terrified.

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Alexander Pierce drops his smug little tidbit about Bucky a couple of days after that. Steve knows, as soon as he sees it, that they need to prepare for this. The dip in attention on them will begin to pick up the closer it gets, thick and foreboding like the air before a rainstorm, and Pierce is going to keep his iron-tight grip on the story’s reins as long as he can.

So he reveals it in another interview with fucking Fox, of course, and Steve and Bucky don’t even learn about it until after it’s already out there. The texts start to come through while they’re eating dinner so they don’t even see it until after, when Steve checks his phone and, to his alarm, finds increasingly irate messages from everyone he knows.

Sam
6:03 - you guys okay?
6:04 - still not gonna poison him, right?
6:06 - if you need to blow off steam or anything, let me know and i’ll be over there with a couple of beers and ice cream for you guys. I love you

Tony
6:18 - i’m not a lawyer but you should sue him for this too. That’s fucking absurd
6:18 - honestly bucky probably COULD for defamation of character or something
6:18 - so sorry you guys are dealing with this. pep is pacing around monologuing about how fucked up it is and i agree with her

Scott
6:25 - Hey steve its scott i hope this is your number, i’m not hearing from bucky so im not sure if you saw yet but if you did, have him shoot me a text when he feels like it. Hang in there and im here

Clint
6:37 - Hey, Steve, let me know if you want me to release any statement or anything. We should probably say something in the next few days but no rush, you guys hang in there.

Wanda

6:53 - hi steve bucky isnt answering me but are you guys alright? Thats so upsetting god tell me if theres anything i can do

Nat

7:02 - i’m going to kill that son of a bitch i swear to god. me and peggy are raging. You bucky and sam should join too. what an evil piece of shit

7:14 - ok fuck based on the fact that neither you or bucky are answering me im guessing either you don’t know yet or you don’t wanna talk about it which is fine. just know me and peggy love you guys and are here for any ranting/murdering that needs to happen. if this is all news to you give me a call.

Sam

7:22 - seriously you guys okay????

Steve looks up, panic setting in. Across the room, Bucky’s staring down, flicking through messages, gazing down horrified confusion.

Finally, he looks over at Steve. His eyes are huge and there’s a sharp, terrified glint to them. “Do you know what…” he asks, voice caught horribly.

Steve shakes his head, bewildered.

The laptop is on the counter, and Bucky gets to it first. Steve is right behind him, nearly tripping over himself to make it there. Bucky types alexander pierce into google and practically slams on the search button, hands trembling. Steve reaches around him to lock their fingers together, and Bucky’s skin is so cold.

The first headline. **Accuser in Alexander Pierce case worked as a prostitute when alleged attacks happened, according to Pierce and lawyer.**

Steve feels sick. Rage has seized ahold of his insides and twisted them up like a tin can, and he feels so fucking sick. How dare they, he thinks wildly, how dare they use that against him. How dare people publish it like that.

Bucky’s breath has become panicked. Steve can feel the too-fast rise and fall of his stomach underneath where their hands are clasped, and he wants to find the right thing to say but he’s floored, just fucking appalled at how this could happen.

Bucky clicks the link, and that sets Steve right back into motion.

He begins, frantically, “Bucky, don’t, baby, please don’t, it’s not gonna be worth it—”

“We should—we should—we should see what he said.” Bucky is trembling hard enough that Steve feels it in all the places they’re touching. His voice is stilted and small, petrified in a way that makes him seem shrunken. Steve doesn’t have it in him to argue, and in some awful way, he knows that Bucky’s right. If they don’t watch now, the miserable not-knowing will burn away at them until they do.
Steve holds on to him like the fucking wind will tear him away if he doesn’t. Bucky presses back into Steve, subdued.

Pierce is sitting on that couch, talking to the same sallow reporter the last time they’d watched him. The lighting is different, dimmed in a way that makes the shadows stretch dramatically. It’s orange, too-sharp campfire lighting, lighting children create with flashlights when they’re telling ghost stories. Pierce has an arm thrown over the back of the couch, glass of water in hand, or maybe not. It looks like water, anyways.

“We haven’t caught up in a couple of weeks,” the reporter is saying, “how are you doing?”

Pierce smiles and makes sure it looks forced. “I’m alright,” he says, with the air of an exhausted parent keeping up appearances for their kid. “I’ve been a bit stressed, as you know.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” the reporter says sorrowfully, like watchers can’t even begin to imagine it. “You seem to be handling it well.” Pierce smiles. Oh, do I?

“I heard you have some information that you wanted to let people in on,” the guy continues, leaning in pointedly.

Pierce sips his drink and smirks. “I do. While my lawyer has been gathering evidence, it’s come to our attention that James Barnes used to be a hooker.”

A dramatic pause. “My god,” the reporter says. Steve sets his jaw against urge to punch this guy’s teeth in. “Well, that’s obviously shocking—”

“Yes, Greg, it sure is. We’ve got it on good authority that while he was… working” —Pierce stewed on the word to make his distaste obvious— “he used similar tactics for money… that is, threatening to report assault in order to get paid more.”

He says something else, but Steve can’t hear it because a ringing in his ears has swelled to an apex and it’s just nothingness, it’s rage and nothingness that stretches for miles around him as he tries to comprehend how someone could do this.

Bucky leans forward, and Steve realizes he’s crying, helpless, stifled sobs. And god, anything would have been better than that reaction. He’s trying to suppress it, tensing his shoulders against shudders, and all Steve can think is that Bucky should never look so small and so shattered.

Maria has already come back with a statement. *Mr. Pierce’s reports on his accuser’s actions are irrelevant to the case and an attack of character. His explanations are an unfortunate and insensitive attempt to further perpetuate myths about sexual abuse and contribute to the idea that there is a “right way” to be a victim. He is exploiting someone’s trauma for his own gain, and for a man who has spent so long expressing his concern over how ‘false allegations’ affect victims, he should exercise respect and understand that career does not determine whether or not someone is a victim. His statements do not accurately reflect the situation.*

There’s nothing to be said. Steve stands in the kitchen with Bucky for ages and holds him while he sobs himself breathless, and whispers to him the same things he always says, but it feels like something treacherous and massive is coming. Steve wants to shield Bucky, to wrap himself around him and hold on for dear life, but this feels bigger than them and unstoppable, the powerlessness colossal, and he’s scared.

Chapter End Notes
idk im sorry poor bucky suffers so much

love all of you BIG shoutout to your comments i wrote this one fast bc i kept reading them for motivation (also the people who start reading this fic and leave an individual comment on any chapter? actual angels among us i see u and i love u)

anyway hmu on tumblr @cafelesbian for any fic or non fic related conversations honestly shoot me a message i love talking to u guys sm

thanks cia as always i love u !

see u in 1-2ish weeks ! maybe more like 1 bc i have some of the next chapter done but no promises
The ground beneath Bucky’s feet has become sifting, writhing sand, throwing him to his knees every time he thinks he as a handle on standing.

He feels violently exposed, carved out into pieces and displayed for the world in the way Alexander Pierce wanted him to be seen. You’re mine, Pierce had growled to him, more times than he could count. I control you, got it?

That’s still true. That will never stop being true.

Everything he’s been told—by Steve, by Jennifer, by all of his friends—flickers, swallowed whole by the disapproving headlines, the smugness in Alexander’s voice when he’d said it. He feels the way he’d felt every time he finished sucking off some stranger or left some guy’s house through the backdoor because his wife was getting home—repulsive, worthless, and subhuman for what he was doing. Everyone who had tricked themselves into not seeing him that way seems delusional suddenly.

He feels in and out of his body as he stands there with Steve, listening to what they’re saying about him. Opportunistic…evidence that he’s falsely accused before… Willing to do anything… It feels like an eternity, but it’s maybe only a minute before Steve smacks the computer shut hard enough that it vibrates.

Bucky has started to cry. There’s a tightness in his chest that won’t unknot itself no matter how frantically he breathes.

He becomes vaguely aware that Steve is still holding him, arms around him from behind, and that he’s shivering. He tries to take a breath again, but his teeth chatter through it. Everything feels sickly and wrong, the universe thrown just enough off balance for everything to slow down too much.

He opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, but he has no idea what, so he turns around to look at Steve and everything is swaying. Steve starts to say something but it doesn’t register. He feels so lightheaded that his knees start to buckle, and Steve catches him before that can happen, letting Bucky slump against him, holding on tight.

Bucky is sobbing, almost hysterical with panic, and he can’t stop. “I didn’t,” he gasps, “I didn’t lie, I never—”
“I know,” Steve whispers, “I know, I know, baby, I promise. You didn’t.”

Bucky buries his face in his hands, then rakes them through his hair. He feels lightheaded with disgust, wants to scrub his skin raw to get the feeling of strangers’ hands off of him, but he’s too exhausted to move so he kneels, broken and curled in on himself, shaking and feeling overwhelmingly undeserving of the gentleness Steve is touching him with.

“What are you thinking, right now?” Steve says, so gently. This comes after several minutes of quiet, rippled over by Bucky’s breathless sobs, once he has finally forced himself to calm down.

Bucky stares down at his hands.

“I feel so fucking disgusting,” he whispers, and the anger in his voice surprises him. “Just fucking used.” Every time he’s ever been called a slut or a whore or an eager little bitch you want it I know you do rushes up on him, feeling like frost in his throat, vicious self-blame that he hasn’t felt in ages slamming him, Alexander’s words twisting into some kind of horrible truth.

*Everyone is going to think you wanted it, Bucky’s brain snarls, everyone sees you like he does now.*

The quieter, rational, compassionate part of his brain says, feebly, *He was your abuser. Of course he wants to paint you that way. That doesn’t mean it’s true.*

It’s too much. It’s more than he can even begin to handle right now.

“Fuck. God, Bucky, he’s such a lying piece of shit. None of that is true, baby.” Steve’s voice shakes.

“I wanna—um—” Bucky is almost gasping; he thinks he’s worn his lungs out. “I wanna take a shower.”

Steve swallows. “I don’t want you to be alone, when you’re feeling like this,” he says softly.

Something hard inside of Bucky crumbles into relief, underneath all of the dizzying panic. He’d heard Alexander’s voice and his body had prepared itself for pain, as if Steve was gonna berate him or hit him or he anything but loving. He shudders, still curled up in Steve’s arms.

“Would you take a bath with me?” He winces, some part of him expecting a no.

“Always,” Steve says, and kisses his forehead, now pale and damp.

Steve helps him up and starts the water and cradles him while they wait, because he’s a literal goddamn miracle and he knows exactly how Bucky needs to be taken care of, and Bucky leans against him, flooded with love and gratitude. When the bath is almost full, Steve looks at him and holds his face with one hand, waist with the other.

“You should never feel disgusting, Buck,” he whispers, “you’re incredible. Every time I look at you I can’t believe how brave and good and beautiful you are.”

Bucky closes his eyes and rests his head against Steve’s chest. The steam has started to rise off the tub, filling his lungs and helping them come unstuck. By the time they’re settled in, just tees and boxers, and Steve works his fingers lightly through Bucky’s hair and over his back, he feels almost calm.

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Jennifer makes time for him to come in the next day when she hears. Bucky tells her the same thing he’d told Steve—that hearing it from his mouth, thinking of the way everyone else would view it, made him feel vile and untouchable. Jennifer listens intently and sympathetically, then gives him a look of both understanding and skepticism.

“I know. I want you to remember what we’ve talked about, what Steve and all of the people in your life have told you, and what I know is true—you’re so loved, and you’re so deserving of care, and anyone who suggests otherwise is trying to manipulate you. Alexander is psychologically manipulating you into thinking less of yourself—it’s what he’s done for months, because he’s awful and he’s an experienced abuser.” Bucky flinches.

Jennifer goes on “Just because now he’s doing it publicly, that doesn’t make any of it true in the slightest. He wants you to think lower of yourself because if you do, he thinks it makes you easier to control, and right now, you pushing back against him is probably terrifying.” Jennifer pauses. “I’m so sorry this man is still trying to have power over you. It’s sick. But he’s just a cruel, scared criminal who’s trying to keep power by being as destructive as he can.”

It helps to keep in mind. Of course she’s right, and so is Steve, and their friends, all of whom had flooded him with messages of love and offers to kill Pierce as soon as the news broke. But the thought of anyone in the world viewing him through Pierce’s eyes, taking the thing that he’d started to do because he was seventeen and desperate and alone, that he had hated having to do with everything in him, and twisting it into the thing that defined him made him feel violated, exposed in the same horrifying way that it had felt like to get undressed for a stranger.

But the panic lessens as he reminds himself of what Jennifer is saying and what he knows to be true (maybe, he notes, therapy is helping him take things in stride). It’s not nothing. It accumulates with the other things that wake him up in the middle of the night, firing off like a fucking machine gun, kind of dulling into the background of the endless list of horrible things that Alexander had done to him, especially for the first few days afterward, but it doesn’t drown him like he’d half-expected.

But truthfully, Bucky barely has time to process it because with a few weeks to trial, preparation has amped up to its apex. Maria has her paralegals tying up a couple of loose ends, finalizing the evidence list and what not, and Bucky sees her more in about a week than he has for the whole case, because she’s started grilling him on the cross-examination.

The questions she’s going to ask are straightforward enough: Tell us when you met Alexander Pierce. What do you remember about the first time you were attacked by him, and how many times did this occur? Can you describe what he did to you, on any of these given dates? They hurt, though. Answering each one feels like a punch to his stomach, knocking the air out of him, leaving him stiff with horror.

“If you need a moment, when it really happens, to take a breath or have some water or anything, that’s okay,” Maria has told him. “I’ll wait, the judge won’t mind, the jury won’t mind. Same thing if you cry. If you’re overwhelmed, it’s totally fine, and I’ll call a recess so you can have a minute to calm down. What you’re doing is hard, and it’s so brave.”

The questions she’s predicted for the cross-examination are a hundred thousand times worse. Before the first time she reads them to him, Maria prefices it with this: “So, what Zola is going to say is going to be hard to hear. Their entire defense is built on you being unreliable as a witness, so that’s what they’re going to say. It’s gonna be hard to keep calm. He can’t personally attack you, or say anything too explicitly leading, so if he does, I’ll object. But there’s a lot he can say that’s going to be hard.”
And her predictions are bad. Maria reads them off with a wince in her voice: *What was your occupation when the alleged crimes happened? And how if you first met Alexander Pierce as a client, how are we supposed to be absolutely sure that the attack in question wasn’t just consensual, purchased sex? If you were having intercourse with multiple people a day, how can you be positive that the person who attacked you was the defendant? Awful, in a completely different way, are the questions targeted at Steve. What’s your relationship to Steve Rogers? Are you aware that Steve Rogers attacked Mr. Pierce at a party on December eighteenth of last year? Did you have anything to do with that attack?*

“It’ll probably be something along those lines,” Maria says apologetically, “I doubt they’ll actually say it, because it wouldn’t pass in court, but they’ll want to suggest that maybe, this is a revenge move on your part; some fight between Steve and him. I’ll object on relevance, just in case Coulson overrules.”

Bucky nods, dread drilling a headache in.

It gets easier after a few times. He gets them without a panic attack or sobbing, which is a success in his mind, but every practice examination leaves him feeling drained and awful for the rest of the day, keeping him up at night, too worried to sleep.

“You doing okay?” Steve asks Bucky one of those nights, kissing his temple.


“It’s gonna be okay,” Steve reminds him quietly.

And the universe takes Bucky’s statement as a challenge.

Maria comes over again the next day, saying she has a few new things to go over. The trial is in three weeks now—Coulson approves their evidence (which sends a wave of illness over Bucky every time he thinks about it), and their witness list has been mostly finalized: Bucky, Ava, a neighbor of Pierce’s who came forward a few days prior and said she could testify to having seen Bucky leaving and coming in most Wednesdays (Bucky, when he sees a picture, realizes he’d been so far gone he doesn’t ever remember seeing her, the black hole around him having swallowed up everything else), Carol.

For the testimony practice, Steve has typically hovered around, either sat there with Bucky for emotional support or been somewhere else close, his studio or wherever else. Bucky’s finally stopped reminding him he doesn’t need to be there, Steve’s constant reminders that he’s there because he wants to be finally sinking in, but when he asks him to stay for whatever she has to talk to them about, he still feels overly needy.

Of course, Steve says yes without a second thought, and so when the time does come he’s there on the couch with Bucky again, sitting close and tolerating Bucky bouncing his leg anxiously while Maris goes through her bag.

“So their witness list is here.” Maria says, and frowns. “A lot of it is what we expected—he’s got his wife in there as a character witness, not sure how Zola managed that one, since word on the street is they aren’t talking, but I guess she’s still in it for the money—and Pierce is gonna testify, and they’ve got some letters in evidence from people talking about what a wonderful guy he is. There’s also some kind of trauma specialist, who, based on how these cases usually go, is probably going to talk about how memories of victims can change over time—she’ll say that you could be misremembering Pierce as the perpetrator when it was someone else, it’s pretty easy to shut those
down in the cross-examination.” She rolls her eyes. “But there’s one name I didn’t recognize before…” She scans the list, trailing her finger down it. “You don’t know a Brock Rumlow, do you?”

Bucky feels as though he’s been thrust into freezing water. His lungs grapple for air but it’s just cold everywhere and he can’t make them contract, the pressure of those words knocking him off balance and sending him reeling the moment he finally thought he’d hit the ground. “What?” he hears himself say faintly.

“What?” Steve repeats, with horrified disbelief. Then, “oh, god.”

Bucky presses his face into his hands. There’s a trembling inside him that has started and won’t stop, rocking him, sending a painful ringing to his head. Maria says something that’s white noise.

“No,” Bucky realizes he’s saying, over and over, “no, no, no.”

“Can you, um—could you give us—” The words strain on Steve’s tongue, but evidently, Maria gets it because there’s a quick rustle of papers and then the swish of the balcony door.

Bucky can’t lift his head.

His name on the fucking witness list. Rumlow and Pierce, having met, having talked, figured out some attack.

And he was Pierce’s source for the newscast, he had to have been. And he’s going to get up there and say he knew Bucky, saw how he was with the guys who were paying him, or that he’d been falsely accused by him and that the rumors about what a life-ruining slut he was were true. All of the blood has rushed from Bucky’s head straight into the floor, and he feels flat and ruined as crumpled up paper, some overused, broken thing, not worth even touching. He wants to scream, but he can’t find the breath for it.

“Bucky,” Steve says breathlessly. He sounds like there’s a spear right through his soul. He’s moved, somehow, from the couch to the ground and he’s kneeling in front of Bucky. “Breathe, baby. You can do this. Just take a deep breath, okay, and we’re gonna get through this. I’m right here, alright?” Steve’s hands linger gently over Bucky’s wrist, and he pulls with gentle pressure to get him to lower his hands. He does, after a moment, but can’t bring his gaze up because seeing the devastation on Steve’s face will make it real. He takes a breath, finally, because he has to, and the air tastes toxic. Steve envelopes both of Bucky’s hands in his.

“No,” he says again, his voice breaking, and Steve obviously thinks he’s talking about the touch, because he retracts his hands. “No, Steve, this can’t be real”—his hands feel lifeless without Steve, so he reaches for him again. Bucky has started weeping without noticing it, pleading with someone to make this go away—“he can’t be there, this can’t be happening—”

“I know,” Steve whispers, a flinch in his voice, “I know, baby. Whatever—whatever this means, we’re gonna get through it together, I promise.”

“I can’t fight them both,” Bucky whimpers. He’s started shaking his head, a miserable, helpless movement, and all Steve can do is grip his hands because he’s worried about touching him anywhere else, and there’s absolutely nothing to say because these people are so unworldly evil.

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispers, his voice fracturing, “god, Buck, I’m so, so sorry.” Hollowly, Bucky reaches his arm around Steve to steady himself, and Steve moves back up beside him and Bucky falls into his arms.
And for a while, Bucky just sobs, the air swallowing the sound up, while Steve holds on to him, rocking back and forth a little, until Bucky makes himself say, “How—how did he…”

“I don’t know,” Steve says. There’s a brokenness in his voice that Bucky’s rarely heard there. “I have no fucking idea.”

“I don’t get it,” Bucky whispers. His voice has gone oddly blank, hollowed out into something plastic and unrecognizable and shaky.

“We don’t—we don’t know what it means yet,” Steve replies weakly. Bucky doesn’t answer. He can’t, not when his thoughts have been reduced to dissipating fog and haywire electric currents, so he presses against Steve and tries to breathe and he can’t even tell if he’s still crying or not.

“Fuck,” Bucky says after a few minutes, sitting up in panic, “Maria—”

“She’s fine, she’s outside on the phone.” Steve presses a careful kiss to his shoulder. “She doesn’t mind waiting, I promise.” The ugly knowledge, though, that she’s going to need to know, sets the air between them on edge, unspoken and heavy.

“Can you explain?” Bucky finally asks timidly. He feels pathetic for it but if he has to relive all of what Rumlow did to him right now, it will kill him.

“Yeah,” Steve says, swallowing, “of course, baby.”

Bucky leans back into him, allowing himself the moment to bury his face in Steve’s shoulder. He drags in a few brittle gasps of air, Steve holding him patiently while he does, then sits up, rubs his eyes, and gives Steve a nod. When Steve gets up to pull her back inside, Bucky feels the lost comfort when he isn’t close anymore.

Bucky is prepared for irritation, but when Maria comes back in the only thing he can sense is concern. “Are you alright?” she says, worried. Bucky gives what he hopes is a nod and a convincing look.

Steve explains it, gentle and sensitive as can be, rubbing his hand in figure eights over Bucky’s back the whole time. “That guy, Rumlow… Bucky and him have met. Um… he was a cop, and a couple of months back, he—he hurt him.” Steve’s voice grows very thick. “Or, rather, um… assaulted. A couple of times.” Steve exhales heavily; Bucky is staring down through tears, but he can feel Steve’s eyes on him, and he nods miserably in confirmation.

Maria takes a quiet breath. Her face is stricken and serious. “I’m so sorry,” she says quietly, “I had no idea.” Her eyes flash with something hard, but she blinks and gives a quick shake of her head and it’s gone.

Bucky gulps and looks up. “No, it—it’s totally fine, it’s not your fault or anything. You didn’t know,” he says quickly, voice wrecked, reaching up to rub his eyes.

“That’s just—that’s absolutely awful.” She swallows and pushes her hair back.

Bucky can tell she’s trying to figure out how to phrase the next question, so he sits up and says, wearily, “I know you, um, have to ask me some stuff about it.” The exhaustion in his voice surprises him. Steve lets his hand linger on Bucky’s shoulder for a moment, squeezing lightly.

Maria grimaces. “Eventually, yes, just to get a sense of what he could be saying. If you’re not up to it, we don’t have to do it now—”
“It’s okay,” Bucky mutters, a tremor going through his body. “Let’s just—we should get it over with.”

Maria nods sympathetically. “I don’t want to have to make you relive this anymore than you already have, Bucky, so if you want to stop, let me know.”

“Thanks,” Bucky says quietly, and tries for something resembling a smile. “I’m, um, I’m okay.”

“Okay.” Maria opens her laptop. “If you don’t mind, can you tell me when you met him?” Bucky’s face must flash with pain, because she adds kindly, “Like I said—”

“No, it’s okay.” Bucky closes his eyes and leans into Steve. “Um.” His voice already quivers. “Yeah. So, um. Back when, um, I was doing that for money, um—Pierce—Pierce wasn’t the only one who…who, um, didn’t care about consent. There—there—there were other guys, too, and he—Rumlow”—Bucky squeezes down on Steve’s hand—“was one of them too. He, um, he was a cop, and”—a small, hard breath—“he used that—his job—as a way to um…get people to…give him things. He’s in prison now. He attacked his pregnant wife.” Bucky catches the way he stops using first person—Jennifer, recently, had mentioned that it was a part of dissociation, sometimes being unable to talk about things in a way that acknowledged they’d happened to him—but he can’t make himself explain to Maria Hill the vileness Rumlow had put him through. She could only hear so much before she stopped trusting his sanity.

Bucky takes a breath. His insides feel like tin, battered and rusted and cutting sharply into him.

Bucky closes his eyes. “I don’t remember where I first met him,” he says, voice snagging in his throat, “maybe on the street, somewhere. Um… I think I first, um, gave him oral.” He bites down hard on his cheek, fucking hating what it feels like to have people know that. Even now, his body automatically expects Steve to jerk away. He doesn’t, of course. “I, um, did that a couple times. Then I went back to his place one day, and he, um—” Bucky pauses and leans forward, almost so his head is between his knees. Tears choke him again, violent and awful, sick at the memory, sick at how fucking weak he is. Steve leans close to him, rubbing his back slowly with one hand, the other pushing his hair back. If Maria is bothered, she doesn’t show it.

It feels like an eternity later, but he gets enough control over the tears and breathing to sit up straight again. He leans into Steve, face half-buried in his shoulder, feeling too slashed open to care how it looks. Steve puts an arm around him, tucking him in closer, as perfect and patient as he always is. “I’m sorry,” Bucky mumbles, still leaning against Steve. He feels Steve exhale shakily, then run a hand gently through his hair.

“Bucky, you don’t need to be sorry,” Maria says. “This is absolutely awful to talk about, I know. Take your time.”

He swallows again. “I’m good now,” Bucky says, half to himself. “Sorry. Um. Okay.”

He tells her what happened; Brock hurt him at his house. He doesn’t mention all the fucking things he’d had hidden away neatly, belts and prods and ropes and things Bucky had begged him not to do to him but he’d done anyway. He tells her that three times after that, Rumlow cornered him on the street where he’d typically waited and threatened to rape him and arrest him if Bucky didn’t just let him fuck him in his car. Maria listens, her face somber, interjecting a few times to ask if he remembers dates or exact locations, which he remembers maybe half of.

“Did you know he and Pierce knew each other?”

Bucky shakes his head. “They didn’t,” he whispers shakily.
“Are you sure?” Maria presses patiently.

“I mean… It’s obviously possible, I guess.” Bucky shivers suddenly. “But, um, I never had any idea that they did.” She nods and types that.

“So what it sounds like is… He saw news about the case, recognized you, and seen it as an opportunity to strike a deal for his own sentence,” Maria says with a grimace. “I’m gonna look into him and see what we can do. Bucky, I’m so sorry for this.” She genuinely sounds it, too. Her jaw sets, her face going hard.

All Bucky feels is that he’s falling, out of breath and out of control, the ground being yanked out from under him when he thinks it can’t go on.

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Maria doesn’t drive back to her office. Instead, she gets in her car and dials Zola’s assistant.

“Office of Arnim Zola,” a woman’s voice answers.

“Hi,” Maria says, “is he there?”

“Who’s speaking?” The woman asks.

“Maria Hill,” Maria answers. “If he’s there, tell him I need to speak to him.”

“Please hold.” So Maria waits, annoyed. “I’m putting you through to him,” the woman says a moment later.

“Thanks,” Maria says shortly.

A click, then some more ringing.

“Maria.” Zola sounds surprised. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

She rolls her eyes. “Hello, Arnim.” She thinks about asking how he is, but decides she doesn’t feel like hearing it. “Do you have a minute to meet today? There’s something I need to discuss.”

“Really?” he says, and she can tell he’s going to drag it out.

“Really,” she says tightly, “I think we’re professional enough to talk first, instead of filing a motion for Coulson to handle it.”

That gets his attention. “I’d like to think that, too,” he says, condescending.

Maria glares at her phone. “So? You’ll meet me somewhere?”

He pretends to think it over. “I think I have time.”

“Great,” Maria says, trying to withhold the sarcasm, “how about the Irving Roasters on seventy second in half an hour?”

“I’ll try to be there. Looking forward to it.”

“Me, too,” she replies sweetly. “See you then.”

She waits a moment, then calls her paralegal and tells him to find out everything he can about the
Brock Rumlow serving time for domestic violence. The whole thing leaves a bad taste in her mouth; this entire case has been tugging at her a little harder than usual.

She’s not sure what about it. Probably, it’s the combination of her resentment towards the Alexander Pierces of the world: rich, privileged assholes who grew up believing they were entitled to anything and everything and everyone around them was a pawn for what they needed and the particular awfulness of the things he’d done. The public spotlight on the case, bright white and glaring, accentuated everytime Pierce and Zola decided it was time for another cheap TV interview to damage the integrity of the case a little more.

She feels for Bucky. She always feels for the victims of whoever she’s trying to get put away, but even more than usual, she feels for him; he’s so young to have been kicked as brutally and by as many people as he has. Still is—everytime Pierce goes on TV and calls him a liar and manipulator, that must be another slap in the face. This new Brock Rumlow angle… She can’t even imagine. She’s seen witnesses fall apart before, everything from hysterical sobbing to hyperventilating to screaming in rage, but the shocked, total terror, the mask of pain she’d seen on Bucky today went beyond what she was used to.

She feels for Steve, too. It’s easy to forget that the two of them are practically kids, barely into their twenties; when she’d been on the balcony today, making a few calls and wondering what the fuck Brock Rumlow had done to get that kind of reaction, she had glanced inside once and seen Steve, kneeling in front of him, clasping Bucky’s hands, gazing up at him with so much grief and tenderness and love, and felt twinge of pain for them. There was more love between them then she saw in most adults, but more hurt, too.

She shakes herself out of it and starts the car.

Because he’s an insufferable sleazebag, Zola shows up an hour later. Maria is sitting with an empty cappuccino and a draft of her opening statement on her laptop, which is becoming more complicated every day with the shit Alexander keeps pulling, and she closes it as soon as she spots him.

“So sorry I’m late,” he says, but he really means, ‘I knew you would wait.’

She smiles tightly. “You ordering anything?” she asks. He pretends to consider this, then makes her wait ten more minutes while he orders a coffee, tells the barista he said a latte, and asks for a refund and the new drink, so Maria makes a point of standing up and putting a ten in the tip jar for the poor teenager fighting tears at the way he’s talking to her.

They’re off to a good start.

“So,” he says, fucking finally, “what did you want to talk about?”

She refuses to beat around the bush and baby him anymore.

“Take Rumlow off the witness list,” Maria says calmly.

Zola raises his eyebrows, then gives her a half offended, half-incredulous look that says, This is what you made me come over here for? “I don’t think that’s gonna happen.” Zola sips his fucking free latte that he took out of the paycheck of a minimum wage-earning barista, and Maria grits her teeth. “Is that all?”

Maria holds his gaze. “He gives your case nothing. He’s got no verifiable evidence and he’s a serial abuser. The only thing you’re doing by having him on the stand is intimidating Barnes. I’m
only asking you so I don’t have to go through Coulson and make us all have to go back while he decides not to let Rumlow testify.”

“Why should he intimidate Barnes?” Zola says smugly. “If he’s telling the truth—”

Maria purses her lips. “Arnim, you know he’s telling the truth. I don’t think it’s any of your concern here is who’s lying. Pierce has probably straight up told you he’s guilty.” His eyes narrow, but he doesn’t cut her off. “How’d you even hear from Rumlow? Did he reach out and say he had information?” Silence. “He attacked Barnes, too.”

A smirk. “Convenient, that he’d say that. Is that gonna be the story with everyone who contradicts him?”

Maria curls her fingers into a fist under the table. She’s never gone against him before, but he has a reputation for this unbelievable jackassery and she gets it, now, the reason people she’s spoken to about him always discuss him in thick tones of disgust. “You know he isn’t lying.”

“I don’t, actually. He seems like the type.”

“I know you’re doing your job defending Pierce,” Maria snaps. “I get that. I know that you have to get up there and make everyone think that the twenty-one year old rape victim is a liar and an attention seeker. I don’t agree with it, but I get that it’s a job, and this guy is paying you. But don’t put Barnes through having to watch a second guy who attacked him get up there and make him think he was asking for it. That’s literally the least you can do for him.”

Zola leans forward. “Do for him? Maria, I don’t care about him. Like you said, it’s a job, and my job is to make sure Alexander has the best defense. If Rumlow is part of that and Barnes can’t handle seeing him for half an hour, then he can decide not to watch him testify. If you’re that worried about his feelings, you try and get Coulson to take him off the list.” He pushes his chair out and stands. “By the way, I saw Barnes is gonna testify. You really think he can handle that, if he can’t sit through some other guy who got a little handsy with him talking?”

Maria stares coldly at him, disgusted. She grits her teeth, then snaps “Speaking of handling it, Pierce is on your list too. You think he can handle it sober?”

His lips purse, but he keeps his composure. “You’ve seen his interviews. He’s perfectly capable. We’re using what we have. Is the reason you haven’t gotten Barnes to go on goddamn Rachel Maddow, or some other PC sound piece because you know he can’t keep his story straight? Or because he’ll have a nervous breakdown if he even has to think about it?”

“I’m not as into exploiting someone’s trauma as you are,” Maria snaps. “But fine. I guess I’ll see you on the twelfth.”

“I guess so.” Zola turns without another word and stalks out, and Maria glares after him before opening her laptop and starting the request to stop a witness.

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Bucky sees Jennifer the next day, which gives Steve the space to let out the rage he had pushed aside. He could text Henry—he’s met with him one or two more times and Steve likes him, even trusts him, but he doesn’t want to have a calm conversation about it. He’ll talk to him later, when rage isn’t burning him up. Right now he wants to be so angry it hurts, because the fury is still trembling like glass inside him, ready to burst. He could run ten miles, or beat up the punching bag until his hands bleed, or—and this one he has to stop himself from doing—call a journalist and
monologue to them about how Alexander Pierce and everyone associated with him is going straight to hell.

Instead, he calls the only person who will react with the appropriate amount of rage and clarity.

When Sam picks up, he doesn’t sound like he’s been interrupted, which comes as a relief. “Hey, man, what’s up?”

Steve had thought he might cry, but he’s beyond that now. He stares forward into nothing, too angry to feel anything but the steel, blunt cut of the rage into his heart.

He says, very softly, “That son of a bitch.” The words drag themselves out in a hard breath.

Sam sighs. “Shit, what happened now?”

“You, um”—Steve swallows raggedly—“remember Rumlow? The cop?”

“Yeah,” Sam says after a beat. “In jail, right?”

Steve’s throat coils shut. “He fucking… Pierce got him to… He’s gonna testify, he’s gonna say Bucky’s lying…” He’s too angry to talk or breathe or think about what he’s saying.

“What?” Sam says blankly. “Rumlow is?”

“Yeah.” Steve laughs bitterly, hysterically. “Yeah. I don’t know how. Fuck, man, these… these people are so perverse.” A drawn out breath. “The lawyer thinks he, um, saw all the shit Pierce was saying and then reached out and offered to testify about Bucky.” Finally a sob tears through his voice. “How fucked up is that?”

Sam was the right person to call. He hotly attacks Alexander and Brock for a few minutes with Steve, enraged, and reminds him that it’s all a lie, no sane person will believe these guys over Bucky, and when he hangs up Steve feels maybe five percent better. Since dread and anger still ripple through him like tidal waves, he texts Henry and makes an appointment for a few days from then, and takes some deep breaths and tries to remind himself that it will be okay.

A few blocks away, Bucky is in Jennifer’s office in tears. He’s told her what happened with Rumlow, and she had the same appalled response as everyone else; Bucky has spent the last ten minutes just crying, helplessness in his chest big enough to rock.

“What’s going through your mind, exactly, when you think about it?” Jennifer asks gently, after a while.

Bucky takes a breath and a minute to compose himself as much as he can. “I um—I’m just scared.” Tears push up against his throat again. “I’m so fucking scared to-to see him, um… I feel, like, physically sick about it. My hands are kind of numb, um, I’m nauseous, lightheaded. I keep…just thinking about him, Rumlow, specifically, just um…random bursts of remembering.”

Jennifer watches him carefully. “This is giving you extreme symptoms of reexperiencing. That’s totally normal. Having to confront this part of your past is extremely distressing, and with the shock of it, that’s more than enough to trigger heightened symptoms of PTSD that you maybe hadn’t been experiencing for a time.”

Bucky closes his eyes. Everything in him feels like it’s stalling and whirring and not working right. “It’s like, um, that, plus Pierce saying that stuff about me, um—it feels like I’m back to square one. Emotionally speaking. I feel”—a swallow—“I feel so like, worthless, and sick, and just…so
scared, even right now. And, um—fuck, like, I haven’t thought it was my fault, for a while, but that’s back these last couple of days.”

“I know,” Jennifer says empathetically, “Just because you’re feeling that way right now doesn’t mean that this is undoing the progress you’ve made. Recovery is never linear—you’re gonna have setbacks, and that doesn’t mean you have to re-learn everything you know that’s helping you to cope. This didn’t backslide you back to square one, it’s just a distressing event that, right now, is causing you to have symptoms you haven’t felt for a while. The feelings of inadequacy —’worthlessness’—and heightened fear, self-blame… Those are all symptoms that are being dragged out right now. It doesn’t mean they’re permanent. The tools and support you have to cope with them are still just as effective, and you’re still in the process of recovering.”

Bucky nods, rubbing his sleeve over his eyes.

“But Bucky, one thing that might help to remember is that Brock Rumlow is a desperate, scared man who wants to do everything he can to get out of prison. Whatever he says up there is a play to get his sentence shortened. That doesn’t mean it won’t be awful to hear, but it’s all a lie. He’s pathetic for doing this, and people will be able to see that. The self-blame you mentioned—whatever he and Pierce are saying, it’s meant to foster that. They are wrong.” There’s a rare intensity in her voice, the conviction almost contagious.

Bucky swallows. “It’s part of how they tried to control me,” he says, repeating what Jennifer had told him, needing it to exist in the world.

“Exactly. Pierce is trying to sell a lie. Everything he does for this case is built on manipulation and abuse and lies. It completely makes sense it’s distressing, but that doesn’t change the complete fiction of his story. You know the truth.” She gives him a nod, wanting him to say it.

Bucky pulls in a quivering breath. He says, thickly, “I was a victim. Pierce and Rumlow and-and all the other guys like them abused me. Whatever, um—whatever they said to um…make me think it’s my fault, that’s part of the abuse.” Bucky tries to let the words wash over him.

***

When Bucky gets home, Steve has just returned from a run, and he’s kind of pacing around the kitchen. Bucky kisses him on the cheek and gives him a half-hearted smile.

“Wanna get out of New York?” Steve says suddenly, before he says anything else. Bucky cocks his head. “We could drive out to Montauk and get a hotel for the weekend.”

Looking at Bucky, Steve realizes he hadn’t picked up on what a physical toll it’s all taken on him. He looks too small and too young, shrunken in the tee he’s wearing, his normal spark dulled over by a sheet of exhaustion and pain. Steve wants, more than anything, to piece him back together.

But Bucky shrugs and smiles anyway, leaning against the wall. “For real?”

“You got plans?” Steve quips back.

“Gotta cancel on my side piece, I guess,” Bucky deadpans.

Steve snorts. “Who’s that?”

Bucky thinks for a minute. “Tony.” Steve laughs and flips him off, which gets a tired—but genuine —smile from Bucky. “Yeah, let’s do it.”
“Really?” Steve replies, surprised. Bucky rolls his eyes, amused.

“You suggested it.” He crosses the room to Steve and hugs him, holding on a little too long for it to be okay. When he pulls away, though, he smiles. “Let’s go.”

So that’s how they find themselves en route to the peak of Long Island, driving through rain. It’s too cold to swim and too early in the season for most of the shops to even be open, which renders it a quiet little beach town, but Steve doesn’t realize until they’re far enough on the road how suffocating Manhattan is becoming. He can tell Bucky feels it, too. They’ve got the windows rolled down a bit and Bucky leans his head back and shuts his eyes with a small, quiet exhale of breath, like he’s letting himself relax for the first time in weeks. He smiles at Steve, the softest smile in the world, and then starts flicking through radio stations.

“Leave this,” Steve says after a bit. “I like this song.”

Bucky glances over at him. “Me, too.”

Steve takes his eyes off the road to grin at him. Lowering his voice, and in a rasp, Steve sings along, in his best Springsteen impression, “Oh-oh-ohhhhh, I’m on fire.”


Sometimes it’s like someone took a knife, baby, edgy and dull and cut a six-inch valley through the middle of my skull.

“We just gonna wing it with a hotel?” Bucky asks after a moment.

“There’s that one we used to drive past, the nice one? With the pillars out front?” Steve grins. “We can afford it now.”

“Beachside manor it is,” Bucky says with a smirk. Steve laughs, amazed he remembers.

“When, uh, was the last time you’ve been to Montauk?” Bucky asks. It’s casual, but Steve hears the slightly nervous have you been there without me? that lilts under the words.

“Ages,” Steve answers easily, “not since me and you went after graduation.” Bucky looks at him and smiles warmly.

By the time they get in, it’s stopped raining. They check into their ridiculously lavish hotel and then grab some food and spend the rest of the afternoon on the beach, jeans rolled up past their ankles, laughing and tossing a frisbee and feeling kind of like the world isn’t crumbling back in the city.

They stay past dark. Eventually, they just sit and watch waves crescendo and crash, hypnotic. They’re the only ones left, and Bucky curls practically into Steve’s lap, wrapped in his sweatshirt, head on his shoulder, half-asleep.

Steve loves him so much. He feels it as easily as he feels the swell of the sea around them and the salt in the air.

“Hey,” Steve says quietly. Bucky shifts his weight and hums to let Steve know he’s listening.

“When this is all over, let’s go somewhere.”

“Does this look like Manhattan to you?” Bucky murmurs into Steve’s shirt. Steve laughs, a rush of fondness washing over him.
“Not Montauk. Nowhere we can drive. I’m talking France or Spain or Thailand or something.”

That gets Bucky to look up with an intrigued smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Steve smooths down a couple of stray tufts of hair for him. “Your call, baby. First class, five star hotel, all of it. I’d say we’ve earned it.”

Bucky looks, for the first time in a while, so hopeful. “Really?”

“Yeah, of course.” Steve grins at him, lifting an eyebrow.

“That sounds really good,” Bucky says sleepily, “Can we go to Barcelona? See how much high school Spanish we remember.”

“Absolutely.”

Steve feels Bucky smile against his neck. For a minute, they feel complete.

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By the time the trial is three weeks away, Alexander has stopped talking to everyone but Zola, when he drags him into practicing cross-examination. So the day Zola shows up unannounced, when Alexander is half-drunk and in the rumpled clothes he slept in, Alexander is livid.

“You wanna call next time?” Alexander snaps as soon as he opens the door.

“We’ve had this scheduled for weeks.” Zola looks him over wearily. “Jesus, when was the last time you left the house?”

Alexander glares at him and he drops the question. “Fine.” He jerks his head, telling him to come in, then sits heavily on the couch, watching him carefully. “What do they have?” No use in a how are you.

Zola sits and rubs his forehead. “For witnesses, they’ve got Barnes” —Alexander laughs nastily, like that pussy can hold his own, couldn’t go three minutes without screaming or begging or crying— “they’ve got the arresting officer, Carol Danvers—”

“That dyke bitch,” Alexander snarls.

Zola ignores this. “—and someone named Ava Starr. Any idea?”

Alexander narrows his eyes. The name is familiar, undoubtedly, but he can’t place it; could be a friend of Claire’s or Martha’s, could be an employee, but he can’t see how that would connect here. “Starr her real name?” If not, if she was another hooker or stripper… It’s been a while (once he met Barnes, no one else was as satisfying), but he doubts it.

“I think so,” Zola says, and tries not to wince. He’s paid off a fair amount of affairs before for Alex, but none of them were Starr.

Suddenly, he remembers; years ago, a secretary, one who’d flirted and led him on for months while he gave her benefit after benefit and then, when he gave her the time of day, suddenly became frigid and disobliging. She quit the day after.


Zola pinches the bridge of his nose, dread beginning to creep in. “Who is she?”
“Fucking Christ,” Alexander mutters, something like panic beginning to open in his chest.

“Who is she?” Zola repeats harshly. Alexander snaps his head up.

“Nobody. An old secretary. It was years ago.” And it was nothing. Alexander reaches for his bottle, which is empty, so he stands to get another. His fingers curl in tightly.

“Alexander,” Zola snaps, “I told you to tell me, if there was anything that would come out like this —”

“And how the fuck was I supposed to know it would come out? Wanna hear about every person I pissed off in the last twenty years? Jesus Christ, it was nothing—”

“Alex, sit down.” He glowers, but he sits. “Tell me exactly who Ava Starr is, and what she’s going to say.”

Chapter End Notes

i hope these chapters getting progressively longer is something you guys like lmao if not i apologize, basically i have no sense of how many more chapters this will be bc plot wise it's all planned out but i'm still not 100% sure how it will be structured but there's a good bit left so i hope this doesn't feel endless lol, anyway i'll update again in 1-2 weeks depending on how my days are looking

as u know by now im on tumblr @cafelesbian

THANK U FOR COMMENTING U GUYS MAKE ME TEAR UP DAILY I STG I SCREENSHOT THEM AND EVERYTHING i love u all so much
It’s three days before the trial begins and Bucky can’t sleep. He feels fucking miserable in the way that isn’t attached to any one thing, just solid and heavy in his chest and branching off from everything happening in his life. He’s exhausted from the time with Maria today and now that they’re in bed, and Steve has let himself fall asleep, misery spreads through him, and Bucky can feel something cold and broken seeping into all of him, paralyzing his muscles.

This case is killing him.

He’s thinking about Alexander because he can’t fucking force the thoughts away. Over the last week, attention on them has ramped back up with the case looming closer. The outside world has latched onto it and found their ways to react to it, and it sends Bucky closer and closer to the edge, threatening to snap him. Everyone in the world has decided that their feelings on it matters, and so he’s been subjected to the opinions of strangers for the last few days—op eds, facebook posts where Steve got fucking death threats, interview requests. Sneering tabloid articles about his prostitution that leave him shaking and crying and repulsed with himself, that Steve holds him through and promises him he doesn’t believe the things being said. But there have been responses on the better sides of things; encouraging, supportive emails, purposeful smiles from strangers when they go out, a text from Scott of the front of one of Pierce’s banks, where someone had spray painted STOP SUPPORTING RAPISTS.

It’s all giving him whiplash to take in.

Bucky thinks, all of a sudden, about his parents. It’s been a long time since he’s thought about them for more than a few moments of brittle hatred. There had been a time when he’d been convinced that no one was as evil as them, when he’d been fenced into Christian conversion camp and breathing terror and rage and unable to imagine a worse place than where he was, before he’d found his way into alleys at night and the back of strangers’ cars and Alexander Pierce’s penthouse.

He doesn’t hate them anymore. He doesn’t have the energy. It’s just dull, hurt disappointment that fills his head. He wonders if they’ve been following the case. He wonders if they feel responsible, even a little bit, for shoving him into a place designed to make him see himself as worthless, laying the groundwork for what would happen to him. He wonders if they care. If his mom cried, thinking about someone doing that to her son. Probably not. She’d sent him somewhere that had fucking drugged and tried to exorcise him. They weren’t far down on the list of people who hurt him the
most. Honestly, maybe he wasn’t giving them enough credit for the responsibility they’d had in making him into what he was.

He hopes they have been following it. He hopes they know he’s with Steve, that their brilliant solution hadn’t worked, it had just prolonged their ability to have a life together and made sure Bucky suffered immensely for a few years before that. He hopes his mom reads the articles that don’t shy away from the details, had to see the report alleges that the accuser was repeatedly raped and beaten by Pierce, who blackmailed the accuser with explicit photographs of him unconscious and drugged. This occurred “countless” times over a period of about seven months… His dad wouldn’t care. His dad was probably part of the crowd that thought he was a lying, attention-seeking slut. He hopes he feels guilty anyway.

Abrupt, intense grief pulls Bucky under, so sudden it knocks the air from his lungs. There had been a different person, before all this. Once, he had been able to simply exist without fear pushing, ceaseless, into his lungs, suffocating him. He could talk without constantly second-guessing himself; he could make a mistake without a landslide of panic crashing down on him that someone was going to punish him. He could let his friends touch him without freaking out, his boyfriend didn’t have to pull back from kissing him or throwing an arm around him, he could have sex, god, he could make love, without it being a weapon, brutalizing him, being something that he absolutely hated, couldn’t even bear the thought of.

Steve called it that once. Making love.

They were lying in his old room, post-making love, curled up into one another, hands all over each other with no need for hesitation. “I like making love to you,” he’d said, and Bucky had laughed so hard he cried, and Steve had laughed at himself a little bit.

“Making love?” he’d replied, through gasping laughter, and Steve grinned.

“Yeah, what else would you call it?” Steve was mostly joking, mock-affronted.

“Well, I’m not a forties bachelorette, so um, having sex, fucking, babymaking?” He smirked, and Steve snorted. “Same difference, babe. It just doesn’t make you sound like someone’s Christian grandmother.”

But there was a difference, and even though Bucky knows it doesn’t matter now, he kind of wishes he hadn’t laughed.

Bucky feels deflated. He feels like a match, burnt out and splintered and discarded, worn out of their one use. He feels like glass as it shatters, the high pitched crack of it as it hits the ground. He feels so sad, too sad to cry, a sadness that chokes him and blankets him, almost comfortable in its familiarity.

“Steve?” Bucky whispers without thinking. Steve stirs, blinking blearily, then his eyes open, wide with concern.

“Yeah?” he says hoarsely. “What’s up, baby, you okay?”

Bucky swallows and shifts. There’s something tentative and unsettling about the room, the eerie dim lights thrown across walls from the buildings around them, the faint wail of a siren, muted and growing small in the distance, someone else’s emergency.

His hand is light on Steve’s shoulder, and he focuses on the curve of his muscle, the warmth of his skin. “Sorry,” he whispers, guilt at waking him settling over his lungs like ash. “It’s stupid, I didn’t
mean to wake you up—"

“Shh,” Steve murmurs, and pulls him closer. Bucky feels Steve’s lips brush against his forehead, gentle and protective. He burrows closer into his chest. “Don’t be sorry. I’d way rather you wake me up than lie awake feeling bad, okay? No question.”

Bucky nods against Steve’s shirt. Something heavy and forlorn is choking him, squeezing in on his heart and soul and making him feel like he’s flinching, waiting for some disaster. Steve can tell something is wrong, but he doesn’t push. Bucky feels him run his fingers through his hair, over and over, gentle as anything.

“I’m so tired,” Bucky whispers finally.

It sounds pathetic, but somehow Steve gets it, the landslide of pain behind the word tired that he can’t make himself articulate right now. “I know,” Steve says sadly, “It’s alright, baby. Close your eyes. I’ve got you.”

“What if he wins?” Bucky whispers.

Steve takes a small gulp of air. “If that happens, we’ll still be okay. Then his career is derailing, and his marriage is over, and I know it’s not even one millionth of what he deserves, but his life is gonna become this miserable, pathetic thing, and you and me are gonna be happy, and heal, and be in love, and I’m always gonna take care of you. And no matter what, he won’t hurt you again, ever.” A pause, as Bucky hugs him closer and exhales. “I don’t think he will win, though.”

“Oh okay,” Bucky says, eyes closed. He tries to let that possibility remain for a minute, glimmering, untouchable, dangerous. He doesn’t believe it, not completely. But the idea of Pierce having to pay hovers over him, slim and unlikely, but there, flickering feebly. “Okay.”

“What do you need right now?” Steve asks him softly.

“Just—just talk to me about something else.”

Steve keeps rubbing his back. “Okay. Well, when this is over, we’re gonna do our trip, and it’s gonna be amazing. We’ll get our tickets this week, and book a hotel, and we’re gonna eat a ridiculous amount of churros and paella. And we’ll go to a million museums so I can make jokes about how you’re the real art there.” Bucky chokes out a laugh. He feels Steve smile against his hair. “And we’ll be really fucking far away from everything here, so the only thing we have to worry about is the next tourist thing we’re gonna do.”

Steve keeps going, and the warmth and love and hope in his voice is enough to get Bucky into a restless, tentative sleep.

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It rains the morning of the trial.

Biblical, torrential rain. It wakes Steve and Bucky up twenty minutes before their alarm goes off, so they just lie there, listening to it and holding each other, not saying anything. Bucky’s head is tucked against Steve’s chest and he can feel his too-fast heartbeat thrumming against his cheek, and he just closes his eyes and holds on to him until they need to get up.

Bucky isn’t hungry, but Steve basically begs him to eat, so he forces down some toast and yogurt without tasting it. He has a cup of coffee, even though his heart is already slamming into his throat and he’s wide awake.
They barely talk all morning. Bucky can’t make himself speak and Steve doesn’t push him to, but the closeness is there, wordless and rich with love. As Bucky sits on the bed, fingers trembling as he tries to button his shirt, he drops his face into his hands and takes a sharp, battered breath. Steve gets to him, and kneels right below him and does the button for him. Then he takes Bucky’s hands and kisses them, very slowly, his wrists and fingertips and knuckles, on both hands.

“It’s gonna be alright, Buck,” he murmurs. Bucky nods and tilts his head forward to rest his forehead against Steve’s for a moment. Then he reaches out to wrap his arms around Steve’s neck, dropping from the bed to his knees and hugging him on the ground.

Maria had told him that it would probably take them two or three days to get through their witnesses. Bucky’s last for the prosecution, so he takes some comfort in the knowledge that he won’t have to go up there today. He keeps reminding himself of that all morning when he starts to get dizzy with fear. The world feels silent. The rain beats against the window of the car they take but everything else is utterly still, eerily so, like the prelude to the apocalypse. After Steve tells the driver they’re going to the courthouse, Bucky can’t tell if his eyes flicker with suspicious recognition or if he’s just being paranoid.

He’s not being paranoid when they finally pull up to the steps of the courthouse and there are reporters clustered under umbrellas, waiting. Steve opens their own umbrella and juts it over and in front of them like a shield, pushing easily past the press. They aren’t mobbing them, thank God, but the shutter of cameras follows them, making Bucky flinch.

“Jesus,” Steve says quietly.

Bucky nods.

But then they’re inside, passing through security, and Bucky has maybe half a second to breathe before the universe hauls him back into panic.

He recognizes Alexander’s kids from across the hallway. His son—*Alexander Jr*—Bucky remembers, with a twinge of nausea. He’s tall, blonde hair slicked back, wearing a fucking Armani suit. He lives up to his name, too; when he turns his face, Bucky shivers at the resemblance. The hardness on his face is the same, crystalized cruelty in the ice blue eyes, but it might just be the look he gives Bucky. Withering, disgusted, despising. It sends Bucky pulling back from him, fear rising and curling like smoke inside him. When Bucky steps back, body kind of caving in, Steve straightens his shoulders and sets his jaw and fixes him with a look that says, *try something, I dare you.*

The daughter, Claire, trails behind her brother. Everything in her appearance is tight, her stature and her lips and her fingers clenched in on themselves, a mix of anxiety and something that might be guilt, if Bucky could allow himself to entertain that possibility. She keeps twisting blonde hair around her fingers and glancing around. When her eyes land on Bucky, they go wide, and she opens her mouth like she might say something—*God, please don’t let her say something*—then she turns away sharply. The younger one, thank God, isn’t there.

“God,” Steve mutters. Bucky nods blankly. Then, with a hint of uncharacteristic snarkiness, “They look like the Lannisters.”

Bucky laughs despite himself, half-hiding it in Steve’s shoulder. “I’m gonna go splash some water on my face,” he tells Steve quietly. Steve gives him a quick, worried nod. Bucky squeezes his hand quickly and slips away from him, down the endless hallway.

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Bucky leaving gives Steve the chance to backslide into panic. Everything here is so much, the world’s intensity turned up too high; pouring, threatening rain, relentless press, Pierce’s Barbie-doll kids watching them stoically. He feels useless and agitated at the terrifying whirl of everything around them and his inability to make it easier for Bucky.

“Steve.” Steve snaps his head around to see, to his surprise, Carol, leaning against the wall beside him. She’s traded out the hoodie and baseball cap for a neat button down and tight bun, and she gives him a smile.

“Hey,” he says, and coughs. She blinks and looks him over.

He must look terrible, because Carol says, gently, “You okay?” Steve does something between a shrug and a nod and winces, and Carol casts him a sympathetic look. “Just stressed?”

“Something like that,” Steve says vaguely.

Carol nods and purses her lips. “You like cats?” she asks suddenly.

Steve blinks. “Sorry?”

Carol coughs and gives him a sheepish grin, shrugging. “Um. My wife and I send pictures of our cat when we’re stressing about a work thing. Sound like something that might help?”

“No, that sounds great actually,” Steve says weakly. Carol looks surprised for a minute, then pulls out her phone and flicks through a few photos—“that’s my wife Maria, and our cat, his name’s Goose… Aw, here’s us and our daughter Monica on Christmas, she’s three…”—and it actually makes Steve laugh. Carol smiles up at him, then says, quietly, “Look. Whatever happens, it’s gonna be alright. Maria—lawyer Maria, that is—knows what she’s doing. You guys’ll be fine.”

“Thank you,” Steve says, meaning it. She claps him on the shoulder. “You, uh, you’re up today, right?”

“Yes.” Carol leans against the wall again. She glances past him and gives someone a wave, and Steve turns to look as Bucky returns, taking his hand again. “I should go get in there. It’s gonna be alright.” She looks between Bucky and Steve as she says this, gives them a smile, then strides off.

Bucky and Steve head in a few minutes after her. Bucky grips Steve’s hand fervently, clinging to the thing that’s tethering him to sanity, and Steve squeezes back easily. Maria is already inside, settled at her desk, so focused on looking over her opening statement that she doesn’t notice them come in until they’re already seated behind her, next to Carol.

“You guys doing okay?” she asks, in lieu of a greeting.

Steve nods wearily, Bucky shrugs absently, and she seems to get it, because she gives them a sympathetic grimace. It’s hard to talk, because the rows have started to fill up and people are filing in, a vibrating, tangible hum to the room that only comes along with high stakes cases. It’s unbearably nerve wracking. Reporters take the back, mainly, all of them glancing incessantly at Bucky and Steve and Maria, until Carol clocks the way Bucky has tensed up and shoots them a cold stare, and they back down at the threat of a detective on their bad side.

“Thanks,” Bucky says weakly.

She smiles. “Don’t mention it.”
Alexander and his family don’t show up until about fifteen minutes before it starts. Zola is muttering something to him, kids and wife in tow, all of them looking like they couldn’t imagine a worse way to spend their morning; the son and wife enraged, Claire just looking fucking miserable in a way that almost makes Bucky feel sorry for her. When Pierce spots Bucky, his face twists into hatred, a look that makes Steve sit up straight and pull in closer to Bucky and glower at him.

Alexander looks terrible. It makes Bucky think that what Tony had told him might actually be true; he looks fifteen years older than the last time Bucky saw him close, the tight anger from before having spun out into clear, vicious rage.

He stays close to Steve as the jury comes in and the judge gets it all started. If he were to pull away, he thinks he’d cease to exist, hurtle aimlessly out of control into some horrifying black hole. The swearing in of the jury and the explanation of their job is endless, leaving time for the panic in Bucky’s head to swell and pulse rapidly, but when the bailiff announces the commencement of “The state of New York versus Alexander Pierce” it sends a white-hot shot of adrenaline down Bucky’s spine.

Maria gets to go first in opening statements, which she commands pretty flawlessly. “Over the course of this trial, I’m going to share with you a story,” she begins, “about power, abuse and entitlement. A little over a year ago, Bucky Barnes met Alexander Pierce. At this point, Mr. Barnes was twenty years old, and he had, in desperate circumstances, turned to sex work as a way to survive. Alexander Pierce, a married, billionaire CEO, decided to take advantage of this. He purchased sex from him the night they met. A week later, he told Mr. Barnes to return to his house. That night, Alexander Pierce drugged him, raped him violently” ––(Bucky exhales shakily. Steve kisses the top of Bucky’s head and shuts his eyes.)–– “and recorded this. He then used the photos and videos to blackmail the victim into continuing to return to his home, where he abused him sexually, physically, and psychologically over the course of seven months.”

She goes on for a while more, brushing over the evidence uncovered, the consistency in the reports and allegations against Pierce, the credibility of Bucky’s story. She’s setting everything up, Bucky knows, building the scaffolding of the case for witnesses and evidence to fill in the details or. She does a good job. It’s just that the whole thing makes him dizzy, sick enough that he tastes blood in his mouth.

“Thank you, Ms. Hill. Will the defense please present their opening remarks?” Coulson says, nodding to Zola.

Zola stands and clears his throat, paces forward to look at the jury. “Ladies and gentleman, this is not a case about rape. This isn’t about abuse, or consent, or lack thereof. The allegations against Alexander Pierce make a mockery of the true severity of rape. The accuser”—his eyes glaze over Bucky coldly, making him wither in his seat—“James Barnes, has fabricated the story that Ms. Hill just told. There was no abuse—not once, and certainly not long term. Here’s the true story—last year, with the knowledge of his wife, Mr. Pierce purchased sex from a prostitute. They began something of an agreement over the next several months, and yes, part of this agreement was engaging in roleplaying and BDSM—but that’s not a crime, ladies and gentleman, not when it’s consensual. In this case, the defendant had Mr. Barnes’s full consent for everything that went on between them.” A purposeful pause. A wave of broken, furious nausea comes over Bucky. He looks up at Steve, who’s watching Zola in appalled, entranced disgust. “A few months ago, long after Mr. Pierce and Mr. Barnes’s agreement came to an end, James Barnes saw an opportunity for money and extortion, and he took it. I can’t say why. Perhaps he was worried about his reputation, what with his new… relationship.” Next to Bucky, Steve squeezes his hand tightly and sets his jaw. “Or, perhaps he wasn’t alone in this plan. Perhaps some of the people associated with Mr. Barnes—namely, his new partner, Steve Rogers—had reasons for revenge against Mr. Pierce, and
these accusations were a convenient way to get something from him—money, praise, media attention. It’s not my job to know. It’s my job to tell you that Alexander Pierce is a kind, hardworking, highly moral man who has not committed these abysmal crimes, and it’s your job to see that, and to grant him a not guilty verdict.” Another brief silence. “Thank you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Zola. Will the prosecution call its first witness?”

“The prosecution calls Carol Danvers to the stand.”

They swear her in. Clearly, Carol has done this before. Maria asks her to walk them through the arrest and she does it perfectly. She describes the house, points to photographs that had been taken during the search and then waits for Maria to present transcriptions of Bucky’s statement describing the rooms. She testifies for a long time; it’s interspersed with a lot of the evidence, including recorded clips from Bucky’s police report, so it takes ages to even get to her description of the arrest and search.

“How accurately do the photographs and your perception of the defendant’s apartments match the description in the police report?” Maria asks her, after they’ve gone through her interview and arrest, maybe two hours into testifying.

“Almost exactly,” Carol answers easily. “The only differences were some furniture in different spots then the victim described.”

“How sure are you that the descriptions had to have come from someone who had seen the house before, and isn’t just guessing?”

“Very. The descriptions were specific enough that it couldn’t have been someone guessing. I’m a hundred percent sure to describe it the way the accuser did, they would have had to have seen it before.” Carol smooths a hand over her hair.

“Let the record reflect that I’m referring to exhibit fourteen from the state,” Maria says, to the transcriber. “Detective Danvers, can you explain this image?”

Exhibit fourteen is the DNA match that Carol and her partner had gotten, the sample Bucky had given them tested against whatever they’d pulled off of Pierce’s couch or mattress.

Carol says “That’s the DNA sample that we got from the victim—”

“Objection,” Zola snaps, “alleged victim.” Bucky digs his nails into his palm.

Carol says, without missing a beat, “—from the alleged victim, which he gave voluntarily, compared with the DNA we were able to obtain from the defendant’s house. We tested blood we pulled off of the mattress that matched what the alleged victim gave us.”

Maria nods, and lets that sink in for a moment. Then, she says, seriously, “I want to turn your attention to exhibits fifteen through twenty. Fair warning, these images are graphic and might be upsetting.”

“Objection,” Zola interrupts. “Your honor, I’m renewing my motion to dismiss the evidence on grounds of it being unfairly prejudicial against my client.”

“Overruled,” Coulson says shortly, before Maria can respond, “We’ve been over this. Ms. Hill, proceed.”

“Thank you, your honor,” Maria says.
Zola grimaces and sits.

Bucky looks down and doesn’t look up. He can feel blood rushing through his head too fast, something clawing him open, leaving him raw. He can actually fucking feel the change in the room when Maria clicks to the next slide; the prickle of shocked discomfort, attention turning, momentarily and sharply, towards him. Steve’s arm is around his waist, and it tightens in on him, protective.

“These were pulled from the defendant’s computer,” Carol says. “We obtained them during our search. They’re timestamped to the dates reported in the initial report against Mr. Pierce, and they’re consistent with how the accuser described the initial attack.”

“How many photos did you find?” Maria has clicks past them now, sparing Bucky, but he still can’t make himself look up. All it took was a few moments to rip the breath from his lungs. The panic dulls, and he leans against Steve.

“Forty-eight photographs and three videos,” Carol answers stoically. There’s a coldness in Bucky’s stomach that turns over and over. Steve exhales through his teeth, a small, pained breath. “They were all similar to these.”

“Was there anything else of significance that you discovered during the search?” Maria asks.

“We found a bottle in the back of the defendant’s alcohol cabinet full of GHB,” Carol says calmly.

“Can you explain, for anyone who isn’t familiar, what that is?”

“Gamma hydroxybutyrate acid. It’s a drug that’s available in some medication, with a prescription, but otherwise illegal. It can cause unconsciousness, especially if paired with alcohol.”

“Is it consistent with the description of the attack?” Maria asks.

“Yes,” Carol answers.

Maria nods. “The prosecution rests.” She settles back at the desk and waits.

“May I proceed?” asks Zola.

“You may,” Coulson answers, nodding. Zola paces up to the witness stand and folds his hands behind his back.

“Detective Danvers,” Zola says, a sneer in his voice. Carol holds his gaze without flinching, watching him with mildly interested distaste. “What’s your job title?”

“I’m a detective in the sex crimes and domestic violence unit,” Carol answers.

“So you’re not a narcotics expert?”

Carol gives him a faintly irritated look, but keeps her cool. “I’m not.”

“So then your knowledge of the effects and uses for GHB are, with all due respect, about on par with the average person?” Arrogant condescension fills his voice.

Carol smiles politely. “Well, working in sex crimes, I see an awful lot of date rape cases, and the vast majority of those involve GHB, so I would say I’ve got slightly more expertise than the average person, Mr. Zola.”
“I like her,” Bucky mumbles to Steve.

“Me, too,” Steve replies, and actually smiles.

Zola’s face flashes briefly with agitation, but he blinks and it’s gone. “Fair enough. But perhaps you aren’t familiar with its other uses—treating narcolepsy, treating alcoholism”—Bucky’s stomach drops—“even recreationally.”

“I’m familiar,” Carol says coolly, “but in my line of work, when I’m investigating someone with credible claims of rape against them and I find the most common date rape drug on the market, my first thought isn’t usually narcolepsy.”

It takes Zola a moment longer to purge the annoyance from his face this time. Bucky works up the courage to steal a look at Alexander. His face is tight with thinly veiled fury that he’s trying to keep a lid on, but he’s watching Carol with unmistakable hate.

“But you agree that there are other uses to GHB than to drug someone?” Zola finally says. “It isn’t solely a date rape drug? Just a yes or no will suffice, detective.”

“Yes,” Carol replies, and smiles at him.

“About exhibits fourteen through sixteen,” Zola begins, “the photographs. Is it possible that those were photos of consensual sex, with, perhaps, a kink aspect to them?”

“The victim—”

“Alleged victim, detective.”

Carol raises an eyebrow. “The alleged victim was unconscious in all of the images and videos we recovered. I believe that’s in my summary. I’d be incredibly surprised to hear it’s possible for someone to consent while unconscious.”

“You don’t think it’s possible he was playacting?” The mockery in Zola’s voice makes Bucky shudder, but there’s a hint of desperation in it; he’s lost control to Carol.

“These videos weren’t entered into evidence, Mr. Zola, because they were deemed too disturbing by the prosecution for people to see publicly, and too traumatic to make the alleged victim sit through them being played in court. I watched it for my investigation and—and you can see all of this in the official summary of evidence, which has been entered for the trial—in the video, the alleged victim has absolutely no reaction to things that it would be impossible for someone conscious to ignore, including violent, repeated punching and striking with a leather belt.”

Bucky’s chest hurts. He leans into Steve and closes his eyes, and Steve goes back to rubbing his back.

Zola takes a breath that shakes his shoulders. She’s got him, though. Carol smiles, and he moves on to asking her a couple of flimsy questions about the house, the arrest, the evidence gathered. None of it is especially convincing.

After another forty minutes or so, Zola says, with a note of weariness, “Nothing further.”

When Bucky looks over at Pierce, his face burns with lividity. It scares him.
Coulson calls a recess for lunch after that. They’ve already been at it for hours, with just one witness down, and Bucky sees why Maria thinks he won’t have to go until at least tomorrow. He and Steve end up at some cafe a block or two away, where Steve has to practically beg him to eat half a biscuit, but he’s too nauseous to want anything.

Pierce’s neighbor is the second witness. She says that she used to see Bucky leaving the building on some of the days he’d reported that matched up with his timeline, and, when Maria asks to describe how he’d seemed emotionally, says, “Just blank. Scared, shocked. I tried to ask if he was alright a couple of times, but I didn’t get much of a response.”

It’s more empathetic than accusatory. Bucky has to bite his lip. He had been so far gone every time he left, paralyzed with horror and pain. He doesn’t remember ever seeing her. He doesn’t remember leaving, most days. The space between when Pierce would fucking finally be done with him and tell him he could leave and when he found himself in the alley beside his building, on his knees getting sick or sobbing, was a gray slate.

She’s convincing and clear; she had been able to pull a photo of Bucky out of a lineup when she’d been asked to identify the victim, and her times and dates line up with when Bucky would have been there.

Zola’s cross-examination is half-hearted; there’s not much to go off for her. He tries to destroy credibility that she’s sure it was Bucky, and then casts doubt over her report that he’d looked blank and shocked and scared, but it’s too little to really poke holes in it.

It’s already four by the time she’s done, so Coulson dismisses them for the day. “Nine am tomorrow,” he reminds everyone.

Bucky is so fucking ready to be home. As he and Steve leave, they run into Martha, standing outside the courtroom, glowering at nothing. She turns to them, shocked, then disgusted.

Martha stares at him, her whole face stone. Then she hisses, “I wish my husband had never met you.”

Steve sets his jaw and goes to say something, but Bucky snaps, first, “Yeah? I bet I wish it more than you.” She looks astonished, and Bucky pushes past her, pulling Steve with him.

Outside, waiting underneath the roof over the courthouse, Steve turns to him and grins. “That,” he says, “was amazing.”

Bucky buries his face in Steve’s shoulder and dissolves into immediate, miserable tears. Steve switches into tenderness immediately, pulling him close, circling a gentle hand over his back to calm him down, murmuring, “Oh, baby, oh, Buck, I’m so sorry. It’s okay, baby, it’s alright, you’re alright. I’m right here, you’re okay, baby.”

Chapter End Notes

kind of a two part chapter but feel free to leave comments on this one anyway lmaoooo
The rain intensifies the next day. Bucky wakes up feeling even more like he’s made of rusting lead, the terror at testifying leaving him feeling sluggish and weak.

He’d asked Nat to come for today. He doesn’t want Steve to have to sit through it alone, up to his throat in worry, and out of all of their friends, she had felt like the right one to ask. He knows her and trusts her as much as anyone, and she’s close enough to Steve that he thinks she’ll be a comfort. He hadn’t wanted a whole group there, but he’s alright with the idea of her coming, so she meets them in front of the courthouse at eight thirty and hugs him, holding on longer than she normally would.

Bucky meets Ava immediately after he and Steve and Nat get through security. He doesn’t notice her until she comes up to him, leaving the friend she had brought along waiting a couple of feet away.

“Bucky?” she says, nervous; she twists her hands in front of her. Bucky gives her a blank, anxious stare, and she adds, “Sorry—I’m Ava. Um, I think Maria said something…”


Ava is young and extremely pretty—light brown skin and eyes, dark hair, soft, radiant features. She gives him a relieved smile. “Hi.” A beat of something heavy, some twisted, uncomfortable kinship between them. Steve smiles at her, then steps back to give them a minute, Nat following.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Ava says finally, with a sad, apologetic twitch of her mouth.

Bucky shoves his hands in his pockets. “You, too. I wish it wasn’t here,” he says, after a brief moment of hesitation.

Ava sighs. “Me too.” She glances down, then back at Bucky. “You’re up today, too?”

“Yes. After you, I think.” He gestures vaguely to the courtroom. Ava nods absently. People have started heading in, and the friend Ava was standing with gives her a questioning jerk of her head—want me to go in?

“We should probably…” Ava trails off and looks in.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky agrees, and turns to wave to Steve.

Ava is still waiting, though. Abruptly, she hugs him, very carefully, her arms light around his neck. “Thank you,” Ava says quietly. Bucky hugs her back, astonished, something lodging itself in his chest at the words. She pulls away before he can say anything back. When she looks up, something is shining in her eyes, bright with grief and anger and strength, untouchable. “Let’s go get that motherfucker,” Ava says to him.

Bucky laughs, surprised, enthused. “Alright,” he replies. Ava gives him a last long look, and they head in.

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The judge goes through the usual introductions; waiting is setting Bucky on edge. He’s bouncing his leg insistently, so much that Steve has to remind him to slow down.

Finally, Coulson tells Maria to step up. “The prosecution calls Ava Starr to the stand,” Maria says. As Ava heads up there, her friend giving her a final squeeze of her hand, Zola stands too.

“Your honor, I’d like to renew my motion to dismiss the prosecution’s witness on grounds of irrelevance.” Zola says, eyes narrowed.

Bucky glances at Pierce. He looks worse than he’s ever seen him, which is a slight shock; he’s staring forward at nothing, stale rage in his tightened expression. Bucky looks away quickly.

“Dismissed, as I already said,” Coulson replies, irked. “Ms. Starr, come up…”

As Ava swears to tell the truth, Bucky leans forward to watch her. She looks visibly nervous, but there’s a strength in the way she’s carrying herself, something invincible, that gives him a beat of hope.

Maria has her state her name, her job, how she first met Alexander Pierce. After a few minutes of explanation and setup, Maria asks her to describe the attack.

Ava sits up and swallows. “It was um—it was an office party.” She inhales sharply. “It was actually a party for Alexander. It was his twentieth year as CEO. We, um—everyone had organized a little party, we ordered some food and we got some champagne and wine. I had a glass of champagne, and I was talking to someone else from the office, then they left for a moment, and he, um, Alexander came up to me, and said—” She swallows and grimaces, a whirlwind of pain coming over her face. “He said something like ‘I know you planned all this. Thank you, Ava.’ I thought he was just being nice, so I laughed and said thanks, and that it wasn’t just me, or something like that.” Ava folds her hands together and looks down. “Then maybe an hour later, everyone had started going home, and I was staying to help clean up. Alexander, um—Alexander started helping me, and I figured he was being nice again.” She closes her eyes miserably. A beat as Ava takes another long breath. “Anyway, he was helping, and it was just us, we were talking about weekend plans, I think. Then he picked up a bottle of wine and was like ‘one more drink?’ And I said no at first, but then he said, like ‘I know you only had one glass. It’s a party, this isn’t a test.’ And I figured, you know, what’s the harm?” Ava’s voice cracks slightly.

—in his apartment for the first time, perched on his couch, nervously telling him he doesn’t need a glass of wine, but then taking it when Alexander pushes him because he seems, all things considered, normal and Bucky isn’t used to anyone listening anyway—

“So, um—he poured me a drink, and I had a few sips, then we kept cleaning. And then—then—” She sounds splintered. “And then, um, I blacked out.” A long, ragged breath. “When I woke up… we were in his office. My, um, my dress was pushed up, and I was kind of—” Ava stops then, and breaks off into a small sob, cupping her hands over her mouth. “Sorry,” she whispers breathlessly.

“It’s alright,” Coulson says gently, while Maria nods. “Would you like me to call a recess?”

Ava rubs her eyes carefully. “No, no. Sorry, I’m fine. Thank you, your honor.” She gulps and straightens up. “Sorry. Um. I woke up, and I was kind of just, like, thrown across his desk, um, my—my legs were hanging over the edge, and my underwear was down at my ankles, and he—his pants were completely off and he was—he was thrusting into me.”

Bucky has been watching her, utterly entranced this whole time, the familiar horror of what she’s telling tightening around him like a leash or a noose. At this point, something spills open in him,
the sick knowledge of exactly what it had been like to go through that breaking in him, pinpricks of pain all over.

“I think, um—I think I screamed, and he, he covered my mouth.” Ava looks down again, so much hurt in her movements. “That’s the only thing I remember.”

—on the bed, pressed under his full weight, sobbing audibly, too loudly for Alexander’s liking, so he reaches around and clamps his hand over Bucky’s mouth so his nails dig into his skin and hisses, “You want me to fucking gag you?”

“What happened after that?” Maria asks kindly.

“I woke up. He wasn’t there anymore. I couldn’t remember anything, it was just flashes, but it was just—it was so much pain. I could realize what happened, you know, I was undressed and I’d woken up for a second so I knew.” She takes a gulp of air. “So I got dressed. I was completely freaking out. I threw up in the hallway, just out of everything hurting, and panic. And, um, I took a cab to my house.” She shuts her eyes. “My friend was there, and I told her, ‘cause she kept asking. She tried to get me to report it, but I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

Ava laughs bitterly. “I knew how people looked at those cases. No one was gonna listen to the secretary of a major CEO with no proof of rape and believe me.”

“But you told people in your life about what happened?” Maria asks.


“In these emails between you and Julia Dupont from February of two thousand ten, is that what you’re referring to? This is exhibit thirty.” Maria projects a couple of screenshots. She’s highlighted a few of the lines—Ava’s friend, checking in: hey my love, just got settled in my hotel, you doing okay?, Ava responding, Yeah, alright. I saw him on the news last night bc Principle trust bought out another bank and I couldn’t get out of bed today. Flashbacks have been really bad since then. The whole thing is frighteningly familiar; it makes Bucky’s chest ache.

“Yes,” Ava says.

“And was that the last time you saw him?”

“Yeah. I quit after that. I never went back in.”

“Thank you, Ava,” Maria says warmly, “The prosecution rests.”

Ava slumps back, exhausted relief coming over her face. She looks at Bucky, her gaze soft and hurt, and he bites his lip and gives her a small, painfully understanding nod. She takes a breath and straightens up. Focused, brave, powerful.

***

If Bucky weren’t already convinced Ava Starr is the most impressive person he’s ever met, her response to Zola’s cross-examination would have done it. It’s fucking cathartic to watch.

“During your job as a secretary, did you ever enjoy any special perks from Mr. Pierce?” Zola asks,
after a couple of drawn out questions about her old job.

Ava gives him a blank look. “Not really,” she says shortly.

“Nothing?” Zola presses.

“I mean… I don’t know. He bought me coffee a few times. He paid for me to take a car home once or twice, if it was late or the weather was bad. That’s it.”

“And you took these things without a second thought?”

Her jaw tightens. “Yeah. I was trying to save to go to grad school and he was a billionaire. I didn’t feel bad about him buying me a coffee. He did it for other people in the office, too.”

“Did you ever interpret these little gifts as flirting?” Zola asks.

“No.” Ava purses her lips. “He was my boss, he was like forty years older than me, and he was married. I thought he was just a good guy.” Her face flashes with momentary, stark rage.

“Were you flirting with him?” Zola asks. “Maybe to get him to buy you breakfast or a car home? Did you ever flirt as a way to get something from him.”

“No.”

“Anything that could be easily misinterpreted as flirting?”

“I guess if you’re waiting to rape someone, anything could be misinterpreted as flirting,” Ava snaps.

Zola’s face darkens. He moves on. “You were drinking the night of the attack, correct?”

“Objection,” Maria says, “leading question.”

“Let me rephrase—were you drinking the night of the attack?”

“Yes,” Ava says, “a little.”

“What did you drink?”

“A glass of champagne and whatever he gave me.”

“If you were drinking, how can you be sure that you didn’t consent?”

Ava stares at him. She says, very quietly, “Alexander Pierce raped me and ruined my life. I didn’t make it happen. That’s the truth. I have absolutely no doubt about it.”

Zola’s jaw tightens. The words hang in the air, flammable, coursing through Bucky. Finally, he looks away. “Nothing further.”

***

“How,” Alexander spits, “the fuck are you letting these people destroy you like this?”

He’s leaning over a table in some breakroom, staring, enraged, at Zola on the other side. Zola takes a breath. “Alexander, it’s never easy to completely destroy the opposing side’s witness, once we present—”
Alexander smacks his hand down on the table. The noise splinters through the room, horrific. Claire is leaning against the wall, staring down. Alex Jr. is next to her, shaken, and Martha is on his other side, watching her husband in repulsion. It shakes them all, and Zola. “This isn’t fucking rocket science, Zola! You stood there, and let some bitch detective young enough to be your fucking daughter, my downstairs neighbor, and a lying ex-secretary make a fool of you!” He bellows. Everyone flinches. “I’m paying you hundreds of dollars an hour for this bullshit! Any public defender would do a better job then you’re doing right now.”

Zola glares back. “Any public defender would quit dealing with a client stupid enough to let cops find images of the crime on his computer. I’m putting my entire career on the line to save your ass, Alexander. When you fucked up that badly, there are gonna be setbacks. Let me do my goddamn job!” Zola shouts this and then braces himself. He’s spent the last day and a half listening to people talk about what a monster his client is—and they’re right, obviously—but he’s never seen him get violent before.

Alexander’s face goes back to the hardened, razor sharp rage he’s worn the entire trial. He leans forward, and hisses, very quietly, “If you let James Barnes get up there and ruin this for me, I will end your career myself. Fucking handle it. I don’t care how. Get everyone to see he’s a liar.”

***

There’s an hour between the end of Ava’s testimony and Bucky’s. They don’t leave the building this time. He sits on a secluded bench with Steve and Nat, whose stress manifests itself in different ways; Steve is staring down blankly, tapping his forefinger against his thumb relentlessly, and Nat is talking too fast about nothing, trying to distract him.

“I’m gonna step outside for a second,” Bucky says finally. “I’ll be right back.” He kisses Steve quickly and squeezes Nat’s shoulder and heads off, desperate to move.

He’d been hoping to find Ava, so when he rounds the corner and comes face to face with her, it’s a relief. “Hey,” Bucky says, with a tired smile.

She runs a hand through her hair. “Hey.”

“You were so great up there,” he says truthfully. “Thank you, Ava.”

She blinks, then gives him a small smile. “It’s hard, seeing him,” she says quietly.

Bucky leans back. “I know,” he replies sadly.

Ava exhales, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. “You’re gonna do great, too,” she says, fixing her gaze on Bucky again.

“Any advice?” he asks weakly. She smiles joylessly.

“His lawyer’s a fucking nightmare,” she says after a pause, “I guess, don’t let him get to you with that victim-blaming bullshit. God, it’s hard though. He might’ve just undone three years of therapy.” Ava laughs bitterly and scrubs a hand over her face, her voice flat and humorless.

Bucky grimaces. “He’s lying,” he says, surprised by the fierceness in his voice.

Ava blinks. “I know.” She bites her lip. “I mean… You spend so long thinking it’s your fault, and then once you’re finally at a place where you don’t think that anymore…” she trails off and shakes her head. “Sorry. But yeah. Just remember you’re telling the truth, no matter what he tries to make you think.”
“Thanks,” Bucky says weakly. She smiles sadly. “I’m sorry that I dragged this up for you,” he adds hoarsely.

Ava’s eyes snap up, alarmed. “God, no. Are you kidding me? No, I mean—look, I’ve spent three years trying to come to terms with the idea that he was just gonna be out there, allowed to keep hurting people and being rich and not face any consequences, and just… knowing that there are repercussions… Bucky, you have no idea what a relief that was. Which is so fucked up, that that’s what it took.” She winces, and Bucky nods. He gets it. The awful relief he’d felt, knowing he wasn’t alone in having been abused by Alexander Pierce, has been stirring in his chest ever since he heard about Ava.

“Thank you, for doing this,” Bucky says again, so fucking grateful. “You staying, now?”

“Yeah,” Ava answers, “I think I wanna see what happens.” She casts him a long look. “You’re gonna be great, Bucky. Really.”

He nods, and prays she’s right.

***

When they head back in and are sitting again, Bucky has gone pale and still, a hollowness in his eyes when he looks at Steve. It’s worrying him.

Steve leans close to him. “You got this, baby,” he says fiercely, “I’m so, so, so proud of you. You’re so brave for doing this.” Bucky squeezes his hand and doesn’t let go.

“May I proceed?” Maria asks Coulson. He nods. “The prosecution calls James Barnes to the stand.”

Bucky takes a breath and looks at Steve. He nods, knitting his eyebrows together. Bucky squeezes his hand again and then untangles their fingers, standing and walking up there. Next to Steve, Nat tenses and draws a breath.

“Please raise your right hand. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do,” Bucky says, a slight tremor in his voice. He looks at Steve, a frightened sheen in his eyes that tugs dully at Steve’s heart. Steve nods. **You got this.** The bailiff backs down, and Maria walks up to him, calm and focused.

Her first few questions are easy—**state your name, what do you usually go by**—then harder—**what was your job at the time of the attack? What were the circumstances that led you to that position?** Bucky’s prepared, and he gets through it fine, and Steve is so fucking proud of him.

“Bucky,” Maria says, once they’re through with that, “can you tell us when you first met Alexander Pierce?”

“Last January,” Bucky says. His voice wavers, slight enough that only Steve can pick it up. “It was at this dive bar on forty sixth street, Rick’s. It’s this um—sketchy, like, underground club, where you can get all sorts of drugs or escorts or whatever.” He swallows thickly. Steve hates the fear that’s clinging to him, visible all over him, so fucking much. “Anyway, I, um, would go there sometimes to meet people. And this one night, Alexander came in, um—I kind of scoped him out, and he came up to me, and we talked for maybe a half hour. And then he asked me to go with him back to his place, and I said yes.”
Bucky flinches; Steve realizes he’s seeing this all unfold again. He drops his gaze, bites down on his lip, and Steve can feel the shame he’s experiencing, a hard pang in his stomach. Something tears right through his soul at not being able to hold him.

“What did you talk about?” Maria asks.

“I don’t really remember,” Bucky says, quieter, “um—I think I asked what he did, he told me, I said it was impressive. I was flirting with him. I wanted him as a customer.” His cheeks redden. Steve stares at him, willing him to hear it isn’t your fault.

“What happened after you left?” Maria continues.

Bucky swallows. His eyes flicker back to Steve, who gives him a small nod. I love you, it says, you’re doing great.

“We took a cab back to his apartment. He had—has—the penthouse of this building on fifth Avenue and twenty-second, so we took the elevator up.” Bucky shifts; his voice grows thick again. “Then, um, he asked me to give him oral.” He closes his eyes. “So I did.”

Steve’s heard him tell this story before; weeping and shaking in his arms in their bed, stumbling anxiously through it with Maria half a dozen times, voice subdued to a terrified whisper when he reported it to the police. It still sends a spiral of grief through him. The consistent shame in Bucky’s voice, the conviction that he’d existed to submit to whatever horrifying shit other people wanted, the knowledge of what had happened next, spears right through him.

“After that, um, he gave me fifty dollars. Then he asked me if I could come over again that same time next week, and I said sure, and then I left.” Bucky’s eyes go blank and glassy and unfocused.

Maria pulls him back with “And you went back?”

Bucky swallows and works his jaw mechanically, pushing back the beginning of tears. “Yeah,” he says softly, “a week later.”

“What happened then?”

Bucky takes a breath, shuddering so deeply that Steve can see it from his seat. He shrinks in on himself, his whole body retreating in. The need to be beside him, hold his hand, reassure him, is so intense it dizzies him. Nat wraps her fingers lightly around his wrist, like she can tell he’s ten seconds away from hurdling himself up to the stand.

“I, um, I went back to his place. He had told me his apartment number—at his building there’s a doorman sometimes, but never the times I came, so I just walked in—and I took the elevator up and he let me in. We kind of did the ‘how are you’s for a minute, but, um, we both knew what I was there for, so…” He trails off, staring down at his hands. “Um. Then he asked if I wanted a drink, and I said I was fine at first, but he—he sort of insisted. He made it like—I think he said ‘it’s the least I can do.’ So I thought whatever, I didn’t wanna argue, and I said okay, and he poured me a glass of wine.” Bucky’s face darkens. “That’s—I don’t remember what happened next.”

His voice is so fucking small. Steve lets out a quiet, hurt breath; Nat squeezes his hand. He realizes, startled, that she’s never heard it like this. When Steve steals a look at her, she’s pale, eyes stretched wide and horrified. He squeezes back.

“What’s the next thing you remember?” Maria asks gently.

Bucky takes a moment to breathe. A tremor runs through his whole body, but when he speaks, it’s
clear. “I woke up in his bed. I was, um—” A hard swallow. “Everything really hurt, and I was naked, and, um, I remember I felt really, really heavy. Like it was hard to move. I couldn’t remember anything at first, and it kind of came back to me really, really slowly, and, um, things kept kind of…occurring to me. Like, um—” Bucky rubs his hand over his face. There is so much pain in his voice and his eyes and his soul, and it drags Steve under too. “I’d been, I guess, assaulted before. Um. But I’d never been drugged, and um, I realized that was what happened. And I remembered the drink, and everything, and where I was. And just, um—there were these bruises everywhere. After a minute I got up, and his bathroom was there, and I kind of stumbled in and I could see…some of what happened.” Tears well in Bucky’s eyes.

“What do you mean?” Maria presses carefully. She knows how he’s going to reply.

Bucky, though, looks like he’s struggling to figure out what to say. “I had all these, like, bruises over my stomach, and back, and um, my thighs. And my wrist — I didn’t have the prosthetic yet—there were some marks, like he tied it up, and, um”—he bites his cheek—“I couldn’t walk right, so, you know, I had a pretty good idea.”

It still slashes Steve open to hear. How could he? plays over and over again in his brain, heartbroken, loathing, the thought that someone could do that to Bucky so indescribably awful, so excruciatingly wrong.

“And then what happened?”

Bucky’s eyes, terrified, dart back to Steve. He nods again, small and desperate, and mouths I love you. Bucky takes a breath and blinks a few times.

“Then, um, I got dressed. My clothes were just, like, on the floor, and I left but I didn’t realize he was in the kitchen.” Bucky blinks, an empty, frightened sheen in his eyes. “I had to get through there to go out, and I tried, but then, um…he was in there, and he stopped me. He—he grabbed my arm and told me that if I didn’t come back, he’d post the pictures.” Bucky looks down and doesn’t look back up. “I tried to leave anyway and he—he hit me. He made me give him a blowjob.” Bucky’s voice catches, terrified. The words cut into Steve, still hurting after all this time. “I—I—I tried to—stop him. When he was—when he was done, he told me I had to come back, or he’d get me arrested and…post what he had.”

“And did you go back?”

Bucky closes his eyes miserably. “Yeah. I, um, I believed him. I was scared. So when he told me to keep coming back, I did.”

“I know this abuse occurred over the course of several months, so I don’t want to ask you to relive every single time you saw him. However, can you give a description of what he would typically do?”

“He’d, um, he’d rape me. Anally. And orally. Both, most of the time. On his couch, on his bed, wherever. He would, um—he hit me, a lot. If I—if I screamed, or said no, or cried. Or just…just ‘cause.” Bucky is describing mechanically, disattached, still staring at his hands. “Sometimes with his belt. Sometimes while he was, um, having sex with me. Or after. He, um. He sometimes gagged me, with it too—the belt, like tie it around, um, my mouth, if I wasn’t quiet enough. He—he would choke me, during it. During, um, the sexual stuff. I’d pass out sometimes, ‘cause it hurt so bad. If, um, there were bruises, he would press his fingers into them. He called me things.” Bucky swallows; his voice barely grazes a whisper. “Um. You know. Slut, whore, fag, ‘you belong to me, I control you, I’ll fucking kill you if you forget that.’” Bucky finally looks up. Tears are running down his cheeks. Steve’s heart twists itself into a pulsing knot. Bucky takes a long, trembling
breath, then gives Maria a quick nod.

“When did you stop going to his house every week?” she asks patiently.

Bucky shuts his eyes. “After seven months. It was mid-July. Um, he—he beat me up really badly, one night. I went to my friend’s house after, and she made me promise I wouldn’t go back. And, um, I knew she was right. I couldn’t.” His voice wanes slightly; his gaze drops again.

“Did this friend know about Mr. Pierce?”

“No. She figured something was happening, um—I showed up at her house a lot, on Wednesdays. After I saw him. But she didn’t know who he was.” Bucky rubs his neck anxiously.

“What’s this friend’s name?”

“Wanda Maximoff.”

“And what are these texts—exhibits twenty five and twenty six—from the night you’re referring to?”

She projects the screenshots that she’d gotten from Wanda on the screen. Steve has read them already—it’s Wanda and Scott, going back and forth about how worried they are about him, the horrible shape he’d been in, Wanda debating if she should call the cops.

Bucky says, his voice quivering “It’s Wanda and my other friend, from that night, after I crashed at her place.”

Maria clicks the screen off. “When was the next time you saw Alexander Pierce?” she asks.


“What happened at the party?”

“I was there with Steve, my partner, and um, Alexander was there. Steve had met him before. He, um—I told him about Alexander, but he didn’t know that they knew each other. They talked for a minute, and then I went to the bathroom, for a minute, ’cause I was really shocked. And just… really scared. Once I came out, um, Alexander was there.” Bucky crosses his arms over his chest. His eyes go to Steve again, and he swallows.

Every time Steve hears this, it hurts. You should have been there. You should have protected him. He knows it’s illogical, ridiculous to think he should have known—knows it more than ever, since he’s talked to Henry about it—but he can’t help the nausea, and he bites it down. All he fucking wants is to take care of Bucky. He should’ve done it that night, too. As Bucky retells the story of that night, it tugs at him more than ever, and he finds himself glaring at Pierce, hatred threatening to split him down the middle. He shakes it off to watch Bucky, grief and love and astonishment at his strength overwhelming him.

“Why did you wait several months to report this abuse?” she asks, after Bucky has finished describing the night of the party.

“Because I didn’t think anyone would take it seriously. Considering his position, and mine, but, um… People in my life eventually convinced me to.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barnes. I’m calling a twenty minute recess, and then we’ll continue with cross-examination.” Coulson bangs the gavel, the noise making Bucky flinch, briefly terrified.

He can’t get off the stand fast enough. He pushes through the gate, the ground feeling like it’s tumbling out underneath him. Steve has jumped to his feet and pushed to the front so he’s there when Bucky gets through, letting Bucky stumble into his arms and not letting go. He keeps his eyes down as Steve throws an arm over his shoulder and leads him out of the courtroom and around a corner in the hallway, and when Steve slumps against the wall Bucky allows himself to come unraveled.

Steve holds him, pours all the love he’d wanted to give him during that last hour and a half out while Bucky leans into him. He’s crying softly, not sobbing, just desperate, quivering whimpers. Steve opens his eyes and, upon realizing there’s a photographer a couple of yards away, glowers until he has the decency to look embarrassed and leave.

“You’re doing so, so, so good, baby.” Steve runs his hands through Bucky’s hair, brushes away tears for him. “I’m so proud of you, Buck, you’re so fucking brave.”

“Bucky,” Nat says thickly, materializing with some water bottles and holds her arms open. Bucky gives her an exhausted lift of his shoulders and hugs her tight. Her eyes are squeezed shut and she’s clinging to him with the same desperation to envelope him in love that Steve feels.

They just wait. Before they go back in, Steve holds him for a good three minutes, silent, not letting go or moving or speaking. When he pulls away, his eyes are so soft it’s excruciating. “I love you so much, Buck. You’re almost done.”

Bucky nods and breathes, memorizing the feeling of being safe and loved to hold on to for the next hour or so.

And then, in a frantic few minutes, he’s up there again, heart plunging into ice water when the defense begins.

“Bucky, is it?” Zola begins, and Bucky feels an immediate, intense wave of dread.

“Yeah. It’s from my middle name. That’s what most people call me.” Bucky’s throat has constricted shut, but he manages to keep it stable.

“Alright if I call you that?”

“Fine,” Buck says tightly. Already, he can feel everything tightening, the walls and his skin, his shoulders hunching in slightly, a noose materializing.

“Great.” Zola gives him a repulsive smile. “I have a couple of questions. You said, I’m quoting”—he makes a show of glancing down—“‘I’d been, I guess, assaulted before.’” Fear pricks Bucky’s skin. He bites his lip. “You guess?”

“I have,” Bucky says. His voice feels flimsy and thin.

“By who?”

“Objection!” Maria says fiercely, standing, “Your honor, he’s badgering my witness.”

Zola turns. “All due respect to Mr. Barnes, your honor, asking him to clarify a previous statement isn’t badgering.”
Coulson glances between them for a moment, then says “Overruled. You can ask him to clarify, but then move on, please.”

“Thank you.” Zola smiles and turns back to Bucky. “Who assaulted you before, Bucky?”

“There were… other men.” Bucky feels like half the oxygen in the room has plummeted, leaving him with the need to gasp but without the energy.

“More than one?” Zola pushes. Bucky shuts his eyes briefly.

“Your honor, objection!” Maria stands again, indignant. “This is distressing to my witness and has nothing to do with Alexander Pierce.”

This time, Coulson takes it. “Sustained. Move along, Mr. Zola, this is completely unnecessary.”

But the damage is done. He’s burrowed a knife into Bucky and left him vulnerable and exposed, easier to prey on. Bucky feels like he’s had the air kicked out of him. Everything curls in; his shoulders, his stomach, so he’s smaller, braced against what’s coming.

“So you willingly went home with Mr. Pierce the first night you met him?” Zola says, changing gears.

“Yes.” The word sticks to Bucky’s throat, disgusting.

“And what happened that night was consensual?”

He stares down at his hands, self-hatred and shame rearing it’s head again, burning through his throat like acid. “Yeah.”

“But nothing after that was?” There’s a smirk twisting in Zola’s voice; he’s enjoying this.

“No.” He shakes his head, not lifting it. It’s barely a whisper. Breathe, breathe, BREATHE. Bucky curls his fingers in, looking back up at Steve. He’s leaning forward in his chair, all widened, concerned, alert eyes that go warm and gentle when Bucky looks at him.

“So even though you allege that you were raped by my client the second time you ever met him, you willingly returned to his house afterwards?” Zola’s words have hardened, sharpened; the knife twists.

Alexander, thrusting shallowly in his mouth, sneering You want it, you know what’s good for you baby, this is what you need. The thick, searing, poisonous fog of conviction that he deserved this, it was his fault, he knew what he was getting into; it presses in on him the same way it had when he watched Alexander’s interview. Suffocating, strangling, hurting.

“Yes,” Bucky says, faint and far away.

“Why did you go back, if you’d had such an awful experience before?”

“I was scared,” Bucky replies hollowly.

“You were scared,” Zola repeats. Bucky doesn’t miss the mocking note. It makes something sick writh inside him. “Of what, exactly?”

Bucky looks, stupidly, at Alexander. He’s resisted it the whole time but he can’t help it anymore, and he wishes right away that he hadn’t. His mouth is curled into a tight smirk, eyes driving into him, full of the same callousness as every time he’d beat him, screamed at him, choked or hit or
thrust harder when Bucky begged him to stop. It sends terror corkscrewing through him.

“He—he—he had those pictures. He said he’d…release them.” Bucky swallows the coarse shame.

Zola walks back and forth, pretending to think it over. “He had photos, that you say he took while you were drugged and unconscious. You were afraid he’d post them… where, exactly?”

The room is swaying. “Some porn site.” Something within him has doused his insides in gasoline and tossed a lit match into his chest.

“You were afraid of explicit photos getting posted, but you were willing to give strangers sexual favors?”

*Itwasn’tmyfault* “Yes. And I—he told me—he told me that if I didn’t come back, he’d get me arrested, and I was scared of that, too.”

Zola stops pacing and fixes him with a condescending look. “Even though he didn’t know your full name or address? You thought he could track you down?”

Maria asked him that question when they had practiced. Her voice, though, hadn’t been laced with cruelty, and he hadn’t been ten feet away from Alexander, and there weren’t thirty other people around. The admission tears through his soul, the very thing he’d been so ashamed of, laid out for everyone to see, the inconsistencies that kept bearing down on him.

His eyes flit to Steve. He looks murderous, ready to spring from where he’s sitting and go for Zola, and Nat seems to think so too, because she’s leaning forward and touching his arm. When he looks back at Bucky, the anger subsides, melting away into gentleness and encouragement.

“I was scared,” Bucky repeats hoarsely, something desperate surging in it.

Zola waits, leaving a long enough beat for everyone to understand that it doesn’t make sense. Then, he says “But you stopped coming much later. Once he potentially had a lot more information on you. Why?”

Reaching across himself to rub his neck, Bucky says, trembling, “Because it got so bad that I—it didn’t matter if he posted it. I just couldn’t go back.”

Zola doesn’t like that answer. His eyes narrow, irritated. Then, he says, “Bucky. You were seeing several different men at a time. You say you were assaulted before, correct?”

It takes him a couple of tries, but he manages, “Yes.”

“Do you know all of their names?”

“No.” It feels like his voice is being spiraling down a gyre, smaller, smaller, gone.

“If you saw them in a lineup, could you identify all of them?”

“Objection. Relevance,” Maria calls.

“One more second, and you’ll see the relevance,” Zola replies, so fucking *eager* to get to it.

Coulson glances between them, then at Bucky. “Get there now, Mr. Zola. Mr. Barnes, you can answer.”

Fear is caving in on him. “Yes.”
“Are you sure? Remember, you’re under oath.”

Everything feels like it’s closing in, threatening to swallow him whole. “I think so,” Bucky whispers.

“You think, or you know?” Zola’s eyes have narrowed into focused, cold pockets and are bearing in on him.

“I think,” Bucky says breathlessly, terrified. Zola’s voice, the frightening, impersonal stares of everyone in the room, Alexander staring him down; it’s all making him think whatever flimsy scaffolding is holding him up is collapsing in, his insides turning to brittle stone. Paranoia is hot under his skin; every answer feels wrong, the repercussions of them lurking, waiting to jump.

“But you’re not one hundred percent sure?” Zola confirms, quiet triumph lying behind the words.

Bucky whispers, a little tearful, “I don’t know.”

“If you aren’t absolutely sure you could guess the other people who you say attacked you, how can you be sure that your relationship with Alexander Pierce was abusive?”

Bucky makes himself look up, stunned. “It— it was,” he stammers.

“But you just said that you don’t know if you could pull another attacker out of a lineup. How are you so sure that this is the man who hurt you?”

“It was months. It was him,” Bucky says, his voice stronger. The shock of the question threw him, momentarily, out of panic.

“You’re so sure about that, even though you aren’t sure about anyone else who allegedly raped you?” Zola’s tone has turned condescending.

“Yes,” Bucky grits out, “I’m sure.”

Zola gives him a lingering, skeptical look that he makes sure the jury sees, but moves on.

“Can you describe your relationship with Steve Rogers?” he asks, changing gears.

Bucky looks anxiously to Steve. He’s promised a hundred thousand times that he isn’t worried about his name being dragged through the mud, but Bucky is still terrified that hearing it for real will be too much for him.

Steve has straightened up, but he still looks calm—relatively, anyway—and he’s watching Bucky with the same encouraging love he has been the whole time. His eyes stay fixed on Bucky, endlessly soft, and it sends him a feeble jolt of relief.

“Objection,” Maria says immediately, “relevance.”

“I’m getting to the relevance,” Zola says calmly. Maria had predicted all of this.

“Overruled. But get there fast.”

Zola turns back to Bucky. “We’re in a relationship,” Bucky answers. It gives him a surge of something like strength.

“Is it a business relationship?” Zola replies, thinly smug.
Maria stands, furious. Before she can object, Coulson snaps, “No more questions about the witness’s history or relationship, or I’ll cut your time. Get to the point, Mr. Zola.”

“Apologies, your honor.” Zola pushes up his glasses, but recovers quickly. “When you entered into your relationship with Steve Rogers, were you aware of his relationship with Alexander Pierce?”

Bucky swallows, throat feeling like sandpaper. “No.”

“When did you become aware that the two of them knew each other?”

“In December. At the party,” Bucky says hoarsely.

“You’re sure?” Zola presses.

“Yes.”

“So you told Mr. Rogers about a person who allegedly attacked you, but you never gave his full name?”

Bucky swallows, his mouth dry. “Yeah. I didn’t…like talking about him for long.”

Zola’s gaze lingers, demeaning. Then he turns away.

“Do you know what these photos are?” Zola clicks briefly through his evidence folder and selects a photo, enlarging it. Bucky bites his lip. It’s a close up of the bruises Pierce had gotten when Steve punched him; a couple of different angles of his face, a shot of his knuckles.

“It’s injuries Alexander had,” Bucky answers shortly. He wishes, bitterly, he had taken pictures of some of the shit that Alexander had done to him then.

“Do you know how he got them?” Zola asks, a smirk tearing through his voice.

“It’s from when Steve hit him,” Bucky says, anxiety spiking again.

“Can you see how, potentially, someone with the knowledge that a person they attacked had these images might want to ruin their reputation?”

Bucky is just done. He is so fucking done with being called a liar by these people, but more than that, he’s done with anyone trying to drag down Steve.

Bucky snaps “Yeah. Kind of like what your client did to me with all those interviews.”

Alexander’s face contorts into momentary astonishment, like he didn’t think Bucky had it in him. It sinks back into rage, more so than before. Bucky looks at Steve; his mouth twitches upward into an amused, proud smirk. Zola blanches, obviously angry. He covers it up a moment later.

“Did you ever go to the police about any of these other alleged attacks?” Zola asks him. Bucky looks down.

“No.”

“Why not?”

He feels shrunken, diminished again. “There was no proof. And I didn’t think anyone would
believe me, since I’d been a sex worker. It seemed pointless.” Everything blurs in and out of focus.

“But all of a sudden, after an altercation with your boyfriend and Mr. Pierce, it seemed like the right time?”

Bucky makes himself look up even though panic wants to pull his gaze down again. He swallows. “Pierce tried to rape me again at that party. I didn’t feel safe, and there was evidence. And… And I hadn’t been in a place where I felt like reporting was an option, and now I was.” His voice shakes, but he doesn’t stammer.

“Because you were living with Steve Rogers?” Zola presses.

Bucky bites his cheek.

“Objection, relevance and abusing my witness,” Maria calls. Anger flares quietly behind it.

“Sustained. Strike that from the record.”

Zola’s eyes flash. Finally, he says, “The defense rests.”

Bucky can’t contain his relief. Whatever had been keeping him up collapses; his shoulders go in, his head drops. Tears threaten to push over, exhausted, terrified, grieving, but he swallows it. Coulson dismisses him, and he makes it off the stand, back to Steve, who pulls him in, tight and safe. Waiting, paralyzed, for whatever is next.

Chapter End Notes

so here we are trial pt 1 down i hope everyone is enjoying i also am pretty sure it's quite accurate because i have now read every legal information page known to man but if there are any glaring mistakes feel free to tell me!

it might be 2 weeks before the next part bc it's also long but also i'm seeing endgame saturday and if they fuck things up for steve and bucky i might rage-write the next chapter in one night i did that for some chapter after i rewatched civil war bc i was MAD so we'll see..... thank you all for reading THANK YOU FOR YOUR BEAUTIFUL COMMENTS THEY ABSOLUTELY FLOOR ME EVERY TIME

come see me on tumblr if u feel like it @cafelesbian if you read these entire 2 chapters in one sitting big kudos to you see yall soon pals
Bucky keeps it together until they get into the car.

When Coulson dismisses everyone, Maria gestures to them to hang back a moment. People filter out in clusters with the same intensity of people leaving a theater after an especially shocking movie. Zola and the Pierces stay, talking quietly and urgently. Bucky is acutely and horribly aware of their presence, of Alexander in particular, a couple of empty yards from him, his eyes on Bucky, violating, shrinking. Steve has an arm around his shoulders, relentlessly protective. Natasha hovers behind them a few feet, locked in a glowering contest with Alexander’s son.

“You did great,” Maria says quietly. “Bucky, seriously, that was perfect.”

Bucky nods vaguely. “I, um, I’m sorry about that first part,” Bucky says timidly. The conviction that he’d compromised the case by letting what Zola said get into him and poison him has been grinding down on him. He’s half-waiting for her to yell at him for it.

“That was nothing,” Maria says briskly, instead, “seriously. It’s impossible to say the perfect thing while you’re under that grueling of a cross examination. You did everything right.”

“Thank you, Maria,” Bucky says wearily. He reaches up and takes Steve’s hand that’s lying loosely over his shoulder.

“You’re done with the hardest part, Bucky,” Maria tells him. “Go home, get some rest. I have something to check on”—she glances back vaguely—“so I’m gonna run. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She gives Bucky and Steve a quick hug each, says to Nat “nice meeting you,” and heads out, loose bun bouncing. The three of them wait for a moment, regaining balance, before turning to go.

The Pierces and their team are still there, heads bent, as Bucky begins to head out. As he’s leaving, Alexander Jr. breaks from the group and pushes past Bucky roughly. Bucky flinches hard, panic leaping in his throat at the contact, the hollow, desperate echo of don’t touch me don’t hit me don’t look at me stirring again, paralyzing his lungs.

“Sorry,” Alex Jr. says coldly, with a sneer that says he isn’t sorry at all. Bucky tries to take a stunted breath and drops his gaze and his head. Steve lets go of him and steps forward.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Steve says. A knife twists in his voice, white-hot and threatening, angry in a quivering, acute way that Bucky has only ever heard from him a few times.

Alexander Jr. holds his gaze, slow satisfaction seeping into his eyes. “Watch it, Rogers,” he says smugly, “you’ve already assaulted one member of my family, and look what it’s brought you.”

“Does Daddy love you more if you fight his battles, Alex?” Steve retorts hotly.

Alex looks momentarily furious, but then comes back with, “Does your boyfriend love you more if you fight his?”

At that, Steve steps closer. His shoulders are thrown back, fingers taut; Bucky knows he’ll do it too, the same way he’d gone after anyone who threatened Bucky.
He reaches out and squeezes Steve’s arm. “Steve,” Bucky says quietly, “don’t. Let’s go.” Nat touches Steve’s arm on the other side, a soft warning. Steve keeps his gaze trained on Alexander; for a minute, Bucky sees seventeen-year-old Steve with too much impulsivity and too much more of a sense of morals, adrenaline leaping through him, bounding after the chance to fight someone who was meeting the world with less-than acceptable human decency no matter how badly the odds were stacked against him. There’s a glint of something bright and hot in Steve’s eyes, and for a minute, Bucky thinks he might go for it.

Instead, he takes Bucky’s hand again and steps forward. “Get out of our way,” Steve says in a low, dangerous voice. Alexander’s eyes narrow, something almost like disappointment pulling at the corners of his mouth, but he steps out of the way.

Bucky sags with relief. Steve throws an arm over his shoulder as they head out, exhaling heavily, and Bucky looks up at him. “You might be the dumbest asshole I’ve ever met in my life,” he says, because if he says I love you and you make me feel so protected and loved, he’ll cry.

Steve smiles tiredly. “I wouldn’t have actually done anything,” he says, defensive.

“Yes, you would’ve,” Bucky and Nat say in unison, and then the three of them start laughing, out of place in the middle of that miserable hallway.

Then he hears “Bucky!” A girl’s voice, high and nervous. Bucky swings around, shoulders tensing, then his breath catches.

Claire Pierce, coming after them, heels clicking dully against the linoleum. Bucky winces at his name on her lips and leans closer to Steve, too fucking drained to find the words to answer her.

Steve, evidently, is not. “Can we help you?” he snaps, impatient, angry. Protective.

Bucky loves him.

She startles at the harshness of it, but then grimaces, resigned. “No, um. I don’t–this isn’t what you probably need right now, I don’t, um.” She takes a hard breath and pushes back her hair. She looks tired, almost sheepish. “I’m just–I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” She bites her lip and looks up. “You don’t, like, need to talk to me, or anything that’s not… what I want here, um, I’ll leave you alone in a second. I just–I’m so sorry. I know–” she pauses, grief coming over her face. “I know you’re telling the truth.”

Bucky blinks, bewildered. “Um,” he stammers, after a stunned beat, “thank you.” It comes out more as a question. He isn’t sure what her angle is. He reaches for Steve’s hand again, locks their fingers tightly, the security of it like drawing a weapon. Claire’s eyes flit down, then up, then back to Bucky. He stares at her. He doesn’t know what she wants, if she’s waiting for it’s okay or I forgive you or it’s not your fault. He doesn’t especially feel like comforting Claire Pierce right now, when he’s just spent the last hour and a half being told by her family’s lawyer what a lying, manipulative slut he was in front of an entire room of people and his legs feel like they could give out and he just wants to collapse into tears or into Steve’s arms.

She takes another sharp breath. “Right. Yeah. Um. I’m sorry, I’m gonna go…” She gestures back, towards where the rest of her family and Zola are inevitably discussing how else to cut Bucky down, then seems to realize what a bad idea that was. Steve gives her a cold, unimpressed gaze. Bucky swallows and looks away, feeling suddenly sick. Claire winces, then lifts her hand in a vague goodbye. For a moment, she looks like she might, like, touch Bucky’s shoulder or something, but either the look Steve gives her is enough to stop that or she has the common sense to pull back, because she ends up touching her hair and giving him an apologetic nod. She turns
and hurries back to her family, the tap of her heels echoing incessantly.

Bucky, Steve and Nat all stare after her, trying to figure out if that really happened. Nat breaks the silence first.

“Is she fucking kidding? ‘I believe you.’ God, I’d hope so. What’s she want, a pat on the back? Congrats, sweetheart.” She’s hotly indignant, resentment all over her face.

“Yeah,” Steve says. He’s staring into space in confused irritation, trying to work out what he just witnessed.

“Can we go home?” Bucky says wearily. Almost before the words are out, the sound of his name hauls his attention elsewhere; he spins, startled, when someone yells, “Bucky! Do you have a minute?”

A woman and man, standing just beyond them, waiting eagerly. Reporters, Bucky can tell immediately, from the notebook and camera, and anxiety clenches at his throat. “Do you have time to answer a couple of questions?”

Bucky stares, blankly, irritation flaring up. “No,” he says coldly, after a moment.

The woman pushes in anyway, with, “How did that feel? How are you feeling about the defense starting their witnesses tomorrow?” Bucky startles, overwhelmed. “Steve, what’s this like for you?”

Steve opens his mouth, probably to say something snarky and impulsive, but Nat cuts him off. “He said they don’t have time,” she snaps, “now fuck off, if you don’t mind. They’ve dealt with more than enough today.” The woman blinks, offended, but then she backs down, turning away sheepishly.

Nat turns back to them and smiles. “Figured they can call me the obnoxious, disagreeable asshole instead of you guys,” she says calmly, “I’ve got no reputation to uphold.”

“You’re a gem, you know that?” Bucky says to her, with a grateful smile, and Steve gives her a good-natured shove. She grins, and they walk out of the courtroom together.

***

Alexander’s driver is waiting for him when he finally fucking gets out of that courthouse. Alex Jr. and Zola take the car with him. Martha and Claire wait for a different one.

He doesn’t have time to care. Alexander gets into the car and uncaps one of the airplane bottles he’d left, downs it in one gulp. Then he tosses it aside and goes for another.

Zola and Alex Jr. exchange a quick look. Neither of them say anything. The air around them has been pulled taut and tense; they’re waiting for Alexander to fracture it.

After his second drink, he does. “He got a little too fucking bold up there,” Alexander snarls. Cold, crystal-solid hatred fills his voice.

Zola looks towards him. “It’s okay,” he says calmly. “What’s important, is now the prosecution is done, and starting tomorrow, we get to put our side of the story forward.”

Alexander turns to him. Zola looks utterly useless, fumbling and unsure, and hatred towards him suddenly rises. “You could’ve brought him down harder,” he says scornfully. “Do you know how
fucking weak he is? How easy it is to get him to break?”

Zola purses his lips. “Is that what you would’ve said, Alexander? You think the jury would’ve taken that well?”

Alexander glares at him. “Barnes is pathetic. The fact that he kept it together at all up there meant you were going too easy on him.”

“There are *rules* about what I could say—”

“Arnim, that is bullshit!” He smacks his hand against the window; the car shudders. “I’ve gotten him to fall apart with a look, it’s not fucking hard—”

“I guess not when you’ve been beating the shit out of him,” Zola snarls. For a moment, astonishment from both parties makes the air go still. Then Alexander rears forward and grabs him by the sleeve, jerking him in.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?”

Zola wonders, wildly, for a moment, if Alexander is really a threat to him. He’s spent the thirteen years he’s known him secure in his knowledge that no matter how bad the stories were, no matter how many non-disclosures he had to convince people to sign, Alexander was a decent person to the people who mattered. He’s been at the parties thrown in his home for years and been met with nothing but generosity, seen him charm businessmen into deals in a matter of minutes with nothing but warmth, seen the dinners he planned and gifts he bought for his wife and children, all of whom he’d never put a hand on. The people who claimed other things, frankly, were nobodies. Secretaries and whores acting like their feelings mattered more than the empire Alexander had built and the needs he might have had. Zola doesn’t see that as immoral, no matter how many people would condemn it. In his eyes, there will always be a hierarchy of the people who matter. People like Alexander Pierce, the only billionaire in America to have made his wealth in banking, and people like Zola, who protected the integrity and livelihoods of the capitalists and titans who did so much for the world, they got the top. The James Barnes’ and Ava Starrs of the world should have to settle at times. Whatever Alexander did to them wasn’t his concern.

But right now, Alexander is looking at him with a venom he’s never witnessed, and the attacks that Starr and Barnes had whined about seem almost plausible.

“My bad, Alex,” he says shakily. Alexander doesn’t let go for a moment, his anger palpable. Then he shoots Zola one last detestful look and shoves him back.

“Who’s going tomorrow?”

Zola looks shaken, (Good. Teach him to talk to me that way Alexander thinks triumphantly) but he clears his throat. “Um. The psychologist. And Martha, probably. I, uh—she knows what to say.”

“Fine,” Alexander says. Zola nods, still struggling to get his footing.

“We’ve, um, we’ve sent the character letters in. Coulson should read them in the next few days. Thank you, Alex.” Zola turns to Alex Jr., who’s been staring, wide-eyed and pale, at the floor. He gives Zola a weak nod and goes back to looking like he wants to cease to exist. “Then, uh, Rumlow and you, in the next few days.” Alexander nods dismissively.

“Alex,” he tells his son, who startles, “pass me that bottle.”

He’s met Rumlow once; he went to talk to him at one of the visiting hours with Zola, scoping him
out to make sure he’d be a solid enough witness. Rumlow gave him the shortened version of what Zola knew; he’d say he knew James, had seen him on the street, knew the kinds of things he was willing to do. Another wave of hatred hits Alexander—low-life slut like that thinks he can ruin my life.

“How come you’re doing this?” Alexander had asked him, skeptical, cold.

Brock had leaned back and crossed his arms. “Same as you. I’m doing whatever I can to minimize the time I’m in here. Cooperating in a court case…” Brock trailed off. Then he narrowed his eyes, licked his lips. “The other thing is some of the things that Barnes is accusing you of…” A slight, joyless smirk. “Let’s just if he’s going down a list and checking off people to put in jail, I don’t need another charge on my name. James—that the name he gave you, too?”

“Yeah,” Alexander said, with a rough laugh.

Rumlow nodded. “Well, if he gets brave with this case, it won’t do me any good if he decides to try his luck.” A pause. “Not that I did anything. But you know what I mean.”

“Of course,” Alexander said, and smiled. “I know how he is. I’m sure you do, too.”

“Fucking pain in my ass,” he said irritably. Then with a smirk and a slight cock of his head, “Well.” Alexander had laughed, and decided this had been a good choice.

Not to mention, if James had the same panicky, deer-in-headlights reaction to Brock as he did to Alexander, it couldn’t hurt.

He shakes off the panic that’s growing harder and harder to ignore and takes another swig.

***

The car drops Nat off first. She gives them each a tight hug and says she’ll text later, her eyes lingering, worried, on Bucky as she leaves. As soon as she’s gone, Bucky collapses against Steve and starts weeping, exhaustion bearing in on him more than anything else, the hurt of what had been said to him burning him up. Steve holds him, and tells him what a good job he did, how much he loves him, while the driver pretends not to notice. Bucky doesn’t have the energy to be self-conscious.

When they’re home, Bucky calls Jennifer and Steve calls Henry. Jennifer and Bucky had pre-scheduled this session, so they’re on the phone for about an hour, shut in the bedroom. Bucky is too exhausted to cry; he tells her what happened, the beginning of the day feeling like a lifetime ago, and Jennifer reminds him fiercely that what they’d said is a lie.

“I’m so proud of you, Bucky,” she tells him, “you’ve come so far. You’re handling all of this so, so well.”

She asks him how he’s feeling now, and what he and Steve are planning to do for the rest of the night, and reminds him of the truths to repeat to himself and the grounding exercises to use in case it all becomes too much tonight. While Bucky talks to her, Steve calls Henry from the studio.

Henry had texted Steve earlier I know it’s a big day for you and Bucky….. Let me know if you wanna chat later. Thinking of you both. Steve has grown to like him immensely. They’ve been talking a lot about the guilt Steve’s been dealing with and the helplessness that he can’t do more for Bucky. Those feelings have flared up around the trial, coupled with the anxiety of it and all-consuming hatred for Pierce and everyone associated with him, and it’s helping, laying it all out with someone unbiased who knows why feelings like that carve so deeply into him at times like
this. He tells Henry that Bucky had done great, and so had Ava Starr, that Arnim Zola was one of the worst people alive and so was Alexander’s son, that watching Bucky go through this hurts so, so much and he’s still grappling with the lack of action he can take. Henry listens, and tells him he’s doing his best, reminding him how much of a process healing is, for Bucky, who, no matter how much Steve loves him and supports him, still has parts of recovery that only he can accomplish.

“The same way it is for you,” Henry continues, “your relationship is so strong because you’re both so fiercely supportive and loving towards one another. But there are elements of growing and recovering that aren’t facilitated by other people no matter what, you know? Just like you’d never expect Bucky to shoulder all of the weight that you’re dealing with, it’s not fair of you to put that on yourself. I’ve been married fifteen years, Steve, believe me.” Steve smiles at that. “Seriously, you’re such a great partner to him. And it’s one hundred percent better that you didn’t beat up Pierce’s son in the middle of the courtroom.” Steve’s not sure he agrees, but when he hangs up he feels maybe ten percent lighter than he had earlier.

Afterwards, Steve looks through the news for a few minutes. The headlines piss him off, all sensationalized and insensitive — Alexander Pierce accuser testifies, details months of abuse and Two separate witnesses claim sexual abuse from Principle Trust CEO during trial and, most infuriating of all, Pierce accuser gets tearful during testimony, with a grainy photo of Bucky and Steve in the hallway, frozen in a painful embrace. The guy Steve had glared at, presumably. Because he has no self control, Steve reads that one.

The trial of Alexander Pierce, CEO of Principle Trust bank who’s been accused of rape by former sex worker James Barnes, continued today (read our coverage from yesterday here). For over three hours, Barnes testified against him today. During the course of his testimony, Barnes got repeatedly emotional while describing the alleged abuse. Artist Steve Rogers, Barnes’ “partner” was present for the trial, seen here comforting him...

Steve closes it, livid at the way Bucky is being talked about. The rest are the same, some slightly less judgy, most longer and focused on the things Bucky had said. A few talk about Ava (Steve hopes to God she’s doing alright), a few of them talk about him, and Zola’s evidence that Steve had attacked Pierce, but he has lost the ability to care even a fraction.

He tosses aside his phone—reading this isn’t helping anything—and heads back into the living room. Bucky is out on the balcony with his knees pulled to his chest, watching lights flicker on in skyscrapers as the sky fades from one gray to another. It looks like the sky before the end of the world.

Steve walks out and Bucky looks up. “Good talk?” Bucky asks him, smiling sadly.

Steve sits next to him and puts an arm around him. “Yeah,” he says, “you?”

“Yeah.” Bucky laughs, a weak huff of air. “Pretty romantic, huh? Concurring therapy sessions?”

“I don’t know what you think isn’t romantic about recovering, Barnes,” Steve says with a grin.

Bucky laughs again, something heartbreaking in it, then kisses Steve on the cheek. “You think about them much?” Bucky asks, resting his cheek against Steve’s shoulder. His voice has grown quiet. “The other Pierces?” He sounds wounded.

Steve pushes his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “I don’t know,” he says, “not until the trial started. Do you?”
He feels Bucky swallow. “I do now,” he says, exhausted. It hangs in the air, thick as the summer heat.

When Bucky doesn’t elaborate, Steve says, “There is so much dysfunction in that fucking family.”

Bucky nods, gaze dropping. “Seeing them is so weird,” he says. He sounds so hurt. “God. I knew they, like, existed, from photos and stuff, but I didn’t really, you know?” A heavy pause. The oppressive city heat makes the air throb, dangerous. “They hate me.” Something bitter and sad sprains the words. Steve squeezes Bucky closer to his side. “I thought—I don’t know. I didn’t think it would be that.” ‘That’ being Pierce’s wife looking at him like something repulsive and hideous, Pierce’s son threatening him vaguely, smirking at the terror he caused. “At least from the wife and kid. I don’t know about the daughter.” Bucky blows out a frustrated, exhausted breath. “I can’t stop—fuck, Steve, I can’t stop thinking that I fucked up their whole family. And the worst is that I know that’s not true, and he did it by… by doing that to me, and his wife supporting him is crazy. But I can’t not feel that. Even when Claire said that today, all I thought was that I was fucking up her life.”

Steve feels a sudden flash of anger at the selfishness of it. Claire Pierce, sitting with her family, hovering around while they talk about how to let her dad get away with his horrific abuse, feeling the need to clarify to Bucky that she believed him. Like it mattered what she thought, while Bucky was here, reeling from what her father did to him, like the knowledge that she believed him was important. No offer to help the prosecution. No apology for the letter she had signed when the case first broke to the public. No condemnation of him. Just a half-hearted apology so she could sleep at night.

“Baby, they were broken way before this,” Steve murmurs carefully, kissing his forehead. “Pierce has been hurting people for a long time. No one who loved their family would do something like that. He doesn’t know how to love anyone. The fact that they’re seeing that now doesn’t make it your fault, Buck. I’d bet you any amount of money that there have been tons of problems in that house for years. You didn’t cause them.”

Bucky sighs. They’re quiet, for a while, the sky deepening in color, the smell of the rain swelling. Bucky lifts his head.

“I’m gonna make some tea, you want some?” he asks Steve. Steve shakes his head, then follows him inside. It’s gone almost totally dark, dusk having pushed shadows in on the kitchen and living room, so Bucky flicks on the stove light as he starts the water. Steve watches him lean forward, hands pressed onto the counter, shoulders tense as he lowers his head and shudders.

“You alright?” Steve asks him, pushing Bucky’s hair to one side to rub his shoulders. Bucky takes a small breath and leans backwards, Steve’s hands working away some of the tension in his stature.

Bucky turns his head to look at his incredible, beautiful, miracle of a boyfriend. The light on over the oven is the only light in the room, and it’s throwing a golden luster over Steve’s face that makes him look like he’s under a spotlight. The only bright thing in all that darkness.

Bucky smiles, a broken thing, like light cutting through shattered glass. That’s what it makes Steve think of.


Bucky looks up at him through those exquisite eyes, the color of them changing slightly with every pinprick of light that flickers. Wide and brave and focused on Steve. Then he leans in and kisses him, soft and slow, one hand on Steve’s cheek, tentative at first but then desperate, surging in,
crashing their lips together.

Steve’s hands fumble touching Bucky’s back, pushing aside his hair. Gentle, patient, careful. Bucky’s skin is soft under Steve’s fingers, his lips feel like tasting color, and all Steve can think, overwhelmingly, is you’re all I’ve ever wanted you’re so beautiful how could someone take advantage of this, this closeness, this love, twist it into something impossibly cruel.

Steve pushes the thought away.

He kisses Bucky like he’s trying to heal him, like if he kisses him slow and deep enough he’ll touch the parts of him that have been battered and hurt from the inside and soothe them. Bucky kisses him back like it’s working. His fingers press lightly on the back of Steve’s neck and his prosthetic gathers the fabric of Steve’s shirt and they stumble, for a minute, until Bucky backs into the counter island and startles and Steve pulls away, worried he’s hurt him, but Bucky pulls him back in and they’re kissing again. Bucky wraps his arm around Steve’s neck, their chests pressed against each other, close. A movie screen kiss. On tiptoes so he’s closer to Steve. Desperation, pain, love, so much fucking love it leaves them breathless. Closeness. Trust. Love, love, love, love.

“I love you,” Steve murmurs against Bucky’s lips, because if he doesn’t say it it will drown him, which wouldn’t be a bad fate at all.

“I love you, Stevie,” Bucky mumbles back, and laughs, punch-drunk. Then they’re kissing again, pulling each other in, trying to close the space between them that has already ceased to exist, trying to eradicate any possible separation of their bodies. Bucky pushes himself up to sit on the counter and Steve helps to hoist him, pushing his hips up gently. Bucky’s arms tangle around Steve’s neck again, inseparable and gentle and brave, and when Steve wraps his arms around Bucky’s middle, Bucky straddles Steve’s waist so that there is nowhere they aren’t touching, so that it’s just Steve and Bucky and the rest of the world somewhere around them, unimportant.

“Wait,” Bucky says, breath catching, pulling away for a moment. “I, uh, I don’t wanna have sex. I just wanna kiss. Is that…okay?”

“Course it’s okay,” Steve says quietly. “I didn’t, um, think we were gonna, baby.” Their faces are still close, skin touching, breath warm and soft against each other’s necks.

“Okay,” Bucky says, nervousness under it, “okay, I didn’t wanna, um… lead you on, I wanted to be sure…”

Steve tucks a strand of hair behind Bucky’s ear and kisses his cheek. “That’s not possible,” he says firmly, “okay, baby? We won’t do anything without talking about it.”


“Good,” Steve whispers, “are you okay with this? We don’t have to—”

“No, I am,” Bucky assures him, and smiles. “This is good.” He kisses Steve again, the love between them feeling fucking titanic.

“You sure?” Steve murmurs, between kisses.

“Mhm,” Bucky breathes. “’M good with you, I trust you. I’m safe with you.”

I trust you. I’m safe with you. The words make Steve feel, momentarily, like he’s soaring.
“Yeah,” Steve whispers, smiling, “you are.”

Bucky laughs, and Steve does too, and they’re kissing through it and the world has never felt more love in history than what they’re sharing right then.

***

Bucky wakes up screaming that night.

Panic is clenching him, wild and frenetic, making it hard to breathe. It was the dream. He can only remember in kaleidoscopic, contorted images, flashes that don’t make sense, a horror movie montage; Rumlow looking down at him, laughing, Pierce’s hands on him, cruel, too harsh and too tight in all the wrong places, the black hole of viciousness in his son’s eyes, the gun Alexander owned, loaded and cocked pointed at him. Then at Steve. Terror exploding inside him. Steve, too far away for him to reach.

“Buck, it’s alright. You’re okay. It’s just a bad dream, baby, you’re safe, I’m right here.” In real time, Steve is running his hand in tiny infinities over Bucky’s back, soothing and safe, as Bucky chokes on his own breath trying to calm down. He’s gasping like he’s just come up for air, half-crying, if he had the breath for it. Steve hands him a glass of water. He drinks it and rubs his eyes, trying to get the pictures out of his head.

“It–it–it scared me,” Bucky says. His voice feels so fragile, panic grinding down on the words. For Bucky to say that without Steve coaxing him to talk, that means it’s bad. Something about it feels worse than if it had been a normal flashback. It lingers like something paranormal, scaling the walls of their room, waiting to jump from the shadows and drag him away from Steve. He closes his eyes and leans forward, his body heaving, the feeling of falling. Steve picks his sweatshirt up from beside the bed and wraps it around Bucky’s shoulders because he’s shaking.

“Lay down, baby,” Steve tells him. Bucky does. Steve runs his hand up and down Bucky’s shoulder then lays his head on the pillow next to him, stretching out an arm for Bucky to move in if he wants. Bucky does, resting his head on Steve’s chest. “What was it?” Steve asks him sadly.

Bucky gives a quick jerk of his head. “I don’t know, that’s the thing.” He shudders so violently that Steve freezes for a moment, his hands going still. “It was just… I don’t even remember. It’s just flashes. It’s so stupid.”

“No it’s not,” Steve reassures him firmly.

Bucky huffs in a way that might have been relief or argument, or maybe a bit of both. “Stay with me,” Bucky rasps suddenly, unfounded panic that Steve is going to slip through his fingers suddenly slamming him.

Steve kisses his hair. “I’m not going anywhere, baby.”

***

The nightmare follows Bucky until the next morning. He wakes up with fervent terror; even though he’s done with his part, next is them.

Because the way trials play out are unpredictable, Bucky has no concrete date of when he has to watch either Rumlow or Pierce testify. Maria, however, gave him her prediction of the timing of the defense, and she’s putting them somewhere in the next two to three days.

“They’ve got the same number of witnesses we do, so I’m guessing the same timeline: two a day,
give or take,” she’d said. “When Pierce goes, his is gonna take a long time. Probably about on par
with yours. After that, closing remarks, and then we wait on the jury.

So here they are. Trial day three, defense day one. Bucky stares at himself in the mirror for longer
than a couple of unpleasant seconds for the first time in a couple of days, shell shocked. It reminds
him of the times he had looked in the mirror after Pierce, or Rumlow, or whoever it was who
decided they were entitled to his body for the day had finished. He looks small and pale and scared
and twisted into the things that they’d done to him.

Steve comes up to him, holding him from behind and trailing simple kisses along the back of his
neck, and some calm sweeps over him. “We don’t have to go,” Steve tells him quietly. They both
know, though, that they do.

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees. He turns his head and lets it fall back against Steve, his cheek pressing into
his shoulder. “I need to see it, though.”

“You have nothing to prove to them, Buck,” Steve says fiercely. “You know that, right?”

“I know,” Bucky says, even though he isn’t sure. “I need to know I can face it, though. All of it.”

Turning his head to look at him, Bucky meets Steve’s eyes, begging him to get it even though he
doesn’t totally get it himself. There’s hot, insistent conviction nagging at him that if he isn’t there
to witness what they say, they’ll win, absurd and irrational as it is.

Steve sighs and kisses the creases on his forehead. “Okay,” he says simply, understanding.

So they go. Walking into the courtroom has already started to feel less like a journey into some
unknown, terrifying abyss and more like an achingly familiar punishment, the way it had felt to
walk into Pierce’s building after the first few times.

Amazing, Bucky thinks, what the body and brain can get used to.

The psychologist that the defense team called, Dr. Jasper Sitwell, goes first. He’s a middle-aged
guy who makes a point to preface everything he says with “well, in my opinion…” and removes,
cleans, and resets his glasses and least twenty times during his testimony. He explains how trauma
warps memories and can even falsify them, giving a couple of examples of people he’s treated who
spent years convinced they’d experienced one thing when it had actually been something else. He
spends a long, long, long time up there, just explaining.

“So, if someone had, say, been sexually assaulted in the past, and they engaged in consensual sex
later, trauma could make them confuse the assault for the consensual sex?” Zola asks him, after an
eternity. Bucky realizes he’s been clenching Steve’s hand so tightly that the blood flow has stopped
and there are white indents where his fingers are pressing Steve’s skin. He shudders and lets go,
leaning on him instead, Steve slipping a silent arm around him. His jaw goes tight every time Zola
opens his mouth.

“Objection. Leading question,” Maria calls.

“Sustained. Rephrase it.”

Zola gives an apologetic nod. “Could past sexual assault cause someone to confuse consensual sex
for nonconsensual sex after the trauma occurred?” he says. He’s pacing, turning occasionally to the
audience, and his eyes ghost coldly over Bucky.

“Yes,” the guy answers, with a self-important nod.
“Nothing further,” Zola announces, and sits.

Maria is sharp and brisk and springs on him fairly quickly. She’d explained to Bucky and Steve, earlier, “There isn’t much to deconstruct for these types of witnesses. He’s going to say that you’re remembering incorrectly, or something like that, and I’ll ask him to put it into context, or if that’s a common result of a trauma, and that’ll be it.”

And she does. After pushing him on a broader description of trauma and its effect on memories, Maria says, “Dr. Sitwell, what’s the typical age that, when a trauma is experienced, memories of it are warped, repressed, or altered so severely that one has the inability to recall anything accurately?”

“Well,” he says, “it can happen at any age.”

“But when does it usually happen?”

“Typically, it happens under five years old.”

Maria tilts her head. “How many of the patients that you just described having forgotten or changed their memories were adults when the trauma occurred?”

“None of them were,” he says, with a grimace.

“In your opinion, how common is it for someone who’s assaulted as an adult to misremember the event so severely that they invent a different perpetrator of the abuse over a course of several months?”

Sitwell rubs his temple. “It’s possible—”

“But is it likely, Doctor?”

“No,” he says, sighing, “it’s not.”

“The prosecution rests.”

***

Bucky hadn’t expected the surge of dread and shame when Alexander’s wife got called up, but it hits him anyway, knocking him off balance. Martha strides up to the stand with an impressive amount of confidence and shamelessness for a woman about to defend her rapist husband. Her son gives her a quick pat on the shoulder, Claire gives her a grimace, and Alexander squeezes her hand as she heads up. Steve rolls his eyes.

Everything is white to the point that she looks almost ghostlike; newly dyed blonde hair, pale, chemically-creaseless skin, white dress past her knees, white heels. She looks like a barbie-doll bride. Like a corpse, once it’s been made up elegantly enough that you can almost believe it’s alive. When she raises her hand and promises to tell the truth, Bucky catches a dark spot of burgundy lipstick on her teeth that she missed. He wonders if her hands trembled while she put it on, if it was distraction or trepidation. She doesn’t seem like the type of person who would usually find that oversight acceptable.

Zola asks how long she’s been married.

“Twenty-three years.” Something about it makes Bucky bite down a sickened laugh. She married him before Bucky or Steve had even been born.
“Would you say you know your husband well?”

“Of course.” She answers with a small smile, calm eyes, and Bucky wonders how true the things Tony had told them about their marriage are.

Zola asks her about Alexander for a little while. She keeps it calm as she describes him, smiling vaguely and talking about how wonderful he is, no, he’s never ever hurt me, never hurt our kids, he’d never put a hand on anyone, he’s too kind.

“Mrs. Pierce, were you aware that your husband was engaged in a sexual relationship with James Barnes?”

Martha’s face grows cold. “Yes,” she says seriously. “We agreed, shortly before… they met, that we could both be involved with other people, occasionally.”

“So this wasn’t a secret?”

“No.” Martha’s eyes flit back and forth, uncertain, but she nods.

“What did Alexander tell you about it, exactly?”

She keeps her face neutral, answering flatly, “He asked me if it was alright that he… hired someone, to do that with. I told him it was fine. I really appreciated that he asked. I wasn’t asking for details, but I had no problem with it. I saw other people sometimes as well.”

Bucky looks across the aisle at her kids, who are watching this with humiliated disgust, and it gives him the bizarre, terrible urge to laugh, rising briefly above the throes he’s in watching her. He sinks back against Steve, a shiver coming over him.

“Based on what you know, do you have any reason to believe that your husband raped Mr. Barnes?”

“No,” Martha says, “absolutely not.”

“The defense rests.”

“Thank you, Mr. Zola. I’m calling an hour recess for lunch. We’ll reconvene afterwards for cross-examination. Thank you, Mrs. Pierce.” Coulson bangs his gavel.

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“Mrs. Pierce,” Maria begins, smiling tightly. She’s pacing a little back and forth, fixing Martha with a focused, serious gaze. “You said you two agreed that you could both see other people two years ago,” Maria says. Martha nods tightly. “Did you know about what Alexander did to Ava Starr?”

“Objection. Hearsay.”

“Sustained. Rephrase, please, Ms. Hill.”

Maria says calmly, “Apologies, your honor. Mrs. Pierce, were you aware that your husband was having reportedly non-consensual sex with his secretary three years ago?”

Martha looks, momentarily, livid. “No,” she finally says. “We—I found out later, that he’d… been unfaithful. We went to couples counseling, and then later, agreed we could see other people as well. He didn’t attack her, though.”
Maria is listening intently, arms crossed over her chest. She gives a small, skeptical nod. “Right,” she says, “so after finding out your husband had cheated, you just agreed to open up the relationship?”

“We talked about it,” Martha says coldly, “and then we did, yes.”

Maria nods skeptically, but moves on. “On a typical week, where are you on Wednesday afternoons and evenings?”

“In the afternoons, I see a massage therapist. After that, our driver picks up my daughter, and she and I do something together, like get dinner or see a play or take an art class.”

Bucky and Steve share a wildly inappropriate smirk at the absurdity of that statement.

“What time are you usually home?”

Martha says, “It depends on the night. Usually, anywhere from seven to ten.”

“And did your husband tell you what he does on Wednesday afternoons and evenings?”

Martha stiffens. “Sometimes. I don’t ask his whereabouts all the time.”

“Mrs. Pierce, were you aware your husband was having sex with other people in the bed you shared, while you were out to dinner with your daughter?”

“Oh… figured, sometimes, what he might be doing.” Her voice shakes. “We didn’t usually talk about it.”

“Did you know he’d do it in your home?”

“I didn’t ask,” Martha snaps.

“Did you know your husband kept explicit pictures on his computer of him with Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky tenses, feverish dread kicking in at the mention of it. He curls towards Steve, who squeezes him closer into his side.

Martha looks down. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes bright and angry and defensive, dolled-up
composure coming gradually undone. “Yes,” she says, though it’s more of a snarl, reaching up to

touch just below her eye.

“How did you know?”

“He—he told me.”

“How did you know?”

“Do you remember what he said, exactly?” Maria presses.

“No,” Martha says shortly.

“Had you seen them, before this trial?”

“No,” she says again, hatred writhing in it. Bucky can’t tell if it’s towards him or Maria or

Alexander.

Maria moves on. “Five months ago, Mrs. Pierce, you wrote a Facebook status regarding your
daughter’s private school holding something called a ‘week of inclusion’ that included a day
dedicated to creating a safe space for gay students. In that post, you wrote, and I’m quoting…”

Maria clears her throat, “‘When my husband and I chose this school for Evangeline, part of our
adoration of it was the value they placed on religion. We aren’t strict Catholics, but we’re firm in

our beliefs about the sanctity of the family, and we thought this place would be too. Right now, it’s
becoming extremely apparent that the appeasement of younger, liberal teachers and the coddling of
children who might be confused is more important than instilling the right beliefs and helping them
to understand the right choices to make. I don’t want my thirteen-year-old starting to think that
something as explicit and dangerous as the normalizing of same-sex relationships is okay— it’s not
even about religion or sin, but about basic respect, decency, and normalcy.’” Maria looks up coolly.

“Not only that, but you and your husband have donated to several organizations and political
candidates who were explicit and aggressive about being anti-gay. Were you okay with the

knowledge that your husband was having a sexual relationship with a twenty-year-old man in your

home?”

“Holy shit,” Steve whispers, somewhere between being appalled and impressed. Bucky nods. It

might have made him laugh once, the absolute fanaticism of it, if it didn’t send memories of that

place shuddering through him.

“Objection!” Zola practically chokes on it, jumping to his feet, furious. “Your honor, clearly this

can’t be used, it wasn’t entered as evidence.”

“Your honor, this post is public domain. It remains on Mrs. Pierce’s Facebook page right now. I’m

not entering the post as evidence or subpoenaing the witness, I’m quoting from something that can

be accessed publicly online. There are no grounds to enter that into evidence.”

Coulson looks genuinely bewildered. He looks between the two of them, thinking it over. Finally,

he says “Overruled. Ms. Hill is right in that quoting something a witness wrote publicly doesn’t

require being admitted as evidence before a trial. Proceed.”

Zola looks absolutely enraged. Maria straightens up, a hint of smugness ghosting her face, waiting

for the answer.

Martha’s cheeks have gone pink. She draws a breath and keeps her face tight and neutral, her

mouth pulled into a furious, humiliated grimace, not speaking.

“Answer the question please, Mrs. Pierce,” Coulson says finally.
“I, um. I had—I didn’t. Um. What Alexander was… doing… sexually, didn’t affect our politics.”
She looks dazed.

When Bucky looks over at the defense table, a quiver of satisfaction runs down his spine.
Alexander is breathing heavily, watching her with panicked dismay, hands curled into fists on the
table. Zola has gone rather pale, helplessly frozen.

“How did Alexander explain to you the fact that he was in this ‘relationship’ with another man and
still donating to organizations that fund conversion therapy and discrimination laws?” Maria
continues.

“We—we didn’t discuss it.”

“It never came up?”


Coulson thinks about it for a moment, then says, “Sustained,” a hint of regret behind the word.

Maria nods with a flicker of frustration at being cut off. She recovers with “Mrs. Pierce, how many
reasons are there that your husband would have kept GHB hidden in your apartment?”

Martha purses her lips. Bucky can’t read her—anger, he thinks at first, then pain. Then nothing.
“He struggled sometimes. He had a hard time sleeping. Sometimes… he drank more than he
wanted to. Maybe for those.”

“Do you think he would have obtained and hid an illegal drug if he wanted to address those
issues?”

“I don’t know,” Martha says shortly, averting her eyes.

Maria has got her. She spends another hour up there, undoing the story Martha and Zola had spun,
asking her about every single detail —how did your husband explain the injuries he sustained at
Tony Stark’s Christmas party? You’re telling me you didn’t find it suspicious? You mentioned that
you were seeing other people as well, can you tell us their names? Where you met them?— and by
the end, Martha has become a furious, humiliated mess of I don’t know
s and I don’t remember
s.

Bucky feels guilty, almost, until he remembers the hardness in her face yesterday as she had
watched him up there, terrified and grief-stricken and reliving the worst things he ever went
through. Coulson concludes the day after that, which means Rumlow and Pierce both tomorrow,
back to back, but if Bucky thinks about that he’ll pass out.

“That was amazing,” Bucky tells her afterwards, while Steve nods vigorously.

Maria smiles. “Thank you. They were just careless with her preparation and didn’t bank on anyone
noticing the inconsistencies.” Still, there’s a note of pride in her voice. “There were a few questions
I held back on for her, because I think it’ll be more effective to use against him during his
testimony.” Steve and Bucky nod, like they totally know what she’s doing. “You feeling alright?”
she asks Bucky kindly.

“Yeah,” he says, breathless. “Thanks, Maria.”

She smiles, and they walk out together, talking quietly about weekend plans, pretending everything
is normal.

She leaves them on the courthouse steps with a reassuring smile. As Bucky and Steve wait for a
car, Steve pulls him close and smiles, fog clouding his eyes, turning them milky-blue.

“It’s going really well,” he murmurs, tentative, tucking a strand of Bucky’s hair back. Bucky takes a breath.

“Yeah,” he whispers, “it is.” The hope feels palpable and terrifying, surging through his bloodstream, addictive and horrifying. It swells in a way he’s never felt it, catching in his breath, amplified in Steve’s smile and the light in his eyes. It’s beautiful, and scary, and it reminds him of the way he had felt right after he had found Steve. Bucky breathes in, then tilts his head up and kisses Steve, pulling him in by the shirt collar, smiling, and when that picture appears an hour later on the Daily News website, he doesn’t even mind.

Chapter End Notes

i DID, in fact, write an extremely short extremely subpar endgame fix it last week, it's quite bad bc i was rage writing it at 2 in the morning and when you are tired the first thing you lose is your ability to retain words buuuuut it was honestly therapeutic and i've already accepted that the ending wasn't real so :) :)))) other fic she is if u wanna check it out

otherwiseeee same stuff as always cia is the best for editing this and the comments you guys leave are, quite honestly, more important to me than oxygen flowing through my bloodstream i screenshot sooo many of them and reread them if i'm not motivated to write i love u guys so much, i shall see you soon for the next part

oh also if anyone was wondering which i'm sure you were not this week i went down a rabbit hole of figuring out who i'd want to play characters in this who arnt from marvel so if you're curious i ended up with martha, claire, alex jr and then i had actual things in my life to attend to but here r how i picture the pierces lmao

as always i'm @cafelesbian on tumblr where you can find lots of brie larson content these days come say hi i got a couple messages/qs about this fic last week on there and my heart fluttered :) this fic is kinda my baby and i love talking about it so dont be shy okay i will see you all soon take care cuties much love
twenty-seven

Chapter Notes

how is everybody on this cold sunday night here is a LONG one
tws apply a lot here AND ALSO brief mention of self harm!!!!!!! plz plz be careful it's very short but just so yk

CIA EDITED THIS WHOLE THING FOR ME IN ONE DAY SHES A GODDESS AND I LOVE HER AND YOU ALL SHOULD TOO AHHHH

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky isn’t in bed when Steve wakes up that night. He trods sleepily out of the bedroom to find him on the balcony, door still open, leaning against the railing and looking over the feeble, glittering lights over Central Park.

“Can’t sleep?” Steve says.

Bucky looks back and tilts his head sadly. “I was trying not to wake you up.” Steve bites his lip and, before he can even say anything, Bucky adds, “I know. I’m sorry. Didn’t work anyway, apparently.”

“You can’t keep me away, Barnes,” Steve says, wrapping an arm around him.

Bucky smiles half heartedly and rests his head against Steve’s shoulder, tangling himself up in Steve’s sweater. “I haven’t seen him in a long time,” Bucky says into Steve’s shirt. His whole body sags when he says it, slumping against Steve like it took everything out of him.

“I know,” Steve says quietly.

“I’m scared,” Bucky whispers. “How fucking pathetic is that?” He laughs, sad and bitter. “He’s literally in jail and I’m fucking terrified of having to see him for a couple hours tomorrow.”

“Don’t say that about yourself,” Steve says sadly. “It’s not pathetic, Buck, you know it’s not. He hurt you.”

“It feels pathetic,” Bucky says miserably. “I’m just scared.”

Steve swallows, because there’s nothing to say. They can't hurt you anymore and I’m so sorry and that’s alright all come to mind, but none of them are right so he just pulls Bucky close and cradles him.

“It’s almost over,” Steve says instead, very softly. “Buck, you’re so, so, so strong for going through all of this the way you have.”

Bucky exhales slowly. His fingers knead lightly against Steve’s chest, absentely tender. Steve kisses the top of his head.

“Thanks for being with me, through all this,” Bucky says to him, after a few minutes of silence.
“Are you kidding me?” Steve answers. “Buck, of course.”

Bucky smiles tiredly. “You gonna fight Rumlow tomorrow?”

“We’ll see,” Steve says, raising an eyebrow. “Probably.”

Bucky looks up, kisses him lightly on the cheek. “I guess we should try and sleep.”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. “You gonna be able to?”

“Guess it’ll be a surprise.” Bucky cocks his head wearily. “Fuck, I don’t want to go through this tomorrow.”

“I know,” Steve whispers. “I know. But you know what? We’re gonna get through it. I promise.”

Bucky smiles sadly, touching Steve’s cheek. “Alright. Whatever you say, punk.” But there’s relief in his voice, and in his touch when he throws his arms around Steve’s neck and hugs him. Steve stays close to him as they head inside, bracing themselves against what’s coming.

***

Brock Rumlow gets led in flanked by cops, which feels ironic.

Seeing him sends dread coiling tight inside Bucky, locking itself into a hardened, twisting weight, familiar terror. Rumlow looks worse for wear—Bucky remembers him trimmed and meticulous, smirking confidently in a pressed uniform, only unraveling once he’d pressed Bucky into somewhere tight and secluded and dark. He looks, now, like a middle-aged guy who’s lost everything. Dark stubble and dark circles makes him look older and unhinged, he’s lost the comb over for spiky, stringy hair that juts out everywhere. Everything about Rumlow has always been hatred, the sharp lines of his face and the cruelty in the way he walked and the malice in his eyes that never vanished, and it’s all accentuated now and it’s terrifying. The knowledge that it would be impossible doesn’t stop conviction from crawling into Bucky’s blood that he’s going to turn to him and hit him or grab his hair or choke him or point the gun that he no longer has at him.

He isn’t handcuffed. Bucky remembers Maria saying that was only for when there was potential that a witness could be violent, which, he guesses, there hadn’t been here.

(shut the fuck up you think this is bad? This is for your own FUCKING good, James, keep crying like that and I’ll show you something that really hurts)

Yeah, Bucky thinks hysterically, bitterness and grief reaching into his chest, seizing ahold of his heart, no potential for violence.

His eyes rake over Bucky coldly, assessing him, dark and violating. Forgetting where they are for a moment, he smirks and lifts an eyebrow, mocking him, diminishing him. Bucky feels like an invisible tether has jerked him forward; his shoulders lurch, terror hauling him up from his seat so he flinches too hard to hide.

Rumlow’s mouth curls into a smug sneer. Steve holds on to Bucky and stares at him, wild, blazing hate filling his eyes.

Alexander spots Rumlow and gives him a nod. The motion sends Bucky’s balance spinning to nothingness; he feels like he’s been punched in the stomach. He turns away, eyes shut, not realizing he’s lifted a protective hand up slightly until Steve catches it.
“It’s okay,” Steve reminds him, so softly. But it’s not, not when he’s twenty feet away from the two people who have hurt him most in the world and who are looking at one another with that fucked up recognition. The thought of them meeting sends dread, sharp and cold as frost, creeping through Bucky’s lungs. Some flipped version of the mangled, awful, immediate connection he’d had with Ava. Hurt by the same person, hurting the same person. He wonders, morbidly, if they exchanged stories—what made him cry, what made him quiet the fuck down and take it, what they did to him that made them come the fastest. He wonders if they laughed.

Bucky presses his hands over his mouth and nose, the way he would if he were trying to stifle a scream.

He gets enough footing back to stand when Coulson comes in and announces that the court is in session. He says the defense can start presenting their witnesses, so Zola stands importantly and clears his throat. “The defense calls Brock Rumlow to the witness stand.”

The helplessness that Bucky feels watching him spreads through his whole body, fingertips to stomach to head, draining him, leaving him feeling half alive. He’d almost forgotten the callousness in how he moves, and it slams him again when Rumlow smacks his hand again on the railing of the witness box. Weightless fear corkscrews through him, making it impossible to look away.

Zola begins slowly, introducing him and his old job and why he’s relevant to the case. Then he jumps right into it.

“This is exhibit nineteen from the defense. This is a sample of images of white, brunette men in their twenties—Mr. Rumlow was able to identify James Barnes from the sample. How certain were you, when you identified him?”

“A hundred percent,” Rumlow says. There’s a note of carelessness, flippancy in his words. He has nothing, anymore, to lose; anything that happens here can only help him and tear down Bucky. It makes Bucky feel sick. “I’ve met him before, several times.”

“Where and when did you meet him?”

“Objection. Compound question.”

“Sustained.”

“Let me rephrase. When did you first meet Mr. Barnes?”

“A year, maybe a little more. More like eighteen months, now, probably,” Rumlow answers. He hasn’t looked at Bucky so far, but now he does, and it feels like metal clamping down on his lungs.

“And where did you meet him?”

“Fiftieth street. I was on patrol there and I saw him in an alley. Barnes was down on his knees, there was another guy standing there, counting out money. I knew what was going on, so I went to break it up.”

The worst thing about what he’s saying is that it’s true. However they had planned this, they’d thought it out. Everything Rumlow says is true, the locations, the timing, the things—oh, god—the things Bucky had done. Bucky had forgotten that was the first time they met, but it slams him now, his memory of it hot and urgent as dripping wax. Rumlow had stood over him, tall, harsh stature looming, the top of his face cast in darkness beneath his cap so all that Bucky could make out in the abrasive late-night lighting was his sneer.
“Um, I’m sorry, I’m just leaving,” Bucky had stammered, and tried to stand, but Rumlow put a hand on his shoulder and he went still.

“You’re good right there,” he said, very quietly, “what’s your name, sweetheart?”

Bucky swallowed. “James,” he’d said softly.

“James,” Rumlow had said, and reached out and touched, prodded his face, light at first, then harder, gripping his chin, “what you’re doing is illegal, you know.”

Bucky said nothing. The fact that he wasn’t letting him stand, the way he was touching him; Bucky knew what to expect.

Mouth dry, Bucky waited while Rumlow looked him over. “How much, baby?” he asked with a smirk. “If it’s reasonable, I might be able to let this one slide.”

Bucky didn’t want to. He wanted to go back to Wanda’s and take a shower and eat something and fall asleep in a bed where in didn’t have to wake up next to someone grinding against him asking how much for another go. He wanted to cry and to talk to someone who called him his real name. He wanted to be held and handled gently and told it was going to be okay.

He wanted this to be over as fast as it could, without ending up half-conscious and bent over in the back of a cop car if this guy didn’t take no for an answer, or in a jail cell. He could take it for however long this guy wanted if it meant avoiding the fight. Swallowing thickly, Bucky whispered “Twenty.”

Bucky bends his head down, tears pushing against his throat at the memory. Beside him, Steve works his hand gently on Bucky’s shoulders, a light, careful massage, touching Bucky like he’s fragile.

“For those of us who are less familiar with the prostitution scene in New York, can you give some context?”

“Yeah. So there are a lot of hotspots for hookers in Manhattan. Fiftieth street and eighth avenue is one of them—right off Times Square, near a bunch of hotels and bars that look the other way, big homeless population. I was there just checking things out; it can get a little lawless over there. I was looking for whatever, you know… prostitutes, drug deals, the things that go on over there. It was late, so people were being less careful, but it was pretty quiet ’till I saw Barnes.”

“And what happened next?”

“I called ‘NYPD, don’t move.’ The other guy dropped his cash and took off. I didn’t go after him, though.”

“Why not?”

“If I was going to arrest anyone, it would’ve been Barnes. He was breaking more laws.”

“So then what happened?”

“I walked up to him. I was going to arrest him, but then he started talking, saying the guy had attacked him and forced him, he wasn’t a hooker, he swore.”

Bucky’s shoulders heave as he leans over and in on himself.
“Did you believe him?”

“At the time, yeah. So I said alright, and ran after where the guy had left, but he was gone and when I got back, so was Barnes. I still didn’t think much of it.”

“But you saw him again?”

“Yeah. Same area a couple of days later. I wasn’t working at the time, but it was late and I was walking home through that area and I spotted him. I didn’t realize it was him, actually. I just saw two people against the wall, and the way Barnes was letting this new guy handle him, I assumed it was a fight.”

_Letting him._ The words echo, hollow and metallic and feeling like the moment before you get hit, dissolving Bucky’s brain to stale smoke and a couple of useless wires.

This is the first part that’s been a complete lie; Rumlow never saw him with anyone else after that first night. Bucky’s pretty sure the next time they met had been a few days later, but it had been late and he’d been alone till Rumlow tracked him down. It doesn’t stop the words from cutting with jagged edges into his clarity, making him dizzy.

“It wasn’t, though.” Rumlow is still talking, enjoying the attention. “A few seconds later, the guy let go of him and asked if he was alright. Barnes nodded and looked fine, and the guy paid him, got into his car and drove off. So I went up to him, and said ‘I thought you weren’t a hooker.’”

Bucky shouldn’t be surprised, at this point, that these people have resorted to cruel, purposeful lies, carved out from the whole story so a shred of truth remains, leaving what really happened bare and tattered for the jury to try and piece together. It still shocks him, that Rumlow is sitting up there and telling everyone about this night that never happened with that much comfort.

What he’d really said the second time they met was _I wanna fuck you tonight, up for that?_ not really caring if Bucky was up for it. He remembers that. Horrible lightheadedness sweeps vaguely over him.

“Barnes looked kinda worried, for a second. Then he said something like, ‘I’ll let you do whatever you want, if you let this slide.’”

“And what did you do?”

“Well.” Rumlow tries to look slightly regretful, but it’s stiff and artificial and he gives it up after a moment. “I let him blow me, yeah. I figured, whatever. I was off the clock and honestly, my marriage had been taking a beating, and I didn’t want to drag him down to the station. I paid him, though.”

“Did you two continue the sexual relationship?”

“I payed him for sex a couple of times, yeah. That was the first time.” It stuns Bucky, electric waves of panic rolling over him, —_why would he say that why would he want people to know that_— but then he understands. Rumlow has lost everything. All he has left is the chance to get out sooner and the chance, right now, to dehumanize Bucky one more time.

“If you don’t mind, what did that entail?”

Dread knots itself into a sharp mass in Bucky’s throat.

Rumlow runs a hand through his hair carelessly. “Oh, a lot of things. He did basically anything he
got paid for, wherever I said. I mean… oral, full service, additions…”

“Additions?”

“Well, not to be graphic, but yeah. Other things you could do. Like for extra, he’d let people hit him, handcuff him, use a toy, whatever. You name it.”

Bucky leans forward and buries his face in his hands. He has the sudden, awful sensation of something caving in on him, a building or a tsunami or someone’s body. He can discern panic and shame, so bad it smothers him, and terror. Turning over and over, relentless, sharp and bright as the glint of a knife.

Steve pulls him closer, so Bucky can lean against him. He touches him with a softness that makes Bucky feel less than disgusting for maybe half a second, but Bucky clings to it anyway. Rumlow is still talking, his words seeping in under Bucky’s skin, poisonous, infecting him, filling him with a vileness he hasn’t felt this badly in a long time. For one confused, horrifying moment, Bucky can’t remember where he is, or why Steve is touching him, and the self-disgust is so bad that he almost jerks away from it. Suspended, for a moment, in the old, miserably familiar mindset of you don’t deserve to be touched like that. He should hit you, he should punish you, he should remind you where you belong.

Bucky manages, somehow, to rock himself out of it. He’s leaning against Steve now, the rest of the courtroom forgotten. He forces himself to repeat what Jennifer had told him. These people want him to think it was his fault, want him to think he deserves to be hurt, because that made it easier for them to get away with it. It’s a part of abuse. They’re wrong, and they’re lying.

“Objection, your honor, immaterial evidence. This is totally unnecessary.”

Coulson glances at Bucky, who is less-than-discreetly falling apart, and Steve, curled towards him, trying to comfort him. “Sustained. That’s enough,” he says, grimacing. Maria turns, worried, but Zola pulls focus again.

“I’m sorry, your honor,” he says, but there’s a smugness in his voice, elicited by Bucky’s reaction. Pierce responds to it too. When Bucky looks up again, it’s to him smiling calmly at them, and he draws back again immediately, feeling violently sick. “How long did this… transaction go on between you and James?”

“A couple months. It wasn’t anything planned. I’d see him, sometimes, if I was off the clock, I’d ask if he was up for it. He always was. It was only three or four times.”

It was more than that, until Bucky had ditched fiftieth street completely out of terror. Everything Rumlow says bears down on him, snatching the past out from under him and reworking it into a slew of what if he’s right what if I led him on what if I was eager and Bucky can’t get it to stop no matter how much he knows it isn’t true.

He becomes aware that he’s freezing, and that he can’t stop shaking.

“When did this relationship end?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I tried to end it. I felt terrible about being unfaithful to my ex, no matter how bad our relationship was at the time, so I told him one day… I found him that night. He wouldn’t hear it, though. I think he liked the pay. Maybe he even liked it all: he never gave me any indication he didn’t.”

―Stop, no, no, no, please don’t, please no, I don’t want this STOP PLEASE STOP—
Bucky trembles so deeply he thinks his core must be cracking.

“Anyway, I told him it was over, I couldn’t do it anymore, and he got mad. He said he’d go to my precinct and tell them I raped him if I stopped. He said it would end my career. He meant it, too; he was angry.”

The room sways, unstable. Steve is murmuring something very quietly to him, swallowed up by white noise and Rumlow’s voice. *It’s not true.*

But no one knows that except for him and Rumlow, and right now the idea of anyone believing him feels fucking impossible.

“And what did you do?” Zola pushes forward, sounding satisfied.

“I was worried, obviously. I couldn’t keep it up, though; my ex was pregnant, I was trying to see if we could work through things, so I gave him fifty dollars and told him we’d talk later. He said he’d be waiting.”

“When was this?”

“Last September.”

“Did you see him again, after that?”

“I didn’t, actually. I wasn’t going back… I figured he could say that, if he wanted to, it wasn’t true. Apparently I wasn’t the only one he threatened with that.”

“Is that why you contacted me about this case seven weeks ago?”

“Yeah. I recognized him from the news— ‘Bucky’ was new, but at that point, a fake name wasn’t much of a shock. But there were an awful lot of similarities. I thought it was important the jury knew that.”

It feels like being hit again. It feels like when Rumlow had dragged him up from the back of his car and sneered, *Don’t tell anyone, princess. No one will believe you anyway,* knowing Bucky wasn’t going to say a word anyway. Bucky can feel blood rushing through his head and it surprises him that he’s still human enough to have that.

“Based on your knowledge of the accuser, how confident are you that the accusations he’s making are false?”

“Very.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rumlow. The defense rests.”

***

Coulson calls a recess after that, which is good because if Bucky had had to stay in that room any longer, drinking in the things Rumlow was saying about him and the way he was looking at him, he would have ceased to exist and become a pile of shattered glass and crushed-out cigarettes.

He bolts out of there on trembling legs, clasping onto Steve’s hand and dragging him with him. They end up back on the steps outside, and Bucky gasps for air through paper-thin lungs that don’t do their job, doubling over on himself in tears. He wraps his arms around himself to try and stop trembling but he can’t.
Steve is there, like he always is, placing his hands on Bucky’s shoulder and grounding him quietly, enough that he can straighten up. Steve holds his arms open and Bucky falls into them, delirious with panic.

“I didn’t do it, I didn’t, Steve, he’s lying, I never said I’d report him,” Bucky is whimpering, barely even hearing what he’s saying.

“I know, sweetheart,” Steve murmurs, his voice anguished. “Baby, I know. I know. I know.” He mumbles soft, loving words while Bucky clings to him because Steve is his cornerstone, his rock, and if it weren’t for Steve keeping them anchored there he’s sure that a gyre would have opened up around him and pulled him into nothing.

Gray and mournful, the sky is spitting cold flecks of rain on them. Steve doesn’t care. He holds Bucky so, so, so tightly, swallowing tears, wanting him to feel the love pouring off of him, to breathe it in and let it wash out the cruelty Rumlow had just spent two hours making him live in.

Bucky cries, silent and surpressed, trying to force it down as Steve hugs him and rubs his back. They stay there for five, ten minutes, until Steve says “We don’t have to go back in there, baby.”

If he doesn’t go in there, though, Rumlow will know he still has that much power over him. He can’t give him that satisfaction. Not after everything, not now.

“I can do it,” Bucky says shakily.

“You don’t have to,” Steve says softly.

And he’s tempted by it. He wants to let Steve sweep him into his arms and go home and let Rumlow spend the rest of his miserable life rotting away in prison, but he can’t bear the idea that he’d go back to jail secure in the knowledge that he can still drive Bucky to submission. He’s taken so fucking much from him already. Bucky won’t give him that too.

“If he sees that…” Bucky trails off darkly, and Steve understands.

“You’re doing so good, Bucky,” Steve reminds him again. Bucky swallows and hugs him again, burying his face in Steve’s shoulder, drawing a sharp breath.

“Maria’s gonna kick his ass,” Steve says when he pulls away, with a half smile. Bucky chokes out a laugh and tucks himself into Steve’s side to head back in, anxiety swelling darkly again as they settle back in.

“You okay?” Maria says quietly to him. Bucky manages a half nod. “Jesus, I’m so sorry about that,” she adds, and before Bucky can answer Coulson calls the beginning of the cross examination and she stands quickly.

“Mr. Rumlow,” Maria says with distaste, approaching him “what are the charges you’re currently serving time for?”

Bucky sees a crack in his composure for the first time; heavy, terrifying darkness flits over across his face.


“It’s relevant, your honor.”

“Overruled. Proceed, Ms. Hill.”
She smiles, then turns to him and waits.

“Aggravated battery assault,” Rumlow finally says unpleasantly. Maria raises an eyebrow.

“Against whom?”

Rumlow glares at her, but spits out, “My ex-wife.”

“Did the report include accusations of sexual violence against her?”

Resentment burns in Rumlow’s eyes. “That’s what she said, yeah,” he snaps.

Maria changes direction. “Did you use your position as an NYPD officer to coerce Mr. Barnes into sex, in any way?”

Rumlow sneers. “It wasn’t coercion. He was willing.” His eyes land on Bucky. It makes his whole body shrink in like he’s been punched. Steve, meanwhile, throws his shoulders back and stares him down, hatred radiating off of him, unil Rumlow looks away.

She presses him. “Mr. Rumlow, he was a twenty-year-old sex worker and you were a cop. There’s a power dynamic there that would’ve made it impossible for him to consent to anything. Wouldn’t your position have been coercion no matter what?”

“Objection,” Zola snaps, “badgering the witness.”

“I’m pointing out a relevant aspect of the witness’ claims, your honor,” Maria says.

“Overruled, but that’s enough after this, Ms. Hill.”

“I don’t even know if Barnes knew I was a police officer,” Rumlow snaps in defense.

“But you just said you met him while you were on patrol.” Maria raises her eyebrows. She’s going harder on him, Bucky realizes, than she has on any of the other witnesses so far.

Rumlow tightens his jaw. “So I guess he did, then. I didn’t attack him.”

“That wasn’t what I asked,” Maria says calmly, “but why did you feel the need to clarify that?”

Everything feels dangerous down to the quiver of air in Bucky’s lungs. He watches, fraught with anxiety, pressed desperately into Steve’s side.

Rumlow shifts. His face goes slack with vicious, familiar agitation, a look Bucky has seen on him before, a look that makes him want to shrink back. “It sounded like that’s what you were saying,” he snaps, “I don’t need another false accusation. I’m sure he’d love to make one.”

That sends Bucky drawing back again, punctured by the words and his tone of voice. Your fault drags itself over his mind, cutting him again, still sharp and sickening as the first time after a million repetitions.

Maria presses forward. “If you’re so secure in the knowledge that everything you did was one hundred percent consensual, then why feel the need to clarify so aggressively so many times?”

His eyes land back on Bucky, solid as iron with hate. “Clearly, he’s got no problem making things up.”

“Mr. Rumlow, you barely even know Alexander Pierce. How can you possibly be so confident that
he’s innocent?"

“It’s like I said,” Rumlow snaps, “he’s been known to threaten doing it in the past.”

“You aren’t the one on trial, Mr. Rumlow. Even if the accusations against the defendant were falsified, why would you assume, immediately, that Mr. Barnes would bring charges against you, if you never did anything to force him into sex?”

Maria is putting so much on the line right now. She goes after Rumlow with calculating, tactful focus, trying to force him into a corner where he has to admit what he did. Bucky wishes he could tell her not to risk it, that there’s not a chance she’s going to get Rumlow to admit he raped him up there, to just back down.

*Oh, you mean like you would?* he says, cruelly, to himself.

“We have a past. If he’s getting bold all of a sudden and bringing this bullshit to the courts, I didn’t wanna be next,” Rumlow spits.

“There are corroborable reports by Mr. Barnes and people close to him that you did, in fact, attack and coerce him into sex on multiple occasions. How do you respond to that?”

“Objection! Argumentative!” Zola says angrily.

“Overruled,” Coulson says immediately.

“I bet that’s what he said,” Rumlow sneers. Bucky’s breath goes flat and immovable in his lungs.

“That’s not an answer,” Maria says coldly.

“Everything he did, he wanted to do. I didn’t force him into anything.”

“Are you sure? Lying under oath can be five years in prison, Mr. Rumlow.”

“Objection. Asked and answered. This isn’t an interrogation.”

“Sustained. Next question.” Coulson gives Maria a little warning nod, and she backs down.

Changing tactics, Maria says “Final question about this, Mr. Rumlow. Please remember that you’re under oath and if you lie, the court will find out. Are you saying you never threatened Mr. Barnes with arrest if he didn’t have sex with you?”

Rumlow’s eyes go wide, like he hadn’t been expecting it. Bucky realizes with a violent lurch in his stomach that the shock isn’t what she’s saying, but that Bucky had told anyone at all. He blinks and works his jaw angrily.

“It wasn’t a threat,” he finally says, hate spearing through his voice. “I reminded him it was illegal. I never raped him.”

“You never said to him anything along the lines of ‘I’ll either do what I want to you now and then you can leave, or I’ll arrest you, do what I want to you, and drop you off in jail?’”

Rumlow snaps his head towards Bucky. The detest in his eyes is so strong that Bucky’s breath catches in his throat in terror.

But he doesn’t look away.
“Objection–”
“Overruled.” Coulson leans in, waiting.
“Mr. Rumlow?” Maria waits.
“I don’t remember,” he hisses.
“I’m sure you don’t. No further questions.”

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Bucky can barely even walk.

He doesn’t know how he is, in fact. Steve steers him out, somehow, and he trails along on autopilot, the disconnection feeling horrifically familiar, Steve’s hands feeling alien and unsafe.

He doesn’t say anything. Steve retracts his hand when he realizes Bucky is cowering away from him, eyes squeezed shut.

“Buck,” he says softly, “it’s alright, baby.” They’re out in the hallway, tucked into some corner.

“Are you mad at me?” Bucky mumbles.

Bucky is looking down at his hands, curling his fingers in and out like he’s trying to remember how to use them. Steve reaches out and slips his fingers between Bucky’s, pulling his hand in lightly.

“Buck,” he whispers, “why would I be mad?”

Bucky takes a breath that shakes his shoulders. “The stuff… the stuff he was saying. I, um–if you were mad, I wouldn’t… I wouldn’t blame you—”

Steve blinks. “You didn’t do anything, Bucky,” he reminds him firmly, “I don’t—I’d never believe what he said. Buck, god, please tell me you know he’s lying, right?”

Bucky closes his eyes and breathes, shallow and uneven. “Yeah. Fuck. It just–” he gesticulates vaguely and delicately, hands trembling. “I’m sorry…”

“Look at me.”

Bucky does. Steve gazes at him through grief-laden eyes, then reaches out, hesitating to touch his cheek. This time, it’s relief, and Bucky leans into his hand and exhales shakily.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” Steve’s voice trembles with the weight of it. “You’re so brave for sitting through that bullshit, Bucky. I’m so sorry you had to hear that. It’s not true, baby, it’s not. I promise you, I don’t believe a single thing he said, and I’m not mad, okay?”

Bucky hates that he needs that reassurance, but it soothes the burn of Rumlow’s voice over his soul. He nods and closes his eyes as Steve thumbs his cheek and kisses his forehead.

“Thank you,” Bucky mumbles, still feeling dazed. “I love you.”

“Love you more,” Steve says warmly. Then, softly, “You okay for the next part?”

Bucky squeezes Steve’s hand and nods. “Yeah,” he says breathlessly. “Yeah.”
“The defense calls Alexander Pierce Sr. to the witness stand.”

Next to Bucky, Steve is grinding his teeth. Rumlow has set him so far over the edge already, his threshold for anger having taken a beating all day. He hates these people so much. It burns like the drag of a cigarette, like the taste of blood. He watches Pierce walk up there, chest thrust out, head lifted as he promises to tell the truth, and hate rises in him, untouchably hot.

Zola lays the groundwork for a long time. His job, his family, his relationship with Martha and their completely fabricated open relationship. He’s a good liar. He’s had the practice. He keeps it calm the whole time, short, neutral answers and sympathetic grimaces towards his family. Sometimes he looks towards Steve and Bucky and smiles tightly, cruelty condensed into one look, making Bucky flinch.

He is so utterly, completely vile.

“When did you first meet James Barnes?” Zola asks eventually. Bucky draws in like he wants to vanish. Steve squeezes his hand.

Pierce pretends to think about it. “January of 2012,” he says.

“What did you meet him?”

“The bar that Barnes referred to. Rick’s, I believe.”

Steve realizes, with a violent snag of anger in his chest, that he’s going to keep it all as close to what Bucky had said as he can. He thinks, for the billionth time since this all began, about how he can’t believe people this evil exist. Bucky exhales sharply, realizing it, too. He’s got a bruise on his wrist and he presses his thumb into it too hard, almost obsessively, not even noticing he’s doing it. Steve stops him, taking both of his hands.

“Baby, stop,” he says quietly, “don’t hurt yourself.”

Bucky squeezes his eyes shut, but he stops.

“What happened the night you met?” Zola asks him.

“I went into the bar. My wife was away, but she knew I might see someone that night. I was in there for a bit, and James was smiling at me, so I went over to him. I bought him a drink, we chatted for a while. He was flirting, so I thought, you know, why not? I was never… ah… with another man before.”

“Flirting how?”

“Laughing a lot. Touching my knee. I mean, it was obvious.”

The heartbroken rage that’s spiraling in his chest, winding and chaotic, leaps again. Their entire fucking defense is based on making the jury think Bucky wanted it to happen, that the things Pierce and Rumlow had done to him were on him for initiating things. That he shouldn’t have smiled so much, or given them so much attention, or been a sex worker; that alone justified it.

It hurts like nothing else that Bucky has to hear this. Bucky, who’d come into Steve’s life crippled with the conviction that it was his fault, that he let people do this, that he had somehow caused it. Bucky, working so fucking hard to understand that what happened to him wasn’t his fault, reliving
it all over and over to try and unlearn the things that now, Rumlow and Pierce and Zola were throwing back in his face in a crowded courtroom. It’s unbearable. Brock Rumlow and Alexander Pierce had hurt him for months on end, fucking raped him, ruined his life and it wasn’t enough, they still have to twist the things that he’s worked so goddamn hard to reclaim and recover into more pain.

It makes him so angry his vision goes white for a moment.

“Did he go home with you?”

“Yeah. After about forty minutes.”

“And what happened then?”

Pierce crosses his arms. “We had sex. He was at my house for about an hour, I paid him, and he left. We agreed he would come back the same time the next week?”

“Did you drug Mr. Barnes, either on that occasion or any others?”

Alexander smiles, tired and exasperated, like the notion is ridiculous. “No,” he says, “I didn’t.”

“Why do you think he’s claiming that?”

“God, I don’t know. I confided in him that I… self-medicated, for sleep and stress issues. I’m not proud of it.” He gives the jury a sheepish smile, and Steve wants to punch him through a wall. “But maybe he got the idea from that. I can’t say.”

“What happened the night that Barnes claims you drugged him?”

“He came over, like we planned. We talked for a little while. I did give him a glass of wine–he had lied about his age, I thought he was twenty five–but it was just wine. After that, I asked if he was still up to do what we agreed. He was.”

Next to Steve, Bucky has made himself small; arms crossed in, head bent, shoulders hunched forward. It breaks his heart. He pulls closer towards him, letting Bucky curl in, leaning into his side. Steve hugs him and holds him like it will protect him from what Alexander is doing, even for a second, even though it won’t.

“What was it he agreed to?”

“Well. This isn’t exactly information I wanted to make public, but it was a sexual… roleplaying, I guess you could call it, in a way. We agreed I could tie his wrist, strike him, to a certain degree, while having sex, and film it.”

Steve realizes, startled, that Bucky has pulled away from him and is fighting tears. He’s trembling with the effort of it, chin tight and quivering. He’s gripping the base of the seat, knuckles white, so Steve lays his hand over Bucky’s, not wanting to pull him in if he doesn’t want to be touched. It takes him a minute, but Bucky flips his hand over and locks their fingers, a breathless sob escaping him.

He is so, so, so brave, and Steve is so in awe of him.

“And was he conscious during this?” Zola asks. The words are grotesque, what’s behind them is grotesque, and Steve is back to being enraged.
“Yeah. I checked a few times that it was alright.”

The look on Bucky’s face punctures through Steve’s soul. Total helplessness and misery, glassy, tearful, terrified eyes and too-pale skin. Alexander is making him relive this fucking unreal horror, and he’s making him relive it in his terms.

“Buck, c’mer,” Steve whispers. Bucky leans against him again. He’s shaking, his hands trembling so badly he can’t even reach up and hold Steve’s. “I love you, baby. It’s gonna be okay. You’re so good, Buck, you’re so brave.”

“How would you describe the relationship that followed?” Zola asks. Alexander tilts his head.

“It was a casual, paid, consensual relationship between two adults. He came over most weeks, on Wednesday evenings. We chatted a bit. We’d engage sexually. I paid him. It was all very normal.”

Bucky is crying so softly that Steve doesn’t even notice at first. His face is buried in Steve’s neck so he doesn’t have to watch, and he doesn’t realize it until he feels Bucky’s tears run down his skin. He shudders and exhales shakily, running a hand up and down his back.

“What were the things you made sure he was okay with?”

“Everything. Sex, oral, kink things, if that’s what it was… He always said yes.”

Savagely, Steve thinks about putting his hands around Alexander’s throat, squeezing until that sneer turned purple and lifeless. Bucky’s eyes are grey in the light and with tears. He lifts his head slowly and looks at Alexander, pain and fear and hate flashing across his face.

LIAR.

“When did this stop?”

“I guess it was about a year ago now. Yeah, last July. He didn’t come for one of the times we planned, and I didn’t see him after that.”

“What did you think?”

“I wasn’t sure. Everything had been normal, the last time.”

(The last time, Bucky thinks, the reminder a dull, bottomless ache in his chest, you beat me until I passed out, and raped me, and when I woke up I could barely stand but you made me blow you anyway and you squeezed the parts of my skin that were bruised so it would hurt more, and you said I loved it even though I fucking begged you to stop.)

“Were you angry?”

“No. I was surprised. I always made sure he was alright with it. He always said yes. He never seemed disturbed or upset; I would have stopped if he did.”

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LIAR.
You didn’t have anyone to check with so you could hunt him down, you sick motherfucker, Steve thinks viciously.

“When was the next time you saw him?”

“The Christmas party. The night James testified about.”

“What happened that night?”

“Well—” Alexander shifts in his seat, “I arrived at Stark’s house. My wife didn’t come, she was on a ski trip with my daughters—I was going to join them the next day. I saw talking to someone, and I spotted James, and I didn’t recognize him at first, and then I just couldn’t believe he was there. I mean, I was glad, obviously, that he seemed to be alright. He was with Steve Rogers.” Alexander’s face flickers with annoyance; he glances at Steve, who stares back at him with steel-hard hatred. Alexander holds his gaze, and goes on “I knew Steve from about a year back. My bank was sponsoring a small gallery that his work was featured in. I went over to say hello. I thought”—a slight smirk—“I assumed Steve was paying him to be there.”

Bucky shivers with a small, desperate shake of his head, like he’s trying to get Pierce’s words out of there.

“So I said hi,” Pierce goes on, “I spoke to Steve for a minute. I didn’t… James wasn’t letting on that we knew one another, so I went along with the introductions. He said his name was Bucky.” His mouth curls around his name, spitting it out mockingly. “They left. A little bit later, I was waiting for the bathroom, and James came out. I stopped him and asked how he was. Like I said, I was glad he was okay. He was… cold towards me, though, and left. I wasn’t sure what to make of it.”

“What happened next?”

“I went outside for a cigarette. A couple of minute later, Steve came out. We talked for a minute and then, out of nowhere, he attacked me.” Pierce grimaces, like he’s disappointed. “He punched me and said something like ‘stay the fuck away from him.’”

Actually, he’d said he would break his neck if he ever looked at Bucky again, and he wants to make good on that promise.

“Did you hit him back?”


“That’s what you assumed it was? Just jealousy?”

“Well, yeah. I figured Barnes probably told him about our arrangement, and the combination of jealousy and… humiliation at knowing me sent him over the edge.”

“Did you speak to either Barnes or Rogers, after that?”

“No.”

“Did you know that Barnes was going to press charges?”

“Well, not right away, but I had an idea after Stark pulled Stark Industries from their partnership with my bank. He said something to me like ‘I can’t support bad guys, Alex,’ and I knew he was fairly close with Rogers, so I thought he might have said something.”
“When did you realize exactly what Barnes was claiming?”

“When the police came to my house?”

“This was Danvers?”

“Yes. And Fury, her partner. And a couple of other cops.”

“Can you describe the arrest?”

His lip curls. “Danvers and her partner arrived at my house the morning of March twenty-third. She had a search warrant, so they turned my house over looking for evidence. Eventually, she asked for my laptop, then they placed me under arrest. She said it was for raping Barnes. I assumed it would be that, judging from how things had transgressed from my last interaction with him.”

“Than you. No further questions.”

“Let’s have a fifteen-minute recess,” Coulson announces, with a smack of the gavel that makes Bucky squeeze closer to Steve, momentarily petrified.

Steve is up before anyone else, a hand on Bucky’s back, guiding him as gently as he can. He shoves through to the exit and shoots reporters a look that says don’t even think about it, and they all have the decency to keep their distance.

Steve gets them outside, and turns to him, heartbroken, and Bucky breaks in his arms.

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Too fast, they have to get back inside. Bucky is still trembling, every cell in his body worked into a quivering, petrified numbness that he can’t shake. He stares forward, eyes glazed, room rocking back and forth, as Pierce gets back up there.

“The state will now commence their cross examination of the witness.” Coulson nods to Maria.

She stands up and paces to the center of the floor. “Mr. Pierce,” she says, “If you and Bucky Barnes were in what you’re calling a consensual sexual relationship, why didn’t you have his number?”

Pierce looks her over coldly, eyes narrowed. “He never offered it. I thought he wanted to keep our lives separate, besides what we planned together, and I had no problem with that. We weren’t exactly friends.”

“But you were ‘worried’ about him when he stopped showing up?”

“Worried in the sense that I hoped nothing happened to him?”

“Mr. Pierce, why did you repeatedly go on TV and reassure people that you’d never met Mr. Barnes?”

His face darkens a notch. “It wasn’t good PR for people to think I was involved with a prostitute. I’d rather keep that part of my life private.”

Bucky glances meekly at Steve. He looks unrecognizable, transformed by loathing. Bucky isn’t sure how he’s managing to keep himself in the seat next to him. He squeezes Steve’s hand lightly, and Steve turns back to him, gentleness washing back over his face.
“In that case, why keep photos on your laptop? Hacking is easier than ever these days.”

He says, easily, “It was password protected. It wasn’t hurting anyone.”

Bucky’s whole body feels like a stalled car, lurching and stuck, made worse with every word he says.

“You didn’t see a problem with keeping photos of that nature on a laptop you used every day for work and other personal matters?”

Annoyance begins to writhe under his expression. “It wasn’t bothering anyone. No one even knew.”

“Bucky Barnes knew. It was hurting him, and you didn’t care, did you?”

She’s zeroing in, trying to get him to break. Anger flares in his eyes, but he doesn’t crack the way Martha and Rumlow had. With them, she had found the crack in their stories and pushed and pushed until it spread too far to control and she could bear down on them, chip away at the lie until it all came crashing down. He’s harder to break.

Bucky watches, breathless and enthralled and very, very scared.

“As far as I knew, Barnes was fine with it,” he repeats coldly.

“But if you had to keep these photos, that you’re claiming both parties agreed to, why a folder on your desktop? Why not somewhere that could be less easily hacked or sent by accident?”

“I didn’t think about it.”

“Mr. Pierce, you seem like a man who thinks things through. You never thought about the most careful way to handle files that were that explicit and, had they come out, would have devastated your career?”

“It was easier to just have them on my laptop. I could check on them,” Pierce snaps, fury starting to bubble over.

Maria pauses. “Check on them?”

“Make sure they hadn’t been corrupted or hacked.”

“Are you sure? Or by ‘checking on them’ did you mean making sure you still had them as something to dangle over your victim’s head as blackmail and make sure it was easy enough to access them if you needed to use them as a way to emotionally abuse and blame him for what you were doing to him?”

She’s pushing harder; the spiderweb crack spills open further.

His face darkens. “I didn’t use it to blackmail him,” he snarls.

“But you showed them to him, as a way to blame him, didn’t you?”

Pierce glares at her. “I never did that.”

She casts him a long, skeptical look, but changes directions. “Did you ever engage in sexual intercourse with Ava Starr?”
Pierce reeks, not expecting that. “No.”

“So she’s lying, too?”

“I guess so.”

“If that’s the case, why did she quit out of nowhere in January of 2010?”

“That’s her business,” he snaps.

“You never checked with your secretary about why she was suddenly quitting?”

“Ms. Hill, I’m a CEO of a multi-billion dollar bank. I have more pressing things to deal with.”

“Why did she email her friend about you assaulting her three years ago, and have notes from her therapist three years ago about it, if it’s a sudden opportunistic lie?”

“Maybe she’s been planning it,” he hisses. She’s gotten under his skin now, and the cracks are starting to deepen.

“So you’re saying three years ago, Ava Starr suddenly quit a steady job, sent her friend emails and spoke to her therapist about an assault that never really happened in the hopes that one day, there would be a situation she could use it against you in?”

He looks livid. “Maybe she was going to use it, and Barnes beat her to it.”

Maria raises an eyebrow. “Let’s discuss the Christmas party. Tony Stark has written a letter to the court detailing his experience of the night of December eighteenth. His version of events line up with Mr. Barnes’ description of the night. How do you respond to that?”

“He’s lying.”

“Mr. Stark’s company, until recently, was in business with yours. Publicly, you two seemed to be on rather good terms. Why would he lie?”

“I don’t know. Ask him.” He’s losing control, voice growing tight and furious. Maria knows it.

“Are we supposed to believe that after finding out the person you were allegedly ‘involved with’ and had abandoned you without warning was seeing someone else, you had no animosity? The only reason you followed Bucky to the bathroom was to casually catch up?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I did.”

“Did you touch him? Or are Tony Stark, Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes all lying when they say you did?”

There’s white-hot rage splitting his voice when he says “I might’ve touched him for a second. It wasn’t anything hostile.”

“At first, you said you just spoke to him and he left without saying anything, and now you might have touched him?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Mr. Pierce, I want to go back to the months you were having this ‘relationship’ with Mr. Barnes. He was the first man you ever had a sexual relationship with?”
“Yes.”

“As your wife already testified, you two were prominent donors to several conservative organizations, many of them known for opposing LGBT issues?”

He grits his teeth. “Yes.”

“So what was going through your head during your relationship with Mr. Barnes?”

“It was just sex. I didn’t have feelings for him. It had nothing to do with my politics.” Defensiveness flares in his voice.

“Did that make you angry?”

“Excuse me?”

“The cognitive dissonance between what you were doing to Bucky and the things you and your wife were meant to be supporting. Did it make you angry, that you were betraying your ideals like this?”

“I didn’t think about it,” Pierce snaps.

“Ever? Over seven months?”

“Like I said, it had nothing to do with my politics.”

“Do you identify as heterosexual, Mr. Pierce?”

“Yes.”

“Can you see how there could be a disconnect between that and your actions?”

“It was just sex.” His hands have constricted to fists. It makes Bucky wince.

“So you weren’t thinking of Bucky Barnes as a person?”

Pierce says, viciously, “What does it matter? I was paying him.”

“Well, it would have been easier to justify abusing him if you were dehumanizing him, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I wasn’t dehumanizing him,” Pierce spits, “He was a hooker. I treated him like one.”

The glass shatters, falling in sheets. Maria’s eyes, for a moment, shine with disgusted satisfaction.

“So because he was a prostitute, it wasn’t rape, right?”

“I didn’t rape him,” Pierce snarls. He’s unhinged, now, and Maria pushes harder, unwinding him to nothing but the truth.

“So what did you mean by ‘treating him like a hooker?’”

“I paid him for sex. That’s what he did.” His voice is trembling with anger.

“And you just admitted that because of that, you didn’t see him as a person?”

“That isn’t what I said.”
“But it’s what you meant.”

“He let people screw him for a living,” Pierce sneers. “Even if I had raped him, it would hardly count.”

“So the things you said about how you always checked with him, and you would never have done anything he’d said ‘no’ to– that all meant nothing?”

“He got paid,” Pierce spits, venomous and out of control, “he should’ve been fine with it all. It was his job.”

Maria lets it sink in. Bucky is shivering, tremors shooting electrically through his whole body, slumped against Steve’s side. The words leave him feeling sick and used and exhausted, the way it feels before a fever breaks, the way it feels when he wakes up from a nightmare.

But she got him to break.

“Nothing further.”

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There’s a recess, but Bucky barely registers it. He’s just numb the entire time, slumped against the wall next to Steve, shaking as Steve tries to get him to toss back a cup of water.

He wants to go home. Everything feels like a threat right now, and he’s so exhausted that his vision is starting to white out, and when they have to head back into the courtroom he thinks he might start crying again.

Maria strides back in, a little flustered looking. She glances at Bucky and lifts a finger – wait or one minute. Bucky frowns, leaning in a little as she gets to her table and sits, clicking her pen.

“Are we ready?” Coulson asks, looking between them. Maria stands quickly.

“Your honor,” Maria says, “I’m requesting the admission of one final witness for the state.”

Bucky and Steve exchange a startled glance. At the defense table, Zola has stood up, irritated.

“Your honor, she should have cleared all of her witnesses weeks ago, it’s too late now–”

Coulson blinks, bewildered. “Ms. Hill, why am I just hearing this now?”

Maria says, taking a breath, “The witness in question wasn’t comfortable coming forward until now. New information has come to light that made them feel like they needed to testify.”

“Absolutely not, your honor,” Zola snaps. Coulson waves a hand at him.

“Who are you talking about?” he asks Maria.

Bucky realizes what’s happening a half second before Maria answers. He squeezes Steve’s hand in anticipation, anxiety and shock washing over him.

“Claire Pierce,” Maria says, a hint of apologeticness in her voice, “the defendant’s oldest daughter.”

“Oh, my god,” says Steve softly. Bucky looks towards them and feels suddenly, excruciatingly sorry for Claire. She’s sitting a few rows behind them now, looking down, jaw tight, as her family
and Zola all snap their heads towards her. The courtroom has gone silent, and Bucky hears her mother hiss, “Is this a joke?” They’re looking at her with varying degrees of shock and rage, her brother astonished, her father chillingly, familiarly hateful. Bucky can’t look at him for more than a few seconds.

“Your–your honor,” Zola says, remembering he has a job here, “this is absurd.” He blinks and shakes his head like he’s trying to get it together. “Cla– Ms. Pierce has witnessed the entire trial already. Her credibility as a witness would be destroyed.”

“Your honor, witnesses with emotional stake in cases are allowed to testify after viewing a trial,” Maria comes back with quickly, “The defendant and his wife both testified for the defense after having seen most of the trial already. The defense was given a character witness, and now a member of the defendant’s family has decided the information being presented didn’t tell the whole story. I think it’s important that the jury hears what she has to say.”

Zola scrubs a hand down his face.

“Is Claire Pierce present in court right now?” Coulson says, after a moment. Biting her lip, Claire stands timidly. “Would you approach the bench, please?”

Claire does. Her heels click too-loudly on the endless walk up there. “Claire,” her brother says frantically as she passes, but she doesn’t look at him.

She pushes through the gate and stands in between Zola and Maria. Her hands are crossed in front of her, blonde hair cascading down her back, swaying a little on her feet.

“Ms. Pierce,” Coulson says, observing her, “you’ve decided you want to testify as a character witness for the state?”

Claire’s voice trembles. “Yes, your honor.”

“Why didn’t you reach out to the prosecution before the trial began?”

“I, um. I thought I was doing the right thing siding with my family. But, um, I’ve thought about it, and that wasn’t right.” She whispers it, like if she doesn’t say it too loudly her parents won’t have to hear it.

“Your honor, please,” Zola says, practically ringing his hands. “This can’t possibly be appropriate.”

Finally, Coulson says, “Okay. I’m going to allow Ms. Pierce to testify for the prosecution. We’ll resume tomorrow at two pm, so both sides have a fair amount of time to prepare what they’ll say. After that, you’ll both deliver closing remarks. Alright?”

Maria nods. Zola gestures in a way that he guesses is helpless agreement, and when Coulson concludes the day, Maria gestures for Bucky and Steve to follow her into a spare office. Claire joins them.

Steve’s arm tugs protectively around Bucky’s waist. He’s still trying to decide if he can trust her, watching her with tentative intrigue. Bucky leans against him, relieved for the touch.

The air in the room is stale and intensely awkward. Bucky almost wants to laugh at the bizarreness of it. It could be the setup for a joke, he thinks deliriously, your boyfriend, a prosecutor, and the daughter of the guy who raped you walk into a bar...
He shakes his head. *Get it together,* Bucky snaps to himself, and shifts his weight.

“So,” Maria says, after what feels like an eternity but what’s really only a few fraught moments, “Bucky, Steve, Claire. Claire, Bucky and Steve.”

The three of them grimace at one another. Steve tightens his arm around Bucky nervously.

No matter how badly anxiety is twisting into a thicket in Bucky’s chest, he realizes at this very moment, it’s probably worse for Claire. She’s gone pale, hair starting to fall limp, arms crossed over herself. He wants to say something – *thank you* or *sorry your family is probably gonna write you out of their wills now* – but he can’t figure out what would put her at ease.

“Claire’s going to be our last witness,” Maria reiterates; she’s trying to figure out what to say that’s sensitive to all parties, and there are very few things that work. “Basically, she’s going to talk about how she–about what she’s seen, from her–from Alexander. The court will call it a character witness.” Maria takes a breath, eyes darting between the three of them.

“How come?” Steve says finally. It’s not hostile; he’s genuinely asking.

Claire bites her lip. “He’s lying, up there,” she says. Her voice shakes a little. “He’s hurt people really badly. I, um–if he keeps… doing that to people, after this, and I didn’t say anything, I’ll feel awful. Even if, um, he loses, I still don’t want to have been… you know. Complicit.”

For a moment, defensiveness flares in Bucky’s chest. *You aren’t gonna be the make-or-break here,* he thinks snarkily, but he pushes back on it. Claire isn’t her dad, she isn’t her family. Disliking her when she’s offering help gets them nowhere. So he nods, instead.

“Thank you,” Bucky says quietly. He almost adds *I’m sorry.*

She half-smiles.

Something tremendous Bucky thinks, is building. A reckoning, a catastrophe, an earth-shaking change. It’s almost here, and he’s scared and he’s ready and he can’t look away now.

**Chapter End Notes**

i hope....u all liked this......as u know by now ur comments !!! are!!!!!!

everything!!!!!!!!!! THANK U!!!!!!

come see me on tumblr @cafelesbian! I love everyone!!!! ahh!!!!

also i’d guess like....15-20k more words at least based on how long the chapters have been but who knows! i hope you aren't too sick of me!! ok goodbye love u 3000
Chapter Notes

hey i feel like its been a hundred years since i updated but i dont think it has ive just had a lot goin on....anyway here we are

usual warnings pls be safe xx

as always, Cia is an absolute goddess for editing this at like 1am last night....i love her :')

The meeting is a whirlwind of discomfort and politeness and bewilderment. After a few minutes, Bucky and Steve say their stiff goodbyes to Claire and head out to get a cab. She and Maria are taking off to Maria’s office to cram four months worth of witness preparation into one night. Steve realizes they don’t know where she’s going after that. Presumably not home.

Once they’re in a car, Steve blinks and shakes his head a couple of times, exchanging a startled glance with Bucky.

“What the fuck just happened?” Bucky says hoarsely.

Still bewildered, Steve rolls down the cab window, shuddering into the gritty summer air. “Your guess is as good as mine,” he says, with a weak laugh.

“You think she means it?” Bucky asks seriously.

Steve turns to look at him. Bucky’s eyes are bright with worry. He lets his head fall against Steve’s shoulder, and Steve drapes an arm over him. “Yeah,” Steve says, “I do.” A beat. “Did you see how her family reacted?”

Bucky takes a breath. “Yeah.”

“That wasn’t planned.”

“No,” Bucky agrees stoically, “it wasn’t.”

Steve looks down at Buck, worried for him. “You okay?”

Bucky pauses, the swell of traffic noises filling the beat. “Do you think—” he begins quietly, and swallows, grimacing. “Do you think they’re gonna like, disown her now?”

Steve looks down at the man he loves more than anything in the world and remembers, his heart breaking a bit, exactly why the universe could reinvent itself ten times over and still never be worthy of Bucky. Bucky is good. There is so much more good in him than in anyone Steve can think of. Even now, in the midst of this nightmare, he’s preoccupied with the consequences that the daughter of the man who abused him will face for telling the truth.

He wishes, wildly, Bucky could see that. He wishes he could know that that type of goodness is so
spectacularly beautiful, that it was that relentless, unyielding goodness that had made Steve fall endlessly in love with him when he was too young to even know what love was. Even after horror after horror after horror, it never wavered.

Steve thinks, for the billionth time, *I am so indescribably lucky to get to love you.*

“No,” Steve tells him softly, “no, I don’t. I think that after this is all over, they’re gonna forgive her. If they can stand behind him…” He trails off, leaning in to kiss Bucky’s forehead. Bucky squeezes close to him, wrapping both arms around his stomach, exhaling shakily into Steve’s shirt.

***

The night is nice.

Bucky and Steve make pasta with chickpea sauce in a candlelit kitchen, Dixie Chicks playing on vinyl in the background (“Shut up, Steve, they’re the one acceptable country group, you’re the one who bought this album...”), chilled rosé pulled out from the back of the fridge. As the water boils, Bucky wraps his arms around Steve and pulls him in, swaying vaguely to the music, a strange sense of calm coming over him, a mixture of the wine and of the tenderness Steve puts into touching him, one hand on his cheek and one arm around his waist as they rock back and forth. Their faces touch, foreheads and noses and lips brushing, safe and divine.

*How long do you wanna be loved? Is forever enough, ’cause I'm never never giving you up...*

That night gives them a moment of peace in the center of carnage. Looking back on it, Bucky should have stayed there with Steve for the rest of their lives, cooking a meal and holding one another without realizing what was coming for them.

***

The morning is less nice.

Surprise witnesses, Maria had explained, are almost unheard of. They exist for plot twists on legal soap operas and in the drowsy eyes of hopeful juries who are desperate for something less dull to happen. She’s never had one, she knows maybe one other lawyer who has, and she never expected to.

In short, it’s a big fucking deal. The media knows this, too. *Alexander Pierce’s daughter to testify for the prosecution* makes the breaking news section of CNN and the Times. Steve ducks the requests to comment. When they arrive, the crowd seems thicker with reporters.

Anxiety is thick in Bucky’s head, running a dull thrum through his brain. He lets Steve take over, waving off reporters with a steel, cold look before they can say anything.

Claire shows up with a tall, mild-mannered looking guy who Bucky assumes is her boyfriend. They’re holding hands, and he looks at her the way Steve looks at Bucky, and for a moment, all Bucky thinks is that he’s glad she has somewhere to stay, at least, other than her home with her family.

He turns the corner for the bathroom, then stops and backs away. Claire and her brother are standing close, talking heatedly and quietly, and Bucky listens for a moment from behind the corner.

“Claire, have you lost your mind? Think about this–”
“Alex, I thought about it so goddamn much, okay–”

“No, you didn’t–”

“Alex! Alex, he’s lying, you know he is. We’ve seen him at home, you saw him up there yesterday, you heard him– ‘I treated him like a hooker.’ Jesus Christ.” She sucks in a breath. “Do you honestly think he didn’t do this? I’m really asking.”

Alex stares at her. “Who cares?” he snaps, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Claire inhales sharply, appalled.

“Claire, this is our dad. This is our family,” he adds, pleading.

“‘Who cares?’” Claire echoes dully. “Are you kidding me?”

Alex hesitates. “You know what I mean. This other guy is a nobody, Claire, we’re talking about Dad.”

“You’ve seen him,” she says. The sadness in her voice makes Bucky wince. “He’s a wreck. When was the last time you saw him sober? Seriously? Fuck. I wanted to think it wasn’t true so badly, but it is. It just is. And now we have to deal with that. Look, I know it’s different for you to hear ‘cause you’re a guy and you don’t deal with creeps on the street and on campus–”

“Oh, so now it’s about gender–” Alex scoffs, but Claire keeps going.

“–but think about it. Do you want Eva living with him, knowing he did this? She’s thirteen, and she’s gonna grow up learning that rich men are allowed to rape anyone–”

“Don’t say that,” Alex hisses.

Claire laughs incredulously. “Alex, that’s what he fucking did! He raped a guy younger than us in our house for months! And his secretary; I mean fuck, Ava helped me with my SATs when I visited Dad at work, I remember asking why she quit, and he told me she moved. How fucked up is that? He did this no matter how much we don’t want it to be true.” Her voice quivers; Bucky thinks she might be crying.

Alex says, through gritted teeth, “That’s why he needs us.”

Claire doesn’t answer for a minute. Then she says, flatly, “No, he doesn’t. He did this to our family. Think about Mom.”

“She knew about it–”

“Oh first of all, I never, ever want to fucking think about our parents having an open relationship. God.” A pause. “And also, she didn’t. She’s gonna need us way more than he does. He did this to Ava, and to Bucky–”

“Oh, you guys are on a first name basis now?” Alex says nastily.

Claire ignores him. “–and now he’s ruining everything for all of us and he’s going to jail, Alex.” She exhales sharply. “He is. He’s losing this case, and Mom needs us, and Eva needs us, and I need you, okay? I need you guys to not hate me for this. I love you, and I love Dad even though he did this– this unbelievably fucked up thing. Please. We need to stick together right now.”

There’s a beat of silence. Bucky hopes they’re hugging, or something. Then he hears Alex say
“What the fuck is wrong with you? Dad needs us to stick together and you’re throwing him under the bus. Figure out what you want.”

He storms off. Bucky jumps when he turns the corner but Alex Jr. walks the opposite way without even noticing him. Bucky slumps against the wall. He can hear Claire crying.

He could go back to where Steve is waiting, pretend he didn’t hear this. He owes Claire nothing.

_Goddamn it_, Bucky thinks, and turns the corner.

She looks up, surprised, then hiccups and rubs her eyes. Her makeup is running a little, and she tries desperately to contain it. “You okay?” Bucky says awkwardly.

“Yeah,” Claire croaks out. Bucky reaches out nervously and pats her on the shoulder, grimacing.

“How much of that did you hear?” Claire asks, catching her breath.

“I didn’t wanna interrupt,” Bucky says nervously. She gives him a sad, sad smile. “Um. I’m sorry.”

“Shit.” Claire rubs her eyes again. “I’m sorry, I know hearing me talk about my family is the last thing you need right now—”

Bucky half smiles. “It’s okay.” Claire looks, for the first time, like a real person. Alexander is a monster, and the rest of the Pierces still all seem a little like porcelain dolls. Until the trial, they’ve only existed in dozens of family photos, smiling on vacations to Europe and on birthdays and at graduations, looking so much like the goddamn Brady bunch that even Alexander could’ve fooled him. Claire was just a subject in the painting that Alexander and Martha had hanging over their bed, frozen in time as her high school self, wearing a white dress and being hugged by her dad, part of an image that Bucky had to stare at during the worst hours of his life.

Bucky is honestly surprised by how normal she seems right now, how much he doesn’t hate her.

“I’m so sorry,” Claire says thickly. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Bucky blinks back sudden tears. “It wasn’t your fault, Claire,” he says quietly. Because it wasn’t.

She rakes her hands through her hair. “Still.”

Bucky nod, understanding. “Thank you,” he tells her, then draws a breath. “And thank you for doing this. It really… I appreciate it.”

Claire gives him a watered-down smile. “Yeah. It’s um—you know. It’s the least I could do.”

Bucky thrusts his hands in his pockets and nods. There’s a beat of discomfort.

Claire clears her throat and says, “I should go find Luke…” and Bucky nods, stepping aside. She takes a breath and smooths her hair down. “I’ll see you in there.”

“Take care, Claire,” Bucky says sadly.

She shifts her weight and gives him a little nod.

***

“Court in session.” Coulson taps his gavel. “Okay, today we’re starting with a last-minute witness for the prosecution.” He eyes Maria. “Are you ready to start, Ms. Hill?”
“Yes, your honor.” Maria stands. “The prosecution calls Claire Pierce to the stand.”

Claire is sitting a couple of rows from the back with her boyfriend. She stands, her face grim, and walks up to the stand.

Her family glares at her as she’s sworn in. Alexander looks livid. Martha and Alexander Jr. just look defeated.

Bucky looks away from them and shifts closer to Steve.

“Ms. Pierce,” Maria begins, “what’s your relation to the defendant?”

Maria’s starting gently, slight warmth behind her voice. She feels bad, Bucky assumes, that Claire has so few allies in that room.

“He’s my dad.” Claire’s voice is steady, but there’s nervousness behind it.

“Do you two have a close relationship?”

Claire bites her lip. “We did.”

“Past tense?”

“Yeah. Kind of. Since the case started it’s been distant.”

“Do you hate your family, Ms. Pierce?”

Obviously, Claire had been expecting the question, but she still looks hurt by it. “No,” she says, “I love all of them.”

“Including your father?”

She swallows. “Yeah.”

“So what made you decide to testify against him?”

Claire is trying very, very hard to not look at where her family is sitting. “My dad, um. He really… I didn’t realize how much he hurt…other people. Um. I felt like it would make me terrible if I stood by that. I owed it to the people he’s hurt to tell the truth. It’s… it’s the least I can do.”

Bucky feels attention turn vaguely to him; even Claire glances his way, quickly, then back down. It’s a strange, awful sensation, feeling bad for Claire. If she kneels in the rubble of what her father has done, to Bucky, to Ava, to his family, she’ll be hurt in the crossfire too.

“Is this based just on what you learned from watching witness testimonies?” Maria asks Claire.

She sweeps hair from her face. “Partly that. But not only.”

“What else made you want to testify?”

Claire is tapping her french-tips against the witness booth. She looks down at them now. “The way he’s acted at home, since the charges were brought against him.”

“When did you find out about the allegations against your father?”
“After he got arrested. My mom and brother called me and told me he was gonna be charged with rape.” She swallows and winces.

Martha is watching her daughter with a bright, hard expression. Anger and betrayal and something like envy. Bucky gazes at her for a minute, trying to work it out. Then he thinks, dully, **she’s free of him. Martha isn’t.**

“What was your reaction when you learned that?”

“At first I was shocked. Um. I thought it had to be a mistake.” Claire runs a hand through her hair.

“Why was that?”

“Because he’s never–I never saw him act violently towards anyone.”

Anxiety that he can’t quite place twinges in Bucky’s stomach. He leans heavily against Steve, who wraps an arm around him.

“So what did you do?” Maria asks.

“Honestly, I didn’t do anything at first. Um, I had classes, and he got out on bail pretty fast, and I thought the whole thing would be smoothed over pretty fast, so I didn’t come home until like a week later.”

“Can you describe the dynamics in your family when you came home for the first time?”

Claire purses her lips unhappily. “It was chaotic,” she says finally. “Just… a lot of anxiety. My parents were fighting a lot, me and my brother were at each other’s throats from stress, my little sister was confused and upset. I was only there for the weekend at first. It was just too much to be there for a long time, and I had school.”

“What do you mean your parents were fighting?”

Claire works her jaw like she’s trying to delay tears. “Yelling at each other all the time. They couldn’t be in the same room together without a fight. It got to the point where my brother and I decided we couldn’t leave our younger sister there alone. We were switching off days to be home.”

“Where do you attend college?”

“I go to Princeton.”

“And your brother?”

“Georgetown.”

“Neither of those are especially close. Was it that urgent, that you were both commuting several hours home to make sure it didn’t get out of hand?”

Claire gulps. “Yeah. We were really worried about them being in the same house.”

Bucky glances at Alexander Jr. His face is screwed up in stunned disbelief, flashing with rage and astonishment and anguish, like he’s watching his city crumble.

He thinks, bitterly, **now you know one millionth of what this has been like for me.**

“And what was your dad acting like, separate from just his marriage?”
She looks down. “I’d never seen him like this before. He was drinking all the time. He was screaming at my mom—really horrible things, calling her a bitch and saying, um, she had nothing without his money. He was fighting with his lawyer, he was barely looking at me or my siblings. He was just… he was so angry.”

“And when did you start to think maybe he had abused Bucky Barnes?”

Claire says, blankly “When I asked him about it. He, um, he got really, really mad. He said, like—” She bites her lip, hesitating. Maria gives her a nod, and Claire closes her eyes. “Um. ‘It’s a load of bullshit made up by a couple of fags. That whore Barnes is a lying little cunt.’” She winces. Bucky shrinks back, and Steve kisses him lightly on the forehead. “And, um. I’d never, ever heard him talk like that. So that was when I thought, um, maybe this was real.”

“And was there anything else that made you think that?”

“The way he acted up until the trial. It was the same, just getting worse. He was drinking all the time. My little sister, she’s thirteen—it got to the point where my brother and I were scared of her being alone with him. He wasn’t, um, hitting us, or anything, but he was so, so angry. And, um. The evidence that was coming out. The photographs, and everything. I knew by that point there was no way this was made up. He was constantly attacking the press, but he was doing tons of appearances and interviews to try to get control of the story. My dad wouldn’t have cared about all of this that way, if it was a lie.”

Maria nods, then changes course. “Did your parents ever do or say anything to indicate they were in an open relationship?”

Claire cringes slightly. “No.”

“Do you think that was true, when they testified about it?”

Claire bites her lip. Bucky can tell she’s trying to figure out how to say this without getting her mom in trouble, because she finally answers “It’s possible we just didn’t know, or he convinced my mom that that was true. But I don’t think they were… open.”

“Why not?”

“It’s possible, but neither of them would have ever wanted an open relationship. My mom and I had a conversation a couple of weeks before the arrest about how she doesn’t respect people who do that in their marriage. And, um.” Claire purses her lips. “They’ve had… problems with… infidelity before.”

“They told you this?”

“No. But you know, I lived with them. You overhear things and figure it out.”

“Was this a serious issue in their marriage?”

“I thought they worked through it,” Claire says shakily, “but a couple of years ago, my brother and I thought they might split up over it. So that’s why I just…didn’t expect them to suddenly agree to that.

Maria nods. “How much of what your father said during his testimony do you not believe?”

Rolling her shoulders forward, Claire takes a breath. “A good chunk of it,” she says, a wince in her voice that Bucky recognizes as horrible, horrible guilt.
“Do you remember specific things you didn’t believe?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you give us some examples?”

“He didn’t self-medicate using that drug. There’s no way.” Her tone has gone flat and resigned; she’s too deep now to try and minimize the damage.

“Anything else?”

“Well like I said, the idea that he and my mom were, uh, agreeing to see other people. I really doubted that.”

“Do you remember seeing your father after the Christmas party he spoke about?”

“Yeah, I do.” Claire closes her eyes grimly.

“Was there anything unusual about his behavior?”

“Yeah. Well, um, he flew out to Aspen to meet the rest of us the next day, and when he got to our mountain home his whole face was messed up… he had a black eye, his nose was completely swollen, and he hadn’t told us what happened, so we were all pretty, um… alarmed. What he said at the time was that he ran into a guy he used to work with—Steve Rogers—and he was drunk and attacked him over a money disagreement. And we all believed him at the time. But after that he started acting… I don’t know. Stressed. Paranoid.”

“How so?”

“He basically stopped sleeping, at least as far as I could tell. He was having all of these, um, urgent sounding calls with Arnim—sorry, with Mr. Zola.” She blinks quickly. “I didn’t really hear them, just a couple of snippets—he was saying something like ‘I need you to make sure this doesn’t get out.’ He—he’s always been um, comfortable drinking, but he started drinking earlier and more. But I wasn’t home much, so I assumed it was work stress.”

“If you had to guess, what would you say the paranoia was connected to?”

“Well, now I think it was the worry about this. About charges being pressed.”

“Ms. Pierce, do you believe your father is guilty of abuse against Bucky Barnes?”

“Yeah,” Claire says shakily, “I do.”

Maria says, solemnly, “The prosecution rests.”

***

In the hallway, Claire is sobbing.

Bucky and Steve nearly walk into her as they turn the corner. She’s on a bench with her boyfriend, who has an arm around her, face in her hands.

She’s just blown up her entire life. Because of Bucky.

Bucky thinks about saying something, but there’s no point. It’s the same helplessness she must have felt watching this unfold, the same reason she’d caught him in the hallway the other day to
apologize. It wasn’t Claire’s fault, what her dad did, not at all. And it wasn’t Bucky’s fault that Alexander had taken a hacksaw to his family unit and destroyed them.

But he still feels the burden of that responsibility burning him up.

“Buck,” Steve says gently, an arm over his shoulder, “c’mon, baby.” He pulls him lightly away, into one of the small offices that Maria had told them they could duck into if they needed, relief flooding him as Steve shuts the door and the franticness of the hallway becomes an indistinguishable hum.

Bucky rushes to Steve and hugs him around the middle, needing that closeness. He closes his eyes as Steve runs a hand through his hair, letting the feeling of being taken care of surge through him.

Watching Zola cross-examine Claire feels wrong, like witnessing someone else’s family fighting as a kid. Bucky had read somewhere that Zola has been the Pierce’s lawyer for thirteen years or so, more than half of her life, a decade plus of dinners and family parties to linger uncomfortably behind the questions. When Zola stands up he looks almost regretful. Alexander stares at her with cold apathy.

“Ms. Pierce,” Zola begins stiffly. She winces at how impersonal it is. “Has your father ever hurt you physically?”

“No,” Claire says firmly.

“Your siblings?”

“No.”

“Your mother?”

Claire hesitates, but then repeats, “No.”

“But you’re suddenly convinced he’s capable of raping someone else?”

Claire bites her lip. “I really didn’t… I really didn’t want to think he was. But, um. He did, and that’s something that…” She swallows. “I love my dad. But I can’t pretend he didn’t do this.”

Zola’s face flickers with aggravation.

“Do you have evidence other than what had been presented this week in court to support that, Ms. Pierce?”

“Just the way he’s been acting at home.”

“Where do you live currently?”

Claire purses her lips—really?, “In an off-campus apartment at my school.”

“So not with your parents?”

“No.”

“So you aren’t home most of the time?”

“I guess not, no.”
“So how can you really know how your father was behaving?” Zola asks, and narrows his eyes.

Claire gives him a weary look. “Because I was home all the time after this to make sure my little sister was okay. I know you know this, ‘cause you were there too.”

Steve chokes back a laugh. Even Bucky smirks.

Zola grits his teeth, humiliated. “There were still large chunks of time where you were away, and had no idea what was happening in your house, or how your dad was behaving, correct?”

“I wasn’t there, but I was talking to my mom and my sister. And my dad, sometimes. He was the same. I talked to my brother a lot when he was home too. It was the same. He was deteriorating.”

Zola clears his throat. “How can you be sure it wasn’t just stress about the case in general? Your father’s entire life was being changed by these allegations.”

“Because I’ve seen him stressed before,” Claire answers, sounding so sad. “This was different. The way he was talking about... about the accusers, and everyone involved... It wasn’t just normal anxiety. He was furious.”

“Couldn’t he have been angry that lies were being spread about him?”

“It wasn’t that. The way he was talking about, um, James Barnes, even to me and my brother, it was scary.”

Bucky swallows and shudders. Steve shoots Pierce a glare.

Zola’s eyes flash. “Ms. Pierce, would your parents have told you about the status of their relationship if they were seeing other people?”

“Probably not,” Claire says.

“So you admit that it’s very possible you just didn’t know?”

“Like I said before, it’s possible. But I doubt it.”

“So your entire testimony is based on speculation?”

Claire sighs. “It’s based on the way I’ve seen him act for the last few months, and the evidence I’ve seen, and the fact that I’ve got nothing to tell me he didn’t do this.”

There’s a note of helplessness in Zola’s voice when he says, “No further questions.”

***

Maria spends forty minutes on her closing. Maybe Bucky’s biased, but he thinks she does immaculately. She represents the evidence, quick and professional, not mincing words. It’s the end, though, that sends a spark of adrenaline coursing through Bucky.

“Alexander Pierce is a rapist.” Heat cuts behind her words. “He is a serial abuser who used his privilege to rape and abuse Bucky Barnes for months. Even members of his family believe he’s guilty. He blackmailed him with photos of this abuse going on and used those to blame Bucky for the crimes that were being committed against him. It’s a disgusting tactic that we’ve seen plenty of this trial from every witness on the defense, all of whom tried to insinuate that the horrific abuse he endured was his fault. The defense used Mr. Barnes’ history against him to try to convince you that he was somehow responsible for the unimaginable sexual, physical, and emotional abuse that Mr.
Pierce committed. They tried to gaslight him into thinking that, just because he had survived similar traumas in the past, he was misremembering the months of abuse Alexander Pierce put him through. Ladies and gentleman, Bucky was twenty years old at the time he was abused by Alexander Pierce. He had to relive that trauma over and over this week, and hear from people who tried to turn it into his fault. The defense wants you to believe he’s lying. What could he have to gain from making this up? What about the abuse he described could make anyone think he was using it for attention?”

Bucky squeezes Steve’s hand and doesn’t let go. Steve squeezes back.

“Mr. Pierce, on the other hand, has every reason to lie about committing these crimes. I implore you not to allow him to get away with it again.” She pauses. “We’ve heard from two survivors of Alexander Pierce’s violence this week. They told similar stories. They were both drugged. They were both treated like there was no way for them to report what had happened, because Mr. Pierce was so secure in his position of power that he thought he could continue to abuse people with no consequences. Ladies and gentleman, you have the chance today to make sure that’s not true. You could find him not guilty, and tell victims of assault that their stories don’t matter. Tell the public that as long as privileged men continue to take advantage of people, they will face no consequences. You could tell sex workers who have faced abuse that their circumstances make what happened to them acceptable. Or you could find him guilty, and give countless other survivors the bravery and hope that they can seek justice against their abusers. You could tell the two victims who testified this week that they didn’t relive their traumas and listen to the lies of people who want to blame them in vain. You have a choice here to do something revolutionary. I hope you choose the right thing. Thank you.” Maria lets it settle for a minute, standing in the heavy, full silence. Then she gives Coulson a nod and sits.

Zola talks for longer. Maybe Bucky’s biased again, but he’s astonished at what a poor job he does. It’s not entirely his fault; the entire defense has imploded, collapsing like a house of rotted wood, but still.

He makes Bucky suffer for it, though. Through his digressive, disconnected ramble of a conclusion, he says things that make Bucky’s insides seize up. He throws around the words “attention-seeking” and “rewriting the past” too many times for it to feel natural. He says, at one point, “Barnes was willing to do anything, if the price was right, and now that he’s reinventing himself, of course he doesn’t want his loose morals to catch up with him. Alexander Pierce is the victim here,” and Bucky feels sick.

“Please, ladies and gentleman, think about this logically, not emotionally. The fact is, James Barnes has plenty to gain from making this up. Steve Rogers has reasons to want his partner to bring down Alexander Pierce. You’ve heard how Barnes behaved while he was letting people do whatever they wanted to him.” Bucky swallows, and Steve lets out a tight breath. “Don’t let the victim act fool you. You’re smarter than that. Alexander Pierce is guilty of trusting someone who betrayed him, and that’s all.” He clears his throat. “Thank you.” As Zola sits down, he looks rather pale. Bucky looks at Pierce; his face is contorted in anger, eyes flashing with urgency.

“Thank you for the closing statements. The jury will reconvene this Monday to begin deliberations. Until then, court dismissed.”

***

Alexander is losing.

It’s becoming more apparent every second the case drags on, every time that bitch Maria Hill opens her arrogant mouth, every time James pulls the victim card and cries into Rogers’ shoulder.
He’s losing this case. Zola was too stupid and incompetent to break the most pathetic witnesses to ever testify. Coulson decided he was guilty before the trial even began. Martha and Rumlow let themselves be backed into a corner up there. Hill attacked him and forced his hand. His own daughter betrayed him. Claire, who he had done everything for her entire fucking life, had gotten up there and called him an abuser to the court. It makes him so furious it blinds him. *How dare she.*

How dare Barnes, that pathetic little slut. Alexander thinks of him and tastes blood.

His fucking fault, all of this. In a couple of months he had taken everything from Alexander. His marriage was over. Even if somehow, the jury pulled through with a ‘not guilty’ verdict, his career was over. The bank had already had three of their biggest clients pull out of their contracts. Their stock had dropped exponentially. Other companies were pulling out of deals they had.

Fucking incredible, the way people were willing to destroy him to seem politically correct and sensitive.

Even his daughter. Barnes turned her against him with his whining and his crying and his pretending that everything Alexander had done hadn’t been his own fucking fault for getting himself into it in the first place.

It sets rage ablaze inside of him, torching everything. Alexander turns and drives his fist into the metal hand-dryer, the pain barely registering.

He’s going to go to jail because of the story of a fucking hooker.

He needs to drink. He needs to drink but there’s not enough alcohol in the world to calm him right now. Alexander thinks back to the prison he’d gone to to meet Rumlow, the suffocating misery of the place, and he feels sick.

*There will be something,* he tries to convince himself, *a mistrial. An appeal. This isn’t over.*

He thinks, spitefully, whether or not it was rape Barnes had deserved it. He had ruined Alexander’s life, turned his business and his family and everything he had to shrapnel and flames. Getting his legs spread a couple of times was nothing compared to that.

Alexander wants to drink. He wants to hit something. He wants to hit James again.

When Alexander pushes his way outside and sees them, the last of his composure spirals to dust. Rogers and Barnes, standing close at the bottom of the courthouse stairs. Barnes has his arms around Rogers’ neck, Rogers around his waist, and Rogers says something and Barnes fucking laughs.

Laughing, as if he didn’t just spend a week making everyone believe Alexander had ruined his life so badly he couldn’t function.

It makes him impossibly angry, seeing Barnes look like that. He doesn’t even notice Alexander watching them.

*No,* Alexander thinks, with a bloodlust he’s never quite felt before. *If he does this to me, I’ll burn him down, too.*

He drove today, for this very reason. He wasn’t sure he’d go through with it, but he stares at Barnes, smiling up at Rogers, victim-act gone, and he knows he’ll do it.

When he pulls his car around, Barnes and Rogers are still waiting there. After a moment, Rogers
says something, and Barnes nods and smiles, and they walk off, Rogers’ arm draped over Barnes’ shoulder, Barnes reaching up to hold his hand. It disgusts him, the ridiculous codependency, the patheticness of whatever that relationship is.

They never notice the car that follows.

***

On their way home, Bucky and Steve stop for dinner at a Thai food restaurant close to the courthouse, then get a car home. Bucky lays his head on Steve’s shoulder on the drive. Hope is burning, luminous and dangerous, in his chest, and for the first time he doesn’t immediately stamp it down. He can tell Steve feels it too, from the light way he plays with Bucky’s hair, the smile on his lips when Bucky kisses him quickly.

Steve glances down at his phone. “Check your texts,” he says.

“Just read them, I’m too tired,” Bucky grumbles.

Steve laughs. “Sam and Nat and Peggy wanna come over.”

“Oh.” Bucky looks up. “Wanda does, too.”

“We hosting a little party tonight?”

“Guess we are.” Bucky smiles faintly. “This isn’t a celebration, though. We aren’t jinxing it.”

“Right,” Steve says, sobering up, “right. Maybe he’ll invent a time machine to go back and stop us from destroying him in court this week.”

“Stop.” Bucky drags the word out and shoves him lightly. “I’m serious, Steve.”

Steve smiles. “Okay, okay. Not a celebration of the fact that Alexander Pierce is gonna die in jail.”

Bucky rolls his eyes fondly. “Shut up,” he says, with no malice. “After the verdict comes in, we can talk about that forever.”

“Fine.” Steve texts them back, letting them know that he and Bucky are picking up pizza and asking if they want anything else.

“Claire really came through,” Bucky says quietly. “I didn’t expect it.”

“Me neither,” Steve says, tilting his head. “I didn’t expect her to seem… I don’t know. Like a decent person, all things considered.”

“Yeah.” Bucky looks out the window; it’s starting to get dark now, streets framed in claustrophobic lights that thicken the heat. Bucky longs, suddenly, for quiet, cool air. He swallows.

Steve has the cab drop them off at a pizza place a block from their house—he and Bucky aren’t hungry, but Nat said none of them have eaten and he’s more than happy to buy them dinner. They walk in holding hands.

New York 1 is on the restaurant TV, and Bucky startles when he looks up and sees himself and Steve on the screen. It’s a shaky video taken today as they left the courthouse; Bucky’s eyes are cast down, biting his lip, and Steve is in front, shooting the camera a dark look. Accuser leaves courthouse after final day of Pierce testimonies.
It sends a dull spike of anxiety through Bucky. Mostly, he’s just surprised and tired. Steve raises an eyebrow, watching it with distaste for a moment, until he turns around and pulls Bucky into his arms.

At the counter, a couple is whispering indiscreetly, looking from TV Bucky and Steve to real Bucky and Steve with intrigue. Steve raises an eyebrow coldly, and they go back to their pizza intently.

Bucky rolls his eyes and kisses him on the cheek.

7:17
Natasha:
hurry up you idiots the three of us are crammed in the hallway outside your place

Steve rolls his eyes.

“I’ll go upstairs and let them in,” Bucky says. “You finish up here.”

He smiles. “Okay. I’ll be right up.” Steve squeezes his hand quickly. Bucky hangs on for a moment longer, pulling him back in to kiss him. He smiles, and Steve smiles. Bucky glances from the TV to the couple at the counter to Steve’s face, which has slipped back to irritation.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Bucky tells him, cocking an eyebrow.

Steve rolls his eyes. “How can I? You’re taking all the stupid with you.”

Bucky smiles. Steve fake-salutes as he leaves.

Between the restaurant and their building, a sudden, unbearable thicket of panic twists its vines around Bucky’s heart, knocking his breath away. It comes out of nowhere, leaving his hands shaking, and Bucky chalks it up to worry for the verdict but picks up the pace.

He calms down once he makes it into the building. The doorman is reading something and gives Bucky a vague wave of his hand as he comes in, not looking up.

As Bucky waits for the elevator, someone behind him grabs his shoulder, and Bucky flinches at the suddenness of the touch.

Then he looks up, and the terror intensifies, if that can even be used to describe it. Terror snakes itself around his throat and his lungs and squeezes. It burns through everything inside him, right down to his soul, and takes his breath away so sharply that he will never be able to breathe again.

Pierce jabs something hard underneath his coat into Bucky’s ribs. “Make one fucking sound and I’ll shoot it,” he hisses.

Bucky’s brain screeches and crashes, the world around him going up in flames. He can’t say anything. He can’t even swallow. No. No no no nonononono.

“Walk outside and get into the car,” Pierce growls.

“You—you can’t…” Bucky whispers, his voice thin and feeble as smoke. “You can’t… restraining order—”

Pierce laughs, an awful, cruel thing. “Get in the fucking car, Bucky.”

Bucky blinks, over and over, like he’s trying to shake a hallucination. Maybe he is. “Steve…
Steve’s on his way—"

Pierce’s face turns impatient. “Then you better not be here when he gets back, or I’ll shoot him, too.”

The fear that has come over Bucky has sunk in too deep for him to feel it on the surface anymore. It trembles him from the inside of his bones, from the part of his soul that has never touched the light. “No,” Bucky pleads, and he isn’t even sure what he’s saying it to. Don’t hurt him. Don’t do this to me.

“I’m gonna give you one last chance,” Pierce snaps. He pushes the gun further into Bucky’s skin.

Bucky closes his eyes and shakes his head, a desperate, helpless movement that he can’t stop, tears pushing over his lashes.

Pierce bristles, glancing back at the doorman. “Now,” he snarls.

Bucky doesn’t know what else to do, so he steps forward in the direction Pierce jerks his head. It feels like walking to an execution.

It might be exactly that.

Bucky looks down. He watches the ground, somehow moving underneath him even though it’s not him walking, because if it were that would mean this is really happening.

Scream, Bucky begs himself, run. Do SOMETHING.

But he doesn’t. Pierce puts a hand on his back, steering him forward, and Bucky’s consciousness goes crazy, hysterical, hazy panic pushing in on him.

The car is parked right in front, in a hydrant spot. Pierce yanks the passenger door open and waits for Bucky to step in.

Bucky forces himself, against every cell in his body, to lift his head and look at him. “Please,” he whispers, voice breaking.

Pierce’s eyes puncture him, brutal and cold and violently hateful. “Get in the car.” He punctuates every word with disgust.

Head bent, shaking so badly his knees start to buckle, Bucky does.

Pierce slams the door, hard enough that it makes Bucky gasp. He walks around and gets in the driver’s seat before Bucky can get it together enough to begin thinking about running.

Bucky swallows poisonous tears, trying for a gulp of air that stings his lungs. Pierce starts the car without a word.

Chapter End Notes

im sorry i am so sorry
Chapter Notes

okay everybody u can stop yelling at me now goddamn

thank you as always Cia for reading this/generally being wonderful

TRIGGER! WARNINGS! PLEASE READ
in this chapter there are descriptions of fairly graphic violence and some descriptions of sexual assault, I don't wanna spoil it here if you don't want it spoiled but if you're worried AT ALL i'm putting a more detailed description of what to expect in the bottom notes so just click see more notes and i'll write what happens

See the end of the chapter for more notes

7:48

Steve walks home feeling good. He smiles at everyone he makes eye contact with, and he opens his top pizza box to give a slice to a homeless man on his corner, and everything feels light, the sunset casting gold over the tops of the buildings, the warm air comforting.

They’re going to be okay. He always knew, but now he knows. Alexander Pierce is going to prison, and everything Bucky went through for this trial was worth it, and this time in two weeks they’re going to be in Europe, curled up on a balcony overlooking a Spanish beach and far away from the chaos of New York.

As Steve heads inside, he’s thinking about Manhattan and how much he dislikes it and wondering if they should move to back Brooklyn, find a cute little redbrick apartment that they can make theirs in Park Slope or Red Hook. Bucky would probably like that, too. Bucky has made Steve’s place more of a home within a few months than Steve had in two years and with an absurd interior design budget, but he wants somewhere that’s his and Bucky’s from the beginning. He thinks about that and smiles; maybe a dog, too, they’ve talked about that but there hasn’t been time. Steve thinks further into the future, allows himself that joy he’s been so cautious about. He pictures kneeling in front of Bucky, on a beach or in a park somewhere, cleanly cut crystal ring in his hands, pictures Bucky smiling and nodding. He pictures, someday a few months or maybe years from now, low lighting and quiet music and gentle kissing and soft, lovely desire, pictures relearning that closeness and love with Bucky, trusting and unafraid.

There’s no rush, not for any of it. He’d said to Bucky he’d wait as long as he needed and he meant it. He smiles, though, thinking of all the beautiful things that are coming now that Alexander Pierce’s presence won’t be constantly hovering over them, Bucky waiting for him to strike.

There’s so much time now. There’s forever. Steve feels almost giddy as he heads upstairs, impatient with the elevator for making him wait to see Bucky.

When the doors pull open to his hallway, the joy trips on itself and falters slightly. Sam and Nat and Peggy are alone in his hallway, sitting and leaning against his wall, and they all look relieved when they see Steve.
“Oh my god, you brought pizza, you’re a gem,” Peggy says, smiling and untangling her legs from Nat’s to stand.

Steve blinks. “Where’s Bucky?”

Blank stares from all of them. “He’s not with you?” Nat says, frowning.

“No.” Steve looks around, like he’s missed him. “No, um… he came up here to let you guys in…”

Sam cocks his head. “Maybe he beat us here and we just didn’t realize it, we’ve only been here for like thirty minutes.”

“He left like twenty minutes ago,” Steve says, reaching slowly for his keys. Maybe he stopped somewhere. Maybe he ran into someone. Worry clots itself in Steve’s stomach, small and insignificant, but he forces it down. Don’t be stupid, he reasons, relax.

Not that he had expected it, but the fact that Bucky isn’t in their apartment is a slap in the face. All of the lights are off and the stillness feels heavy, eerie, untouched since this morning when they had left, hands clasped, smiling at one another. Dazed, Steve sets the boxes of pizza down.

“I’m gonna call him,” he announces, even though they aren’t really listening. Sam gives him a thumbs up.

Bucky’s phone rings three times, then goes to voicemail in the middle of the fourth ring. The worry intensifies. Steve tries him again, and it cuts off on the second ring.

Shit, he thinks, tightening his hold on the phone and setting his jaw. Then he takes a breath. Get a hold of yourself. You’re just being paranoid.

Steve turns back to his friends; they’ve all started on the pizza, unconcerned. “You reach him?” Peggy asks, without looking up.

Steve swallows. “No.” There’s a pounding in his head that’s started, that’s frustrating him because everything is fine. He saw Bucky twenty minutes ago. As far as Steve knows, he’s grabbing coffee.

He shoots Bucky a text that says babe where’d you go? and tries to stop his hands from shaking as he sends it. Steve shakes his head quickly.

“Steve?” Sam says carefully, “You okay, man?”

Steve’s mouth has gone very dry. He nods.

“Steve,” Nat says, with slight, good-natured dismissal, “relax. I’m sure he didn’t run off with another guy.”

Steve forces a laugh and goes to join them. They ask about the trial and today’s closing and do you think they’re gonna indict, oh man, Steve, that would be so great, and the whole time Steve bounces his leg and tells himself that nothing is wrong.

But then Bucky doesn’t text him or call him or show up, not for ten, fifteen, twenty more minutes, and Steve grows restless. Wanda is on her way; she texted him and Bucky in a group chat a few minutes prior, and Bucky doesn’t respond there either. The anxiety has twisted into a mass of full-blown panic, too big to ignore.

“I’m gonna go down and see if Bucky’s here,” Steve tells them, standing up pointedly. He gets
“Okay,” Sam says, with resignation, because he can tell Steve is becoming distressed. “Okay, we’ll come down with you.” He shoots Nat and Peggy a firm look. “I’m sure he’s almost here.”

Steve nods.

They’re quiet in the elevator down, everyone trying to assess if Steve is on the verge of a breakdown. He might be. It feels simultaneously agonizingly slow and too fast, like the cable has snapped and sent them through the floor. When the doors finally drag open, Steve strides towards the lobby without waiting for them.

Bucky isn’t there. He doesn’t know what he was expecting, but it sets him so far on edge that his hands shake.

“Stan!” Steve turns, somewhat frantically, towards the doorman, who’s reading a book under the desk. He looks up and gives Steve a smile. “Hey. Have you seen Bucky tonight?”

Stan looks around, taking his time, like this isn’t the only important thing in the world. “Yeah,” he says after a moment. “Yeah, he came in about a half hour ago.”

And Steve’s heart is yanked out of his chest.

“Oh, god,” Steve thinks, oh god oh god oh god.

He says, choking on the words, “Do you–do you–do you remember what the guy looked like?”


Steve squeezes his eyes shut. Everything around him is spinning out into running colors, various shades of gray and red that make him sick. When he opens his eyes, Sam, Nat, and Peggy are all staring at him.

Sam raises his hands calmly. “Steve,” he says slowly, “don’t panic–”

“Don’t panic,” Steve croaks out. “Thank you, Sam.”

Sam takes a breath. “You don’t know that it’s him. It could be anything, maybe…”

“Maybe what?” Steve snaps, and then, “Exactly.” He isn’t mad at Sam. He isn’t mad at anyone because he doesn’t have room for anger when everything inside him has turned to terror, too big to contain.

“Try calling him again,” Nat says carefully.

“No.” Steve has turned around and started walking, because if he stays in that lobby where Alexander came and dragged Bucky god knows where, he’s going to lose his mind. Stan calls something behind him that he doesn’t hear; everyone else hurries behind him.

“Steve?” Peggy calls, “Steve, where are you going?” Worry is thick in her voice.
“Pierce’s house,” Steve grits out. He hears the three of them stop walking, but he doesn’t. He’s heading towards the garage.

“That’s insane!” Nat calls, when she realizes he’s not joking, and trots to catch up with him. “Steve. Steve. Please listen.” She grabs his shoulder, and Steve shakes her off. “You can’t show up at his house—”

“He’s got Bucky,” Steve snaps, and saying it out loud knocks the air out of him. “Oh, god. He’s got him.” It makes him stop in his tracks.

Sam catches him and puts both hands on his shoulders. “Listen,” he says firmly, “there’s no way he came for Bucky. Even he wouldn’t be that stupid. Bucky is probably helping some sweet old guy find his way back to the library—”

“No, he isn’t,” Steve says, and it comes out as a gasp. “You know he isn’t. He— fuck. Goddamnit. Pierce knows he’s losing and he can’t handle it. Oh, god, and he’s already—it’s already the rest of his life in prison. Oh, my god.” Steve rakes his hands through his hair, hunching over slightly. “I’m going to get him. No fucking way am I letting this happen.” And he sidesteps Sam.

The three of them stand there, astonished, as Steve picks up, almost running down the hallway that has never seemed so fucking long in his life. Peggy tries this time, jogging to block him and fixing him with a stern, understanding gaze.

“Think about this,” she says, very calmly. “If you’re wrong, and you show up raging at Pierce’s house, that will put the whole case in jeopardy. Come upstairs, sit down, and we’ll figure out what to do together, okay?”

Usually, Steve admires Peggy’s unwavering pragmatism, but right now he stares at her and feels nothing but furious. “I’m not wrong,” he snarls, vicious in a way he’s never been with any of them before. He swings around to look at Sam and Nat. “I’m not wrong, okay? Pierce has him, and if no one finds them he is going to rape him again and kill him.” The words send a blunt knife spearing straight through his soul.

But Steve knows Pierce has Bucky, knows it so deeply that he might as well be acting on it instead of standing in this godforsaken hallway where Bucky is not, talking to his friends who don’t understand the severity of the situation. Pierce will kill him. He knows he’s losing and he’s already going to jail for the rest of his life and he won’t let Bucky get out of this unscathed. Peggy, Nat, and Sam stare at him with alarm.

“Steve, I’m begging you to think this through,” Sam says softly.

“I don’t have time for this,” Steve says, to himself, to no one, the the world, and he turns around again. They’re still following him.

“Please, man, you gotta think clearly here. Even if—even if this is Pierce, you have no idea where they are, you don’t know what you’re getting yourself—Are you listening to anything I’m saying?”

He isn’t. After that fucking eternity of a walk, Steve reaches the door and pushes out into the parking lot. He can’t remember where he last parked, or what his car looks like, for that matter, or anything that isn’t the image of Pierce cornering Bucky in their own fucking building and making him go somewhere. He fumbles in his pocket for his keys and clicks at them furiously, until he hears his alarm go off and he paces towards it.

“Do you even know where he lives?” Nat yells after him.
“Yes,” Steve snaps, his voice clipped. Fifth avenue and twenty second. Red awning. Bucky has said it to him enough times.

“Steve.” Sam rushes him one more time, placing both hands on the hood of his car as he reaches it. “Steve. If you’re really doing this, think about it. Come out and talk for a minute so we can help you. You can’t just barrel down there. Do you… god, you got a weapon?”

“Let me grab my hunting rifle from upstairs,” Steve barks out, his voice tight. Then he remembers Bucky at that party, his face terrified, whispering he owns a fucking gun, what if he’d had it? and his heart shudders and plunges through the floor again.

“Steve, please. You aren’t thinking clearly. You’re scared, I know. We’re all worried. You can’t…” But Steve has stopped listening. He fumbles in his pocket and realizes he left his cell phone upstairs, and there’s no way he’s heading back up, so he stumbles into the car and calls back, “Call 911.” And then he’s pulling out, hands shaking against the wheel in the worst driving he’s ever done.

Sam shouts behind him, “And tell them what? Steve? Steve!” But he’s gone, he’s pulling out and speeding down the relatively quiet New York streets and choking as he thinks that’s fifty fucking blocks of Manhattan traffic he has to drive.

When Steve turns the car on, the radio is on already, and of course it’s the fucking Dixie Chicks, and Steve thinks that twenty four hours ago, he and Bucky were spinning around the kitchen and laughing, and he’s choking on the memory. When the song declares Earl walked right through that restraining order and put her in intensive care Steve actually punches it off, wincing at the pain, but fuck he can’t do this, he can’t, he can’t.

Because oh, god, Bucky could die. Bucky could die. If he loses Bucky again, there won’t be a grace period, there won’t be four years of numbness where he can convince himself he’s fine. If he loses Bucky he’s lost everything. That future that he’d been imagining half an hour ago spins out into nothing, not even grief, not even loneliness, just nothing.

Steve jerks himself forward with a gasp and goes faster.

Steve has never been this scared in his life, he doesn’t think. Fear has left his whole body wrung out and useless, feeling like he’s moving in automated lurching motions.

Then he thinks of how scared Bucky must be right now. Oh, god. Oh, Jesus fucking Christ, Bucky must be so, so, so scared. His brain plays over Bucky’s face that night at Tony’s, the terror that had controlled him, that had dragged its way to the surface in the way Bucky breathed and blinked and moved. Bucky, sobbing when he had to relive what Pierce did to him, over and over, Bucky’s eyes, hollow and glassy and full of nightmares as he’d watched Pierce during the trial. Bucky, alone, right now, trapped with Alexander Pierce who is more unstable and enraged than ever.

Hang on, Buck, Steve pleads, like the universe will relay the message. Baby, I’m coming, hold on. He forces himself to slow the car down, even though that makes him want to scream even more, because if he gets stopped by cops he’ll never make it there.

They have to be at Pierce’s. They have to. Steve won’t allow himself to consider what anything else would mean.

Please don’t let him hurt him again please please please please let him be okay oh god, Steve begs the world.
The drive is usually twenty minutes, but Steve takes about fifteen. He half-parks his car illegally at the hydrant in front of the building that has to be Pierce’s and flings the door open.

Steve realizes as he’s about to throw himself out of the car that he has no weapon, nothing that could even pass. “Shit!” he shouts, to himself, and looks wildly around the car. Fucking nothing. He reaches across and fumbles through the glove compartment in the dark until his hands close around something heavy and metal, and he grabs it.

A water bottle. A stainless steel water bottle with the American flag printed on it that Tony gave out as Fourth of July party favors, that Steve left in the car because that kind of nationalism left a bad taste in his mouth. Heavy enough that it could do damage if he hits hard enough, and he doesn’t have time to be picky. God bless America, Steve thinks bitterly, and stumbles out of the car with it.

There’s no doorman, which is good because if Steve had had to deal with another human being right now he might have actually, completely lost his mind. He looks frantically around the lobby until he spots the elevators, and sprints towards them.

He pounds the elevator button until it finally fucking arrives. Steve staggers into it like someone high on cocaine and holds down on the penthouse button until the doors close. The elevator up takes so fucking long that Steve starts pounding on the doors like it will do something. When it reaches the top floor, it opens into a long, empty hallway, directly in front of a pretty oak door.

Steve throws himself against it, slamming his fist on it. “Alexander! he screams, “Alexander open the door you fucking coward!” Silence. “Pierce! Open it!” Silence. Half-sobbing, Steve screams “Bucky! Buck, are you alright, oh, God, Buck–”

But no one answers.

***

7:37

Bucky stares forward, too afraid to move. Alexander isn’t looking at him. He’s staring at the road through narrowed, malicious eyes. Fear bleeds through him, terror that leaves him cold, so cold he’ll never stop shaking.

He has no idea how long they’ve been driving. Everything splinters and runs and turns in on itself; Manhattan looks like the fucking Matrix. Pierce still hasn’t looked at him. Bucky looks at the latch on the door. He could pull it and jump. At the next stop sign. He tries to get his breathing under control enough to think this through; he could get his seatbelt and throw himself out before Pierce can pull the gun out again.

He’s staring at the latch, trying to work up enough nerve to try it, when Pierce reaches over and squeezes his thigh, a warning. Bucky lets out a small, terrified gasp that makes him squeeze harder, nails digging into his skin. It hurts so badly that tears spring to his eyes.

“Don’t even fucking think about it,” he snarls.

Bucky closes his eyes and swallows, panic seizing him. Let go of me let go let godon’t touch me. Pierce lets of his leg after a moment, and Bucky doesn’t look at the door again.

After what feels like several horrible years, Pierce stops and parks in front of his building. Bucky looks out of the car at it and misery chokes him. This can’t be happening, it can’t, it can’t, it can’t, I can’t–
Pierce finally turns to him, picking up the gun again. “You’re not going to try and run, right, sweetheart?”

Possessive, dehumanizing, in total fucking control again. Swallowing a sob, Bucky nods.

He doesn’t want to be here. Oh, god, he doesn’t. He never thought he would have to stand in this lobby again, this fucking precursor to hell, but it’s happening and it’s real and he isn’t going to wake up in Steve’s quiet, strong arms. Pierce tightens an arm around Bucky’s waist and pulls him towards the elevator, pressing their bodies together, and Bucky swallows tears or bile or both.

He’s shaking his head again, wrapping his arms around himself and rocking himself back and forth like a goddamn trapped rabbit, flinching against a wire trap. Pierce shoves him into the elevator by the back of his neck, and Bucky lets out a terrified whimper and he laughs darkly.

His phone rings, cutting through the paralyzing stillness of the ascending elevator. Bucky braces himself, tucking his head down and closing his eyes.

Pierce snaps towards him. “Give it to me.”

Bucky’s fingers are trembling as he reaches for it and, hating himself immensely, holds it out to Pierce. He catches Steve’s name on the screen. Oh, god. He’ll be worried by now.

Blankness comes over him, hollowness filling him up. Dissociation, he thinks vaguely, and he doesn’t try and stop it.

Pierce scoffs and grabs it from him, then hits decline.

It rings again. Bucky flinches.

“Jesus Christ,” Pierce snarls, and declines it again.

Bucky starts sobbing, suddenly, quiet and uncontrollable, pulling in on himself as the reality of what’s happening begins to sink in. He can’t look up.

“Don’t be pathetic,” Pierce snaps, “pull it together.” And he grabs Bucky’s waist and squeezes, torching him in fresh fear.

The helplessness that strangles Bucky burns too intensely to try and cope with. Misery rocks him, covering the world in a dull, horror-film residue that he can’t shake or blink away. It paralyzes him, so that when Pierce opens the door and jerks his head for Bucky to go in, he doesn’t move, too stunned with hopeless disbelief. When he doesn’t move, Pierce drags him by his shirt collar inside. Then he shoves him roughly towards the living room.

Bucky doesn’t move. He stands there, pinned to the ground, swaying slightly on his feet. He thinks vaguely if he stays still, he can stop whatever is about to happen.

Alexander throws down his coat. He takes the gun and holds it, keeping it in Bucky’s sight as he walks around to his kitchen and pours himself a glass of whiskey.

He looks up and smirks. “You want a drink?” Bucky swallows a sob and doesn’t move.

Then he walks towards Bucky, very slowly. Ice is clattering frantically against the glass; that’s what Bucky feels like, the hysterical quiver of ice against glass. Bucky draws a breath that’s more of a whimper. His soul shivers and dissipates and whines painfully.
As he looks Bucky over, rage and disgust tighten in on his face.

“Jacket off,” he snarls. Bucky closes his eyes and shakes his head, begging him. “I said off,” he growls, and raises his hand, and, with a tearful gasp, Bucky pulls it off and crosses his arms tightly over his chest.

Alexander takes a long sip, draining his glass. Bucky is shaking so hard he can’t believe he’s still standing up.

Then he raises the empty cup and smashes it down, glass exploding over the floor. Bucky curls in on himself, terrified, and with his free hand Alexander hits him across the face so hard he sees stars, so hard he collapses to his knees.

“You stupid piece of shit,” Alexander hisses, and steps towards him. Bucky brings his hands over his face, trying to protect himself, so Alexander drags his head back by his hair. “Fucking look at me when I’m talking to you!”

“Stop,” Bucky croaks out, the room still spinning from the blow. “Please–”

Alexander grabs his jaw roughly, forcing him to look up at him. Bucky cries out from the pain. “You should’ve thought of that before you ruined my fucking life.” He squeezes against Bucky’s chin, nails raking through his skin. “You stupid slut. You worthless, stupid little slut.” He shoves Bucky again, so his head snaps back and he loses balance, staggering forward to catch himself on his hands.

Bucky draws a ragged breath that burns his throat. When he sobs, it hurts, his whole face lit up with pain.

“I said look at me!”

He hits Bucky again, harder, somehow, knocking him from his knees to his stomach. Pain grinds in on him, a roaring, heaving thing that makes him think he’s going to be sick—

—you can’t, you can’t it’ll just make him madder you’ll only get hurt more—

He’s so scared that it feels childish. It pools in his stomach, heavy and relentless, cutting him from the inside, making him lose control of everything. He gasps, ragged and terrified. Bucky scramblesto his knees, limbs flailing, tears blinding him, and Pierce brings his foot into Bucky’s stomach so he doubles over, then kicks him again.

—he loses his breath, all of it, sucked from him with blindsing-white pain, and he doubles over again, shielding his face with his arms—

—someone is screaming, Bucky hears, sobbing out, “Stop it stop it please don’t do this please PLEASE NO—” but it can’t be him because if it were him that would mean he really exists, it would mean he isn’t just severed consciousness and fear—

–Pierce hauls him back up by his hair and Bucky whimpers, feeling so small, feeling fucking splintered again—

—he hits him and hits him until Bucky can’t remember what it felt like to not feel this pain, until he can’t tell the difference between this fucking Olympic hurt and his own body. He’s crying, he thinks, slurring hysterical pleas, stop it no I’m sorry I’m sorry please stop.

“Steve,” Bucky hears himself say vaguely, like he’s begging him to save him. It makes Pierce stop
for a moment, stunned.

“Steve isn’t coming,” Pierce sneers, and then laughs. “He doesn’t love you, you know. No one loves you. Look at you. You think because he buys you things, he cares what happens to you? What, is he real gentle when he fucks you? Whores are a dime a dozen. He’ll find another one.”

Bucky is shaking his head, he thinks, but he can’t feel anything beyond pain and numbness, replacing each other every few seconds.

“You think I raped you before, Bucky? I’m gonna fuck you until you forget that Rogers convinced you you’re anything but my worthless little slut,” Pierce growls, “and then I’m gonna kill you.”

Through the pulsing, shrieking pain, Bucky manages to croak out, “You… you… you ca–you can’t, people will… people will look for me–”

Pierce twists Bucky’s hair tighter. He sobs again. “You know who the first suspect is when someone goes missing? The boyfriend.” He smirks at the horrified whimper Bucky lets out. “You took my fucking life already. What’s another jail sentence?”

“Don’t–” Bucky chokes out, “Don’t, Al-Alexander, please, I’ll do anything, I’ll say–I’ll say it was a lie–”

Alexander slaps him.

“Too fucking late.” Then he lets go of Bucky, his body crumbling in on itself, and snarls, “Up.”

Disgusted at his submission, Bucky scrambles to his feet in terror, staggering slightly, the whole world thrown off balance, all sickly colors and spinning that makes his head hurt worse. Everything hurts. Oh, god, everything hurts and he doesn’t want this.

Alexander catches his hip with one hand, his throat with the other that’s holding the gun, and metal burns against his cheek and Bucky is crying all over again.

“Couch or bed, Bucky, since you were so eager to describe them the other day,” he hisses.

“No,” Bucky whimpers, eyes screwed shut.

He reaches under Bucky’s shirt and squeezes at his stomach. “No means fucking nothing anymore from you,” he sneers. “Fucking slut. Rogers might not see through you, but I do. You need this, James or else you forget your role here. You’ve got two good holes and nothing else.” Bucky struggles against him, but he’s too dizzy and he’s too scared and he’s crying and crying and he can’t get away. “Both, then,” Alexander says, the cruelty sending a fresh wave of tears over Bucky. Then he adds, pressing the barrel of the gun into the side of Bucky’s head, “If you struggle, I’ll shoot you. I’m not gonna kill you yet. I wanna watch you cry first. But you get to control how much it hurts before I do.”

It’s not the first time someone has put a gun on him, it’s not even the first time Pierce has put a gun on him, but the freezing, all-consuming terror is new because god, Bucky doesn’t want to die. He doesn’t, and he doesn’t want to die at Pierce’s fucking hands especially. He’s so scared that it has reinvented him; it feels like waking up being tossed into ice water, it feels like how he imagines the moment before a car accident. Total numbness. Total loss of control.

Then, somehow, his brain grapples onto the word Steve. Steve. Steve. Oh, god, Steve. The last thing he’ll have said to Steve will be don’t do anything stupid. What the fuck.
If Bucky dies right now, Steve will blame himself forever, somehow, go over it saying he should have stayed with Bucky, or something, and that can’t happen. Pierce won’t ruin Steve’s life.

Bucky isn’t going to die because he isn’t going to let Steve sit in guilt for the rest of his life. Somehow, that thought is enough to snap him out of it.

Okay, Bucky tells himself, dragging the voice from somewhere in his head he’s cracked open with Steve and Jennifer and watching the trial. You just need to get to a phone. Pierce’s face is close to his, breath hot on his cheek, and with the last bit of defiance Bucky thinks he’ll ever muster up, he jerks his head back and spits in his face.

It shocks him long enough for Bucky to wrench himself out of Pierce’s hands, swinging wildly, as he shakes himself up and roars, “You stupid little bitch!”

Steve taught him some fighting tips once in high school, but the only thing Bucky can latch onto right now is his voice, warm and out of place, saying ...nice job, baby, then you’d aim for the neck... and because he doesn’t have time to pry that entire fucking lesson from the back of his brain, he swings towards Pierce’s neck and gets a feeble collision.

And then Bucky is running, and also crying, which is a horrible combination because he can’t see and he doesn’t remember his exact way around this fucking house of horrors and he finds himself at Pierce’s counter, gasping. He reaches, frantically, for a weapon, and he spots the knife block, and his trembling hands close around the handle of the first knife he gets to. It takes both his hands to hold it because he’s shaking so badly.

“Don’t touch me,” Bucky tries to say, but it just comes out terrified and tearful.

Pierce stands a few feet back, eyes narrowed and mocking. “You used to be so happy to just lie down and take it, Bucky,” he sneers. “You know, you’re only gonna make it hurt more. Fighting it isn’t really your nature, right, baby?”

“He calls it--” Bucky spits out, but it doesn’t really land when he’s crying so hard he’s convulsing. God, please help me, someone--

Then Pierce raises a hand to strike him again, and without thinking, without planning, Bucky swings the knife.

It collides with Pierce’s palm, a horrific slicing sound coming with it, and it scares Bucky so much he drops it.

Pierce lets out a mangled, horrible growl. His hand is stained red entirely, dripping onto the marble, and it freezes Bucky–what’s he going to do to you now.

What he does, with a grunt of pain, is raise the gun and hit Bucky with that instead. It turns his head to sparks and screaming; it hurts so badly for a moment all that exists is this dull, endless pain that stretches for miles and swallows everything that isn’t the pain. When he starts to come back, ragged bits of terror piercing his consciousness, he’s on his knees again; Pierce forced him there. He tastes metal, so strong he gags, and something cold presses into his forehead.

There’s a dull, frantic thud somewhere. Bucky can’t tell if it’s his brain or not. The world is flickering in sickening red light everywhere, and terror has its icy claws shoved so far down his throat he chokes on it, and it could be coming from anywhere--

--but Pierce jerks his head up to look at where it’s coming from, his face flickering with panic for a minute, and anything that scares Pierce has to be good, right?
What he hears, inexplicably, is, “Alexander! Alexander open the door you fucking coward!” And Bucky has to be hallucinating now because Steve is not here, he can’t be putting himself in that kind of danger.

But he screams again, “Pierce! Open it!” Hysterical, breathless.

“What the fuck?” Pierce hisses furiously.

“Bucky! Buck, are you alright, oh, god, Buck—”

Panic jolts Bucky back to semi-lucidity. “No,” he croaks out, and Alexander looks down at him, eyes crazed.

Then he pulls the gun from Bucky’s forehead and aims it at the door. “If you make a sound I’ll kill him,” he says in a low voice, so that Steve doesn’t hear it. Bucky is still gazing, petrified, at the door that Steve is behind, banging desperately, his brain fritzing and trying to figure out what the fuck what the fuck how did he know how did he get here what the fuck.

Pierce cocks the gun. Bucky stares up at him, eyes wide, his face blurred by tears, and shakes his head frantically. Keeping the gun aimed at the door, Pierce drags him up and shoves him towards the bedroom.

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There’s nothing. Steve stops banging and screaming for a moment to listen, almost hyperventilating. The creak of a floorboard, maybe, the shift of something being set down, but nothing that tells him they’re in there, and Bucky is alright. He pulls at the knob desperately, like adrenaline will let him break it open.

Then Steve remembers, bizarrely and out of nowhere, a conversation he’d had with Bucky in high school. They were sitting in Bucky’s room, heads bent over homework, and Bucky looked up from his shitty 2008 Windows computer and said, “Do you know how to kick down a door?”

“Does that seem like something I’d know?” Steve asked, laughing.

“I mean, of anyone…” Bucky grinned. “Nevermind, I’ll look it up.”

“You planning a heist without me?”

“I’m writing something,” Bucky replied, without looking up. “Well, if you’re wondering, you have to kick above the handle, and make sure it’s a door that pushes in, and you don’t throw your body against it.” And he smiled at Steve, self-satisfied.

“I’ll keep that in mind for all the doors I’m gonna kick down,” Steve answered dryly, and Bucky had laughed.

Because somehow, Bucky was giving him everything he needed even right now, even without knowing it, even across timelines.

Steve takes a breath and steps back. Aim above the handle. He rolls his shoulders back a few times and stares at the handle. Okay he thinks wildly, and, squeezing his eyes shut, jerks his body back and slams the bottom of his foot into the wood.

Steve jumps back at the crash. By some miracle, it works; the door pops open cleanly, swinging urgently, shaking off of its hinges. Steve stares for a minute, heart in his throat, then races inside.
“Alexander where the fuck are you, you son of a bitch?” he screams. Steve swings wildly in a circle, looking around.

He was right. There’s smashed glass on the floor, there’s objects strewn off the coffee table, but what severs his heart from his body is that there’s blood smeared across the countertops and on the kitchen floor.

And Bucky’s jacket, strewn on the ground. Oh god, no, no, no no NO. Steve stares at it through huge, wild eyes for a minute, paralyzed.

“No,” Steve gasps, ragged, and then, hysterically, “Alexander, I’m going to fucking kill you!” He gasps again. “Bucky!” he shouts, like the word is being ripped from his chest.

Then he hears, from the other room, a horrific, panicky scream that reminds him of shattering glass.

“Bucky!” he cries out in hysteria, half relief and half terror.

Silence, then: “Steve, run! Get out, he has a gun!”

And Steve bolts towards his voice.

Chapter End Notes

Thorough trigger warnings

okay so starting where it says 7:37, it cuts to Bucky's pov where he's in the car with Pierce, things to know:
-Pierce DOES NOT rape him. however, he attempts to;
-when they're in the car, he grabs Bucky's thigh
-in the elevator at his building/in his apartment he touches Bucky's neck/stomach/back and it's distressing, he says he's going to rape him and he says a lot of victim-blaming/generally very upsetting and horrible things
-THERE ARE PRETTY GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF OTHERWISE NON-SEXUAL VIOLENCE: in the apartment, Pierce hits him several times/slaps him around pretty badly, eventually Bucky gets away from him and gets a knife and slashes the palm of his hand with it, Pierce hits him with the gun after that and then the scene cuts out shortly after that

that should be a pretty in-depth summary of all the potentially triggering content in this chapter, however if you have any reservations about reading it and need more information PLEASE don't hesitate to dm/message me on tumblr, @cafelesbian i'm happy to tell you anything else that would make it easier to read/help you decide if you can read and if you're self conscious about messaging me please know that there's nothing that makes me happier than talking about this fic and i will never be annoyed
to answer a question about it (that applies to like all messages about it if u ever slide into my dms with any time of comment or q about it we'll be best friends)

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:))

it will def be about a week till the next one at least so sit with this until then, love u even though most of you said you hated me last update which was really the greatest complement i could ever get from yall
Alexander presses his hands up against Bucky in the bedroom; the injured one goes over his mouth so blood chokes him and makes him gag, hot and sickening. “Do not fucking scream,” he warns Bucky, voice low and grinding in on him horribly. With the other one, he holds the gun out, aiming it towards the door in case Steve gets in.

Nothing is processing. Everything that’s happening spins and tangles and burns out to nothing, and Bucky can’t hold on to consciousness long enough to think about anything and the pain is fucking alive and ricocheting brutally on the inside of his head, or maybe that’s the fear or it’s both and it’s going to kill him long before Pierce does.

Steve isn’t here, Steve can’t be here, but Pierce is reacting to something so maybe he is. Bucky’s knees buckle, his mind slipping, and Pierce grabs him by the hair and snaps, “Get it together.”

Banging, muffled by the walls between this room and the front door and the low hiss that’s started relentlessly in Bucky’s head. On the gun, Pierce’s hand is unsteady with rage.

“Don’t–” Bucky whispers, voice slurring. “Not him–”

“Shut the fuck up.”

There’s a crash, a swift, pounding sound that makes Bucky jump, jerking him momentarily out of the poisonous haze he’s slipping under, trying to stay lucid from.

Then, Steve’s voice, clear and unmistakable: “Alexander, where are you you son of a bitch? A frozen, heavy pause; the air fizzes with tension. “Alexander, I’m going to fucking kill you!” His voice is frayed at the edges and crazed and more unhinged than Bucky has ever heard him before, unwound with rage and fear. Then he screams, “Bucky!”

His name curls in Steve’s mouth, like someone is burning it. The syllables drip in blood and pounding terror, animalistic with horror, and Bucky is jarred to life again, panic slamming him from the inside.

Alexander stiffens, and Bucky isn’t sure what he does, but he must make a noise or try and pull away or maybe Alexander just wants to hurt him again, because he gets ahold of his neck and snarls, “I said shut up or he’ll find your pretty face with a bullet in it.”

But if he doesn’t warn Steve, Alexander will have the upper hand and he’ll kill him. There is no fucking way that can happen.
Bucky screams without even thinking about it, the noise splitting his chest in two, spilling out the horror of Alexander’s hand on his throat and body pressed against his back and the fucking unreal terror that he’s going to kill Steve, that Steve will die for Bucky, and if it’s going to be one of them he won’t let it be Steve. Because Steve would do it, Bucky knows, without a beat of hesitation, without a shred of doubt, without thinking about the fact the world needs him, that Bucky needs him like he needs the air that his lungs are feebly pumping right now, like the sand needs to pull the ocean back in to prevent the world from collapsing into carnage. Because all Steve has done since they were five and six is save him, over and over again, protect him from anything in the world that threatened him, and Bucky will not let that be his fatal and only flaw. He’ll choose Steve over himself in any fractured heartbeat, in any devastation like this, however many times he needs to.

Alexander startles, shocked that he’d done it, and in the half second when he’s able to get Alexander’s hands off of him, Bucky shrieks, “Steve, run! Get out, he has a gun!”

Bucky thinks, vaguely, impossibly, if Pierce doesn’t kill Steve then he’s going to.

Alexander yanks his hair back again, and pain erupts behind his eyes and the world starts to slide out of focus and into fragments of glass and drops of blood and a cascade of terror.

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Steve runs towards Bucky’s voice like it’s dragging him, impossibly fast and out of control, down a dark, empty hallway. Gray, muted light spills out under one of the doors, and Steve tears at the handle and it’s locked, of fucking course, but there’s movement on the inside and oh god Bucky is behind that door–.

So Steve rears back and kicks in his second door in under two minutes, and then staggers back when he realizes what he’s seeing.

It’s a bedroom: Pierce’s, presumably, because it’s bigger than Steve’s living room and had clearly once been immaculate but now looks like the limbs and heart of the room have been torn away. And Pierce has Bucky. Steve’s body goes cold with fear, fear that makes everything turn gray and begin to dissipate into slow motion and toxic fog. Pierce has Bucky thrust in front of him, hand around his neck, gun cocked towards Steve in his hand, but not even that is what opens a pit of terror in Steve’s stomach.

Bucky looks kicked to pieces. It sends a scream through Steve that falters in his throat, horror filling his head. Swelling and redness has started rapidly, around his eyes and over his cheek; his nose is bleeding, there are open cuts over his cheek, there’s–god, no, PLEASE no– a muzzle of blood over his chin and mouth and soaking his neck and shirt collar, and it makes Steve stumble and trip slightly until he realizes it isn’t his; Alexander has blood running up his entire arm, pouring out of a cut across his palm. He’s gripping Bucky’s jaw too tightly so he can’t move, and a veil of terror has been thrown over Bucky’s face so he looks almost unrecognizable with fear. Steve can’t tell if he registers him or not; his eyes are dark and unfocused and glassy and he’s crying, terrified, miserable, quiet sobs that send grief splintering Steve in half.

“Buck,” he chokes out, and Bucky doesn’t even react.

Pierce squeezes tighter around his jaw. “Nothing to say, James?”

Steve wants to rush forward and hit him, again and again, pin him down and punch him until his face is a bloodied, mangled mass of broken skull and split skin. He wants to turn the gun on him and shoot, wants to snap his neck, wants to strike him with that fucking water bottle until his brain
gives out and his heart stops working.

But what he wants more than that is to get Bucky to safety, to get that terrified, half-alive look to go away. And Alexander is holding a fucking cocked gun, and if Steve lunges for him, he’ll shoot Bucky.

Steve’s heart has bled itself dry with fear. He takes a small step back.

Bucky whimpers incoherently.

“Stop,” Steve gasps, suddenly begging him, “Alexander, stop, let go of him–”

“Fuck you, Rogers,” Alexander spits. “He doesn’t even know who you are. You’re a fucking moron for this. Take it from me; he’s worth nothing. It’s in your interest to leave right now. I’m doing you a favor so your life doesn’t get life fucked over by him, too.” The gun is dangling at his side, waving vaguely with every word, his finger taut on the trigger–Steve’s breath catches.

“Alexander,” Steve says, trying to stay calm, needing to get to Bucky–and oh, god, Bucky flinches and cowers when he steps forward. Steve’s voice shakes. “Alexander, it’s over. The police are coming.” Please, Sam, call Carol, call Maria, call anyone.

Alexander stares at him through hard, vicious slits. Then he looks at Bucky, who’s still curled in on himself, trapped in his arms. “What do you think, Bucky? If I kill Steve first, he doesn’t get to watch you be a slut for me, but I guess I can fuck you while you watch him bleed out.”

Steve startles and jumps and braces himself for a fight, horror slamming him, gripping his fucking water bottle over his shoulder like a bat.

Alexander barks out a rough laugh. “That’s what he came to save you with, huh?” He sneers to Bucky. Then Bucky snaps his head up, and the mask of glossy terror becomes sharp, violent fear.

Three things happen in that moment. Pierce raises the gun. Steve dives out of the way. Bucky reaches up and grabs onto Alexander’s hand, digs his nails into the cut across his palm so he lets out an excruciating snarl of pain. Then he drops the gun, and it fucking erupts, an explosion of sound scraping across his consciousness, so fucking loud that it covers everything in white light and fear, and Steve’s heart leaps in terror, but he’s okay, he wasn’t hit, oh, god, oh god WHERE’S BUCKY WHERE’S PIERCE–

Steve throws himself across the room for the pistol, but Pierce gets to it first, letting go of Bucky to dive for it, shoving him aside and latching his blood-soaked hands around the base of it. Steve scrambles back, staring around wildly—where is Bucky WHERE IS BUCKY— but his head is pounding from the shot and he can’t look away from Pierce because that’s a loaded fucking gun and god, Steve is going to tear him to pieces–

“Steve!” Bucky screams, from across the room where he has collapsed to his knees, swaying slightly. He tries to stand and can barely get to his feet and god, he was hit so hard, so fucking hard, his face is all discoloration and blood and fucking otherworldly terror that Steve has never seen before–

“Bucky, stay back!” Steve screams back to him, throwing out his arms wildly like he can shield them, because Alexander has the gun under control again and it’s pointed at Bucky, and he’s fumbling with it, to get it reloaded, and in the split second when he’s distracted, Steve lunges forward and swings the bottle at him. It strikes across his face and the sound of it splits the room open—fuck yes—a brutally satisfying shriek of noise, and in a voice that sounds nothing like his
Steve bellows, “Take that, you piece of shit!”

Pierce drops the gun again and cries out, half in fury and half in pain, and instead of looking for where it went Steve hits him again, hard enough that it has to keep him down, the swing reverberating up his arm, and then goes for Bucky. He’s gone back to looking half-dead, and Steve doesn’t want to grab him like that but they can’t stay here, so he takes Bucky’s arm as lightly as he can to pull him to his feet–Bucky whimpers in protest, and Steve’s heart twists–

“Baby, it’s me, it’s Steve, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry Buck, we have to go–” But Bucky’s been hit so badly he can’t stand alone, so Steve half-drags, half-carries him, getting Bucky’s arm over his shoulder so he can support him. Bucky is scared; he’s flinching away from Steve and trying to shield himself and nothing has ever broken Steve’s heart this way before, and he’s murmuring desperately, “Bucky, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry–” and throwing a terrified look over his shoulder. He gets them out of the bedroom and slightly down the hallway, but Bucky is about to pass out and they won’t make it to the elevator, so Steve pushes into the nearest door and gets them inside of it.

It’s a bathroom. Steve gets them in there and Bucky sinks to his knees, pulling in on himself, drawing away from Steve into the corner. He’s completely out of it, face shielded, body braced inwards, meek and small and terrified. Of Steve.

New terror comes over Steve, having nothing to do with the fact that there’s a madman outside of this door with a gun.

“Buck.” The word comes out punctured. Steve kneels a few feet away from him, desperate to get him back to consciousness. “Buck, baby, it’s me–”

Bucky presses his palms over his eyes, his body screwed up in terror, shaking his head again and again. “Don’t–don’t touch me,” he’s mumbling, sobs washing over him, “I’m sorry, I’m–I’m sorry, don’t hit me, please no more–”

“Oh, Buck,” Steve whispers, with a torn, punched out breath, “Buck, it’s me, it’s Steve, Bucky, I’m not–I’m not gonna hit you, you’re alright, okay? You’re gonna be okay, I’m not ever gonna hurt you, it’s just me.” Three times, Steve reaches for him, and three times he has to stop himself from comforting Bucky and accidentally making it worse, so he waits, hands thrust in his pockets, pleading for Bucky to come back to him, hyper aware that they only have a few minutes until Pierce gets to them.

He calms down slowly, unwrapping his fingers from his biceps where they were clenched, taking a few shuddery, fractured breaths. Steve nods along, murmuring, “It’s okay, Buck, you’re okay, I love you,” and recognition begins to sink in.

“Steve,” Bucky gasps finally, and all the fear in Steve crumbles into relief.

“Yeah, Buck,” he whispers, but still doesn’t touch him. He doesn’t want to say ‘baby,’ or ‘sweetheart’, or anything that Pierce might have called him, mockingly and cruelly, in the last hour, so he says, “Buck, my love, it’s okay, you’re okay, we’re gonna be fine.”

“You’re here,” Bucky says, dazed and delirious. Desperately, Steve grabs one of the hand towels on the rack and soaks it in warm water.

“He’s here, right here. You’re alright. I’m gonna get us out of here, just hang on, okay?” Very, very slowly, Steve raises the towel up, hesitates, eyes wide, until Bucky gives him a little nod and he reaches in and, as gently as he can, wipes away some of the blood. Bucky stays very still, and Steve stops, worrying he’s afraid again, and then he starts sobbing and Steve pulls all the
way back.

“How—how did you—” Bucky is shaking like there’s something grabbing ahold of him and jerking him back and forth, too badly to get out the words. Steve shakes his head quickly.

“I’ll explain later, it’s okay, it’s alright.” Steve is trembling pretty badly too, a violent quiver shooting tiny bolts of lighting through his whole body, little jerks of fear and sorrow and startling, overwhelming hate for Alexander. “Bucky, we’re gonna get out of here, yeah? Do you think you can walk?”

Bucky’s face crumbles into a suppressed sob and he shakes his head, shame making him shrink back.

Steve immediately says, “That’s okay, it’s alright, it’s not your fault, Bucky, okay?” Then horror splinters him, as he realizes he doesn’t know what else Alexander did besides hit him, and he whispers, “Buck, did—did he—what did he do to you?”

Bucky keeps his eyes screwed shut. He’s rocking himself back and forth again. “He, um— he didn’t, um… he didn’t… he didn’t—” He can’t say it, but relief shudders through Steve all the same.

“He didn’t,” he adds anyway, an anguished strain in his voice, “if… If he did, I’m not… I’m not mad.” His soul flinches and screams at the thought of Bucky worrying he’d be fucking punished for it.

“He didn’t,” Bucky says hollowly. “He tried. He was—he was—he was gonna.”

Steve thinks, numbly, I’m going to kill him, I’m going to fucking tear him to pieces.

“Okay, love. Alright. Oh, Bucky, I’m so sorry, I’m so, so, so sorry. Fuck.” Steve’s voice breaks as Bucky collapses into crying again, head bobbing back and forth.

But he isn’t dissociating again, Steve realizes. He’s just crying. “Steve, I’m so, so sorry, I didn’t—”

“Bucky, shh.” Steve’s voice quivers. “Bucky, you have nothing to be sorry about. Absolutely nothing, okay?”

Bucky is still shaking his head and crying into his hands, his body coiled tightly in, looking fucking shattered.

“Can I touch you, love?” Steve whispers. He can’t stand it anymore, watching Bucky fall apart by himself.

“There’s so much blood,” Bucky whimpers, like he’s just realizing it. “You’re gonna get it on you.”

“I don’t care about that,” Steve says, with a choked, heartbroken laugh. “I just wanna hold you, Buck. But only if you want that.”

Exhaling on a sob, Bucky nods, and collapses into Steve’s arms so fast it almost knocks him back. They’re both soaked in blood and sweat and terror, and Bucky is shaking so hard that Steve worries he’d fall away into pieces if he were to let go, so he doesn’t. He cradles Bucky, letting him cry into his shoulder, terrified and Steve becomes vaguely aware that maybe this isn’t the time for this, but in that moment he doesn’t care. He’s going to take care of Bucky. It’s the only thing that matters in the world. He wants Bucky to feel safe, even now, in what’s arguably the least-safe moment of their entire fucking lives, Steve can’t stand the thought of him not being comforted.
“Buck, we gotta go, baby, alright? We gotta get out of here, just hold onto me and I’ll help you out.”

“Steve,” Bucky gasps, half sobbing, “Steve, you’re gonna—he’s gonna hurt you—you shouldn’t have—”

“Hey.” Steve is strangely calm; having Bucky in his arms has grounded him, calmed the hideous, roaring terror to a dull buzz. What’s replaced it is the need to protect Bucky, leaping through him, driving every move with razor-sharp purpose. “Of course I came. I’m not gonna leave you, Buck.” A shaky breath. “I’m with you ‘till the end of the line.”

Bucky laughs, a miserable, terrified, incredulous laugh that he half-gasps out. Steve squeezes his hands.

“Steve,” Bucky whispers. Steve gives him a tiny, encouraging nod, eyes wide, and then Bucky leans in and kisses him, even though they’re both shaking, even though they’re out of breath, even though there’s still some blood on Bucky’s chin and Steve might have cared if it were anyone else or any other time it would have probably been disgusting, but he kisses Bucky back and it’s like coming up for air. Strength surges, wildly and irrationally, through his body, into his blood, down to his bones. They’re going to be okay.

“I love you,” Steve whispers, cupping his face so lightly, smoothing his thumb over the cuts. “I love you so, so much. We’re gonna be okay.”

Tears glimmer in Bucky’s eyes. “I love you,” he echoes shakily. He grasps vaguely at Steve, squeezing his shoulders like he needs to be sure he’s really there.

Steve helps him up, one arm gentle around his waist, the other clinging to his water bottle (which he mentally thanks Tony for). Bucky staggers against him, half-slumped into Steve’s shoulder, arm tight and desperate around his neck.

“You okay?” Steve asks, frantic. Bucky nods. “You’re doing great, baby, we just–we just gotta get to the elevator.”

But it’s taking him so much effort to stay standing, even against Steve, and fear pushes back into his chest. “Buck, just stay with me, okay?” Bucky nods, but his eyes are glassy again and sweat glazes his forehead and fuck fuck FUCK, Steve wishes he’d paid attention that time he passed out in Sam’s freshman dorm and hit his head on his bedpost and then got an earful about the symptoms of concussions.

Steve could carry him, he’s sure, and he’s about to do it, but Bucky grits out, “I’m good, I’m fine, let’s go,” and when he meets Steve’s eyes he looks certain, so Steve nods and kisses his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut.

They make it down the hallway, and they’re so close they’re so goddamn close, Steve can see the door he kicked in with Bucky’s voice in his head, can see the elevator–

Then Bucky gasps and draws back, gripping wildly onto Steve’s shoulder, and he swings to see what’s happened–

“Going somewhere?”

Pierce stands from the couch; he must have been fucking waiting. Blood pours down his face, seeps into his hideous fucking snarl, and he raises the gun–WHY DIDN’T YOU GRAB THE FUCKING GUN–
“Bucky,” Steve says shakily, “baby, stay back, okay? Stay behind me.” Fear like Steve has never known pulses through him, cymbals crashing in his head, panic tearing him in two. For one helpless second, Steve just wants to hold him, shield him, cover him from having to see Alexander and his monstrous glower, make sure that Bucky doesn’t die terrified.

Then, staring up, Steve thinks no. They’ve suffered so much already, too much for it to end like this. Their story won’t be a tragedy.

“No fucking way, Steve,” Bucky hisses, petrified.

“Have it your way, then,” Pierce snaps, and Steve hears the click of the gun being prepared, and he lets go of Bucky and throws himself towards Pierce without a thought, without even fear, with one thing on his mind and that’s he won’t hurt Bucky again, propelling him, consuming him.

***

Carol Danvers gets a phone call from an unsaved number on her way out of the station.

She’s dead on her feet. It’s been a long day; she’s spent the last several hours trying to coax a pregnant, heroin-addicted teenager into giving her attacker’s name; she and Fury are so close to taking down a child prostitution ring. It’s one of those cases that makes it hard to sleep, that makes her so sad she can’t focus. She wants to go home and see Maria and Monica and inhale the feeling of home and forget how fucked up everyone else in the world is.

But she answers in case it’s important, shooting Fury a grimace. “Detective Carol Danvers.”

“Um.” A young guy’s voice, slightly unsure. “Hi, yeah, detective? My name’s Sam Wilson.”

A pause. Carol raises an eyebrow. “Can I help you, Sam Wilson?”

“Um. Yeah, sorry. You—you know my friends, uh, Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes? The Pierce case?”

Carol stops walking. Fury turns to her. “Yeah,” Carol says, straightening up, “I do.”

“Okay.” Sam takes a breath on the other end. “Look, this might be nothing, but, uh, it might be… anyway. I dug your business card out of Steve’s wallet, um—he’s going to Pierce’s house right now.” Carol startles. “He’s convinced Pierce kidnapped Bucky and is gonna…” Sam trails off, a choked falter in his voice. “Look, like I said, he might be wrong, but he’s really freaked out and he left a little while ago, is there anyway you could… I don’t know, have someone go over there?” Sam is worried; she can hear a slight tremor in his voice.

Fury watches her carefully. He can hear the other end of the call. She bites her lip and looks up at him, and they share, momentarily, a brief, untouchable, wordless conversation that can only be perfected after years of this kind of brutal, soul-searing work together. A tiny nod. A quick grimace.

“Yeah,” Carol says, “my partner and I will take a look. Thanks, Sam.”

He lets out a small, relieved noise. “Thank you, detective.”

“I’ll give you a call with whatever we find.”

Sam thanks her again, and she hangs up and, with a resigned sigh, heads with Fury to his car.
Guys like Pierce are Carol’s least favorite types of assholes to deal with. For almost everyone else she deals with, she can pluck some semblance of humanity inside whatever terrible abuser she’s trying to bring down; her wife is a psychologist, and has drilled it into her brain that abuse is a cycle, that nine times out of ten it comes as a result of a hopeless surroundings, and she thinks about that a lot. They still disgust her, and she still finds grim satisfaction in slapping handcuffs around them, but the ability to track where it comes from stops her from seeing them all as monsters, prevents the dehumanization that she thinks is very, very dangerous in her line of work.

With the Alexander Pierces of the world, there’s no explanation. They’re just entitled scumbags who get off on hurting people less powerful than them. Very few things make Carol as angry.

“You think he’d really do that?” Fury asks her, as he starts the car. “Go after the guy accusing him during a trial?”

“I don’t know,” Carol sighs. “You kept up with that trial? It’s looking really bad for him right now. Maybe he’s trying to drag Barnes down with him.” She winces, remembering Bucky, the familiar, unmistakable sheen of pain and terror over his face when he had talked about the things Pierce did to him.

She texts Maria that she’s gonna be a little late (‘That’s fine, baby, pick us up some Chinese food? xo’) and then calls lawyer Maria.

“Carol,” she answers, “hey.”

“My second favorite Maria,” Carol answers easily, and she laughs on the other end. “Hi. Quick question: when was the last time you talked to Bucky Barnes?”

A pause. “A few hours ago, when we left the courthouse. Why?”

Carol frowns. “No reason, probably. You talked to Steve Rogers since then?”

“No, same time.”

“Alright. Um, listen, I just got a call from a friend of theirs who says Steve thinks Pierce forced Bucky to go back to his house, and Steve’s on his way over there.”

Another beat, then Maria hisses, “Oh, god. Oh, shit.”

“Yeah,” Carol says bleakly. “Fury and I are going over there to check it out. Just wanted to give you a heads up and see if you’d heard anything.”

“No,” Maria answers, and she sounds worried, “no. Should I call Zola?” Carol scoffs at the thought of him.

“Will he make things worse or better?”

A dark laugh. “Worse, I’m sure.”

“Listen…” Carol pauses, drumming the dashboard absently. “Let us just check out what’s going on. It might be nothing. I’ll give you a call.”

“Alright. Thanks for the heads up, Carol. I’ll let you know if I hear from them.” Maria hangs up, worry taut in her words, and Carol turns to Fury.
“How far are we from Pierce’s?”

“How far are we from Pierce’s?” Carol bites her lip.

“Use the sirens.”

Fury raises an eyebrow and punches the alarm on. People begin to hurry across the street for them, and he hits the gas. “You really think we’re gonna find something? It’s not more likely that… I don’t know… Barnes took off for some space and they’re overreacting?”

“I don’t know,” Carol says, and props her feet up on the dashboard, ignoring Fury’s good natured scowl. “I don’t know. It is more likely. But if Pierce really did something…”

“Yeah,” Fury says grimly. “Alright. Let’s get this son of a bitch.”

“Roger that,” Carol says with a grimace, and they stop talking.

***

Steve wrenches himself out of Bucky’s arms, and it feels like someone has pulled the ground out from below Bucky. He stumbles, half from the physical loss and half from the terror that clutches at him, the panic that sends the whole room through a blender so it’s just colors and grinding sound and no god no not Steve no no no.

“Steve, have you lost your fucking mind?” Bucky screams, and of course it doesn’t deter him. This fear is different. Bucky is more familiar than anyone with terror, has lived with it constant and hot in his chest for four years, has grinded up against it and let it fuck him for fifty dollars, has felt it all over him, the only solid thing in the world that he can recognize when in the worst moments of his life, crawling up his throat and spreading into everything while he screams and begs and sobs.

And still, the terror that winds its way around him right now is new, because right now it’s Steve who’s up against the monster, Steve who’s going to bear the worst of the pain for him, Steve who could get fucking shot and killed, and this terror freezes him, paralyzes him imagining what will happen if Pierce kills Steve.

Steve knocks him off-balance when he lunges at him, dropping the bottle and aiming a blow to the side of his head, and Pierce stumbles. Steve stays on him, raising his hand again, and before he can Pierce lands a shocked punch to his chest, grabbing him by the neck. Steve groans in pain and Bucky gasps, electric horror coiling through him–

“Stop, Alexander, please, please, not him, he has–he’s got nothing to do with this–” Bucky screams, and it takes everything out of him to do it. Dizziness collapses in on him again, and he slumps against the back of the couch to stand, his head splitting open again.

“Buck,” Steve gasps, “Bucky, go–”

The knife, Bucky thinks hysterically, WHERE IS THE KNIFE? But between the throbbing, pulsing headache and the horror that’s gripping to him so fiercely he’s convinced everyone in New York can feel it, he can’t even remember where a knife would normally be, let alone in this house that’s full of more pain and horror than an actual haunted house, that’s been torn at the seams and resown to try and appear unblemished. White light splits over his vision momentarily, making him sway, but he forces himself to stay up because there’s Steve, putting his fucking life on the line for Bucky, and he won’t leave him.

Bucky thinks, through shattering consciousness, that every time he’s ever been convinced he could
never be brave again, Steve either showed him how or stepped in to be the brave one for him. Steve is still protecting him right now, with a fucking gun pointed towards him, with the knowledge of what Alexander will do if he gets the upper hand—do something fucking DO SOMETHING DON’T LET HIM GET HURT NOT FOR YOU—

Steve is stronger than Pierce, and more in shape, and has been in more fights. Pierce has a gun.

But Steve is still holding his own; he hits Alexander hard in the face, closed fist, lit ablaze with loathing that Bucky’s never seen from him before. Pierce’s neck snaps back but he’s still standing, somehow. Pierce spits, blood spraying over the white carpet, and swings the gun again, trying to get ahold of himself enough to aim and shoot, and horror swells in Bucky’s throat again, but Steve is a step ahead of him and catches his hand and god, no, NO.

Steve pushes him against the TV; a crack spiderwebs, fanning out over the glass, panicked and sudden and startling, and—let go let go Steve don’t be fucking STUPID—he’s wrestling him for the gun, gasping, and Pierce isn’t getting up. Bucky watches through paralysis, too scared to even scream. Alexander’s hands are on the trigger and Steve’s are on the fucking barrel and it plays like a bad action movie, all the movements slow and exaggerated and hot and tinged in red and black; Pierce tries two, three, four times to cock it but Steve won’t let up long enough for him to do it, his face screwed up in effort. Bucky becomes semi-aware he can’t move, only wait in this crystalized, awful fear that saturates the air and makes it too thick to breathe, to blink, to shake his head.

He gets it cocked. The click of it lights the room on fire. Steve’s eyes go wide and panicked, and he’s still fighting, still fucking fighting him so hard, trying to drag the gun out of his grip, his hands trying to force Pierce’s away.

“No,” Bucky screams, or tries to, but it’s more of a gasp, because he sees what’s about to happen; Pierce has grabbed a framed photo from the shelf below the TV and while Steve is distracted, he raises it and jerks it back and hits Steve across the face with it. The crack is so full and sudden that Bucky screams again, a shapeless, ragged sound that makes Pierce smirk at him. Steve collapses, head snapping back, staggering to his knees. Pierce tosses aside the photo and draws his arm back again, ignoring Bucky’s hysterical stream of

“You did this to him, Bucky,” Pierce snarls, and laughs. Bucky becomes aware that he’s hurled himself across the room towards Steve, who’s still on the ground—he’s moving vaguely thank god, THANK GOD, but he isn’t getting up, and Bucky throws himself to his knees beside him but before he can even touch him, Alexander slaps him and the hissing, grotesque pain is back and he staggers backwards.
“I think I’ll leave him for a minute,” Pierce taunts him, “if he comes back, it’ll be to his Bucky getting fucked by someone else.” The terror is already so massive that Bucky can taste it, can feel it dragging all his limbs down, but it somehow spikes then. Pierce has his back to Steve now, looming over Bucky, and relief leaps in Bucky’s throat when Steve forces himself up on his elbows and blinks, shaking his head, sluggish with pain and shock.

And then, realizing what’s happening, because Steve is an idiot, and because he loves Bucky in ways he’ll never understand, he musters whatever fraction of strength is left in him to pull back and slam a fist into the back of his leg. Steve is still reeling, limbs uncoordinated and vision flickering, so all it does is distract him.

Pierce spins around. “Goddamnit!” he snaps, and kicks Steve in the ribs and he’s down again, but now Pierce leans over him and punches him again, and Steve is fighting him, getting in a few punches to his side and his face but nothing hard enough that he can get the upper hand–

**He’ll kill him,** Bucky thinks, the words cutting across his consciousness as a blunt knife, and Bucky can’t do anything except sob and beg because he’s a fucking coward and he isn’t strong enough and if Pierce touches him again his brain will become a shrieking, cowering mess of submission and pain and he really won’t be able to do anything.

Then, whatever is left of his brain now latches onto the gun, thrown somewhere in the room, and he snaps his head around so fast his vision crumbles momentarily but when it comes back he spots it, a few yards away in the middle of the floor. Bucky throws himself towards it; Steve is still struggling against Pierce, thrashing and groaning and putting everything into fighting him, but he’s losing and everyone knows it. Pierce is on top, getting the real punches in, and that’s where the rage that lets Bucky pull himself together long enough to get across the room comes from.

His fingers close, shaking, around the grip. It’s heavier than he’d expected, and it’s cold, and he raises it but the second he does he realizes he has no idea how to aim a gun and they’re too close together and moving so fast that he might hit Steve by mistake, so instead, he turns and shoots at the corner.

His whole body lurches back at the shot of it; he staggers against the wall and clings to it, horror rushing through his head in waves of pain, and the room is so still that for a second he’s terrified that somehow, he did hit Steve.

He didn’t, though. Steve and Alexander had both frozen and swung around to see him, and Pierce is looking at him with this vile, vivid hate that makes him tremble even harder. Steve is still down, but in the second Pierce isn’t hitting him he gets his hand around his neck and gets a punch across his face, knocking him off balance and onto his side, and with fucking superhuman strength Steve manages to get to his feet.

He’s unsteady. There’s blood pouring down his face now, and his cheek is swelling, but he’s still clear-headed, and he kicks Pierce in the chest, and the face. He’s on the ground now, shuddering, groaning, one arm up to shield himself from Steve. All Bucky feels watching that is bitterness.

Then Steve stops, turning to Bucky, and his whole face changes and softens into tenderness. Bucky is still holding the gun, limp in front of him with both of his hands, and his whole body threatens to give into exhaustion. Steve starts toward him, very carefully, very slowly, like Bucky might panic and shoot at him, and Bucky’s brain is so fucking shot that it doesn’t seem out of the realm of possibility.

“Buck…” he whispers. Bucky doesn’t answer. He can’t remember how to get his voice to work, and he wants to bury himself against Steve’s chest and in his arms but he’s afraid if anything
touches him he’ll spin into panic, and he can’t get himself to respond to the person he loves more than anything on this earth, the person who just took a brutal beating because of Bucky, who was just nearly killed so that Bucky wouldn’t be hurt, and suddenly he’s crying again.

Steve still has his hands raised in front of him, crossing tentatively towards Bucky, face anguished. His back is to Pierce, so Bucky sees it before he does. Pierce lifts himself up, getting to his knees, then his feet, somehow, and he starts towards them and it’s just panic, thick in Bucky’s bloodstream, so much fear it fucking hurts, the same fear that’s constantly suffocating and festering in him from every time Pierce hurt him, hit him, thrust into him, made him nothing.

He raises the gun and pulls the trigger.

Steve jumps aside, more from shock than fear he’s going to be hit. Bucky doesn’t know what he was aiming for, his chest or his head or, if he had a sense of poetic justice, his cock, but he hits him in the calf and Pierce crumbles with a violent howl of pain. Bucky curls in on himself again, clutching the gun with one hand, terrified of what he’s just done, and before he knows it he’s on his knees, arms wrapped around himself, shaking so badly he can’t move.

When he lifts his head, Steve is close, on his knees beside him, eyes lit up with fear he’s never seen on Steve before. Bucky wants to reach for him, but he can’t make his arms work. He isn’t crying anymore. He’s just shaking.

“Buck,” Steve is whispering, “it’s alright, baby, it’s over. You saved me, you saved us, it’s alright, we’re gonna be fine.”

He still has the gun, and Pierce isn’t getting up. He could cross the room and stand over him and put a bullet through his head. This is for your own fucking good, he could say, just like Pierce did to him, or you don’t say no to me or I don’t give a fuck what you want. Bucky’s soul shudders as he thinks about it. His finger is taut on the trigger again, and the room is slanted and tinted red and he’s staring at the crumpled heap where Alexander is lying and thinking about how easy it would be.

Then his eyes flick to Steve, who has stopped talking and is watching him very carefully. Steve knows what he’s considering; Steve knows every inch of him, can read his mind in a half second, pull his desires from a flicker of an expression, has been able to since they were kids who could never, ever fathom the kind of hurt they’ve gone through now. He expects horror, or disgust, or desperate begging him not to do it.

Instead, his face stays neutral, eyes wide and gentle on Bucky. Bucky stares back at him wordlessly, pain throbbing between them, taut and heavy enough to touch, and realizes it. Steve isn’t going to stop him.

Bucky stares down at his hands. They’re trembling so hard it’s more of a vibration and they’re covered in blood and the gun feels heavy enough to drag him through the floor.

Then Steve says, very, very quietly, “I’ll say it was self defense.”

Bucky looks back to him. He knows he looks wrecked, but he can’t imagine what Steve is seeing on his face right now. Steve gives him a look full of more pain than Bucky has ever seen, his eyes glistening with tears in the lighting of this awful room, massive and hollow and full of blinding white everywhere that’s been stained over with blood and alcohol and pain.

He could do it. A roaring, aching part of him wants to. He sees Alexander that first night in the club, smirking at him, knowing what he was going to do to Bucky, and he sees him across the
room after raping him, apathetic as he poured himself a drink, and he sees the impossible cruelty on his face as he pinned Bucky down, as he beat him until he couldn’t walk for saying no.

But if he does it, the rest of his life will be defined by Alexander Pierce even more than it already fucking is. It will follow him everywhere, the reminder breathing down his neck. Even if he ever recovers, it will be there, an ugly, winding scar over his soul, Pierce’s voice in the back of his head, I still own you. Everyone will know; it will be a scarlet letter seared over his skin for everyone he knows and doesn’t know to stare at and whisper about. People will cross the street if they recognize him, wide eyed and horrified and trying to get another look, there will be cries to boycott Steve for staying with him, there will be investigations.

If he does it, it won’t ease the colossal fucking hurt inside of him. It won’t stop him from living in constant panic and waking up screaming and sobbing, it won’t make him able to sleep with his boyfriend or stop hating himself.

And Alexander Pierce’s death should be slower than a gunshot wound.

The gun slips through his limp fingers and clatters to the ground, a hollow echo coming from it as it hits the wood. Bucky slumps to the side; he has no strength left, not enough to even hold himself up, and he becomes aware that he’s in Steve’s arms, face buried in his chest and he’s crying so hard he can’t breathe. Steve wraps both arms around him tightly, presses his face in Bucky’s hair. He’s crying too, sobs that shudder through him so that Bucky can feel it where they touch. He reaches his arms clumsily around Steve, pulls himself closer, swallowed by this quivering, titanic need to be held by him. They don’t move. They don’t say anything. They just hold each other and cry, surrounded by the smoldering remains of what they just went through, slammed by sorrow and horror and relief and love and grief. Steve stops crying at some point, maybe after a few minutes or seventy years; time has ceased to exist, has just become weight bearing down on them. Bucky doesn’t. He stays that way, face hidden in Steve’s shirt, clinging to him with more urgency than the world has ever known, tears running down his cheeks, and Steve holds him and cradles him and rocks them back and forth.

That’s how Carol Danvers and Nick Fury find them.

Chapter End Notes

some things....

1) i said this a while ago and it turned out to not be true but we really ARE towards the end right now....probably 2 or 3 more chapters....if I wrote a chaptered sequel would anyone be interested in reading it? i have a loose idea right now and i’m really way too attached to this story to give it up oml so let me know if that's something you'd read

2) besides a potential longish sequel i'd also love to do some one shots in this universe and like i'd do literally anything so if there's something you wanna see....idk another characters pov, a scene before the story picks up, a specific moment after, literally anything, just comment or send me a message on tumblr and theres a 99% chance i'll do it at some point

3) i really love you guys so much i can't believe the responses i've been getting ahhhhhh it warms my tiny heart so much you guys have no idea what the things you say mean to me
im cafelesbian on tumblr for anything at all you want to say, otherwise i’ll see you in about a week or two
Carol’s hair is different.

It’s short now, Bucky thinks, when Steve coaxes him into lifting his head from where it’s buried in Steve’s shirt and looking up at her. It looks nice like that.

He says it. “You got a haircut,” Bucky mumbles, and alarm flashes over Steve’s face.

“He’s in shock,” Carol tells Steve, not harshly. She looks across the room stoically; Fury has gotten handcuffs around Pierce, has gotten him upright and leaning against the couch, and his expression has changed. It’s not just rage anymore; it’s astonishment, disbelief, looking around at the splintered pieces of what’s left of his life and trying to figure out how it happened.

Bucky looks away from him, pressing against Steve again, fear washing over him again. Steve is stroking his hair, a quivering, insistent gentleness in the touch that makes tears well in his eyes. He can hear Carol still, talking into a radio, saying “…Fifth avenue and twenty second street, penthouse floor… need EMTs as soon as possible… suspect has a gunshot wound to the calf, and victims need to be checked out for concussions or brain injury…”

“I don’t wanna go to a hospital,” Bucky whimpers suddenly, panic setting in. He looks up at Steve, who cups his face softly and looks down at him with a wrecked expression. “Please, Steve, I don’t—I wanna go home.” His voice breaks. Steve’s face crumbles helplessly into grief.

Carol kneels down so she’s at their level. “Bucky,” she says quietly, “you’re in shock right now. You might not have to go to a hospital at all, but you and Steve both need to be checked out. We can do it here, but we have to make sure.”

“Buck,” Steve murmurs, softly enough that only Bucky hears, “it’s alright, baby. They gotta make sure we’re okay.”

The panic from earlier hasn’t subsided. Bucky thinks that in fact, it’s gotten worse, and he’s just waiting, his whole body clenched, for the next crescendo of pain, of threats, of hands on him that aren’t Steve’s and aren’t kind. He can’t make himself stand, and no one makes him, not Steve, not even Carol. Steve just holds him, until the sickening terror starts, excruciatingly slowly, to flake away.

Backup starts to arrive a few short minutes later, cops and paramedics and detectives that swarm the room and make a scream claw its way up Bucky’s throat and die. He’s still on the ground with Steve—he isn’t sure if they’re ever getting up from there—and the flash of uniforms and graceless smack of boots against the ground near him sends him cowering again, sends Rumlow’s growl crawling up his spine and piercing his head until he’s fully pressed against Steve again, shaking his head and trembling, and Steve knows what he’s thinking because he hugs him closer and says softly, “Buck, it isn’t him, baby, he isn’t here, I promise.”

“There are paramedics downstairs,” Carol tells them kindly, “if you wanna get out of here.”

They do. But Bucky doesn’t want anyone who isn’t Steve to touch him, and he doesn’t know how to say that without whining like a child, and he doesn’t want to breathe in this thick, blood-heavy air anymore, so he lets Steve pull him gently to his feet.
He sinks into Steve’s side again when they stand, relaxing a little when Steve tightens an arm over his shoulders, so secure that for a moment, the panic ebs away. He’s looking down, face half-hidden in Steve’s shoulder, and Steve shoots a dirty look to the officers who stare at them. The door is still open, swinging on its hinges—Steve must have kicked it open, Bucky realizes, startled—and so when they get into the elevator and Bucky looks up, he can see Pierce before the doors close. Fury is standing next to him, not saying anything, watching him stoically.

The look Pierce gives him sends a sharp chill through him, one that takes its time crawling over him and squeezes its harsh fingers into the back of his neck and knocks his breath away. The hate in it could light the building ablaze; his whole face contorts with it.

Bucky turns away, heart in his throat, and the doors shut.

He’s still leaning against Steve, clinging to his one lifeline so desperately that patheticness flushes him, but Steve is the only thing in the whole world that could bring him a breath of comfort right now and if he grows any more afraid, his heart will give out. Steve holds him back. In the elevator, Bucky is crying again, breathlessly and so suddenly he can’t pinpoint when it starts, and Steve just cradles him and rubs his back and murmurs, “I’ve got you, baby, it’s alright, we’re okay, you’re safe.”

Carol leans against the opposite corner, giving them as much privacy as she can in the twenty-five square foot box. When Bucky looks back at her, he expects irritation or exasperation or even anger, but she meets him with a sad, understanding gaze, and Bucky remembers her mentioning her wife and he wonders if she gets it, loving someone so deeply that even in the middle of the fucking apocalypse they can soothe you.

Bucky doesn’t remember getting out of the elevator, but at some point they’re walking outside. Carol stays in front of them, shoulders thrown back, eyes sharp and focused. Bucky stays close to Steve, tucked under his arm, trembling, pressed up against him for the safety, the only fucking safety in the entire world. He draws a shattered breath when the door swings open; his brain moves in panicky flashes of static; blue and red and white light, blinding and overwhelming, a groups of people, maybe twenty or maybe two hundred, pooling in clots outside, whispering, perking up when they see Bucky and Steve, a hiss of indistinguishable noise and voices, some of which he catches—

—the one who was accusing Alex, isn’t he—

—lives right upstairs, heard something—

—did they do something, revenge—

And Bucky can’t bear it. Every word cuts through him and makes him flinch, and the sirens are too loud, a horror-movie esque shriek of noise and pain, and the eyes on him leave him raw and violated until he’s drawn in on himself, arms wrapped around his chest, and Steve is murmuring to him, quiet, soothing words that Bucky can’t hear, and finally Carol announces loudly, “If you aren’t supposed to be here, you’re interfering with a crime scene!” and the crowds ebb away unhappily.

Carol says something about getting medical attention, and then he’s propped next to Steve on an ambulance car, just waiting. Someone handed him a shock blanket but he isn’t sure what to do with it so it lies lifelessly over his equally lifeless hands, until Steve takes it from him, draping it over his shoulders and drawing it in in the front and the violent trembling is contained within it.

He leans on Steve, laying his head on his shoulder, curling in on him like a burnt slip of paper
coiling closed, laying into his side and trying not to feel the endless, horrible twitching of the motion and action around them. Steve holds him, silent and steady, and Bucky doesn’t know if he’s stopped crying or if he just can’t feel it anymore.

People start to arrive, a furious, endless stream of them, each addition making the air grow taut and tense and spasm with electricity. It starts with more cops—“...evidence and DNA.” Steve hears Carol say—who walk past them, brisk and impersonal, who make Bucky flinch just by showing up, and Steve develops a deep distaste for them even though really, they haven’t done anything but share a uniform with the second worst person on Earth.

Save for Carol and Fury, Steve hates the way everyone is acting. The smell of chemicals, the impersonal, insensitive ways it’s being talked about, the total apathy in the gazes directed towards Steve and Bucky. Like their entire lives haven’t just been slashed to pieces by what he’s just done. Steve can feel what’s just happened pressing into him and Bucky, so fucking heavy on his shoulders, making it hard to breathe. He doesn’t want detectives picking this coldly apart, doesn’t want them viewing this as another case, as something to snap shut and check off under solved while they try to pick up the shrapnel of their lives after this without getting cut any more.

Steve doesn’t know how long they wait there, sitting on the edge of the ambulance, staring bleakly at Pierce’s building. Someone checks on them, mechanical questions and lights thrust into their faces and quick, precise swabs of alcohol over the worst cuts, until they decide that apparently neither Steve nor Bucky is going to have a brain aneurysm overnight and warns them to see a doctor if they recognize concussion symptoms.

No one has told them they can’t leave, but it still feels like it isn’t allowed, like the crime scene tape that has been strung up is boxing them in. Steve knows, vaguely, that they’re going to need to give statements, that there might even be charges brought against them, but the thought of tackling that right now feels so fucking daunting and monumental and impossible to conceive that it makes his vision swim. They’re waiting on something, some image or explanation that will shift everything back into place, that will make it stop feeling like the ground under them is paper thin and unsteady. Because once they go home, all that’s left is the aftermath, the miles and miles of emptiness that Pierce has spun from cruelty, and neither of them are ready to face it. So they wait, curled against each other, their shallow breaths in a perfect alternating rhythm, for something to make them exhale.

When Sam and the rest show up, they hurdle up to the crime tape for Carol to stop them and tell them, firmly but kindly, that they can’t see Bucky and Steve right now. There’s a lot of begging, and gesturing, and tears until Carol finally relents and tells them, “Ten minutes.”

When they get through, Sam throws his arms around Steve’s neck, tighter than they would ever hug under normal circumstances. Steve hugs back, intensely glad to see him.

“You get to say ‘I told you so’ forever,” Sam says shakily, when they pull apart. Steve forces a laugh. “I’m so sorry, Steve—”

“Don’t be stupid,” Steve responds, a little choked up, “you called her, you got them here—”

Nat pushes Sam aside and hugs Steve, casting a horrified glance over his face. “We should’ve come with you, we should’ve—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Steve says. His head hurts, and he isn’t mad at them, not a bit, but he doesn’t have it in him to comfort them. “You guys got the police here.”

Next to them, Wanda is still holding onto Bucky, her face pressed into his shoulder, his pressed
into her neck. He knows she’s thinking about all the times she saw him just like this, bleeding and shaking and out of his mind with terror, after he came back from Pierce’s, can read the guilt and sorrow and fear and relief flickering in her eyes when she pulls away finally, and touches his face and says something and Bucky shakes his head and she hugs him again. Then she turns to Steve and hugs him, quieter, more subdued, but full of love and relief. For a while, the four of them just stay close to Bucky and Steve, arms draped over their necks and hands on their shoulders, quiet and comforting, until Carol comes over and informs them, apologetically, that they have to leave.

Then the Pierces show up. It’s the first time Steve has seen the youngest one (Evelyn or Emmeline or something—Steve doesn’t think he could remember right now if there was another gun on him), and it startles him. She climbs out of the back of a black car with her mom and her brother and stares, wide-eyed, at the scene in front of her home.

Claire arrives about ten seconds later, somehow, running up the block with her boyfriend. She looks unrecognizable, no makeup and hair damp like she’d just showered and wearing sweats, and she stares around in horror, utterly fucking devastated, blinking again and again.

Her eyes land on Steve and Bucky, who’s got his head bent, leaning into Steve and not looking up. She pauses, like she might say something, and Steve gives her a quick, exhausted shake of his head, and she takes in the utter fucking brokenness of Bucky’s stance and she backs the fuck off. She and Steve share another beat, watching each other. There’s something there; sorrow, apologeticness, understanding. Resignation, like somehow, this is the least surprised she’s ever been. Claire is fighting tears, he knows, and she turns around and Steve knows that’s the last time they’ll ever see each other.

Instead of going to him, she crosses the street, or tries to; Carol stops her, then she says something and Carol sighs and grimaces and nods. She walks cautiously, almost meekly, to the rest of her family; the boyfriend follows, hanging back. Her brother sees her first. His face stays blank, like he can’t decide whether to scream at her or hug her. The little sister doesn’t hesitate. She bolts to Claire and starts sobbing, and Claire doubles over like she’s crying too, clutching her sister’s hair.

Arm around Emily or Esther or whatever, Claire walks towards her mom. She reaches a nervous hand out, and her mom hugs her stiffly. There are silent, private, tears rolling down Martha’s cheeks too. After a moment, Claire pulls away and looks at her brother. He shoves his hands into his pockets and grimaces. It isn’t hate, exactly, but no offer of warmth, no forgiveness. After a moment, Carol walks up to them and begins, in a hushed, somber tone, to explain.

So much fucking pain in this one-block radius, Steve thinks. Too much for a lifetime or ten. All of it because of Alexander Pierce. His destruction fanned out for miles, left cracks and rubble and devastation in the lives of everyone he’d touched and poisoned. Steve feels sick.

Bucky finally looks up at him, after the Pierces have been ushered away and into what remains of the rest of their lives. He looks the way flowers look after a rainstorm; everything on his face and body is dulled and sunken in, this sheen of misery and fear coating him that twists a knife into Steve’s gut. “How did you know?” he croaks out.

Steve swallows. He thinks back to the rolling, gathering mass of panic that had started inside him earlier when Bucky wasn’t getting home. It feels like a hundred years ago, like the man who had stood in his hallway, gasping for air as he realized what was happening had been changed in some fundamental way, couldn’t possibly be the same person he had been before he kicked down that door.

“When, um—when you weren’t getting—getting home” —Steve closes his eyes— “I went downstairs to check if Stan had seen you. And he said that—that you left with an older blonde
“Guy.” He lets it trail off there. He doesn’t need to describe the way fear, more brutal than he had ever experienced it, had turned his bones to ice and his breath to fog, how the idea of losing Bucky had sent a horrendous shriek of dread through him that left him crippled. Bucky knows all of that. He closes his eyes and lowers his head, resting his forehead against Steve’s shoulder.

“You could’ve died,” Bucky tells him. The tremor in his voice has picked up, so it’s back to being airy and scared, like there’s still a chance some psycho with a gun and too much hate in his lungs will come up behind them now.

“You could’ve, too,” Steve whispers, his voice catching. The flashing of the ambulance and police car lights are so claustrophobic; Bucky’s face keeps flickering in red and blue and gray, making the fear feel violently real, some physical, visible thing that can be touched and held and fought against.

Bucky’s hands curl in tighter against Steve, grasping for him. There’s this thing between them, this complete, untouchable, gigantic lack of care for themselves when something threatened the other. It’s always been there, that fierce need for the other to be okay even when they weren’t, and it corkscrewed to an apex tonight. Steve, diving for that gun without thinking about the fact that if he’d been half a second later, Pierce would have put a bullet in his skull. It didn’t matter. Even as he thinks about it now, it doesn’t seem to matter. All that mattered was Bucky, the terror on his face, the harm that could never, ever come to him, that Steve would have been tortured, would have given everything, would have died without a moment of regret or consideration to prevent. Bucky, delirious with pain and fear, trying to put himself between the man who brutally abused him, this person whose touch had only meant pain and violation and fear, and Steve because he couldn’t stand the thought of Steve being hurt.

Something almost dysfunctional about it. Something utterly tragic, the impossible indifference to each of their own safety because the other being hurt would have torn them open and seared them on the inside in some unbearable way. Maybe something beautiful, in the most fucked-up sense of the word.

Or maybe that’s just what it is, to love someone so much it’s sewn into their molecules, to love someone so much that all the galaxies that have ever existed spelled it out for years and years before they ever existed and for years and years after they’ll be gone. The unyielding, undying conviction that they’re more important than you, more important than anything.

Bucky looks down again, his face shrouded in misery. Then he says quietly, “Did you kick his door down?”

Steve laughs, a dry, choked noise, even though there’s nothing funny about it. “Yeah.”

“Lucky you knew how,” Bucky murmurs vaguely. He’s still a little out of it, deep shudders coming over him every minute or so, and Steve pulls him closer.

“Had a good teacher.” When Bucky gives him a blank look, Steve clarifies, “You told me how. In high school. You were… You were reading about it.”

Bucky tries to laugh, but it’s a splintered gasp of air. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Steve smiles, exhausted and heartbroken, and pushes a strand of Bucky’s hair back. He’s alright, Steve reminds himself, with a small, relieved breath. He’s here, he’s alive, he’s in my arms and he’s perfect and I’m never letting him go again.

Steve takes another breath. “We’re gonna—we’re gonna be okay, Buck.” He says it like an oath,
Tears prick Bucky’s eyes again. They aren’t ready to talk about this yet, not really, so he pulls Steve close, burying his face in his neck and crying and breathing, as Steve strokes his hair and rubs his back and lets himself fucking inhale the feeling of Bucky in his arms, memorizes it, hyper-aware of everything about his touch and swearing to himself that he’ll never, ever leave Bucky with no one to hold him.

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Steve wakes up the next morning and forgets, for a half a second. Then it collapses in on him, violent, angry flashes of the night before, and it’s all hurting again, clawing open a deep cavern in his chest that weighs him down, threatens to pull him towards the earth’s core. He closes his eyes. He’s sore all over, face stiff and tender, head splitting open with pain.

He looks down, and Bucky looks incredibly small in his arms. The swelling on his face is worse now, his skin too pale or too red, the outlines of where the bruises are going to be in a few hours. Steve traces his fingers over some of the swelling, very softly, and without opening his eyes, Bucky tilts his face so he’s leaning it into Steve’s hand. Pain flits across his face, and everything tenses like he’s trying not to cry, until finally he blinks a few times and lets out a quiet gasp.

“Baby,” Steve mumbles sadly.

Bucky closes his eyes again. Then he lays back against Steve’s chest and they stay like that for a long time, avoiding the thing that’s hanging over them swinging violently in the forefronts of their minds, palpable in its aggression. But they don’t talk yet. They lay there, listening to each other’s shallow, nervous breathing and pretending they can hide from this.

Sam and Wanda stayed over; she took the guest room and he took the couch, and when Bucky and Steve drag themselves lethargically out of bed, they’ve already made breakfast and coffee. Carol took their statements the night before, but Bucky barely remembers giving them. Wanda was with him, and Sam was with Steve, because they couldn’t give them together, but it didn’t take long, and Bucky was so fucking disattached that it wouldn’t have mattered either way.

He remembers the night in fleeting images and cutouts of emotion after he got away with Steve. Everything with Pierce and with Steve showing up and watching them fight for the gun, that imprints itself on the inside of his mind, playing back in full detail every time he closes his eyes, but the rest of it is choppy and surreal. Carol, leaning quietly towards him, asking him a question he couldn’t find the words to answer, Wanda squeezing his hand, collapsing against Steve once it was done, arriving home and staring around an apartment that looked distorted and wrong, that felt like it had been rifled through and then put back together all wrong. Showering, blood running over his skin, its thick texture impossible to stop feeling. Burying himself against Steve in bed and crying himself to sleep.

It’s all over the news by the next morning. When Bucky looks at his phone—at some point while he was still half-gone, Carol must have decided it didn’t need to be in evidence and given it back to him—he’s got missed calls from about a dozen different people. He looks for a moment—it starts with frantic messages from Steve from the night before, asking where he is, and then messages from Sam and Nat and Peggy and Wanda, begging him to call them, or call Steve, and then the ones from after the news broke. Maria, Scott, Jennifer, all checking on him, telling him to call, asking if there’s anything he needs.

He calls Jennifer first. She answers on the second ring with a breathless, “Oh, Bucky,” and tears push up against his throat again.
They talk for a long time. She tells him the same things she’s been telling him all along—*not your fault* and *violent control tactic* and *psychopathic abusive tendencies* and *completely normal that you’d be overwhelmed right now... dissociating...terrified...blaming yourself* but none of it makes him feel better; he’s impervious, he thinks, to everything. The world is skimming by, all of it looking wrong, shifted and warped in some fundamental way that he can’t place, like some sixth sense has been thrown into the mix.

“Bucky,” she says before she hangs up, when he’s agreed to come in the next day, “listen. If you start experiencing worse symptoms, if you start to feel like you’re backsliding into the feelings and coping mechanisms that you’ve been working to get over… That’s normal. It’s okay. It doesn’t mean you’re back to square one, alright? You’ve gone through an extreme traumatic event, but you’re still recovering. You’re still making progress, alright? I don’t want you to feel helpless. Having a reaction to trauma doesn’t mean you’ve lost all the progress you’ve made.”

“Thanks,” Bucky says hoarsely. Then he hangs up and buries his face in his hands until he thinks he has it in him to face Steve again.

Steve is in the living room. He’s sitting on the couch and staring down at the coffee table, and when Bucky comes in his whole body goes alert, face softening. Bucky crosses the room and buries himself in Steve’s arms, in the only place in the whole world that he can be completely certain is safe.

“You saved me,” Bucky mumbles into his shoulder. The words ring hollowly; his voice shakes. “Fuck, Steve.”

“You saved me, too,” Steve reminds him, with a light, chaste kiss to the side of his head.

Bucky exhales, feeling like a knot has been yanked roughly undone in his chest. “I got you there in the first place,” he says, his voice beginning to tear at the seams, a violent flinch in the words.

But Steve shakes his head firmly. “I should’ve stayed with you—”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Bucky scoffs, without any hostility. He’d known this was coming. “How were you supposed to know? I had no fucking idea.”

Steve just nods, brushing his hand lightly over Bucky’s jaw, this tender, loving motion that makes him feel breakable, but in a strangely comforting way, in a way that tells him that even though he’s fragile, Steve would never do anything that could shatter him. Bucky wraps his arms around Steve’s stomach tightly, biting against tears that rise in his chest.

“What did he do to you?” Steve whispers, his voice thick with grief. Bucky grits his teeth, shakes his head.

And Bucky tells him, tells him with words that make him taste blood and spite and terror, tells him crying, tells him shaking. And Steve stays there, quiet and solid and gentle, listening to him, not interrupting and not reacting too much and not trying to kiss him. When Bucky’s done, he just holds him.

“I’m here, baby,” Steve murmurs, as Bucky shivers against him. “I love you, you’re alright, you’re safe, I’m right here, I’m so sorry…” And on and on, until it drowns out all the other things that are pounding and shrieking in his mind.

“He’s going to jail now,” Steve mumbles, after a long time. It’s dark and empty. “He’s gonna die in there.”
Bucky nods. The thought of it still feels strange, disattached from reality, still too hard to believe. Pierce feels fucking impossible to defeat. Even if he watched them slam the jail cell doors on him, Bucky doesn’t think it would bring him relief anymore, doesn’t think it would ease the conviction that he’s still out there and he’s still going to hurt him.

He doesn’t want to think about Pierce, or what’s coming for him. He doesn’t want to look up at Steve’s battered skin and see what he’s done, indirectly, to the person he loves more than anything on this earth, the only sacred thing he has. He doesn’t want to think about how last night, he’d fucking rolled over again and done everything Pierce told him to, let himself be beaten into patheticness and terror and submission, would have probably let him fuck him and kill him if Steve hadn’t saved him.

He just wants to fucking forget.

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Alexander Pierce is found guilty on all counts.

The jury decides that on Monday, after Maria gives them a brutal, two-hour long description of what Pierce did to Bucky on Friday night, and Zola yields his time. They delegate for ninety minutes. Coulson gives him life in jail.

He pleads guilty to the other charges. It all happens within the week. There’s a new prosecutor, since it’s technically a different case, and Zola talks them down to attempted murder, kidnapping in the second degree, and aggravated battery assault. There are about a dozen more charges that could’ve been filed if he’d plead not guilty, but it doesn’t matter and everyone knows it. He’s going to die in prison no matter what.

Steve and Bucky don’t go back to the courthouse. Maria updates them on both the decisions, and when he hears there won’t be another trial, Bucky slumps against the wall in dull, incomplete relief. If Pierce had really wanted to kill him, he would have put him through another trial, another nine months of reliving it all. He doesn’t want to relive any of it anymore. He’s sick of feeling used, sick of the same knives cutting him over and over again but refusing to dull.

The next few days are so saturated in chaos that when it bleeds into a week, and then two, Steve can’t believe time has continued forward at its usual, unphased pace when his world has been brought to a standstill. No charges are brought against him or Bucky; self-defense, Carol explained, all of it.

Steve spends the next few weeks in a startled daze, locked in the feeling that comes when you miss the top step and your chest clenches, braced for the fall. God bless Henry, who Steve goes to see a few days after that night, who listens to him as he grits out what happens through stunned, enraged tears.

“Jesus,” he says quietly, once Steve has gotten it all out. “My god, Steve. I’m so sorry.” He’d seen it on the news, but it’s all being misconstrued and reported wrong and this is the first time he’s gotten the story accurately. “How are you feeling right now? How has this made the last few days for you guys?”

Steve doesn’t know how to answer that because something has changed, undeniably. Steve’s more agitated, constantly alert and bristling, scanning every crowd for a threat or not at all, finding himself staring, blank and unattentive into space for several minutes at a time. He’s angry. The lingering fear dissipates more quickly for him; after that it’s just a tight ball of rage turning in his chest, all of it meant for Alexander Pierce but being turned on whoever looked at him and Bucky
the wrong way when they went out, on the reporter who calls him asking for an interview and
makes him snarl, “If you ever fucking contact me or Bucky again I’ll sue you for harassment and
that will be the fucking story.” On himself, for not being there with Bucky to prevent this whole
nightmare in the first place.

And that’s where Henry comes in with soothing practicality. “You went through a trauma–”

“I didn’t go through a trauma,” Steve says, irritation twisting through the words. “Bucky went
through–”

“Steve,” Henry says, grimacing good-naturedly, “you had a gun pointed at you. You thought
Bucky was going to get killed. You watched him get threatened and harrassed and attacked by his
rapist. That’s a trauma. I think right now, you’re trying to walk around in the world not
acknowledging the way this affected you, and that’s where some of the anger and frustration
you’re telling me about is coming from. This was terrifying for you.” Steve bites his lip. “Look.
What I’ve learned from the last few months of seeing you is that the thing you want to do, more
than anything, is take care of Bucky. And you do that–”

“I left him,” Steve says, his voice hardening, “and Alexander fucking Pierce walked into our
building and kidnapped him and I wasn’t there.”

Henry leans forward, clasping his hands between his legs. “You couldn’t have known he was
coming after Bucky. That’s not fair to yourself, Steve.” He pauses, as Steve scrubs a hand over his
face. “In fact, you drove to Pierce’s house and broke down a door to get to him. None of what
happened was on you.” Another heavy pause. “What I was saying before, was I know that all you
want to do is protect Bucky because he’s been so hurt. I get that. But you can’t let that be the only
thing you think about to the point where you aren’t giving your own well-being enough thought. I
think Bucky would agree with me on that one.” He would, but Steve still eyes Henry wearily.
“You have to look after yourself too. And that means acknowledging that what happened to you
was traumatic, and being patient with the ways it’s affecting you now so you can learn how to
process it all.”

So Steve tries. He’s seeing Henry a lot more these days than he had been before. He’s running
more, seven or eight miles a day, because it helps with the otherwise unbearable heaviness that’s
settled in his chest. He stays close to Bucky all the time, partially because of paranoia that
something terrible will happen if he doesn’t and partially because Bucky is the only person who
can make him feel fully okay these days, who doesn’t look at him half in alarm and half in pity,
just gentle recognition and tenderness and closeness that reminds Steve that as long as Bucky
exists, there’s enough.

And when he starts taking better care, when he starts acknowledging it all, it feels manageable. It
doesn’t feel okay, doesn’t feel anywhere near it yet, but it feels like it will be, and that gets Steve
up every morning.

Bucky fares worse. Every night for the first week after, he wakes up frantic and screaming, so
scared that Steve can’t even touch him until he calms down, mumbling about how he’s coming,
he’s here, no, no, NO, STOP– until Steve can talk him softly out of it, and then holds him for a
long time while he sobs and mumbles out apologies that Steve hushes gently. In the lobby one
night, someone pushes past him and he absolutely panics, retreating in on himself and covering his
face and shaking his head.

Steve wakes up one night and Bucky isn’t in bed. When he heads out of the bedroom to find him,
he’s standing by the door, arms wrapped around himself, hunched over a little, staring at the
camera linked to the lobby.
“Buck?” Steve says softly.

Bucky startles, pulling his arms in closer around himself and swinging around. His gaze drops. “I’m sorry,” Bucky stammers, cheeks flushed, like he’s been caught doing something he isn’t supposed to.

Steve shifts his weight slowly, nervously. “Don’t be sorry, baby,” he says quietly, a pained note in his voice.

Bucky bites his lip and looks behind him again at the faint gray glow of the camera, then back at the ground. He’s rubbing his hands over his forearms almost neurotically, vicious anxiety in it.

Finally, he breaks the stillness. “I just wanted to, um, to check.” There’s a hot bite of shame in the words, and Bucky flinches.

Steve crosses the room slowly to be closer to him. “Baby, he’s in prison,” Steve says carefully, “we’re safe, okay? No one is—no one’s coming, no one’s gonna hurt you.”

“I know,” Bucky whispers miserably, “I fucking know that and I still—” He’s shaking his head now, desperately, staring down. “Fuck.”

Steve’s soul is hauled forward with sorrow. He takes a hard breath and reaches his hand out between them, hesitating for Bucky’s, and after a minute Bucky slides his fingers in between Steve’s with a miserable, quivering breath.

“I don’t wanna be scared anymore,” Bucky whispers, a shudder in his voice, in his soul. “I can’t.”

He chokes out a small sob.

“I know, baby,” Steve murmurs. “Buck, listen to me. You’re safe. I know—I know—I know it doesn’t feel like it, right now, and I know you’re scared, but you’re safe. And I’ll remind you of that however many times you need me to, for however long you need, until you feel it, sweetheart. You aren’t gonna be scared forever.”

Bucky is still looking at the ground, but Steve can see the twitching of his face, tensing as he swallows tears. He squeezes Steve’s hand and doesn’t let go, and Steve squeezes back.

“Can, um…” Bucky bites his lip, keeping his gaze trained down. “Can we—can we sleep on the couch?”

Steve swallows thickly. “Yeah. Yeah, of course. You, um—if you want the bed, baby, I’m happy to sleep out here, too—”

Bucky shakes his head. He’s still looking at the floor, pulling his sweatshirt in on himself like he’s trying to vanish into it. “Um. No, I, um—I wanna be with you, I just, um—” He draws a gasp, like speaking is physically hurting him, and Steve swallows his grief. “I just—I can’t—I can’t do the bed right now. I couldn’t, um, stop—stop thinking about—about him tonight.”

Anguish cuts cleanly through Steve. He nods—it’s all he can do—and watches Bucky, struggling to keep himself together, unsure if he can touch him or not. “Okay, baby,” he says finally, raspy from sorrow, “okay. I’m here. It’s okay, Buck, I’ll stay with you out here, yeah?”

Bucky nods, eyes squeezed shut. Then he’s crying again, deep, wrecked sobs, and finally Steve pulls him into his arms. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry—”

“Baby, shh. You have nothing to be sorry for, alright?” Steve runs a hand down his back, and
Bucky is still crying, muffled whimpers into his shirt. “Buck, baby, breathe, okay?”

Steve holds him for a long time, soothing him quietly, soft fingertips over his skin and hands stroking his hair and forehead kisses and gentle, tender whispers of love and comfort. When he mumbles, several minutes later, “Wanna lie down, my love?” Bucky nods and curls against his side as they cross to the living room.

They’ve slept on the couch together before, but it’s usually out of laziness, when they fall asleep watching tv and don’t want to move. It’s a little too small for them both, so their bodies are pressed close; Bucky hugs his arms around Steve’s chest and nuzzles his face into the crook of his neck, and Steve lays his arms over Bucky’s back so he can keep rubbing small circles between his shoulder blades. Bucky has stopped crying by the time they lie down, but there’s this awful tension in his body that won’t let up, this horrible, stiff fear that, even when he falls asleep, lingers miserably in the way he’s holding himself, and Steve bites back tears and tries to figure out how he’ll possibly recover from this.

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“Steve?” Bucky says quietly, a few nights later.

There’s something wrong in their house, something off; the dust has grown ever so slightly thicker, or all of the furniture has been shifted an inch over, or everything has been put on a slight slant. It’s been like that since that night, and Steve can’t figure out how to get it back. Nothing feels quite as safe anymore, especially for Bucky. He hate it. Steve was washing dishes, or was supposed to be, but when Bucky calls his name he realizes he’s been staring at the sink for twenty minutes without moving, hands braced on the counter. He shakes his head.

“Yeah, baby?”

“What, um, what’s the date?” He leans against the doorframe. His hair is pulled back, and he’s wearing a sweatshirt that belongs to Steve and is too big for him so it’s about double Bucky’s size, and he looks fragile. The lingering bruises don’t help, the thin cut that’s glaring over Bucky’s cheek that he’s been caking foundation over, that every time Steve sees send white-hot rage spearing through him again.

“It’s…” Steve has to think about it for a moment. “July twenty-fifth. Wednesday. Why?”

Bucky blinks, like he can’t believe that’s right. “Um. We still have plane tickets for Friday, right?”

“Oh, shit,” Steve says, stunned. With everything, he’d completely forgotten that he and Bucky were supposed to go to Spain in two days, hadn’t even thought about it since before what Tony called Pierce-gate and Steve hadn’t laughed. It feels like Pierce had tossed a minefield into their future and blown everything out of the way, left his fucking damage and pain and hatred for Bucky and Steve to stand in, shell-shocked and bleeding.

There’s a beat. Bucky bites his lip.

Steve says, finally, “I guess I should call the airline, see if we can get a refund…” Not that it makes a difference to Steve anyway, but still.

There’s a long pause. Bucky looks down, pulling at his sleeve, and then up again. “Why?”

Steve shifts towards him. “Hm?”

“I mean… you got somewhere to be in the next week and a half?”
Steve blinks. “No,” he says slowly, “no.”

“Then we might as well go, right?”

Steve stares at him. Incredible how Bucky looks fucking beautiful, even in this slightly off-kilter, uncomfortable room, even with two fading black eyes and a dozen more bruises that are still visible if he looks hard enough, even after all the pain in the world has come tumbling down on top of him.

Steve laughs, suddenly, a lightness he hasn’t felt in weeks tugging at him. “Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, let’s go to fucking Spain.”

Bucky laughs, then rushes towards him and throws his arms around Steve’s neck. Steve catches him with his arms around his waist, stumbling a few steps back, and holds on with such fierceness that he lifts Bucky up very slightly, and they stumble a little more but they don’t let go. They cling to each other so tight that they swing a little, left and right, a small, pendulumic movement that makes them pull in tighter. They’ve held each other a lot, over the last two weeks, but there’s been a cautiousness, some shy wall up between them that shatters right now, and Bucky is crying and Steve is crying and drawing ragged, desperate gasps of air like even their lungs need to be in sync, like they can pull in and release the same breath and it will heal them. And it almost works.

Bucky pulls away, but it’s only to touch their foreheads together, to bring his fingers to either side of Steve’s face and breathe in, and Steve runs his hands softly up Bucky’s back and pulls him in closer, so that they’re perfectly aligned, bodies and hearts parallel and symmetrical.

“You heart’s beating really fast,” Steve says softly, to Bucky. He can feel it, an insistent, familiar pattern pushing faintly against his own chest. “You okay?”

Bucky’s eyes are closed, eyelashes fluttering like a delicate, sacred ritual, and he nods. “I’m good,” Bucky murmurs, and moves his thumb in small circles over Steve’s cheek. “I’m good. I’m safe right now.” A pause. Steve exhales, shaky and relieved and broken, and reaches up to take Bucky’s hand. He shifts it slowly down to his lips and kisses his fingertips and his knuckles and the back of his hand and his palm until Bucky has been elevated to just thrumming electricity and dazzling light.

“You love the breath right out of me, Rogers.” And Bucky laughs, a small, trembling thing that hurts a little bit to hear, a noise that suggests it’s the first time in his life he’s realizing how loved he is.

“Loving you takes the breath out of me, Barnes,” Steve tells him simply, and smiles.

Bucky laughs again. It’s the first time he’s really laughed since that night, and it brings something back to life in Steve, stirs some stalled electric thing in him back to whirring.

“Steve?” Bucky says softly. “We’re gonna be okay, right?” There’s this excruciatingly gentle, terrified hope in it, like saying it aloud will send the roof crashing down on them, and Bucky holds his breath for a moment.

Steve smiles again at him. “We’re gonna be great, baby. We’re gonna be so happy. We deserve it.”

Bucky nods, and smiles. There’s so much behind it that Steve’s breath catches, so much longing and hope, so much pain and brokenness, so much light. “Okay,” he breathes, and tilts his head up so their foreheads touch again, and Bucky is the only solid thing in the world, and Steve breathes in with him and gathers the curves of his skin under his touch like he’s trying to memorize it for a
painting, even though this kind of love could never be recreated, and for the first time in months, peace settles over them.

Chapter End Notes

some important announcements!

we have ONE CHAPTER left holy shit....this has been almost a year of my life i can't believe it's almost done ahhh i'll save the long emotional note for the end of the next chapter

BIG ANNOUNCEMENT! between all of you leaving absolutely LOVELY messages when i asked about a chaptered sequel and me consulting Cia who is now my top advisor for all fic related things.......there will be one :) i have a vague outline of what it's gonna be and it solidified a LOT more in my head and i'm very very excited about it :) i'd guess sometime in the next 4 weeks....i'm going on a trip and idk how much i'll actually be able to get done when i'm away but i don't want there to be too long of a wait between the end of this one so i'd guess late june/early july for that......get ready hehe it's gonna be a great time

since it's a wait i'll still probably do some one shots and post them in a collection here......keep letting me know if u have like a real request haha

love to all of you :) i can't get over how wonderful you all are when you were all saying to do a sequel my heart was just so FULL ugh you're all amazing see you soon for one more chapter ! ahhh
Montauk, 2009

Bucky and Steve skip the graduation parties and family dinners and take off to Montauk in Steve’s dad’s car. Senior week, they tell their parents, and no one is checking on them, and so they find themselves another motel, get in at nine pm, and go straight for fish and chips that they eat, tucked close against each other, on an empty, moonlit beach.

Bucky is leaning back against Steve between his legs, one of Steve’s arms draped carelessly around his stomach, keeping him warm. Tilting his head back so it fits against the crook of Steve’s shoulder, Bucky glances up. Outside of the city, grit and smoke has been filtered out for light, brilliant and uninhibited, endless stars in pinpricks of a velvet blue sky.

“You forget how pretty it is, when you aren’t in New York,” Bucky remarks, gesturing up.

He feels Steve shift behind him to look up and nod. “Not the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen, though,” Steve says with a grin, and kisses Bucky on the cheek. Bucky grins and snuggles closer to him, contentment washing over him.

“So now what?” Steve says after a moment. Bucky glances back at him, waiting. “I mean. It’s real now, right? We’re out in the world. When do we get our place?”

They’ve talked about this a lot, over the last nine months. Whispered conversations in the dark, pressed up against each other in bed, warm skin and gentle murmurs, giggled on the street late at night after sneaking out together, in hushed, important tones in corners of coffee shops or a library, like anyone else was listening and waiting to foil it. They both work shitty, minimum wage paying jobs that they’ve been pocketing money from for this very reason; they’ve thought and dreamt up all the possibilities a hundred thousand times, but now it’s here, and they’re staring this chance in the face, and they have to seize it.

“I was thinking about that,” Bucky tells him, “and I don’t know. January at the latest, right? My birthday?”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. They’ve had versions of this conversation a dozen times, and each time holds the same focused urgency, the conviction that if they just talk it through enough times, the resolution will present itself neatly. “Yeah. I just… I was thinking too, and maybe… Maybe we do it this summer instead.” A beat. Bucky turns to look at him, weaving his fingers gently through Steve’s.

“How would we pull that off?” Bucky asks, eyebrows raised. “We’ve got like eight thousand between us, right? And that’s from years of working and summer jobs and Christmas money, and that’s what, four months rent on any place in New York? And my parents still have control over my account until I’m eighteen, and I somehow don’t see them letting me put it all towards an
apartment with you, let alone helping."

“Maybe we don’t even tell them,” Steve says after a beat, “maybe we just up and leave.”

Bucky snorts. “We’re running away now?”

Steve grins. “Not running per say,” he says, “but I’m eighteen. I’m sure I can get us a shitty apartment in… god, I don’t know, Bushwick. I’ve got like four thousand, that might be enough for a place. You could withdraw some without them noticing, right? So, if you take out like, a couple hundred bucks at a time for the next few weeks, and we keep working, by the end of the summer we got enough for a deposit, we can get coffee shop jobs, or wait tables, I can sell my art, you can write.” He raises his eyebrows, cocks his head, this hopeful, energized look lighting up his face.

Bucky laughs. “This is crazy,” he says, like he’s trying to convince himself. “We can’t–our parents would freak.”

Steve pauses. “That’s what I’m saying, though. What they don’t know won’t kill them, and by the time it does, it’ll be too late for them to do anything.”

Bucky hesitates. “Are you serious about getting a place together this summer? If we can do it?” he says, locking his fingers in tighter with Steve’s and pulling their clasped hands up to his chest.

Steve kisses the back of his head. “‘Course I am,” he says easily, “aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says thoughtfully, “of course. I just… It’s so real, now.” He thinks another moment, the sound of the ocean filling his head, his lungs, sending a thrum of excitement through him. “I don’t wanna wait till January,” he says with a grimace. “But I don’t know if doing it like this will work either.” Impatience weighs down the words. Now, the thought of an apartment with Steve sometime in the next few weeks is sending this roaring, rapid electricity surging through him, excitement too big to contain, and he wants it so bad he can taste it.

“I know, babe,” Steve says, “but ‘till you’re not a minor–”

“Oh, don’t say it like that, you’re eighteen months older than me,” Bucky scoffs, and Steve laughs. “Just. They think we’re just best pals anyway, it isn’t that weird we’d get a place together. Maybe we just tell them that.”

Steve thinks this through. “That could work,” he says slowly, “but what happens if… I don’t know… My mom swings by unannounced and thinks it’s weird that two best friends are sharing a bedroom?”

Bucky sighs. “Yeah. And… I don’t know… I don’t wanna owe my parents anything. I don’t wanna talk to them after I leave.”


A pause, thick with the sound of the ocean.

“So maybe we just use the money we’ve saved and tell them we’re getting a place as friends, but don’t ask them for anything, you know? Like, we just tell them we’re getting a place once we’ve already put a deposit down, we could even spin it like it was their idea, you know, act like we’re giving them space, they can downside, we’ll just be off staying best buddies, and then my parents might not hit the roof or file a missing person’s report or drain my bank account before I turn eighteen.” Bucky’s eyes are bright with fervor and hope.
“Okay.” Steve pauses, adrenaline racing through him. “I think that could work. We say we’ve been saving, we say we’re getting a little bachelor pad” –Bucky snorts– “and we don’t need them to pay anything–it’s not like we’re turning down trust funds, anyway. And then we just go. It’s not that likely they show up when we’re in the middle of a blowjob, right?”

“I think you’re underestimating how much sex we’re gonna have once we’ve gotten rid of the threat of one of our parents coming upstairs,” Bucky retorts, but he’s grinning, and Steve laughs and smirks. “No, that could work. We start laying the groundwork now–’Yeah, Steve and I were thinking we might get a place next year, save money by living together, get jobs’–so that, if in August we tell them you’ve signed a lease, it won’t be a total shock. And, we can adjust depending on what they say.”

“Definitely,” Steve says, and he’s grinning. “Fuck. This could work, baby.”

“I know,” Bucky answers, and laughs, placing his hand on the side of Steve’s face and pressing a quick kiss to his lips. “Oh, my god. It’s really gonna happen.” And they’re kissing again, soaring and invincible.

Steve kisses the back of his neck, slow and hungry, and Bucky lets his head hang back, breath growing heavy and slow. When Steve reaches around and runs a hand down his thigh, he pushes him off and laughs. “Not on the beach. Jesus, Rogers, keep it in your pants for ten minutes.”

Steve grins and kisses Bucky, surprising him, making him laugh. “Get your mind out of the gutter, James, I didn’t mean right now.”

Bucky shoves him lightly. “So c’mon.” Bucky stands and reaches out his hand, pulling Steve to his feet. “I hear ‘we just decided to secretly move in together’ sex is the best.”

Steve grins, catching Bucky by the waist and lifting him briefly up so that Bucky wraps his arm around his neck and his legs around Steve’s hips and kisses him while being held, laughing when Steve loses his balance a little and half-drops him.

“C’mon, punk,” Bucky says fondly, and takes his hand, turning up the beach.

“Jerk,” Steve tells him, and Bucky winks. “Buck?” Steve adds, and Bucky turns. Steve is grinning at him, giving him this look of total joy, of total softness. “I love you.”

Bucky smiles. “I love you, too.” Then he tugs his hand, dragging him up the beach.

Before they get back to the hotel room, Steve wraps an arm around Bucky’s waist and leans back in to kiss him, full and heavy with love, breath catching. Bucky wraps his arm around Steve’s neck and his legs around Steve’s hips and kisses him while being held, laughing when the universe is laughing cruelly at their plans, that in one week, their beautiful, naive future is going to dissolve to smoke under their feet. They kiss like this because they’re too fucking happy to be anything less than perfectly close, and stumble, Bucky’s back pressed against the brick wall, kissing breathlessly, giggling through it.

Back at the motel room a few minutes later, Bucky straddles Steve’s waist on the bed and keeps kissing him, this fierce, vivid desperation in it, drunk on the warmth of it. Steve tugs Bucky’s shirt over his head for him, this trust between them so simple, the ease and love and care as much a part of them as any of their limbs or organs, and between muffled, soft moans and endless kisses and
delicate hands, Bucky mumbles against Steve’s mouth, “God, our neighbors are gonna fucking hate us.”

Steve laughs so that their teeth click together, and then they laugh more. “I can’t wait,” he says, grinning.

“Me either,” Bucky tells him, and then they’re kissing again and there’s no more talking for a long time.

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Barcelona, 2013

They go to a market the first day. They’re too jetlagged for any tourist excursions and they’ve tried to sleep it off so they don’t wake up until noon, and they stumble out walking, hands clasped, smiling at one another. It’s a good day. It’s the best day they’ve had since before the trial. Bucky is smiling in a way Steve hasn’t seen in longer than he’d realized, giggling these sweet, wonderful sounds into Steve’s neck, leaving cinnamon on his lips after quick kisses, his fingers careful and delicate, grazing over the fruits they purchase. They go back to the hotel early, stopping for a quick dinner that they eat curled against each other on a bench, fingers knitted together as they watch a band perform in the center of the square.

But they’re still a little shaky, especially Bucky, and it doesn’t go away with a change in timezones.

Steve wakes up that same night and Bucky is crying. He’s already up, sitting with his knees drawn to his chest, hand over his mouth to muffle shaky, quiet sobs. He doesn’t notice that Steve’s up until he sits up beside him and whispers, “Buck? Baby, what’s wrong?”

Bucky jumps, like he’d forgotten Steve was there. When he doesn’t say anything, Steve says softly, “Bucky, baby, do you know where we are?”

It takes him a minute, but he nods. The hotel room they’re staying in is this sprawling suite in a hotel near the center of the city, the bedroom framed by huge, floor to ceiling windows so moonlight spills in and over Bucky’s face, giving his skin a pale, porcelain glow, making his eyes look light and wide and young. His hair is falling limply over his face, but Steve doesn’t reach to push it away yet.

“Yeah,” Bucky finally mumbles. “Yeah, I just… It was another dream…” He trails off, tears filling his eyes again, light catching on them so they glisten against his skin. “Fuck.” His voice is small and scared.

They’re quiet for a moment. Steve is giving him space, because he’s still shaky, distrust obvious in the way his muscles tense and recoil and the guarded, fearful sheen in his eyes when he looks at Steve.

“It’s okay, Buck,” Steve whispers, “It’s alright.” Bucky looks down, not answering, and for a second Steve thinks he’s slipping away again into the quiet, safe space where he doesn’t have to feel this hurt, and his heart skips a desperate beat but then Bucky looks up at him.

“Steve?” he says meekly, and Steve sits up, nods gently. “Would you–um–could you hold me, for a little?”

Relief floods Steve, and he moves closer, wrapping his arms around Bucky and nodding. “Always, baby,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of Bucky’s head and winding his arms tighter. Bucky shifts, flush against him, face buried in the crook of Steve’s neck, arms pulled clumsily around his
stomach, half in his lap. They stay there for a long time; Bucky crying softly, Steve holding him and soothing him, until Bucky lifts his head from Steve’s shoulder and looks down.

“I’m sorry to do this here,” Bucky mumbles, choking on the words.

It stuns Steve. “What?”

Bucky turns away, pulling his arms in on himself, and it takes Steve a moment to recognize it as shame, his chest growing unbearably tight when he does. “I mean, um. Just… We’re here, you know, and this is… This is amazing and I’m just… I’m fucking it up—”


Bucky shrugs and shudders and shakes his head.

“Baby,” Steve says gently, and rubs his back, back and forth, very slowly, “baby, baby, shhh, it’s okay. What do you need right now?”

Bucky swallows; he looks wrung out with pain, almost confused by the question. Steve keeps rubbing his back, patient and not expectant of anything, until Bucky takes a shaky breath. “Can we… um…” He winces, drawing slightly in on himself. “Could we go for a walk?”

It takes Steve by surprise. “Really?” Bucky nods, not looking up. “Yeah. Yeah, sure, whatever you like, baby.”

So they head out, pulling sweatshirts on over tees. He wants to pull Bucky in, to place a gentle hand in the small of his back and ground him, but he decides to let Bucky initiate the touch, so he walks beside him. Their steps are quiet and cautious at first. It’s late enough that even most of the other tourists have headed home, but Steve feels suddenly wide awake, rich, clean air filling his lungs and moonlight surging through his veins and his eyes on Bucky, watching him carefully, not looking away.

Bucky reaches for Steve’s hand. Their fingers slide together effortlessly, the same warmth between them that has always been there, the same gravitational, cosmic pull between their skin that makes the worry ebb away a little. They don’t let go.

They end up on the beach. There’s a stillness that feels ancient; it’s nothing but the firm, worn-in sweep of the wind and the endless lull of the sea and the two of them, holding hands and breathing tentatively, looking into the darkness like they’re waiting on something.

“You wanna sit?” Steve asks Bucky quietly. Bucky nods, gives him a sad little upturn of his mouth that isn’t quite a smile. He sits in the sand, knees pulled to his chest, and Steve sits close to him, and after a moment Bucky leans into his side, head on his shoulder, so Steve puts an arm around his shoulder and steadies him.

“Do you remember,” Bucky begins softly, after a few moments, “the night of our high school graduation?”

Steve used to think about that night all the time, replay it and the days that followed over and over and over to figure where it went wrong, sickened and enraged at the happiness that had been ripped brutally from them. It came to him stumbling home with someone else at his side, disgusted at himself and nothing but apathetic for whoever it was who was with him, wishing he was kissing Bucky the way they had kissed that night instead of this faceless stranger who he wouldn’t
remember by the next afternoon. It came to him when he was lying awake alone in the apartment that should have been his and Bucky’s and he couldn’t get to sleep and he needed something peaceful. It came to him when he was too drunk or too exhausted to think straight and he remembered it fondly, smiling, before realization hit him and tainted the memory grey and soaked in misery. He’d become obsessed with it, relived it like if he just went over it enough, every touch and word and breath, he could go back to it.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, and presses a light kiss to Bucky’s neck, waiting for him to go on.

Bucky swallows. He’s a little tearful again; he’s been fragile, lately, crying a lot. “It was a stupid plan,” he says, with a quiet laugh. He doesn’t say ‘running away together’, but Steve knows. “Nothing about it would have worked.”

Steve smiles sadly, holds him a little tighter. “Yeah.”

Bucky swallows again. “I wish it had worked out that way. The way we were thinking.”

“Me, too,” Steve whispers.

Bucky ducks his head a little; almost shy, almost ashamed, like he doesn’t want to face Steve, but he squeezes tighter to him. “Do you, um—do you wish it was the same? Like, exactly the same as we were before?”

Steve thinks about this, stroking Bucky’s hair, worry flitting through him when he keeps his head down. “No,” he finally says simply. “No. I mean… I wish that—I wish that you never had to get hurt. And I wish you weren’t hurting now, baby.” A small swallow from Bucky; Steve thinks it might be more tears. “But I don’t, um—I don’t want some replication of how we were in high school, or how we might’ve been if things… had happened differently. This you and me, I wouldn’t trade us for anything, Buck.” He pauses. Bucky has looked towards him again, eyes full of caution, unsure if he should believe it or not.

“I wish I could be more for you,” Bucky whispers shakily. Rage cuts briefly through Steve. He’d been doing better with this, had finally, finally just begun to stop insisting he wasn’t good enough, and Pierce took that from him. Again. “I just—I wish things—I wish I could be”—he breaks off and squeezes his eyes shut; Steve squeezes his hand gently—“could be just, just not damaged like this, for you. Like before, when I—I was better back then. I wish I could give you that again.”

Bucky closes his eyes, tears spilling over his cheeks. The hurt is still there, unmistakable and terrible, this glistening, aching misery that he’s carrying, that he’s been carrying for far too long.

Steve wants, fervently, to take it all that hurt from him. He takes a breath before he answers. “I love you, Bucky. I love you, this you that I’m looking at, so much that I can’t breathe sometimes thinking about it.” Bucky’s breath catches; a quivering hint of a laugh. “Please, baby. You give me everything I could ever possibly need just by being you.”

Bucky is shaking his head, eyes closed. “That isn’t true—”

“It is,” Steve says, simple and firm and gentle.

Bucky watches him very carefully. Then he leans in and kisses him, this impossibly soft thing that makes Steve see constellations. He lets Bucky be the one to pull apart a moment later. Then he rests his head on Steve’s shoulder and stares out into the ocean. Lights flicker over the water, quick and impermanent, and Steve and Bucky watch them flit over the dark, endless water for a long time. The moon’s reflection glitters vaguely, sending light fanning out over the horizon, a soft,
milky glow that turns the water silver.

Steve listens to Bucky’s breathing instead of the waves. It starts to even out, starts to turn deep and slow again, but Steve doesn’t stop rubbing his back. “You feel any better, baby?” he asks softly, eventually.

Bucky shifts back and forth and nods. “Yeah,” he says, his voice airy and caught, “a little.”

Steve gives him a small, gentle smile. When Bucky rests his head in the crook of Steve’s neck again, Steve moves his hand to Bucky’s hair and strokes it lightly.

“You, um—” Bucky bites his lip, a taut, tense quality to his breath. “You’re—I could never, um, fully tell you what you mean to me, you know that?” A pause. “I love you so much. So, so, so much, Steve. What you’ve done, in my life… It’s not the kind of thing anyone could ever even describe.” He hesitates, breath hitching. Steve smiles, hand light against Bucky’s cheek, moving his thumb back and forth, shadow catching on Bucky’s jaw. “You, um, the way you take care of me… That’s not… That’s not anything I ever thought I’d have.” The words hang in the air, unfinished, like he’s fighting against saying something else. Steve already knows before he speaks it. “I, um, I know it’s exhausting. And you still love me through it. So, um. Thank you, Steve.” A sad, timid smile lilts over his face.

“Taking care of you is my favorite thing I do,” Steve says, simple and honest. “So thanks for letting me. And I’m gonna love you through anything that we ever have to face, baby, no matter what.” He sighs, his shoulders slumping. “You’re everything to me, you know that?” It’s all he wants, for Bucky to know that, for the love to be enough to sweep him off his feet and above everything that’s ever hurt him, that’s ever lied to him and told him he wasn’t good enough, he wasn’t worth love and gentleness and every universe that’s ever existed.

He knows better now, understands in the ways he hadn’t before in those early, early days that love alone can’t do that. But Steve is going to keep loving him like it could, because he deserves the kind of love that could almost do that.

Bucky doesn’t nod, but he doesn’t fight it either. They stay there, the silence full, rich and wordless and so thick with love that it flavors the air, turns it sweet and warm as honey, and when they finally get back to the hotel room they sleep a little easier.

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They wake up that second morning lethargic, leftover jetlag and tears mimicking a hangover, but there’s something light too, this ease that’s settled on them. Steve is up first, like always, but he’s just outside of the bedroom on his laptop, and when Bucky heads out to join him, he gives him a soft, full smile that holds nothing back, that doesn’t ask him for anything in return, just gives, and gratitude for Steve makes him dizzy. And he smiles too, and Steve doesn’t make him talk or cry or feel guilty about the fact that he’d kept him up all night crying. He just wraps both arms around Bucky and holds him close and murmurs that he loves him, and then they’re off for breakfast.

And the next few days are good. They’re so good that it sets Bucky on edge, this teetering, constant conviction that he always has that things are about to go colossally wrong that grinds in the back of his head and sometimes drags itself along his spine, but even with that gnawing, miserable discomfort, the days are framed by joy and excitement and laughing and not even Bucky can find a way to twist it into something sharp and poisonous and glowering.

Because Bucky is hurting. He’s hurting so much that he’s scared Steve and Jennifer and all of the people who love him and look at him with so much care and hope and fondness are going to decide
he’s been shattered one too many times to rebuild. He’s hurting in a way that suffocates him, that barrels into his mind with so much rage and destruction that when it does, all he can do is shrink in on himself and away from it and try to shield himself from the pain and terror that he’s sure will never go away.

But here, far away from New York and the hissing tabloids and streets full of people who stare shamelessly at them when they go out for coffee and their home that Alexander has infected, the ache on top of Bucky’s chest that’s been making it hard to breathe eases, and he remembers what he’s working so goddamn hard to recover for. There’s still this whirring, whining, sometimes shrieking noise in his head, growing louder and shooting sparks when he remembers, when someone touches him unexpectedly, when he catches the face of someone who looks or moves or speaks like they did.

Except he’s so far away from the things that made it worse, and it feels like coming up from being too deep underwater, where the pressure is building and aching and threatening to collapse your skull if you don’t move. He escapes it all and everything seems a little more bearable, because he’s here with Steve and Steve makes joy effortless, and then he remembers that this is what it’s for. This happiness is unusual; the times where he can breathe like this, unrestrained by terror or misery or panic or the haunting, searing memories, are few and far between. They’re unusual but they’re real, and they’re in his reach, and on one of those days, Steve grins at him at the top of a cathedral tower and sunlight streaks across his face, filtering in through stained glass and dotting Steve’s skin with sharp, precise geometric shapes of color, and Bucky goes breathless and remembers why it’s worth recovering.

And he will. He will, he will, he will, he will, because right now he’s able to look around this gigantic, spectacular world and in the center of it, Steve, more gigantic and spectacular than anything else that the world could ever come up with, and it’s breathtaking. And no one, not Pierce or Zola or Rumlow or Rollins or any of them will take that from him, because he’s here and he’s breathing, inhaling air through lungs that have almost been crushed but that haven’t, and he isn’t alone and no matter how much it hurts and how long it takes to heal, he remembers that it won’t hurt forever.

They go to another beach further from the city in the middle of the week, this time when it’s still light out. The sun has just begun to dip below the horizon, setting the skyline on fire, ablaze before it gives in. Everything shimmers, shades of orange and gold and pink, giving a warm, hazy feel to the world that reminds Bucky of the feeling of laying against Steve’s chest at night, hovering comfortably in the in-between area of awake and asleep just before sleep sweeps over him.

They walk for a long time, hands clasped, shoulders bumping against each other, until they’ve made it far away from the main stretch of beach and into a quiet, unclaimed area that’s been marked by eroding cliffs and rocks and feels like it might have materialized straight out of some century old novel.

The sky has turned purple now, so the whitecaps in the ocean are stark against the dusk-colored water, and the sun has become a thin band of light over the horizon so the whole world looks too soft and precious to touch. For a few minutes, they just take it in. Steve wraps an arm around Bucky’s shoulders and Bucky leans into him and places a hand on his chest and they watch the even, rhythmic pattern of the waves that the sea perfected centuries ago.

Then Steve turns to him. “Race you,” he says with a grin, and Bucky blinks and before he can work out what Steve is talking about Steve lets go of him and takes off sprinting towards a boulder a couple dozen yards away.
“Asshole!” Bucky yells, laughing, and takes off after him. Steve makes it first, of course, panting and turning with a satisfied smirk to Bucky.

“I win,” he says triumphantly. Bucky huffs, mock indignant.

“You don’t win shit—” But he’s happy right now, so happy he can’t even effectively pretend to be mad, and he just shoves Steve lightly and then falls against his chest, smiling into his shirt, arms wound around his neck, and when Steve kisses his forehead Bucky can feel his lips curved into a smile.

Bucky tilts his head back and stares at him, laughing, and for a moment they’re indistinguishable from the teenagers who ran down a different beach together, ages ago, untouchable and drunk on their imagined invincibility. Steve pulls Bucky closer into his arms and lifts him, just enough that he can spin them in a circle, and Bucky laughs so hard it hurts his chest.

And Bucky feels safe. It’s the first time he’s felt really, completely safe since that night, and it takes him by surprise and almost sends him barreling back towards panic, scrambling to shoot his walls up again, but Steve is there, his hands gentle and always asking for permission and incapable of ever turning to weapons, so Bucky holds them and lets himself feel safe.

When Steve sets him down, Bucky throws his arms tighter around Steve’s neck and kisses him. They’re still laughing enough that he can taste it on Steve’s lips, and it makes him kiss him longer.

“I love you,” Steve murmurs, between kisses, “god, I love you. Bucky, Bucky, Bucky. I love you so much.” Gold-tinted wind tears past them but it doesn’t pull them apart. It musses Bucky’s hair, sweeping it over his eyes, and Steve laughs and reaches up to push it aside so he can see again and Bucky doesn’t flinch at the touch.

“I know,” Bucky tells him, laughing, and in that moment, Steve is looking at him with adoration so bright and unmistakable that it reaches into him and soothes everything that tells him he isn’t worth being loved, fills him with this warm, humming light that swells and spins and weaves its way gently through his chest. Steve laughs, like he’s just said something groundbreaking and beautiful, and cups his face. “I love you, Stevie,” Bucky says, grinning up at him. “I love you more than anything.”

AndSteve looks down at Bucky and he can’t get his brain to form around anything except love. Love, love, love, love. So big and bright and effortless that Steve knows it’s been there as long as he’s lived and will be there until they die, the most obvious thing in the world, the thing that lights the stars in the sky and pulls the waves in and out from the shore and sends trees shooting up towards the clouds. This love between him and Bucky, it’s everything that’s ever been and everything that ever will be, and it’s what splits the molecules around them into dazzling electricity and warmth instead of air.

Love.

Bucky kisses him again, slower this time, like sobering up. Steve can taste the pain and sorrow now, can feel it in the quiver of their shared breath, in the rapid beat of Bucky’s heart against his. It’s there. It isn’t vanishing, they both know. Not for a long, long, long time.

But then they break apart and pull each other in, and the lines between their limbs blur, or maybe they were never there in the first place. And the thing that eases through them is love, simple and obvious as the trickle of a stream that has flowed for thousands and thousands of years. They hold each other as close as they can, drawing air together, the gentleness exquisite, soft hands and warm skin and the flutter of eyelashes against cheeks.
wow.....this is a year-long project coming to an end.....i can't believe....i mean not really ending-ending bc the sequel is already in the works and i gotta be real guys......it's gonna be good.......but still.......wow :') i loved writing this so much i loved hearing from you guys this has been amazing and i’m excited for you to read the next bit :) i’m not giving a lot of info rn but it's gonna be a fun time

Let me just SAY.........Cia has been the most amazing editor and friend she's fucking amazing and brilliant and beautiful and tolerated me texting her at 2am in all caps for plot advice she's so wonderful and I can't believe we met from this fic but I'm so glad we did I love you!

Also everyone who read this far....the fact that you read almost 200k words of this story over all these months makes me so happy, this story means a lot to me and has been my labor of love for the last year and the responses have just overwhelmed me, all the comments and messages you leave/send are so goddamn important to me and just make my heart SO FULL and were such motivations to keep going when i was having writer's block and were a HUGE part of the decision for a sequel so thank you thank you, you're all so wonderful.... ESPECIALLY comments from people saying it was helpful to read because of their own experiences w trauma or any of the themes and found comfort in the story....I love you all so much and i’m sosososo glad I could give you even a little bit of representation and comfort it means so much to me you're all absolutely perfect

So I'll see you soon for part 2 which will get linked here when it's up but in the meantime i'm at cafelesbian on tumblr for anything you may have to say! seriously, idk how to end this so thank you all so much.
An update to let you all know that the sequel is [HERE](#) and a recent one shot is [HERE](#):)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!