Little Lies to Get Me By

by OhCaptainMyCaptain

Summary

Forced into a traumatizing situation that neither can control, Bucky and Steve have to confront their feelings for each other. It's a long road ahead...

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WARNING: Some dub-con activities up to about chapter 6 (from an outside source; neither Steve nor Bucky are the perpetrators). *WARNING TAG FOR NON-CON IS ONLY APPLICABLE UP TO CHAPTER 6. THERE IS NO RAPE IN THIS STORY.*

*UPDATE: A 21st chapter has been added with the entire playlist for this story. :)

Little Lies to Get Me By

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January, 1938

It’s January and Steve is sick, real sick. That’s nothing new – it never has been - but this is one of those times where Bucky knows it’s worse than normal. He’s fevered, and one breath too quickly brings on an asthma attack that leaves his tiny body wracked with shudders and causes him to curl in on himself. There are the symptoms; the ones that Bucky doesn’t want to admit out loud because it would mean that word again – that word that scares him to death because it represents the very real threat of that very same outcome for Steve. He tells himself it isn’t that - it isn’t pneumonia - and Steve will get better. Because Steve always gets better, and for all his fragility and illnesses in the world, he has always found a way to pull through.

The last time it was that bad, their priest had actually come by the orphanage and read his best friend his last rites. That had pissed Bucky off – it was as if this guy had been there to look Steve in the eye and tell him, “I don’t think you’re strong enough to shake it.” Bucky remembers sitting by Steve’s bed and holding his hand and he’d been terrified, so terrified, but that was a secret he liked to think he hid well from Steve.

So as Steve had lied there and asked the priest if he was going to die, Bucky had answered before the Father had the chance, and snapped that the blond was being stupid; he wasn’t allowed to because he still owed Bucky a dollar from several years prior. Fuck what the priest had to say – there was no way that Steve was going to die on his watch.

The Nuns admonished Bucky for being insensitive. But Steve had just smiled at him, weak and pale and please God, if you’re up there, you’re not allowed to take him. Not him.

In so many ways, Steve understood Bucky Barnes like no one else did.

So he keeps telling himself now that Steve’s going to get better. In the meantime, Bucky ensures that their cots are pushed together in their tiny bedroom, and Steve has long since stopped complaining about having to strip off his clothing every night before bed so that Bucky can wrap him up in his arms and let their skin-on-skin contact preserve as much body heat as they can. After everything they’ve been through, there’s nothing uncomfortable about it anymore. They’re practically brothers, always have been.
And that’s exactly why Bucky has to do everything in his power to keep Steve safe.

He’s never had to ask himself, ‘What would I do for Steve Rogers?’ The answer has always been crystal clear; since the day he saw a Steve who was much younger and impossibly smaller and no doubt weaker (but somehow, still just as gutsy and stubborn) than he is now… Who was getting hit, and hit, and hit, and the stupid kid just wouldn’t stay down. No, he’d have to get the last word – and of course, that’d only ever lead to another punch. Bucky was James back then, and James didn’t know why he felt compelled to go help him. He thinks it has to do with the fact that he, too, has never liked bullies – but he also isn’t afraid to admit (to himself) that there was just something about Steve that naturally drew the brunet to him.

The first time he stepped in and saved his hide, they’d started a series of actions they’d both repeated ever since, and Bucky has no doubt that they will continue to repeat them until they both have earned their laughter lines. So no, sorry punk, Steve isn’t allowed to get pneumonia again. Bucky doesn’t think he can handle it.

But then Steve’s inhaler starts running low. And that cough is getting worse and the sound of his lungs rattling with every breath is actually keeping Bucky up at night. And that means they’ll have to get medication, because if it is the beginnings of that word Bucky refuses to think of, then their best shot is to nip it in the bud before it gets worse. Bucky will have to save up some money from his work on the docks; money that Bucky doesn’t have, but he’ll find a way – he will – because he has to do everything in his power to keep Steve safe.

But then Bucky loses his job. It isn’t Bucky’s fault, nor is it the fault of the other fourteen people who showed up only to be sent back home within the first half hour. “Times are tough,” they’re told. “Money’s tight and we can’t afford to pay everyone.”

So the people less important have to go and Bucky has only been working there for two months. He doesn’t even need to be told that his name is on that list; Eddie Raymer is stomping off, muttering curses and something about the whole thing being bullshit, and he’s been there twice as long as Bucky has.

So Bucky just turns around and leaves as quickly as he’d arrived.

When he gets back to the apartment, Steve’s still lying in bed with that poor excuse of a blanket pulled up to his chin. He isn’t sleeping, though, and pops open his eyes with surprise when Bucky trudges into the bedroom and dumps his lunchbox on the floor, kicking off his boots. The younger man is too focused on the fact that Bucky is here and not there, that he momentarily forgets to snap at Bucky to pick his crap up. Damnit, it’s all Steve can do most of the time to just keep their place clean – no matter how much of a dive it continues to be despite his best efforts.

He hates feeling useless, especially when Bucky often has to try extra hard to pick up his slack. Steve Rogers doesn’t like to be in debt to anybody, let alone Bucky Barnes.

“So this isn’t the docks,” Steve finally says, sitting up (and coughing – shit, it sounds worse than yesterday, how is that even possible?). He raises an eyebrow at Bucky as the older of the two pulls off his work pants and fishes through the dresser – far too big for the amount of clothes they actually have – for his one good pair of dress slacks. Losing his job means he has to now hit the pavement to go looking for another, and Bucky’s always hated this part.

“Got fired,” he mutters, pulling them up his legs and retrieving his good belt.

“What’d you do?”
Bucky spares him an unimpressed look. “I didn’t do anything, asshole; I got laid off.”

Steve frowns, looking down and then back up at him. “Want me to come with you? Maybe I can find something. It’s been a few weeks, maybe –”

Bucky shakes his head, now tucking his undershirt into his pants. “Nah, Steve, the weather is garbage out there and with your asthma, you’d only slow me down. No offense, buddy. Besides, I heard of a couple places hirin’, so I’m goin’ straight for those.”

Both of them know what he really means; the unspoken, “You’re too sick to go out today, or any day until you get better, you hear? I want you to stay in bed and keep yourself warm until I get back home.” Bucky doesn’t need to clarify – Steve’s known him long enough.

And he hates feeling helpless, like he can’t contribute in any useful way. For as long as he and Bucky have been living together, Bucky’s had to work extra hard to compensate for what Steve just can’t contribute. Sometimes that means two jobs, sometimes it means three; sometimes, it’s extra long hours, or having to give Steve his portion of whatever food they can afford to have because he’s sick and actually needs the nourishment. How many times has Bucky gone to bed hungrier than how he’d started the day, because of Steve? And the worst part always is, even though he jokes about giving the blond a hard time, Bucky’s never upset about it. In fact, he sacrifices whatever he needs to for Steve without a single genuine complaint.

“I’ll find a job soon,” Steve promises, more to himself than anything.

Bucky’s finishing buttoning up his dress shirt, and he nods. They’ve danced to this tune before, no matter how many times the song replays. And as always, he replies, “I know you will, pal,” before turning to Steve and gesturing to himself. “How do I look?”

The shirt’s wrinkled and desperately needs to be ironed, but Hell if they own one of those. All he’ll need to do is throw on the jacket and tie and it’ll be fine. And the pants are a tad too short around Bucky’s ankles, but you have to really be looking at them to notice. In reality, the suit reflects their financial situation, but Bucky’s handsome and his charisma shines through more than anything else, so he manages to pull it off.

As always, Steve replies, “You look like a shmuck.” He smiles weakly. “Knock ‘em dead, Barnes.”

Bucky grabs the matching jacket and black tie and then spins around to give Steve the finger as he back steps out of the room. He grins just before turning the corner and waves. “Always do,” he retorts, finishing the assembly before slipping on a scuffed-up pair of black dress shoes. They could use a shining; unfortunately, they’ll have to do.

“Get some rest,” he calls out, like he always does, before walking out of the apartment and letting the door shut behind him.

He told Steve that he had heard of a few places hiring. He was lying. It’s a thing he does sometimes to make Steve feel better. He’s not proud of it.

Of course we’ll have food for tomorrow, Stevie, don’t be stupid.

If you’re inhaler runs out, we’ll just get it filled up. Now stop freakin’ out and calm down before you give me asthma.

It’s just a cold, buddy; nothing to worry about.
It’s pointless thinking about enlisting, Steve, because the war will never come over here.

As he walks down the streets of Brooklyn, résumé in hand and trying not to think of the biting cold in the air, this is one of those times where Bucky wonders if Steve knows when he’s lying. If maybe it’s a brave face that they both put on for each other, to make things feel a little easier. Because neither of them are the type to give in, nor even admit when they’re thinking of giving up. Stubborn, many (all) would say. It’s one of the reasons they get along so well, and bicker so frequently.

He spends eight hours walking the streets. He is able to see three managers. He leaves all three with nothing. Not even the promise of something. By the time the sky is getting orange, his feet are aching and he can feel a blister on the back of his right heel. He knows he has to head back when he can feel a dry scratch in the back of his throat. The one rule he has with himself is that, no matter what, he isn’t allowed to get sick. Even the slightest head cold could be the thing that did Steve in, and he’d just never be able to forgive himself.

He has a little bit of money on him, no more than fifteen cents or so, but he uses it to pick up some oatmeal, milk, and brown sugar. It’s not gourmet, but the brown sugar is a treat. He hopes Steve’s eyes will light up a little when they sit down to eat. His eyes have been looking a little too dim lately.

“How did it go?” Steve asks when Bucky’s finally back. He’s sitting at the kitchen table with the blanket from their cots wrapped around him, pencil in hand and half a sketch in the works on the tabletop. Bucky hasn’t even taken his shoes off yet.

It was shit. I can’t provide for us. That’s not okay, Stevie, it’s just not. I’ll go back out tomorrow and keep looking.

“Went fine,” Bucky answers, keeping his tone level and nonchalant. He should just stop there but of course he doesn’t. “Got another interview with one of the managers tomorrow.” He doesn’t know why he said that.

There’s a small pause, and he can’t see Steve so he isn’t sure what his face looks like right now. But the scratch of the pencil’s stopped, and that means Steve’s thinking, which is never a good sign when Bucky’s fibbing through his teeth.

But then--

“That’s real good, Buck. I’m sure you’ll get it.”

Bucky wonders again if this is one of those times.

Steve’s eyes do light up, when his bowl of oatmeal is put down in front of him and he sees the clumps of the beautiful brown sugar dusting the mush. He had thought Bucky had splurged when he revealed that they were getting milk with dinner; so, of course, the first thing Steve does is scold Bucky for spending money they don’t have on something they don’t need. But that doesn’t stop him from digging in and Bucky can see the moment when the blond’s taste buds are hit with the sweet flavour, and even with the “yeah yeah, punk, just shut up, stop riding my hide, and eat your oatmeal”, seeing Steve warm and content and not coughing so bad makes him feel a little bit better.

They clean up their dishes afterwards (using nothing but cold water, since they ran out of dish soap last month and the bottles have gone up ten whole cents since then and Bucky swears that’s theft) and then wile away the evening in the living room. Steve’s wrapped up in the blanket on the tiny couch as he continues his sketch. Bucky sits on the floor, leaning against the front of the couch, halfway through a second-hand (perhaps third or fourth) copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 
It’s the sixteenth time he’s reading it since he “borrowed” it from the public library back in ’35. He’d given it to Steve for his seventeenth birthday, because it looked intelligent and, well, Steve’s plenty of that. He’d asked Steve what it was about while the younger boy’s nose was buried in the pages, but all the latter would say was that if Bucky wanted to find out, he could read it when he was finished. And eventually, he did. Then he read it again. And again. And again. Gradually, there was an unspoken agreement that the book just sort of became Bucky’s rather than Steve’s.

He flips to the next page and can hear the tip of Steve’s pencil gliding away, and he realizes his eyes just glazed over the last page without taking anything in. He wonders how long it’ll take him to find another job. He wonders how long he can keep up the charade that everything is fine in front of Steve. He thinks about the amount of food they have and knows they’ll be out within a few days – maybe a week if they can really stretch it.

He doesn’t even want to think about the bills, or the rent, or where they’ll go if they lose the roof over their heads.

And then Steve coughs. It’s wet and deep and lasts far longer than it should, and it’s enough to startle Bucky from his thoughts and make him jump. The air is chilled and the sound of harsh winds and a snowstorm outside the window has Bucky wondering how he didn’t realize it sooner. With a sinking heart, he realizes it was wishful thinking to believe that Steve would get better before he got worse. It rarely ever happened that way.

He turns his head and opens his mouth to ask if he needs anything, and Steve waves him away – which is impressive considering that his eyes are closed. Instinct. Or maybe habit. They just know each other too well. Steve’s fist in his shirt in the middle of his chest and his face is all red against skin otherwise far too pale. It makes Bucky’s own chest tighten; he always feels so helpless watching Steve fight through these.

Eventually, the coughing calms down, though his lungs still rattle in his tiny chest when he breathes. “I’m fine,” Steve insists, keeping his eyes downward on his drawing. Loosening his grip on the pencil, the scratching starts back up again, as if he’d never been interrupted. But there’s a high-pitch whistling sound with every inhale that Steve hopes Bucky will ignore.

He doesn’t comment on it, but Bucky doesn’t ignore it either. Frowning, grey eyes drop back down to the words on the page.

“Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.”

Bucky wonders if Dorian is talking about Steve.

“You should go out, Buck,” Steve tells him almost a week later.

Six days of Bucky doing nothing but trying – and failing – to find employment; of spending the evenings stuck in the apartment because Steve’s been too sick to go out and the weather’s been too bad that Bucky knows he should stay in. Six nights of being huddled together in their cots with Steve shivering in Bucky’s arms - a bony back spasming against a hard, healthy chest as the blond hacks up phlegm and last night, blood.

Steve had tried to hide it and Bucky had tried not to act too concerned. It’s a weird thing they do with each other, much like the lying. The fear is there, in both of their eyes, and so they water it down to save face. Steve had wiped the light spray of red onto the blanket and muttered without
prompt that he was fine. Bucky had just nodded and pulled him closer, doing the only thing to help that he knew how, and promised for the millionth time that they’d get Steve the medicine he needed; he’d get better soon.

Bucky hadn’t slept much that night.

He’s sitting by the window, cracked open a bit to accommodate his habit (for the first time in weeks, the weather is cool rather than cold, and the sky is clear). He exhales the smoke from his lips, trying to aim as much of it as he can out of the apartment. He’d found the smoke in near perfect condition on the sidewalk that afternoon, and it’d driven him crazy having to hold off as long as he could before enjoying it. Cigarettes have been another luxury he’s having a difficult time affording these days.

“And leave you to kick the bucket while I’m gone? Not gonna happen.”

Steve grimaces and lowers his sketchpad, knobby knees tucked up tight to his body. “I feel fine tonight. You’ve heard me, I’ve hardly been coughing. Seriously, Buck, it’s swell of you to have been watching over my like you’re my personal nurse, but I can handle a night by myself and you should really go out. You’ve earned it.”

(Steve thinks he got hired on that second day. It’s the only way Bucky could justify being out all day, every day since.)

Bucky just shakes his head and takes another long drag. “I don’t even have the money to drink.”

“So? Just go out dancin’. You could meet a pretty dame. You know you will. It’ll take your mind off things for a bit.”

Things. Like the fact that they didn’t know what they were going to eat tomorrow, and tonight, Steve may in fact be doing a little better, but those symptoms have been adding up and Bucky’s pretty sure at this point that it is shaping up to be pneumonia… Unless Steve gets the proper medication. Which they don’t have yet. For the same reason that they’re avoiding the discussion about rent being due in four days and neither of them having the dough to cover it.

They’re in dire straits and Steve wants Bucky to go out dancing?

But Steve has a way of talking Bucky into these things – that is, doing something because they think it’ll make the other happy – and within the hour, he finds himself at his favourite joint and trying not to be too preoccupied with wondering if his best friend is okay.

He scopes out the crowd and can’t help but smile a little bit. The music is good and there are a lot of pretty little dolls, and Steve was right – Bucky could just dance and he’d feel loads better for the time being. It was always something of a release for him.

Except Steve is wrong. And if Bucky would’ve known how bad of a decision it would prove to be by the end of the night, he would’ve rather burned this place to the ground than step one foot inside of it.

Chapter End Notes
Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
To Obey

Chapter Summary

Someone's watching Bucky.

They think he moves real nice.

Chapter Notes

Somethin’ filled up
my heart with nothin’,
someone told me not to cry.
But now that I’m older,
my heart’s colder,
and I can see that it’s a lie.
Children wake up,
hold your mistake up,
before they turn the summer into dust.
If the children don’t grow up,
our bodies get bigger but our hearts get torn up.
We’re just a million little god’s causin rain storms
Turnin’ every good thing to rust.

I guess we’ll just have to adjust.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky’s sweaty beneath the collar of his shirt, and even without liquor, his smile is drunk and his eyes glaze with adrenaline. He can’t pinpoint exactly why dancing always does this to him, but it’s a natural high that lends to the overall experience. The ivory keys of the piano are tickled just right, and the floor is alive with people his age who jitter around, laughing and grinning and carefree - and it’s a good night to be young.

Soft hands are held in his. She’s a beautiful little thing; small, blonde, with some of the brightest blue eyes he’s ever seen. They remind him of Steve’s eyes. He’s always had a weakness for blondes, and he hadn’t even needed to ask her if she had wanted to dance. Bucky had worked through three other partners before another song had picked up and she just sort of came to him. He can’t remember if he’d asked her her name but he’s pretty sure it starts with a K. They hold onto each other, kicking their feet and he twirls her every so often as they do the Lindy like a couple of pros. When their hands hold on tight and they spin in circles, arms out straight in front of them, Bucky grins so hard his face hurts. She tosses her head back and laughs; all good spirits and a carefree naivety. Bucky does the same, and he hasn’t even thought of money or food or sickness or even Steve in over an hour.

The song eventually turns slow, romantic, and Little Miss K presses up to him and places a hand on
his shoulder. His own finds its way to her waist while their other hands are held in the air just below shoulder level. She smells sweet amidst the smoky air of the bar. She smiles up at him and he returns it, a charming curl of pouty lips that from experience he knows can make a kitten like her purr. It occurs to him that they haven’t really exchanged any real words with each other yet – they haven’t needed to. But she rests her head on his shoulder and he thinks words aren’t necessary.

They slowly circle on the spot, again and again and again. The crowd on the dance floor dwindles away a bit because a lot of the dancers either need a break or a drink to wet their whistle. (Bucky envies them; wishes he could partake.) It’s a little more intimate this way, and Bucky’s in the middle of wondering if perhaps he’ll be able to talk his way into going back to this little doll’s place with her when he sees him.

He’s standing at the back of the joint, leaning against the wall with crossed arms. He must be in his late thirties; slicked back black hair and dressed to the nines in crisp, clean clothes, and this man definitely owns an ironing board. The only reason Bucky notices him is because of the way he’s staring. He can’t tell the colour of his eyes from where he’s standing, but they’re fixed on him in a way that makes Bucky suddenly feel as though he’s been the object of his stare for more than just this moment. Bucky tries looking away – purposely avoiding eye contact to see if that’ll give this guy a hint – but when the song ends and he glances back, he’s still staring.

He looks like he’s smirking, but it could also pass as a frown.

Bucky doesn’t like it.

He excuses himself politely when the song ends, granting himself a moment by asking Little Miss K if she wants a glass of water. (He hopes that she won’t ask for anything that’s actually worth a pretty penny and he’s relieved when she doesn’t.) He makes sure not to look to the back of the bar as he makes his way to the bartender and orders two glasses of complimentary water.

“Guy like you comes off as liking somethin’ a bit stronger.”

Bucky turns his head quickly, and finds himself staring at the man who’d been watching him, jumping slightly. He regains his composure and tightens his jaw, instantaneously put off. There’s something about the way this guy’s eyes are boring into him with a purpose he hasn’t yet figured out. But he’s standing so close that Bucky can see that his eyes are green.

“Didn’t feel like drinkin’ tonight,” he mutters curtly, looking forward. Trying to cut off this conversation at the source. It doesn’t work.

“If it’s money that’s the issue, I’d be more than happy to spot you for a glass of whiskey.”

And boy, does that sound tempting. Bucky’s mouth waters at the thought. But there’s just something off about this whole thing and he isn’t having it. He keeps his eyes averted. “How do you know money’s the issue?”

“You just told me.”

Bucky shifts, lips pressing into a tight line. The bartender is taking his sweet time, distracted down the line by a couple of pretty girls. Bucky considers hopping over the countertop and just pouring himself the damn water. He can feel green eyes still stuck on him. It’s slightly unnerving and a whole lot of annoying. Eventually he lets out a small huff and glances back, glaring slightly.

“You wanna take a picture? I’m sure it’ll last you longer,” he snaps.

Thin lips turn up in a way that makes Bucky feel uneasy. “That’s actually what I came over here to
talk to you about," the stranger says. “I’d like to offer you a business proposal.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow. “You gonna recruit me to be on Broadway? ‘Cause otherwise, I haven’t really given you a reason to be havin’ this conversation with me, pal.”

He’s met with a grin of perfect pearly whites. “Can’t say I have any connections to Broadway, but I do dabble in the arts. I’m a photographer, actually. I saw you dancing out there, kid. You move real nice; you have a natural talent for it. Have you ever considered modelling?”

Oh, no. Bucky sees his angle now and scowls at him, turning abruptly and clenching his fists, bracing for a fight. “I ain’t no fairy, pal,” he snarls threateningly.

This earns a convincingly surprised laugh from the proposer. Then he leans over and flags down the bartender, who comes right over as if he’s completely forgotten that he stills owes Bucky his drinks. “Two hooches, straight, please.” A dollar bill appears between his index and middle finger as if from nowhere and maybe it’s because he tells the barkeep to keep the change, but the drinks are set down in front of them within seconds. Bucky doesn’t touch his.

“Don’t blow your wig, kid,” the man murmurs charmingly, lifting his glass to his lips and taking a swig. “I’m not what you would call a ‘fairy’ either. Just a business man. I’m merely offering you the chance to pose for a few photos, in exchange for some cash. Cash, by the way, that I get the feeling you need.”

Bucky hates the way his interest suddenly peaks. This punk smells like trouble and Bucky has a good sense for stuff like this. But the first thing he thinks of is the undeniable fact that he does need money; and it’s not that he’s desperate, it’s just that he is. So he tries to keep his tone firm as he narrows his eyes suspiciously and asks, “How much we talkin’?”

“Thirty bucks.”

Bucky’s jaw almost drops. There’s no way this guy’s on the level. That kind of money is practically unheard of in their neighbourhood – not unless you’ve been working yourself down to sweat and blood and been saving up for months.

“You’re lying,” he challenges, but it sounds more like a question.

“Am I?”

“You think I’m an incapable? You’re some sort of grifter. You’re gonna talk me into followin’ you and the second we get into the alley you’ll get me to empty my pockets to make sure I ain’t foolin’ about having no money.”

“That’d be a waste of my time; I can tell you’ve got no money. Why else would you have ordered city juice for your date?”

Bucky grits his teeth and feels his nostrils flaring. He grabs his drink and pounds back the whiskey in two large gulps before slamming the empty glass down on the countertop with a satisfying clunk.

“Go fuck yourself,” he parts with, turning and walking away with a sense of satisfaction at having gotten the last word.

“Fifty bucks.”

Bucky stops. Blinks a few times; can’t believe this guy’s bargaining with him. Can’t believe he’s offering him more money as if it was nothing. He slowly turns and looks back, confusion in his eyes.
The man returns his gaze patiently, but he already knows. And Bucky already knows.

He’s not going to say no.

Because how can he? Now he remembers Steve, and he thinks of the coughing, the asthma, the hunger – the blood, the blood, the blood. Of the rent and the bills and that shitty little blanket Steve keeps using that does about as much good as a thin napkin. He thinks about the heating that will surely be shut off by the end of the week and then he might as well just kiss Steve goodbye because there’s no way that scrappy little punk can withstand that much cold.

He remembers that he will do anything to keep Steve safe.

Something’s not right, and his gut tells him that he needs to continue to walk away, but money is money is money. He isn’t in the position to turn it down. So against his better judgement, he closes the distance between them – hands still tense and ready to make into fists, and movements stiff and guarded – and glances down to the man’s pockets.

“Show me the money first.”

All grins and I gotcha now, boy, the man does. Bucky’s never seen that much money at once in his life. It’s beautiful. He raises an eyebrow again, narrows his eyes skeptically. “And all I gotta do is let you take some pictures of me?”

“That’s all you gotta do. You can even get a copy of the photos later if you want ‘em. Use them for a portfolio or something. You could make a real living off of this I think, kid. You got the looks to be a model.”

It shouldn’t make Bucky feel proud deep down, but it does. He knows he’s good-looking, gets told by the dames all the time. But it’s different hearing it come from an actual adult who seems to know what he’s talking about. It fuels that small part of him, tucked away and the part he never talks about out loud, that’s always craved some sort of approval; confirmation that he can do something with his life. He knows – he’s always known – that Steve’s the one who’s really destined for greatness. He may be small and topple over at the slightest breeze, but he’s got talent up to wazoo and so much potential. Bucky sees it, even if no one else seems to. Bucky knows he’ll never be a Steve Rogers.

But that doesn’t mean he can’t hope for more.

The problem is, this guy’s bought Bucky a drink, and he swears it’s just a business proposal – no funny stuff, and the money’s right there. He’s played all his cards right, and Bucky starts to think that he might be making a huge mistake by not taking the offer. How long would it take him to make this kind of cash otherwise? With bills and food and Steve’s medication, it could be anywhere up to a year – and that’s if it were somewhere decent like back at the docks.

Steve’s going to ask questions soon, when the days keep passing and the bills keep piling up and Bucky has no paycheck to show for his supposed employment. He knows the blond will only grow more determined to earn his keep and that could mean eventually sneaking out, all fevered and hacking and pale as a ghost, and go trying to find himself a job to help Bucky out. He knows how much Steve hates feeling useless.

The first image that floods his mind is of Steve lying unconscious and alone on a sidewalk in the snow somewhere, because he’s just too damn sick and the guy is just too damn stubborn to know when to call it quits.

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll do it.”
And as he follows the man in tow, unsure of where they’re going and a small little knot in the pit of his stomach, he glances over his shoulder at the pretty little blonde. Her eyes are following him and she looks confused and a little appalled. Indignant. She kind of reminds him of Steve. He breaks eye contact and heads back out into the winter’s night, and he realizes her name might’ve actually started with an M.

He’s driven to a hotel in a real nice car that even comes with its own driver. That’s when he knows for certain that this guy’s a real butter and egg man. He wants to ask how he makes so much just by being a photographer, and then he considers that maybe he has another job. He keeps his thoughts and questions to himself.

“You can call me Peter, by the way,” the voice to his side says as they drive.

Bucky glances his way. “Is that your real name?”

“Does it matter?”

Bucky supposes it doesn’t. He just stares and then looks back out his window. After a few more moments, he hears the voice speaking to him again.

“What’s your name?”

“Bucky,” he replies before thinking and fucking sonofabitch, he meant to give him a fake name. There’s a moment of silence, and Bucky’s pretty sure that “Peter” has heard the tone in his voice and put two and two together. Still, he asks--

“Is that your real name?”

Bucky shifts uncomfortably, but otherwise his face is reticent. Anything to hide the fact that his heart is pounding a little bit faster in his chest as he suddenly finds himself on streets he no longer recognizes. “…Does it matter?”

Peter chuckles. “No. It doesn’t.”

The minutes seem to stretch impossibly long, but eventually they get to their destination and Bucky steps out of the vehicle and stares up at the hotel with a childlike look of wonder that he just can’t control. Just for a second. It’s gone the moment Peter walks up behind him and pats his back, laughing and making an offhand comment about how foreign fancier places must seem to a kid like Bucky.

He follows Peter with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders slouched, passing by the receptionist at the front desk. To his surprise, they don’t look at him as if he’s just some poor Brooklyn boy slumming it up. In fact, they seem to be very well acquainted with Peter, and look at Bucky with a sneering sense of recognition. Bucky frowns with confusion as they round the corner and start climbing the stairs. He wonders if perhaps Peter does a lot of his shoots here.

The room isn’t as big as he thought it would be, but there’s a really large bathroom and a Queen-sized bed on one side of the room. The sheets are stark white and the pillows look fluffy. Bucky almost just wants to lie down and take a nap instead, it looks so comfortable. He notices a professional-looking camera and a bunch of rolls of unused film littering the table across from the bed, and he feels himself relax slightly. This is alright. This is alright, and everything’s fine. Just pose a bit, do what needs to be done, get the money, get out. Easy.

“So… What do you want me to do?” he asks, trudging about and looking around the room. He tries
to put as much distance between himself and Peter as he can; he just feels more comfortable that way.

The raven-haired man is pulling out two glasses and a bottle of amber-coloured alcohol out of one of his bags. He smiles at Bucky, this one sans teeth. But he still chuckles. “Relax, kid. I prefer to unwind a bit before getting started. I find most of my clients are way too tense at the start.” He pours the liquor into a glass and then hands it to Bucky. “Here ya go.”

Bucky takes it but eyes it warily. He smells it, guesses it’s brandy. He remembers getting lectured by the Nuns growing up about not taking stuff from strangers, and it makes him want to laugh in a helpless sort of way. It doesn’t stop him from taking a sip. It burns going down, and fills his belly with warmth that spreads up his chest. He hums in appreciation, muttering his thanks.

But it gets better. Because then Peter is asking him if he smokes, and when Bucky says yes, he’s tossed an unopened pack of Luckies. He eyes them and then Peter, silently asking what the catch is and expecting there to be one. But the older man just laughs again and strikes a match to light his own, taking a deep drag and blowing the smoke in the air between them.

“Like I said, I want you to be comfortable.”

That’s really all the excuse Bucky needs. He opens the pack and accepts the matches and damn, that’s good - the smoke filling his lungs and then billowing from between parted lips, smooth and rich. He stands there awkwardly for a few minutes, alternating between nursing his drink and smoking his cigarette nice and slow, savouring it. Until he remembers that he has an entire pack, so he allows himself to have another straight away.

“I fucking love this song!” Bucky slurs, his smile drunk and his eyes glazed, and this time it is because of the liquor. He’s an hour in and six glasses of brandy deep on an empty stomach, and the alcohol has his heart pounding and his chest feeling a little hot and his head light and carefree. He’s halfway done his pack of Lucky Strikes, but don’t worry, kid, I got more for ya.

He’s moving around the room now, making nonsensical conversation with Peter while the latter just sits there and laughs and watches and drinks and chats back with an eye far too keen for Bucky to notice right now. He sways and nods and trips a little, making him laugh a lot easier. He gets hot as he starts kicking his feet and dancing by himself on his side of the room. At Peter’s suggestion, Bucky opens the window to get some cool air in the room.

But Bucky’s still intoxicated and dancing and drinking and smoking, and he starts fanning himself as sweat lines his brow. At Peter’s suggestion, Bucky opens the top button of his shirt. Then another. Then three more. Eventually his bangs are damp, his hair a tad messy, and his shirt is completely open down the middle, exposing a strip of a hard abdomen and a light sprinkling of soft brown hair between pecks.

He forgets Peter’s there for a while as he zones out, getting lost in the music and the brandy that no longer burns going down and the smoothness of the cigarettes. He knows he’s supposed to feel anxious about something but he can’t remember what that is at the moment. He just knows that he wishes Steve was here, because even though he’s a horrible dancer with the dames, Bucky’s been
trying to show him how at home. And though they have no music to dance to, they laugh and curse whenever Steve steps on Bucky’s feet, but then Steve’s actually not that bad when he gets the hang of it and they have a good time doing it for as long as the blond’s lungs can handle the exertion.

The sound of a shutter flickering on and off pulls him from his thoughts. Peter’s now holding up the camera to one eye, index finger pressing down like clockwork and it’s like he’s taking a dozen photos a second – at least, that’s what it sounds like. Bucky sways on the spot, trying to focus, and mumbles, “What are ya doin’?”

Peter doesn’t bother lowering the camera. “Don’t worry, kid, you look great. Just keep doing what you’re doing; you’re a natural. The camera loves you. Just pretend I’m not even here.”

It’s a little strange, but Bucky tries his best. He’s topping up his own glass by this point, and lights up another smoke; goes back over to his side of the room, near the open window. Fred Astaire’s *Nice Work If You Can Get It* starts playing and Bucky points to the radio with an impressed look, and there’s no finesse about him at all now. He opens his mouth to say something and then just shuts it. Laughs at nothing in particular and starts sloppily dancing around again.

And all the while, Peter snaps away; immortalizing Bucky’s form. He watches with a gaze that is hidden by the camera in his hands, and if Bucky were sober and could’ve seen it, he might’ve shoved past him and tried to make a run from the room as fast as his legs could take him. But the twenty-year-old just carries on in his own world, all sense of caution thrown to the cold winds of January. His moves are, unintentionally, more crude now as they grow to lack less and less skill. He rolls his hips and he bites his bottom lip in concentration until it’s a little swollen and a very pretty shade of red. His cheeks are flushed rose - rose that spreads down his neck and dusts along his upper chest - and those blue-grey eyes look like marbles.

The camera keeps snapping away.

Bucky’s wiping at his forehead now. Peter suggests that he remove his shirt entirely, since it’s just getting in the way and Bucky knows it’s a weird request but he also doesn’t think it’s all that bad of an idea. Peter tells him to keep his suspenders on, and *this* is a bit stranger, but he does it anyway.

“You got a real nice body, Bucky. Do you mind if I call you Bucky?”

“Sure,” Bucky slurs, eyes closed and wavering far too slowly now in comparison to the upbeat tempo pouring from the radio. The room starts to feel like it’s spinning, but it’s a feeling he’s always enjoyed; likes the reminder of how drunk he is, how good the liquor tastes. “I mean, tha’s m'name. Actually, m’real name’s Ja…” He hiccups. “James.”

“Now *that’s* a damn good name, kid. I like that much better than Bucky. James is a *man’s* name, and you’re a real *man*, aren’t you?”

Bucky laughs even though he doesn’t get his meaning. Eyes opening, he goes and lights up another cigarette. He’s chain smoking and his throat is starting to feel raspy and raw. He wonders if Peter will be nice enough to give him a fresh pack when he heads home. Otherwise he should really be taking it easy and spacing them out so he has some for the days to come. It still doesn’t stop him from burning right through them.

“So why’re ya still callin’ me ‘kid’?”

Peter makes an uncomfortable humming sound in his throat, as if Bucky’s just about the tastiest-looking thing he’s ever seen. But he keeps on snapping pictures, if only a bit slower now. He finally rises from his seat and takes a few steps towards Bucky.
“Does it bother you?”

Bucky’s head tips to the side just as a cloud of white smoke pours from between finely parted lips, and he can swear he hears Peter groan. He really does look magnificent, uninhibited. Debauched. Vulnerable.

Bucky doesn’t understand why it should obviously be a problem. “M’m’no… ‘Kid’s’ fine I guess.”

“Hmm. Alright, looks like I’m out of film in this roll. I’ll just need a minute to reload.”

Peter turns to the table and carefully switches rolls without compromising the first one. Bucky’s staggering too much now and starts to lose his balance. He stumbles forward and leans one hand on the bed, trying to keep upright. The older man notices and soothingly says that Bucky can take a minute to lie down if he wants. Bucky thinks it’s a good idea.

He lowers himself onto the bed slowly, lying down on his back and resting his head on the pillow. It’s as soft as it looks; Bucky sighs with content and closes his eyes again. The spinning’s escalated faster and he’s worried he’ll start to feel sick. He groans ever so softly, draping one arm over his eyes and bringing the cigarette to his lips lazily every so often until it’s burned down to the filter.

“How do you feel, kid? Aces?” he hears the photographer ask in a low voice, somewhere near the foot of the bed, off to his left.

Bucky pushes out a breath of air with a hum; eyes still covered by his arm and the rest of his body relatively limp. “M’okay… Pretty drunk… But relaxed I guess…” The words seem to take forever to come to completion, Bucky’s tone thickly laced with the effects of the brandy.

“You feel good?” he asks again.

“Mhm…”

“You look nice where you are; you can stay there. I just need you to adjust your pose a bit.”

The voice is closer now – the other side of the bed, but the side furthest from Bucky. A single flicker of the shutter goes off. Bucky doesn’t bother opening his eyes.

“Can you hear me, kid? You can keep your arm up like that but it’d look better behind your head. And if you’re done with your other hand, can you rest it on your leg?”

Grey-blue eyes still closed, Bucky exhales through his nose and makes a small noise in his throat as he forces himself to listen. With heavy, sloppy movements, he repositions his arm so his head is resting on it, and he places his hand just above his knee – not sure where exactly to put it.

“No, not like that; like this.”

Peter closes long, thin fingers around Bucky’s wrist and pushes his hand up so it’s holding onto his inner thigh in a suggestive way. He can feel his thumb practically brushing the crotch of his slacks. Bucky’s eyes fly open and he looks at Peter with confusion, dark brows knitting together.

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay,” the black-haired man shushes, immediately drawing back his hand. He straightens up and brings the camera to his chest, keeping it there while his eyes are glued to Bucky. “You look like you’re about to throw up. This can help take your mind off of it. You want to make the spinning go away, doncha?”

Rationality states that this reasoning isn’t reasoning at all – but the brandy assures Bucky that this
makes sense. Somehow. Still, he’s uncomfortable. He knows this is wrong. He doesn’t want to do…
that to himself, in front of this guy. Or any guy.

“I told you… M’notta…”

Peter laughs, bringing the camera back up over one eye and aiming it at Bucky with anticipation.
“Never said you were. Stop worrying about what everyone thinks about you. Give yourself
permission to just be free. Moments like these make for the best photography, and if it makes you
feel any better, I won’t put these ones in my portfolio.”

Bucky’s drunk, but not drunk enough that he can’t see the flaw in that argument.

“Then why take ‘em at all…?”

Peter pauses and then hardens again, the epitome of control as he changes his tactics.

“Tell you what: I’ll pay you a full seventy-five bucks if you touch yourself, just a little bit.”

And that shuts down all proper thought in Bucky’s mind because holy cow, seventy-five smackers?
That would take care of all his and Steve’s expenses for months, not to mention stock the food in
their cupboards and rid them of any worry that the blond’s medication wouldn’t be able to be refilled.
Bucky could take Steve out dancing – treat him to a night out – and they could meet a couple of
pretty girls… Bucky would make sure to find one who was real sweet; a good, all-American girl,
who wouldn’t mind that Steve was on the shorter side or thin as a post. He’d tell her all the
wonderful qualities about his best friend, and this one would be the one who’d finally see it. Steve
would thank him later as they sat in that cozy-looking diner near their apartment that they always
passed but could never afford. Steve could order whatever he wanted, and Bucky would watch blue
eyes light up as that sweet little punk stuffed his gob with a hamburger and fries, and had his first
strawberry milkshake in about five years.

He bites his lip and looks away, out the window at the night’s sky, as his hand starts shaking and
slides up his slacks to try fumbling with the button. His fingers are too clumsy. Peter tells him he can
use his other hand – he doesn’t have to keep it where it is – and Bucky feels the sudden urge to snap
at him to just stop talking. He can handle it all on his own. He doesn’t need to be reminded that
Peter’s in the room, let alone watching him like a hawk.

It’s easier with his other hand. He tries to shut out everything in the room as he pulls down his zipper
and slips his right hand beneath the waistline of his underwear. It’s a tight squeeze and he’s not even
sure he’ll be able to get it up. But Peter didn’t say anything about needing to, or even needing to
finish. Just… touch himself for a little bit. Then he can stop, and he’ll say he’s ready to go back
home, and he’ll be seventy-five dollars richer. That has to make it worth it.

Fingers awkwardly touch his limp cock. He barely has room to move his hand, so he chooses instead
to palm himself and rub his hand up and down. He keeps his focus on the night sky beyond the
window. He tries to keep his breathing even, even when it starts to feel good. The camera clicks
away to his side, and Peter’s murmuring encouragement, and Bucky just tries his best to ignore it.
Except the whole thing makes him feel so exposed, and he knows – he knows he shouldn’t be doing
this. He’s playing with fire, much like he’s playing with himself.

Peter will not stop. He says things like, “Yes” and “Does that feel good?” and “You look so good;
the camera absolutely loves you” and “Mmm that’s good” and all variations of the word ‘good’ and
Bucky just wants to scream at him to shut the fuck up. So he tries to escape the only way he can
think to; he moves his hand a little harder to distract himself with the odd little lick of pleasure, and
he tries to picture a pretty little broad to make the whole thing easier.
The image becomes more vivid as he starts to grow hard. His breathing hitches in his chest and then becomes quicker, shorter, through his nostrils. Eventually, lips part because he just can’t help it, and then the breaths become a bit more audible. He can hear the camera capturing photos much quickly now, and it doesn’t even matter that Bucky’s face is purposely directed away from the shooter.

He pictures the girl he was dancing with, on her knees in a dark alleyway while he stands, back against the brick wall. She doesn’t complain about scraping up her kneecaps as she shoves her mouth back and forth over his dick. He thinks in detail about how warm and wet and perfect her mouth would feel as it took his length until his tip collided with the back of her throat. When he imagines the way she’d look as she hollows out her cheeks, the limited friction just isn’t enough anymore.

He ignores the fact that he’s got an audience as he lifts his hips up enough to pull his slacks down and free his erection. He wraps his hand around the girth and wastes no time stroking from base to tip and back again, establishing a quick and focused rhythm. He thinks he hears Peter whispering things he’d rather not listen to, so he goes back to thinking about the girl on her knees.

She looks a little less like the dame he danced with, but he chalks that up to the alcohol and a falter in his memory. She’s still blonde and still looks up at him with those stunning blue eyes, but her eyelashes are much darker than he remembers them being. Her nose is a bit more defined, and she’s so good at swallowing his cock that he doesn’t pay much attention to the fact that she’s sickly thin, with collar bones way too prominent. But they’re still delicate-looking, and he wants to touch her. She looks soft. She reminds him of someone but he’s too preoccupied to give it much thought.

He bites his lip to keep from groaning; his hips now rolling up to fuck himself into his hand. He forgets why he was keeping his face pointed to the window, and his head starts turning from side to side. Breathing picks up, and that mouth in his mind bobs fast and eager, and a soft, wet tongue glides along his skin; circles the head, flicks the slit. He can’t really control it at this point, his body that can’t lie still – back arching and head shaking and legs bending and elongating uselessly. His lower belly begins to clench and he can feel the veins in his dick against his palm when he gets hard to the point of no return.

She looks up at him and he never knew that anyone could manage to smirk with their mouth that full. Eyes gleaming, all stubborn and determined, and fuck, why do I feel like I know that smirk? And then Bucky tumbles off the ledge with a soft groan, streams of white shooting over his abdomen and the sheets messily. Blood and liquor and the pounding in his own temples feel like they flood his ears. And it’s a good thing he can’t hear the string of soft profanities Peter groans out as his camera captures the breathtaking look on Bucky Barnes’s face as that pretty little kid comes.

He lies there for several long moments, his head still spinning and his lungs working to regain their air. Gradually, he softens in his fingers again and the sticky, unpleasant sensation of cooling come on his skin brings Bucky back to reality. He opens his eyes and looks to the ceiling and thinks, God… What have I done?

Some tissues are placed down next to him as the brunet pulls his pants back up quickly. Bucky can’t look at Peter when he grabs them and hurriedly cleans himself off. The older man tells him that he’s such a good model and a whole lot of other stuff that makes Bucky feel disgusting and cheap. Cheap, in a ‘three-quarters to a hundred dollar whore’ kind of way. He wants to jump across the bed and tackle this inverted pervert to the ground and make him eat his fist until he chokes on his own blood. At the very least, Bucky would normally have a quick-witted, colourful quip to shoot his way.

Bucky doesn’t know where that Brooklyn boy went. He does none of those things; instead, he scrambles off the bed onto shaky legs and finds his shirt. He doesn’t think he’s ever redressed so quickly. Peter just watches with a grin of pearly whites.
When Peter approaches Bucky, slowly, almost stalking, Bucky stands ramrod still and just looks ahead with a hard but empty look in his eyes. He feels like he stops breathing. The photographer places Bucky’s near empty pack of Luckies into Bucky’s pants pocket and then pats it gently, like a parent would to their child. He says something about maybe doing it again sometime. He tries to touch Bucky’s cheek, and instincts kick in. Bucky shoves him away, his eyes now fierce. Peter just laughs – calls Bucky fickle – and then holds out his payment. Bucky’s honestly surprised; he had grown convinced that he wouldn’t actually get the money after all.

Before the older man – photographer, orchestrator, businessman, boss, negotiator – can make anymore snide comments, touch, look, or just say anything at all, Bucky strides past him, making sure his shoulder knocks roughly into his. Peter doesn’t stop him as he storms out of the room, leaving the door wide open behind him.

He takes the stairs three at a time.

He doesn’t recognize that part of town, and he winds up walking around in the chilly winter’s night, alone and down the middle of the street, for almost two hours. He’s not presently aware of any of it. If a few tears fall, he wipes them away before anyone can notice, even though there’s no one there to notice at all.

He feels like an idiot. He’s disgusted with himself for having thought for a moment that this guy saw real potential in him. He’s even more sickened by the fact that he fell for it… for what he did. With a dejected heart, he tells himself that he’s destined for nothing more than a blue-collared life, with a blue-collared income, and a blue-collared legacy that no one will ever remember. And it’s high time, he spits at himself, that he accepts that.

He flinches whenever strangers pass by, his hand in his pocket clenching tighter around the small wad of bills. It’s dirty money, but money is money is money, and he remembers hearing someone once refer to these times as the “Dirty Thirties” so he supposes he’s just doing his part. At least now he can put it towards some good causes.

It’s nearly four-thirty in the morning when Bucky finally steps into the dark, freezing apartment. He huffs, wonders why the hell they pay at all for heating when it never seems to do shit. He’s sobered up over the course of the walk home. He takes off his shoes and then goes into the kitchen to put his key on the table. On it, there’s a note scribbled in his best friend’s handwriting.

“How you had a great night, Buck. Left you the last slice of bread. –Steve”

Bucky rolls his eyes, but he can’t bring himself to throw out the note. Only Steve would feel the need to clarify that he wrote it, even though there’s only two of them living here. It’s laughable, but at the same time, it’s sweet. Bucky realizes he could use ‘sweet’ right now. He glances at the lone slice of bread (dotted with mold, but he and Steve just pluck those bits off), but he isn’t hungry. He knows he’ll pay for that in the morning.

He just doesn’t care.

He tip toes into the small bedroom, making sure to create as little noise as possible. Quickly, he pulls out a shirt of his he knows Steve would never mistaken for his own and folds the money inside of it before putting it back in the dresser. Stripping off his clothing, Bucky walks over to his side of the cots and slides in next to Steve, under the covers.

The smaller boy is shivering in his sleep, but his breathing is even. He’s cold, but unfortunately Bucky’s colder. Steve jerks with a sharp inhale through his nose and then grumbles. “Are your feet
made of ice?” he demands only semi-consciously.

“Shut up, punk,” Bucky replies, purposely shoving them against Steve’s as he wraps an arm around him and huddles against a bony back. Steve’s hair smells musty. It’s comforting somehow.

Steve complains and tries to wriggle away but they both know it’s a losing battle. Bucky makes sure to pull his feet back after a few seconds though; because the worry is still there that he could wind up doing Steve more harm than good.

“You’re such a jerk,” the blond mutters.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get warmer in a second. Go back to sleep.”

There’s silence for a few minutes, and Bucky thinks Steve’s dozed back off. He stares ahead at the wall on the other side of the room. But then--

“Did you have a good time?”

“Hmm? Yeah, it was fine.”

Another pause.

“Meet anyone special?”

Bucky closes his eyes, frowning, and he’s glad Steve can’t see it. He clears his throat and tries to keep his voice cool, calm, and collected. “You know me, Steve-O. Plenty of dolls for the picking; just had to find the right one.”

Steve snorts, and the older boy can practically hear his eyes rolling. “Oh yeah? Did you happen to catch her name this time?”

“I think it started with an M.”

“You’re such a putz.”

“Asshole.”

“Dick.”

“Twit.”

“Hooligan.”

They go on like that for a while, progressively coming up with clever responses to try and outdo the other; laughing at the immaturity of some of the names they come up with, like they did when they were children. Even with the blond’s back to Bucky, the latter can still picture clear as day the smug little smirk on Steve’s face throughout the entire exchange. It’s one of his favourite things in the world. He wonders if maybe his purpose in life is to make sure this little guy in front of him survives his adult years long enough to make a difference in the world. He thinks he wouldn’t mind that at all.

Eventually, Steve does fall back asleep. Bucky can hear that high-pitched little whistling sound in his lungs as he breaths, but his body is warmer now and he’s no longer shivering in his arms. He lasts until dawn, and then Bucky just can’t keep his eyes open any longer. He repeats to himself that it’ll be okay; it’ll all be okay. Today is a new day and Bucky’s going to make things better for them, just like he always promises he’ll do.
It’ll be okay; it’ll all be okay...

Chapter End Notes

(It's not.)

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Some 1930s lingo and terminology is used in this story. Here’s a translation of some of that found in this chapter:
- Fairy/Invert: homosexual
- Hooches: whiskey
- Dame, Kitten, Broad, Doll: pretty girl/woman
- Butter and eggs man: the money man (a man who’s well off financially)
- Incapable: handicapped individual
- Blow your wig: to get overly excitable/riled up
- City juice: glass of water
- Grifter: Con man
- Aces: Great

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Thank you so much to those who’ve taken the time to read this story, leaves kudos and comments, and bookmark it. I love you all <3

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
Chapter Summary

The day after. Steve is dangerously sick, and feels ensue.

Also, a look back at the moment the two boys first met.

(All aboard the Feels Train - choo, choo!)

Chapter Notes

I've finally accepted the fact that this story will be longer than 4 chapters. Peter and all the intense suspense will be back in the NEXT chapter. For now, have some Bucky and Steve feels.

---

It's amazing how you
Can speak right to my heart.
Without saying a word,
You can light up the dark.
Try as I may, I could never explain
What I hear when you don't say a thing.
The smile on your face
Lets me know that you need me.
There's a truth in your eyes
Saying you'll never leave me.
The touch of your hand says you'll catch me whenever I fall;
You say it best when you say nothing at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July 3rd, 1925

You’re never too young to fall in love.

James Buchanan Barnes is only eight years old when he first experiences it. He’s sitting on the front steps of the orphanage with a thin stick in his small hand. Cross-legged, he rests his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand as he drags the tip of the stick around on the concrete. He’s short for his age – several years shy of growing into his height – but he’s what the old ladies down at the Church call “adorably tousled”; shaggy brown hair that’s dangerously close to getting in his eyes and could really benefit from a cut. He kind of likes it that way – the Nuns cut all the children’s hair and they always snip it way too short for his liking. Big, grey-blue eyes are framed with long black lashes, and a soft sprinkling of summer freckles dust his button nose. He’s recently lost his top right tooth, and it’s become a habit of his to poke the tip of his tongue through it and play around when he can’t sit still.
The other kids want to be friends with him but they’ve long since given up trying. After all, he’s been there for almost two months and the only people he’ll talk to are the Nuns – and even that only seems to happen when it absolutely has to.

It isn’t like James to be so antisocial. He wants to be liked – he’s just sad. He’s young and pure and can only understand so much. For example, he understands that his parents died and he understands that he should be completely broken by that. And he is. Sorta. He’s definitely sad, but people kept treating him as if he should fall apart at any second and there was a numbness in his chest that always seemed to stop him from getting to that point.

Maybe it’s because he knew he was now the man of the family. He had to be strong for Rebecca. He’d (falsely) assumed that they would be some sort of packaged deal when they were packed up and shipped to the orphanage. To a child, it seems impossible to think that any adult with a heart would separate a big brother from his baby sister. But sure enough, they’d only been there for a week before a nice-looking couple showed up and spent an awful lot of time holding Becca and smiling. James had stood by, hair tidied and clothes as clean as possible (as he always looked on the days when families would come “shopping”), and he’d held his hands folded in front of him, standing patiently a few feet away and waiting for them to acknowledge him, too.

They didn’t. They hadn’t even known that Rebecca had a sibling.

Because that’s just the way it is; babies and toddlers get snatched up quick and easy. There’s hardly any layover time for them. The cuter and smaller and more innocent you are, the better your chances. Rebecca was beautiful and pure.

James is scrappy, and even at eight is considered to be past his prime.

After she’d left, James had closed off.

And this day, like every other day, is pretty much the same. He watches the kids having fun and wishes he could join but he thinks he’s forgotten how to make the first move; break the ice. They’ve stopped trying with him, understandably. The hot sun of summer beats down on his head, and he’s grateful for the beaten up wool cap he’s wearing. It’d been his father’s, and it’s his favourite possession. (He doesn’t have many to begin with.)

A small commotion grabs his attention, making him tilt his head up from the ground.

“Gimme your book, kid. C’mon. I just wanna take a look! C’mon! Give it to me; whatcha always drawin’ in there, huh?”

Most of the kids glance in the direction of the small huddle that’s now forming, but they turn away with discomfort in their eyes. James perks as the goading turns to insults and mockery; grows louder in volume. At first, he looks around and wonders where the Nun on yard duty is but he can’t seem to see her. He sees a small circle of boys a little older than him, backs to him, and the others are encouraging their leader now. They shout taunts and laugh loudly.

He can’t see the object of their bullying; only a flurry of blond hair from behind skinny boys. The leader – he recognizes him as an annoying jerk named Hank something-or-other – shoves his victim roughly, and James doesn’t have to be able to see that the smaller kid plows into the ground. He can actually hear the thud. His hand tenses around the small stick.

Whoever this kid is, he isn’t saying anything. But he must’ve stood back up, because Hank winds up his fist and sends it flying forward. That smaller body spins and falls face-first back onto the ground. The second the assault makes contact, James stands alert; eyes wide and fierce. He drops the stick;
feels frozen there for a moment, almost relieved at the idea that this kid is finally out cold so the onslaught can stop.

But he isn’t. Whoever this kid is, he must be the dumbest person on the planet, because he gets back up again, only to be pummeled down a second time. James can’t believe what he’s seeing. No matter how many times Hank’s heavy fist collides with this kid’s face, and no matter how many times the smaller body slams back down to the ground, the latter just keeps getting back up. James wants to shout for the kid to just stop moving – stay down, dummy, are you crazy!? You’ve got nothing to prove; quit making it worse!

This kid’s courageous and stubborn and has absolutely no sense of self-preservation - and maybe it’s that hole in James’s chest that longs to be the protector again, or maybe it’s a sense of respect that whoever this person is, they’re taking the beating without backing down. Either way, James isn’t having it anymore. He catches a glimpse of the blond finally swinging a fist, and it’s possibly the most pitiful display James has ever seen. Hank just backs out of it and cocks his fist back to deliver another punch.

The brunet doesn’t let it happen. He’s running now at full speed and tackles Hank to the ground, sending the bully flying off to the victim’s side. His hat falls off in the process. Hank’s friends scatter back in shock and pivot on their heels as if they don’t know whether to jump in and pull the two off each other, or make a run for it before Sister Abigail sees them.

Hank puts up a good struggle and the two roll around for a few seconds. James is shorter, but still not by that much, and he uses his momentum to get the leg up. He straddles Hank and anchors his knee to the ground before letting his fists fly, wailing on the older boy with clumsy but successful attacks. The latter manages to throw his arms up and shield his face, but James doesn’t stop punching.

“Say ‘Uncle’, you dirty thug!” he shouts.

Hank does. It’s indignant and comes out more like a snarl - but he does. James moves off of him and Hank makes a run for it, cursing the two boys with language that would get his mouth thoroughly washed with soap if the Nuns had heard it. His nose is bleeding and his lip’s split, and James knows he’ll get his knuckles wrapped for that once the Nuns see Hank’s injuries.

“Dry up!” James yells back, watching him flee. Sighing, he gets to his feet and brushes off his pants before turning to the boy – the entire reason this whole thing happened – and holds out his hand to help him up.

Surprisingly, the boy doesn’t take it. His face is a mess and his hair is ashen with dirt, and James can finally see just how tiny this kid really is. He’s younger, and even though James is short for his age, this kid’s head looks like it’d only come up to his shoulder. He’s thin – way too thin, why is he so thin? – and has an inhaler on a string around his neck. He looks to be about the most helpless thing James has ever seen.

But the look he gives him. It shocks the heck out of James, because it’s so fierce and almost angry.

“I had ‘im on the ropes!” he argues in a little voice, still splayed on his butt and wiping at his bloody mouth.

James keeps his hand extended. “I’m sure you did.”

The kid takes his response to be condescending. He looks at the gesture and then glares upwards.

“I don’t need your help.”
James retracts his hand and finds himself scowling. “Says you! Because I’m pretty sure you just did.”

“I coulda taken ‘em.”

“Baloney! You got a death wish? They were pummelin’ ya!”

“I said I di’nt need your help!”

James huffs, hands clenching into fists again. “Fine! Then you’re on your own! See what I care!”

He spins on his heel and begins to storm off. He’s only a few feet away when something inside of him inclines him to look back. Perhaps if he hadn’t, things would’ve turned out a whole lot differently.

The golden-haired boy is balancing on skinned knees; face completely etched with frustration and dejection. James suspects that this isn’t the first time he’s had a brush with these bullies – or other ones. It reads all over him. His book – what Hank had been trying to take – is sprawled out face-down on the ground and a bunch of its pages have ripped out and litters the space around the small form. The kid is trying to gather them up as quickly as he can.

James sighs and goes back. He’s confused when the boy visibly flinches the moment the brunet kneels down in front of him. James is already helping him pick up the pages when the small voice speaks again: “You gonna try and mug me, too?”

And it all makes sense now, why he’d been so hostile towards James. He’d thought it’d been a trap. The older boy frowns and hands him the papers he’s collected. “Was just tryin’ to help. I don’t like bullies, and that wasn’t a fair fight anyway. Four against one? That’s a chump’s way to fight.”

Blue eyes meet his and the small boy nods in agreement, otherwise saying nothing. James catches a glimpse at one of the drawings and points at it. “Hey, you do that? That’s pretty good! You’re like a young Biggazo.”

This earns him a small snort, to which he doesn’t understand its meaning. The boy stuffs the papers back into his sketchpad and then shoves it into the pack sitting far too large on his back. “Picasso,” he corrects, standing up onto wobbly legs (with pants way too baggy but somehow coming up way too short on his stickly limbs, as if he’d grown out of them years ago). He picks up James’s hat in the process and holds it out to him. “But thanks. This yours?”

“Yeh, thanks.”

He fixes it back on his head and they stare at each other for a bit, neither knowing what to say. Eventually, the brunet holds out his hand between them again; the other, stuffed in his pocket. “The name’s James.”

“That rhymed.”

James smiles; the other boy gives the tiniest one back. “Yeah, guess it did. James Buchanan Barnes,” he clarifies.

The blond takes his hand this time and shakes it. “Steven Grant Rogers,” he replies, since they’re being formal.

“Nice to meet you, Steven.”

“You can just call me Steve.”
“Okay, Steve it is.”

“You go by Jimmy, or do you like James?”

“Naw, never had a nickname. People seem to like James fine.”

Steve is silent for a few moments and then shrugs. “I can give you a nickname if ya want.”

For absolutely no reason, this sounds like a nice idea. James shrugs back. “If ya want.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Steve rolls his eyes. “You’re such a jerk.” At first, James is hurt by that and looks about ready to defend his honour when the blond gives him a tiny, jesting smirk. The older boy relaxes. “Hmm,” Steve muses, looking off in thought. “I know a few Jimmys, and they’re all mean. I could call you Barnes?”

James shakes his head. “Not that. My pa used to be called that all the time, and he died.”

Steve gives him an apologetic look. “Sorry. My dad’s dead, too.”

That makes James feel a little bit better; likes the fact that they have this in common. Steve continues to think. Then he makes a face, scrunching up his nose slightly, like he’s testing out an idea in his head.

“Well, how ‘bout your middle name? Buchanan’s too long… Bucky? What about Bucky?”

James’s brows knit together in response and he plays with the name, repeating it back aloud. He shrugs yet again, but he’s smiling coolly. “I can like ‘Bucky’. Bucky’s good.”

Steve just looks at him and then nods, abruptly turning and starting to walk away. “Okay, Bucky, well, it was nice to meet ya. Thanks for the, you know.” The small body pauses, as if debating saying or doing something else, and then thinks better of it. He sways awkwardly and then turns, heading back down the sidewalk.

James’s - Bucky’s - running after him. “Well hang on!” He catches up and slows his pace to stride alongside Steve. “You live around here? I can walk ya home.”

Steve regards him with surprise. “Won’tcha get in trouble for leavin’?”

The brunet considers this. “Yeah, prob’ly. So? Sure as shoot can’t let ya get jumped again, now can I?”

Blue eyes narrow at him and Steve goes to insist yet again that he’s more than capable of taking care of himself. Bucky raises his hands and interrupts, “Yeah, yeah, I know. You can handle yourself, m’not saying you can’t.”

(That’s exactly what he’s saying.)

The shorter boy knows it too but chooses to ignore it. They start making idle conversation, which leads to excitable chatter and laughter - and Bucky thinks Steve has a real nice laugh. Like music, only more tentative. The walk isn’t that long, but Bucky learns a few things. First, Steve’s a real firecracker. It’s quite extraordinary how such a resilient, gutsy person could exist within that mousy frame. Steve looks like he could just about be wiped out by a breeze and yet his personality is vibrant
and roaring, like the sun. He doesn’t need to say much – everything he *does* say has meaning.

Bucky also learns how his father died; that his mother takes care of him on her own, and when Steve says that “sometimes she has trouble makin’ ends meets for the two of us”, Bucky knows that what he’s really saying is that they’re poor. He could’ve guessed; Steve’s clothing makes a whole lot more sense now. Poverty isn’t exactly unheard of; in fact it’s the norm. Everyone Bucky knows is poor.

He could’ve guessed that Steve was an artist, but the blond implies that he’d like to be a professional drawer some day, and Bucky thinks that’s just a great idea. When Steve then asks him what *he* wants to be when he grows up, Bucky doesn’t have an answer. He thinks about it for a while.

“I wanna be a Big Six… real ritzy life, never havin’ to worry about money,” he finally answers. Steve frowns.

“Life ain’t about money. I mean, whaddaya wanna *do*?”

“I dunno…”

“Well, whatcha like?”

“…I like… Hmm… Books. I like to read. Maybe a writer. I like pretending I’m a soldier like my dad was. Maybe I’ll join the army one day.”

Steve glances at him competitively. “Well if *you* join one day, *I’ll* join, too.”

Bucky grins. “We’ll defend good ole’ America and nuthin will stand in our way!” He holds up his hands like they’re guns and makes firing sounds.

Steve cracks a small smile.

“We’ll be unstoppable! Barnes and Rogers; we’ll kill *every* enemy in our way!” Bucky continues. Steve’s smile drops.

“I don’t wanna kill anyone.”

Bucky drops his hands, staring at the blond, who’s now looking ahead with a solemn expression. Awkwardly, the brunet shoves his hands in his pockets. “Yeah well, you know what I mean,” he mumbles. Then he nudges Steve with his arm. “Don’t be such a wet blanket, I was just kiddin’ ya.”

Steve relaxes a bit and they finally get to his house. It’s small and run down, and the grass on the lawn is yellow or dead. Both boys find themselves wishing that they didn’t have to part so soon, but there’s a silent mutual agreement that Bucky needs to head back to the orphanage as quick as possible. Still, they pause before the front steps and Bucky kicks at an invisible pebble, trying to think of something to prolong the conversation.

“You got any plans for tomorrow?” he finally asks lamely. It’s the Fourth, and this year, the Nuns said something about trying to bring the kids to see some fireworks. Bucky’s been looking forward to it for weeks, but now he finds himself suddenly wishing Steve could join them.

The tips of Steve’s ears go red as he makes an uncomfortable face and fidgets with the strap of his backpack. “S’my birthday tomorrow,” he shrugs, as if he were telling the older boy what he was planning to eat for dinner.

“Really?” Bucky exclaims, grinning. “Happy early birthday, then! Your birthday’s on the Fourth – lucky you! Your parties must be real fun!”
Blue eyes look away and Steve looks like he’s trying to push down some heavy emotion welling up in his chest. Eventually, he looks back, and his eyes are so distant and old – way too old for his age. “Not havin’ a party,” he replies. “S’okay, though. Gonna spend the day with my ma.”

Bucky’s heart sinks. Not having a party? Who doesn’t have a party on their birthday? He wonders with a sharp, painful twist of the gut if Steve even has friends. He can’t for the life of him understand it – yeah, the kid is tiny and could definitely crack a smile more often, but Bucky really likes him. He’s funny, talented, and he’s sure that if he opened up Steve’s chest and took a good look at his heart, it’d be three sizes bigger than average. Some people naturally exude goodness; Steve Rogers is one of those people.

He doesn’t know what to say to make Steve feel better, and he doubts that the blond would even want to be coddled. So instead, he invites him to come see the fireworks with him. Steve gives a small smile and says he’ll ask his mother, but he’d like that. Then, Bucky’s pulling his father’s hat off his head – because he noticed Steve eyeing it periodically as they’d walked – and plopping it onto the messy head of gold. Steve makes a surprised sound; the wool cap is way too large for that tiny head, and the lid falls right over his eyes to his nose. Bucky laughs at the sight, and he’s happy when it evokes a similar, tiny peel of laughter from Steve.

“But this is yours,” Steve finally says, tilting the hat up and looking at Bucky, who shrugs.

“And now it’s yours,” he replies coolly. He punches the blond lightly on the shoulder. “Happy birthday, pal.”

Steve opens his mouth to thank him when they both turn to the sound of the front door opening. A woman in her early thirties – blond and thin and so beautiful, Bucky thinks – comes rushing out of the house and swarms her son, pulling him into a hug (much to Steve’s embarrassment). She sees his injuries and starts fussing all over; trying to turn him to check his backside, cupping his face and turning it from side to side, even as Steve groans and whines, “Aw maaaaaa, I’m fine, quit it!”

She finally notices that there’s a third party present, and casts a wary eye onto Bucky. He can literally see her pull Steve tighter against her as she waits for an explanation.

“No, ma, he didn’t do this, he –”

“James Barnes, ma’am,” Bucky beams, giving her his most adorable smile. He holds out a small hand, to which Mrs. Rogers regards and then shakes with a funny, almost amused look in her eyes. He grins at Steve. “Some bullies were roughin’ him up a bit, ma’am, so I thought I’d walk him home.”

Her face completely changes; becomes soft, and she’s smiling so big, and Bucky thinks she looks like an angel. He sees a lot of resemblances between her and Steve. She squeezes Bucky’s hand and gives him an appreciative smile. “That was very sweet of you to do for my son, James,” she says, and even her voice is as beautiful as her face.

Bucky feels proud. He looks back at Steve as he says, “What’re friends for?”

And Bucky looks away, so he can’t see it… The way Steve’s eyes look so lost and unprepared, for someone to call him their friend. His breath catches in his chest for a moment and he just watches Bucky with a sense of wonder. By the time Bucky looks back, Steve’s fidgeting with his new hat, which he shows off to his mother proudly.

Bucky does get his knuckles wrapped. Hard. The Nuns scold him but Bucky doesn’t listen, doesn’t
care. Because tomorrow is Steve’s birthday, and his mother agreed that they could go see the fireworks together.

There’s something of a routine established between them. Firstly, for as much as they can help it, they are never one without the other. If neither is in school, they’re together. Bucky opens back up at the orphanage and makes more friends – he’s a popular kid with a larger-than-life personality, what can he say? – but the second Steve’s around, that’s where all his attention goes. He tries to introduce him to some of the other kids but they all find him weird – too shy. Bucky just shrugs it off and hangs out with those children less.

They play all the time and they bicker just as much. Steve gets annoyed when Bucky uses his age to dominate their games; calls Bucky bossy. Bucky stomps his foot and gets frustrated when Steve is always so solemn and sensical about everything when they’re just supposed to be having fun. Bucky tells Steve he needs to smile more; Steve helps teach Bucky to better his manners.

They may fight, but the kids around the orphanage learn right quick that no one is to hurt Steve. Bucky’s knuckles are scarred now from scuffles to prove it. Steve always tries – man, he tries so hard – to stand up for himself, but in the end, the fight can only end once Bucky intervenes.

“If you stopped opening up your yap, you’d stop getting punched so much,” the brunet repeats for the hundredth time as he’s washing off blood from his hands, wincing at the sting.

*Steve sits on the counter next to him, letting Sister Margaret clean his torn knees. “No one asked you to fight for me.”*

*Bucky rolls his eyes, shaking his head. “Punk.”*

“Jerk.”

*The Nuns scold them for their use of language, make sure they’re all patched up, and send them back outside to play.*

After Sarah Rogers finds out that Bucky is an orphan, she tells him that he can come visit their home whenever he wants. When they can afford to have extra food, she always feeds him hot meals. If he doesn’t bow his head and thread his fingers in prayer before taking his first bite, she clears her throat and eyes him impatiently until he remembers to do it, with that look that only a mother can give. It’s something Bucky’s missed; makes him feel like a son again.

And she does indeed treat him like a son. He has to help Steve clean up sometimes, and when he starts spending the night there every once in a while, she makes sure he brushes his teeth and washes behind his ears before bed. They shove as many pillows as they can onto the floor and lie there well into the hours of the night, laughing and whispering and horsing around. They pretend to be asleep every time Sarah grows suspicious and checks in on them, and they reluctantly chant, “Okay, sorry,” when she does catch them red-handed, long past their bedtime.

And Steve. Bucky sure does adore Steve. They adore each other. Sarah’s heart warms every time she walks into her son’s room to wake them up and finds them cuddled up to each other in an otherwise embarrassing sleep – both boys with mouths wide open and drooling all over the pillows. She’s thankful that Steve has Bucky to take care of him when she cannot, and she believes with all her heart that Bucky is just as thankful for what her son provides for him.

Bucky wishes he could live with them all the time. But he knows it’s just not in the cards. So he’s happy with whatever time there he can get. He likes being around Steve. He learns his body
language and develops a deep appreciation for it; for the way Steve gets that indignant little look in his eyes when he feels Bucky’s babying him too much, or that smug little smirk he sprouts when he knows he’s right about something. The way the tip of his tongue pokes out of the corner of his mouth when he’s immersed in a drawing, or how his eyes light up when he’s excited.

He also learns about the parts of Steve that scare him. Like just how sick he really is. The story’s been rewritten and edited a few times over the years, but the truth of the matter is, the first time Bucky witnesses Steve have an asthma attack, he cries. He thinks Steve is dying, as the smaller frame clutches his chest and gasps loud enough to frighten Bucky. Blue eyes are wide with fear, and his little face is so red, and nothing Bucky says seems to help. Steve’s frantically throwing his hands about, looking for his inhaler, and Bucky panics because the last time he saw it was before they’d started playing, and it must’ve fallen off from around his neck somewhere along the way.

By the time Sarah hears them and runs into the room, Steve is writhing and sobbing, making it harder for him to breathe. Bucky is sitting cross-legged with the blond in his lap; clutching him tightly and burying his face into golden hair and crying, wet and helpless and begging Steve to stop. She runs into the bathroom and retrieves her son’s emergency inhaler. It takes some prodding and Bucky refusing to let go of Steve, but eventually she’s able to coax her son free and pop the inhaler into his mouth. She holds her tiny boy to her and instructs him through it soothingly. Bucky realizes while watching them that they must’ve done this many times before. Within a few seconds, the tiny body is relaxing, desperately trying to take big, long breaths. He’s unusually pliant and doesn’t even fight his mother’s grasp when she cradles his head to her chest and strokes his hair, wiping away the beads of sweat dotting his forehead.

When Steve’s finally calmed down, Sarah gives Bucky a hug too. He thinks in that moment that he doesn’t know what grown-up love is, but he thinks he may love Sarah Rogers.

Because she’s the angel that brought Steve to him.

No matter what horrors he sees Steve go through, and no matter how much of a mental and emotional handful being friends with him can be, Bucky never stops coming by. Never even considers it. The days he dislikes the most are the ones where he shows up and Sarah answers the door, because then he knows that his friend is too ill to get out of bed. But even if it’s a gorgeous day outside, and even if Steve urges him that it’s okay to leave, Bucky keeps his butt firmly planted on the left side of Steve’s bed.

If Steve’s particularly sick, Bucky will hold his hand while he coughs. If he falls into an uncomfortable sleep, Bucky will keep watch to make sure his fever doesn’t go up.

Sometimes, when Sarah makes one of her frequent checks on them to make sure they’re both alright, she’ll find Bucky fast asleep on Steve’s left, with his head next to the bony shoulder.

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January, 1938

“Wake up!”

A hard, lumpy pillow hits Bucky’s head. He’s face down on his side of the cots with one leg hanging off the side. Their thin blanket is draped over his rear and thighs, providing his naked frame some coverage. His head is pounding and so he groans loudly into his own pillow as a response.

Steve’s voice sounds way too amused. The blond walks over and shoves Bucky’s shoulder, jostling
him. “C’mon Buck, it’s almost noon. Can’t have you sleeping the entire day away.”

“No,” Bucky complains, the sound muffled. He grabs the pillow Steve chucked at his head and pulls it over his skull, as if using it as a shield to drown out all sound. “Go away.”

“You did this to yourself, Buck.” There’s some rustling and the sound of a glass being placed on the side table next to where the brunet is lying. “I got you some water. Drink up, or it’s just gonna get worse.” He turns and leaves the room, chuckling to himself. This is a game they’ve played countless times before.

Bucky turns his face to the side and lifts the pillow enough to bark in a hoarse voice, “Thanks mom.”

He can hear Steve’s voice coming from the kitchen now. “Well maybe if you took better care of yourself, I wouldn’t ha… have to…”

The cough is throaty and wet and sudden, and Bucky can hear it too clearly, even from under his pillowed protection. Forgetting about his hangover, he jumps out of bed and throws on a pair of pants before running into the kitchen - Steve’s violent coughing leading the way. He’s only just stepped into the door frame when the nineteen-year-old’s skinny body falls dead-weight into his arms, unconscious.

“Steve! Stevie!” Bucky says sternly, pulling his friend into the living room and lying him down on the couch. He checks his forehead and sure enough, he’s burning up, hot and fast. His skin colour is doing that really disconcerting thing again, where it’s blotched red on an otherwise sallow shade that has no business being on human flesh. He taps Steve’s cheek lightly, repeating his name and trying to get him to come back around. When that doesn’t work, he darts to their bedroom and brings back his inhaler.

Steve’s stirring now, eyes opening with a weak moan. Bucky shakes the device as he drops back down to one knee – and it’s such a clear rattling sound, the older boy knows that it’s probably only got two, maybe three good pumps left in it. Cradling the back of blond hair, he gently tilts Steve’s head up, bringing the inhaler to his lips.

“Here we go, buddy, same as always; I’m right here, we got this.”

When Steve’s mouth is wrapped around the nozzle, Bucky presses down on the top, always grateful to hear the sound of the medicine blasting into his best friend’s lungs. Steve’s bony chest expands, and as it’s coming back down, he presses his lips further onto the inhaler. It’s a silent plea for more. Bucky obliges nervously, pressing the top again and giving Steve a second dose. The blond breathes it in and then tries the motion again. Regretfully, Bucky has to pull it away.

“M’afraid we can’t spare any more at the moment, pal. But it’s okay, you’re okay. See? Just breathe with me. C’mon, deep breaths, like this.” He turns Steve’s chin to look at him and then demonstrates. At first, Steve’s body seems to refuse to want to cooperate, but then he slowly relaxes and finds it in him to emulate the expanses of his best friend’s chest.

Relieved, Bucky nods and swipes golden bangs from out of Steve’s eyes. The younger’s eyes roll around behind closed lids as he swallows and comes down from his struggle. Slowly, he looks up at Bucky and nods back, silently thanking him.

“I’m gonna get you back into bed, and then I have to step out for a little bit,” Bucky tells him. He sees the nerves in those blue eyes; the stuff that Steve tries so hard to mask. It makes Bucky’s heart clench. It’s only when Steve is feeling particularly under the weather that he actually fears being left alone. So he adds, “I got some money saved up from work and I have to run out today to get you
your medicine. And some food; it was good pay, Stevie – we’re gonna get to have a real meal for the next little while. When you wake up, I’ll have a nice, hot bowl of chicken soup waiting for ya. How’s that sound?"

Steve doesn’t hear half of what he’s saying. Sweat is already misting his upper lip and temples from his fever, and Bucky can see how hard he’s trying to hold onto consciousness a second time. But he manages a tiny nod. Bucky swallows. This is bad. Under normal circumstances, he would’ve been questioned. Steve would’ve wanted to know what exactly he’d been doing at work to be getting paid so generously – especially given that Bucky never actually told him what his new employment was. With a pang of shame, he gets a flash memory of the previous night… Hand gripping his dick, stroking quickly… Panting and writhing and it feels so fuzzy and discombobulated… Eyes behind a camera, capturing his every private moment…

Forcing the thought from his mind, he gathers his friend into his arms and heads for the bedroom. Steve’s too out of it to argue at being plucked up and carried like a baby. Bucky tucks him in, even grabs some of their clothes from the dresser and drapes them over him in an attempt to provide him with more warmth. He stares down at Steve, whose eyes are already closed as his little body shivers with sickness, and he frowns. Promises he’ll be back soon, and everything will be okay.

Only when he’s certain that Steve isn’t looking does he finish getting dressed, quietly sneaks out his money, and heads out.

He’s out for only an hour and a half when anxiety over Steve forces him to return. Bucky feels like he’s accomplished a lot by the time he gets back. He’d stopped by their landlord’s place on his way out and had forked over the money for rent and bills, so that was no longer a concern for the time being. He’d gone to get Steve’s medication and while he’d waited for the prescription to be filled – inhaler and antibiotics and pills for his fever – he’d wandered around the block and found himself inside a little shop that sold quilts. His eye landed on one in particular, fluffy and thick and a little worn-out looking. A voice in his head that sounded an awful lot like his intuition (and also, funny enough, an awful lot like Steve’s voice) told him that this is the one Steve would’ve chosen. So he buys it before heading back to the pharmacy to get the order.

He stops at the grocery store near their apartment and spends a decent amount of his money stocking up on food. Mostly non-perishables, because he’s savvy that way, but he also picks up some fruits, vegetables, eggs, bread, meat, and milk. The bakery has a beautiful chocolate cake on display, so he spends a little extra and gets them to cut and package up two generous slices. When he gets home, he dumps everything in the kitchen before grabbing the blanket and medication and heading back into their bedroom. The image that greets him causes his stride to falter.

Steve’s staring up at the ceiling with wide, glazed over eyes; hair matted to his face and cheeks dotted unevenly with patches of bright red. His breathing is rapid and shallow, and it scares the shit out of Bucky. Running to his side, he quickly sits on the edge of the bed, pressing his palm to Steve’s forehead again. It’s so hot that it almost feels like it burns him. Trying to conceal his panic, Bucky keeps his shaky voice as level and cheerful as possible.

“Hey buddy, look what I got you. See? Brand new blanket – now you won’t need to cuddle up to me so much at night. You scratch me with your toenails when you sleep.”

(Steve doesn’t respond the way he wishes he would, but doe eyes slowly roll over and look at him without recognition. Bucky swallows and pulls out the medication one by one, showing him.)
“I got your inhaler all filled up, so now you can wheeze as much as your little heart desires, k buddy? And I got some stuff to give you right now that’ll make you feel good as new.”

With shaking hands, he fumbles the containers open and dumps some of the pills into his hand, making sure to count them properly. He lifts Steve’s head up and helps him get them down; tipping up the glass of water meant for him and talking Steve through properly swallowing it. Bucky’s impatient, and wants the medicine to kick in now. He ignores the voice of dread in the back of his mind that wonders if it’s too late this time; if he waited too long. He only leaves Steve’s side to run to the kitchen and quickly put all the perishable food in the fridge so it doesn’t spoil, then he returns.

An hour later, Steve’s fever still hasn’t broken, and his shivering has escalated to tremors and spasms. Bucky’s no longer sitting by his side, but propped next to him, forcing a screaming Steve to take off his shirt.

“No! Let me go!” Steve shouts feverishly.

Bucky’s face is pained but he wrestles with the flailing Steve to try and yank his shirt above his head. “Steve, stop! You remember what your ma always taught us; we have to cool you down; your fever’s way too high. That means no blankets and no shirt or else you’re gonna overheat!”

Steve struggles, teeth chattering, and Bucky feels so awful. Eventually, the blond just doesn’t have the strength left to fight anymore. He glares at Bucky as the older guides the sweat-soaked fabric off of his gangly upper body. He uses a cloth he’d soaked in cool water and bunches it up in his hand, gliding it over Steve’s forehead and cheeks, causing the blond’s teeth to chatter so loudly, Bucky fears he’ll chip one.

“I know, Stevie,” he murmurs apologetically, now running the damp cloth down his neck and over his shoulders and collar bones. “I’m sorry…”

Steve tries so hard, always, to not let anything less than strength register on his face. But his resolve starts weakening as he’s pulled deeper into the throes of his fever. Bucky’s carefully wiping the cloth along Steve’s left arm when he hears a weak and quiet voice start mumbling sluggishly, “First time I met you, I wanted to kiss the cleft on your chin…”

Grey eyes snap up to Steve’s face in confusion, unsure whether he heard that correctly. “Huh?”

Steve’s staring at the ceiling, and he looks so far away. Bucky wants to ask where he is right now; he appears to be a million miles gone. It’s been a long time since Steve was so sick that he became delusional. The last time it’d happened was right after Sarah had passed away, and Steve had accidentally knocked over a lamp in the midst of a coughing fit. Bucky had sat right there on the floor and held him while Steve shook and cried and repeated over and over that “ma was gonna kill him when she saw the mess he’d made.”

“It’s not okay…” he slurs, eyes still glazed and transfixed. “S’not… I can’t, Buck… Just can’t… I’m sorry…”

Bucky doesn’t understand. His brows knit in confusion and he leans down, trying to hear him better. “What’re ya talkin’ about, buddy? You can’t what? Why are you sorry? Stevie?”

But now he’s mumbling about something else, and Bucky has no idea if what he’s saying is even English anymore. Out of ideas, Bucky hooks his arms under Steve’s knees and back and lifts him up out of bed. Walking them to the bathroom, he doesn’t even shed his own clothes when he gets into the shower and lowers Steve onto his feet. The younger is too weak to hold himself up, so Bucky keeps an arm wrapped around his waist and carries most of his weight. Bracing himself, he turns on
the shower. Cold water bursts from the shower head and hits them. Bucky gasps and curses, gritting his teeth at the shock.

It seems to jar Steve as well; he starts trying to push out of Buck’s grasp and escape, but Bucky just holds the tiny body to his with whispered apologies. Eventually, pushing turns to pulling, and Bucky feels Steve’s arms fly around his back; hugging himself to Bucky with pained breaths and shudders, in an attempt to share whatever body warmth the other might have. They cling to each other until Bucky’s teeth are chattering too, but he keeps them in there until he feels Steve’s temperature start to even out. Then he helps strip both of them of their clothing (leaving them in a soaked clump in the bath tub) and wraps his best friend up in a towel, drying him off a bit. The latter just stands there and stares off, a little more clarity in his eyes, but still wholly lost, with an ample amount of misery. Bucky walks Steve back into their room, one arm around the smaller guy’s shoulder.

Bucky lowers himself down onto the cots and pulls the shivering body against his. Steve complains weakly, but doesn’t try to move. Bucky grabs Steve’s new quilt and pulls it over them both, only up to their waists. Pressing his hand to Steve’s chest, he locks him into place, hoping to relax the blond’s body and assist him into sleep.

“When you wake up, I’ll have that chicken soup ready for ya,” he whispers soothingly into Steve’s hair.

“M’sorry…” Steve repeats languidly. Bucky’s past the point of trying to decipher what it means. He just hugs him tightly, nodding.

“It’s okay, Stevie. Don’t be sorry.”

Without thinking, he tilts his head down and presses a light kiss right below Steve’s ear. The blond hums softly.

“Love you, Buck…” he whispers way too slowly. Bucky chuckles sadly.

“Love you back, pal.”

(Steve eventually falls asleep. Bucky stays up and finds himself thinking way too much.)

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter: Bucky gets greedy, bites off more than he can chew, and goes BACK to the joint in search of Peter. This time he has a plan. His ego gets him into big trouble.

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Some 1920s slang included in this chapter:
-Dry up: Get lost
-Baloney: Nonsense
-Big Six: Strong, powerful, successful man
-Ritzy: Elegant (pricey)
-Wet blanket: Someone acting negative who ruins other peoples' good time/mood
Thanks again to everyone who's been taking the time to read, comment, bookmark, etc. You are all amazing, and you give me the added motivation to update for you all. I really am proud of this story so far; I hope you continue to enjoy it. The next chapter will return us to the Explicit-rated stuff.

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
Chapter Summary

First Peter sought out Bucky. Now Bucky seeks out Peter.

Things don't go the way he planned.

Chapter Notes

I knew in general where I wanted this chapter to go. I never expected it to get this intense. I sobbed as I wrote the entire last quarter of the chapter. It also didn't help that I was listening to "The Bridge of Khazad" on repeat while I wrote. Either way, I am still crying. I am so very sorry for the amount of feels in this chapter, and what I subject Bucky to. My heart breaks for him.

---

Sing me to sleep...
Sing me to sleep...
I'm tired and I,
I want to go to bed.
Sing me to sleep...
Sing me to sleep...
And then leave me alone.
Don't try to wake me in the morning,
'Cause I will be gone.
Don't feel bad for me,
I want you to know...
Deep in the cell of my heart,
I will feel so glad to go...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

February, 1938

Steve gets better. With him, there’s always some residual sickness that lingers, but asthma attacks and the base cough aren’t as big of a worry to either of them. Importantly, the symptoms of that word that Bucky hates eventually dissipate, and with each passing day, Steve is able to go longer periods of time without falling into fits; he stops losing consciousness, and within a few days, his fever finally goes away. That doesn’t stop Bucky from making sure their cots are still pushed together at night; they still sleep pressed together, because even though Steve’s gotten better, the shitty weather has not, and Bucky doesn’t want to take the chance that the sickness could come back with a vengeance.

Neither of them brings up the peculiar confession Steve made in his fever dream. Bucky tells himself that it was the delirium talking, and if the blond doesn’t even remember saying it, he isn’t about to embarrass him by bringing it to his attention. Steve, on the other hand, remembers full well – he just
hopes that Bucky’s forgotten.

Ignorance must surely be bliss.

Steve does wind up asking about how he made that kind of money, but by then, Bucky’s been successful in finding a new job. It’s random jobs – but steady employment – for a decent guy uptown who’s old and good and even makes Bucky a sandwich every day at lunch time. It doesn’t pay nearly all that well, but Steve doesn’t need to know that.

He tries his best to keep a level head and ration what he has so it lasts as long as possible, but he definitely splurges more than he should. He gets himself a new blanket of his own, so it doesn’t seem strange or gives off the wrong impression that he intends to always share with Steve. He smokes lavishly, buying a new pack every day; picks up bottles of alcohol so he and Steve can drink at home while the weather’s too bad to go out. (Bucky’s looking for excuses not to go out for a while; he doesn’t admit this.) He buys Steve brand new pencils and a new sketchbook that’s got real nice binding and a mock leather cover. He uses Christmas as an excuse; even though it’s two months passed, he wasn’t able to get Steve a legitimate present back in December (neither of them were), so he refers to it as an IOU.

(It only makes Steve feel worse, because he still hasn’t been able to get Bucky anything in return.)

Halfway through the month, Bucky’s only got about thirty dollars left. He tells himself that he has to be smarter about it. He finds ways to subtly imply to his roommate that his income is getting a bit tighter thanks to some excuse that he can no longer remember, and only spends the cash on stuff they need. So meals start to become blander again – not that Steve complains, he’d never do that – and when Steve accidentally breaks the tip of one of his pencils, he bats Bucky’s hand away while he uses the brunet’s knife to sharpen it again, instead of going out and purchasing a new one (which had happened a few weeks before, much to Steve’s protests).

And it’s difficult to go back to that – familiar, but difficult. Bucky and Steve have known nothing else their entire lives, and maybe that’s why the former finds himself in a slump when he’s suddenly back to feeling like he has to pinch every penny. Financial comfort is an easy trap to fall into; It lures you into Its seductive ensnarement and makes you fall in love with It. When you lose It, It leaves you wanting more. Bucky hadn’t even realized he’d become addicted to not having to worry about money; addicted to being able to give Steve everything he deserved.

Not that he feels pressured by Steve. In fact, he doesn’t understand how his friend isn’t feeling the same withdrawals that he’s feeling. A few nights prior, they were eating a dinner of beans and toast (definitely not a meal fit for Kings), and Bucky found himself apologizing for the change back to shitty meals. And he swears to God, Steve looked him dead in the eye, shrugged, and with a voice as earnest as anything Bucky’s ever heard before, said, “There are some people without food at all. We don’t need anything fancy. A bite of something is more than those with nothing. This is the best darn beans and toast I’ve ever had.” Then the bastard smiled at Bucky and went back to eating, and Bucky felt like the biggest asshole on the planet.

And it’s the truth. Steve doesn’t need fancy things, tasty food – all he really needs is his medication, a warm blanket, a roof over his head, and Bucky. He doesn’t tell Bucky this, but he could actually make do with only one of those things and still be happy, and he certainly isn’t referring to the medicine, the blanket, or the roof. But there’s no way to express that sort of sentiment without it coming off the wrong way. He likes to think that the meaning is obvious, and Bucky already knows.

And he does, and somehow, that only fuels Bucky more. Because Steve doesn’t need fancy things, tasty food – and that’s exactly why someone as good as him deserves it.
That’s how he finds himself thinking about Peter, and what he’d done to make that first hundred. It starts off as a seed planted in his head, but as the days pass, it blossoms and grows until it’s all he can think about. Desperation causes him to rationalize what happened and justify it, justify Peter. Does he like him? No. Was that guy a total creep? Absolutely. But at the end of the day, what he’d been told to do in order to earn that cash was not actually that big of a deal. Bucky touches himself all the time – alone, when he knows Steve can’t hear him, but he does, nevertheless – and in retrospect, getting paid big bucks to do something he otherwise enjoys doing isn’t the worst thing he could do. It isn’t ideal, but it’s the best option he has.

So on the first clear winter’s night in weeks, he’s getting dressed up in clothing he shelled out the money to have dry-cleaned properly. He rubs a bit of hair wax onto his fingers and threads them through his tresses, styling it just right. He looks into the mirror and feels good – looks good.

*Good enough to photograph.*

He grabs only a few bucks and shoves the bills into his pants pocket with his key, and then strides out into the living room. Steve’s lying belly-down on the couch, knees bent and the tops of his feet resting on one of the arm rests. He’s snuggled beneath his *and* Bucky’s quilts, and he’s working on something in his nice, new sketchbook. Whatever it is must be private, because when Bucky steps into his peripherals, he lowers his pencil and snatches up the sketch, pressing it to his chest. Blue eyes meet grey.

“*You goin’ out?***

“*Whatcha workin’ on?***

“*Nothing,*” the golden-haired boy mumbles, eyes trailing along Bucky’s getup.

The elder frowns. “*You always show me your sketches.*” He wants to kick himself for the edge of hurt that he can’t disguise in his voice.

Steve looks apologetic; decides to give in just a tad. “*It’s a surprise,*” he explains. “*Just don’t ask questions, please. So you’re goin’ out?***

Bucky realizes how rude that must seem of him, to be going out for the evening without even inviting Steve. Bucky always invites Steve. It’s not that he doesn’t want him there – in fact, he *always* wants Steve with him, no matter where he goes. But this is something Bucky has to do without him. Hoping that the blond will say no, he takes his chances and asks casually, “*Yeah. Did ya wanna come with me?***

He looks like he considers it but then glances down at his shielded drawing and back up again. “*Naw, I’m good. I wanna finish this.*” Steve gives Bucky an exasperated look, not noticing the small sigh of relief the latter exhales. “*If you come back home in the middle of the night smelling like booze, I’m not gonna let you get into bed until you’ve brushed your teeth. You reek sometimes when you come in.***

Bucky rolls his eyes; leans down and messes up Steve’s hair while the smaller man blocks his drawing again, cursing Bucky. He hates when the brunet tousles him up like he’s six-years-old again. Bucky smiles affectionately and glances around the room one last time.

“*You need anything before I go?***

Steve feigns a mock groan. “*Are you still here?***

Bucky laughs; Steve gives a small smirk. “*Alright, alright, I get it,*” Bucky surrenders, throwing his
hands up in defeat. “If you croak while I’m gone, can’t say I didn’t try.”

It’s a poorly-made joke and they both know it. It’s the only way they know how to make light of the situation; pretend it doesn’t scare them all the time as much as it does. Then Steve gives him this look, and Bucky doesn’t know what to make of it. It’s tender and understanding and so goddamn loving. He rarely looks at him like this, but every time he does, Bucky feels something in his stomach akin to butterflies.

It makes him uncomfortable.

Steve feels it too. The look vanishes and he clears his throat, averting his eyes. “Have fun tonight, Buck. Don’t take any wooden nickels.”

Bucky shakes his head, making for the door. “Have a little faith, Stevie.”

“Oh, I do. I just know how you can get.”

Bucky pauses as he swings the door open, glancing back with a frown. He knows that Steve doesn’t know about what he’d done – he can’t. So this isn’t one of those times where the truth lies unspoken.

Bucky leaves the apartment wondering why it still feels like that’s the case, though.

Peter isn’t there when Bucky first shows up. He hates himself for feeling something very similar to disappointment at that. The first time this had happened, he’d been unprepared. The ball hadn’t been in his court. This time, he’s armed with a plan and it was starting to look like it was about to go to waste.

He keeps a sharp eye on the joint as he gets himself a drink, and then sets his sights on finding a dance partner. It doesn’t take long. Within ten minutes, he’s twirling a busty brunette whose mission seems to be to grind herself against Bucky any chance she gets while still remaining subtle. Not that he minds. Her body is amazing and he considers that there are worse alternatives; even if the night doesn’t go exactly as planned, chances are it wouldn’t be hard to talk his way into heading back to her place and having a little fun.

The bar has opted for a jazz band instead of their usual pianist and singer, so the music is a little more sultry and dirtier. It’s probably one of the only joints in the city that does it from time to time, for little hood rats like Bucky. The crowd gets off on it. The smell of liquor permeates the air, and soon the dance floor is packed with people of all ages, pressing to each other and swaying around in ways that are both acceptable and also a bit scandalous.

It usually makes Steve feel awkward, when he’s there. No matter how much Bucky will try and talk him into joining him, the blond always winds up sitting at their table, sketching away, just so he doesn’t have to watch all those strangers getting way too familiar with each other for his liking. Bucky wonders how Steve’s drawing is going back at home.

When he isn’t busy working his way through different partners, Bucky’s fine dancing by himself. A lot of the people there alternate that way. Even when he’s on his own, he’s surrounded by others just like him. He knows he moves exquisitely - can feel wanting eyes on his body; the way he bites his lip and gets a look in his eyes that makes him seductive. He always feels sexiest when he lets the music guide him.

The hair wax mixes with perspiration and gradually, a few wisps of Bucky’s bangs fall onto his
forehead. He unbuttons the top two buttons of his shirt and is constantly pulling his suspenders back up as they slip down his arms. As his head bobs feverishly to the music, he spares a glance upwards and--

There.

There he is.

Standing at the back of the bar - dressed more casual than the last time, but still in clothing far too expensive for Bucky’s means. Black hair slicked back beneath a beautiful fedora. Green eyes on Bucky – but that’s no surprise – and Bucky averts his orbs as quickly as they landed on his. Passes it off as if he never even noticed him.

But his dancing becomes more deliberate. Grey eyes lock onto a pretty dame’s baby blues and he holds out his hand, which she takes… Spins her towards him and then hoists her up and twirls her… Lowers her back down and presses one hand to her lower back and holds her other… Feels a small hand press behind his shoulder, and then they’re swaying, quick and hot and splayed together. And Bucky feels a little guilty for the look he’s giving her – like he wants to rip her clothes off and take her right there on the floor, as sultry jazz beats around them and the air is heavy with sweat and booze and hormones. Because he knows it isn’t meant for her.

He feels dirty that, to some degree, it’s meant for Peter. To make himself look as alluring as possible, so when Peter “chooses” to approach him again, Bucky can grab onto the opportunity.

And Peter does, the second Bucky goes to the bar.

Bucky doesn’t grab onto it, not exactly. He plays hard to get; puts on a cold persona, like the photographer is the last person he wants to see. It takes some coaxing on Peter’s end – he loves a challenge and this kid is something quite special – but eventually, Bucky agrees to go with him.

On the promise of another hundred dollars.

It’s a different hotel this time. A bit grungier; feels more homely to the brunet, like something he’d be able to afford to stay in if he saved up a little. He takes off his coat and tosses it onto the single bed, walking around the room and taking it his surroundings.

“Spend all your money yet?” Peter asks conversationally. He pulls out two glasses and that bottle of brandy again. Bucky accepts it, but this time he’s planning to be smarter.

“Not all of it,” he answers honestly. He takes a tiny sip and then puts the glass down on the night table next to the bed. He’ll drink, oh yes, because he doesn’t turn that kind of thing down. But he’s also not going to get all boozed up for Peter’s enjoyment. He wants to be in control. Pulling out his pack of cigarettes and matches, he lights one up and looks around to see if there’s a radio. Green eyes never leave him.

“How did the photos turn out from last time?” he then asks, because he’s trying to appear as casual and friendly as possible. He finds the small radio and flicks it on, adjusting it to a station with a clear signal and decent music.

“Very well. They look real good. I told you, you could be a model.” He pauses. “The more intimate ones were my favourite.”

He’s testing Bucky now. The young man can feel it; they’re dueling in a battle of limits, and Bucky needs to show him that he has none. That nothing Peter could dish out would be able to break him – not when he’s fighting for something.
Something as important to him as Steve.

Bucky makes a half-hearted humming sound in his throat – deflecting and pushing down anger and disgust and yeah, I bet you liked that, you sick fucking pervert – and sucks on the tip of his smoke, reaching for his glass of brandy and taking a nice, long swig. The older man watches for a while and then starts pulling out his camera and several rolls of unused film.

Bucky knows the drill now. He responds to whatever conversation Peter makes with him; he sips his liquor and smokes his smokes and dances like a good little boy, and lets his body get to work.

Maybe it’s because he’s in control this time, but Bucky actually feels quite sexy in this moment. Powerful. He’s swaying and laughing – pretending that the alcohol has affected him much more than it really has – and spinning around the room with reckless abandon. Every time he hears the shutter click, he knows he’s that much closer to another big fat pay day, and it feels good. He wishes it were anyone other than Peter watching him, though, because he doesn’t like to think about what’s going through that man’s mind when Bucky moves for him like this, but he repeats over and over in his head: It is what it is.

What makes it worse is that that voice in his head (intuition, Steve - whatever it is) is shouting at him that he’s digging himself into a hole he won’t be able to crawl out of – when he tilts his chin down and looks up at Peter from under heavy eyelids and dark lashes; pouty lips open slightly, tongue swiping out once in a while to wet them. It gives off entirely the wrong impression, as he looks directly into the camera lens every few minutes and silently begs with his pools of blue-grey to be fucked mercilessly. It’s not something that he particularly likes thinking about, but he’s assumed by now that Peter gets off on it, so he’s trying to please. He’s not only playing with fire now, he’s becoming engulfed in it.

Bucky hopes the reward will still be worth the burn.

It’s all pretend… It’s just for the camera. Money is money is money is money is--

“God damn, you’re smokin’ tonight,” Peter husks, half of his face concealed. He’s on his knees on the bed now; jacket and tie removed, hat resting on the coat rack, and sleeves pushed up his forearms. He keeps snapping away. “I thought you’d never come back after the way you left the last time.”

(He’s lying. He knew Bucky would come crawling back; had hoped for as much.)

“Just had the jitters was all,” Bucky lies, keeping his eyes locked on the camera. He bites his lip, makes his voice low and sensual. (Stop it, stop it, stop it now.) The song on the radio changes to something jazzy, and Bucky pretends he’s back in the bar again. “Ain’t exactly ever jerked off in front of a total stranger before, and certainly no man.”

He hears Peter chuckle, dark and deep in his throat.

“Did you like it?”

No.

“Yes.”

“You liked touching yourself while you knew you were being watched?” the raven-haired man clarifies. He wants to hear Bucky say it.
He can’t.

“Yes,” is all he can repeat, while pushing down the bile making his throat tighten.

The shutter goes off a bit faster. Bucky lights another smoke and takes a deep drag before blowing it out and plucking the filter back between his lips, letting it stand erect there. He’d needed to be coerced into this the last time - but this time he won’t need to be instructed. He knows what Peter wants, and he’s going to give it to him. He hopes that maybe, because he’s being extra good tonight, this man will consider giving him extra cash for his little performance.

He rocks his hips deliciously, sweat damp on his flushed chest and forehead. He brings his hands to the top button of his shirt and slowly pops it open. Keeping his eyes on the camera lens, he makes good, slow work out of undoing his shirt and incorporating it into the way he dances to the beat, washing out of the radio like a majestic wave. Peter groans a degrading little “yeah” when Bucky slides the suspenders one at a time down his arms, much like the way the brunet has always seen girls do it for him with their brassieres. Once they’re hanging by his sides, he arches his back ever so slightly and pulls his dress shirt off of him – now looking away, like he’s lost in his own little world.

He isn’t. He’s right here.

He alternates how he moves now. Everything is deliberate. He continues gyrating slowly, as if his body is being weighed down by the amber liquid taking up room in his belly. He purposely turns to open up one of the windows and stands by it blowing out smoke, so that Peter can get some shots of his bare back, freckled and muscular and smooth.

(And for the love of fuck, his ass in those slacks.)

He speaks before he thinks.

"And what about you?"

Stop it, stop it, STOPITSTOPITSTOPIT!

He keeps going.

"You like watching me like this? You like the way I look?"

Peter groans again, and it makes Bucky's stomach feel sick. He doesn't let it register on his face. But he can see the way the photographer licks his lips and oh God, oh no, it looks like the front of his slacks are getting a bit tighter, and Bucky thinks he fucked up. He doesn't know why he doesn't stop right here, right now, grabs his clothes and makes a run for it. All he can keep thinking is that he needs the money, wants it so badly; wants to be able to go back to not having to worry about rent and bills and being able to spoil himself and his best friend without guilt.

"I do," Peter replies, index finger still clicking away.

And Bucky thinks that very thing that Steve always seems to think when he's in the middle of taking a beating - I have him on the ropes. Right where he wants him. And Bucky's so goddamn sure right now; letting his ego drive him forward while he takes a passive back seat. Decides to escalate things, because he knows where this is heading; he knows what Peter ultimately wants from him. He brings his fingers to the button of his pants and slowly undoes it, looking down at his hands and feigning a look of young innocence. And he feels so wrong, so dirty, and he doesn't like who he is in this moment. Who he's let himself become. Steve would be so disappointed in him; in his mind, Bucky's already trying to come up with reasons to justify himself to Steve.
The camera goes silent for a moment and then resumes, but the shutter is opening and closing at a slower pace now - almost as if Peter is opting to simply be the voyeur now rather than the photographer. Bucky glances up nervously and then forces his face to become controlled with a quiet confidence; almost as if to challenge, 'You think I'm weak? You think I'm afraid of you? Fuck you.'

The sound of the zipper slowly being opened mixes with the music. His body is taut, on edge, but he forces himself to continue as if he wants this. Because he has to make it seem that way, doesn't he? Peter wants some sort of submission - and Bucky wonders if the man realizes that the ultimate form of submission comes from the submissive being the one who's really in control. He pinches both corners of his opened waistline in his fingers and spreads it open, to tease. Then he lets go with his right hand to press his palm to his chest and slowly slide it down the center of his abdomen while he rolls his body in one grand undulation to the music. It's so fucking obscene, how he's making himself move. He feels about as low as if he were starring in a pornographic film. That's about as much as he deserves right now.

His fingers are just starting to disappear into his underwear when Peter suddenly lowers the camera and interrupts:

"I don't think I want that this time. You can stop doing that."

And Bucky just freezes and stands there, blinking like an idiot; confusion washing over his face and misunderstanding in his eyes. Something akin to humiliation and rejection climbs through him, as he's on display awkwardly, hand half vanished to grab his dick and his upper body shirtless and exposed. He doesn't know in this moment what makes him feel more disgusting: the fact that he did this the first time because he was hammered and manipulated, or that he's willingly offering to do it now, only to be shut down.

"I... I thought..."

The black-haired man rests back on the balls of his feet and lowers his camera, looking down at it with a look of apathy that Bucky's never seen on him up to this point. As if what the latter's suddenly doing has no affect on him whatsoever. It's a nonchalance that makes Bucky's face grow hot and his heart start hammering in his chest. He doesn't understand it... Peter, the fucking twisted invert, had been so into this the last time. Did Bucky have to be next to incoherent for it to be a turn on?

Peter looks back up to him as he gets off the bed and heads to the table to load up on new film. "I know; you're doing great, kid. I love the way you've opened up. Makes me want to see you open up s'more." He pauses, back to the Brooklyn boy, and then tilts his head to the side to cast him an impish grin. Bucky's skin crawls. "You willin' to work a little harder for your money this time, James?"

His heart palpitates - is that what it feels like for Steve? Because it's really unsettling - and his face grows hot as blood rushes in his ears.

"What do... What do you mean?"

"I want to watch you get your dick sucked."

Simple as that. As if he's telling Bucky, 'Oh yeah, just go pose by the window; that'll look real nice.'

I want to watch you get your dick sucked.

And Bucky gapes at him in stunned silence, unable to find his voice again. There's only two of them in the room.
When his lungs are able to properly resume functioning, he holds his hands up as if to ward off the man and practically shouts, "You come any closer to me, I'll start punching--"

Peter laughs. Shakes his head, as if that's the dumbest thing Bucky's ever said. "Who said anything about me doing it? Seriously, kid, calm down. I got people on standby for arrangements like this. And I promise you, they're the tops at giving head."

Bucky stands there, hands still raised and body still braced for battle, but his eyebrows knit at this. His instincts - he might as well call the damn thing 'Steve' now - are practically begging him to leave. There's still time - you don't have to do this, you don't.

...But I do.

Lowering his hands and straightening cautiously, he speaks in a soft voice. "And that's it? Just get my dick sucked - I don't have to do anything else?"

He's met with a wolfish smile. "Not unless you want to."

"I don't," he snaps quickly.

"Then no, you don't have to."

Bucky makes a pitifully weak sound in his throat; looking down, trying to make sense of this. "...Why?" is all he can think to muster, and his voice is small and cracks.

Peter eyes him, never blinking. "Why not?"

The brunet opens his mouth to retaliate but then closes it again dumbly. He doesn't have a good answer. Frowning, he's right back to justifying things. (He admits reluctantly in this moment that he'd probably do anything for money if it came down to it. Where, oh where, have my good morals gone... Oh where, oh where can they beeee?) How many times has he gotten his cock deep-throated in a sketchy alleyway by some dame he'd only met less than five minutes beforehand? How many of them did he even ask for their names afterwards? This is really no worse than those instances.

His shoulders sag; the confidence deflates out of him. He nods in defeat. "Okay. I'll do it."

Peter beams. "Perfect! They're across the hall. Give me one moment to go grab them."

Bucky waits awkwardly, feeling as though his feet are glued to the floor. He hopes for a couple of things: he hopes that she's a nice girl. He doesn't know why. He's fooled around with plenty of questionable girls, with less-than-questionable morals. Any dame who breathlessly whimpers for him to call her his "cock-hungry slut" while he's balls deep inside of her, fucking her up against a wall, is probably not a nice, good girl. No... he wants someone that would be worthy of a guy like Steve. Selfishly, he knows that this is his way of once again trying to redeem the situation a bit, in the hypothetical event that his best friend ever finds out.

On the other hand, what he also wants is a complete contradiction to the first: he doesn't want it to be a nice girl, because what would a nice girl be doing in a place like this, doing a thing like this in the first place? If it were some innocent sweetheart feeling forced into it like he currently is, he'd never be able to forgive himself.

So, no... It can't be a good girl. It has to be a filthy, tainted one. Bucky would rather martyr himself than have anyone else feel what he's feeling.

Only it's neither of those things.
Because Peter walks in with a man.

All the blood rushes from Bucky's face, and he's instantly shaking his head and pointing and he can't think properly because no, no, no, this isn't happening.

"FUCK no! No! Not fucking happening! You're sick - you hear me? You're fucking SICK!" He starts grabbing his shirt from the ground, bundling it up against him and looking around frantically for his jacket... When the accompanying man comes to him and presses a gentle hand to his chest. Bucky goes rigid and looks at him with wide, frightened eyes. To his surprise, the guy looks back with the same sense of fear. And my God... That sick fucking sonofabitch... He sees it now. Bucky isn't his only pawn. Peter's some fucked up, power-hungry rich bitch who has money to throw around - and gets off on tricking unsuspecting boys into dancing and jumping and desperately clutching for it.

Because that look on this guy's face... it's like looking into a mirror. This guy is in the same position Bucky's in. He wonders how much money he's doing it for.

From the way this guy's cheeks are paled and brown eyes are round and wet with tears, it's a safe assumption that - just like Bucky - this guy ain't no queer. He's shaking like a leaf, and for a moment, they just stare into each other's eyes. Bucky's vision becomes blurry as hot tears fill his own orbs. He doesn't know this man - will probably never know his name - but for a brief flicker of time, they share a connection. Something that no one else in their lives may understand. But they do. They do.

"Please..." the man begs, and it's barely audible in the air between them. Bucky can't blink, can't look away; just stares back, eyes wide. After a few seconds, he gives the smallest nod, and he thinks he can see the guy's shoulders deflate in both relief and dread. Bucky averts his eyes and looks ahead, at the wall across the room. His face becomes reticent - lost. He takes a couple tiny steps back until he feels his back hit the flat surface behind him. He lets his hands hang loosely by his sides as his body is lightly jerked in order for his pants to be pulled down to his knees. He feels the air of the room around his dick; knows it's limp. Doesn't bother pointing this out. Feels the way hands hesitantly grip his upper thighs, and they shake, they shake so bad. Lips part, breath exhales against him, and then there's that familiar warm wetness.

And this isn't right. No, this is so wrong. To be standing there, dick in the mouth of a man who has no idea what he's doing; more than likely has never done this before. He can hear the snifflies and knows without looking down that this guy is crying. Then he can hear it, the flickering of the camera shutter, and here we go again; pawns in a performance... Monkeys forced to dance. And Bucky's humiliated, and he's a fool; realizes full well in this moment that he never was at an advantage. He'd never pulled a fast one on Peter. Peter had merely played along; knew he wasn't drunk, knew Bucky was sober enough to hold on to his virtues and morals. He'd deliberately let Bucky continue on, thinking he was the one in control, so he could snatch it away at the last second. Let Bucky be sober because what's better than making this kid get his dick sucked, knowing exactly what's going on?

Bucky has never hated himself more.

And the worst part - more than the situation, and the sound of the camera, and the knowledge that Peter's watching and enjoying this and poor me, poor you, poor us - is the fact that it starts to feel good. Because a blowjob is a blowjob, and Bucky wants to fight it, wants to scream his apologies to this guy for the way his cock is filling up inside this guy's virgin mouth, but his survivor's instinct has shut down. All he can do is stand there, and stare ahead with blank eyes... with hands limp by his sides... as he listens to this guy on his knees cry softly... and feel the suction around him.
A single, low moan slips past his lips, and a tear rolls down his cheek.

He doesn't know how long it goes on for. Eventually, the sound of the music, the camera, the crying - it all sounds further and further away, like he's standing on the other side of a tunnel.

(He remembers running down a tunnel with Steve once... Just kids... Young and free and things weren't so complicated... He remembers the sun... And Steve's smile...)

The mouth moves along him faster now, cheeks hollow out. Bucky can vaguely feel his lower abdomen clenching and unclenching. He tries to hold onto the sun.

(Golden hair whipping back to look back at him... Blue eyes sparkling and so full of hope; little pools of the ocean and the sky and all things infinitely free... They just keep running... Because they can, and nothing is holding them back...)

He's trembling now. He doesn't blink. His bottom lip quivers, but his face is passive. Another thick tear wets his skin.

(He wants to go back to that... Back to that summer... Back to simplicity... Where he could play and live and laugh with Steve Rogers... Where he was still a boy with a future and not a man with a broken soul... He remembers the sun... He remembers Steve's smile...)

He's tensing up. His breathing, shallow and uneven. He stares ahead but sees nothing. His vision is blurry and his face is soaked with the steady stream of tears. They drip from his chin and land on the face below. He looks so lost, so fragmented. He's too hard now. He thinks he might be moaning.

*I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...*

(Golden hair... blue eyes sparkling... Laughter like music... He remembers the sun... He remembers... Steve's...)

His eyes widen and a strangled, broken sound gets trapped in his throat as his orgasm hits him. He comes down that man's throat.

He comes, thinking of Steve.

And the realization paralyzes him; keeps him stagnant there in a stunned silence as his body shudders and runs the course of its climax. He feels like he's going to throw up. He wants to.

He wants to die.

*I'm... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...*

The other guy wipes his mouth, is full-on sobbing now, gets onto shaky legs and runs from the room. Bucky wants to say he's sorry... *I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...* But his movements are sluggish and he's still staring ahead with a blank stare, mouth now ajar... He feels numb. He's surprised he still knows how to feel at all.

He moves languidly, gathering his shirt and sliding it on; eyes never leaving the floor. He puts on his jacket, pockets his smokes, and walks up to Peter without saying a word. Just stands there with a hopeless, dejected obedience - because *I deserve this, I did this to myself, just please still pay me.* And Peter stiffs him a whole fifty dollars *just because he can.* Because Bucky is broken and he knows the boy won't fight back.

And he doesn't. Just takes the money, stares ahead, and walks out of the hotel room.
It hits him on the walk home. He's walking alone down the middle of the street... collapses to the ground and starts howling with pained sobs... Wishes that he could lie there forever and get swallowed up by the Earth until there was nothing left of him and his shame.

Gets home... It's late... He doesn't know what time it is... It's silent in the apartment. Steve must be sleeping.

Steve.

I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...

There's something on the kitchen table for him. Hands shaking, Bucky flips it over and holds it up. A drawing; the drawing from earlier that Steve wouldn't show him. It's of the Ferris wheel from Coney Island, in astoundingly crisp detail.

"To Bucky, Merry belated Christmas. I'll pay you back some day, I promise. -Steve"

(He remembers that day, at Coney Island... He remembers the sun... He remembers Steve's smile...)

He slides down to the ground and clutches the picture and cries.

Chapter End Notes

Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3
Bucky gets into a fight. Steve gets put into danger - he just doesn't realize it yet.

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You’ve already won me over in spite of me...
And don’t be alarmed if I fall head over feet...
And don’t be surprised if I love you for all that you are.
I couldn’t help it;
It’s all your fault.

Steve notices the changes; subtle enough that to anyone who didn’t know Bucky Barnes as well as he did, they’d go unseen.

It had started back in February, the night Bucky had gone out and he’d worked on the brunet’s belated Christmas gift until almost one in the morning. He’d tried to stay up for another hour or so in the hopes that his best friend would come home, and he could see Bucky’s reaction in person. He wasn’t expecting some sort of grand gesture or response – he just wanted to see the little smile on Bucky’s face that Steve was so particularly fond of. He always got this one look any time he perused through Steve’s drawings (the ones he’d agree to show him, anyways)… Grey eyes would grow soft and gentle, and there’s this interesting expression of wonder that curls one side of his mouth up just the tiniest bit – as if Steve’s just about the most talented artist he’s ever seen.

Steve knows he isn’t; that it’s just Bucky being Bucky. He doesn’t even think he’s all that good, if he’s being honest. It’s just something he loves to do; almost as much as he loves seeing the look on Bucky’s face when he observes them.

But it was nearing two-thirty and Bucky still hadn’t returned. When Steve fell asleep with his head propped up in his hands, sitting at the kitchen table, only to have it slip from its perch and knock his jaw off the hard surface, he called it quits and resigned himself to bed. Bucky would have the present waiting for him, and Steve would just have to find a casual way to ask about it in the morning.

What he didn’t expect was to wake up almost three hours later because his body was shivering violently and lacking its usual protective, extra body warmth. He could feel that he was still alone in their cots, but he glanced behind him just to be sure. Tip-toeing across the cold floor, he threw on a shirt and started checking around the apartment.

He had stopped in the doorway of the kitchen and looked down, a knot forming in his stomach and a frown growing on his face. Bucky was fast asleep on his side – knees slightly tucked up to his stomach – with the blond’s drawing loosely gripped in his limp, left hand. His breathing came out deep and slow, so he was out cold; but his face appeared off somehow. Making as little noise as possible, Steve went to him and crouched down to get a better look.
It looked as if Bucky had been crying; dried tear trails all down his cheeks and across his nose, as if he’d fallen asleep that way. Even though he appeared peaceful, there was some sort of trouble lying beneath the surface that Steve couldn’t put his finger on. For a split second, he was afraid that the sound of his heart breaking would wake Bucky up.

What he had wanted to do was rouse him awake and ask him what had happened. Had he been turned down by a dame? It didn’t seem likely, since it took a lot to make Bucky cry; in fact, he could only count on one hand exactly how many times he’d witnessed it happen in the entire time they’d known each other. Perhaps he’d gotten into a fight… Or maybe, he considered in an attempt to calm himself, Bucky had just had a nightmare and the tears had occurred while he was sleeping.

What he did instead, was go back to the bedroom in order to gather up their quilts. When he returned to the kitchen, he gently pulled the paper from between Bucky’s fingers and put it back on the table. He lowered himself down on the floor next to Bucky and covered them both. Bucky stirred and Steve stilled, careful not to wake him. Then the brunet made a soft sighing sound and Steve had turned on his side, used his arm as a pillow, and closed his eyes.

The first oddity he’d noticed in his friend’s behaviour – which had been strange to say the least – was that Bucky had awakened him that morning by practically jumping out of his skin. Steve had startled and shot upright, looking up at Bucky - who was back to the wall, palms splayed flat, and looking down at the blond as if he’d seen a ghost. Steve had asked what was wrong, and the older boy had seemed a bit out of it at first; trying to recall exactly why he had fallen asleep in the kitchen. Eventually, he had forced a smile and replied that he was fine, just hadn’t expected to wake up on the floor – credited the incident to having drank too much.

Steve didn’t push any further, though he knew there was something Bucky wasn’t telling him. Just nodded and got up to bring the blankets back into their room, and then make his friend his usual hangover breakfast of dry toast and a glass of water.

Little things seemed to pile on from there… Like the fact that Bucky had started acting weird at night when they’d go to bed. Not once did he separate their cots – in fact, when things had finally grown rather awkward, Steve had asked him if that’s what he wanted to do, and Bucky had vehemently insisted that it was alright the way it was. But he’d stopped wrapping his arm around Steve’s tiny body, and if the brunet thought he had fallen asleep, he’d turn around completely and merely keep their backs pressed together.

Steve didn’t know what he’d done wrong. He tried not to pry – much like he tried to push down that feeling of loneliness now that Bucky seemed to have developed some aversion to touching him as they’d fall asleep – but still found himself asking at least every other day if Bucky was okay. Every time, he’d get the same answer – a quick deflection, an aversion of eyes and a mumbled reassurance that Steve was just looking into things that weren’t there.

Most of the time, other than that, Bucky was his normal self. He went to work during the days, came home at night; either stayed in or went out to go dancing and drinking. If he stayed in, he’d hang around Steve and chat with him like things were still A-OK. It was only at night, it seemed, that he’d closed off.

Then, from about Bucky’s twenty-first birthday onward in March, that would only apply when Bucky chose to sleep beside Steve. The blond was used to the older boy staying out late and coming home with story after story about whichever dame he’d hooked up with that night, but this was different. Bucky would start coming home with these girls – sometimes two at the same time – and if Steve was in the living room, that’s where he’d wind up sleeping. If Steve was already in bed, he’d be woken up to the sound of feminine voices keening and moaning and crying out Bucky’s name for
hours. And Bucky’s voice would be right there with it.

Of course, Steve had overheard Bucky having intercourse before, although he’d usually go red in the face, feel embarrassed for the both of them, and cover his head with his pillow to drown out the sound the best he could. Usually, though, in those rare instances, it was only the dame’s sex noises that were audible. Bucky would usually remain so silent that one might’ve thought she was all alone in there.

Now, well… Now. Now it was as if Bucky was making a point to be as loud as he could. Steve would lie – in bed, on the couch, wherever he’d happened to get stuck that night – and be robbed of sleep as his face grew hot with mortification at the string of profanities Bucky would practically shout at his dates. It was as if every sentence of curses and dirty – vulgar – talk was solely said to outdo the last one. And it always earned him girlish squeals that would escalate into screams, and Steve’s dick would be so hard at the mental images it forced into his mind. But he’d just turn onto his side, grind his pillow down against his ears, and try to ignore them.

And in the mornings, Bucky would just pretend that nothing had happened. Oh sure, the odd time, he’d apologize to Steve – sorry if you heard anything, buddy – but the truth was, Bucky never looked very sorry at all.

But Steve would never stop asking if he was okay. No matter how many eye rolls or groans it got him, or Bucky snapping at him, raising his voice and barking for Steve to shove off and mind his own. Steve would just keep his gaze unfaltering and not say a word, and within seconds, Bucky would be sighing and rubbing at his eyes, apologizing and trying to explain himself, and those times, his sorries were always genuine.

By the end of April, once the weather had started to take a turn for the better, Bucky had been able to get a job back at the docks; a different one than he’d had before, but still a decent position and a steady pay (not that money had been much of an issue for them over the last few months, thanks to all of Buck’s hard work for Mr. Gamble, the elderly man uptown). His attitude seemed to pep back up around that time, and suddenly he was back to being traditional Plucky Bucky (as some kids had titled him when they were both younger) – laughing more, and snapping less.

His interest in dragging Steve along for double dates seemed to reach some sort of record-breaking peak around that time, too. The smaller boy was used to getting dragged out once or twice a week to be set up with a real pretty girl who would instantly realize she wanted nothing to do with him upon meeting him – but then Bucky suddenly seemed to have something planned for them almost every night. Steve would protest and try to find excuses to get out of them – and it became so much more than merely growing incapable of putting up with the constant rejection, but also because, honestly, he was just getting tired of going out drinking so much – but Bucky never seemed to want to take “no” for an answer.

(Steve also noticed that they never seemed to go to The Goblet anymore, which was curious, as it had always been Bucky’s favourite bar. When asked, Bucky had just shrugged it off and said that it had grown lame, and then quickly switched the topic.)

Steve never goes home with any of these girls, of course. Never even gets a kiss. What he always goes home with is the guarantee that he’s going to be kept up all night yet again by--

Oh God, HARDER, Bucky! (Yeah?) Mmm, oh! Oh, ohhhhh, yeah! (You like that?) Unh… unh… MMM! (Yeah, you like it when I fuck your tight little pussy?) MMM! Mhm! Mhm… (You gonna come for me, baby doll? You gonna come all over my cock?) MMMMUNHH, fuck, Bucky! (That’s it, sweetie – say my name… You’re so fucking wet… Scream my name and come all over me…) Oh God, oh God, oh Gooodddd! -- (Fuck… Oh, fuck, yes…) BUCKYYYYY!
And Steve tries his best to ignore the way it fucking hurts so much.

When Bucky had woken up that morning after, he hadn’t expected to come to on the kitchen floor – much less with Steve sleeping directly in front of him. At first, it didn’t bother him that he wasn’t sure what day it was, or what time it was, or how he’d gotten there. It was those few precious seconds before the fog of residual grogginess evaporates, and all he could think in that moment was that Steve looked so beautiful when he slept.

Then the fog was gone, and everything had come flooding back in.

And suddenly, lying on the floor with Steve was about the worst thing he could’ve possibly been doing. Because he wanted to scream at the blond – *Don’t you know what I did!? Don’t you know how disgusting I am!? You lied next to me after I had my dick sucked by a dude and thought of you when I came! Hate me, hate me, I want you to hate me!*

But when he scrambled and Steve woke with a start, he couldn’t manage to find the words. The confession was trapped in his throat and so he lied instead, because it’s a thing they do with each other sometimes. And he was positive that when Steve had asked him if everything was alright and he’d given another false answer, that Steve’s easy acceptance of it was his way of lying right back.

And he had decided that this was just one of those things he had to work through on his own – which would’ve been so much easier without Steve fucking asking him all the time if he was okay.

Because even though lying is something that they do sometimes, because it has to be done, it’s not an easy thing to do, either. At the end of the day, Steve is still his best friend, and Bucky doesn’t take pride in being so deceptive. So he found himself responding unpredictably; some days it had been easier to brush off – others, it made his teeth clench and his stomach twist. Then there were the times where he’d turn on Steve and speak to him in a volume he never had before. He hated those times the most; the way Steve wouldn’t shout back, wouldn’t call him out on his behaviour, the way he deserved. No, he’d just stand there, the pinnacle of patience and understanding and *goddamn devotion*, and then Bucky felt like dirt and would be apologizing.

After that night, Bucky couldn’t bring himself to hold Steve close to him in their cots anymore. He knew he *should*, because Steve could still benefit from the body heat, but it was just too much. He didn’t know how to cope with what had happened; what he did. He didn’t know who he was anymore. *Man… boy… Dancer? Fool? Hooker? Whore? Was he an invert? He still liked girls, and as far as he knew, he wasn’t attracted to men. He didn’t think he was, anyways. He’d told himself that it had been a coincidence that he’d thought of Steve when he climaxed – the orgasm had just caught him off guard.*

But then he’d catch himself looking at Steve – *really* looking – and it would feel like a knife twisting in his guts, the way Steve’s blue eyes gazing downwards at his sketchbook were so damn beautiful and framed by the most gorgeous lashes… Or the pink lips that had always fascinated him, even as kids… The way his shoulders curved so delicately, and his collar bones looked almost sharp, and he really had the urge to touch them… Or how he’d offhandedly brush his bangs out of his eyes with the tips of his index and middle fingers – and Bucky was terrified that something that insignificant could make his heart flutter.

He told himself it was nothing; he was being stupid. Confused about the way he’d compromised himself for money at Peter’s hands, and was transferring those messed up feelings and projecting them onto the way he saw Steve. Because he liked girls… *he likes* girls… And he ain’t no fairy.
So he stopped holding Steve at night, and once the little punk would be sleeping, he’d turn and face in the opposite direction. But he always made sure their backs were still touching, because he couldn’t bring himself to sever all contact. He’d stare at the wall ahead of him until the late hours of the night, and when he’d finally sleep, he’d dream of photographers and hotels and crying and Steve.

Avoiding that sort of physical contact didn’t make him feel any better, and neither did the dames he nailed every night. He didn’t know why he brought them home, because he’d always treated their apartment – shitty hole in the wall as it was – as a respected neutral ground. As far as he could help it, he didn’t take women back to there, out of fairness to Steve. And the odd times he had, he’d go as far as burying his face into his pillow or biting his arm until it bled just so he could stifle his sounds. It just would’ve felt wrong otherwise.

But after that night… He just couldn’t care anymore. He wanted to lose himself in the arms of whatever woman he could get his hands on; he wanted to bury himself inside of her and make her scream his name and moan and cry out and never stop making those noises so he could burn them into his mind and drown out the thoughts in his head of what Steve would sound like in that same position. He wanted to remind the world that Bucky Barnes was a ladies’ man – and he wanted Steve to be fully aware of that, too.

Going back to the docks helped bring back some positivity into his life, but not by much. He just tried harder to mask it from the world. From his best friend. The truth was nothing seemed to be working. So he’d just try harder.

Work during the day, drag Steve out on dates at night; drink and dance and remember for just a few hours what it felt like to not be tainted and not be diseased with unnatural thoughts… What it felt like not to be broken. He’d fuck all night and apologize to Steve the next morning, act like things were A-OK – and then do it all over again. Steve would just smile at him and is so goddamn understanding - and life goes on, with both of them trying.

And Bucky tries his best to ignore the way it fucking hurts so much.

May, 1938

Bucky loses his job again. This time, it’s Steve’s fault – sort of.

Here’s what happens: Bucky notices Steve standing off in the distance as the brunet and the rest of the dockworkers disperse for lunch – all shirtless and covered in sweat and dirt and looking like something straight out of a wet dream. Confused, Bucky goes over to the blond, eyebrows knit in confusion. He wipes at his brow to catch some beads of perspiration before they drip into his eyes. Before he can ask, Steve holds out Bucky’s tin lunchbox.

“You forgot your sandwich, you dope,” he explains with a small grin.

Bucky blinks at it and then smiles, taking it and giving his thanks. He hadn’t realized he’d left the apartment without his food – but then again, he always seems to be looking to get out of the apartment quicker than normal these days. He asks if Steve wants to hang out with him while he’s on his break and Steve says sure, so they find a place in the shade and take a seat on a concrete ledge.

Bucky gives Steve half of his sandwich – “No, Buck, you’re the one who needs it”; “Just shut up and take the sandwich, you punk” – and they chat. It feels like the way it’s always been between them. There’s no awkwardness or discomfort, and it gives Bucky mixed feelings. On the one hand,
he feels hope that nothing between them has changed; on the other, it reminds him of everything he’s trying to ignore.

Steve asks him what he’s doing today in terms of work, and Bucky looks down while he picks at his food and answers. He’s mid-sentence, though, when he glances back up to see that Steve is no longer paying attention. His face is cocked to the side, and he’s staring off at something.

“Steve?” Bucky asks, before turning his head to see what his friend is looking at.

He notices Paul, an older fellow with a loud voice and an even louder opinion, standing with some of the other guys. They’re engaged in conversation, and now that he’s paying attention, Bucky can hear what’s being said.

“…And I told her, ‘You think you can backtalk me, bitch? If it weren’t for me, you’d have no stinkin’ husband, and you’d be even fatter than you are now!’” (The other men laugh.) “Then she turns around and tries to tell me to fuck off, can ya believe that? So I gave her a nice little kiss with the back of my hand. I swear, fuck, the only reason I keep her around is cause I’m trying to nail her sister – nice piece of tail, mmMMM…”

Bucky frowns. He’s hung around Paul before on breaks; exchanged banter. But he never even knew the guy was married. He’d thought he was a nice enough guy – would’ve never pegged him to be saying the kind of shit he is now. He glances back at Steve and sees the look on his face. He knows that look. He immediately sighs and gives him a wary eye.

“Steve,” he warns. He can see the way pink lips are tightly pressed together as the blond listens; how slim fingers twitch against the bread of his sandwich. Then suddenly he’s putting it down, never taking his eyes off of Paul, and jumping from the ledge onto his feet.

“Steve, stop!”

But he doesn’t. He marches right over to Paul and sticks his nose where it doesn’t belong. Accuses Paul of being a pig and not knowing how to properly treat a lady. And Bucky’s jumping right off and following him in tow, trying to call him off his mission – and he understands, he does, why Steve is pissed at what he overheard. If they were anywhere else, Bucky probably would put Paul in his place, too. But there is a time and place for everything, and this isn’t it.

“The fuck are you saying to me, kid?” Paul barks, turning right towards Steve now, and they’re way too close for Bucky’s liking. The older man towers over his best friend, and he has far too much backup. Steve doesn’t just shut up like he should; he opens his mouth and keeps instigating, and now Bucky can’t keep up with who’s shouting over who, or what exactly is being said. Before it can escalate and Steve gets his face pummeled in, Bucky steps in between them, holding out one flat palm towards Steve and one towards Paul.

“Whoah, whoah, hey now,” he mediates, mostly keeping his gaze fixed on the bigger guy. “No need to get our hands dirty – he just doesn’t know when to keep quiet, trust me, I know,” he tells Paul, who’s scowling and fists at the ready and looking about ready to tear Steve into pieces. Bucky turns his chin over his shoulder and in a low, controlled voice, mutters to the blond, “Steve, go home. Now. I’ll see you when I’m done work.”

Steve looks like he’s going to refuse, but he sees the look on Bucky’s face, and he isn’t an idiot. He knows just as well at this point that this isn’t the time or place, and that he made an error to confront Paul – even if someone had to. His shoulders sag and he nods, but he keeps his glare on Paul and his jaw tense.
“Fine,” he replies curtly. “See ya, Buck.”

He turns and Bucky watches him start to go. He lowers his hands and straightens, turning so he can face Paul properly. Bucky isn’t impressed; had Paul even tried to lay a hand on Steve, it wouldn’t have mattered how many people he had to go through, there would’ve been a brawl.

“We good here?” he asks, voice sharp. He glances from man to man. “Yeah? Good.”

He only just turns to start walking away when Paul opens his mouth.

“‘See you when I’m done work?’ Never thought you were a faggot, Barnes. So that’s your little bitch, right?” He starts talking to his buddies, and they’re all sniggering and sneering. “Sure is one mouthy little shit, isn’t he, fellas? How much you wanna bet Barnes keeps the lights on when his little princess sucks his dick with that mouth?”

The sentence isn’t even fully out of Paul’s mouth when the older man’s jaw is met with a heavy fist.

In the end, it takes six guys to pull Bucky and Paul off of each other. No one else intervenes; everyone merely stands by in surprise and watches, though Paul’s goonies shout encouragement and egg their leader on. They roll around and land punches whenever possible, until Paul’s got quite the cut above his right eye and the left one is practically swollen shut. Bucky thinks his nose might be busted, and he can taste blood in his mouth.

And Bucky has no qualms about fighting dirty; not when he’s seeing red. When Paul’s wailing onto his face, Bucky’s fingers reach about and close around a small rock. He swings it up and nails his assailter across the side of the head. Paul drops off of him and Bucky takes the opportunity to spin them over so Bucky’s straddling him. And they’re a flurry of fists and spit and blood and profanities and threats.

Steve hears the commotion as soon as it starts and runs back over, but by the time he gets there, they’re already being split apart. Bucky tries to break free from the arms holding him back; arms still swinging and chest heaving up and down, and he’s looking at Paul so viciously, it almost frightens Steve.

So Bucky gets fired. All because he threw the first punch.

“Fine by me! Didn’t want to work at this shithole anymore anyways!” Bucky shouts over his shoulder as he stumbles forward, one arm slung around Steve’s shoulder as the latter steadies him as best as he can. He doesn’t mean it; he actually really enjoys working at the docks, and now he’s right back to square one again. But his pride refuses to let him walk away from this without at least getting the last word.

Steve apologizes profusely on their walk home, as the sun beats down on them and reduces them to a stinking, sweating mess. Bucky says little, using his mouth mostly to gather the blood and constantly spit it out. Steve notices his nose and says they’ll take a look at it when they get home. This time, Bucky flinches when he hears that word.

“I can clean my nose on my own, Steve. I’m not five,” Bucky mutters, ducking his head away when Steve tries to bring up a wet cloth to dab at it.
They’re both sitting on the couch, and Steve’s brought in a bowl of warm water, some bandages, gauze, and the cloth. Steve gives him an apprehending look, raising an eyebrow. “Gee, sound familiar?” he deadpans, but he doesn’t lower his hand with the cloth.

Bucky eyes it and then that stubborn face he’s known his entire life. Groaning and rolling his eyes, he mumbles, “Fine, whatever.” He stays still and watches the blond’s face as eyes narrow with concentration and those artistic little fingers make work at first gingerly cleaning the blood from his cheeks and chin. After a couple of silent minutes, Bucky’s voice is softer. “Is that really how I make you feel when I help you?”

Steve blinks and locks eyes with him quickly. He averts them just as fast, looking back down at where he’s wiping up crimson red from the cleft in his chin. (“First time I met you, I wanted to kiss the cleft on your chin…”) 

“Sometimes,” he answers honestly. His tone is gentle, in no way accusatory. Bucky frowns. “I mean, I understand that I need it most of the time,” the blond continues matter-of-factly. “I just hate feeling so useless. When you do things for me, or wrestle me around because you think I’m too small or weak to do it myself, I feel like I’m being babied. And it just reminds me of everything you do all the time that I can never seem to repay you for. Just… Makes me feel like I’m more of a burden than a friend.”

“Hey.” Bucky’s hand comes up and takes Steve’s chin, tilting it up so blue eyes meet his. His voice is stern. “You’re never a burden, you hear me? If you were, I’d have kicked you out by now. Don’t be like that, k?”

It’s posed as a question, but Steve knows Bucky’s leaving him no room to argue. All he can think to do is sigh and look back down. He finishes wiping the dried blood from his face and then soaks the cloth in the bowl of water to clean it out. White is stained red. He wrings it a few times and then turns back to now start working on cleaning Bucky’s actual nose, and the fresh blood dripping from his nostrils. He warns Bucky that it’ll sting, and it does, but Bucky doesn’t let it show. Steve swallows hard and pushes down – deep down – the fact that the brunet looks so very beautiful right now, even with a swollen nose and a split lip. He wants to lean forward and see how his blood would taste if he pressed their mouths together. It makes him feel awful inside, like a real asshole.

They’re silent again for a while. The reminder of all that had subtly changed between them weighs heavily in the room around them. After what feels like hours, Steve interrupts Bucky’s thoughts in a quiet voice.

"I'm sorry again 'bout getting you fired."

"Don't be; I was the one who chose to deck him."

“...Why did you hit him?”

Bucky looks away, lips pursing in a rigid line. He doesn’t answer at first. He remembers the disgusting things Paul said, the way he taunted him. He isn’t sure what got to him more – what had crossed the line… Whether it had been the fact that he was accusing him of being that way, or if it was the perverted, horrible things he was saying about Steve. Perhaps it’d been a combination of both.

In the end, he decides that this is one of those moments where honesty might be the best policy.

“He basically called us fairies. Said you were my bitch, called you mouthy… Then made a comment about you sucking my cock.”
He’s purposely being crude. He wants to see Steve flinch at the admission; wants some sort of confirmation that Steve finds the idea disgusting, just so he can push himself into believing the same thing. But the blond doesn’t give him that much. His face remains neutral, if only for his brows that furrow slightly. Bucky misunderstands his silence.

" Doesn't that bother you?" he pushes.

"No, " Steve answers finally. He lowers the washcloth with a sigh, and his face looks troubled. Blue eyes rise and meet his. "Why would it? All they were were words; they mean nothing... It bothers you, though."

That last part sounds like a realization. Steve sits back a little bit, increasing the space between them. Bucky chews on the inside of his cheek, frowning.

(He pushes down the part of him that already misses Steve touching him.)

(Steve pushes down the part of him that already misses touching Bucky.)

"It's just... it's wrong, Steve."

"Says who?"

"Says everybody."

It's a horrible answer, Bucky knows. He doesn't even know why he's saying any of this at all. Steve is just as confused as he is and gives him this look.

"Buck, we live in a neighbourhood with plenty of that. We see men and women holding hands and kissing the same sex all the time. We hung out with Bobby Fisher, and he was a queer."

"Bobby wasn't a queer...?"

Steve scoffs. "Oh, yes he was. That Geoffrey guy he was always hanging out with? They were sweet together."

Bucky says nothing, but recognizes that that actually makes sense in retrospect. He looks off, feeling ashamed.

"And we even know some of the drags and they're real swell people," the blond continues. "It's never been an issue before - so seriously, Buck, where's this coming from?"

"Nowhere, Steve - but, I mean - okay what about, I mean, what about the Bible? We were taught all our lives that that sorta thing ain't okay." (It's a last ditch effort and a low blow, bringing in Steve's faith like this. But he doesn't know what else to do and please Stevie, please, just agree with me on this, show me it's wrong so I can believe it, too...)

It's made worse by the fact that Steve's voice is so fucking genuine and gentle and good when he answers, and Bucky wants to cry--

"I think God just wants us to be happy. 'Us', as in, His children," the blond quickly corrects. He clears his throat and looks down at his hands. "Love is love, Bucky. It's not our place to judge others for what makes them happy. Would you hate me if I were like that?"

And Bucky was wrong, because that is the real low blow. His eyes snap to Steve. "Of course not," he answers right away.
(And he doesn't want to acknowledge that little hope he has - that dreadful, frightening possibility that maybe, just maybe, Steve's--)

"Well, there you go," his best friend shrugs. "I mean, I'm not, but the point is the same. I wouldn't be no different than the guy you've always known." Little hands rinse off the cloth and then wring it again, trying to rid it of as much blood as he can. Bucky's nose is still wet with the faint traces of blood. He sighs, turning back to Bucky and scooting closer to him. "Here," he says softly, pinching Bucky's chin in his thumb and fingers, and bringing the cloth back to his nose.

Grey eyes watch his face and never leave him. It's almost unnerving to Steve, the look Bucky's giving him right now. He doesn't think Bucky ever looked at him like this before, and he doesn't know what it means. Tenderly, he wipes the red from his upper lip and then dabs at his nostrils again. Bucky winces.

"Sorry." Steve reacts automatically, pulling his hand away. To both of their surprise, Bucky's own flies up and snaps around his wrist, stopping it in mid air. Steve looks from it to Bucky, question marks in his eyes.

Neither of them say anything; they just look. Bucky wonders if Steve can hear his heart racing; Steve feels like he's seconds away from collapsing into an asthma attack, and he hopes to God his inhaler is where he last left it.

"Stevie, I..."

The words get lost in his throat. He doesn't know how to say... whatever it is he wants to say. He's not even sure he fully knows. So they just continue staring. He never knew Steve's baby blues could look so doe-eyed... That his face could look anymore innocent and pure and goddamn good... His own orbs flicker down to those pink lips, and stop it, stop it, STOPITNOW!

He pulls back (didn't even realize he'd started leaning in); lets go of the tiny wrist (bones so weak and frail he could easily snap them if he tried). Steve blinks and Bucky thinks for a second he sees disappointment flash across his features. Then it disappears and he wonders if he'd just imagined it. The blond clears his throat and gets up, dumping the cloth into the bowl. He picks up the gauze and tosses it to Bucky.

(They will not talk about it. No, they will not. They will pretend and carry on and lie, because it's a thing they do sometimes.)

Steve gathers the things on the table and heads to the kitchen, saying in a (shaky?) voice, "Shove some of them up your nose and keep your head tilted back for at least ten minutes."

Bucky watches him go. "Kay..."

(They will not talk about it. No, they will not.)

That night, Bucky's sitting in the living room, dealing himself cards in a game of solitaire. His nose is sensitive (he's accidentally knocked it more than once), but was able to remove the gauze hours ago. His bottom lip is a bit tender too, which means he's constantly cursing every time he forgets and bites it in thought. Steve's been in their room for the last little while, presumably to work on his latest sketch. Bucky's itching to go in there and continue his game on his side of the cots - just so he can peek at the drawing, see what it is (see if maybe it's of him). He knows Steve has sketched him before, both to his knowledge and when Steve thought he wasn't looking. He'd always chalked it up to the artist just happening to lack inspiration in their surroundings... Bucky was the only sort of
model he ever had - that had to be the reason, right?

(C'mon Steve, draw me now. I've gained some practice; I move 'real nice' and I can be quite the subject - could even make a profession out of it. Don't believe me? Oh, I've been told so. C'mon, let me show you how fucking obedient and pliant I can be, c'mon.)

But then Steve walks in, putting an end to that thought, and he's in the middle of doing up a tie. Bucky glances over at him, raising an eyebrow.

"You goin' out?" He can't help but sound surprised.

"We're going out," the blond corrects. He can't seem to get the knot right. He's never been overly good at tying his ties.

"Since when?"

"Since you've seemed a little off tonight, and I'm not gonna let you stay in and mope. C'mon, go get dressed, you're still in your work stuff."

Bucky doesn't move.

"I don't feel like drinking."

"You always feel like drinking."

"We no longer have the money for that sorta thing," he tries instead. It's not true; he still has some money left over from that night. But he's pretty sure Steve doesn't know and that's what counts.

But the blond head of hair just shakes, though blue eyes don't look up from the fabric that still won't cooperate. "I had a few bucks lying around. I'm the reason you lost your job, so it's on me." He pauses; makes a soft, frustrated sound as his fingers fumble. "Look, can ya just let me do this for ya? Just be a pal and say yes, alright?"

Bucky wants to argue; he really doesn't feel like going out. But he knows what something as important as returning a favour - making up for a wrongdoing - means to his best friend, so he acquiesces. Sighing, he shakes his head and stands.

"Fine," he says, walking over to Steve. He bats the smaller hands away and takes the tie in his, already starting to undo the mess Steve had managed to create. "Here, I got it."

He fixes the tie, does it up right, within thirty seconds. He wishes he could feel Steve's eyes on him, but the shorter man is looking away the whole time. It isn't until he's finished that Steve does look up. There's a palpable energy that surges between them for a fraction of a moment.

And fuck him, if Bucky's never wanted to lean down and kiss someone so badly.

The thought makes him turn with a grunt and head for the bedroom to change, leaving Steve standing there, wondering to himself what the hell that had been all about.

Steve takes him to The Goblet. Bucky has to fight every urge to beg him otherwise. Steve tells him they haven't been there in a while and he misses their bar food. Bucky doesn't know how to argue something like that.

"What about that girl over there? She's pretty," Steve leans in and says from across the small table.
Bucky barely glances up from his drink.

"Fucked her already," he mutters, looking back down and then taking a swig from his whiskey.

Steve makes a face. He hates when Bucky uses that kind of language. Sighing, he continues looking across the bar. He's been at this for almost forty-five minutes now; trying to pick out a nice-looking dame for Bucky to go dance with. He's conflicted about it; he wants to try and make Bucky happy, and usually he's happy on the dance floor with a beautiful lady on his arm. But selfishly, every attempt is also like a punch to the stomach. He just tells himself to be a good friend and stop thinking so much about himself. The night's supposed to be about Bucky, not his own messed up, confusing feelings. He notices a redhead who's making eyes at the brunet without shame.

"What about that one? She looks like she's dying to dance with you."

Bucky sits up, shaking his head and looking exasperated. "What, are you suddenly my matchmaker now?" He scoffs and chuckles a little, but Steve hears the bitterness in his tone. He doesn't know why it's there. Then Bucky says, "It's like I'm turning into you. This is some horrible dream."

Steve flinches, wounded. Shoulders slumping, he sits back against his chair and looks away, brows knit. "Okay," he eventually mumbles. He gets up. "I'm going to get another drink."

"Wait." Bucky's hand snaps out and grabs his wrist again, and Steve feels like it burns where Bucky touches him. He hopes that the elder won't be able to feel his pulse beating hard and fast beneath his fingers. Bucky sighs. "I'm sorry, I'm being a real asshole tonight. I'm sorry, buddy."

He gives him the most apologetic look that Steve can't help but sit back down and frown with concern. "What can I do?"

Bucky looks to the dance floor in thought and then answers before thinking, "Come dance with me."

Steve visibly gapes at him. "What? Bucky, you know I don't dance, I--"

"Yeah, I know. You always say no. But you asked me what you could do to make me feel better, and I'm tellin' ya. Come dance and have some fun and I'll feel better."

Steve gulps. How is he supposed to say no to that? He can't. So he doesn't. "Fine," he sighs. "But if you laugh at me..."

"I won't laugh at you."

"And don't even think about trying to sneak a slow song in with me. I ain't one of your dames."

He sees the smirk on Steve's face - trying so hard to make him smile - and Bucky can't help but chuckle. He lifts up his hands in surrender. "Well shit, there goes my whole scheme for the evening..."

They wind up dancing. Steve's awful at it. His feet are entirely off beat and it's like he's made it his personal mission to bump into as many people as possible - even knocking their drinks out of their hands at times. Bucky loses count of how many times Steve's shouting "I'm sorry!" over the music. He tries to back out a few times, too; says it's a mistake and he's ruining Bucky's good time and he's going to go sit back down. Bucky just grabs him by the scruff of his neck and manhandles him back to his side.

"C'mon, Stevie, you're so much better than this when it's just you and me! Pretend we're back at the apartment!"
He starts instructing the blond right there in the middle of the dance floor. Bucky starts expertly doing the Lindy, because he knows it's Steve's favourite, and is raising his voice to direct Steve into falling in line with him. It hardly works and Bucky does laugh - quite a lot, actually. But by that point, it's the happiest Steve's seen him in months (a real, genuine sort of happy), so he doesn't make good on any threats, and he doesn't try to leave again.

(And my oh my, do they ever look lively, those two boys... Interesting, how that kid responds to the short one...)

Gradually, Steve starts to accept his general awkwardness, and even starts using it to his advantage. He purposely dances even sillier, laughs at himself easier; anything he can do to keep Bucky laughing, too. They kick and swing and move and laugh and things feel back to normal again, they really do.

Bucky starts to feel like things can get better; maybe there's hope. Maybe things can be as they were.

They have to abruptly stop when Steve's asthma kicks in without warning, making him double over and hold his knees while he wheezes. Bucky immediately goes to his side and rubs his back, murmuring encouraging instructions in his ear to get through it that cannot be overheard by anyone else thanks to the music.

(And that's so precious...)

When the blond is able to start walking, Bucky helps him go back to their table and sit down. He fetches Steve a glass of water and continues rubbing circles on his back to help him get it down without choking. Steve insists he's fine - even offers to continue dancing once he's had the chance to calm down - and Bucky full-on beams now. Feels glad that Steve talked him into going out, because it's shaping up to be a good night after all. They're both sweating like crazy, and they lock eyes and find themselves chuckling again. Bucky pushes his brown tresses back and straightens up, letting out a deep breath and glancing around.

"Hey buddy, I gotta piss; you gonna be okay on your own for a minute?"

Steve gives him that indignant look again and Bucky rolls his eyes.

"Alright, wise guy. I'll be right back. Don't take any candy from strangers!" he shouts over his shoulder with a grin as he strides in the direction of the men's restroom. Steve rolls his eyes back but he's got a little smile on his face and it makes Bucky's heart warm.

(Hey kid, got a minute? I wanna talk to ya...)

Bucky relieves himself and then washes his hands, looking at his reflection in the mirror. He looks pretty rough, but he likes to think it gives him a bit of an edge. Almost makes him look manlier. More rugged. Maybe even a little dangerous. He feels confident that no one will try to mess with Steve on their way home tonight with him looking like this. Shaking his hands dry, he walks back out into the bar, eyes drawn right back to Steve as if the blond were magnetized.

Bucky's grin vanishes. He stops dead in his tracks. He thinks he might have also stopped breathing, and his heart rate spikes.

Steve's smiling and nodding and chatting and shaking hands, and of course it would be, why wouldn't it be, because he's like a nightmare that Bucky just can't shake.

Peter. He'd found him.
Next chapter: Steve and Bucky are forced into a situation neither one of them is prepared to face.

(There will be smut.)

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

**Tumblr**
To Survive

Chapter Summary

Steve gets lured into Peter's trap; Bucky follows to try and protect him.

After tonight, their friendship will never be the same again.

Chapter Notes

*WARNING: Non-con sex in this chapter. Steve and Bucky may wind up enjoying it, but it's still being forced upon them. ALSO, potential trigger warning for underage masturbation and handjob in the 1931 flashback.

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Regrets collect like old friends
Here to relive your darkest moments.
I can see no way, I can see no way...
And all of the ghouls come out to play.
And every demon wants his pound of flesh,
But I like to keep some things to myself.
I like to keep my issues drawn;
It's always darkest before the dawn.
And I've been a fool and I've been blind.
I can never leave the past behind.
I can see no way, I can see no way...
I'm always dragging that horse around -
Our love is pastured, such a mournful sound -
Tonight I'm gonna bury that horse in the ground.
So I like to keep my issues drawn;
But it's always darkest before the dawn...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky’s not sure how long he stands there. Somehow, it’s long enough, and yet neither Steve nor Peter looks his way. The heart pounds so fast, pumping adrenaline through his veins; too thin to carry it all, too weak to handle it. Somehow his legs keep him upright, though falling would be a sweet relief. If he collapsed, people would notice, and Steve would undoubtedly run to his side. Maybe in the commotion, Bucky could sneak them out of the bar. He’d try to start planning their escape route safely home – slipping away from Peter’s claws and dodging his attempts to follow them – and he’d get them home and find some sort of explanation later.

He’d do this, of course, if his brain hadn’t stopped functioning.

It feels like one of those moments where everything is moving in slow motion, as if he were dreaming. He watches Steve’s lips move in conversation, brows quirk, eyes narrow, but Bucky can’t
hear a thing and all of the blond’s movements look way too slow. He dreads what Peter is telling him.

The music sounds muddled and hollow, and it’s a strange thing – that the world continues to spin for everyone else, but for him, in this moment, it feels as though it’s all coming to an end. When he rediscovers how to use his legs, he’s advancing towards their table. The golden head of hair turns and Steve gives Bucky a small look of surprise, and oh fuck, oh sweet God in Heaven, does he know does he know what did he tell him—

“Hey Buck,” and the small, cautious half-smile pulls one side of Steve’s mouth up. He looks almost guilty about something. He looks almost guilty? Bucky keeps his eyes fixed on his best friend; refuses to look at Peter. But he can feel those green eyes burning holes into him, and he barely knows Peter at all, but he knows him well enough to know that he’s probably smirking.

(“You move real nice, kid…”)

Steve gestures to the older man, as if forgetting his manners. “Buck, this is Robert. He’s a photographer in the real ritzy part of New York, isn’t that cool?” he introduces almost nervously.

Grey eyes snap over to Peter now, confusion evident. Robert. He’s telling Steve that his name is Robert. Peter matches his stare – sizes him up, daring him to call him on his bluff. And in that moment, Bucky realizes two things: that Peter hasn’t told Steve a thing about their history, and that this is what’s going to be used against him. Cooperation in exchange for silence.

Bucky glares. “Evening, Robert. What’re you doin’ hanging ‘round a dump like this if you’re from the rich part of town?”

He’s trying to provoke a stumble in Peter’s façade, but it does nothing. Thin lips curl further upward and his orbs flash dangerously.

“I grew up in this area. I like to come back here sometimes to… readopt my roots.”

They remain frozen for several moments; Bucky glaring and Peter smiling and Steve looking back and forth between the two of them without understanding. The latter wonders what’s gotten Bucky so wound up; he looks about ready to leap across the table and start a fight. But then again, it could just be his instincts kicking in that this guy will maybe try and mug them in the alleyway out back. It wouldn’t be the first time. He opens his mouth to assure Bucky that no, don’t worry, this guy’s on the level, honest, when Bucky beats him to it.

“Well this has been fun. Sorry for cuttin’ this short, but my friend and I were just leavin’ .”

“We were?” Steve asks, brows knitting.

Peter’s smirk grows into a sneer, but he remains unmoving. Stoically so. It’s unsettling. “Oh, my mistake,” he surprisingly replies in a falsely polite tone. He shoots the smaller man a smile so friendly it completely changes his intimidating appearance – and it’s like nothing Bucky’s ever seen before. He looks approachable, charming, trustworthy… Just another fellas out for the night and absolutely harmless. “I was just having a chat with Stevie here, and I was under the impression that – you know what? Never mind, my mistake. You two have a great night.”

Bucky’s whole body tenses and his nostrils flare as a seething hatred washes through him. Stevie. No one calls him that but… He bites it back, but he visibly snarls at the older man. Steve, however, is focusing his blue eyes on the predator.

“No, no, wait. Hold on,” he says, holding out a hand to catch Peter’s attention. He turns next to
Bucky and explains: “Robert’s been lookin’ for a subject to photograph for his editorial and he came over to ask me if I’d be interested.”

“Your friend here is exactly what we’re looking for; very photogenic, I bet,” Peter interjects from Steve’s side. He’s unblinking and all focus on Bucky; waiting to see if the brunet will cave and give himself up in order to save his friend. Will you do it? his eyes dare. And Bucky should, but he’s not at that point yet where he can admit what happened – can’t face the possibility of coming clean and watching Steve’s face morph into one of disgust. So he keeps trying to hold on to his current plan, which would be so much simpler if Steve weren’t so fucking oblivious.

Because the blond is nodding, as if Peter’s comment explains everything perfectly, and he looks back to Bucky. ‘He offered to pay me fifty bucks to go pose for him a bit. No more than a coupla’ hours tops, he said.’

Bucky’s blood freezes. And there it is. Luring Steve into the exact same trap he’d been sold into. He imagines Steve in some hotel room - in a part of town where no one knows his name and he doesn’t know his way home – while music plays and he’s pumped with liquor and he becomes increasingly less coordinated than he already is. And he knows that even though he’ll be falling over and there will be nothing sexy about his movements, Peter’s camera will be snapping away and he’ll tell Steve all sorts of things – how good he looks, how perfectly he moves. And Steve will listen because he wants to hear it. The blond won’t admit it, but Bucky sees it – the craving to feel attractive. Maybe that isn’t his motivation right now, but it will be. He’s fallen into this trap himself.

And Steve – who barely curses and blushes at the mention of sex and whom Bucky has never even suspected of even touching himself (even after three years of living together, in one bedroom, no less) – will be told to strip his clothes and masturbate, or worse. And if Steve said no… what would happen if Steve said no? Would his body even let him get that far with all the stress the request alone would put on him?

Now he’s picturing a thin, breakable body lying on the floor of a hotel room - in a part of town where no one knows his name and he doesn’t know his way home – while music plays and Peter laughs, while Steve makes horrible choking sounds and gasps for breaths that just will not come… Reaches out a hand in a silent, desperate plea for Peter to help him, and Peter will just take his photo, because you sure do look pretty when you beg.

The image literally ends there because Bucky bites it back; can’t let it progress or else he’s going to either puke or start crying. Instead, he just grabs Steve’s wrist and yanks him from the table, dragging him away a few feet and then turning them so Bucky’s back is to Peter and he’s shielding him from Steve.

“Bucky, what—”

“Are you outta your mind?” Bucky cuts in. His voice is way too nervous and stern, and he’s sure the same emotions are written all over his face but he just can’t help it. Steve gives a small shake of his head, mouth open to reply, and eyes still confused. Bucky holds up a finger to silence him and keeps going. “You don’t even know this jerk and you’re gonna follow him to God-knows-where and let him photograph you like you’re some dame?”

Something peculiar flashes across Steve’s face and he looks wounded before he looks offended. “What – you sayin’ I’m not nice-enough lookin’ for someone to actually want to photograph me?”

Bucky closes his mouth and gives Steve a warning look, but it’s layered with a deeply rooted emotion that comes from years of friendship. “You know that’s not what I mean.”
Steve’s shoulders slump and he looks away. Yeah, he knows. He knows Bucky would never be saying something like that. He doesn’t know why the idea stung so badly. He then saves face by shrugging and meeting grey eyes again. “This is my choice, Buck.”

Thinking fast, Bucky tries to change his strategy. “How do ya know he even has that kind of money?”

“He showed me.”

**Of course he did.**

The older boy shakes his head, impatience and desperation growing. “That’s not the **point!** This doesn’t seem at **all** strange to you - that he’d be willin’ to pay you all that cash for a coupla’ photographs? There’s always a catch, Steve - c’mon, you’re not a complete idiot!”

(All things he realizes he should’ve seen himself. But that’s the thing – he **is** the complete idiot; not Steve. Never Steve. No.)

Steve frowns, looking embarrassed but (**fuck, Stevie, now’s not the time**) stubborn and defiant. Then his resolve seems to weaken a tad and he sighs.

“Look, Buck, I’ve been tryin’ to look for work but it’s not exactly like anyone’s dyin’ to hire a skinny asthmatic who constantly has to take sick days because he can’t get outta bed.”

“Who **asked** you to work?”

“No one, and that’s the problem! You’re my friend, Bucky; you’re not my parent. You shouldn’t be the only one expected to have jobs and make money. And thanks to me, now you don’t even have a job.”

“I still have some money saved up—”

Steve shakes his head, and Bucky notices how tired he actually looks. (Habit makes him worry that the beginnings of summer pollen might be irritating the blond’s sinuses; that the growing mugginess might be activating his asthma.)

“Buck – **Bucky, come on.** I’m a grown man and I’m more than capable of making my own decisions. I promised you I’d pay you back one day and this will give us more than enough money to live on easy street for a while. You can take your time finding new work, and maybe we can finally take those art classes we always talked about - the nice ones, uptown at the college.”

Bucky makes a quick, weak sound as he realizes that he’s in a losing battle. His anxiety skyrockets but he tries to remain as calm as he can.

“Steve, stop – you don’t owe me anything!”

Steve gives him a sad, self-deprecating smile. “C’mon, we both know that’s not true.”

“You’ve got **nothing** to prove--”

“It ain’t about provin’ anythin’. This is just me playin’ my part. C’mon Buck, it’s just for a coupla’ hours – what’s the worst that can happen?” (**Oh Steve, you have no idea...**) “I can handle myself,” he adds.

He gauges Bucky’s expression, and just as Bucky’s trying to get a handle on his racing thoughts,
Steve says the one thing that scares him shitless: “I already said yes.”

“No.” Bucky presses his lips in a firm line and gives one decisive shake of his head. “I’m not letting you do this.”

The blond chuckles humourlessly. “It’s not your decision to make, Bucky.”

Bucky opens his mouth to argue – really put his foot down now - when he sees Peter approach from his peripherals; hands stuffed casually into the pockets of his finely-pressed slacks. “Sorry to interrupt, but I couldn’t help but overhear some of the conversation.” And the sonofabitch is a real good actor, because for a split second – before Bucky registers that it’s him – he almost buys the good guy act. But now he’s right back to glaring daggers. Steve, none the wiser, gives an exasperated smile and tilts his head to indicate that he’s listening to whatever Peter is about to say.

Green eyes move between the two. “I understand that you’re trying to look out for your friend,” he says to Bucky (whose fists clench by his sides, because don’t you talk to me about Steve, you don’t have the fucking right). “I think that’s mighty admirable of you to want to make sure he’s treated right. So I’ll tell ya what: I’ll pay you each fifty dollars if you both come. Two models are better than one, right? And you two have a wonderful dynamic together – I’m sure it’ll translate beautifully on my camera.”

“He’s not going with you,” Bucky hisses.

Steve sighs and makes his choice – steps away from Bucky and closer to Peter… and Bucky has never felt more betrayed. Steve cants his head back at him from over his shoulder and gives him an apologetic look. It’s sincere and guilt in their purest forms, mixed together to make that delicate face look almost pained. Bucky’s eyes beg him to reconsider; to just turn back now and leave with him. We can go home and forget this ever happened… Please, Stevie… Please just come home with me, and we can have a boring rest of the night in and you can draw me as many times as you want and I won’t complain, won’t even open my mouth once, I promise, just say you’ll come home with me.

“I’ll see ya later, Buck – I promise,” the blond says quietly. Before that look Bucky’s giving him can talk him out of it, he breaks eye contact and turns away to leave. Peter watches him pass by and his eyes drop down to linger on that adorably tiny ass, unfortunately hidden beneath slacks far too baggy for his frame. Bucky’s breath hitches; he sees it. And he’s about to see red when Peter shoots him a triumphant, dark grin.

I win.

“Wait!”

The two men turn and look back at Bucky, and is that hope in Steve’s eyes accompanying that naïve little smile?

(Fuck.)

Bucky doesn’t trust himself to speak anymore, so he just grabs his jacket, face contorted with anger, and follows them out of the bar.

"You want a drink, Buck?"

Steve holds out the glass of brandy; sleeves rolled up to the elbows, revealing fragile, delicate wrists
and forearms. They’re in the hotel room – fancy, like the first one was – and they’ve been there for a little while now and Peter’s smoking away. Bucky’s sitting on the window frame, arms crossed against his belly and a Lucky sticking out of his fingers. His nerves are shot to hell, and his heart’s racing so fast that his skin prickles and he feels like he could get sick at any moment. He shoots the glass a sparing look but he doesn’t want Peter’s fucking brandy and Peter’s fucking fake courtesy and Peter’s fucking tricks. He just wants to get the hell out of there.

But he can’t without Steve. And Steve has no intention of leaving any time soon.

He half-heartedly raises his hand and shakes his head, jaw tense and eyes slightly narrowed. He eyes the drink in Steve’s other hand. “Careful not to get yourself slammed.”

Steve rolls his eyes, putting Bucky’s rejected glass down and taking a sip of his own in response. “I can handle myself, jerk.”

He expects Bucky to laugh at that – a crack of a smile, something – but instead, Bucky’s eyes meet his and there’s almost a warning in them. He’s deadly serious. So Steve takes another small sip before putting his drink down. Bucky’s already very unhappy about being there; he doesn’t want to make things worse.

The photographer gets all of his equipment ready and neatly laid out, and Bucky notices that there’s no radio this time. The silence in the room – save for the fidgeting and the preparation and Steve’s little attempts at conversation – weighs heavily on Bucky’s ears. He twitches and flicks the ash from his cigarette onto the floor in a pitiful act of rebellion, before sticking it between his lips and taking a shaky drag.

“So how long you been a photographer?” Steve asks the older man, having given up on trying to get a response out of his friend.

The raven-haired man doesn’t look up from his camera, but gets a small smile. “About four years.”

Steve seems impressed. “And you already established such a thriving career? How’d ya do it?”

Shut up, Steve. Just shut up. And this is even worse than when it had been him; Bucky sees that now. Because Peter has appealed to Steve on an artistic level – presented himself as a man with a creative vision, just like the blond, and providing Steve with the opportunity to be on the other side of the process for a change. Steve knows what it’s like to be an artist with a muse, and now he gets to try his hand at being that muse.

“It’s not my career. I’d say it’s more of a… hobby. But it’s all about the resources, Stevie. I know how to network. It ain’t about what you know, but who you know – get what I’m saying?”

He looks up now, right into Steve’s eyes. The blond nods. Peter grins – wolfish and bleached and falsely perfect – and then holds up his camera. “Alright, you ready, boys?”

Steve looks to Bucky with anticipation, but the brunet doesn’t move. Peter just shrugs and points the camera at Steve and starts clicking away, even though Steve hasn’t done anything yet. The blond squirms a little as his cheeks start to turn pink.

“Whaddaya want me to do?”

“What do you normally do for fun?”

Steve thinks for a moment and then shrugs. “I like drawin’ but I didn’t bring my stuff with me.”
Peter pauses and fishes through his bag, pulling out a notepad and a pencil. He tosses them onto the bed and then nods to them. “It ain’t much but it’ll put you in the right mindset.”

Steve hesitates, and Bucky sees the vulnerability flicker across his features. Steve may love to draw, but it’s a personal thing for him. The truth is, he’s very self-conscious about his abilities – downplays them to the point where he really just doesn’t understand how talented he is – and with the exception of art teachers and his best friend, he’s never openly shown his sketches to people. But then he’s nodding and awkwardly getting onto the bed, picking the items up.

“It’s not gonna be very good,” he predicts. He sits against the headboard, and his body looks so tiny on the King size bed. Bucky wants to go sit directly in front of him so he can shield the blond from the lens of the camera, but he feels like he’s stuck in a bad dream and he can’t move his limbs. So he just watches the scene – watches Peter watching Steve.

“What do you want me to draw?”

Peter brings the camera back up and continues shooting. “Whatever ya want, Stevie. Just draw whatever makes you happy.”

“Stop calling him that,” Bucky’s voice cuts in, sharp and deadly like a blade. Both men glance over at him and Bucky keeps his gaze unfaltering on the older man. “Stop calling him Stevie.”

Peter narrows his eyes and then grins, big and wide. He’s getting to Bucky; gets off on it. Yeah, your prick’s probably hard as a rock seeing how defiant I’m being right now, isn’t it, you sick fuck? He raises his hands in what looks like a friendly surrender. “Hey, whatever you say, boss,” he replies before smiling charmingly at Steve. “I’ll call you ‘kiddo’.” He points between Bucky and Steve. “Kid and kiddo.”

And for the first time, Bucky sees Steve look momentarily annoyed. Peter couldn’t have known that Steve hates being treated like a child; that it’s one of his biggest pet peeves. Bucky’s hoping it’ll be enough for the blond to voice some sort of retort, but nothing comes, and dammit Steve, you’re usually always so bullheaded and loud-mouthed, where the hell is that now!?

Money. That’s why Steve is keeping quiet. He sits there on the bed and has to swallow down the ball of indignation he feels at the way Peter’s referring to him and his best friend. The fact is, he likes the idea of helping out a fellow artist, but it doesn’t justify putting Bucky in a situation he’s clearly unhappy about being part of. But the cash – being able to earn his keep and pay Bucky back for everything he’s ever done for him – that’s enough. He wishes Buck had never come; he would’ve preferred only having to worry about himself.

Because he does worry. It seems stupid, because he’s about half of Bucky’s weight and height and wouldn’t be able to do shit for him if Bucky was on the ropes in a fight. But he’d do whatever he could. His own regard means nothing to him in comparison to Bucky Barnes’s. So he ignores the sound of the shutter and the uncomfortable sense of self-consciousness and loathing he feels at being scrutinized and studied based off his looks – which he knows are nothing to be awed by. Instead, he glances up quickly at Bucky in order to momentarily take in his features and memorize them, before setting the cheap pencil to paper and drawing what makes him happy.

Bucky doesn’t notice because he’s too busy keeping a hawk’s eye on the photographer – but Peter does. The camera shows him everything, and the best part is it doesn’t lie. He sees clear as day the way the skinny boy steals peaks at the brunet while the latter isn’t looking. He notices the drawing coming to life on the notepad.
And oh yes, that is interesting.

It’s a heartbreaking sort of irony, really… That Peter of all people realizes the feelings struggling to come to the surface in both Brooklyn boys – before either Steve or Bucky does.

He grins to himself; decides to dig a bit deeper. “So kiddo, you got yourself a sweetheart?”

Bucky’s jaw clenches. He pitches his smoke out the window and immediately lights up another one. “Don’t answer that, Stevie.”

“No, I don’t.” Steve answers at the exact same time. Bucky sighs and shakes his head, looking down and momentarily giving up trying to gain control over the situation.

“But you like the ladies real nice, don’t ya?”

Steve’s brows crease and he looks up at Peter for a split second. Clears his throat; goes back to his drawing. Bucky feels moments away from having to bite his own hand to stop himself from screaming. As if purposely trying to goad the older boy – the raven-haired man noticed the rage in Bucky’s eyes - he turns the camera quickly in his direction to snap one single photo of Bucky’s face. Then he’s right back to shooting Steve.

“Yeah, I like them fine,” Steve answers, a little quiet now. More guarded. Bucky can hear it in his voice; gears are getting oiled up and slowly starting to turn in the blond’s head.

“When was the last time you fucked a dame, Steve?”

“Watch it!” Bucky snaps, back straightening and body going on the defence.

Peter grins at him. “I think he can answer his own questions.”

Bucky pushes himself from the window and starts to step towards him. “Oh yeah?” His voice is rising in volume.

Steve watches with alarm and throws a hand up. “Hey, stop it. Buck, it’s fine. It’s okay.” He clears his throat and addresses Peter, and his voice is calm and confident and a total lie. “First of all, I don’t much care for that language – I would never do that with a lady because they deserve more than that. But to answer your question, I never have.” Now he squirms a bit, his cheeks growing red as the weight of the admission leaves his mouth. He tries to immerse himself back in his drawing. “Can we please talk about something else?”

And voila! There it is! That epiphany Peter’s been searching for; evident by the blush on Steve’s cheeks, the inexperience laden in his voice, the awkwardness of his limbs… And the way he looks at the kid. He straightens and lowers the camera casually, causing both boys to watch him warily. Sitting back against the table in the room, he plucks out another cigarette and lights it up. Takes his time to suck its smoke and let it billow out from his parted lips.

“So what I’m doing, Stevie, is quite the artistic piece;” he suddenly starts explaining. There’s something in his tone now that wasn’t there before. It’s business-like, but hiding something much darker. When Steve keeps his eyes down on the notepad, Peter spares a glance at Bucky before walking forward towards the bed. He chuckles and takes another long drag of his smoke before blowing it out in Steve’s direction. Bucky flinches; Steve ignores it. Peter grins and then reaches his hand out. With a tap of his index finger, he ashes on Steve’s drawing. The blond tenses and looks ahead now, eyes slightly wider with anger and fear, but the rest of his face is still calm. He still isn’t looking at Peter, though – but that’s okay, kiddo.
Because Peter just takes another long drag and ashes on top of Steve’s head.

Everything happens too quickly: the blond drops the pad and pencil and immediately starts swatting at his hair, jumping up from the bed and springing in a split second to Bucky’s side. Peter laughs. Bucky’s face turns crazed and he shouts profanities at the older man as his body activates. He charges towards Peter --

And then stops just as suddenly when Peter casually pulls out the M1911 pistol that neither knew had been snuggly held in the waistline of his slacks, pressed to his back. He points it up at Bucky’s head.

“No!” Steve shouts, his heart leaping into his throat.

Bucky looks visibly frightened. But he swallows hard and tries to gain control over his body. Holding up his hands slowly, he speaks with caution: “Hey… Alright… Look, I’m sorry… Just… Put that thing down.”

Peter just smiles. Glances at Steve and then experimentally draws his arm away from Bucky so that the gun is now pointed directly at the blond. It’s disturbing, the way that gesture actually brings some sort of comfort to Steve – to have the barrel aimed at him rather than Bucky. The brunet disagrees with this sentiment, however, and immediately side steps, hands still outstretched, so that he’s once again blocking the path between Peter and his best friend.

“And my, oh my, it’s truly fascinating – the way that this kid is willing to take a bullet, end his own life if need be, for the little one. Peter wants to see how far he can push Bucky’s resolve. Grinning, he steps forward at a dangerously slow pace, as if advancing on his prey; gun still at the ready and it’s scary, the way his hand doesn’t shake. He continues walking towards Bucky until the barrel of the gun is snugly pressed against the boy’s forehead. Bucky doesn’t flinch, but his eyes are wide and the terror is all over his face now and his delicious body starts trembling.

It’s all too much for Steve. His heart rate elevates to dangerous levels before he can help it and suddenly his lungs feel as though they’re being held and twisted and yanked in a vice grip. The sharp screech of a high-pitched gasp fills the room, filling Bucky with even more dread than his current predicament ever could. Steve stumbles back against the wall as he’s hit with a full-blown asthma attack, and when the room starts spinning, he collapses to the floor.

Bucky breaks. “Please!” he practically shouts, eyes still on Peter. “He needs my help, please! Please!”

Peter holds off for a few seconds, still smirking. He looks enthralled. Eventually, after what feels like years, he backs up enough to gesture the gun in Steve’s direction, giving Bucky permission. The brunet doesn’t waste a second. He spins around and drops to his knees and pulls Steve to him, trying not to cry as he starts rambling helplessly to encourage him through his attack. Steve stares up at him and looks to Peter and the gun frequently, and it prevents his constricting lungs from easing up in the slightest.

“C’mon Stevie… Breathe! Breathe for me! It’s alright, it’s okay. We’re gonna be okay, just focus on me, come on, buddy, please…”

Steve’s hands fly out and start feeling around the floor aimlessly. It’s his way of signalling to Bucky
that he needs his inhaler. Nodding, Bucky starts looking around desperately for his jacket, where he
knows he always keeps his inhaler when they go out. He’s only searching for a second when his
eyes rise to Peter.

The black-haired man grins and is holding up the device in his hand (Steve’s jacket is strewn on the
bed). “This what you’re looking for?” he asks conversationally. “Is this what you want?”

Bucky nods, terrified and angry and--

Peter holds it out but then retracts it just as quickly. “See, it didn’t have to come down to any of this.
I don’t like being the bad guy. I’m actually really nice once you get to know me. I’m a nice guy,
James. I just don’t like people getting up in my personal space. You intruded in my space, and that
made me feel threatened. You wouldn’t like it if I did that to you, would you?”

“Please!” Bucky pleads. The sound of Steve’s wheezing and gasping is swallowing up most of
Peter’s words.

“I’ll give it to you, don’t worry. All I’m asking in return is for you to give me something back. So,
I’ll give you this, and then you do something for me. That’s how a business arrangement works,” he
explains calmly, as if speaking to a child. He’s still smiling, but his eyes are icy and precarious.
“Then we can go back to having a pleasant evening. I’m having a lot of fun, and this is nice, isn’t it?
It’s so much nicer when we can all get along. Don’t you think?”

“Yes!” Bucky cries, reaching out his hand. “Please!”

Peter regards him and then chucks the inhaler. Bucky scrambles for it then shakes it before sticking it
in Steve’s mouth. “Here we go, Steve, it’s right here, come on. One, two, three.” He presses down
on the top and listens to the medicine blasting into Steve’s lungs. Small, bony fingers clutch onto his
shirt as the body in his arms shudders violently. They repeat this process two more times, with the
brunet’s voice cracking as he babbles weak attempts at reassurance. Steve’s breathing finally evens
out and he slumps against Bucky, completely exhausted. Bucky wants to cradle him close and sob,
but he doesn’t get the chance.

“Get him on the bed.”

Bucky eyes the gun and knows better than to fight it. He scowls and shakes, tears wetting his eyes
but refusing to fall. He scoops Steve up as the latter weakly moans in response, still trying to gather
all of his air into steady breaths. Bucky sits Steve down on the bed so he’s propped against the
headboard and then sits beside him. Instinctively, he wraps an arm around the blond’s shoulder in an
attempt to keep him close and protected.

Peter’s grin expands. “Isn’t this better? Now we can go back to being pals. And pals keep their word
when they have a bargain to fulfill. So kid, I want you to take off Stevie’s shirt.”

Bucky’s eyes snap to him with alarm, all the colour draining from his face. No, no no no no no, this
can’t be happening. “No, please—”

“A deal is a deal, Bucky,” Peter interrupts casually, still lazily pointing the gun their way. “I did
something for you, and now you’re going to return the favour. Take off Steve’s shirt. Now.”

“Bucky…”

Grey eyes turn to meet blue. They stare at each other, and they really are both so young. It’s hard to
tell who trembles harder. But they’re both determined to look out for the other, because that’s just the
way it’s always been. Steve swallows and whispers, “I’m sorry.”
A choked sound gets caught in Bucky’s throat and his face pains. He shakes his head weakly and then releases another strained sound, looking down to the buttons on Steve’s shirt. Using one hand, he reaches over and shakily undoes the tie – done up so perfectly – before pulling it off. Peter watches in silence as the brunet pops open each button, revealing pale skin and a bony torso. Steve leans forward, eyes cast down and nervous breaths pushing out of his lungs, as Bucky takes the fabric and pulls it back from the blond’s frame.

They hear Peter groan and then chuckle. “Look how small and smooth he looks. You’re real pretty, Stevie. Just as pretty as any broad you could ever stick your dick into.”

“Shut up!” Bucky snaps, then grabs the side of Steve’s head and turns it towards him. “Hey, look at me,” he whispers hurriedly. “We’re gonna get through this, okay? Don’t listen to him. I’m going to make sure we’re okay.”

For once, Steve doesn’t argue. Just nods, because he trusts Bucky. Whatever it is, they’ll survive it together. Or die trying. The thought’s more comforting than it should be.

“Steve, now it’s your turn. Take off Bucky’s shirt.”

Steve’s hands are much clumsier and it takes twice as long, but within a minute, both boys are shirtless. Peter continues instructing them and their shoes and socks are next to follow; then their pants. Eventually, they’re just sitting next to each other, shivering in their underwear. Bucky wraps both arms around Steve and keeps him as close as possible to try and somehow calm the other body down.

Peter tucks the gun in the front waistline of his slacks so that the two can see that it’s still readily available at his disposal. Then his camera is back in his hands.

“Stevie, look at me. You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

Bucky glares at him and Steve swallows. Doesn’t answer. Peter doesn’t need one; he grins again - already knows. “Mmm, this is going to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity then, boys. It’s not every day you get momentos of a boy becoming a man.”

Bucky freezes and then yanks Steve hard against his side. “No! No, you leave him alone!”

Peter tisks. “Now kid, it has to happen to everyone one day, doesn’t it?”

Steve’s returning the embrace; latching onto Bucky as both boys stare at Peter with a mixture of horror and hatred painted on their faces. The blond wants to open his mouth and say something, but he’s still straddling that fine line between breathing and being unable to again, so words escape him.

“You bring anybody in here – you so much as have someone look at him that way, I swear to God, I swear, I’ll--”

“You’ll what? What are you going to do, kid? Kill me? Is that what you’re going to say? I guess we’ve already forgotten which one of us has the gun. Now you’re going to shut up, keep quiet, and listen. You’re gonna fuck him, Bucky. Nice and hard, while I watch because that’s what you two want. You asked for this. You’re here, and we play by my rules. And then, after you’ve made a nice mess of him, I’ll pay you both and you can be on your way. See? I told you – I’m a nice guy.”

“I won’t do it,” Bucky chokes out. They’re both shuddering so badly that it’s causing their teeth to chatter. He shakes his head; fingers clutching Steve so tight that pale skin is starting to bruise.

“Oh, you will. Because it’s either you, or me. I wouldn’t mind; I’m sure he’s nice and tight. Bet he’d
feel real good wrapped around my dick.” He smiles. “If you’d prefer, I can make sure you’re the one taking the photos, while I fuck your little boyfriend raw and hold my gun to his head the whole time. I’ll make him say all sorts of sexy things – I bet you don’t think he’s capable of it, but he is. You see it? In his eyes? He’s got real fire, don’t he? I bet underneath all that inexperience is a real slut who would just love to–”

“SHUT UP!” Bucky screams, face going red. “I’ll do it! I’ll fucking do it, just shut the fuck up!”

He looks at Steve and the blond can’t bare it, seeing Bucky like this. He looks like he’s about to take away Steve’s life. With an unsteady hand, he reaches up and grasps the side of Bucky’s neck. Trying to anchor him. “Buck,” he whispers. The brunet makes a weak sound, so full of guilt, and stares into his eyes. Steve nods. “It’s okay… We’re going to get through this… I’m going to make sure we’re okay.”

He echoes the words back and Bucky shatters. Laughs short and weak and void of all humour, and just grabs Steve and hugs him to his chest.

“Okay boys, that’s enough,” Peter cuts in, fidgeting with his camera and bringing it back up over one eye. Hunching forward a bit, he orders: “First I wanna see little Stevie here take a nice big cock in his mouth.”

Bucky’s a fast thinker, always has been. “Wait,” he cuts in quickly. He gestures to Steve. “His lungs are shit, and he just had an asthma attack. He won’t be able to do anything like that; he’ll just pass out. I’ll do it to him.”

(Steve tenses in his arms.)

Peter considers it but then chuckles dryly. “He looks like he wouldn’t last five seconds. Bet he’s never even kissed a girl in his life.” He makes a clucking sound while he thinks and then perks with a new idea. “Take off your underwear, both of you, and jerk each other off.”

They’re silent and unmoving, bodies freezing up and survivor’s instincts kicking in, only rearing its head in the form of unspoken defiance. Peter sighs dramatically. “Are we going to have a problem, gentlemen?”

They look at each other, and Steve sees it – that Bucky would sooner take a bullet right between the eyes than do anything that violated him. The brunet is preparing himself just for that and Steve’s never been so scared. He can’t let Bucky sacrifice himself like that. Taking the initiative, he grunts and moves out of the older boy’s arms so he can lift his hips and pull down his underwear. Bucky watches in shock. He can’t help but glance down quickly at Steve’s exposed sex as reflex – bigger than one would assume, but still not quite “large”, and nestled in short hair, darker than the stuff on top of his head. He snaps his eyes back up and shakes his head weakly. Steve doesn’t give him the chance to try and argue, no, there’s too much at stake right now. He just grabs the waistline of Bucky’s own underwear in his hands and starts trying to yank them down.

“Help me out here, Barnes,” he mutters, trying to keep his face reticent.

After a few moments, he’s met with a wet-sounding sigh, but Bucky does it. He does it, because they have to; lifts his hips and ignores Steve’s hands as he grabs the fabric and pulls it down his legs quickly… Kicks it off and then tries to cover himself with his arms.

“C’mon boys, no need to be shy,” Peter coos, snapping a few experimental photos. “You both look fantastic. Why don’t you take a second to look at each other’s cocks? Touch them a bit.”
It isn’t a suggestion.

“I… Stevie, I can’t,” Bucky whispers, and Steve closes his eyes and lets the words soak in. He understands.

“We have to,” he whispers back. “I promise I won’t hate you for it. Let’s just get it over with.”

Bucky still won’t move, and Steve can feel “Robert” growing impatient… Imagines him just whipping the gun back out and shooting Bucky right then and there and splattering Bucky’s brains all over the wall because he wouldn’t move quick enough. Because he has money – he’s untouchable. Who are they? Just a couple of poor kids from Brooklyn – unemployed, disposable. Nobody would ask questions; nobody would care if Bucky Barnes died here in this hotel room tonight.

Except he would. Because Bucky Barnes is the sun, the moon, and the world to Steve Rogers.

So Steve just grabs Bucky’s hand and shoves it between his legs and holds it there, while his own wraps inexperienced fingers around the brunet’s limp sex and squeezes it gently. Bucky’s body gives a small spasm and he inhales sharply through his nose. Tenses, but doesn’t move his hand on Steve’s lap. The blond has no idea what he’s doing – he’s never given a hand job before – but he has a good enough idea from doing it to himself. (Despite whatever Bucky may think, Steve’s touched himself on numerous occasions.) So he tries to recall the things he likes, and moves his hand along the length. Uses his thumb to swipe over the tip and gently twists his wrist as his limb rides out the movements.

Peter groans and starts whispering things to them – instructions, Bucky thinks, but he can’t hear them over the blood pounding in his ears. Because he’s scared, and Steve’s scared, and he just doesn’t want anything bad to happen to them… But Steve’s little hand is on his dick, and he’s surprisingly good at what he’s doing, and biologically, his body can’t resist its natural responses. He grows hard, fast, and before he’s thinking about it, he closes his hand around Steve and starts returning the gesture.

When Steve jerks at the sudden friction and makes a small grunting sound in his throat, Bucky feels an uncomfortable rush of arousal flood him and his cock twitches in the blond’s hand. He realizes he’s closed his eyes; forces them open and then looks over at Steve. Blue eyes are slightly narrowed and glued to his own hand moving up and down Bucky, and he’s biting that red bottom lip. Both of them are trying so hard to be silent. Steve’s chest is rising and falling heavier now, and Bucky fears he’ll fall back into another attack, so he whispers, “Do you need me to ease up?”

Steve just shakes his head; can’t trust what sound would come out of his mouth if he tried to speak. He just concentrates harder on watching what he’s doing, almost as if becoming transfixed by it. Bucky, on the other hand, can’t stop staring at Steve’s face… Grey-blue eyes glazing over, pupils dilating, cheeks flushing, and lips slightly parted as soft, deep breaths push out of them.

They work each other deliberately, trying to provoke the other’s orgasm so that they can be done with it – but also incapable of denying how good it feels. Neither wants to admit to themselves that perhaps it’s so good because it’s the other doing it.

Peter says something that might specifically be directed at Steve because Bucky notices his best friend look up and over at the photographer, startled. On autopilot, not thinking, can’t think, Bucky reaches up the second Steve’s head is turned and turns it right back so that Steve is now looking at him. Bucky just looks into his eyes – his face mesmerized and bordering on debauched in appearance – and just focus on me, forget about him, it’s you and me to the end of the line pal, always, just like I promised, just stay with me…
So Steve stares back into grey orbs and Bucky’s hand stays on the side of his face, keeping it there. Their hands continue to move, and suddenly the smallest, most breathless little moan comes out of the blond. Bucky’s never heard anything like it and what’s more, he’s never heard anything that erotic. He responds in kind with a confused, helpless little groan and then they’re silent again, as if they understand each other and what the other needs.

Because that’s the way it’s always been – even long before this moment.

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**October, 1931**

Puberty is an unforgiving force. It strikes out of nowhere and throws your entire being out of whack. You start to come face to face with that funny little thing called “hormones” and develop one killer sex drive – even though you don’t really know all that much about sex to begin with. And that’s fine and dandy for the other boys in the orphanage, who’ve discovered how easily those pent-up feelings of frustration and arousal can be satiated by a few keen tugs and twists of the hand.

But it’s Hell on earth for Steve.

He stays there sometimes, in the orphanage with the other boys. Over the years, his mother started having a more difficult time being able to keep a roof over two heads while staying on top of food and bills. So it’s a thing that happens from time to time: if money gets too tight, Steve will go stay in the orphanage for a few days (sometimes weeks), while Sarah works and sends whatever extra money she can to the Nuns to cover Steve’s medicine. It’s okay by the blond; he sees it as a vacation. The Nuns know him so well by this point and everyone knows his relationship with Bucky, so he was already seen as an honourary member of their little Island of Misfit Toys.

The best part about it is that he always gets his own bed in the same room as Bucky. And they discovered that they both sleep much better at night when they’re tucked in next to each other. It started with nightmares; either Steve would have one or Bucky would, and it always ended up with the one woken up tip-toeing into the other’s bed and crawling in beside them. Eventually, it just became second nature. After lights would go out and the other boys would fall asleep, Steve would get out of bed and go join Bucky in his. Just being beside each other always brought so much comfort. Luckily, they were early risers in their youth (a habit that stuck with Steve as he grew older but faded out of Bucky as he did the same), and thus they were never caught by any of the Sisters.

When Steve started going through puberty, however, things became more… complicated. Because masturbation downright scares him; he’s taught – they all are – by the Nuns and the priest at Church and the Bible and everything sacred to Steve that that sort of pleasure is sinful. That you’ll go to Hell if you touch yourself that way. And sure, none of the other boys take it seriously. Maybe they do, the blond doesn’t know, but he knows it doesn’t stop them at night when it seems like there’s always one boy relieving himself when he thinks everyone else has fallen asleep.

He hears the movements of a hand beneath the covers, and the body squirming, and he doesn’t know why they make those sounds – soft and quiet and desperate not to wake the others – but they always seem more relaxed by the end. At first, he doesn’t understand what they’re doing. He asks Bucky about it one day when they’re by themselves and Bucky lets out a loud peel of surprised laughter. Explains what masturbation is all over again to Steve, but doesn’t talk about it in terms of Hell and fire and sinning and brimstone – no, he describes it with adjectives like “incredible” and “relaxing” and “damn fucking good” (the latter especially makes Steve turn red because Bucky shouldn’t really be cursing, not at their age, not ever if Steve could have his way, but that’s Bucky for you).
The brunet laughs and encourages Steve to try it; rolls his eyes and shrugs when Steve adamantly refuses. But then time goes by and the urges are only intensifying. And it doesn’t seem fair, really, because that’s about the only thing about Steve right now that seems to be progressing at such a rapid pace. Unlike Bucky - who’s sprouted at least a foot in the last year, and who’s started filling out in his frame, and suddenly went from looking like a child to a young man somehow – Steve’s still a shrimp. His voice has dropped a little, but otherwise, everything about him is still the same.

He continues to hear the boys from time to time at night, and he stops sleeping in Bucky’s bed – they realize (reluctantly, though neither will admit it) that it stopped being appropriate long ago. Steve doesn’t think he could continue it anyways… Not with the mortifying erections he keeps inexplicably waking up with every morning these days. Sometimes, he’s so hard it hurts. Sometimes, he finds his hand wandering, but then he remembers the horror stories of an eternity with fire and sinning and brimstone, and he stops himself every time.

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“Steve?”

Bucky ventures down the stairs into the basement quietly; skipping the fourth step habitually because it always squeaks real loud and the Nuns don’t let them into the basement. It’s always been a rule. But he’s checked everywhere else and Steve’s nowhere to be found, so there’s really only one option left by this point. He looks around and then walks up to the closed closet door where they’d always snuck into and hid while playing childhood games of Hide N’ Seek. Twisting the knob and pulling back, he’s surprised to see Steve sitting in the corner of the small space, face wet with tears and slacks unzipped. He’s sobbing silently.

“Steve-O? Hey, you okay? Buddy?” Bucky asks quickly with concern. He shuts the door behind him and takes a seat next to the blond’s side. When his little friend won’t answer him, he turns his face so he’ll look at Bucky and asks Steve to tell him what’s going on – what he’s doing down there. Steve’s too ashamed – sick with guilt and sobbing too hard – to lie right now. So he spills out everything: the things he’s been feeling lately, the urges he’s been having. How he didn’t know what to do and his erection just wouldn’t go away, and he didn’t know what else to do. He repeats that last part as if it were his personal chant, and his way of apologizing for something he wasn’t even capable of doing, as it turns out.

Bucky realizes that that’s part of the reason why Steve’s crying so hard; feels even more ashamed – he couldn’t go through with it and he feels so bad in the eyes of his God, and yet his penis is still rock hard. Bucky notices the silhouette pushing against his slacks. Steve rambles and his face is so red. It’s an ugly cry; the kind where you’re hiccupping, snot wetting your nostrils, and you can barely breathe or speak. He’s going to work himself up into an asthma attack, so Bucky rubs circles on his back and musters up enough of a stern tone to hush him silent and tell him everything’s going to be okay.

“I’ll help ya through this, buddy. Just trust me, k?”

Hesitantly, he reaches down and starts tugging Steve’s pants down his thighs, just enough to reveal his white underwear. Steve’s eyes grow to saucers and he tenses; squeaks out a terrified, “What are you doing?”

And Bucky isn’t a hundred percent sure, himself; just knows that Steve needs to get this out of his system but he sure as heck won’t do it himself; and yeah, it’s a little weird, but friends stick by each other in the good and the not-so-good times. So he just snaps quietly, “I’m still figuring that out – just trust me, please.”
He reaches into Steve’s underwear – and bony hands try to stop him but it’s a half-assed attempt at best – and finds the blond’s erection with his fingers. Bucky’s nervous – sweating the pits out of his shirt – but he won’t show it, because Steve needs someone to be strong right now. And Bucky’s never had difficulty being Steve’s rock. The muscle feels hot and clammy in his hand, but no different, he supposes, then how his own dick feels.

“Bucky,” Steve pleads in a voice barely audible. He doesn’t know what he’s asking for, and neither does Bucky. But the latter assumes it’s for him to stop. He can feel the shame and embarrassment heating Steve’s skin to an almost scalding temperature, and yeah, he needs to start getting to work on this now, because high blood pressure is never something they can take lightly when it comes to Steve.

“I’m already going to Hell, if what the Bible says is true,” Bucky replies, trying to lighten the mood. It’s tough when his own voice is strained with nerves and so quiet. “This way, you won’t have to. Just don’t resist it and I’ll make it fast for you, okay?”

He starts moving his hand the same way he’s used to doing to himself. Steve immediately tenses and jerks with a gasp. Bucky’s other hand flies up and clamps over the blond’s mouth as Bucky’s heart leaps into his throat. He glances at the door with wide eyes and stops moving his hand long enough to make sure no one is coming down into the basement.

“You’re gonna hafta stay quiet, ya hear?” he whispers. “If we get caught, they’ll tear our hides. Can you stay quiet for me, buddy?”

Steve stares at him, baby blues just as wide, and he gives a small, scared nod. Bucky nods back and slowly removes his hand from over his mouth. His hand resumes moving, and Steve’s body stutters again, but he bites down on his tongue and squeezes his eyes shut to keep the noises pushed down.

“That’s it, pal,” Bucky murmurs soothingly. He keeps an eye on his best friend’s face, watching carefully for any signs of distress or the beginnings stages of an asthma attack. He doesn’t want to push his friend too hard, so he keeps his hand moving firmly but slowly. Steve keeps his eyes squeezed shut and his body completely rigid. His hands are bawled into little fists by his sides, and he’s using every ounce of self control that he has to fight the stirrings inside of him.

Bucky continues his ministrations and picks up on Steve’s resistance. “Stevie, you gotta stop fighting it. I know you’re scared, I know, buddy… It’s okay, I’m right here… The harder you fight it, the longer it’ll take for you to finish. Trust me, you’ll feel much better afterwards… Just think of a pretty dame… Think of Esther, you like her, dontcha?”

Steve relaxes a tad and Bucky feeds on this, encouraging him more with whispered words. “There we go, buddy… It feels good, I know… It’s okay… You’re not a bad person… I’ve got ya… You’re almost there… Just think of a pretty girl and give yourself over to that…”

His hand works faster; not exactly experienced in their movements per say, but not completely virginal. Bucky’s masturbated enough over the past couple of years to know the ins and outs of what feels pleasurable and what doesn’t. And Steve’s fear is so palpable, and all Bucky wants to do is chase it away for him. Never wants his best friend to be scared, to think he’s a bad person, ever. So he squeezes a bit harder, twists his wrist, circles the tip with his thumb and swipes over the leaking slit – all in an effort to push Steve over the edge and bring him the ending his little body clearly needs.

Steve’s hand flies up and clutches onto Bucky’s bicep now, and he squeezes with a surprising amount of strength; doesn’t ease up but grasps for dear life. His face is scrunched up and he’s started to hunch himself forward now, tensing up. His breathing is rough and fast, and the smallest grunts fill
the small space around them.

Then Bucky twists his wrist again, rubs his thumb on the underside, right below the head, and Steve full on *whimpers* – soft and quiet. And Bucky isn’t sure what *that* was that just jolted throughout his body but now his hand is moving faster, and he watches Steve’s face with a combination of concern and fascination. Steve squeezes Bucky’s arm and suddenly shudders heavily with a barely audible groan as he starts to come. Bucky yanks his hand back reflexively so none of Steve’s climax gets on him, but he grabs his handkerchief from his pocket and closes it over the streaming tip to try and catch as much of it as he can. He doesn’t want Steve to stain his slacks – it’d be obvious.

He listens to the golden-haired boy inhale raggedly through his nose, head bent and his face covered by loosely-hanging tresses, and Bucky can almost pinpoint exactly how long his first orgasm lasts based on how long his body trembles. Eventually, it subsides, and Steve just sits there, still staring down at the ground miserably. Bucky blinks and quickly cleans the rest of him up before slapping his thigh lightly and telling Steve to cover himself back up. He grimaces at his handkerchief before bawling it up and ditching it behind some old boxes against the wall. Looking back at his friend, the brunet feels a strange, uncomfortable feeling blooming in the pit of his stomach. It feels as though it spreads all the way to his heart. Settling down again against the now fully-dressed Steve, Bucky slaps him on the back and forces a grin to his lips.

“*Atta boy, Stevie – you’re a *man* now!*” he congratulates.

Steve says nothing; just stares down at his lap, face red and eyes trying not to unleash the tears welling up.

“*Hey,*” Bucky whispers, wrapping his arm around his shoulder and shaking him lightly a few times. “*You did nothing wrong. You’re not going to Hell. Okay, buddy? The Devil wouldn’t be able to put up with you for long anyways – not with that sass mouth of yours. He’d kick your butt back out within the hour and then God would hafta take you!*”

Steve looks up and actually gets a small smile at that. It’s good enough for Bucky, who grins at the sight. “*C’mon man,*” he chuckles, pulling Steve up, arm still wrapped around his shoulder. They both leave the small closet together and go to head back upstairs – and Steve hates himself for realizing that he *does* in fact feel better.

Despite the fact that they talk about *everything*, they never talk about this again. They play it off as if it’s simply because they may be *close*, but that isn’t exactly something that’s overly simple to explain. They know stuff like that isn’t exactly normal. They chalk it up to them just having a uniquely strong bond – but still… they don’t need to talk about it.

Inside, their reasons are a little more complex than that. Steve doesn’t know how to admit to *himself* – let alone Bucky – that he had *tried* to think of a pretty girl, he really did, but it did nothing for him in that moment. Fact was, all he could focus on was how intensely his body responded to having Bucky’s hand on him, and try as he might, his thoughts couldn’t stray from that.

Bucky doesn’t know how to admit to *himself* – let alone Steve – that he enjoyed it.

Peter doesn’t let them come. He watches them stare into each other’s eyes and it looks like the kid has gone somewhere in his mind – a memory, perhaps. Then the blond is reaching up a shaking hand and whispering something Peter can’t hear, and the brunet’s eyes lose some of their fog and he’s back in the room again. They hold on desperately to that invisible tether tying them together as
their hands move in separate rhythms over each other’s cocks.

The camera snaps away, fast and with purpose. In the end, Peter’s pitching a tent of his own in his black slacks and just when he sees the little twitches in Steve’s upper lip – the way his flush spreads down his torso and his bony chest starts to hitch – he orders the two to stop. At first they don’t, they just keep going, but when he raises his voice and shouts at them for the first time all night, their hands fly off each other and they look as though they jump about a foot off the bed.

Steve’s tip is practically purple now with need; too much blood trapped in the muscle and desperate for release. He bites down a whine when the friction leaves him. He won’t do it though; he refuses. There’s no way he’ll give “Robert” the satisfaction of hearing him sound dangerously close to the dame the raven-haired man likens him to.

Bucky’s ordered to start “opening Steve up” in preparation for the big finale. Bucky tries to fight it but Steve’s still too afraid of that gun gleaming right there in front of them, so he just lies down on his back and shakily tells his friend to just do it. They try their best to ignore the way the older man walks around the bed to get a better angle; try instead to focus on each other and drown out everything else. Bucky settles down between Steve’s legs. They’re shaking violently. Bucky takes one calf in each hand and tries to hold them still.

“I’ll try not to hurt you,” Bucky promises, looking down at that beautifully frail body he's always protected.

He wants to kill Peter. Wants to rip him apart and watch him drown in his own blood, for forcing Steve into this position. Bucky takes in how exposed and vulnerable the little body is, with legs spread and on display like this. Steve turns his face away from Peter, and it’s truly admirable, Bucky thinks – the way that blue eyes are bright with unshed tears but that through everything, Steve still looks as though he’s trying to be as strong as ever.

The older boy looks further down and assesses the situation; sees Steve’s rear and tries to best plan how to go about doing this. He’s never done it this way before. He knows it’s different than how a dame’s body works. With shallow breaths, he sucks on his index and middle fingers and then tentatively brings them down to where he knows the opening is waiting for him. Steve’s already tensing and shivering so badly that Bucky thinks he might flop right off the bed. And Peter’s back to talking again and neither of them want to hear it, so they just focus on each other. Them against the world, just like it's always been.

They lock eyes as the pad of Bucky’s middle finger experimentally brushes the small, tight ring of virginal muscles. He stops there, holding his breath. Steve nods. With that, Bucky slowly – so fucking slowly – pushes the tip of his finger into him. The blond’s face scrunches up in discomfort, blue eyes squeezing shut. He makes a sound of distress, and Bucky immediately stops.

“I’m sorry, oh my God, I’m so sorry…” Keeps inserting until his finger can’t go in any further. At
Peter’s instruction, he pulls it back and then thrusts it back in slowly; starts up a rhythm, in and out, in and out… And he whispers apologies over and over, his voice thick with the tears now streaming down his face. It doesn’t make him feel any better when Steve cries out in pain and snaps his hand out to grab Bucky’s wrist. He expects the blond to beg him to stop, but instead, Steve bears it - takes the punishment - and grasps onto Bucky’s hand instead. The brunet responds quickly, twisting his limb so he can entwine their fingers together. Steve squeezes so hard Bucky feels like he’s going to break his hand. That’s okay; he's convinced he'd deserve as much.

It’s a sick form of torture. Peter watches with a keen eye and waits until Steve starts to become accustomed to the intrusion, only to tell Bucky to add another finger. It continues that way until Bucky has three fingers stuffed inside of him, and when he scissors them, Steve practically howls in pain.

“Fuck him harder,” Peter groans.

“I can’t,” Bucky practically sobs, unable to tear his eyes off Steve’s face. “He’s going to have an asthma attack if I don’t stop – please! Please stop making me do this!”

He whimpers loudly, all resolve broken, when he feels the barrel of the M1911 get shoved against the side of his head.

“I said: Fuck. Him. Harder.”

Bucky grits his teeth, cheeks red and hot, angry tears dripping down his chest. Steve looks up at him, his own face wet. “I’m sorry,” Bucky chokes and then starts moving his fingers rough and fast. Steve’s hand squeezes his own painfully and he tosses his head back again, making a sound similar to as if he’d been stabbed. (He was once. In the shoulder. Bucky had nightmares about that sound he’d made for months.)

The minutes pass and Bucky continues to fuck his fingers in and out of Steve's skinny body. Gradually, the younger boy weakens and stops writhing; just lies there, staring up at the ceiling with glazed-over eyes and frighteningly quick and high-pitched breaths. Then pained cries lessen to uncomfortable groans and lessen even more from there. Bucky feels relieved when Steve starts moaning softly. The pain has given way to pleasure, and Bucky subtly eases up his movements to provide him with some alleviation.

"See? He likes it," Peter husks. "I told you he would."

"SHUT UP!"

They don't address his comments. That doesn't deter the photographer.

"Tell him you like it, Stevie."

Steve closes his eyes and moans loudly. He's lost control of his body now - of his rational mind. There is nothing right about this situation, and yet all he knows in this moment is Bucky and Bucky's fingers and Bucky's strokes and Bucky's tenderness, even in his strength.

"I like it," he breathes. "Buck, I like it..."

A soft groan fills the air. Bucky can't help it; he tries to force it down but he's not that strong. Steve just looks and sounds too… incredible right now. Like nothing he's ever seen before. Steve likes it. He likes it. So he keeps plunging his fingers in and out, and his own cock is aching and heavy between his thighs. He absolutely despises himself right now.
"UNH!" Steve suddenly cries out when the brunet's fingers brush something particularly sensitive inside of him. His eyes fly wide and his back arches sharply off the bed, pushing his ribs against his thin skin, jutting them out. Bucky finds himself wanting to kiss each one of them. Still, he's afraid he's hurt Steve - his Steve - and goes to pull his fingers out of him. He doesn't give a shit about Peter - he can go fuck himself and blow Bucky's head off in the process for all his cares. He won't hurt him like this.

To his surprise, Steve's other hand latches onto the brunet's wrist and holds it in place; keeps his digits deeply inside of him. He isn't sure what Bucky just touched, but it was indescribable. He's never felt anything that pleasurable. It's enough to make him want to come all over the place there and now. The black-haired man picks up on that too and tucks his pistol back into his pants to put all his focus on holding up his camera.

"Kid, look at him. Look at how fucking gorgeous he looks. He's ready for you; he wants it." When Bucky doesn't respond right away, he goes right back to using Steve as his secret weapon. Because getting him to parrot back what he wants, voice it to Bucky - those are the magic words, aren't they? They're the key to unlocking Bucky Barnes and moving him to action. So he murmurs seductively to the smaller boy: "Tell him you want it, Steve. Tell him you want to feel him inside of you."

And Steve's way too gone at this point. He wants that pleasure back. He wants Bucky to make him feel so good so that he can forget about where he is and why this is happening.

"Bucky..." he whimpers, body still undulating gently against the mattress. "I want you..."

Bucky just about falls apart. His head spins at the declaration and his dick stiffens so painfully that a generous bead of precome drips from his slit. This isn't right - this is so wrong; they're friends, they're buddies, they're best pals, they shouldn't be doing this - and oh my sweet Lord, Bucky's never wanted anybody so badly in his life. It's wrong and sinful and he ain't a fairy but he wants to run his tongue over every curve, every freckle, every line on Steve's body and drink it in. He wants to feel Steve all around him and lose himself to him in every way possible. He wants to chase those little sounds Steve makes and never stop hearing them. He's in deep shit and they're going to regret this but they can deal with that later.

He pulls his fingers out and spits feverishly into the palm of his hand. Steve whimpers and Peter chuckles breathlessly from somewhere off to the side. "Fuck him, fuck him, FUCK HIM! Just focus on me, Stevie, I've got ya... Just you and me..."

He strokes his own cock, gets it slick, groans lowly at the temporarily relief it provides him - giving it friction like that. He crawls over the blond's body and plants a flat palm on either side of his head... Holds himself up... Can't believe it when he feels Steve's hand reach down and grab hold of his dick, angling it towards his stretched entrance.

"This'll hurt," he whispers.

"I trust you," Steve breathes.

And that's all it takes to set Bucky's heart racing. Those three simple words. That unshakable reassurance of their bond - their connection that no one can break. He tilts his hips and pushes the head of him into that tight heat. Steve mewls with pain and his head tilts to the side, biting his bottom lip and furrowing his brows. Bucky holds back; pauses every time he thinks it's too much for the blond.

Peter starts telling Bucky to just fuck him harder, but neither boy can hear him over their pounding hearts and deep, shaky breaths. It's an uncomfortable first few minutes for the younger boy; Bucky's
always been well endowed, but it feels massive inside of him - far more to take than just his fingers. Eventually, Bucky bottoms out and Steve can feels his hips bones press against his thighs and somehow that's one of the most arousing things he can ever recall feeling. He releases the breath he'd been holding, causing his body to vibrate softly around the appendage. Uncontrollably, Bucky twitches inside of him, and that's the tipping point for Steve.

He reaches up and hooks his arms under the brunet's armpits, gripping onto his shoulders. Blue eyes look up into grey; both wide and confused and so damn lost in each other.

"Tell him to fuck you, Steve," Peter hisses impatiently, trying to use his secret weapon again.

And Steve - who has never so much as uttered that curse before; who blushes scarlet when it's said in his presence - looks Bucky dead in the eye and helplessly whispers, "Fuck me... Bucky, please..."

Hips immediately starts rolling slowly, and it's like nothing either of them have ever felt before. Pain for Steve - burning and stretching and possibly slight tearing - but it's Bucky inside of him and somehow, in this moment, that's all he needs. He doesn't want to be anywhere else. And Bucky... After losing count of how many beautiful little dolls he's slept with over the years, he doesn't think he's ever known anything as exquisite and being buried inside of Steve's body. And he doesn't know why - he really fucking doesn't - and that absolutely terrifies him. He can see in Steve's eyes that the blond is terrified, too. All the unspoken, why are we doing this and this is wrong and I'm not supposed to want you like this and where will we go from here once this is done?

None of that matters right now. Because Steve's pupils are so blown and his cheeks are dusted a beautiful rose and his neck contracts and expands hypnotically with every breath he takes. Never breaking eye contact, he moans deep in his throat. Bucky exhales heavily and starts making his thrusts deeper - not quicker per say, but deeper. He feels fingers digging into his shoulders and before he knows it, Steve's lifting his hips sloppily to try and meet his movements.

Burning gradually subsides for the blond; driven out by the thought alone of the fact that Bucky's filling him up, as much as one can be filled. And he knows he shouldn't want this, and this will send him to Hell. But he remembers Bucky once telling him that he was already going there anyways, and he thinks in this moment that he'd be alright following Bucky into the fire and brimstone. With every thrust, it starts to feel good - and nothing Peter is saying registers with him, and he doesn't care what he's saying. He just doesn't care. The only thing he cares about is in his arms. He clings to his best friend, brazen and afraid; not knowing what their future will hold after this, but--

"Please..." he whispers, unsure of what he's asking for.

Bucky drops his weight down so he's resting it on his forearms. He's mindful not to press down against Steve's chest. Their foreheads come together; they never break eye contact - not even when Bucky shifts his angle and accidentally strikes his prostate again, causing Steve's mouth to drop and a startled, strangled groan to tumble out of him. Bucky stares right back into pools of baby blue and his own mouth hangs open with heavy pants; he breathes Steve's sounds in and they taste so sweet. Watching him with heavy lids and shrouded with lust, Bucky slows his movements and thrusts back in again, deeply and pointedly. Just to watch that look on Steve's face again; just to hear that sound. This time, it comes out as a sharp, ragged gasp. Bucky isn't sure which noise was more beautiful.

Steve's chest starts rising and falling erratically. Bucky worries in the back of his mind that it's something negative.

"Want me... to... to stop...?"

Steve shakes his head vehemently; reaches down and grabs Bucky's firm ass in his hands and pushes
down on it, encouraging the brunet to keep moving. Bucky does, and Steve moans, arching his neck and tilting his head back. Their lips brush against each other; like a feather's caress. Bucky groans languidly, eyes still looking down at the blond's face. Steve's hands helps tilt him around until he's hitting that sweet spot again. Bucky knows when he's found it because he feels the delicious dull pain of Steve squeezing his ass roughly as if trying to lock him in place. Skinny legs are wrapped around him now; feet pressing into the back of Bucky's thighs. They move together until they've synced their rhythm. They forget where one body ends and the other begins. Bucky feels Steve's hot breath wash over his face, hears those little sounds, smells the sweat making golden bangs mat to his forehead, and all Bucky can think is how he wishes he could crawl into Steve's chest and live within his heart.

Steve's eyes widen slightly, almost looking surprised. His brows remain creased.

"Buck... M'gonna... M'gonna..."

Bucky's hips quicken; fuck into Steve quicker now. He tries his best to drive in on that angle that hits Steve's prostate. The blond's panting rises in pitch and quickens, and he would fall into an asthma attack if Bucky wasn't right here to anchor him. Bucky feels his balls rising and his dick getting hard to the point of no return, and he brings one hand to Steve's face, pushes the bangs off his forehead so he can better see his face.

"S-Steve..."

This is Steve's undoing, hearing Bucky moan his name as breathlessly as he just did. He is able to come completely untouched, and he does, pumping hot, wet streams of seed between their abdomens. The sound he makes is so wrecked and uninhibited that Bucky is hit full-force and unexpectedly with his own climax. He can't think. All he knows is Steve.

The second he starts coming - filling his best friend up - he closes the space between their mouths and presses his lips to Steve's. He groans into the kiss; mouths closed and chaste but still hard and needy and filled with years and years of hunger and desire. He thrusts his hips until he has nothing left; he finally breaks the kiss to slump against the smaller body and bury his face into his neck, eyes still closed, mouth hung open with loud pants. Steve lets his head fall back and he cradles Bucky's head to him, threading fingers through his hair. They're both drunk with their post-orgasm high; bodies still writhing with small movements and little moans pushing out with every few breaths.

They've forgotten where they are. Slowly, as the adrenaline subsides and the previous moment vanishes into the next, they remember. And it's like night and day. Bucky draws back and stares back down at Steve, and their eyes are clear now and filled with bewilderment... Compunction. They're scrambling off each other now - Bucky pulls out too quickly and Steve yelps softly in discomfort. They're literally just off each other when Bucky gets a towel thrown into his face. Startled, it falls against his arms and he looks up to Peter, who looks a dangerously terrifying combination of aroused and pissed. Steve's hit with a separate towel and the two boys move quickly, confused, to clean themselves off and then tug their clothing back on. Bucky's so frazzled that he doesn't even help Steve off the bed, and Steve doesn't even bother asking for it.

He hisses at the sting - the uncomfortable stretch and looseness in his rear - when he crawls off the bed and gets to his feet. Bucky wastes no time grabbing Steve's jacket and shoving it into the blond's hands, along with his inhaler.

"We're getting out of here - let's go," Bucky says harshly, grabbing his own jacket and yanking it over his arms. Peter is packing up his camera, scowling in a way Bucky's never seen before. He looks disgusted. The brunet swallows and moves Steve behind him so he's shielding the body. They're not out of the room yet. Anything can still happen. He wouldn't put anything past Peter
Bucky guides them and heads towards the door slowly. They both keep a careful eye on Peter. To
their surprise, the black-haired man reaches into his bag and pulls out an envelope. He counts some
bills and twists his body slightly so he can look Bucky in the eyes. He holds out forty-five dollars -
and not a penny more. He knows he shouldn't argue after all this, but Bucky's not the brightest when
it comes to that. He takes the money and looks at it in outrage and shouts, "Forty-five!? That's less
than half of what you owe us!"

"Bucky, let's go," Steve says sharply.

Peter just stares at him, face eerily emotionless and hollow.

"What is this!? We did everything you asked for--"

His head snaps to the side as Peter backhands him powerfully. A mist of blood sprays out and dots
the wall.

"Get the FUCK out of my room, you GODDAMN QUEERS!" Peter all but shouts. They stare back
at him in horror. The photographer lowers his voice to a threatening snarl. "I said I'd pay you both if
you played by my rules and did what I said. You break my rules, you don't get paid." He raises his
voice again; angles his face so his voice is directed to the front door - as if he wants others in the
building to hear it. "I said: GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY ROOM, you FUCKING
FAIRIES! Go! You two are disgusting - get the HELL out, get your DISGUSTING INVERTED
ASSES out of MY PART OF TOWN!"

"What!?" Bucky shouts.

Steve grabs his arm and starts yanking him from the room. "Bucky, let's go!"

They wind up running from the hotel for the first five minutes. Terror follows them; the fear that
someone will be on their coat tails and beat them dead in an alley because of what they heard.
Eventually, Steve can no longer stand the exertion and they have to slow down to a walk. He sucks
on his inhaler (ignores the way he can still smell Bucky all over him), and Bucky keeps a few steps
ahead, never letting himself look anywhere but forward (and ignoring the way he can still smell
Steve all over him). It takes them three hours to find their way home and they say nothing the entire
time.

Bucky wants to ask Steve if he's alright, but he doesn't know how. There are too many questions and
too many answers he isn't ready to hear. Mostly, he just wants Steve to tell him where they're
supposed to go from there.

Steve uses the washroom second, and when he walks into their bedroom afterwards, he stops in the
door frame to see his cot back on his side of the room and Bucky in the middle of dragging his own
back to the other side. Hurt and anguish and so many other things Steve can't put his finger on mesh together into one big ball in his stomach, and if his heart breaks, he doesn't let it show. For a split second, when Bucky notices him standing there, he gets the smallest trace of guilt on his face. Then he's clearing his throat and getting into his cot, turning his back to Steve and saying nothing. After a few moments of silence, Steve turns off the light and takes his place on the other side of the room.

It's nearly an hour later before Bucky finally speaks.

"We're never talking about this again."

Steve says nothing. He might as well start now.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Steve and Bucky seriously consider whether or not they can stay friends. Bucky considers moving out. Steve destroys his sketches.

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Originally, the story was going to culminate and end here, after this chapter. But that was back when I thought it'd only be 4 chapters long. I have an entire story planned now for these two. I hope you continue to stick around and be a part of it. Thank you so much to everyone who's been commenting, leaving Kudos, bookmarking it, and just READING it in general. You have all my thanks and more <3

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
To Realize

Chapter Summary

Bucky ignores Steve, and their friendship strains. Steve tries to apologize and comes face to face with far more than he ever wanted to.

Chapter Notes

There's a hope in every new seed,
And every flower that grows on the Earth.
And though I love you, and you know that,
Well I no longer know what that's worth.
And I'll come back to you, in a year or so
And rebuild, ready to become...
Oh the person, you believed in,
Or the person that you used to love.
If I'm still here hoping, that one day you may come back...
If I'm still here hoping, that one day you may come back...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 17th, 1938

It’s 3:30 in the morning and someone’s banging on the other side of the wall, from the neighbouring apartment. They’ve been at it – the dull, bang, bang, BANG, BANG – on and off for the last hour.

Steve and Bucky barely hear it over the sound of their own screaming… Poisonous and angry.

Neither one of them can quite fathom how they got there.

June 15th, 1938

Steve can’t remember the last time he and Bucky had an honest-to-God, legitimate conversation; not since that night. Which was about three weeks ago. Which feels like an eternity when you live with your best friend and suddenly the friendship seems to fizzle away to nothing overnight.

Steve isn’t sure what hurts more: that Bucky barely talks to him anymore, or that Bucky barely looks at him anymore. He’s fairly certain that there had never been a more uncomfortable moment in the history of uncomfortable moments, than when Steve had woken up the next morning (after that night, like a plague, like a goddamn plague) to find the brunet already in the kitchen, eating breakfast without even waking him up. Steve had tried to say hi, and Bucky had just stiffened in his seat, back to the blond. He took a sip of his water, muttered a ‘hello’ back that was barely audible, then rose from the chair and dumped out the rest of his toast – as if Steve had literally made
him lose his appetite. Then he had walked out of the other side of the kitchen, not even looking at him, and before Steve knew it, he could hear the shower running.

Bucky had left within the half hour to go looking for a new job.

That became the trend. Bucky would wake up and get himself ready, only say good morning to Steve if Steve said it first, then leave for the majority of the day in search of employment. For the first week, he was never successful. Steve always knew without having to be told by the way Bucky would come home well into the evening, smelling of booze and sex, and there’d be something vicious in his eyes that scared the jeepers out of the blond. Blue eyes would just glance up and follow him while he stumbled into the bedroom and slowly made his way to the bed with a lack of finesse that only someone bordering on alcoholism could have. He never removed his clothing to sleep anymore, either. It didn’t matter how hot the nights were getting. He’d even pull his quilt up to his chin before turning his back to Steve and going silent for the remainder of the evening.

He’d never even say a single word from the time he came in to the time he’d go to bed anymore.

Steve knew Bucky was mad at him. Why wouldn’t he be? The entire thing was his fault anyways. Because Bucky had tried to warn him; about taking such a stupid offer, about there always being a catch, about… about Peter. He’d tried so damn hard to change his mind, and in the end, Steve had agreed anyways and put them into just about the worst situation they could’ve ever been in.

They’d split the money evenly, and Steve had even tried to buy Bucky an apology present; a brand new, beautiful copy of The Picture of Dorian Gray. He kept it hidden under the pillow on his cot, because he knew it was just about the one place Bucky wouldn’t check or accidentally stumble across it. The brunet never seemed to step anywhere within a meter radius of Steve’s bed now – which was difficult in such a tiny bedroom. He had waited and waited and waited, because no night seemed to be the right time; not when Bucky was plastered upon his arrival back.

Then one evening, Bucky had actually walked through the front door at a decent hour for a change. Steve had been half-lying on the couch in the living room, working lazily on a random sketch. It didn’t matter if Bucky never seemed to speak to him anymore; Steve always called out a greeting anyways. He just stopped letting himself look visibly hurt when it never garnered a response. What he felt on the inside was irrelevant.

He could hear the heavy sound of Bucky’s boots thud around and then clamber into the small closet space as the older boy shucked them off. At first, it sounded like the footsteps were then heading into the bedroom. Steve assumed Bucky was going to go grab a shower, get changed, and be right back on his way out for another night of drinking and fornicating.

(And if he thought about it too long, his weak little pitiful excuse of a heart would start to physically hurt. He decided it was pointless to mention to Bucky that thinking about his best friend sleeping with these girls now gave Steve an asthma attack. It had happened while Bucky had been out one night – which, as was evident by the smell of him when he tumbled back into the room well after midnight – had been probably right at the same time that the brunet had been buried deep inside whatever dame he’d picked up at God-knows-what bar. Knowing Steve’s luck.)

To his surprise, the footsteps had stopped momentarily and then restarted, gradually getting louder. Bucky stepped into his line of sight, stopping beside the couch, grey eyes downcast to the floor. For a while, neither of them said anything, but Steve never stopped staring.

“I got another job,” the older boy finally said. His voice had sounded rough, almost as if from disuse. Steve knew that couldn’t be the case, though; he was the only person Bucky was no longer really speaking to.
“That’s great.”

Bucky fidgeted, gradually tilting up his head to look at the blond.

“It’s down at the docks – not the ones I used to work at; the ones opposite the coast of Manhattan. Can look straight across and see it; sometimes feels like I can just walk right over.”

Steve had no idea why Bucky was telling him any of this, but it was the closest thing to a conversation they’d had in what felt like years, so he wasn’t about to reject it. He stayed silent; let Bucky continue at his own pace.

Then he wished he hadn’t.

“It’s, uh… It’s probably best that you don’t come by anymore while I’m working,” Bucky finally had continued. His voice was quiet and almost sounded laced with guilt. He gave Steve what was supposed to look like an apologetic shrug. “Y’know, given what happened last time. Can’t have anything like that happen again. Nothing personal.”

“Yeah, no, of course,” Steve replied, keeping his face even. Inside, his stomach was sinking. He felt as though Bucky’s words had punched him in the gut. He couldn’t trust himself not to break right in front of him – and, well, that was just something Steve didn’t do. So, clearing his throat, he broke eye contact in favour of glancing back down at his sketch. “Consider me out of your hair,” he mumbled.

Bucky had flinched at that; Steve couldn’t see it, and it’d been as minute a gesture as possible, but it happened. He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it. Nodded, turned, and left the room as quickly as he’d entered.

Blue eyes bore down at the delicate lines of his drawing – that was halfway done, looked halfway decent, and that he had been working on for almost two hours. All he saw was Bucky’s face as it’d been hovering over him; the way his grey eyes almost looked black because his pupils had been so blown… How his mouth was red and wet against his own when Bucky had kissed him… Contrary to what the world thought, that wasn’t Steve’s first kiss. But it’d been the first kiss that mattered.

And now Bucky hated him for all of it.

Gritting his teeth and tightening his grip around the pencil, Steve scribbled wildly over the paper… Lines, thick and jagged, and destroying everything that had once been beautiful, and Steve knew that feeling all too well.

Bucky went out again that night and didn’t return until the crack of dawn.

In the two weeks that follow, Bucky works and goes out less. Not that he doesn’t anymore, just – less. The days are long and they simply tire him out too much to even consider fucking most nights. He opts against ties and pressed shirts – liquor and getting his rocks off – for falling face-first into his cot once he’s gotten something into his stomach, and letting sleep wash over him.

The thing is, the sooner he can be done with the day and close his eyes, the less amount of time he has to be around Steve. The less he has to feel that heavy weight pressing down on his shoulders, trying to squash him into the ground, from the guilt of not talking to him.

He finds himself considering at one point whether or not he should find a new place and move out.
The thought only lasts a quarter of a second, though, before he realizes how moronic it was for him to even think about that at all. Steve would never be able to last on his own, not without a source of income. And Bucky doesn't even want to consider what would happen if he got himself a new roommate that didn’t know how to treat him right... What if he got an asthma attack? Or worse, what would said person do when (not if) Steve got real sick again? He knows full well that Steve can't manage through those things on his own, regardless of whatever he may think. Steve needs him.

And Bucky doesn't like thinking of him possibly needing anyone else.

He knows it’s hurting Steve - everything he's doing, the way he's acting - and that kills him. The very last thing Bucky ever wanted to do was cause his best friend any pain... If that’s what they even are anymore. Bucky just doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say. “It’s all my fault, all of it, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I got us into this shit; I’m sorry that I fucked you (made love to you? Is that what that was?)... I’m sorry that I liked it; I’m so disgusting, I just... I’m sorry.”

The worst part is that he knows that Steve blames himself for what happened. He knows how the whole thing came across to the younger boy. Bucky bites his tongue and avoids interaction with Steve because he knows – he knows – he needs to come clean, if only to end the blond’s guilt. But selfishly, he can’t. He doesn’t know how. Because he knows he’ll lose Steve if he does; that he won’t be able to look Bucky in the eye anymore, and every look he would ever get from him would just be doused with disappointment. He’d lose his best friend, and... well, no one ever taught him how to live his life without Steve Rogers.

He realizes he's all sorts of fucked. When he dreams at night, it’s of Steve. When he’s awake during the day and he thinks – and he thinks a lot – it’s of Steve. He tells himself that it’s only because of what transpired between them, and the residual guilt he’s unable to shake off. But the longer he dreams – sees eyes closed, brows knit, and lips slightly parted; hears the smallest, most beautiful breathless sounds push out of that delicate little chest – the more terrified he becomes.

Because they’re best friends and he isn’t supposed to feel this way. It’s wrong, in every sense of the word; goes against everything he – Steve – believes in. He refuses to believe that he’s diseased. There’s nothing wrong with him. He’s just confused, and being around Steve only makes it worse. So, until he can get a hold of himself and get a grip, he has to keep his distance.

Then, everything will go back to normal (he will be normal, he will), and he’ll be a man and tell Steve the truth about Peter. And he’ll fight tooth and nail to make it up to that scrappy little punk. He won’t let Steve walk away from their friendship without a fight – and hopefully, because Steve can never seem to back down from one of those, Steve will fight for it, too.

They’ll be alright, he keeps telling himself - as he lies awake at night and stares at the wall and has his back to Steve and he can hear Steve’s breathing and it’s so relaxing, he hates it...

We’ll be alright... Please...

June 16th, 1938

Bucky was home when Steve had stepped out to run to the grocer’s to pick up a new bottle of milk. They’d drank the last of it over a week ago and Bucky had still yet to go out and buy some more, which was strange even for him, since the guy could live off of it if given the chance. Steve thought that maybe he would earn points in his best friend’s good books if he replenished their stock before Bucky got around to it. He’d called out that he’d be back shortly, rather than seeking out the brunet
and telling him face-to-face. It was getting to be too unbearable to look him in the face while Bucky made a point to look everywhere else.

As usual by now, Bucky didn’t reply, so Steve just left. The store wasn’t far, and he was gone for no more than twenty minutes – tops – but when he comes back in and sticks the two bottles he’d bought into the ice box, he notices a note on the table. Written in chicken-scratch very much unlike Bucky’s usual penmanship, it reads:

*Gone out for a drink. Don’t wait up. –B*

Shoulders slouch and a heart sinks, and because he’s once again got the entire apartment to himself, the sound of it breaking echoes off the walls and engulfs the space around him. He tosses the note into the trash before heading back into the living room, where he’s seemed to have made camp for the past couple of weeks. He sits on the couch and stares off, unmoving and lost in thought, for what feels like forever. When he feels as though he’s closer to a scream than peace, he grabs his sketchbook. Usually drawing can do a decent job at calming him down, centering him.

But there’s a noticeable pattern that’s evident when he flips through the occupied pages. Different poses, different expressions, different circumstances – but all of that same head of brown hair; cat’s eyes sparkling and mischievous and warm, and that telltale cleft in the chin. Steve realizes that Bucky hasn’t looked through his sketchbook for some time, and perhaps that’s why he’s been so careless about leaving it out in the open. If this was a few months earlier, photos like these would’ve had Steve hiding that book away about as adamantly as he currently hides *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He flips through each sketch, turning off his artist’s eye and pushing down the ego in him that makes him automatically want to correct all the mistakes he’d normally catch in each one. But right now, all he can drink in and focus on is how undoubtedly Bucky all these drawings are… or at least, how Bucky used to be.

**Happy. Loving. Protective… His.**

Not entirely, but enough. He was his in a way, always had been. Maybe not in the romantic sense, but it was the same invisible “Property Of” marking that, to everyone they’d ever known, always appeared to be stamped onto Steve’s forehead, too.

And now… well, now. Now, Steve feels like some stranger to him, and he knows why, he knows, and the blond hates himself for it. There are not enough words in the English language to properly sum up just how sorry he is for what he put Bucky through. He suspects that even if he tried to borrow some from other tongues, it still wouldn’t feel like enough. The truth is, looking back on it, Steve’s already realized that the majority of his negative feelings towards that night have nothing to do with himself. There’s no pity party, no post-traumatic stress, no feelings of being violated. Not by Bucky, anyways. He knows that what his best friend did, he did because he had to. Everything that followed was purely biological – and that’s why Steve feels so awful.

Because how must Bucky be feeling in the aftermath? He penetrated Steve and slept with him – this boy he’s known his entire life – and Steve was born, but not *yesterday*; he knows that when Bucky kissed him, it had nothing to do with actual *feelings* and everything to do with being swept up in the adrenaline, the endorphins, the mind-numbing bliss of his orgasm-induced high. Steve knows that perfectly well; it’s part of the reason why he so willingly kissed back. He suspects that Bucky could’ve done just about whatever he’d wanted in that moment and he would’ve complied without a second thought.

But Steve’s a selfish man. He sees that. He recognizes – doesn’t know what to do with the information, mind you, but recognizes at the very least – that all those excuses were only *part* of the reason why Steve kissed back. One thing Steve’s never been is a liar, although he’s always found it
easier being honest with everyone else, rather than to himself. He’s tried forcing down that voice inside of him... The one that he suspects resides within his heart... that screams and pounds against the walls of that beating organ and tries so hard to be freed – that voice that nags at him and keeps him up at night and you kissed him because you wanted to, you liked it, you’d never felt closer to another human being and it was Bucky, it was Bucky, IT WAS BUCKY, it's always been Bucky, even when you have nothing you have--

He slams the sketchbook closed; realizes that he’s trembling. He swipes at his eyes before the tears fall, because he despises feeling as weak as he looks – even if no one else is around to witness it. It’s easier to carry on with the façade when he’s committed to the act twenty-four/seven. His chest feels tight and for a brief moment, he considers chucking his inhaler out the window and letting fate take its course. But alas, Steve’s never been a coward, either, and if that isn’t enough to keep him from thinking stupidly, his faith usually is. Sometimes, the line gets blurred in his head between whether his faith in that moment is in God or Bucky Barnes.

So, with shaking hands, he finds the small plastic device and pumps his lungs nice and full of medicine – just to be safe. He leaves his sketchpad closed on the coffee table and leaves the apartment before he can talk himself out of it. Fresh air. Yes, he needs fresh air. Their place is too stuffy, and right now, smells way too much like his best friend. Fresh air will allow him some time to clear his mind, get his thoughts in order, and then attack the situation with a clear head.

Then, he’ll be a man and wait however long it takes until Bucky gets home... And when he does, Steve will give him the book, and he’ll apologize, and he’ll fight tooth and nail to make it up to that stubborn, amazing jerk, and get their friendship back on track. He’ll swallow down whatever feelings, whatever confusion he has to. He’ll do it, if it means securing what they’ve always had and keeping it safe. He won’t let Bucky walk away from their friendship without a fight.

And maybe, just maybe, Bucky will do what he’s always done and stand up for it, too.

Two hours later, he walks back into the apartment with a renewed hope. It’d been freeing in a way to walk around the neighbourhood without having anywhere he needed to be; he could just go, as far and as long as his legs would take him. Knowing Bucky wouldn’t be back anytime soon meant that no one was waiting up for him, and in this situation, it was a bit of a relief.

It meant that Steve could give himself the chance to think everything over – unlock the details, both good and bad, from the treasure chest in his mind, and sift through whatever he pulled out. The longer he walked, the more he let himself wander back through the years, the timeline of their friendship, and get lost in nostalgia. The memories were like fine bits of sand, so he made sure to cup his palms tightly so none of the precious grains could spill away from him.

Time had also granted him the opportunity to come up with an entire speech he feels ready to say to Bucky now. Most of it has to do with how sorry he is; the rest focuses on how important their friendship is to him, and how badly he wants the awkwardness between them to end. He just wants things to go back to the way they were. He wants to assure Bucky that he isn’t dwelling on what’d happened between them that night; that if Bucky’s willing to forget about it and move forward, he is, too.

(It’s irrelevant that Steve doesn’t think he can actually forget, or even that he wants to. It doesn’t matter that there’s a part of Steve – and he isn’t sure just how big it is yet – that doesn’t want things to go back to how they were... That he yearns for more of those touches; for Bucky to look at him the way he did in that hotel room. No, what he wants deep down inside doesn’t matter – not when
there's no chance of it being a reality anyways.)

It's quiet in the small apartment, and muggy as all Hell. The kitchen light is on, which makes him falter for a moment because he thought he turned it off before he left. But he doesn't see Bucky's shoes anywhere, so it must've just been a slip of the mind. Shrugging, he goes over to the windows in the living room and opens them up a crack to try and welcome in the fresh night's air.

He’ll wait up for Bucky. He'll wait all night, if he has to. He'll wait as long as need be, so that as soon as his best friend walks through that door, they can make amends. Steve's tired of this - of the silent treatment and avoiding each other (even though it really only feels like a one-way street). He just wants his friend back. He should go get the book; have it ready, just in case. When he gets to the bedroom, he notices that the door is closed. That causes a frown; he definitely left it open earlier. Maybe Bucky is home, but he already went to bed. Turning the knob, the blond opens the door as quietly as possible, so as not to wake him, if that's the case.

Bucky's cot is directly opposite the door, so there's nothing to hide the image Steve is greeted with as soon as it's fully open. He stops dead in his tracks, and what's that sound? Oh yes, it's undoubtedly the sound of his heart shattering to the floor beneath him for a second time that evening. He stares with wide eyes as grey ones meet his.

The brunet is sitting on the cot, shoulders back against the wall lazily and legs slung over the side, feet firmly planted on the ground. He looks up at Steve over the head of blonde hair bobbing back and forth along the length of his dick. He still has on his pants (opened and shoved down to above his knees), though his shirt was lost in the frenzy. Steve can hear the noisy feminine breaths pushing out of her nostrils, and the obscenely wet sucking sounds emanating from between Bucky's thighs. It feels like everything is suddenly moving entirely too slowly; all the blood drains from Steve's face and his saliva tastes sickly sweet and thick in his mouth. He's too shocked to notice the way his large, disbeliefing baby blues suddenly become wet.

Because here he is, preparing for Bucky to return home so he can put himself out there and save their friendship - and Bucky's been here the entire time, not giving a single shit about him, and getting his dick sucked by a total stranger. Steve wonders if Bucky even knows her name.

They don't take their eyes off of each other. At first, Bucky looks mildly shocked to see him - Steve doesn't know why, he does live here after all, for god's sake - and the blond hopes that maybe the sight of him will be enough for the brunet to stop what's happening, even if only to show some respect. It'd be the decent thing to do. Where else does he expect Steve to go? Does Bucky just assume by this point that he should go sleep on the couch again without complaint?

Except Bucky doesn't stop it. His expression morphs into a scowl and his eyes harden, and Steve has no idea what he did in his life to deserve this. Even though he's too frozen to move, the smallest, audible breath must escape him, because the dame swallowing Bucky's cock pulls back with a sickeningly loud pop to twist around and look at him. She's too drunk to even act surprised to have an audience. She teeters on her knees slightly and just stares, as if waiting for an introduction.

Steve's glaring right back now. He can't ever remember feeling so humiliated; so besmirched. He takes one look at the girl and then feels his hands bunching into fists, his jaw tightening.

"No, please, carry on," he flares, but his eyes - angry and incredulous as they are - beg Bucky to put an end to it. To all of it.

She continues to stare, and Bucky's jaw tenses. His face remains reticent, but his eyes are cold. Reaching forward, he makes his decision; turns her face back towards him, palms the back of her head, and directs it back down to his erection - all the while, never taking his eyes off of Steve.
There's no change in his demeanour when she willingly complies, taking him back to the hilt. And it's like a knife in Steve's gut.

If ever he felt like someone was grabbing hold of his lungs and twisting, it's that moment. It burns into his mind and he knows that no amount of time will be able to erase it from his memory. It seems to last the span of a lifetime, looking into Bucky's eyes like this. And all Steve can think is, *Do I really deserve this? Was what he caused bad enough for Bucky to hate him this much, that this would be happening?*

He can't do it. If he watches a second longer, he fears he'll actually lose the will to carry on. Turning, he slams the bedroom door behind him and runs into the living room, the tears now flowing freely down his cheeks, thick and hot and painful. Grabbing his sketchbook, he throws on his pair of shoes and bolts from the apartment, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Bucky hears the slam, then hears the silence. He continues staring ahead, and his heart breaks, but he doesn't show it.

Steve runs for as long as he can stand it, in a direction he isn't sure of, to a destination he hasn't picked yet. He cries as he moves; clutches the sketchbook to his chest, and when an older man calls out a taunting insult his way in a gruff voice, Steve can't even find it in him to shout something back. He just keeps running, until he can't run anymore, and he can't breathe anymore - but that's nothing new, because he stopped being able to breathe the second he saw--

*Bucky's fingers move in her now. She's on her back and splayed generously and she keeps begging for more and the brunet gives it to her. He's still glaring, and his teeth are still grit, but her eyes are closed and she doesn't notice. She hasn't asked for it to be harder - not yet, but he knows she will - and so he pumps his digits in and out of her, fast and brutal. She squeals, high-pitched and that usually does it for him, why isn't it doing anything now? She's so wet, the ministrations so easy, and the sound of his fingers moving in and out is loud and obnoxious... Fills the room, and it should be arousing, and it usually is, so why is it doing nothing for him!? He looks down at her - the way her body undulates, hips bucking up against his hand, his hand that glistens with her arousal, that same arousal that douses her thighs, and it'll be so fucking easy to push into her, he knows this, but the jiggle of her breasts does nothing for him, and the look on her face does nothing for him, and the sound of her voice does nothing for him, but he's still hard, he's still so hard, and he won't admit that it's because he sees her and thinks of--*

Steve can't run anymore. He stumbles onto grass and teeters before finding balance beside a tree and sucking from his inhaler until it no longer burns to breathe. Even the sun is abandoning him now; the sky a faded mixture of cream colours. He's in a park; luckily, still knows where he is. He shoves his inhaler back in his pocket and continues marching on - still unsure of where he's going, still unable to care. The tears continue flowing but the rest of his face grows hard and angry. He can't work through the emotions colliding and spiraling and rising within him. All he knows is that he hurts. He fucking aches. Can't stop replaying what he's just seen; can't stop himself from imagining what's happening right now. He feels like he's going crazy, and he knows he has no right, he has no claims on Bucky - none at all. That knowledge only drives him further insane; fuels the anger. Because it isn't enough that he has these wants and knows he shouldn't, but he has them and doesn't know why. Just that he does. He tries to tell himself that it's just because Bucky should know better - Bucky should know how disrespectful what he's doing is. But he knows... he knows it runs so much deeper than that. And his heart, it hurts, *God help me*, it physically hurts inside his chest, and no one ever warned him it'd be like this... Whatever it is... And suddenly he's stopping, all ninety-five pounds of anger
and betrayal and why is he doing this to me, and with shaking hands and jerky movements, he hursts open his sketchbook and stares down in anguish at the first drawing, that first one that had christened the present that Bucky had gotten him - and it's of Bucky, of course it's a goddamn drawing of Bucky, and with shaking–

Hands fly all over each other, and Bucky's pretty sure he's made her come at least twice by now. He feels something scary and overwhelming welling up in his chest but he tries his best to ignore it. He can't roll on the condom fast enough; he can hear Steve's voice in his ears - see that look of absolute, unfiltered hurt on his face - and he needs to force it out. He needs to forget. Then he's in her, and she clenches around him and fuck that's good, and he groans, but she's looking up at him and it's not her he sees. He sees blonde hair and blue eyes and an entirely different face. 'I like it... Buck, I like it...' And his mind screams no, and he plows into her harder. His heart pounds away and--

His chest is still tight; it still hurts to breathe, as one hand holds the book in place and the other grips and tugs and tears wildly. He’s making broken, frustrated sounds as he yanks the pages out of his book, one by one by one – sometimes whole, sometimes piece by piece so the drawing is in shreds by the time all its fragments fall to the ground. Every face of Bucky has to go; he can’t look at them anymore. And it hurts, it hurts him so badly to be doing this, but it hurts him even more not to. Because those memories – they remind him of a better time that he’s certain he’ll never get back now. And he keeps asking himself, why is he doing this to me and why is this happening and what did I do to deserve this? His hands continue to move of their own accord, as he tries to shut his brain off to little avail. He needs them gone, he needs to--

Rip those thoughts clear from his head, that's what he needs to do, that's what he needs. And he tries; he pounds into her and she’s tossing her head from side to side, moaning loud and sharp and wantonly, and ‘I like it... Buck, I like it...’ NO! He sees her face, and it still isn’t her he’s seeing at all, and it isn’t her body tightening around him – clenching, unclenching – and it isn’t her moans he’s hearing. He grits his teeth, thinks he hears himself snarl, and his heart hurts, fuck it hurts, and ‘I like it... Buck, I like it...' And this isn’t working for him – no, it’s only making him angrier, more terrified – so he pulls out and orders her to get on her hands and knees; face away from me, don’t wanna see your face, but he doesn’t say this. He drives back in, grips her hips with bruising hands, and she cries out and begs for more, now says she wants it harder, and yeah, Bucky can do that. And it’s a little easier this way, he thinks as he moves; only it’s not, not after a few seconds, not when the lines blur for him again and all he can see is--

Steve keeps tearing, keeps tugging, keeps crying. He’s in a frenzy now, faintly hearing the sounds of his artwork tearing from the binding – that sharp rip – as his little frame is surrounded (engulfed) by those shards of Bucky Barnes, happy and not anymore and slowly powdering the ground like the soft snow flakes of the past winter Steve fought so hard to survive. They all have to go, all of them, because seeing his face makes Steve want to die – because no one ever warned him what it'd be like, caring so damn much for--

‘Bucky... I want you...’ SHUT UP!!! He thinks there might be tears streaming down his face, and he’s angry, he can’t remember the last time he felt this angry – not even with Peter, and his fucking photographs, and his fucking tricks. For everything he’s done in the recent months of his life, Bucky doesn’t think he’s ever hated himself more. And he’s so confused, and all he can hear is Steve – that’s all he can ever seem to hear now... No matter how many dames he fucks, no matter how many bodies he seeks solace in, no matter how many high-pitched voices keen his name – all he can hear is Steve, all he can see is Steve, all he can fucking. Feel. Is. Steve. He’s insane – or at least, he feels like it – and he wants it to go away. I’m diseased, I’m so fucked up, Steve’s gonna hate me if he ever finds out, finds out what I did to him, finds out what I did to us, finds out about these thoughts. He--
Thought he could do it—handle it—but he can’t. He drops to his knees, and he’s all alone with no one to stare or judge but that’s just fine because he wouldn’t have given a damn anyways. There are still more pictures, more memories he needs to rid himself of, but for this moment, he’s run out of steam. Drops the open book to the grass and his head into his hand and—

*She screams; tightens around him spastically, comes hard and soaks his cock. He pins a hand on her back and pushes—pins her down and keeps her there so he can thrash his hips into her, and he’s close, he’s so close, and he will not think of Steve when he comes, not again, no he will not, he—*

Cries and shakes and fists are bawled and he wishes he were getting the shit kicked out of him because that’d hurt a Hell of a lot less than this. Wants to scream; can’t find it in him to do so. Sobs until there are no more tears left to squeeze out of his body, and then hangs his head, slumps his shoulders, and stays there. Opens his eyes, and sees the drawing on the page—boring up at him—and it isn’t the one he’s expecting—and his heart, it mustn’t have broken earlier—not yet—because it finds a way to pound and hurt and twist all over again. Because there’s—

‘Bucky… Fuck me… Bucky, please…’ And no, no, no, no, NO, NO, NO, but sure enough, then there he goes, snapping his cock as far as it can go inside of her, and his head flies back and he’s pretty sure he groans too loudly, but fuck you, fuck you, Barnes, you weak piece of shit, you pathetic fucking fairy, because there he goes, coming hard and thinking of fucking Steve again… Fucking Steve. That’d been the problem, hadn’t it? That’d opened up the flood gates; that’d been the scissors that had cut through whatever restraint he’d had. He should feel good but he feels gutted and he feels dirty and—

He’s sitting right there, in black and white—the softest lines of charcoal that Steve thinks his hand have ever been capable of. A drawing come to life of an image Steve has had burned into his mind for over a year. It was only after *that night* that he suddenly found the urge to immortalize it; gingerly pull it from the deepest vault of his mind and transfer it to the thing most intimate for him. He looks down at the sketch—and it’s Bucky’s profile, and he’s staring off, and his eyes are slightly narrowed, and the shading on his face makes Steve remember the glow of the fire so perfectly.

It’d been the Fall of 1936, and they’d just moved out together into their own place for the first time… September, or maybe it was October… All of their money had gone towards the next month’s rent and they hadn’t had any left over for bills. It was a learning experience; the first and last time that Bucky wouldn’t know just how hard he’d have to work to keeps things square for them, and the first and last time that Steve wouldn’t know just how much of a burden he felt like for his best friend.

So they couldn’t afford bills, and they had no heat. The evenings weren’t cold, but they’d been chilly, and, well, Bucky always made such a fuss about making sure Steve didn’t fall sick again. So they’d put on their coats while it was still mild outside, and they’d trekked for a few hours; stole a tin garbage can and walked around Brooklyn gathering newspapers and trash and anything that would burn. They pitied themselves and laughed and actually had a fun time, all things considered. Had one Hell of a time trying to maneuver that garbage can back up the stairs of their apartment building… Whether it was Steve falling, or Bucky falling, or both of them falling… And they had been laughing so hard. It’d been the first time Steve could remember laughing like that since his mother had passed away.

They’d squeezed together on the couch, large tin can burning its contents in front of it. Steve was leaning his back against one arm rest, with his legs tucked in nice and tight, and Bucky sat in front of him, and he remembers complaining about the brunet’s thigh pinching his toes against the stiff cushion. The older boy had just rolled his eyes and said he’d be thanking him when his body heat warmed his feet up, and sure enough…
He remembers waking up, and not remembering when he’d even fallen asleep. Somehow, he was then lying across the couch, and somehow their thin blanket from their cots had been draped over him. His eyes had opened a sliver and he saw him… Bucky, sitting on the ground against the couch, staring ahead at the flames licking up from the rim of the can. He looked to be far off in his thoughts, and grey eyes were narrowed the slightest bit, eyebrows furrowed. He had been shivering, and yet he’d made sure Steve had the blanket, and Steve was comfortable, and Steve was sleeping soundly, and he hadn’t even realized that Steve was now awake and peering at him.

And Steve knows without doubt that in all the years they’d been pals, he had never seen Bucky look so beautiful. He wasn’t sure what it’d been… Chalked it up at the time to the way the soft glow of the fire danced around his face; softened the sharp angles he was so fond of and airbrushed the lines of fatigue under his eyes. His jaw had been dotted with the pinprick hairs of a five o’clock shadow, and he had gone - at one point - forty-five seconds without blinking. Steve knows because he’d counted. He’d just looked so… ethereal. And yet the sight of him in that moment had affected Steve so strongly that he’d been too scared to draw it out until almost a year and a half later. Blue eyes look down at this drawing, and the memory floods in and hits him hard and swift, and he feels like he can’t breathe again.

Because it suddenly hits him – the same way it’d hit him that night, in that moment, only he was too cowardly to face it back then. Everything clicks: why Bucky had looked so beautiful that night… Why he’s always looked so beautiful to Steve… Why it hurts him now to watch Bucky give himself to the rest of the world, and why it’d meant so much to him when he’d finally experienced the tiniest slice of what that felt like… Why Bucky’s always been able to make his heart race, and why he’d wanted to kiss the cleft in his chin the first time that cocky jerk had stepped into his life and felt the need to protect him.

I love him. I... love him...

And that should be relieving, somehow. The clarity - so many questions finally getting their answers - should make him feel better.

It doesn’t. It’s about the worse conclusion he could’ve ever come to. Because he can’t do it, he just can’t.

Bucky talks his way out of what's-her-name staying the night. He smiles charmingly at her, promises they’ll do it again sometime, and helps see her to the door. He’s a real piece of shit, and he knows it. She's completely wasted; she should be staying the night, for all intents and purposes, if only to ensure nothing bad happens to her. But she assures him sluggishly that she has a friend who lives up the street where she can go crash, and that's good enough for him. He doesn't want her to stay; right now, he just wants to be alone.


He doesn't know what he's been thinking... He'd just felt so helpless; felt like he was going to explode. It was like a barrage of images and sounds and they were all of Steve, and he couldn't shut them off no matter how hard he tried. After that night, it'd started gradually, at a slow pace - just a little flash of him in Bucky's mind, here and there. If it happened while he was balls-deep in sex, he could just shake it off and carry on. But then it got progressively worse, and with every day, every night, Bucky thought of him more, until the thoughts felt like they were no longer his own. Sometimes - like tonight - Steve's breathless moans and his whimpering pleas and his 'I like it... Buck, I like it... Buck, I want you... Fuck me... Bucky, please...' played on repeat, over and over and over, and no matter how loud that voice in Bucky's head screamed for it to stop, it would just grow louder, deafening him, crushing down that voice inside of him until he was practically holding his
head and screaming for real.

So it was a desperate act by a desperate man... Drown out the sounds in his head by increasing the sounds from the body beneath him.

At first, it usually worked. These days, it never did.

He lies in his cot for a while, just staring across the room at Steve's. He realizes now that he doesn't know where the blond went, and that automatically fills him with panic. He forces it back down. Steve always argued that he was a grown man who could take care of himself - (as much as he doesn't like it) Bucky guesses he should probably let him live his own life.

Eventually, he pulls on a pair of grey, worn-out pajama pants and goes into the kitchen to put something in his stomach. He opens the ice box and peers in, and then stops... Reaches in with a surprisingly gentle hand and pulls out one of the two bottles of milk. He stares down at it, and Steve got this for them... for him. He knows his best friend well enough to know that that was the sentiment. He sighs sadly, and the sound is wet.

He really is a total fucking asshole.

Then he closes the ice box door and the drawing taped to the outside catches his eye.

The Ferris wheel from Coney Island, in astoundingly clear detail.

"To Bucky, Merry belated Christmas. I'll pay you back some day, I promise. -Steve"

And he stands there and stares for what feels like hours, and it's never been more true that Steve Rogers deserves so much more than him, than Bucky Barnes and everything he's put him through. He stands there until he has to put the bottle of milk back because, just as quickly as he'd scurried the dame from the apartment, he's lost his appetite.

Going back into their bedroom, he pauses in the door and looks from his cot to Steve's. He wishes things could go back to the way they used to be, before they'd gotten so complicated. He misses sleeping next to Steve; holding him in his arms and not feeling so paranoid about it. He misses laughing with him and talking to him and just being around him. That's what he misses the most... simply basking in his presence. Steve's always been his anchor, his most calming source. And he knows he did this to himself; he chose to behave the way he did, and treat Steve as if he didn't matter. He wishes he could just tell him, it's not because you don't matter, it's not that at all, you see, it's the opposite, you just matter way too fucking much and I don't know why and it scares me...

Him being a complete idiot sometimes obviously doesn't help matters either - if his actions tonight were anything to go by.

Scratching the back of his head, he turns and chooses to lie down in Steve's cot instead. It's warm and the pillow smells like him, and God, Bucky misses that... He curls up on his side and goes back to staring off, getting lost in his head - getting lost in thoughts of Steve. He's too tired to fight through them at the moment, so he just lets them wash over him. When he tries to get more comfortable after a while, he slides his hand beneath the pillow while readjusting and stops when his fingers touch something solid. Frowning, he props himself up a bit and closes his fingers over the object, pulling it out. It's hard to see with only the moonlight streaming in from the window as his light source. He squints his eyes and holds it up and waits until his eyes adjust.

_The Picture of Dorian Gray_ - probably the most beautiful copy he's ever seen. It looks like it cost a mint, and Bucky frowns, not understanding. If Steve wanted to reread the book, why didn't he just
take his copy? Unless Steve no longer felt like he could even talk to Bucky about things like that anymore, either, so he'd just gone out and picked himself up a brand new one. And that thought - that he drove Steve to such a thing; that he'd created that much of a wedge between them - now that fucking destroys him. Sighing, he runs his fingers down the smooth cover and then opens it up. He immediately notices the inscription inside.

"Bucky,

If you give me one chance in this world to be the stubborn punk you always say I am,
let me be that way now. I'm sorry for what I did. I'm so, so, so incredibly sorry. I never
ever wanted to put you in harm's way, or cause the kind of crap I caused. You've put
up with more than anyone else ever would've, and I don't know why. I don't deserve
it... But thank you for making me feel like one day, I just might. Please let me make this
right. I miss my best friend.

Love,

Steve"

Below the message, he'd also scribbled two quotes. Bucky squints his eyes to get a better look.

"Promise me you'll always remember: You're braver than you believe, and stronger than
you seem, and smarter than you think.’ - A.A. Milne

Never forget how incredible you are. You can be anything you want to be.

And...

“Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just
walk beside me and be my friend.” - Albert Camus

(This isn't true. If you walk behind me, I'll slow down to let you catch up. If you walk in
front of me, I will always follow. But I prefer you best when you're right by my side.)"

Bucky holds the book to his chest, lowers his head, and finally lets himself cry.

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He tries to stay up until Steve gets home, and he tries not to get sick with worry when the 2:00 am mark hits and the blond still isn't back yet. Steve never really goes out without him in the first place, let alone come back at such an hour. But he's still exhausted from his shift at the docks, and before he can help it, he's passed out on Steve's side of the room, wrapped under Steve's blanket, breathing in his scent.

When Steve finally does get home not long after, his face is red and his eyes are tired. He looks exactly like someone would look after crying for several hours. His sketchbook looks significantly thinner than it did when he left with it. Leaving his shoes on, he marches straight into the bedroom
with a purpose. He tosses the light on and stops, surprised, when he sees Bucky curled up and sleeping in his cot. For a second, it makes his stomach flutter and his heart skip a beat. But then he remembers what he saw the last time he walked into this room and he remembers why he's here now. Because he can't do it anymore, he can't.

This time, he doesn't care about keeping quiet. He goes into the closet and fishes out his own brown suitcase; tosses it onto Bucky's cot and opens it up. He shoves his book into it and then crosses the room and pulls open the top drawer of the dresser to start pulling out whatever clothing he owns.

Bucky jumps at the sound and sits up, grey eyes trying to adjust to the sudden brightness and then focus on Steve.

"What're... What're you doin'?' he asks, words coming out slow and confused.

Steve doesn't answer; doesn't trust himself to answer. Just walks with heavy feet back over to his suitcase and dumps his stuff inside before returning to the dresser and working on the second drawer. Bucky watches him and slowly, realizes what's going on. Clarity floods his eyes and he throws the blanket off of him and jumps to attention on his feet.

"You're leaving?"

Steve pauses and then just sighs and goes back to the suitcase without answering; dumps his stuff in, repeat process. Bucky watches in shock.

"You can't just - you can't just leave, Stevie!"

And that makes the blond angry; so angry he doesn't know what to do with it all. So he spins on Bucky, arms full, and shouts (with surprising volume), "Don't! Don't 'Stevie' me right now - not after ignoring me for almost a month!" He wants to say more but everything's fighting to get out at the same time, so he just makes a frustrated sound and goes back to the suitcase. Bucky moves the second Steve's now heading to the closet, and starts quickly grabbing as much of the blond's stuff from the case as he can. He crosses the room in less than three steps and throws it all back into one of the dresser drawers.

"You're not leaving," he says in a hard voice, but it sounds scared too, and he wonders if Steve can hear it.

"I'll do whatever I damn well want to do."

"Where will you go?"

"I'll find someplace. Doesn't matter."

"How will you afford to live?"

"I have money still saved up. I'll work. I'll figure it out."

"Steve, stop!"

They're paralleling each other in a way that makes them looks perfectly mirrored; Steve puts his things into his suitcase, and Bucky takes them right back out. Eventually, Steve snaps.

"Stop that! Fucking stop that, and just let me leave!"

Bucky recoils, straightens, shock painted on his face at Steve's unexpected cursing. "I... No. No. I'm
"What, Buck - I'm just gonna get myself what? In trouble? Killed? Stop treating me like a liability and stop treating me like a goddamn child!"

"Then stop acting like one!"

"Oh, I'm acting like one!? Wow, Buck; you've got quite the nerve, don'tcha? You know, I get that you're peeved at me, and I get why, I do - but you've made it perfectly clear that you don't want me around anymore, so I'm doing you a favour!"

Bucky gapes. "I - I don't - Steve, stop - I don't want you gone! Look, I'm sorry - hey, can you just stop for a second!? Look, I'm sorry!"

There's a loud bang from the other side of the wall. The neighbour yells for them to keep the racket down.

"Mind your own!" Steve shouts back, and Bucky's never seen him this mad. Not ever. And he sees it; he sees how deadly serious Steve is - he's never been the type to be convinced out of something he's so vehemently set his mind to. Steve wants to leave right now, and if he leaves, Bucky doesn't know if he'll ever see him again. He thought he knew fear before... He knew nothing.

But fear has a funny way of translating into anger, because it's the easier emotion to show. Fear shows weakness, and Bucky's afraid of showing Steve plain as day that he is Bucky's greatest weakness. He's still fighting accepting that, himself. So when Steve goes to throw more shit into his case, Bucky grabs one of his arms and yanks it, causing the items in his grasp to fall to the floor.

"Do you even hear yourself!?" he shouts.

"Get out of my way, Buck!"

"You're talking crazy! You're gonna calm down and put that shit away and we're gonna talk about this!"

"Why!?" Steve's face is scarlet and hot and - is he crying? He turns and kicks Bucky's cot in a surprising display of strength and then spins back to Bucky, throwing his hands in the air. "WHY!?" he demands again, and this time his voice breaks. "So we can pretend things are fine for a few days, and then you can bring more dames back here and fuck them in front of me and not give a shit how I feel about it!?"

The pounding continues from the other side of the wall. Bang, bang, BANG, BANG!

Bucky's brows furrow. "Steve, I... I don't..."

"No, you listen! This is my apartment too, and I'm sick and tired of you treating me as if you hate me, and making me sleep on the couch because you don't care enough about my feelings to think better on bringing some girl you care nothing about into our room and having sex with her until all hours of the night! And I'm especially sick and tired of having to be kept up all night, listening to it! I would never do that to you! I would never disrespect you like that!"

(Because I love you, I fucking love you, why can't you love me back? Why don't you?!) Bucky stands there, guilt stricken. He only heard as far as the words "hate me". Rushing forward, he wraps his arms around Steve and crushes the smaller boy to him, burying his face into golden hair. He feels Steve stiffen in his arms, as if momentarily stunned. Bucky breathes roughly and responds
only by tightening his grip, clutching him closer.

"I could never hate you..." he whispers, pained. "I'm... I'm so sorry... God, Stevie, I'm so fucking sorry, I - I'm an idiot. I've been a real asshole to you lately. I'm so sorry. I never wanted you to think I hated you - I could never ha- I, I could never..."

Steve seems to relax slightly against him. Bucky feels a hesitant hand press against his back.

"You should hate me... I've been awful to you, I know I have... I just haven't known how to deal. Everything feels so fucked lately. You didn't deserve any of this... Just, please, don't go. Stay here. I'll move out, if you want me to. Cause you're right, this is your place too and I should've never brought her here. Any of them. I don't know what I was thinking. If anyone should be packing up and shipping out, it's me."

The blond head shakes slightly.

"I don't want you to move out... you stupid jerk. I just want my friend back."

Bucky nods quickly, turning his face and pressing it into his hair harder. "I know, I'm right here, I'm so sorry. Things'll go back to normal, I promise. We can even put the cots back together, if you want. I'll take a sick day tomorrow and we can go to Coney Island or something. We can do whatever you want."

Steve hugs him back now. He's selfish, he knows he is, that he feels happy at everything Bucky's saying right now; at feeling his arms wrapped around him possessively. He tries to lighten the mood with a small, dry chuckle, suddenly feeling most of his anger lift. "You don't have to get all crazy about it; some conversation here and there would be good enough."

And it sounds like a mixture of a sob and unadulterated relief, what comes out of Bucky then. He knows it doesn't fix the issues - doesn't help remedy everything waging war in his mind these days - but he just can't let Steve leave. He just can't. He can do better and die a little inside every day while he suffers in silence, but he will not let Steve walk out of his life. So he just nods and assures him again that things will change; go back to normal.

They don't wind up pushing the cots back together, although it isn't for a lack of trying on Bucky's part. To double - triple - check, he asks several times over the hour that follows, and every time, Steve just shakes his head and says it's fine, that he knows Bucky's sorry and they don't need to do that.

It's not that Steve doesn't want that... to fall asleep with Bucky's arm around him and Bucky's body pressed to his - because he knows now more than ever that that's exactly what he wants. And that's the problem. Rebuilding what they had and going back to normal is a two-way street, and Steve knows he needs to put in just as much of an effort as Bucky. If he has any hope of being able to do that, he can't put himself in a position that only hurts him more. He doesn't know if he'll ever know how to not love Bucky Barnes, but for Bucky, it's at least worth a try. He can die a little inside every day while he suffers in silence. It's worth it, he thinks. He knows.

"I'm sorry again, Steve..." Bucky murmurs quietly from the other side of the room, about an hour later. They've both been lying in the dark - backs to each other, eyes already adjusted thanks to the moonlight - and Bucky's back in his cot, and Steve's back in his. The blond is too distracted to notice that Bucky's apology present is no longer under his pillow. Neither of them have spoken in some time.

"I know," he replies after another moment's pause. "...Me too..."
"You've got nothing to be sorry about."

How Steve wishes that were true. They fall back into silence.

"...Hey Steve?"

"Mm?"

"I could never hate you."

Steve closes his eyes and tries not to cry again. "I know, Buck."

"You're stuck with me forever."

Steve chuckles weakly. "Sounds like torture."

Bucky snorts softly. Sadly. "Shut up, punk."

"Go to Hell."

"I love you, twerp," and Steve thinks he hears an attempt at a small smile in Bucky's voice.

He closes his eyes, his face scrunching up. How Steve wishes that were true, too. He pretends he didn't catch that and opts for silence. Bucky frowns, staring at the wall, but doesn't push. Neither one of them falls asleep for hours, but the silence continues.

*Oh, what a tangled web we've woven...*

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Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bucky and Steve try their best to ignore their feelings and go back to the way things were. Bucky sets them up on a double-date... He isn't prepared for what happens when his matchmaking actually *works* for a change - and he definitely isn't prepared for the feelings it provokes in him.

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

[Tumblr](http://example.tumblr.com)
Bucky drags Steve out on a double date. He isn't expecting it when the date *actually* shows Steve interest. Bucky gets jealous, and that of course leads to another fight.

A *lot* comes tumbling out.


title: To Confess

Chapter Summary

Bucky drags Steve out on a double date. He isn't expecting it when the date *actually* shows Steve interest. Bucky gets jealous, and that of course leads to another fight.

A *lot* comes tumbling out.

Chapter Notes

If it makes you less sad,
I will die by your hand...
I hope you find out what you want;
I already know what I am...
And if it makes you less sad,
We'll start talking again,
And you can tell me how vile
I already know that I am.
I'll grow old,
And start acting my age.
I'll be a brand new day,
In a life that you hate;
A crown of gold,
A heart that's harder than stone.
And it hurts a whole lot,
But it's missed when it's gone.
Call me a safe bet;
I'm betting I'm not.
I'm glad you that can forgive;
Only hoping as time goes,
You can forget.
If it makes you less sad,
I'll move out of the state.
You can keep to yourself;
I'll keep out of your way.
And if it makes you less sad,
I'll take your pictures all down,
Every picture you paint,
I will paint myself out...
It's as cold as a tomb,
And it's dark in your room,
When I sneak to your bed,
To pour salt in your wounds...
So call it quits,
Or get a grip;
Say you wanted a solution,
You just wanted to be missed.
Call me a safe bet;  
I'm betting I'm not.  
I'm glad that you can forgive.  
I'm only hoping as time goes,  
You can forget.  
So you can forget...  
You can forget.  
You are calm and reposed,  
Let your beauty unfold;  
Pale white like the skin  
Stretched over your bones...  
Spring keeps you ever close,  
You are second hand smoke;  
You are so fragile and thin,  
Standing trial for your sins.  
Holding onto yourself the best you can.  
You are the smell before the rain;  
You are the blood in my veins.  
Call me a safe bet;  
I'm betting I'm not.  
I'm glad that you can forgive.  
I'm only hoping as time goes,  
You can forget...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 17th, 1938

When Bucky wakes up in the morning, this time, he wakes up Steve, too. It’s a gentle shake, almost tentative, just in case the blond doesn’t actually want to get up. He whispers Steve’s name and the smaller boy groans before blue eyes slowly flutter open.


The brunet nods. “Just gonna make some breakfast. You want in?”

“Sure… Jus’… Gimme a minute.”

Bucky nods and pads out of the bedroom towards the kitchen. He winds up putting in a little more effort into breakfast this morning, whipping up some scrambled eggs and toast. He pulls out one of the bottles of milk Steve had bought them and pours two tall glasses. By the time he’s setting the table, Steve’s yawning and walking into the room like a zombie. His legs move slowly and he teeters, still half-asleep. Golden hair sticks out boyishly in a dozen different directions, and Bucky’s stomach flops. He ignores it; ignores the urge he has to reach a hand out and smooth the flyaway tresses back down. He decides not to say anything – and he likewise pushes down the voice in the back of his mind that tells him that he doesn’t want Steve to fix it because the blond looks particularly adorable this way.

They sit down together for the first time in almost a month and eat. At first, it’s in silence. But Bucky meant it when he said he would try harder, and so he forces conversation. After a few awkward minutes, they find themselves falling into the old routine, and Steve laughs as Bucky regales him
with humorous stories of his time so far on the new docks.

It feels good. Neither one of them have to comment on it. Steve watches Bucky munch on his eggs, mumble something offhandedly about how he’s going to pick up some pepper because they could use some seasoning… and Steve just can’t help but stare. Bucky’s always looked particularly magnificent in the mornings. Most people tumble out of bed and look rough around the edges until the energy of the day graces them; eyes are usually lined with the residual bags of sleep, and the light in the orbs themselves takes a little bit of time to spark up and burn.

Bucky’s light burns from the moment he wakes up, even with him not being a morning person like Steve is. And even if that light is contained to a soft glow, it’s still there, and whereas others look gruff with fatigue, Bucky looks gentle with it. When grey eyes look up and lock on Steve’s, all the latter can do is smile. To his relief, Bucky smiles back.

This isn’t so bad, Steve thinks. I can do this. Because after their last conversation (confrontation?), and then having the chance to sleep on it, Steve wasn’t sure what the new day would bring; if things really would change. But this is a good start, and if things can continue at this pace, then he has no doubt that they can go right back to where they’d been; pick up where they’d left off. And it’s a good feeling.

Bucky takes his time eating, even though he’s on the clock, so he can stretch out their conversation and make it last. It’s been so long since they’ve spoken so openly and easily, and, well, Bucky’s missed that. He still feels like a jerk for what he’d done and how he’d treated Steve, but he would continue to make up for it however possible. He also recants his earlier statement about Steve not being able to visit him at work.

"You can come visit me whenever you want, you know that," he tells him. Steve doesn't know if he will, but he thanks Bucky for the offer anyways. When Bucky takes their clean plates before Steve gets the chance - "No, it's okay, I've got it" - Steve rolls his eyes and with a small smile, says, "Okay, you don't have to kiss up, Buck. I'm not mad at you anymore."

Bucky pauses, back to Steve, and the blond can't see the deep frown on his face. "But you were," he reminds him softly, as if that's reason enough. Then he clears his throat and whips back around, the old Bucky back on his face. He shrugs, smirking. "Alright, if you insist - you can clean them then." He claps his hands and heads out of the kitchen (but only because he saw Steve chuckle first). Grabbing his work clothes, he goes into the bathroom and doesn't re-emerge until he's showered and brushed his teeth. Dawning his getup for the docks, he packs up a sandwich and an apple into his lunchbox, and stuffs his pack of Luckies and matches into the pocket of his pants. Steve's finishing up with their dishes when Bucky fastens up his boots and then walks back into the kitchen and comes right up behind Steve.

He stops, frowning. Steve feels his presence and stops, too, still staring ahead.

What exactly is he doing? Bucky isn't sure. He'd come back into the room and approached Steve as if he meant to... give him something goodbye. A hug? It had to have been a hug. He clears his throat and then does the only thing he can think to do: reach that hand out like he had the urge to earlier and touch Steve's hair. But it isn't in the form of a tender, intimate caress; he palms the top of the boy's head and ruffles it up more. The blond ducks out of the way and complains with a scowl; looks over his shoulder at Bucky and brings both hands to his hair to shield himself.

"Go already, before I kick ya," Steve threatens, but it's loving, just like it used to be.

Bucky grins, relieved. "You wouldn't even be able to reach."
"I'll steal all your lunch money," the blond retorts.

"I'll make you eat dirt."

"Jerk."

"Punk."

"Asshole."

Bucky spins, laughing, and heads out of the kitchen, calling back, "Putz." He calls out a goodbye and then heads out of the apartment.

The door shuts behind him and Steve is once again by himself. But he notes that this time, it's not like it has been recently. The air between them is different; familiar. He thought that would hurt - and it does, still, on some level - but the relief and happiness he feels about having his best friend back overrides those other things. He hopes with a full heart that it will last.

Still... He wishes he knew how to explain that charge that seemed to fly between them when Bucky had approached him just now. Probably all in your head, he tells himself. But it seems so much more than just wishful thinking, because he remembers that this isn't the first time he's felt that. It'd happened that day on the couch - that day, that night - when Steve had been cleaning Bucky's busted nose. He'd felt it that mortifying time he'd found Steve sitting, pants unzipped, in the basement at the orphanage... And the day they went to Coney Island and rode the Ferris Wheel, and Steve had been so terrified of heights that he just about passed out when their carriage stopped right at the top and didn't seem to start moving again for minutes. Steve had been absolutely certain that they were trapped up there, and they were going to die ("The most likeliest of scenarios," Bucky had muttered sarcastically), and he had started to feel the onset symptoms of his asthma attack and no, oh no, he'd forgotten his inhaler at home.

"Well what'd you do that for, dummy?" Bucky had almost shouted, but he'd looked just as scared as Steve did. So he'd rubbed circles on Steve's back as he wheezed and gasped, and when that didn't work, he held Steve's hand and hugged the smaller boy to him and whispered in his hair... Started making up a story on the spot - a fairy tale about a small, scrawny boy who wanted to be a knight, and wound up overcoming incredible odds to save the Princess and proved to the Kingdom just how valuable he was - and Steve understood in that moment why Bucky should've become an author. He was so good at telling stories - so good, so soothing in fact, that it gradually had calmed Steve right down. Then he'd sat there with his head on the space where Bucky's neck met his shoulder, and still Bucky hadn't let go of his hand; still had't removed his arm from around his body. He remembers feeling the sudden, inexplicable urge to tilt his chin up and press his lips right on the spot where Bucky's pulse thudded against the skin of his forehead.

When he slowly pulled away and peered up at Bucky, Bucky's eyes fell to his at that same moment, and they were so close that he could see every pore on that boy's face. They breathed silently through parted lips and Steve wasn't sure what was happening but his heart was beating faster and his body felt alight with nerves. It had only lasted a fraction of a second, and then both of them seemed to snap back to reality, and Bucky had cleared his throat, pulled his arm back, and they straightened back to their proper places in the seats. The ride started moving as if timed perfectly, and they didn't talk about afterwards.

Steve realizes that he's hard in his pajama pants. There's still a part of him that feels somehow guilty about reacting that way to thoughts of Bucky, but with a clearer head, Steve's coming to accept the fact that it is what it is. He's in love with the guy, and he can't help that. So bodily reactions like this are purely biological and can hardly be blamed. Locking himself in the bathroom and stepping into
the shower, Steve stands beneath the lukewarm stream with one palm splayed against the cool tiled wall, and works his hand around his erection. At first, it's quick, hasty - as if Bucky could walk in at any minute. Then he remembers, and his movements become lazy, like he has all day - and he does, really.

His head hangs and he stares down, unblinking, as water drips from his bangs, his nose... He looks but sees something from memory instead... Remembers the way Bucky looked, Bucky sounded, Bucky felt when he'd been inside of him. "Robert" had instructed him to say certain things, but he hadn't been lying when he'd said a single one of them. He had wanted Bucky, just as badly as he wants him now. He can't get the image out of his mind, and God... Bucky had looked so beautiful. It was the first - and undoubtedly the last - time Steve had ever seen him look so vulnerable and heated at the same time. He twists his wrist and rubs his thumb underneath the head, and he moans.

He isn't sure what - who - Bucky had been thinking about while he'd thrust into him, but it was his name he'd breathed... "S-Steve..." Steve remembers (can never forget), because that was what had made him come. He closes his eyes and plays it again in his mind; slowly, draws it out, focuses on every single letter as it'd sounded in Bucky's voice... The breathy way it'd been exhaled, almost as if a thought rather than a spoken word... Like a secret between them... His body stutters, and his brows furrow, lip twitching. He pumps himself harder. It'd been his name Bucky had said - not anyone else's, and no matter how Bucky actually felt about him, that had to have meant something. Steve knows it means the world to him. He replays it again, but this time he adds the sight memory of what Bucky's face had looked like.

And it's too much. Bucky overwhelms him. He gasps, presses his forehead against the cool tiles, and shudders as his orgasm washes over him. It feels like it lasts longer than usual, and the blond thinks of Bucky the entire time. Even once it's passed. He stays that way for a while, until the water is getting colder, and he doesn't want to waste all the heat, so he washes himself with soap and then turns off the shower and gets out. Dries off, gets dressed, goes back into the bedroom and immediately fishes out his sketchbook.

It's time to fill it back up with sketches of Bucky Barnes.

Bucky gets through the day and wonders how Steve's doing back home. The relief he feels at knowing that skinny little punk will be smiling when he gets back home is enough to temporarily make him forget everything he'd been previously consumed with. He wonders if maybe this was the issue all along; that maybe it had all been just the shit that'd gone on with Peter that had fucked with his head. Then that, mixed with the guilt he felt and the poor way he'd taken it out on Steve - threw their friendship off balance - had only confused him more. That had to be it.

And wow, does Bucky feel like a weight's been lifted from his shoulders. He actually can't stop himself from beaming, even as he works and even as his muscles ache. His friendship with Steve doesn't have to be compromised; he isn't diseased, there actually isn't anything wrong with him. He tells himself that he's going to wait until he gets his paycheck the following day, and then he'll take Steve out for a nice meal, and he'll tell him everything... Peter, the money, the confusing thoughts and that that was why he'd pushed Steve away. But it's alright now, because now he knows that he'd just been an idiot! He doesn't think he's ever felt more giddy about admitting to having been acting like one.

He's actually slightly disappointed when he doesn't spot Steve on his lunch break. He doesn't know why he thought that maybe he'd come by, but he'd constantly been popping his head up and looking around like a startled bird, just in case, so he wouldn't miss that head of blond hair that could so
easily get lost in a crowd. It's alright though, it's *A-OK*, because things are finally back to normal, and Bucky isn't diseased, and their friendship is going to be just fine.

He finishes the second half of the day still smiling. When his coworker Henry inquires (more like, "The fuck you so aces about, Barnes?"), he simply calls back with a grin, "Just a *good* day, my man! Just a *good* day!" and then hoists some barrels onto his shoulders and walks off.

After his shift, on his walk home, he notices a beautiful little blonde sitting on a bench, reading from a book. And he's grumpy and probably smells something awful, but he's also feeling on top of the world, so he approaches her anyways. And the thing is, he *is* grumpy, and he *does* smell of sweat and rust and dirty water, but he actually looks *breath-taking*. Rugged. The dirt matting his skin is complimented by the perspiration glistening and highlighting the contours of his muscles, and add in that tousled hair and that charming smile, and – well, a girl would have to be either blind or stupid not to swoon at that.

He pretends that the only reason for initiating conversation is due to his interest in her literature, and then he breaks the ice by tapping into his vast knowledge and preferences when it comes to the written word. Because Bucky’s not just good-looking, he's smart as Hell; no one at the docks would be able to guess that Bucky was always the top of his class in school – he just doesn’t come across as the brainy type. But he’s also street smart, and has a knack for being able to take one look at a dame and getting a sense for the type of fella she goes after. So not surprisingly, she’s quickly enamoured by his smarts.

Soon, they’re laughing and he introduces himself and gets her name in return. *Evelyn*. He asks if he can call her Evie and she giggles; says all her friends already do.

“Bucky and Evie,” he says charismatically, giving her his most adorable smile. “Sounds like it was meant to be.”

“What was?” she asks, a curious smile on her lips.

“You goin’ out dancin’ with me tonight.”

She blushes, giggles again, and the brunet’s grin expands. He finds himself thinking how much he likes her eyes – blue and beautiful. What can he say? He has a type. She plays coy, hard to get, but they both know it’s an act. Bucky likes it anyways; he’s always enjoyed a girl who can make him work a little harder for it. In the end, she doesn’t put up much of a fight for long, because they agree on a time and a place, and Bucky winks and tells her that she’d better come ready for dancing, because he needs a new partner.

They should be patented - the smooth lines that flow out of Bucky Barnes’s mouth when he’s working a lady over.

She gives him one last little smile before turning to leave. Then Bucky remembers, and he can’t believe he almost forgot. Calling out her name, he catches up to her and laughs as he rubs the back of his head.

“I completely forgot to ask… You wouldn’t happen to have a friend, wouldya?”

Steve tries not to let his disappointment show when Bucky returns home and tells him that they’re going on a double date that night. The blond assumes he had this coming; he *did* say that he wanted his best friend back and their friendship to go back to what it had been and, well… it doesn’t get
much more back to normal than Bucky dragging him out on a double date, now does it?

At first, he tries to talk his way out of it.

“Buck, as much as I appreciate the effort, I really don’t feel like disappointing another dame,” he sighs.

But that won’t deter the brunet. “Aw, c’mon buddy, she’s apparently real nice, and she apparently even likes to go to art galleries and stuff. She sounds like she was made for you!”

But Steve doesn’t want to hear that; he doesn’t want someone else to be ‘made for him’… he wants Bucky. Still, he knows he has to come to terms eventually with the fact that that just isn’t in the cards. And he can’t spend his life waiting on something that’ll never be, even if he may just spend the rest of his life pining for it anyways. Because that’s not the way the world works; he’s expected, as most men are, to settle down one day – get married and have a family. And Steve wants those things, he always has.

And he knows he still likes girls. That’s never been a doubt in his mind; in fact, he’s been more attracted to women in his life than he ever has men. When he thinks back, it’s really only Bucky that’s ever been the exception. So, as much as it hurts, maybe Bucky’s doing him a favour. Maybe the only way to make his heart stop hurting is to let himself put everything he can offer a person towards someone else. He doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to fall out of love with Bucky – not after he’s realized that he’s been in love with him for basically his whole life – but this could be a start.

Reluctantly, he finally agrees.

They go out that night, dressed in their best clothes (still second-hand, but even Steve feels like he looks alright, which is rare), and meet their dates in Commodore Barry Park. Bucky lights up and turns on the Bucky Barnes charm, giving both young ladies a smile that could power half of New York for a month. Steve takes in his friend’s date, and can’t deny how pretty she is. It makes him feel a little sad.

He gets introduced to his date for the evening. Her name’s Virginia and she’s gorgeous in a very understated sort of way; like she’s beautiful, but she doesn’t fully know it. Steve appreciates that in a person. To his utter surprise, her face doesn’t fall when she lays her eyes on him. In fact, she gives him a shy, polite smile and holds out her hand to shake his. Bucky looks pleased with himself; Steve knows that look. It’s the one that spells “I told you so”.

Bucky’s got his arm around Evelyn’s shoulder already, and the blonde is standing between him and Steve. Then they get introduced. “Stevie, this is Evie,” Bucky says, and it isn’t until Virginia giggles and points out how the names rhyme that Bucky even notices. Small world. His date gives Steve the once-over and then offers him a courteous little smile, also shaking his hand.

“What?”

Virginia smiles. “You two look like you could be twins.”
“What? No they don’t,” Bucky replies quickly, but he sounds confused. He pulls away from Evie so he can step back and take a proper look at them. Steve just glances at the blonde and shrugs. Steve doesn’t see it; they have the same hair and eye colour, so what? But Bucky can’t believe it – what in the actual fuck. Evie’s taller than Steve (but who isn’t?) but it’s unbelievable how many features they have in common; their golden hair is almost exactly the same shade, and their eyes, the same colour. Even a similar shape. Both have slightly darker lashes that frame the circles of baby blue, and what the fucking hell, even their facial shapes and the curve of their lips are identical.

He suddenly feels deeply unsettled, as if the observation has revealed something about him that he still hasn’t figured out yet.

“Nah…” he lies, his voice not nearly as confident as he wants it to be. “I don’t see it.”

Virginia grins with disbelief and gestures to them. “How can you not see it? They look like they could be brother and sister. You must be blind!” She smiles between the two. “Well, I see it. How bizarre.”

Steve shrugs again, looking away and feeling uncomfortable at being scrutinized so closely. Bucky feels just as uncomfortable, but for entirely different reasons. That voice – Steve’s voice – is becoming audible in the back of his mind again, and he needs to squash it as quick as possible. So, changing the topic, he puts his arm back around his date and separates her from next to Steve; reminds them all that the night is young, so they shouldn’t waste it standing around, and then they all head out together.

Steve expects Virginia to avoid him as much as possible and stick to her friend, but she actually winds up trailing behind them and keeping a slower pace next to Steve. And it isn’t out of pity, to try and subtly encourage him to hurry up. She doesn’t seem to mind at all, actually. She gives him small, polite smiles, and asks him questions about himself.

*She wants to know about him.* If ever there was a foreign concept in Steve Rogers’s mind, it’s that. He answers all of her questions and asks ones of his own, and he learns a lot of interesting things about her. Bucky’s wasn’t fibbing when he said she enjoyed art; they discuss their favourite pieces and even have a debate at one point about primitivism, and Steve even feels comfortable enough to argue lightheartedly with her when he feels she hasn’t made a strong enough case. He starts to think that if the rest of the night continues this way, he may just invite her to the gallery. He still has money saved up, and he’s never had the chance to take a girl on a real date before.

Bucky hears them conversing, and finds himself more interested in trying to hear *that* than carrying on his own with Evie. Several times he has to ask “what?” when she pats his arm after realizing that he’s zoned off yet again. He can’t make out all of what they’re saying, but Steve’s chuckling a lot and even Virginia is laughing. And not even the fake kind – like, real, genuine laughter.

This is good. This should be good. She’s showing an interest; that’s exactly what Bucky wanted. That’s the whole point of a double date, right? Yeah, this is… This is good…

Except it isn’t.

Bucky's on the dance floor and he's spinning Evie around, and the last time he checked, she was laughing, but he's spending more time glancing over his shoulder and checking on Steve.

The blond had hesitated to admit his aversion to dancing, but to his *and* Bucky's surprise, Virginia
replied that she was a horrible dancer too, so she was more than fine sitting it out. Steve had smiled then and offered to get them drinks, and for the quickest, briefest moment, Bucky was annoyed by that.

*Get your bearings straight, Barnes.*

So he keeps dancing and twirling and if he catches Evie's eye, she grins and he forces himself to laugh right back - but... The moment she's looking away, he's peering right back over his shoulder, and they're still talking, and the brunette hasn't upped and ditched him yet, and wait, no, this is what you wanted! This is the whole point of a double date. He frowns, jaw clenching slightly as he swallows, and his brows knit and tug upwards in the middle, confused.

But he isn't confused. He refuses to be. Because this is exactly what he wanted. He's just concerned for Steve's well-being, that's all. They've never actually been in a situation where Bucky's date's friend would show an interest in Steve, so Bucky's just adjusting... Feeling protective and making sure that Steve's feelings aren't compromised.

*That's exactly what it is.*

And Steve's having a surprisingly great time. Virginia is a sweetheart; incredibly smart and sharp-witted. She laughs at Steve's awkward attempts at jokes, and *this is what it feels like to be visible.* The only time he's ever felt like this is around Bucky. Bucky... He's aware that his best friend is off dancing somewhere, but he's too caught up in his discussion to check on him. He's making sure of it; purposely distracting himself. He doesn't want to see him pressed against that girl who can apparently be his twin. That baffles him on every level possible; if she's so much like him, what is it about him that isn't good enough?

"Do you take any art classes?" Virginia asks him, propping up her chin in her hand.

Steve smiles. "I've always wanted to; just have to save the money first. And you?"

"Yeah, I've been enrolled in an art class over at the college for the last seven months. It's a lot of fun, I've been learning a lot. I can get some information for you if you want?"

"Really? Yeah, I'd love that."

And he really would. He starts to dig down deep and start gathering the courage he needs to ask her on a proper date; he's beginning to feel confident that she might just say yes.

Bucky watches the table from over his date's head, and his jaw hurts from clenching his teeth so hard. His blood is boiling and he doesn't know why; but he feels positively agitated. His mind finds strange excuses; things that he knows don't really bother him - like, *why won't Steve just fucking come dance and socialize with them? Why does he have to stay all the way over there? Why's he laughing so much?! She can't possibly be that funny...* Then he stops dancing all together when he sees Virginia say something as Steve lowers the glass he's just sipped from. She gestures to his chin and he wipe at it but she shakes her head and mouth something else. Before the blond can dab with his sleeve again, she's reaching across the table and taking his chin in her hand and swiping at it with her thumb.

Bucky's arms fall from Evie's sides and he physically - albeit gently - moves her out of his way and suddenly he's no longer on the dance floor but advancing towards the table, never taking his eyes off of the two sitting there. Steve sees him approaching from his peripherals and when Bucky's finally standing in front of them, the blond gives him an oblivious look of concern at the brunet's expression.
"Hey Buck...?"

Bucky keeps his eyes on him. "We're leaving."

Steve's brows crease. He looks from his date to the older boy and Bucky wants to shake him because hey, you don't need to run it by her, I'm the one talking to you.

"Uh... Buck, I'm kind of in the middle of--"

"And I said we're leaving." He grabs Steve's bicep in his hand - firm, but not tight enough to hurt him - and pulls him out of his seat.

Blue eyes regard him with confusion. He opens his mouth to speak but suddenly Bucky's free arm is getting yanked and now Evie's joined them and she looks furious.

"What the hell was that all about?" she demands, directing her question at Bucky. He doesn't answer; just keeps staring at Steve. She gives him an incredulous look. "Hello? I'm talking to you! You've barely been paying attention to me all night - you ask me out, and then you ignore me?"

"Ready to go?" Bucky asks, eyes still hard on Steve, but it doesn't even sound like a question. His tone is firm and unimpressed and what did Steve do now?? Helplessly, the younger man looks to Virginia, but the brunette is getting to her feet, looking incredibly uncomfortable as she witnesses the scene before her.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Steve," she says apologetically, and it's so sincere that Steve wants to beg her to stay. She averts her eyes, looking genuinely disappointed, and takes her place next to her angered friend. Linking her arm with Evie's, she looks back up at the blond. "It was nice to meet you, okay? I had a good time..." She regards Bucky almost nervously and then Evie is storming off, and Virginia follows in tow.

Steve's too stunned to even begin to process what just happened. And he isn't given the chance, for Bucky just turns and power walks out of the bar. Steve has no choice but to follow (he always follows Bucky Barnes, he always does).

They don't speak the entire way home. Steve tries; he keeps saying Bucky's name, but Bucky won't answer. The brunet's heart is racing in his chest and he feels like he needs to punch something - maybe scream - and he doesn't know why. He doesn't know what's happening to him. He'd been so happy all day, and things had seemed so optimistic and the future, the future had seemed promising again. And within a matter of seconds, it'd all reverted right back to how it felt twenty-four hours earlier. Because he can hear Steve's moans and Steve's breathless gasps and Steve's 'I want you... Bucky, I want you...' all over again and it's louder than ever but then no, there was Steve, wanting someone else, and that's what he wanted right? That's what he wanted, except he'd grown so used to being the only person in the world who seemed to be capable of seeing Steve for how amazing he truly is that it was like he'd dismissed the possibility that someone else in the world could, too. Someone who could give Steve the world in return; treat him right, provide everything- he couldn't.

No. No, there's nothing wrong with him; he's just confused.

He feels like he can't breathe when they finally get back into their apartment. He shoves open the door and walks right in, and it's Steve who comes in second and shuts it behind him. Blue eyes don't leave Bucky, not as he storms into their home and then charges into the living room as if having planned to wind up in there, only to watch the older boy pace. As if he's seconds away from scolding Steve; giving him shit for having a good time? But Bucky's not the only one angry now, because the
walk home - the *silent treatment, always with the goddamn silent treatment these days* - has given Steve time to let everything that just happened sink in. And *now*... now he has some questions of his own.

"What is your *problem!*?" he all but shouts, stepping into the living room and rooting himself to the ground where he stands.

Bucky doesn't answer; just keeps pacing and shaking his head, breathing so roughly and casting Steve scowls every few seconds.

"Hey! What the Hell, Bucky! What was that!?"

"I don't - I don't *know*, okay!?" is suddenly the reply. And that doesn't make anything any less confusing.

Steve marches towards him, grabbing his arm to turn the body his way and stop Bucky's pacing. It's only making him more anxious.

"*Why* did you make us leave!? I was having a good time - she was actually payin' attention to me for once, Buck! For *once*, you actually set me up with someone who seemed to give a damn!"

"*Yeah, I noticed!* You don't think I noticed?"

Steve shakes his head, not understanding. All of Bucky's answers are only muddling up the situation more and making Steve more confused. He's trying to get answers - understand what just happened and where the Hell Bucky was coming from - but the brunet isn't giving him anything at all.

"Then why the Hell did you sabotage it!?!"

"I don't--"

"*All those times, dozens* of times, I've been dragged out and then spent all night sitting by myself because none of the dames wanted me, they only wanted *you*, and then *finally* someone shows an interest, and--"

"*I get it*, Steve, I heard you the first time!"

"Then what is this about!?"

"*It doesn't fucking matter!*"

"*Oh, you're damn right it matters!* Where is this even coming from!? Everything was *fine* today, things were - things were feeling good again... Suddenly you're mad at me again--"

"I'm not *mad* at you, Steve--"

"*What did I do!*?"

"*You didn't do* anything!"

"*You're lying!* You're lying through your teeth and you think I don't know you well enough by now to see it?"

"Don't fucking accuse me of lying - you don't know nothin!"

Steve throws his hands in the air. The neighbour bangs on the walls again but Steve couldn't care
less. "You're right! I don't! Because you never talk to me anymore!"

"What do you want me to say!?!" Bucky suddenly screams, and his face is red and his eyes are shining. He's breathing so raggedly that he's almost wheezing, and Steve's never seen him like this - not in thirteen years of friendship. "That it pissed me off to see you with her!? That I didn't actually expect her to be interested!? THAT I GOT JEALOUS!? IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT!?”

Steve's heart is slamming frantically in his chest. He can't fathom or make sense of anything Bucky's saying right now; all he knows is that he's suddenly seeing red.

"How is that fair, Buck... How is that FAIR!?!" (Bucky stares at him, looking like he's seconds away from grabbing him by the lapels and hurling him across the room.) "You only set me up because you think the dame won't be interested in me!?”

(Fuck me... Bucky, please...) "Don't put words in my--"

"You drag me out on dates hopin' I'll be stranded on the sidelines while you get showered with attention!?"

(Bucky... I want you...) "Steve, shut up--"

"You don't think I'm worthy of that kind of attention, too!"

(I like it... Buck, I like it...)

"SHUT UP!"

"YOU DON'T WANT ME, BUT YOU DON'T WANT ANYONE ELSE TO HAVE ME EITHER!"

The sentence doesn't get the chance to be finished; Steve's still talking when Bucky makes a pained sound that the blond has never heard before... before grabbing Steve's face in his hands and crushing their lips together. Steve's eyes immediately close and his hands fly up to clutch Bucky's wrists, as if to shove him away. But Bucky's rushing him forward until Steve's back hits the wall, and suddenly it's all Steve can do but hang on. Bucky's fingers clutch his face as if - if he lets go - Steve will float away. Their harsh breathing is the only sound that fills the room as their mouths move against each other; Bucky steering the kiss and Steve blindly following. Then small, artistic fingers are threading into Bucky's hair and clinging to the tresses, and Bucky makes a pained, whimpering sound. The kisses are open-mouthed but chaste, desperate. All thought is shut off. This is a very different kiss than the one they'd shared that night. That one had been all ecstasy and fear and the need to anchor each other... This one is hungry and angry and terrified for an entirely different reason.

And then just as quickly as it happened, Bucky realizes what he's done and it's broken. Bucky's hands are off of him and he's halfway across the room and Steve wants to beg him to come back but he's too dazed and doesn't react quick enough.

"Buck..." he starts, stepping forward once he's regained control over his legs.

But Bucky puts up a hand and Steve stops.

"Don't come near me," Bucky warns, as if he's somehow dangerous.
"Buck..."

"No, don't! You should - you should hate me!"

"For what? For kissing me?"

"Yes, for kissing you! I don't... I don't know what I was thinking - that was stupid, that was so stupid!"

"Buck, stop, I could never hate you."

And the brunet laughs then, dry and bitter. "You really think so?"

"I know so."

"You're wrong."

"I know damn well that I'm not."

"You're about to hate me. You will. You will, Steve."

"Bucky, stop, please, what are you talking ab--"

"It was my fault."

Steve shakes his head, brows knitting together again. "What?"

"It was my fault," he repeats simply, and he's gone somewhere in his mind now. His emotion has shut down; face stoic, voice flat, except for that hint of self-loathing... Like he deserves everything bad in the world resting on his shoulders.

"What was your fault?"

**No turning back now.**

"When I met Robert, he told me his name was Peter," Bucky blurs out. "I met him back in January; the night you were feeling a bit better and you told me I should go out dancin'. We were starved for cash, Steve, I had no other choice."

Dread fills Steve's chest, suddenly makes it feel tight. "You had no other choice but to what?" he whispers, and that volume is the best he can do.

Bucky laughs, loud and sudden and it makes Steve jump. It's so acidic... self-deprecating... malicious.

"I danced for him!" Bucky shouts, still smiling crazily and throwing his arms out in a grand gesture. "He got me nice and drunk and I danced for him, and then I stripped for him, and then I jerked off for him! And he paid me a hundred dollars to do it, and I liked the money! Liked it so much that I went back a couple weeks later and did it all over again!"

His voice continues to build in volume and he starts animating his words with large hand gestures... He's losing control. But he's been losing control since that very first night.

"I chose to go back! I sought him out and I willingly danced for him, and stripped for him, and was gonna touch myself for him again but no, that wasn't good enough, and so he made some kid I've never met before - who was sobbing and scared and in the exact same position I was in --"
voice is hysterical and cracking now, and his resolve is breaking, and he's starting to sob.) "He - he got him to suck my cock and I stood there and I let it happen! I let it happen, Steve! I fucked that guy's mouth and I hated it but I liked it enough to get hard - yeah, I got hard, Steve, and you know what else!? I came thinking of you!"

Tears are streaming down his face but he laughs again, and it's the most unsettling sound Steve's ever heard.

"Didn't even get paid the full amount - he stiffed me, and I took it and left because he made me his little bitch. And I never went back, not again, not after that, and I never saw that kid again - I don't even know what happened to him, or if he was okay. And then he found me, he found us, and I could've put a stop to it - we could've avoided everything that happened - had I just called him on his bullshit and told you the truth, but I couldn't, Steve, I couldn't tell you! Oh, then I let you walk around for weeks thinking this whole thing was your fault! Because I was too much of a fucking pussy to just tell you, so here's me telling you! It was ALL. MY FAULT. My fault, not yours! I'm the one who fucking whored himself out for cash, I'm the disgusting invert who thought of you when I came, I'm the liar who let you blame yourself, and OH! GUESS WHAT!? I haven't been able to stop thinking about it - any of it! Not since that night - I keep replaying it over and over and fucking over, and I can't shut you up no matter how hard I try!"

He seems to run out of breath and he stops; pants, throws his hands in the air and lets them slap against his thighs as if to say, 'So there ya go."

Steve stands in shock. It's impossible to wrap his head around everything he's just been told. It's too much at once. The only emotion he can fathom is mind-numbing, violent fury... Not towards Bucky. Never towards Bucky. Peter... for putting Bucky through this. Himself... for not being strong enough to be able to do something about it. Because he wants to rip that predator limb from limb; he doesn't wish death on anybody but for the first time in his life, that's exactly what he wants. And he wishes he could be the one to do it.

"Why?" he finally stammers, after what feels like ages of silence. His voice cracks. He's shaking with rage. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Bucky misinterprets his anger; believes it to be directed towards him. Good, he thinks. I deserve it.

"Because I didn't want to lose you! Because I didn't want you to find me disgusting; I know I'm disgusting - trust me, Steve, I already fucking know! I fucking hate myself! I've hated myself since the first time I let him photograph me! And I knew you'd hate me, too!"

Steve looks visibly stricken, as if he'd been slapped. His eyes widen and his jaw drops. And now, yes, he's angry at Bucky, but it's a strange sort of anger.

"You know me..." he says in a shaky, outraged voice. "Buck! You've known me your whole life! Thirteen years of friendship - thirteen years - and that's how you think I would've reacted!"

It's painful to believe to be true; Bucky's the one person who was always supposed to know him better than anyone. If that's what Bucky thinks of him, then it throws into question whether he really know him at all... and if that's the case, then Steve was always more alone than he ever realized. No... He needs for this not to be true. He needs it.

Bucky looks like he's trying to form sentences; whatever's going on in his head is a war in its simplest terms. He looks more lost and confused than Steve's ever seen him. The blond tries to step towards him but Bucky throws up his hands again and takes a step back.
"No, don't come any closer!" he shouts, tears still streaming down his face. He's shaking so bad, and Steve's heart breaks, and all he wants to do is take this boy - this stupid, amazing, vulnerable boy - in his arms and hold him until Bucky never again doubts his loyalty... His love for him.

"I'm **sick!**" Bucky keeps yelling, over and over. "I'm **disgusting!** Fucking **fairy,** fucking **fairy,** **FUCKING FAIRY!**"

"Bucky, stop!" and now Steve is crying too.

"**HATE ME!** You're supposed to **hate me!** You're such an idiot, Steve, you're so fucking naive! I'm **not** a good person; I'm just going to hurt you!"

Steve grabs his own hair, feels like he's about to go insane. **Why is this HAPPENING!? Things were finally getting BETTER!**

"Then stop hurting me!" the blond cries back, trying to step closer. "Let me be there for you!"

"I can't! I can't, I can't, I CAN'T, I FUCKING CAN'T!"

"Why not!?"

"**BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!**"

Silence.

Both are equally stunned by the confession. Steve stares, and Bucky stares back, and it's possible that Bucky's even **more** shocked at what just came out of his mouth; as if it never registered before. And the words, they haven't sunken in yet for Steve, and they can't - there's no time - because he seems the ticking time bomb in Bucky's demeanour... Sees his face slowly morphing into one of complete and absolute terror as his own admission finally sinks in and he realizes, loud and clear, what he just said.

"Buck--" And then Steve tries running forward to touch his face, to try and bring him back, **stay with me, don't leave, not right now, not after that,** and he needs to calm him down, because Bucky looks three seconds away from a mental breakdown. Bucky doesn't even seem to register that the smaller body is fast approaching him until slim, bony fingers touch his jaw, and then he reacts without thinking...

Puts his hands on Steve's shoulders, and shoves him away, harder than he's ever touched him, with a loud, horrified cry.

Steve loses his footing and goes crashing to the floor, landing on his side.

He's hardly injured; jarred a little, and surprised, but not hurt. His immediate concern is watching the realization sink in a second time as Bucky takes in what he just did, and that horrified expression changes to one of absolute disbelief and guilt.

Bucky's jaw drops and his eyes pool with fresh tears... His chest rises and falls so erratically and so heavily that he looks like he's about to have a heart attack.

"Bucky," Steve says sternly, with concern. He needs to assure him that he's alright. It doesn't seem to get through. "James."

Grey eyes snap to his face now, and Bucky breaks harder. Shaking his head, he starts stumbling back.
"I'm sorry," he breathes, so fast and so barely audible that Steve almost misses it. His eyes are wide and thick tears fall, rolling down his cheeks. His mouth is perfectly slack in shock. Bucky shakes his head again, keeps backing up towards the doorway. "I'm - I'm sorry."

And then he turns, and Steve isn't quick enough. He runs into their bedroom and slams the door, barricading himself inside. Steve follows and practically hurls himself against it a second later; pounding on it with an open palm and shouting Bucky's name desperately, begging his best friend to let him in. He can hear banging and heavy footfalls and Bucky's sobbing and angry cries, but the older boy does not - will not - open the door.

Steve tries for almost an hour, until the sounds die down and he can no longer hear anything coming from the other side.

(Bucky sits on the floor, back to the wall, and stares off, dazed and eyes red and what have I done?)

Steve sits on the other side of the door for a while, but then gets up and heads back into the living room. But not before saying to the door, "I know you can hear me... I'm not going anywhere. I'm never going anywhere."

(Bucky hears. Bucky always hears him.)

Steve lies down on the couch in the living room, staring at the ceiling and trying to calm himself down... make sense of the situation. All he wants to do is hold Bucky.

Bucky stares ahead; isn't calm, can't be, but has worn himself out too much for anything else. All he wants is to disappear and never be seen or heard from again.

...What have I done?...

Time ticks by and the hours pass. Steve watches the patterns the moonlight casts across the ceiling. His arm rests behind his head and his feet dangle off the side of the arm rest. He hasn't heard anything come from their bedroom in a long while.

"BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!"

It replays over and over in his mind, almost like a dream.

Bucky's scared; Bucky's so scared... And it's Steve job to protect him. Just like Bucky's always protected him.

He feels calm now. Peaceful. Because everything makes sense now. His stomach still churns at the idea of Bucky being forced to dance, and forced to touch, and forced to stand there and take it as if he means nothing. Because Bucky means everything - he wishes his best friend could see that. Right now, though... Steve just wants to see him. That's it. Just see him and promise him that no matter what happens, he will never leave him. Friend, lover, acquaintance... it doesn't matter anymore. Steve will be whatever Bucky needs him to be.

I just need you to know that I love you.

His feet find the floor and he gets up. When his hand tentatively wraps around the doorknob and twists, Bucky must've unlocked it at some point, because the door opens.

Bucky's in his cot now, lying beneath his quilt, facing the door. He's shirtless, down to only his boxers to accommodate the humidity in the summer's air. He isn't asleep. He sees Steve and the kid
looks like a fucking angel, and he knows, he knows so well that he will never deserve him. He props himself up on his forearm but doesn't say anything. Just looks.

They take in the silence for a moment; the distance between them. Steve expects Bucky to warn him away again, but he realizes when his eyes start to adjust and he can absorb the features on his face, that Bucky's way too tired for that. For fighting - any of it. Steve had words prepared, gentle and unassuming. Practically a mini speech. But he stands there and takes one look at Bucky, and he's so beautiful, and words aren't enough anymore.

Slowly, Steve takes a step into the room; starts approaching the bed. Keeping his eyes on Bucky's, he brings his hands - and they shake a little - to his loosened tie and undoes it, sliding it off from around his neck. After letting it fall to the floor in his wake, he undoes every button of his shirt until he's pulling the fabric from his chest; exposing it. And Bucky's eyes fall then, slowly, unsure, and they take in Steve's everything... His neck, his shoulders, his collar bones, his chest, his ribs, his belly. Grey eyes even land on his hands and then observe his wrists, so thin and delicate and breakable. Bucky looks scared, hesitant, but he doesn't move, and he doesn't look away.

Steve's almost at his cot now, and Bucky can see how he isn't even self-conscious in this moment as he's pulling his slacks from off his legs, followed by his socks. Usually undressing makes him uncomfortable. Now he's bearing himself to Bucky by choice; as if shedding everything that'd ever held him back and making an offering. He's only in his underwear now but then... He isn't.

They fall to the floor; are toed to the side. And then he's just... standing there, with the moonlight cascading over his body, and he's so small and so fragile and so perfect. Bucky's never seen anything so perfect. His heart feels like it's both racing and slowing at the same time, and for a moment, he wonders if he's dreaming. If that's the only logical answer to why he's tense with nerves but also inexplicably feeling so calm.

Still, neither says a word. Steve looks down and Bucky looks up and for once in their lives, it feels like something is falling into place. Bucky's lips are slightly parted and his eyes are sad, but there's a sliver of hope there that Steve isn't sure even Bucky is aware of. He looks up at him as if he's a lifeline, and Steve can feel it in that moment - why Bucky had been so scared to lose him. Bucky is his tether. Without him, Steve is nothing. Yes... He understands full well.

Slowly, perhaps a little carefully, Steve gets onto the cot. There's still the chance that Bucky could make him leave. But he doesn't; the brunet shuffles back a bit to give the him room, and then Steve's sitting with one leg tucked under the other and looking down, and still neither speak, and they forget how to blink. Bucky rises and holds his weight up with his left arm. Now their faces are even; their eyes dancing back and forth with each other. They stay that way for a while.

Then their eyes start roaming and taking in every details of the other's face. Bucky drinks it all in... every single detail... Tries to desperately store it away in his memory so he'll never have to forget it. Steve memorizes every angle, every curve, every freckle and blemish; he knows this face better than he knows his own, but it's like he's seeing it for the first time. When his eyes linger on those full lips, he lifts a hand and gingerly brushes the tips of his fingers across them. Bucky just keeps watching his face. Then Bucky's hand is coming up, and it shakes even harder than Steve's; he traces, almost if awed, the sharp line of the blond's cheekbone... Then his jaw... And then his hand slides back so his fingers thread into golden hair and his palm presses to that jaw, and he cradles the side of Steve's head... Strokes his cheek and temple with an unspoken apology.

Steve's the one to lean in. For all his inexperience and all of Bucky's bravado, it's the older boy who's too scared to take the plunge. But Steve moves slowly... because Bucky's like a frightened animal right now, and Steve knows that anything too fast will startle him and make him run. Steve can't let
him run right now... He needs Bucky with him. They lock eyes again, and Bucky sees the look in those baby blues... *Tell me to stop, and I'll stop...* And Bucky says nothing. Because he's too tired, and he tried so hard, he tried to fight it, and he has no fight in him left. And Steve... Steve is so beautiful, so angelic, and for once in his life, he wants Steve to take care of him.

The pads of the artist’s fingers still linger on Bucky's hard jawline, and suddenly they can feel each other's breath on their faces. And it's slow... The world spins on around them but they move... so... slowly... Because they've waited for this moment for thirteen years, and they can wait a little longer. They give themselves time at this new angle to stare some more; Steve tries to count how many eyelashes Bucky has, but then Bucky exhales a little deeper and it washes over Steve's face and takes over his senses because he smells and tastes so sweet and so undeniably Bucky... He's right there.

Lips touch, finally... and it's gentle, with barely any pressure. Just the slightest, most unassuming tip of the chin and Steve's lips caress Bucky's. They let it sink in, and then they just let themselves feel. Bucky's hand holds the side of Steve's face and he tugs the tiniest bit, and Steve is reassured that Bucky wants this. So he presses his lips to his a bit harder, and they're both breathing through their noses, and Steve has no idea what he's doing but it's okay... Bucky will lead the way.

He does. His thumb strokes Steve's cheek and he starts guiding the kiss; directing the timing, the length, whether his face tilts to the right or to the left, and whichever way he moves, Steve mirrors, because that's the way they've always been. It's an exploration; simply taking in the feel and texture, temperature and taste, of the other's lips, and there's a tiny sense of fascination from both boys - like they're unlocking a puzzle, and this is the answer. Bucky slowly lowers himself back down and gently pulls Steve down with him, and they break the kiss just for a moment so Steve can reposition himself so they're lying next to each other. Bucky pulls his blanket up over both of them and Steve doesn't fight it, even though it's warm enough in the night's air that they don't really need it. Then it's Bucky who's leaning forward, but they meet half way, like they've always done... Bucky uses his weight to guide Steve onto his back, and then he's partially leaning over him, moving his lips over the small, plush ones he's always wanted to taste.

Steve's hand holds the back of Bucky's neck; Bucky's, still the side of his face. Their breathing deepens but even as Bucky starts kissing Steve more passionately, it's never less slow, and it's never less gentle. He kisses Steve like it's both a question and a solution; there's desperation, because he needs Steve to help heal the hole in his chest, but there's also consideration, because he never wants to hurt this boy ever again. Steve doesn't mind; in fact, prefers it. He wants to provide those things, and he realizes that maybe that was his purpose all along... Bucky provides in a way Steve can't, and Bucky never complains. Loves taking care of Steve. Maybe the only thing Bucky ever needed from Steve was *this*. Unfiltered, unchanging, undeniable love.

He feels the tip of Bucky's tongue touch his lips, silently asking for permission, and Steve grants it, parting them. Everything is languid and lazy, but with intent. Bucky inhales deeply as their tongues beat together and he can *properly* drink in Steve's taste. Steve's head spins. He's lacking the same education on this sort of thing that Bucky has, so he's uncoordinated at first and probably awful at it. Bucky doesn't care, because it's *Steve* and that makes it perfect. He kisses with an unfaltering patience, holding Steve's head in place and constantly redirecting the blond back to the proper pace and technique. He discovers that Steve's a quick learner, though he knows he shouldn't be surprised. Instead of being presumptuous, the younger boy just lets his mouth tip open and lets Bucky's tongue fill it, licking into the space and making it his own. He mirrors whatever it is Bucky's tongue does, and he doesn't try to speed things up. They establish a rhythm, and Bucky wants to praise Steve for how good of a kisser he's already become in such a short time, but he doesn't want to use his mouth for any other purpose than the one it's currently set to, so he congratulates him with more kisses, with deeper presses of his tongue.
Then he feels perfectly straight teeth experimentally take his bottom lip between them and gently nip, and oh... Bucky moans softly, barely audible, because they have to keep quiet; it may be that kind of neighbourhood, but there are people in their building who wouldn't hesitate to get the police involved if they knew... cart them away to some insane asylum or worse... But he can't help it, because where did ya learn that, you surprising punk, and Steve, he's always full of tricks, isn't it? He tightens his fingers in Steve's hair and kisses harder, and now he's coaxing that little body to the center of his cot and climbing over top of him. Steve sighs into Bucky's mouth as hot, open-mouthed kisses are exchanged like promises, because Bucky feels so welcoming on top of him. Like that's where his body was always meant to be.

The brunet is mindful not to rest all of his weight onto Steve's chest, but he lets their stomachs and their hips press against each other. He takes a moment to simply look down at him; pull away from the kiss, give himself a second to miss those lips already, just so he can... look. He has a forearm resting above both of the blond's shoulders, and he brings both hands to Steve's forehead and gently pushes the blond bangs from off his face... Keeps his hands on either side of his head as grey eyes flicker across all of his features again. He can't process the way Steve's staring right back... So much love and trust and none of the things he deserves. It's such a deceiving kind of look; makes him believe for a moment that he can have this, something as precious as Steve... That he could be worthy of it and not taint or destroy it. He wishes he were enough--

Steve hears Bucky's thoughts; can see them on his face. He cuts them off by grabbing the back of his neck and pulling the older boy back down so their mouths reconnect, and this kiss isn't any less passionate this time, but it is crucial. Bucky... my poor, incredible, wounded Bucky... Bucky's lips seek comfort against his own and nothing is close enough, not for either of them. Steve feels like he could press against Bucky hard enough to seep into his skin and live within him and he'd still ache for more. But suddenly he gasps - and Bucky silences the sound with another kiss - and the hips above him grind down. Bucky's protective instincts kick back in and all he wants to do, all he can do, is guide this boy and make him feel so good, because he wants to make it up to Steve, and he needs for Steve to love him back. So he holds him still, palms on either side of his head and fingers buried in golden hair, and his body undulates like a steady rolling wave, and he rolls his hips against Steve's.

The blond can feel Bucky's erection beneath the fabric of his underwear. It makes his brain feel fuzzy, and when the brunet lines their hips up perfectly and they press and rub together just so, Steve thinks he's forgotten how to breathe. His chest gets tight and his vision blackens, like an asthma attack only peaceful...

"Breathe," Bucky instructs with a whisper, and his voice doesn't sound like his voice at all; it's low and breathy, with a hint of gravel, but still, so soft. It grabs Steve from the recesses of his mind and brings him back. So Steve breathes, makes sure he doesn't stop. And the more he breathes - the more in control he is - the more aware he is of the sensations. They both pant quietly, foreheads pressed together and eyes closed, as Bucky's hips rock, arch away, roll back down, repeat... Steve brings his hands to Bucky's back and splays them flush on the heated skin... Just feels... How the muscles move and how smooth his flesh is and memorizing, holding on to every last detail...

So beautiful...

Every moan is sacred; every gasp is a secret. If one makes a sound, the other swallows it gratefully; keeps the other anchored. They keep the blanket on, and Steve doesn't know why; but when the added insulation makes their bodies slick with sweat, Steve can't find it in himself to care. Because there is nothing more glorious, he discovers, than feeling Bucky's body against his like this.

Bucky feels Steve's hands lower and hooks the thumbs into the waistline of his underwear. He
doesn't go any further, and it's almost like a shy request. Like he's asking if it's okay because he
doesn't want to assume and do anything Bucky doesn't want to do. It makes him fall a little more in
love with Steve. It's a bit of a tight squeeze on the cot and the movements are a little awkward, but he
makes up for having to break the kiss by busying his lips on the stretch of Steve's neck as he
maneuvers the clothing off. His heart skips beats and his mind races at those little sounds he's able to
provokes from Steve, as he gives the tiniest, sucky kisses along the curve of his neck... gently runs his
tongue along the thin flesh below his ear... He feels Steve's hands unable to keep still; one second
they're in his hair, the next, one hand is palming the back of his neck while the other clutches to his
back and then slowly drags his fingers along him, scratching in such a deceivingly gentle way that
Bucky's toes curl... And Bucky wants all of it, never wants Steve to stop touching him like this...

He purposely keeps all attention paid to Steve's neck gentle and slow, even as he presses his now-
naked hips back down and oh my God, he can feel Steve's sex beneath his. The body beneath his
bucks at the contact, and the brunet adjusts his hips until they're properly lined up, and then he rocks.
Steve gasps again, but it's contained enough that Bucky doesn't stifle it. He bites down the groan
welling up in his throat and focuses instead on peppering kisses across Steve's throat - over his
Adam's apple, but with extreme gentleness, because he can't do anything to hurt Steve - so he can
work his way over the other side. It's exquisite, the way they feel against each other... hot, almost
scalding-feeling between their thighs, but sending sharps licks of pleasure throughout their bodies
with every movement. Steve sighs, and it's such a soft, innocent sound... so pure and good... and it
makes his neck momentarily expand and then deflate against Bucky's mouth and he licks it because
that was just so beautiful...

Next are the shoulders and collar bones, and Bucky is especially mindful of those because they're so
damn frail, and Steve's broken his clavicles more than once throughout their lives, and he needs to be
gentle with them. He traces every curve and dip with his tongue, licks up the sweat gathering, and it's
salty and heady and Bucky's never wanted anybody more. Steve's lost in everything that is Bucky,
and his hands boldly run down Bucky's sweaty back and palm his rear, feeling its rise and fall as
Bucky's body expertly and slowly oscillates between his legs. Bucky's cock is long, thick, and rock
hard against his, and Steve wants to beg Bucky to put it inside of him, but his chest is too tight and
his throat is too hot and he can't get any words out. He's finding it hard to breathe, but in a
good way... It's a way that surrendered every part of who he is to the boy above him, even the breath in his
lungs... He wants to share everything with Bucky; everything he has to give is already his anyways.

The brunet continues to monitor Steve's bodily reactions - even while he's so caught up in his own
- and any and every time he feels that bony body become too taut, or his chest moves too quickly, he
calms his onslaught... Will stop his hips and rise a bit to give Steve room to breathe, and do nothing
but kiss along his skin. He licks a strip up the side of his neck and then kisses along his jaw. Steve
moans - too elegant and breathtaking to be quieted - and Bucky responds with a breathy groan,
staring down at the face beneath him as blue eyes squeeze shut and brows furrow. Steve tips his head
back, arches his neck, and drives his chin against Bucky's mouth, so Bucky parts his lips and grazes
it with his teeth, and the hips beneath his positively stutter. Steve opens his eyes, tilts his face back
down, and they're staring into each other again. And the blond... he's so doe-eyed and glazed and
feverish, with cheeks flushed and lips parted and bangs matted to his forehead, but this time it isn't
from sickness, or fevers, or pneumonia, it's from him, he's doing this to him, and Steve looks so good
and pure and Bucky doesn't know what to do with everything he's feeling. His heart feels like it's
overflowing.

So he keeps his eyes on Steve's, and lowers, and licks straight into Steve's mouth... And Steve's
tongue meets his, and then their eyes are closing, and Bucky seals his mouth over Steve's like a vault.
It's hungry and harder and frenzied now, and Bucky's hips roll faster, push harder, and that friction,
oh God... Steve feels as though he's either going to pass out or burst, and he's sweating so badly, he
can feel it rolling in beads from his chest onto the cot, and he's trying to stay quiet, he really is, but
then he's whimpering, soft and low, into Bucky's mouth, and he's suddenly, inexplicably scared - because this is *everything* and the stakes have never been higher... If Steve loses Bucky *now*, it's not just friendship that's being lost, and Steve doesn't think he'd be able to survive the hole it'd create in his heart... They've crossed a line they can never go back on, and it's sinking in, it's sinking in, what this means, and Steve needs Bucky to take care of him and make him believe that it's possible...

Bucky clutches to him and doesn't realize until he feels the tears roll down his cheeks that he started crying. Steve trembles beneath him and he keeps moving, and he thinks Steve might be close, and he hopes so, because he knows he is... All he wants is to make Steve feel good; all he wants is to spend his life grovelling at his feet until he has his forgiveness because he *doesn't deserve Steve, not after all this*... He cries, but his heart isn't sad - just... full. And then suddenly Steve must have seen it, because his mouth is all over Bucky's jaw, Bucky's cheeks, and he's kissing away the tears; holding Bucky's face in his hands and blindly caressing and licking them away, and his eyes are closed, and so are Bucky's, and it's such a devoted and selfless action that Bucky moans into it, the sound wet and whole. He slides a hand down Steve's side and clutches onto the side of his thigh, rucking it up and using it to steady himself. He's overheated, and Steve's overheated, and Steve's lips - *that perfect mouth* - is all over his face, and it's too much and he can't think or do or fathom. All he knows is Steve.

He catches those lips and presses Steve hard against the cot, and now his movements are fast and desperate and almost barbaric in nature. Steve clings to him, and their skin glides off each other with ease, and that just makes Steve hold on tighter, because he never wants to lose Bucky, *not ever*. They pant and tremble and Steve moans and Bucky moans, and they try to say the other's name, but neither can vocalize words, so they just shake and stutter and come undone.

Steve comes first. Bucky can feel his cock pulse against his, and then suddenly there's something fresh and hot pumping between them, and Steve moves in a way that Bucky's never seen him move before... His teeth grit and his whole body arches, pushing his chest against Bucky's. The brunet uses the opportunity to wrap his arms around Steve back, so when the blond collapses back to the cot, Bucky's holding him, *I got you*... And hugs that body to his as he continues to rut. Steve's eyes are still closed, mouth still hung open, and face still painted with the lingering throes of his orgasm, and the sight of it does Bucky in. He buries his face into Steve's neck as his body spasms and then tenses, spilling between them and joining the mess Steve had already made. It's hot and wet, but they're covered in so much sweat that they barely notice it.

They lie there for what feels like forever, panting and twitching and trying to remember how to breathe again properly. Steve cradles Bucky's head, just like he had *that night*, but now they've nowhere to be and no one to answer to. He brushes his fingers through dark tresses, his chest still rising and falling heavily, and he feels the bursts of hot air as Bucky tries to catch his breath against his neck... Moans softly, so quietly, when he feels Bucky's lips kiss along his skin again.

Steve wants to fall asleep, but Bucky won't let him. He gets up and leaves the room to soak two cool washcloths. Then he makes Steve lie there and keep still while he carefully uses the first one to clean up the climax from both their stomachs, and then uses the second one to slowly and soothingly run over every single inch of Steve's body to cool him down. Steve watches him and neither boy says a word... But when Bucky meets his eye, they give each other the smallest, shyest smile, and there are so many questions and so many emotions in their orbs.

Eventually, Steve gets what he wants when Bucky comes back to lie down again. He wrangles Steve and shifts them around until they're awkwardly mashed together in the small space. Bucky's mostly on his back and Steve is mostly on top of him, and it's cramped and a little uncomfortable, but neither of them want to move and both of them are perfectly happy staying that way. Bucky's chin is tilted down and Steve's chin is tilted up and their lips just barely touch. They just look... and Bucky
runs his fingers through Steve's hair, and both of them want to say it all, but neither knows how to say a word.

Steve opts for the only thing he thinks is the most important. He promises Bucky in a whisper: "I love you back..."

And Bucky's hand stops, and his gaze falters, and he looks like he might cry again because for some reason, even though he knew it deep down, he still wasn't expecting to hear it back. And he doesn't deserve Steve Rogers - he doesn't think he ever will - but for some reason, this boy, who's small and overlooked and destined for so much fucking greatness chose him, all those years ago. And still continues to do so. And that baffles and overwhelms and touches Bucky so strongly, that when a tear does fall, and he feels Steve kiss it away again, he can't feel ashamed.

He pulls Steve back, lips seeking and yearning, and steals what was always meant to be his.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bucky and Steve try to see if they can have a normal, functioning relationship - even if they have to keep it a secret, and even if Bucky still has to maintain the facade of his reputation.

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Thank you so much to Demi187 for recommending the song I used the lyrics for at the beginning of this chapter; it's called "The Boy Who Blocked His Own Shot" by Brand New, and it reminded Demi187 of this fic, and so I took a listen, and I basically cried, lol. And of course, thanks to everyone who's been reading, bookmarking, commenting, etc. on this fic - you're all amazing!

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
To Flourish

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky enjoy a summer of being in love and not being able to take their hands off of each other.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the happiness while you can.

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It's a little bit funny, this feeling inside...
I'm not one of those who can easily hide.
I don't have much money, but boy if I did,
I'd buy a big house where we both could live.
If I was a sculptor, but then again, no...
Or a man who makes potions in a travelling show...
I know it's not much but it's the best I can do.
My gift is my song and this one's for you.
And you can tell everybody this is your song.
It may be quite simple but now that it's done,
I hope you don't mind,
I hope you don't mind that I put down in words:
How wonderful life is while you're in the world.
I sat on the roof and kicked off the moss;
Well a few of the verses well they've got me quite cross.
But the sun's been quite kind while I wrote this song;
It's for people like you that keep it turned on.
So excuse me forgetting - but these things I do -
You see, I've forgotten if they're green or they're blue...
Anyway, the thing is... what I really mean:
Yours are the sweetest eyes I've ever seen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 18, 1938

Sunlight pours in from the window, streaming across Bucky's face, and it pulls him slowly from his sleep. For a second, he can't remember where he is - but he can feel Steve's body next to his, and it's so familiar, the events of the past five months are completely skipped over.

Then he remembers, "BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!" It resonates from somewhere in the back of his head; sounds far away, echoing off the walls. Everything comes back to him; the screaming and the fighting and the jealousy and the crying - but also the breaths shared, the feeling of slick skin against
his own... And the sound of Steve Rogers moaning softly; so, so softly.

He should feel weird about this. The morning after has always felt weird for him. But he props up his head in his hand, and looks down at Steve's still-sleeping form - and he can't help but smile. They'd spent the night tangled in each other's limbs, and yeah, Bucky had woken up a few times because Steve's breath was ridiculously hot on his neck, and for such a tiny guy, he could smother with the best of them – but he had loved it. When he did sleep, he slept the same way as Steve had: peacefully.

There is a small part of him that still feels slightly uncomfortable with himself; still can't fully believe that he admitted to his best friend that he was in love with him. Had he meant it? He takes in every feature of the blond's face and he knows he did. Does. And it makes sense… Everything has its answer now. He doesn't know where they’ll go from there, but right now that doesn’t matter. This sort of thing isn’t going to be easy, but… then again… he and Steve are used to complicated. That seems to sum up their entire life, both together and apart.

He feels conflicted; he wants to let Steve sleep because the kid looks so comfortable and innocent. God, he’s so beautiful... But at the same time, he’s impatient; greedy. He wants Steve awake so he can get all of his attention and hold onto it as long as possible – just in case this is some sort of cruel dream. He’s never been the clingy type, or even the dependent type; he’s only ever been dependent on Steve. So maybe it makes sense, why he’s suddenly feeling like he’s switched places with every dame he’s ever gotten involved with… He finally understands what a lot of them had been feeling.

It makes him feel a bit crazy. All he wants to do is breathe Steve in and be around him in every way possible. It’s almost scary, how quickly the transition happened. He’d always loved Steve and he’d always needed to have him around, in his life. But then all of a sudden he realizes what had been residing in his heart all along, and it was like the flood gates had been opened. This will probably bite me in the ass, he thinks, but then he smiles again, because Steve twitches gently in his slumber and makes the smallest, softest sound, and fuck, Bucky’s in deep.

How had he gone so many years not realizing what had been right in front of him and so, so obvious?

In the end, he is too impatient; too greedy. He leans down and kisses Steve’s forehead. Pulling back, he whispers, “Steve…”

And that pulls the blond from his dreams, because he hears it – how a person’s voice changes; how they exhale your name differently when they’re in love with you.

Steve smiles half-consciously. Blue eyes slowly open and Steve looks up at him, taking the older boy in as his frame becomes less fuzzy from fatigue.

“Hey,” he murmurs in a hoarse tone, his voice still in need of warming up.

“I love you,” the brunet whispers almost immediately. He’s testing the words out; repeating his declaration from the previous night and seeing how they taste on his tongue now. The first time he’d admitted it, he hadn’t even been aware of what he was saying. It’d been blurted out in frustration, helplessness, and fear. They’re wonderful now; sweet and light and freeing. He wants to announce it properly this time, so there’s no doubt in Steve’s mind that he means it.

Steve blinks, and when his smile expands, it’s so appreciative and relieved. He touches Bucky’s jaw and replies, “I love you back.”
“I love you,” Bucky repeats in the exact same, unassuming way. As if he hadn’t even said it the first time.

Steve gives a small chuckle and quirks an eyebrow. “I heard you the first time, dumbo.”

“I just wanted to say it again,” Bucky answers, nuzzling Steve’s nose gently. “I want to say it to you every morning.”

Steve’s heart skips a beat. God, the effect this boy has on him…

“You can, if you want to.”

“I want to.”

Steve gazes adoringly at him, then reaches up and runs his fingers through Bucky’s messy bedhead. Grey eyes close and the older boy sighs, almost inaudibly, to the gesture. The golden-haired boy slides his palm down his cheek so he can stroke the skin with his thumb, and Bucky turns his face and kisses the center. Steve can still feel the apology in his actions.

"I meant it, you know..." Bucky says quietly.

"You meant what?"

"When I told you I loved you. I meant it."

"I know you did..." Bucky nuzzles his cheek to Steve's hand again, looking slightly relieved. "You don't regret it? What we did?"

Bucky narrows his eyes quizzically. "No... Why? Do you?"

The sudden boyish look of vulnerability that flashes in his eyes makes Steve want to kiss him. He shakes his head and gives a small smile. "No. Was just making sure."

Bucky's eyes soften. "You're the only thing I've ever been sure about, pal..."

Steve snorts and rolls his eyes. "You're being such a sap. I feel like one of your ex-girlfriends. You sure you're not sick?"

The brunet grins. “Well, I hadta lure them in somehow." But Steve’s stomach has butterflies, because this is how it feels to have Bucky Barnes look at him the way he’s always looked at the dames he’d liked... The ones he’d actually stuck around for, for longer than a night. He knows Bucky had never been in love before – he would’ve told him, but there were a select few over the years that had earned a particular fondness that Steve had always envied. He’d reasoned at the time that it’d been because he wanted that with a girl, too. Of course, he knows better now.

“You look real cute when you’re pretending to be annoyed.”

Steve groans, punches his shoulder and then rests his arm behind his head. He takes his moment of silence, enjoys the playful look on Bucky’s face. “Are you gonna keep yappin’ or are you gonna kiss me? Not getting’ any younger here, Buck.”

He gets rewarded with a full-toothed grin and oh, there it is, my favourite smile, and then Bucky
holds the side of his face and leans down, pressing their lips together. Steve’s a little too eager, because Bucky always has a way of riling him up without either of them even realizing it – but now he can touch… Now he can touch… Bucky’s all his (he thinks). It’s almost too much for him to know what to do with it. So he settles for jumping head-first into the kiss and parting his lips. Bucky laughs against his mouth; makes a face.

“Steve, you really do have some awful breath in the mornin’. What, did a mangy cat curl up and die in there?”

Steve swats his shoulder again. Bucky snorts but kisses him a second time. They both have morning breath, and it’s both pretty terrible, and they agree to go brush their teeth but first… They let themselves linger a little longer. Their hands roam innocently, remaining above the waist, and no touch is anything other than curious and gentle. They’d been pumped with so much adrenaline the night before; they remember every single thing perfectly, but they’re just… making sure. That it’s real. That they’re not dreaming.

They practically run to the bathroom and race to see who can finish brushing his teeth first. Steve finishes a split second before, but then Bucky rinses out his mouth with water and spits a thin stream at Steve. The blond leaps back as if it’s acid and Bucky wipes his mouth and laughs before picking up the tiny frame with one arm – like Steve weighs nothing, because really, he doesn’t – and throwing him over his shoulder. Steve complains loudly and tries to pound Bucky’s back with his fists. Even though things have changed, they haven’t completely changed. Steve still hates being manhandled and treated like a child.

But then he’s suddenly on his back again in Bucky’s cot; the brunet swoops down over him, and they’re kissing again, and his complaints die in his throat. It’s a lot more invested now. They chuckle here and there as their mouths move, and neither knows why, but it doesn’t matter. They’re just happy; it’s been a long time, it feels, since they’ve felt such an emotion.

“You’re pretty good at this,” Bucky murmurs lowly, swiping his tongue along Steve’s bottom lip. “You were pretty awful at first.”

“Shut up, jerk,” Steve breathes, clutching one hand into Bucky’s hair; the other, his back.

“I must be a good teacher.”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

Bucky grins and kisses him again. Their tongues beat together, gentle but quick. They breathe through their noses, and Steve can feel the short bursts of hot air on his face as Bucky’s chuckles in his throat again. But then the older boy manoeuvres between his open legs, and they’re both still naked, and Bucky’s hips roll down innocently and Steve stutters, gasps. The air between them shifts, and Bucky grows hard in record time, because those noises Steve makes… They drive him insane.

“Can’t believe I waited so long for this,” he husks, lips now working along Steve’s neck.

The younger boy cradles the back of his head and arches. “I was here the whole time,” he moans softly.

Bucky hums and bites lightly on Steve’s pressure point, eliciting another excited gasp from the small blond. “I must be the dumbest guy in Brooklyn…” He licks a stripe up to Steve’s ear and then sucks on the bottom lobe with a gentle consideration. He can feel Steve’s chest starting to rise and fall faster, and Bucky can’t help but still treat him like he’s made of the most precious glass.
“Didn’t need me in my skivvies to be able to tell you that.”

“Slow down your breathing, Stevie,” Bucky whispers in his ear, soothing but serious. Steve frowns, mutters something about him being a wet blanket, but then nods begrudgingly and forces himself to inhale deeper, then exhale. Bucky rewards him by tonguing into his ear, and usually that earns him points, but Steve startles him with a laugh; says it tickles and whacks Bucky on the arm. Bucky laughs back – he never feels more comfortable and less judged than when he’s with Steve – and does it again, just to cause trouble. He loves pushing Steve’s buttons.

“Stop that, you stupid – oh…”

Bucky grinds down against him again, shutting him up. The older boy is fascinated by Steve’s reactions. He watches as Steve’s head tips back, lips parting with soft, breathy sounds. Bucky grins seductively, before crushing their lips back together and licking into Steve’s mouth. The blond lets out a rather sharp moan when that rock-hard erection presses along his just right, and Bucky breaks the kiss to press his index finger to Steve’s lips. He stares down into pools of baby blue, and both their pupils are so dilated; cheeks flushed, mouths hung open.

“Shhh…” he breathes.

Somehow that makes it even more erotic. Steve knows it shouldn’t; it isn’t a joke, it’s dangerous. What they’re doing could make them targets. Most of the people in their building are just like them (and what are they, exactly?), but some of them… Some of them silently agree to go along with it, but only if it’s not flaunted. If it is… well, their building has been raided by police before, thanks to these snitches.

He nods obediently, if only so he can feel Bucky’s lips against his again. He isn’t disappointed. Not at all; not when the brunet’s wet, hot mouth is sucking, licking, nipping along his jaw; down his throat again… Not when their cocks grind together and he can feel their precome drizzling below his navel… Not when… Bucky’s…

Steve’s body becomes more alert, and his eyes fly open with alarm. He peers down, suddenly worried when he sees the top of brown hair moving down his skinny stomach. Bucky’s lips caress along his skin and Steve’s eyes widen. “Buck, what – what are you doing?”

“Just relax,” he purrs, eyes still closed and his lips still pressed to Steve. The velvety tone in his voice – Steve’s never heard it before, and it makes his bones turn to jelly. He lowers his head, feeling weirdly self-conscious all of a sudden, but he forces himself to obey. He focuses on his breathing – even as Bucky whispers encouragement and even--

The blond gasps raggedly when he suddenly feels hot, moist breath against his erection. Bucky’s never done this before, but he has a faint idea thanks to his experience on the receiving end. And, well, he’ll try anything as long as it results in more of Steve’s beautiful sounds. He blindly kisses along the length, and it’s hot and pulsing beneath his lips. He didn’t know whether or not he’d be able to get aroused by this, but now he doesn’t know how the Hell that had even been a possibility. His dick is throbbing against the cot, and he has to tip his hips the tiniest bit to provide it with some friction.

Steve’s skin is clammy and salty, and oddly arousing. Bucky never thought he’d get turned on by a dick against his tongue but nothing’s off the table when it comes to Steve. He knows he should just stop being surprised by now. He licks around it, cradling the base gently in his left hand so he can tilt it around; so no inch of skin is neglected. Steve’s thighs are already shaking, and the brunet wants to poke fun at him for being so easily rattled – but Bucky finds his inexperience so mind-numbingly appealing and sexy that he just presses his tongue flat along the head and licks it as if it were an ice
cream cone. The precome leaking from the slit coats his tongue and he gives himself a moment to properly taste it. Maybe he’s a bit biased because at that same moment, Steve shudders and whispers his name as if it’s a surprise, but it tastes delicious, even though it’s bitter and tangy and strange all at once.

“If you need me to ease up, I need you to tell me,” he preludes, eyeing his best friend’s face. “Okay, buddy?”

Steve nods; tugs impatiently at Bucky’s hair. Bucky chuckles, eyes lowering again.

“You’re so impatient.”

“I will seriously thump you if you don’t hurry up.”

“That sounds like fun, actually.”

“Bucky.”

“Okay, okay…”

In the end, Steve never asks him to ease up – not once. Even when his body steadily undulates against the bed… Even when Bucky pins his stomach down with a large hand just so he can watch him try to squirm… Even when Steve’s biting his lip so frequently that they’re painted a pretty shade of red… Even then, he doesn’t tell Bucky to stop. The brunet has quickly picked up on what Steve especially likes. His mouth bobs up and down, and his tongue massages along the muscle; twirls around the tip. Steve’s average (maybe a tiny bit bigger), but Bucky isn’t feeling brave enough yet to even try and attempt to take him to the hilt – it is his first blowjob after all, and he figures he should be cut some slack. So he makes up for whatever his mouth can’t reach with his hand.

It’s all heat and slick and suction and Steve’s head tosses from side to side and oh Christ… Lord in Heaven… Steve can see stars. His breathing starts to quicken; he can feel himself getting close, and then the punk fiststhis hands into Bucky’s hair and thrusts. Straight up into Bucky’s throat, as far as the tight walls constricting will allow him. Bucky’s eyes widen and he gags lightly, but fuck, oh fuck, that was hot… They lock eyes for the briefest of moments and the brunet nods. Steve’s throwing his head back then, grunting and panting, and his back rises and falls from the cot. His legs squirm uselessly, thighs trembling, as he holds Bucky’s head in place and fucks himself up into his mouth with shallow thrusts.

Bucky alternates between keeping his eyes closed, letting himself be used – but this is different than with Peter, oh yes, Bucky will gladly let Steve use him for the rest of that scrawny punk’s life if he wants – and forcing his eyelids open so he can gaze upon Steve’s face. The younger boy is so lost in the sensations. His brows are tightly knit and his nose is scrunched up. He bares his teeth as he breathes roughly through his opened mouth, and he’s so in control for someone so at mercy – and Bucky’s never seen him like this. His cock feels heavy on Bucky’s tongue and his own is pained, it’s so hard. He groans, the sound stifled by the object in his mouth and vibrating around it.

The sound makes Steve look down at him again. Bucky picks that moment to hollow out his cheeks.

Steve’s gone; that’s it. It would take a superhero’s will power to be able to withstand that look on Bucky Barnes’s face; the friction created by that plush, soft mouth. He tries to warn the brunet by using his fingers in his hair to tug the head away, but Bucky uses his strength to fight against the pulls. Grey eyes bore up at Steve, defiant and challenging and dark with lust. Steve uses everything he has to hold back for one generous second but that’s all he can handle. He pumps his come into Bucky’s mouth, and has to shove his fist into his mouth to muffle his cry when he feels Bucky
The taste is a bit more overwhelming now, and not entirely pleasant, but Bucky gulps it all down as quickly as he can. More importantly, however, the look on Steve’s face made it entirely all worth it. He pulls his mouth off Steve’s now-softening dick with a soft, wet sound, and then wipes his lips with the back of his hand. Steve remains as he is, panting and face stuck in his passing orgasm, and Bucky knows he will never get tired of this.

He kisses back up his bony frame and then covers Steve’s mouth with his, slipping his tongue into the other’s receptive mouth. Steve moans weakly and matches his movements. He can taste the residual come — his come — from inside Bucky’s mouth, and he’s both mortified and aroused as Hell by it.

“How was it?” he breathlessly asks with a curious, albeit goofy little smile curling one side of his mouth.

Bucky groans and breathes between kisses, “Hot… hard… the ending was a little gross, but—”

Steve looks a bit offended and smacks his shoulder again. Bucky grins, obviously having been pulling Steve’s chain. “I’m kidding; stop being such a dame,” he chides lovingly. He pecks Steve’s lips again. “I loved it. I wanna do it to you again.”

Steve is more than alright with that idea. But he’s a little miffed that the brunette called him a dame; Bucky knows it’s one of the insults that actually stings. Bucky quickly senses it. “Hey,” he whispers apologetically, saying he’s sorry by showering slower, ginger kisses along his cheeks, his temples. “I’m sorry.”

Steve relaxes; can’t stay upset when that perfect mouth is against his skin. “You’re such an asshole,” he mutters, but it’s only half-serious.

“How can I make it up to you?”

Steve thinks of the possibilities. There’s really only one thing he wants more than anything else in the world right now.

“Put it in me…”

Bucky stiffens; pulls back and eyes Steve with sudden concern. “What?” His voice is barely above a whisper.

Steve’s face remains calm; sure. He smoothes Bucky’s hair out of his face and then holds the side of his neck in his hand. “Inside me; I want you inside of me, I mean… Do you not want to?” His brows crease; he hadn’t actually considered that to be a possibility.

“No, no, I…” Bucky chuckles, but it’s heavily tinged with nerves. He seems almost embarrassed, and a tad guilty. “I just didn’t know if you’d feel — you know… comfortable doing that again, after…”

Steve stops him — places his index finger to Bucky’s lips.

“Shh,” he whispers sternly. “That wasn’t your fault. We had no other choice; you didn’t hurt me, you didn’t violate me — I told you I wanted it and I wasn’t lying. I felt safe because it was you. And I’m glad it was you.”

Bucky’s looking away and Steve can feel himself losing him. He’s slipping back into his head — the
memory filling the void in his mind and renting the space. He turns Bucky’s face back to line up with his. “Buck… make love to me…”

Clarity slowly seeps into those grey eyes, but Bucky still looks a little unsure. Steve decides to pull out the big guns, because he knows how Bucky operates, and he knows what Bucky likes. And he’s just as selfish as Bucky is, because Steve’s willing to fight entirely unfair to get what he wants – to get Bucky inside of him. He wants it so badly, he almost can’t see straight.

“Bucky… fuck me…”

Bucky blinks; focuses on Steve, disbelieving. There’s a short, surprised groan that gets trapped in his chest. The blond feels that long, hard cock pulse against his inner thigh. He isn’t sure he’ll ever see anything more gorgeous than Bucky’s pupils retracting and then expanding violently as his words sink in.

“Fuck, Steve…” And then he’s kissing Steve with so much force that the smaller boy is crushed down against the cot.

The blond groans and relishes in the taste. He’ll never tire of the way Bucky's lips feel. He needs them like he needs air - and Bucky knows just how badly he needs the latter. The brunet bears down on him in a way that is both dominating and submissive at the same time, and Steve never knew there was such a thing. He feels it in Bucky: how badly the boy above him needs him, too. He's pretty sure that - for whatever his reasons may be - Bucky needs him right now just a little bit more.

"Thought you were... all against the premarital..." the brunet mumbles against his jaw as he traces it feverishly with his tongue.

Steve snorts a little; it's slightly bitter with the memory. "S'a little late for that now."

Bucky recoils back like he's been slapped. He stares down at Steve with a look of genuine hurt and then averts his eyes, turning his head and covering his mouth with his hand. Steve instantly recognizes his mistake. He tries to turn Bucky's face back to him but the older boy won't budge at first. Steve tries again with a bit more force and succeeds.

"Hey, that's not what I meant, I'm sorry," he says softly. "Hey, Buck, I'm sorry. You know I don't regret what happened... I wouldn't change a thing."

"Yeah, cause you're a stupid punk," Bucky chuckles sadly, still looking anywhere but into Steve's eyes.

"Hey..." Steve tugs on Bucky's earlobe gently and then strokes his cheek with his thumb, and Bucky eventually meets his gaze. "If you were anyone else, I'd want to wait. I'd be able to... I waited all my life for you, Buck, I'm a little impatient at this point."

"What about... God? What about what you believe in?"

"I believe... That God wants me to be happy. I think He wants me to love - and I love you more than I've ever loved anything else in my life, 'side from my ma... The rest is no one else's business but our own."

Bucky quirks at eyebrow at that. The corner of his mouth tugs up a little - *Steve always manages to surprise him.* He releases his breath and feels some tension alleviated from his body. He studies Steve's face and lets his words sink in. He finds himself silently asking in his own mind if this is something even he can do right now. He's silent for just a little too long.
"What are you thinking, Buck?"

"I'm thinking..." He sighs. "I want you, Stevie. It scares me a little, actually, just how badly... But... I'm trying to figure out whether I should. This is all still so new... I want to have sex with you - believe me, I do, it's just... I don't want to mess this up. You're the only real thing I've ever done right by; I don't want to lose you."

"You're never going to lose me," the blond promises, his face warm and his heart hammering. He's so damn touched; he's pretty sure that Bucky has never turned down sex - not since he'd started having it all those years ago. The sentiment puts him into a bit of a predicament - it makes him want to hug Bucky to him and reassure him that it's okay; that they can wait.

It also unfortunately makes him want Bucky to jump his bones right then and there.

Bucky can see the conflict on the face beneath his. "Would you be mad... if I wanted us to wait?"

Steve closes his eyes and smiles. There's no lie to it; he could never be angry with Bucky for that. Shaking his head, he replies, "Never."

The brunet smiles and kisses him again. Bucky backs off; gives Steve a chance to calm his half-erection back down. Then he's readjusting so he's got his leg slung over Steve's and leans on him a bit, his cheek resting in his hand as he looks down. Steve feels a little self-conscious, being watched so intently now. Like he's the most delicate, valuable thing in the world. He blushes pink when Bucky smiles.

"What?" he asks, playful annoyance in his voice.

Bucky gives an aborted shrug. "Just love you, s'all."

Steve rolls his eyes, but it makes him grin. "Stop acting like such a dame."

"Oh, I'm the dame?"

"Yeah, you're the dame. Gonna put lipstick on you and take you out on a proper date."

Bucky feigns outrage, but then his opened mouth spreads into a toothy grin. He holds his head up on his own now so he can use both hands to start mercilessly tickling Steve's stomach and ribs. Steve sputters and starts kicking and trying to punch Bucky off of him, but the older boy is too strong for the blond to compete with. He hates being tickled, and he shouts curses at the brunet as he tries to flop away to no avail. It's a little hard for Bucky to take him seriously when Steve's also laughing up a lung.

He only stops when Steve suddenly does seem to laugh up a lung, and then grabs the smaller boy's inhaler before Steve hacks himself to death.

Their self-restraint is amazing. Bucky's is staggeringly - and surprisingly - better than Steve's, who has had to bite his tongue more than once to stop himself from outright begging. They pass the weeks with copious amounts of cuddling, kissing, touching... Steve can't help but think that he likes that part the best. He quickly learns just how much Bucky Barnes likes putting his mouth on people, because if the brunet isn't at work, he's pinning or lifting Steve to the nearest hard surface so he can get his lips all over him. He's made Steve come with his tongue more times than the blond can count in the last week alone, having quickly mastered his blowjob techniques and figuring out exactly what makes his best friend unravel at the seams.
They can't get enough of each other. Bucky never goes out anymore in the evenings. Steve's pretty sure neither of them would see the light of day if they had it their way. Staying true to his word, not a single morning passes where Bucky doesn't wake Steve up by telling him he loves him. If the younger boy is the one to wake first, it's still the first thing Bucky makes sure comes out of his mouth as he slowly comes-to; eyes still closed and a lazy smile growing on his lips. They procrastinate getting out of bed every morning so that they can get a few more minutes rolling around in their cots and mouthing at each other like a couple of horny prepubescents.

In fact, the only time that they had forced themselves out of the apartment was on the Fourth. Since they'd met, they'd never missed out on seeing the fireworks together for Steve's birthday. Steve had wanted to stay in - even tried to manipulate his way into it by saying what he really wanted to do was draw Bucky - but the elder refused to let them end the streak of their tradition. They went out on principle alone; in fact, it could hardly count as going out because that usually implies social interaction of some kind. There definitely was none. Instead, they'd snuck to what they'd dubbed over the years as 'their spot' - a tiny clearing in the middle of the brush in Commodore Barry Park where hardly anyone ever ventured to - where the fireworks could still be seen perfectly clear overhead.

They spent the first half of the evening waiting for the fireworks and jumping with fear any time they'd even so much as hear a twig snap. But no one came. No one ever did.

They missed the fireworks anyways; spending the remainder of their time out with Steve pushed up against a tree and Bucky rutting against him, both Brooklyn boys still fully clothed and swallowing each other's gasps.

Later that night, after they'd returned home, Steve had every intention of drawing Bucky until the brunet had pulled his shirt off. Normally the artist could keep his concentration, but then Bucky had sat back on the floor, looking smug, and proceeded to bite his lip in the most wanton way while grey eyes burned holes into Steve's. The smaller boy found himself ditching the tools and straddling his best friend's lap, pulling a satisfied chuckle from the brunet's throat when their mouths met.

Bucky had also been fascinated to discover that night that he could bring Steve to orgasm using nothing but his words. He'd had every intention of sucking him off again - and this time, using his fingers, because they were starting to play with that and the blond seemed to respond enthusiastically to it - but as he'd pressed to Steve's side and nipped his earlobe, he'd started talking to him. Right there on the living room floor... Low and quiet - only loud enough for Steve to hear; started whispering all the things he wanted to do to Steve, how good he wanted to make him feel. Steve had gasped and started moaning in his throat, thrusting his hips into the air gently as if willing it to provide him with some friction. Amused, Bucky kept going, expanded; made sure to go into excruciating detail, just to see how far he could make the blond go. Then he started describing how it would feel for him to do all those things to Steve. Suddenly, to his thrilled surprised, Steve had grabbed the back of his head and smashed their mouths together to stifle his cry as he came hot and wet across his stomach, completely untouched. Bucky swears he's never seen anything quite as extraordinary - and he'd tried it again another time, but it seemed like it'd been a one-trick pony.

Still... It'd been a phenomenal night.

He loves taking Steve apart and then putting him back together. It's his new favourite past-time. He's enthralled by seeing what new things he can do; what touches Steve's body ignites for. This boy... He deserves to have the world kneel before him and kiss his feet in worship. Bucky promises himself that he'll do that one day. In the meantime, he's enjoying guiding Steve down this path - and it's a little bit of a guilt trip, because Steve was always so wholesome and naive when it came to sex of any kind. Bucky feels like he's turning him into a deviant. He knows he shouldn't like it half as much
as he does, but he can't help it. He's comforted a little every time he touches Steve - whether with fingers or lips or tongue or teeth or all of the above - and sees just how willing that boy is. Bucky knows he's persuasive, but no one's forcing Steve to do anything - not anymore, not ever again. In fact, he constantly has to remind himself that he's the one making them wait for the actual sex. Steve's pushing for it more; Bucky may be the dirty talker (always has been), but Steve is the vocal one.

Almost to the point of concern. At first, Bucky tries to simply shush him, but that starts losing its affect. Then Steve resorts to biting - his own fist or arm at first, and Bucky quickly puts a stop to that because he hates seeing Steve hurt himself, even if it's in the name of pleasure. He encourages the blond to bite him instead if he feels the need to suppress a particularly loud sound. And Bucky gets off on that - loves the pain and groans through a clenched jaw whenever he feels Steve's teeth drive into his shoulder to keep from screaming as Bucky fingers him; learns the location of his prostate. But then he starts leaving marks, but Bucky isn't going out at night anymore, so some of the guys at the docks are starting to ask questions. That means no more biting, as much as they both want it. Their new thing is for Steve to grab one of their pillows and shove it over his face, biting into it savagely and muffling the volume of whatever delicious sound comes out of him at that moment. Then Bucky pulls it off him just as quickly because he doesn't want Steve to be denied oxygen.

Steve is good and noble and morally unshakable - and fuck, Bucky can't believe how horny and needy and insatiable he is, all the same. Only Steve Rogers could be all those things at once.

Steve tries to return the favour and go down on him once, but that ends in disaster. He's so worked up, and so nervous and jittery, and his heart's already racing so quickly, that when he gets halfway down Bucky's erection, he forgets how to breathe altogether and falls into an asthma attack. Bucky swears and has to palm Steve's shoulder and push him back lightly, freeing his erection right before Steve's jaw uncontrollably snaps shut and he clenches his teeth together. They work through it, and the blond is more mortified than anything. He feels awful, and Bucky just keeps chuckling, reminding him that what he cares more about is that Steve's okay. He holds Steve to him and coddles him, stroking through his hair. The younger boy is frustrated, and asks Bucky if he can try again. Bucky wants to say no, but he knows that this isn't just about a blowjob for Steve. It's about pride. So he reluctantly agrees and lets his eyes flutter closed when he feels those soft pink lips trailing back down his body again.

He quickly realizes Steve's pride would've been better spared if he would've just said no. Steve gets further than the first attempt; manages to wrap his lips around him and start sucking, and the technique is lacking a bit, but it's okay, Bucky can help him out. It doesn't matter; Steve's mouth is on him and whether it's sloppy or graceful, it still feels fucking brilliant. Bucky is just about to start enjoying it when Steve starts sputtering around him, and when grey eyes look back down, he can't believe he's been so selfish and hasn't noticed - how red Steve's face is, and how little consciousness there is left in those baby blue eyes. He forces Steve to stop a second time, and opts instead for holding him close and whispering assurances in his hair. Again, Steve is angry with himself - his limitations - and once he regains some strength, asks for one more chance. But Bucky tells him no and says they can try again another time. Steve tries to argue, but it gets him nowhere. In the end, Bucky goes down on Steve, and the brunet makes sure to prolong it for as long as humanly possible so Steve sees Heaven when he finally comes.

Neither boy has ever been so happy; never been in love before. They're perfectly content living in their own little subspace of the world, treating the rest of it as if it doesn't exist. Bucky doesn't even miss the dames, or the drinking, or the wild nights out. Everything he needs is in their crappy little apartment; their own slice of paradise.

But then Bucky is hit in the face with a cold dose of reality. He goes into work one day and the guys
mention that they're going out that night to one of the local waterholes to go pick up some tail. They invite Bucky out with them and the brunet can hear it in the way they're speaking to him - that it's not in fact an invitation, but more like a test. They're gauging to see his reaction. These are guys who Bucky knows are queer-beaters; he's heard some of their stories before. Not all of them, but even the ones who don't are not afraid to vocalize similar opinions. It gets worse when he overhears one day that one of the guys he gets along with decently well knows Paul. He wonders with a sense of dread if his and Bucky's confrontation is known to these guys - and if it is, then they probably know all about Steve, too. So Bucky regards all of them and knows that if he says no, it could spell danger. The last thing he needs is one of them following him home and learning where he lives. What if they went there when he wasn't home so they could get their hands on Steve?

Masking the sharp, painful twist in his gut, Bucky reluctantly accepts their proposal.

He explains everything to Steve as soon as he gets home. He's pacing the living room, cursing and raising his voice, and "Fuck them - FUCK them, Stevie. This was exactly what I was afraid of - now what are we gonna do?"

Steve sits on the couch and listens; hates everything he's hearing. He'd forgotten for the longest time that anything mattered outside of their new-found relationship. He could've done without the reminder for at least a little while longer. Bucky continues to grow more agitated, and Steve feels for him; understands why this bothers him so much, and the situation it puts him into.

"I don't want to go out and pretend I wanna be with anyone else," Bucky keeps snapping.

"I know..." He really does. The idea makes him feel sick. "But for now, we might not have any other choice."

Bucky stops pacing and gives Steve a dejected, disbelieving look. He'd hoped Steve would have some sort of magical answer - that somehow, his best friend could think of a way out of it. Steve was always the best one at doing that. But they look at each other and they both know... This is the price they have to pay if they want to keep their relationship a secret. They haven't officially referred to each other as being "boyfriends", or even "sweethearts", but... when you wake up every morning and the first words on your tongue are "I love you", it's a safe assumption to make. They know that this can't last forever - eventually, they'll be expected to settle down and marry the right partners (and of course, that's just a gentle way of saying 'the right gender'); have a family, carry on their names. They choose not to talk about it; forgetting the inevitable makes it easier to live in the now.

"You know you'll always be it for me," is the most Bucky's ever been able to say on the subject, as he'd lied next to Steve and trailed his fingers along the smaller boy's ribs. "No matter what happens."

"To the end of the line," Steve answered. His heart had ached, and he didn't trust himself to open up that can of worms.

"To the end of the line," Bucky had agreed. His lips had found Steve's then and they couldn't bring themselves to do anymore talking. Bucky made Steve come four times that night; himself, twice. If either of them shed a tear, the other wouldn't comment.

Bucky sits down beside the blond. His eyes roam over his face with concern, and he waits for Steve to continue speaking. The younger boy does wind up proposing a plan, though it's hardly ideal. At first, Bucky tries to argue it, but in the end, he sees Steve's reasoning. They agree that Bucky unfortunately created a reputation for himself over the years, and suddenly changing his ways overnight (which was exactly what happened, but for Steve, Bucky would do anything) was way too
big of a red flag. If they wanted to be inconspicuous, they had to make some adjustments - starting with Bucky's behaviour. Steve never thought that he would ever be encouraging Bucky to go out and play the part of the charming ladies' man, but here he is, doing exactly that. Bucky promises it won't be a permanent solution; just something to get the guys off his back, and then he can taper it off slowly. Bucky also gives him his word that he will never go home with anyone he meets - "I'll just dance and pretend that I'm into it, and if I have to give her a goodnight kiss, I'll only do it if I have to - but I'll be thinking of you the entire time, and I'll come straight home to you after" - but Steve doesn't need it anyways.

"Just for a little while... Then I'll tell the fellas that I found myself a sweetheart; that I'm trying to turn a new leaf or somethin'," Bucky vows.

Steve just smiles sadly and kisses him.

Bucky drinks and dances and has a pretty girl pressed to him all night, but no matter how much he laughs and how big he smiles, he's having a rotten time. He seems to have appeased his coworkers, and he tells himself that that was the whole point. He did his duty, and after the night's over, he tells himself he won't have to do it again for a while. Hopefully this will tide them over for another few weeks. He misses Steve; wishes he could at least be with him. But he's also glad he isn't, because he remembers what it felt like to see him with Virginia. Knowing what he knows now, he'd never purposely wish those same feelings onto Steve. Even if it'd be a comfort to have him there, all the blond would be forced to do would be watch him pretend to be happy with someone else. Bucky knows that even if you're pretending, it can still hurt.

He's finally granted an excuse to break away from the crowd - who by now are all wasted and belligerent, and Bucky might've enjoyed that if he'd been drunk himself - so he can walk the girl home. He does it partially because the guys now think that he's left with her so he could get lucky... But mostly he does it because he knows that, despite everything, that's what Steve would expect from him. She leans in when they're are her door, and closes her eyes, expecting a kiss. Bucky tries to worm his way out of it. He tries to imagine what Steve would do, but falling into an asthma attack wouldn't do him any favours, so Bucky smoothly takes her hand and lifts it to his lips, planting a soft kiss on the knuckles. Then he flashes her his most charming smile - and he probably should've just stopped at the kiss. Because he forgets what that smile does to people, and next thing he knows, she's throwing her arms around his neck and attacking his mouth with hers. Bucky stumbles back with his hands up in surprise; and even though he doesn't react right away, she keeps gliding her lips over his, and Bucky feels sick - like he's betraying Steve, even though they'd already spoken about this. The worst part is that she's beautiful and his body is traitorous and starts to react. Old habits die hard. It almost physically hurts to will it all back down, but he does; he gently palms her shoulders and kisses her back for a fraction of a second - to appease - before moving her away and covering it up with a chuckle.

"I normally don't mack on a girl on the first date," he lies. He's so good it; has had so much practice. That seems to be the right thing to say, though, because she giggles - takes it as a compliment - and finally heads inside. Bucky turns and immediately starts walking home. The longer he walks, the more everything gets to settle in, and the more he feels as though he betrayed his best friend... The more he's aching for Steve. His legs start picking up and he breaks into a light jog, staring ahead and unblinking. He needs to get back to him; he doesn't want the taste or smell or touch of anyone else. He fucking wants Steve. He needs... to get back... to him... Just because he had been a dope about his feelings for the kid for thirteen years didn't mean he still needed to be punished, did it? And the worst part... Is that there's still that little voice in the back of his mind that tries to remind him of that word - diseased - but then he remembers what Steve had said about God just wanting him to be happy
and love. He knows that God could never turn His back on Steve Rogers - but what about him? Was he worthy enough for that sort of forgiveness? Was he worthy enough of Steve's? Jogging turns into running, until Bucky's sprinting across town to their part of the neighbourhood. He never slows and he never stops, no matter how much it's hurting to breathe and no matter how quickly his heart's hammering and no matter how loudly he's wheezing.

Steve's walking back into the living room from the kitchen when Bucky comes charging in through their front door, letting it slam shut behind him. Steve looks to him with surprise, still mid-step, and his brows knit with immediate worry. Bucky looks intense; angry and confused and guilty and hungry all at once - and he's charging right for him without so much as saying a word.

"Buck, what--"

Then he's suddenly being backed against the wall, and Bucky's hands are on either side of his face, his hair, his neck, his body. The brunet kisses him with everything he has. It's fast and hurried and frantic, and Steve completely melts into it. He whimpers lowly, letting his hands hang by his sides as the taller boy's body cages him against the wall; as Bucky has to hunch over to be able to work their mouths together. All Steve can think to do is breathe and tip his head to the side, letting Bucky take over him and control his actions. When Bucky's tongue pushing against his lips, he lets his mouth fall open and be filled eagerly. When their kisses are so rough that they're almost bruising, Steve begs for more by whimpering harder into Bucky's mouth. He finally finds use of his hands and holds onto Bucky's waist. He's a goner; he loses all coherent thought and will-power the moment that beautiful boy's touching him.

Bucky wrangles his hands under the back of Steve's thighs and hoists him up, wrapping skinny legs around his hips. Steve lets out a startled sound that evaporates into a hot moan as the blond's head positively spins. Bucky's never wanted him like this - whatever this is. It's the same unfathomable need that they both felt the night Bucky said he loved him - except that'd been tender and gentle, even in its passion. This is animalistic... A baser need, a primal want. He doesn't know what brought this on, but the heat and ache between his legs makes it difficult for him to care. He's almost thankful. Then Bucky's pinning his backside to the wall as his hips grind rhythmically against his and he knows he's thankful; arches his back and tips his head against the wall, exposing his pale throat with a breathless gasp. Bucky's mouth immediately latches onto it and bites... sucks... kisses... licks...

"Want you..." is the first coherent thing he can muster, and he more inhales it rather than speaks it.

"Steve..."

"Oh God," Steve moans. The heat pulsing through his cock is unbearable; made only worse each time he feels Bucky's own concealed erection stroking against his. "Buck..."

Bucky groans; falls apart a little bit more whenever he hears Steve say his name like that... Like he's turning the blond into a complete wreck. He attacks Steve's neck with more fervor... Then his jaw... Then sucks and bites at his bottom lip until it's swollen and cherry red.

"Again..."

"Bucky," Steve arches.

"Again..."

"Buckyyyy..."
He spasms lightly in Bucky's arms, and the brunet can feel how taut and worked up and yielding he is... Can actually feel the heat radiating from between his thighs, adding to his own throbbing lust. He loves this boy... I love him, I love him, oh God, I need him, so badly, I love him... and it's dizzying.

"Fuck, baby..."

And that's it, Steve's sanity leaves the room. He writhes against the wall and slips into complete and total submission. He feels blissful with it. He arches his head back again and fills the space with an unabashed moan. Bucky covers his mouth with his hand but bites down onto his neck, too hazed by his own hunger, and that of course doesn't help the situation at all. Steve sinks his teeth into the side of Bucky's hand and Bucky cries out in pain, yanking it away, and then he's drowned out by Steve practically howling with need. Let the neighbours hear. Let the world hear. He doesn't care right now. Bucky watches his face with a mixture of shock, fascination, and fear. But his pupils stutter in size and then blow up, and he's slamming his mouth back over Steve's to shut him up the only way he knows how.

The blond claws at his back with surprising strength, and suddenly Bucky's pulling back from the wall and breaking the kiss to look over the smaller boy's shoulder and practically run them into their bedroom. Steve can't bear the thought of not having his lips on him for even a second, so with heavy, noisy pants, he buses his mouth on Bucky's neck while they move. The brunet uses one hand to grab the plastic jar of vaseline he already owns, followed by their quilts. He drops all the items to the floor, and then groans and puts Steve on his feet - ignores the complaints it evokes from the latter - so he can spread them out and then pull their pillows down, too. The cots might not make a lot of noise, but they might squeak along the floor, and it's worth the extra precaution. He takes advantage of being on his knees already to grab Steve's slacks by the belt and start yanking it open. Small, artistic hands - beautiful hands - lace into his hair and tug at it, and Bucky can't shove Steve's pants down fast enough. He clutches Steve's ass in his hands and his mouth sets to work on the exposed muscle. He sucks it hard and fast and desperate, like he wants to get Steve off as fast as humanly possible. Steve tosses his head back and holds himself up on shaky limbs; the pleasure exploding throughout his body and paralyzing him on the spot.

But his knees give out and he sinks to the floor. Bucky catches him and lowers him onto his lap so the older boy is being straddled. They attack each other's mouths again and Steve rolls his hips against Bucky's - he's been practicing, and he's getting so good at it - and fuck, his body drives Bucky wild. He manages the lid off of the jar and dips three of his fingers into the slick until they're generously coated. He runs them down the center of the blond's ass and Steve gasps; arches into it, trying to get more. He loves being fingered. Is completely wanton for it. It's the closest thing that reminds him of Bucky's dick, and how it'd felt inside of him. And though he's small, he takes it like a champ, and he grits his teeth, letting out an elated, strangled groan when that first finger breaches him.

"You're so good..." Bucky keeps whispering against him, working his digit in and out before adding a second. "So tight..."

He thrusts and retreats and scissors and crooks and does all the little things Steve begs him for. He's never any less blown away when he's able to stretch his lover open with yet another finger - Steve looks so damn fragile and breakable - but then there the blond is, three long fingers stuffed inside of him, and all Bucky has to do is rest his hand between them, fingers pointed to the ceiling, and Steve takes over from there. He's learning, too, and he knows what he likes. He moves his body at a pace doable by him and fucks himself on and off those digits, and Bucky's got him - one arm wrapped around him to keep his body stable; lips massaging over his to swallow his sounds.
Bucky wants more - wants to see Steve *come unmade*. So he moves the blond onto his back before manhandling him around onto his hands and knees. Steve's so lost in lust that he doesn't even question it; just moves however Bucky wants him to move. Doesn't speak; just moans softly, dependently. He brings his hands to the pale, ivory asscheeks and uses his thumbs to spread them, revealing Steve's tight ring of muscles. He doesn't know *why* he suddenly feels so compelled to do this but he wants to eat Steve out and he wants to do it *now*. So he dunks his head in and licks a stripe straight from his balls to over his opening. Steve's eyes fly open and he makes the most uninhibited sound. But he's a *good boy* and drops his head into the pillow, clenching his teeth into the fabric and squealing when Bucky's tongue starts flicking against him.

It's *dirty* and it's *sodomy* and *all the things they shouldn't enjoy* - but it's the hottest thing either of them can ever recall doing together. Bucky sucks and licks him as if he's the most delectable thing he's ever consumed, and Steve lies there, trembling all over, in a state of shock as he takes it. It feels indescribable and both of their cocks are pumping with way too much blood. The brunet spread him wider and pushes his tongue *into* Steve, and the blond just about comes on the spot. He's already stretched pretty generously from Bucky's fingers, but the older boy refuses to unlatch his lips from Steve until he can feel those muscles completely *give* around his tongue. Until Steve's completely lax and receptive and loose for him... Ready to take him, so Bucky won't hurt him...

After a few agonizing minutes for Steve, Bucky finally feels satisfied. He hums and gives the opening another soft lick before dipping the tip of his finger inside to give it a feel. His cock twitches when it feels *exactly* the way he was hoping.

"Christ, Steve," he groans, muscling the boy back onto his lap. Greedily, he shoves two of his fingers back into the tiny body, and the blond whines, burying his face against the brunet's neck.

"Buck," he keens, eyes squeezing shut tighter and brows coming together. He looks almost pained. Concern fills in Bucky's chest and grey eyes flit over Steve's to make sure nothing's wrong. There isn't. Then his eyes drop further and he realizes what the problem is... Steve *is* pained. His cock is so hard that the veins are jutting out against the skin; tip practically purple and leaking so much precome, making the skin shine. Bucky wants to lick it up, but he needs to tend to Steve first. That's the priority.

"I've got you, buddy, I've got you."

Bucky pulls his fingers out again from inside of the blond's body - drawing out a low whine from Steve - so he can gather up more vaseline and coat it onto his cock. Steve's breathing out pleas; for more, for Bucky, *please, Buck... oh, God*...

The older boy uses his strength to hold Steve up slightly so he can properly fist his cock and angle it. He remains with his legs tucked under him, kneecaps anchoring him to the floor. Instead of thrusting up, he lets gravity take its course and carefully lowers Steve onto him. The blond immediately clenches but his opening is welcoming, and *oh, fuck... he's so good at this*...

Bucky feels like he's about to lose his mind. All the prep in the world could make Steve more stretched, more loose, and make it less painful for the blond - but it didn't seem to make him any less tight *at all*. Bucky's being squeezed and pulsed and both boys gasp and press their foreheads together. When Steve's fully seated, Bucky tilts his chin up and opens his eyes a sliver; orbs darkened and shrouded with desire. He grazes his open mouth against Steve's gingerly and then touches the blond's bottom lip with his tongue. Silently asking... Steve accepts, tilting his head to the side and kissing him, deep and passionate. Steve tries to start moving but Bucky doesn't want him to exert himself. So he holds Steve in place and rises so his weight is resting on his shins and knees. Keeping the blond as he is, Bucky pulls his hips away and then rocks them back up, thrusting slowly
Steve spasms around his dick and cries out softly; face knit with pleasure. Bucky whispers encouragement and his name and "God... Yes... Oh..." into his ear, and his voice is low and quiet but shakes. He controls himself; doesn't take Steve too hard. Hips undulate and fuck up into that perfect body... in... out... in... out... Over and over, and they breathe together, sweat together, gasp and moan quietly as if one physically pulls the sound from the other's body and ingests it.

"More," Steve breathes. "M'not made of... g-glass..."

"Steve..."

He moves quicker; thrusts in deeper... Feels Steve's inner thighs press to his hip bones and enters him each time until he's buried to the hilt. Their ministrations are wet - slick - and the obscene slapping sounds join their panting. Steve sobs with pleasure when the brunet thrusts in at exactly the right angle that hits his prostate, and Bucky reflexively covers his mouth with his hand again. Steve moves then, still sobbing beneath Bucky's hand, in a way Bucky never knew he was capable of. He arches his back away from the brunet and practically drapes himself over the arm holding the lower half of his back. His ribs stick out and his collar bones are so prominent, and he looks erotic, like a dancer, like--

"Fuck, you're so fucking perfect, Stevie," he groans, lifting his other hand to cup the back of Steve's head and hold him in his position, providing the blond some relief and taking some weight off. Steve curls back up; looks at him doe-eyed and innocent and flushed and dazed - and sweet merciful Lord, he isn't even putting any of this on. He's not faking it - laying it on thick - just for Bucky's sake. He's looking at him like this because this is what Bucky does to him... Makes him so lost in the senses that all his mind can think to do is follow his body and ride out the ecstasy in whatever direction it takes him in.

Bucky's usually always able to hold off until Steve comes first, but that look on his face - fuck, he wants him so much, he can't do it... He moans uncontrollably, short and hot, and starts driving into that skinny body deep... hard... rough. Steve's nose scrunches, blue eyes narrow, brows furrowing, jaw slack. He stares into Bucky's eyes, feeling too feverish to even vocalize the moans caught in his throat. All he can manage are the smallest of breathy whimpers every time that thick cock buries itself back inside of him. His own dick rubs against Bucky's stomach, smearing his precome across his abs.

Every thrust makes contact with his prostate as Bucky continues to hold Steve in place and fuck up into him. Steve trembles violently and hooks his arms underneath Bucky's armpits, gripping onto his shoulders for stability. When he can no longer even keep his head up, he rests it on Bucky's shoulder, facing away, and finds his voice. Controls himself enough not to scream but he damn well wants to. Just keeps groaning, tone rising in pitch, and breathing Bucky's name.

Bucky hugs him tight; feels every beat of his heart, every pore on his body, everything he has to offer... feels it all overflow with his affection for this kid. He never wants to hurt him - not ever again, not if he can help it.

"You okay?" he whispers tenderly, voice breathless. Just checking in... Just making sure. Eyes closed, he's burying his face into the back of golden hair as their bodies still come together - moving towards the precipice they're both so close to.

Steve continues to moan low, quiet 'auh's with every exhale; every time he feels his best friend's cock slide in and out of him... Every time he's filled, stretched, opened, one with Bucky Barnes... His fingers clutch to Bucky, knuckles white. "Yes..." The warm, soft inner walls of his rear quiver.
momentarily around Bucky's member and the brunet can feel Steve's own sex give a tiny twitch between them.

"Gonna come for me, Stevie?" he moans, feeling his balls rising.

"Yeah..."

"I want you to come for me..."

"M'gonna come, Buck..."

"Fuck, baby, mm..."

There's that word again. It tips Steve over the ledge and he turns his face into the meat of Bucky's shoulder and forgets all about their rule, clamping his teeth down and making a noise that doesn't even sound human. The brunet's abdomen is splattered with hot come. Pain radiates up Bucky's neck and down his back, and he shudders, a delirious smile forming on his face as he gasps raggedly. He lets out a string of expletives - barely above a husk - and plummets into Steve, thrusting two, three more times before coming with a choked groan deep inside of his lover. They ride out their orgasms together, clinging and panting... Then Bucky lies Steve down and remains settled between his legs, still inside of him. He lets the blond simply melt into the floor and regain his composure; fill his lungs with some much-needed air. He helps soothe that tense body back down to relaxation by licking and kissing along his collar bones and neck - areas he knows are Steve's Achilles' Heels.

The body gradually relaxes beneath him, and Bucky swears he will never be less amazed at the wondrous things Steve can do.

They're able to get through the rest of the summer like this; in this routine - this lie - of theirs. Bucky works during the days from Monday to Friday, comes home, and the two boys lose themselves in each other. Steve still can't seem to give a blowjob without losing the ability to breathe, but that's alright. Bucky doesn't mind. Steve's very good with his hands. Once in a while, Bucky goes out with the guys - or even by himself, just to keep his reputation in tact - and true to his word, he never goes home with any of the girls he meets; doesn't even consider it for a second. And as much as he hates knowing that Bucky's out, dancing and drinking and probably getting a kiss goodnight, Steve's also developed a love-hate relationship with those nights... Because those are the ones where, without fail, Bucky always charges through the door and makes the most desperate, passionate love to him. Sometimes they don't even make it to the bedroom. Sometimes, it's all they can do to tear their clothing off right in whatever room the brunet finds him. They've been intimate on almost every surface of their apartment.

Steve likes their cots (feeling Bucky's weight pressed down on him in such a snug space) and up against the wall (during those nights when Bucky just can't contain himself) the best. Bucky's favourite places are the kitchen counter (seeing Steve arched with his head tossed back, resting back on his forearms, while Bucky holds his limp, skinny legs over the crook of his arms as he fucks into him is probably his new favourite sight in the world) or in the shower (because the second best image is seeing Steve completely wet with his hair matted to his face as he pants).

"I wish we could have sex on the ceiling... How fun would that be?" Bucky murmurs one night with a goofy grin, as they lie on the floor in the living room - comfortable on top of their blankets - and stare upwards. Steve snorts and calls Bucky an idiot.

They like that about their relationship... Realize that one of the perks about being in love with your
best friend is how easy everything feels with each other. The sex isn't always hot and steamy; just as often, one of them will do something awkward - whether it was Bucky unexpectedly sneezing in Steve's face or Steve losing his footing and face-planting into the side of the couch or them being uncoordinated and knocking their faces into each other - and then they're falling into fits of laughter while they continue to move. It always winds up escalating back into those quiet little gasps or grateful sighs, but those few short moments where they grin and chuckle together before meeting halfway for another kiss - those moments mean the most to them.

Keeping the truth of their relationship a secret - inconspicuous - turned out to be easier than they'd anticipated, but perhaps that was because things just seemed to fall into place. For once, luck was on their side. Despite the volume that a couple of their heated nights in had created, none of their neighbours in the building went to the cops. They did get a strongly-worded letter nailed to their front door, and after that, they went back to forcing themselves to keep it down (the letter had really scared them; could've been so much more). But whoever had written it had clearly not even known who they were, because gossip was never spread. And thanks to Bucky's willingness to continue to play to the charade with his coworkers every once in a while, they didn't seem suspicious either.

July flew by, and so did August. They returned to the outside world and got themselves incorporated back into it. One of their favourite hobbies was going to see a film whenever they could. The Adventures of Robin Hood starring Errol Flynn had been released into cinemas in May, but due to its popularity, had remained at their local theatre until the beginning of the Fall. Bucky had sneaked them in and then casually went to the concession and got them some popcorn and soda. When the lights had fully gone down, they'd held hands beneath the drink rest. They'd go for walks, lie in the park staring at the clouds, and even ate at that diner once. Bucky was right: seeing Steve's face as he sipped his first strawberry milkshake in years was definitely worth it.

Their summer is filled with sunshine and sunsets and warmth and love - and all the breathtaking things that fill one's heart and makes them feel all the more alive, when they're in love. Years later, when memories of Bucky are all he seems to have, Steve will always regard that summer as having been the best.

But of course... All good things - as good things do - tend to come to an end.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Someone was bound to find out eventually.

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Thank you all again, so much, for all the support on this story. I can't tell you how much I love every single one of you, just simply for taking the time to read it. I apologize if this chapter was way too fluffy for any of you... For those of you who are addicted to the angst, be careful what you wish for. After you read the next chapter, don't say I didn't warn any of you, haha. xo

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
To Unravel

Chapter Summary

Warning: violence in this chapter.

Steve gets a job and runs into someone he hasn't seen for a while.

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*throws precautionary cookies and then runs away*

Chapter Notes

Come up to meet you, tell you I'm sorry;
You don't know how lovely you are.
I had to find you, tell you I need you,
Tell you I'll set you apart.
Tell me your secrets and ask me your questions;
Oh let's go back to the start.
Running in circles, coming in tails,
Heads on a science apart.
Nobody said it was easy.
It's such a shame for us to part...
Nobody said it was easy.
No one ever said it would be this hard...
Oh, take me back to the start.
I was just guessing at numbers and figures,
Pulling your puzzles apart.
Questions of science, science and progress
Do not speak as loud as my heart.
Tell me you love me, come back and haunt me.
Oh and I rush to the start...
Running in circles, chasing our tails;
Coming back as we are.
Nobody said it was easy.
Oh it's such a shame for us to part...
Nobody said it was easy.
No one ever said it would be so hard...
I'm going back to the start...
November, 1938

It’s the tail-end of Fall, which means Bucky and Steve are back to preparing for the coming Winter; squeezing every penny and saving as much money as they can. With ironically happy hearts, they feel confident that this year will be different from past years – after all, they had managed to put together some of their earnings from that night and gathered up a whole nineteen dollars to stash away. Bucky put the money into Steve’s hands because he knew then there’d be no way he could get to it and be tempted to spend it. He doesn’t know where the blond hid it and Steve doesn’t say – but it’s the comforting reminder in the back of their minds that they will not have to go hungry or cold this Winter. And importantly, Steve will always have his medication, and however many extra blankets he needs.

They share little smiles, like secrets, from time to time because they both know, too… That keeping Steve warm at nights will be especially easier now than it had been in the past.

Still, even with having that money there, they don’t let themselves slack. Bucky’s kept his job at the docks on and off, whenever they’ve needed him. If it’s an off-time and there isn’t as much use for him, he is always on top of finding little tasks he can do around town, getting paid under the table. Steve had found the odd job here and there over the summer months, but then the shop he’d been sweeping at had been closed down due to bankruptcy, and come September, it was always more difficult to get employment because that seemed to be the time when all the able-bodies were out hitting the pavement as well. He takes his chances and applies for a job at the grocer’s near their apartment when he notices their ‘wanted’ sign for a stock boy. Steve’s not tall, nor is he strong, but he’s practical and efficient, so he decides to go for it.

To his surprise, the owner (who’s known Steve and Bucky for years and maybe he’s biased and that’s why he offered, but Steve doesn’t care) smiles at him after they have a formal interview and tells him he got the job. He hands Steve his new forest green apron – a little faded from previous wear, but Steve thinks it’s beautiful, all the same – and is told he starts work the upcoming Monday.

The skinny boy runs home and practically falls into the apartment from wheezing so badly. Bucky’s home early, having gotten off work a few hours shy of his usual quitting time, and runs to the doorway to sling Steve’s arm around his neck and help him to the couch. He scolds Steve worriedly about working himself up, but Steve just replies after managing to catch his breath, “You don’t notice nothin’! Ask me about the apron in my arms.”

Bucky notices it finally and quirks a brow. “Uh… k. What’s with the apron in your arms?”

Steve beams and tells him he got the job. The brunet grins and congratulates him – getting far more excited than Steve thinks is necessary, but still, the gesture makes him feel good. Proud. Capable.

Bucky takes his face in his hands and gives Steve a big, happy kiss that smacks loudly. He pulls back and smiles at him fondly and then jumps up and tells him the news calls for something special. That night, he takes Steve out to an actual restaurant and even though they have to order from the cheaper selections on the menu, Steve still thinks the sentiment in real nice. They pick a table in a corner, and whenever no one’s looking, Bucky sneaks his hand under it and holds Steve’s.

Even though he’s still always afraid of getting caught, the elder has grown comfortable enough over the months to take his chances at times. In public venues such as these, if they can get away with it, it’s usually either the occasional hand-holding, or intentional bumps of the feet or knees if they’re
sitting within touching distance. If they’re alone outside and Bucky feels veiled well enough, he’s even grown more willing to slip in the odd kiss here and there.

Over the last few months, they’ve grown to feel like they’re in a real relationship – even if no one else knows.

Bucky kept his word and told his coworkers on the docks back in September that he’d found himself a sweet girl; a real pretty dame with blonde hair and blue eyes and the sassiest mouth (Bucky had looked so smug when he’d explained it all back to Steve), who didn’t particularly care for drinking or partying. Because he was really sweet on her, he wanted to try turning over a new leaf, he told them. So they shouldn’t expect him to be hitting the bars as much anymore.

He only goes out once in a blue moon, and nine times out of ten, it’s with Steve. Bucky will tear up the dance floor, and sometimes he’ll even dance with a dame, but it means nothing; it’s different. As always, Steve will hang behind at their table and drink and sketch – but he and Bucky share those little looks and those adoring half-smiles any time their eyes meet and they know they won’t get caught.

Monday rolls around and Steve has his first shift. The environment is friendly and the work can get a bit tough at times when he needs to balance on crates to put boxes away on tall shelves, but overall, it’s pretty laid back. His bosses – Mr. Stan and his wife, both in their late fifties – are personable and treat Steve with respect and smiles. He gets paid twenty cents an hour, and Steve feels accomplished. His muscles are stiff when he gets home, but it’s worth it. He’s back to feeling like he’s earning his keep and on equal ground as Bucky.

The brunet gets home shortly afterwards, covered in dirt and leftover sweat from the day’s hard labour. Despite having to work three times as hard as Steve, the brunet knows it was his best friend’s first day, and he doesn’t overlook the way he keeps rubbing uncomfortably at his shoulders. Steve shrugs it off and insists that he’s fine. He feels like he hasn’t earned the right to complain; not when he knows that the difficulty of his job pales in comparison to Bucky’s. Nevertheless, Bucky ignores his response and shrugs out of his dirty clothes into something more comfortable and clean. He seats Steve in front of him on the living room floor and gets the blond to read aloud from their worn-out copy of The House at Pooh Corner by A.A. Milne, while he massages Steve’s tight muscles and works out the kinks.

He’s able to fight his urges when the blond hums with appreciation as his fingers are able to loosen up a particularly stiff knot. Steve senses his momentary pause and gives a genuine apology, because it really hadn’t been meant to sound so suggestive. Bucky encourages him to keep reading because the moment is actually nice and he doesn’t want to ruin it. So Steve continues. But then he groans, stopping to close his eyes and tilt his head to the right when the brunet’s hand presses and circles on the side of his stiff neck. This time, Bucky has a more difficult time restraining himself.

Steve forgets all about the story when he’s leaning back against Bucky’s chest and the brunet rests his head on his shoulder, sucking below his ear as his hand grinds down over his clothed erection.

December 1938

“My shift’s done a coupla’ hours before yours, Buck – you want me to come meet you and we can walk home together?”

They’re both in the kitchen, Bucky cleaning the dishes from breakfast and Steve getting a couple peanut butter sandwiches ready for their lunches. Bucky snorts, keeping his eyes on his hands in the sink. Now that the snow’s slowly making an appearance again, jobs down at the docks were
becoming slightly fewer. Today, he’s heading downtown to help out a widow in need of moving her piano up a flight of stairs. Not particularly enjoyable work to say the least, but she offered to pay him a five spot, so he couldn’t turn it down.

“You’re gonna walk forty-five minutes in the chill, just to walk me back home? Didn’t know you cared so much, Stevie.”

Steve rolls his eyes but smiles to himself.

“But seriously,” Bucky continues, rinsing the last plate and then drying it off. He turns to the blond. “You shouldn’t be out for too long in the evenings anymore, Stevie; it’s getting too cold outside. I’d feel better if you just came home and kept warm. That’ll give me somethin’ to look forward to when I get back.”

“Oh, so you can stick your cold feet against me and expect me to be your furnace?”

“You mean you’re good for somethin’ else?”

Steve shakes his head with a small smile, putting Bucky’s sandwich in his lunchbox and shutting it. “Jerk.”

He feels Bucky’s hand on his shoulder as the brunet passes by and presses a kiss to the back of his head. “Punk,” the older boy replies, giving that tiny shoulder a loving squeeze before heading to the bathroom so he can finish getting ready. They rush around before sharing one last kiss behind their closed door and heading out of the apartment.

“Love you, squirt,” Bucky says quickly, quietly.

Steve glares at the nickname but then steps on his tip-toes to plant a quick, tiny kiss on Bucky’s chin. “Love you back, asshole.”

They part in separate directions once outside – and they cannot hug or kiss, but they can sneak one last loving look over their shoulders before giving a small wave and turning away.

Steve spends most of the day in the back, unloading boxes. He’s had to shove his inhaler into his mouth a half dozen times during that time, but he’d always managed to make it through.

When he’s only got about thirty minutes left until his shift is over, however, Mr. Stan finds the blond and tells him that their cashier, Lucas, has had a minor family emergency and had to leave. They currently have no customers, so luckily there isn’t a line backed up, but the point is that they need Steve at the register until it’s time for him to clock out. At first, panic fills his chest. He tries to tell his boss that he’s not a cashier and has no idea what to do. Mr. Stan just smiles as he walks him to the front of the store, and shows him the essentials of what he needs to know; tells him that he’s a quick learner and he’ll figure it out.

Luck is on his side because for the first twenty minutes, he only gets two customers, and it doesn’t take him all that long to ring everything through. The rest of the time, he’s staring off and finding himself thinking about Bucky, as per usual. He wonders how his best friend’s shift is going; decides that he still intends to at least meet Bucky halfway, if he can’t make it all the way there in time for when the brunet’s shift is done.

“Steve?”

He jumps at the sudden voice – mostly because of how unexpected and feminine it is. Turning his head, he sees Virginia standing opposite him. She has a hesitant but friendly smile on her face. He
“Virginia! Hey! What – what are you doing here? I didn’t think you lived in this end of town.”

“Oh, I don’t,” she clarifies, adjusting her bag slung over her shoulder. “I was actually just in the neighborhood to drop something off for a friend. So… you work here?”

Steve glances around and exhales, giving a pleasant nod. “Yeah. Just started a couple weeks ago.”

Looking back to the brunette, he adds awkwardly, “You look, um… healthy.”

She stares at him, eyebrows creasing, and then she giggles and gives him a fond look. “You still don’t seem to know how to talk to girls.”

The blond rubs the back of his head, giving a dry chuckle of embarrassment. “Yeah, I… I guess I don’t.”

They look at each other for a few moments, and Steve feels genuinely glad to see her. It had weighed on his mind for months – the guilt he’d felt about their last encounter and how poorly it’d ended.

“Oh, I should let you get back to work,” she says quickly when she seems to take in his apron again. “Uh – do you get off any time soon?”

Steve glances over his shoulder at the clock. “Ten minutes, actually. Why? Did… you want to talk or something?”

Virginia smiles, warm and genuine. She gives one small nod. “Why don’t I wait outside and then we can go to the soda shop? My treat.”

“No guy should let a girl pay.”

Virginia considers this and then shrugs, giving him a small, playful smirk. “Good thing I’m a lady and not a girl then, isn’t it?” She begins to back step towards the door, still smiling at Steve. “Besides, you paid the last time. Meetcha outside.”

Steve blinks, feeling a bit dumbfounded. “Okay.”

He cleans up a bit and then punches out, pulling off his apron and rolling it up into a ball under his arm. He zips up his tattered jacket and heads through the front door. He can’t help but feel surprised when he steps outside and finds her actually waiting there patiently, just like she said she would. After their first meeting, he was certain that she had left with the worst impression of him – even if it hadn’t been his fault. But he reminds himself that that was almost six months ago, and though he didn’t know Virginia overly well, she didn’t seem the type to hold a grudge.

“C’mon, shop’s this way,” she says, pointing her thumb over her shoulder.

They walk along the sidewalk, and Steve can see his breath every time he exhales. He adjusts his apron so he’s holding it against his chest, trying to add a bit more warmth. The last thing he needed was to fall ill with a cold or something; given the warning Bucky had given him that morning, the brunet might just kill him if he did.

“It’s getting chilly out,” Virginia comments to break the silence, having seen Steve move from the corner of her peripherals.

“Yeah…”
“You could use a new coat.”

Steve chuckles. “Yeah, I know. I’ve been meaning to get one for the past coupla’ years, but money always tends to have to go towards the more important stuff, so… what can ya do, right?”

She gives him a small smile and hums her agreement. He isn’t sure if she understands financial struggles like he does, but he appreciates that she doesn’t simply pretend to listen or pity him. She’s just the type of person that you know listens because she’s interested, and sympathizes rather than pities. He’s still a little baffled – and impressed with himself – that he seems to be comfortable enough to talk to her like she’s a human being, rather than a scary female entity. She makes him feel comfortable. Maybe it’s because she was the first girl to treat him as though he mattered as a person, that he wasn’t invisible after all to the opposite sex. He’s thankful for that.

They get to the soda shop and grab a booth. Virginia sticks a dime into the jukebox and Steve stares at it with surprise because he’s never actually gotten the chance to hear one up close. The music is rich and full as it pours out, and Virginia giggles at his expression when she sits back down.

“Do you wanna pick the next song?” she asks amusedly.

Steve smiles excitedly and nods. He chooses Billie Holiday’s *I Got My Love to Keep Me Warm*. It reminds him of Buck. She raises an eyebrow at him as he sits back down before getting a goofy grin.

“Bit of a romantic choice, don’t you think?”

Steve blinks, tries to figure out how to best answer that. “I just really like this song.”

She gives him an unnervingly knowing look and then turns and greets their server with a cheery smile. Their order gets taken and then they’re left alone again.

“Look, now that we’re here, I wanted to just – I mean, I wanted to say that I’m sorry. About what happened before,” Steve says awkwardly, feeling that nostalgic guilt creep back up. He’d never regret that night – not even a little – because being with Virginia turned out to be the catalyst that Bucky had needed to have his little breakdown, which turned out to be the best thing that had ever happened to them. But still, that meant that a part of him had indirectly used her, and he didn’t feel like much of a gentleman at the side of him that was alright with that.

She waves him off. “Oh, no, it’s fine. It wasn’t your fault anyways. I hope whatever was wrong with your friend resolved itself.”

“It did.”

“That’s good,” she smiles, and she means it; doesn’t even harbour any ill feelings towards Bucky, and wow, Steve’s heart is warmed by this girl. She’s just an overall good person. Steve hopes that maybe she wouldn’t be opposed to being friends now that they’ve fallen into each other’s lives again.

“And, uh… Hope your friend wasn’t upset for too long. What was her name? Evelyn?”

“Evie, yeah; your twin - yeah, she got over it pretty quick,” she nods, pausing to thank the server when they’re presented with their maltas. They start sipping and Steve hums when his taste buds ignite.

Virginia chuckles. “I take it you like it?”

Steve nods. “It’s delicious.”
She agrees. They sip and listen to the jukebox and the chatter from the people around them for a bit, before Steve asks her what else has been new in her life; if she had a good summer. She nods and fills him in a bit. She tells him how she started a sculpting course over at the college, and Steve can’t help but feel a little envious. He’s always wanted to try that medium. He lets her continue uninterrupted though, because he doesn’t want to be rude. She also tells him about the boy she’s now going steady with, Jonathan. Steve doesn’t realize that he lets out a small sigh of relief at the news.

“So you’re happy then?” he clarifies with a small, hopeful smile. She returns it.

“Yeah, I am. He’s great.”

"Good, I’m glad." And he really is.

They continue nursing their drinks and chatting about little, unimportant things. Other than Bucky, Steve doesn’t really have much going on in his life that he can talk about, so he’s able to offer little in terms of things to discuss. He apologizes several times for being so boring.

When they’ve finished, they stroll down the sidewalk on York Street, talking and watching the sky start to show signs of slowly fading into pinks and oranges.

“You didn’t have any plans tonight, did you? I hope I didn’t keep you or anything,” the brunette says.

“Oh no, it’s fine. I’m just waiting for Buck to get off work and then I’m gonna go meet him.”

He doesn’t notice her glance over at him, studying his face with an interested expression. She looks back ahead, hands stuffed in her pockets to keep warm.

“So did you ever find out?” she suddenly asks.

Steve peers at her, raising a curious eyebrow. “Find out what?”

“I – I don’t –”

She takes in his expression with a tinge of confusion and then laughs, walking back over to him. She looks around to make sure no one is within earshot and then links her arm with his to get him to start walking again.

“Oh c’mon, you can’t tell me you didn’t know,” she goads lightly, her tone still just as friendly and non-judgemental, but quieter so people won’t hear them. Her reaction confuses Steve; he looks to her uncomfortably but starts walking slowly again. He’s waiting for the punch-line; for her to turn around and call him out on it in the streets so the whole city can hear. He tries to calculate how fast he’d have to run to get back to the apartment in record time. But it never comes, because she continues:

“I saw it from the second we met you guys. I almost couldn’t believe that Evie never picked up on it, but she was just too moon-eyed to notice. I mean, you two looked exactly alike and – okay, Evie and Stevie? Come on.” She shoots the blond that small, knowing smile again. “It was written all over his
You may not have noticed how many times he kept looking over at our table while he and Eve were dancing, but I did. Like, two billion times.”

Steve can’t help but blush a little. “Really?”

She tightens her arm looped through his a bit and brings up her other hand to rest on his arm and pat it. “Yes, really. But it didn’t even look like he even realized it. So did he ever tell you?”

Steve stops and looks to her. He wants to be able to talk to someone about this – unload everything locked away in his mind – with someone. Someone who isn’t Bucky, because Steve doesn’t think that counts. He also likes the idea of maybe having another friend. He glances around nervously; there’s no one. He keeps his voice near silent anyways.

“Could I maybe tell you somethin?”

She keeps his gaze and nods. “Whatever you want. I have no reason to tell anybody.”

So he does. He tells her everything. They eventually start strolling again and Steve keeps going, only stopping whenever he sees someone crossing their path. Then he starts right back up again. He tells her all about their childhood together; how they met and how their friendship blossomed… Their time in and out of the orphanage together, and how Bucky had been the only person in his life after his mother passed away from TB. She watches him and listens intently as he admits to all those little times he’d felt throughout their lives as though there’d been something deeper to their relationship than simply friendship, and that he fell in love with Bucky long before his mind realized it. Then he finds himself blurt out what’d happened the night of the failed double date; he doesn’t mention any of the events that’d happened with Peter and the photographs, but he touches on the important stuff: that Bucky realized he loved him too, and that they’ve been seeing each other in private since then. When he finishes, he casts nervous eyes her and sees her staring ahead in thought, biting the corner of her lip.

“Do you think I’m disgusting?” he asks.

She keeps looking ahead and then meet his gaze. Her eyes are still warm. “I don’t personally agree with it,” she admits. She squeezes Steve’s arm in her hand reassuringly. “But I also don’t think I’ve ever heard anybody talk about another person the way you just talked about Bucky. No one could ever convince me that you don’t love him – like, real, true kind of love. And I don’t think feelings like that should ever be ignored.”

Steve feels like a colossal weight lifts from his shoulders. He makes to hug her and then stops himself when he remembers that she’s a lady and usually he’s too uncomfortable around those. He settles on this weird moment before sticking out his hand for her to shake. She eyes the blond like he has two heads and then laughs, pulling him in and wrapping her arms around him.

“You really are so awkward,” she chuckles, hugging him lightly. He relaxes and hugs back before the two pull away.

“Please don’t tell anybody,” Steve then says, remembering how important silence is on the matter.

She nods. “I won’t.”

He believes her.

They stay quiet for a couple more moments before Virginia seems to remember something. “Oh! Umm, did you still want information about the art classes?”
Baby blues light up. “If you’re still alright with getting it for me?”

“Yeah, it’s no problem.”

“Thank you! I really appreciate that.”

“Great, well, I know where you work now, so I can always just drop it off there for you sometime.”

“That sounds perfect.”

They chat for a bit longer before Steve ducks into a shop to ask for the time. It’s almost 7:30, which means that Bucky should be about halfway back to the apartment.

“I gotta go,” Steve says, gesturing back behind him from where he came. “I completely lost track of the time.”

“That’s alright, I should be heading back my way anyhow. It was great to see you, Steve.”

“You too.”

They smile and then part ways. Steve gets only a few steps ahead when he stops and twists back around. “Virginia?”

The brunette glances over her shoulder.

“Thank you,” he says. “For not treating me like I was invisible.”

She gets a small, sad smile on her lips before giving a tiny shrug. “People just weren’t looking hard enough. But it looks like the one that mattered was the one who was always able to see you.”

Steve considers that, looking away for a moment and smiling at the thought of Bucky. He gives a small nod and turns to go.

“Oh, and Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Call me Ginny.”

Steve is only about one hundred feet away from his apartment building when it happens. He’s staring ahead and literally just takes in that familiar building when he hears quick footfalls – several pairs of them – approach him fast from his side. Then there’s a sudden collision, and all the wind gets knocked out of his lungs as he’s rushed into the alleyway. He loses his footing and plummets to the ground, knocking his elbow straight off the concrete. He feels the impact before he feels the pain. He’s vaguely aware that his right knee is now skinned.

There’s shouting and taunting, but it’s too quick for Steve to hear any of it – not when they don’t even give him the chance to get back up before they start stomping. Feet come slamming down what feels like every angle, and they kick down on his chest, his ribs, his legs, his head. Each attack hurts, and instinctually, his arms fly to constantly shield whichever part of his body he can feel the most pain from. Strategically, it’s a horrible tactic, because it keeps leaving his head and chest wide open.

He thinks he can hear the word fairy and pretty dame being repeated, and they’re cursing him, but then a heavy boot comes down directly onto his ear, crushing his skull to the ground, and he stops being able to hear anything at all.
He can taste blood in his mouth. There’s so much pain radiating throughout his body but the impacts never stop coming. He can’t help but think, What did I do? as they kick and shout at him; these strangers that Steve’s never even met. One of them draws their foot back and swings it forward full force. The toes of his boot make contact with his chest.

Steve starts gasping; the action driving all the air from his lungs. His heart struggles erratically to make up for all the blood seeping out of him and staining the cement ground around his body, and he can’t breathe, Lord, I can’t breathe… And this isn’t like a normal asthma attack. He actually… can’t… breathe…

He starts to feel woozy… Warm… He wonders why he feels so warm… Maybe it’s all the blood? Like a blanket… He wishes he would’ve had the chance to fight back… He wishes he could ask them why they’re doing this…

The kicks keep coming but he can no longer feel them. That warmth spreads across his body and he can’t breathe, he actually can’t breathe, but then the warmth floods across his chest and into his head, and he starts to relax. He feels sluggish; wonders if he might just be dreaming the whole thing. Because this is way too peaceful… Getting beaten up is never like this… Yes, he… He must be dreaming…

He can’t hear their shouting anymore, and he’s relieved. He’s so comfortable; feels dazed and cozy and warm – when he can’t really feel anything at all.

When he stops moving all together, the jumpers back away simultaneously, mumbling to each other that they’d better get out of there. Turning, they run, and if a pair of green eyes watches the whole thing from across the street, no one knows for sure.

Steve’s body lies motionless in the cold alley, and his skin is snow white everywhere it isn’t darkened by blood. Crimson red pools the ground around him, still seeping from his body and threatening to drown him in it. Golden blond tresses are mostly stained copper.

And Steve feels so warm, so comfortable. He hopes Bucky wakes him up soon - he misses his smile...

Bucky’s got his hands in his coat pockets and coming from the opposite side of the block when he hears the small commotion and looks up from the ground. Four men burst from the alley down the street together, clambering together before glancing back in and then booking it away. Grey eyes narrow and brows come together, and all Bucky can think is, God damnit, was that Steve again?! How many times has he had to peel Steve off the ground in that exact alley – sometimes only after getting himself busted up in the process – before helping him stumble home and then spending the good portion of a few hours cleaning him off? He wonders what happened this time, but he also gets filled with that telltale sense of panic. He wants to shout and call down those thugs so he can get his hands on them first – just in case – but they’re already too far gone. So he picks up his pace and jogs to where they’d spilled out from, and glances in.

He stops.

“Steve?”

The body lying at the other end – so limp and bloodied and oh God, there’s so much blood – doesn’t move. Sheer terror sets Bucky’s heart racing and he breaks into a sprint.

“STEVE!”
Still caught in the momentum, he throws himself to his knees – and they scrape against the pavement and his blood mixes in with Steve’s, but he doesn’t even feel it, _he doesn’t even feel it_. He grabs Steve’s face and turns it towards him, and it’s so pale – it’s white, it’s almost completely white – and his lips are purpling, and his eyes are closed, and _blood, Christ, there’s so much fucking blood_--

“Steve! Steve, wake up! C’mon, buddy, I’m right here, c’mon, please Stevie, it’s me, open your eyes!”

They stay closed. There’s no physical response.

Bucky unzips his jacket so he can stick his head against the small, bony chest to look for a pulse, but he pulls back before he can check for the heartbeat, because… something had pressed against his cheek and startled him. Yanking the blond’s blood-soaked shirt up his body, Bucky’s stomach twists; ribs are all bruised black and blue, and some jut out at unnatural angles. On his left peck, there’s a morbid, small bump protruding beneath is skin, where Bucky knows the lung is. His throat tightens as hot tears are already streaming uncontrollably down his cheeks, and he can’t help it – he twists away and vomits, hot and sour and sickly, at the sight.

He can’t even think to wipe his mouth. He wraps his arms around his best friend and pulls his onto his lap, gritting his teeth and eyes roaming all over him desperately as if to try and find some magical solution. The body in his arms lies completely limp. Steve’s head tips back over Bucky’s arm and _he isn’t breathing._

Bucky stares at his face, his own looking pained and angry and that of a desperate man. He shakes the smaller boy lightly.

“Steve! Wake up, alright, I need you to wake up, you can’t leave me, Stevie, come on, Stevie – don’t do this to me, Steve, don’t you fucking do this me--”

And he’s covered in Steve’s blood, _drenched in it_, and the blond feels so cold.

“Steve!” he repeats, his voice breaking. He makes an anguished sound, never taking his eyes off his best friend, and continues to shake him; hug the body to his. “Steve!” He grits his teeth and his tears fall thick and hot onto the blond’s pale cheeks. _So much blood… he’s so fucking cold… He’s not breathing, God, why are You doing this, he’s not fucking breathing!_

“STEVE!” he shrieks, breaking. He drops his head to the blond’s chest and howling sobs against his chest. He snaps back up and starts glancing frantically over his shoulder. “HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME, PLEASE! I NEED HELP!”

He continues to scream and he continues to clutch and he refuses to let go and _no, this can’t be happening_, but he sits there, _drenched_ in Steve Rogers’s blood, and his best friend won’t move, won’t stop bleeding, will _not breathe_…

He never stops screaming.

Chapter End Notes

*comes back, throws more cookies, and then books it*

And no, in case you were worried about it, Virginia had nothing to do with Steve
getting jumped (this isn't some conspiracy that she was in on lol). I just wanted to make that clear.

---

Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
Chapter Summary

Steve's injuries are extensive, and while he slowly recovers, Bucky's had time to think.

He makes a very difficult decision.

Chapter Notes

Get these left-handed lovers
Out of your way...
They look hopeful, but you,
You should not stay...
If you want me to break down
And give you the keys,
I can do that but I
Can't let you leave.
Oh, please don't go...
I want you so...
I can't let go,
For I lose control...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Doctor’s Report – December 14th, 1938

(I’m sorry; you’re not family, you’ll have to find your own way to the hospital’.)

Patient: Steven Grant Rogers

D.O.B: July 4th, 1918

Age: 20

Height: 5’4”

Weight: 95 lbs.

(I’m all the family he has – please! Please, you gotta let me come with you!’)

Patient was found by friend (James Barnes; emergency contact now on file) on Water Street at approximately 7:50pm. Barnes discovered friend after patient was attacked in the alleyway by a group of men. Emergency responders arrived at the scene at approximately 8:07pm. Patient is in critical condition. No signs of respiratory function, hypotension (60/50), bradycardia (heart rate, 46 BPM)...
(Please, Stevie, you can’t do this to me, you can’t do this to me; you have to wake up, please…)

*Patient has suffered extensive injuries:*

(They let Bucky into the ambulance. He’s told multiple times to stay back; to give them room to work. He trembles and cries and watches as the paramedics try to perform CPR while manoeuvring around all the damaged bones and ribs. They keep announcing that he’s still not breathing – like a constant reminder to Bucky, an accusation. He hears it. If he’d only been there sooner… Bucky can’t breathe either. And it makes him feel so helpless – that he couldn’t even offer Steve the air in his own lungs if he tried.)

7 broken ribs; 3 true (#3 [left], #5 & 6 [right]), 3 false (#7 & 9 [left], #9 [right]), 1 floating (#11); 9 additional ribs bruised…

(‘We’re losing him!’ they suddenly shout, and Bucky makes a weak, pitiful sound in his throat as he stares; writhes where he sits, as if trying to find a hole in the vehicle to fall out of. He’s pale but red from the tears and grey eyes are wide and his own heart starts to feel as though it’s no longer beating – two peas in a pod; wherever you go, I go, buddy…)

*Punctured left lung, four broken fingers, broken nose…*

(He’s so little lying there… *God, he’s so small…* Bucky puts his hands in his hair and grits his teeth and it’s all he can do to make another one of those disgustingly helpless noises as hot tears, big and beady, drip down his face… He remembers the time with the wagon…)

*Fractured cheekbone, hairline fracture along the left kneecap, dislocated shoulder…*

(Steve was eight – *no, maybe it was nine* – and they’d found a wagon… A barely-functioning red little thing with chipped paint and no handle to pull… It’d been Bucky’s idea… *Get in, m’gonna take you on a ride!*… Pushing, running, tiny footfalls scuffing down the paved sidewalk as Bucky runs and Steve… Clutching to the front, knuckles white, jeepers scared out of him… But then the wind… it’d been blowing through his hair and he could hear Bucky’s excited laughter, *C’mon Steve-O, put your hands up, it’ll be like you’re flying!* And then they did; hands hesitantly let go, go up, and something sparks in him because the wind, the adrenaline, the momentum, Bucky’s laughter… Steve starts screaming with excitement and Bucky thinks it sounds like a chorus of angels, and his little heart warms, because Steve is so happy, and that kid, that kid is flying – through time and earth and clouds and sky – high, high above, even as he’s grounded right here, because that’s where angels deserve to be…)

*Trauma to the head, extensive damage to the right eardrum, possible internal bleeding (extent of damage yet to be determined)*…

(Bucky hadn’t even seen that hill coming. But then the momentum picks up and the wagon’s moving too fast for him. It slips from his hands, picks up speed, starting going down, down, down… And now Bucky’s screaming, but it’s panicked, and all he can think to manage is a chorus of *Steve!* He watches that little blonde head of hair zip down the hill, and Steve’s screaming his name, and he sounds so terrified… Hands gripping the front again and knuckles ghostly white from squeezing so hard… And Bucky runs, tries to run faster, as quick as skinny legs and knobby knees will take him without tripping over his own feet… He watches that wagon hit the fence – and he watches Steve fly over it… When he gets to him, Steve is unconscious on the ground; he’s only out for no more than twenty seconds, but for one brief, fleeting one, Bucky’s certain that his best friend is dead… He’s so small, so tiny, as he lies flat on his back, head tilted limply to the side… He looks so peaceful, *don’t leave me…* )
Steve’s broken bones were set the best they can be and after an emergency surgery upon their arrival at the hospital, his punctured lung was also cared for. He’d been hooked up to bag after bag of blood for the first eleven hours, because he had lost that much and his pulse was as weak as an eyelash’s flutter.

He lost vitals twice in the first four hours. Legally, he was pronounced dead once. Bucky wasn’t allowed in the room; he didn’t hear that part. But he was told afterwards, and it still felt exactly the same. A shock to the system; a knife to the gut, and his hand had flown to his stomach as if there had been, and he doubled over in the middle of the waiting room and puked up stomach acid. The nurse gave him water. He kept a little, as if it were some sort of insurance… Like he could drown himself in it if the doctor walked back out and told him Steve was gone.

But Steve Rogers is a fighter. Waging war within his body, Steve somehow pulled through, and the blood helped, it did a wonder on him. His vitals, his blood pressure – they all stabilized, and thank God, there were no serious internal damages. The most they had to worry about was seeing the extent of his head injuries once he woke up.

That took a lot longer to happen than Bucky was prepared for. The first three days, Steve didn’t wake up at all. Bucky listened to the steady *beep, beep, beep* as he sat by his bed – whenever he was allowed in, *for as long as he was allowed in* – and when they were alone, he’d reach out and touch Steve’s hand, casted and broken and frailer than ever, and he’d whisper pleas for the blond to wake up. Eventually, Bucky started to feel guilty for maybe demanding too much of Steve while he was in this state. So instead, he’d just talk to him; reassure him that he was there, that he wasn’t going anywhere.

By day four, Steve’s eyes fluttered open but there was no clarity in them. It was so quick that by the time Bucky called the nurses into the room, Steve was already back out. Bucky didn’t take his eyes off of that face for the rest of the day – just in case.

On the fifth day, Steve regained consciousness enough to be able to follow simple instructions. He was still too drugged up and out of it to recognize Bucky – and that had hurt. He knew it wasn’t Steve’s fault, but Bucky had never been a stranger to Steve before; not since they’d met, and even then the bond had been almost instantaneous. Baby blue eyes – clouded and hollow – stared from under half-drooped lids as the doctor had slowly spoken; performing a few audible tests to gauge Steve’s reactions. They were able to determine that the damage to his eardrum seemed to have resulted in partial hearing lost in the right ear, but whether it was permanent or temporary would only become evident with time. Steve fell back to sleep within fifteen minutes.

It was on the day six that Bucky had been sitting by Steve’s bed, gingerly holding his hand and stroking absentmindedly with his thumb while he looked off in thought, that he heard that familiar voice whisper hoarsely, “Bucky?”

It had been difficult not to hurt Steve by squeezing him too hard into that hug, but he did his damndest. He tried to keep his cool so as not to make Steve anxious, but it had only resulted in him sobbing with his head buried in Steve’s lap while the blond carded his fingers through brunet hair and soothingly whispered, “Shh…” as if the roles were reversed.

Whenever Bucky couldn’t be by Steve’s bedside, he was hitting the streets – asking questions, getting whatever information he could. From what he gathered, the rumour going around was that the group of guys responsible were notorious for beating up queers, and had had their eye on Steve for a while. Bucky worded all of his inquisitions carefully – making sure nothing gave away the nature of their relationship – and he was dumbfounded by the conclusions everyone seemed to come
to: apparently Steve had only been targeted because the thugs had seen him around town and had assumed he was an invert because of how he looked. They hadn’t even seen him and Bucky together.

Something about that rooted him on the spot. He’d thanked his source and walked home in a daze, letting everything sink in. It’d been a hate crime, from what he’d been told… Not because they’d had any proof of Steve and Bucky’s relationship… But because Steve looked soft… That was all it’d taken.

That was all it’d taken.

He’d lied awake all night in Steve’s cot; staring at the ceiling, wrapped in his best friend’s quilt, and he thought… And he thought… And he thought… And that knot in his stomach bloomed and spread throughout his system, until it seeped around his heart and clutched it with deadly claws. They’d been fools… Bucky should’ve known better…

The guilt keeps him up at night now. Bucky’s been getting by on two to three hours at most, and they’re usually distributed throughout the course of the evening.

I should’ve been there… I could’ve stopped it… If I hadn’t have gone to work… If I would’ve just stayed home… If I’d hadn’t have slowed down to light up that smoke… If I’d have just walked faster… I. Should’ve. Been. There…

Things a rational person would know is not their fault; Bucky takes it all and hurls it onto his shoulders, and every day (hour, minute, second) makes it just a little bit heavier, and it crunches him lower and lower to the ground until he feels like he’s crawling.

It’d been too close a call; closer than any bout of pneumonia or Tuberculosis or asthma had ever taken them. Steve had been pronounced dead. It didn’t matter that they’d managed to bring him back – he’d still, for however long it’d lasted, been taken from this world. From him. All because Bucky had been selfish and latched onto a situation he should’ve never let them fall into in the first place.

He thinks, and he thinks, and he thinks, and that sense of hopelessness – that reminder that Bucky’s convinced he isn’t allowed to be happy; that the last six months were too good to be true – grows. And it’s only made worse being in that apartment, surrounded by the memories of everything that is Steve.

When he looks to his cot, he can see them lying there like they had the night he told Steve he loved him… and every time since. He can hear Steve’s laughter, and his breathless moans, and Bucky has to bite back a tear when he recalls the sound of Steve’s voice whenever it’d whispered his name. When he takes a shower, he can feel Steve behind him, lathering his back and kissing along his spine. He can’t make food in the kitchen without glancing at the counter beside him and seeing Steve with his limbs wrapped tightly around him as they’d kissed each other feverishly. Every surface in this damned place, they’d made memories of – whether they reflected intimacy of the heart, the flesh, or both.

He had spent Christmas by Steve’s bedside. The smaller boy wasn’t doing too well that day; had developed a minor lung infection from the drugs and the surgery and the trauma. After spending all morning coughing – and Bucky had had to be forced out of the room twice when the exertion pained Steve to sobs and the nurses had to sedate him – he had been exhausted. He’d hardly been able to keep his eyes open for longer than ten minutes at a time for the rest of the day, so Bucky waited until he was fast asleep to give him his present.

A pocket watch; used, but still beautiful and functioning properly. Steve had always wanted one.
Bucky knew Steve would just put himself through unnecessary guilt if he’d given him a present and Steve had nothing to return. It would’ve also sparked a conversation about money that would’ve ended with Bucky having to admit to Steve that all that money they’d managed to put aside for the coming months had been drained thanks to the hospital’s ridiculous expenses. Bucky didn’t care about any of that; he gladly forked over all of it so it could do its job and get Steve the treatments he’d needed. But he knew Steve wouldn’t take it that way; he’d blame himself for something that wasn’t even his fault. They’d be right back to square one.

So he had opened Steve’s hand and tucked it against the palm before gently closing those long, thin fingers around it. No one was around; Bucky made sure to check over his shoulder multiple times. He leaned in and pressed his lips to Steve’s forehead. The blond stirred slightly but remained asleep. Bucky pulled back and pressed his own forehead to his, eyes closed and face pained.

“I love you,” he vowed, just above a hush. “Please don’t ever forget that.”

He wiped his tears from Steve’s skin and then sat back down.

December 28th, 1938

Steve’s eyes slowly open. The lights in the room are bright, too bright, and it’s sensory overload. It takes a couple tries for his vision to become more than just a white, fuzzy circle, but clarity slows graces him. Turning his head to the side, he sees a discombobulated blur of brown hair. Bucky. Steve trains his focus on the blob until it gains definition, and he makes sure that his best friend is the first thing he sees.

“Buck,” Steve whispers. His voice doesn’t even sound like his own; it’s gravelly and raspy from disuse.

Bucky’s sitting in the chair with one ankle resting on the other knee. He’s staring off, chin in hand and index finger draped over his lips. For a second, he looks more solemn than Steve can remember seeing him in months. But the second he hears Steve’s voice, his head snaps over and he straightens so he can lean forward. Bucky’s heart breaks at the sight of him: nose casted, eyes swollen and the most horrible shades of purple and brown, and his right cheekbone a bright, angry red. No face that perfect should ever be hurt… And yet, Steve still looks just as beautiful as ever. It hurts Bucky inside.

“Hey Stevie,” he replies softly, tentatively. As if anything louder would hurt his ears.

Steve holds out his hand weakly and the brunet looks around to make sure no one’s about to come into the room. His own hand slips forward and they lace together. Steve stares at him adoringly, and Bucky can’t take it – can’t understand how Steve could look at him like that after everything he’d just been through… Everything Bucky had failed to protect him from. *He isn’t worthy of this look, this love.*

“You look like shit,” he mutters. It’s a strange attempt at lightening the mood; said with that same joking air they’ve always shared between them but there’s something strange in his tone. It matches the look on his face. His heart’s racing.

Steve doesn’t notice. He glances down at his body and then gives a small shrug. “Well, it’s all an illusion. I feel peachy.”

Bucky frowns. “Please don’t joke about this.”
“Why not? You just did.”

“That’s not--” Bucky pulls his hand away, rubs his eyes and doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself.

Steve’s brows come together. “Hey,” he says gently. Soothing – Bucky hates it, he’s not the one who should be soothed. “Hey, look at me… I’m fine. Bucky, I’m okay.”

“You weren’t,” Bucky replies quickly. His shoulders sag and he wants to yell – he doesn’t know why – but he can’t summon the strength. His words are sad and dejected. “You were hurt real bad, Steve. We almost lost you a couple times. You almost died right in my arms, I…”

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispers, and fuck, he means it.

Bucky makes a face and groans, covering his mouth before tensing and making a jerking motion. “Stop, don’t even say that, I… Why would you even – this isn’t your fault.”

“And it isn’t yours either.” Because Steve knows him better than anybody; he knows without having to have seen it that that’s exactly what Bucky’s doing: taking the responsibility and transferring it solely onto himself.

“I should’ve been there,” the brunet mutters, looking away.

“You were there – as soon as you could be. The doctors told me you found me. You saved my life, Buck.”

“No!” Bucky snaps, louder than either of them had intended. He’s looking enraged now, jaw tensing and fists curling and Steve just wants to hug him. “No, I almost got you killed, because I wasn’t there in time – I wasn’t fucking there! I promised your ma I’d never let anything happen to you and you almost died Steve; you did die at one point! You were fucking dead; they had to bring you back!”

Steve’s eyes are sad; he watches with that trademarked calm, patient devotion that Bucky hates so much when he knows he’s unworthy of it.

“Shh… C’mere – please…”

He holds out his arms to Bucky and makes a small grabby motion with his hands. Everything in Bucky screams at him to fold into it; every cell in his being gravitates to Steve. But he can’t. He just can’t. He meets Steve’s eyes and that face he loves so much, he looks at it and it just hurts so badly… He sighs and leans back forward, resting his elbows on the side of the bed and taking Steve’s hands in his. Lowering his head, he kisses the fingers – flesh and casted alike. Each caress feels like one more nail he’s hammering into Steve’s casket, but he’s selfish, he’s greedy, he’s not a good person, because he doesn’t want to let any of this go.

He feels Steve let go of his left hand so he can stroke his fingers through Bucky’s hair.

“You saved my life,” Steve repeats firmly. “No, you did. I’m sorry I scared you.”

Bucky buries his face into the blanket next to the blond’s hip, bringing up his free hand to close it over Steve’s, still in his hair. “Stop saying sorry,” he insists, the sound muffled.

Steve tries to crack a small smile, even though it hurts. “Make me, jerk.”

Bucky looks up at him, exasperated and so, so tired. “This ain’t funny, Steve.”
“You’re right, it’s not. I’m sorry.”

“Damnit, Steve, stop apologizing!”

Bucky stands abruptly and runs both hands through his hair. He feels like he’s about to go crazy. He wants Steve to yell at him; give him shit for failing him. He doesn’t understand why his best friend is being so understanding and worse, so gentle with him. It confuses Bucky.

Blue eyes just watch him – so bruised, so swollen, Bucky wishes he could just hold his face and kiss them away – as if Steve’s got all the time in the world to let his best friend vent his frustrations. When Bucky says nothing, Steve lifts his hand and holds Bucky’s again. Something in this deflates the brunet’s rage a bit and he looks down at their connection, sighing miserably.

“I need you to tell me what happened,” he mumbles lowly, not trusting himself to look into Steve’s eyes while he feels so emotionally unstable. Not now. Not right now. He knows what needs to be done but he wants the information first. He has to be strong.

“Nothing I tell you is gonna change what happened, Buck.”

“Steve, just tell me, for God’s sakes.”

The blond looks unsure, and then he sighs, eyes finally averting. “I don’t really remember much,” he admits. “And it all happened so fast. One second I was walking and then next they got me into the alley and started kickin’. I don’t remember anything after that.”

Bucky lets go of his hand and sits back down, his face grave. That was about as basic as the information could get, and he basically knows all that by now, but still… Hearing it from Steve, picturing it happening all over again, makes his chest tight with unadulterated hatred.

“If I ever find them, I’m gonna kill ‘em,” he threatens. His voice is steely and haunted; Steve’s never heard him talk like that before. It’s scariest because Steve knows right away that he means it.

“No you won’t,” he replies quickly, nervously. “Don’t get yourself locked up cause of a few scratches.”

“A few – are you kidding me right now!? They broke you, Steve! You have more broken bones than I can count – let’s not even get into your head injury! They beat the shit out of you and they left you for dead; they were trying to kill you, Steve! Fuck, why are you so Hell-bent on giving everyone the benefit of the doubt? Huh? Why!?"

Steve gives him a weak, frustrated look. “It’s not worth it, Buck—”

“What, you’re not worth it? They beat you to a bloody pulp and I’m just supposed to let it slide because golly, sorry Bucky, it’s just not worth it.”

“You know that isn’t what I meant—”

“You wanna know why they attacked you, Steve? Because they thought you were a fairy!” he blurts out, hissing the words rather than shouting them because they’re still in a hospital after all. Steve’s face turns to one of disturbed confusion. He continues: “Yeah, they tried to kill you because you looked like an invert to them – oh, not even because they actually saw proof that you were one, no, just because you looked like one!”

“I…”
“Fuck, they tried to kill you, Steve! They almost did! Because of… Because of looking like a fairy… Because of nothing more than an assumption…”

He loses steam and lets himself fall back into his chair. He looks like he’s about to be sick again. He covers his mouth – his now go-to to try and ward off more vomiting – and stares off. He can feel Steve watching him from the corner of his eye. And the blond does; stares at Bucky with so much sadness and guilt, because he wants to wrap him up in his arms and kiss him until his best friend feels better. He couldn’t imagine what it would’ve felt like for him to turn a corner and see Bucky lying near-dead on the ground… To have shaken him and screamed his name with pleas to wake up, only to feel more of his blood flood out of his body and soak his own. He tries to picture how it might’ve felt to be told by a doctor that Bucky had died on the operating table – and then he has to just as quickly stop imagining that, because it destroys him. Life without Bucky Barnes is a life he’d no longer be longed for.

“Hey,” he says again softly. He waits until grey eyes look at him. “I know… I know, I’m sor-- I just… I know you’re mad. I would be, too. But I’m here, and I’m going to be okay, and… I love you so much, Bucky. Please just tell me you love me back, I really need to hear it right now.”

Bucky’s eyes soften, but not as much as Steve’s hoping for. In fact, there’s something harsh there, ringing the edges, that unsettles him. Bucky’s mouth twitches.

“I do love you, Steve,” he says quietly. He struggles with his words, looking more and more pained. Breaking eye contact, he looks down and brokenly adds, “You’ll never know how much.”

Steve’s sensing something that shouldn’t be there. A frown starts twisting his mouth and he watches the brunet carefully.

“What?”

Bucky looks at him and gives a small shake of the head to show he doesn’t understand the question.

“What’s going on?” Steve clarifies hesitantly. “There’s something harsh there, ringing the edges, that unsettles him. Bucky’s mouth twitches.

“I do love you, Steve,” he says quietly. He struggles with his words, looking more and more pained. Breaking eye contact, he looks down and brokenly adds, “You’ll never know how much.”

Steve’s sensing something that shouldn’t be there. A frown starts twisting his mouth and he watches the brunet carefully.

“What?”

Bucky looks at him and gives a small shake of the head to show he doesn’t understand the question.

“What’s going on?” Steve clarifies hesitantly. “There’s something you’re not telling me – what is it?”

Bucky blinks at him and stays silent for one second too long. “Nothing,” he tries to lie, and for the first time, the deception is written all over his face; is laced in his voice. It’s a lie even he can’t seem to swallow.

A split second’s pause between them and Bucky can see Steve becoming tense with nerves.

“You’re lying,” he accuses, his voice disbelieving but weirdly calm – like he doesn’t know what to be more worried about: the fact that Bucky lied at all or the fact that he lied and it was so blatantly obvious for a change. Because this is supposed to be a thing they do with each other from time to time; one of them lies – and it’s usually for a good reason – and the other one pretends not to know so they can get by a little easier. This is different… Steve has no idea what’s going on.

But he knows he wants Bucky to assure him that nothing’s wrong; he’s just scared, pissed, worked up about what happened to him… He wants it to be the truth so he can believe it, so nothing can be wrong right now, in a moment where he needs Bucky the most.

Bucky tries to get out of it again.

“It’s nothing, Steve; we can talk about it later.”

“I want to talk about it right now.”
“Believe me, you don’t.”

“Don’t tell me what I do and don’t want.”

It’s not even angry or accusatory, just… Steve standing his ground. Stubborn, defiant, perfect Steve…

“This is one of those things I just know,” Bucky insists.

“Then at least tell me what it’s about – is it about what happened?”

“No… I mean, yes. Sorta. It’s sorta about that.”

“I don’t-- okay… Did I do something?”

Bucky’s eyes snap to him then and he speaks quickly, firmly, “No, you didn’t do a single thing. Don’t think for a second that you did anything wrong, you hear me? This is my fault; I’m the one who messed up, not you.”

Steve’s anxiety is rising. The beep, beep, beep on the machine is starting to get just a little bit quicker. “Did you… I mean… did you sleep around or somethin’?”

“What? No! I’d never do that to you, I -- no, just, no Steve, I wasn’t unfaithful; you know I’d never be like that to you. C’mon.”

“Then what is it? You’re freaking me out here, Buck. Does it have to do with us? Is it somethin’ to do with that?”

Silence.

Now Bucky goes quiet; looks away, looks… Like he’s seconds away from either screaming or crying. But then his face slowly drops, becomes eerily stoic; lips press in a firm, uneven line and his eyes are troubled and heartbroken, and yet… The rest of his expression is impassive. As if he’s just taken every morsel of emotion threatening to bubble over the surface and forced it down – shoved it all into a chest and busted the lock to keep it closed. His grey eyes dart to Steve’s for only a moment before looking away again and then he does it - he gives the tiniest, affirming nod.

Steve’s chest tightens but he tries to remain calm. He doesn’t want to jump to conclusions; work himself into an asthma attack over nothing, and please, please, Bucky, please say it’s nothing, you can’t do this to me right now…

“What about us?” he asks, and he’s starting to shiver from nerves and so the question can’t even come out as anything but a wobbly whisper. “Do you… not want to be with me anymore?”

Bucky flinches, eyes stuck on the other corner of the room, and it looks like he wants to say something but then he just… doesn’t. Steve can’t believe what’s happening.

“You… You don’t want to be with me anymore,” he says again, this time slowly, definitively.

“No…”

Steve looks back up and Bucky’s armour cracks the slightest bit. His mouth wavers and he brings up a hand to cover his face for a moment. When it falls, so has his expression, and it’s back to guarded and almost cold. He’s reeled it back in.

“I want to be with you,” he clarifies carefully, but the tone of his voice doesn’t reassure Steve in the
slightest.

“Do you not love me anymore?”

“I love you,” Bucky replies almost flatly; as if to say, ‘Oh, I do, and that’s the problem.’ The brunet frowns in thought and then evens out his pursed lips to a tight line. “I’ve loved you for thirteen years—two weeks couldn’t change that if I tried.”

Steve doesn’t understand.

“So you… love me… and you… want to be with me… But you… don’t…?”

The tension between them mounts and the silence persists as Bucky takes his sweet time answering. Steve feels like he’s about to spasm and shout, ‘Just tell me! Say something!’ when Bucky finally speaks:

“I love you. And I want to be with you… But I can’t.”

Steve opens his mouth but his throat tightens and his chest grows hot now as Bucky’s words sink in. He’s so confused; why are you saying this? What did I do? He can’t find the words; Bucky, as usual, has left him speechless. Only this time, it isn’t in the way that Steve loves.

Bucky continues to stare away, trying to plan his words carefully. His heart hammers within the cavity of his chest and it pounds so violently, it feels like it’s going to rip clear of the arteries and veins holding it in place. Maybe then he’d just die. That’d be a sweet relief.

“Steve…” he begins, “We knew things could get dangerous for us if anyone ever found out—”

“But no one found out!”

Bucky holds up a hand to silence him; not taking his eyes off of the corner of the room. “That’s exactly my point. Those guys, they… They did this to you and I’ve never been more scared in my life. And that was just because they thought you looked queer. Imagine what they would’ve done to you if they would’ve seen us together.”

“We can just be more careful! We don’t have to go out together anymore, we—”

“People were starting to get suspicious,” Bucky continues, as if Steve hadn’t interrupted. His voice is deceivingly calm and straightforward; as if he were explaining how basic math works to the blond instead of something that’s currently destroying them both from the inside out. “I need to start going back out again; doing what needs to be done.” He finally turns his gaze onto Steve, and it’s so settled and unshaken in his decision that it only makes Steve’s stomach twist more. “I need to do whatever I need to do to keep you safe, do you understand? I can’t let you get hurt again.”

“You’re hurting me now,” Steve argues weakly. His face flares and hot tears begin to spill down his cheeks. He tries to keep it together. “I know you don’t want to do this.”

Bucky gives a dry, bitter chuckle. “You’re right, I don’t. But it’s for the best.”

“No it’s not… We can think of another way, we can, we… Please… Buck, don’t do this.”

Something about that resonates with the brunet. It strikes a chord deep inside that he was hoping he’d have been strong enough to resist. A sharp, painful pang shoots throughout his body and again, his resolves wavers and his mask slips just a bit. It looks like his eyes are shining, but he licks his lips and presses them tightly shut before sniffling and looking back away. Trying to calm himself again;
trying to stay in control.

“I know you don’t agree with me right now, but you’ll see… Eventually you’ll realize that I’m doing the right thing.”

“I will never agree with you,” Steve threatens, his voice cracking and wet. He makes a frustrated sound and shakes his head. “Why are you doing this, Buck? If you loved me, we’d find a way to work this out.”

Bucky just regards him with sadness; it comes across a lot like pity. “Stop living in your head, Steve. The world ain’t peaches and cream. People die every day for bein’ the way we are – whatever we are. Freaks who like dames but love one of their own.”

“We are not freaks, Buck!”

“I know that. But they don’t. And none of them would think twice about beating you down again. What if one of them had a gun? All they’d need to do is shoot you once where it matters and you’d be dead before you even hit the ground. I… I couldn’t…” He voice is unreliable now and rises in pitch; cheeks flushing and forcing himself to blink back tears. He clears his throat, but when he talks again, his voice is too low and still just as wavering. “I couldn’t help you even if I got there in time.”

More silence; Steve looks at Bucky, begging him with his eyes to look at me, please, look at me, but Bucky does everything he can to avoid it all.

“…Please don’t do this…” Steve whispers.

Bucky closes his eyes and his face twists; it’s slow and Steve can see every emotion run over his features like clockwork, and it’s honestly one of the most heart-wrenching things he’s ever seen. “Steve…” he mutters. “I have to. Trust me, I… I don’t want to… This is killing me. The thought of you eventually with someone else, it…” His breathing hitches he looks to Steve then, unable to finish the sentence. He makes a soft, pained sound and clenches his teeth together, giving a small shake of the head. A tear rolls down his cheek. Steve sees it and lets out an uncontrolled sob. This hurts… this hurts too much…

“I will always be yours,” Bucky promises. It sounds more like a goodbye, to Steve. “I’m always going to love you--”

“Don’t,” Steve chokes out, shaking his head. He feels anger push up and he tries to force it back down. “Don’t sit there and end things with me and tell me you love me at the same time--”

Bucky sighs and shakes his head. Another tears escapes from the other eyes but he hasn’t deteriorated to crying into them yet. “M’just tellin’ you how I feel.”

Steve starts to cry now; really cry. He wrings his hands and casts his eyes down to them. “You don’t love me,” he whimpers. He knows he sounds pitiful; he doesn’t give a damn. The doctor could walk in and Steve wouldn’t stop crying.

Bucky blinks and looks away, broken – both inside and out. Closing his eyes, he whispers, “I do…”

“Then please, Bucky… Don’t. Please…”

Steve looks back to him when he hears the pained whimper Bucky releases. The brunet’s now covering his face and sobbing silently into his hand, eyes shielded. All Steve can see is his mouth opened, teeth clenched together. His shoulders bob up and down and teardrops drip from his chin in a steady stream. Steve tries to move, to go to him, but if the IV in his arm doesn’t restrain him, all the
healing ribs in his body do. He cries out softly in pain and falls back to the bed, and suddenly he’s sobbing too, because this can’t be happening, but it is, and all he wants is to go to Bucky, touch him, maybe touching him would change his mind, and like always – like always – he’s too weak to do any of that. Too useless to change a thing.

But Bucky hears that pained sound and jerks up to look at him in fear. He leaps up and makes for the bed and then stops; pivots on the spot, on either side of a battle, because he wants to go to Steve, but he needs to stick to his guns. If he touches Steve in this moment, he’s a goner. He’ll go back on everything he just said. He stares at the boy he loves helplessly.

“Steve… I… I’m so sorry…”

“No, please!” Steve sobs, coming unhinged. “Please don’t, I… I need you… I can’t go back to how things were; I can’t lose you, please, Bucky… Oh God,” he buries his face in his hands, lungs constricting and making it hard for him to breathe. “God, I love you so much, why am I not enough? Why don’t you want me?”

Bucky can’t do it anymore. Whatever was holding him back snaps and he drops to Steve’s bed. Grabbing either side of Steve’s neck and cupping his face carefully, he eyes the blond with intent. “Steve, breathe. Deep breaths, in and out. If you don’t relax, you’ll just have all the docs back in here… Steve, listen to me; breathe in… Breathe out… C’mon baby, follow me…”

Steve fights it, and then he doesn’t. He wants to; wants to wheeze until he passes out, so he won’t have to exist through this anymore. He stares into Bucky’s eyes until he’s forcing himself to mimic the rise and fall of the older boy’s chest… Until his face isn’t a stark shade of red… And his hands hold onto Bucky’s wrists the entire time.

“Please don’t leave me,” he begs again, voice small and rough, once he’s calmed back down.

Bucky doesn’t divert his gaze this time; no, he continues staring right back, and Steve waits for those grey eyes to give, but they don’t. Bucky just regards him sadly; orbs still wet and reflecting the breaking of his heart.

“I’m never going to leave you,” he says, soft but firm. Only Bucky Barnes could be both. “I never could leave you. My heart’s always going to be yours. Stevie… Fuck…” He tightens his grip slightly on the blond. Each word seems to anguish him. “I love you. I’m so crazy about you. I will never love a person as much as I love you. You gotta believe me… I’m doing this… You gotta believe I’m doing this because I love you… I’m trying to protect you.”

Steve shakes his head weakly, still sobbing. “I’m not yours to protect.”

“Yes, you are,” Bucky answers, and now he’s back to crying, too. “You are because you’re mine. Whether you’re with me or some dame or some fella or whoever – you will always be mine. You’ve always belonged to me. It’s always been my job to do whatever n-needed to be done to keep you safe.”

Steve tries to argue but it just comes out as a pained groan. He doesn’t care about his broken face and all its pain – he grabs the back of Bucky’s neck and pulls him in. Crushes their lips together, and it stings, and he whimpers into it, but he just pulls the brunet closer to him. Bucky wants to fight it but he doesn’t. His heart is shattering and he needs this just as much as Steve. They pour everything they have into that kiss, and they both know… It’s a promise, but it also feels dangerously similar to a goodbye. They make small, grief-stricken sounds and cry into the kiss.

It’s Bucky who breaks away first. Steve isn’t surprised; he would’ve stayed attached to his mouth
forever if he could. Bucky breaks away because someone could walk in at any moment. Mostly, he breaks away because every second feeling those lips against his – those lips he’s loved since he was eight – was weakening him. And he needed to strong, for both of them. Be the one to see reason when Steve, to him, could not. This needed to be done. Steve could – and would, he just knew it – go on to eventually find someone else and be properly happy. No hiding, no lies… Just like he deserved. Without fear of being killed for it. He couldn’t let Steve get hurt like that again for him… Bucky knows he isn’t worth Steve’s life.

Their foreheads are pressed together, and Bucky gives in one last time to tilt his chin forward and kiss that mouth just once more – quick and firm, careful not to bump into his busted nose. “To the end of the line,” he vows.

Steve lets out a soft cry and he knows it’s over. It had ended when they’d kissed. He could try to fight it, and maybe he’d convince him, but he probably wouldn’t. One thing Bucky never budged on was keeping Steve safe, no matter what the cost. Steve hates him in this moment for choosing to do this, but he loves him more than ever because he understands why. It feels like the sickest form of torture the universe could be putting him through. He nods.

“To the end of the line,” he echoes, knowing that when Bucky leaves that night, he’ll be taking with him a part of Steve’s heart that Steve doesn’t think he’ll ever get back.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Steve and Bucky don’t really know how to define what their relationship turns into, but they do their best to work through the next couple years as best they can. While in an art class together, news hits about the attack on Pearl Harbour. America's going to war.

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I am so sorry. Please don’t hate me. I promise things will get better from here for a while.

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
To Rebuild

Chapter Summary

A lot can happen in two years...

Chapter Notes

What would I do without your smart mouth?
Drawing me in, and you kicking me out...
You've got my head spinning, no kidding, I can't pin you down.
What's going on in that beautiful mind?
I'm on your magical mystery ride.
And I'm so dizzy, don't know what hit me, but I'll be alright.
My head's under water,
But I'm breathing fine.
You're crazy and I'm out of my mind.
'Cause all of me
Loves all of you.
Love your curves and all your edges;
All your perfect imperfections.
Give your all to me;
I'll give my all to you.
You're my end and my beginning;
Even when I lose I'm winning.
'Cause I give you all of me.
And you give me all of you..
How many times do I have to tell you,
Even when you're crying you're beautiful too?
The world is beating you down, I'm around through every mood.
You're my downfall, you're my muse.
My worst distraction, my rhythm and blues;
I can't stop singing, it's ringing, in my head for you...
Give me all of you...
Cards on the table, we're both showing hearts;
Risking it all, though it's hard...
'Cause all of me
Loves all of you.
Love your curves and all your edges;
All your perfect imperfections.
Give your all to me
I'll give my all to you.
You're my end and my beginning;
Even when I lose I'm winning.
'Cause I give you all of me
And you give me all of you...

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The radio broadcast at the end of this chapter is in fact a combination of two real broadcasts played on the radio in December of 1941. I found both on Youtube.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**January, 1939**

Steve finally gets released at the beginning of the month. He’s still bandaged up real good and he leaves on crutches thanks to his busted kneecap. Steve had insisted he could walk on his own, but because most of his ribs were still healing, it had quickly proved too difficult for the blond to be able to make it a single step without doubling over in agony. Bucky follows beside him, keeping Steve’s slow pace; one hand on his back and a worried eye on him to make sure he doesn’t lose his footing or collapse.

Despite the awkwardness between them at first, Bucky never stopped coming by for a single day; would arrive the moment visiting hours began and wouldn’t leave until they asked him to. He made it perfectly clear the day after Bucky had ended things that the only reason he’d leave otherwise was if Steve told him to.

Steve never did.

That’s not to say things weren’t uncomfortable between them for the first while. Most of their days together contained of nothing but silence for the most part; sometimes, those first several days, the younger boy would suddenly break and beg Bucky to take back the choice he’d made. Other times, he’d pretend he was perfectly fine and in control – only to dissolve into anger and start getting upset with Bucky until it ended with Steve falling into sobs. Bucky knew how difficult it was – he was feeling it himself; couldn’t stop himself from wanting to turn back on his decision because it’d be so much easier in the short term to just put a smile back on Steve’s face. But he couldn’t change his mind; he’d just sit there, sometimes he’d cry silently, but he’d always let Steve get whatever he needed to get out. Then, he’d sit on the side of the bed and hold the blond to him and stroke his fingers through his hair – something he could still do to comfort, lovers or not, because this was something he’d done their whole lives – until Steve finally calmed down.

To both of their surprise, Bucky doesn’t lose his job. The guys down at the docks get wind of what happened to Steve and luckily, the ones with power are not cold-hearted men – they’ve seen, they know, how important Steve is to Bucky. And they’ve grown used to that tiny, scrawny kid always hanging out with the brunet on his lunch breaks. So when they get word of what transpired, they offer Bucky their pity - let him take the time he needs, under the condition that once Steve is able to fend for himself again (a.k.a can walk again without needing assistance or a babysitter), he’ll return.

Steve doesn’t lose his job either. That one’s a lot more understandable, especially given how much Mr. Stan likes him. In fact, his bosses put together a homemade “get well” basket and walk it up to their apartment door one night after Bucky’s brought Steve back home. Steve’s sleeping at the time, so it’s Bucky who answers the door. He doesn’t know when he became the touchy-feely type, but he can’t stop himself from staring down at the basket in his hands with a touched surprise before stepping forward and giving them both a hug.

Steve finds out about the money. Or more so, the lack of it now.

“But I didn’t tell you where I hid it,” he’d mumbled, slightly perplexed.

“Yeah, so I spent all night tearin’ the place apart until I found it,” the brunet answered.
It’d been under one of the loose floorboards in their bedroom. Bucky couldn’t help but admire Steve’s creativity when he finally discovered it. As he expects, Steve blames himself. Bucky responds reflexively and cups his face gently in his hands, sternly telling him not to be an idiot – that it needed to be done, it was no one’s fault, and the money went to good use.

“We both still got jobs, Stevie,” he reminds the blond. “We’ll still make ends meet.”

He realizes he’s holding Steve’s face a second too long – it’s habit, it’s so hard to break, he’s become so comfortable… But he forces himself to pull away.

It’s not easy for them. Not at all. Because it’s getting colder, and Bucky doesn’t like the idea of Steve being so injured and sleeping by himself all the way on the other side of the room, so he insists they keep their cots together. He can’t hold Steve the way a large part of him still wants to, not with all his bruised and broken bones and ribs still healing, but he makes sure his best friend is warm at night with both blankets on top of him, and when Steve wakes up throughout the night, moaning brokenly in pain, Bucky rubs soothing circles on his back until he falls back asleep. Until that happens, though, Steve stares ahead and lets silent tears fall, because he wants so much more than that.

They almost have their slip-ups. If Steve is too pained – either physically or emotionally or both – sometimes Bucky can’t stop himself from giving him one, maybe two, small kisses… Because it’s too hard not to. He does his best to fight those urges though, because he knows giving into them wouldn’t be fair to Steve. He was serious when he’d ended it, no matter how much it kills him. He knows he can’t have his cake and eat it too; he has to give Steve a chance to move on.

About midway through January, Steve wants to take a small walk around the block to get some fresh air. Going up and down their flights of stairs is too exhausting for him, so he rarely gets the chance to leave the apartment since he’s been home. Bucky, of course, goes with him, and they make small conversation as they circle around the block at a snail’s pace. One of Steve’s crutches almost slips in the snow, but Bucky steadies him quickly before the blond can lose his balance and topple to the ground.

Bucky’s chuckling softly and making a quip about Steve always having had two left feet. Steve grumbles and tells him to shut up, when Bucky glances up and his face falls. Coming up the street, on the same side as them, is… He can’t believe it… one of the thugs who’d attacked Steve. Bucky could recognize that face anywhere – as if perfectly timed, he gets a flashback clear as day of this guy and his three buddies running out from the alleyway before ditching Steve’s body to die, all alone. Steve realizes that he’s lost Bucky’s attention because the brunet can faintly hear the blond obliviously asking, “What? What is it?”

Steve glances at the guy approaching, but the lightbulb remains off. He wasn’t able to see their faces; he doesn’t have the same realization that Bucky’s having. Bucky lets go of Steve – who’s regained his footing – and his face morphs into a vicious scowl. He’s already walking towards the guy, footsteps increasing in speed until it’s a powerful stride. The guy’s still approaching but too busy staring down at the ground to notice Bucky coming towards him.

Not until the last second. He glances up and gets a fleeting look of confusion before Bucky’s grabbing him by the lapels and rushing him into the nearest alleyway, just as he’d helped do to Steve. He thinks he can hear Steve shouting something to him as he tries to catch up, but Bucky’s seeing red and he can’t think straight.

The thug’s caught off guard, so he has no time to react. The second they’re deep enough in the alley, the brunet shoves him to the ground and then kicks him in the stomach before he can get back up again. The guy – the kid, he can’t be more than eighteen – drops to his stomach, wraps his arms around his middle; curls in on himself.
“This what you guys did to him!?” Bucky shouts, sending another kick flying. The guy on the ground makes a strangled sound in pain. “Huh!? Did he do that!? Hmm? Did he try to cover himself up – to shield his body so you’d stop kickin’!?”

He slams his shoe into the guy’s stomach and chest three more times, and his face is wild and animalistic; his chest heaving up and down as rage and adrenaline pump through him. He can kind of hear Steve shouting now, but the blond keeps his distance. Seems to know better than to interrupt at the moment. Good.

Bucky turns him over and straddles him, and the second that face below him is accessible, his fist starts flying. He holds the guy’s collar with one hand and punches and punches and punches with the other – and he shouts, he shouts so loudly that his throat hurts… Whatcha thinkin’? Huh? WHATCHA FUCKING THINKIN’!? ‘Oh, why’s this guy pummelin’ the snot out of me – I didn’t do nothin’ wrong!’ That’s why my goddamn friend was thinking! YOU hurt him! YOU almost killed him! YOU ALMOST TOOK HIM FROM ME! You… fucking… piece of… SHIT!

Then he’s shouting incoherently and he doesn’t even know what he’s saying anymore. Just unleashes it all, as the body beneath his stops reacting to the assaults and slowly drifts out of consciousness. There’s blood everywhere.

“BUCKY!” Steve screams firmly, over and over, trying to get through to him so he can make him stop. He’s quickly been able to piece together who this guy is, and you think that that would make things okay by Steve then, but it doesn’t. Steve Rogers isn’t like that. He doesn’t trust himself to go to Bucky directly – he’s never seen Bucky in this state before. He’s bloodthirsty, vengeful. It’s scary. But that fist keeps coming up and down, up and down, and that face is being slowly busted in and he can see the chest just in front of the brunet’s thighs rising and falling, but it’s getting weaker now. Bucky’s looking to kill him.

“BUCKY, STOP!”

He doesn’t. He keeps going. Because this guy – this thing, he doesn’t deserve to be called a human being – is the reason why he had to give up the most important, perfect thing in his life. This thing is the reason why Steve was almost taken from him forever. The body below him makes low, gargled noises as his eyes swell shut and he chokes softly on his own blood, and Bucky just keeps punching, because you tried to take him from me, no one takes Steve from me, no one, you don’t deserve to live, you don’t deserve to breathe--

“BUCKY, STOP, BUCKY PLEASE, STOP!”

You don’t deserve to be up and walking when Steve, my Steve, has to hobble around in fucking crutches now! I’ll kill you, I won’t stop until I fucking kill you, you deserve this, you deserve this, you don’t deserve life--

“JAMES!!!”

Bucky stops, just as quickly as he coils his fist back for another blow. Something in that brings him back, slowly. He looks down at the body – his other hand still clutching his collar – and pants. Slowly looks behind him to Steve, that crazed look still in his eye.

“He did this to you! Him and his buddies!” he snarls incredulously.

“I don’t care!” Steve snaps. “This isn’t the answer, Buck! You’re better than this – better than them! An eye for an eye won’t turn back time!”
“It’ll sure as Hell make me feel a bit better!”

“Bucky, I said no! Get up – now. Get up and we’ll go home and I’ll heat up some milk for you. I’ll even read to you if you want. Just get up, stop this. This is not the answer!”

It takes a few moments for Bucky to calm down, but the fire burning within him gradually simmers down to embers. He begrudgingly lets go of the guy’s shirt, and he’s already starting to move a bit and groan in a disoriented pain, and Bucky has to fight the urge to kick him again. Once he’s standing, he spits on him – he doesn’t care what Steve says. This guy doesn’t deserve to live. Turning, still scowling, but with a gentleness that only comes from being around Steve, he glances behind him one last time before taking Steve’s arm gingerly and muttering, “Let’s go.”

He hopes that the fucker bleeds to death before anyone can help him. That’d be nothing but karma. He did, after all, walk away.

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**Winter, 1939**

Just as quickly as Steve’s able to start walking again, and the majority of his broken bones are at least no longer causing him constant pain, he’s only granted about two weeks before he falls ill with the flu. He gets sick three times that winter; each time lasts at least a couple of weeks. It’s not bad enough that Bucky’s worrying for his life (as much), but it’s still enough that he’s bedridden.

Bucky’s faith in humanity is restored in the form of Roger Stan. Not once does the man ever threaten Steve with losing his job due to his many absences. Never even gives him a hard time for it. Perhaps it’s due to the fact that the blond had tried going into work the first time he’d fallen sick that season, despite having a fever. When Mr. Stan had heard the sound of boxes crashing to the floor and found Steve barely conscious, drenched in sweat, he’d seen what Bucky has always been able to see: the strength, determination, and stubbornness of a boy who wants nothing but to prove himself. From what Mr. Stan told Bucky, he’d helped Steve up and the blond was barely coherent. Yet he’d still insisted that he was fine; apologized for making a mess and swore he’d clean it up. Mr. Stan closed the shop for twenty minutes to walk Steve home and hand him over to Bucky, who took it from there.

Steve is promised that for as long as he needs work, he will always have a place at Stan’s Grocers. Bucky doesn’t know what they’d do without them.

As always, winter means cold and winter means sickness and winter means conserving body heat, so their cots still haven’t been separated. The moment he can get away with it, Bucky spends the nights holding Steve in his arms. At first, they tell themselves they’re only doing it out of necessity, because really, it hurts too much to be torturing themselves for any other reason. To be so close but not let themselves do anything more… Bucky’s decision, of course. And by now, Steve just follows. Always follows Bucky. Knows he won’t change anything by trying anything else.

Gradually, they come to terms with the fact that they continue to do it because neither of them can let go just yet. They’re not together but they don’t know how to be apart. Can’t not love each other. Sometimes they still say it; most of the time, they don’t. Bucky had stopped saying it first – no longer wakes Steve up with those three little words anymore in the mornings. And Steve doesn’t think he could handle saying it and not hearing it back. At least if he doesn’t say it either, he can never know for sure.

Every day is hard, but every day makes it a little more tolerable. They do everything they can to get by and pretend that things can go back to the way they were.
April, 1939

Sometimes, they can’t do it, though. Sometimes, they spend so many days and nights doing exactly that – **pretending… that they don’t love each other, that they’re not aching inside, that they don’t want each other so badly** – that they hit their breaking points.

Sometimes, Bucky doesn’t feel he’s strong enough. He constantly has to remind himself why he’d made the choice he’d made back in December, and why it’s still just as relevant now as it’d been then. Sometimes, it’s harder than others – because **sometimes**, Steve wants to say ‘to Hell with it all’ and it’s so difficult for him to respect Bucky’s wishes, and he purposely lets his gaze linger, or his touch be suggestive, or his voice lower until it’s sultry and hot, like lava. He’ll watch Bucky’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallows with difficulty but then that stupid punk always averts his eyes and puts a stop to it… Changes the subject… Backs away…

Only sometimes, he doesn’t… because **sometimes**, they just can’t anymore. Sometimes, they still go out drinking together and one night, they stumble home, drunk and uninhibited, and all it takes is for Steve to back up against the wall and start undoing his shirt, and Bucky loses his grip.

And though they rip each other’s clothes off – too heated to even kiss yet; just stare hungrily into each other’s eyes as they strip – and though Steve’s legs are soon wrapped around Bucky’s waist, and though they fuck against the wall until they finally do kiss – **they have to, they have to, it’s the only way to silence each other’s sobs of pleasure, because I miss you… I miss you so much…** - they go right back the next day to pretending that they’re best friends.

And nothing more.

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July 4th, 1939

Steve turns twenty-one. Bucky’s present to him is to take him out to the cinema to see *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. Bucky actually pays this time. They sit in the dark, munch on popcorn, drink their sodas, and try not to remember how easily they used to sneak their hands beneath the drink rest so they could lace their fingers together… and they watch the tragically short love story between Robert Donat’s and Greer Garson’s characters. Steve gets up and walks out halfway through the film, to Bucky’s surprise. The brunet runs after him and once they’re outside, he guides Steve along until they’re behind a diner before pulling the smaller boy to him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers; lips crushing against the top of the head of golden hair. “I didn’t know it’d be like that.”

_Painfully familiar._

They go back to their spot. That night, they watch the fireworks. Steve’s hand accidentally bumps into Bucky’s and he pulls it back as if he’s been burned, mumbling a hurried apology. Bucky stares at him and he feels so sad. Their heads tip back up to take in the brilliant explosion of colours above – deceivingly so close, yet both know how far they really are.

_Also painfully familiar._

Bucky knows he shouldn’t, but he can’t help himself. When the aerial show is over in the night’s sky and they rise to their feet, Bucky surprises Steve by turning and gently taking that skinny face in his hands.

“Happy birthday, Steve,” he whispers, leaning in.
They kiss, and it’s slow. Steve doesn’t react at first. Then his hands are in Bucky’s hair and their mouths glide along each other’s, and everything in Steve’s body is alive and pounding and heating up. Their tongues beat together; strangely languid and lazy, even with all the desperation they have to drink each other in. It only stops once they’ve both become breathless, and then Bucky hunches to press his forehead to Steve’s. His eyes are closed, and his hands still cup Steve’s face. The blond holds onto his wrists and watches as Bucky sighs sadly.

Giving his forehead another small, chaste kiss, they break apart and head back to the apartment — another thing to store away in the vault of stuff they choose not to talk about anymore.

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**September, 1939**

Steve had been so good throughout the rest of the summer; kept his distance, tried his best to treat Bucky like his buddy again, and they’d laugh and joke and *fake it*. Not all the time, just… most of it. Anything to mask how much it still hurts… Almost a year later and it still hurts just as badly. The only difference is that things are tolerable now. They’ve become very good at playing their parts; keeping their masks secure as tightly as they can.

He’s the one who initiates it this time. He spasms awake, covered in sweat; still gripped in the terror of his nightmare. He gets those sometimes – ever since he and Bucky had broken up. Sometimes, they have to do with Bucky; sometimes, they don’t. Sometimes his ma is in them, like the one he’s just woken up from. He’d watched her die… Slowly… Never taking her eyes off of him and asking him why he wasn’t doing anything to stop it…

He needs comfort. He needs his best friend.

Shaking, he tiptoes out of bed and climbs into Bucky’s cot – moved back to his own side of the room, since they couldn’t seem to find an excuse to justify keeping them pushed together during the hot months of summer. The brunet stirs slightly – wakes up just enough to groggily sense the new addition next to him – and out of habit, rolls over a bit and throws an arm around Steve. The smaller boy has his back to Bucky’s front, and he can feel the older boy’s hot breath brush against the back of his neck as Bucky starts to fall back asleep and he… He stares ahead, needing more.

Rocks his hips back. Feels Bucky’s dick against his rear, separated by two thin layers of underwear. He hears the small, shap inhale through Bucky’s nose and the bigger body freeze behind him.

Bucky awakens with a startled, confused moan when Steve bites his lip and starts grinding back against him harder.

“Steve… Wait…” he breathes, but his hands clutch to Steve tighter.

“…Please…”

“Steve… *unh*… Steve, stop…”

He doesn’t. He brings a hand back and palms the back of Bucky’s head; rolls his body and pushes his ass back against that hardening muscle until it’s rock-hard and evoking the same reaction out of his own. Soon they’re both breathing rougher, heavier, and Bucky tries to beg again… Can only get as far as his name…

Then Steve flips over so they’re face to face, and Bucky’s eyes widen, but they’re also glazed and Steve doesn’t need to see his pupils to know how blown they are. Before the brunet can protest or stop him, Steve covers those plush lips with his own and pushes Bucky down onto his back so he
can crawl over him and settle one leg on either side. Bucky groans into Steve’s mouth and for the first time in as long as he can remember, he lets Steve lead… Lets Steve take over him… He can justify it this way…

He lets Steve guide the way when his thighs are on either side of Bucky’s head and the brunet, still lying and eyes still closed, clutches his hips and moves his mouth back and forth over the blond’s cock while he listens to Steve moan above him.

He lets Steve guide the way when his tongue darts and licks and penetrates Steve’s tight ring of muscles, slowly… So slowly, he draws it out as long as he can, he makes sure – until his best friend is trembling and begging for more.

He lets Steve guide the way as he lies there and takes it; hands pressing and sliding up and down Steve’s perfect little chest as the blond rides him, slow and deep. Their bodies move together and Bucky’s head keeps arching back because they shouldn’t be doing this, it isn’t fair to either of them, but he knows nothing as miraculous as being inside of Steve’s body. They make low, quiet, full breathless sounds… deep, barely audible “auh”s every time Steve rolls his hips; clutches around him. Steve digs his nails into Bucky’s chest and they make love all night, never stopping, never speeding up, never taking their eyes off each other even when they come.

The next morning, they continue pretending.

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February, 1940

It was bound to happen eventually. Steve had just been hoping it wouldn’t.

Bucky hides it from him for weeks, until he’s sitting next to him on the couch one evening; Steve sketching and Bucky with a book in hand. But the brunet stopped reading hours ago; has been sitting there, nerves shot to shit, trying to gather the courage to say it.

“Steve, I gotta tell you somethin’…”

He’s met a girl. Her name’s Laura. They danced together one night when Bucky had gone out and Steve had declined his invitation to join. Steve doesn’t want the details but he finds himself asking anyways, because he’s pretending to be happy for him; pretending to be interested. Bucky misinterprets Steve’s reaction, thinks that Steve is genuinely happy for him, and this only makes him feel worse… so he keeps his answers brief and to a minimum. They’ve apparently been seeing each other, officially, for two weeks. Steve can’t believe he had no idea. He can’t believe he didn’t go with him that night; he could’ve stopped it.

Don’t be selfish.

He hears Bucky’s voice promising him that his heart would always belong to Steve. He feels anger; wants to throw it back in Bucky’s face and demand to know at what point that promise had become bullshit.

Instead, he swallows it down. Looks directly into Bucky’s eyes – while the brunet stares back with a strange look of fear – and tells his best friend that he’s happy for him.

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March 10th, 1940

For Bucky’s twenty-third birthday, he, Steve, and Laura go out for drinks and dancing. Steve only goes because it’s his best friend’s birthday and he really can’t bail on something like that. He also
goes because – and he hates himself for it – he actually can’t help but like Laura. He’s liked her since the moment he met her, and it’s the most awful feeling he thinks he’s ever known.

Laura isn’t like most dames – not the ones Bucky’s been so used to dating in the past. She’s smart as a whip and surprisingly on the plain side. Bucky’s always had a reputation for only going after those who look like they could be pin-ups. Steve’s confused as first until he watches the way the couple dances together. Then it all makes sense.

They flow together like the wind and the earth. They spin and kick and when Bucky spins and then flips her, she lands as gracefully as if her body were made of air. Steve knows he could never move like that, and he thinks, That’s the sort of dance partner Bucky needs. So he sits back and watches the way they smile at each other, and he can remember when Bucky smiled at him that way.

But Bucky looks so happy… And that part of him that only ever wants for that, for Bucky to be happy, can’t help but feel partially happy, too, at the sight. He curses that part of him that’s always so goddamn noble.

But the reason Laura really isn’t like most dames is because she not only acknowledges Steve, but includes him. She never treats Steve like a third wheel, nor does she let him get away with making himself one. Because then she’s running up to him and grabbing his hands and pulling him from his seat, even as he throws on a reluctant smile and tries to fight it.

He dances with them, and he’s awful at it. No surprise there. Bucky laughs and smiles at him, and Steve doesn’t know if he’s hallucinating it or not, but there’s still that fondness in his grey eyes as the brunet watches him awkwardly move around that Steve knows shouldn’t be there. Not now; not now that he’s back off the market again.

When people start doing the Charleston, Steve tries to make a getaway, but Bucky ducks out first. Excuses himself to get a drink and Laura jumps all over that and says she’ll teach Steve the dance. And as she tries, Steve does his best to follow, but he keeps looking over his shoulder and every time he does, Bucky’s already staring right back at him. He tells himself that that look is directed towards Laura, but their gazes are locked, and Bucky gives a tiny (sad?) smile, and Steve knows it’s meant for no one but him. It’s confusing.

Still… He hates Laura. He hates her because he likes her so much. And it now makes him feel guilty for the things he feels – for still feeling like he has claims over his best friend.

They walk Laura home at the end of the night and he definitely doesn’t miss the way Bucky shoots him a small glance when Laura leans in for a goodnight kiss, and instead, the brunet ducks his head to the side and pecks her cheek. So quick; lips barely make contact. He pulls back and chuckles uncomfortably, blaming it on the fact that his breath reeks of cigarette smoke (Laura isn’t a smoker and doesn’t overly like the taste). Then she hugs Steve and he turns beet red – he can’t help it, some things never change – and then they leave and head back to their apartment.

They’re silent the whole walk home. Bucky wants to do nothing but apologize. But Steve seems to like Laura so much, and the truth is, he hadn’t even seemed to care when Bucky had first told him about her. He tells himself that that’s a good thing; it’d be selfish of him to wish for Steve to care because that’d mean that Steve would be hurting. He doesn’t want Steve to hurt. He’s done enough of that already.

So, he reminds himself… Steve’s moved on. That’s good. Yeah… That’s a good thing. He’s moved on – he has, he has, he has – and so has Steve. It was bound to happen eventually…

When they get home, Bucky goes and sits by the window to light up another Lucky. He stares out of
the window and thinks – a little about Laura… mostly about Steve. He hears some rummaging coming from their bedroom and then suddenly the blond walks into his peripherals, staring down at something small in his hands.

“Whatcha got there?” Bucky asks, looking over to him.

Steve approaches slowly, not talking his eyes off of the item he’s holding. Then he offers it out to Bucky.

“I’ve had this since August. I knew I wanted to give it to you today.”

Curiously, the brunet takes it. It’s a photograph of Bucky and Steve at Coney Island; arms around each other… Bucky beaming and Steve in the middle of a chuckle. Bucky remembers that day. It was one of those times where they let themselves feel for just a few precious hours that they were still together. They didn’t kiss, or even hold hands, but they’d let themselves laugh and had meant it. There was always a photographer there who could take your picture for a price; a small one, but Bucky never wanted to fork over the unnecessary cash for it. It was sort of a useless tradition they’d always had whenever they had the money to go to the Island – get their photo taken (Bucky always grinning; Steve usually looking uncomfortable) and then leave without actually purchasing it. Somewhere on Coney Island, there must be dozens of photos of Bucky Barnes’s and Steve Rogers’s history littering dusty shelves.

This photo is special; the only one Bucky can recall that Steve had actually been caught smiling.

“I remember this…” he says slowly. He runs his fingers over the print. “When did you…?”

“After you’d gone to the bathroom,” Steve answers, forcing himself to be nonchalant. “Ran back over and got it for you. Happy birthday, Buck.”

“Thank you…” the brunet murmurs, half distracted.

Steve stares at him a moment longer, feeling his chest growing tight, before turning around to leave the room.

“I think of you, you know…” Bucky suddenly says quietly.

Steve turns around and looks at him, eyebrows furrowing. Bucky glances to him with a small, self-deprecating smile.

“When I’m with her. I close my eyes and imagine it’s you. I know you don’t want to hear that,” he sighs, looking back down at the photo. “I know you’re… over it, and that’s okay. I’m glad you are – I’m happy for you, I mean. You always deserved so much more than my shit. I told myself so many times that I was doing the right thing, ending it with you. That you’d eventually get past it, and then you could finally be with the right person.”

Steve turns and faces him slowly, face contorted with confusion.

Bucky lets out a small, sad laugh and looks back to him.

“When I met her, I was feelin’ low that night. After the last time we… you and I…” He swallows and closes his eyes to take a deep breath, and Steve realizes he looks pained. “After that last time, I noticed how you’d changed. Slow, not very noticeable at first. But then I saw it. I didn’t want to accept at first that you were falling out of love with me, but I kept tellin’ myself, ‘This is what you wanted. You wanted to give him a chance to be able to be happy, the right way.’ And it was such a hard pill for me to swallow, how pathetic is that?”
Steve’s flashed another anguished, ironic little smile. The blond’s heart pounds.

“She was so nice, and she seemed like exactly the kind of girl that you would like, and for some reason, that drew me to her. Don’t get me wrong… I like her. I like her a whole lot, actually – you don’t have to worry about me, Steve. I guess I just… Hoped that it would’ve helped me catch up to you and get over you a little bit quicker.” He gives a small shrug and lowers his hands to his lap, turning that hollow smile, those sad eyes, ahead of him now. “You always were stronger than me, Stevie.”

The blond stands dumbfounded. It takes a few seconds for the implication of Bucky’s confession to sink in, and as soon as it does, he’s crossing the space between them and lowering himself to his knees by Bucky’s side. His heart’s racing and he tries not to smile in disbelief; no, he keeps it contained, because as ironic as the whole thing is, he knows it’s still a difficult moment for Bucky. He lifts a hand and gently shoves Bucky’s shoulder. The older boy teeters slightly and then gives a small, sad exhale of a chuckle – but he still doesn’t look at him. Steve does it again, only harder this time.

“You remember when you told me you must’ve been the dumbest guy in Brooklyn?” he asks.

“Yeah?”

“I think the whole world would’ve been more accurate.”

Bucky blinks, not understanding, and shakes his head slightly. Steve gives him a small, sad smile now.

“You’re always makin’ assumptions,” the blond murmurs. “Always assumin’ you know what’s going on in my head and what’s best for me. You’re such an ass.”

Bucky thinks to himself and smirks a bit. “Yeah, I guess I am,” he admits, but he still doesn’t fully get it.

Blue eyes regard him and then avert away, and Steve sighs as he straightens back up. Bucky doesn’t say anything to stop him from leaving, but when he’s almost rounded the corner, his hand stops on the wall and he pauses. Glancing back over his shoulder, he says, “I never stopped loving you, Buck. And I never got over you, either.”

Bucky’s head snaps up to look at him, and the blond only lets himself see one second of that baffled look before he turns and walks away.

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The next day, Steve’s coming home from a walk around in the fresh air. He and Bucky hadn’t said much else the previous night after their little discussion. Bucky had looked more somber than usual, and perplexed. Steve thought it best to let him work through whatever was going on in his head without mediation, because sometimes, his best friend thought more clearly when he was given space.

Steve isn’t sure what he was expecting. He had hoped that when he awoke that morning, Bucky would greet him with those three little words again. He hadn’t. They’d barely said anything at all. It was a Saturday and that meant they both have the day off, and Steve had been hoping they could spend some of it together. Instead, Bucky had haphazardly made an offhand comment about going to meet up with Laura, and Steve knew then that nothing he’d said from the night before had changed anything.
He’s heading home now because the sky’s growing cloudy. He doesn’t mind this kind of rain – “sunshower”, his ma had always called them – and it’s about the one kind of rain that he can manage being caught in without falling sick because it’s usually not that cold, especially with all the snow gone by now. When the clouds rumble just the slightest bit, he tips his head up and watches them, as if hoping to catch the first sight of precipitation if he looks hard enough.

He almost walks right into Bucky.

“Whoah! Dang, Buck, y’scared me.”

“Maybe if you looked where you were goin’--”

“What happened to your face?”

Bucky’s left cheek is a bright, angry pink. The brunet barely acknowledges it, shrugging it off as nothing.

“I was actually on my way to find you,” he tells Steve; hands uncharacteristically shoved into his pockets. Bucky’s always got his hands shoved in his pockets – it’s a habit the Nuns spent years trying and failing to break – but it never usually flares up when he’s around Steve. “I figured you’d take your usual route. You’re kinda predictable.”

Steve feels the tiniest raindrop splatter on his brow.

“Sure, what is it?”

“Not here,” Bucky replies, but then glances up and brings one hand to his face when he too is pelted with a small drop of water. Blue eyes join his.

It goes from dry to pouring within seconds. They make a startled sound and throw their hands over their heads, and when Bucky looks to Steve with wide eyes, Steve bursts out laughing.

“Aw c’mon Buck, scared it’ll ruin your do?” He runs past the brunet in the direction of their apartment and Bucky sets off after him, a grin pulling up his lips.

They’re completely soaked by the time they finally burst through their front door. Steve’s wheezing gently and heads in first, still laughing, despite his constricting lungs. Bucky closes the door behind him and then stays there, staring. The blond turns a few feet away and looks back to him.

They both look beautiful; clothes clinging to their bodies and hair matted to their heads. They can’t help but let their eyes roam up and down the length of their forms.

“I ended it,” Bucky blurts out; grey eyes still taking in Steve’s tiny body. Steve’s eyebrows shoot up. The brunet’s orbs meet his. “I broke up with Laura. That’s what I wanted to tell you. That’s why I looked a bit rough.”

“She slap you?”

“Full-on clocked me in the face, more like.” Bucky gives a small, wry chuckle. “She’s got a mean right hook.”

“You must’ve really ticked her off.”

There’s a pause, and Bucky looks at him calmly and confirms, “I told her there was someone else.”

Steve can’t help but gape. Given their awkward morning, he hadn’t expected the break up, let alone
what Bucky’s admitting now.

“She hounded me to tell her who; I know she deserved that much but obviously I couldn’t do it,” the brunet says, looking away and rubbing the back of his head guiltily. “I told her she deserved better than me anyways and promised her I hadn’t strayed while we were together. Course, she didn’t believe me and that’s when she decked me. Kinda suppose I had that one comin’.

Steve’s still standing there, still staring like a fish. He lets the words sink in and wraps his head around them. Speaking slowly, brows knit, he responses, “And this ‘someone else’… I mean, what do… Who’re ya… I mean – I…”

Bucky sighs, resting his hands on his hips. He closes his eyes and scrunches his nose and then zeroes his gaze on Steve. “It’s obviously you, Steve. C’mon, did I really hafta say it?”

Steve gives a tiny half-smile. “Yes?”

Bucky doesn’t return it; instead, his eyes slowly lower down the blond’s body before sliding back up. “Last night made me realize that it wasn’t fair to her to be stuck with someone who was still hung up on somebody else – ‘specially not when she was such a sweet dame. If I had any sort of clue when these feelins’ for you would stop, then maybe I woulda toughed it out. But I don’t know if they ever will, so… It was the right thing to do.”

“Do you still love me?” Steve asks. It’s a genuine question; he just wants to hear it.

“You know I do,” the brunet mumbles uncomfortably.

“Do you want to be with me?”

Bucky’s eyebrows crease. “I – I don’t… I mean, yes, of course I do. I never wanted things to end in the first place. We always knew one day they’d have to, but…”

“Then tell me you want me to be yours again.”

Blunt and to the point – how very much like Steve. Bucky frowns. “I thought you had–”

“Dumbest guy in the whole world, remember?”

Slowly, Bucky seems to get it. His frown wavers but doesn’t vanish. “Steve, we still can’t…”

The smaller boy keeps his eyes on the brunet and backs up until he can feel the wall behind him. His hands come to the hem of his drenched shirt and start pulling it up his stomach. Bucky can see the pale strip of smooth skin peeking out and growing larger as the clothing slides higher up, inch by inch.

“Why can’t we, Buck? It’s been over a year… I never got beat up like that again… M’pretty sure you scared the horses out of those guys thanks to whatcha did to their friend – which I still don’t agree with, by the way…” He peels the shirt from over his head, leaving his golden hair disheveled, and drops the soaking fabric to the floor. He watches those grey eyes widen slightly and drop to his naked torso, drinking it in. Bucky’s mouth dries at the sight, and he licks his lips. Steve looks away, knowing full-well what he’s doing, and starts running his hands over his upper body.

“Steve, stop that…” Bucky says. His voice sounds strained. “Please…”

“No, Buck… You wanna stop me, come over here and make me…”
“Steve,” Bucky warns. His orbs never tears away from the blond’s moving hands.

Baby blues lock on his face again. “You want me,” he says calmly. It’s a statement; it’s fact. He knows this now. “There’s no reason we can’t be together. We can be smart about it; we won’t get caught. I won’t let it happen.”

“Fuck…” Bucky exhales when Steve’s fingers brush over his collar bone while the other hand slides down his stomach. “When didja become such a…” He swallows.

Steve bites his lip and hates that his body picks that moment to suddenly feel shy and bashful. His cheeks dust a soft rose and he stares down at the floor. “A what?” he whispers. “Say it…”

“A tease…”

Steve lowers his hands to his sides then. Baring himself to Bucky, he strips away the add-ons and decides the only thing he wants to give to his best friend right now is his honesty. “You just make me feel comfortable… Beautiful. I know I’m not… But you make me feel like it.”

“Don’t say that, Stevie. You’re perfect.”

“Then… touch me? Tell me we can be together again…”

“Steve…”

His voice is weak now. Steve knows he has him on the ropes. Uncontrollably, his skin coincidentally erupts into goosebumps due to a small passing chill, and his bony frame gives the smallest shiver. It’s almost unnoticeable. Except Bucky notices everything when it comes to Steve. His breath hitches and suddenly he’s walking forward – he’s made his decision, Steve made it for him. He takes his best friend’s face in his hands and tilts it up so he can press their lips together in a firm kiss. Steve sighs right into it, holding the brunet’s waist.

“Steve,” Bucky breathes between kisses, pushing his body to the blond’s; wet fabric and glistening skin coming into contact.

“Mm…”

“Steve…”

“Mphh… Heard you the first time, Buck… Need somethin’?”

Eyes still closed, mouths still moving feverishly slow against one another’s after every word.

“Take me back… Take me back, Steve…”

The blond falters and feels his whole body erupt into tingles and heat. He needs no time to think about it; hearing those words come from Bucky’s mouth – his dangerously perfect mouth that’s currently back to massaging over his – makes his head spin and his heart pound. He nods heatedly into the kiss and then grabs the hem of Bucky’s shirt and tugs it up that lean, muscled stomach. Bucky closes his hands over Steve’s and takes over, yanking it over his head and tossing it aside, never taking his eyes off of the boy in front of him. Splaying his palms on the wall on either side of Steve, he hunches down and claims those kiss-swollen lips again, reveling in the feel of Steve’s gentle, artistic hands mapping out the terrain of his abdomen, getting familiarized all over again – that body of Bucky Barnes that was and always would be his to touch… to possess…

Steve hastily tugs open Bucky’s belt and zips down his slacks. Bucky takes one hand off the wall to
grab the side of Steve’s face and kiss him harder; licking into the back of his mouth as if he damn well owns it.

“I’m so sorry,” he says, tilting his face to the opposite side.

“Mhm,” Steve replies distractedly, still trying to shove Bucky’s pants down his hips.

“No, I’m serious.”

Steve gives up on his current task to bring his hands to either side of Bucky’s neck and grip him close, expressing his forgiveness through his lips.

“I missed you,” the older boy breathes, “so fucking much.”

“I missed you, too.”

“Was so scared you were over it…”

“Never…. Never…”

“I love you so much.”

“I love you back, Buck.”

Bucky picks him up and takes them to their bedroom. It’s been so long that Steve doesn’t even care about being hoisted into the air and carted around like he’s incapable of moving on his own. He knows Bucky’s only doing it because he needs him so badly; he needs him too – more than he can express. Bucky puts him down to grab all the essentials – blankets, pillows, vaseline – and then sets them up on the floor, as second nature as if they’d never missed a single day doing this.

Steve makes to join him when Bucky holds up a hand, looking up into his eyes.

“Wait. I just… Let me…”

Walking on his knees over to the blond, Bucky starts unfastening Steve’s rain-soaked slacks. He can feel the smaller boy shivering a bit, starting to get chilly. He leans in and closes his eyes while his hands work, softly pressing his mouth to Steve’s stomach. It’s so soft and smooth… Bucky’s ached for those little things about Steve for what feels like so long now… He likes the way Steve’s stomach stutters against his lips as the blond’s breath catches just the tiniest bit. He peppers ginger kisses around his navel as he pulls the slacks down to Steve’s ankles.

Breaking away, Bucky crouches down and slips off Steve’s shoes. Steve feels very exposed; even in the times where they’ve made love, Bucky’s never been taking his time like this – almost as if his best friend wants to burn every single second, even the smallest touch, into memory. He feels like he’s being elevated onto a pedestal, and it’s an uncomfortable place for him to be. He gets the urge to make a joke about Bucky not treating him like some princess, but he also doesn’t want to ruin the moment. The look on Bucky’s face is enough to keep him quiet; Bucky’s palming the back of his calf and lifting it gently to slide off Steve’s pant leg, and Steve has to rest his hand on Bucky’s bare shoulder to keep his balance, and… Then he’s repeating the action with the other leg and Bucky’s looking at his legs and yet he’s staring at them with that same expression he gives Steve when he’s gazing upon his face. So adoring, so appreciative, so… Those words don’t cover it.

Bucky lifts Steve’s legs one after the other again to peel off his socks, until all of the blond’s clothes are in a wet heap off to the side. It’s all bared flesh and vulnerability now. Bucky knows he needs to get a move on so he can get Steve warm, but first… He just needs a second to touch. He’d promised
himself once before – all those many months ago – that he’d worship Steve’s body, and there had never felt like a more perfect time.

Running his hands up and down Steve’s legs, he looks no higher than where he touches.

“I love these,” he says quietly, a small smile tugging up one corner of his mouth. He kisses Steve’s kneecap gently – the one that had seemed to take forever to heal from its fracture – and the blond is surprised at the jolt of arousal that sends through him.

“I love your legs,” Bucky continues, kissing his thighs; alternating from one to the other. He pulls back and runs his hands up to the blond’s hips before looking up at him with a look of earnest. “I love all of you,” he says, and Steve believes it. His voice is too honest for there to be any room for deceit. Steve can only stare back down and exhale the smallest of shaky breaths, his heart now hammering wildly.

Bucky slowly lowers his hands to the floor and bends down, bringing his face to Steve’s feet.

“No, wait – Buck, don’t, they’re dirty and–”

Bucky doesn’t care. Steve watches in horror and flattery as the brunet kisses the top of his left foot before moving to the right and kissing that one, too. He barely catches the older boy murmuring, “You deserve to be worshipped…”

Rising back up, Bucky takes Steve’s hands one at a time and kisses along the knuckles, before turning them over to press his lips to the palms. Next are the wrists, and Bucky whispers, “I’ve always loved these… They’re so delicate… So beautiful…” as he stares at them like they’re the most precious things in the world. Steve blushes. Bucky has a way with words, you see… Under any other circumstance, Steve curls in and rejects all this sort of attention; having his wrists called ‘delicate’ and ‘beautiful’ would normally leave him offended and getting defensive. But when Bucky looks at him this way… Talks to him this way… Touches him this way… Steve melts. It’s the one time Bucky can get away with it – whatever he wants, Steve will give him. Because in these moments, Steve actually believes him… That he can be those things: beautiful, perfect, desirable…

Bucky’s nose is an inch away from Steve’s sternum, but he doesn’t back away as he stares at his hands now rubbing along Steve’s stomach, up over his chest and to his prominent collar bones. “I love your body,” Bucky continues. “Missed it so much… No one’s as perfect as you…” Leaning in, he kisses between Steve’s pectorals (or lack thereof), and then directly over Steve’s heart. The blond’s hands are in his damp hair now, stroking his fingers through. He closes his eyes when his orbs fill with tears. Bucky’s making him feel overwhelmed, and so, so precious. Unable to help it, his mouth tips open and he lets out a tiny, breathy moan.

“Was such an idiot, ending it with you…” Bucky kisses his ribs – every single one of them, carefully, now that he can.

Steve’s shivering, and moans again, this time louder.

“I know, baby,” Bucky whispers sympathetically against his skin, nuzzling it with his nose. “C’mere…” Pulling the blond down, he helps Steve onto his back. He gets himself out of his own slick slacks and continues stripping until he’s also in the nude, before lying down with Steve and pulling their blankets over their bodies. “Let’s get you warmed up…”

The smaller boy whimpers at first when Bucky’s chilled body presses down on top of his. They both know it’ll only be a couple short minutes before their body heat warms them, but Bucky apologizes all the same. He tries to take Steve’s mind off of the goosebumps rising on their on flesh by busying
his lips along his neck. The blond sighs and turns his head to the side, offering more to Bucky. He sucks gently along the length before licking back up and kissing below Steve’s ear.

“You’re so pretty, Stevie,” he whispers huskily into his ear. “You’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Steve sighs out a tiny moan. It escalates into a gasp when Bucky rocks their hips together; neither of them is fully erect thanks to the cold, but that doesn’t make it feel any less amazing.

“Wanna suck you,” Bucky continues, voice tickling and heating Steve’s skin. “Wanna kiss every single inch of you and make you mine again…”

Steve cradles the back of brown hair in his hands and hugs Bucky to him with the other arm. He bends forward so he can find the brunet’s smooth shoulder with his mouth. Kissing along him feverishly, he exhales, “Was always yours… I never stopped…"

Bucky wraps his fingers in golden hair and tugs back, freeing Steve’s mouth. The younger boy gasps, pupils expanding at the feel of Bucky’s dominancy until those pouty lips are covering his. The body above his grinds down until they’re both hard and moaning softly into each other’s mouths.

“What do you want, Stevie?” the brunet asks after worrying Steve’s bottom lip between his teeth. They’re swollen and the prettiest shade of red and God, Bucky loves it.

Steve blushed scarlet, making his flush spread to his chest.

“I… I want…”

“Yes?”

“I don’t… I mean, I – I want…”

“It’s okay baby, you can tell me…” Bucky adores Steve’s random spurts of shyness. When things are heated and hungry, his best friend surprisingly seems to have little problem vocalizing the things he wants Bucky to do to him – albeit it in a much more polite way than Bucky usually musters. The second things are tender between them, though, it’s like Steve remembers his morals and always has difficulty saying what he desires.

It’s okay. They can work their way up to coaxing Steve into dirty talk. Maybe one day.

Steve looks up at him helplessly, so Bucky gives him a warm, reassuring smile and says, “It’s okay, sweetheart… Do you want me to touch you?”

Steve gives a bashful nod, biting his lip. Bucky kisses along his jaw.

“D’ya want me to kiss you… maybe use my tongue?”

Another nod, and Bucky can feel the small body beneath his becoming taut. He wishes he could see what exactly Steve’s picturing in that head of his, because it must be good.

“Do you want my cock? Is that what you want? It wants you… I wanna fuck you so bad…”

“Buck…”

The brunet looks up then, unsure whether or not he’s crossed a line. Dirty talking seems to be hit or miss with Steve; some days he goes crazy for it – others, he swats Bucky and scolds him on his lack of manners. But when he meets the blond’s gaze, his cock gives a powerful twitch; Steve’s staring
back, and he looks like a wreck… Like he wants Bucky so much.

“Sorry… Should I stop?”

Shyly, Steve gives a small shake of the head. Bucky can feel his best friend’s erection, now at full hardness, spasming lightly against his. He licks his lips and rocks his hips again, making them both groan, barely audible.

“You like that, Stevie?” he whispers. “You wanna ask me to keep talkin’ to ya like this?”

There’s a pause, but then again, Steve nods. Bucky exhales and crushes their lips together, kissing heatedly before breaking away and moving his mouth feverishly down his bony, perfectly imperfect body.

“Missed you so much,” he breathes as he makes his way down, down, down. “Drove me crazy… Broke my heart, that I thought I’d lost you… M’such a moron… Thought about your body every time I touched myself…”

That draws out a rather loud moan from Steve. The blond fists his hands back into Bucky’s hair, eyes closed and mouth hanging open. The brunette’s lips brush over one tiny pink nipple, so Bucky seals himself over it, lapping at it with his tongue and pinching it softly with his teeth and sucking until it’s perky and aggravated. He makes sure the other one is left just as puffy, red-hot and stimulated – to the point where Steve’s groans sound just as much from pain as they are from pleasure.

“Shh… Shh, baby. I’ve got you. Gonna show you just how badly I missed you.”

He does. He resumes his mission down until his lips find the blond’s erection. Bucky wastes no time wrapping his lips around the head and sucking it deep into his mouth. Steve’s back arches from the floor and he reaches up to grip the pillow beneath his head. He forces down the gasp threatening to rip from his throat. Palming the back of Bucky’s head with one hand, he lies there uselessly as Bucky draws him in until the tip is colliding with the back of his throat, and then retreating, leaving the skin glistening with saliva.

Bucky takes the base of him with one hand and pulls his mouth off with a small, wet pop so he can coat the length of the shaft with kisses. “Missed this so much,” he babbles, eyeing it hungrily. “You taste so good, Stevie.”

Motivated by the needy writhing of his best friend’s body, and those little breathless sounds coming from above, Bucky closes his mouth over him again and starts suckling with a gentle pressure. He anchors himself with his other hand to the floor so he can maneuver his body, twisting every so often so he can circle his tongue around Steve’s dick, changing the angle. He laps up the precome leaking from the slit before darting at it with the muscle in his mouth, and Steve keens softly.

“More…” Steve pants. “Please.”

Bucky obliges. When he settles into one spot and brings that other hand to Steve’s balls so he can fondle them lightly, Steve unexpectedly comes on the spot – hot and powerful and deep into Bucky’s throat. Steve’s eyes are wide as he stares at the ceiling with surprised gasps, because he really hadn’t thought he was that close. But it’d been so long since he had Bucky’s mouth on him, and that boy’s mouth, well… it’s so talented. His orgasm is intense and washes over every fiber in his body – feels as though it expands through every hair on his head, down to the tips of his toes. Bucky takes it all gratefully, breathing through his nose as he continues bobbing his head along until Steve softens between his lips.
Bucky kisses his way back up Steve’s body, stopping at the right collarbone to ask for permission to suck on it. The question alone riles Steve up all over again, and though he needs some time to recover, there’s still that residual heat coiling in his belly that ignites just a bit hotter at the request. He nods, and bites down his groans as Bucky provokes a small red bruise to the surface of his skin as if it were his job. He seems proud of his accomplishment when he pulls back to look at it; gets a smug smile and brushes his thumb across it as if to reiterate, you’re mine.

Steve gapes up at him, flushed and satiated, and then palms Bucky’s shoulders and guides the brunet onto his back. A curious look crosses Bucky’s face.

“I think I wanna… I mean, it’s my turn now…” Steve says quietly, glancing up into grey eyes before averting them and taking a deep breath, beginning to peck kisses down Bucky’s chest. He feels a big hand grab his arm gently.

“Steve--”

“I want to,” he argues, looking back up. And fuck, he looks so determined and innocent at the same time that Bucky doesn’t know how he could possibly reject the offer. Slowly letting go of the skinny limb, he cups the side of the blond’s face and strokes his cheek with his thumb.

“Okay,” he whispers. “Okay, buddy…”

Steve’s been thinking about this in excruciating detail for over a year now. He’s regretted every single day since they broke up how badly he messed up his opportunities to go down on Bucky. He ached to try it, and every day they weren’t together, he’d stew on every moment when they had been, and mentally berated himself for either not taking the chance, or ruining it. And those spontaneous moments they’d experienced since then, well, they were just that – spontaneous. Too spontaneous for Steve to think straight and gather his bearings enough to try.

That much time had given him the opportunity to think, though – about how he could best go about it. By the time he’s staring at Bucky’s impressive member, he’s salivating. Bucky feels tense beneath him, and just as much as he knows it’s due to arousal, he also knows it has to do with worry for Steve’s well-being. Kissing Bucky’s hip bone, he reaches up a shaking hand to wrap around the girth and tilt it towards his face. Bringing his mouth to it, he chooses first to lick straight up it rather than dive right in.

Bucky stills and tightens his jaw; eyes still boring down at Steve, making sure to watch everything this time so he knows right away if he needs to stop it. It’s difficult, though, because that’s just about one of the hottest thing he’s ever seen. Steve eyes it like he’s trying to plan his strategy, and then a soft, wet tongue comes back out and licks up a fresh stripe.

He kisses and caresses it, the hardness of the muscle against his lips making his head spin. He can feel the grooves, the little rise and falls, along his tongue, and for some reason, knowing that it’s Bucky’s veins beneath the skin that he can feel turns him on even more… Because Bucky’s so hard for him, and he’s pumping so much blood that he’s already drizzling out precome around the tip, and if Steve can do this right – not mess this up – he thinks he might feel more powerful than he ever has before.

Aware of his breathing, he keeps his inhalations steady and deep as his mouth moves, exhaling hot and full against Bucky’s dick. It feels indescribable for the brunet. He continues watching, but now his mouth is hung open and his brows are furrowed. He stays silent, save for the shaky exhalations he releases every few seconds, constantly relaxing his body before it tenses right back up again. Then Steve eyes the shining tip and licks his lips and Bucky’s whole body becomes taut as a bowstring with anticipation.
He watches with slightly widened eyes as the blond presses his tongue to the head and licks – just the tiniest little kitten lick – and Bucky feels like he’s about to lose it. He can’t help it; if he keeps staring, he’s going to blow his load before he even gets to really feel what the inside of Steve’s mouth is like. So he lowers his head to the pillow and lets out a sharp, breathless chuckle as he covers his face with his hands.

“Fuck, Stevie,” he groans, the sound muffled. He sounds as though Steve is killing him. In a way, he is. “Stop teasin’ me; ‘bout to lose my mind… Auh!”

He jerks and he raises his head the second he feels his cock become enveloped into Steve’s mouth. The sight he’s met with does not disappoint; Steve’s damp bangs are hanging in his face, partially obscuring Bucky’s ability to see him, but from what he can see, the blond’s baby blues are closed, and he’s putting everything he has into being mindful of his breathing while also tending all his attention to the dick in his mouth. He looks so lost in it already, but also so determined and curious. Bucky already knows right away that this is the image he’ll rely on the next time he needs to get his rocks off and he’s, for whatever reason, unable to use anything but his own hand.

And that mouth… Sweet fucking Lord in Heaven… It’s soft and warm and wet and Steve’s cheeks feel like velvet. He can’t hear his best friend’s breathing so it’s impossible for him to monitor it, but he doesn’t feel the trembling brought on by Steve’s sputters, and the body resting mostly on his legs hasn’t stilled yet – and that mouth, that mouth, it hasn’t stopped moving along him, timid and exploratory and yet eager and greedy at the same time. So Bucky assumes things must be going alright down there.

They are – oh, how they are. Steve’s having the time of his life. He can hear the unstable, jerky gasps and shaky breaths Bucky’s lungs are drawing in and pushing out, and it makes him feel a little smug. He keeps a mindful eye on his own respiratory patterns; breathing through his nose and forcing himself to keep things in that department slow and full, even as his head moves. As long as he remains on top of his breathing, he remains on top of his heart beat – so long as he has those things in check, he runs no risk of falling into an asthma attack.

Despite how much adrenaline is rushing through him and the arousal making his skin prickle and sex harden slowly again, Steve also feels calm. Of course, he’s nervous, so he’s still shaking a bit, but he’s being anchored by Bucky’s reactions. He remembers the almost blasé look on Bucky’s face that one time he had walked in on him – he recalls the way Bucky sounded whenever some dame would be going down on him in the next room and Steve could hear everything. None of what he can recall could hold a candle to the way Bucky’s reacting right now… As if Steve is just about the best cocksucker he’s ever met. He knows he isn’t, but he also knows that Bucky isn’t overreacting or putting any of this on as an act. This is just how he makes Bucky feel, and it’s something he gets, because the feeling is mutual when the shoe’s on the other foot.

Constant, thrilling jolts of excitement rush through Steve every time what he’s doing provokes another response from the older boy. Bucky’s dick feels amazing against his tongue; it’s heavy and yeah, it’s making his jaw ache a little bit from having to keep it open so wide to accommodate the size, but it’s a good ache, because there is nothing disappointing about Bucky’s sex. To Steve, it’s perfect in literally every way. And his skin is salty and the liquid constantly leaking from his tip has a bite to it but it’s undeniably Bucky and it’s Bucky’s body’s way of begging for more, and Steve wants nothing but to give it to him.

“Oh, God, Steve,” Bucky moans, just loud enough for the two of them to hear. He has to fight every impulse to either push Steve’s head down or hold it still so he can thrust up into that plush, giving mouth. “You’re so good at this… How are you so good at this?… Fucking… Feels fucking amazing… Oh, oh…” Steve presses his tongue right below where the tip meets the shaft and Bucky
jolts. “Oh God, right there… Keep doing that… Right… There… Fuck, yeah… Holy fu-auh!”

Steve feels the muscle becoming impossibly harder, and he doesn’t miss out on the way Bucky’s breathing has picked up in both speed and pitch. A small rush of nerves burst throughout him as he knows the end is near and he isn’t sure what he should do, so he picks the most logical thing and sucks faster, hollowing out his cheeks the way he’s so used to seeing Bucky do. Bucky grabs his shoulder and squeezes it.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck – m’gonna come, gonna come, stop, Steve, stop – stop!”

Startled, the blond pulls off, scared that he’s done something wrong. He can feel his heart racing and now he’s breathing a bit too heavy so he tries to steady himself. He also can’t help but brace himself for some form of rejection as he leans back on his heels and wipes his mouth, looking to the brunet.

He gets the exact opposite. Bucky writhes, even though he’s now untouched, and when the older boy tilts his head down to meet Steve’s eyes, his own are dark with lust and desire. Sitting up quickly, Bucky has to fist the base of his cock in his hand and squeeze gently to stop himself from coming, since that still feels like a possibility, even with Steve’s mouth no longer torturing him. Grabbing the back of Steve’s head with the other hand, Bucky pulls him into a sloppy kiss. They barely touch before Bucky sucks the blond’s bottom lip into his mouth and bites down on it, making Steve cry out low in his throat.

Bucky’s hands fly all over Steve’s back until they’re cupping that small, smooth ass. He squeezes it. “Can I fuck you?” he begs breathlessly, his voice a throaty husk. “Need to be inside you – M’gonna go insane. God, you’re so good, Steve, you got no idea how good you are.”

“Yeah,” Steve acquiesces effortlessly, wiggling out of Bucky’s grip and lying on his back. He expects Bucky to open the container of vaseline but gets that familiar rush of butterflies in his stomach when the older boy settles down on his front instead and throws Steve’s legs over his shoulders.

“You’re gonna---?”

“Fuck yes – missed this so much,” Bucky responds, spreading Steve with his thumbs. He groans in his throat when he reveals his best friend’s tight little hole. He licks his lips and peers up at Steve. “Unless you don’t want me to.”

Steve groans and rolls his eyes, but his dick is hard again and twitching against his belly. “If I didn’t want you to, I would’ve stopped you.”

“You mean you would’ve tried.”

“Big words comin’ from a guy who has my legs on either side of his head. Careful – I could just squeeze and knock you right out.”

Bucky smirks, but his expression is still lusty. Steve’s throat is dry.

“Just makin’ sure.”

“Like I said, I would’ve told you no if I didn’t want it.”

“So you want it?”

“What am I – a broken record?”
Bucky leans in and runs his tongue over Steve’s perineum and Steve shuts right up – verbally, anyways. Bucky exhales heavily at the pitchy gasp it draws from the smaller boy. “I just wanted to hear you say it,” he breathes, licking it again before running his tongue across the blond’s opening.

“God…” Steve squirms, head already thrown back and his hands clutching the blanket beneath them into his fists.

He has to resort to that old trick of grabbing the pillow and biting down on it to keep from shouting as Bucky’s tongue makes good work of slowly relaxing his muscles. Every time he begs Bucky to hurry, Bucky makes a point to slow down. Some of the seductive edge has diminished from the brunet’s vibe, and he’s gentler now. He remembers what every single day without Steve felt like – made worse by the fact that his best friend was still always with him, just no longer his to touch. A part of him always knew that all it would take would be a few single words and Steve would rush back to him, but it never felt like a possibility – not in Bucky’s mind – and he already felt guilty enough about those times when they’d given into their urges over the past year. He’s filled with the very palpable realization that he never wants another person laying their hands on Steve – not so long as Bucky’s in the picture and Steve can still be his. He doesn’t want anyone else loving him the way Bucky loves him. So no matter how much his best friend tries to speed things up, he has to make the most of it. He wants Steve to know exactly what it feels like to be worshipped.

It feels like it lasts forever; Bucky laps at him in earnest, sucks on him, pushes his tongue into him until he’s slick and loose and puckered. Steve thinks then he might stop. He doesn’t. Bucky slips his middle finger into his mouth to lube it up and then pushes it into Steve, the smooth walls of his body accepting his digit with ease. He lifts his chin and starts tonguing and sucking on Steve’s balls, and Steve’s howling into the pillow. Bucky is relentless; Steve feels like he’s bound determine to wring out every last drop of pleasure from his body until Steve either comes or passes out.

When Bucky finally feels satisfied, he pulls back and grabs the vaseline, twisting the lid off and taking a generous amount. He coats his cock – back to standing fully proud and erect – liberally, and Steve still pants and moves uselessly from where he’s lying. Bucky shuffles closer and angles himself to the entrance; using his other hand to hold him open. They share a quick glance and then both look down. Slowly, Bucky pushes in, and while he holds his breath, Steve tightens and groans. “Relax, Stevie,” Bucky instructs soothingly, eyes still watching as the head of his dick disappears into that ring of muscles now expanding to take him in. “I know…”

“Been a while,” Steve reminds him.

Bucky stops after pushing in another inch, looking up to the blond’s face. “Not even when you’d… y’know, do it to yourself?”

Steve shakes his head. “Was never the same, so I stopped. Always just made me miss you more.” That makes Bucky’s heart tighten with sadness. “Oh, Steve,” he sighs, grey eyes losing some of their heat and the space being occupied now with guilt. “I’m so sorry…”

“I know, Buck. You’re here now.”

“Not goin’ anywhere, I promise.” Looking back down, Bucky bites his lip and uses both thumbs now to spread Steve’s cheeks so the push in is a bit easier. Steve releases a deep breath and closes his eyes, willing himself to relax. They both groan again as Bucky continues to penetrate, deeper and deeper, until his dick is nestled snugly in Steve’s body with nowhere else to go.

Keeping still, Bucky moves Steve’s legs so one is resting on either forearm, knees bent over the
elbows and dangling comfortably. Wrapping his arms around the outsides of Steve’s thighs, Bucky holds onto the sides of his torso, stroking the skin over his ribs with his thumbs.

“So pretty…”

They lock eyes for a few moments before Bucky holds on steadily to Steve’s body and begins to rock his hips. At first, Steve hisses in air through clenched teeth, so Bucky keeps things slow. It’s been so long since either of them felt these sensations, and so they’re both hypersensitive to them all.

“Oh God, sweetheart, you feel so good,” Bucky gasps.

“Buck…”

“That’s right, baby… I know… I know it feels good…”

He keeps his thrusts lazy, gentle; stares from Steve’s face to where they’re connected – his own face, concentrated and mindful. Steve moves the pillow back beneath his head and then slides his hands up and underneath it so he has something sturdy to clutch onto. Expression knit up into pure ecstasy, he grits his teeth and mewls deeply every time Bucky’s cock slides back inside of him. Suddenly, he feels Bucky’s hand gently gripping his chin. When he opens his eyes, Bucky’s staring down at him in a way that makes Steve’s breath catch.

“Eyes on me,” Bucky orders softly. “Don’t close ‘em. You have such pretty eyes; I wanna be able to see them.”

Steve can only nod. He watches the way Bucky’s body moves; the muscles in his abdomen tightening and relaxing rhythmically, the way his lower back rolls into every thrust, the twitch in his neck where his pulse point is… Steve deduces after watching it for a few minutes that that’s one of Bucky’s tells – that little twitch in his neck – when a lick of pleasure flows through his body.

“How ya feeling, Steve?” Bucky’s eyes are still zeroed in on his face.

“Good,” he breathes.

“What do you want?”

Steve bites his lip; lets his head fall slightly to one side as he does his best to do what Bucky told him to do. “More…”

“Yeah?” Bucky’s voice is breathless. “Harder…? Faster…? Deeper…? Whaddaya want, sweetheart?”

“Mmm… All of the above an option?” Steve tries to laugh but it morphs into a moan when Bucky’s cock just barely grazes that sweet spot inside of him. It’s almost a tease to the point of hurting.

Bucky’s body is started to look the slightest bit misted with perspiration. “Sure can be… But you know the drill; need you to tell me to take it easy if it’s too much for you.”

“I can take it,” Steve insists, regardless of whether or not it’s true.

Bucky humours him, because he’s so lost in what they’re doing. “I know you can, baby… You’re so good at taking me…” That last part is most definitely true. “Hand me that pillow by your head.”

Steve does as he’s told, and they move together so Steve can lift his hips enough for Bucky to slide the pillow beneath his lower back, Bucky still inside of him. When Steve settles back down, Bucky
resumes moving; holding onto the blond’s hips and adjusting his angle every few thrusts in search of Steve’s prostate. Steve pants and tries to squirm to meet his movements, but it’s difficult with his legs slung over Bucky’s arms.

“Steve…”

The blond moans. Suddenly, his baby blues become saucers and his chest expands violently. “There,” he gasps.

This excites Bucky’s motor skills right back into function again. “Yeah?” he replies, glancing up at Steve’s face and repeating his motion into him again.

“Unh! Buck! Holy… Christ… Oh my God, holy cow…”

Bucky groans and fucks into him quicker, now mercilessly driving each thrust so that he brushes against Steve’s prostate. “Right there? Fuck, you look so pretty like this, baby doll – ohhh God, yeah, Steve, I wish you could see yourself right now,” he rambles heatedly. Steve’s moans grow louder and neither of them can bring themselves to care at the moment. “Fuck, I missed this, I missed you… Love you so much, Stevie… You’re so fucking pretty, fuck…”

He grabs Steve’s swollen cock in his hand and starts stroking it in time with his thrusts. Steve wheezes and squeezes his eyes shut, tossing his head back. Right away, Bucky’s squeezing his chin with the other hand and tugging it back down before gripping his hip again to reestablish his rhythm.

“Breathe,” Bucky whispers, voice broken and laced with trembles. “No closing your eyes, k baby? Keep looking at me… That’s it… God, you’re so good, Steve, you listen so well… So good…” He thrusts deeper; twists his wrist as his thumb presses against his tip and swipes along the slit. Steve’s face is red, making his eyes an all-the-more brilliant shade of blue; his hair mussed up and standing in a dozen different directions. “You look like a fuckin’ wreck, baby – so goddamn sexy, you have no idea… You’re crazy if you don’t see how beautiful you are… Drive a guy insane…”

“Oh… Buck…”

“You gonna come again for me, Stevie? You gonna make a mess?”

Steve can only reply with a vehement moan, twisting every which way, as much as he can get away with – his body on overload and not knowing what to do with itself. Bucky bites his lip and fucks in harder. Steve yowls with pleasure before shoving his arm into his mouth and biting down. Bucky grabs it and yanks it away, not wanting Steve to hurt himself.

“Pillow,” he corrects, and Steve nods, pulling out the one from under his head and hugging it to his chest so he can bite down on the top. His sounds come out strained and garbled now, and erotically animal-like. Almost like needy snarls. Bucky’s upper lip twitches as he watches and Steve’s so breathtaking and his cock is squeezed, cradled, stimulated without relief inside of the blond’s tight body.

“Tell me you love me, Stevie.”

Steve frees his mouth to pant, “I love you… I love you… Oh God, I l-love you…”

“Say my name…”

“…Bucky…”

“One more time, baby.”
“Bucky!”

“Listen to you – mmm, fuck – so goddamn perfect… Come for me, Stevie; I’m so close… Want me to fill you up, sweetheart? M’gonna fill you up, fuck I’m close…”

Steve nods. That’s all he can do: nod as Bucky babbles, and neither of them are fully there and both of them are trembling so hard for release. This time, it’s the older boy who reaches his climax first. He comes with a choked groan, and Steve watches the way his mouth drops into an ‘O’ and his eyes narrow, brows coming together and creating that little wrinkle Steve loves so much. But Bucky keeps those blue-grey eyes glued on him, never tearing them away, and his hand is still moving along Steve’s dick, and so the blond is very quick to follow. He knows he’s supposed to maintain eye contact – Bucky said, Bucky said… But the second white, wet streams start to ribbon across his stomach and his orgasm crashes over him, Steve’s sounds get caught in his throat and his eyes roll straight back into his head.

“Oh yeah… Mm… Yeah,” Bucky moans, watching that tiny, flawless body beneath his nighly convulse as he keeps pumping come – fuck, there’s so much – in spurts across his belly. Steve’s entire frame seems to scrunch together; drawing in as if his orgasm is sucking the life source from him. Bucky watches the blond’s splattered stomach rise from the floor as his back clearly arches, and he wants to see those pools of blue, but all he can see of Steve’s eyes are thin strips of white; his lover’s eyes still fluttering behind half-drooped lids. Then they’re closed and damn, Bucky just wants to look at him, but Steve is so perfectly fucked out in this moment that he has absolutely no intention of interrupting until the blond is completely finished.

Eventually, Steve slumps heavy into the floor, breathing rough and flopping his head around, eyes widening and narrowing as they struggle to focus. Bucky pulls out carefully and Steve makes a low, uncomfortable sound in his throat as his body is left gaping and empty.

“I never liked this part,” he manages between ragged pants.

Bucky kneads his thigh. “Deeps breaths… Do you need your inhaler?”

Steve waves him off. “Naw, I’ll be fine. Just need a few minutes.”

Bucky tries to relax him – in the most counterproductive way – by cleaning up his stomach.

With his tongue.

Steve tries not to stare but he can’t help it. Bucky chuckles at the look on his face and Steve swats him before covering it with his hands and groaning, much like Bucky had been doing when he had been the one on his back. He twitches and whimpers quietly when Bucky sits back and admires Steve’s ass, dipping in the tip of his index and middle fingers to feel how wet he now is from Bucky’s ejaculation.

“Too sensitive for anymore at the moment,” he chokes.

Bucky helps readjust Steve’s legs so one is elongated along the ground while the other is bent at the knee. The brunet gets comfortable, sitting next to the erected leg and wrapping one arm around is so he can rest his chin on the kneecap. Casually, he pushes his fingers into Steve but then keeps them there, immobile. Keeping the majority of his come trapped in Steve’s body. Fuck… Steve can’t help but find that hot.

“That’s okay, I can wait,” Bucky replies nonchalantly. He smiles down lovingly at his best friend. “You’re pretty incredible. No one can say you don’t take cock like the best of them.”
Steve rolls his eyes. “Well this ain’t my first rodeo.”

“Seriously, you okay though? Feelin’ good? I can grab you a shirt or somethin’ if you’re cold.”

“But then you’d have to move your fingers.”

“I could be careful.”

“I mean I don’t want you to pull ‘em out is what I mean.”

Bucky’s smile tugs up one corner of his mouth until it’s lopsided, and Steve’s tummy flops. He adores this smile; doesn’t think it’ll ever lose its effect when Bucky Barnes flashes it his way.

“Oh, I won’t then,” Bucky replies, kissing his knee. “But you get too chilled an’ I need you to tell me, got it? You been sick enough lately.”

“I been sick enough always. One more cold ain’t gonna put me under.”

Bucky gives him a serious look and Steve stops joking. The brunet rests his cheek on the bony knob of his leg and releases a deep, content sigh as the moment passes.

“So you take me back, huh?” he asks.

Steve lifts and hand and pushes the brown tresses out of his best friend’s face, gazing up at him with the same adoration he’s shown him since he was six. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

Bucky’s smile comes down and his eyes grow sincere, almost sad. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Steve gives a small shake of the head. “Don’t. You don’t have to. I was miserable without you.”

“I know… And I’m sorry for makin’ you miserable. I never wanted to hurt you. It seemed like no matter what I did, I was doing ‘xactly that, though. I just thought that was the best way.”

“I know, Buck. I always understood, even if I didn’t like it.” He props himself up, ignoring the flinch when it rattles around Bucky’s fingers in him, and grips the side of Bucky’s face tightly as he brings his own real close. “But no more of that, okay? I don’t care what happens down the road; we cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, no more breakin’ up because you’re trying to be a martyr. If things get tough, we find a way to work through it together. It’s you and me, Buck… k? We only end it if we absolutely have to.”

Bucky stares back into his eyes and gives a tiny nod. “Deal,” he agrees before leaning in for a kiss.

Within minutes – and a few long, heated kisses later – they’re moving together into Round Two.

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**July 4th, 1940**

They discover something new about Steve Rogers. Apparently he responds quite well to a specific pet name.

He likes “baby” and “sweetheart” when Bucky’s fucking him – and the brunet can even get away with “baby doll” sometimes, much like the way he can always seem to get away with calling him pretty while they’re intimate. Things Steve normally hates in their regular day-to-days, but practically keens for when their clothes are off.

Steve spends the day working – Mr. Stan has moved him up to their full-time cashier over the last
few months, and the blond has really developed a knack for it (except, his boss notices, when he has to serve women – and then Steve just about forgets how to talk entirely) – and Bucky picks him up when his shift is over. The brunet is still sweaty and grimy, as he’s come directly from his own shift at the docks, and they got a new manager recently and this one’s got a real stick up their ass.

“Won’t even let us take our shirts off,” Bucky complains as they walk home. “We wind up sweating like pigs in the sun; it’s real bad, Stevie.”

“Mm, that must be why you smell like an armpit.”

Bucky shoves him playfully but the two agree that he most definitely needs a shower.

Of course, Steve joins him. Steve always joins him. The blond tries for probably the millionth time to sink to his knees right there, but Bucky’s worried he’s trying to bite off more than he can chew – what with his shitty lungs as it is, then add in the steam from the water pelting down. In the end, it goes the way it pretty much always does: they kiss feverishly against the cool tiled wall, until Bucky either goes down on him or enters him.

When they’re toweling off and pulling on clean clothes back in the bedroom, Steve gets impatient; drops to his knees, cursing quietly when they knock off the floor a little too roughly, but just bats Bucky’s hands away when the brunet tries to see if he’s alright.

“Just shut up and let me blow you,” Steve mutters, yanking the towel from around his best friend’s toned and well-muscled hips.

“Gee, always the poet,” Bucky replies sarcastically, putting his hands on his hips and staring ahead. “Should write a book with your pickup lines; you’re a modern-day Casanova.”

But when he looks down, it changes. It always changes the second Bucky takes a look; because he really can’t say no when Steve’s mouth is inches away from his sex and he knows now what the inside of it feels like. And Steve’s been getting better and better; still can’t deep-throat to save his life, but most people Bucky had been with had lacked that ability anyways. And sometimes Steve still forgets not to get too carried away, and Bucky will have to slow him down and remind him to breathe. But his overall technique is definitely tops in terms of anything the brunet has ever felt before, and he’s even been able to start swallowing lately without nearly choking on it. The older boy constantly thanks his lucky stars that Steve was either born a natural or a quick study.

Bucky finishes quick, because Steve knows how to suck every orgasm out of him nice and fast when he’s greedy, or prolong it and have Bucky growling when he’s feeling like a particularly evil bastard. It’s easy to come quick, because he’s discovered that Steve has this real interesting sort of secret weapon that he constantly uses against him. It’s what Bucky has taken to call ‘Kitten licks’… something Steve had done innocently that first time, back on his birthday, that the blond very quickly realized made Bucky go crazy.

It’s that thing he does where he holds the brunet’s length in his hand and kisses along it rather than sucks – and then it always leads up to Steve licking those ruby red, swollen lips, and giving Bucky’s tip the softest, most precious little lick. It’s gentle and teasing and naive and good and sonofabitch, it makes Bucky’s eyes roll into his head. Once Steve figured out what it did to him, there would be plenty of times where he’d make Bucky writhe in sweet agony from minutes upon minutes of torturing his head with these Kitten licks, until the tip was purple and aching, and Bucky was trembling all over – and then all it would take was one good suck, and the brunet would be coming uncontrollably.

This is one of those times.
That isn’t the part that surprises them, though; no, they’ve long since gotten over being taking aback by that. It’s after they’ve gone to see the fireworks, and they’re back at the apartment, and Bucky’s dishing out Steve’s payback. He’s got Steve on his hands and knees and he runs his own hands along his spine, and he always loves the way the pale moonlight illuminates the golden-haired boy’s body in the night. He’s eating Steve out while one hand alternates between cradling Steve’s testicles and stroking the blond’s cock, and Steve is, as always, stuffing his face into the pillow to silence his sounds.

Bucky’s talking dirty to him, low and quiet, every few seconds. He isn’t really mindful of what he’s saying, just that this is one of those times where Steve’s craving it – and those times are becoming more and more frequent since they’ve been back together – and so he aims to please.

“You like my tongue?” he husks before plunging it back in and licking circles around Steve’s opening. He feels rather than sees Steve nod. “Could do this for days; would live on a diet of nothing but you if I had the chance.”

It’s filthy and vulgar and even Bucky’s second-guessing some of the things he’s saying, but Steve moans feverishly at it and appears to be losing his mind, so… Bucky assumes he hasn’t crossed any lines yet.

When the blond gasps and bucks his hips down into his fist, Bucky knows he’s close. He strokes harder as his mouth kisses and bites the flesh of his ass cheeks. He talks Steve through the sensations because he knows it always seems to help bring him closer to climax; makes him all the more hot and bothered. “Come for me and then I’ll fuck you, baby, I promise… Make you feel so good… Just a little more… Mm, God, you move so nice, your body’s so perfect, Kitten, it’s fucking magical…”

Steve bucks back against Bucky’s mouth with surprising strength, and the sound that comes out of him seems to surprise even him. He glances over his shoulder at the brunet with wide eyes.

“What? Did I hurt you?” Bucky asks quickly, straightening up.

Steve shoves his ass back against Bucky’s erection, grinding to it. Bucky gasps. “Steve – what--”

“Get in me,” Steve pants; voice low and thick and desperate. “Now, get in me now.”

Bucky grabs the vaseline and slicks himself up, unable to turn something like that down. Not when Steve’s asking in such a wonderful way. “Someone’s a little horny,” he tutts with a surprised chuckle when Steve reaches behind him to line Bucky up to his body.

“Call me that again,” Steve cuts in, but it’s more an inquiry than a command. He sounds thoughtful; like he’s curious and wants to try something out.

Bucky spreads him open and pushes just the tip of him inside, grunting and biting his lip as he looks down. “What – baby?”

Steve shakes his head, staring off with knitted brows.

Bucky quirks his own in response. “…Kitten?” He pushes in a bit more. Steve’s reaction would be comical if it wasn’t so fucking hot; he grows completely tense at the word and then stutters, crying out as if Bucky was already fucking him six ways to Sunday. Bucky watches with astonishment and then nods, getting a breathless grin to accompany his wide eyes. “Yeah,” he breathes; still can’t believe how badly Steve’s squirming – can’t fucking believe it when the blond pushes himself back heatedly to swallow the rest of Bucky’s cock into his body, as if he physically can’t wait any longer to have it.
Grabbing his hips, Bucky wastes no time driving into him – admittedly, probably far more roughly than he should without building up to it first. “You like when I call you that? Hmm? Kitten? My Kitten?”

“Mmm?” Steve tries not to thrash and buries his face back into the pillow, letting out a noise that makes him sound like he’s in excruciating pain. Bucky stills, but almost immediately, Steve kicks his inner heel against Bucky’s leg and nearly shouts, “Why’d ya stop?”

Bucky jumps and continues, chuckling and shaking his head. Steve never ceases to amaze him. “You’re so fucking bossy,” he chides, thrusting in powerfully so he’s always buried to the hilt. He punctuates every word with a strong push, each one met with a strangled cry from Steve. “Bad Kitten. So. Fucking. Bossy.”

Steve shudders and comes before the final word is even out of Bucky’s mouth. He lets loose his pleasured sobs into the pillow, but this time, he also pounds his fist against the ground – as if smothering his face just isn’t enough this time. Bucky follows shortly after with a loud grunt and a sharp snap of the hips because there’s no logical way he can hang on when Steve falls apart like that.

Bucky tries to call Steve ‘Kitten’ again later when they’re brushing their teeth. Steve punches him in the arm and scowls. Bucky just smirks as Steve stomps out of the bathroom.

*It’s another one of those things.*

**December, 1940**

For his Christmas present to Steve, Bucky promises that the artist can draw him. After all, Steve’s been asking since September, but Bucky kept making excuses. The circumstances consist of: Bucky will not complain, Bucky will not ask when it’ll be over, Bucky will not lose his patience, and Bucky will take it seriously.

Bucky’s almost a little hurt by that last one. He always takes Steve’s art seriously, because he knows just how important it is to his best friend. The blond sets up and assures him he was just covering all his angles, to be safe.

Bucky’s been saving up for months for this, so when he comes out wearing the newly-bought second-hand clothes he picked up, Steve does a double-take. Though the clothes are used, they still give Bucky the appearance that he’s dressed to the nines. His brown hair is slicked carefully with the little bit of tonic Bucky’s got left over from the bottle he’d lifted when he was thirteen. On his head is a black, worn-out fedora. Still…

“Bucky…” Steve murmurs with wonder, rising from the chair he’s set up opposite the couch and walking up to the brunet to get a better look. “You… You look…”

“Pretty spiffy, right?” Bucky finishes proudly, holding out his arms and turning slowly so the blond can take it all in. He feels like he did pretty good.

“You look… perfect,” Steve breathes, his voice small and full of awe. Bucky stops and looks to him and feels himself actually blushing. “I mean it,” Steve continues, staring at him like Bucky’s just about the most handsome fella to have ever existed. “You’re so good-lookin’, I can never believe it… And you’re all mine? Dam, that’s about the best Christmas present I could’ve ever asked for.”

Bucky rubs the back of his neck, going red, and mumbles coolly for Steve to knock it off. Steve says
he actually feels guilty about Bucky having to shuck off the jacket for the vision he had in mind, but he lets Bucky keep the hat. True to his word, the brunet poses exactly the way Steve tells him to, and Steve wants to take extra care with this one, because he wants it to be perfect… Thankfully, he’s also kind; letting Bucky take tiny breaks every half hour or so, so the brunet can light up a smoke and shake out his stiff limbs a bit.

“You’re the perfect model,” Steve keeps repeating, as his intent eyes move up and down from Bucky’s body to where his pencil is scratching across the eggshell-white of his sketchpad. Bucky can’t help but believe it whenever he hears it coming from Steve’s mouth. And it’s true, Steve thinks. Bucky looks glorious; all sharp angles and perfect contours and symmetrical features that can – and do – drive people nuts.

They discover that night that just as strongly as Steve reacts in the moment to being called Bucky’s Kitten, Bucky responds just as intensely to Steve calling him his muse. For a split second, once the drawing is finally completed and Steve’s attached to Bucky’s mouth and dragging the brunet towards their bedroom by his tie, Bucky has the sudden urge to ask Steve to put it in him. The idea scares him, though, so he settles – with no complaint – for letting Steve ride him until all hours of the night.

February, 1941

Bucky tentatively brings up the idea to Steve about maybe one day having Steve top him. The blond just about chokes on his glass of milk. Bucky thinks it’s a little ironic.

His cheeks burn red and Bucky quickly dismisses the suggestion; telling Steve to forget about it. As he’s walking away, he feels a bony but firm hand grab his wrist.

“Hey,” Steve says reassuringly. “You just threw me off guard was all… You’d really trust me to do that?”

Bucky faces him and runs his hand through Steve’s golden hair, pushing his bangs out of his face. “I trust you with my life,” he answers.

Steve smiles and pulls Bucky down for a kiss. “Maybe one day,” he murmurs, his voice as bright as sunshine. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay,” Bucky replies.

April, 1941

They still go to Church every Sunday.

Bucky hadn’t stopped going after he’d left the orphanage – back when he’d been, to everyone’s surprise, adopted by his new family at the age of sixteen. They’d all been forced to go by the Nuns, but his new family wasn’t overly religious to the point where they felt the need to go to Mass every week – only on holidays. Bucky would’ve been fine with that, as his faith had already begun to grow rocky in his adolescent years – had it not been for Steve. Because Steve had been left behind; still no one wanted him and in just a few short years he’d become a ward of the state and would most likely have to leave the orphanage and then sorry kid, you’re on your own. Bucky felt like he’d abandoned him somehow. So he tried to make up for it every Sunday when, without fail, he’d meet Steve at Church and accompany him for the hour and a half that the Priest gave his sermon.

They’ve gone together since then for pretty much the same reason; Steve’s faith is unshakable,
whereas Bucky goes mostly to show his support. It isn’t that he’s given up on God altogether – he’s just a bit more skeptical after everything he’s seen and heard about the world. Sometimes, Steve renews his faith; gives him hope. Other times, it’s all Bucky can do from falling asleep in the middle of the Mass. The odd time he does, he’s awakened by a sharp elbow in the ribs and a scolding eye from Steve.

They usually refrain from touching each other for the first few hours after they get home. They’re not really sure why. It seems more like Steve’s decision rather than an equal, mutual one, but Bucky respects his choice. Steve takes whatever time he needs to work through whatever guilt always stirs back up in his mind every time he walks out of that Church – every Sunday, it never fails – and Bucky lets the younger man come to him.

And he always does. First almost timidly, and then they hold each other – and while Bucky usually won’t push for sex on those days, they’ll still seek redemption in each other’s mouths.

June, 1941

Mr. Stan passes away from a heart murmur. His wife can’t afford to keep the store running on her own and it has to close due to bankruptcy.

Bucky attends the funeral with Steve as his moral support. The blond tosses in a small handful of dirt onto the casket and they watch it sink down, down, down into the hole in the ground designated specifically for him. Steve doesn’t shed a tear, he just stares. Bucky looks to him constantly with concern; even holds his hand when he thinks the blond needs it. They’re at a funeral – no one pays it any mind. Steve doesn’t reject the gesture.

Steve barely says a word that day. But that night, when Bucky’s woken up to the soft tremors of Steve’s body shaking against his, and he sees the wetness on his face and hears the gentle sound of crying, he holds Steve tighter and whispers into his hair until his best friend falls asleep.

July 4th, 1941

Over the past year and a half, Steve and Ginny have grown pretty close. They get together at least once a week to go to the soda shop and catch up. Because Steve assures Bucky that she’s open-minded and supportive of Steve’s relationship with Bucky – which at first, Bucky almost had a panic attack when Steve informed him that Ginny knew in the first place – Bucky meets her properly and they reintroduce themselves all over again. Bucky likes Ginny, and Ginny likes Bucky – though the brunet suspects that, like Steve, it’s difficult for her to really dislike anybody.

Sometimes, he finds himself feeling a little sad when he’s around her. She’s about the only dame that Steve’s ever been able to talk to without stammering like he’s about to pass out, and sometimes, when he watches the way they interact, Bucky can’t help but think that Steve would’ve been better off with her. Though he doesn’t vocalize it in a particularly needy way, Steve picks up on this anyways, and once they’re alone, he always showers the brunet’s face with kisses – as if Bucky were a child – and assures him that there’s no one in the world for him but Bucky.

Bucky and Ginny never hang out alone. Though they respect each other and understand their roles in Steve’s life – and it’s not that they’re opposed to the idea of spending time together by themselves – there’s just sort of this mutual, silent agreement that they’re first and foremost friends through Steve and, for the time being, nothing more.

Except for one time they get together. And Bucky’s thankful for the fact that Ginny is a schemer, just
like him.

It’s Steve’s twenty-third birthday, and Bucky casually finds a way to slip his birthday present onto the kitchen table so Steve can find it at his own pace. When he does, he comes walking into the living room, holding up the receipt form.

“What is this?” Steve asks, but Bucky can tell he already knows the answer. The brunet lowers his book to the table and sits back, spreading his arms along the back of the couch.

“Well, you can read, can’t ya?”

“I never signed up for any art classes – did you pay for these?”

Bucky grins. “Ginny and I did. We’ve been plotting it behind your back for months. I saw that brochure she’d given ya about the classes down at the college in Hell’s Kitchen and we met up to talk about it. It was all my idea, of course; can’t let her take the credit for that. But I gotta hand it to her – she’s one Hell of a gal. We both saved up some of our earnins’ and pitched in. Classes start in September.”

Steve stands dumbfounded, already stammering and waving the paper in his hand around. “Buck, I can’t let you guys do that – those classes aren’t cheap ya know!”

“Yeah, I know,” Bucky replies calmly.

“We’re going there and you’re gonna get your money back.”

Bucky stands. “I’m sure as Hell not.” He cups the blond’s face in his hands, making his voice gentle. “C’mon Stevie, it’s a present. It’s awful rude to say no to any present, let alone such a thoughtful one. Why don’t you think you deserve to have nice things like this?”

Steve tries to answer and then sighs, shrugging. “It’s money we should be puttin’ towards things that matter, Buck.”

“And this does matter. There will always be more money in the world, Steve.”

“And there will always be more art classes.”

“We’ve already made up our minds. If you try and get the money back, we’ll tie you down to a chair and won’t let you go no matter how much you complain. Besides, Ginny knows the Head of Admissions, and she already made it very clear that if you try and go in for anything other than to take your classes, they’ll turn you down.”

Steve tries to argue. He’s stubborn, and he keeps persisting. But Bucky won’t budge on this, and he’s fueled with the fact that he has Ginny on his side for this one. Eventually, his shoulders sag and he mutters his cooperation.

Bucky pulls him into a hug, tutting and chuckling lovingly. “Just close your yap and accept it. We love you. And you’re a real good artist, Stevie. You’re gonna be somethin’ real special in the great big world one day – you’re gonna make a difference.”

Steve disagrees, but he knows vocalizing it will only start his best friend on another rant. So he just lets himself be pressed to Bucky’s body and bury his face against the brunet’s firm chest, bringing his arms around his lower back. “Only worth doin’ all that if I got you there with me.”

“Always on your left, pal. Nowhere else I’d rather be.”
September, 1941

Steve starts his art classes, and something in him ignites. His confidence seems to go up, and he’s always got a new story for Bucky every time the artist gets home in the evenings. Bucky just sits, wherever that may be – whether it’s on their cots, or the couch, or with Steve’s head in his lap, or his head on Steve’s – and just smiles at his lover while the latter always rambles on for almost a solid hour about what he did, what he learned… Everything. He sees how happy being in his element is making Steve, and so he never fails to remind him every chance he gets, “Told you so.”

Bucky starts picking him up from his classes – every week, right on time, without fail. By the end of the month, he knows most of his classmates by name, and even knows Steve’s instructor’s coffee preference. She’s a woman in her early forties named Sue, and Bucky knew he liked her the first time he’d picked Steve up and she had said to him, “He your friend? You should be very proud. Steve here has quite the talent.” Anyways, thank fuck she likes her caffeine black, because Bucky can actually afford that without putting holes in his pockets. He doesn’t do it to suck up – although he does like knowing he’s making a good impression. He wants to make Steve look as standup a guy as possible by association, though he’s already certain the blond is doing a fine enough job of that on his own.

It’s the last class of the month, and everyone else is packing up and leaving, but Steve’s taking his time because he’s showing Bucky the painting he’s working on. It’s of Sarah. Bucky smiles at it, a mixture of fondness and sadness and nostalgia, and tells Steve with a loving smile that he just can’t hide that it’s absolutely beautiful.

“Mix a little bit of white to the blue and add it on the inner ring of her eyes,” he says without thought, pointing to the area he’s referring to. “Just right… there. It’ll make it look like the light is reflecting off of ‘em and it might make it look a bit more three-dimensional.”

Steve looks from the painting to him with a small smile. “Thanks, Buck. I’ll do that first thing next class. I still think you shoulda signed up with me.”

No one but Steve knew it growing up, but Bucky was not half bad in terms of artistic creativity. After all those years of watching Steve sketch, Bucky had gotten a bit competitive and wanted to try it too, if only to prove himself. They both quickly realized that he was nowhere near as good as Steve – the blond always chalked it up to having more experience, that’s all, but Bucky just knew that Steve had a born gift for it, and that was alright. But still, Bucky was better than average; he just never applied himself towards it.

“Only had the cash for one, m’afraid,” he replied – not their first dance about this subject.

Steve sighs an apology and starts cleaning up, saying he’ll just be a moment and then they can go. Bucky’s treading lazily around the room, looking at the pieces on the walls, when Sue calls him over to where she’s standing.

“I hope you don’t mind that I overheard,” she tells him. “Were you interested in taking a class? We have a spot that just opened in this slot; I mean, you’re always here to pick up Steve anyways.”

Bucky smiles at her but sticks his hands in his pocket and shrugs, shaking his head. “Appreciate the offer, ma’am, but money’s a bit too tight for me at the moment. Maybe next time.” Flashing her one more little smile, he turns to go when she says his name again. He turns back to her.

“As it happens, we might just be able to work something out,” she says. “We’re starting on model portraits in the upcoming month and due to budget cuts, we’re a little short this semester. If you
would be willing to volunteer as one of the models every once in a while, you can take the class in exchange for being paid.”

Bucky glances over his shoulder at Steve and then looks back with a raised brow. “Really? Well, what kind of modellin’ are we talkin’?”

She holds up her hands. “Whatever you’re comfortable with – if you’d prefer to remain fully clothed, no one will push here.” Her voice is trustworthy and Bucky knows she means it. In the back of his mind, he hears Peter’s voice as he’d told him how attractive he was; that he could be a model. It’d stung him so much, for so long afterwards. Now, though… In a setting like this, and getting to share something like this with his best friend, he can’t help but want to laugh at the fact that Peter wasn’t exactly wrong.

“Okay, I’ll do it. Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

“Perfect. We’ll provide you everything you need here, so don’t worry about supplies. We’ll see you next week – and don’t be late.”

He keeps the news to himself, passing each day with growing excitement. The next week, when Steve’s gathering his stuff before heading out the door, he’s surprised and thrown off to see Bucky putting on his shoes as if he’s about to go out with him.

“What – you walking me to school all over again?” he asks, heading out the door that Bucky’s holding open for him.

Bucky scoffs as if Steve’s the dumbest guy in the world. “Why would I do that? I’m going to my art class – didn’tcha know?”

November, 1941

They love taking class together. It’s always a nice little break from their regular routine; for Bucky’s, it’s especially a nice change of pace after a long, arduous day at the docks. They help each other with their pieces, but Bucky’s more reluctant to offer feedback on anything Steve does because, well, his work at its worse is still always on par with Bucky’s work at its best.

Bucky models for the first time in October. He stands in the center of the room, on a chair, and with a confident grin, pulls his shirt off his body and lets it drop to the floor without prompt. There’s a female model too, who strips down to her brassiere and girdle. So Bucky just shrugs and shucks off his slacks so he’s standing in nothing but his underwear, too. The girls in class giggle and whisper amongst themselves at Bucky’s boldness, Bucky’s appeal – while Bucky fights to contain his little grin and keep the entire class from seeing that he really only has eyes for Steve.

It’s different than the last time he’d stripped down like this for the objective eyes of another. It feels completely different than it had with Peter. Bucky actually does feel sexy as he stands up there, and he realizes that all those times where Steve made him pose for his drawings actually gave him the perfect amount of experience. He’s an excellent muse, but he only care’s about being Steve’s muse.

It’s an interesting form of foreplay, they discover… Intimate, despite sharing it with thirteen other people and the instructor. Bucky tries not to lock eyes with the blond for too long, because the intense, concentrated look Steve keeps giving him would completely make him. Pitching a tent in his underwear would not be a good first impression.

In November, Bucky models again, and this time, he has to think about baseball and fistfights and
backbreaking labour to not let his body get riled up. It has a lot to do with the fact that this time, he’s completely naked. It might also have a little to do with the fact that this time – because the female model is sick – he’s up there all by himself.

But it has everything to do with the way Steve keeps eye-fucking him from his side of the room.

They crash into their apartment that night, barely having made it through the door before their hands are fumbling and yanking each other’s clothes off frantically.

“Call me it again,” Bucky pants, dropping to his knees and undoing Steve’s belt.

The artist knows what he’s asking for by now.

“My muse,” he answers, and Bucky groans frantically, yanking the slacks down his legs so Steve can kick them off. Steve tugs on his biceps so Bucky stands back up and now it’s Steve’s turn to work the brunet’s pants off. “You’re my inspiration,” he continues, pulse thudding wildly in his throat as he pulls the clothing down Bucky’s thighs and exposes his hard cock. “Most beautiful muse in the world.”

He silences himself by exhaling hungrily and mouthing at Bucky’s erection before giving it those little Kitten licks Bucky’s so crazy for. The brunet’s knees buckle and he sinks down so they’re at the same level, and when Bucky breathlessly moans “Kitten” while Steve’s going down on him, Steve loses his mind. And – as it always seems to happen whenever Bucky has those nights where he wants the artist to call him by that little pet name of theirs – they fuck with Steve straddling him; controlling the pace, the depth… Controlling whether Bucky comes when he wants to or when Steve wants him to.

It’s Bucky’s way of handing himself over to Steve and trusting him to lead the way.

December 7th, 1941

Class has barely even begun when the news hits. It’s late-afternoon on Sunday as opposed to their usual time slot on Thursday evenings, thanks to a new rotation due to scheduling complications. The change became effective as of the first of the month. Steve had said it couldn't have worked out better, since the switch didn't require him to have to choose between Church and class (Bucky likes to think that class would have won, but he knows better so he's glad of how things worked, too).

Steve’s examining his work from the previous week and mapping out his game plan for today’s class, and somehow Bucky’s already got streaks of drying clay on his cheeks when Barbara Matley runs into the room with wide eyes and a horrified expression on her face.

“Guys, c’mon!” she shouts to the oblivious class, who glance at her with surprise.

“Miss Matley, what is it?” Sue says with concern, rising from her seat.

“The Japanese! The Japanese attacked! It’s all over the radio – c’mon, come quick!”

Everyone’s eyes widen; Steve and Bucky look to each other before springing from their seats and running out of the room with the rest of the class. The hallways are already filled with huddles of students and instructors alike – everyone talking all over each other and separated into mini groups, centered around wherever has a radio.

The two Brooklyn boys push their way through a tiny crowd so they can properly hear the announcement, starting right back up again – apparently having been playing on loop for the past
half hour:

“From the NBC News Room in New York: President Roosevelt said in a statement today that the Japanese had attacked the Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, from the air. I’ll repeat that: President Roosevelt says that the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii from the air... The Whitehouse is now giving out a statement: ‘The attack was apparently made on all Naval... Naval and military activities, on the principal island of Oahu.’”

“Oh my God...” Bucky whispers under his breath, as they stare ahead with wide eyes and try to take in everything they’re hearing. He can feel Steve tensing beside him.

“The President’s brief statement was read to reporters by Stephen Early, the President’s Secretary,” the broadcaster continues. “‘A Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor naturally would mean war. Such an attack would naturally bring a counterattack – and hostilities of this kind would naturally mean that the President would ask Congress for a Declaration of War.’”

Bucky holds his breath. Everyone is on edge around him. He hopes to God, he hopes, but he doesn’t know why he even bothers. It’s another one of those moments where he isn’t sure that someone’s even up there listening.

“There is no doubt from the temper of Congress that such a Declaration would be granted...”

Bucky stops listening. He feels as though he’s forgotten how to breathe. The room feels as though it’s starting to spin around him.

“America’s going to war,” someone in the crowd whispers. Suddenly, Bucky can hear them shouting, “AMERICA’S TO WAR!”

And now everyone’s shouting over each other – outraged and patriotic and scared and exhilarated. And Bucky stares at the floor as his body is shoved around from all the commotion, and everything’s spinning and this can’t be happening, this isn’t happening...

But when he looks up, eyes wide, he sees Steve and his face is determined. So determined, so stubborn, that Bucky wants nothing more than to snatch him up and beg him to stop thinking whatever it is he’s thinking.

“Looks like we’re going to war, Buck,” he says; voice steely and void of all nerves.

No, Bucky thinks. That’s not how the world works, Stevie. You won’t go... but I’ll have to.

He forces his face to neutralize as he does his best to ignore the noise and the franticness and the terrifying reality that life as they all know it is about to change.

“Looks like it."

Chapter End Notes

Bucky and Steve train. Bucky doesn't want to enlist in the army. Steve does, and refuses to take no for an answer. This time, rejection leaves Steve feeling *incredibly* inadequate as a man - and there's really only one way Bucky can think of to make Steve feel in control.
*EDIT: Thank you to ItsTheClimb for pointing out the incorrect day of the week for pearl Harbor, as well as correcting what time of day these radio announcements would've been made public at. I edited that part a little bit thanks to this awesome reader, so they have my eternal gratitude (if one thing doesn't irk me more than others, it's thing not being as accurate as possible.)

*Thank you to my buddy for suggesting the song "All of Me" by John Legend - I felt it definitely fit with this chapter. I've been getting a ton of song/lyric suggestions for this fic, and many of those lyrics will be used throughout this story. If you have a song that you think the lyrics fit well with this story, feel free too comment them here, or on my Tumblr. :) Thanks everyone, you're all colossally AWESOME <3

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

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Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky disagree about enlisting. After a particularly dejecting experience for Steve, Bucky decides it's time they try something new together.

Chapter Notes

You will notice I added three new tags to this story. Can ya find 'em? Two of them are pretty important ;) Oh yes, and I've also added chapter titles now - as more and more chapters get added, it'll just make things easier to keep track of.

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You let me violate you, you let me desecrate you,
You let me penetrate you, you let me complicate you.
Help me; I broke apart my insides... help me, I've got no soul to sell.
Help me; the only thing that works for me... help me get away from myself.
I want to fuck you like an animal -
I want to feel you from the inside -
I want to fuck you like an animal.
My whole existence is flawed;
You get me closer to god.
You can have my isolation; you can have the hate that it brings.
You can have my absence of faith; you can have my everything.
Help me; tear down my reason... help me, its' your sex I can smell.
Help me; you make me perfect... help me become somebody else.
I want to fuck you like an animal -
I want to feel you from the inside -
I want to fuck you like an animal.
My whole existence is flawed;
You get me closer to god.
Through every forest, above the trees,
Within my stomach, scraped off my knees,
I drink the honey inside your hive -
You are the reason I stay alive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December, 1941

Bucky doesn’t know how he’d gotten roped into agreeing to help Steve train, and he’s just as unsure about why. He knows what Steve’s aim is and he sure as Hell doesn’t agree with it. A part of him thinks that his reasons for finally relenting – after days of “C’mon Buck, you’re the fittest guy I know – if anyone’s gonna be able to get me into gear and ready to hit those enlistment fairs, it’s you” – are
entirely selfish. Because there’s a part of him that’s sure, that’s absolutely certain that Steve won’t be able to make it through basic training, so that scrawny punk will finally see that he wouldn’t be able to manage actual basic training.

It’s a cruel sort of lie, and Bucky knows it; put on the façade that he’s willingly trying to help Steve prepare for the war, when really all he’s doing is trying to show Steve how utterly incapable he is of joining in the first place. But the thing is, Bucky’s intentions aren’t malicious or ill-willed – he’s just terrified. Terrified, because he knows what would happen to Steve in the war, if by some act of God he was even accepted into the military to begin with. If basic didn’t kill him first, Bucky reckons he’d only last five minutes on the front lines before he’d get a bullet to the head.

Because Steve’s kind of clumsy. And when Bucky dreams at night now, he dreams of Steve Rogers in No Man’s Land, clutching a rifle to his chest and practically bouncing off the ground with every grenade that detonates around him. He pictures Steve trying to run to shelter, a stream of merciless bullets on his tail as if it were a game of Tag, and right before he can make it, his asthma starts kicking in. Because Steve has never been able to run for very long without his lungs giving up on him, and with all the commotion, there’s no way he would be able to avoid either misplacing his inhaler or losing it on the battlefield entirely – and no one, not even the guys on the home team, would give a damn about helping him find it. Not in the middle of the crosshairs.

When he sleeps, Bucky always dreams of Steve running and then stopping dead in his tracks as his legs suddenly get heavy like lead… And he clutches his chest with widening eyes, and Bucky can see the panic, the realization, dawning on his face, and he doesn’t even get the chance to collapse to the ground (maybe then he would’ve fallen out of the line of fire), no… He gets one split second to glance behind him, because he can still hear the gunshots and it’s getting closer – before he’s hailed down by that stream of shrapnel that was always following two steps behind.

This is what Bucky sees. And he doesn’t see it ending any other way.

And those nights, he always wakes with a small start, eyes wide and breathing rough and tears threatening to spill and tightening his throat. He never knows where he is at first because, in those dreams, he’s not just watching his best friend die from afar but he’s always right there with him, because where else would he be? Then reality slowly seeps back in, and Bucky knows he’s in the safety of his shitty little apartment, and he’s sleeping next to his best friend – who’s alive, who isn’t dead, he’s perfectly healthy and safe right here – and he’ll look down at Steve, who’s still sleeping, probably having dreams of doing everything Bucky knows he can’t do… And Bucky will hug the blond tighter to him, and Steve will stir and softly exhale, and he looks so content, and all Bucky can do is close his eyes and kiss his hair and whisper into the golden tresses, “Please stop.”

But of course Steve doesn’t, because he’s Steve.

And the thing is: Steve doesn’t give a damn about his size or the list of medical problems he has that span from Brooklyn to Katmandu. With each passing day, he hears more on the radio; about the war efforts, about those already giving their lives, and he pictures himself in full uniform, with a helmet on his head and a weapon in his hands, and in his dreams, he isn’t so much attacking as he’s defending. Steve doesn’t want to kill anyone; he just wants to do what’s right and serve his country from the bullies wreaking havoc on the world.

It’s got nothing to do with wanting to prove himself, it does not. And if it does – if any morsel of his being does indeed feel that way – Steve ignores it, because he knows that that isn’t what’s truly fueling his motivation anyways.

Bucky doesn’t argue with Steve at first; doesn’t hide his reluctance either, but no conversation on the topic results in a fight. It’s still early on – the news of Pearl Harbor is less than a week old – and
Bucky’s holding onto hope… Hope that giving in and going along with Steve’s ridiculous plan will work out in his favour; will open Steve’s blue eyes and make him see reason.

So they wind up at Goldie’s Boxing Gym. Bucky pulls some strings; goes to John, his pa, who knows the fella who runs the joint, and through association they’re able to have access to the facility for pennies. Steve’s eagerness reaches new bounds, and it makes Bucky all the more uneasy, but they start going by the end of the week anyways.

At first, Bucky thinks his plan is working. Steve can barely lift ten-pound weights for more than one rep of five without his arms starting to shake; when they run laps, Bucky keeps his pace slow so he never gets ahead of the blond, and tries to encourage him onwards even as Steve damn-near collapses to the ground after three minutes. His asthma kicks in more during this time than Bucky can recall seeing it in the last year. He helps his best friend work through it, and all the while hates himself just a little more every time that part of him that’s glad to see this happening continues to grow.

And Bucky doesn’t even want to get started on Steve’s hand-eye coordination. In the ring, Bucky tries to teach Steve the basics of throwing a proper punch, and it’s nothing if not sad. Steve’s limbs move like wet noodles, and all Bucky has to do to avoid it every time is arch his back and lean right out of it. He stays patient – even as Steve grows frustrated – and just tries harder to demonstrate the right technique. It’s still pretty pathetic, but Steve tries so hard and they both agree after a week that it’s gotten a little better.

Holds and grapples are even worse, namely because Steve stinks so rotten at it and Bucky’s always too afraid to hurt him. Bucky’s not the most trained fighter either, and he knows he would have his work cut out for him if (when) he’d be sent to basic training himself – but he’s still light-years ahead of his best friend. The size difference doesn’t really make for a fair fight, either. That often leads to arguments between them – Bucky constantly backing off the moment he thinks he’s using too much strength, and Steve fuming mad because he knows that the brunet is treating him with kid gloves.

But it isn’t good – because Bucky hasn’t even mentioned to Steve yet the fact that he’s choosing not to enlist. There was never a thought about it in his mind. He’s not thick; he knows that eventually, they’ll hunt him down and slap a serial number to his name that Bucky feels has no business being there… And he’ll become Private James Barnes and be ripped away from Steve, to prepare and get ready for when they ship him overseas into the middle of the battlefield, where he’ll probably be killed in action, and then Steve will be all by himself, and would he even ever find out, how would anyone even know to contact Steve Rogers in the event of James Barnes’s death? – Would Steve just be sitting around forever, waiting with that same stubborn defiance because no, Bucky will come
“home, you don’t know nothin’, he will--

He swallows it all down; holds onto that tiny shred of naïve hope that if he doesn’t enlist, maybe they won’t find him. Maybe he won’t have to go… Have to leave Steve Rogers… Have to die… He’s scared of both of those things, and he knows it’s selfish, because right now, you’re not an American if you’re not willingly trying to butt to the front of the line to fight – and Bucky thinks, Fine. Then write me out of the books of those who qualify to be a part of the ole’ US of A. And perhaps, right now, that makes Bucky one of the bravest people in the country; one of the only few who’s willing to admit to themselves that there are more important things to them than getting swept up in the propaganda of war and how romanticized everyone’s making it.

A part of Bucky does feel morally obligated to help defend his country and its freedom. But the larger part of Bucky doesn’t want to die; doesn’t want to leave Steve Rogers behind in a world where Bucky can’t be there to protect him.

So Bucky holds onto that sliver of hope. Hoping seems to be the only thing Bucky’s been doing lately.

Steve, though, doesn’t understand why the brunet always changes the subject whenever he talks about the recruitment fairs or enlisting or even just the situation at hand.

“Aren’t you mad about what’s going on over there?” he asks more than once; this time, while they’re eating dinner.

Bucky keeps his eyes on his plate and gives a small grunt and a half-shrug. “Course I am,” he replies. Then says nothing else.

“You don’t seem to overly care.”

“I do care, Steve.”

“Can I ask ya somethin’?”

Bucky sighs and lowers his toast. “Is it about the war?” Again.

“Yeah.”

“Do we always hafta do this while we’re eatin’? I’m tryin’ to enjoy this.”

Steve’s shoulders sag and he gives a small, dejected nod after a few seconds. Mumbles “fine” and goes back to eating. Bucky hates when Steve gets that wounded, kicked-puppy look. It’s both his pet peeve and his weakness. Groaning and rubbing his eyes, he says, “Okay, what?”

“Naw, Buck, it’s fine, we’ll talk about it later.”

“Steve, just tell me. What.”

The blond worries the inside of his cheek, brows coming together in thought, and Bucky watches him, trying to imagine what he’s about to be asked.

“D’ya think I have a shot?”


Steve shoots him a deadpanned look. “No, jerk, I mean about enlisting. I’ve been training real hard; you’ve seen it.”
“Steve--” Bucky sighs.

“And I know I could keep getting’ better if they just gave me a chance.”

“Steve,” Bucky says, a bit more firmly now.

That pulls the blond from his train of thought, making blue eyes snap to him expectantly. Bucky knows what Steve wants him to say: Yeah, of course, Stevie; sure, they may take one look at ya and tell ya that you can’t do it but I believe in ya – you may be small and weak as shit, but you have so many other redeeming qualities about ya that’d make you an excellent addition to the front lines, like… Like…

Heart? Bold determination? Good intentions? Morality?

Believe it that none of those things will save you when you’re staring death in the face. Death doesn’t care how good you are. Death won’t care about Steve Rogers.

Bucky doesn’t want to lie, not about this. Bucky wants to tell Steve exactly how he feels, but… He’s still holding onto that telltale hope, that when the twenty-fourth comes around, Steve will have forgotten all about enlisting. Maybe he’ll have changed his mind. Maybe Bucky can distract him and bide a bit more time so he can talk Steve out of it.

He wants to be strong; he doesn’t want to lie. But he does.

“I think you got just as good a chance as any.”

December 24th, 1941

Steve doesn’t forget and he doesn’t change his mind. Bucky doesn’t know why he’d thought he might. He forces down the seed of dread blooming in his stomach as he follows behind Steve, hands stuffed in his pockets and head down, while they walk to the US Recruiting and Induction Center in New York City.

The blond chatters away – so indulged in his own aspirations that he doesn’t even glance behind him as he rambles on and on to Bucky. The older boy replies with half-hearted “yeahs” and “mhms” and anything that requires as little involvement in the discussion as possible. Steve doesn’t notice. All the while, Bucky is frantically trying to think of something to do or say – anything that can turn it around and set them on the path back to their apartment. He considers bribery; he considers threats. He considers all the things he knows he couldn’t actually do and wouldn’t work anyway.

When they finally get there, there’s already a lineup out the door. Steve’s heart is racing with adrenaline and a little bit of fear, but he quickens his pace.

“Lotsa people here already,” he calls over his shoulder. “Looks like we might be here a while. Let’s get a place in line.”

He’s only just stopped behind a very tall, burly redhead when he takes the time to glance back for Bucky. To his surprise, the brunet is standing a small distance away, staring at Steve with this look, and his feet are planted firmly to the ground and he isn’t coming any closer.

Glancing around, Steve waves him over. “C’mon Buck, line starts over here.”

Bucky doesn’t move.
Now the smaller boy’s brows come together in confusion, and he leaves the line to approach his best friend. “Bucky? C’mon, what’re ya doin’? Gettin’ cold feet? It’s okay, I’m sure everyone here’s got the jitters.”

Except you, Bucky thinks bitterly. He wishes Steve didn’t sound so concerned for his well-being. It makes it so much harder to just come right out and say--

“I’m not goin’.”

“…What?”

“I’m not goin’ in there, Steve.”

Steve gives a small, oblivious shake of the head, gesturing back to the Center. “You afraid they won’t take ya? Course they’ll take ya, Buck, you got nothin’ to worry about.”

Bucky sighs and shakes his head impatiently. “Steve, Steve – listen to me.” He speaks slowly: “I… am not… goin’ in there. I’m not enlisting.”

Steve’s jaw drops. There’s no way he heard Bucky correctly.

“I don’t – what do you mean?”

Bucky shrugs, keeping his face firm and with no room for cracks. “I’m not enlisting and I don’t think you should either,” he says, but inside, he’s trembling. This is the moment he’s been dreading. He sees that face he’s known his whole life register exactly what Bucky’s saying and it’s unmistakable, the flitter of different emotions that circulate across his features. Before Steve can open his mouth to say anything, Bucky cuts him off. “C’mon Steve, they have enough people willing to go over and fight – look at that line! They don’t need us out there,” he insists; his tone trying to appeal to Steve’s reason. “There’ll be plenty of things we can do to help right where we are; there’s no reason we need to go over there and get ourselves killed.”

Steve looks at him incredulously. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m plenty serious, actually. Steve, please, let’s just go back home. We can do anythin’ you want, just not this.”

“How can you not want to enlist?”

“I just don’t want to, okay?”

“That’s not a reason!”

“My reasons are my reasons, Steve. Buddy, c’mon. This isn’t a good idea.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing right now,” Steve says slowly, looking a mixture of outraged and baffled. “Bucky, people are dying over there! It’s our duty to help.”

“No, Steve, it’s our duty to live,” Bucky snaps, starting to feel himself get riled up, too. “I don’t owe anybody else my life.”

“How can you be so selfish?”

“I’m being selfish?”

“Yes, selfish! Those men over there, whether they’re from here or from other countries, they’ve been
fighting this whole time to save us – to save their families, their people, their freedom. So you’re
damn right you owe them your life if need be! They already gave you theirs!”

“I never asked them to!”

Steve throws his hands in the air, stammering on his words; face growing red and hot. “God – Buck –
just – where is this even coming from!”?

Bucky grits his teeth. “It’s been there the whole time; you’ve just been too self-absorbed to notice!”

“What--”

“Every time I didn’t want to talk about it – why else did you think I was avoiding the conversation?
C’mon Steve, you knew somethin’ was up; you just chose to ignore it.” He sighs, losing some of his
fire, and tries to reason with his best friend again. Palming Steve’s shoulders, his tone becomes
gentle. “Steve, please… Don’t do this. Come home with me.”

Unfortunately, Steve tries to use the same tactic. Eyes softening, the blond reaches up and clasps the
side of Bucky’s neck in a reassuring gesture. “Buck, we’re going to be fine. I know you’re scared.
But c’mon, come with me and we’ll do this together.”

Bucky throws his hands into the air with a loud sound of frustration and turns, pacing a few steps
while covering his mouth and shaking his head. He whips back around to Steve. “Damnit Steve, no!
We won’t be doin’ this together! I’m not goin’ in there – and neither are you!”

The smaller boy clenches his fist, now glaring. “I’m goin’ in there and you can’t stop me.”

“Fine, go in there! I’ll just wait for you out here – s’not like you’ll be in there long! They’re not
gonna take you, Steve!”

Steve presses his lips in a straight line and seems to falter. “They will too! I can show’ em!” But his
voice breaks and there’s the smallest trace of doubt.

“Oh, for God’s sake – no you won’t! You think you can change their minds but you can’t! Look at
you, Steve; yeah, you got more guts than any other guy here and I know how badly you wanna go
over there but they have rules for a reason! You go to war and you’re gonna get yourself killed!”

“At least I’d be doin’ what’s right and dyin’ for my country!”

Bucky has the actual urge to punch Steve for that. He holds out his hands and then makes a violent
grabby motion before reining them back and swinging his fist in the air away from Steve. He makes
a loud sound of annoyance. He doesn’t want to say it – he doesn’t want it to tumble out of him, but
he’s feeling desperate now and why does Steve have to be so fucking stubborn!??

“Steve, you’re no good over there – you’re better off here where I can keep you safe!”

Silence. Bucky’s eyes widen and he feels as though he’s about to swallow his tongue. That hadn’t
been what he’d meant to say; he’d meant to tell Steve that by staying home, he could keep himself
safe. But it’s too late; Steve’s brow quirks and he quickly gets it.

“That’s why you’re not enlistin’,;” he says slowly. There’s no gentleness in his voice anymore. Only
steel. His face goes from red to scarlet. “You wanna stay behind so you can babysit me. You’re
usin’ me as your excuse.”

“Steve--”
“I am NOT a child!” Steve shouts. Several of the people in the line glance back to look at them. “How dare you put that crap on me! I am not stayin’ here! I’m goin’ over there, and you can’t stop me! I DON’T NEED YOU!”

Bucky recoils back, eyes widening. He looks as though Steve’s slapped him. He stutters and then finds himself getting flustered, replying, “F-Fine! Fine! Go then! Go in there and humiliate yourself! They’ll never take you, Steve!”

“Yes they will!”

“No they won’t! Fuck, listen to me!”

“You don’t know that!”

“Yes! I do!”

“I can show ‘em!”

“No you can’t! They’ll never take you, Steve! NEVER!”

Steve swings. It comes out of nowhere. Steve swings, fist aimed right at Bucky’s face. Bucky’s caught off guard but leans out of it in the nick of time. It’s a horrible punch at best; Steve’s limbs are still clumsy and too loose. But still.

Steve swung at him. Steve tried to hit him.

Bucky stares at the blond, shocked and wounded. Steve stares back, fist still clenched but lowered now. The smaller boy pants, eyes blurry and bright in contrast to his flushed cheeks. There’s a moment there, when it hits him: what he just tried to do. He’s thankful that Bucky backed out of it because he doesn’t know if he’d ever be able to forgive himself if it’d made contact. But… Bucky’s words had stung too deep. He’d always thought he at least had Bucky in his corner; Bucky – his best friend, his soul mate, the love of his life – who was supposed to believe in him even when no one else did.

Both hurt, both feeling betrayed – they keep their eyes locked as they glare. Bucky starts to back away.

“Go fuck yourself,” he mutters angrily, shaking his head before turning and walking away, leaving Steve standing there.

Steve wants to chase after him, apologize. But he’s still so mad himself, he can’t. He can do this. He can. He’ll show Bucky – he’ll show everyone. Straightening and releasing a heavy exhale, he watches Bucky until he’s no longer in sight and then turns begrudgingly and heads back into line.

It takes Bucky a couple of hours to get home. He feels like shit by the time he does. He’d been cruel; he should’ve paid more mind to how he’d handled the situation and what he’d chosen to say to Steve. Of course telling Steve they’d never take him would’ve been the worst thing he could’ve said – especially when the blond had already asked him once if Bucky had thought he had a shot and Bucky had lied to his face and gave him hope. Bucky was just as much part of the problem Inadequate. Not good enough. That’s basically what Bucky called him. Indirectly, of course, because Bucky could never see Steve as those things. To Bucky. Steve was always more than enough – perfect in every way. He just wishes his best friend could see those things about him that make him insufficient for the army as positives, rather than hindrances.
He doesn’t know how to make it up to him. He wonders if telling Steve to go fuck himself constitutes as just as bad as Steve taking that swing. Bucky can’t even bring himself to stay mad about that – he understands that the blond was angry and hurt. It’d been the same reason why Bucky had responded the way he had. He just hopes Steve will be able to see that, too.

He feels restless. He tries to read but focus is impossible; all he winds up doing is tapping his foot wildly off the floor until his whole body gives a small spasm. He whips the book across the room and then feels guilty about that too, so he picks it up as if it was a baby and cradles it to his chest. He almost apologizes to it. After putting it away in its proper place, he decides to clean the apartment. He almost never does; usually Steve takes care of that. He knows he doesn’t deserve the praise but he hopes the blond will notice whenever he gets back. When he finishes with that, he takes a quick shower to get himself clean.

Bucky’s in the middle of cooking dinner when he hears the front door open. Pulling the small sauce pan of milk off the element so it doesn’t get too hot, he walks into the front hall and stops when he sees Steve. It looks like the blond has been crying; though he isn’t anymore, there are bags under his eyes and what appears to be dried tear trails down his cheeks. They exchange a moment of silence, standing and staring awkwardly, until Bucky breaks the silence.

“I’m glad you’re home early. I went out and picked us up some chicken… I was just about to start cookin’ it.”

Steve says nothing; doesn’t even try to be a brat and fight Bucky on shelling out cash for something fancier than usual. He just averts his eyes to the ground and mumbles, “Thanks.” It’s so quiet that the brunet can barely hear it.

Bucky notices the form in Steve’s hand. There’s no way… For a split second, he wonders with a thundering heart if Steve actually got accepted. But the blond just holds it out for him, never looking up. Slowly, Bucky takes it; doesn’t even need to hold it up close to see the stamped 4F in bold red. He sighs with relief and then tries to cover it up by clearing his throat casually.

“Tried to reason with ‘em… They wouldn’t have it. Stamped it and handed it back before I could even finish talkin’.”

Despite everything, Bucky can’t help but sympathize. He regards the blond with sadness for him, because he can see how badly Steve is hurting. “Steve… I’m real sorry, pal.”

“No you’re not,” Steve replies, chuckling dryly. But then he looks up. “You were right. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna stop tryin’ though.”

Bucky’s heart sinks but he nods. “I know,” he says gently. “Doesn’t mean I’m gonna support you, either.”

“Buck… I know you don’t think I can do this…” He sounds so tired; so beaten down by the world. It’s rare that Bucky sees him like this; even after everything he’s been through, Steve’s usually always the pinnacle of optimism. But now, even as he exudes that same stubbornness as always, he sounds so dejected. Hopeless.

Bucky walks to him and cups the side of his face. “I think you can do anythin’,” he insists sincerely, tilting the blond’s chin up to look at him. “But I can never be on board with somethin’ that could get you killed, whether it’s a war or somethin’ else. You can’t expect me to do that.”

“Looks like we’re agreein’ to disagree.”
“Guess so, pal.”

Steve doesn’t lean into Bucky’s touch like he normally does. He averts his eyes back down, looking as downtrodden and sad as he did the day they attended Sarah’s funeral. Bucky aches to make him feel better.

“I’m sorry I swung at you,” the blond says after a while.

Bucky shakes his head. “It’s okay. I was being a jerk.”

“No, you were just telling me what I didn’t want to hear. I overreacted.”

“I did too, so… I think we’re even.” He gauges Steve’s expression and it’s still so damn solemn, and he just wants to lighten him up and see him smile. He gives him a little shake and then turns to direct him into the kitchen. “C’mon, man. I’m heating up some milk; I’ll give ya a glass. Calm ya right down.”

Steve follows and gets his milk a few minutes later. He cups the glass in both hands and takes tiny sips, staring at the table where Bucky had put down the 4F form. Staring. Dwelling. Bucky notices and takes it away from him before ripping it up and throwing it in the small garbage can. Steve doesn’t even try to protest. He just stays so silent.

Until Bucky’s cooking the chicken, and then he jumps almost a foot out of his skin when he hears the sound of glass shattering loudly. Steve’s standing, arm slightly outstretched and face red all over again, and his eyes are wet from tears this time, and Bucky can’t believe he’d never even heard any changes in the blond’s breathing pattern. The empty glass he’d been cradling in his hands lies in pieces a meter or so away, having been hurled at the wall. Bucky strides to Steve with concern written all over him, and Steve crumples.

“I hate this!” he shouts, eyes darting around, unfocused, and his chest rising and falling with quick, unstable breaths. “I hate being so useless! All I want to do is go over there and do my part! But it’s never enough! I’m never enough! It isn’t fair – it isn’t goddamn fair!”

“Hey, hey, shh,” Bucky soothes, going to him and taking his face in his hands. Steve tries to squirm out of it but caves after a few seconds. Bucky kisses his face, along his wet cheeks, and then looks him in the eyes. “What can I do? Let me make you feel better. What do you want to do – name it, we’ll do it.”

Steve barks out a bitter laugh, but his face is anything but humorous. “Wanna trade bodies?” he asks. “Startin’ to grow convinced that I’m just a boy after all – always gonna be that, just some useless, fragile little boy.”

Bucky shakes his head and whispers back encouragements but he sees how little help they’re doing. Steve’s in a shaky place right now; so uncertain, so self-conscious. After everything Bucky said to him, only to then have that confirmed by facing rejection at the Recruitment Center, Bucky knows Steve’s faith is shaken. Mostly in himself. It’s hard to feel like a man when the rest of the world refuses to see you as anything but a child. Bucky’s heart drops; he’s been just as guilty of doing that. He always has been.

Turning off the stove and putting the food into the ice box, he goes back to Steve and takes his hand.

“Why don’t we go lie down for a few minutes? We can just talk, or just lie there even… C’mon, let’s go…” And he’s grateful that Steve doesn’t turn the offer down.

They get into their cots and at first, Bucky makes to pull Steve into his arms like he always does. But
he wonders if that will only further emasculate his best friend. So he tries something new. Shifting
onto his side, he turns so his back is to Steve’s front, and murmurs, “Put your arm around me.”

Steve narrows his eyes and doesn’t say anything, but Bucky can feel him settle behind him and then
wrap his skinny limb around Bucky’s side; hand splaying flat against his chest and essentially
hugging Bucky’s body to his. It’s a little more awkward this way thanks to their size different, but
Bucky finds himself actually liking it. Especially when he feels Steve rest his face against the back of
his neck; lips barely touching the skin.

“Your hair smells nice,” the voice behind him mumbles with little inflection.

“I actually washed it for a change.”

“Mm.” It’s a half-hearted response at best, and then Steve goes quiet from there. Bucky can feel the
palpable sadness radiating off of him; the feelings of self-doubt… Such little self-worth… Silent
questions and angry thoughts all circling in that blond head.

After a few minutes or so, Steve speaks up again.

“I wasn’t mad at you. I was mad… am mad… at myself. So pissed that I can’t ever seem to do more.
I tried so hard.”

Bucky rubs the top of Steve’s hand with his own. “I know…” He rolls over so they’re facing each
other. Steve stares into his eyes sadly, with so much shame it makes Bucky’s heart burst. Before he
can think about it, he tilts his chin in and presses a tiny little kiss to Steve’s mouth. Steve doesn’t kiss
back.

Bucky does it again – his way of apologizing while also trying to show his undying support; peppers
small, chaste kisses to Steve’s lips, trying to break down his walls. Finally, Steve’s eyes close and
Bucky can hear his breathing deepen, and when Steve kisses back, it’s tentative. But he also reaches
up and holds the side of Bucky’s face, and something about that makes the brunet’s body heat up.

They stay that way for a while, lying on their sides, kissing slowly while Steve palms Bucky’s
cheek. Bucky knows what Steve needs; he’s always known what Steve needs. And Bucky’s ready
to give it to him, because right now, he is what Steve needs. So he presses his mouth to the blond’s
harder, pushing the kiss to deepen. The second it does, he grabs onto the back of Steve’s neck and
slowly turns onto his back, dragging Steve with him so that the blond is now half leaning over him.

It’s a small gesture, and yet it’s new, all the same. Shifts the dynamic between them and transfer the
power to Steve. The younger man can sense it and pulls back to knit his brows and look down at
Bucky with confusion.

“What…”

“Kiss me,” Bucky whispers, and his voice is soft and breathy, and completely unintentional.
Genuine. He really does want Steve to do this.

Blue eyes look down into his while the blond frowns, clearly unsure. But then he’s closing the space
between their mouths and crushing Bucky’s head into the pillow with a firm kiss, and Bucky
surprises himself by moaning right into it. He parts his lips as an offering, to which Steve accepts;
pushing his tongue into Bucky’s mouth and licking along his. Steve’s breathing is getting too rough,
but when Bucky whispers for him to calm down, Steve utters, “Don’t tell me what to do.” And
Christ, his voice is hoarse and deeper than usual and it’s an order, not a request, and Bucky’s body
completely responds to it.
Steve feels Bucky’s hands squeeze up between them and grip onto the collar of his shirt, pulling his body down harder. He feels so much hatred for the world, and it scares him… So much self-anger and **nobody thinks I can have anything, but I can have** this… He’s vaguely aware that his best friend is squirming beneath him and letting Steve take over his mouth as if it were property of Steve Rogers, and in this moment, that’s exactly what Steve wants. He can’t think straight. He’s just so damn tired of everyone thinking he’s less than what he is – he’s scared that if something doesn’t change, he may actually start to believe them.

“Steve,” Bucky breathes, bringing one hand to golden hair so he can clench it in his fist. Steve responds by tilting his face and kissing him harder; beating their tongues together with fervor. The younger man gasps softly when the body beneath his rocks up, pressing their hips together. And Bucky starts exhaling, “**Want you…**” and Steve’s never heard Bucky be this needy before and it makes him feel powerful. He provides Bucky some relief by shifting so he can fit one leg between Bucky’s, and press his thigh to the brunet’s growing erection.

Bucky groans at the contact and arches his neck up, driving his head back into the pillow. He grinds himself down on that bony leg, and **Steve, he’s so perfect**, because the sharpness of all of Steve’s angles make for the most delicious friction. Steve’s still a little clumsy, and he’s so used to Bucky being the one to deliver such an onslaught that he isn’t overly sure what to do with himself. Bucky can sense that, and so he holds onto Steve’s hips and keeps him still so he can do all the work; pressing his body down and undulating his hips against Steve, groaning in his throat with every few breaths.

“Feels good,” he manages through grit teeth, trying to reassure the blond.

“Yeah?” Steve asks. But whereas it’s always a rhetorical question when Bucky says it, with Steve, it’s a genuine inquiry.

Bucky nods and pulls him in for another kiss. Steve breathes hard and rough through his nose, and he can feel his heart racing and that little rattle starting up in his lungs, so he breaks away to look down at Bucky nervously.

“What are we… I mean…”

Bucky slows his movements and strokes Steve’s cheek with his thumb. “**You’re so gorgeous. That was pretty ballsy of you to try and hit me earlier… Never seen you like that. Got me kinda hot.**”

Steve sighs and shakes his head. “Don’t try and justify what I did; there was nothing sexy about it.”

“**Steve.**” And then Bucky kisses along his neck, trying to relax the artist; mouthing up to his jaw and then along its delicate curve. “Stop. **You’re everything in here, with me. I want you so bad. You can make it up to me if you want, though.**”

“How?” Steve **does** want that.

“Fuck me.”

Steve pulls away from Bucky’s lips and makes a quiet, startled sound as his blue eyes grow to saucers. Bucky shakes his head and leans back up, catching his mouth and shutting him up.

“I want it,” Bucky insists, because he knows Steve needs this – needs to feel like he’s in control of **something.** And the more he’s thinking about it, the more Bucky needs it, too. “**Been wanting it for forever now, was just buildin’ up the guts to ask. It always looks like it feels so good, and I wanna know what you’d feel like inside of me.**”
“Buck…” Steve groans, his resolve weakening.

Bucky grinds down on his thigh harder and gasps, closing his eyes as his eyebrows pull together. “I want it,” he repeats breathlessly. “Give it to me, Rogers. Please. Can you do that?”

Steve doesn’t know if he can, but… he supposes he can try. It’s a little hard to think straight when Bucky’s looking so willing and compliant for him. The brunet opens up that stretch of bronzed skin along his neck – somehow, no matter the season, Bucky’s always got a sun-kissed colour to his body – and Steve leans down and latches his mouth to it, kissing along the length.

“What do I… What do I do?” he asks in a small voice.

Bucky clutches to the blond’s back and shifts them so Steve’s fully on top of him now. “I dunno, uh… Mm… I can suck you until you’re hard and wet, and then, um… You can… hah!” He hisses through his teeth when Steve gives an experimental bite over the meat of his clothed shoulder. He tries to remember what he was saying. “You can… Open me up, same as I do to you… Then you just… You fuck me…”

Steve’s hips cant involuntarily at the suggestion, and both boys groan softly.

“And you want that? You’re sure?”

“So bad,” Bucky breathes.

“What if I hurt you?”

“Then you hurt me.” Bucky can tell this isn’t what Steve wants to hear – not if the slowing of his kisses says anything. “I’ll tell you to stop if I can’t handle you,” he verifies, rephrasing it in such a way that it’s a subtle compliment aimed to flatter the blond. “But you know I don’t mind a little pain.”

He can’t see Steve’s face and he worries that he’s just shot himself in the foot and spoiled the entire thing. But then he feels Steve’s tongue lick a soft stripe up to his ear, and then his breath is hot and heavy in Bucky’s ear, and the brunet groans, smiling.

“Think you can make me see stars, soldier?”

And that gets a response from Steve; he grabs Bucky by the hair and yanks his head back in a burst of strength that leaves the brunet gasping at the pleasant sting, and Steve fucking growls and slams their mouths together. Bucky isn’t sure whether calling him that offended him or turned him on, because the sound he made – the aggression he’s showing – can come off as both. And in retrospect, Bucky realizes that it was sort of a cruel thing to say, given what Steve had just gone through - especially given Bucky’s position on the matter. But now he’s beneath Steve Rogers, and he’s offering to be Steve’s plaything – to be used, abused, made a mess of – and perhaps that makes it perfect.

“You like that?” Bucky moans as Steve starts rutting against him feverishly.

“Shut up,” Steve breathes, trying to ravish his mouth.

Bucky chuckles and then cries out loudly – he can’t help it – when the blond pulls his head to the side and clamps his teeth back down on the other side of his neck. A blissful, open-mouthed grin curls Bucky’s lips up and he whispers, “Yeah… Yessir… Fuck, Steve…”

Steve’s moving frantically now – so frantically that Bucky would laugh if it wasn’t so sexy. Slim
fingers fumble with the buttons of his shirt, and Bucky stammers when Steve gets impatient and frustrated and just yanks the top of it open; buttons popping out of their seams and littering the cot around them.

“What – Steve!” Bucky says with mild annoyance. “I don’t have many good shirts, you asshole!”

“Sorry,” Steve mutters, going back to quickly trying to undo the rest of them. But he doesn’t sound very sorry at all. Just flustered.

He shoves Bucky’s shirt open, revealing his perfect torso. Bucky rolls his eyes and starts to hassle his friend some more when he’s shut up by the blond’s teeth pinching down on his left nipple. He jolts and arches his back, making a pain sound and reflexively barking out, “Too hard – ease up, Steve!” But when he looks down, his anger melts away, turns into a broken moan, because Steve starts lapping at the flared, swollen nub with his tongue. It’s a soothing warmth, but it’s the look on Steve’s face that makes Bucky hot.

Steve senses Bucky’s stare and looks up at him through hooded lids; eyes dark and something still broken and compensating written all over his face. “I thought you liked a little pain,” he challenges in a throaty voice, and Bucky all but comes all over the place. Up until that point, Steve had actually been partially scared by the thought of hurting Bucky, and had seriously considered giving up on the whole thing the moment Bucky got upset with him for biting too roughly. But the body beneath his laxes like jelly, and Bucky’s chest flushes, and Steve feels comfortable continuing.

“Yessir, I do,” Bucky says, most of his voice trapped in his throat. “Just… Not so hard next time.”

“Sorry,” Steve repeats, and this time it’s a little more considerate and genuine.

They sit up so Bucky can fully pull his shirt off and toss it to the floor. Steve dives back in and starts coating his shoulders and collar bones with scalding kisses – hot like molten – while Bucky sighs at the feeling and manoeuvres the blond’s own clothing off with skilled hands.

“You’re my soldier,” Bucky exhaleds, and whimpers embarrassingly when that word causes Steve to pinch his other nipple between his fingers. He knows Steve would tell him to stop calling him that if it really bothered him. “What’s your rank, soldier? What should I call you?”

“I dunno,” Steve mumbles distractedly, head spinning, as he tries to yank Bucky’s belt open.

“Private Rogers isn’t good enough,” Bucky ventures, shoving Steve’s slacks down his hips; thumb brushing against the blond’s erection in passing. He shifts up onto his knees so Steve can start pulling his own clothes down his thighs. He tries to ignore how Steve eagerly grabs his dick and squeezes it, not even giving Bucky a chance to lie back down. “Sergeant’s okay, but it doesn’t have a nice enough ring to it.”

“I don’t care, Buck, I really don’t care,” Steve husks, sloppily trying to multitask kicking off his own pants while not having to remove his hand from Bucky’s erection. He finally manages to get them off, and then directs the brunet onto his back, only moving his hand so he can peel the slacks from Bucky’s toned legs. He never takes his eyes off of Bucky’s beautiful cock – and habit makes him want to just slick himself up and impale himself on it, but no, Bucky wants him tonight… Wants Steve to call the shots, and Steve selfishly wants it too, so it can wait. He grabs the swollen muscle again and starts wringing his hand from the base to the tip.

“Oh…” Bucky groans, eyes fluttering closed. He grins again deliriously. “Want you to fuck me so bad, Stevie… Bet you feel so good…”
Steve’s cock gives a spontaneous twitch and a surprised moan gets garbled in Steve’s throat. His body ignites and he grows so hard so fast that he can actually feel a dollop of precome drip from his slit. With a hurried sound, he bends down and swallows Bucky’s cock, sucking along it fast and eagerly.

Bucky’s eyes fly open and he fists his hands into Steve’s hair as his mouth drops. He makes a strangled sound. “Steve… Christ… Holy fuck… Wait, I’m s’posed to be the one going down on you, c’mon – unnnmm, shit… Your mouth is a sin, sweet Lord…”

Steve’s hand flies up and clasps over his mouth while his own still bobs along Bucky’s sex. He presses down roughly, silencing Bucky, and it’s such a subtly dominating action that Bucky groans against his palm, the sound muffled. The blond pulls back with a wet pop and looks up at Bucky sternly. “No cussin’,” he orders.

And fuck, Bucky doesn’t know if that’s even possible, because he’s always had a mouth like a sailor – and anything involving touching of any kind with Steve Rogers always elicits the worst language from him. He truly believes it’s 100% involuntary. He really can’t filter what comes out of him when they’re intimate, because his control is always surrendered one way of another. He considers what Steve would dare to do if he disobeyed, but for the time being, he nods obediently. The blond rewards him by letting go on his mouth and holding his cock still so he can swipe his soft tongue along it with those little Kitten licks, and Bucky bites his lip so hard to keep from blowing his load that he can taste the faintest, coppery trace of blood.

Steve backs off a bit to provide Bucky with some reprieve; instead licking along the length and then kissing the insides of his thighs.

Bucky moans. “Steve… Unh, Steve… Can I suck you yet? You’re killin’ me…”

“Patience is a virtue.”

“When have you ever known me to be patient?”

Steve nips his leg gently and Bucky’s hips jerk up. He makes a small sound in his throat.

“Stop sassin’ me,” Steve mutters, looking up at him.

Bucky licks his lips; the blood already clotting but leaving his mouth looking a sinful shade of red. “Yessir,” he says reluctantly. But then asks in a sweeter tone, “Golly, Steve, may I please suck your cock?”

That makes the blond blush and look away in embarrassment. He gives Bucky a light shove. “Don’t spoil the mood.”

“Sorry,” Bucky chuckles. Tilting his head to the side, he says sincerely, “You just have such a nice cock. And you’ve had a rough day. I wanna make you feel good – you know I can make you feel so good, Stevie. Just want you to lie back and let me take care of you, before you take care of me.”

It does make Steve feel good, hearing Bucky say it like that… That what they’re going to do is really being done for Bucky’s sake rather than his own. They both know it’s not wholly true. But it’s okay to pretend; makes Steve feel like the protector for a change.

He nods and pats the brunet’s thigh so they can change places, but Bucky just sits up and shuffles around Steve so he can get off the cot. Steve’s brows furrow but he lets Bucky gently guide him until he’s sitting on the edge of it, feet firmly planted on the floor.
“Wanna do it like this,” Bucky says, palming Steve’s knees and pushing them open wider. “Then it’ll feel more like I’m your little slut.”

Steve grabs him by the chin. “I said no cussin’!” he says firmly.

Bucky just grins, wide and devilish. “Well one of us has to,” he insists. “If it ain’t gonna be you, it’ll sure as Hell hafta be me then.”

Steve frowns, mouth twitching, like he’s considering Bucky’s words carefully. “You don’t think I can?”

“I just think you won’t.”

Maybe it’s because of the foul mood Steve was in – the residual effects of which are still making him feel funny; maybe it’s the desperation to prove himself in this moment and actually feel worthy. He knows it’s completely out of his character and the idea does make him feel a little uneasy, but he keeps his gaze hard and replies, “I can do it.”

Bucky shoots up a brow. “You’re gonna talk dirty to me?” Inside, he’s thrilled; feels his stomach flop at the idea. But he doesn’t want to get too excited – dirty talking has never been Steve’s thing to dish out, and he isn’t even sure the blond would know what all to say, let alone letting himself say it.

“Might need a little direction, but yeah, I can do it.”

Bucky’s eyes twinkle and he leans in to start kissing up the blond’s inner thighs. Steve leans back on his hands and watches, biting his lip gently. Bucky takes his time; languidly drags his tongue along the fine pale hairs on his legs and then mouths at his protruding hip bones, tracing them lightly. Steve shivers.

“You gonna start sometime today?” Bucky teases, licking the skin so close to Steve’s genitals but not actually providing contact.

“Oh, um… Yeah. Just dunno what to say.”

“Tell me what you want me to do,” Bucky instructs helpfully, kissing Steve’s testicles. It causes the smaller boy to twitch, breath catching in his chest.

“Okay… I, uh… I want you to get on with it now…”

Bucky snorts quietly, nuzzling Steve’s cock with his nose. “Get on with what, Steve? Gonna hafta be a bit more specific than that.”

Steve clears his throat and musters up the courage swirling around in his belly; pulling it up his chest, his throat, to his mouth, until it comes out in the form of words. “My cock, I want it in your mouth. Want you to suck it now, please.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, even though it sends a current of electricity to his own. It’s a start. “So polite,” he says. “You don’t gotta be so formal with me. Boss me around a little. I promise I won’t mind, it’s okay. Maybe…” He takes Steve’s hand and places it on the top of his head. “Tell me what you want me to do by showin’ me.”

Bucky licks the underside of Steve’s dick while the blond watches with dilated eyes. Steve hesitates; waits until Bucky’s mouth is sucking softly around his head before pushing gently on Bucky’s skull, trying to silently tell him to take more in. Bucky glances up at him, looking unimpressed, and if looks could talk, he’d be saying, Really? That’s the best you can do?
So Steve chews the inside of his cheek nervously and pushes with more force – and isn’t prepared to feel as thrilled as he does when Bucky’s jaw falls open so the brunet can start lowering his head, drawing Steve into his mouth. Bucky’s grey-blue pools are fixed on him the entire time and what a sight… watching inch by inch of his hard dick disappear into Bucky’s hot, wet mouth as Bucky stares up at him like he wants Steve to do the world’s most unspeakable things to him.

A wave of pleasure spreads through him and uncontrollably, Steve snaps his hips up straight into Bucky’s mouth. The brunet’s airway gets blocked as the head of Steve’s member hits the back of his throat, and he chokes quietly. Steve’s eyes widen and he makes to pull back when Bucky’s hand snaps up and grabs his wrist. Looking Steve dead in the eyes, he gives a small affirmative nod. 

_Keep going._

Steve regards him worriedly, not wanting to do anything to possibly hurt Bucky, but if he’s being given permission and Bucky _wants_ him to do it, he doesn’t think he should say no. So he tightens his hand in brown hair and pushes Bucky back down so he’s choking on him again. Bucky moans – an impressive feat that Steve isn’t even sure how he’s capable of – and the blond can feel the walls of his throat constrict around him and _oh God, it feels incredible…_

He moans, tipping his head back. Bucky smirks around him and starts moving his mouth along the length; suckling and rubbing his tongue to it in all the places he knows his lover falls apart for. When he scrapes his teeth lightly beneath the head, Steve clenches his jaw and makes a sound that’s a mixture between a breathy groan and a wheeze.

Steve remembers that he’s supposed to be talking. He’s having a hard time remembering his own _name_, let alone forming sentences, but he tries his best.

“Your mouth… It’s nice,” he mumbles, feeling his face flare with more embarrassment. He feels like an idiot. He clears his throat. “_More_ than nice… I love it… You’re so good… You like having your mouth on me, Buck?”

“Mhm,” Bucky hums, nodding enthusiastically as the wet muscle slides in and out from between his plush lips. He pulls off and then tilts it up so he can press his lips right below the underside of Steve’s cockhead and suck.

“Unh!” Steve’s back arches. “Right there… Buck… D-Damn… Been obsessed with your mouth since we were kids… Used to… _hah_… Used to have dreams of it all over me…”

That makes Bucky groan, and the brunet has to press the heel of his hand to his hard-on to give it some friction while also trying to force himself not to come too soon.

“You want me to keep goin’?” Steve asks curiously, and Bucky groans out a guttural, “Yeah…”

“Put your mouth back on me then.” Bucky does, and it’s glorious. Steve’s body undulates; rhythmically pushing Bucky’s head down in time with the older boy’s movements. “_Ohh…_ Love your perfect mouth… Your lips are so pretty… You like when I call you that? You like when I call you ‘pretty’? You call me pretty all the time, but it’s you, you’re – _Christ, Buck –_ you’re the breathtaking one… You got lips made for suckin’ dick…”

Bucky moans loudly. The more Steve’s talking, the hotter the content coming out of his mouth is getting. Bucky can’t believe it. It’s possibly the sexiest thing he’s ever heard – Steve’s voice saying those wanton things – and he feels like a kid in a candy store. He highly doubts anyone else on the planet will ever get to hear Steve Rogers say these sorts of things, and the more Bucky thinks about it, the more he gets off on the idea that every day for the rest of their lives, the world over will always
see Steve as this precious, naïve, inexperienced little thing – while he’ll know better. He always knows Steve best.

“God, Steve, why’ve you been holdin’ out on me?” the brunet groans, pulling his mouth off for some air but still licking along him with noisy breaths. “Got a mouth like a pornstar on ya – so goddamn perfect. Christ, you’re hot. Need you in me; need you to fuck me, Stevie.”

Steve pushes his face back down onto his lap, watching with a scrunched up expression as Bucky willingly sucks him down his throat again, even though he’s clearly getting tired and his jaw must be aching. His lips are swollen and tender-looking, and Steve wants to fuck himself into Bucky’s mouth until he comes undone, but then who knows how long it’d take to get him ready again. It’s a very difficult thing to hold off on doing, though.

“You want me, Buck?” Steve chokes, his voice laboured. He’s so lost in watching his brunet boyfriend that he doesn’t even second-guess it when he adds, “You want me to fuck your pretty little ass?”

“MMM!” Bucky’s eyes fly open wide, staring at Steve’s pubic bone as his body suddenly jerks, his orgasm flooding over him without warning. He pumps his seed all over the floor and his fist messily. Both the Brooklyn boys are equally surprised. Bucky makes confused albeit blissful sounds as he tries to continue sucking Steve even through the strong currents of his climax.

When it passes, Steve feels the sudden urge to tell Bucky to clean it up, but then the brunet is pouncing on him and knocking him back onto the cot; that same mouth that was just on his dick now crushes against his. He can taste the salty, bitter taste of his precome off of Bucky’s tongue, and he isn’t sure how much he enjoys it, but the sentiment is always hot because it’s a little bit of himself that’s now a part of his best friend.

Steve’s on a roll now. He isn’t even sure if what he’s saying is crossing lines or getting too filthy. He’s too far gone to overly care. Bucky’s kissing him with everything he’s got and the blond pants between kisses, “Wish I coulda blown my load in your mouth. Wish you woulda had me warmin’ up your belly and keepin’ ya full.”

“What… the fuck, Steve,” Bucky groans slowly, almost sounding as though he’s offended. And he is, you see – he can’t believe Steve denied him this side of him for so fucking long.

“Too much?” Steve asks with a hint of worry.

“Not enough,” Bucky snaps, kissing him hard before leaping back off the cots to run to the dresser and grab the jar of vaseline from the top of it. Opening it up, he lets the lid fall to the floor and then thrusts the container into Steve’s hands before attaching himself back to the blond’s mouth. “Hurry up, hurry up,” he says impatiently. “Don’t take your sweet time, Rogers – we’re past that. For the love of sweet fucking Christ, get inside of me!”

The smaller boy growls again and Bucky doesn’t think there will ever be a nonsensical sound that’s as hot as Steve Rogers doing that. The blond mouths at Bucky’s neck hungrily, biting and licking and sucking, leaving marks in his wake that Bucky hopes will last. He barely softened from his orgasm so he’s still feeling rather worked up and needy, as if he never came at all. Meanwhile, Steve slicks three of his fingers up – just to be sure – and then lowers the vaseline to the floor.

“How should we-?”

“Uh, I could--”
“Hands and knees, maybe?”

“Whatever you say, soldier.”

“Hands and knees, now.”

Bucky’s excited all over again, but it isn’t until he actually gets into position that he starts to feel a little scared. Because what he wanted most is actually here now and all he wants to be able to do is take it, for Steve. Not let that amazing little punk down.

Steve senses the shift in the air – or maybe now that the moment’s finally arrived, he’s hit with the same dose of nerves that Bucky is. But Bucky feels Steve’s dry hand gently press flush to the center of his nape and then run down his spine soothingly before rubbing over his taut rear.

“You still sure you wanna do this?” Steve whispers.

Bucky lowers himself down to his forearms to get more comfortable and clasps his hands together, his head falling forward. “Yeah,” he replies quietly, and already he’s starting to shake. “Just… take’er easy, alright?”

“I’d never hurt you,” and soft lips kiss his tailbone.

Bucky sighs, closing his eyes and feeling warmth spread throughout him. “I know, baby…”

“Tell me if you need me to stop at all.”

“I will.”

“Okay, I’ll just… Okay…”

He spreads Bucky with his clean hand and takes a moment to stare at his puckered hole. He’s never really seen one like this; he’s always been the one to take it, and if he did it to himself, he didn’t look in the mirror or anything. It’s a lot smaller than he’s expecting for some reason, but cute. He’s also aware that this is about the most vulnerable Bucky’s ever been, and he suddenly feels overwhelmed with gratitude. Bucky is baring everything he has to Steve – his body, his heart, his soul – so that Steve can have his moment to regain some confidence, some control in his life… Bucky Barnes really is the greatest thing to have ever happened to him.

Kissing his lower spine again, Steve brings the tip of his middle finger to Bucky’s entrance and presses against it. Bucky starts a bit at the wet feeling but Steve whispers soothingly to him and he relaxes. He presses only the tip of it in and his head feels light at the way it feels around his finger, even though it’s exactly the same feeling as his own body… Smooth and warm, like marble.

Bucky grunts uncomfortably and drops his head into his arms. His body is so tense that it’s already growing clammy and misted with perspiration. He knows he needs to loosen up, because remaining so taut will only make the push in harder, but it’s difficult to keep control over his breathing. He wonders how Steve managed to pull it off so well, given his asthma. Steve must be superhuman.

Steve alternates between watching his finger and the back of Bucky’s head, on the lookout for any signs of overt distress or desires for him to stop. He rubs the brunet’s back with his other hand in gentle circles.

“How’s it feel, Buck? You need me to stop?”

Bucky shakes his head. “No, I’m okay,” he grunts.
“Okay,” Steve murmurs, looking back down. He slides a bit more of his finger in, up to the first knuckle; watching the way Bucky’s tight ring of muscles sucks around his digit. It’s a beautiful sight. The brunet groans louder, the sensations from the penetration astoundingly acute. He wonders if it feels this distinct for the dames, of it’s just a guy thing. He’s stretched a bit wider, and it’s possibly the strangest feeling he’s ever experienced. He isn’t sure just yet whether or not he likes it.

Steve repeats the same process; continues rubbing Bucky’s back and talking him through it with quiet praises – *It’s okay, Buck, I know… It’ll start to feel good soon… You’re doing so well, you look so wonderful* – keeps a watchful eye on his best friend’s reactions, and then asks him if he wants Steve to continue or not. He does this over and over at an achingly slow pace until his finger is entirely buried in Bucky’s body.

“Ugh… How do you *do* this, Stevie?” Bucky hisses, eyes squeezed shut and now resting his forehead between his arms against the cot. “Feels so weird.”

“It’ll feel better soon, Buck, I promise.”

He starts moving his finger slowly, treating Bucky as if he were made of glass, and for a fraction of a second Steve gets an idea of how Bucky feels with him. Steve really doesn’t want to hurt him and that’s the number one priority right now. At first, Bucky’s bodily response contradicts itself – his muscles try to pull him in tighter, but he constricts around Steve as if trying to keep him firmly in place, immobile. Bucky’s breathing is ragged and rough and by the time Steve’s able to slide it slick, in and out, slow and gentle, the brunet’s back is shining with sweat.

“You can add another now if ya want,” Bucky says after a few minutes; voice so strained.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, think I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, just tell me if you’re not.”

Bucky grits his teeth and cries out hoarsely against his arm when the second finger stretches him all the more open. There’s burning and some pain, and again, he knows he’s making it harder on himself by the fact that his body *refuses* to cooperate and settle down. Steve’s so gentle with him, so tender, and works those digits in and out of him at a snail’s pace; and that hand on his back never stops circling, and for the first time in *God-knows-how-long*, Bucky actually feels as though he’s completely at his best friend’s mercy and Steve’s helping him through it… saving him.

Steve twists his wrist back and forth so he fingers can wiggle softly inside of Bucky’s body… And when he slowly crooks them, he brushes against something. Bucky’s back immediately bows and his head snaps up and he moans heatedly.

“What was – was that-?”

“That’s when it starts to feel good,” Steve confirms, still working Bucky carefully, but making sure to seek that spot out every few thrusts so the brunet’s body can reap the benefits.

Bucky never thought that much pleasure was physically possible. It all makes sense now why Steve goes insane whenever Bucky hits that sweet spot inside of him, because every time Steve’s fingers touch it, his cock gives a mighty jerk and he feels as though he’s about to come. It’s so good it’s almost painful.

The longer Steve pumps his fingers, the more the brunet’s body finally starts to adjust around them. Soon, Steve’s got the third one right in there with the other two, and he’s now holding onto Bucky’s
hip with the other hand to keep him steady. Biting his lip and drops of sweat clinging to his forehead, the blond grunts softly as he fucks all three digits in and out of Bucky’s hole – now slick and welcoming – fast and hard.

_Because Bucky had long since begged him to._

The brunet’s head is pressed back into his arms, and he’s banging his fists around and clutching at anything he can grab hold of. “Oh! _Fuck!_ Steve! Oh God, oh God, oh… _Auh!_ Harder… _Nnnngghhh_…” Anchoring himself by gripping the frame of the cot, Bucky shoves himself up and looks back at Steve – and he looks absolutely _debauched_ as he thrusts himself back onto Steve’s hand.

The blond obliges; his own lips parted and cheeks flushed and breathing heavy. Bucky’s body looks so exquisite taking his fingers like this. And _Christ_, the older boy is so receptive of all the sensations that Steve can barely keep a steady grasp on his hip with how _drenched with sweat_ Bucky is. His brown hair is soaked to his forehead and temples.

The air in the room is hot and thick with the smell of sex and pheromones. Bucky shrieks when Steve scissors and then shoves them back in with direct contact to his prostate, and Steve’s so goddamn turned on – feels so goddamn powerful – that he can’t even think to warn him to keep quiet. He wants the opposite.

“You like that, sweet boy?” he husks. “You’re takin’ it so well – you were made to be _fucked_ like this. God, you look so perfect, you’re so beautiful; wish I could draw you like this, all wrecked and sweaty and dyin’ for more… Maybe I just might; maybe I’ll draw you in all sorts of positions, hmm? Should draw you with your lips wrapped ‘round my dick is what I should do.”

_“Steve!”_ Bucky keens. He’s long beyond gone. He may still be Bucky Barnes, but right now, he’s just a shell of a man who desperately needs Steve Rogers to fill it. He’s a slave to his best friend; will do literally _anything_ and _everything_ Steve wants him to do, as long as the younger boy will continue making him feel this way.

“Yes, Buck? Whaddaya want?”

_“Oh Goooodddd, fuck me, please._ Fuck me so hard; wanna feel you inside me, bet you feel so good, like your fingers – shit, _auh_, your fingers feel so goddamn good,”_ he babbles.

Steve bends forward and licks his back, lapping up some of the sweat making Bucky’s skin glisten. He pulls his fingers out and grabs the vaseline, scooping out a generous amount. He coats himself and groans at the temporary relief it provides him, stroking himself like that. Bucky’s still writhing wantonly, wiggling his ass in the air, back arching up and down.

Heart hammering away, Steve grips himself steady to Bucky’s entrance and says, “Tell me if you need me to—”

_“For god’s sakes, Steve, just put it in me already!”_

He pushes in hard with one thrust. Bucky howls. Steve grips his shoulder with his clean hand and Bucky’s hip with the other and groans loudly at the feeling of his best friend’s body swallowing him whole. It feels extraordinary; he gets why Bucky likes it so much. His cock is squeezed and hugged snugly within those tight walls, and when he twitches, it pulls a moan from deep in his chest because _wow_…

“Stop bein’ so fuckin’ bossy!” Steve snaps and brings his hand down on Bucky’s rear before he can think better of it. There’s a loud smacking sound that echoes off the walls around them and the brunet makes a choked, shocked grunting sound. Steve stills. “Buck,” he whispers. “Buck, I’m… oh my God, I’m so sorry…”

“Again,” Bucky cuts him off. He circles his hips around Steve, even though it burns, because Steve’s dick, even at average, is still larger than his fingers, and inside his body it feels fucking massive. But he doesn’t care. “Do it again or I swear, m’gonna cut your hand off in your sleep.”

“I–”

“Do it, you coward!”

That does it. Steve lifts his hand and brings it down again, hard. It smacks off the flesh and leaves it a light rose, and Bucky groans vehemently.

“Again…”

Steve does. Again, and then again, and then again. He watches the flush on Bucky’s ass grow darker, and this is twisted, he shouldn’t like this, but Bucky’s getting off on it like it’s just about the most arousing thing he’s ever felt, so Steve can’t help but go crazy for it, too. By the fourth consecutive spanking, he licks his palm up to the tips of his fingers (can taste Bucky’s sweat already making it wet) and snaps it off Bucky’s skin again. Bucky’s just about as delirious as he can get.

“Oh! Oh yeah, oh fuck, auh, auh… Fuck… me… Oh, please, oh…”

Steve grabs his muscular hips in his hands and starts pounding into Bucky, skipping the pleasantries. He’s pretty sure Bucky’s wanting more than slow and gentle right now. It’s tough for Steve, because he’s exerting himself pretty badly and he can feel how it’s getting harder to breathe. But he can’t stop. The sound of skin slapping on skin ensures that.

Bucky is in Heaven. If he died right now, and he was fortunate enough to make it up there, he’s three hundred percent sure it would pale in comparison to this. For such a little guy, Steve packs a wallop, and it’s rough and barbaric and it hurts, there’s no doubting that, but just the fact that it’s Steve – good, moral, innocent Steve – fucking him like this is enough to make it good. Amazing. Sensational. His erection hangs heavy between his legs and he would think to stroke it if he could even think at all. All he knows is the cock in his ass and the cries on his lips.

“Buck… Mm… C-Christ… You feel so good – God, you’re tight…”

His hips snap into Bucky like a piston, like a machine made for fucking, even though his body is breakable and small and by everyone else’s standards, should amount to nothing, let alone this. They moan and move and cry out together, and they wouldn’t be surprised if they had another strongly-worded letter nailed to their door by morning. Because whereas when Bucky fucks Steve, it’s usually just Steve who’s the vocal one, when it’s Steve fucking Bucky, they both sound like they’re being murdered. It’s both ridiculous and completely beyond their means to contain.

Nothing this good should ever be censored.

Bucky’s lids are half-closed, and when Steve shifts the angle of his hips and drives against his prostate – yeah, he sees stars. It’s so overwhelming that he is no longer even capable of screaming, of moaning, or even of gasping… His head just hangs there as his body jolts back and forth from Steve’s thrusts, and he stares down at nothing with parted lips and an empty yet feverish brain. He breathes out low “auh”’s each time he’s filled to the brim, and then once again, it’s mainly Steve’s
sounds surrounding them both – moaning and gasping and crying out in the way Bucky no longer can, as loud and as dedicated as if he were the one being fucked.

Steve hits his prostate again. And again. And again.

“Ohhhh God,” Bucky whimpers, finally finding his voice again. It’s strained and pitchy and sounds far too needy to be coming from him. “Right there… ohh… Ohh… Captain… Oh, Captain… Oh, Captain, my Captain, FUCK!”

Steve groans at the name; the title sparking every simmering ember within him that yearns to be something more. His lungs are rattling with every breath but by the grace of God, he’s still somehow able to hold onto that tether that keeps him from tipping over the edge into an asthma attack. He drives into Bucky, and the brunet’s body jerks; he has enough thought to now grab his dick, jerking it furiously, completely out of time with the way Steve’s moving inside of him.

“Captain R… Rogers… So good, mmm…” He twists awkwardly so he can glance at Steve from over his shoulder. The sight makes him exhale a shocked, “Holy fuck.” Steve’s plowing into him and he can see it – the look on his face, the way his little body moves with so much more strength than it looks capable of, and it really hits him – Steve’s fucking him; Steve looks fucking godly right now… And it’s too much. “M’gonna come, Stevie, I can’t hold on…”

Steve’s relieved to hear this – he can’t either, and he’s also selfishly not wanting to continue playing with fire, because nothing would kill the mood more than having to stop because he did fall into an asthma attack.

“Come for me, Buck. M’gonna, too, you feel way too good – been needing to do this since before we even started.”

“Steve…”

“Buck…”

“Steve… baby… you fuck so nice, oh! Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck, yeah!”

Bucky spills first, making yet another mess, only this time on the cot. Steve whimpers as he feels his balls rising and Bucky’s sounds are the tipping point. With one final thrust, pleasure crashes over him like a tidal wave, and he cries out brokenly, the sound laden with whooping gasps. He fills Bucky up until the brunet is actually leaking around him, and then before he can let himself enjoy the moment, he’s carefully pulling out (Bucky whimpers, goddamn it, why must he always sound so tantalizing!?) and running to grab his inhaler. He stuffs it into his mouth the second it’s in his hand, and sinks to the floor while he pumps his lungs full of medicine. They burn and they hurt, and now that Steve’s endorphins are simmering back down, he can actually feel just how badly.

Bucky pants with his head buried into the pillow and then turns his head to cast a glazed eye on the blond. The second he sees him, he’s jumping out of bed to run to him. He only gets one step forward though before the most comical look of horror washes over his face and he straightens, bringing one hand behind him and clenching. It’s leaking out of him and fuck, gross! It’s the most unpleasant thing he’s ever known.

Despite everything, Steve knows what the problem is and can’t help but let out a loud peel of laughter.

Bucky scowls in disgust, eyes wide, and holds up a single finger. “Just one second!” Hobbling to the bathroom as quickly as possible, he goes to clean himself up. Steve focuses on his breathing until his
body is relaxed again and it’s not as arduous to inhale. Making a face of his own, he goes and grabs a cloth from the kitchen, wets it, and returns to the bedroom to clean up the mess they’ve made.

A few minutes later, the floor is clean and Steve’s working on scrubbing the stain of come from their cot when Bucky walks awkwardly back into the room, one hand on his ass. Steve takes one look at him and tries not to laugh.

“Shuddup,” Bucky mutters, but he’s got a lazy smile on his lips; still high from the pleasure. “How much am I gonna hurt in the mornin’?”

“Decent amount,” Steve replies, sighing and giving up on the stain. It’s as clean as it’ll get. “I didn’t exactly go easy on ya.”

Bucky hums with content, picking up the vaseline and screwing the lid back on. “No you did not. M’glad you didn’t though.”

Bucky joins him on the cot, takes his face, and kisses him.

“How’d ya like it?” Steve asks, and he can’t help the note of desire for approval in his voice.

Bucky gives him a look. “Is that a serious question? I thought I made that pretty obvious.”

“Were you puttin’ any of it on?”

“What? Steve, no,” Bucky frowns. Does Steve really feel that poorly about himself that he’d even have to ask that? After the day he’s had, Bucky supposes it makes a sad sort of sense. He strokes the blond’s face with his thumbs. “You need to give yourself more credit. You were at least a solid seven.”

“A seven?”

“Okay, maybe an eight. Eight and a half because of the dirty talk.”

He grins playfully and Steve scoffs good-naturedly, grabbing one of the pillows and thumping Bucky across the head with it. Bucky just takes it and tosses it behind him, smiling adoringly at the blond. “But really,” he says, voice much more serious now. “Are you feelin’ any better? From earlier?”

Steve takes a second to check in with how he feels and then gives a slow nod. “I’m still a little down about the whole thing, but it’ll all work out. I’ll find a way.”

Bucky sighs, knowing he’s not about to get back into this discussion again. Instead, he just kisses Steve’s slick forehead. “Okay, buddy.”

“We ever gonna do this again?” Steve asks while they’re in the bathroom, splashing water over their faces to clean off the sweat. “Cause if we are, we’re gonna need to learn how to quiet down. That was way too reckless. M’sure the whole building could hear us.”

“Well, Mr. Waters’s place still hasn’t gotten any new renters, and the Burkes went on vacation last week, remember? So at least our immediate neighbours weren’t around.”

“Guess so. Still…”

“Yeah, I know, you’re right. It was my first time, gimme a break.”

Steve smiles to himself, feeling a tad smug. Mostly proud. He kisses Bucky’s bicep. “And ya took it
like a champ.”

“We’ll be more careful next time,” Bucky says, turning the tap off.

Steve nods.

They put on clean clothes and go back into the kitchen to finally eat their dinner. Bucky walks a little funny and Steve tries his best not to chuckle. When he does, Bucky just gets him into a headlock and gives him a noogie, much to Steve’s annoyance. An hour later, they finally sit down and enjoy the meal Bucky had intended for them to eat long before. It tastes just as delicious.

While doing dishes, Steve thanks Bucky for having cleaned the apartment. He shows his gratitude by dropping to his knees while Bucky’s hands are still somewhat in the dirty water. The brunet laughs incredulously and calls Steve insatiable; asks him if he’ll be able to talk Steve into talking dirty to him again in the future. Steve tells him not to hold his breath. When Bucky calls him a punk, Steve lovingly calls him a jerk.

It’s the last thing he says before he sets his mouth to better use.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: For Steve's twenty-fourth birthday, Bucky surprises the birthday boy by telling him it's his turn to try drawing Steve. While on their way home from seeing the fireworks, they make a three-legged friend.

NOTE: Just wanted to make it clear that though bottom!Bucky will make more appearances throughout this story, Bucky will predominantly remain the top in the relationship. I prefer Steve as the bottom (though I do love both), and for anyone worrying that once Steve gets all huge after the serum, he’ll become the new top, don’t worry about that, that’s not where I’m heading with this. Bottom!Bucky finally made an appearance because it was what Steve needed, but the dynamic in their relationship isn’t suddenly going to change. Bottom!Steve and top!Bucky is still the steady for this fic :) Just wanted to address that!

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
To Celebrate

Chapter Summary

It's Steve's twenty-fourth birthday; they celebrate with fluff and feels.

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*WARNING: This chapter deals on a small level with body dysmorphia.

Chapter Notes

It was a hot summer night,
and the beach was burning.
There was fog crawling over the sand.
When I listen to your heart,
I hear the whole world turning;
I see the shooting stars falling
through your trembling hands.
You were licking your lips,
and your lips were shining;
I was dying just to ask for a taste.
We were lying together in a silver lining
by the light of the moon.
You know there's not another moment,
Not another moment,
Not another moment to waste.
You hold me so close that my knees grow weak,
But my soul is flying high above the ground.
I'm trying to speak but no matter what I do
I just can't seem to make any sound...

And then you took the words right out of my mouth.
Oh, it must have been while you were kissing me.
You took the words right out of my mouth.
And I swear it's true,
I was just about to say I love you...

Now my body is shaking like a wave on the water,
And I guess that I'm beginning to grin.
Oh we're finally alone and we can do what we want to.
The night is young,
And ain't no-one gonna know where you,
No-one gonna know where you,
No-one's gonna know where you've been.
You were licking your lips,
and your lips were shining.
I was dying just to ask for a taste.
We were lying together in a silver lining
by the the light of the moon.
You know there's not another moment,
Not another moment,
Not another moment to waste.

And then you took the words right out of my mouth.
Oh, it must have been while you were kissing me.
You took the words right out of my mouth.
And I swear it's true,
I was just about to say I love you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**June, 1929**

Bucky doesn’t like to sit still. Blame it on whatever you want – hormones, testosterone, the fact that he’s just a kid, and boys will be boys, but the fact still remains that Bucky Barnes just does not. Like. Sitting. Still.

He doesn’t sit still during class, no matter how many times he’s reprimanded or gets his knuckles wrapped with the ruler or has to clean the boards after school has finished. He doesn’t sit still during Church, even when Steve practically boots him in the ankle as the blond turns beet red with mortification when the entire congregation is staring at them for disrupting. He doesn’t sit still during prayer before dinner – or dinner itself – and it seems like the Nuns only ever have to turn around for a split second before they’re calling out again, “James Buchanan Barnes, you get back in your chair right now!”

He feels like he has too much energy. He’s fire and drive and go, go, go, all wrapped up in the finely-wrapped package of a twelve-year-old kid. When he’s forced to remain stagnant, it’s only seconds before his left hand is twitching (he doesn’t know why it’s the left, since he’s right-handed by nature, but he’s had this habit for as long as he can remember) or his foot is tapping impatiently off the floor.

It’s a large part of the reason why everyone is always so quick to believe that Bucky is the bad influence in his friendship with Steve – because Bucky’s always here and there, presumably never in the same place for more than a moment at a time, whereas Steve – so small, so innocent – is regarded as the Boy Scout. Steve… Who says his prayers faithfully before every meal and on his knees before bedtime; who swats Bucky’s shoulder every time the older boy cusses or speaks too loudly or takes the Lord’s name in vain. Surely, everyone believes, Steve Rogers is just an accessory to all of Bucky Barnes’s mischievous schemes.

Now, Bucky doesn’t like to sit still – and sure, maybe he’s had his fair share of less-than-brilliant ideas over the years – but Steve is by no means an angel. Not in that sense. Because if the Nuns actually took the time to pay attention, they’d notice that it’s always Bucky pulling Steve away from a fight, or Bucky trailing behind that small, breakable boy every time the latter gets some hair brain that Steve always insists has nothing to do with compensation for his size. Bucky wouldn’t necessarily argue that Steve’s the devil on his shoulder, per say, because there’s no disparaging the fact that Bucky isn’t innocent either. It’s more like… They’re both perched up high somewhere; each the devil counterbalancing the other’s angel, with an equal amount of blame for the stupid shenanigans they get into.
But Bucky lets everyone think that about their friendship anyways; lets Steve get away with it, because Bucky knows there’s something inherently good in Steve that Bucky himself will never quite tap into. And he doesn’t mind being seen as the bad boy – it only seems to make the girls like him more.

But there’s one idea that Steve gets from time to time that Bucky, for the longest time, thinks is his worst of them all. And he knows whenever Steve’s about to ask for it because the blond is so predictable that way. In fact, it’s not even so much that Steve even needs to ask anymore – at this point, Bucky just knows. It’ll be at a moment when they’re not doing much of anything, and Steve’s got that worn-out sketchbook in his lap… And he’ll glance at Bucky on and off, over and over, for minutes before Bucky gets annoyed and mutters, “Ya keep starin’ and yer gonna go cross-eyed.”

And the younger boy will get embarrassed at getting caught – usually his cheeks will turn pink and for some reason, Bucky likes when he looks like that – and then he’ll mumble an apology and put all his focus back into whatever he’s currently drawing. Far too much focus, to the point where Bucky finds it amusing. There’ll be silence between them and Bucky sometimes plays this game where he likes to see how long he can keep that up before Steve glances over at him again. But it always ends in him caving; huffing a sigh, closing his book if he has one in his hands, and rolling his eyes as he asks with exasperation, “Where d’ya want me?”

Steve used to try and play all innocent about it; would pretend he didn’t know what Bucky was talking about, and then when he did, he’d insist that the brunet didn’t hafta. He doesn’t really do that anymore, he just sort of skips the pleasantries as his face immediately lights up. He’ll straighten and clutch his sketchbook excitedly before pointing to wherever he wants Bucky to get settled and telling him how to pose himself.

Steve’s drawings of Bucky are always real good. Too good, Bucky thinks sometimes when he sees them afterwards, because he doesn’t quite believe he looks like that. There’s something almost idolizing about the way the strokes of the pencil twist and form and cocoon the shape of his face and body. If Bucky didn’t already know it was him, he would swear Steve was drawing some sort of Saint, what with how glorious he makes him seem. Steve swears that that’s just how Bucky looks, and I ain’t did nothin’ but draw ya, but Bucky’s never wholly convinced. He likes the fact that Steve sees him that way, though. He isn’t overly sure why.

Bucky hates sitting still – absolutely loathes it. He’s incapable of sitting still for anything. Except Steve. Bucky always sits perfectly still for Steve, for as long as he can handle it. If he complains (which he does do in ample amounts at times) or asks how much longer until it’s over, it’s still with a stoic rigidness – a careful consideration not to turn his head out of its pose, or move his mouth too much, or even look away from where he’s been looking the whole time. On the inside, he’s pent-up and dying for one good twitch to ease the edge. Bucky’s never truly calm on the inside; there’s always some sort of swirl of energy that constantly makes him want to be in two places at once. But he always forces himself to ward it off for as long as it takes, until the artist takes pity on him and tells him he can take a break.

Bucky thinks after years of watching Steve that he wants to try his hand at drawing him for a change. At first, it was just a fleeting idea, until it grew and he actually found himself getting competitive in his own mind – as if he wanted to prove to himself that he could do it. He’d watched Steve draw for four years; how hard could it be?

Very, is the answer. Not only does his best friend become stubbornness incarnate when Bucky first suggests the idea – which leads to an argument because so you can draw me as much as you want but the second I ask you, it’s like pullin’ teeth; fine, I ain’t never posin’ for ya again! – but then once
Steve finally gives in and it’s go time, Bucky realizes he has absolutely no idea how to draw a face. Steve always makes it look so easy… And yet Bucky’s using the eraser to undo almost every line he puts on the paper, until it’s smudged unattractively and the brunet is making a loud sound of annoyance, ripping the paper from the binding, crumpling it up, and throwing it to the ground.

Even though a part of Steve feels a flicker of hope at the idea of Bucky giving up – because he hates being on display like this, he really does, and maybe that’s hypocritical of him but it’s not the same, because Bucky’s so handsome and he just isn’t, you see – he really doesn’t like seeing his best friend so hard on himself. So he murmurs encouragements and does his best to stay as still as possible while he does so. He builds Bucky back up until the brunet is sighing reluctantly and giving it a second try on a fresh page.

It takes about three times as long as it does when their roles are reversed, and it’s a Hell of a lot less graceful and inspiring.

When Steve sketches, he goes somewhere in his mind. It’s almost hypnotic to Bucky; he could watch Steve like that all day. There’s so much passion there – a concentration that Steve never seems to have anywhere else, as his baby blues study the structure of Bucky’s face as if it’s the only thing in the universe to have ever mattered. It’s the only time Bucky ever feels both so self-conscious, so self-aware, and yet so at ease and beloved… And it makes him feel things he’s not sure he should be feeling, having Steve look at him that way.

When Bucky sketches Steve, however, it’s laden with expletives and an angry commentary huffed under Bucky’s breath. There’s a lot of fuck, FUCK, this is stupid, why won’t this – sonofabitch, I just gotta… I – FUCK… Fuck this, fuck it! Language a boy of twelve shouldn’t be using, but he’s so worked up and peeved that Steve knows better than to scold him at the moment. And every time he says he’s giving up, which he does often, Steve just calmly soothes him back into continuing.

When Bucky finally finishes, he doesn’t want to show Steve. The blond leaps forward to sit next to the brunet and check out the final product, but at first, Bucky clutches the sketchbook to his chest and angles away, telling him how much it stinks. He tries to rip it out of the book before Steve can see it, with every intention of chucking it in the garbage in a hundred pieces. But Steve bounces up and down and keeps repeating, “C’mon, show me, Buck, please, pretty please, c’mon!” And eventually, Bucky sighs and gives in, because there’s really no way to fight a face like that.

It’s really not that good. It hardly looks like Steve, and that’s what upsets Bucky the most. Because he doesn’t understand how the rest of the world, how Steve himself, doesn’t see it – sometimes it makes Bucky feel like he’s looking at a completely different person than who everyone else must be seeing… Because to him, Steve’s sharp angles and delicate features and how he’s almost pretty - like a dame but most certainly not a dame because there’s still that masculine nose (defined and matured, even though he’s only a month shy of eleven), that overall essence of being a fella with the strength and presence that contradicts his stature – have always seemed like things that should be immortalized in art. Steve’s like a silent, wondrous, enigmatic storm. The kind you watch from a distance because it feels too powerful to get caught up in, but God, you want to try.

Steve gets this look on his face when he sees it. It isn’t disappointment or embarrassment like Bucky’s expecting. Rather, it’s almost like a quiet sense of astonishment; like the breath has been stolen straight from his lungs. When he tells Bucky in a small voice that it’s beautiful, Bucky thinks Steve is mocking him. At first, he gets defensive; maybe a bit too much. But Steve just takes the pad from him and keeps looking; shaking his head like he doesn’t know what to say… Like he can’t believe – much like Bucky can hardly ever believe – that that’s how the other sees them.

There’s something about the way Steve’s eyes are wide, looking almost lost, when he meets Bucky’s
own grey orbs to thank him that makes Bucky believe him.

Then Steve’s lips are pecking against his cheek before he even registers what’s going on.

It’s quick – barely a touch against his skin – but Bucky can’t help but think how soft and warm they feel. Steve pulls back and squeaks; literally squeaks, like he didn’t even think before he had acted. His face flushes crimson and he’s stammering now, and all Bucky can do is stare back in surprise. The blond hug the sketchbook to him as if some sort of lifeline and utters a barely audible, “Sorry, I…” before springing up and booking it out of the room. Presumably to the nearest mirror so he can properly dislodge his foot from his mouth.

Bucky just sits there, staring ahead. He gets a weird look on his face as he brings his fingers to his cheek and touches the spot where Steve’s lips had just been. It feels warm to the touch and it tingles - that one little spot - and Bucky wonders if that’s just in his head. Then he’s chuckling a laugh, quiet and private and to himself. He’ll go to Steve and poke fun at him for a bit, until he’s assuring the blond that it wasn’t a big deal and Bucky knows what Steve meant by it.

(He thinks.)

But for now, he remains where he is... And even though he’s sitting still – and Bucky never sits still, not for anyone but Steve – he suddenly, for the first time in his whole life, feels inexplicably calm.

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1942

It’s a tumultuous seven months, both in the world and in their own lives. Each month presents a brand new share of worldly complications. January brings a declaration of war on America and the United Kingdom from Thailand, as well as the first of American forces landing in Northern Island to join the good ole’ fight. The battle for Bataan continues into the month of February, and with everything that happens overseas during that month, the Western part of the United States begins to send away Japanese-American citizens to internment camps as a precautionary measure to avoid an invasion increase.

March is no better; American troops begin to land in Nouméa, New Caledonia – while a rumour starts spreading around that Jews in Berlin are becoming forced to mark their homes in order to publicly announce their race and religion to the Germans. The Pacific War Counsel meets in Washington come April for the first time, but the collapse of the ABDA Command quickly renders that whole thing pretty much useless, and the need for American soldiers to ship out increases dramatically when over 20,000 sick and starving troops become trapped on the Bataan Peninsula. The name Adolf Hitler is the primary thing on everyone’s tongues when by the end of the month that man rises to become a kind of supreme authority over in Germany.

In May, everyone thinks there might be a change in the tides when the US makes the first carrier strike of the Battle of the Coral Sea – attacking Japanese naval targets near the small island of Tulagi. That hope is quickly squashed though when – as it had seemed to be the case lately – the enemy forces prove to have already withdrawn and so the attack does minimal damage. Thanks to Hitler ordering elements of Richthofen’s Fliegerkorps VIII, the Germans start to develop increasing air superiority over their enemies.

By the fifteenth of the month, there’s a bill created in the States called the ‘Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps’ that allows for a women’s-specific branch of the military. Unlike with the men, the WAAC is entirely voluntary – and Bucky doesn’t even try to hide his relief when he finds out that Ginny isn’t taking part. No, she already has a job geared towards the war efforts, in a factory to help build weaponry. Even Steve is glad to hear that she’s staying where it is safe. Bucky would’ve felt a little
annoyed at that double-standard if he didn’t perfectly understand where his best friend was coming from. His situation isn’t the same as Ginny’s and he knows that.

Steve almost breaks his knuckles in June when the West starts to get news that gas is being used to kill the Jews overseas. They’re at the school when they hear about it, and before Bucky knows it, Steve’s throwing his fist into the wall with an angry cry. Immediately, all of Bucky’s concern selfishly goes to his best friend, who is clearly in a great deal of pain from his stupidity but is desperately trying to mask it. He helps the blond wrap his hand with some bandages Bucky’s able to lift from a local pharmacy, and though Steve’s anger only intensifies – especially in light of the news of what the Nazis have done in Lidice – he doesn’t try to attack any more walls.

Of course, Steve does try yet again to enlist when he finds out at the end of the month that America has deployed the II Corps to the European Theatre.

That marks his second attempt – his third overall – since he’d first been rejected back in December. The previous one had been in March.

The first time Bucky found out that Steve had somehow found his way to Philadelphia to try his luck at one of the recruitment fairs there, Bucky had almost ripped his blond head right off his body. Steve had never seen him so mad. Their voices rose in volume until they were in each other’s faces and neither was backing down. Bucky couldn’t believe his best friend would be so careless; falsifying your place of birth on an enlistment form is a crime and worse yet – what if they’d actually taken him? Steve usually tried to keep from hounding Bucky about his refusal to enlist himself, but then there he was, throwing that back in the brunet’s face. He did not – could not – understand where Bucky was coming from.

That night - that fight - had been a strange one. Bucky’s face was red from yelling but somewhere along the line, his eyes had become so black from the dilation of his pupils that he only looked all the more dangerous. If Steve wasn’t so infuriated and frustrated himself, he would’ve actually been worried that Bucky was about to slug him.

But that wasn’t what had happened.

What had happened was, their faces were inches from each other’s as they’d fought, and Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky had leaned down or he had moved up – or perhaps they had moved forwards at the same time – but suddenly they were kissing furiously; hands fisted in each other’s shirts and snarling under their breath like a couple of animals. Steve was in no mood to be manhandled, but he was almost certain with the way Bucky was acting that that was exactly where it was heading.

Only it wasn’t. Bucky didn’t lift Steve up or try to pin him down. As they made quick work of shoving each other’s slacks down and finding the other’s cock with their hands, Bucky only broke the kiss to suddenly turn around and bend himself over their kitchen table. Steve didn’t need any coercion, and Bucky didn’t need to ask. They fucked just like that – Bucky’s cheek pressed against the table as he cursed Steve and bossily choked for more, as Steve pinned a hand to his back and gave him everything he had until both Brooklyn boys were exhausted and sweaty and far too satiated to be angry anymore. Then, there, covered in perspiration and come and slumping to the floor so they could press breathless, open-mouthed kisses to each other’s mouths… Then they were finally able to talk about it.

It’s the same sort of case in June. Steve comes home one day and Bucky just knows – from the look on his face and the way the air changes the second he walks through their front door. He suspects that Steve somehow found his way to God-knows-what State this time, but he doesn’t want to know so he doesn’t demand the information. The blond is scowling at the ground and he tries to hide it, but not for long. Not once Bucky is taking his face and pressing reluctant kisses around his mouth in an
attempt to soothe him. They do not fight the way they had the last time, but that incapability to understand, that underlying anger that comes from neither agreeing with the other’s actions - it’s still all there. Bucky leads Steve to the bedroom while the younger man starts to vent, and Bucky doesn’t let him get very far – not before covering his mouth again and beating their tongues together as they make camp on the floor. They fuck until they’re sobbing each other’s names; Bucky on his back, legs wrapped around Steve’s slight frame with far too much extra space, as the blond moves in and out of him faithfully.

It’s a silent agreement that this is just how it is between them. Any other day and Steve enjoys the feel of Bucky’s weight crushing him down or holding him still while the brunet makes love to him or fucks him senseless. But whenever Steve gets another rejection – comes home questioning his self-worth and that familiar anger at the world pushing painfully against his chest – Bucky lets him do whatever he wants to his body. He never complains; he only begs for more. It’s the few rare times where the roles reverse and Steve gets to be the one in charge, and even though it’s also bittersweet because the sex is never fully tender or gentle – not with the frustration they’re both feeling – it’s what they both need for the time being.

And each and every time they finish, they fall right back into their natural pattern: Bucky holds Steve in his arms and kisses the top of his head until he feels the bony body relax against him… And Bucky knows with a hurting heart that he could ask Steve to stop enlisting until he’s blue in the face, but at this point, it’s obvious that his best friend isn’t going to give in. So he just waits until the blond is sleeping to whisper his pleas aloud, in the hopes that they’ll transfer into Steve’s subconscious, permeate his dreams… Maybe change his mind that way.

July 4th, 1942

“Oh for God’s sakes, Steve - seriously!?”

Bucky wraps an arm around the younger man’s shoulder – jacket in tatters and ripped around the elbows from the nice scrape Steve must’ve had with the ground – as the latter stumbles into the apartment, panting softly and scowling as he wipes at his bloody mouth with his hand. Bucky helps him into the living room and then strides into the kitchen, returning with a wet cloth to press to the gash above his best friend’s eye. Impatiently, he demands to know what happened.

“They left the soda shop without payin’!”

At this point, Bucky doesn’t need to know who ‘they’ is referring to – a couple of guys who, in one way or another, touched one of Steve’s many moral nerves. Today that nerve clearly seems to be the injustice of the good ole’ dine and dash. The brunet gapes at him, unimpressed with Steve’s answer. “And what – you just left Ginny there so you could go play hero?”

“Naw, I said goodbye to her first.”

“For fuck’s sakes, Steve…”

“It was Eleanor workin’! You know she needs the money – her husband just died; she works her butt off!”

Bucky sighs, easing up when he notices the wince Steve tries to hide. “Stevie, it ain’t none of your business what other people do. You don’t always gotta stick your nose where it don’t belong.”

“Someone needed to stand up to those jerks,” the blond mumbles, swiping at his mouth again and then pulling his hand back to assess whether the bleeding’s lightened up or not. Luckily, it has – at
“Just ‘cause you got a heart made’a gold don’t make you a white knight, pal. ‘Sides, couldn’t you have picked a better day to prove your nobility? Was s’pposed to draw you today, ya punk.”

Steve rolls his eyes, but it’s true. They’d already made the plans more than a month prior; for the blond’s birthday this year, Bucky was going to try his hand again at sketching him. He hadn’t done it in years but as it just so happened, he’d claimed to have been practicing. Steve isn’t sure if that’s the full truth of it or if Bucky was just short on cash and didn’t have enough to buy him an actual present. It didn’t matter how many times Steve insisted that Bucky didn’t need to get him anything – Bucky’s pride never let Steve’s hands go empty every time the fourth rolled around.

Still, being on display like that never did bode well with the artist. He prefers doing the observing rather than being the one observed. So, potentially getting a pass out of it doesn’t sound like the worst thing in the world – even if it had cost him a couple of scratches.

“Guess we’ll just hafta do it another day,” he offers casually.

The pressure against his brow ceases momentarily as Bucky pauses to give Steve an incredulous look. Pressing his lips together and giving a loud ‘hmm’, Bucky snorts, “Nice try. You’re good, but not that good. Still drawin’ ya today and yer just gonna hafta deal with it. Just means I’ll hafta get ya on yer good side.”

Steve groans. “I don’t have no ‘good’ side.”

“Shut up.” Bucky finishes cleaning up his face before placing a gentle kiss to Steve’s forehead. “I’m gonna get everythin’ ready,” he says, going back into the kitchen to rinse off the cloth. Afterwards, as the older boy does – his best friend having loaned him his sketchbook and good pencils – Steve leaves the room to go check out his face in the bathroom mirror.

He definitely looks roughed up, but not as bad as he was expecting. Sighing, he pulls off his shirt, just as Bucky had instructed him to do. Frowning, his eyes flicker over his bare torso. He hates the way his skin’s always seemed to have the transparency of wet paper, making the thin blue veins beneath the flesh stand out like little colourful rivers flowing in tangles all over his body.

He observes the jutting collarbones that Bucky always describes as “beautiful” and makes a disgusted face. The left one sticks out more than the right, since it had never healed correctly that one time Steve had fractured it after taking a nasty tumble when he was fifteen. They’re disfigured-looking, if anything - and he thinks, absolutely nothing beautiful about them. Same as his flat-as-a-board chest, or the way his belly is smooth and soft if you poke it – totally unlike the hardness of Bucky’s abs.

And his head. He could write a book about how disproportioned that thing is compared to the rest of his body… Sitting atop a long, thin neck (“Bawk, bawk, Chicken Rogers”, the kids had cackled for a solid month one summer when he was thirteen); face long and gaunt but cheeks no longer hollow – skin no longer the sallow shade of bad milk – since it’s summer and pollen allergies and the odd asthma attack don’t get to him as badly as the ailments of the colder seasons.

His ma used to say that his head was big because he had such a large brain. He was smart. The other kids were just jealous. And then when Steve would complain how his hands were too large from his frame, too, Sarah had just remarked without missing a beat that it was because God had put him on this Earth to be an artist.

“All drawers would do well with bigger hands, wouldn’t you say? You be thankful for what God
gave you, Steven – He gave you the tools when He could’ve given you nothing at all.”

Sighing, Steve turns his back on his reflection and heads out of the room, shutting the light off behind him. Bucky perks when he walks into his line of sight, and the brunet is sitting comfortably on the couch with everything ready to go. The smaller boy has his arms wrapped around his midriff.

“What’re you bein’ shy?” Bucky asks, frowning. “I seen you in your skivvies even long before we started goin’ steady, ‘member? Your upper body ain’t nothin’ I’ve never looked at before. You cold?”

Steve shakes his head.

“Y’sure?”

Steve mumbles something Bucky can’t hear and then asks before the latter can ask about it, “So what am I supposed to be doin’?”

Bucky lowers the book and walks over to him, gently untangling the gangly arms from around Steve’s stomach. “Well, you can stop hidin’ from me, for one,” he says with a small chuckle. When the blond won’t meet his eyes, Bucky slips a finger under his chin and tilts that face up to look at him. “Hey,” he murmurs, concern clouding over in his grey orbs. “Hey,” he repeats, leaning in and pressing a small, reassuring kiss to Steve’s mouth. “You know ain’t no one gonna see this but us. And no matter what you say, I think you’re the handsomest fella in all the State. The country. The world, even.”

Steve rolls his eyes but his cheeks are turning pink. “I get it, Buck.”

“Well, maybe not the whole world,” Bucky continues as if uninterrupted, looking away in mock thought. He feigns concentration and then adds, “Ain’t never seen every person on the planet so I s’ppose it’s not a fair judgement. There might be someone better lookin’ than you.”

Steve whacks him on the arm. Bucky breaks into a grin and kisses him again, holding either side of his head. “Relaaaaax, Stevie,” he says, pausing the kiss only to quickly utter, “I obviously meant me.”

Steve whacks him again, but this time there’s the tiniest smile on his face that’s impossible to hide. Bucky matches it, only multiplied in size, and then takes his hand and walks him over to the windows. The sunlight pours in and makes Steve’s skin look almost alabaster as winter. Bucky has the urge to run his tongue over the curve of his shoulder just to see if it tastes like snowflakes, but he’s fights it.

“Just stand like… that,” Bucky instructs, more to himself than anything it seems, as he helps position Steve the way he wants him. “Turn your head this way… Chin up just a bit…”

The end result has Steve standing ramrod straight, shoulders back and head held high, tilted to the side and staring off into the metaphorical horizon. His hands hang awkwardly by his waist but Bucky doesn’t mind; he’ll only be drawing Steve from the chest up anyways.

“I feel like a doofus,” the model complains.

Bucky shakes his head. “With the angle I’m gonna be drawin’ ya at, you’re gonna look fierce.”

“Why’d I need my shirt off for this?”

“Because I wanted to show you that even without coverin’ your body, you’re just as strong and
capable as the rest of us. *Ten times* the man the rest of us lowlies are.”

Steve grunts uncomfortably, shifting on his feet but not averting his eyes from the upper corner across the room. Bucky notices. “You gonna be able to stand in that position with your back? Would you rather sit?”

Steve *could* say yes; the pose makes him feel all the more exposed, as if bringing attention to every feature about himself that he’s self-conscious of. He could blame the discomfort on his scoliosis – an excuse that he knows Bucky wouldn’t think twice about accepting without argument. But… He also knows what it’s like to be an artist with a vision. And for all the times he’s had Bucky pose for him, whether *this way* or *that*, or *here* or *there*, and for all the times Bucky’s willingly done it no matter how tedious the task… Steve knows he sort of owes him.

So he shakes his head and chooses instead to mumble, “I just don’t feel very ‘fierce’.”

Bucky’s eyes run up Steve’s right arm and his fingers trail behind them. He cups the side of Steve’s neck and gives a small squeeze, replying, “I know.” Turning, he retakes his seat on the couch and pulls the sketchpad onto his lap. “Because you’re too down on yourself, buddy. That’s why I wanna try and show you how *I* see you. Now… I can’t promise this is gonna be some Michelangelo or Monet or whoever it was you were ranting on about last week, but… I’m gonna do my best. So, you laugh at it and I am goin’ to pummel ya.”

“I’d never laugh at it,” Steve insists, and they both know he means it.

Bucky smiles and then takes a deep breath. “Alright, uh… Think of somethin’ that makes you feel proud. Somethin’… That makes you feel as though you could take on the world.”

Steve tries but comes up with nothing. He stutters and then makes a frustrated sound, shaking his head. “I can’t think of anything, Buck.”

“Yes you can,” Bucky pushes gently, the tip of the pencil pressed expectantly to the paper. “Just try.”

Sighing, the model does as he’s told. He wracks his brain for any morsel of inspiration he can find when he suddenly pictures himself in full uniform, standing amongst his fellow soldiers after they’d won the war. The lapels and breast of his regulation jacket are adorned with medals of honour, and Bucky’s standing beside him, grinning proudly as the country welcomes them back – their heroes.

Something changes in his expression because Bucky says quickly, “Yeah, just like that – whatever you’re thinkin’, keep thinkin’ it.”

He quickly starts sketching, starting with the outline of Steve’s head. The blond, meanwhile, holds onto the image fueling his fire.

Bucky’s seen this particular look on Steve’s face before – when he fights, when he stands up to bullies… It’s the same look he’d had when he’d confronted Bucky the night he’d tried to pack up his stuff and leave. He’s not sure he’s ever actually fully grasped the concept of what *fierceness* looked like, but looking at Steve now, Bucky knows. It’s this.

“You’re the strongest guy I know, Stevie,” he encourages, eyes dropping and lowering rhythmically as the scratching of the pencil fills the room around them. “You’re doing great. You’re high up, above all of us; no one can touch you. You’re invincible. Yeah, keep doing that.”

He continues these little praises as he does his best over the following hour to best convey Steve’s face, Steve’s features. It looks light years better than that first attempt he’d made all those years ago,
but Bucky knows it still pales in comparison to his best friend’s level of talent. When he’s finally finished and moving onto the rest of his body, he tells Steve he can relax now. Whereas Bucky would let out a loud sigh of relief, laced with a comment (complaint) or two, Steve just carefully moves his head, working out the stiffness in his neck in silence.

Bucky doesn’t want to actually ask what Steve was thinking about. He has a feeling he already knows.

Now that he’s not putting his focus into keeping Steve up, Bucky’s frustrations become the focal point again. Despite – for all intents and purposes – already being past the most difficult part, Bucky finds he’s having more trouble nailing the outlines of Steve’s shoulders; the gentle shading on the inner lining of his throat. Then Steve’s hair is even worse, because Bucky’s never been good at those finer details. He curses quietly under his breath when he needs to start using the eraser in ample amounts.

Steve tries to busy himself looking around the room, or watching Bucky. But watching Bucky only mirrors back the fact that Bucky’s staring so damn intently at Steve, and the younger man really doesn’t like it all that much. Not under these circumstances. He can’t help but worry that all the cussing and difficulty stems from the fact that he’s just a subpar model, and has nothing to do with Bucky’s slightly limited skill set.

“Hey Buck…?” he says after a while, looking down and clearing his throat. He’s wringing his hands and he has no idea when he’d started.

“Mm?” the brunet replies distractedly, eyes lowering again. He huffs out a small, annoyed sigh as he gives a small shake of the head and picks up the eraser again.

“…Do you ever miss being with a dame?”

Bucky stops. Blinks, because the question came entirely out of left field and he’s not sure he heard correctly. Frowning, he looks back up at Steve. “What? No. Where’s this comin’ from?”

Steve gives a half-hearted shrug, averting his eyes again. “I just… Was just wonderin’. Never mind, forget I asked.”

But Bucky’s eyes don’t leave him.

“Steve… You know I don’t want nobody but you. You know that, right?” The blond nods. Bucky forces a warm smile, though inside, his heart aches just the tiniest bit. “Good, ‘cause it’s true. Besides, you got nothin’ to worry about; dames’ bodies don’t feel nothin’ like yours. I like yours much better.”

Steve tries to imagine what he means by that. Clearing his throat, he peers up shyly and finds the courage to ask, “What, uh… What do they feel like?”

Bucky pauses; looks like he’s about to answer but then looks back down at the sketch and keeps going. “C’mon buddy, we don’t gotta talk about this.”

“But I want to.”

“You’re just gonna work yourself up and get all jealous.”

“I’m not gonna get jealous – I just wanna know.”

Bucky sighs. “How come?”
Steve chews on his bottom lip in thought. Bucky doesn’t let himself stare for too long because he sure does look fucking pretty when he does that.

“I just… I mean, s’not like I’m ever gonna know,” the blond finally answers quietly. Bucky opens his mouth to protest but Steve just sighs. “Buck, even if we were gonna marry a couple of pretty girls one day, who would want me? You’re just about the only person who’s ever given me the time a’day.”

“Ginny liked you when she met you,” Bucky points out. There’s not even a tinge of jealousy to the fact; Bucky’s long since gotten over feeling threatened by her.

Steve shrugs. “She was never meant to be more than a friend. But c’mon – name one other dame who’s ever even batted her eyes in my direction.”

Bucky hates that he can’t think of any.

“See?” Steve continues. “It’s not like girls are linin’ up to date a guy they could trip over. So, I mean, I might not ever know. And who else am I gonna talk to about this? I’m askin’ you as your friend, Buck.”

Damn. The Friend Card – Bucky knows he can’t argue with that, as much as he wants to. Heaving a heavy sigh, he mutters, “You’re a punk,” before quickly pointing and sharply adding, “I’m not done yet!” when he notices that Steve had started to move. The blond rolls his eyes and resumes his position. Bucky doesn’t feel comfortable looking into Steve’s eyes while they talk about such things, so he busies himself with trying to perfect the stray bang that’s dangling in the middle of Steve’s forehead.

“I dunno, Steve,” he says with exasperation and a rise and fall of one shoulder. “It’s just… I dunno - you fit me like a glove. You just feel differently around me; kinda like your body was made just for me. Dames are great, don’t get me wrong. But, I dunno, they don’t feel as snug, if you know what I mean.”

Steve just stays quiet, listening intently. He actually didn’t know that. But he’s trying to imagine all the things Bucky’s describing and there’s a part of him that wishes he could’ve known what all that felt like.

“What’s it like goin’ down on a girl?” he asks when Bucky doesn’t continue.

Bucky raises an eyebrow and meets his gaze. “Okay, really, you actually didn’t know that. But he’s trying to imagine all the things Bucky’s describing and there’s a part of him that wishes he could’ve known what all that felt like.

“Anything?” he asks when Bucky doesn’t continue.

Bucky raises an eyebrow and meets his gaze. “Okay, really, you actually wanna hear all this?”

Steve nods. The brunet frowns and then bites his lip and shrugs, looking back down. “Okaaay, you’re the boss. Um… it’s tiring.” He chuckles and the blond smiles cluelessly. “It sometimes takes a while, I mean,” Bucky clarifies, stopping to mutter a barely audible “fuck” before wiping the eraser across the paper again. “It’s not as easy as suckin’ dick, I’ll tell ya that. With cocks, all you really gotta do is move up and down, and make sure you don’t forget about the suckin’ part and then the rest just comes naturally. But with the ladies…” He actually groans slightly with a small shake of the head. “Some like it when you suck ‘em, but then some want it rough while others are too sensitive
and need it gentle. Some like you to just tongue fuck ‘em, while others just want you to lick their clit ‘til they come. *That*, I tell ya, leaves your fuckin’ jaw aching.” He rolls his eyes dramatically. “So picky, right?” he jokes.

The younger man gets a small smile but just shrugs, because it’s not as if he has any actual input he can contribute. “You ever tried doin’ it from… you know… behind, with one of ‘em?”

Bucky lets out a sudden peel of laughter. “Yeah, once, and she just about cut my dick off. Was just askin’, y’know? She lost it. Started screamin’, and I got the Hell outta there.”

Steve frowns. “That wasn’t very gentlemanly to do, Buck.”

“Neither’s spillin’ out all their dirty details, but you asked me to do *that*, din’cha?” Bucky quips back. That shuts the blond right up. Releasing a deep breath, Bucky fidgets and then puts the finishing touches on the drawing. “We done talkin’ about this yet?” he asks conversationally.

“Sure. Sorry.”

“It’s alright; just kinda weird to talk about when we’re together. I don’t want ya thinkin’ you’re not good enough – I know how much you love livin’ in your head.”

Steve frowns. “I don’t love livin’ in my head.”

“Then why do ya do it so much?” Bucky retorts lightly. Steve bites his lip and lifts a hand to rub the back of his head, not knowing what to say. The brunet observes the drawing and then flips it around so he can see it. “Whaddaya think?” Bucky asks.

Steve’s heart skips a beat at about the same time he feels his face growing warmer. The man in the drawing – even though it’s hardly a literal manifestation of Steve on paper – looks like nothing Steve’s ever seen before. Even though it’s the same face, the same body and stature, the same *everything* that Steve had just rejected when he’d looked into the bathroom mirror (*every time* he looks into a mirror)... It’s somehow a completely different person. This one looks proud… brave… capable. Even with the larger-than-life head, the skinny neck, and the sharp angles in the collar bones – this man is somehow still Steve Rogers, while at the same time, being the further thing from him.

“I don’t look like that,” he breathes, moving closer to get a better look. But it sounds more like a question – *do I really look like that?*

A shit-eating grin spreads across Bucky’s face and, yeah, he feels pretty proud, even for him. He nods and lets the smaller man take the sketchbook from him. “You’re damn right you do. You always look that amazing to me. So I did alright then?”

Overwhelmed, Steve answers Bucky by suddenly crawling on top of him on the couch, straddling his thighs so he can lean in and grab the back of Bucky’s neck to pull their mouths together. With his other hand, he holds the present to his chest. “I still don’t believe you,” Steve argues stubbornly between kisses. “But still… Thank you.”

Bucky rolls his eyes but can’t stop himself from meeting every kiss with the same pressure as Steve dishes out. “Punk,” he breathes.

“Jerk…”

“I love you,” Bucky whispers; hands gripping gently onto Steve’s narrow hips and then splaying flush against his lower back.
“Love you back, Buck.”

“This mean you want birthday sex now?” Bucky teases when Steve puts the pad next to them so he can start undoing Bucky’s shirt. He leans back against the couch and feigns slight offence. “’Cause I mean, I ain’t that easy, Steve. I’m a little hurt that you’d think so. I’m a classy dame – I expect to at least be wined and dined first.”

“It’s my birthday,” Steve argues, finding Bucky’s pouty bottom lip with his teeth and nipping on it, eliciting a small groan from his best friend. He can feel the growing hardness of Bucky’s cock in his slacks beneath his hips, and Steve wants to chase its progression. Holding onto the back of brown hair, he grinds his own crotch down and then rolls it against Bucky’s, making them both shudder.

“Guess you’re right… what about a killer birthday hand job then?”

Steve frowns, pulling back. “I want you to fuck me.”

And for the love of all that is good in the world, only Steve Rogers could say something so filthy and yet deliver it with eyes so fucking innocent. He might as well have said, ‘I want you to tuck me into bed and sing me a lullaby.’

Bucky gapes slightly, stuttering on his next words, before groaning loudly and slamming his mouth back to Steve’s. “So goddamn needy, swear to God,” Bucky tutts whenever their lips momentarily break apart; his fingers working now on unfastening the blond’s belt. “I think I tainted ya; gonna hafta start washin’ your mouth out with soap.”

Steve tips his head back, eyes fluttering closed, as Bucky’s mouth latches onto his neck.

“S’my birthday,” Steve reminds him sluggishly. “I can say whatever I want.”

“M’not stoppin’ you.”

“So you’re gonna fuck me?”

“No,” Bucky replies all the same. Steve pulls back and looks at the older boy with confusion and even a bit of hurt. He can faintly hear the sound of Bucky’s fingers popping open the button on his pants before sliding down the zipper. “No,” Bucky purrs again and his voice, swear to God, drops an octave. He eyes Steve’s lips with hooded lids and the blond suddenly shivers. That shiver gives way to a choked moan when he feels Bucky palm his erection through his pants and give it a gentle squeeze. “M’gonna fuck you alright, but after. Want it to be good. Gonna pound you so hard you won’t be able to see straight.”

Steve huffs out in protest but it sounds a lot sluttier than he’d meant it to. He braces himself on the couch behind Bucky’s head so he can hoist himself up, giving the brunet room to pull Steve’s slacks down his thighs, just enough to let his erection spring free. They work together to get Bucky to the same place.

Their dicks rub against one another and they both breathe out a small groan. Bucky’s hand wraps around them. Steve’s back arches sharply when he feels that familiar pressure and then that delicious friction as the brunet’s calloused hand starts slowly stroking.

“If I have my way with you now, I’ll ruin you for the rest of the day,” Bucky continues; voice much more laboured and strained now. Steve barely hears him over the blood rushing in his ears. “Won’t be able to see the fireworks if you’re walkin’ funny.”

Steve, articulate as he is, can only reply with a high-pitched, breathless moan. They’re both riled up,
precome dribbling from their slits. It coats Bucky’s hand and makes the slide a lot more effortless. Bucky glances down and watches the way their erections look pressed – *pulsing* – together, and *fuck, sweet Christ*… He growls softly and Steve twitches in his hand. Beautiful.

“Look at you, all horny and dyin’ for it,” he whispers, lips finding Steve’s ear. The blond clutches into Bucky’s back and tangles his other hand in brown hair – in need of a cut, it’s getting shaggy and a little unruly, but Steve likes it that way because Bucky looks good no matter how his hair is. *More to pull on.* He tries unceremoniously to thrust his hips into Bucky’s fist but it disrupts Bucky’s rhythm.

“Damnit Steve, stop movin’,” he snaps, making a small sound of annoyance. Steve bites down a sour “*Make me*” and chooses instead to just follow his instructions and let Bucky bring him to the precipice like he always does. “That’s better,” the brunet husks. He drags his thumb over Steve’s wet head first and then his own. The smaller boy gasps. Bucky’s lips seal over his and swallow the sound as he licks into his mouth.

“Someone get a little turned on listenin’ to all that sex talk before?” Bucky teases, and Steve honest to God *mewls*, biting uselessly at the older boy’s bottom lip as he starts to shake in Bucky’s grip. Bucky can feel his inner thighs spasming lightly against his hips. It fuels him to start pumping his hand over them harder. They both jolt and release broken sounds of pleasure.

“Still like fuckin’ you best,” he breathes against Steve’s red and swollen lips. “Love the way you beg me for it… Love your beautiful cock… And your – *fuck*… The way your tight little ass feels wrapped around me… You feel the fuckin’ best of ‘em all, Stevie…”

“Buck,” Steve keens softly, pulse fluttering wildly in his neck. His lip begins to twitch. Bucky knows his best friend well enough to know what this means.

“You gonna come for me, baby?”

“Yeah…”

“*God, Steve*…”

“M’gonna… Buck, m’so close…”

“I know, baby… Me too…”

The squelchy, wet sounds of Bucky’s ministrations fill the air – quick and ruthless and filthy. The two boys press their foreheads together, and that sound of Bucky’s slick, frantic hand is only accompanied by their heavy pants and blissful slivers of moans. Less than a minute later and Steve spills first with a dizzying cry that quickly gets muffled in the meat of Bucky’s shoulder. Only a split second passes until Bucky follows suit, gasping raggedly and his body heaving with a shudder. Their release pumps over his fist messily and arcs on the skin of their stomachs, hot and sticky. Neither boy has the energy to care.

Once he’s caught his breath, Steve tries to pout about not getting what he’d wanted. His words die midsentence in favour of watching Bucky lift his fingers to his lips and start sucking off both of their juices from them. The blond stares wide-eyed like a guppy, making a pitiful, weak, little sound in his throat. He doesn’t even think twice when those fingers, still not fully clean, are offered to him; he just lets his lips part and lets Bucky slide the digits in. Moaning, he latches his hand around his best friend’s wrist and laps along, around, and between his fingers as if starved for it.

“Fuck…” Bucky breathes with slightly wide eyes. Chuckling, he pets his fingers through golden hair.
as he watches his precious little Kitten clean him off - so so enthusiastically. “Don’t know what’s gotten into you today,” he murmurs teasingly. “Must’a been somethin’ you ate. Or maybe your stupid little punk ass got off on gettin’ the snot kicked outta ya earlier. Shoulda’ told me you liked it so rough.”

To his surprise, Steve doesn’t outright argue this. But he does shoot Bucky a sharp look that the latter assumes is meant to convey the same thing. He chuckles and watches Steve adoringly, until the smaller man is letting his fingers slip out of his mouth and leaning away to wipe his lips with the back of his hand.

“How’s your lip doin’?” Bucky asks, brushing his thumb over it gingerly.

Steve shrugs. “Don’t really feel nothin’.”

“You sure you’re gonna be able to do anythin’ with that mouth later? Don’t want you hurting yourself.”

Steve gives him a deadpanned look. “Was that your way to tellin’ me you want me to suck you off tonight?”

“Well, I mean, if you’re offerin’…”

“It’s my birthday!”

Bucky laughs and swings Steve’s head under his arm to grind his knuckles down lightly against his scalp. Pulling Steve into a hug, Bucky kisses his neck roughly, making Steve squirm.

“You’re absolutely right, Mr. America--” (Steve smacks his arm with a scowl because it doesn’t matter how many jokes he’s heard regarding his birthday being on the Fourth – none of them are any less humourless than the last.) Bucky chuckles; sucks his earlobe softly and relaxes Steve right up. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you won’t have to do any of the work. Tonight’ll be all about you – gonna make you feel so good.”

“I want it now,” Steve whines.

Bucky pauses, pulling back with a thoughtful expression. “Huh. Who was it that told me – oh man, who was it that told me that? What was it…? Some old ancient proverb, or… Maybe it was in the Bible or somethin’…”

Bucky slaps Steve thigh to signal him to get off. Steve groans and crawls off his lap so the brunet can stand and do up his slacks.

“I get it, Buck.”

“No no, hang on, it’ll come to me,” Bucky says quickly. His brows furrow and he taps his mouth with his index finger, all mock naivety and innocence and everything Steve knows Bucky is not. “Ah! I believe someone once told me, ‘Patience is a virtue.’ Now who could’a told me that? Hmm… Might’ve been one of the fellas at the docks…”

“I get it, Buck.”

“Rick? No… No, it wasn’t Rick,” Bucky thinks aloud – a little too loud – as he cleans up the art supplies and lays Steve’s sketchbook neatly on the rickety coffee table. “Maybe it was Dale. Dale says stuff like that sometimes…”
“Oh, shut up, Buck.”

“I’m gonna figure it out!” Bucky calls sweetly as he heads into the kitchen. “Don’t you worry, buddy, it’s on the tip of my tongue.”

It’s only when Steve is in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet and right in the middle of his business, that Bucky throws open the door and pops his head in. Steve just about rockets off the lid in surprise.

“BUCK, WHAT--!”

“You told me that, Stevie. Just thought you should know that I remembered.”

Cackling loudly, Bucky shuts the door in the nick of time – narrowly avoiding the roll of toilet paper that had come barrelling his way and is now sitting in the middle of the hallway. There’s a moment of silence where Bucky just stares down at it and waits.

“...Bucky.” Steve sounds annoyed.

Picking up the roll, Bucky leans against the bathroom door with that familiar shit-eating grin. He holds it out and observes it, as if that toilet paper contains the answer to the meaning of life, before tilting his head in Steve’s direction and plastering a sweet-as-pie grin on his face.

“What’s the magic word?”

“Go to Hell, Barnes!”

The brunet makes a loud buzzing sound. “Nope, sorry, but we’re willin’ to give ya one more try. Magic word?”

“Bucky, give me the damn toilet paper!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m afraid the answer we were lookin’ for was ‘please’ – although, ‘Gosh, Bucky, you sure are the pinnacle of all that’s manly and handsome in the world’ would have been an acceptable answer, too! ‘Fraid you’re on your own, buddy.”

“Bucky, I swear to God--”

“What do we have as a consolation prize for young Stevie here?” Bucky drawls in his best radio talk-show voice. “Why, it’s – A BRAND NEW PONY!”

It takes twenty more minutes before Bucky finally stops torturing Steve.

He laughs loudly the second the door opens and Steve tackles him to the ground, fists flying.

They watch the fireworks with Steve’s head in Bucky’s lap. They looked around plenty before getting comfortable, and the odd time that someone had sounded close to walking by, Steve would bolt back up with time to spare. But no one was around when the fireworks started up, and so they knew they ran no risk of getting caught until they were at least finished.

Bucky leans back on his hands as they both look up to the brilliant night’s sky. Bucky can feel the boom of every explosion vibrating in his chest, but the way his heart slams unexpectedly when he glances down at Steve’s beaming face – baby blues twinkling with that ever-constant childlike wonder – puts the fireworks to shame.

I love you, he mouths silently.
Steve’s smile warms; makes the corner of his eyes crinkle in the way that Bucky adores, and mouths the words back. Taking one of the blond’s hands, they both tilt their faces back up and continue to enjoy the show, and Bucky softly kisses each one of Steve’s knuckles, back and forth, over and over, as they watch.

_I love you for the way you make me smile_, Bucky thinks as he kisses the pinky.

_I love you for the way you’re good._ He kisses his ring finger.

_I love you for the way you fight for what’s right,_ as his lips brush the knuckle of the middle finger.

_I love you for giving me the only reason I need to live_, he thinks when he gets to the pointer.

_I love you for being you. Always be you, Stevie_, he finishes at the thumb.

And when he starts all over again, he continues with a brand new list; and even though he kisses all of Steve’s knuckles and fingers over a dozen times by the time they have to peel themselves off the ground, Bucky knows he’d never have been able to finish listing the reasons why he loves Steve.

They’re walking through the park, down a more inconspicuous trail that affords them the luxury of being able to hold hands, when Steve notices the bustling in the bushes.

“Still.”

“What was that?” Bucky whispers. Steve just shakes his head, their eyes never leaving the spot ahead where _without a doubt_ there had been movement.

Automatically, the worst possible options race through Bucky’s head – some plausible, some… well, not so much, but it’s dark and they’re surrounded by trees and Bucky’s always been known for his imagination.

_It’s a group of punks – they’d seen us and now they’re gonna jump us and how much time will I have to throw Steve on my back and make a run for it? It’s a bear – it’s a big, angry grizzly bear and how much time will I have to throw Steve on my back and make a run for it? It’s a serial killer; what do I do then if it’s a serial killer? Or aliens – this is it, this is how it ends, Stevie and I are gonna be kidnapped by a bunch a aliens and we’re gonna be probed – I’ve read those stories! I’ve heard about what happens! Maybe if I just throw Steve on my back now and make a run for it, they won’t be able to catch up or--_

“Aw, Buck, look!” Steve calls over to him.

Bucky blinks and looks to his side; didn’t even realize Steve’s hand was no longer laced with his or that the scrawny blond wasn’t even _by_ his side anymore. He’s actually right up ahead _next_ to the bush, one hand extended and disappeared into the leaves. Bucky’s sort of relieved that – at least from the looks of it – it _ain’t_ aliens, because how crappy of a protector would _he_ have turned out to be?

“What is it?” Bucky asks; staying where he is because he hasn’t _completely_ ruled out the idea of it being a bear.

Steve’s cooing something quietly – too quietly for Bucky to hear – but then he backs up a bit, resting his weight on his haunches. A scrappy, mangy looking dog comes walking out. Well, _wobbling_ might be the better word for it. Its fur is a whiteish cream colour; matted with tangles and dirt. The most noticeable feature is the absence of its front left paw.

“You got a collar, little guy?” Steve asks, hand held out while the dog sniffs it.
“It’s a stray, Stevie,” Bucky answers, still remaining where he is. “Lots of ‘em around here. Probably out lookin’ for food.”

Steve makes an exaggeratedly sad face and starts petting the top of the dog’s head. When his fingers make work of scratching behind one of its floppy ears, Bucky sees its tail start to wag.

“Sorry, little guy, we don’t got no food on us, either,” Steve apologizes.

Bucky shoves his hands in his pockets, raising a brow as he watches them both. “How d’ya know it’s a guy?”

Steve shrugs. “I dunno, just a guess. Sure as heck ain’t gonna just lift up a leg and check.”

“Yeah, you should at least ask it out on a date first.”

Steve shoots him a look, and Bucky snorts out a small chuckle. Glancing back to the dog, who’s now excitedly trying to lick his face clean off, Steve begins laughing. Bucky can’t help but smile; Steve’s laugh is too infectious to be unaffected by. That laughter turns into a playful, surprised squeak when the dog – clearly forgetting its size – presses its paws to Steve’s chest in an attempt to get closer. The blond falls onto his back and the dog just waltzes up onto him, going to town on Steve’s face.

“Mmph! Get off, you silly goose! Yer breath smells awful!” But he just continues to laugh and turn his face this way and that, eyes closed, lips pursed tightly, and face completely scrunched up, as he barely makes an attempt to get the stray to stop kissing him.

Bucky sways on the spot and then clears his throat. “C’mon buddy, we should be headin’ home.”

Steve sits up then, causing the dog to skitter back. Slowly, it approaches him again and greedily accepting all the affection Steve’s hand is showing its head, as if it hasn’t had any human interaction in years.

“Stop bein’ such a wet blanket, Buck,” Steve says. “You haven’t even pet him. C’mere; he’s gonna think you don’t like ‘im.”

Reluctantly, Bucky sighs and goes over to his best friend. It’s not that he doesn’t like dogs – he’s just ambivalent towards them. He’d always wanted a dog of his own growing up, but of course, you weren’t allowed pets in the orphanage. If no one wanted to take care of you, why should you be allowed to take care of something else? But then he also remembers – never forgets – Old Man Crowley’s horse of a dog. Bucky hadn’t known the breed, still don’t, but he did know how terrifying it was to be chased down the street by it. He never forgets the sound of its bark or the look on its face as it had inched its way closer… Closer… Until its jaws had snapped closed on the ducktail of Steve’s shirt.

Steve had been running as quickly as he could, so when the mutt had jerked its head in the opposite direction, the momentum threw Steve right off his feet and hurled him to the ground. Bucky remembers the sound of Steve’s bones crunching as its mighty set of teeth had clamped down on the blond’s stickly ankle and locked its jaw. Bucky didn’t care how much they both loved animals at that point; he hit the dog with everything he could find, even his fists – even at the risk of the dog finally letting go and choosing instead to make Bucky the new target.

The whole thing felt like it’d lasted an eternity, but within only a couple minutes, there were adults on the scene who were able to get the dog off of them. Steve had to spend the rest of his summer wearing a shotty cast to reset his bones – but only after first getting a few stitches for the deeper
The dog obviously got put down. When Bucky had found out, he’d muttered a bitter “Good” under his breath. But to his surprise, Steve had cried; the blond had felt personally responsible.

Despite the fact that it had been Steve who, for all intents and purposes, had every right to develop a lifelong aversion to canines after the incident, it was Bucky who did. You just don’t forget a thing like that, and Bucky found after that, he never once desired to have a dog again.

Still, it’s Steve’s birthday. And really, Bucky has just about a difficult enough time saying no to him under any circumstances anyways. When he kneels down and hesitantly holds out a hand to the mutt, it pauses and just stares at Bucky. The brunet feels nerves creeping up his spine and then heat. He quickly realizes that heat is Steve’s hand rubbing gentle circles against his back.

“Try to calm down,” Steve says soothingly, knowing Bucky’s fears full well. “If you’re tense, it’ll make him tense. If you show he you’re calm, he won’t feel threatened.”

Bucky takes a deep breath and then forces a small smile. “Hey buddy,” he mutters. “Ain’t gonna hurtcha, see? You bite me, m’gonna bite ya back.”

Steve laughs, which eases Bucky up even more. The dog senses the weight in the air lift and sniffs around Bucky’s hand before head butting it. Bucky gets the hint and starts scratching the top of its skull. Within seconds, its tail is wagging so hard that the back half of its body is literally wiggling back and forth with the motion. Steve looks ecstatic when the dog pounces over him so it can practically tackle his best friend.

Bucky gets a shocked look as he falls onto his butt; his lap and legs immediately covered by this heavy, squirming heap of fur and slobbery kisses. He stammers but then finds himself falling into laughter, and maybe he won’t admit it out loud, but that knot in the pit of his stomach – that apprehension – unravels and is replaced with something light.

“Aww, such a good boy,” he says in one of those weird voices people always seem to adopt around animals. He uses both hands to playfully push around the dog’s head until they’re both play-fighting with each other. In the back of his mind, Bucky realizes that there’s something a bit heartbreaking at the way this dog is hobbling around the whole time. It’s second nature to the animal, so it isn’t as though it’s bothered any by it. But Bucky feels a little sad.

This actually is a cute dog, for a stray. And surprisingly people-friendly, which makes Bucky think it must’ve had an owner at one point. He wonders if they got rid of him simply because he was no longer ‘perfect’. He wonders if this dog had all four legs when he’d first had a family, and it was only after he became damaged goods that he was no longer welcome. Who would do that to such a sweet dog? He hopes that wasn’t the case.

“He’s an orphan, just like we used to be,” Steve says, a lazy smile on his lips. He’s still splayed on his butt; legs spread out on the ground and leaning back on his hands. He watches Bucky and the dog horse around, and he’s giving Bucky that look… Like Steve believes heart and soul that Bucky himself hung the moon. Bucky loves it when his best friend looks at him that way. It makes him feel like he’s capable of moving mountains.

“Yeah, poor little guy.”

“Do you think maybe we could…?”

“Steve, no,” Bucky interrupts, because he knows where this is heading. He sees the look the younger
man has on his face now. Sighing, he turns his focus on Steve, ignoring the way the dog’s teeth are still tugging on the corner of his sleeve with playful growls. “We can barely make ends meet for ourselves – we can’t afford another mouth to feed.”

Steve looks to the dog with a sad expression and then sighs. “Yeah, you’re right. Woulda loved to keep him, though.”

“I know, buddy. Maybe one day we’ll get a dog or somethin’. When we have the cash.”

Steve perks a bit and then turns over so he’s sitting on his knees. “Can we at least keep him for the night?”

“What?”

“I don’t want him havin’ to stay around here. What if someone catches him and they bring ‘im to one of those pounds or somethin’? They could put him down if no one adopted him.”

“Steve, we don’t have anythin’ to feed it – and what if it pisses on the floor?”

“We got some old newspaper I could lie down,” Steve insists stubbornly. “And we have tons of scraps we could give it for the night. All else he needs is water.”

Bucky makes a sound as if he’s beginning to say something, but one look at Steve’s face has him sighing and shaking his head, looking away. Pondering their options, he rubs the back of his head. “Just for the night though, right?”

Steve nods eagerly. “Just for the night.”

“And then first thing tomorrow, we start looking around to see if anyone we know can take ‘im.”

Another nod.

Bucky looks to the dog, who immediately steps forward and starts lapping at Bucky’s face affectionately and Bucky knows he’s lost this one. Sighing, he says, “If he takes a dump, you’re the one who’ll be cleanin’ it up.”

Steve’s eyes grow big – almost as big as that massive grin that explodes across his face; bigger and brighter and more fantastical than any firework Bucky could ever imagine, and the older boy feels like this might actually be his real present to Steve. They get up, dust themselves off, and continue down the path leading home. The dog, faithful as ever to these two new strangers, follows at Bucky’s heels.

“I think he likes you,” Steve points out.

“Probably ’cause he got his scent all over me. Probably thinks I’m his kin or somethin’,” Bucky replies. He gives the stray a lazy scratch on the head.

“If we were to keep ‘im--”

“We’re not keeping him, Stevie.”

“But if we were--”

“Which we’re not.”

“—What would we name ‘im?”
Bucky spares Steve a flat look. “Don’t name him, pal. That’s the easiest way to get attached. You name him and come tomorrow, it’s gonna be, ‘Please Buck, just one more night’ and then a night will turn into a week, which will turn into a month, and next thing I know, you gimmicked me into keeping a dog I told you we can’t afford.”

Steve shakes his head defiantly. “Will not! I just think it’s weird to have him stay the night when we don’t even have nothin’ to call him.”

Bucky rolls his eyes. “Fine, let’s hear what you got.”

“Well, I dunno, I didn’t have a list planned.”

“Good start.”

“Just gimme a minute,” Steve huffs. His face twists up the way it always does when he’s trying real hard to think, and to Bucky, it’s just about the cutest thing ever. “Scrappy.”

“Scrappy,” Bucky repeats dully. He shakes his head. “How about Stumpy?”

Steve gets an indignant look. “Buck, that’s not nice at all. If he had feelins’, I bet you would’a hurt ’em.”

Bucky glances down at the mutt by his side. “That so? Then how come he looks so happy right now?”

“Huh?”

Steve bends forward to get a better look and would you know it, somehow it’s true. It could be entirely coincidental, but there it is, wagging its tail so hard its back end looks about ready to lift into the air and fly the dog away. Steve sighs and mutters to him, “You were s’pposed to be on my side.”

Bucky laughs. “Well hey, if you wanted him to be your best pal, we could just name it Punk.”

Steve notices how no matter what Bucky’s saying, the second the older boy’s voice fills the air, the dog gets about twice as excited. His heart warms at the sight and when he rolls his eyes again, it’s entirely loving. Looking back to the stray, he says, “If you start actin’ like him tonight, we’re kickin’ ya out. I can only deal with one Bucky, got it?”

To both of their surprise, the dog barks – just once, like an affirmation. Bucky throws his head back and laughs. Steve grins.

“Fiiiiine… Stumpy it is,” Steve finally acquiesces. “But only because he clearly doesn’t know you’re mockin’ ‘im.”

“I ain’t mockin’ him, Stevie; I’m just pointin’ out the obvious.”

Steve eyes the spot where the front left leg should be. “How do ya think he lost it?”

Bucky glances down, too. “I dunno; maybe he was born like that?”

Steve hums in thought. “Maybe. But I thought I felt a bit of a nub when he was playin’ on me. Felt more like he’d lost it.”

Bucky pictures a plethora of ways Stumpy could’ve lost his leg. He doesn’t like any of them. “Maybe he got hit by a car.”
“Maybe he got into a fight with another animal.”

Bucky gets a small smile. “Maybe he was tryin’ to protect his gal from a bunch of no good punk dogs.”

Steve catches onto the game. “They tried to make it with his ole’ lady but Stumpy had to defend her honour.”

“And even though it was four against one, he never backed down – bet he sent all of ‘em home with their tails between their legs – ain’t that right, Stumpy?” They both look back to the dog and Bucky gives it a playful pet on the head. “Ain’t that right, boy?” he repeats in that same silly tone. Stumpy pants loudly and it looks like, they swear to the Almighty, he’s smiling. They laugh and it sounds a lot like music in the night’s air.

“Guess you were wrong, Stevie,” Bucky says, looking back to his best fella. “Sounds like Stumpy has a lot more in common with you.”

It’s well after two a.m. and they sit in the living room by the window. Bucky has his back against the far wall, arm resting on the windowsill as the streams of smoke from his Lucky rise and twist languidly. Steve sits opposite him, glancing out his stretch of window; their legs are lined one by one together, and with his free hand, Bucky absentmindedly massages Steve’s right foot.

They’d managed to sneak Stumpy into their building, up the flights of stairs, and into their apartment without detection. They set down some leftover food but the animal never seemed to want to leave Bucky’s side, so it had hardly eaten much. It wasn’t until they heard its stomach gargle that Bucky sighed and had to physically squat next to the bowl until Stumpy had finished eating.

He’s lying next to the Brooklyn boys; sleeping in the most ridiculous, sprawled-out fashion, but right next to Bucky’s leg. Its breathing is deep and easy, and every time he twitches from whatever dream he’s having – and Bucky wonders what dogs dream of – it brings a small smile to the boys’ lips.

All the lights are off in their apartment; the only source coming from the bright moonlight and the leftover burning bulbs of DUMBO. They’ve been silent for the better part of an hour now; just staring out the long stretch of window, enjoying the quiet… Enjoying this slice of serenity together.

Bucky lifts the smoke to his lips and takes a deep drag. It billows out from between his lips and circles musky and thick around his head. In the moonlight – with the way he’s staring out at the world beyond their home – his eyes look glazed and his face looks absolutely regal. As if Bucky was a Prince plucked right out of a fairy tale; trading his sword and armour for suspenders and cigarettes. Steve smiles peacefully and looks back out the window.

“Hey Buck?” He keeps his voice quiet; not because he necessarily has to, but because that’s just how it feels it should be right now.

“Yeah, Steve?”

Both still looking outwards, the blond asks, “Do you ever wish your first time had been with me?”

There’s a pause. Bucky fills it by taking another deep inhale and then blowing the smoke out the opened window. “All the time,” he admits, his voice low and soft. “I think a part of me had always wished it, even before I knew.”

Steve leans his head against the window, staring at the flickering lights on the diner sign across the street. “Yeah?”
“Yeah.”

“If I had been your first time, what do you think it would’a been like?”

Bucky hums softly, thinking about it. Steve watches the way he sucks from the tip of his smoke again; grey eyes narrowing slightly so none of it gets in, making them burn. Steve loves the way Bucky looks when he smokes.

“I think…” Bucky starts, speaking slowly, gently. “I think I would’ve tried to make it as careful for you as possible. You would’a been just a kid then…” He gives a short, quiet chuckle before making an apologetic face. “Actually, if we’re goin’ based off of when I lost mine, that would’ve made you thirteen.”

Steve doesn’t know why that doesn’t bother him.

“So? We’re just talkin’ – ain’t no harm in that. Keep goin’.”

A small, tender smile tugs up one corner of Bucky’s mouth. They both continue to look out the windows.

“I would’a tried to be real gentle with you, ‘cause I would’a been afraid to hurt you,” Bucky murmurs. His free hand continues to rub its thumb along the bottom of Steve’s foot and the blond sighs softly. “Would’a waited until night time, when everyone was sleepin’, then snuck you out of the house and brought you somewhere secluded where no one would find us. Would’a… would’a undid your clothes nice and slow an’ kissed ya all over. But, like… Kept that slow, too, ‘cause you would’a been so young and I know you ain’t never even kissed anybody back then, so I know you’d a been scared.”

Steve doesn’t try to argue it. He would’ve been terrified.

“I think I… I think I would’ve laid you down and had a blanket to keep ya warm while I took off my clothes. I would’a picked a night just like this one, so I could see how you looked under the stars…” Bucky’s voice is thick and slow, but it isn’t from the usual lustiness. It sounds more like the feeling of being full… of emotion, of nostalgia, of regret – regret that this wasn’t their reality. Steve swallows hard, feeling his heartbeat quickening but never averting his eyes from out that windowpane.

“Then I would’a… I would’a kissed you deep; would’a taken my time. Just to try and memorize exactly what you felt and tasted like. You used to eat so much peanut butter; I always wondered if your mouth would’ve tasted like it. Knew back then I shouldn’t’ve been thinkin’ bout that sort of thing, but… Anyways… Yeah, I mean… I think I would’a started touchin’ you – just, let my hands feel around your body, not even those parts, just… All of you. And I would’a asked you to touch me.”

“I would’ve,” Steve says quietly, and Bucky inhales from his Lucky again.

“I’d have just had you lie there, not hafta do any of the work,” Bucky continues after almost a minute. “Wouldn’t’a wanted you to hafta do anythin’… just feel. ‘Cause all I would’a wanted to do would be to make you feel as good as possible. You deserved it.” He pitches his smoke out the window and then tips his head back to exhale. Within seconds, he’s lighting up another.

“Then what?” Steve whispers.

Bucky smiles to himself – small and adoring – before taking a long drag and looking back out the window again lazily. “I would’a… kissed my way down your body, takin’ my time. You have
this… You have this way where you always get a little ticklish when I kiss your belly that you sort of… twitch against my mouth.” The brunet exhales a small chuckle. “Dunno why, but it’s always been one of my favourite things about you, since we’ve been together. I think I would’ve loved it just as much back then; would’a kept doing it until you were relaxing underneath me.

“Then I would’a gone down on you, and I probably would’a been awful at it.” They both chuckle quietly. “Had only gotten one or two hand jobs back then; never had a girl on her knees for me before, so I would’a had absolutely no idea what I was doin’ with you.”

“I probably would’ve only lasted a few seconds,” Steve ventures with a small smile; baby blues still fixed on the diner sign.

“Yeah, prob’ly… Would’a finished and I prob’ly would’a choked on it or gotten real grossed out.”

Steve smiles, imagining it so vividly in his head. “Then we would’a laughed.”

Bucky hums, exhaling from another drag and staring out in the opposite direction as Steve. “Yeah, we would’ve. Might’a killed the mood for a few minutes, but we would’a gotten back on track.” He pauses the story to enjoy a few good puffs from his cigarette. Blowing out a thin, long stream of cloudy white, he continues. “Would’a wanted to make you feel so good, and wouldn’t’a wanted you to be scared, so I would’ve acted like I knew exactly what I was doin’.”

“You wouldn’t have had a clue.”

“I would’ve been shakin’ like a leaf,” Bucky agrees softly, getting a tiny, self-deprecating smile. He rubs along Steve’s ankle. “Would’a probably had to use spit ’cause I wouldn’t’a known to bring any vaseline. Probably would’a hurt a lot more for you.”

Steve closes his eyes; just wants to get lost forever in Bucky’s voice as he paints the picture in Steve’s mind. “I still would’ve wanted it.”

He can hear the small smirk on Bucky’s face when the older boy replies, “Yeah, cause you’re a stubborn jackass.” His tone resumes its gentility as he adds, “But I would’ve still wanted it, too. Would’a taken it real slow; start with my fingers first and work you over for however long it took, even if it was hours. If I saw you were hard again, I would’a touched you so you didn’t have to ache in any way.”

Steve’s breathing, soft and deep as it is, quickens just the slightest bit. Bucky looks to his best friend’s face now, even though the golden-haired boy’s eyes are still closed and he isn’t looking back.

“When I first put it in, I would’a asked you if you were okay – wouldn’t have stopped askin’, I think. Every time I thought I was hurtin’ ya, I would’a stopped; only kept goin’ once I got the OK. Then I would’a made love to you, not fuckin’ you, because that’s how your first time should’a been. I would’ve… Would’ve touched your face and kiss along your neck while I moved inside of you… Would’a listened carefully for those sounds you’d make… Bet they would’a been soft and breathless; you would’a sounded so beautiful, Steve. I think I might’ve told you I loved you, because you would’a taken my breath away, and it would’ve been impossible for me not to fall for you in that moment.”

Steve slowly opens his eyes and stares back into Bucky’s. He’s hard beneath his slacks; pupils so blown that, with the limited light and the distance between them, they look naturally black to Bucky.

“I would’a held you close to me and given you everythin’ you wanted, for as long as you’d wanted,
until you finally came. An’ I would’a kissed you through it all, holdin’ you to me for dear life until I finally came, too. Would’a came deep inside of you, so you would’a known you’d always have a piece of me with you.”

There are tears in Steve’s eyes that neither boy realized were there. Moving slowly, Steve shifts up and crawls over to Bucky, planting a hand on either side of his waist so he can press their lips together in a kiss. Bucky inhales deeply through his nose and bring a hand up to cup the side of Steve’s face. When the blond closes his eyes, a tear slips down his cheek.

“I love you,” Steve breathes softly before whimpering deep in his throat and reigniting the kiss, pressing his tongue to Bucky’s. Instead of echoing the words back, Bucky just takes Steve’s face in his hands and kisses him harder. He pulls the blond onto his lap, pausing only to flick his unfinished smoke out the window. They whimper into each other’s mouths as Steve’s body gyrates slowly against Bucky’s own erection.

“I want you,” Steve moans quietly.

Bucky nods. Careful not to wake their guest – but who twitches and almost wakes up when they get to their feet and tip toe towards their bedroom – the two boys sneak to where they can be alone and climb onto their cots.

They don’t need the security of the floor this time. Because Bucky makes sure he makes love to Steve exactly as slow and as gentle and as tenderly as he’d described it. They take their time to get lost in everything about the other’s body, and when Bucky’s finally rocking against Steve, each thrust is drawn out and considerate. Even when they want to speed things up, they keep it slow. Every moan, every gasp, every exchange is but a mere whisper. They stare into each other’s eyes the entire time and they both wonder how they managed to have something so perfect in their lives.

When they come, they’re both crying silently. Not sad – no. Just grateful, happy… Alive. And though their first time couldn’t both be with each other – never could be – in their minds, this was their do-over.

This was how it should’ve always been.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bucky couldn’t run away from getting drafted forever. Steve gets yet another enlistment rejection, but this time, their makeup pattern doesn't go the way it usually does.

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I apologize for the delay in this chapter - most of you know by now that I usually like posting at LEAST one chapter (sometimes two) every week, so to have waited a week and a half to post a new one was awful. It's been a busy and slightly tumultuous time in my life at the moment, but one positive is that I will now have even more time to work on this story! :) Thanks to everyone who's left such wonderful comments, followed me and reached out to me on Tumblr, bookmarked this, subscribed, and left Kudos. Thanks - in general - to those who have simply taken the time to read it. You all have no idea how grateful I am for all of you. <3
Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr

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Also, because I made you all wait so long, here's some StevexBucky eyecandy (courtesy of the lovely KristaRabbit for showing me this):
Credit goes to this amazing artist: MaxKennedy
To Accept

Chapter Summary

There's something in the mail for Bucky. Steve lies about going to Church.

Chapter Notes

Love of mine,
Someday, you will die.
But I'll be close behind;
I'll follow you into the dark.
No blinding light,
Or tunnels to gates of white;
Just our hands clasped so tight,
Waiting for the hint of a spark.
If Heaven and Hell decide
That they both are satisfied;
Illuminate the NO's
On their Vacancy signs...
If there's no one beside you
When your soul embarks,
Then I'll follow you into the dark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 14th, 1943

“Bucky…”

The voice is soft and flows like silk… but deep, and rich, like honey. It seeps into Bucky’s unconscious and makes him feel warm. Making a groggy, unbecoming sound, the brunet stirs and rolls over, wanting to chase that voice but also knowing in the back of his mind what it means. Waking up slowly, he chooses instead to bury his head down into his pillow.

“Bucky…”

“No Bucky here; he’s sleepin’,” he replies sleepily, the sound muffled by the object obstructing his face.

Steve sighs lightheartedly and shakes his shoulder. “C’mon, Buck; gotta get ready for Church.”

“It’s not Sunday.”

“Yes it is.”

“It’s Saturday.”
“No it’s not.”

Bucky pops half of his face up to squint at Steve, and the two boys immediately smile at each other. It’s impossible not to; both have the most outrageous bedhead – Bucky worse than Steve on this particular morning. It gives him a distinctly boyish appearance that always makes Steve’s stomach erupt with butterflies. It’s in moments like these that he knows that these feelings will never go away for him; Bucky will always make him feel like a kid with a crush.

“Don’t make me go,” Bucky whines, reaching out and wrapping his arms around his best friend. Steve tries to push him away with a stream of No, c’mon Buck, we really gotta get up, quit it, but Bucky thanks whoever’s up there that he’s always been stronger. Wrangling the tiny body right up to him, he sighs with content – very overdramatically – as he tangles arms and legs around Steve and rests his chin on the top of the blond’s head.

“You’re gonna suffocate me,” Steve mumbles; face smooshed into the brunet’s warm chest. The straggly chest hairs tickle his nose.

“You’re so comfy, Stevie,” Bucky hums, ignoring him. “Can’t we just stay in bed all day and never hafta get up for nothin’? I promise I can make it worth your while.”

Steve presses a hand to Bucky’s stomach to make to push away. He struggles to no avail for a grand total of about five seconds before groaning and going reluctantly pliant in Bucky’s prevailing grip.

“Don’t put me in that position,” he says a bit guardedly. “You know I can’t not go.”

Bucky just smiles lazily, eyes already closed again. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Just gimme a minute to enjoy this. Yer always so quick to leave me; I’m gonna start to get abandonment issues.”

“Oh shut up, ya mook,” Steve snorts. Finally giving in, he exhales a heavy sigh and then allows himself to relax against Bucky’s body; breathing in his scent of body odour and sleep and something musky that’s always been undeniably Bucky. They lie like that for a few minutes before groaning and going reluctantly pliant in Bucky’s prevailing grip.

Groaning weakly, Bucky’s eyes flutter back open and he opens up his arms with a pout. “But I was comfy,” he argues.

Steve rolls his eyes, placing a quick, chaste kiss to his best friend’s lips before turning over and hopping off the cots. He gathers up a towel and his Sunday best to bring with him into the bathroom, and Bucky props himself up on his elbow – side of his head resting in his hand – as he watches the blond stride around the room.

“You look mighty nice in my clothes, Stevie,” Bucky says suggestively. Steve had been a bit colder than normal the night before and so Bucky had given him one of his undershirts to fall asleep in. It’s still baggy on Steve’s slightly frame, billowing down to just above his knees. He can see the silhouette of Steve’s tiny little ass – he hadn’t even realized when picking the shirt out that it was white but he supposes he must just have an instinct for it – and Bucky really wants to give it a small, playful bite.

Steve feigns innocence as he turns around to blink at Bucky – as if to say, Oh, you mean this thing? I completely forgot I had it on. It’s like the universe is trying to fuck with Bucky’s restraint this morning because right at that moment, the fabric slips down over one of his shoulders because the thing is just too loose on him – like hanging a sheet on a stick. The exposed body part is all sharp angles and prominent bone and skin so pale and smooth with the smallest little fading hickey above
Bucky already had morning wood but now he’s painfully hard. “You’re way too pretty for your own good, you fuckin’ punk,” he breathes, before groaning loudly and letting his head fall back into the pillow. Throwing one arm over his eyes, he wails playfully, “Go! Get on with it – it’s okay. Leave me here to die on my own; just go before it’s too late. Save yourself!”

He can hear Steve’s chuckle and then the reply of, “Coulda’ been on the Silver Screen with how overdramatic ya are, Buck,” before the padding of his footsteps gets quieter and Bucky knows he’s alone. Less than a minute later and he hears the shower running, so he enjoys a bit more peace and quiet and hopefully, maybe, just a little bit more sleep--

Except as soon as he’s back under, Steve’s throwing his damp towel into Bucky’s face and calling out, “Aw c’mon Buck, we really gotta get goin’ and you ain’t even dressed yet!”

Groaning again loudly, Bucky bunches up the towel and shoves it off his face to sit up. Steve’s got his getup on and is hopping across the room, trying to pull on his shoes as he makes his way to the closet to retrieve his tie. Bucky yawns and shakes his head slightly, giving a shrug even though he knows the blond isn’t looking.

“I think I’m just gonna stay home today, Stevie.”

Steve stops and looks at him. The funny part is that he almost looks concerned, and it makes Bucky want to laugh. Steve knows just as well as he does that the only reason Bucky’s ever gone all these years was to give the younger man some company.


Bucky nods, giving him a goofy half-grin. “Yeah, buddy. I just could use a couple more hours of sleep, s’all. Not everyone can run on leftover fuel like you. Some of us need to restart our engines like normal human beings.” When he sees Steve’s hesitation – why his best friend seems to care more about his personal salvation than even Bucky does, the brunet will never understand – he plays dirty and quickly adds, “You can make it my belated birthday present?”

Steve puts his hands on his hips, unimpressed. “Tryin’ to barter yer way outta payin’ service to the Lord? I’m pretty sure that’s blasphemy.”

Bucky grins. He knows that even though Steve’s putting up a fight, he has him on the ropes. Steve would never force him to do anything he didn’t want to do. “The way you looked in my shirt was blasphemy.”

Steve fights his smile, covering it up by shaking his head and sighing loudly. “You’re goin’ to Hell, Barnes.”

Bucky waggles his eyebrows, undeterred. “Wanna sin with me?”

Steve laughs at that; he can’t help it. He’d throw his shoe at his head if he didn’t finally have it on his foot. Rolling his eyes again, he finishes getting his tie and then sits on the edge of the cot, holding it out to Bucky.

Bucky thinks it’s just about the most adorable thing ever that Steve still doesn’t know how to properly do up his own tie.

Despite all the harmless jeers and propositions, Bucky also would never stand in the way of Steve replenishing his dose of faith. So he does up the tie without making things difficult – but he does tug
on it when it’s finally finished so he can pull Steve in for a quick kiss.

“Ya sure you don’t wanna come with me?” Steve asks.

Bucky huffs out a tiny chuckle and nods. “M’sure. Gonna stay behind and sleep and maybe jerk off.”

Steve palms Bucky’s face and playfully shoves him away. Bucky falls back into the cot and grins.

“You’d better be thinkin’ of me,” Steve retorts, pulling on his jacket and heading out of the bedroom. Bucky jumps up, throws on a pair of underwear, and follows. Before passing Steve to get into the kitchen for a glass of water, he pats the blond’s rear and ducks down to kiss his shoulder, narrowly avoiding Steve’s fist in his face for treating him like Bucky’s dame.

Bucky laughs, dancing out of the line of fire. “Wouldn’t even dream of it – not with that temper of yers.”

Steve’s gathering his stuff, shoving them into his pockets, when Bucky notices mid-sip the envelope on the counter addressed to him. Frowning, he walks over to it and picks it up. “Hey Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“When did this letter for me come in?”

“Courier brought it Friday, why? You forgot?” Steve pops his head into the kitchen and looks at Bucky flatly; like a parent who’s at their wit’s end having to constantly remind their child to pick up their toys. “You forgot, dincha?”

Bucky waves it at him. “I didn’t forget because you never told me.”

“Oh, yes I did,” Steve answers quickly. “Told ya as soon as ya came home from work.”

Bucky scrunches his nose, trying to think back that far. It feels like weeks, rather than two days. Steve fills in the blanks for him. “You were drunk; Artie got a bunch of you guys together and suggested everyone go get a few rounds after your shift finished.”

“Ah, that’s right.” He glances back down at the envelope and then looks back up at his best fella. “Anyways, you’d better get goin’. They wouldn’t start the service without ya.”

Steve pauses before walking forward and giving Bucky a kiss. “Last chance,” he says; a precautionary measure. “In case you changed your mind.”

“Steve, get the fuck outta here,” Bucky laughs, giving him a light shove. Steve waves his hand, muttering, “Yeah, yeah,” before calling over his shoulder, “And for the record, I already gave you your birthday present.”

Bucky beams, fingers already working on ripping open the mail in his hands. “Ah yes, that’s right – so good, I wanted to write a book about it. Hey, how many O’s are in the word rimjob? Just one, right?”

“Goodbye, Buck.”

Bucky hears the door close and chuckles to himself.

Bucky’s sitting at the kitchen table when Steve returns home. It’s well into the evening, and Bucky is
staring at the folded form in his hands with a scowl on his face

His drafting notice. He knew it would come eventually, as much as he’d been hoping – but you don’t really escape these sorts of things. They always find you.

It’d been a few months before that when Bucky had finally relented; told Steve when he’d walked through the door that he’d been held back at work, when really he’d gone and signed himself up. It’d been weighing on his mind for a long time. Even though it was the last thing he wanted to do, and even though he’d stared at that space meant for his John Henry for minutes – with a sinking heart and an upset stomach… Bucky knew that it was against the law not to sign up for the draft. He’d managed to put it off long enough but if he pushed his luck, it’d only be a matter of time before they tracked him down and carted him off to the slammer.

So, with a shaking hand, he’d signed it. *James Buchanan Barnes*. A death sentence in black ink.

Not only had he been drafted, but this letter was also giving him his instructions for reporting to basic. Which he’d be starting in but only two days. Two days to tell Steve; two days to spend as much time with him as he could (he’d be quitting at the docks first thing in the morning, he knew that for certain); two days to pretend and hold onto the life he’d always known before it gets ripped from his hands. Two days. And then he’ll be shipped off to Wisconsin - nearly a fifteen hour drive from Brooklyn, from Steve… for God-knows how long.

And Bucky had had every intention of sitting Steve down and telling him all this when the latter had finally returned from Mass. But then Steve never came home. Bucky waited, checking the clock every ten minutes to make sure the time was correct – but then an hour later and he still wasn’t back yet. Bucky knew Steve’s schedule like clockwork, and unless that scrawny punk had gotten himself into another back alley fight, there was absolutely no reason why he hadn’t come home.

Bucky can’t sit still – hates sitting still. But he’d been sitting on the couch faithfully, too scared to leave, because what if Steve came home while he was gone? But then his foot was tapping so incessantly off the ground and as the minutes ticked on, he felt like he was going stir crazy. When he couldn’t handle it anymore, he grabbed his coat and left the apartment to start his search mission.

He checked every back alley he could find; every diner, every pharmacy. He looked inside of them and behind them, just in case. It wouldn’t have been the first time Steve had gotten his ass handed to him in one of those places; the kid always had a talent for getting beaten up in the most random locations. No matter where he looked, though, Steve didn’t turn up, and no one claimed to have seen him.

That’s when the panic truly set in. Bucky ran all over town for hours until it finally dawned on him to trace Steve’s steps back to their source. The brunet was drenched in sweat by the time he flew into the doors of the Church, and relief flooded him when he saw the Priest. Running to him, he had to have a few goes at it in between catching his breath before finally being able to gasp out whether he’d heard Steve say anything about going anywhere after the service had ended. The Father just dawned a look of confusion and proceeded to tell Bucky that Steve had never showed up.

Bucky hadn’t understood at first. He’d stammered and straightened up – even looked around as if somehow expecting Steve to pop up behind one of the pews. There was no way he’d heard him correctly. Steve never missed Church, and if he had been planning on playing hooky, he would’ve told Bucky.

Except he didn’t. And he was nowhere to be found. And it didn’t matter how hard he’d looked or that Bucky was hitting the streets for the entire afternoon, stopping at the apartment to double check and leave a note telling Steve to *stay where he was* if he happened to come back before Bucky got to
him first… When the evening finally hit and Bucky trudged back into the apartment, he was still by himself.

Logic reasoned with him that he should remain there for the rest of the night, because of course Steve would think to return home before going anywhere else – wherever he was. And so home was where Bucky should be.

So he waited. And waited. And waited some more. He’d been sitting at that kitchen table since he’d gotten home; not having moved from that spot in over three hours. At first, he fidgeted like crazy and had to bite down the bile threatening to make him hurl. All he could register was fear – his mind racing with all the horrific possibilities: Steve dead in a ditch… Steve dead in some alley he’d overlooked… Steve dead in a hole in the wall somewhere…

He’d already come face to face with this close encounter before; he knew exactly what Steve would look like.

As the time continued to drain away, however, that fear turned to annoyance, which turned to anger. He started to consider if perhaps there were other possibilities for his best friend’s absence, and you’d best believe it – aside from being dead, Steve was starting to quickly run out of good excuses.

Steve walks into view and his head snaps up quickly, startled to see Bucky sitting there. One look at his face and Bucky knows exactly where he’s been, even if he doesn’t yet know the specifics. He knows that look; by this point, Steve Rogers is an open fucking book. A fresh rush of rage blossoms throughout his entire body but he doesn’t let it reach his face.

“Hey Buck,” Steve mutters apprehensively. He too seems to be trying to hide his true feelings from showing through. Bucky wants to sneer – as if Steve could be that good a liar.

“Hey. Where’ve you been?” His voice is controlled and casual, but not cheery. By no means cheery.

Steve blinks and stares at the floor. Probably with gears turning in his head and trying to figure out the smartest answer. “Went to go see Ginny. Sorry for not telling you first.” His tone is too forced, and Bucky’s nostrils flare. Steve doesn't notice.

Bucky forces a stiff smile. He knows Steve is lying; he ran into Ginny, already covered that in his search. He wants to see just how thick his best friend – his best fella, this goddamn fucking liar – is going to lay this one.

“That’s alright,” he answers. “How was Church?”

“Fine,” Steve answers quietly. Now he’s eyeing the folded paper in Bucky’s hand. Bucky just clutches it tighter because there’s no way he’s going to talk to him about that right now.

“Yeah? What didja learn about today?” And now his voice is sickly sweeter, but he stares at Steve and doesn’t blink. His grey orbs burn holes into the younger man and Steve visibly swallows but then just as quickly, he maintains his composure.

“I-”

“Didja learn about the Ten Commandments, Stevie?” Bucky cuts in, putting the form down and slowly rising from his seat. Steve’s brows quirk in confusion and his eyes stay glued to him as the brunet straightens to his towering height. His grey orbs lose their pleasant façade and narrow until Bucky’s staring daggers at him. “Now, I may not be a Jesus-praisin’, Patron Saint like yourself, but don’t forget that you’re not the only one who was raised on this stuff. I’ve read my Bible – cover to cover, more times than you could count,” Bucky says, voice low, and now he’s rounding the table
and slowly stalking towards Steve.

“What was the first sin in this world, Steve?” he asks softly. He’s leaving no room for Steve not to answer; there’s something oddly threatening and challenging in his tone.

Steve’s jaw hardens. “When Eve lied to Adam.”

“Ah, lying,” Bucky muses, looking up in mock thought as he comes ever closer. “The Ninth Commandment, ain’t it? What exactly did Moses say, Steve? What did he say God said?”

“Buck, I don’t--”

“’You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour’ – Exodus 20:16, Steve, you know that, dontcha?” Bucky interrupts, speaking faster and voice rising in volume.

“Bucky, what are you talking about?”

“Where were you today, Steve?” Bucky asks firmly.

Steve’s face starts to get red. “I told you, I was with--”

“Where were you today, Steve?”

Steve throws his hands into the air. “You know where I was today, Bucky, so cut the crap!”

Bucky nods, staring at him indignantly with a humourless, disbelieving little sneer. “Yeah? Yeah? Out being a good little Choir Boy at Church? Spending time with our good friend, Virginia? All the places I checked and knew you weren’t, huh?”

“I was on my way to Church when I walked past a Recruitment Center,” Steve huffs begrudgingly, looking away. "I didn't leave this mornin' with the intention of goin’ - it just sort of happened." His eyes meet Bucky’s - hard and defiant. "And that was my choice; I don't owe you any explanations."

Bucky knows on some level that that's true but it doesn't mean it hurts any less. "So where was it this time, Steve? Huh? Where were ya from today?"

“None of your business, Buck.”

“Is that it?” Bucky points to the paper he notices in Steve’s hand. “Always like to keep the momentos of your failure, huh? You like the reminder of rejection? You like torturin’ yourself!?”

He snatches it from Steve’s hand before the blond can stop him. Immediately, Steve’s trying to steal it back but Bucky puts a big hand on his shoulder and keeps him an arm’s length away so he can read it, even as the blond struggles against him.

“So this time you’re from Stamford, huh?” Bucky says cruelly after reading the information. He lets go of Steve to free both his hands so he can crumple up the form into a ball. “This shit don’t define you, Steve! But you keep this up and you’re gonna get yourself thrown in jail! Here,” he chucks it at the younger man. It hits his chest and falls to the ground. “Since you want it so badly.”

Turning, Bucky makes to walk away. They’re both glaring, eyes dangerous and jaws clenched. Steve lunges forward and grabs the brunet’s arm, yanking him back around.

“You don’t know what it’s like!” Steve shouts, laying his hands on Bucky’s chest and shoving him back. “You ain’t got no clue what it feels like to not have a choice!”
“You don’t know nothin’ about nothin’!” Bucky yells back, because Steve really doesn’t. Not after today.

Steve nears closer and all Bucky wants to do is throw him down, rip his slacks off and pound into his skinny little ass to ease the edge; to calm himself down. It usually seems to work for Steve. But he doesn’t; he keeps his hands to himself because he knows – he knows… Right now, he’s so mad that he wants to fuck Steve hard and fast, and he wants it to hurt.

And he just can’t hurt Steve like that. Not for all the anger in the world.

They exchange more heated words but neither boy is really letting the other get a full sentence in edgewise. Steve tells Bucky he isn’t his damn parent – I had those and they’re buried next to each other on Anchorage, so don’t you even try to take their place! He shoves Bucky some more and it takes everything Bucky has not to shove him back, because he knows it’d be about as fair as hitting a dame and he’d never let himself do that. He wishes they were a little more equal in stature so this could be a fair fight, but it isn’t, so he lets Steve take his anger out while Bucky fights back with words.

Just as it always seems to be, neither is one hundred percent sure who closes the gap first but Bucky’s pretty certain that this time it was Steve. The blond is on his tiptoes and holding the back of Bucky’s neck and Bucky’s hands are gripping either side of his face and they’re a graceless flurry of lips and teeth and tongues.

When Steve steps forward and shoves Bucky back against the wall, the older boy doesn’t go obediently like he normally does. He inhales deeply through his nose and then suddenly rushes Steve forward until he hits the solid surface. Bucky doesn’t feel like getting treated like Steve’s little bitch at the moment; after the news he’s gotten today – the bullshit he’s had to put up with – he wants to be the one to feel as though he’s in control of something.

Unfortunately, Steve is none the wiser and only consumed with his plight, so he wants the same thing. They wrestle for dominance back and forth, shoving each other around as they lick into each other’s mouths and bite each other’s lips until they’re swollen and bright red and both boys are growling through their heavy panting.

Somehow they find themselves in their room, and Bucky picks the one opportunity he has to let out some physical aggression by pushing Steve down onto their cots. But his body is only crouched over Steve’s for a second before the blond is flipping them over so he can straddle Bucky’s waist. They continue attacking each other’s mouths, but neither of them is able to get it up – even when Steve grinds down and Bucky meets his movements.

Because, well… Bucky really is pissed at Steve for being such an idiot, and he’s annoyed at the way the younger man won’t just stop being stubborn for one fucking second so he can let Bucky have this one.

And Steve… well… Steve feels like Bucky just doesn’t understand and he should know the turmoil Steve’s going through right now so why won’t Bucky just stop being stubborn for one goddamn second so he can let Steve have this one?

“You’re not hard,” Steve mutters, looking down at Bucky with frustration.

“Yeah, well, neither are you.”

“I’d have an easier time if you were hard.”
“So this is my fault, huh?”

“Oh for the love of God, Buck, I didn’t say that!”

“You know what? Just – just get off of me,” Bucky says, turning his face away from the blond. For a single second, hurt flashes over Steve’s face as it drops and he looks as though he genuinely hadn’t expected that answer. But he obliges, swinging his leg off of Bucky and getting off the cot. Bucky covers his face with his hands and then swings them down so they smack off his thighs loudly.

“I thought we were past this, Steve,” Bucky says angrily, sitting up. “I thought we’d put that lying shit behind us.”

“You don’t give me any other choice!” Steve insists, holding his hands out. “You get mad at me every time I do this and you just won’t accept that it’s somethin’ I hafta do, so what else am I s’posed to do?”

“But you don’t hafta – that’s what you’re not getting, Steve!”

“If I were you – oh, Christ, Buck, if I were you, you have no idea how much easier it’d be if I were you,” Steve says.

Bucky barks out a bitter laugh. “You think you got me all figured out, dontcha? You know be better than I know myself, that it?”

“I’ve known you eighteen years, Bucky; I think I know you pretty well, yeah.”

“Then you should know why I can’t be alright with what yer doin’!”

Steve stops and shakes his head as if disgusted. “You know, you wanna talk about knowin’ each other inside n’ out – how about the fact that after eighteen years, you still don’t have a clue why I need to do this!”

“You’re doin’ it because you want the world to know you can – you hate when people treat you like a kid,” Bucky all but shouts. Pushing himself off the bed, he runs his hands through his hair but doesn’t know where to go.

“That ain’t the reason at all and you know it! But hey, since we’re on the topic of people treatin’ me like a kid! If you know it bothers me so much, why d’ya still insist on doin’ it, huh?”

Bucky makes a loud sound of annoyance and throws his arms into the air. “For fuck’s sakes, Steve, I’m not tryin’ to baby you – I just don’t want you gettin’ yourself killed!”

“I wouldn’t get myself killed!”

“Yes, you would!”

“You don’t know that!”

“Well, neither do you!”

Steve points at him. “You know what? Don’t put your crap on me just because you’re too much of a coward to join the war yourself! Got it?”

Bucky’s hands fall by his sides. He regards Steve with a look of disbelief and all the anger in his face dissolves into a quiet bitterness. Lips curving up into a sardonic, open-mouthed grin, he nods slowly and looks away, exhaling a hollow chuckle. “Wow,” he mutters. “So... I’m a coward because I value
my life; because I love you so much that I’d rather stay here and do what I can by your side than storm some battlefield on the other side of the world where I can be worried sick about you. That makes me a coward.”

Steve falters and narrows his eyes at him. In an instant, he seems to lose a bit of his steam as he exhales. His shoulders sag. “Buck…” he starts tiredly; voice much gentler now. He knows he messed up.

“Let me tell you something, Steve,” Bucky says quietly. His own voice is steely and hurt, guarded. He meets baby blue eyes. “You’re the smartest guy I know – but you can be a real idiot sometimes. And a fuckin’ prick. I just want you to know you’re bein’ a real goddamn prick right now.” He draws in a deep breath. “If anyone is layin’ their hang-ups in the wrong places around here it’s you. So I’m gonna tell you this once: don’t take your shit out on me and then call me the coward. You know I’ve got your back, Steve; always will. I’d take a bullet for you. But you can fuck right off with comments like that.”

He shakes his head and walks past the smaller man, who’s staring at the ground with his face twisted up in remorse. Pausing at the door, Bucky mutters, “And for your information, I did enlist. Was gonna tell you when you got home.”

Steve whips around and looks at him in shock but by then, Bucky’s already turned back and leaving the room. He grabs the drafting notice from the kitchen table and throws his jacket back on before Steve can stop him.

Fine. He can lie, too. Seems like old habits die hard and he bitterly thinks to himself that it seems to be something they’re both so fucking good at.

He leaves, letting the door slam shut behind him.

Steve has time to think while Bucky’s gone. He has time to think, to dwell, to regret… He’d spent so many years calling Bucky the jerk and he’d just gone and proven himself to be the biggest one of them all. Because Bucky was right in everything he said, and Steve’s not above realizing that all those times in the past where he’d taken out his frustrations on Bucky by fucking him wasn’t technically right, either. He shouldn’t have used Bucky to vent his anger in any way – Bucky was his partner, not his punching bag

And Steve isn’t stupid; he understands that the only reason Bucky enlisted was to please him. Now that he’s had the chance to calm down, that only makes him feel worse… Because without a shadow of a doubt, Bucky will get in, and what if Steve doesn’t? What if he can’t find a way? He’d been so damn determined – had to stay that way, it was the only way to keep from giving up entirely – that he hadn’t even stopped to consider the possibility of Bucky shipping out and Steve having no choice but to remain behind.

That’s not how it’s supposed to be. It’s always been Bucky and Steve – a duo, a pair, never one without the other. Steve doesn’t know how to live his life without Bucky in it, and what if… What if Bucky did die? All because Steve guilted him into enlisting? The thing about decisions like that is that once you go through with them, there’s no turning back.

Bucky’s enlisted. He will be going to war. Which means there’s just a good a chance as any that he’ll never be coming home once he leaves. It hits Steve full and hard, and he feels as though he’s just condemned Bucky’s life.

If – when – Bucky leaves, it may be the last time they ever see each other again.

*If Bucky dies, he will be the reason.*
It’s a twisted sort of irony for someone who’s only ever wanted to do good.

Bucky doesn’t return home for almost an hour and a half – he only went down to the bar and ordered himself one drink – but when he does, now it’s Steve who’s sitting in the kitchen. He’s drawing, or he’s trying to, but nothing’s turning out right. He straightens up and looks to the older boy when Bucky steps into the doorframe, looking worse for the wear. There are bags under his eyes and it’s near heartbreaking how in such a short time, Bucky could suddenly look at though he hasn’t slept for days.

“Buck,” Steve says softly, standing up.

Bucky stops mid-step but doesn’t look at Steve; just keeps staring ahead. His face is worn out but apathetic. Steve wrings his hands. He doesn’t know the right thing to say.

“I’m proud of you,” is what he comes up with. Immediately, he mentally berates himself. That’s the last thing he should be saying after what happened, but he’d panicked.

Bucky huffs out a small breath from his nose. He blinks slowly and his jaw tenses just a bit. Eyes dropping to the floor, he gives a small shake of the head and mumbles back, “Whatever, Steve,” before continuing down the hall. The blond can hear the sound of their bedroom door close softly.

Steve opens his mouth to call after him but then closes it, frowning deeply. Sighing, he sits back down and crosses his arms over his open sketchbook. He lets his head fall forward into them and sighs again, deep and shaky and if it sounds a little wet, he really doesn’t care.

Steve tries to give Bucky some time; give him space. But in the end, he’s only able to show self-restraint for about fifteen minutes before he’s hesitantly opening up the bedroom door and peeking inside. The light’s off and Bucky’s lying on his stomach, shirtless and their blanket stopping short at his lower back. His arms are crossed over his pillow and his head lying in the center, but his face is turned away from the door so Steve can’t tell if he’s awake or not.

Walking in and closing the door quietly behind him, he opens his mouth again to say Bucky’s name but thinks better of it. Instead, he just pulls his shirt and slacks off so he’s in his underwear and gets into the cot, trying not to disturb his best friend. He sits next to him instead of lying down beside him, and stares down sadly. Thanks to the moonlight, his eyes will adjust to the darkness shortly, but in the meantime, he can’t really see Bucky’s face.

Worriedly, the blond touches the bare back and Bucky doesn’t flinch. That’s how Steve knows he’s definitely not sleeping. The air around them is awkward and Steve sighs. “Buck?” he whispers.

“Yeah,” Bucky replies after a small silence.

Steve bends forward and presses his lips between the older boy’s shoulder blades before resting his forehead there. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly, thick with shame.

Bucky doesn’t react at first. But then he’s shifting, making Steve sit back up. Turning his head the other way so he can peer up at Steve out of the corner of his eye, he gives the tiniest nod. “I know… Me too.”

Steve leans back down and peppers small, apologetic kisses across Bucky’s back until he feels the brunet relax beneath him. “I’m sorry,” he breathes over and over, and every time, Bucky patiently whispers back, “It’s okay.”

“Does this mean you’re leaving for basic soon?” Steve asks some time later – after they’ve remained
there in silence for a while and the artist begins tracing patterns over Bucky’s back to soothe the older boy. He can’t imagine what’s going through Bucky’s head right now.

“Mhm,” Bucky replies with regret. He stares ahead but his eyes look glazed, like he’s not really seeing anything. He hums, barely audible, at the feelings of the tips of Steve’s fingers dancing across his skin, and closes his eyes for a moment. “I leave first thing Tuesday mornin’.”

Steve’s heart leaps into his throat and he tries to swallow down the sudden urge to cry. “So… tomorrow? That’s our last day together?”

Bucky gives a small nod, and Steve can see his face now. It looks so sad, and… scared.

“Where will you be going?” he whispers.

“Camp McCoy, over in Wisconsin.”

Steve’s stomach drops further. He’d held out a sliver of hope that Bucky would’ve been training somewhere a bit closer to home.

“How long?” Steve asks. He knows it’s a stupid question; there’s no way Bucky could know that answer. He isn’t surprised then when Bucky gives a half-hearted shrug. “We could’ve had another day together,” Steve says, and his voice wavers. “I ruined an entire day we could’ve spent together.”

“Hey,” Bucky says sternly, flipping over and sitting up. He cups the side of Steve’s face and presses their foreheads together. “Don’t do that to yourself. We both said a lot of stupid shit tonight but what’s done is done. I don’t want us wasting any more time on that, okay? I just want to enjoy the rest of our night, while I’m here and you’re here and… tomorrow, we’re going to go to Coney Island or somethin’ and we’re gonna enjoy my last day in town together, alright?”

Steve forces himself not to break. He has to stay strong for Bucky – something he should’ve been doing long before this. “Can we just spend the day in bed tomorrow?” he asks weakly. “Not have to get out for nothin’?” He pauses and then echoes Bucky’s words back from earlier: “I can make it worth your while?”


Wrapping Steve up in his arms, Bucky lowers himself back to the cot and pulls the blond down with him. Steve goes easily; tonight, tomorrow, however long they have, Steve will let Bucky do whatever he wants with him. He buries his face into Bucky’s neck and it’s hot against his skin… smells like home. Steve doesn’t want to imagine not having that smell around anymore. He clutches onto Bucky like a frightened child. It’s Bucky’s turn to rub small circles across Steve’s back.

“It’s gonna be alright, baby,” Bucky whispers, staring overtop Steve’s head into the stretch of their bedroom. He’s trying to memorize it all; he doesn’t say this out loud. His voice doesn’t sound nearly as strong as he wants it to. They both know he’s trying to convince himself more than anyone else. They don’t need to comment on it. “I’ll see you after basic. I promise.

Steve knows he can’t really promise anything. Not with the way the world is falling apart right now – you can never make promises during a war. Bucky’s just as likely to get shipped overseas straight from basic training as he is being allowed to come home for a grace period first. In fact, the former seems more likely, given the way things have been going on the other side of the world.

Tomorrow is their last day together. But it’s more than just that… Tomorrow might actually be their last day together. There are no guarantees. After that… After that.
They’ve said goodbyes hundreds of times before, but this one might actually be it.

“Just wanna hold you,” Bucky’s murmuring under his breath. Steve only catches the tail end of it; didn’t even realize his best friend was addressing him. Perhaps he isn’t. Perhaps Bucky’s trying to soothe himself. “Just wanna stay like this…” He tilts his head down and kisses the top of Steve’s head, holding him tighter – as if maybe, the world won’t be able to find them if they remain as they are. “Go to sleep, baby… I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

Steve knows he won’t be sleeping tonight. Bucky knows he won’t, either. They don’t want to waste a minute. What they’ll do instead is clutch each other like the lifelines they’ve always been, and get lost in a war of thoughts… of blood and goodbyes and desperation for do-overs – throughout their entire lives. If they could do it all over, what all would they do differently so they could’ve made the most of their time together?

And on the outside, they’ll hide it all – because that’s what they do with each other sometimes. Lie - little lies - because it helps to keep their hearts beating; helps to stop them from breaking down. Because if they do, they may never stop, and they know they’ll never let go. And they have to… let go. They have no choice. So little lies like these are alright… They help to get them by.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Bucky goes to basic and has his first encounter with a certain Agent. Steve continues to try and enlist, while trying to adjust to the possibility of life without Bucky.

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IMPORTANT AUTHOR'S NOTE: So, as many of you know by now, I've discussed my plans for this story openly and we all know it's going to be pretty damn long; I'll be covering the war and the Howling Commandos, Bucky's time as the Winter Soldier, the Natalia storyline, Steve waking from the ice, into the CA:TWS story, then beyond it. Recently, a reader suggested I break the story up into a series, to make it a bit more cohesive and easier to read in the long run. I was wondering how many people here would prefer that I do that?

If that's what you guys think would be best, here's a breakdown of how it will go...
There will be 4 parts in the Little Lies series. This one, Little Lies to Get Me By, will end at Chapter 20. Part 2 of the series, Little Lies to Give Me Hope, would be all about Steve, Bucky, and the Howling Commandos during the war, up to when Steve flies the plane into the ice. Part 3, Little Lies to Sleep at Night, would focus on Bucky becoming the WS, his experiences/missions as the WS, the Natalia storyline, touching on Steve waking up from the ice, up to "...Bucky?" And then the final installment, Little Lies to Save My Life, would be everything from "Who the hell is Bucky?" through the film's events, post-WS plot, etc. all the way to their happy ending.

Thoughts? Yay? Nay? I just want to pick the option that makes things easiest for you guys, while also not alienating or losing any of the readers for this story.

As always, thank you so much for taking the time to read, comment, etc. As Sebastian would say, "I think you guys are the fucking best."
Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr

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I'm gonna start attaching a nice Starbucks/Stucky photo at the end of every chapter.

Thank you to DeathByRoxas for tracking down the artist of this photo for me, as I was having difficulty. This was done by the very talented venta.
To Reunite/To Part Again

Chapter Summary

Bucky goes through basic training. Steve adjusts to life's many curve balls the best he can.

Chapter Notes

There are two songs that I had to use for this chapter...

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*This song is called Coney Island by Death Cab for Cutie. For maximum effect, start listening to this at the line, "On his walk home, he spontaneously decides to make a detour to Coney Island..."

Sitting on a carousel ride,
Without any music or light...
Everything was closed at Coney Island...
And I could not help from smiling...
I can hear the Atlantic echo back,
Roller coaster screams from summers past.
And everything was closed at Coney Island,
And I could not help from smiling...
Brooklyn will fill in the beach eventually -
And everyone will go, except me...

---

I'll sing it one last time for you,
Then we really have to go.
You've been the only thing that's right
In all I've done.
And I can barely look at you,
But every single time I do,
I know we'll make it anywhere
Away from here.
Light up, light up
As if you have a choice;
Even if you cannot hear my voice,
I'll be right beside you, dear.
Louder, louder,
And we'll run for our lives;
I can hardly speak, I understand
Why you can't raise your voice to say...
To think I might not see those eyes,
Makes it so hard not to cry...
And as we say our long goodbyes,
I nearly do.
Light up, light up
As if you have a choice;
Even if you cannot hear my voice,
I'll be right beside you dear.
Louder, louder,
And we'll run for our lives.
I can hardly speak, I understand
Why you can't raise your voice to say...
Slower, slower,
We don't have time for that.
All I want's to find an easy way
To get out of our little heads.
Have heart, my dear.
We're bound to be afraid;
Even if it's just for a few days,
Making up for all this mess.
Light up, light up,
As if you have a choice.
Even if you cannot hear my voice,
I'll be right beside you, dear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

March 15th, 1943

It’s a rough day.

Steve and Bucky, staying true to their word, spend much of it in bed. It’s not even about the sex – although there is plenty of that. They spend just as much time tangled in each other’s arms and talking, or simply staring at each other while Bucky brushes the hair out of Steve’s eyes. There’s so much they want to say but they don’t know how to say any of it. And if they could, they’re not sure they could gather the guts to say it anyways.

I’ll miss you.

What happens if you don’t come home?

This might actually be our last day together.

I don’t want to leave you.

I don’t want to stay.

How do I start each day without you by my side?

You’d better come home.

You’d better stay home.

The only time they let themselves get out of bed for the first half of the day is to run to the bathroom or grab a quick bite to eat, but even then, they move as if there’s a gun to their heads and a clocking
ticking down. They don’t like the idea that that’s not a halfway incorrect description of things.

It’s around 4pm when Bucky forces himself to peel away from Steve so he can get dressed and go spend a few hours with his family. Steve obviously doesn’t mind; in fact, he was encouraging Bucky to go. There’s no way Bucky can be shipped off to basic – and potentially straight into the war, but they’re still hoping, God they’re still hoping he won’t – without letting them all know first.

Steve doesn’t know what to do with himself while Bucky’s gone. A voice in the back of his mind tells him that he’d better figure it out right quick because this might very well be his life now.

He tells the voice to shut up and goes out to the grocer’s to pick up something nice for dinner.

When Bucky comes home several hours later, he’s considerably sadder and he looks it.

His ma, Cassandra, had tried to hide the shock that comes with being told you’re boy is heading off to probable death, but it was a poor display. She tried to mask the breaking of her heart with a smile but it only took Bucky hugging her for her to completely break down. She had managed to pull it together before his younger siblings can see.

His pa didn’t cry, but there was a solemn look of fear in the way he regarded Bucky for the rest of the visit; as if the sight of his son had suddenly changed the second the brunet gave them the news. When he shakes Bucky’s hand and squeezes his shoulder with the other, his good luck, James sounds more like a I don’t know how to tell you how much we love you.

Because it doesn’t matter if he wasn’t theirs by flesh and blood, or that he’d chosen to keep his surname as opposed to taking on theirs, or that he moved out a mere two and a half years after they’d adopted him so he could get a place with Steve the second his best friend had to leave the orphanage. He’d been their son for ten years – and they, his parents. They’d been in his life longer than his real mother and father had been.

Saying goodbye to Bucky was, to them, like saying goodbye to memories of a baby Cassandra had carried to term in her belly; of a small, wrinkly bundle of brown hair and blue-grey eyes who took his first breath of air and then promptly cried before being placed into his parents’ arms… Of a spritely boy who would’ve ran before he could walk, and whose first word would’ve been ‘mama’, and whom they would’ve sat down with night after night throughout his childhood to help him with his schoolwork, or to teach him how to throw a ball, or watching him finally be able to go on the ‘big kid’ rides at Coney Island.

Saying goodbye to Bucky was, to them, like saying goodbye to a photo album of memories they didn’t even have. But they might as well have had.

Thank God for Bucky’s brother and sister. Michael’s fifteen – old enough to have an understanding of what’s going on in the world; especially when, as he’d told his older brother, they’ve been teaching it in school. Bucky hopes to high Hell that they’re not telling the children about the gas and the camps and the blood and the blood and the blood. He wants his baby brother to grow up in a world where he can still hold onto his innocence. He’s never wanted Michael to have to turn out like him - whether it be the drinking or the years of meaningless sex or the cussing or the war or the financial struggles or even the way your faith dies just a little bit every time you think to yourself, This is all there is for me. He hopes the fighting will be over long before Michael ever hits the age where his country will decide that they want him, too.

Because, truth be told, Michael has always reminded Bucky more of Steve – as if the blond would’ve
been better suited to be his big brother than himself. So, of course, Bucky has always been especially protective, if not just the tiniest bit hypocritical.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, looks exactly like Bucky somehow – ironic, to say the least, since they share none of the same DNA. Bucky’s always been a bit proud of that, even if he finds it a bit worrisome that she acts so much like him, too. Their parents used to tell Bucky that it was because he was her favourite person to be around. So much like they’d adopted him, Beth had adopted his features in turn; like his smirk, or the way she slept with her mouth open and her brows slightly pinched.

At only twelve, she doesn’t really understand why Bucky has to go, but then again, Bucky’s never been overly good at visiting on a consistent basis anyways – he’s always sort of just come and gone like the free spirit they knew him to be when they’d first met him – so she doesn’t see the big deal in him having to leave for ‘a while’. They don’t tell her where he’s going, and even Michael knows better than to bring it up.

She spends most of Bucky’s visit slung on his back, gripping onto him like a baby bear. And they had tried to make the whole thing as casual as possible, they really had. But the elephant in the room’s name was War and it made sure to stomp its feet and make itself known every time a silence fell upon them.

After a few hours, Bucky says he had promised to have dinner with Steve – a gentle hint that he has to get going. They smile – they like Steve, always have – but there’s an obvious sadness in their eyes at the thought of it finally being time for him to leave. Sometimes, Bucky wonders if his parents have figured it out – the nature of his and Steve’s relationship. It’s always been different than regular friendships; that much the two boys knew even before their big revelation. But if his parents knew, they never say anything.

Funny enough, Beth’s the only one who knows. Bucky hadn’t even needed to tell her; it’d been the summer of ’36 and he and Steve had made a point to visit Bucky’s family at least once every two weeks. Beth loved playing with Steve because he drew her nice pictures and always told her how beautiful her own doodles were. And, of course, she always adored spending time with her favourite big brother.

Despite the fact that she was only five at the time, somehow she’d seen something in five minutes that Bucky had been oblivious to his whole life – in this case, the way Steve kept smiling as he watched Bucky cuddle and read to his baby sister.

“Are you and Steve like mommy and daddy?” she’d asked him when Steve had left to go to the bathroom.

“Whaddaya mean, Bumble Bee?” he’d asked in response, chuckling at the question but not quite understanding it.

She had looked at him as if he had two heads; like he was the dumbest shmuck in all of New York. “He smiles at you like daddy smiles at mommy. Are you two goin’ to get married?”

Bucky had nearly choked on his tongue as his eyes bulged out of their sockets enough for Beth to laugh and tell him he looked funny. Shaking his head, he firmly explained that only men and women get married to each other. She’d asked why and Bucky couldn’t think of an intelligent answer, so he simply told her that that’s just the way it was.

“That’s stupid,” she’d muttered, and Bucky promptly tutted her on her language. She shrugged the scolding off – pure Bucky personified in the form of a five-year-old girl. Bucky tried to explain to
her that only people who are in love like mommy and daddy get married. She still didn’t seem to get it, because right before Steve had come back into the room – just in the nick of time that the younger boy hadn’t heard it – Beth had given Bucky’s cheek a little smack and with all the vehemence a kid fresh out of their toddler years could harness, scolded, “Uncle Steve smiles at you like daddy smiles at mommy. I think he loves you. Go marry him.”

Steve’s made him a real nice meal, given their budget. There’s actually potatoes and a little bit of ham; enough for them each to have a slice. Bucky doesn’t really have much of an appetite but he understands what this means to Steve so he eats it all; even makes a point to lick his plate clean, which makes Steve roll his eyes and laugh. The sentiment tastes sweet while everything else tastes like ash. Bucky hides it well.

As soon as they’re both finished, they leave the dishes in the sink and get right back into bed. Steve asks how his visit went and Bucky has to push all of his emotion deep down – force his face to be reticent and his voice to be flat – so he doesn’t have to come face-to-face with everything he’s currently feeling. His voice still wavers; Steve watches him and listens and understands him like no one else ever could.

The second Steve sees Bucky’s eyes shining, and his best friend doesn’t realize he’s speaking faster, and getting louder, more panicked the longer he keeps talking, Steve grabs his face and silences him with a kiss. Bucky whimpers into it, low and under his breath, but when he squeezes his eyes shut a tear finds its way down his cheek anyways and his whole body is shaking.

They let their mouths, their tongues, their teeth do the rest of the talking, until Bucky has Steve flipped onto his back and their clothes are off and it’s all skin on skin… Steve’s opened up, and Bucky’s frantic with his movements in the way he doesn’t trust himself to express in words, and Steve understands – good, patient, perfect Steve… Because Steve feels the same fright that he does; this is something they share – that proverbial gun is pressed to both of their heads, and there’s so much on the line.

Bucky doesn’t let himself cry as his hips roll into Steve, over and over, like a mighty wave undulating onto the shores it constantly tries to call home. He doesn’t let himself say what he’s thinking as he stares down at Steve’s face, and Steve’s staring right back up, and their lips are parted and neither is blinking and they’re both covered in so much sweat. Their brows are furrowed the slightest bit and Steve’s body keeps pushing up and then gently falling back down every time Bucky’s fully buried in him and then retreats, back and forth, never stopping, like a vow.

And Steve is the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen and Bucky… Bucky frantically tries to memorize every single detail on his face – every little, secretive sound he’s making – as if he hasn’t already done that a million times before. As if he’s suddenly very scared that he’ll forget everything unless he’s commits it to memory in this very second, and then what happens when he’s gone and that’s all he has left?

I need you to make me feel alive.

I need you to want me – only me, nothing else – for now and forever.

I need you to give me a reason to survive.

And Steve does; when the younger man’s breathing suddenly hitches and his neck arches, digging the back of his head into the pillow… And he makes the most perfect, guttural sound – a halfway mixture between a whimper, a groan, and a gasp, and Bucky wishes there was a name for it – as his own belly is streaked with his hot release… And Bucky closes the space between them and their lips
collide together to swallow the sounds…

Bucky knows this right here will always be the reason. With that knowledge in the forefront of his brain and the words threatening to push off the tip of his tongue, he finally comes with a breathless gasp… and he forces those words to come out only as one.

“Steve…”

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March 16th, 1943

As hard as Steve tries not to, he eventually falls asleep around 3am. Bucky, wide awake as he thinks he’s ever been, spends his remaining hours alternating between stroking the blond’s hair and his back as he stares off and gets lost in thought. Steve’s on his side with his face buried against the older boy’s neck, and his breath is hot and even. But even when Bucky starts to feel uncomfortable with the heat and could really benefit from kicking the covers off, he doesn’t move an inch.

He has to catch the train by 0700 hours, his notice had said. When he sees the room growing alight with the day’s first rays of sunshine, he knows it’s time to get ready.

And really, he wants to wake up Steve, even if only to have his company while he gets everything prepared. But Steve’s also dead asleep and only really having just fallen so; he doesn’t want to wake him up and disturb the first few precious moments of peace he’s seen Steve have in over twenty-four hours, so that part of his logic wins.

By the time he’s finished showering, dressing, and quietly packing up his things, the clock tells him his train will be leaving in an hour. It takes him about thirty minutes to walk to the station and he’d be better off if he got there with time to spare. His heart is heavy as he realizes, It’s time to go.

As silently as his boots will allow him, he goes back into their bedroom to head to their cots. Between the doorway and their beds, his eye catches the little black and white photo of them at Coney Island that Steve had given him on his birthday three years before. The thought alone makes him ache; he can’t believe it’s already been that long. It’s crumpled from being looked at so often, but even still, Bucky plucks it up with ginger fingers. Before he can find himself longing to somehow crawl into the photograph and figure out a way to live then instead of now, he folds the picture in half and tucks it into the breast pocket of his coat.

All soldiers carry momentos of their sweethearts on them in the war.

Steve looks so gentle and calm that Bucky considers not waking him up at all. But he knows that if the war didn’t kill him, Steve most definitely would – and honestly, maybe a bit selfishly, Bucky can’t stand the thought of leaving without saying goodbye. He reaches out and places a hand on the blond’s bony shoulder.

“Steve,” he whispers, giving him the world’s tiniest shake. His best friend stirs but doesn’t wake up. So Bucky leans down and places a soft kiss to his temple. “Stevie…”

Steve moans softly, confused, as his baby blues slowly open. He glances up at the brunet, his brows pulling tighter together the more clear his orbs become. “Bucky?” he rasps. Bucky realizes that he’s having one of those moments where you’ve just been pulled from a dream and you’ve yet to realize what day it is, let alone the time.

But as Steve takes in his fresh clothing, the slick of his hair, and the look on Bucky’s face, things click. He’s suddenly sitting up, reaching out and grabbing Bucky’s bicep in his hand; looking
around the room as if he just can’t believe it and stammering out apologies.

“I didn’t want to fall asleep,” he says; voice hard-laced with all the panic he’s trying so hard not to show, even though his tone is deceivingly level. “You should’ve woken me up.”

Bucky forces a gentle smile to his face as he tries to lie Steve back down, but the blond won’t have any of it. “You looked so peaceful, and you were exhausted,” Bucky insists. “It’s fine, Steve, really.”

“No – no, it’s not,” Steve replies, throwing the blankets off of him and immediately shivering at the month’s chill.

Bucky tries again with a soothing repetition of his name to get him back under the covers, but Steve just looks at him as if Bucky’s trying to drive a knife into his back and guardedly says, “What’re you doin’? Get off me.”

“Steve,” Bucky sighs.

“Just gimme five minutes – do you hafta leave right just now? God, Buck, I’m so sorry; just gimme five minutes to get dressed and I’ll be ready to go.”

He ducks under Bucky’s arm and jumps out of the cots, striding to the dresser to try and find a clean shirt to throw on. Bucky watches him with a frown.

“Where do you think you’re goin’?”

“I’m walkin’ ya to the train station.” Steve pulls a shirt over his head and then tugs on a pair of slacks; not even bothering with a belt or suspenders. He’s darting to the closet to try and find his shoes but he can’t seem to find its brother. Bucky stands and goes to him, trying to tell him he doesn’t have to do that, but Steve’s insisting, No, Buck, I have to.

The longer he can’t find his other shoe, the louder – quicker – his words are coming out, until he’s suddenly hectically searching through everything in the small space, tossing it behind him haphazardly into the room.

“Where the Hell is it?” he cries in frustration.

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“Steve, Steve,” Bucky says, his voice breaking. He grabs the smaller boy and pulls him to his chest, wrapping his arms around him tight in a hug Steve can’t possibly hope to get out of. “Shh…” Bucky murmurs, pulling back just enough so he can pepper his best friend’s face with kisses. “I know how to get to the station by myself, Steve. I don’t need ya walkin’ me.”

Steve stares at him with that same look of – what is that? Betrayal? It’s something akin to that. Like he just doesn’t understand why Bucky doesn’t want Steve to see him off. “But I want to, I – I have to be able to say bye.”

Bucky forces another easygoing smile. Inside, something feels like it’s shattering and he wonders if maybe it’s his heart finally giving out. “Whaddaya think we’re doin’ right now? Whaddaya think we did all last night? You get to say goodbye to me right now, ya big lug.”

“That’s not the same,” Steve argues.

“Ain’t it, though? It’s too cold for you to be walkin’ me down there and back; I’ll be worried sick the entire ride that you caught your death before you got back to the apartment. That ain’t how I should be startin’ my first day at basic, Stevie, you know that. Stay here where I know you’ll be okay.”
“Buck--”

“Steve, please,” Bucky sighs.

After a few seconds of struggle, he feels the air leave the blond’s lungs as Steve goes pliant in his arms. “Fine,” he whispers, defeated.

Bucky kisses him; he knows Steve’s real upset because at first, he doesn’t kiss back. Bucky just holds his face firmly and reminds him that they’re not going to see each other for a while; for Steve not to be like that. Quickly, Steve kisses him this time, and Bucky has to hold onto every ounce of strength he has not to break down into it.

“All your medication is in the cabinet in the bathroom – don’t forget to take it,” Bucky says afterwards as he’s making one last round through the apartment to make sure he hasn’t forgotten anything. “I don’t have much cash left over, but everything I got is on the kitchen counter for ya.” (Minus some money to get himself some cigarettes while he’s over there, but it’s such a moot detail that he doesn’t feel he needs to bring it up.)

Steve gasps and smacks his forehead. “Buck, what about the docks? You didn’t go in yesterday to give your notice.”

Bucky stops mid-step, eyes widening as a frown crosses his face. After a few seconds, he gets a strange, lopsided little smile and shrugs. “Guess me not comin’ in anymore is gonna be news enough. Not like I’m gonna need that job anymore anyways, same as I won’t need that money so I swear to the Almighty, Stevie, if I come back and you haven’t been eatin’ right, I’m gonna deck ya.”

He’s walking past Steve to go check the bathroom one last time, and Steve’s following on his heels, trying to keep up.

“And don’t get yourself into any fights,” he adds, crouching down to peer into the cabinets under the sink. Frowning, he realizes he might’ve been better off just making a list of Dos and Dons to give to the blond. The Dons section would’ve easily stretched twice as long. Standing back up and turning to Steve, he scrunches his nose. “Did I forget anything?”

“Be careful,” Steve interrupts before he can finish the question. Bucky exhales, lips turning up into a small, tired smile. He pulls Steve into another hug.

“Always am,” he promises. “I’ll see you after basic.”

Steve doesn’t answer.

Bucky kisses his forehead. “I mean it, Steve. I’ll be home before you know it.”

Steve looks like he’s fighting real hard not to say something; instead, he just bites his lip and nods, eyes cast downward. Bucky tilts his chin up and kisses him. It’s meant to be a quick, innocent, reassuring kiss, he swears it. Of course, then the reality of the situation sinks in and before he knows it, Steve’s arms are around his neck and Bucky’s being pushed back against the counter so Steve can press their bodies together.

They kiss feverishly for less than a minute, but for them it feels both like not nearly enough and far too long because Bucky’s really pushing it right now.

“Stevie,” he breathes, breaking it – and it literally pains him to do so. “I really do hafta go.”
Steve sighs, stepping back and untangling his arms. “I know. Are you sure I can’t walk you to the station?”

“I’m sure,” Bucky answers, keeping his voice even.

They kiss again at the door and for the second time, it spans far longer than it should. Every second makes it more difficult for Bucky to leave, and he doesn’t tell Steve that this is exactly the reason why he can’t be accompanied and seen off.

If he has to say goodbye to Steve at the train station, he knows he’ll never get on it.

And he has to; he has no choice.

“I love you,” Bucky promises as he swings open the door and looks back to his best friend. Those three words mean so much more in this moment than either of them can say.

“I love you back,” Steve mutters, fighting to keep his features even. Bucky gives a small nod, regards him once more, and then turns and walks out of the apartment.

The second the door shuts, the blond is running to their living room window and throwing it open so he can pop his head out. The air is cold but he doesn’t care because sure enough, not long after, Bucky emerges from the front doors and – as if he can sense Steve’s presence, with him everywhere, just like the wind – he turns around and looks up at Steve, now walking backwards.

“Get inside!” Bucky calls.

Steve ignores him. “You’d better come home in one piece, Barnes!”

Bucky’s throat immediately gets tight. With every step, Steve’s a little bit further away from him and he can hardly stand it. He doesn’t know how he’s going to survive the next couple of months – let alone, dare he think it, longer.

He plasters a confident smile on his face, echoing back the words he’s grown so accustomed to shooting Steve’s way: “You think I’d leave you to kick the bucket? Not a chance!”

“Don’t you dare forget about me!” he hears Steve shouting back.

Bucky’s glad he’s far enough that Steve can’t see the way he shuts his eyes, face pained. As if he ever could; as if he’d ever want to. He wants to shout back that he loves him – that when this whole war is over, he’s going to come home and buy Steve a house and a ring and he’s going to marry the shit out of him, just like Beth told him to do; he doesn’t care if it ain’t legal, they’ll find a way.

“I’ll try!” he calls back instead, and when he sees Steve’s skinny arm flailing with what looks like a wave, he gives a grand salute.

Steve won’t admit it out loud, but he realizes he’s an absolute mess of a person without Bucky there to keep him in check. Without the steady income – even if it was small – Steve pushes harder every day to find himself a job. Eventually he’s able to lock one down over at the library. It pays pennies, but pennies are better than nothing and with the extra cash Bucky left behind, he’s able to make rent with a little left over for food.

If it were up to him, he’d never eat, because he’s rarely ever hungry these days. But he remembers Bucky’s parting words and even though they’re no longer in the same State, Steve doesn’t want to let him down.
He wonders every day how his best friend is doing. In April, he receives a letter from him and he’s never ripped open anything that fast, not even the odd present that’d been wrapped for him at Christmas when they could afford fancy paper. Bucky skims the details of how training is actually going for him, promising Steve he’ll fill him in properly when he gets home. Mostly, he repeats over and over how much he misses Steve; how badly he loves him. He mentions that he took the picture of them with him and he looks at it at least twice a day – usually when he wakes up and before he goes to bed. Steve smiles when he reads about how much Bucky hates Wisconsin, but that sleeping with that picture under his pillow every night makes it bearable.

He signs the letter off with *Always yours, Bucky.* Steve immediately grabs his sketchpad and pencil and writes him a letter back.

Getting that letter provides Steve with one day of relief and one day of good behaviour, but after that, he’s right back in his rut again. He misses Bucky more than he can fathom, and every night he’s plagued with nightmares about finding out that Bucky suddenly got shipped overseas; the next letter he receives in the post being one that tells him of Bucky’s tragic fate on the front lines.

So he takes his mind off of the constant stress and worry by doing all the things Bucky told him not to do: he tries (and fails) to enlist again – this time over in Scranton, Pennsylvania – and he gets himself into plenty of fights. It’s almost as if he wants to get hurt these days… As if, by some act of God, getting his ass kicked would somehow bring Bucky back because he’d just know, he always seemed to know – and Steve’s assailant would be pulled off of him at any second and Steve would see that familiar face again.

Of course, it never happens that way. But that doesn’t mean he stops trying.

Bucky spends ten weeks at Fort “Camp” McCoy – a 60,000 acres stretch of Hell, Bucky believes at first, between Sparta and Tomah, Wisconsin. He’s told it’s in the Monroe County but Bucky doesn’t give a damn. *Monroe County ain’t no Brooklyn.*

He learns several important things while he’s there.

Lesson number one is two-fold; firstly, he has absolutely no desire to be there. Of course, he already knew that, but it manifests in the form of laziness and arrogance. He doesn’t take anything seriously; he mutters, “Sir, yes, sir” with an air of sarcasm whenever lined up with his fellow Privates and repeating the chant in the face of a superior. He doesn’t want to be there but he is, and Bucky thinks on that basis alone, he’s already doing more than his fair share. He doesn’t owe anybody anything else.

They’ve already taken him away from everything that matters to him, and will only continue to do so, so what else does he have to lose?

He quickly learns, in the form of a Miss Peggy Carter – Agent, as she’s introduced to them – the second initial piece of information: that his behaviour will not be tolerated. She’s curvy and beautiful, with soft chocolate brown hair, lips the most eye-popping shade of red, and breasts that Bucky can’t help but picture naked. And that accent - *Christ.* Any man would be lucky to be bossed around under different circumstances in that voice of hers. At first, he feels ashamed at those little thoughts... Until he remembers that he's taken, not dead.

The problem is that he's been stuck in a permanently foul mood and so he takes her even less seriously than he’s taken everyone else; even when he starts to feel guilty about it, because he can hear Steve’s voice, even his ma’s voice, in the back of his head, telling him he knows better. And he does – he’d clock a guy just for looking at a lady with the sneer he’s often shooting Agent
Carter, but he’s so bitter that he doesn’t know how to stop.

She quickly changes that. They’ve been doing push-ups and jumping jacks for almost an hour, until they’re abruptly called into formation. Bucky stands between a taller man named Private Jackson and a shorter one named Burns – each man a dancing monkey in a regulation army uniform; arms straight by their sides and heads held high with respect, and Bucky… well, not so much.

He sees Agent Carter getting out of her vehicle and he rolls his eyes, muttering under his breath, “Is she pickin’ on us? I swear she’s pickin’ on us. She must wanna take one of us on a date.”

Jackson snorts under his breath next to him. “How quickly do you think she’d put out?” he whispers, just loud enough for Bucky to hear.

Bucky watches her with a small, cocky little grin. Even though he’d never go for it, not with Steve back home waiting for him, he gets all the more sucked into this macho game of testosterone. “With an attitude like that? Five, maybe six. Unless it’s all for show; she might be a real minx in the sheets and this whole act of hers is just to wheedle out the sissies from the real men.”

Jackson glances at him with a sneer. “Yeah? And you think you’re one of those, Barnes?”

“Hell yeah. At least maybe if I wore her out at night she’d stop makin’ me do so many fuckin’ push-ups during the day.”

It’s a lie and he knows it. If he actually got his chance to be alone with Agent Carter, Bucky knows he’d probably eventually apologize his face off and try to explain that he already has a sweetheart back home. But Bucky’s had years of experience with this kind of male banter; it’s a harmless contest in which they might as well be comparing dick sizes, and given how miserable he’s been so far, it’s the only real way to pass the time other than worrying about how Steve’s doing.

“Did I call your name, Private Barnes?” Agent Carter cuts in coolly, approaching the line and standing directly in front of him. This is not their first time clashing.

Bucky gives her a small, deceivingly pleasant smile; tight-lipped and condescending. “No ma’am,” he replies like a good little soldier.

She returns the smile; just like him, it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Then perhaps you’d like to inform the rest of your comrades what you and Private Jackson were just talking out of turn about.”

Bucky sees what she’s doing; a part of him recognizes that she has wit and is a complete spitfire, and somehow that reminds him of Steve and it makes his chest ache. He won’t let himself be the one to back down, though. So he maintains that sardonic smile and replies, “No ma’am, I would not.”

She takes a step closer to him.

“I believe that was an order, Private.”

Something bitter flashes in Bucky’s eyes and he sweetly replies, “I’m already here on orders, ma’am; in case the circus suit didn’t already tip ya off.”

The second he says it, he realizes he’s crossed a line. He can feel the rest of the lineup get tense – save for Jackson next to him, who’s fighting every impulse he has to start snickering. He gets one quick – surprisingly genuine – flash of a smile from Agent Carter before she’s palming his shoulders and swinging her knee straight between his legs. He realizes at that very second that he could’ve avoided that had he took his formation properly like he should’ve.
He’d been kneed in the balls once before, in a dirty fight with a punk who’d fought just as sneakily as Bucky did, and it hurts just as much now as it had then. His eyes widen and his mouth drops as the most embarrassing sound wheezes out of him, and Carter moves back with just enough time for Bucky to grab his crotch with both hands and collapse to his knees, and then promptly his side.

If Steve were there, he’d be telling Bucky that he deserved that. Bucky knows he’d be right. Glancing up at Agent Carter, he’s still able to notice through the blinding pain that he’d probably be flashing him the same smug little smile that she’s flashing him now.

After that, Bucky cleans up his act. In doing so, he learns his third valuable lesson at Camp McCoy: that basic training goes by a lot smoother if you just shut up and follow orders. He’s treated a bit harsher by his superiors at first – rightly so, he suspected he’d have that one coming – but he puts up with it and just tries to apply himself harder.

Lesson four is that he’s in terrible shape. He thought he was much more fit than that, but he supposes that living a life with Steve Rogers as your best friend would make anyone feel healthy as a horse by comparison. Actually getting into shape is what he dislikes the most; every time he’s finished running laps, he thinks he has an idea of what Steve’s asthma attacks feel like, his lungs burn so bad. Every night when he collapses into his bunk, his limbs are aching. They always feel even worse by the morning.

He hopes to run into Agent Carter again after he’s smartened up so he can give her a proper apology, but he hears word that she and her bosses have already left camp. Apparently they were only there because they’ve been scouting the country for some new thing called ‘Project Rebirth’ and they’ve been searching for potential candidates. None of the other soldiers know much about it since the whole thing was kept on the down low, so everything Bucky learns is pretty much hearsay.

At first, he’s almost offended that he wasn’t considered, even though he knows he did nothing to deserve it. When that wears off, Bucky’s glad he wasn’t; he doesn’t need any other reason to be further dragged into this war.

With everything going on – the fast-paced hustle and bustle of being a little soldier boy – it takes only a few days for Bucky to forget all about Peggy Carter and ‘Project Rebirth’. He immerses himself in his training and quickly excels, much like the way he’s always excelled in life once he applies himself. He earns back the respect of his superior officers and becomes one of the select few the other Privates are told to look up to as an example.

He still hates Wisconsin, though. But you can’t win ‘em all.

Sometimes, he’s so busy that he doesn’t have as much time to think of Steve. Still, that scrawny punk is in his mind every other second of the day, and he hopes to God that he’s doing alright back home. That’s the only real thing that’s ever weighing on him lately – not even so much the war or the backbreaking stuff he’s doing now that makes work at the docks look like jacking off… It’s worrying over Steve. It’s always been worrying over Steve.

When he gets a letter from Steve in May, he’s thrilled. He reads it in private because he doesn’t want to take the risk of any of the other guys in their sleeping quarters snatching it out of his hands – which has been known to happen to some of the other guys. It’d be purely a jest; he’s mostly friends with everyone by now, but still. The joke would quickly die on their lips if they found out James Buchanan Barnes was a fairy.

Well, sort of.

He’s got a dopey grin superglued to his face as he reads Steve’s neat cursive, detailing just how
much he misses Bucky back. He writes I love you nine times (Bucky’s counted).

However, when he’s suddenly writing about how badly he misses Bucky’s mouth and Bucky’s body and Bucky’s cock, he has to swallow down his arousal long enough to sneak himself into a washroom. Shoving his pants down and wrapping his fist around his dick, he quickly jerks off to the image of Steve on his knobby knees and conjuring the sounds of Steve’s soft little groans in his mind. Even though he’s alone when he comes, he bites the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out anyways.

He can’t trust that he wouldn’t have shouted Steve’s name.

He writes Steve another letter back – making sure to return the favour and hopefully rile Steve up as much as he had with Bucky – but by the end of the month he still hasn’t gotten anything yet in return, so he figures that the postal service is just backed up, or perhaps they’d accidentally lost his mail somewhere along the way.

The fifth and most interesting thing Bucky learns while at basic training is that he’s a natural sharpshooter. Major Stewart even tells him that he could be one of the best snipers they’ve ever seen if he keeps up with it. Now, Bucky wouldn’t admit it out loud, but he was actually terrified the first time he’d been handed a gun. It’s not like he’d ever used one before. And his first experience firing one hadn’t been any better because the kickback was more than he had ever expected; he’d almost thrown the firearm away in surprise.

But he quickly discovered that something happens to him when he’s got his finger snug against a trigger, and his eye is staring intently into the scope. Bucky Barnes hates sitting still – won’t sit still for anyone but Steve Rogers… And yet his breathing evens out and his hands get deathly calm and his whole body stills into a tableau.

You’d never see him coming if you didn’t know he was already right behind you. When he’s firing his sniper rifle, watching the way he nails the bull’s-eyes in his targets every single time without falter, he feels as shadowed as a ghost. As if perhaps this was what he was meant to be doing his entire life.

By the very beginning of June, he’s leaner and golden-brown from too many days in the sun and considerably fitter. He’s feeling pretty good; feels as though he’s finally adjusted to life at camp. And then as quick as that happens, he gets the best news of his life: he gets to go back home.

And yeah, he may sort of like camp now, but not that much that even a morsel of him wants to stay.

They guarantee that he won’t be home for long – maybe a week or two at best – and he will be sent his orders within the next few days. But Bucky’s too excited to think that far ahead. His mind is stuck on being able to go back home, and it’s a one-track record, replaying SteveSteveSteveSteveSteveSteveSteve.

They get to go home three days after they get the news. Bucky had considered sending Steve another letter to let him know, but the likelihood is that he’d get to him before the mail did – and really, he likes the idea of it being a surprise.

He gets home on a Saturday, and by the time he walks the half hour back to the apartment, the sun’s setting and Bucky is exhausted from the 12-hour train ride. None of that matters though when he’s wrapping his hand around the doorknob of his apartment and quickly pushing it open. He hopes he can catch Steve with his back to him so he can really surprise him. His heart’s beating so fast he feels as though he could pass out from the adrenaline.
When he steps inside, the light’s on in the kitchen so he assumes that’s where Steve is. He tiptoes into the living room and places his duffel bag down before making his way towards the light. But when he gets in, he finds himself alone. Glancing around, he sneaks down the hall and pokes his head into the bedroom. The light’s off and he can’t tell if anyone’s in their cots or not, so he walks the rest of the way in to have a look.

Around the same time, Steve comes into the apartment with a small bag of groceries. Bucky thinks he hears the front door close and heads back out to see if he’d been correct. Steve’s got the paper bag wrangled in one arm as he unloads its contents onto the counter with the other. Bucky walks into the kitchen; stops dead just as that golden head turns his way, and they both freeze.

Steve drops the bag to the ground. The eggs tumble out and scatter along the floor, cracked open and spilling yolks everywhere.

They continue to stare.

“You--” Steve stammers.

“Uh--”

“It’s--”

“Yeah--”

“I didn’t--”

Yeah, this was definitely not the reunion Bucky had in mind.

Suddenly, the younger man seems to realize the mess he’s made. He stammers some more and drops to his knees, trying to pick up the strewn items. He doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself. Bucky quickly takes a knee in front of him with a discarded, “Here, I got it,” as he sets the bag upright and starts putting stuff back in.

It’s only a few seconds before Steve stops just as fast as he’d started and looks right up at Bucky’s face.

“You’re here,” he says quietly, eyes wide; as if convinced this might somehow be a trick of the mind.

Bucky smiles. He’s missed that face so fucking much. “The one and only,” he replies.

“You’re really here,” Steve repeats.


Steve lunges forward and doesn’t let him finish. Bucky lands on his back and Steve’s mouth is on his – long, skinny fingers curling into his now much shorter strands of brown hair thanks to his regulation cut. Bucky smirks against his best friend’s lips and they roll around in the mess until they’re flushed and panting, and neither one of them cares – not at all.

The floor’s long since been cleaned up. Bucky and Steve lie sweaty in their cots; Steve’s head on Bucky’s chest as he trails his index finger in circles around the skin of the brunet’s abdomen while the latter pets his hair. They’re still panting softly, satiated (for now) from the two hours of lovemaking they just lived through.
Technically, they’d had to do it twice. Both Brooklyn boys were so wound up from not having seen each other in so long that Steve almost came from Bucky simply rutting against him and Bucky when Steve so much as breathed on his erection. Literally one push into Steve and Bucky’s eyes were widening in shock as he choked out a startled grunt and ejaculated inside of him.

“Are you serious!?” Steve has asked incredulously.

Bucky stared down at him in shock, his cheeks burning hot as they grew red from mortification. “Shut up,” he snapped quickly, grabbing Steve’s dick in his hand and squeezing. He had every intention of jerking him off but apparently one good stroke was all the blond needed before he was tossing his head back and streaking his belly with come. Bucky had raised an eyebrow and gave him a deadpanned look.

“Yunh-huh. Pot, meet kettle.”

They decided to kiss and explore each other with their hands until Bucky was getting hard again, and then Steve’s hand brought him to completion. The second time lasted much, much longer.

Now that they had that out of the way, Steve asked to hear all about Bucky’s time in basic. Bucky regaled him with stories of his time at McCoy; the people he’d met and the compliments he’d been showered with. He didn’t want his first night back to be tainted with having to tell Steve about his rocky start, so he chose not to mention anything about Agent Carter and the sacking. Steve listened intently, imagining every word in crisp detail and trying not to show his envy that he couldn’t take part in such things too.

“How long are you back for?” he asks, resting his chin between Bucky’s pecks and peering up at him.

Bucky’s smile wavers for a moment and then evens back out. “A week or two; can’t really say for sure.”

The blond frowns. “That’s not long at all.”

“It’s better than nothin’,” Bucky points out, grabbing Steve’s shoulders gently and pulling him up so he can kiss that beautiful mouth and nuzzle his nose to his best friend’s cheek. “Help me make the most of it.”

He does. A couple hours later, Steve tries to get out of bed to make Bucky some dinner, but the larger man just tangles him back to his chest, whining loudly and playfully telling Steve he can eat in the morning. The blond tries to protest, but then his hands are pressing to Bucky’s front and God damn, his body’s gotten impossibly better in the two-some months he’s been gone. His resolve quickly disintegrates and Bucky closes his eyes with a breathy moan and a smile when Steve’s lips are coating kisses all across his chest again.

Yeah, they can eat later.

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**June 12th, 1943**

For whatever reason, Bucky had come back to Brooklyn expecting it to have changed. He reminds himself that it’s only been two months, as he and Steve pass the time mostly in their apartment but forcing themselves to get out at least once a day so the brunet can take as much in of their home city as possible before he has to leave again. He looks to every sign, every shop, every landmark he’d ever known, as if trying to find something in it that’s different. But everything’s the same; completely
unchanged, as if Bucky leaving had no impact at all.

He wonders how he can feel as though he’s metamorphosing so rapidly while the rest of the world feels as if it’s stagnant.

And he’s home for all of a week before he starts running into guys he’d trained with at McCoy who’ve already gotten their orders. He has to do a double-take when he sees them in their uniforms of green and gold; blinking dumbfounded before forcing out, “Already?”

They’re all supposed to ship out on the fifteenth, according to the information they’ve been given. Bucky checks the mail when he gets home that day but it’s still empty. It doesn’t matter; he knows that his notice will most likely be there by Monday. It feels like he’s been back for five minutes; so wrapped up in being around Steve again, and getting to enjoy the little things that he’d missed while at basic, like drinking and dancing at his old favourite watering holes, that he’d let himself forget that this happiness was only temporary.

*Story of my life.*

He doesn’t know how to tell Steve. They’ve been having such a wonderful time since he’s been back and Bucky knows that suddenly slapping it with a deadline will change things. Steve will become sadder again, and every time he looks at Bucky, it’ll be with that sense of dread that Bucky doesn’t want to face right now. He just wants to keep pretending that they have all the time in the world.

He finds the words on the tip of his tongue that night, as they’re lying together and about to fall asleep. He opens his mouth, and maybe it’s the right thing to do, maybe he should tell Steve…Would he want to know, if the shoe was on the other foot?

Yeah. Yeah, he would. So, Bucky should tell him.

He should, but he doesn’t.

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**June 13th, 1943**

“Hey pal… I got somethin’ I need to run by you.”

Steve’s sitting on the couch, doodling a face that Bucky knows is his own. He’s just come back in from visiting his family – *for the last time,* it might very well be the last time, and he told them about the likelihood of getting shipped out in two days, but he still hasn’t told Steve because *it’s Steve,* *it’s different.* He sits on the worn-out armrest of the couch and drapes his arm over his leg.

Steve looks to him curiously. “Okay? Shoot.”

Bucky presses his lips into a firm line, knitting his brows together – trying to think of how best to phrase the situation he’s just been forced into.

“So I was on my way home and I ran into Dougie – you remember him, from the docks, remember? Tall; about yay-high? Brown hair? Bit lighter than mine? Blue – k, you know what – whatever, it doesn’t matter. *Anyways,* I ran into him on the way home and he was with his friend, Connie.”

Steve’s stomach twists and he tenses his jaw. He remembers Connie; or more so, he remembers *hearing* all about Connie.

“She was the one from Minneapolis, right?”
“Yeah,” Bucky nods.

“The one who ya kept tryin’ to get friendly with who wouldn’t give ya the time a’ day whenever she was in town?” Steve clarifies.

Bucky glares at him but gives a small nod. “She always had a boyfriend, but yes, that’s the one; thank you for the reminder.”

Steve stares at him and then shuts his sketchpad. Placing it on the table in front of him, he twists so he’s facing the brunet before tucking his knees up to his chest and resting his chin on them. “Okay, I’m listenin’,” he says reluctantly.

Bucky gets off the armrest and sits down beside him. His gaze has tenderized and is laced with an almost guilty sympathy. “Well… Dougie always knew how much I’d chased after her in the past, so he assumed I’d be able to take her out for a night on the town on Monday; ‘pparently that’s the only night she’s free and he sorta told her I’d take her dancin’ without runnin’ it by me first. She was standin’ right there and I was blind sighted… I didn’t really know how to say no.”

Steve stiffens; eyes hardening. He doesn’t want to be angry with Bucky. But the thing is, they have limited time together and he doesn’t feel like sharing it with some random dame who won’t mean anything by morning. Still, he understands that his best friend didn’t really have a choice in the matter.

Bucky sighs. “Stevie, I know this sucks… Believe me, I don’t feel up to it myself, but Dougie was one of the fellas at work who had gotten suspicious when you n’ me first started going together, you remember? If I didn’t say yes, it would’ve looked bad.” He presses his forehead to the blond’s.

He doesn’t mention the fact that what’s really eating him up inside is that he already suspects that night will be his last in town, and he’d really wanted to spend every second of it with Steve… That the fear of saying no with Connie standing right there would’ve raised a flag so big and red that he’d be worrying the entire time he was overseas whether or not Steve would get another back alley beating like he’d had before – all because the guys had figured Bucky out and put two and two together. And if he did… maybe he’d die this time, alone and afraid. And Bucky would be none the wiser.

“If it makes ya feel any better, I talked my way into makin’ it a double date so that you and I could still spend time together,” he adds.

Steve pulls back and groans. “Buck, no. C’mon, you know those are no fun for me.”

Yeah, Bucky knows; it makes him feel like shit that he’s even asking to put Steve in that position. But he can be stubborn, too, because he really doesn’t want to go alone. “Please, buddy? You know I won’t have no fun without you there. You’re my best guy. Please?”

He bats his eyelashes and sticks out his bottom lip into a pout. Steve stares at him, completely unimpressed, before relenting with a loud sigh.

“I hate you so much sometimes.”

Bucky grins, big and boyish. He knows that basically counts as a yes.

“No you don’t,” he teases affectionately, reaching out and pulling Steve in for a hug. “You love me.”

Steve pauses before his face is smothered to Bucky’s chest and then huffs, “Right now, I really can’t tell which is worse.”
June 14th, 1943

They’re replaying Casablanca over at the cinema, so they decide that before the double date, they’ll catch the flick so they can have a date of their own. It took some convincing on Steve’s part, because he insisted they shouldn’t be spending money on things like that right now when he would’ve been just as content with staying home. But Bucky knows, he knows that little thing that Steve doesn’t know – that ever-ticking clock, that countdown, loud as ever in Bucky’s ears. So he sticks to his guns until his best friend finally gives in.

Sure as the sun rises, Bucky gets that telltale letter in the post. He intercepts the mailman and sneaks it inside with him before Steve can see it. He reads it alone in the bathroom. It must’ve gotten backed up somewhere along the way because there’s absolutely no way they would’ve sent it to him with only one day to spare. No one can be that cruel.

The letter tells him when to report to the train station and where he’ll be shipped out the following day. He has to go and be fitted for his uniform before he can report for duty, so he knows he’ll have to find a way to duck out that afternoon without Steve finding out.

You have to tell him. You really should tell him before you go.

He’s been promoted to Sergeant. Bucky doesn’t feel he’s even done anything to deserve a rank like that.

You have to tell him.

Now it’s set in stone. Bucky’s getting shipped out to England the next morning. This is his last day with Steve – and he has to spend it on some lousy double date, pretending to smile and pretending to be happy and pretending that he isn’t scared for his life… when all he wants to be doing on his final day is wrapping himself up in everything that is Steve Rogers.

He drops his head into his hands, waiting for tears that don’t come.

“I gotta run out for a few hours,” Bucky tells him that afternoon. “I’ll meet you at the theatre. If I’m a little late, save me a seat and don’t you dare eat all the popcorn.”

He tells Steve he’s got to head back to see his pa for something because John apparently has something to give him. As soon as he goes, Steve’s pulling on a worn-out suit and quickly throwing his shoes on. He’s only got a short amount of time to do this.

Because Bucky’s leaving soon; something in his bones knows it. Doesn’t want to believe it, but knows it regardless. It’s any day now, and having Bucky back has made Steve realize all the more painfully how badly he needs to be allowed into the army. Someone has to be willing to give him a chance. He needs to find a way to be by Bucky’s side; that goal is the only thing giving Steve the hope he needs not to fill his thoughts with images of Bucky dying in No Man’s Land, a whole ocean away.

He’s got to hold onto hope. Someone’s got to give him a shot.

Three hours later – to Jersey and back – Steve’s waiting in line to get their tickets with slumping shoulders, sad eyes, and another rejection stamped in his pocket. His chest feels tight, but that’s nothing new. He thought this time might be different. He should’ve known better.

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” he’d asked, trying to ward the hint of desperation from crawling into his tone.
The man had simply given Steve’s bony chest another once over and then had insisted, “I’m doing it – I’m saving your life.”

Why then did it feel like the exact opposite?

When he’s finally got his seat, he looks around the theatre for Bucky. Every time someone comes waltzing in, he perks a bit and then settles back down when their appearance betrays his best friend’s. He doesn’t like being alone after this happens; it gives him too much time to think. And the longer he thinks, the tighter his chest gets. Sometimes his irregularly-beating heart will suddenly pain, sharp and quick, and he wonders if it also senses that Bucky will be leaving him again soon. It pangs again and he presses a hand to his chest, closing his eyes and praying for the movie to start so the noises in his brain can stop.

About fifteen minutes away, Bucky Barnes is staring into a mirror, tightly packaged in green and gold, as he tries not to hyperventilate.

He tells a punk a few rows ahead to shut up. He stands, and Steve gulps, but in his eyes there’s that fire that he’d been desperate to ignite.

He’s in an alley next to the theatre. He’s getting a fist to the face every time he finds his footing again. He can taste the blood in his mouth but he wants this guy to keep hitting him; wants to feel the pain. It helps him take his mind off of everything. He’s vaguely aware that he grabs the lid of a garbage can to try and shield himself but it’s quickly yanked from his grasp.

Another punch to the face. Panting and squinting with his left eye, Steve rises again, fists bawled.

“You just don’t know when to give up, do ya?” the punk asks, clearly amused.

He shakes his arms out a bit and retorts breathlessly, “I can do this all day,” before throwing a punch that he instantly knows would make Bucky cringe. The guy blocks it effortlessly and then swings a heavy right hook, nailing Steve between the eyes. He drops to the ground like a sack of potatoes, falling face-first into that same garbage can and sprawled on his belly.

He’s smarting, and he’s going to get back up – this he knows for certain – when he suddenly hears the sound of Bucky’s voice. Bucky. Just like all those times when he’d been gone that Steve had thrown himself to the sharks just in the hopes of it somehow bringing it back. Only this time, he’s actually here.

“Pick on someone your own size!” Bucky snarls, shoving the attacker away. Maybe this guy doesn’t remember him, but Bucky’s fought him before. He knows his fists may work against Steve, but against him, they’re sluggish and petty. But that protective instinct has revved back up inside of him again, so Bucky’s in no mood to fuck around. He backs right out of the incoming punch before slugging him across the face. When the guy spins around from the impact, Bucky’s foot swings up and kicks him in the ass.

Keeping his eye on the thug until he knows he’s hobbling away, the brunette turns and walks over to Steve, unable to keep the exasperation off his face. He’s incapable of leaving that kid alone for a few hours without him getting himself into trouble. It makes him wonder how many of these little brawls Steve’s been a part of while he was gone.

“Sometimes, I think you like getting punched,” he says tiredly, looking Steve over as the blond gets to his feet – bent over – and tries to regain some equilibrium while working out the stiffness in his jaw. Bucky wants to step forward, take that face in his hands – check him thoroughly to make sure
he’s alright. But anyone could walk by, and who knows if buddy there will try coming back with some friends. So he keeps his distance.

Steve still hasn’t looked to him yet. “I had ‘im on the ropes,” he insists stubbornly. It makes Bucky wants to cry out a laugh – a hysterical sort of sound, but he’s feeling all sorts of off right now.

Something had happened the moment he’d seen himself finally in full uniform. It felt like he was on the brink of it all sinking in, washing over him until he drowned in it, and he couldn’t breathe and he thought he was going to scream, and then, just… Nothing happened. Something in him felt like it tore and in an instant, he reigned it all in and shoved it all back down – down so far, to the soles of his shoes.

He felt like laughing, really, and it scared him. If he laughed, maybe he’d cry, and if he cried, maybe he’d scream… If he screamed, maybe it would all finally hit him, and… Bucky can’t handle that right now. It’s easier to keep brushing it off and ignoring it.

He notices that all-too familiar slip on paper on the ground; the one Steve hadn’t even realized had fallen out of his pocket during the altercation. Scoffing out a breath, Bucky bends down and picks it up. At the same time, Steve straightens and brings the heel of his hand to his temple, eyes squeezing shut as he wheezes out a hiss of pain that makes every nerve in Bucky’s body spark with a hidden rage.

“How many times is this?” he asks flatly, pulling open the form and giving it a look. It never fails, fucking Steve, and Bucky wants to smack some sense into him – same as every other time in the past. But things are different now; a rejection is a rejection is a rejection, and as long as it stays that way, Bucky can’t find it in him to care at the moment if Steve keeps on trying. He’s in no mood to fight with his best friend right now… Not when they only have so much time left together.

Reading the information over, he sarcastically muses, “So, you’re from Paramus now?” Steve just continues wiping away the dirt from his hands and suit, and Bucky wonders if perhaps he’s refusing to meet his gaze because he knows how this routine usually goes and he too doesn’t want to get into it with him today. “You know it’s illegal to lie on the enlistment form,” Bucky reminds him.

“Seriously, Jersey?”

All things considered, Steve could do better than that.

But then Steve finally looks up at him and just like that, his face falls. Baby blues sweep over his uniform, taking it in like for just a second, he can hardly believe it – and he can’t, really.

Because Bucky looks so dashing and proper and patriotic and everything he shouldn’t look out of the blue like this – because no, no, no, this isn’t happening, not right now… He wants to close his eyes and reopen them to see his best friend in a beat-up pair of slacks; maybe a button-up shirt and his hair, he likes it slick but not like that, not like a proper soldier should…

“You get your orders?” he asks, forcing his voice to be as nonchalant as possible. It still doesn’t hide the confused frown of bewilderment off his face.

Bucky sighs and casts his eyes downwards. He could come clean; admit to Steve how fucking terrified he is, maybe admit to how he’d felt when he’d tried on the different sized pants until he’d found a pair that finally fit… Or how when he’d done up the belt around his stomach, he’d suddenly felt claustrophobic. He could be honest about what’d happened when he saw himself in that mirror, or how he doesn’t… want to…

He stops himself. He isn’t letting himself face it, so there’s sure as Hell no way he’ll make Steve do it
alone. He doesn’t want his best guy to be worried about him. He morphs a small, almost proud smirk to his lips, but it doesn’t fit him quite right. Cocking an eyebrow, he tilts his head up and peers down at Steve, echoing back the same words he’d been given an hour before:


*Tomorrow. First thing tomorrow.* Steve faintly nods, trying to soak that last piece of information in as his eyes lower and stare along his uniform again. He was supposed to go to that Recruitment Office today and they were supposed to accept him. He was supposed to have been able to get his own uniform so he could say to Bucky, *That’s okay, Buck, it’s all okay because I’m goin’ with you – we’ll do this together, just like we’re supposed to. You and me, to the end of the line, just like we always said.*

Exhaling, he has to look away, and he shakes his head again because *what else is he supposed to do*? “…I should be going,” he insists solemnly, and that’s all he can say because *what else is he supposed to fucking do!?*

But Bucky sees it all. And again, there’s something in him – maybe *someone*, maybe that bubbly little boy who’s loved Steve since he was eight; maybe the naïve preteen who still saw the world in bright hues instead of duller shades; maybe the man he was before he ever met Peter, or watched Steve almost die, or went to basic training, or would be leaving for England tomorrow – that wants to scream again. Wants to cry… And he almost does.

*Push it down; push it away; push it off. That’s how you survive.*

He grins instead; chuckles, and has no idea why. He feels unstable.

“C’mon man,” he says, cheerful as he’s ever sounded and yet his voice doesn’t sound like his own. He throws an arm around Steve and wrestles the smaller body to his in one forceful jerk. He turns them to head them out of the alley. “It’s my last night,” he reminds him – *as if Steve needs that reminder, he still can’t believe it.* “We gotta get you cleaned up.”

He lets go because he suddenly feels as though if he doesn’t, he’ll rush Steve up against the wall and kiss him, or maybe fuck him, or maybe just sink to his knees and hug Steve’s waist like a frightened child and beg Steve not to let him go.

*Push it down; push it away; push it off.*

He tosses Steve’s rejection form to the side.

“Why? Where’re we goin’?” Steve asks with little enthusiasm.

Bucky hands him the newspaper in his hand. “The *future.*”

Steve takes it with a frown and opens it up. *WORLD EXPOSITION OF TOMORROW* is on the front page, steel globe and fireworks splashed on the paper along with it. He can’t help but get a small smile.

“A *science fair?* We’re taking our dates to a *science fair*?”

Bucky shrugs, but he’s got a playful little smile on his face, too. “An *exposition*, Stevie. Shut up.”

Steve folds the newspaper and promptly hands it back as they head back to the apartment to repair the blond’s face. “You really tryin’ to impress there, Buck?”
“Yeah right,” the older boy scoffs. “Or maybe she’ll get bored and take off early.”

“Ain’t your method of choice usually just drinks and dancin’?”

Bucky sighs. “Yeah, that’s happenin’ afterwards. Science fair first, dancin’ after.”

Steve sneers. “So it is a science fair.”

Bucky chuckles, rolling his eyes. “Shut up, punk.” Throwing an arm back around his neck, he wrestles Steve along as he gives his skull a noogie. Steve curses him and shoves him off.

“How’d you find me anyways?” Steve asks later as he stares into the bathroom mirror, dabbing the dried blood off his mouth with a wet washcloth. Bucky sits on the toilet lid next to him and gives him a are you fucking kidding me? kind of look.

“Checked the theatre and you were nowhere to be found,” he answers. “I always check the alleys first, you know that. Saw some guy throwin’ punches and I was willin’ to bet my bottom dollar and there was this mouthy little blond guy I know on the receivin’ end. Here, let me.”

“Buck, I can--”

“C’mon, let me fuss over ya while I can.”

Steve sighs and hands him the cloth, turning around and leaning against the counter. Bucky gets up and comes in front of him, holding onto the side of Steve’s face and taking over cleaning his mouth up with a gentle pressure. His gaze is focused on those beautiful, busted lips while Steve’s is watching Bucky’s eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he finally asks; a genuine inquiry rather than an accusation.

Bucky pauses, eyes flickering up to his before dropping back down as he resumes wiping. “I wanted to enjoy our time together. I didn’t want it to be tainted with knowin’ I had to leave again soon. I just wanted to be able to pretend for a few days that things were like they used to be.”

He can feel those baby blue orbs still stuck on his face and he wishes Steve would look away. But he always never wants him to him. Steve smells like sweat and garbage and popcorn butter – and yet he also smells wholesome and clean. He’s always had a real innocent, good kind of sweat to his skin.

“I would’ve rather you told me,” Steve says quietly. “These aren’t the kind of surprises I like.”

Bucky stops then, lowering the cloth. He sighs and looks away, leaning forward and palming the edge of the counter top so he’s hunched slightly towards Steve.

“Are ya sore with me?” he asks, meeting Steve’s eyes.

He expects the answer to be a resounding yes. But Steve’s eyes are impossible to read right now, and this unnerves Bucky because he’s always been able to read Steve; see right through him, predict exactly what move he’d make next. So he’s surprised when Steve says, “No,” and the look on his face says he means it. “No, I’m not,” the blond repeats. “I’m mad I ain’t goin’ with you. I should be goin’ with you.”

Steve leans forward then and presses his mouth to Bucky’s. He tastes of blood and that same popcorn butter permeating his scent and Bucky wants to drink that taste in and bring it with him all the way overseas. They kiss until they’re breathless and Steve’s practically bent back at an unnatural
angle on the counter top, and then he winces from a sudden shooting of pain in his back and Bucky jumps away as if he’s broken him. Steve insists he’s alright and coaxes him back over, but they just keep it to soft, unassuming kisses and unspoken words until it’s time for them to go.

Bucky almost wants to call the whole night off and whisk Steve away to bed. But he forces himself to proceed, because as he tells himself, in the long run, it’s better to be safe than sorry. It’s for Steve’s benefit, honest it is.

*Push it down; push it away; push it off. That’s how you survive.*

They head to the Exposition to meet their dates, and Bucky wants Steve to cheer up, because his mood is affecting his own, and he’s feeling as though he’s on thin ice with his emotions as it is. He keeps that bright-as-the-sun (*lie of a*) smile on his face as he jokes something about how Steve should be grateful about being the only eligible man left in New York. He tells him that there are millions of girls there – the insinuation being that the blond could have any of them if he tried. *Yeah right.* But Steve knows it’s a jest – what Bucky’s really trying to say.

*Please cheer the fuck up because it’s my last night and I hate not seeing you smile.*

“Well, I’d settle for just one,” he mutters, eyes on the ground, and Bucky knows *who* he means and he wants to once again suddenly throw Steve to the pavement – *he doesn’t give a damn how many people are around* – and kiss him for so long that he conveniently misses his train and no longer has to leave in the morning.

But he sees Connie ahead and he keeps his gaze there, and she suddenly turns and looks to him so he loses his opportunity. Plaster that grin wider – so wide it *hurts* and he doesn’t feel like himself, not at all – and says quickly, “Good thing I took care of that,” as he throws up a hand and waves.

“Hey, Bucky!” he can hear the brunette call over to him. She sounds so excited. Bucky wishes she wasn’t.

Steve glances to his best guy and then back to the girls, feeling that familiar onset of nerves creeping in. This is the part he hates – the first impression. That moment *right* when he sees his date look to Bucky with that same swoon that all women have around him, before casting their eyes down on Steve as their face falls with disappointment.

“What’d you tell her about me?” he asks a bit guardedly.

“Only the good stuff,” Bucky answers, like he always used to.

They walk around, and Connie holds Bucky’s hand. He lets her, even holds it back, and keeps that smile painted on. Steve’s date, Bonnie – *Bucky and Steve had both almost rolled their eyes at that one, because seriously? Connie and Bonnie was almost as bad as Stevie and Evie had been* – has absolutely no interest in Steve. Bucky’s aware that his best friend is trailing behind them, rejected as always, and though he’s smiling, Bucky’s *hoping* Bonnie will make the mistake of saying something snarky to Steve so he’ll have an excuse to call her out on being a superficial cunt.

Connie and Bonnie run ahead to see the little show Howard Stark is putting on, and of course, since his hand is super glued to Connie’s, Bucky gets dragged along with a smile that reads, *Oh you,* when it really means, *I want to chop my hand off right now.* As always, Steve reluctantly follows behind.

He catches up eventually and has to place himself awkwardly behind and between Connie and Bonnie so he can actually see what’s going on onstage. Stark’s stage presence is amusing, there’s no doubt about that, but Steve’s never been all that swept up in the hubbub of technology, and he
certainly doesn’t feel comfortable with the way the man parades around onstage with a swagger that puts Bucky’s to shame – grabbing and smooching his show girls as if they were nothing more than a piece of meat. So he busies himself with the paper bag of peanuts he’s holding.

He offers the bag to Bonnie, trying to be a gentleman. She turns and looks at him as if he’s just proposed that they fornicate on the floor. And normally, Steve would turn beet red and stammer and apologize profusely for making the lady feel uncomfortable. But something about the fact that it’s Bucky’s last night and he’s out on this stupid double date, having to watch Bucky gallivant around as if he wants to be there while he gets treated like gum on this dame’s shoe – that isn’t sitting well with him at all. So he just returns her stare, and he has to bite down the urge to uncharacteristically snap, *It’s a goddamn peanut, settle the Hell down.*

When the car lifts into the air, it’s about the most amazing thing Bucky thinks he’s ever seen. The “Holy cow” that slips out of him is completely genuine and he hopes to God that Steve is seeing the same thing he’s seeing right now because--

It crashes back to the ground and Connie jumps. He does too, but he hopes no one’s seen it. Everyone laughs, and Bucky can’t help it; he tilts his head and smiles lovingly at Steve because he likes sharing little moments like this with his best friend, even if the circumstances aren’t ideal.

“I did say ‘a few years’, didn’t I?” Stark says to the crowd with a little embarrassment, trying to save face. Everyone starts clapping, except Steve. He can’t stop thinking about Bucky’s uniform and everything it represents for them. He glances around, already bored with what’s happening on stage, when he notices that familiar recruitment poster of Uncle Sam – pointing at him, *I want YOU,* and Steve wishes so badly that that was true.

*Recruitment -->*

He doesn’t let himself second guess it. He’s already gone by the time Bucky turns around, smiling but hoping to God inside that okay, we’ve seen enough, let’s get this thing movin’ along – and when Bucky suggests to Steve that they treat the girls to some dancing, his sentence dies on his lips when he finds the spot next to him unnervingly vacant.

It only takes a few minutes for Steve to locate the Armed Services Recruitment Center. He looks around and watches all the men coming in and out. One of them reunites with his girl, and she beams at him so proudly, and Steve wishes he were half as excited as she is for Bucky to be heading out. Maybe Steve would feel the same way if he knew he’d be joining him.

There’s a little metal square you can stand on that illuminates a display case before you, mirroring back your reflection in the soldier you wish so badly you could be.

Steve’s head doesn’t even fully reach.

Bucky’s left the girls outside of the Center and excused himself the second he sees Steve because of course that’s exactly where he’d be, of course.

Walking up to him, the brunet reaches out and shoves his best friend on the back of his shoulder. “C’mon, you’re kinda missing the point of a double date; we’re takin’ the girls dancin’,” Bucky reminds him, but the smile on his face has wheedled down and his tone isn’t nearly as bright. It’s almost exasperated.

“You go ahead, I’ll catch up with you,” Steve says casually, hands shoved in his pockets.

Bucky stares at him; releases a disbelieving scoff, because *this hurts* – why can’t Steve see how
badly Bucky’s trying not to hurt right now and he needs Steve with him and he can go be noble some other time, for God’s sake.

“You’re really gonna do this again?” he asks flatly.

Steve shrugs. “Well it’s a fair, I’m gonna try my luck.”

“As who – Steve from Ohio? They’ll catch you; worse, they’ll actually take you.”

Steve holds his gaze, and they’re both so tired from doing this. Neither of them has the steam left to make it the grand spectacle it’s always been in the past.

“Look, I know you don’t think I can do this, but I--”

“This isn’t a back alley, Steve, it’s war,” Bucky cuts in.

“I know it’s a war, you don’t have to tell--”

“Why are you so keen to fight? There’s so many other important jobs!”

“Whaddaya want me to do – collect scrap metal in my little red wagon?”

“Yes! Why not?”

Steve fights the urge to laugh. Are they really doing this right now? Really?

“I’m not gonna sit in a factory, Bucky--”

“I don’t--”

“Bucky, c’mon, there are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do any less than them.” (Than you.) “That’s what you don’t understand. This isn’t about me.” (It’s about you. It’s always been about you.)

Bucky’s tired of this argument; he’s tired of it all. He’s tired of having to try and make Steve see reason when he himself would give his left arm just to have the chance of staying behind.

“Right,” he mutters flatly with a nod; a bit condescendingly. “Cause you got nothing to prove.”

Steve sets his jaw and meets his gaze stubbornly, and that familiar defiance, Bucky swears he’s either going to punch him or kiss him. As if that is literally her only mission in his life, for the second time, Connie doesn’t give him the chance to make that decision. She cuts in, calling out, “Hey, Sarge! We going dancing?”

Go dance yourself to the nearest flag pole and sit on it, Bucky thinks, because he really has no time for this shit right now. Instead, he turns, holding his arms out with that cocky little look on his face that the dames have always just loved.

“Yes we are,” he says coolly before turning back to Steve. He knows there’s no changing his mind right now; so he’ll let Steve do this, let him get rejected again, and knowing Steve, he won’t be in any mood for dancing afterwards so he’ll probably just head home. Bucky wishes he’d come join him but he knows it’s a losing battle; he’s already strategizing how he’ll be able to talk his way into ending the night early so he can go home and they can maybe enjoy the rest of their night together.

He starts backing away reluctantly. “Don’t do anything stupid until I get back.”
“How can I? You’re takin’ all the stupid with you,” Steve shoots back, that little gleam in his eye and that little smug look threatening to curl his lips up that makes Bucky’s knees buckle when they’re alone.

He can’t help it. He closes the space between them and almost forgets that he’s just going in for a hug – he wants to kiss those lips so badly. “You’re a punk,” he mutters before bending down and throwing his arms into a hug so strong it makes Steve’s eyes widen the slightest bit.

“Jerk,” he sighs, patting his back. “Be careful,” he says when Bucky pulls back.

Always am, his eyes reply, and for the briefest of moments, Bucky thinks I love you and he wonders if Steve hears it.

He’s got his back to him when he suddenly hears Steve add, “Don’t win the war ‘till I get there.”

And Bucky doesn’t know what he means by that, because it’s not as if he’d seriously leave in the morning without getting to say a proper goodbye. Still, this isn’t the time or place for that, and Bucky feels like a hundred different people living within that suit – but none of them feel like Bucky Barnes. He spins around like the good little soldier he’s trained himself to be, and gives his best friend a small salute.

Like the one he’d sent Steve’s way before heading out to basic, only far less personal.

“C’mon girls, they’re playin’ our song,” he tries to say cheerfully to Connie and Bonnie, but it falls flat even to his own ears. He feels a skinny arm wrap around his back and his own flies around the brunette’s shoulders, and he pretends it’s Steve, as Steve watches him go.

Steve comes home that night not knowing how to feel. He’s overjoyed; he’s also confused. It’s exactly what he’d wanted, and yet he’s just as much utterly baffled as to how it’s possible.

All because a man with a German accent and a kind smile and a thing for life’s underdogs, apparently, had seen something in him and told him he was willing to give Steve the one thing he’d been fighting so hard for over the past seven months: a chance.

And also very little time.

Bucky was shipping out to England in the morning and now, Steve will also be shipping out to basic. It’s ironic in a way, but given their history, it seems only fitting.

He’s now, for all intents and purposes, Private Steve Rogers.

And Private Steve Rogers falls asleep thinking of Bucky and thinking of war and thinking that he doesn’t really know what to think.

Bucky dances. He dances until two in the morning because he can’t find a window big enough to crawl out of. Connie kisses him at the end of the night, and Bucky stiffens against her mouth; forces himself to kiss back and for the first time, he’s glad he has to ship out in the morning because it’s the exact excuse he needs not to have to promise himself to another date.

On his walk home, he spontaneously decides to make a detour to Coney Island. It’s closed, of course, and he can only get so far inside, but he can see it and that’s enough.

Because it’s enough that he can see everything else too – all the memories from summers past, of
laughter and shrieks of exhilaration and photos and innocent hand-holding with Steve Rogers. He walks along the closed gates and stares inside. On the other side, he sees his fifteen-year-old self lifting a candy apple and sneaking it over to Steve. He remembers lying about having paid for it; he wonders if it was yet another one of those times when Steve just knew. Bucky looks in and smiles to himself when he sees fourteen-year-old Steve take his first bite, and Bucky whispers to himself, three… two… one... And then there it is – baby blues lighting up like a brilliant solar flare as Steve’s entire face becomes exuberant at the taste. Bucky remembers thinking to himself that he’d do anything to make Steve smile like that, and if he looks hard enough, Bucky thinks he can pinpoint the exact moment when his younger self thinks just that.

He thinks about when they’d gotten stuck at the top of the Ferris wheel and Steve worked himself into an asthma attack; how he’d forgotten his inhaler and Bucky had had to talk him down until the blond was wrapped tightly in his arms. He remembers how confused he’d been when he felt the sudden urge to see if Steve’s lips would taste like the cotton candy they’d eaten earlier that day.

He remembers rubbing Steve’s back and killing himself laughing until his sides hurt when, after dragging an eighteen-year-old Steve onto the Cyclone, the blond had ran off on wobbly legs and vomited his lunch into the bushes. But he also remembers feeling incredibly guilty – and when he’d pushed Steve’s golden bangs off his sweaty forehead to ask if he was alright, his best friend had looked up at him, all flushed and yet pale and doe-eyed and yet annoyed with him in the way only Steve Rogers can be… And Bucky wonders how he didn’t realize then that that scrawny punk had an iron grip on his heart.

And suddenly his chest is tight and he feels like he’s losing his balance. His hand wraps around one of the metal bars of the gate and he leans against it, all the blood rushing from his face as his body prickles and goes numb. On the brink on an anxiety attack, brought on so suddenly at the realization that these memories might be the last ones he has. After tomorrow – no, today, it’s Tuesday now – he may never get the chance to make any new ones.

He steadies himself, trying to focus on his breathing until the feeling passes. He needs to get home. He needs to spend every last second he has with Steve. So he runs.

Steve wakes up to the sound of heavy footsteps coming into his bedroom. Bolting upright, he fumbles around for something to defend himself against the intruder, when he immediately makes out that familiar outline standing in the doorway.

“…Buck?” he says with surprise.

Bucky says nothing at first. Just stands there, taking Steve in. Slowly, he makes his way with stiff movements to the cots and then takes a seat on the side. He’s staring ahead now, and as his eyes adjust, Steve notices the wetness on his cheeks.

“Buck…” he says with alarm, sitting up straighter and putting a hand on the older boy’s back.

Bucky turns his head and looks at him, and he looks like he’s already been a million miles away. His eyes are lost and his face, his face… he looks like a frightened little boy.

“I don’t wanna die, Steve,” he chokes, and his voice crackles on the last word, and suddenly his face is twisting up and he’s sobbing – shoulders heaving as he struggles to breath and his whole body shakes into it and he’s sobbing in a way Steve has never seen him cry. Loud and wet and whole and terrified.
Steve throws his arms around him and hugs the spasming body to his. Bucky hunches down, uncomfortable but he doesn’t care, and lets Steve cradle his head to that bony chest.

“I’m gonna die,” Bucky sobs.

Steve’s shaking now too, and he looks ahead with wide eyes because he doesn’t know what to do, he doesn’t know what to say; he just wants it to be the right thing so he can make this better. “No you’re not,” he whispers firmly, quickly. “Don’t you say that.”

“I don’t wanna die!” Bucky repeats, as if uninterrupted. He clutches onto Steve so tightly that it hurts, but Steve lets him because right now, he wants nothing else. “I – I thought I – I thought I’d have so much more time,” Bucky stammers, struggling around whooping gasps and the cries leaving him shuddering. “There was so much I – I wanted to – I wanted to do – oh God, Stevie, I can’t die, please!”

Steve’s never been so scared in his life. How do you comfort someone when you’re trying to ward off those exact same fears? He just keeps uselessly repeating, “Shh…” and rubbing Bucky’s back, his hair, anything he can reach that could possibly soothe him.

“I’m so sorry!” Bucky weeps. He pulls back abruptly and grabs either side of Steve’s face and Bucky’s completely broken and the way he’s staring into Steve’s eyes like he’s already given up makes Steve’s heart stop. “For everything,” Bucky keeps going. “I’m sorry for every stupid thing I ever did to you! I’m sorry it took me so long to realize… Please, please, you gotta know how sorry I am!”

“I don’t wanna leave you,” Bucky says with panic. “I don’t wanna lose you – I – I’m gonna die, Steve, oh my God!”

Steve tries to open his mouth to reassure Bucky that, actually, he won’t have to leave him for long because Steve’s going to be following shortly after him now – because now he does have something he can say to make him feel better… Bucky doesn’t give him the opportunity. Leaning in, the brunet cuts out his own sob and forces it to get lost in Steve’s mouth. For a moment, Steve’s eyes fly wide and he tries to repeat Bucky’s name to get him to stop, just for a second, just so Steve can calm him down.

But then Bucky’s tongue is pushing into his mouth and it’s as if the urgency overwhelming Bucky’s body is exchanged much like their saliva; it floods into Steve and now he’s feeling it, too. Everything that Bucky’s feeling; Steve has always been so acute to it all.

He grabs the back of Bucky’s head and kisses back hard, and Bucky moans unabashedly between wet, frantic kisses. Their heads tilt from side to side, and when Bucky feels Steve accidentally knocking his forehead into his hat for the fifth or sixth time, Bucky just grabs it from his skull and whips it across the room. They break apart with panting breaths so both of their hands can fly to Bucky’s uniform and undo it as fast as possible. The brunet tosses everything to the floor, his eyes locked on Steve’s as if ready to eat him alive. Their pupils, blown; their lips, swollen and red; their faces, cherry red on the tops of their cheekbones. He tosses his uniform as if he doesn’t give a damn about wrinkling it up, or protocol, or the army, or the fucking war.

The moment Bucky’s completely naked, he grabs Steve by the hips and tugs, causes the blond to fall onto his back. Bucky snarls through his tears and covers the small, fragile body beneath him with his own – keeping his weight supported with his hands on either side of the blond’s arms. He kisses
feverishly down Steve’s long, pale neck and groans when he feels those artistic fingers he’s always worshipped threading into his hair and tugging uncontrollably.

Steve’s eyes are closed and he gasps and he arches and he wants Bucky closer, closer, he needs to be closer, but Bucky’s too preoccupied with mouthing down his body – lapping and sucking at Steve’s nipples until he’s writhing, as if Bucky fears it’ll all be ripped away from him this very second – until he gets to the blond’s underwear.

Curling his fingers in the waistband, he tugs and Steve lifts his hips so they can be pulled down his legs and removed. Some of the fog in his head has cleared and he finds his voice.

“Bucky – Bucky, wait.”

The brunet looks up at him, breathing roughly and that unhinged look still in his eyes – and his cheeks are still so wet with tears and Steve wants to kiss them all away…

He realizes that if there’s even the smallest possibility that it’s his only chance left, then that’s exactly what he’s going to do.

“Come back up here, please,” he whispers, running his shaking hand gently through Bucky’s slick hair. “Not like this… Not before you go…”

Bucky swallows hard and his jaw tenses. Steve can’t help but wonder if his request is about to be ignored, but then Bucky’s sighing a breath, heavy and wet. He nods, his body seeming to relax the tiniest bit as he loses some of his edge.

“You’re right,” he mutters quietly, voice rough and wobbly. He brings his mouth back to Steve’s belly and kisses back up it. This time, it’s slow and soft. When his mouth trails back up the blond’s neck and brushes against Steve’s, the younger man cups Bucky’s face in his hands and gently pushes him back enough that he can get a good look at him.

Bucky looks miserable; broken. Steve fights down the tightening of his throat; the very real threat of breaking down right here and right now himself. Tilting his chin up, he starts kissing along his cheeks… Trying to kiss away Bucky’s pain. Bucky shudders again and bites his lip as he whimpers, and Steve can feel a fresh, hot tears roll down against his top lip. He swiftly caresses it away as quickly as it came.

“Tell me you love me,” Bucky begs desperately.

“I love you,” Steve answers immediately.

Bucky moans softly in his throat; the sound coming out pained. “Tell me again.”

“I love you.”

“Steve…”

“I love you, Buck.”

Bucky cries harder.

“I love you so much,” Steve insists, now kissing along his jaw and down his throat. “I’ve always loved you, always will. I’m so fucking in love with you.”

“Steve, I don’t want to go,” Bucky says.
“I know, Buck… I don’t want you to go, either… Bucky, I love you…”

“But I have to go,” Bucky chokes.

“There’s nowhere you go that I won’t follow… I’m gonna find you, Buck… M’always gonna find you… I love you so much…”

“Steve, I need you,” Bucky breathes, every word making his lungs feel like they’re burning him from the inside out. He’s gritting his teeth as he feels his best friend’s hands map along his back, his abdomen, his chest… They sear his skin, and he already feels like he may be dying. He’d rather die right here in Steve’s arms than in blood and dirt and mud and carnage.

“I’m right here,” Steve promises, turning them over so Bucky’s the one on his back. He kisses down the older boy’s body until he gets to his hardening cock. He wastes no time kissing along it, and Bucky, all his foul language has fled him, and the only thing he can say is the only thing he knows – the only thing he’s ever cared about.

“Steve,” he pleads, eyes already closed as more tears slide now along his temples. “Steve…”

“I love you, Buck,” Steve says sadly, and then draws him into his mouth.

Bucky cries out loudly – far too loudly, and neither of them care. The sound disintegrates into a helpless sob; his body wracking with more trembles as he continues to cry, and Steve’s heart shatters in his chest. He sucks him harder, squeezing his eyes shut as his own tears finally find their way out of him. They cry together, and Steve’s head bobs, and Bucky moans, quiet and unreliable and cracked. Steve licks along him and suckles on the tip and tries to do everything he can to make Bucky feel good, if only for but a few precious seconds.

Bucky feels like he’s going to come far too soon. He doesn’t want it to be like this; he needs more. He needs Steve. He repeats the blond’s name like a desperate prayer and pulls him back up by his arms. They kiss – Bucky’s wet erection pressing to Steve – and grind against each other for a few minutes. Bucky brings two of his fingers to Steve’s mouth as their tongues beat against each other, and Steve quickly turns his face and sucks down to Bucky’s knuckles; lapping circles around them and slicking them up.

Bucky holds Steve flush to his body as they resume memorizing everything about the other’s mouth. He finds Steve’s opening with his middle finger and circles it, causing Steve to gasp against his lips. They kiss – Bucky’s wet erection pressing to Steve’s – and grind against each other for a few minutes. Bucky brings two of his fingers to Steve’s mouth as their tongues beat against each other, and Steve quickly turns his face and sucks down to Bucky’s knuckles; lapping circles around them and slicking them up.

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Bucky holds Steve flush to his body as they resume memorizing everything about the other’s mouth. He finds Steve’s opening with his middle finger and circles it, causing Steve to gasp against his lips. Steve gives a tiny nod and Bucky slowly pushes it into him with a grunt. Foreheads pressed together, Steve lets himself get lost in the sensation of that digit slowly sliding into his body as Bucky works him open. Bucky watches Steve’s face with all the concentration and intense focus he gets when staring down the scope of a rifle. He never wants to forget how any of this feels, looks, or sounds. If he’s going to die, he wants Steve’s face to be the very last thing he ever sees.

The second finger joins the first, and Steve shakes against him, wheezing out a broken groan. Bucky watches him intently with parted lips; the only sound coming from him being his rapid, heavy breaths. He moves his fingers around inside of him – scissoring and curling and rubbing – until the blond is nodding feverishly and moaning, “Okay, I’m ready. Buck, c’mon, I’m ready, please.”

Bucky licks his lips and kisses him again, pulling his fingers out and wiping them against the blanket. He blindly fumbles to the little table beside their cots for the vaseline, handing it to Steve to take over. While the blond quickly opens it up, Bucky rearranges them so he’s on his side and Steve’s next to him, splayed on his back. The younger man scoops out some slick and then Bucky closes it back up and drops it carelessly to the floor. He grabs the side of Steve’s face and crushes their lips together, moaning helplessly when he feels his best friend’s glistening hand wrap around his dick.
and start stroking.

It’s not so much a kiss as it’s open mouths, hot exhalations, and gasping.

“That’s good, I’m good,” Bucky pants when he feels as though those knowing little twists might bring him to the edge again too soon. Steve removes his hand and wipes it off to the side; Bucky, shuffling the blond closer and hooking his arm under Steve’s knee so he can lift his leg up. The blond reaches down and angles Bucky to his body. They look into each other’s eyes. “Tell me you love me again,” Bucky whispers, his eyes revealing just how badly he needs it.

Steve stares up at him and he’s just so beautiful.

*Let me be yours forever, Bucky wants to say. Let me marry you when this is all over. I promise I won’t let myself die as long as you can promise me that.*

“I love you,” Steve breathes. The brunet’s heart bursts.

Slowly, Bucky pushes inside.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Part 2 of Steve and Bucky's goodbye. Bucky ships overseas and gets thrown into a war he isn't ready for, while Steve survives basic training long enough to meet Peggy Carter and become over a foot taller.

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Just so no one else misreads anything and gets confused, Bucky's parents and siblings in this chapter are his adoptive family. I mentioned back in Chapter 12 (?) that Bucky had been adopted at the age of 16, and I gave him two younger siblings because in CA:TWS, the Smithsonian exhibit claims that Bucky was the oldest of four children - but they never stated that all four children were from the same family. So, in this story, Bucky's younger siblings are Michael, Beth, and Rebecca (wherever she may be). Just in case some of you got confused.

Also, thank you very much for all the feedback I received in the last chapter regarding whether or not will will be a series. As you may have already noticed, that's the path I've decided to take. This story will end by Chapter 20, and then the rest of the series will go as follows:

**Part 2: Little Lies to Give Me Hope** --> Steve's and Bucky's life together in the war with the Howling Commandos, up to when Steve flies the plane into the ice

**Part 3: Little Lies to Sleep at Night** --> Bucky's experience becoming and being the Winter Soldier; Steve waking up in 2012, and up to the line, "...Bucky?"

And finally, **Part 4: Little Lies to Save My Life** --> Everything from "Who the hell is Bucky?" through the events of CA:TWS, and then post-WS.

For those of you who've expressed worry that I'd sooner get tired of this story than finish it, please be rest assured that Steve and Bucky have been my favourite fictional characters for almost 17 years, and my OTP for, like, 13 lol (It all began with comic book Bucky and Steve... haha) I could never give up in these two. ALSO, for those worried that now that the story is being broken up into a series, I will take unnecessarily
long breaks between installments, don't worry about that either. Even though I'm breaking it up, I'm still treating it as if it's one long story. Updates will happen just as regularly as they always have been.

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Come follow me or add me on Facebook? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3 I love meeting new people :)

Tumblr

---

Steve x Bucky art for today:
All of these are found on one of my favourite Tumblr blogs ever: youneedtostrut
To Change

Chapter Summary

Their lives are no longer the same.

---

WARNING: Depictions of violence and unsettling subject matter in this chapter.

---

Thank you to my buddy for recommending these lyrics to me for this chapter. I'm definitely in love with this song now.

Chapter Notes

Come on skinny love, just last the year.
Pour a little salt; we were never here.
My my my, my my my, my-my my-my...
Staring at the sink of blood and crushed veneer...
Tell my love to wreck it all.
Cut out all the ropes and let me fall.
My my my, my my my, my-my my-my...
Right in the moment this order's tall...
And I told you to be patient,
And I told you to be fine.
And I told you to be balanced,
And I told you to be kind.
And in the morning I'll be with you,
But it will be a different kind -
'Cause I'll be holding all the tickets,
And you'll be owning all the fines.
Come on skinny love, what happened here?
Suckle on the hope in light brassieres.
My my my, my my my, my-my my-my...
Sullen load is full, so slow on the split...
And I told you to be patient,
And I told you to be fine.
And I told you to be balanced,
And I told you to be kind.
And now all your love is wasted,
Then who the hell was I?
'Cause now I'm breaking at the britches,
And at the end of all your lines.
Who will love you?
Who will fight?
And who will fall far behind?
Come on skinny love,
My my my, my my my, my-my my-my...
My my my, my my my, my-my my-my.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hips roll slowly… Push forward, pull back, rock home again… Soft breaths – low and deep, lost in the night… Blue locked on grey; trembling, sweating, memorizing… Never blinking, never looking away; two hearts desperately trying to sew themselves together so they can never be separated…

Bucky moans quietly, the sound resonating from the center of his chest and vibrating up through his throat. It’s a broken kind of sound and it hurts. It hurts because it feels so good, it feels so perfect, but when it’s over… When it’s over, Bucky can’t bring himself to think about when it’s over.

So, as the rest of his body remains still – one hand clutching beneath the back of Steve’s knee to keep the blond’s leg in the air – his pelvis undulates back and forth achingly slow. Because he never wants it to be over, no matter how badly his body hits moments where it begs for release. And Steve understands, because Steve always gets it (gets him). He lies there on his back; side pressed to Bucky’s front and keeps his head tilted to the right so he can look up at that boy, that boy he’s been crazy about his whole life. And his leg, the one propped up so Bucky has the room to seek refuge in his body, it shakes; it mists with perspiration that makes the grip of the older boy’s hand slip and constantly have to readjust.

But Bucky never lets go. If he shifts – if he has to find a way to hold on tighter – his grasp only eases up for but a second before he’s grounding himself again; fingers buried so tightly to the flesh that it near bruises, but makes Steve feel safe. In their entire lives, this has always been the way Bucky has handled Steve… If he slipped, he always came back. And when he does, he only ever holds on tighter.

Bucky tries to breathe Steve’s name but his lungs are twisted up and all he can manage is the smallest, most helpless of gasps.

Steve. The boy who gave up his first ice cream cone when he was seven so Bucky could have the first taste; who took precious care of Bucky’s father’s hat until he got mugged when he was sixteen. Steve. The angel who always split up his sweets with Bucky so they had the exact same amount – so things were always fair between them, because Steve never wanted Bucky to feel less than the center of Steve’s universe. Who hadn’t told a single soul when Bucky was seventeen and had his heart broken by Angela Wilson and cried and cried and cried, because they’d been going together for almost ten months and Bucky was certain that he loved her, even if he wasn’t in love with her yet… Steve, who had slung an arm around his shoulders and let him fall apart just a little with his head in his hands – even though something in Steve must’ve smarted something awful at the position he was being put in.

Steve. The scrawny punk with a heart ten times bigger than his body – who was a thousand times over the greatest, kindest, most good person Bucky Barnes had ever known; the boy who went to Church with an unfaltering faith Bucky admired, and who stood up for what was just, even at his own expense, always. Who let Bucky hold him countless nights as kids, just to make him feel better… The one person who saw Bucky the way no one else – not even Bucky – saw him from the
beginning; who never once doubted the things the older boy was capable of… Where he could be, what he could do.

Steve Rogers took a broken, vulnerable boy and helped him find himself again. Time after time. He was still doing this for him.

“I love you,” Bucky whispers shakily, feeling a bead of sweat trickle down his temple.

They’ve been at it, slow and torturous, for over an hour; the ministrations so controlled and steady that Steve hasn’t even come close to falling into an asthma attack yet. But the flush across his entire tiny body, how blown his pupils are – the way he stares up at Bucky in a daze… Bucky knows there isn’t much time left. He can feel it, too, coiling in the pit of his belly and slowly seeping throughout his veins like ink in water.

Steve hears him but everything feels as though it’s moving in slow motion, like a dream sequence. Bucky’s lips move but there’s a second’s delay before the words reach the blond’s stunted hearing. He feels Bucky keeping him stretched and open; he’s been maintained and cared for this way for what feels like forever now, and Steve is drunk off of it. Every thrust is like a promise that neither of them can say, and he both wants to hear it and wants to ward it off as much as possible.

But Bucky… he looks so ethereal. Steve doesn’t know why… Perhaps it’s the moonlight. It spills into the room and cascades over the brunet’s body – and with the way they’re laying, Bucky is shielding him from the light, so it seems to only encompass him. The older boy is encased in a fuzzy line of white and he… he looks like he’s glowing. He’s radiant. He’s a fucking angel.

Sent here to save me, Steve thinks, and he hears his own voice in his thoughts but even that sounds sluggish and far away. He’s hypersensitive to Bucky’s touch, and it’s like he’s here but he also isn’t, and he never wants this to end. Because he looks up at Bucky – glassy, doe-eyes of the most spectacular, bluest marble that take Bucky’s breath away – and Steve remembers the exact moment they met… that urge that he ignored to rise up and peck his lips to that little dip in the center of his chin.

He remembers the boy who snuck through his bedroom window from time to time, whenever Steve wasn’t staying with him at the orphanage, so he could bossily tell the blond to move and give Bucky space to squeeze onto his bed. Children, teens, it didn’t matter – Bucky did this until they finally moved out and found a place of their own. Steve remembers… He remembers Bucky trying to convince him on his tenth birthday that the Fourth of July fireworks were actually meant for him, not America, and that split second where Steve let himself believe it… He remembers Bucky stealing lollipops at Coney Island and sucking on them so they’d stick to the bottoms of Steve’s shoes, making him just tall enough to join Bucky on some of the bigger rides.

He remembers nights in Bucky’s arms, and far less many nights without them. He remembers fights and tears and laughter and hugs and kisses – both with intention and accidental… Summers of lingering smiles and innocent adventures; winters of fear and protection and Bucky never stopping in his quest to keep Steve with him but for yet another day.

Bucky Barnes was a loud-mouthed, golden-hearted, bright-eyed planet of a kid who came with his own orbit, his own gravitational pull. He could’ve saddled himself with anybody he wanted, but instead, he gave a lonely boy a second chance. Bucky brought Steve happiness. Time after time. He was still doing this for him.

“Do you love me?” Bucky pushes breathlessly, eyes still stuck on Steve’s face. His mouth is permanently slack to accommodate his heavy panting, and Steve watches a drop of sweat drip from a clump of his bangs and he’s pretty sure it lands on the pillow right next to his cheekbone.
Steve nods. “I love you,” he promises, for about the hundredth time that night. He doesn’t mind repeating it; he never tires of saying it. “Ah,” his breathing hitches momentarily and he can’t help but flutter his lids closed. Bucky never breaks his stride and slides back in, and when he brushes against Steve’s prostate, the younger man’s jaw drops and he draws out a languid, “Auuuhh…”

“Fuck…”

“I love you, I love you so much,” Steve repeats, eyes still closed. His back arches; Bucky ducks down, disrupting his rhythm, so he can run his tongue across a patch of the skin and lick up the taste of salt. Steve’s hand flies up and tangles its fingers into Bucky’s mess of hair, slick with sweat and tonic, to feverishly pull his best friend’s head up and crush their lips together. The slightly awkward angle makes Steve try a shift a bit to make things easier, squeezing tight around Bucky’s cock in the process.

The brunet stutters against his lips and gasps loudly. Steve’s eyes open to look at his face and God, my God… Bucky’s eyes are squeezed shut and his face knit in a sad sort of ecstasy… Like he doesn’t deserve to be feeling this much pleasure…

“Baby, please,” Bucky moans in a throaty voice, and Steve is powerless to resist. He wiggles his hips in a tiny circle and clenches his muscles, and Bucky releases a staccato groan, body twitching. Grey orbs open, lids half-mast, and they lock their gazes. For a moment, Bucky doesn’t move. Steve can hear his heartbeat in his ears.

“I… I don’t want to stop,” Bucky whispers. He sounds seconds away from crying again.

Steve doesn’t know if Bucky means that he doesn’t want them to stop having sex, or that he doesn’t want to stop himself from coming any longer, but either way, Steve agrees. He exhales a soft, reluctant moan and cups the side of his face. “I know…”

They pause. For both of them, something in that is good enough, because even though they don’t want it to end, they both know that eventually, all good things must. And they’re too invested not to chase the finish line.

Bucky starts moving again; fucks into Steve quicker, desperately. Steve’s eyes roll into his head and he cries out, trying to keep his volume contained. Bucky watches him with an intensity that makes the blond’s dick harden until it’s throbbing with pain. His lover notices.

“Hold your leg up,” he hears the brunet say, and Steve obediently takes over so Bucky can let go and instead take up Steve’s erection. Long, calloused fingers wrap around the girth and squeeze, quickly establishing a rhythm to match his hips as Bucky wrings his hand up to the tip and back down to the base relentlessly. Steve wheezes and arches his back, over stimulated from both ends and feeling his orgasm now approaching fast and powerful – so much building up and threatening to rip throughout him that he’s almost frightened.

When Bucky hears Steve whimper, he can’t help the moan that slips from his throat as he exhales. “Steve… M’gonna miss you so much… God… You feel… I can’t, Steve… M’gonna come…”

“Please,” Steve gasps, forcing his eyes open so he can watch Bucky fall apart. Maybe for the last time.

Bucky licks his lips between ragged, quickening wheezes. His eyes scan Steve’s face before meeting those baby blues. He replies just above a whisper, “You first…”

“Just keep doin’ that,” Steve begs. He’s filled with too much… Too much of Bucky, too much
sadness, too much fear – too much of everything… He wonders of he’s capable of splitting apart at the seams. “Please…” His voice sounds thick and wobbly. “Talk me through it…”

Bucky closes his eyes for a moment, pained. He stammers out an accidental groan and then nods before composing himself and reconnecting their gazes. Bucky’s dick is so hard it hurts, he wants to come so bad, and Steve’s body always feels so fucking perfect and welcoming and he needs this, Steve needs it… They both do.

“Come for me, baby,” he breathes; watches the way Steve’s pupils seem to tremor at the words before expanding impossibly larger. There’s hardly any ring of blue left to speak of anymore. He stares up at Bucky helplessly, with slightly furrowed brows – that little wrinkle between them – and swollen lips and cheeks blushed apple red.

“You feel so good around me, you do… Gonna win this war, gonna do whatever I needta’ do, and… I… oh my God, oh yes, ah… M’gonna come back here, and you n’ me, we’re gonna… we’re gonna… Mmm, baby, fuck… Gonna find someplace to go, just you n’ me, and m’gonna get on one knee and ask you to be my best guy for life… Gonna marry you, Stevie… Don’t care how long it takes… Don’t care… Unh, I don’t care if you say no… Gonna keep asking until you finally say yes…”

Steve stares back with wide eyes, glossy with tears and maybe a little apprehension. There’s a small part of him that knows they’ll never be able to do that – that’s just not the way the world works… Their paths are not mean to be written that way. But in this moment, he doesn’t care. He doesn’t give a single damn at all, because that sounds perfect, and Steve wants exactly what Bucky wants: to be able to indulge and believe, if even for a minute, that that’s the life they could have together.

“You feel so good around me, you do… Gonna win this war, gonna do whatever I needta’ do, and… I… oh my God, oh yes, ah… M’gonna come back here, and you n’ me, we’re gonna… we’re gonna… Mmm, baby, fuck… Gonna find someplace to go, just you n’ me, and m’gonna get on one knee and ask you to be my best guy for life… Gonna marry you, Stevie… Don’t care how long it takes… Don’t care… Unh, I don’t care if you say no… Gonna keep asking until you finally say yes…”

“Bucky…” Steve whimpers. “M’so close… Please… M’gonna come…”

“Yeah, baby, come,” Bucky pleads again, pumping his hand harder; thrusting faster. “Fuck, I love you so fucking much, Steve… You got no idea, swear to God… I… I…”

The tether holding Steve together disconnects. He tries to snap his hips into Bucky’s fist while that beautiful stretch and slide continues to assault his badly abused prostate. Eyes flying wide, he looks up at his best friend as if terrified, and uses the split second he has before the wave crashes over him to whisper, “Bucky, Bucky, I’m coming fuck fuck fuck, I’m coming, mm!”

Bucky watches with wide eyes as Steve’s belly snaps up into the air - back arching off the cot - as if someone impaled the blond through his center and tugged. Steve tosses his head back into the pillow and groans out the sounds of his orgasm as his cock pulses in Bucky’s hand and arcs stream after stream of his seed onto himself. He gasps midway through, as if shocked into a fresh rush of thrumming pleasure.

And then he says it:

“James!”

It’s more of a scream, really. It’s gravelly and fucked out and Steve has never called him that during sex, not ever. It’s the single most grounding thing Bucky has ever heard. He feels the hot wetness
messing his hand, and he scrunches his nose involuntarily when his balls tightly draw up without warning.

“Oh, fuck,” he mutters before letting go of Steve’s still pulsing cock. He presses his hand to the inner thigh of his best friend’s raised leg and pushes it back until the blond’s knobby knee is touching his chest. Opened up for Bucky more, the older man lets out a strangled sound and then frantically increases the speed of his thrusts; slapping into Steve with little finesse or rhythm as all his body tries to do now is follow the path to its freedom.

Steve’s writhing and gasping and lost in a stasis of complete and total bliss beneath him – bringing his arms up to wrap around Bucky’s neck and clutch onto the back of his head. Bucky lets himself get pulled down so his forehead is pressed against Steve’s jutting collarbone. The position is slightly uncomfortable and there’s no rhythm to speak of anymore with the way Bucky ruts into him fast and uncoordinated, but neither of them care.

Bucky pants quickly into Steve’s skin and then grits his teeth with a grunt as he finally comes, deep and intense into the latter’s body.

“Steve… Steve…” Bucky pants, just about a whisper, his body still trembling as he lets his weight collapse to the side of the younger man. Burying his face into Steve’s neck, the brunet laves kisses against the skin between heavy breaths as he slowly drops back down to earth. Steve sighs out a soft moan and manoeuvres his skinny arms around the much bigger body so they can be held together.

Bucky carefully pulls out and then slings an arm around the blond’s middle. He’s still caught in the throes of their passion and Steve thinks, This is it. This is the moment; you have to tell him about Dr. Erskine. You have to tell him what happened tonight. But when he opens his mouth to speak, Bucky gets to it first.

“I’m tellin’ ya, Steve,” he murmurs into that space between Steve’s shoulder and throat where Bucky has always fit so perfectly. His voice is a lot more controlled now, even amidst the lingering sadness and trepidation. “Literally the only reason I’m alright with headin’ out there into the fire is ‘cause I know you’ll be here waitin’ for me where it’s safe. Promise me you’ll stay safe.”

And just like that, Steve’s words die on his tongue.

How is he supposed to respond to that? Bucky’s just fallen apart in his arms, in a way Steve’s never seen him before – not even back on that fateful night when Bucky bared his feelings for Steve as well as the truth about Peter. This is different. It’s the worst sort of guilt trip Steve could think of, even if Bucky hadn’t intended it to be.

But he can’t tell the truth – not right now. Because when he feels Bucky pull away and he peters his head down, they look into each other’s eyes and Bucky’s are pleading please… please just tell me what I want to hear. I need you to do this for me.

It’s one of those times where they both just sort of know.

“Steve,” Bucky pushes, voice straining.

“I promise,” Steve replies without letting himself give it too much thought. Then he considers that maybe he doesn’t need to outright lie. He just needs to choose his words carefully. So he merely echoes back what Bucky asked of him: “I promise I’ll stay safe.”

Because he can try his hardest to control that, can’t he? Whether he stayed in Brooklyn or joined the army, there would be circumstances that would try to hinder his safety; seasons without Buck would
mean fighting through sicknesses on his own – and in all fairness, he’d be just as likely to die from that as he would be from dying in No Man’s Land. All he needs to do is be mindful of self-preservation.

He doesn’t know if Bucky fully believes him, and Bucky isn’t completely sure either. But now isn’t the time for that. In their couple, short remaining hours together, now is the time to believe in fairy tales and happy endings and that anything is possible… Where they can believe in a world where Bucky goes off to fight the good fight while Steve stays behind and continues living; where Bucky comes home safe and sound and Steve can help him through the nightmares he would have, for years, until they found a way to run away together and get hitched… Right now, they can only believe in a world where they’re with each other until the end of the line. Right now, they choose to ignore the truth in favour of living in a world where they can have their happy ending.

Time drains by a lot sooner than either boy would have liked. They tried to mentally will the universe to stop – just for a few seconds – to grant them some more time together. They’d spent the remainder of the night into the early morning alternating between whispering promises in the dark and simply exchanging small, sad kisses while they stared into each other’s eyes, only to see their own reflection inside of them. Then the sun begins to rise and they both know it’s time for Bucky to get ready.

He takes advantage of their shower, knowing that luxuries like that will become scarcer the longer he’s overseas. It’s funny, he thinks as he steps inside and turns on the water, how things in their crappy little apartment that once reflected just how poorly they got by now suddenly seemed like riches. He wishes he would’ve been more appreciative of the simple things – like a shower (even if the water is mostly cold), or a cot to sleep on, or even a morsel of food to eat… Of electricity, and heat, and privacy, and Steve. This place – complete dump or not – was his and Steve’s home. And it had, truly and completely, felt like the only real home Bucky Barnes had ever known.

Steve clambers in behind him and they share the shower in silence. Bucky feels Steve’s breath puff against the middle of his spine as the blond steps in close. They only have a tiny bit of soap left, and Steve uses it to wash Bucky’s hair. The brunet closes his eyes and tries to lose himself in the sensation of those nimble, artistic fingers scraping pleasantly along his scalp. He turns around to make it easier; resting his hands on Steve’s hips. After rinsing out the small amount of suds, the older boy opens his eyes to meet the baby blues looking up at him.

He tilts Steve’s chin up, leans down, and they share a kiss. The water is quickly cooling but neither is paying attention. Their lips part just a sliver – just so their tongues can gently press together and drink in the other’s taste while they still have a chance – but even still, it’s just not like that. It’s not one of those kisses. It’s more. It’s slow and languid and unassuming, and after a minute or so of deep, soft breaths through their noses and a peck of their lips, Bucky wraps his arms around Steve and holds him to his chest. Still, neither says a word. They both already know.

Afterwards, Bucky does his best to smooth the wrinkles out of his uniform before dawning it again, and he uses the very last from his old bottle of tonic to reset his hair just right before he puts his hat back on his skull. He’s already packed up everything he’s bringing with him in his worn-out duffel bag, but he throws some last-minute items into it. Steve laughs when Bucky makes a point to pull out the two ties that Steve owns and pre-ties them, so they’re ready for wear since you still don’t know how to do them up by yourself. But when he laughs, it’s clumsy and sounds too close to escalating into tears.

Crouching by his bag, Bucky fishes inside of it and closes his palm around something small and round. “I got you somethin’ earlier,” he says, rising back up and holding it out for Steve. The blond
starts to argue but the look Bucky gives him makes him stop himself. Tentatively, he holds up an opened palm and the brunet places the object into his hand.

It’s a compass. A little rusty and definitely used by someone else in the past, but Steve instantly thinks it’s one of the most beautiful items he now owns. Giving Bucky a small, shy smile, he jokes, “You’re not gonna make some joke now ‘bout how you got this for me so my heart will always finds yours, are ya?”

Bucky snorts. “It’s a compass, Steve, don’t be stupid. I got it for you because you’re complete shit when it comes to directions and I don’t want ya gettin’ lost now without me.”

Steve keeps his eyes on him. “I will be, though.”

Bucky’s smile fades until only one corner of his mouth is still upturned. It’s hollow now. “Quit that. Someone’s gotta hold down the fort until I get back.” But he still leans in and kisses the top of Steve’s forehead, and he’s glad that Steve can’t see all of the emotions that his eyes give away.

“You’re not gonna let me walk you to the train station, are you?” Steve says rather than asks into the breast of the green uniform.

Bucky huffs out what sounds like a sigh. “’Fraid not, kid.”

Steve blinks, zoning out while staring at the details in the fabric of Bucky’s collar. “It ain’t March no more. M’not gonna catch a cold. You gonna tell me the real reason?”

The Sergeant considers simply not answering. Then he considers fibbing. In the end, he quietly answers, “Because if you come with me, I’ll never be able to leave you.”

The truth hangs in the air around them. Bucky isn’t sure whether he’s relieved or heartbroken that he feels Steve’s head give the tiniest of nods against him. Bucky pulls back and gives one last look around their room. “M’gonna miss this place,” he tries to say lightly.

“Bet you’re gonna be missin’ it a Hell of a lot more when you ain’t got nothing to use but rocks for pillows,” Steve replies, looking around with him.

“Don’t remind me.”

Their gazes end on each other. Bucky produces a weak smile. “We had a good run, didn’t we? It was a good time.”

“The best,” Steve agrees, face solemn and completely betraying the smile he tries to copy. “Luckily we’ll have all the time in the world once this whole thing is over.”

It’s his way of reminding his best friend, Don’t you do that. Don’t you dare talk like you’re never going to come back. Bucky doesn’t look convinced. “You’re gonna be alright,” Steve insists. Bucky nods, but again, doesn’t quite seem to believe it.

They stay that way for a while. Steve stares at the ground, worrying his bottom lip. He tries to imagine what Bucky must be going through; tries to picture what his best friend will be going through far too soon.

“Hey Buck?” he says after a few minutes, breaking the silence.

Bucky peers over to him. “Yeah?”
Steve’s brows crease as he thinks his words over carefully. He looks to his best friend. “Just know that… While you’re over there, I don’t want you to be worryin’ about me. I know what you’re gonna be runnin’ into – in the middle of… I mean… What I’m tryin’ to say is, I want you to live every moment you have there for what it’s worth, okay?”

Bucky’s brows raise in the center, confused. Shaking his head slightly, he starts to speak, but Steve keeps going. “What I mean is, I know what this is – you n’ me. And I trust you. I trust you, that’s what I’m tryin’ to say. As long as your heart is mine, that’s all that matters to me. I’m fine with whatever happens, as long as you love me best.”

The brunet finally gets it; what Steve’s insinuating. People do certain things when they’re thrust into the middle of a war – things to keep sane, to hold onto their humanity… To survive. But the thought is difficult for him to process. “Steve, I wouldn’t…”

Steve gives him a sympathetic smile. He knows what Bucky wants to say – and of course he’d say that now, while he’s still here… When he hasn’t yet experienced the worst of it. He doesn’t want Bucky to make promises he can’t keep – mostly just because he doesn’t want Bucky to have to experience any guilt about it. And it hurts Bucky that that smile he’s being given is so genuine, without even a hint of judgement or jealousy.

“Buck, just tell me you’ll always love me best.”

Bucky nods dumbly. “I – I’ll always love you best,” he replies, feeling a little lost. Guilty, for things he hasn’t even done yet. He reaches over and caresses the side of Steve’s face – his grey orbs full of concern and adoration and sadness and every emotion under the sun with a name. “You’ll always be my best guy.”

Steve nods resolutely. “Okay,” he murmurs. Then he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Okay,” he exhales again before opening them. “I guess it’s time for you to be headin’ out now, huh?”

Bucky nods, lips tight, and gets up. “Yeah… It is. Walk me to the door, will ya?” He picks up his duffel bag and slings it onto one shoulder. Steve follows him to the front door. Bucky’s hand closes around the knob but he hesitates before pulling it open. Turning, he says, “Steve—”

Steve palms Bucky’s shoulders and rises on his tippy toes, shutting him up with a kiss. “I know,” he whispers. “Me too.”

“Always,” Bucky says.

“No matter what.”

Bucky tries for one last smile. It looks more like a frown. “Stay outta trouble.”

“You too.”

Bucky bends down and plants a final kiss to his lips before pulling back with a stiff nod and heading out the door. Just like the last time, Steve heads over to the living room window and pops his head out. When Bucky emerges onto the street, the brunet turns and looks up at him.

“To the end of the line!” Bucky hollers, waving and walking backwards. Steve knows what it’s being substituted for.

“To the end of the line!” Steve shouts back, waving. “I’ll see you soon!”
Bucky nods and keeps their eye contact before turning his back to the apartment and walking away. Steve knows that Bucky doesn’t really get the full weight of his words – but he will. Soon enough.

“I’ll see you soon, Buck,” he whispers again into the morning air, before dashing inside to start packing.

If Basic felt like Hell for Bucky at first, there needed to be a word created for how it felt for Steve.

It’s a strange sort of thing; he’s never felt more liberated and motivated, and yet he’s also never felt more useless and humiliated. The other privates are tall, broad-shouldered, and masculine, making Steve stand out like a sore thumb. They can bench press well over their own weight – many of them, even twice as much. Steve discovers that he can bench press a grand total of thirty pounds. He can only manage about four proper push-ups before his arms are trembling and he’s collapsing to the ground, and at 21.48 seconds, he always comes dead last in the hundred yard dash.

The partial deafness in his right ear that he’d never fully regained after he’d been almost beaten to death is a major hindrance for him. Sometimes, he doesn’t catch his orders the first time around and not all of his superiors care to look into his medical records, so they just assume he’s being bratty. Most orders are given to the unit as a whole and then followed by a sharp and punctual, “Rogers!” because he’s either still focused on the task at hand, or he’s scrambling around like a deer caught in headlights, trying to figure out what everyone else is suddenly doing.

But they don’t go easy on him or give him any special treatment just because of his ailments, and for this, Steve is eternally grateful. Even if it can be embarrassing at times (a lot of times), and even if it pushes Steve’s dedication, it’s the first time in his life that he feels as though he’s been as an equal. So he never complains when he pushes himself too hard; if his poorly constructed spine makes obstacle courses nigh excruciating to complete, or if his heart arrhythmia sometimes brings him close to blacking out during those mandatory jogs that seem to go on for hours. He never protests. He never says no. In fact, the only time he’s incapable of participating for a couple days is when he develops a stomach ulcer and cannot take a proper step without doubling over.

But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t try to fight having to go into the medical unit to see a nurse; doesn’t mean he doesn’t absolutely insist that he’s fine and can continue. And it definitely doesn’t mean he doesn’t try to sneak into the crowd every day for the few days he’s temporarily discharged from all the activities so he can try and participate.

Every time, he gets escorted back to his sleeping quarters, or to the nurse. Every time, they call him foolish and tell him that with an attitude like that, he’s going to get himself killed. But he also earns a lot of their respect that way – even if they won’t admit it out loud.

Steve’s too preoccupied to let himself feel lonely, but not a second goes by that he doesn’t miss Bucky or wonder how he’s doing. He keeps the negative thoughts – the horrible possibilities – at bay, because it does him no good here. He really wishes he could write him; tell him everything that’s going on, have someone to talk to about it all... But he doesn’t have an address; in fact, he currently has no idea where Bucky is even stationed anymore. It could have still been England, but that had probably already changed.

He hadn’t even realized until after he’d left that by not telling Bucky where he’d be going, Bucky might try and send letters back to their apartment. And since Steve wouldn’t be there, he obviously would be unable to reply. The first time Steve realized that Bucky’s letters would go unanswered, and he had pictured Bucky constantly seeing his fellow soldiers getting things from their sweethearts but getting nothing himself – maybe he’d ask every day, ‘there anythin’ in the post for me?’ and then he’d be told no and he’d pretend it didn’t disappoint him, he’d wait until he knew no one was
watching to let his easygoing smile slip away – he had had a panic attack. It was the only real moment where he’d wondered if he’d made a huge mistake.

And he had had to work through his attack alone, which was harder than he’d anticipated, but not impossible. He was just used to a familiar pair of grey-blue eyes and a warm, calloused hand on his shoulder; hearing a calming voice he knew better than his own talking him through it. Without Bucky, Steve had to learn how to survive on his own – and it took about twice as long, but he was able to eventually get his breathing under control and slow his rapid heart rate. In a weird way, it made him feel proud and sort of accomplished.

There’s this one guy, though – Gilmore Hodge. And Steve doesn’t know what exactly he did to get on Hodge’s bad side, but there is most definitely a throne on his bad side with Steve’s name on it in big, bold print. He stops at nothing to make things as difficult as possible for the blond. He knocks his food off his tray when they’re having lunch in the mess hall (he spat in it once, but immediately was seen and got reprimanded, which only seemed to make him more angry at Steve – as if that were somehow Steve’s fault); he sabotages Steve’s performances in the obstacle courses whenever he finds an opportunity. Hell, he’d even once taken all of Steve’s belongings from their sleeping quarters and found a way to stick them all on the roof, on a day when the weather had been particularly unforgiving. Steve had had to sleep in rain-soaked clothing that night, on a flimsy excuse of a mattress without sheets or a blanket – but the blond had not reported him, or complained, or made a fuss because he would not give that to Hodge; he wouldn’t let the bully think he’d won.

It was only by the grace of God and the fact that it was summer that Steve didn’t come down with a cold that night.

Gilmore Hodge is unrelenting… Which is why it’s so goddamn satisfying when Steve sees Peggy Carter slug him in the face the first time he lays eyes on her.

Man, it’s a beautiful sight – watching him spin around from the force and go slamming to the ground is well worth the weeks and weeks of torment that Hodge had been personalizing onto Steve. His only regret is that he’d not been the one to have done it. But he can’t help the little smirk that turns up the corners of his lips.

And man… Peggy is a beautiful sight. It had actually caught Steve off guard, the first time he’d seen her. He didn’t know what to do with that information; to be honest, he still doesn’t. They’ve never interacted one-on-one before – in fact, she’s never even really said much to him in general, but he remembers all too well the way she’d looked when she shot him that little impressed smile, back when he’d retrieved the flag from that flag pole and clambered into the back of their vehicle to hitch a ride.

She’s all fire and attitude and sass and she don’t take no guff from no one.

So Steve chalks it up to that; chalks it up to the fact that any dame who has the chutzpah to deck a guy bigger than her just to stand up for what’s just is definitely a catch. Any woman who can slug it out with the best of them – tough it out and prove herself in a place dominated by nothing but men – and completely hold her own, now that’s someone special. He just notices it, is all. He assumes she must have herself a fella, and whoever he is, he’s one lucky guy.

Today, they’ve only just had a ten minute grace period to collect themselves from the two-hour run they do every morning. Steve’s limbs feel like jelly, but even still, they’re doing push-ups now. He struggles with every upforce; arms wiggling and teeth clenched, but he peers up to catch a glimpse of Agent Carter whenever he can. He isn’t sure why; she just feels like the only person around there that Steve feels comfortable around, save for Dr. Erskine.
She has a confident sway in her step, even as she’s perfectly collected and orderly. Her voice is strong and edged with the most proper of English accents Steve’s ever heard. He hasn’t heard many; the ones he has heard were very choppy and didn’t sound nearly as sophisticated as hers does. Before he knows it, they’re being led into a succession of jumping jacks. Those jumping jacks turn back into push-ups, which turns into jumping jacks that lead into push-ups that lead back into jumping jacks – and Steve just about feels like he’s going to die.

Except that Agent Carter is ordering them through it – bossing them around, he wants to say, but in an endearing way, because he can’t stop listening. She calls them ‘ladies’ and says something about her dead grandmother having more life than them, and everyone grunts and pants and tries not to complain – and Steve grunts and pants and doesn’t even consider complaining. Her voice is lovely. She’s mouthy and has a presence to her that automatically makes him think of Bucky, and it makes his chest hurt a little bit, but it also brings him a sense of comfort; makes him feel as though his best friend isn’t all that far away. She’s familiar to him, even though she’s nothing but a stranger. But he holds onto that familiarity because it’s like a little reminder of home, and he needs that right now.

He’s pulled out of his thoughts when he suddenly hears what sounds like Colonel Phillips shouting, “GRENADE!”

The men scatter like a startled flock of seagulls. There’s no time to think; all Steve can see is the grenade thump into the clearing and then roll to a stop, and all he knows is that he has to protect these people – he has to protect Peggy, and even Hodge, because no one deserves to die, not no one.

He throws himself onto it, curling on his side and trapping the grenade against his stomach to try and form a protective cocoon from the others. He doesn’t have time to hope that no one gets splattered with his innards; he doesn’t have a moment to reconsider his choice. He shouts, “Get away! Get back!” and curls in tighter, waiting with clenched teeth for the impending blast – for the single split second where he might hear the explosion before he feels nothing at all. The only thing he has time to do is think, Bucky, I’m sorry.

But nothing happens.

Steve knows how long it takes for an Mk 2 hand grenade to detonate after the pin has been pulled and the spoon released. Mentally, he registers that it’s been longer than five seconds since that must’ve happened, and with confusion, he props himself up, looking around with a bewildered expression. Peggy’s standing far too close, but he’s distracted, so he can’t bring himself to stutter and stammer and do all the things he’d normally do. He looks to her and she’s smiling. Steve ignores the way he really enjoys seeing that.

“Is this a test?”

There’s gunfire. There’s blood. There are explosions.

Death, Christ, there’s so much death.

He hadn’t been ready. They’d thrown them in there almost straight away.

Straight into the action, straight into the fire – scorching flames of white-hot malice that burns from both sides and refuses to be stoked.

There’s a ringing. It’s in his ears; it’s been there since his platoon first stormed Schleswig-Holstein. His first steps into real battle. (You’re a man now.) Pop goes the cherry.

There’s gunfire. There’s blood. There are explosions.
The ringing doesn’t go away, not even at night. Not even in the silence – which admittedly, there’s little of. It echoes in his head as he tries to sleep; curled into a ball, lying on his side, face smeared with dirt and sweat and blood (whose blood? Who knows).

Sometimes, it gets so loud, so high-pitched, that it stops sounding like ringing, but a little girl screaming.

His dreams are filled with screams and sometimes they have no faces. No one here has faces. Just guns and serials and dog tags. He’s getting used to the screams, he thinks. Half the time they’re from his allies and half the time, his enemies. Usually, it’s a meshed chorus of both. Sometimes – a lot of the time – he thinks he hears himself screaming, too.

He pisses himself in his sleep the odd night; wakes up shouting, immediately silencing himself because a slip of a scream can mean a sudden knife in your throat. He learns to sleep with his rifle hugged to his chest. It’s not warm or soft like Steve.

But it’s just as comforting.

He never bothers to clean the piss from his pants. What’s another liquid to add to the mix? There are worse smells in the war.

There’s gun fire. There’s blood. There are explosions.

Don’t make friends. War ain’t like in the pictures. Don’t make friends, but you do. They’re all you have. You laugh with them one second and then shove their intestines back into the gaping hole of what used to be their belly in the next.

Medic, medic, MEDIC, MEDIC, MEDICMEDICMEDIC--

It’s pointless. Hardly anyone gets saved.

You drink, you laugh, you smoke, you fuck, you scream, you cry, you breathe, you don’t breathe, you fire, you run, you hide, you puke, you pray, you beg, you sleep, you don’t sleep, you plot, you improvise, you make friends, you watch them die, you talk, you listen, you try to understand, you don’t understand, you dodge, you fight, you survive, you kill, or you be killed.

There’s gun fire. There’s blood. There are explosions.

James Buchanan Barnes is in a war he was never prepared for.

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Steve remembers Colonel Phillips explaining what they were all there for: a new advanced super soldier program, of which only one candidate would be chosen from Steve’s entire group. He hadn’t put much thought into it because he’d already assumed he’d never have a shot. So, of course, when Dr. Erskine pulls him aside after the grenade incident and informs him that they’ve decided on him, Steve’s too stunned to say anything other than, “…Me?”

The way the kind Doctor looks at him leaves him confused, because Erskine regards him with such a knowing look; face entirely resolute. He seems to believe in him more than anybody else at this Camp, even Steve himself, and Steve just wants to ask him why. But then he’s being whisked away and he’s left standing there, mouth hanging open with a dozen unanswered questions.

Agent Carter walks by and flashes him another one of those coy, impressed smirks. “Congratulations, Private Rogers,” she says simply before turning back to the other privates and ordering them back into line. This time, Steve does stammer – just a little bit – and he tries to ignore
the way his cheeks burn a light pink, as if her opinion of him means far more to him than it should.

They really waste no time in the middle of a war. Steve’s informed that they’re heading back to Brooklyn first thing the next morning because that’s where the operation will take place. It’s unsettling, the way they’ve chosen that word – ‘operation’. Steve’s also heard it be called the experiment – that sounds even more unreliable than the former, so he settles on what seems to be the lesser of two evils.

Operation makes him sound like a broken patient who needs to be fixed. Experiment makes him sound like a lab rat. Neither makes him sound like a person.

But it’s for the good of his country. And even though no one else seems to be giving much regard for Steve’s personal well-being, Dr. Erskine and Agent Carter certainly do. He feels as though they’re the only two friends in the State that he has, even though he’s barely exchanged words with either one of them. And that’s far too embarrassing to admit, so he keeps that to himself.

That night, Steve sits by himself on the side of his bunk in the soldiers’ sleeping quarters. He stares down at his open sketchbook, but his thoughts are not with the pages. He thinks about the brunet with the mischievous eyes and the silver tongue, capable of cracking out words as sharp as a whip, and he realizes he doesn’t know which one he’s thinking about – maybe it’s both of them, and he feels sick to his stomach. Best to just ignore it.

There’s a knock at the door, which is strange because no one in this place is courteous enough to knock. Everyone just barges in. Steve thought he was the only one who still had the thought to do something like that.

But when Erskine pops his head around the door and peers in with that gentle, unassuming nature of his, Steve can’t help but be glad to see him.

“May I?” the Doctor asks politely.

“Yeah,” Steve permits, closing the book.

He approaches Steve with two empty glasses in one hand and a bottle of what looks like wine in the other. “Can’t sleep?” he asks conversationally.

Steve watches him. “Got the jitters, I guess.”

Erskine laughs softly, and Steve thinks it has a real nice sound to it. He wishes more people laughed around here – or in general these days. The world was in desperate need of more laughter.

“Me too,” the older man admits, folding the mattress out of the way on the bunk opposite the blond before settling himself down on the frame. Steve frowns to himself, thinking back to every thought he’d had earlier after the Doctor had given him the news.

“Could I ask you a question?”

“Just one?” Erskine replies playfully, but Steve recognizes that as an invitation to proceed.

Steve pauses. “Why me?”

For a second, Erskine doesn’t answer. He returns Steve’s stare, but the blond can see the way the gears are turning in his head. He averts his gaze down to the bottle of alcohol he’s got pressed on the top of his thigh; Steve wonders if he asked the wrong thing. Maybe asking was another test, and he’d just failed. They wanted someone who could be a super soldier, right? They were probably
looking for someone with confidence; they’d probably expected Steve to jump all over the opportunity when it was offered to him, not second-guess their decision.

“I suppose that is the only question that matters,” he eventually murmurs, still not re-meeting Steve’s eyes. “This is from Augsburg – my city,” he then says, referring to the bottle. Steve glances down to look at it. Erskine continues, his glance going all across the room, but Steve makes sure that whenever the Doctor meets his eyes that he’s meeting them right back, as if to say, It’s okay, I’m listening. I’m here for you.

“So many people forget that the first country the Nazis invaded was their own,” the older man goes on. “After the last war, they… My people struggled. They… They felt weak… They felt small. Then Hitler comes along with the marching, and the big show, and the flags, and the, and the…” He takes a deep breath, and he almost sounds ashamed. “And he… He hears of me, and my work, and he finds me, and he says ‘You.’”

He points at Steve to punctuate the last word. Steve tries to picture this man – this noble-hearted, gentle man who probably would never even hurt a fly – being approached by someone as power-hungry and backwards as Adolf Hitler. The thought makes dread pool in the pit of his stomach.

“He says, ‘You will make us strong,’” Erskine continues. “Well, I am not interested. So he sends the head of Hydra, his research division, a brilliant scientist by the name of Johann Schmidt. Now, Schmidt is a member of the inner circle and he is ambitious. He and Hitler share a passion for occult power and Teutonic myth. Hitler uses his fantasies to inspire his followers, but for Schmidt, it is not fantasy. For him, it is real. He has become convinced that there is a great power hidden in the earth, left here by the gods, waiting to be seized by a superior man. So, when he hears about my formula and what it can do, he cannot resist. Schmidt must become the superior man.”

Steve lets this all soak in. “Did it make him stronger?” he asks.

Erskine gets a small, self-deprecating ghost of a smile. “Yeah,” he says regretfully. “But… there were other… effects. The serum was not ready. But more importantly,” he says quickly, firmly even in his gentle tone, “the man.” He points his index finger in Steve’s direction, speaking much more passionately now.

“The serum amplifies everything that is inside,” he explains. “So, good becomes great; bad becomes worse.”

He gives Steve a moment to understand the implication of his words. The blond breaks eye contact and stares down, frowning to himself. He’s never thought of himself as much of a good man, even though he’s always tried his hardest to be.

Dr. Erskine regards him gently, with a subtle sympathy and understanding. “This is why you were chosen,” he finally says. “Because the strong man who has known power all his life, may lose respect for that power – but a weak man knows the value of strength, and knows… compassion.”

“Thanks… I think,” Steve replies, giving the Doctor a confused but grateful little smile.

The older man grabs the bottle of wine and tells Steve to get them the glasses. He pours them each a small amount and asks Steve to promise him that no matter what happens, Steve will stay who he is – which, according to Erskine, is not a perfect soldier, but a good man. The sentiment almost chokes the Brooklyn boy up, and he doesn’t want Erskine to think he’s recruited a sappy, emotionally unstable wuss, so he deflects by holding out his glass and toasting, “To the little guys.”

Not that Erskine lets him drink it, however. He stops the blond just as he’s raising the glass to his lips.
and reminds him that the procedure the next day prohibits him from consuming any fluids. Steve suggests they drink their toast after it’s done, but the Doctor takes his anyways because he’s not the one getting the procedure done. The banter is so easygoing and comfortable that Steve can’t fight the genuine, warm smile that graces his mouth.

He looks away in thought, smile slipping back into that somber little line that always makes him look like he’s frowning. In the back of his head, he hears Bucky from his childhood complaining about him needing to lighten up. He chuckles under his breath.

The Doctor notices. “What was that?” he asks; his own smile curious and somehow always in that knowing way he gets when he regards the young soldier-to-be.

“Hmm?” Steve turns and looks back to him.

“That smile; whatever it is you were just thinking just now.”

“Oh, that was… nothing. That was nothing, it doesn’t matter.”

Erskine hums, hardly sounding convinced, and he gives a slow nod but doesn’t push. He glances down to the sketchbook Steve had placed down upon his arrival and gestures to it. “You like literature? It is refreshing to see some of the young faces in here indulging in the written word for a change. What is it you are reading?”

Steve glances to it and picks it up, holding it tightly and unconsciously closer to his body, as if to protect it. *Hide it?* He isn’t sure. “Oh, no, this is… uh, it’s my sketchbook. Just…”

“Oh, you draw? I am quite a fan of artwork myself.”

He’s trying so hard; Steve knows he is. And he really does miss people speaking to him like they give a damn – but his drawings have never been something he’s been comfortable sharing with people, not without a good reason. The Doctor sees his hesitation and lifts his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“It is okay, you do not have to show me,” he insists, lowering his hands. He gives the blond a friendly smile. “I am sure they are wonderful, Steven. It takes a special sort of person to be able to see the true beauty in the world.”

Steve stares back, not knowing how to respond. He feels a little guilty, especially because the man is being so genuine about it. He wonders if this was what Bucky meant when he called Steve out on acting like this all those times. Erskine rises with a polite goodnight and a comment about seeing him bright and early, when Steve suddenly turns and says without thinking, “Would you like to see one?”

Dr. Erskine narrows his eyes slightly, but his smile turns into that approachable little knowing smirk again. “Only if you are certain,” he replies.

Steve’s glad he has this sketchbook in his hands and not any of the other ones. Those ones are filled with drawing after drawing of his best friend, and not all of them in innocent positions. At least this one, everything is explainable and decent. This one is completely full - even with all the pages he’d ripped out years before - but still one of Steve’s favourites. He couldn’t imagine not bringing it with him; they’re his sketches from the first few months after he and Buck had gotten their first place together.

Hesitating only a little, he stares down at the cover and then hands it over. He watches the Doctor open it up and study the first drawing intently. “Steven, you are exceptionally talented,” he compliments, slowly flipping to the next page. The artist can hardly bare it, so he folds his hands on
his lap and stares down at them, trying to will his cheeks not to burn too hot under the pressure.

He continues to hear the pages turn. Slowly, they begin to be flipped just a little bit faster. He hears Erskine hum and then the older man inquires, “I am curious as to who the model in all these portraits is.”

“Hmm?” Steve glances up at him. He knows who Erskine is referring to, and so he’s expecting to see a look of disgust. To his surprise, Erskine is smiling down at whichever drawing’s displayed to him.

“This boy,” he clarifies, angling the book so Steve can see the drawing he’d done of Bucky sitting on the floor in front of the fire in the tin garbage can. The sketch – the one he’d done the night his heart fell in love with his best friend before Steve’s brain had even caught up. “You seem to have a fascination with his form. Who is he?”

Steve tries not to blush at Erskine’s phrasing. He clears his throat. “He’s, uh… my best friend. Since we were kids; pretty much grew up together.”

“He means a lot to you, yes,” Erskine smiles, flipping to the next page to see a sketch of Bucky with his head tossed back, laughing gleefully.

Steve shifts a little uncomfortably, trying not to focus on how his heart rate is speeding up just the tiniest bit. “Yeah, I mean… All we had was each other for the longest time, you know?”

“And where is he now?” the Doctor asks, eyes still on the pages as he continues to flip through.

Steve cranes his neck a bit to see which drawing Erskine is on now. “Overseas; part of the 107th infantry. He shipped out the same day I got sent here.”

Erskine glances at him now. His smile wavers, because he understands. Steve wants to know if he’s wondering silently whether or not Bucky is even still alive anymore; if part of him wants to ask Steve if he ever wonders that. But of course, Erskine doesn’t say anything like that – no, he sprouts that familiar smile and insists, “I am sure that he is fine.”

Steve gives a small nod. “I was hoping to eventually join him out there. Do you… think that maybe, if everything goes well, eventually I could--?”

Erskine nods. “I will do everything in my power, Steven.”

It’s not a guarantee, but it’s something.

“Thank you,” Steve replies, feeling like a small weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

The older man nods to himself and then flips back to the drawing of Bucky in front of the fire. He taps his pointer finger off of it. “I like this one best,” he says. Steve smiles, just a little fraction of a thing.

“That’s my favourite, too.”

“There is much love in the way you have composed this one,” Erskine says definitively – with absolutely no room for judgement. Steve furrows his brows, knowing his script well enough by now after so many years.

“He’s the closest thing to family I have; he’s like a brother to me.”
To his surprise, Erskine looks to him quickly at that, almost like that wasn’t the answer he was expecting. He almost looks... Steve can’t make out his expression. It only lasts for the briefest of fleeting moments before he’s smiling again, eyebrows resetting, and he shuts the book. “A - yes, of course,” he responds, holding the book back out. Slowly, Steve takes it, still trying to decipher his gaze.

Erskine looks away, as if he’s worried he’s just overstepped some sort of line. When he looks back to Steve, he says, “Thank you for sharing your artwork with me.”

Steve gives a small shrug, trying to lighten the mood. “Thank you for not laughing at it.”

The Doctor chuckles and then flashes Steve another knowing little smile, and it makes the blond feel as though Erskine knows every single one of Steve’s secrets without having to be told. And yet, he would never judge. Steve knows this and doesn’t know what to make of that as the older man heads back out of the room with a polite little goodnight.

“Goodnight,” Steve echoes back, watching the door shut. Already, he misses the company.

Steve awakens before he has to. The sun is only just starting to rise and he knows he’ll have to get up soon anyways. It’s not like he could get back to sleep if he tried; his slumber had been fragmented and uncomfortable at best. All night, he tossed and turned, and when he did manage to fall asleep, he still felt like a part of him was awake.

For the most part, he’d dreamt of disaster – oversleeping, somehow missing his ride back to Brooklyn; showing up to find out the procedure had already been completed on another candidate. At one point, he’d even dreamt that he had to drive himself back home, which was a stressful thing in and of itself as Steve has never even sat behind the steering wheel of a car in his life.

The reason he feels so wide awake now, though, is because he’d just woken up from a dream of Peggy. Nothing inappropriate – simply sitting next to her and talking. She’d laughed a lot, and gave Steve a smile so big and girlish that it was simply a figment of his imagination, because he sure has never seen her smile like that before in real life.

He sits up, feeling his stomach churn and an uncomfortable tightness of the chest that comes when you’ve been caught red-handed. He feels like an asshole; he immediately thinks about Bucky and hates himself. He’s been trying to ignore… whatever this is, for Agent Carter, but it keeps finding a way to creep back up when his defences are down. Frankly, it’s getting on his nerves.

Because he doesn’t care about her the way he cares about Buck – what he and his best friend share is one of those, for the story books, kinds of love. He just… wants to know Peggy more. There’s this basal, unyielding need to.

He mentally berates himself and insists that he’s only drawn to her because she reminds him of Bucky. He just misses his best guy so damn much, and he’s lonely. That’s all it is.

He buries his face into his hands and hopes to God he can convince himself of that soon.

It really doesn’t help that she’s the one to escort him on the drive back into New York. He’s informed that Dr. Erskine and the Colonel headed out a few hours prior, so they will already be waiting upon Steve’s arrival. He’s dressed up in his uniform – had to ask Peggy how to do up his tie, Jesus Christ, that had been embarrassing – and as he sits next to her, he starts to worry that she made his tie a bit too tight because the longer she’s there, the harder it seems to be for him to
breathe.

He forces himself to pretend he’s sleeping for the first two hours of the drive.

He really and truly hates himself for this.

It isn’t until they’re finally back in the familiar streets of Brooklyn that Peggy breaks the silence, saying, “So this is where you’re from.”

Steve nods, keeping his gaze fixed out the window. It feels good to be back home again. “Born and raised,” he answers. “This wasn’t the part of town where I grew up, but… I know this neighbourhood.” He points his finger to the window. “I got beat up in that alley. And that parking lot,” he adds a bit bitterly. He sighs, hanging his head – feeling like a jackass. He should really stop talking but now that he’s started, he doesn’t know how to stop. “And behind that diner,” he adds lamely.

He wonders how much of a loser Peggy must think him to be. He isn’t sure whether that thought is only further justified when she asks, “Did you have something against running away?”

Taking a deep breath, he shakes his head and looks up. “You start runnin’, they’ll never let you stop,” he tries to explain. “You stand up, you push back… Can’t say no forever, right?” He hopes it’s a good answer. (He hates himself for caring so much about her approval, he absolutely loathes himself.)

To his surprise, she replies with a genuine gentleness, “I know a little of what that’s like; to have every door shut in your face.”

He supposes she does. After all, that’s part of the reason why he finds her so full of moxie; so brave – willingly throwing yourself into a world where the odds are stacked against you and forcing yourself to push on through anyways, in order to fight for what you want. Still…

Steve has this brilliant, talented, truly exceptional habit of shoving his foot into his mouth.

Without thinking, he says with a forced casualty, “I guess I just don’t know why you’d want to join the army if you’re a beautiful dame.” It’s like he hears himself and he cannot believe he just said that out loud. Just shut up, just stop talking, his mind says sternly. “Or a – a beauti— a woman,” he back pedals.

STOP TALKING, JUST STOP! GOOD LORD – WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU!?

“An agent, not a dame – you are beautiful, but--” he stammers, because apparently the connection between his brain and his impulse has been conveniently shut down, much like the connection between his filter and his mouth. She turns her head to look at him, as if trying to decide whether or not to feel offended by him or pity for him.

“You have no idea how to talk to a woman, do you?” she asks gently, and if his inner thoughts weren’t so busy packing up its suitcase to abandon ship, he’d notice how adoring her tone is.

All he can hear is the blatant fact in her words – because no, he absolutely does not. The only exception he’s ever had was Ginny, but those circumstances had been different; special, even. He never even compared his friend to talking to other women. Those two situations were nothing alike. When it came to someone like… this… whatever this was, Steve realizes this is about the longest conversation he’s ever had with a lady. So he goes for broke and admits that to her.

“Women aren’t exactly linin’ up to dance with a guy they might step on,” he adds, looking back
down. He tries for it to come out humorously, but instead, it just sounds downtrodden. Pathetic. And it is, really.

“You must have danced,” Peggy says, still in that same soft tone that Steve’s never heard her use before.

“Well, asking a woman to dance has always seemed so terrifying,” he confesses, averting his gaze out the car window. “The past few years, it just… didn’t seem to matter that much,” he adds, because it hadn’t. Not when he was with Bucky. No one’s attention mattered except Bucky’s. But he realizes that it had also made him rusty for situations just like this one – as if he needed to gain any more rust. “Figured I’d wait,” he lies.

“For what?”

“The right partner,” he says with a single nod and this time, when the slightly bitter tone edges his words again, he can’t help it. The right partner. The one society would deem him acceptable with. Because apparently it’s only love if it’s everyone else’s idea of love. He wishes he could elaborate and explain all this to Peggy, but he knows she’d never understand and… And selfishly, he doesn’t want to scare her off. He isn’t sure why.

(He hates himself.)

She smiles and says nothing, but he doesn’t miss it – not when he peers from the corner of his eye to see her staring back ahead. He feels butterflies in his stomach, and yes. He hates himself. Loathes himself. Cannot stand himself. This isn’t fair to Bucky and, he finds himself thinking, this isn’t fair to him, either.

He wishes he could be some semblance of normal. He wishes he wasn’t innately selfish – because that’s what he is right now, isn’t he? Selfish? Why couldn’t God make him to only like one or the other – men or women? Not both; it seems cruel to allow him to feel desire for both.

And what’s even crueler is for Steve to know somewhere deep down in his heart, that no matter what happens, he can never truly get what he wants. No matter how this would end, he’d have to settle for a version of happy that isn’t fully happy. Because Peggy… he’d been wrong about her. About how he felt about her. He attributed his infatuation, because that’s indeed what it is, to the fact that she reminded him of Bucky – but she is so much more than that. She’s a remarkably incredible woman – one who makes Steve feel visible, like Ginny, but more, like Bucky. She’s smart and funny and headstrong and everything Steve could ever desire in a woman.

Not that she’d ever waste her time of day on a scrawny excuse of a man like Steve Rogers, but… But if Steve could imagine it (and he can), he thinks that Peggy Carter would be exactly the kind of women society would expect him to settle down with. He could grow to love her – a fact that he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to say out loud, because he hates himself, he really does – and he thinks he could love her a heck of a whole lot. Maybe even with most of his heart. He’d cherish her and they could raise a family together and he’d worship the ground she walked on, because she deserved it.

Except.

Except there would always be Bucky. There’s not even the option of there not being Bucky – Steve would rather lose everything and everyone if it meant keeping him, if even just as his best pal. And whereas Peggy would get all the love that maybe three-quarters of his heart could provide, she could never get the full hundred all to herself. Because even if he could love her with seventy-five percentage of his being, Bucky would still have Steve’s one hundred percent. Steve would always be
his.

Bucky would no doubt have little difficulty finding a sweetheart of his own eventually. Steve’s sure he would even really, truly care about her. She’d probably have blonde hair and blue eyes that paralleled his, because Steve’s done pretending now – they clearly have their types, and their types will always be doppelganger echoes of each other. Bucky would get married in a Church all the same, even if it was only to make Steve happy. They’d probably pop out a few little Barnes babies – maybe a girl that’d have her mother’s eyes, or maybe a couple boys with their father’s smirk and sense of reckless abandon.

Steve would have children too, most likely. He’s always secretly hoped for one of each; a boy he could take to baseball games and a little girl whom he could call his ‘princess’. Their children would grow up together – probably call each other cousins. In a perfect world, their wives would be real close, maybe even best friends. They’d get together while the children had play dates, leaving Bucky and Steve to enjoy a night to themselves over a few drinks at the bar.

Bucky would probably try to get Steve to dance; it wouldn’t matter that they weren’t teenagers anymore. Steve would still say no. Bucky wouldn’t leave him anymore, though. He’d stay right where he was and order them another round.

They’d probably end every outing together with a drunken walk back around their old neighbourhood; maybe even to their spot in the park where they’d always watched the fireworks. As the years passed, they’d comment on how the world around them was changing. They’d poke fun at the other for how poorly they were aging, even though Steve knows Bucky would always be the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

They’d probably make small talk for as long as they could about their families – fill the other in on the children, how they were doing in school, how the marriages were going… They wouldn’t talk about the past, but somehow it would always eventually come back up. It wouldn’t matter which one of them broke first because the other would be quick to follow. They’d kiss, and it’d be sloppy and intoxicated and even more sinful than what they’d done in the past because Christ, they were supposed to be faithful to other people.

It wouldn’t matter. They’d probably fuck – wouldn’t matter where; up against a tree, in some bushes, in an alleyway. Anywhere they could get away with it and nowhere that would be conducive to the romance they both craved. When it was over, they’d stumble back to their wives and children and pretend to be happy – and on some level, Steve doesn’t doubt they genuinely would be, too – until it happened all over again.

This would be their life, he just knew it. They could pretend all they wanted that they could run off together and get hitched illegally until the day came that maybe, just maybe, the law would allow it for real, but… The likelihood of that ever happening was slim to none. He and Bucky always knew what they were getting themselves into. Or at least, Steve thought he had. He’d been wrong.

Because he realizes that he will most likely never fully be happy, no matter how his story ends. Because even if he gets to have a slightly watered down version of a happy ending with someone he loves, he will never love anyone else the way he loves Bucky Barnes. When he promised to be with him to the end of the line, he never knew his heart was taking it so literally.

In this moment, Steve hopes, he hopes that Peggy will never develop any sort of romantic feelings for him. Because then he’d be a goner, and she’d be subjected to a future that no woman would ever deserve. She’s worthy of so much more than what he could give her, and he’d never want to hurt her, not ever.
He’s not worthy of someone like Peggy Carter. He’s not worthy of Bucky. Dr. Erskine definitely chose the wrong guy.

He’s never once questioned his faith or found a reason to be angry with the Lord, but as he stares back out the window and watches the world pass by, he thinks to himself that as much as he may love God, God must not like him very much.

If Timothy Dugan knows one thing, it’s how to judge character. He has a nose for people – always has. He’s a fantastic people-person, but he’s like a bloodhound when it comes to moral fiber; if he gets within a ten-foot radius of a bad apple, it’s like he instantly knows. Which is why he likes to stick around the ones he knows are the good kind.

One look at Sergeant James Barnes and Dugan knows that this is a good kid. It almost unnerves him that such a young boy is already making rank as Sergeant. When they first meet, it’s on the battlefield – what a way to establish a friendship. Barnes hadn’t even seen the grenade that’d landed just to his nine o’clock; he’d been too busy reloading his gun. But Dugan had, and it’d been a spur of the moment decision to run at him and body slam him away from the radius of the blast with a quick shout of, “Grenade!”

Barnes hadn’t even known what’d hit him as they both slammed to the ground, but the blast that followed only seconds later made it pretty clear. When the Sergeant had spun around and looked to him with wide eyes, mouth rounded into a small ‘O’ of shock, and an almost scared look of gratitude on his face – yeah, Timothy Dugan knew that for whatever reason, he needed to protect this kid.

They hadn’t had time to properly introduce themselves, and Bucky couldn’t even voice his thanks because more orders were being barked out over the incoming line of fire. They were on their feet and running back into the chaos once more. But when Dugan heard the sound of a single shot and a grunt from behind him later on, he’d turned to see a German soldier falling face-first into the dirt – a clean bullet hole in the back of his neck. Barnes stood less than a yard away with his rifle still held up and one eye peering down the scope. He’d pulled back and had given a tiny salute before turning on his heel and running off to find cover and Dugan knew – you got my back, I got yours.

Sergeant James Barnes is only twenty-six years old – far too young, in Dugan’s mind, to have to bear the responsibility of leading men into battle; of having to make any of the tough decisions. Sometimes, he thinks that kids Barnes’s age shouldn’t even be allowed in the war. It just doesn’t seem fair. But then again, absolutely nothing about any of this has ever been fair. The world isn’t a forgiving place.

Still, when he sees the way that kid hardens in the face of danger – seems to reach deep down somewhere inside of him and leads the way with a commanding and somehow reassuring authority that belies his youth – Dugan gets it. Barnes is a natural born leader; maybe not the type you put on your money or have making big speeches as a member of Congress, but the type you really, truly follow.

He has his fair share of fellow soldiers that he gets along with, and his fair share that he doesn’t. Loyalty is a flimsy, unreliable thing in the war; you would lay down your life with zero prompt for a complete stranger, but then refuse to talk to them when the opportunity arises to grab a drink. Likewise, sometimes it’s the other way around. Sometimes you can shoot the shit and slam a few back with a man who, in that moment, is your best friend in the room – but when the time comes to sacrifice your ass over his, you’re suddenly re-evaluating your priorities.

Despite what anyone may tell him, Dugan knows you don’t go into a war because you have morals. War fucks with your morals; makes them all backwards and messed up. He knows just as well as
anyone that he’s earned just as many tickets to hell in the past few weeks alone as he’s earned to any heaven that may be up there.

So he perfectly understands how one second, the Sergeant will be all jovial and grins and laughter, and then silent and distant and inward the next. He doesn’t take it personally when the first time he calls Barnes ‘kid’, something about that sets the brunet off, and he scowls at Dugan and says, “Don’t fucking call me that.” But then, when it accidentally slips out a few days later in conversation, it doesn’t seem to phase him at all.

Barnes – “call me Bucky” – Bucky drinks with him whenever they can get their hands on some liquor. Good or bad, it really doesn’t matter; that’s not the point of why they do it. The point is – well, no one there needs to talk about it. They all know. He notices that the Sergeant is very persuasive and always seems to get his hands on several packs of cigarettes at once. He trades them as currency sometimes; even hands Dugan a cigar one night, much to the older man’s surprise and delight. Money is inconsequential where they are; so everyone finds all sorts of others things to barter with. Dugan thinks it’s the best goddamn cigar he’s had in months.

They fight alongside each other and develop a legitimate friendship amidst the wreckage and destruction and chaos that is their fucked up lives. At least, it’s as legitimate as it can get, given their circumstances. One night while they bivouac in the woods a few miles outside of Dresden, the men sit around a makeshift fire (careful to monitor the smoke emitting from the flames and only just big enough to provide them with the tiniest of light) and share stories of home as they pass around and share smokes and flasks.

When it’s his turn, Dugan shares with them a little bit about his hometown in Albany; about his old job at the mill, and how he’d enlisted into the war the second he found out it was an option because “there was no way in hell I was gonna let those German fucks get away with what they were doing – not if I had a say in it”. He also finds any excuse he can to talk about his gal back home, Pattie. He wastes no time whipping out a worn-out little photo he has taped to the inside of his bowler hat so he can pass it around. They’ve been married for twelve years – twelve years, boys, and she’s still the apple of my eye, he tells them vehemently – but when asked, he tells them that no, they don’t have any children. They’d been trying for a long time, but it just didn’t seem to be in the cards for whatever reason.

They’ve all made it a game that each man ends their little story with one interesting fact about themselves – preferably, an embarrassing one. Dugan has many good bar stories but he doesn’t really feel in the mood to relay any of them on this night, so he says with a cheery grin, “One interesting thing ‘bout me is that I hate apples.”

The men simultaneously groan and begin to haze him for picking such a dumb confession. Bucky leans over and ashes his smoke on Dugan’s boot, just as much a part of the complaining crowd, but with a grin on his face. Dugan shakes the clump off his foot and then shoves the brunet lightheartedly.

“Alright, Sarge, how about you, huh?” he challenges. Immediately, the other guys are all on board – egging Bucky on and shooting questions his way.

Bucky offers an exasperated little smile and shrugs his shoulders. “Well, whaddaya wanna know?”

“You got yourself a sweetheart back home, Barnes?” Private Morrison asks before taking a swig of – whose was it? Hadley’s flask? Dugan was losing track.

At first, the Sergeant says nothing; just stares into the tiny flames in the center of their circle. “Sure do,” he replies after a while. He smiles – so small, so gentle, that Dugan wonders for a moment if
that smile was meant to be all for himself. Bucky’s been nothing but a walking example of bravado and strength; doesn’t matter if it’s forced as often as it’s not, no one judges that shit in times like these. But to see the kid’s features soften, become so adoring, Dugan has no doubt that whoever’s waiting for him back home, they are the rise and fall of the sun itself in Barnes’s eyes.

“What’s her name?” Johnson asks.

“What’s she look like?” Rouble says not moments later.

Bucky continues to look into the fire, and he must be picturing her right now, Dugan thinks, because that little smile grows. “Name’s Stephanie. I call ‘er Stevie, though,” the Sergeant finally reveals. “Been my friend since I was just a dumb little shithead kid; for some reason she put up with me our entire lives without ever telling me to buzz off.” He leans back then, staring up at the night’s sky. In the distance they can hear the sound of bombs going off; fighter planes and if they listen hard enough, gun fire. But this patch of sky overhead must be just for them, because it’s nothing but endless possibilities and stars.

“She’s a little thing; small and thin but tough as hell. She could put’cha in your place faster than you’d know what hit you. Toughest gal I know,” Bucky murmurs, grey eyes fixated high up above. “Blonde hair, blue eyes – prettiest thing in all of Brooklyn.”

“You got a photo you can share there, Sarge?” Howards pipes in.

But Bucky shakes his head. “Nah. Never had the money for pictures growin’ up – Stevie and I, we were always real poor. Can picture her in my mind, though. That’s all I care about.”

Some of the guys snicker. “You sure you ain’t making this broad up?” they joke. “Yeah, Barnes; how do we know this isn’t just some fantasy girl?” “Bet he ain’t ever even talked to her in his life!”

They’re harmless jabs, but Bucky just gives a small shrug and keeps his head tilted back. Dugan can tell by the way that smile still hasn’t left his lips that he’s telling the truth – and Stephanie must be quite the lady to make the Sergeant’s eyes twinkle and soften like that. And though the kid swears he doesn’t have a photo, the older man has caught glimpses of him sneaking a look at a tiny square of paper that could very well be a photograph. He assumes as much, because whenever Barnes looks at it, he smiles the way he is now. It doesn’t matter what his reasons are for not wanting the others to know – privacy is basically ripped from you the second you’re given your serial number, so any shred of it you can hold onto, Dugan thinks you should.

The whole thing makes him miss Pattie something awful. These other guys, they can laugh and joke all they want, but Dugan likes to think he gets it – Pattie is the reason he’s going to make it home when the war is over. She’s his reason. And he’s willing to bet the shirt off his back that Stephanie is Barnes’s reason, too.

Eventually, the rest of the guys have all head off to get what little sleep they have, and it’s Bucky’s turn on watch. Dugan doesn’t feel all that tired so he keeps the younger man company. Bucky uses some papers he’d traded a Lucky for to roll up some marijuana he’d traded some of his leftover moonshine to get. They remain silent as they pass the joint back and forth, alternating between getting lost in the dying flames or the stars in the sea of black above their heads. Dugan feels nice and loose several minutes after they’ve finished smoking, and he can tell by the glaze reflecting off of Bucky’s own grey orbs that the kid is mellow in his own high as well.

“Whatcha going to do when the war’s over, kid?” he asks, lying down onto his back.

The Sergeant remains silent for a few minutes; legs splayed out in front of him and still leaning on his
hands, head tipped back. Dugan doesn’t think he’s heard him until he hears Bucky answer languidly, “When the war’s over, I’m gonna head straight back home and wrap my arms around my best pal.”

“That be Stevie?”

Bucky takes pause before saying, “Yeah. She’s my best friend, always has been. When the war’s over, she’s the first place m’gonna go. You?”

“When the war’s over, I’m going to take the longest nap of my life,” Dugan answers. They both grin.

“When the war’s over, I’m gonna shower until all my hot water runs out,” the brunet says next. Dugan thinks. “When the war’s over, I’m going to take Pattie on a real nice date and then make love to her for hours.”

“Mm,” Bucky hums in agreement. “When the war’s over, m’gonna not get outta bed until neither Stevie or I can walk for a week.”

“When the war’s over, I’m gonna have a meal fit for a king.”

“When the war’s over, m’gonna go out dancin’ and get completely shitfaced.”

“I’m gonna find a way to have a baby with my wife, when the war’s over.”

“I’ll get myself a new job, save up, and get me and Stevie a nice, big place, when the war’s over.”

They continue like this for a while, and Dugan can feel his heart beating in his ears, and his mouth is dry, and for the first time in a really long time, he feels weirdly content with where he is right now.

Eventually, silence falls upon them again. The blond pulls his bowler off his head to get more comfortable and finds himself unable to keep his eyes open. He’s just about to drift off to sleep when Bucky speaks again.

“You know Kyle Jensen? That kid from Omaha?”

Dugan hums sleepily but then forces himself to reply, “Yeah, what about him?”

“…I watched him die today.”

His voice is so calm and so distant from the pot that Bucky wouldn’t even seem phased by what he’s just said if you didn’t listen hard enough. Dugan’s eyes open and he immediately turns his head to blink at the Sergeant. Bucky’s staring ahead now, face blank. Dugan didn’t overly know Jensen all that well, but the thing he suddenly remembers more than anything else was that the kid was barely nineteen. It was men like him that made even Bucky Barnes look middle-aged by comparison. Jensen hadn’t even lost all of his baby fat yet.

“ Took a slug right to the chest,” Bucky continues, voice soft and void of emotion. “Tried to get to him in time; held his head on my lap and got his blood all over me. Just kept bleeding, y’know? Squirted everywhere, wouldn’t stop… Lifted my head to shout for a medic but then I looked back down and he was just… gone.”

He sounds as though he’s in a state of shock, but it could also be the weed. Or maybe it’s something sadder than that, Dugan thinks. It’s the effects of everything you see on a daily basis – the horrors that no one should have to live through – and they slice you open and spread you apart; pull out everything that made you human, that made you feel, and stuff dirt and garbage and rubble back in.
So you can’t feel; so you’re practically dead inside.

Some guys can go the entire war without catching this little edge to their voices; some, Dugan’s seen, lose their minds within the first few days. He wonders if this is a reflection of how Barnes truly feels on the inside, or if it’s just one of those moments that they all get from time to time.

“His eyes were still open and everythin’,” the brunet says. “So I closed ‘em and then... It feels so wrong just to leave them there like that, y’know? But I had no choice.”

Dugan stares back up at the sky and thinks. He knows what the kid is going through; he’s seen the light leave more than enough peoples’ eyes in too short an amount of time so far. He knows how much that chips away at your humanity each and every time you watch someone else lose theirs entirely.

“I fucking hate the war,” he settles on muttering. He hears the Sergeant huff out something akin to a humourless laugh and then the younger man’s eyes drift upwards again, too.

“I’m fuckin’ stoned,” Barnes whispers.

“Maybe I’ll actually get a decent night’s sleep for a change,” Dugan agrees.

They both just remain there, staring at the stars and thinking of everything they’ve seen and felt and known since coming here – and it really feels like it’s been a lifetime, it really does. Just a few weeks starts to feel like just a few years a bit too quickly.

“Sometimes… I wish I could just… grow a pair of wings and fly away,” Bucky says out of nowhere; the ramblings of an intoxicated man. Dugan smiles to himself. The brunet gets his own smile too – lazy and drugged out and a little bit sad. “I’d go up really high… way, way high up… Away from the earth, where… no one could touch me, or find me, or make me do nothin’. I’d get as far away from here as possible… live in the clouds and shit. Live off the rain…”

Dugan closes his eyes and simply listens. It’s a fantasy he thinks is worth gripping onto right about now. He wishes a lot lately that he could simply fly away, too. But he knows there’d be no point; even in the clouds, you’d have nowhere to hide.

The bullets and bombs kill in the sky, too.

“You ready?”

A nod…

Strip. People stare. So exposed.

You are a lab rat.

(This is for my country.)

(This is for the good of mankind.)

(I can finally make a difference.)

You are a lab rat.

But Erskine puts him at ease, and Peggy smiles so reassuringly – almost as if she’s worried about him. Steve’s heart flutters, and he hates himself a little bit more.
Lie down. It’s cold. Nerves start to sink in.

_You are a lab rat._

(This is for my country.)

(I will finally be useful for once.)

(This might be the only way to get back to Bucky.)

_You are a lab rat._

“Comfortable?”

(No.)

“It’s a little big.”

Steve tries for a smile to ease his own jitters; Erskine returns it. Steve wishes everyone’s smiles were as soothing and honest as this man’s – the world would be a much better place.

“Mr. Stark?”

Steve’s head snaps to the side, immediately thrown off guard. That’s the last name he’d been expecting to hear.

“Levels at one hundred percent – we may dim half the lights in Brooklyn, but we are ready…”

Stark looks at him like a science experiment; there’s the smallest of amused, excited smiles threatening to tug the corners of his mouth up. His eyes lack concern. Or maybe that’s all in Steve’s head.

Brown eyes trail down his body and that smile is replaced with _disappointment_ – hesitation, but not for the right reasons. “…As we’ll ever be,” he hears Stark finish.

_You are a lab rat._

(I have to do this.)

_You are a lab rat._

(I _need_ to do this.)

He watches Peggy go. She turns at the staircase to glance back and give him such a _fond_ look, _she’s so worried about him_, Steve can’t stand it. He doesn’t want her to look at him like that and yet he wants it, he wants it, he’s a selfish prick and he doesn’t deserve any of this. He hates himself, he hates himself.

_Tap, tap, tap, DISTORTION._ Flinch.

“Can you hear me? Is this on? Ladies and gentleman, today, we take not another step towards annihilation, but the first step on the path to peace… We begin with a series of micro injections into the subject’s major muscle groups. The serum infusion will cause immediate cellular change; and then, to stimulate growth, the subject will be saturated with vita rays.”

Poke, prod, poke, _pinch_. Sharp inhale; careful exhale.
(I can do this.)

“That wasn’t so bad…”

(I need to do this.)

“That was penicillin.”

(…Can I…?)

“Serum infusion beginning in: five… four… three… two… one…”

Pinpricks all over his arms and chest; like a dozen simultaneous bee stings on his skin. Pump, pump, pump – the blue goes in, and it feels so cold. Hot. It feels hot. No, it feels cold. Steve’s body hums, and it stings, gets worse, worse, worse… He grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut.

(I’ve gotta do this.)

You are a lab rat.

(It’s the only way!)

Pump you up nice and full of chemicals.

His chest feels tight. He wonders if he’s about to have an asthma attack. It burns, burn, burns, hot cold, hot cold, hot cold--

Explodes across his body; digs its way into every inch of muscle tissue. Eyes fly open wide – pupils dilated.

“Now, Mr. Stark.”

Gears turning, metal whirring, the machine starts moving and Steve gets brought upright. He watches it close all around him, casing him inside.

You are a lab rat.

(I need to get to Bucky.)

You are in a cage.

(This is the only way I can help.)

You are a lab rat in a cage.

(I trust Dr. Erskine.)

You are a lab rat in a cage and no one cares about you.

It feels like a coffin, except he can still breathe. It’s appropriate, he guesses, since this could very well kill him.

(Bucky would rip you apart if he knew what you were doing.)

(I’m doing this for him. For everyone.)

Knock, knock, knock.
“Steven? Can you hear me?”

He responds with a joke; it feels like his go-to response to try and mask his fear.

“We will proceed.”

Then it’s like the sun has found its way into the chamber with him and everything’s too bright. He has to shut his eyes, but even then, it blinds him through his lids and makes him disoriented. He desperately wants to shield himself with his hands and only then does he become acutely aware of how immobile they are by his sides.

Bright, brighter, brightest. Too much – too bright – it hurts – my head…

You are a lab rat.

(I can do this!)

(I have to do this!)

Brighter, brighter, but now it’s getting hotter, hotter, and his body is thrumming, it’s vibrating, and it’s hot, it’s too hot, it’s *too fucking hot* – he’s burning alive, his blood, it’s starting to sear in his veins, is he dying? Is he dying? Is this what death feels like? There is fire in his lungs and molten lava under his skin; it pumps through his arteries and there’s burning, there’s burning, there’s ripping, he feels as though he’s being ripped open – and it’s too bright, it’s *too fucking bright*, it’s the sun, he is trapped with the sun, he is Icarus and he’s flown too close, he’s being swallowed whole, it’s getting *worse, worse worse worse*, is he dying? Is he dying? This must be what dying feels like.

You are a lab rat in a cage.

(SOMEONE HELP ME SOMEONE I CAN’T I CAN’T BUCKY BUCKY I’M SORRY SOMEONE PLEASE I NEED TO GET TO BUCKY)

You are a lab rat in a cage and all rats eventually get exterminated.

Too bright, *too fucking bright*, can’t breathe, his blood is boiling, his lungs are pushing against the wall of his chest, he feels like he’s going to explode, and his body’s singing, *it’s singing with pain*, and he remembers the alleyway, and this was nothing like that, that had been peaceful, is he dying? Is this dying?

(PLEASE I NEED TO DO THIS THIS CAN’T BE HOW THIS ENDS I NEED TO BE ABLE TO HELP BUCKY BUCKY BUCKY PLEASE I’M SORRY BUCKY BUCKY BUCKY)

He’s screaming. He doesn’t know how, since his lungs are bursting and his blood is on fire and his brain is melting and he’s dying, he must be dying, but then he hears the good, kind, gracious Doctor – who would never hurt him, he cares, he does, this Steve knows, and he knows, even though he hurts too much to think – shout for Stark to shut it down, and yes, please, yes, his body is begging, it is begging for relief, for pity, for this to stop; his skin is splitting open and his teeth are grounding to a powder, and he’s melting, he’s melting, *he’s fucking melting, he’s dying*—

“NO! DON’T!”

You are a lab rat.

(I NEED TO DO THIS!)
You are a lab rat in a cage.

(I CAN—

“—DO THIS!” he shouts.

It gets worse – oh God, it gets worse; brighter brighter brighter hotter HOTTER HOTTER TOO HOT, his eyes are melting behind his lids, he’s tearing open everywhere, it’s excruciating, it’s unbearable, he’s plummeting into the sun, into the molten, can’t breathe, he can’t breathe HE CAN’T BREATHE, the molten is leaking into every orifice and drowning him, he’s dying but won’t die, he’s exploding everywhere, all he knows is pain, it’s too much, too much, this is Hell, kill me…

Suddenly, nothing.

As quickly as it swallows him whole, it spits him back out and he feels… nothing. Not a lick of discomfort. He’s panting and even the ghosts of the sensations have vanished completely. He just feels exhausted. But he breathes, and suddenly it’s like he’s gulping the air and he can taste it, that’s new… He can taste it in a way he’s never been able to taste it before.

Machine opens.

You are a lab rat.

Everyone gapes. They flood him. Dr. Erskine is the only one to ask him if he’s alright.

Everyone talks at once. It sounds way too loud in Steve’s ears. He continues to gulp and it’s almost dizzying, how much oxygen his lungs are able to consume. It goes straight to his head and he feels light, but also heavy, and he has no idea what’s going on anymore.

“I did it,” he says weakly. His voice sounds the same, but he is anything but.

He slowly floats back down to earth; really opens his eyes and starts looking around. The world feels different from this angle.

You are a lab rat.

Experiment successful.

He doesn’t know why everyone keeps staring. Peggy practically runs up to him and his heart flutters all over again, and is this just an effect of the serum, that it suddenly feels so much more powerful? He hopes so.

She touches his stomach. No woman has ever done that. Steve doesn’t know what to think; he has no idea what’s going on anymore.

“How do you feel?”

You are a lab rat.

(I don’t know.)

You are a lab rat.

“Taller.”
Next chapter: After coming face-to-face with Hydra for the first time, Steve gets recruited to the USO tour and sees an old friend. Bucky seeks comfort and learns a few lessons from a new one.

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I feel weirdly emotional that this chapter marks the end of pre-serum!Steve. I will miss that kid. But now I get to explore and embark upon post-serum!Steve, who I love just as entirely. Still, thanks for the good times, skinny Steve - you were a real gem <3

Also, I think it's been made pretty clear by now that anything from the MCU in terms of events and dialogue is being handled canonically. Any scene from CA:TFA will be unchanged and all dialogue will be 100% as it is - just with my own twists on the backstory and context to fit this story. That means - yes, there will be more exploration of Steve's feelings for Peggy and his conflict with it. Let me be clear: this is still a StevexBucky story. Once Steve and Bucky are reunited, things will make more sense. I understand Steve having conflicted feelings might be upsetting for some of you; you are entitled to those feelings and opinions, but please be mindful to how you express them if you have any intentions of cutting my head off for it, haha. It just doesn't make sense to me not to give Peggy this kind of focus, because she is an exceptional character who is very important for Steve. As you will see in Part 2 of this series, this will be explored more but eventually everything falls into place as it should (given the circumstances).

Thank you to everyone for the support with this story. I love you all.

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr

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Artwork for this chapter (there is a LOT because I'm bidding skinny Steve a grand farewell):
To Miss

Chapter Summary

Steve struggles to come to terms with his new body and the sudden attention he's getting. Bucky's losing touch with himself and learns that appearances can be deceiving.

**Note:** This chapter's timeline is not consecutive - Bucky's timeline takes place throughout the month of September, 1943. Steve's timeline in this chapter begins on the same day as where he left off in the last chapter, and then spans throughout the summer, until the end of September.

Chapter Notes

It's hard letting go.
I'm finally at peace, but it feels wrong.
Slow, I'm getting up.
My hands and feet are weaker than before.
And you are folded on the bed
Where I rest my head...
There's nothing I can see -
Darkness becomes me.
But I'm already there,
I'm already there.
Wherever there is you,
I will be there too.
There's nothing that I'd take back,
But it's hard to say there's nothing I regret.
'Cause when I sing, you shout;
I breathe out loud.
You bleed, we crawl like animals;
But when it's over, I'm still awake.

A thousand silhouettes dancing on my chest...
No matter where I sleep, you are haunting me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dated July 4th, 1943:

**Dear Steve,**

*Happy birthday, buddy. I know this is my first letter to you since I left and I’m sure you’re expecting to hear all about what I’ve been up to so far, but sorry, you’re about to be disappointed. I’ll fill you in when I get the chance to write to you next (which I know you understand, I never know when that will be but I will always do my best to keep in touch).*
All I really wanted to talk about right now is the fact that it’s your birthday and you’re on my mind. You’re always on my mind, Stevie. I think about you constantly – worrying about if you’re alright, if you have enough food, if you’re warm enough at night. If you look into the closet, left-hand side near the wall, I left you my warmest sweater. I made sure to wear it the night before I left, if you remember, so maybe it still smells like me. I just wrote that and imagined you heckling me about how I reek of B.O. and cigarettes, and it made me smile. I miss your voice, Stevie, and I hope that however this letter finds you, you’re smiling too.

This is the first Fourth since I was seven years old that I won’t be seeing the fireworks with you. Do you realize we’ve never once missed it? Not once, in all the years we’ve been pals. You’d better go and see them tonight, and when you write me back, I want you to tell me everything in detail. Don’t skimp out or I’ll kill ya. I wanna know every colour, the sizes, how loud they all were. I expect you to sit in our spot but I’ll forgive you if you don’t. I’m not sure if I’d be able to handle it if I had to go there without you either.

There won’t be any fireworks here, I’m afraid. No one gives a damn where we are about the Fourth. To be honest, I don’t really give a damn either. America is the reason I’m here and not with you. I know you’d give me hell for saying that. I really only care that it’s your birthday – that’s the only thing I ever care about on this day of the year.

I wish this could be longer but I have to get going. Down time is sort of a luxury around here. What I wouldn’t give for a nice hot shower, our shitty little cots, and a boring day in with you. Bombs go off a lot like fireworks... If I see any in the sky tonight, I’ll imagine that they’re the colours of the rainbow and that you’re by my side.

I love you. Stay out of trouble.

Always yours,

B

Dated August 21st, 1943:

Steve,

I don’t have much time but I wanted to send you something to let you know that I’m alright. I never heard back from you the last time I sent you anything, so I’m hoping my letter just got lost in the mail or something. You’d better be alright. And you’d better still not be trying to enlist. I’m asking you with all my heart, Stevie, if I could ask just one thing from you for the rest of our lives, it’s to please listen to me. Stop trying, please. I need you to trust me on this.

You’re always on my mind. Sometimes I need to remind myself that you’re real, just to get me through the day. I’ll be alright, I promise. It’s just hard sometimes. I look at that picture of us every night. One of the guys in the platoon, he almost came close to seeing it but I’ve been careful. I still talk about ya all the time. I hope you don’t mind that I have to call you Stephanie. Sometimes I just have to talk about you to remind myself that you’re still here with me, even if you aren’t. He’s a good guy though. I don’t think I’d ever tell him, but IF I had to tell anyone, I think I’d be alright telling him.

I still expect you to tell me how your birthday went. How’s Ginny? Tell me about home and don’t skimp on the details. I miss Brooklyn.

I love you.
Always yours,

B

__________________________

Dated September 4\textsuperscript{th}, 1943:

Dear Steve,

They must keep losing my letters. I was sure I would’ve heard from you by now but I guess not. Anyways, I hope you’re staying safe. You’d better be at home. If I find out you somehow found a way to get into this war I’m gonna fucking kill you. If anyone could figure out a way, it’d be you and that’s what scares me.

Stay home, Steve. The pictures make war look so heroic. There’s nothing heroic about the things I’ve seen. Just trust me. Please. I need to know you’re as far away from it as possible.

I love you. I hope, wherever this finds you, the feeling is still mutual.

Always yours,

B

__________________________

Dated September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 1943:

Steve,

I hate this place. I can’t sleep. When I sleep, it’s just replaying everything I saw when I was awake. We blew up a small hut today. There was a child in it. I didn’t even know until a few seconds before. We all got drunk tonight. I smell like whisky and I know you’d hate it. I keep seeing the kid and I wish it was me. If I could go back, I would’ve made sure we switched places. I killed a kid, Steve.

I know now that I’m going to hell. There’s no place for me in heavn. God doesn’t make room for men who kill kids. I want to come home. Please stay right where you are. This is the one place where I don’t want you with me. I’m scared, Steve. No matter how fast I run I can’t seem to get away from the bullets.

I love you.

James Buchanan Barnes

__________________________

Steve realizes that he has it in him to truly, desperately, unfathomably kill someone when Heinz Kruger’s collar is in his fists. And not just the thought to – but now, the strength, the capability. A quick surge forward and he could crack the back of this man’s head off the ground; watch the blood seep and pool around him like the Devil’s halo. A brief slip of the hands, and he could maybe feel Kruger’s pulse point as he squeezes and twists his neck, getting rewarded with a sharp and crude snap.

Steve doesn’t do any of these things, though; because even if he can, and even if this man deserves it, Steve still doesn’t want to kill anyone. No, people can be redeemed. He’ll only kill someone if he absolutely has to, and as he demands to know who the Hell this guy is, he thinks that this isn’t one of those times. This man can be turned in – that’s what Steve will do. Get the necessary information, then hand him over the Colonel Phillips and know that justice will be served. But Kruger doesn’t
give him the chance.

“The first of many,” he answers. “Cut off one head…” Steve watches the tip of his tongue dislodge a mock tooth from his gums. It drops and before Steve knows it, Kruger has it between his teeth and he’s biting down. Kruger swallows down the cyanide, staring defiantly up at the super soldier with a hatred in his eyes that Steve can’t understand. “Two more shall take its place!”

He starts foaming at the mouth. Steve doesn’t know what to do; for a split second, he almost considers if there’s anything that can be done to save him. But then the mousy man is choking out, “Hail… Hydra!” before gurgling, choking on his own bile, and going limp against the ground, lifeless.

So that’s it. Dr. Erskine is gone. Dr. Erskine, who lived long enough to see his serum be a success – the experiment, come to completion; who lived long enough to give Steve the opportunity at a new life, in one way or another, and who showed that once scrawny kid compassion and understanding when it felt like he was surrounded by those who had already given up on him. What he hadn’t lived long enough for was to write down his formula in a way conducive to replicating the serum. As it turned out, most of the mathematical equations had existed only in the Doctor’s head, and now, that information was gone.

Replicating the serum – pumping out an army of men like Steve Rogers – that’d been the goal, hadn’t it? Steve isn’t sure what to think. He feels as though it’s somehow his fault; if he would’ve reacted faster, he could’ve stopped Erskine from getting shot. If he wouldn’t have hurled Kruger from the water, the last remaining vile of the serum wouldn’t have shattered. He was supposed to have been turned into the ‘perfect fighting specimen’ and yet he was still messing things up. Maybe the serum had made the mistake of amplifying that part of him, too.

They take his blood – vials and vials of it. He watches them at first; vaguely aware that the amount they’re sucking out of him would make any normal person weak, woozy. He hardly feels the prick of the needle now. In fact, he feels perfectly fine. He supposes he isn’t normal anymore. He’ll probably never be ‘normal’ again.

People keep staring at him; men and women alike. After spending a lifetime in the proverbial shadows, the sudden attention makes Steve uncomfortable. He’s never been one to enjoy scrutiny; not when it’s aimed his way. It wasn’t until he’d straightened up after Kruger had killed himself below him that it had even sunk into Steve’s mind that his body was actually different. He’d stared down at his arms in shock, taking in the thickness of them now – the way his hands suddenly seemed proportional in comparison to the rest of his body. But he’s been too scared since then to look into a proper mirror.

He’s afraid of what he might see… That the face staring back will no longer be his own.

A crowd had gathered, after he’d saved the boy; man-handled the criminal. He’d ran down streets and chased cars at an inhuman speed; he’d crashed into shops and broken windows, and threw himself on the hood of a speeding vehicle. He’d dodged bullets and punched a hole through a mini submarine, and even when he’d held his breath as he swam down, down, down, his lungs held onto the air snugly, as if he could’ve stayed down there for hours.

He’d emerged from the water as if having been reborn – like the final stage to his transformation, after having first metamorphosed in his metal cocoon. That morning, Steve had woken up as the same ugly caterpillar he’d always been. Now, suddenly, the world regarded him like some sort of stunning butterfly. The crowd had gaped and gawked and ooh’d and aww’d and it had all been a bit disorienting.
They had looked at him like he was important. The people now – the medical team – look at him in the exact same way; as if a mere hour ago, he hadn’t even been brought into existence yet but now… Now. Now it’s as if he’d God’s gift to mankind.

Colonel Phillips seems to be the only one who doesn’t think so, however, and Steve would be almost grateful for that if it wasn’t also so damn insulting. He won’t let Steve go overseas and fight, like he should be doing. He won’t let Steve go to Bucky. He wants an army, Phillips tells him, and all he got stuck with was Steve.

_He is a lab rat, and even when he’s suddenly ‘perfect’, he’s still not enough._

That’s when Senator Brandt swoops in, seeing Steve’s desperation.

“With all due respect to the Colonel, I think we may be missing the point,” he says smoothly, stepping in and addressing Steve. His eyes are trusting and have the appearance of being kind, but there’s something too calculated in his voice. “I’ve seen you in action, Steve. More importantly, the country’s seen it. Paper,” he orders to the side; one of his lackeys scampering off immediately to retrieve a copy of the newspaper and deliver it to them.

The Senator keeps talking – says something about how everyone’s been talking about Steve since his picture hit the news stands – but Steve’s focus is now on the headline, the paper being held out for him to see. There’s a black and white photograph of him holding up the dismantled car door he’d momentarily thought to use as a shield. The ‘Lucky Star’ print is visible, and Steve remembers how the star beneath it was a staggeringly bright shade of red. _All_ hues seemed all the more vibrant now. Above the article, in big bold print, reads: **NAZIS IN NEW YORK – MYSTERY MAN SAVES CHILD.**

“You don’t take a soldier – a symbol like that – and hide him in a lab,” Brandt continues.

Steve’s eyes snap to his. All he wants to do is help, in any way he can. He wants to serve his country, and find a way to get back to Bucky – to make sure his best friend is safe.

As if he’s reading his mind, Brandt places a comforting hand on Steve’s shoulder and starts walking them, saying, “Son… do you want to serve your country on the most important battlefield of the war?”

“Sir, that’s all I want,” Steve answers firmly.

“Then congratulations,” the Senator says, shaking Steve’s hand, “you just got promoted.”

Steve can’t help the small smile that crosses his lips. Finally, _finally_, he’s going to be able to do something to actually help.

The Senator pays Steve’s way to put him up in a swanky hotel room for the night. He would’ve rather stayed in his own place, since they’re already in Brooklyn – in fact, he had nearly begged for it – but alas, there’s too much to discuss and too tight an agenda. Steve thinks this is ironic, given that he’d only just signed on but a few hours ago. He wonders if Brandt has been plotting for this since the moment the procedure turned out to be a success, and he had already assumed Steve would say yes. But he also figures that he really has no right to ask.

It turns out that _their_ idea of serving his country on the most important battlefield isn’t exactly the same as _his_. He’d been under the impression that Brandt would ensure him a way overseas; when they’d shaken hands, Steve had thought, _I finally did it. I’ll finally get to go over._
But then they’d sat him down and explained the entirety of what will be the USO tour, and Steve could only sit there with confusion painted on his face until he finally asked about five minutes later, “…So I’m not being sent to fight?”

And they had laughed – laughed at Steve’s suggestion, as if it was the most adorably naïve thing they had ever heard.

Their idea of serving entails Steve traveling around the States and then the UK, wearing a costume and making speeches to sell bonds. They’re heading out to Pennsylvania in the morning, since they waste no time, and Brandt wants their first show to happen as soon as possible so it can start gaining some media attention. He tells Steve that he’s going to become the face of America – Captain America, he’s told, and it’s just about the most ridiculously egotistical thing Steve thinks they could’ve ever come up with – and that the country is going to love him.

“You’ll sell so many war bonds, all them boys overseas are gonna start writing you themselves to thank you,” he’s told.

Steve somehow doubts that.

He tries to tell them that he’s no good at public speaking – he’s never been overly popular. Brandt hardly tries to hide the deprecating look he gives Steve because yeah, he knows, he saw what Steve looked like beforehand. But the Senator just assures Steve that he’s not that same kid anymore, and don’t worry, we can tape all of your lines to the back of your shield.

“Shield?” Steve had asked.

“Every good Captain needs a shield. We’ll paint the American flag on it and everything – the crowd will go nuts.”

He’s told that he won’t be alone onstage, so not to worry. There will be an entire chorus of female dancers that’ll accompany him for the tour. But that only makes Steve really worry.

He sort of just sits there and nods along; listening to everything and not really getting half of it and certainly not agreeing with most of it, but he says nothing in protest because this may be his only chance. Colonel Phillips isn’t sending him where he wants to be. This won’t get him to Bucky, but it will give him a way to help (somehow, sort of), and that’s halfway there in his mind. They’re excited and focused on the goal, and Steve no longer feels like a lab rat. Yet he doesn’t feel any closer to a human being.

When they’re all heading out to go to the hotel for the evening, Steve’s rushed along so quickly that he doesn’t get the chance to say a proper goodbye to Peggy. He’s got a man on either side – Brandt to his left and one of his assistants to his right – and they’re both palming his back and guiding him into the walk. They talk over him but not to him, and it’s all details, details, details. He stammers quietly and tries to look over his shoulder, desperately trying to spot the familiar brunette.

When he sees her, she looks just as frazzled as he does – with just a hint of something else that Steve can’t put his finger on. Disappointment? Longing? It must be all in his head. He looks at her helplessly as he’s carted away. Right before they make him turn a corner, he thinks she might have waved.

So now here he is, at the hotel in the heart of downtown New York. His room is nice and large, with a bed bigger than any he’s ever slept on before. Only now, he supposes he’ll fill most of it. The last time he’d been in a hotel room was—
He swallows hard and shakes his head, dropping his suitcase on the floor. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he stares off, glazing over in thought. He suddenly misses Bucky a Hell of a lot – even more so than he’s missed him in days. Because people keep staring; staring at him, even though they had looked right through him before.

(*Not Peggy: Peggy had seen him.*)

He remembers that for most of his life, he was only ever visible to Bucky. And he needs him right now, more than anyone.

It’s late. He knows he won’t be disrupted until morning, when they come for him. In the morning, they’ll all leave, and then Steve won’t return to Brooklyn until the end of the American tour. Apparently it will end there at the Radio City Music Hall, and Steve *would* feel excited about that if it wasn’t for the fact that he’d always thought the first time he went to the Music Hall, it would be with Bucky.

In the morning, his life will ‘change forever’, they told him.

He doesn’t *want* his life to change forever… He doesn’t *want* to sell bonds and wear a costume and pretend to be something he isn’t. He doesn’t want all those eyes – *so many* eyes – staring up at him every night. He only ever wanted to be a soldier; he never asked to be a hero.

So, in the morning, his life will become theirs. Tonight, though… tonight, it is still his own.

He goes into the bathroom and turns on the light. He’d avoided every reflective surface on the way over because he still hasn’t had the nerve to take a proper look at himself. He’s afraid of what he’ll see, because…

Because this isn’t his body. He’s suddenly standing taller and seeing the world at a new angle, and it throws him off balance. He feels thick all over, and uncomfortable warm; can practically feel the heat radiating off of his skin. He wonders if the serum made his blood hotter. He likes the way he feels *full* when he breathes; how it doesn’t hurt anymore. And yet he’d felt strangely nostalgic and protective when he’d held his inhaler in the palm of his large hand and realized he didn’t need it anymore. It was somehow both comforting and saddening. He dropped it into the trash can anyways.

They had told him that now, he can never get sick. If he gets injured, he’ll heal faster than regular people. (*Because he’s not regular anymore – he’s special, what a special kid, the whole country will love you.*) His metabolism is four times faster than average, so he’ll feel hungrier more often and require more nourishment. But he’ll also be able to run on substantially less sleep and still always be in top physical health.

He isn’t immortal, but he’s damn close. It’s comforting to a man who’s known nothing but sickness and the nearness of death so often growing up, and yet…

This body isn’t his.

At least when he was small and useless, he had reassurance. It was tiresome and frustrating and yet he’d grown used to the cards he’d been dealt. He had hated his body and yet it was the only one he’d ever had. He had accepted it. He at least knew who he was. *Now* who was he? His voice was still his own, this was the only thing he knew for certain so far. He feared the face that would possibly be staring back at him when he finally took the time to look.

Releasing a shaky breath, blue eyes rise up and meet those of the reflection staring back. His own widen, and the figure in the mirror widens its eyes, too. The man staring back at him looks shocked,
but that’s not right, because why would this stranger be shocked to see him? It doesn’t make any sense. He can hear the tiny, sharp inhale through his nose as he slowly leans towards the glass and touches it with his fingers.

No, it is indeed a mirror. This is his reflection. This is what he looks like now.

Six-foot-something (six-foot-two, they’d measured) and broad-shouldered. Muscled – that explained the constant feeling of warmth Steve must’ve been feeling – literally all over. There’s not a blemish on his body; every scar he’d ever worn over the years, miraculously gone. It should be good. His skin is perfect.

And yet, this body isn’t his.

Because his body was riddled with scars – a road map of the scuffles he’d had; the fights he’d been in. Maybe he’d never won any of those battles, and maybe all those scars had been nothing more than the imprints of all the bullies he’d ever faced, telling the world that they’d had their say with Steve Rogers and they were the victorious ones. Except…

He holds up his hands and examines them. Not all the scars had been like that. There were the ones all over his knuckles… Like the jagged one between his index and middle finger, on the right hand, where he’d punched Joseph Bradley in the nose for pulling Miranda Crossworth’s hair. Sure, it may have resulted in the scar next to his left temple from Bradley beating the snot out of him for it – but the one on his knuckle, that’d been all him. Every scar told a story – a battle he’d survived, been strong enough to survive. They were a part of him.

And now, every story was magically erased. Because now he was perfect – the perfect specimen. He’s the new face of America, which means he’s the face of thousands upon thousands of people, and none of them are Steve Rogers anymore.

He only ever wanted to do what was right.

He brings his fingers to his abdomen and they hover over the skin. He’s too afraid to touch; afraid it won’t feel like his own body, because it isn’t, it isn’t. He looks back up and meets his own eyes. They’re still the same, he thinks. Maybe they look a little bluer, but that could be just him. He’s relieved to see his eyelashes are still just as long – which seems a strange thing to be grateful for, but he hears Bucky’s voice in the back of his mind, breathing into a chilly February’s night… Your eyelashes are so fucking pretty, Stevie – so long and inviting; frame your eyes so right, could hypnotize a gent just by batting ‘em like you do.

He brings one hand to either cheek and slowly drags the tip of his fingers down to the jaw line. That looks about the same, just fuller. His lips haven’t changed – and neither has his nose. He lets out a short, humourless chuckle, even though there’s no one around to hear. Erskine’s serum could undo every imperfection his body had the offer, and yet it couldn’t fix the bump on his nose. He touches it gingerly with one hand, as if making sure. It feels like the only real thing from his old body that carried over into the new one. He’s glad it hasn’t changed, because that’d been all Bucky.

A thirteen-year-old Bucky, in fact, who’d accidentally pegged Steve in the face with a baseball they’d found on the side of the road. It’d been Steve’s own fault, really; he wasn’t the best catcher, and Bucky had a wicked arm. It’d whizzed right past his outstretched hand and smoked him right between the eyes. Of course, he fell like a bag of bricks and his nose was clearly broken. Blood had poured everywhere, and Bucky had freaked out. Almost worked himself into an asthma attack as he lost his marbles over Steve’s condition and tried to help him clean the torrent of blood, rushing out a million apologies without taking a single breath.
He was afraid Steve’s nose wouldn’t heal right if they waited to get him back to the Nuns, and for some reason, Bucky never trusted them to do anything properly when it came to broken bones. So he volunteered himself for the job, even despite Steve’s protests. Eventually, Steve was willing to let anyone do it because it smarted so bad, so he held as still as possible while Bucky poked his tongue out from between his lips and used his thumbs to reset the bones. Steve remembers there being a loud crunching sound, and he had yelped. Bucky then withdrew his hands as if burned, and then he had yelped, too. Then Bucky puked everywhere, and Steve had shouted, “What did you do!?” as he wondered in the back of his mind if his nose was about to fall clean off.

Turned out, Bucky didn’t have any sort of future in nursing, but he did manage by sheer luck to set the bones enough, until Steve could see a proper doctor. It had healed a little offset, with the bump in his bridge, and Steve made sure Bucky never heard the end of it, even though it was most likely not really his fault.

And it’s still there somehow. We’ll I’ll be a son of a gun, Steve thinks as he turns his face from side to side, just to make sure.

His face, on the whole, isn’t as bad as he was expecting. He still looks like himself just… more. It’s just everything else that feels out of place. Even his hair suddenly seems to sit just right. He keeps staring, letting his eyes travel down the planes of his new form – still too afraid to touch. He wonders if Bucky would like it just as much as Peggy seemed to have. His best friend never shied away from making it known just how much Steve’s body had driven him wild, and it’s a strange thing… to suddenly look like exactly the thing everyone else wants, when it could very well be the opposite of what Bucky might want. Maybe Bucky would hate the new him; prefer the old body and ask Steve how he could get it back. Maybe Bucky would find him ugly.

Steve knows his body is now beautiful. He knows this on an objective level; with his artist’s eye. But he doesn’t feel it, because this body isn’t his. He snaps off the light and leaves the room, grimacing.

He sits down in the center of the bed, away from his own leers and prying eyes, and tries a different tactic; feels the way his heightened senses prickle at the feeling of the fabric of his shirt sliding up his skin as he pulls it over his head and tosses it aside. He shuts off the lamp so he’s shrouded with darkness – he doesn’t want to see, not yet – before lying on his back and lifting his hips, removing his pants and underwear. When he’s down to nothing but his socks, he just lies flat, arms and legs spread, and stares at the ceiling. He takes the time to listen to the steady – healthy – rhythm of his breathing. He tries to focus on how his voice still sounds the same. When he feels relaxed (as relaxed as he’ll ever be, he assumes), he toes his socks off and then crawls under the covers.

He has to close his eyes to do this. He doesn’t want them to adjust to the night because he doesn’t want to see, not yet. He continues to focus on his breathing – soft and steady, in and out – as he brings his hands to his chest and presses them down. He feels strange; too broad. His skin is hot under his palms. He lets them splay flush, one under his collarbone and the other between his pecks (he suddenly has pecks now - Jesus, Mary, and Joseph). Then he slowly slides them down.

He trails them along his torso; takes his time counting the muscles as they slide over his abs. He doesn’t realize that his breathing has shifted from his nose to his mouth – still soft and steady – as he feels along his arms; absorbs the way the new bulges, dips, and curves feel under his palms. He bends his left arm at the elbow so he feel all around his neck and shoulders, while the other hand slowly drags its fingertips back over his stomach with just the slightest amount of pressure. Everything feels more intense than it used to. He gasps when he slides his left hand back down and his fingers brush over a nipple.

This body isn’t his, but this body feels good.
He pinches it, just a little, and bites his lip. His other hand is starting to shake but he wills it to continue lower; squeezes his eyes shut tighter when he wraps his hand around his cock, already hard—*quicker than usual*—and realizes he’s gotten at least a good four and a half, maybe *five* inches on what he’d had before. This body isn’t his, and this *dick* can’t be his, because it feels so large and the first place his mind goes is that he wants to know what it’d feel like inside of him—and that can’t be right, this body can’t be his, because who would think that about *themselves*?

This body isn’t his and there must be something wrong with him.

He could probably get away with making a *little* noise, but Steve’s too on edge. He opts instead for biting on his lip—it’s *fine, it can heal within minutes if he bleeds; you’re perfect now, you’re perfect, and the country’s going to love you*—and furrowing his brows tighter. The only sound he’ll permit is the heaviness of his breathing as he starts to stroke himself with the right hand and continues feeling around with his left.

This body isn’t his, but he wants to still be *wanted*—by the people who matter.

At first, his thoughts go to Peggy, and he hates himself, he hates himself so much. He can only scrounge up the nerve to imagine what it’d be like kissing her; the soft, feminine sounds she’d make. He recalls the things Bucky had told him about what it’s like to be inside of a dame, and even though he doesn’t let himself imagine how warm and wet and tight her body would feel, Steve still feels pretty certain that she’d feel warm and wet and tight. It’s enough—just picturing the kissing alone—to get his prick so hard that a bead of precome is smeared when he rubs his thumb along the slit, making his hips stutter up.

But it starts to feel wrong. Eyes still closed, he shakes his head and frowns…and just as his left hand rubs down his peck, right over his heart, he switches the image in his mind—morphs the mouthy, busty brunette he’s so infatuated with into the mouthy, smirking brunet he’s so head-over-heels for. It just doesn’t feel right to imagine those sorts of things about Peggy, especially when Bucky’s got a permanent rental spot in his mind and heart.

This feels better; eases the guilt. Steve’s relieved and elated at the fact that picturing *Bucky* above anyone else still gets his body going like no other, even if this body isn’t Steve’s anymore. His left hand glides back along his throat, fingers along the opposite collarbone, as he keeps his grip tight but his pace lazy and pictures Bucky standing at the foot of the bed; eyes raking over his lover’s new form.

In his fantasy, there’s nothing but longing in the older boy’s grey orbs. He looks at Steve like he’s a meal. Though his own eyes are still closed, he imagines looking down and watching Bucky holding himself up by the palms of his hands as he licks up Steve’s inner thighs; staring at everywhere his mouth touches with a sense of wonder, like he’s trying to figure out his strategy for taking Steve like this. Steve palms his leaking tip so he can spread the slick and pump harder when he imagines with the most vivid of detail how hot Bucky’s breath would be as it was exhaled against his swollen balls—in desperate need of attention.

Steve jerks himself fast now, because in his version of reality, Bucky’s just sealed his mouth over his cock and is sucking down, *so far down*. He can remember the feeling of the back of Bucky’s throat crystal clear. His chest is rising and falling erratically now, and just because he may not be susceptible to asthmatic attacks anymore doesn’t mean he’s not capable of feeling *close* to one—not when his heart’s beating so fast. He squirms, lifting his hips up and off the bed to meet the rhythm of his fist, and this body, it isn’t his; he’s nothing but a passenger, feeling the pleasure this body is feeling.

But every sensation is somehow amplified and he’s about to come, and he wants to know what it’s
All it takes is one finger. He drops his left hand and throws it between his spread legs, and it’s a combination of three very important things: he twists his wrist right at the tip, picturing Bucky’s eyelashes fanning up as the brunet looks up at him and his pupils are completely fucked and his eyes are dark and his face is hungry - and when that pad of his middle finger brushes his asshole… he’s done for. The smallest of startled groans rumbles in his chest, and even that feels new, the way is reverberates like that – with so much more room. He arches his back, stilling, before collapsing back against the mattress as his cock streams warm, wet lines of come across that chiseled abdomen that he’s told is his own.

Except it isn’t. Steve isn’t sure he’ll ever make peace with this.

He allows his eyes to finally reopen and gaze back up at the ceiling. His body is satisfied, but his mind is confused. And his heart feels lonely; lonelier than he thinks he’s ever been. It’s only made worse when he sighs, rubbing his eyes with his the back of his clean hand, and suddenly sees Peggy back in his mind – looking offended and dejected and asking him in that husky voice of hers, “Why wasn’t I enough for you?”

And then Steve feels like a real asshole, but he isn’t sure who he’s offending more right now. This body may not be his own, but it’s still got the same idiot piloting it.

There’s a bombed-down pub in a small town outside of Isar, Germany. Bucky and his battalion of troops find that the second floor of the rickety building is still standing, so for the night, they’ll be making camp there. Bucky almost took a bullet to the neck that day. The only reason he’s still standing is thanks to slipping on Private Morrison’s blood squelching beneath his boot – and his body, what was left of it, just lied there, and his eyes would have been staring heavenward if half of his face hadn’t been blown up – and sending him flat on his back.

He can’t remember the last time he’d smiled and meant it. He keeps his gun at the ready as he, Dugan, and a couple other men tiptoe silently through the remnants of the structure to make sure they are in fact alone. He can hear the excited clamber of the others on the floor beneath them when they realize that there are still several bottles of liquor intact beneath the half-broken bar counter. The coast is clear, and when they rejoin the rest of the group, Dugan grins and slaps a meaty hand on Bucky’s shoulder. They get to get drunk tonight. Bucky plasters on a shoddy attempt at a grin but it doesn’t even come close to reaching his eyes. Still, his heart aches for those bottles, and though his face doesn’t show it, he’s glad to have them.

Getting drunk – making himself numb – seems to be the only thing tethering his sanity together anymore.

Well, that – and Private Owen Mackenzie.

The guys gather all the fallen bar stools and set them up around the perimeter, passing along the bottles after they’ve been opened and trying to find things to talk about while they slam it all down. The blond sits on the end opposite Bucky and takes part in the conversation with a jovial attitude that Bucky hates him for.

It’s just the beginning of a long list of reasons why Bucky can’t particularly stand this kid. He’s heard enough from Owen’s stories; those nights when he’d get his turn to talk around the fires. At twenty-three, he’s a nice thing to look at – tall, lithe, with perfectly straight teeth of the whitest shade, and short golden hair. His eyes are blue, just like Steve’s, but Owen looks far from Steve. He has the same kind of swagger that Bucky remembers himself having at one point – that same swagger that’s
been missing from his steps lately.

But seeing it mirrored in another person when he’s been feeling so hollow just makes Bucky angry. Because this kid has no right being here, and what’s more, he never had to be here. He’s gotten what Bucky never did: a choice. Not even a choice, the kid had gotten a fucking free ticket out of the draft. Because Owen is nothing more than a spoiled little rich boy; born and raised on a wealthy plantation in Louisiana. Had his entire way paid for growing up; even got to go to a nice college back home – had himself a sweetheart, sickeningly perfect-looking, but apparently his pa was always the stricter kind. Bucky remembers some of Owen’s stories, about how tightly his father kept the reigns; how Father Mackenzie (because of course that kid’s pa was a minister, of course he was) always thought his boy was the spitting image of himself when really… Really, Private Mackenzie got himself straight As and was a real gentleman to his girl, but the second his pa’s back was turned, he was getting high with his buddies and drinking his face off. He didn’t even believe in God, and though Bucky couldn’t exactly blame him for that anymore, he still thought the whole display was sickening.

Nothing more sickening, however, than finding out that Father Mackenzie – with all his money and power – had tried to pull some strings to get Owen out of the draft. Bucky didn’t even know such a thing was possible. And it had worked – until the stupid shit went and enlisted himself anyways, just to spite his daddy.

Part of Bucky knows that he only dislikes Owen because he represents everything that Bucky never had, never could be. But he spends far too much energy on the battlefield these days pretending that he isn’t scared boneless, that he isn’t terrified to fall asleep each night because his dreams are just as horrifying as his reality… That when he makes friends with these men, he cares – too much. And it’s a weakness he’s reminded of over and over, because it’s never any less painful when he watches one of them die and there’s fucking nothing he can do about it.

So yeah, he doesn’t have the energy needed to pretend to play nice with this guy; not once he’s awarded with a few single moments of calmness in his otherwise chaotic existence.

But there’s something else Father Mackenzie doesn’t know about his ‘picture-perfect, Jesus-worshipping little Prince’ – and that’s just how much he loves a good cock in his ass.

The first time had been all sorts of fucked up, and Bucky had absolutely no intention of it happening. He can barely remember the details; they’d been sleeping that night in a forest near the border of Frankenöhne, and Bucky had been particularly on edge. It’d been his turn on watch while the others slept, and he’d taken a momentarily break to wander a bit deeper into the woods and relieve himself. Owen had been awake and followed; tried to make conversation with the Sergeant, but he was all cockiness and harsh chuckles and wouldn’t just piss off even when Bucky told him to.

Then the blond’s words had grown suggestive – just enough for Bucky to be able to pick up on them but not enough for Owen not to be able to deny it if he needed to. But the kid had had no interest in denying anything. He’d continued advancing, and Bucky ordered him to head back and he wouldn’t listen and who did this fucking kid think he was? He wasn’t sure why Owen being in his space bothered him as much as it did, and it made no sense, it really fucking didn’t, why Bucky wanted to wipe that smug little smirk off his face so badly – and he doesn’t know how it happened, he really doesn’t.

Because somewhere between Owen pressing a hand to Bucky’s chest – breaking that wall that’d been disconnecting them – and Bucky telling him to fuck off, Owen wound up bent at the waist and gripping onto the trunk of the nearest tree while the Sergeant pounded into him, snarling silently. Owen knew what he was doing, Bucky could tell; he’d offered himself up, for reasons Bucky wasn’t
sure of yet. And no matter how hard he gave it to him, or how much his chest tightened with hatred for this kid, he could see Owen’s face whenever it was turned to the side and the Private was fucking smiling breathlessly.

They, of course, kept it a secret. Bucky had tried to avoid him whenever possible, unless on the battlefield. For all his gusto, Owen never once played up to his cocky nature when there was a gun in his hands. He prowled just as intently as Bucky did, and was willing to throw himself into the line of fire to save a fellow soldier just as quickly. It was as if he were two completely people, and it left Bucky confused as to what this kid’s deal was.

The second time they’d fucked was very much like the first. Owen had dropped subtle hints Bucky’s way all evening on a night when the platoon had actually had the chance to set up proper tents and cook halfway decent scraps over the fire. They’d all passed around some sloppily-made joints and got high (Dugan sacrificed himself to stay sober and keep a clearer eye out in case an enemy was spotted), and by the end of the night, the way Owen was eye-fucking him from across the fire was too much for him.

He couldn’t stand Owen Mackenzie – this selfish, privileged, spoiled little brat – but his body craved the feeling of being inside of his. So, they’d found someplace fast to sneak off to and for a second time, Owen got that little spaced-out smile while Bucky jerked and fucked him to climax.

After that, it’d always end the same way; Bucky would pull out, unable to meet Owen’s eyes. Every time, he feels guilt, because he feels like a prick for using this kid and he also just doesn’t care. He had realized that second night that a part of him had done it because he’d hoped it’d spark something more in him to care. To feel. In just a few months, Bucky thinks he’s forgotten how to do that.

The only thing he still cares about is Steve, and that hurts him so fucking much because there’s nothing he wants more than to be back there with him in their shitty Brooklyn apartment and he… he can’t have that.

If it weren’t for Steve, Bucky would’ve gladly stuck his own gun in his mouth by now.

So he fucks Private Mackenzie to try and feel human again; because he’s selfish and desperately needs some semblance of intimacy, even if there’s nothing intimate about it at all. And for whatever reason – a reason Bucky really doesn’t give a shit about – Owen needs it just as much. Because even if his ass is sore afterwards, or he has to bite down on his own arm to stifle any noises he wants to make, he always smiles when they fuck, and he always drawls coolly to Bucky in that Southern accent of his Afterwards, “Stop lookin’ like I just killed your dog. If I didn’t want it, I wouldn’t keep comin’ back for it.”

Then he saunters away, and they don’t talk about it. They never talk about it.

Bucky suspects sometimes that most of the other guys know, but if they do, they never comment on it. Turns out he’s not the only one; in fact, most of the men there have been guilty of partaking in similar acts at least once, if they’ve felt particularly lonely. Most of them aren’t even fairies. You just do what you have to do to get by – if that’s trading a handjob for some cigarettes, or a quick fuck to ease the tension, or blowing one of your teammates because you’re both desperately missing home and it’s the only way to get through the night without losing your grip on those last tiny shards of yourself… Then so be it.

Tonight, they drain the bottles amongst themselves, and Bucky says very little. Most of the night, he keeps his eyes cast downwards, and all he can think about – as is always the case – is Steve. He’s been sending letters but has yet to get a response, so of course, as the days have passed, his mind has only jumped to worse and worse conclusions. He worries himself sick, wondering if Steve got
himself into a fight that he couldn’t back himself out of; if maybe he’s fallen ill, or had an asthma attack that was just too much for his rattling lungs to handle. Sometimes, he wonders if Steve maybe hasn’t replied to him because he’s already found himself someone else. That thought hurts the most, so he tries his best to avoid it as much as he can.

It feels like decades since the last time he’d felt loved. He misses everything about his best friend; tonight, he misses the intimacy – the emotions he isn’t even sure he’s still capable of anymore.

That’s how he finds himself around the back of the building, hours later, feeling the twigs and rocks scrape uncomfortably beneath his kneecaps as he presses down on Owen’s lower back and drives into him. The others are all still drinking a decent distance away, but the blond still buries his face into his arms in order to stifle his groans.

Bucky has a long list of reasons why he doesn’t like Private Mackenzie, but in this moment, he hates him most because he isn’t Steve.

“You like this, don’t you, rich boy?” he mutters, voice angry and a low growl – just loud enough for the other man to hear. Owen pushes back against his dick, trying to bury it deeper inside of his body, and responds only with a near-silent, breathy moan. He gets off on dirty talk, on being made to feel filthy, and that only urges Bucky on more. They both understand that everything being said has a layer of truth behind it – that the Sergeant is letting some of his steam off. For whatever reason, Owen never seems to care. Sometimes, he provokes Bucky in order to hear those sorts of things. Little fucking masochist, he is.

“You like my cock,” he continues in a whisper; takes those hips in both hands and punctuates the end of his sentence with a hard thrust. “Bet you thought about this every time you sat in on one of your daddy’s little sermons – bet you pretended to listen like a good like altar boy, when really, you were fantasizing about a nice hard dick in you.”

Owen nods, glancing back over his shoulder. His face is flushed and he looks completely debauched, but there’s that hard little gleam in his eye that means to defy; to goad. Bucky meets his eyes for just a second and then quickly averts them because he isn’t here for this – that eye contact thing. That’s one step closer to stepping over the border where it goes from being a meaningless fuck to something else.

“Yeah,” Owen breathes. His voice is laced with something hard. “You gonna give it to me sometime today?”

“The fuck do you think I’m doin’?” Bucky snaps, then buries his fingers deeper into the flesh of his hips and drives in faster, harder. Owen’s mouth drops open, eyes rolling into his head, and he grins, finally getting what he’s after. When he comes several minutes later, he stutters, as if there’s a name on the tip of his tongue. The only reason it catches Bucky’s attention is because that first syllable sure sounds nothing like the name of his girl back home, which he knows is Jeanine. Bucky’s brows crease with confusion as he watches Owen stare ahead, frowning, even despite his hitched breathing. Then the blond lowers his face back into his arms and goes silent until Bucky finally reaches his end, grunting quietly.

This time, when he pulls out, he feels the weird urge to ask Owen what that had been about. Something in him says that he should ask if he’s okay, but as he pulls up his pants and Owen sheds his own so he can wipe himself clean with his underwear, Bucky can’t voice his words. The blond keeps his eyes elsewhere until he’s finally redressed. Then their gazes meet and Bucky shifts uncomfortably. This isn’t how it normally goes. Owen’s supposed to treat the whole thing as if it were meaningless, not look at him with the solemn frown he’s wearing now.
“Uh--” Bucky offers.

But then that familiar smirk spreads back across Owen’s face, and gone is the man who’d just been standing there. Bucky just continues to stare, thrown off. “Don’t get all sappy on me, Sarge,” Private Mackenzie mocks, a little too gleefully. “Never been one for the after sex cuddlin’ and chit-chat myself.”

And with that, he turns around and heads back into the pub, leaving Bucky standing there.

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Every time Steve hears the opening chords for *The Star Spangled Man with a Plan*, he wants to hit his head off a wall. They’ve been touring for the entire summer, and at this point, the only thing keeping him going is that they only have four more performances until they wind up back in New York. For the first little while, he’d thought the tune was catchy, and it’d been hard not to get distracted by the lineup of beautiful girls kicking their legs up all around him. He’d fumbled over his lines and stood on stage looking a lot more like a deer caught in headlights than the *Captain America* that was supposed to rile the entire nation to patriotism.

But then a few days turned into many and those turned into weeks, and eventually, Steve lost track of the time and *eternity* actually turned out to be only two months. Two months of traveling the country and punching out Adolf Hitler and selling bonds; signing autographs and people cheering and the USO ladies dancing… Pretending to fawn all over him onstage and then actually fawning all over him when off of it, too.

*Series E Defense Bonds – each one you buy is a bullet in the barrel of your best guy’s gun.*

He knows his lines inside and out now; he’s learned how to smile charmingly at the crowd and follow his steps so he doesn’t crash into anyone, like he did during his first few performances. He’s learned how to properly style his hair, thanks to the dancers, and public speaking – though still uncomfortable for him – doesn’t seem nearly as daunting anymore. They’ve even started printing comic books about him, and though Steve always believed Bucky was the one meant for the silver screen, it’s *him* who’s been on Hollywood sets, filming movies about a world and a battle he’s only pretending to be a part of.

Everyone keeps portraying Captain America like he’s some sort of seasoned war veteran, and yet Steve Rogers knows those spangly tights these days better than he’s ever known a proper uniform. He’d even tried to wear his dog tags from Basic under his costume one night, but Brandt had swiftly put a stop to that, since the too-bright lights reflected the silhouette of the metal and the apparent bulge between his pecks ‘looked too strange’.

He sleeps in nice hotels and has women throwing themselves at him left, right, and center; he’s hungry all the time and yet he never goes hungry – there’s always food for him of the nicest variety. For all intents and purposes, Steve knows he’s living the dream. It’s just not *his* dream.

Because even though he’s always surrounded by people these days, and everybody wants a piece of him, he never feels any less lonely. These people, they don’t want Steve Rogers; they want the *Captain*. They want his body and his notoriety and a *piece of him*; they all just want a *piece of him*. There’s a select few of the dancers on the tour who seem a little less enthralled by all the glamour surrounding Steve’s fame, and those ones actually talk to him like he’s a person. They’ve all spent enough days and nights together, going across the country, that Steve’s learned a few things thanks to them.

He learns the placements of each of their costumes, their helmets, their heels. He helps them when they’re all running around before each show; he’s the guy they know will have whatever they need.
already in hand if ever they misplace it (which there’s always one per night, it never fails). He learns to stop blushing so hard whenever they’re all changing around him and he’s suddenly surrounded by dozens of topless, beautiful bodies. Because they need all the hands they can get during quick changes, he even learns how to quickly do up their costumes with nimble fingers instead of shaking, clumsy hands.

He likes Ida the best – the blonde sitting at the front of the motorcycle he hoists above his head at the end of the number each night. He thinks he enjoys being around her so much because she doesn’t seem to give a damn about who he is or what he can do. She’s not rude, per say – she just flat-out tells Steve one night while they’re all celebrating another good show that he just isn’t her type. She’s not all about the muscles and lifting and basically everything Steve has to show off every night. She overlooks Steve in the same way that women did when he was small – and for the first time, Steve’s glad to have that back.

Because this body still doesn’t feel like his, and the more people that come up to him… begging for an autograph, or a picture, or telling him with moony eyes that they love him when they don’t even know him… Steve feels less and less like himself. Some nights, when he knows no one will catch him, he stares into the mirror and whispers under his breath, “My name is Steve Rogers.”

He repeats it every time until it starts to feel true again.

Bucky had always thought that taking a bullet would be nothing but excruciating pain; it’d penetrate the skin and bury its way deep, deep down into your body and the second your flesh split open from the wound, it’d be a searing fire and a sharp stab.

He’s right, but there’s something they don’t tell you about taking a bullet – that split second when it hits you that seems to drag out for lifetimes… That makes the world feel as though it just stops. For that split second, all you know is that you’ve been hit, you’ve been shot, it’s happened, and yet you feel nothing. You hear your heart in your ears and then you don’t even hear that, and you wonder if it’s because it’s stopped. You know you’ve been hit but you’re not sure where you’ve been hit, and despite what everyone else may say, there’s no time to have your life flash before your eyes, but there’s certainly enough time to think, I’m going to die.

Then the world resumes spinning and your concept of time returns, and the pain comes. It feels exactly like what it looks like: a hole in your body and ripping, tearing, splitting, burning. Bucky takes a bullet to the shoulder and drops to the ground. His eyes are wide in surprise as he drops, and his split second occurs while he’s falling. It’s a strange feeling, falling in that moment. The universe spins upward and Bucky’s eyes go to the sky and he blinks… He blinks and it feels so slow, and he feels nothing yet, but he wonders… Will I hit the ground? Or did I finally get wings and I’m about to fly away?

He knows it’s wishful thinking. He already knows no heaven would want him; he’s not destined for that place anymore. After all, because of him – maybe not directly but it sure as hell feels that way – a kid got blown up. He spends that split second feeling relief wash over him because right now, thoughts of Steve and Brooklyn and home are furthest from his mind, and all he wants in this moment is a way out of the wreckage.

The air is knocked from his lungs when his back hits the ground, and the pain bursts throughout his body, and he can hear his heart beating again, and no one’s screams sound louder than his own. He clutches his shoulder and shouts out his agony, along with a string of curses. He looks ahead frantically, wondering if another bullet aimed for his head is on its way and how quickly he has to move to dodge it and find shelter. Between quick, shallow breaths, he can hear the sound of boots running towards him and a familiar voice, but though Bucky’s here, he’s not paying attention. His
situational awareness is currently shit.

Hands grab him and tug and the Sergeant's down, the Sergeant's down, we need a medic! The voice is deep and familiar and unshakable, even though it’s also clearly frantic. He’s able to get to his feet and impulsively, lets the arms of his fellow soldier wrap around him to keep him upright. He holds onto them for support and together, they stumble off as fast as possible to the nearest piece of rubble to seek reprieve behind.

It isn’t until the other man settles him down and shouts, “Over here! He’s over here!” before getting back up and running away, gun poised and at-the-ready, that Bucky realizes he just got saved by Private Mackenzie.

Fighting feels ten times harder when your shoulder’s patched up but you’ve still got a bullet lodged in your muscle tissue, and eventually, Bucky had had to retreat. When they’d managed to get past the enemy fire and take out as many of the Nazis as they could for a day, they continued trekking and decided it was going to be another night of bivouacking in the middle of nowhere. No tents, no fires – nothing that could give them away. They’d need three men on all watch rotations, because the cautions were too high.

The medic, a guy named Smith, gives Bucky a swig of some leftover vodka before handing him a rag to bunch up and bite down on. He wills himself not to let his fear show when Smith sanitizes a small blade and Bucky’s eyes follow the sharp tip that has his name written all over it. Bucky snarls out raggedly, squeezing his eyes shut when the medic digs the blade into his shoulder and carefully extracts the small bullet. They’re running low on good supplies and need to pick up whatever they can in the next city, so Smith has to waste some alcohol on Bucky’s wound to clean it out. Bucky’s body jerks when the liquid splashes over the hole and he hisses.

Dugan has to hold Bucky still when Smith burns one side of the blade and then presses it to the wound in order to stop the flow of blood and properly cauterize it. Bucky can smell his flesh and hear the sizzle and it doesn’t matter how hard he bites down on that damned rag, it doesn’t hurt any less. By the time he’s getting patched up – can’t stitch it closed just yet, not with that shitty clean job; don’t got all the proper tools and we don’t want no dirt getting trapped in there or you’ll get an infection – we’ll have to get more stuff in the next town, there’s bound to be some pharmacies or somethin’ – all of Bucky’s sounds have died in his throat. He stares ahead and all he can keep thinking is, Today, I got shot... Today, I got shot and I lived... Today, I got shot and I wish I hadn’t...

A lot of the guys are lingering around because there’s little else to do. Smith is just finishing wrapping him up with gauze when Bucky’s eyes focus and land on Owen; standing a half dozen feet away, arms crossed, eyes intently on the Sergeant. He’s sans his usual cocky grin. His face is actually rather stoic, but his eyes hold something almost challenging that makes Bucky’s blood boil. He waves Smith off, says he can put his shirt back on himself, it’s okay, and then mutters his genuine thanks and stands, finishing the job.

“You want something to numb the pain, kid?” Dugan asks helpfully, holding out the bottle of vodka Smith had used to clean his shoulder.

Bucky shakes his head but forces a small smile. He turns down the offer and then sets his sights on the blond, taking off towards him. Owen’s eyes never lose their edge, but the corner of his mouth turns upwards just a tad. He keeps his stance, even as the Sergeant advances with purpose.

Bucky comes to a stop an arm’s distance in front of him. He frowns, brows knit together, before clearing his throat and meeting his eyes. He knows what he should say but it feels like such a difficulty to actually get the words out.
Owen arches a brow. “You could say ‘thanks’, you know. I did save your ass back there.”

Bucky’s expression hardens into a glare. He stays silent but then thrusts the hand connected to his good shoulder out into a rigid offering. “Thanks,” he echoes stiffly. “I owe you one.”

Blue eyes stare at the outstretched hand and slowly, a look of amused disbelief stretches across the young Private’s face. “You sure about that?” he asks, taking the brunet’s hand and squeezing it. Bucky doesn’t understand the meaning, so Owen clarifies, “You seem like you’d faster step over my dead body than throw yourself in front of it.”

“Are you questioning my nobility as a superior officer, Private?” Bucky whispers, low and almost dangerous. He’s really in no mood for this shit – maybe this kid likes to egg Bucky on when he’s balls deep inside of him, but right now, it’s more likely to earn him a fist in the jaw than a dick in his ass. Because Bucky’s nothing if not a good soldier; he’s already proved himself by now. Each and every one of his men, he sees as his responsibility. Whether he likes them all on a personal level or not is irrelevant; they are a team, and Bucky’s never shied away from doing whatever needed to be done to keep his men safe.

Owen gives a small, definitive shake of the head and widens his eyes. He’s still got a ghost of a smile on his lips. “No sir,” he replies. “Was just a question, sir.”

Bucky pulls his hand back and tightens his jaw before spinning around and going to leave. Owen sighs and loosens his stance. “Why do you got such a grudge against me, huh?”

The brunet stops, back still to the other man, and blinks. Looks to the ground and chuckles; can’t believe this guy’s nerve. And he knows, he knows he only dislikes him so much for all the wrong reasons, but he’s bitter and lonely and he can’t for the life of him understand why someone would willingly put themselves in this sort of situation when Bucky wants to scream and beg anyone who’s up there listening to get him out of it on a daily basis.

“Because you treat this war like it’s a game,” he answers, turning back to him. By now, some of the other guys have turned their heads and are watching curiously. His voice gets steely; he speaks quicker. “Because you waltz in here and act like you’re above everyone else, what with your money and your daddy’s power, and you think death won’t find you. You think you’re somehow untouchable because you chose to come here, even though you di’int have to.”

“If I thought the war was a game, I wouldn’t be throwin’ my ass on the line every time I save one of my friends,” Owen snaps just as quickly, and that smile is gone now. He’s scowling at Bucky with an anger the Sergeant’s never seen before. “I wouldn’t have saved you!”

Bucky throws his good arm out, keeping his other held to his chest. “What are you here for, Mackenzie!? Why. Are. You. Here.” He starts stepping back closer to the blond, glaring and eyes fierce and cheeks burning hot from all the pent-up fury – at Owen, at his shoulder, at the enemy, at the world. “You sit around them fires and you boast, you boast about how your father pulled strings so your ass could stay safe and sound at home while the rest of us who were never given a choice went off and fought for YOUR freedom! But naw, you just wanted to piss your daddy off, so you come out here anyways, just to raise some hell back home. Now, I dunno about the other guys here but when I hear that, you best believe it makes my blood boil because some of us grew up with nothin’ – some of us didn’t get to have all the privileges you got, and some of us would’ve given anythin’ to have stayed home! You don’t appreciate how good you had it!”

The fierceness and hatred is mirrored in Owen’s eyes, and the younger man’s nostrils flare. Bucky can actually hear the Private’s teeth gritting together. Then Owen exhaled a humourless chuckle and sneers. “You think you got me all figured out, dontcha? You think you know my whole life’s story.”
Bucky gets in real close now. Their noses are almost touching and they never blink; they just glare and everyone around them is tense, and Bucky thinks he can hear Private Jones mumble something, something… Alright, fellas, c’mon, that’s enough now… But Bucky isn’t having any of it.

“You are a greedy –” He shoves Owen once on the shoulder. “Spoiled –” Twice. “Asshole – and I know your story and it makes me want to puke--”

Owen swings and punches Bucky across the face. Bucky immediately sees red. He forgets all about the pain in his shoulder and lunges forward. He tries to throw punches with his right hand while Owen has full mobility with both of his, and it only lasts a few seconds before they’re both pulled away from each other. Nevertheless, they both continue to try and break free and run back forwards.

“YOU DON’T KNOW NOTHIN’ ABOUT ME!” Owen shouts, voice breaking. “YOU DON’T KNOW FUCKING NOTHIN’!”

Bucky’s too riled up at the moment to even stop and consider whether or not that might be true.

It had been packed at the Radio City Music Hall, and Steve doesn’t think they’ve ever had a performance run quite as smoothly. They’d gotten a standing ovation and there were chants of his name – not Steve Rogers, but Captain America, because his body is the body of everyone in the country, and his face is the face of thousands upon thousands of people, and none of them is his own. Tomorrow morning, they will be shipping straight out to continue the tour in the UK. Tonight, Steve’s made it known to Senator Brandt that he will not be spending his last night back in New York in a hotel; he’ll be spending it in his own apartment in Brooklyn. To his relief, the Senator allows it, even though he doesn’t understand why his merchandise would want to sleep in some dump when there’s a clean, King-size bed waiting for him already.

Steve’s still in his costume – minus the cowl and hair always set just right – and heading for his dressing room so he can get back into his usual attire and hit the road. Distractedly, he signs an autograph for a small boy and only looks up in time to almost walk head-first into a tall, beautiful blonde.

“It’s me, Evie,” she swoons, just as moony-eyed as the rest of them.

At that same moment, Steve sees a flash go off in his peripherals. He glances up and immediately has to do a double-take because it’s Evie – it’s Evie, standing right in front of him, smiling at him like she wants him to whisk her away and make passionate love to her, but it’s Evie, and she doesn’t even recognize him. He glances down at the paper and pen she’s holding out for him and he takes it, shooting her another glance.

“Hi,” he replies; waiting for the sound of his voice to tip her off. It doesn’t. She proceeds to tell her how much of an inspiration he is; how she picked up one of those Captain America comics and gave it a read, even though she knows they’re meant for boys, and she adored absolutely all of his films. She flirts – Steve knows his way around that enough to pick up on the not-so-subtle hints cast his way – and Steve just stares back at her, dumfounded. She must think it’s because he’s so enamoured by her looks that he’s fumbling for his words and blinking at her like he’s just so darn shy, because it only makes her giggle more and tuck the strands of her hair behind one ear.

But all Steve can remember is that night… That double-date, the dancing, the fighting, the shouting, the kissing, the touching, and the moaning… He hasn’t seen Evelyn in five years, and she doesn’t recognize him at all. And sure, maybe it’s too great of a difference to be able to put two and two together, but it makes Steve feel panicked. Because his face – it hasn’t changed that much, has it? And his voice, that stayed the same, too. There’s not even the tiniest bit of familiarity in her eyes.
Five years ago, she’d been Bucky’s date and now here she was, gazing longingly at Bucky’s best guy, like she loves him, and wants to run away with him, and he’s so perfect, and it’s exactly the same way everyone else keeps looking at him.

He is a lab rat. He’s a dancing monkey. And nobody cares about Steve Rogers anymore – they only want the Captain.

The moment she finishes talking, he stammers out a polite thank you and books it to his dressing room. Brandt tries to come in to talk to him, but Steve feels tense; squeezed, as if the walls are coming towards him. He replies, “Yes, sir… Uh, yes, yes, sir,” whenever he’s asked a question and he can only hope that those are the right answers as he shucks off the costume and tugs on his worn-out slacks. He dresses in record time and excuses himself while the Senator is still speaking but he doesn’t get stopped.

“Don’t you forget your call time tomorrow, son!” he hears Brandt calling after him.

“I won’t, sir!”

“We’ll have a car in front of your building by 7:00am, sharp!”

“I’ll be ready, sir!”

They’ve been paying him while he’s been on tour – nothing overly substantial, since they cover pretty much all of his way for everything else (including his rent back home), so what else would he need money for? Hailing a taxi, he sinks against the backseat and tries to will it to suck him up whole. The driver says something friendly like, “Hey, don’t I know you from somewhere?” But Steve just meets his eyes and tries to hide the blind look of panic on his face and answers quickly, “Sorry, I don’t think so.”

He starts seeing familiar streets, landmarks, and then the soda shop, and his heart, it aches to just lie down in the middle of the street and get absorbed into everything that makes Brooklyn, Brooklyn. He never wants it to change; he’s had enough things change on him to last a lifetime. The moment the cab parks outside of his building, he hands over a couple dollars and hastily thanks the stranger before practically running out.

His new feet, they’re fast. His new legs, they’re faster. And his new lungs, they let him run as fast as he wants without him losing his breath. He sprints up the stairs at what feels like five at a time. His hands shake when he fumbles to grab his key – thank goodness he’d remembered to bring it tonight – and the second he’s inside his old apartment, he presses his back against the closed door and slides to the ground, panting softly, even though there’s hardly any need to.

It still smells the same. Nothing’s changed. He stays where he is for a while because he’s almost afraid to take a look around, lest he be proven wrong. But eventually, he’s back on his feet, taking slow steps from the living room through the kitchen, to the bathroom and then his and Bucky’s bedroom. Everything’s exactly the same. Nothing’s changed. Nothing’s… changed.

Their cots are still neat from when Steve had made them on his last morning there. He must’ve forgotten to put Bucky’s glass of water in the sink because it’s still standing on the dresser, but its contents have long since evaporated. Something about that makes Steve’s heart constrict. He crosses the room and reaches out a hand, picking up the glass and looking at it – maybe hoping that with his new body, he might be able to actually see the imprint of Bucky’s lips on the rim. He can’t. He doesn’t need to turn down his own cot; he knows he’ll be sleeping in Bucky’s tonight.

He showers, and finds himself laughing under his breath when the hot water runs out after only a
couple short minutes. When he gets out, he grabs his towel (still dirty from months before, *never got the chance to wash it properly*) and wraps it around his waist but he… He walks back into his bedroom and realizes none of his old clothes will fit him. Even though they’d been at least a size to big on him anyways, they’d still be too tight and too short now. He opens his dresser drawers and his face falls.

Pulls the remaining items out; the ones he didn’t bring with him to Basic. Holds them up and takes a good long look at each one of them. Bucky’s got some shirts in there, too. He smiles to himself when he sees a dirty-looking undershirt – one that used to be white but then eventually turned the shade of sour milk from too many shifts on the docks. Steve cradles it in his hands and lifts it to his face, breathing in. It mostly smells like nothing but *right there*… just a hint of it, lingering as if in the background, is Bucky’s trademark scent. It’s so welcoming and so dearly missed that it almost makes Steve cry. He doesn’t, though. He just pulls the shirt over his head and puts it on. It’s a tad tight, because he’s even bigger than Bucky now – and *Christ, what a thought* that is… But Steve doesn’t care. He puts on the slacks he wore over there and heads back out into the living room.

The part of him that’s been aching to be back home feels satiated now that he’s in his apartment again, but it still doesn’t feel right. Because there’s too much of an echo; it’s far too quiet, and everywhere he looks, he sees Bucky reading or Bucky drinking or Bucky laughing or Bucky kissing him. Well… who he used to be. He doesn’t know who he is anymore.

As he passes by the front door again, he notices there’s a decent amount of mail gathered up in front of the door, beneath the letter slot. He’d been too preoccupied and overwhelmed when he first came in to notice. Immediately, he sees his name in Bucky’s penmanship and runs over, dropping to his knees and scooping them up all. Flicking through them he counts four, four envelopes addressed to him from his best friend. He doesn’t even find a better place to sit before he’s ripping into the first one and pulling it out to read.

It takes a few days for Bucky and Owen to converse again. They’re both stubborn as mules, and Bucky had actually found himself growing annoyed that the blond hadn’t come and apologized sooner. The longer he got the silent treatment, the more he started to wonder if there was some invisible line he hadn’t realized he’d crossed. All he’d done was spoken the truth – there was nothing he’d said that hadn’t stemmed from *something* Owen had told all the guys before.

But then on the fourth day, Bucky watches Owen singlehandedly drag one of the other men, Lieutenant James Falsworth, to safety when the Brit had been caught in the perimeter of an incoming poison gas attack and fell unconscious, unable to breathe. He’d been close enough that he’d already started to seize from the neurotoxins, but far away enough that there was still time to get to him if they acted fast. The second Bucky spotted Private Mackenzie, bent down and pulling Falsworth beneath the armpits to try and get him to a clearing, the Sergeant took off towards them.

Owen keeps shouting for help, because it’s a slow process when it’s a one-man job, and the blond had sprained his ankle pretty bad from a nasty fall the day before. He needs backup, so Bucky gives it to him. He runs to the Lieutenant’s feet and hoists them up, grunting out in pain thanks to his still-healing shoulder. He and Owen make eye contact and they both know now isn’t the time for childish feuding. They have to put that past them right now, for the good of the unit. Working together, they manage to get Falsworth to safety and while Bucky runs to retrieve a medic, Owen performs CPR on him until he’s properly breathing again. The Sergeant returns with Smith on hand to find the blond turning Falsworth’s body to the side, tipping his mouth open.

“We have to keep him off his back in case he vomits,” he tells Bucky before looking to the medic. “He’s been hit with a low dose of toxic gas. I’ve performed three sets of chest compressions and
mouth-to-mouth, and his seizure seems to have stopped. Do you need me to do anythin’ else?”

Smith shakes his head and kneels down by the Lieutenant’s side; the Englishman now starting to regain some consciousness. “No, son, you did great. Thank you – and thank you, Sergeant,” he adds, looking back up at Bucky with a nod, before turning back to his patient.

Bucky just stares at Owen, frowning softly. The blond gets back up to his feet, hissing under his breath when he accidentally puts too much pressure on his busted ankle.

“No need,” he says to Smith, but keeps staring at Private Mackenzie. “That was all this kid. Good job, Private.”

For a moment, Owen’s face doesn’t register the approval. Then it morphs quickly to a portrait of confusion, then distrust, then suspicion. It all happens so quickly that Bucky is thrown off by how quickly that little, familiar smirk suddenly quirks up one corner of his mouth. He adjusts his grip on his gun, gives Bucky a tiny salute, and then turns and hobbles away.

That night, they’re tenting it again on the outskirts of town. The evening progresses at usual – smoking and drinking and exchanging banter, jokes, and tales around a small fire. They heat up chicken broth in a tiny metal pot and take turns passing it around and sipping from it to put some semblance of food into their bellies. Falsworth is back on his feet and feeling back to normal; he shows his thanks by offering up two of his pre-rolled cigarettes to Bucky, who politely turns them down and says he doesn’t need any compensation for saving his life. He can feel Owen watching the exchange and Bucky’s surprised when Owen offers the Lieutenant a similar answer, accompanied by a smile so warm that Bucky almost doesn’t recognize him for a moment, and a clasp on Falsworth’s back as he sincerely replies, “Any time, man.”

Around 1100 hours, Bucky pulls Dugan aside and tells him that he needs a few minutes to speak with Mackenzie in private. He tells Dugan because he knows he doesn’t need to explain himself with this man, nor would Dugan insinuate or pass judgement. When Dugan confirms this by giving a small nod and assuring Bucky that he’ll make sure no one goes near his tent for at least an hour unless it’s an emergency, Bucky can’t help but hope to God that this man before him never meets his fate during the war. Bucky doesn’t think he’d be able to handle it.

They return to the others. Bucky approaches Owen from behind and quietly clears his throat. When Owen glances up at him from over his shoulder, Bucky averts his eyes, looks ahead, and calmly says, “I’d like a word with you.”

All he gets in response is a nod as Owen staggers up and follows him over to the tents. They get inside and then Bucky sits down by his things, gesturing for the blond to have a seat.

“I, uh… I s’ppose I owe you an apology, don’t I?” Bucky mumbles, staring at his hands.

“Did you know that your accent always comes out the moment you’re not playin’ Sergeant?” Owen asks nearly a split second after Bucky finishes talking.

“What?”

Owen gets a lopsided grin. “Your accent,” he says again. “You’re from Brooklyn, ain’t ya? Whenever we’re on the battlefield, you lose it. Second things settle down and you’re talkin’ like a regular fella again, I can hear your accent, clear as day.”

Bucky’s brows furrow and he frowns, looking from Owen to the floor and letting out a little, “Huh.” He shakes his head a bit. “Naw, I never noticed that.”
“You don’t got to apologize, you know,” Owen says.

Bucky sighs. “Yeah, I kind of do. It don’t matter if we don’t see eye-to-eye all the time; I’m your Sergeant and I shouldn’t have went at ya like that.”

The other man stays silent for a few seconds, seemingly considering this. “I’m alright with you thinkin’ you know all about me – even if you’re wrong. I’m not here to make friends.”

“But you make ‘em anyways,” Bucky points out, unable to stop the slight edge to his voice. That jealousy and bitterness creeping back in. “Why?”

“Why not?” Owen retorts. “If I make a few buddies, then who am I hurtin’? Say what you will about me, Sarge, but I protect the people I care about, and I care about every man out there, same as you. All I’m sayin’ is that making friends ain’t the reason I’m here.”

Bucky stares at him firmly, trying to figure him out. “…Then why are you here? Aside from you sayin’--”

“I know what I said. My reasons are my reasons, Barnes; and just because you think you know ‘em don’t mean you actually do.”

The brunet’s frown deepens and he looks back to his hands, sitting in his lap. Maybe he doesn’t; maybe there are things about this kid that Bucky’s never considered. He wonders how Steve would handle the situation… Well, he doubts Steve would’ve been so quick to thrust his cock into this guy’s ass, that’s probably a safe bet – but then again, Bucky knows Steve’s a much better person than he’ll ever be. The war wouldn’t have broken Steve, at least not so hard. Steve probably would’ve spoken to him, actually spoken to him, much sooner… Asked to hear his story, earned Owen’s trust so he’d feel comfortable opening up.

He huffs out a chuckle. “You realize this is the longest conversation you n’ me have ever had?”

“Not much need for talkin’ when we’re fucking,” Owen jokes quietly. Bucky chuckles again, shaking his head.

“Why did you come to me that first time anyways?” Bucky asks, a tad guardedly. “You couldn’t have known I’d have done it. For all you knew, could’ve gone and reported ya.”

“Let me ask ya somethin’,” Owen says calmly. He points to Bucky’s breast pocket where everyone knows by now the Sergeant keeps the photograph of his sweetheart that he’ll never show. “That picture you carry with you – that’s your girl back home, yeah?”

“Yeah…”

“How come you never show no one?”

Bucky’s face starts to get hot, and he averts his eyes while attempting to harden his features back out. Before he can answer, Owen continues speaking: “See, the way I see it, Stephanie’s a beautiful name. Stevie, on the other hand, now that’s an unusual nickname for a dame, ain’t it? My cousin’s best friend, her name’s Stephanie and we’ve always called her Stephie. Now it’s clear Sergeant Barnes has himself a sweetheart, and yet he won’t show no one her picture. But he looks at it every single day, and so I start to wonder… what is it about Stevie that Barnes is hidin’ from us?”

Despite the inquisition, Owen’s tone is nothing but calm and gentle. Still, even Bucky’s teeth are on edge and he’s shaking his head as if to deny an accusation that hasn’t even been made yet.
“M’notta fairy,” he insists for his own benefit and safety. “I like girls” – because that’s not a full lie, so it’s a cover he can hang on to.

Owen grins, looking down, but it almost looks sad. “I think it’s a sad world we live in when you can’t even tell anyone who you love because of what they are,” he murmurs.

Bucky raises a brow. “You sound like you’re speakin’ from experience.”

Owen doesn’t deny or confirm anything; simply replies, “Even if you were, it’s not like I would’ve gone and told anyone. They wouldn’t have seen me as bein’ no better – takes two to fuck, after all.”

“Why are you saying all this?” Bucky asks with exasperation, and yet he looks and sounds so drained. All the fight has left him.

Owen shrugs. “Because you asked me why I chose you.” He gets onto his knees and comes closer to Bucky. Normally, the brunet tenses around this moment, but he’s too tired to do anything but watch this time. Owen surprises Bucky by reaching up and touching his cheek with one hand, just for a moment. Then he drops it and starts gently undoing Bucky’s pants. Bucky watches him with slightly widened eyes, and he wants to say no, but he also doesn’t. He feels so hollow inside and he needs this. Owen pats his thigh lightly and he lifts his hips slightly to give the younger man room to tug his clothes down to his knees.

“The world is a much more forgiving place when you don’t have to do things alone,” the Private says, just above a whisper, before meeting Bucky’s eyes. He nods, just a little tip of the chin, and then Owen wets his lips and bends down.

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They’re sweaty and panting and the tent now smells like sex, but they’d managed to stay near silent. Admittedly, both men now feel substantially better. It’d been different this time around – not emotional, per say, because Bucky knows that he’ll never share that part of him with anyone who isn’t Steve, but… more than the other times. The tension between them had lifted a fair amount, which allowed the sex not to be tarnished with the usual anger and franticness.

They’re silent for a while, and Bucky mentally checks in and notes that probably a half hour has gone by, and so they’ve only got about thirty minutes left to spare. They won’t need it, but he wants to take advantage of the privacy to gather his breath and calm down. Owen lies beside him, one hand lazily lying on his own chest as they both stare upwards. Bucky makes to pull the condom off his now softened dick and Owen surprises him by helping. When he lies back down and watches the blond follow suit, his grey orbs never leave the Private’s face.

Eventually, he admits quietly, “You were right.” Owen tilts his head and gives him a questioning look, and Bucky straightens again and covers his face with his hands. He rubs his eyes, frowning, and then lets them slap by his sides in a gesture of defeat. “Stevie is a nickname for Steve,” he confesses, just above a whisper. “And he’s been my best guy for years now.”

Owen rolls over onto his side and props his head in his hand; golden hair disheveled and now a messy, boyish mop on his head. “Childhood sweethearts?” he asks.

Bucky shakes his head. “Not like that. Didn’t realize I loved the guy until a couple years after we’d moved out together.”

“But you’d always loved him,” Owen guesses.

“Yeah,” Bucky exhaled, still staring at the roof of the tent. “Yeah, I did. Still do.”
“What’s he look like again?”

Bucky gets that sentimental little smile again as Steve’s face floods back into his mind. “Short, thin… Blond hair and blue eyes… He, uh… He’s got this way about ‘im. First thing I noticed about him when we met was how small he was; then I saw his hair and it was… like the colour of the sun – what I imagine the sun would look like if you could stare right into it. And I thought to myself, Ain’t nothing ever gonna be as amazin’ to me as the colour of this kid’s hair. Then I got a real good look into his eyes and I tell ya, they’re blue as the fucking sky. And so then I thought, Nah, his eyes, man. His eyes were the most amazing thing I ever saw.” He chuckles to himself. Owen smiles. “But then he opens his mouth and talks… and half the time, I wanna deck him for the stupid shit he says, and the other half, I just never want him to stop, y’know? He’s an artist, too. Best damn drawer I’ve ever known.”

“You sure are sweet on this guy,” Owen murmurs, just a tad teasingly. Bucky just huffs quietly and gives a small nod. “Does this mean I get to see the photo now?”

Bucky stiffens; instinctively wants to say no. But it’s out in the open now, and Bucky knows that – for whatever reason – he can trust Owen on this. Because the blond had a point: there’d be nothing for him to gain by telling anyone, because then Bucky could just throw him under the bus in turn. No one would care that Owen had himself a girlfriend back home; bottoming for the Sergeant time after time would be all the authorities would need to know to slap a title on him and a Blue Discharge.

So he pulls over his jacket and reaches into the inner breast pocket, tugging out the picture of him and Steve at Coney Island. Holding it out, Owen takes it, and Bucky notices the way the man only holds onto the edges of the paper, as if afraid to smudge it with his fingerprints. He gets that same genuine, warm smile Bucky had seen him give Falsworth, and for a moment, Bucky wonders if somehow he’d found himself in the tent with an entirely different person. This didn’t seem like the same guy he’d been butting heads with and fucking secretly for weeks.

“He looks nice,” Owen says, handing it back over and lying back down on his back. “I like his smile; reminds me a bit of my sweetheart back home.”

“Mm,” Bucky hums, nodding and sliding the photo away before pillowing the back of his head in one hand after dropping back down.

“Blond hair, too,” Owen says lazily with a smile. Bucky blinks and looks over at him, confused. “Green eyes, though. Got a smile that could charm the pants off even Hitler himself.”

“Are we talkin’ about the same person here?” Bucky interrupts, clearly not following. “I thought Jeanine had brown hair…”

Owen stills, the breath catching in his chest. Eyes widening slightly, he then laxes as he releases a sigh and closes his eyes, his own frown forming. “However things are for you back where you’re from, being… this way… I’m sure it ain’t all that bad,” he says suddenly. His voice is eerily calm but definitely saddened.

“Police arrest queers in Brooklyn,” Bucky offers. “Steve got almost beat to death by a group of guys one time just because they thought the looked like a fairy.”

“People… drag others into the street… lynch ‘em in broad daylight, just for… bein’ the way we are… And no one cares. Not the pigs, not no one…”

“So, you… You’re a…?” Bucky tries to say.
Owen sighs. “Jeanine’s a great girl. I’d have probably wound up marryin’ her someday. Her father’s friends with my pa from their country club.”

“But she’s not who you think of when someone says the word ‘sweetheart’,,” Bucky ventures softly.

Owen smiles; it’s twisted up and hardly a smile at all. For a second, Bucky thinks his eyes are shining but it could also be a trick of the light. “His name’s Nicholas,” Owen reveals, and there… That makes perfect sense. The way he breathed that name, Bucky knows it must sound exactly the same as the way he says Steve’s. It’s the closest thing to true happiness he’s ever seen this kid feel.

“Met in high school; became best friends, sort of like you and your Steve,” Owen continues. “I’d known since I was a boy that I was… that way, but… he hadn’t realized until a few years into our friendship. Kissed me one night while we were drunk,” he laughs to himself. “Looked scared outta his wits about it until I kissed him right back. So… we’d go on, seeing pretty girls and keeping our folks happy, and saw each other in secret for years.”

Bucky frowns, now turning onto his side to face the blond; hooked on every word in this confession that Bucky’s sure Owen’s never voiced out loud before. The Private clears his throat.

“I’m, uh… the oldest of three kids,” Owen says. He turns, reaching into the pocket of his army pants and pulls out a small photo. Bucky takes it and looks down at the family portrait; Owen looks a lot like his mother, while his other siblings – a brother and a sister – seem to take more after their father. Bucky doesn’t say out loud how Father Mackenzie looks just as intimidating as a queer-hating plantation owner would in print.

“I got a brother and sister, too,” Bucky murmurs, running his fingers gently over the paper. “Well, three, but my baby sister got adopted when I was just a kid. Haven’t seen her since I was eight or so. What’re their names?”

Owen leans over so he can look, too. He smiles again, but it’s not as warm anymore. “Elizabeth and Charles.”

“My sister’s name is Elizabeth, too. But we call her Beth.”

“We call mine, Eliza. Though I’ve been calling her ‘Lizard’ since she was two.”

Bucky glances at Owen, grey orbs sweeping over his face, and he smiles. “I call Beth ‘Bumble Bee’.”

Owen meets his gaze and smiles back. Retrieving the photograph, he slides it back into his discarded pants pocket, where Bucky assumes there’s a picture of Jeanine stuffed in there as well. “You the oldest?” Owen asks, and Bucky nods. Owen hums his understanding, getting comfortable on his back again and folding his hands over his naked abdomen. “Me too. My dad always assumed I’d take over the plantation for him whenever he’d retire. So, he pays my way through school, makes sure I got everythin’ growing up, right? I want a car? I get a car. I need money to take a lady on a date? He gives me exactly the amount I need and then some. But in return, he expects things of me, y’see. He--”

“Expect you to be the perfect son,” Bucky finishes, frowning deeply.

Owen nods, smiling self-depreciatingly. “Charlie was always the more… man’s man, the son a dad like ours would want. I mostly mimicked everything he did, even though everyone looked to me to set the example. So, my dad shows my off at parties, tells all his golf buddies ‘bout me, constantly sets me up with his friends’ daughters. And I’d… smile and say everything exactly as I was s’posed
to, ‘cause what other choice do you have, right? So, eventually I started getting serious with Jeanine and it got my dad off my back.

“Eliza was the only one who knew about Nicholas. She’d walked in on me sneakin’ him a kiss goodnight one time, but she promised not to tell anyone. She didn’t find it disgusting or nothin’. She n’ me, we always got along real tightly. Sometimes I think she’s the only person back home I even miss.”

“So… I mean… what happened?”

Owen chews his bottom lip, staring up; his eyes dancing along the top of the tent. With a sudden sigh, he sits up and rests his elbows on his knees; his head in his hands. Bucky stays where he is and watches the back of that blond head. “The second word hit our town about the war, Nick found me and told me he wanted us to run away together.” He chuckles – dry and sardonic and broken – and it makes Bucky’s heart hurt. He imagines everything Owen’s describing as if it’d happened to him and Steve.

“So he says to me, he says, ‘We can do it, we can; we can just pack our bags and leave, not ever come back here,’ he says. And I’d laughed, because how could we get away with somethin’ like that, y’know? But he keeps pushin’ me, keeps sayin’, ‘Baby, do you trust me? Do you trust me?’ And of course I do, and it’s not like I don’t want that, so’s eventually I agree; tell him yes, and then we start plannin’ about… ‘bout finding some place in the middle of nowhere, where we can go and live somewhere where no one can find us. Just be together.”

Bucky wants to touch him to see if he’s okay but he keeps to himself; he doesn’t want to overstep any boundaries.

“So, my dad, he’s already makin’ calls, writin’ letters – doing everythin’ he can the second he hears the news to get me outta the draft. He didn’t want me stayin’ home because he wanted me to be safe; he just didn’t want me dyin’ out here because Charlie already told him he didn’t want no plantation to look after, and my dad says, ‘That’s fine, was never yours to begin with. It’s Owen’s.’ Except I don’t want it, Barnes.” He glances over his shoulder and meets Bucky’s eyes, and yeah, Owen’s are shining now. “I ain’t never wanted it. None of it.”

Bucky sits up now and fuck it, he puts a hand on the blond’s bare back as a flimsy sign of support. Owen clears his throat, and he won’t let those tears fall, he will not. He fights to keep his voice steady.

“Month or so passes and Nick n’ me, we decide it’s time to get goin’ because even though the draft wouldn’t be comin’ for me, it’d be comin’ for him and he could go to jail for running away. So the day comes, right, and I’ve got all my stuff packed and my doorbell rings. Go downstairs and there’s Nick, and he looks all ready to go, but his eyes are red n’ he grabs my arm and tells me we gotta talk, and he sounds so terrified. So we find a room to talk in private and he tells me he got his draftin’ notice and he’s gettin’ shipped out that day. Only had enough time to come over and say goodbye.”

Bucky’s stomach drops. He shakes his head, looking off and trying to find the right words. The only thing he can exhale is oh my God, because he gets it, he understands how badly that would kill him if it would’ve been Steve showing up and saying all that. He can’t even picture it without feeling choked up.

“I begged him not to go,” Owen says, voice dropping and cracking. He clears his throat again, willing himself to keep it together. “But of course he had to. Second he leaves, I’m runnin’ upstairs and grabbin’ my coat and I take my dad’s car, his precious little baby, and I drive all the way downtown to the Recruitment Center and I get myself enlisted.” Snorting softly, his lips curl up into
a bitter sneer. “His papers hadn’t gone all the way through yet so there was nothin’ he could do. Screamed at me and I swear, I thought he was gonna hit me – I told him, ‘Do it. That won’t stop me from goin’.”

Bucky feels like an asshole; truly, the world’s biggest asshole. He glances back to Owen with sad eyes and finally, he gets it – and yes, he’d been wrong. He’d known nothing about Owen Mackenzie.

“You didn’t enlist because you were tryin’ to spite your father,” Bucky says. “You enlisted so you could follow Nicholas.”

“Thought maybe I’d find him out here,” Owen mutters, trying to hide the disappointment in his tone. He offers a half-shrug, like the whole thing doesn’t phase him nearly as much as it really does. “I thought, ‘How big can Europe be?’ Didn’t actually know it was this big. Don’t even know if he’s still alive or not.”

“I’m sure he is,” Bucky lies.

Owen hums flatly. “I couldn’t stay back there; not when I knew he would be all the way over here. So…” He turns and rests his chin on his shoulder, meeting the Sergeant’s eyes again. “I’m not here to make friends. I’m here for him.”

“No,” Owen breathes out another dry chuckle. “Could never get one of us just him n’ me without it lookin’ suspicious.” His eyes trail away. “The one picture I want most is the only one I couldn’t have,” he whispers as an afterthought.

Bucky frowns, taking in the pale colour of his eyes in the shadows of the night. “Why didn’t you tell me before…?”

Owen smirks, and after all that, Bucky can see how much of a lie that thing is. How much of a lie, a shield, it’s always been. “Would you have believed me?” the blond retorts.

No. He probably wouldn’t have; and for that, Bucky feels awful. He rubs one small circle in the center of Owen’s back. “I do now,” he says softly.

This time, when Owen smiles, it’s a little more genuine, and Bucky returns it. “Does this make us friends now?” the Private asks, trying to lighten the mood.

Bucky gives a small nod, his heart aching for this poor boy. He realizes that this is probably the only other person in his entire platoon who fully understands, wholly and truly, what Bucky’s been going through. Only Owen’s situation is worse – because at least Bucky trusts that Steve is still at home, safe and sound (even if he hasn’t heard from him in months, he has to keep believing that, he has to). Nicholas, on the other hand, is undoubtedly somewhere on the same side of the world as they are, and Owen has no way of knowing whether his best guy is still running out of the fire with a beating heart, or lying in a ditch somewhere with only one dog tag.

He doesn’t know what to say to be there for this guy, but his heart is aching, and he misses Steve - his body is aching and trembling and dying for Steve - and Owen is the only one who understand what that feels like. So he tilts his chin up and leans in and presses his lips back to the blond’s. And he must get it, because he doesn’t even try to fight it; just twists a bit so he can bring a hand to Bucky’s cheek and slowly tangle his fingers into the strands of brown hair. This kiss is gentle, but far from unassuming. They both know what their aim is.
They kiss, slow and steady, until Owen lowers himself back down and pulls Bucky down by the back of his neck. This time, Bucky takes his time to plant his lips all along this boy’s body; uses his mouth to bring Owen off – listens for those little hitches in his breathing that sound so broken and wet this time, and Bucky feels it, too. This time, he uses his fingers and tongue to open him up, and they both keep their eyes closed, because it isn’t the other they’re picturing, but that’s perfectly alright.

Because when Bucky’s lying on top of him and their tongues beat together, Bucky’s hips thrust back and forth and they swallow each other little gasps and moans, and they’re too quiet for any of the others to hear, but Bucky wants to sob and Owen wants to scream – and still, they do none of that. They move together, two victims of circumstance desperate to feel again, and it’s not Owen Bucky sees and it’s not Bucky Owen sees. It’s not each other they feel, but that’s perfectly alright.

And when Owen comes a second time – his hand wrapped around his erection as he coats their stomachs with his climax – Bucky is quick to follow, and though they don’t voice any names, it wouldn’t be each other’s names they’d sigh anyways. Because as his body moves, Bucky only pictures Steve, and as he takes it, all of it, Nicholas is the only face in Owen’s mind. It’s not making love, what they’re doing, but it’s something close to that… And it isn’t each other they’re falling a little more in love with, even from so far away, and that’s perfectly alright.

Because it’s what they both need.

It takes Steve an hour to walk back across town and get to Ginny’s place. It’s late and he isn’t even sure if she’s home, but he has to take a chance. Knocks on the door – three times – and then shoves his hand in his pockets and takes a step back, looking away. At first, no one answers, so he sighs and turns around to come back from where he came. But then he hears the door open and when he spins around, there she is, standing there in pajamas as her eyes immediately run up and down the length of his body.

He opens his mouth to speak.

“I was wondering when I’d see your face again,” she says with a smile.

“Can I come in?” he says quietly.

She nods and opens up the door, stepping to the side and letting him in. He heads inside and immediately looks around in the front entrance for signs of her parents. She shuts the door behind him and seems to read his mind, because she lets him know that they’re out of town for the week, so she has the house to herself.

Leaning against the door, she folds her arms and grins. “Heard your tour was coming back this way – Radio City Music Hall, that’s quite the gig.”

Steve looks to her, his face pained. “You know it was me,” he says.

She blinks; laughs. “Of course I did,” she replies, as if that’s the dumbest thing she’s ever heard her friend say. “You may be bigger now, but anyone who knows you wouldn’t forget a face like that.”

He shrugs weakly before looking down at his feet. “Ran into Evie tonight,” he tells her. “She didn’t seem to recognize me at all.”

This earns him a loud laugh. “I’m sorry,” Ginny apologizes, voice high pitched amidst her bursts of giggles. “I knew she was going tonight and I never bothered to tell her you were really the Captain America. You know she hardly picks up on those sorts of things.”
“I guess,” Steve frowns.

Her smile wavers as she takes in his general disposition and then crosses her arms tighter. “So, are you planning on telling me how exactly you hit your growth spurt at twenty-five, or am I supposed to guess?”

“I, uh… I don’t think you’d believe me, even if I told ya.”

He offers her a tiny smile and it makes hers grow again. Then she opens her arms and makes a small grabby motion with her hands. “Well come here, then. Haven’t seen you in months – you just disappeared – and now you’re gonna show up at my doorstep and not even give me a hug?”

Steve stammers an apology and steps forward, bending down and wrapping his arms around her in a friendly embrace. She feels so much tinier now; so breakable. He’s still scared of his strength. When she pulls back, she brings up a hand and touches the side of Steve’s face, taking in the sight of him. She beams as though she’s proud, but not the way everyone else has been; she looks at Steve exactly the same way she had before. “Can hardly believe it,” she says. “You look so different, yet you don’t.”

“You really think so?” Steve asks quickly – a bit too eagerly.

Ginny nods. Steve hears the pitter-patter of paws and turns in time to see Ginny’s dog run at him excitedly and jump up, throwing his paw onto Steve’s belly. Laughing softly, he scratches the dog’s head and murmurs, “Hey Stumpy…”

“Marvel,” Ginny corrects, like she always does, but she’s smiling. “C’mon Steve, you know I hate that nickname you and Buck saddled onto him.”

“He’s growing nicely,” Steve observes, dropping to one knee and messing around with his old pal. “Still drivin’ you up the wall?”

“All the time,” she replies affectionately. It makes Steve smile; Ginny and Marvel had fallen in love faster than Steve and Bucky had with the stray. It’d worked out better than it possibly could’ve when she had told them Stumpy – Marvel – could stay with her.

After a few minutes, she properly invites him in and they make small talk; Ginny tells him all about her job at the factory, how gung-ho her family’s been about the war efforts, even though she’s still been taking classes and her classmates have opinions of their own. He asks if she’s seeing anyone (her and Jonathan had long since ended things and to Steve’s knowledge, she’d been single for months), but she shrugs and says, "Not really." She brings him to her room and shows him some of her latest pieces of artwork while he answers her questions about the tour. Eventually, they find themselves sitting side by side on her bed, leaning against the headboard.

She studies his face and inquires as to why he’s telling her all of these amazing stories, and yet he looks so miserable. At first, he insists everything’s fine, but Ginny’s always had a talent of seeing right through his façade, so it isn’t long before he’s sighing and pouring out the whole story to her. Everything – Bucky heading overseas, his Basic training, Peggy, the serum, Dr. Erskine, Heinz Kruger, the Senator, and the tour. He confesses about all the women who were suddenly showing him attention, and the men who watched the Captain America movies – read the comics – who now randomly wanted to be him.

She watches him patiently as everything rushes out with very few breaths, and Steve explains how confused he’s been feeling… His fear that Bucky won’t even recognize or want him when they finally see each other again, and how he hasn’t even properly felt like himself in months.
When he finishes rambling, he takes a deep breath and gives her an apologetic look. She reaches out and pokes him all over. At first, Steve’s confused, but then she sits back and gives a decisive hum. “You feel pretty real to me. And that’s definitely Steve talking right now. Hmm... yes.” She pushes her hand against his forehead and pretends to feel his temperature. Giving a firm nod, she states, “I’ve given it my expert observation and I’m pleased to inform you that you are in fact Steve Rogers.”

She gives him such a deadpanned look that Steve exhales a helpless laugh, feeling giddy with all the emotions overwhelming him. Ginny grins in response and then punches him in the arm lightly before grabbing it and squeezing a few times. “You feel like you’re made out of bricks,” she jokes, poking his bicep. “Does it feel heavy when you walk around?”

“Sometimes,” he admits, looking down at himself. He knows she’s kidding but the question is still very real for him. “But the weight’s pretty evened out so…”

Ginny giggles again and they exchange small smiles. “How’s Bucky?” she then asks.

Steve’s smile drops and he looks down at his hands, his mouth twisting up into a frown. “I’m not sure. He sent me a few letters, but the last one, he didn’t sound so good.” Sighing, he lets his head drop back against the wooden board. “I haven’t written him back once, either.”

“What?” Ginny exclaims, clearly surprised at this information. “Why not?”

He looks to her and remains silent; tries to figure out the right answer. His chest feels tight all over again, and this is too much... Everything’s been too much... The attention, the lights, the cheers, the doubt, the confusion, the loneliness... He feels trapped in his own skin and even repeating his name in the mirror tonight didn’t seem to make him feel anything.

“Because I was afraid he wouldn’t feel the same way about me anymore once I told him about... this,” he gestures weakly to his body. He casts his baby blues back down, ashamed. “Before I left for the tour, I wound up asking about postal services overseas, and I got all the addresses. I could’ve sent Buck something. I should’ve written him...” He sighs, shaking his head. “Ginny, I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t even know what I’m doing. This, this whole thing, this isn’t what I wanted to be doing with myself – I, I wanted to help. I wanted to be by Bucky’s side so I could make sure he was safe and now I just... I don’t even know anymore…”

He’s surprised when she gives him a light shove. “Bucky was right: you can be a real idiot sometimes,” she chides softly. He looks to her, wounded, and she cups the side of his face again. “Bucky loves you,” she insists. “That means he’d love you no matter what you looked like. When you find him, I’ll expect you to write me and tell me I was right.”

“I don’t even--”

“You’re going to find him, Steve. I promise.”

Shoulders sagging, eyes wet, Steve frowns and returns her stare. And even though he can smell her and feel her breath puff lightly against his face, and even though her hand is caressing his cheek and her side is pressed to his, he still feels so disconnected from the world around him.

“I don’t know who I am anymore,” he whispers, closing his eyes with a sigh.

“You’re Steve Rogers.”

“But--”
“No, you *are,*” she cuts him off firmly, and that hand clutching the side of his face tightens its grip. Steve’s eyes reopen. “Captain America, that’s just a part of you. Steve Rogers will always be *all* of you. And Bucky will see that, too.”

Steve’s eyes dance back and forth across hers, and he wants to say something, to say *more,* maybe to argue, but his throat is so tight and he doesn’t want her to see him cry. He doesn’t even want to feel *himself* cry; he hasn’t allowed it since long before Bucky had left. What if his new body couldn’t even do that anymore? Hadn’t the point of the serum been to erase all signs of weakness from his genetic coding? Is he even human anymore?

He isn’t sure why he does it. He’s staring at Ginny and she’s staring right back and then suddenly he’s leaning in and so is she. Their eyes flutter closed *just* before their lips touch, and then it happens and Steve inhales deeply through his nose. He can hear her breaths, soft and feminine, just like he’d imagined Peggy’s would sound, but this is different; it’s not like that. He *knows* Ginny; he *trusts* her. He just needs… He just needs someone he knows right now. Someone who looks at him like he’s still a person. The *same* person. What he needs is to feel safe.

He slowly lifts a hand and tentatively rests it on her side. She exhales lightly between kisses, and slides her fingers to the back of his head, threading her fingers into his hair as their lips chastely move against each other. It doesn’t grow harsher, or hungrier, or more desperate, but after a minute or so of exchanging those small little kisses, Steve takes the initiative to lightly part his lips and she follows his lead. The tips of their tongues meet – just a quick touch in passing – before they close their mouths again. She tastes like cinnamon and her tongue had felt chilled against his, and in the back of his mind, he remembers the first time he’d ever met her and somehow, that seems just about right. They take their time, kissing lazily and once in a while, letting their mouth tip open so they can deepen things for just a few seconds. Steve lets his mind go blank; wipe it out until it’s nothing but a sheet of white, and he doesn’t have to think about any of the ailments that have been making it hard for him to sleep at night. Their hands remain as they are, and they breathe against each other softly until finally, the urge dies down and they both break apart at the same time.

They touch their foreheads together and it isn’t until he feels small fingertips touch his cheek that he realizes his eyes are still closed, and that he’d failed in his attempt to stop the tears from falling. She wipes them away with her thumbs and smiles at him sadly.

“I’m sure he misses you too,” she says gently.

Steve sighs out a wet sound, frowning and looking away, before hardening his jaw and nodding. Ginny cups the back of his head and pulls him into another hug, and he lets it happen because it’s been such a long time since he’d last been held. He used to hate feeling small in Bucky’s arms; he’d even felt small in Ginny’s. He’d been afraid that he was now too large to be embraced like this; no longer human enough to be able to be touched as though he still mattered. So he folds into it, burying his face into her hair. He uses every ounce of his strength to stop the flow of tears and to hold back the sounds trying to escape his throat. Still, even though she’s holding two-hundred and forty pounds of a stoic, silent man – so different from the boy she’s known for the last five years, and yet still so much the same – she also knows him better than his silence lets on, and so she whispers, “Shh…” anyways.

“You’re still Steve Rogers,” she assures him again.

“I know.”

“You *are* though.”
Steve sighs, pulling away and wiping absentmindedly beneath his nose. “Thank you, Ginny.”

She regards him sadly and then hops off the bed, reaching out her hand. “C’mon, come here.” When Steve just looks to her hand questioningly, she wiggles it impatiently and says, “Just come here.”

Slowly, he reaches out and takes her hand, rising to his knees and shuffling off the side of her mattress. She walks him over to her balcony door and opens it. Following her, they take a step out onto the smell ledge. She looks to the sky and then points with her other hand.

“There,” she says. “Look at the moon.”

Steve glances from her face, to her extended index finger, and then finally to the moon in the night’s sky. It’s almost full, it looks like; big and bright and surrounded by stars. Steve wonders what the sky looks like wherever Bucky is right now.

“The thing about the moon is, it’s the same one no matter where you see it,” she muses as they both stare up. “Did you know that Germany is six hours ahead of us right now?”

Steve nods. He does know that.

“So, maybe the sun is going to rise for him soon. But every night, you two get a few hours where you can both be looking at the same moon. You can stare up at it and think of him and it’ll never go anywhere. No matter how far away Bucky might feel, as long as you can both be looking at the same moon, he’ll never be that far away, not really. And no one can take that away from you, Steve,” she says, looking to him now. She squeezes his hand.

He looks down at her and squeezes back before his eyes go back heavenward. He wonders how his best guy is doing. He hopes that wherever he is, he’s safe. And he promises himself that he’ll spend the entire trip to England the next day working on a letter for Bucky. He’ll mail it the second his feet are back on land.

Tomorrow night he’ll be in the UK and the tour will go on. Tonight is just for him. But when he looks back up at the moon again, there will only be an hour’s time difference between England and Germany. Maybe, just maybe, when he gets a few minutes alone with the moon, somewhere, Bucky will be staring up at it, too. And though apart, for a heartbeat in time, they’ll be together again.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Steve continues the USO tour. Bucky and his men get taken captive by Hydra (expect some familiar faces).

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I am not sorry for anything in this chapter. Just know that right now, lol. Some of the decisions I made were risky and a bit controversial, given the pairing for this story, but war is war, and people do whatever they need to do to stay sane. A part of me hated writing this chapter because I fell so in love with Owen (he wasn't going to have a back story at first); we will see a tiny bit more of him in the next chapter, but not for very long. I owe colossal thanks to my buddy who helped me create this character, his story, and even provided me the inspiration for his name. This chapter is definitely dedicated to that friend.
I found this image online and this was my working inspiration for Owen's character:

![Image](image_url)
Also, someone commented waaaaay back when about them picturing Ginny as a brunette Natalie Dormer, so that's the image I've been working with as well. This, of course, will not be ignored when Steve gets hit on Private Lorraine (who, as we all know, is played by Natalie Dormer, lol). It'll be a bit of a funny moment for him to be flirted with and kissed by someone who looks basically like a blonde version of one of his closest friends. But anyways, here's brunette Natalie (Ginny, in my mind):

And, of course, the Stucky art piece of today is...
Thank you all, as always, for all the support you've shown for this story. I can't tell you how much I love you all. AND to all those who've started following me on Tumblr and joined my insane fangirling blog - you're all gems. Only two more chapters to go for this story; almost there! xo

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Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
To Enslave

Chapter Summary

Owen begs Bucky to make him a promise. Bucky and his team head for a base in the Austrian Alps that they believe is a Nazi weapon's factory - only to discover that it's something far worse than any of them could have ever imagined.

Chapter Notes

Once again, all of you who put up with my crap over the last two weeks and stuck by my side during a very difficult time for me, I can never thank you enough. You're all incredible people and I'm grateful for every last one of you. Thank you for not giving up on me. One more chapter to go after this!

*Note: Some snippets of dialogue used in the scene with the 107th's capture is derived from the deleted scene from CA:TFA. And the "Jimmy Boy" confrontation dialogue is from The First Vengeance comic (from "Hey - hey Jimmy..." to "That's why they call me Bucky!"). Everything before and after is my own. I know I deviate on the specifics from The First Vengeance plot in that scene, but I wanted to take it my own way for certain parts. For those who aren't familiar with that comic though, it's a prequel to the events of CA:TFA, and them killing Lohmer because he had Bucky almost beaten to death by a missile shell actually DID happen, haha.

WARNING: Depictions of major violence and gore in this chapter. Also, brief utterance of two racial slanders. Please be advised.

--

I can't remember anything;
Can't tell if this is true or dream.
Deep down inside I feel to scream;
This terrible silence stops me.
Now that the war is through with me,
I'm waking up I cannot see
That there's not much left of me.
Nothing is real but pain now.
Hold my breath as I wish for death -
Oh please God, wake me...
Back in the womb it's much too real,
In pumps life that I must feel;
But can't Look forward to reveal.
Look to the time when I'll live -
Fed through the tube that sticks in me,
Just like a wartime novelty.
Tied to machines that make me be;
Cut this life off from me.
Hold my breath as I wish for death...
Oh please God, wake me.

Now the world is gone, I'm just one.

Oh God, help Me hold my breath as I wish for death;
Oh please God, help me.

 Darkness...
  Imprisoning me,
  All that I see,
  Absolute horror.
  I cannot live;
  I cannot die.
  Trapped in myself -
  Body, my holding cell.

  Landmine
  Has taken my sight,
  Taken my speech,
  Taken my hearing,
  Taken my arms,
  Taken my legs,
  Taken my soul...
  Left me with life in Hell.

October ??? 1943

Sometimes, when Bucky sleeps, and his dreams aren’t filled with blood and guts and explosions, he
dreams of Steve. He’s become used to it by now; can tell it’s going to be a peaceful night when it
begins – because it usually always starts out the same way.

Bucky knows when he opens his eyes and finds himself lying in a soft pile of snow that this is one of
those times… Because the soft, white stuff beneath his bare hands feels like cotton, and though it
clings in droplets to his cheek – already melting – it isn’t cold. He’s so used to the cold by now; he’d
be able to tell it apart on any given day of the week.

He’s by himself in the middle of who knows where. There are trees all around, but the ground isn’t
littered with bodies. Bucky surveys his surroundings as he slowly rises to his feet. Thick, beautiful
snowflakes fall lazily from the sky. Bucky feels them landing on his face, and they cling to his dark
hair, but he doesn’t feel it. It’s quiet. The only sounds he can hear is the snow crunching under his
boots, the steady breathing from his own lungs, and – what is that? Birds? Those might be birds in
the distance.

No bombs, no gunfire, no screaming – just peace.

“We always liked this kind of snowfall,” Steve suddenly says on his right, and Bucky glances over at
him. He should jump at the sudden presence, but he’s calm. He had a feeling Steve would be
showing up any second now. He smiles fondly at his best friend, who’s holding his hands out and
watching those fat snowflakes plummet lazily down the air, down, down, down, and land gracefully onto his palms, as if trying to seek refuge there. Steve is smiling, big and bright, and Bucky thinks that he likes it when he sees Steve smiling like that.

The first dozen times this had happened, Bucky hadn’t been able to differentiate between what was real and what wasn’t. He’d wandered bombed-out villages, forests, even the empty streets of Brooklyn – a ghost town with only the two inhabitants – with Steve trailing along by his side. They’d chatted, about what Bucky can scarcely remember, and Bucky hadn’t even questioned why they were there or where they were going. He never had stopped to consider that there was no way Steve could be there with him, and it wasn’t until those few seconds before he was suddenly jarred awake that he felt blunt panic course through his veins as he looked to Steve with frantic eyes and stammered out, “Wait--”

And then Steve had always vanished.

The first time he’d realized that he was dreaming, he’d sat down in the middle of a puddle on a sunny, rainy afternoon in what he could only guess was Paris, and put his head in his hands. Steve came over silently and squatted beside him, placing a comforting hand on Bucky’s back. He didn’t say anything – up to that point, Steve never said anything unless Bucky addressed him first. After a few minutes, he’d looked up at him with tear-stained cheeks and muttered, “You’re not really here.”

Steve just gave him that familiar little stubborn smirk and looked around them, reiterating the vast lack of people in Bucky’s dream. “There are a lot of people who ain’t here, Buck – but I don’t seem to be one of ‘em,” he’d shot back.

Bucky watched his face. His heart had ached for Steve to tell him it was real; to prove him wrong so his chest could stop hurting and he could maybe take his hand and when they’d start walking together again, Bucky would have known it would last.

“You’re not real, Steve. I’m dreaming.”

Steve had considered this, pursing his lips together. He didn’t even bother trying to fight it, which Bucky found curious. Shrugging, he’d replied, “Can ya touch me?”

“Yeah…”

“Can ya see me?”

“Well, yeah, but--”

“Then I’m the realest thing you know right now, buddy. Now, you gonna get out of that puddle sometime today or what? You look like you wet your pants.”

That was the moment when Bucky gradually began to accept his situation for what it really was. Sometimes, he was still disoriented in the beginning – still needed those split seconds of disappointment for him to remember what was happening – and then he’d carry on and converse with Steve, holding onto it for as long as he could. Other times, he could tell right away and he liked those times best, because he noticed that Steve would always be the one to start talking and he seemed to talk more when Bucky went into it, accepting it head-first.

In his dreams, Bucky has gotten to see more of the world with Steve than he probably ever will in real life. He realizes it’s part of the reason why he likes having them so much now.

Steve sticks out his tongue and waits for a snowflake to land on it. Bucky grins and mirrors him, reaching out and holding Steve’s hand as his own pink tongue pokes out. They stare up and the sky
is white; Bucky isn’t sure where the sun is coming from today. Flakes land and cling to his eyelashes but he keeps his eyes open – doesn’t close them even when those flakes start landing in his eyes. And he thinks, for just a moment, that he can see every detail of every one; they have colours, a whole spectrum of them, reflected by the light of the day, and yes, each one is unique and beautiful. It’s like he can see one of life’s most precious secrets, and yes, he’s dreaming, and no, he doesn’t care.

He blinks, wipes his eyes, and looks back to Steve. The blond is watching a snowflake flutter around in a loose zig-zag pattern as it gets nearer to his tongue. Blue eyes are watching so intently that when it’s right in front of his nose, he looks cross-eyed. Bucky laughs and watches it finally land on Steve’s tongue and instantly melt. Steve’s tongue slides back into his mouth and he grins up at Bucky, all teeth and crinkles in the corners of his eyes and looking very much like the seven-year-old he’d met all those lifetimes ago.

They walk languidly through the forest, holding hands and talking. Bucky knows it’s a dream, so Steve can’t really fill him in on anything that could be taken as truth, but he likes to listen to his voice anyways. Sometimes, he asks questions just so he can hear the answers; Steve will blabber on, just like Bucky remembers, and Bucky will watch him with the warmest smile. Steve always returns it whenever their gazes meet.

Bucky knows this Steve isn’t really his Steve, not exactly, but he still feels a little bit better when he has any Steve to talk to. How much from his reality he can remember when he’s sleeping varies depending on the night, and this time, he’s fairly certain he remembers everything. He tells Steve about his team, and Dugan, and Owen. He leans against a tree and watches Steve roll up snow into a little ball and aim at invisible targets while he tries to make the details of the battlefield not sound so horrific. Then he blinks and suddenly he’s sitting on a log with Steve in his lap, and he’s stopped questioning it by now, because he knows that dreams aren’t meant to be consistent.

Steve’s a lot more affectionate in his dreams, in that he snuggles up to Bucky without any snide remarks, and Bucky can get away with calling him whatever pet name he wants without the worry of a fist to the ribs. He feels Steve’s hot breath puff against his skin as his best friend buries his face into Bucky’s neck. He likes that he can’t feel the cold, but he can always seem to feel Steve’s warmth. Steve asks him if he’s scared. Bucky looks ahead, tightens his arms around the small, bony body against his, and doesn’t answer at first.

But it’s his dream, and in any dream with Steve, there’s nothing to fear.

“When I’m awake, I’m terrified,” he admits quietly. Clearing his throat, he watches Steve pull away so their eyes can meet and he forces a tiny smile. “Not when you’re around, though.”

“I’m here,” Steve says softly. Bucky feels fingertips ghost over his jaw line, his lips...

“I know,” he whispers, and they both smile. He leans in and brushes his mouth to Steve’s, just a flutter of a thing, and Steve makes this small sighing sound. Bucky’s heart skips a beat and his stomach flutters, and he likes his dreams because it reminds him that he can still feel these things.

Sergeant Barnes...

There’s a sharp pain in Bucky’s side. It only lasts for a second. He jumps, breaking the kiss, and twists to look at where it came from. Steve keeps his eyes on his face, and Bucky knows he’s dreaming because real Steve would look concerned but this Steve suddenly looks blank.

Sergeant James Barnes...
Another prick – burning and deep – from the side of his neck; Bucky’s hand flies up and clasps over it instinctively, as if it’ll stop the pain. It doesn’t. He lets out a small little cry and looks to Steve with wide eyes. With his other arm, he tries to hold on tighter. Steve continues to stare back, eyes now empty.

“Sergeant James Barnes,” Steve says flatly, unblinking.

“Steve, what are you--?”

“Sergeant James Barnes, United States Army, 107th Infantry, Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038,” he recites; words coming out fast, rehearsed, with no inflection.

Bucky shakes his head, not understanding. He opens his mouth to speak but then there’s another painful stab – *hot, like fire* – right above his left peck. He squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth as he wheezes out a grunt of pain, doubling forward. Steve’s no longer in his lap. He’s standing directly in front of Bucky. Bucky’s no longer sitting on a log, but is on his knees in the snow, and he can feel it now and it’s cold, it’s so fucking cold.

“Steve,” he chokes out, looking back up and just wanting desperately to pull him back into an embrace; as if that’ll somehow save him.

“Sergeant James Barnes, United States Army, 107th Infantry, Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038,” Steve repeats faster.

Bucky shouts in sudden pain as it feels like a fire poker has been jammed into the back of his neck. He arches his back, grabbing the back of his neck with both hands and riding out the sensation, before twisting forward and throwing out one hand for Steve to take.

“Steve, please!” he cries, and his voice breaks.

Steve stands perfectly straight – *too* straight for his unnatural spine, and Bucky suddenly wishes he was no longer dreaming because *this isn’t right, something’s wrong, something’s so wrong.* Sudden pain in his left thigh; his body jolts and he falls over onto his side, grabbing for it and wheezing through clenched teeth again. When he opens his eyes, Steve’s head cocks to the side slowly, but his eyes are still hollow and he still doesn’t blink. Bucky’s own fly wide in horror as he watches a thin line of crimson appear from under Steve’s golden bangs, from a wound Bucky can’t see, and drips down his forehead, over his left temple.

“Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038,” Steve repeats, his voice getting louder; quicker. More blood starts falling from his hairline; it slides down his forehead, over his brow. A drop clings to his eyelashes but he *still* doesn’t blink and Bucky’s chest starts rising and falling faster and he realizes he’s beginning to hyperventilate.

Sudden pain in his spine. He flops onto his back and chokes on his sounds and Steve keeps talking, faster and faster, until the words start blending together.

“Sergeant James Barnes 32557038, Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038, Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038.”

And that blood, it’s gushing down his forehead, it won’t fucking stop. It cascades down Steve’s face, paints his pale skin red, and Bucky watches it get in his mouth, pour down his chin, his throat; gets in his eyes, because Steve’s *still* isn’t blinking, and the whites of his eyes are just as red as his skin now, and the only colour left is the angry, brilliant blue of his irises. His head keeps tipping further and further to the side, and his neck, it looks like it’s about to break and contort soon, and
Steve won’t stop talking – faster, faster, louder – and the sudden pain in Bucky’s temple makes him scream now, loud and hoarse as he clutches his head, but no matter how loud it is, somehow, Steve’s words are louder.

“Sergeant James Barnes 32557038, Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038, Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038, SergeantJamesBarnes, 32557038, SergeantJamesBarnes, 32557038, SergeantJamesBarnes32557038, SergeantJamesBarnes32557038, SergeantJamesBarnes32557038,...”

“STOP IT! STOP IT, STOP!” Bucky screams, begs, and then screams again for an entirely different reason when his entire body seems to erupt into unfathomable, searing pain. He elongates, head to toe, as if being electrocuted; the veins in his neck protrude as he arches his head back, and his back is such a tight bow that it feels about to break into two, and it’s heat and electricity – fire and brimstone – shocking his system, and Bucky has no idea where it’s coming from.

Finally, it stops. He heaves heavy, shaky breaths as his body slumps into the snow. He trembles, feeling the licks of agony slowly dying down. His head is still tilted towards Steve and just as Bucky’s screaming had stopped, so had Steve’s words. They just stare at each other. Steve keeps bleeding but his head stops cocking. His ear is almost touching his shoulder; his neck a sickening, unnatural arch.

“Sergeant… James… Barnes…” he whispers passively in Bucky’s voice. Bucky’s eyes widen. Steve’s lips keep moving. “32... 557... 03... 8...”

And then the pain hits him again.

Deep in the Austrian Alps, on a metal slab in a Hydra base, Bucky Barnes slurs his stats and has nightmares while they experiment on his body.

October 2nd, 1943

Owen gets nightmares sometimes, too. They all do. It’s not uncommon for one or more of the men to wake up to the sound of groaning, or even thrashing, in the middle of the night. That’s if they can all find mutual sleep. (They rarely do.) Bucky thinks the worst nights are the ones where one of his men will be so deep within the clutches of whatever horrific thing they’re dreaming about, that another one of them will have to grab their shoulders and hurriedly whisper for them to wake up; constantly checking over their shoulder with wide eyes and palming the guy’s mouth in fear that the sound will rouse an enemy to discovering them. Bucky’s been that guy who wakes up jerking and shouting, because there’s a palm pushing down over his lips and they’re saying something to him that sounds very much like Sergeant, Sergeant, wake up! but it doesn’t make sense until after he realizes he’s not in immediate danger.

As the technical ‘summer’ season ends and slips into fall, nights become chillier. As they make their way through forests, mountains, it’s even colder than that. Whether they’re provided some reprieve in the safety of a tent or are sleeping on dirt and twigs in the middle of the elements, they’ve taken to a buddy system. Thanks to the slowly dwindling number of men, there’s rarely ever an odd man out at night. Even with the constant rotation of someone being on watch duty, there’s always an even number of people to curl up next to each other. Bucky thinks of the bodies littered all around Europe; of men with only one dog tag left (or some, still wearing both because there was no time to get to them at all) that would trace them back to the United States Army, or even the 107th, whose death
made those even numbers possible.

No one comments or says anything, so Bucky’s never quite sure if they know about him and Owen or not – though, it’s not exactly subtle either, even if there’s no concrete proof. But they let the two men bunk together most nights without speculation. He doesn’t always sleep next to Owen, though. Truth be told, Bucky will sleep next to whoever’s closest if need be, because when the cold hits, he’s really not picky. He’s also selfish in that way; they all are. Body warmth is body warmth and they’re all brothers out there, so as long as they can keep you from catching your death in the middle of the night, you’re happy to tuck up next to them.

But Bucky likes sleeping next to Owen because they have a system, you see. The men, they all do what needs to be done. You don’t pick these types of battles in the middle of war, because you’re already in the most important battle, and you sure as shit have no say in that one. None of them will complain or question the need to wrap arms around each other – silently, or aloud, designate the big spoon versus the little spoon. They all do it. Bucky’s seen on more than one occasion men who would never be caught dead in the arms of another man in the real world, fast asleep with one’s head buried into the neck of another. Men will wrap their arms around each other and hold on tight as if they’re lovers, and they all know there’s nothing to read into it, and they all accept it for what it is when push comes to shove.

But with Owen, there’s some little sliver in both of them that relishes in the fact that they don’t have to pretend, not really. Bucky is always the big spoon – he prefers it that way because it reminds him of better times in a previous life he refuses to let go of – because Owen is slightly smaller than him. Owen doesn’t mind that if his back is to Bucky’s front, the brunet will subtly bury his face into golden hair and fall asleep to Steve’s imagined scent; much like Bucky doesn’t take offense that when Owen buries his face into Bucky’s neck, it’s Nicholas who’s on his mind if he’s successfully able to fall asleep. They talk enough now, privately and between only them, to understand what’s going on between them. If anything, it just makes them closer friends.

Bucky also prefers it because he gets the type of contact with Owen that he wouldn’t dare try to get from anyone else, for obvious reasons. Things like Owen taking advantage of the pitch blackness to subtly suck and lick Bucky’s neck when his face is pressed against it. They pretend to sleep and they make as little movement as possible, and Bucky’s never sure on a given night if he’ll feel Owen’s lips move against his skin or not. But if he does, he doesn’t complain. He’ll lick his lips and focus on his breathing, keeping it and his body steady and stoic, while he feels suction and ghosts of kisses and hot breath sliding across his skin. Their own little secret, made even more arousing when Bucky knows Owen’s pushing their limits by doing it surrounded by the others.

And he’s so good at it, too. The Private can keep every inch of him unmoving, and even the attention he pays to Bucky’s neck is so minute that you’d never be able to see the tiny movements from a foot away. Bucky will return the favour sometimes when he has his nose buried in the back of his hair. If he knows Owen isn’t sleeping and is feeling tense, or particularly off, he’ll let his lips brush against the blond’s nape until he carefully snakes out the tip of his tongue and traces lazy patterns across the back of his neck. Sometimes, he’ll pepper his trails with silent kisses. It rarely ever progresses from there; these actions aren’t meant to lead to anything in particular, just to provide some sort of distraction – the reminder that you are human and not only can you feel, but you still deserve to.

Because they do terrible, terrible things. They do heroic, noble things, too. They defend their country and they stand for freedom and they save their men wherever possible. They like to believe that no matter who they’re killing, they know their reasons and their reasons are just. But when they let themselves go a little bit around the fires and Bucky takes a good look around, he can see the bags under everyone’s eyes; the way everyone’s too scared to let the conversation drop because when it does… the silence overtakes them and none of them can get past it. They’ll stare into the fire and
get lost in it, and it’s almost eerie how lifeless so many of these living, breathing men look all the same. Bucky knows without having to be told that he looks no better than they do.

It’s a thing they all know but never have it in them to talk about. That little nagging voice in the back of their minds that asks, Am I doing the right thing? Most of the time, the answer is yes and you trust it with everything you have. There are bad men in the world who are doing unforgiveable things to people who don’t deserve it, and they need men like Bucky and his team to put a stop to it. Bucky knows this.

But… how many of the men they’ve killed truly deserved it? How many of them were just doing exactly what they’ve been doing—following orders? Fighting for a cause they believe is the only right one? Bucky’s grown appreciative of being a sniper because it’s easier to kill people from a distance; he can better separate himself from them that way. He hasn’t had to experience what it’s like to take a man’s life within arm’s reach. He hopes he’ll never have to.

Earlier that day, Owen had learned exactly what that’s like. Bucky hadn’t been there to see it because he was off a few yards away at the time. But when they reconvened in the aftermath, when it was finally safe and they could do the usual head count to see if anyone had been lost (only four today, and it makes Bucky feel sick that this is considered good news to him), Owen stood with empty eyes and was a million miles away. No one else seemed to notice, but when Bucky tentatively nudged his arm and quietly asked if he was alright, Owen had jumped, wild eyes flying to him, before he snapped to it and mumbled, “Yeah, m’fine.”

He wasn’t. He barely spoke all day and Bucky didn’t know what had happened, but he could only guess. That night, they were bivouacking it for about the thousandth time in weeks and no one so much as raised a brow when Bucky and Owen settled next to each other silently on the cold ground, under a small excuse for a blanket.

Bucky doesn’t think he’s all that tired, but he must have fallen asleep at one point because he’s pulled out of it around 0300 hours by the trembling of the Private’s body next to his. Owen’s breathing is rough through his nose and he twitches every few seconds, so Bucky doesn’t have to guess what this is. He twists and glances around them quickly to see if anyone else is awake or has been woken up. Private Jackson is a little ways ahead on watch, staring in a different direction. Other than that, they’re in the clear.

He knows by now how to handle Owen’s nightmares; he can shake him gently until the younger man jerks awake, startled, or he can soothe him back to consciousness. He always opts for the latter when they can get away with it. Bucky doesn’t have to guess what this is. He twists and glances around them quickly to see if anyone else is awake or has been woken up. Private Jackson is a little ways ahead on watch, staring in a different direction. Other than that, they’re in the clear.

He knows by now how to handle Owen’s nightmares; he can shake him gently until the younger man jerks awake, startled, or he can soothe him back to consciousness. He always opts for the latter when they can get away with it. He knows it’s easier for Owen to handle. So he wraps his arm around the shivering body and huddles up to Owen’s back, resting his cheek on the side of the blond’s head. Like this, Bucky’s lips are right above his ear.

“Owen, shh,” he whispers, barely giving his voice life as he hugs the other man tighter to him. “Wake up, shh, shh… You’re just dreaming… Owen, buddy, I’m right here… Owen.”

With a sharp inhale through his nose, Owen’s eyes fly wide and he seizes in fear. Bucky doesn’t take offense to this; they all do it. It’s that split second when you wake up to feel the weight of a stranger on you and you’re trained to assume that that stranger is the enemy. It never makes Bucky feel any less bad though about the fact that, for that split second, Owen assumes that Bucky’s about to kill him. But that always goes away within seconds. He feels the body against him relax, sag into the ground slightly when Owen remembers who’s got him and releases the breath in his lungs.

Bucky closes his eyes and moves his face so he can plant a single kiss to Owen’s neck; nothing more than an attempt to comfort. He rests his chin there. “You okay?” he whispers.
“Yeah,” Owen mutters right away. His voice is void of emotion and the response comes way too quickly, and Bucky knows what’s going on. Sometimes, they switch onto autopilot. They like to pretend that it’s a defensive manoeuvre they pull when the going gets a bit too tough; that they can control it. Bucky used to think so, too – until whole minutes would pass and he’d realize afterwards that he could only vaguely say with confidence that he’d had complete autonomous power over his body, his mind, and his emotions at the time.

Owen does this sometimes when he wakes up from a bad dream; takes him a few minutes to let the autopilot switch off and come back to Bucky piece by piece. Bucky helps him through it by talking to him. The young Private really likes hearing Bucky’s stories about him and Steve; they exchange them like baseball cards whenever they’re able to talk without the others hearing. Bucky understands why Owen enjoys it, because when he listens to Owen, he finds himself smiling and sometimes even laughing in a way he hasn’t done since before he’d left Brooklyn. He learns so much about Nicholas that he almost feels as though he knows him personally, and he wonders if Owen feels the same way about Steve. Whether he does or he doesn’t, Bucky notices that Owen has a soft spot for stories that particularly involve Steve.

He likes the ones best where Steve tries to be a hero, because as he tells Bucky, Steve sounds like a real firecracker. He’s like the ugly ducklin’ who you always knew was a swan inside or some shit. Owen had told him once that hearing stories about a guy with such a good heart gave him hope for guys like him and Bucky. And yes, Bucky absolutely gets that.

So he talks Owen through autopilot by softly, just above a whisper, telling the Private about the time Steve stood up to Ernie Palmer after he’d caught the redhead sneaking a peek up Mary-Ellen Scott’s skirt at Church.

“Didn’t matter that it was a Sunday,” he murmurs, one hand quietly rubbing up and down Owen’s arm. “He waited until we’d all gotten outside and I saw the way he was lookin’ at him, and I told him, ‘Don’t you do it, Stevie.’ But he goes walking right up to Ernie and taps him on the shoulder. Second the kid turns around, Steve calls him a creep and punches him in the nose.” He chuckles, low and soft, like a secret.

He’s met with silence, and Owen’s body is still taut. Bucky can see the kid’s blue eyes still staring ahead – a little less cloudy but still very much filled with too much space. So he continues: “Actually threw a decent punch for a change; I was surprised. But of course, Ernie was about twice as big as Steve so he tackles Steve to the ground and starts punchin’ . Everyone freaked out and I thought the Nuns, they were so useless, man. All they could do was crowd them and shout for them to stop. Wouldn’t put their hands on ‘em – thought for a second they were just gonna throw some holy water on them to try and make ‘em cut it out. So of course, I push my way in and get Ernie off of him, which earns me a slug in the jaw. But I gave him a black eye, so it was fine.”

Owen surprises him by turning over suddenly so they’re face to face.

“I killed a guy today, Sarge,” he whispers out of nowhere, brows knit and eyes widened. His tone is fuller again and he’s back now. Maybe not 100% - you’re never fully yourself anymore, not here – but mostly. Bucky shakes his head slightly, not understanding.

“I killed a guy – really killed a guy,” Owen presses. As he talks, Bucky can feel his hands moving down Bucky’s front until they start to undo his belt.

“What--” He glances quickly over his shoulder and then around to make sure no one else has woken up or is watching. They’re still safe. Looking back to Owen, he licks his suddenly dry lips and tries to find something to say. “We shouldn’t be--”
And they really shouldn’t, but that hadn’t stopped them in the past. Whether it be from loneliness, or frustration, or simply to calm the other down from a nightmare, they’ve taken advantage of the dead of night and played with fire before – sliding hands down regulation army pants and jerking each other off in silence until one or both could find some peace in their orgasm.

His words die on his lips when he feels the blond palm his dick through his pants and squeeze; stroking him to hardness through the material. Bucky’s breath catches in his chest but he keeps his eyes on Owen, face controlled. Owen looks seconds away from laughing or screaming.

“Came up right behind me… didn’t even realize he was that close,” the Private continues, now sliding his hand down Bucky’s pants. He finds what he’s looking for. Bucky bites his lip and twitches in Owen’s hand. Owen starts stroking. “I did what I had to do, Sarge… Right? I did what I had to do, right?”

Bucky wants to ask what exactly happened, but he also doesn’t want to know. Whatever it was, it was enough for this, and that’s explanation in and of itself. All he can think to do is clutch onto Owen’s arm and nod, keeping his eyes on him. “Yes,” he whispers.

Something in that makes Owen’s face scrunch up in pain. The blond looks around quickly, double-checking, and then leans in and presses his mouth to Bucky’s. Bucky lets his brows knit together now as Owen’s hand makes quick, hasty work tugging and twisting his erection. Owen breaks it after a few seconds to bury his face back into Bucky’s neck and exhale hot breaths as he drags his tongue up and down and sucks right above the brunet’s collar bone. Bucky knows Owen feels most in control when he’s the one delivering the onslaught, so Bucky doesn’t bother fighting to return it. What they have isn’t based on a lover’s emotion; they’re not afraid to be blunt with each other. Bucky knows if Owen expected payback, he’d be voicing it already.

It doesn’t take long. It never usually does, for any of them. Bucky comes in his pants and grits his teeth together to keep from even so much as breathing too roughly. Squeezing his eyes shut, he counts up and back from ten, over and over, until it passes. War has taught him well how to completely mask anything that’s supposed to feel good. Owen pulls his hand out and wipes it on the inner thigh of his own pants. They’re all covered in so much grime and dirt and piss and blood that come really isn’t that big of a deal.

It’ll be uncomfortable when it cools, but for now it’s warm against Bucky’s pelvis, and he thinks his life must be real fucked up now for him to think that a godsend.

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**October 7th, 1943**

“Do you think I’m ever goin’ to find Nick?” Owen asks, resting his head on Bucky’s naked stomach. Bucky’s sucking lazily on a cigarette with one hand; the other pillowed behind his head on the bed. Below them, they can hear a loud collection of laughter as Dugan pours everyone another round of shots. For tonight, they have someplace abandoned to stay. Someplace that’s hopefully still safe by morning.

“Yes, I do,” Bucky answers. He holds out the cigarette to Owen and he takes it; rolls onto his back, head still on Bucky’s stomach, so he can stare up at the ceiling while he inhales and fills his lungs with smoke. He lets his head fall to the side to look at Bucky. He exhales.

“Do you really believe that?” he asks flatly.

Bucky doesn’t know what to say.
October 8th, 1943

“What did you wanna be when you were a kid?” Owen asks.

They’re sitting against a tree, guns on the ground by their sides. It’s technically Owen’s turn on watch, but Bucky hadn’t been tired enough to sleep, and he finds that if he tries too hard to chase sleep with it refuses to come, he gets headaches. A few of the others are still awake too, sitting a few feet awake. A couple of them chat quietly; others keep to themselves.

“I used to imagine writing books when I got older,” Bucky answers, eyes sweeping slowly along the perimeter like clockwork. “You?”

“I always loved cooking. Thought maybe I could’ve been a chef.”

“Don’t you have people who do that stuff for you?”

“Doesn’t mean I’m incapable of doin’ shit on my own, y’know.”

They stay silent for a while.

“I also used to dream I’d one day join the army just like my dad,” Bucky mutters. “I mean, my birth dad,” he clarifies.

Owen snorts humourlessly. They both recognize how ironically pathetic that statement is now. It has them both grinning strange grins.

“What would you say to your kid self’bout that, if you had the chance?” Owen asks, the grin lingering in his tone.

Bucky looks off and his lie-of-a-smile fades slowly. He thinks about it. There’d be so many things.

“Run,” he says.

Owen’s smile dies, too. They watch the others, both awake and sleeping, and fall back into silence.

They stay that way for a lot longer this time.

October 10th, 1943

“What’s the plan, Jimmy Boy?” Dugan gruffs - never a morning person, so he’s still warming up the old vocal chords - as he approaches Bucky and takes a glance at the crumpled map the Sergeant has in his hands. He’s taken to lightheartedly calling Bucky Jimmy Boy in the last few weeks; for what reason, Bucky doesn’t know. Probably just because Bucky can’t stand it, and teasing Bucky harmlessly always gets the older man chuckling.

Bucky usually either replies every time with, ‘The name’s not ‘Jimmy Boy’, Dugan; knock that shit off,’” or he chooses to just ignore him completely until Dugan gets it right. There’s never any malice in the exchange, though. He won’t admit it, but it always amuses Bucky just as much. This time, he settles on continuing to rake his eyes over the map, figuring out their strategy for the day and conveniently ignoring the blond beside him.

Dugan grins, adjusting the bowler on his head. “Oh, so we’re playing the silent game now, are we?” he teases.

“Nope, just me – though you could take a tip or two,” Bucky mutters back jokingly. Dugan chuckles
and Bucky lets himself smirk a bit before glancing over at him and adding, “But you keep up that ‘Jimmy’ shit and I’m demotin’ you.”

“Joke’s on you; I’m already a Private. Not much lower you can sink me.”

“Then I’ll make you spit-shine my boots,” Bucky jokes. He exhales, one corner of his mouth curling up into a small, wry smile as Dugan lets out a hearty chortle again. Holding the map out for him to see, Bucky points and taps on a little x he’d marked in the Austrian Alps, about halfway between Kitzbühel and Klagenfurt. “See that, right there? Word is there’s some sort of factory up there. Base seems to think it could be one of Hitler’s, and they might have some Jewish prisoners bein’ forced into labour.”

Dugan frowns, his and Bucky’s eyes scoping out the map’s layout; both silently agreeing on the most efficient route they could take to get to their destination. “What do you suppose the factory’s for?”

Bucky shrugs one shoulder. “Could be anythin’; could also be a dead end. My guess is weaponry, though.”

Dugan nods to himself grimly and then takes a look at the rest of their squad. Taking a deep breath, he forces a smile and says, “Alright then. When are we gonna hit the ole’ dusty trail?”

Bucky looks back down at the map and then glances to the direction they’ll have to head in. He’ll be better off putting the map into Sztupecki’s hands, the team’s navigator. When it comes to having an inner compass, Bucky isn’t nearly as good at reading maps as that guy is.

“Fifteen minutes, no later, no sooner,” Bucky replies. He folds the map into one hand and lets his arms drop to his sides. He gets that strange, hollow smile on his face that could also pass for a frown. “Gonna be a long couple days.”

Dugan grins, slapping a hand on Bucky’s back. “Let’s go kill some Nazis, Jimmy Boy.”

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October 12th, 1943

The journey into the Alps is treacherous. The elements are harsher, the nights are colder, and the territory is deadlier. A lot more of their men are either wounded or lost in battle with those they meet along the way. The team suspects that they hadn’t been hindered too badly when an impromptu ambush by a group of particularly aggressive German troops had thrown them off course, forcing the squad to figure out an alternative way to the Nazi base. At the very most, it’ll probably take them another day and a half to get there, so long as everything goes according to plan.

Luck is on their side when they discovered a small abandoned village in the middle of the terrain, and after a thorough sweep through the small taverns and tiny houses (all of about a half dozen of them at most), they thank whoever may be up there watching down on them that they get an excuse not to lie awake all night, shivering from the cold that prevents them from sleeping. There are enough rooms and enough roofs to provide shelter for every man without having to be crammed too tightly in any given space, so when the rooms get designated and there’s a few to spare, Dugan insists that Bucky take a solo room for himself and enjoy the privacy while he can. After all, the kid’s been through a lot and he’s helped lead these men through more than someone his age should be in the past few days alone, let alone the last couple of months.

Bucky also suspects that Dugan’s subtly doing him another sort of favour, because even though Owen makes a point of shaking up with some of the other guys, in a one-floor, two bedroom hut of
a place separate from where Bucky’s sleeping, it still provides them with the perfect opportunity for the Private to sneak out in the middle of the night, slip past his fellow soldier on perimeter check, and escape to Bucky’s room unnoticed.

They’re far too dirty and disgusting – reeking of stink and blood and fluids – to put their mouths anywhere below the belt, but they indulge in the freedom to spend the fair portion of the night rocking quietly in an actual bed. Bucky can’t remember the last time he’d felt a mattress beneath his spine; this one is lumpy, thin, and scratches against his skin, but it may as well be heaven on earth. And more importantly, the bed doesn’t squeak.

They take turns flipping each other over; letting themselves do nothing more than release steady, heavy breaths as Owen will ride Bucky slowly for the better part of twenty minutes before they switch so Bucky can thrust himself down into the blond while the latter gets his turn to get to enjoy the pillow beneath his head. If either one of them lets out anything above the volume of a whisper, the other presses their hand over their mouth to stifle the sound and shut them up.

There’s no running water where they are, but several water basins and a bucket Bucky had taken with him into his room to piss in if need be. It’s still empty, so he sneaks outside afterwards and gathers some snow. While they wait for it to melt so they can clean themselves up a bit, they lounge lazily in the bed and talk quietly. They always usually save their talking for after they’ve fucked.

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They lie on their backs, side by side, and discuss unimportant things; unimportant, in that they really don’t mean shit in the face of everything happening these days, but at the same time, crucially important because they’re slices of things that remind them of better times. Things like… How much they miss the taste of ice cream, or how Bucky wishes he could be sitting in the crowd of a baseball game back home. Owen tells Bucky more stories of Louisiana and Bucky regales the many adventures he’d had growing up of the times he’d been to Coney Island.

Sometimes, they can’t find it in them to talk about Nicholas and Steve because it hurts too much. Sometimes, they just lie there together and both stare at the picture of Steve and Bucky that the brunet holds in his fingers – and Bucky misses his best friend and dies a little more inside every second they aren’t together, while Owen gets lost in that photo and tries to imagine that the happy faces staring back at him resemble something a little more close to home.

“I had a dream about Nick again last night,” Owen murmurs, releasing a quiet sigh as he leans forward to light a cigarette and then settle back down. Bucky has the picture held to his chest with one hand as he stares upwards as well, looking at nothing in particular. Their free hands lie idly next to one another, just barely grazing innocently. Bucky doesn’t say anything; just plucks the smoke out of Owen’s fingers when it’s offered to him and then takes a deep drag.

“Don’t remember most of it,” the blond continues. He frowns, tapping his index finger lightly off of his stomach. “But it was like he kept trying to run at me, y’know? He kept shoutin’ my name and telling me to run, to go, but every time I turned to go one way, he’d be right there, still runnin’ towards me and shoutin’ for me to run in the opposite direction. It was like I couldn’t run away anywhere.”

Bucky blows out a stream of white smoke and then rolls onto his side, facing Owen and handing him back the cigarette. “Sometimes I dream that Stevie and I go for walks and just talk n’ stuff,” Bucky replies. “But every once in a while, I dream real horrible things; like him pukin’ up his guts and blood while all I can do is stand there, unable to move or nothin’. And he yells at me too, but he’s beggin’ for me to come back and then shoutin’ at me about how I abandoned him.”

“You know he’s doin’ fine back home,” Owen insists, blowing out the smoke in his lungs.
Bucky shakes his head, grimacing. “That’s the thing – I don’t. I haven’t heard from him since I left; for all I know he could’ve dropped dead by now.”

Owen raises an eyebrow and then props his head into his other hand, giving Bucky a flat look. “Well that’s about the stupidest thing I think I’ve heard you say yet, Sarge. Cause that kid you tell me so many stories about – he don’t sound like someone who’d just roll over and kick the bucket the second you ain’t there to protect him.”

“But I did always used to protect him,” Bucky argues impatiently, his voice just above a hiss.

Owen shakes his head. “Nu uh,” he retorts, giving the cigarette back to Bucky. He exhales again and then eyes the brunet carefully for a few seconds. “You may have helped pick up the scraps after he’d get his ass beat, and you may have gotten him his medicine when he was sick, and I’ve no doubt you probably gave him a reason to keep fightin’ more times than he could count – but at the end of the day, was it your body that kept pushin’ through? Was it your body that got broken apart time after time and then always found a way to get better again? No, it was his. You gave him the tools, but it was always on him to find a way to use ‘em.”

Bucky’s eyes trail away in thought as he listens to Owen’s words. His frown deepens as he realizes that… maybe he’d never given Steve enough credit in the past. He’d always assumed that Steve couldn’t survive without him – which was one of the reasons he’d so passionately not wanted to go off into the war. But his new friend had a point; no matter how badly Steve’s body was beaten down over the years – from bullies or asthma or sickness or heart problems – for as long as Bucky could remember, Steve had always managed to pull through. He’d never doubted how strong Steve’s will and soul were. But maybe he’d been wrong about doubting the same thing about his body.

“M’not sayin’ any of that to make you feel like shit, man,” Owen says, taking the cigarette from Bucky’s fingers (the ashes having burned down to the shitty little filter) and stubbing it out on the wall. Grabbing Bucky’s arm lightly, he tugs him down so he can wrap his arms around the older boy. Bucky usually doesn’t do this with Owen but for now, he lets his head rest on the blond’s chest and slowly gets distracted by the steady rhythm of Owen’s heart.

“Wherever Steve is, he’s fine,” Owen reassures him.

“Wherever Nicholas is, I’m sure he is, too,” Bucky replies. And the minutes pass, until Bucky’s eyes are closed and he relaxes to the feeling of Owen’s fingers running through his greasy hair, and before he knows it, Bucky falls asleep.

He’s startled awake in the earliest hours of the morning to the sound of shaky breathing and the feeling of shudders making the mattress tremor beneath him. Owen’s moaning uncomfortably in his sleep – brows creased and sweat beading along his temples – as he fists the blanket at his chest. Bucky quickly rolls over to him and wraps an arm around him, slowly waking him up the same way he usually does.

“Shh, you were just havin’ a nightmare,” Bucky whispers, stroking Owen’s hair. These are the times when Bucky usually lets himself get more sentimental and touchy-feeling with the Private; namely because his protective instincts kick in from all the years he’d spent his nights helping Steve fight through just one more cold.

He isn’t sure if that nightmare had just been particularly bad, or if Owen’s just reached his point of exhaustion, but either way, he crumples; curling into a ball and burying the side of his face deeper into the pillow as he trembles and starts to weep. Bucky’s heart sinks and he pulls him closer, whispering some random memory he has at the ready of a fun time between him and Steve when
they were kids – something with a funny ending, to try and get Owen to laugh.

He doesn’t; just curls in on himself tighter and struggles to breathe as he hiccups through his body-wracking sobs. Bucky gets out of bed and brings the tin bucket over. He rummages through the room, mostly stripped bare but searching for anything he can use, before he comes across a loan hanky in the corner of the closet. It looks clean enough, so he soaks it in the water that’s gathered in the bucket, wrings it out, and then just sits by the blond’s side and starts running it over Owen’s face, his forehead, down his neck.

The water is cold but not too uncomfortably so, and gradually, the Private’s crying slowly dies down as he rolls onto his back to give Bucky the room to clean up his chest and arms. Stopping at the waist, Bucky takes his own turn; flesh breaking out into goosebumps when the chill on the hanky runs across his skin, gathering as much of the sweat and filth it can. In the grand scheme of things, it hardly does them any good. They’re still streaked everywhere and still smell awful, but they look and feel just a little bit cleaner than they had before, and here, that’s something.

Owen watches him, still sniffling and coughing with every few breaths, as Bucky soaks the fabric and wrings out the water again before silently cleaning Owen around his genitals before cleaning up himself. With a soft expression, Bucky pats Owen’s inner thigh, and the blond spreads his legs just the tiniest bit so Bucky can wipe him around his most intimate spots. It’s tender and one friend trying to help out another, and when Bucky tries to comfort him by wordlessly lying down on his belly between Owen’s legs and deeming the blond clean enough for Bucky to suck into his mouth, down to the hilt, Owen doesn’t fight it.

He just lets his head fall back into the pillow as he licks his lips and shuts his eyes with a deep inhale. It feels exactly the way a blowjob is supposed to – which means it inarguably feels good- but Owen’s hurting all over. The one thing that pains him the most is his heart. Despite the bobbing of the Sergeant’s head, Owen opens his eyes after a few minutes and sighs, rubbing his face.

“I dreamt that I watched Nick die,” he rasps quietly.

Bucky stops immediately; doesn’t move from where he is, but pulls his mouth back and looks up at his friend with concern in his eyes. “Owen, it was just a dream,” he assures him.

“I feel like I’m goin’ crazy, Barnes,” Owen whispers, voice losing its life – like it sounds when he’s on autopilot, and yet he’s all right there. “I’m so fucking tired. Of everything.”

At this, Bucky sits up and fishes out another two cigarettes. Usually preservation is important, but this seems like one of those moments where they both need one to themselves. They stay in silence for a few minutes until Owen looks at Bucky and says, “Somethin’ bad is gonna happen soon, I can feel it.”

Bucky shakes his head stubbornly, ashing off the side of the mattress. “Nothing is gonna happen to you or Nicholas. You’re going to be together again, I promise.” He watches the blond shake his head and roll his eyes skeptically, so Bucky just grabs his chin and makes Owen look back at him as he firmly says, “Hey, I mean it. I promise. You two’ll find each other.”

Owen’s resolve weakens and dissolves into something desperate and sad again. “His last name is Chadwick,” he says suddenly. “Nicholas Chadwick – Barnes, I need you to tell me you’ll do your best to try and find him.”

“You’re gonna be right there beside me when we find him, pal,” Bucky says quickly, voice defensive.
Owen shakes his head and sighs, momentarily closing his eyes. “Just listen to me, Bucky,” Owen snaps impatiently. At that, Bucky can’t not pay attention, because Owen’s never called him by his nickname before. The blond’s eyes are pleading silently. “Nicholas Chadwick – that’s C-H-A-D-W-I-C-K. I need you to remember that, okay? Can you do that for me?”

Bucky’s jaw is tense but then he releases a shaky breath and nods. “I have a good memory. I’ll remember, don’t worry.”

They keep their gazes on each other until Owen’s mouth – pressed into an uneven line – starts to quiver. Hesitantly, he sits up and reaches behind his neck. With both hands, he slides the chain with his dog tags from over his head and then works one of them off. Bucky’s eyes widen and he grabs his friend’s wrists.

“Owen, what the fuck are you doing?” he hisses with panic.

Owen just gives him a tired look. “I need you to hold onto this; just to be safe. Somethin’ bad’s going to happen, Barnes, I can feel it. I don’t know what it is, but…” Sighing again, he rubs his eyes and then holds out his hand, the silver tag in his palm. “I need to know it’s safe with you. If I die or somethin’… Bucky, I can’t just be lyin’ there in the mud with both these things left because it was too dangerous for any of you to come grab it in time. This… If anythin’ happens to me, the only person I want having this is Nick. Not the army, not my family. I don’t need anyone else getting’ closure, I don’t give a fuck how selfish that sounds, I just… I just need to know he’ll get this. You’re the only one I’d trust to hold onto it.”

Staring down at Owen’s opened hand, Bucky sighs, pausing with hesitation, before reaching out and gingerly picking it up. The squad had covered all the windows, so the only light they’re going off of is a tiny candle Bucky can lit so he could see Owen to wash him properly. Angling the little chunk of metal towards the weak glow, he reads his friend’s name, rank, and serial. Owen keeps watching his face anxiously.

“So that’s Nicholas Chadwick,” he repeats quietly, pressing Bucky for some sort of answer.

Bucky gives a single nod. “Yeah, don’t worry, I got it,” he whispers sadly. Holding up the dog tag, he looks at Owen with exasperation and says, “When this war’s over, I’m givin’ this back to you myself and you’re gonna owe me an entire round of drinks for putting me through this shit tonight.”

Owen gives him a small smile, but it doesn’t meet his eyes. It’s like he feels sorry for Bucky’s obliviousness; his naivety. “I’m glad I met you, Sarge,” he says after a few moments of silence.

“Stop talkin’ to me like you’re saying goodbye,” Bucky snaps guardedly, unable to keep the edge of hurt from his voice. It feels like everyone he’s ever cared about has either left him, or he’s been the one forced to leave. He feels so fucking alone in the world now that he can’t fathom the thought of losing someone he’s grown so dependent on these days; one of his only friends who understands him. “I’m goin’ to help you find Nick, and I ain’t gonna let anything bad happen to you.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep; don’t do that to yourself,” Owen whispers, shaking his head. Now it’s his turn to cup the side of Bucky’s face and tilt his head up so he can see those grey eyes again. “I am glad I met you.”

Bucky’s throat gets tight. He doesn’t understand what’s going on, or where this is all coming from. All he knows is that this kind of talk scares him and he wants it to stop. Swallowing hard, he forces out the words, “Me too.”
Bucky can’t fall back to sleep.

**October 13th, 1943**

Amidst the noise of gunfire and detonating grenades, the night’s sky is lit up from a lone flare shot in desperation into the air. Faintly, Bucky can hear the high whistling from somewhere off to his left, but he’s clutching his gun to his chest and too busy running as fast as his legs can take him to pay it much attention. Because there’s still the sound of all those gunshots – and so long as he could hear them, it meant none of them were safe.

They had been nearing the borderlines of the Nazi’s territory, where their map told the squad that they were no more than a few hundred yards from where the factory should be. But then one of the guys – Bucky thinks his name’s something, something (Morita?) – had accidentally snagged his foot on a hidden tripwire between trees, and it was as if suddenly there was a tidal wave of enemy soldiers opening fire on them and fast approaching. So they did the only thing they knew how to do best, and that was to start fighting back.

Right now, the priority is to save as many of their men as they can, take out as many of the others as they can if possible, and then get the hell out of there. At this point, Bucky doesn’t even care about the Nazi factory; his selfish sense of self-preservation would rather he make it out alive first.

Taking a leap, Bucky jumps into a small ditch and glances over the lip of it to see if any of the enemy are advancing from the other side. Turning, he quickly slams his back to the wall of dirt, providing himself with a precious moment of protection as he tightens his grip on his rifle. Adrenaline and fear course through him, but it’s only a split second later when Dugan lands into the ditch to his left. “There’s gotta be at least five more to accompany us there!” he shouts to Bucky, which means the word they’d heard earlier was true - that another few divisions of the 107th battalion would be crossing paths with them and merging so they could all take out the factory site together. Whatever was waiting for them there was clearly going to require all the firepower they could get.

“Radio B, company - tell them we need cover!” Bucky orders over to one of his other men; Gabe Jones who, the last Bucky had seen him, had been in charge of one of their radios. But Jones just glances down at the fried and smoking radio and shouts back, “That may be tough!”

“Bucky, behind you!” Dugan’s suddenly shouting.

The older man already had his gun pointed over the rim of the ditch, firing bullets at incoming attacking soldiers. Bucky raises his rifle and joins fire, and they all shoot back and forth, and Bucky’s too single-mindedly set to his task at the moment that he doesn’t even notice Dugan narrowly missing a bullet to the head when his bowler gets shot off him.

Glancing to the side, Bucky sees even more Nazis spilling in from a short distance away. He hollers, “Here they come!” before hurling himself to the other side of the ditch and throwing his gun back up, opening fire and trying to take down as many as he can.

“I hate these guys,” Dugan mutters acidly, picking up the cap and putting it back atop his head before taking his spot right back up next to the Sergeant and resuming his fire as well.

As Bucky stares down the scope of his rifle and zeroes in on his next target, a sudden blast of blue light strikes the German out of nowhere and outright disintegrates the bastard. Face quickly painting to one of surprise, Bucky opens his other eye and pulls back to get a better look at what just
happened, brows furrowing in confusion.

There are several consecutive loud shots fired, and that blue light continues firing and zapping away all the German soldiers that’d been advancing on them. It all happens so fast – whatever that weapon is, it’s more efficient than anything the 107th could fight back against – that within seconds, over a dozen enemy soldiers are vaporized.

In the distance, they can all still hear the odd hail of bullets, but for the most part, an eerie silence falls upon them as Bucky as his men keep from shooting again. Dugan casts a surprised look Bucky’s way as Bucky’s own wide eyes quickly scan the distance to try and pinpoint where the blasts had just come from. Scattered cheers of Yeah! start up around them, as more of more of the squad seems to fall under the impression that they’re now safe.

“What the hell was that?” Dugan asks.

Bucky, Dugan, and Jones rise to their feet and step out of the ditch, still looking around. They approach the edge of the hill from which they stand and watch as another set of blue blasts shoot towards the bottom of the hill and kills another three, maybe four incoming soldiers, now only running to try and desperately make it to safety themselves.

They hear the heavy sound of approaching artillery and Bucky peers up, now able to see the source of the fire.

“That looks… new,” Dugan says, the last word ending like a question.

Bucky narrows his eyes as they watch a large tank rolling towards them steadily – larger than anything he knows their own men have, and even bigger than anything he’s seen the enemy come by before. It comes to a stop, and Bucky isn’t sure what’s going on or who exactly is inside – when suddenly the large barrel of the tank spins and aims directly at him and his men.

“DOWN!” Bucky shouts, turning on his heel and leaping belly-down back into the ditch.

There’s the loud sound of shots fired and Bucky clutches to the top of his helmet as he tries to press as tightly down to the dirt as he can, eyes squeezed shut. He hears detonations, evaporations, overheard a short distance away and somewhere in the back of his mind, a voice panics, Owen! They need to retreat; the only priority now is to get as far away from there as possible or they’re all done for.

He can hear the tank moving again and the moment the sounds of the incoming attack pauses, he scrambles to his feet and grabs Dugan by the top of his arm. “Come on!” Bucky shouts at him; to all the men surrounding him. “We need to get outta here, NOW!”

They run from the ditch as quickly as they can with Bucky beckoning forward and shouting to anyone around who will listen that they need to go, now, run, they’re getting the fuck out of there. In his peripherals, as he runs, he can see men in the distance on either side of him meeting their fates as the blue energy causes them to disappear on the spot. And Bucky realizes right then and there that he’s never been so close to death before – it’s never been so fucking close – and as his legs continue to carry him forward blindly, the inner lining of his pants grows wet with a fresh rush of urine.

All the while, he keeps checking left and right, first to make sure that Dugan is still by his side and then to constantly keep an eye out for Owen. The number of their men had indeed increased over the course of the battle as it appeared more men from the 107th had joined in, and the whole group of them run in the opposite direction from the approaching tank. The outer edge of a forest is only a short distance ahead, and Bucky thinks if they can make it into their safely, they’ll be able to use the
heavy bushes and trees to gain more traction while the tank finds another way to cut them off. Maybe, just maybe, whoever was inside would sooner give up than follow.

He spots Owen up ahead to his right; gun clutched close as he frantically runs to the woods with the same idea in mind. Relief momentarily floods Bucky’s chest when suddenly his eyes widen in fear.

*It’d been a trap.*

Because that tank, it’d been herding them like a group of fucking *cattle*; deliberately forcing them in the opposite direction so they would run *straight* towards the line of soldiers suddenly uncovering themselves from within the woods and stepping out into the clearing in a straight line. Dugan notices too and many of the men come to a quick and sudden stop, no longer knowing what to do. Some of them, though, keep running, having not realized their error yet.

Owen still hasn’t noticed.

“OWEN!” Bucky shouts.

Gunfire opens up again, aimed their way. Dugan tackles Bucky to the ground as more of their men dropping one by one, littering the dirt and patches of grass. Bucky grunts loudly when he slams side-first down, and then clutches his helmet and pushes himself up, looking back to Owen desperately –

Just in time to hear a shot and then watch Owen’s body spin from the hit and crash to the ground.

“NO!” Bucky screams, trying to scramble back to his feet. Dugan’s big hands secure themselves in Bucky’s jacket and keep him pulled to the ground. Owen isn’t moving, and Bucky’s suddenly uncontrollable; he thrashes against Dugan’s grip, trying to break away, all the while shrieking Owen’s name and a litany of *No’s*. Driven out of his rational mind, Bucky turns and punches Dugan in the jaw; just hard enough to stun the bigger man into letting him go.

It works. Bucky leaps to his feet and bolts ahead. It’s reckless and it’s stupid and Bucky could get himself killed for this, but he’d promised, he’d fucking promised, he can’t let this kid die, he’s his friend, he’s his friend, oh God, oh fuck, fuck, he can’t leave him, he can’t—

He doesn’t have time to check and see if Owen’s still breathing. All he can manage is to muscle the limp body over his shoulder and then struggle to get him back to Dugan and the others as quickly as he can. Cursing under his breath, Dugan springs forward and meets him halfway, helping Bucky lower Owen to the ground. They were already out in the open, naked and without protection *anyways*. If they’re about to die, staying where they were would’ve only prolonged their life by a few meagre seconds.

Panting out helpless, wet sounds, Bucky wraps an arm behind Owen’s neck, holding his head up. He clutches Owen to his thighs with the other as his eyes drop to the bullet wound just below his left peck and sees all the blood seeping from it.

“Bucky…” Dugan says; sad eyes on his friend’s face. Around them, more men fall and the gun shots never cease, and that tank gets closer and those men from in the brush are slowly walking towards them. They’re being caged in, cornered; *this is it.*

Bucky makes desperate noises as he checks the rest of Owen over frantically before bringing up his hand by Owen’s side to clutch the side of his face. It’s alabaster and sickly looking. He isn’t breathing. Making a pained sound, Bucky bend down awkwardly and presses his ear to Owen’s chest, getting his friend’s blood on his jaw. He can’t hear a thing.

“No, no, *no!*” Bucky cries through clenched teeth as he shoves two of his fingers to the pulse point
on Owen’s neck. Nothing. Here… He was just here, just a minute ago. He was here, and now suddenly he just isn’t.

“Bucky, he’s gone,” Dugan tries to tell him.

Bucky just shakes his head and hugs Owen’s lifeless body to his with an agonized shout; burying his face against the top of that blond head. Hot tears find their way from his tightly shut eyes – spill down his cheeks – as the world around him collapses. He’d failed Owen, just like he’d failed Steve in having to leave in the first place. He’s about to die and he’ll never get to fulfill his word and give Nicholas Owen’s dog tag; he’ll never get to hold Steve in his arms again and tell him that he loves him.

Somewhere from deep within, something in Bucky suddenly snaps. He loses a little bit more of his humanity, but he gains back purpose. Slowly untangling the body from his arms, Bucky looks down at Owen’s face one last time and then says, “We’re getting the fuck out of here.” His head snaps up and he reaches out his hand to grab a fallen rifle nearby. Dugan stares back and then hardens his gaze and nods. Bucky shouts, “Jones, you still with us?”

“Right here, Sarge,” Jones shouts back from behind him. “What do we do?”

“We either get the fuck outta here or we die tryin’!” Bucky declares, cocking the gun with rage blossoming in his belly. “But we do not let them take us down like we’re a group of sitting ducks!”

On Bucky’s command, a small handful of them run shouting, weapons aimed and firing, to try and get back the line of Germans and make it through to the other side. Bucky hears Dugan’s yelling and watches him up ahead on his left, and for a split second he lets himself think, We’re gonna make it, before he catches a brief glimpse of Dugan getting too close to the line and pegged in the face with the back of a substantially large gun. Unconscious, the blond topples to the ground, hitting it hard. And getting distracted by that for that split second is Bucky’s downfall.

Because he feels a sudden rip and tear and burn as a bullet drills its way in cruelly right above his right knee, taking him out and sending him back into the dirt. Crying out in pain, he grits his teeth and throws his head back. When he opens his eyes, wheezing, and stares up, it’s only with enough time to see the back of a gun come down on him, hitting him between the eyes and turning everything Bucky knows to blackness.

October 17th? 18th? 1943

It is a weapon’s factory, Bucky had been right. It’s run by Germans, but suspiciously, no one there seems to even breathe the name ‘Adolf Hitler’. He hears different names, though - ones he can’t pronounce; ones he can. He isn’t sure who Schmidt is, but that name seems to be spoken the most.

Most of their men in the 107th – the ones who’d been there the night Bucky had been captured – had managed to get away somehow. Bucky figures it had to have been before the men in the trees with guns had helped corner them. He’s glad there were some survivors. (Deep down, he hates every last one of them for living when Owen didn’t.)

But Dugan’s still with him, and if it weren’t for that man, Bucky thinks he would’ve found a way to kill himself by now. Because it is a weapon’s factory and slaves are being used for labour – it’s just not exclusively limited to Jews. Anyone who’s considered any enemy (of whom exactly, Bucky isn’t sure anymore) is taken; ripped away from their homes, or the battlefield, or what-have-you, and forced to work until their fingers are bleeding and they’re too tired to stand but they make them stand anyways. They’d jokingly taunted Bucky how they’d been “kind” enough upon his arrival of
tending to the bullet in his leg – which actually entailed pinning him down and using a knife to scoop it out; singe the skin with heated metal to cauterize it, and then hastily tied it up with a dirty bandage and sent him on his way.

Bucky and Dugan work side-by-side lifting heavy beams and metals and assembling artillery. It reminds Bucky of his time spent back at the docks, except the workload is worse, and they never beatcha’ back at the docks if you got on one of your boss’s bad sides.

They are always on Colonel Lohmer’s bad side; Dugan remarks when they’re locked away in their group cells at night how Lohmer probably stabbed his way right out his mama’s womb with that scowl on his face. Whatever this place is, he’s the CO around the joint, and his word is law. Bucky learns within the first few days that you can behave or you can rebel against them, it really doesn’t fucking matter. If Lohmer even so much as scans the workers as he walks by and just gets bored, he can have you on your side as a dozen steel-toed boots kick into you with a simple snap of his fingers.

If it isn’t bad enough that they already get beaten on a daily basis and completely at random by the German scum, Bucky finds himself suddenly having to play mediator when those he’s locked away with night after night start resorting to fighting amongst themselves. Save for Dugan, Bucky doesn’t make much conversation at first; he prefers to just get the work done while he stews in his own thoughts and silent fury. He spends his nights trying to imagine a way out, and then when he can’t come up with anything, dream of walking about empty cities hand-in-hand with Steve and, for even an hour, pretend this isn’t his life.

They fight about everything, and they seem to fight at the drop of a hat. Funny enough, that’s how it’d started, after Private Jacques Dernier had gotten face-to-face with Dugan and spouted French insults at him while Dugan kept shouting back, “I can’t understand you French, I can’t understand you Frenchie, hey, Frenchie, get the fuck outta our military and go back home, frogs-legs-eatin’ fat head!” Then Dernier had knocked Dugan’s bowler off. Dugan shoved his beret to the floor (which Dernier never saw again), and then Dernier shoved and Dugan threw the first punch. Bucky had had to run between them, getting knocked around a bit in the process, in order to break them up.

Dugan and Dernier weren’t the worst of them, though. The way they all treated Jones and Jim Morita was even worse; muttering offensive things like Jappo and nigger, while, to be fair, the two in question were also just as quick to get in everyone else’s faces. Bucky had to step in to break up a lot of fights with them, too. James “Monty” Falsworth, the Englishmen he and Owen had once saved (and the memory, the sight of Falsworth alone, brought Bucky a great deal of pain), wasn’t the fist-fighting type when he didn’t have to be. Rather, he showed his disdain for the company around him with perfectly-timed snarky remarks that Bucky suspects only those from the United Kingdom have a talent for.

Rivalries, different nationalities and backgrounds, clashing personalities – fucking Christ, none of these guys could stand each other. It was like they created reasons whenever they ran out of them just to justify the things they all said. Bucky, ever the babysitter, kept his bridges in tact with all of them and just passed the time trying to pick up the pieces of what had once been a unit - but was now a disaster.

October 20-something… 24th? 26th? 1943

Until the night Bucky had had enough. They were all crammed in that sad excuse of a cell, surrounded by other cells where other workers – both men from the 107th and civilians they didn’t know. Jones had taken a pretty good blow to the back of his shoulders from a pissed off guard that
afternoon, so Bucky stayed close to him in the cell and chatted with him quietly while some of the others slept; others, fiddled away with the lint in their pockets in silence.

Out and nowhere and for what Bucky assumes is over nothing even in particular, Morita and Falsworth start raising their voices at each other. Then Dugan is putting his two cents in, and then Dernier is scoffing something in French, which has Morita turning on him and spewing insults at the Frenchman. And apparently Falsworth has his opinions of the French as well, and obviously Dugan isn’t Dernier’s biggest fan, so they start insulting Dernier, too. It all happens within seconds, and now Dernier’s face is inches away from Morita’s and when they talk, there’s spit flying from their lips. And the problem is, Jones and Dernier are actually not on that bad of terms with one another (Bucky suspects it’s because Jones is the only other person there who can actually communicate with him); so when Morita shoves the Frenchman, Jones is leaping forward – sore back and all – and now he’s part of it, too.

Bucky watches in anger and he can hear prisoners from other cells shouting for them to shut the fuck up because if Bakker or Kluge, two particularly unforgiving guards, come back when this shit’s happening, the whole lot of them will have to suffer for it. Bucky knows they’re right, and based on the last time the security guard came to do his rounds, they could be back at any minute.

Bucky’s eyes jump to each man, his heart hammering away in his chest as he clenches his hands into fists. Sucking in a quick breath, he lets out a shrill, high-pitched whistle – the one Steve had taught him how to do when he was eleven and had been jealous of how Steve could scare the birds with how loudly he could do it.

“HEY!” he bellows immediately afterwards. They all break apart, panting and scowling, and look to him.

Angrily, and one-hundred percent done with their bullshit, he points to each one of them and then to different spots in the cell. “You, get the fuck over there – and you, right there! Private Morita, you even so much as breathe in Dernier’s direction and try and cause trouble, I’ll shove my foot up your ass myself. If Dernier talks shit about any of us again tonight just because he thinks we can’t understand it, the same fuckin’ thing goes for him, so go ahead and tell him that, Private Jones. And you,” he grabs Dugan by the arm and tugs him to his own corner. “Sit the fuck down and fuckin’ stay put!”

Now standing in the center of everyone, Bucky hisses to them in a contained shout, “We have enough fuckin’ problems to deal with without having to add your stupid bullshit on top of that! You don’t like each other? Fuckin’ deal with it! You think I want to be here? You think anyone here wants to be here? We should be protecting each other, not turning on our own like a pack of goddamn fuckin’ vultures! Now I don’t give a shit if you like it or not, but I am still your superior officer--”

Falsworth raises a hand slowly. “I am actually a Lieutenant, Sergeant Barnes.”

Bucky points at him, snapping, “Not the fucking time, Falsworth!” The Englishman retracts his hand and promptly shuts up. “I am still your Sergeant and you’re my responsibility. If anythin’ happens to any of you, it’s on my head and shoulders. Don’t make their fuckin’ job easier on them. Just--” He cuts himself off and shakes his head, overwhelmed by the childishness of these guys. “Jesus Christ, guys, I mean, come on.”

Dugan is the one to break the silence first, clearing his throat and carefully saying, “Sarge is right. Sorry Buck.”

“Yeah, sorry.”
“Mm.”

“Apologies, I guess.”

And a few other murmurs of agreement, to which Bucky just sighs tiredly and shakes his head. The situation cools down but Bucky stays in the center of things, making sure no more fights are had or goading words are thrown back and forth. It’s another night that passes in which he doesn’t get any sleep.

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The next day, Lohmer sets his sights on Bucky. It doesn’t matter that he didn’t do anything wrong or out of line; the Colonel orders him to be beaten anyways. Dugan tries to jump in and help him but all the Germans shielding those beating Bucky have to do is hold up their guns and point them at their heads for Dugan and the others to reluctantly stand down. They’re forced to return to working; hearing Bucky’s pained cries and grunts in the background, making them all feel sick.

The entire time it’s happening, and the pain is washing over him from every angle, Bucky wonders if this is what it had felt like for Steve when he’d been jumped in the alley. Eventually, he stops giving them the satisfaction of hearing him shout in pain and he wills his agony to only slip out in the winded grunts that uncontrollably push from his lungs whenever his body receives another impact. By the time they’re beating him with a missile shell, Bucky’s lost consciousness, which is a blessing in and of itself because in the dream that awaits him, Steve is waiting for him with an outstretched hand and an excited grin.

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He wakes up in his cell a day later, lying on the small bench on the inside of the bars. He aches everywhere and his clothing is still wet with his blood, which stains the entire front. His jaw smarting something awful and he can hardly move. Running his tongue along his teeth, he realizes he’s missing one of his top ones in the back. He wonders if he accidentally swallowed it. And his right leg, it’s only getting worse. He had already been worrying that it was growing infected from the shitty job the Germans had done to patch it up, but thanks to the full-body beating he’d received, even the slightest muscle twitch had him gasping aloud.

The other guys are standing amongst themselves, talking in hushed whispers. They don’t notice him until Bucky’s sitting up, hissing at his aching joints and the raw burning in his thigh. He pushes himself up by his arms.

“Sarge is up,” Dugan says quietly, and then they face him and he says to Bucky, “Hey – hey Jimmy, that creep Lohmer ain’t gonna bother you – or anyone else no more. They can’t tell it was anything other than old equipment, so we just gotta go without rations for a week.”

The others nod in agreement, looking a combination of grim, pissed, and satisfied. Bucky narrows his eyes, not fully understand – are they implying what he thinks they’re implying? – and he opens his mouth to speak when Dugan grins smugly and adds, “It was worth it to hear that bastard howl, Jimmy Boy.”

Bucky grits his teeth; all the rage and dismay from everything that’s happened boiling in his chest. “Blast it, Dugan, you… Dum-Dum – how many times I got to tell you!?” he barks, shaking his curled fist at him. “No one – and I mean no one – calls me ‘Jimmy’!”

Dugan’s smile falls and he shakes his head slightly. “Your mama named you James, didn’t she?” he asks, but he sounds confused; it’s not like this is the first time he’s called Bucky that lately. It’s just
the first time Bucky’s responded to it with actual anger.

“James Buchanan Barnes.” Bucky snaps back. “That’s why they call me Bucky! You fuckin’ know that, Dugan, so quit it with that Jimmy Boy horseshit!”

Dugan looks wounded. All he’d been trying to do was cheer him up; on some level, Bucky realizes that. Some of the anger in him ebbs at the look on that man’s face, and Bucky opens his mouth to apologize and then quickly snaps it shut. Releasing a distressed breath, he pushes himself to sit up straighter and then hisses through clenched teeth when there’s a very sharp jolt of pain in one of his right ribs. He collapses back to his forearm and angrily shouts, “Fuck!”

The men watch him, looking sad for him. Dugan hesitates and then comes and sits down beside him. Bucky can’t bring himself to meet his gaze so he just scowls and continues to stare away.

“How’s your left shoulder feeling?” Dugan asks.

Brows furrowing, that makes Bucky look to him. “Fine…?” he says slowly.

Dugan gives him a half-hearted smile and clasps one big hand onto that shoulder, making sure nothing he did would’ve caused Bucky more grief. He gives it a sympathetic shake. Bucky sighs, the gesture tearing down the walls he’d just had up. “I’m sorry,” he mutters, shaking his head in self-disgust. “I know you didn’t mean no harm by it. I’m just bein’ an asshole.”

Dugan smiles at him. “You know, given how much of a rock you’ve been for the rest of us lately, I’d say you earned it. We all have our moments, kid.”

Bucky looks to the others, who are nodding and coming closer now that the coast is clear. It only just dawns on him now - the way that Morita and Dernier are standing side by side, and that Falsworth approaches next to where Dugan is sitting without hesitation. Jones stands in the center of the small huddle, and Bucky sees the fierceness in all of their eyes and feels no tension in the air. He wonders what’d happened while he’d been unconscious.

“So… Lohmer,” he says slowly. “What did you guys do?”

They’d killed him; jumped the bastard while Dernier and Jones created a distraction and the rest of them beat the Colonel until the side of his head was bashed in. Then they staged it to look like a missile shell had dislodged and crushed him. Bucky wonders if they were trying to be ironic. He wishes he could’ve had a piece of the action.

When he asks them why they finally plotted to do it, they tell him that no one fucks with their leader. In that moment, Bucky realizes that in order to have a leader, his men must’ve become a team.

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October ???, 1943

Bucky’s leg continues to get worse. It’s a disgusting mish-mash of colours around the wound, and swollen with pus and blood. The Germans had taken most of their belongings when they’d been imprisoned, such as their jackets, but Bucky had an undershirt beneath his green long-sleeved shirt, so Falsworth had helped him rip it up to use as a new bandage. It’s still dirty though, and only adds to the infection.

Sometimes it puts Bucky into a state of delirium when his body temperature spikes to unhealthy degrees. He’ll break out into the shakes and be shivering away while his skin becomes dotted all over with a cold sweat. He starts to vomit a lot, and they don’t clean the cells for the prisoners, so the other guys are forced to learn how to live with the smell. They don’t have a proper medic among any
of the prisoners, so no one can help Bucky with any sort of advice or steps to do himself any favours – but he thinks that the night Dugan and Dernier held him down to the bench while Jones carefully applied pressure to the wound, forcing a heavy stream of liquid puss to gush out and relieve some of the pressure, that he’d felt a little bit better afterwards… Even if the smell made them all gag for the better half of an hour.

He’s still forced to work, he just collapses a whole lot more. On his really bad days, the guards will just tie Bucky’s left leg to Dugan’s right and expect the man to hold up Bucky’s weight the entire day. On those days, Dugan mutters even more than usual under his breath about how one day, they’re going to burn the place to the ground with every last one of them inside. Bucky likes to listen; stories like that almost sound like fairy tales.

October ???, 1943

There’s a place they take some of the prisoners sometimes, one by one. None of them know where it is or what’s inside – all they know is, any time someone gets plucked kicking and screaming from their cell, or from the work lineup, they never come back.

They finally come for him – it’s his turn – and pull him out of his cell in the middle of the night. And despite the fact that it hurts too much to move, Bucky goes kicking and screaming anyways. The others try to save him by rushing the guards; all that gets them is a metal bar hit off the back of Dernier’s head and then guns pointed at them until they settle down.

Bucky thinks he can hear Dugan shouting his name as they drag his thrashing body down the hall.

October ???, 1943

They had started by stripping him of all his clothes and then shoving him into a corner where they could hose him down with skin-peeling water pressure. It’s as cold as ice and Bucky can’t breathe because the water, it’s everywhere, trying to shove into him and fill his lungs. He shrieks with pain when the pressure hits his infected wound – making the skin burst open, sending pus and blood everywhere. He doesn’t stop screaming when they finally stop.

He’s still naked when they force him onto a steel slab and strap him down so he can’t move. His body goes into shock quickly from his too-quick heart rate and the toxicity from his leg finally getting the better of him.

He dreams of lying on a sandy beach with Steve while they begin their injections.

???????????????, 1943

He doesn’t think it’s fair that his leg has somehow – impossibly – healed by the time he comes back to consciousness. He also doesn’t think it’s fair that every time he wakes up, for a brief, shining moment, he forgets where he is, only to have to remember all over again.

Arnim Zola talks to him as if Bucky’s his pet. Bucky spits up in his face the first time the punt-size man encourages him to speak. Bucky’s been trained for this – not at Basic, they could never give you the tools there of what it’s like to be a prisoner of war. No, it’s the months of watching your friends die… of killing or being killed… of nightmares and starving bellies and being without Steve and watching Owen be shot. The greatest thing the war had ever done for Bucky was train him for this moment.
All he’ll give them are his stats – rank, name, serial number, in that exact order. At first, Zola tries to reason with him in that Swiss accent of him, and Bucky starts to become grateful for when one of the guards backhands Bucky for not cooperating, because then he can get a nice big mouthful of blood to hork into his face, instead of the usual glob of spit.

Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038.

They electrocute him. They cut him open. They burn him. They tell him shit to mess with his mind. They do it all, it seems, to see just how quickly his body will recover. Bucky learns – can feel – that his body starts to rid himself of the damages at an irregularly fast pace.

He wishes it wouldn’t. He just wants to die already.

No matter how loud he screams through the mouth guard when they force electricity to course through him, his brain – body arching on its own accord and off the slab, trying to fight its bondages – the second it’s over and he can form coherent thoughts, he always slurs out his stats. That’s all he’ll give them; rank, name, serial number, in that exact order.

When they slice him open with blades of different sizes, held by expert hands that never shake and now exactly where to cut so he can never bleed out, or when they set fire to different areas of his flesh and he can smell it burning, sometimes the pain is so excruciatingly intense that he vomits right there on his back – sending it all over his face and choking him on it. When that happens, they just lazily release him and force him to his side. Can’t have him dying on them. Especially when, as he’s yet to realize, he’s the only patient they’ve had thus far to have survived the initial injections.

He doesn’t know what’s flowing through his veins but it’s changing him. It gets rid of most scars that they put onto his body while keeping others, as if chosen at random. But since he’s strapped down – cut apart and played with and put back together on a daily basis – the advanced healing is the only change he can be aware of.

They won’t let him die, so Bucky lives for the times – no matter how short – when he can fall into the welcoming embrace of unconsciousness and find some peace by Steve’s side. Sometimes, they morph into heinous nightmares, but they never start off as those. For that, Bucky’s always grateful.

The times that scare him the most are when Zola talks to him but he has Bucky’s mouth sealed; it’s usually after they’ve tried their hand at frying his brain, when he’s woozy and can’t quite remember everything… Sometimes, for a split second, he can’t seem to remember his own name. Then Zola’s by his side and the man talks – just talks, that’s all he does. But it’s the things he says… that he is not who he believes himself to be, that he’s one of them.

And Bucky knows this to be a lie, even in those brief times where he can’t remember that his name is James Buchanan Barnes. But it eventually comes back to him, it always does, just in time for Zola to remove the cloth tied around his head – stuck between his teeth – so he can spit in his face like he always does and snarl, “Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038.”

Fuck you. I remember.

The thing that always helps bring him back is Steve. Somehow, despite everything else his mind may struggle to retain sometimes, Steve Rogers is Bucky’s only constant.

They waterboard him. Bucky’s never been more terrified in his life.
They waterboard him so they can break him down. Bucky Barnes has been putting up more a fight than they’d expected him to.

He makes loud, petrified sounds when he gasps for air; tilting back, upside down as his body spasms and tries on instinct to break away. Then they cover it right back up and keeping pouring, and he arches so hard, so fast as his body strains and the veins in his neck stand out violently, that he shatters a chunk vertebrae in his spine.

His body heals it within a day, and Bucky knows for sure now – there is no God.

When Zola tries to get him to talk, his body back strapped down to the metal slab, Bucky doesn’t have the strength to propel the spit from his mouth. He tries; it just falls out one corner and slides down his cheek. His eyes roll around incoherently into his head from under half-drooped lids.

“What is your name?” Zola asks. He asks this every day.

Bucky knows by now that the answer they’re hoping for is, nothing. Because then Bucky will be nobody, and he really will belong to them. They won’t let him die, so as long as he lives, he’ll defy them every chance he gets. He starts to fade into that sympathetic darkness, and he can already see Steve, sitting in the living room of their old apartment and waving Bucky over. He has his sketchbook in his hands; Bucky wonders if he has any new drawings to show him.

“Barnes… Sergeant… 325... 57... James… 038…”

As he slips out of consciousness, he realizes that doesn’t sound quite right.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Steve's tour lands him in Italy, where he learns of Bucky's capture. He resolves to travel into the enemy territory and get him and the others back - or die trying.

A wonderful reader pointed out something I was hoping no one would pick up on - but I should've expected it, since Stucky readers are PARTICULARLY smart people, especially when it comes to historical accuracy :) This reader is absolutely right; the 107th United States Infantry Regiment was in fact a regiment for the New York Army National Guard. That means - you guessed it - Morita (because he's from Fresno, California), Dernier (who's from France), and Falsworth (obviously from England lol) wouldn't have been part of the 107th. They'd have met at the Hydra factory. Jones is from New York, but me putting that Dugan was from Boston was just my bad, because he actually is from the New York state as well, so I'll be changing that.

I've been doing so well for the most part at keeping things historically accurate (with the exception of money value, which a lovely reader had caught and helped me fix earlier on, as well as Steve's inhaler - trust me, I know they didn't have inhalers back then, only nebulizers or asthma cigarettes; I mention in several comments my reasoning for why I gave Steve an inhaler in this story and broke from the historical accuracy thing), but my answer for this is that I wanted to have some fun with this one. For the sake of adding my own flare to the story, I guess, I decided to make them all from the 107th so I could plant some of their names here and there throughout the chapters leading up to it. I'd go
back and change this, but then I'd have to rewrite a bunch of parts and - honestly - I just don't want to do that, haha. I hope this doesn't turn you all off too much; I know how annoying historical inaccuracies are. I tend to stick to try and stick to the canon so closely, but this was just one of those things I wanted to play with so badly because I adore the Commandos.

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Stucky pics for today:

Source: [This tumblr post](https://this.tumblr.post)
Come follow me? Maybe? It'd make me one happy Captain <3

Tumblr
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Chapter Summary

The USO tour brings Steve to Italy, where he runs back into Peggy Carter. He discovers the recent fate of the 107th.

Chapter Notes

1. I am SO SO SO sorry for how long this last chapter has taken - and then it's not even as long as my other chapters, jfc. Lmao. I've been going through a wicked case of writer's block lately, and things were sort of intense in my personal life for a while, which made it difficult to get into the mindset to work on this particular story (as I've still been continuing with the installments in my Stucky Porn Prompt Challenge). So I appreciate all of you being so patient for this last chapter to come out.

2. Speaking of that, HOLY BALLS, BATMAN, THIS IS THE LAST CHAPTER OF PART 1. I sort of don't even know how to feel about it, haha. Next, we move into Part 2, Little Lies to Give Me Hope. This part of the series will be about half the length of this story, since parts 3 and 4 (4 especially) will be longer again.

3. *NOTE: There is a brief look at heterosexual sex in the first part of this chapter. If that bothers you, please just skip over it once you see that it's started.

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If I hold out my hand,  
Would it change where you're standing now?  
Just come back to me...
Leave all you've found  
That's keeping your heart on the ground.  
Just come back to me...
So afraid for love to come around your heart again;  
When it's the only thing you need,  
Just come back to me.  
Calling out your name;  
Wishing you could do the same.  
Just come back to me...
Whatever it takes,  
I will wait until my dying day -  
Just come back to me.  
So afraid for love to come around your heart again.  
When it's the only thing you need,  
Just come back to me.  
This is my only hope:  
That the love that will not let me go.  
Will find its way back into your life?  
So I will not close my eyes
October, 1943

Steve remembers. In fact, Steve remembers *everything*.

Every single detail, in a way no regular person should be able to. But then again, he supposes he isn’t all that regular anymore, and he hasn’t been for quite some time. He doesn’t experience memories the way he used to... Pictures in your mind; the general feel, while being fuzzy around the edges. Normal people remember things in fragments, flashes… They think they can see it, but what they’re *actually* seeing is nothing more than the scraps their brains put back together. Normal people remember in a way that’s best described as *the best that they can*, because time withers away the exact details; leaves behind the important parts – how you felt, where you were, what was said… And even then, those things can become hazier with every day that further separates you from the memory lived versus the memory recalled.

Steve isn’t normal, so he doesn’t remember like that.

If he closes his eyes and drowns out everything else around him, it’s as though he can practically *relive* what he’d been through in the past. The serum had amplified and extrapolated everything about him, and that included parts of his brain like the hippocampus. Sounds, smells, tastes, sights – he can experience them all over again.

It works best when he’s alone, which admittedly, doesn’t happen all that often these days. That just means that when it’s granted to him, the opportunity is never to be wasted. He reserves sketching for when he’s on break throughout the day. Never at night anymore; not if he’s able to revel in time spent by himself. He’ll lie down and if it’s silent around him, it’s perfect. If it’s not (it’s usually not), he makes do. His concentration was another thing the transformation had improved – though he’d always been pretty good at that when he needed to be, even before.

It’s both a blessing and a curse, because he can remember the *bad* things just as acutely as he can remember the good.

He’s no masochist, so he very purposely chooses not to waste his precious time alone stewing on the negative. He chooses instead to think about Bucky. He imagines himself walking around in his own head, where everything’s dark and empty. Vast, like it can stretch out to forever and he’d never be able to walk too far. In the center of this stretch of nowhere is a light. Steve doesn’t bother figuring out the semantics of where it comes from, because it doesn’t matter. This is *his* space, where no one can touch him.

He’ll take a seat and suddenly there’s a chest in front of him. It’s made of wood; looks worn out. There’s no lock, so Steve just opens it up. Doesn’t bother to look inside because he already knows what it’s holding. If he reaches into it, he feels nothing – not at first. This chest is full but Steve’s only after one thing at a time, so that’s how it comes to him, in pieces.

Fingers will close around an object; it feels like a circle but when he looks at it, it doesn’t really have
a shape. It doesn’t have to, that’s not the point of it. He isn’t sure which one is inside at first until he
withdraws his hand from the chest and then holds the item in his palm, nestled on his lap. Only then
will he open it up.

It’s a memory. He never goes into it already having decided which one he’ll choose because he likes
to be surprised. The consistent factor is that it’s always of Bucky – the chest is devoted only to him.
(Sometimes, Steve considers opening up the chest with his mother’s name on it, but with the way
he’s capable of feeling so intensely these days, he’s afraid he’ll fumble and grab for the wrong
memory; accidentally pull out something he might not be able to handle. So for now, that chest
remains closed, and it does have a lock on it.)

Then he just… remembers.

In perfect detail, Steve remembers everything about that moment in his life. Whether it lasted a split
second or several hours, he’ll lose sleep some nights because he dedicates himself to reliving every
single bit of it. When it’s over, if he has time for more, he’ll put the memory away, in the inanimate
shape that still he doesn’t bother to create specifically, and then place it back into the chest before
drawing out another one at random.

Tonight, Steve has a small tent to himself. They’re heading to Italy the next day and he’s nervous.
They’ve been bringing their tour over into the action-side of things, and what he’s realized is that
he’s no soldier – not in the way it matters. And real soldiers don’t seem to be taking to him too
kindly. Oh sure, they’ve read the comic books – they do, after all, indulge in any way they can
distract themselves and pass their free time. They just don’t care.

The people back home, they love Captain America because they don’t know. They haven’t seen the
horror or the bloodshed; they don’t see right through the entire façade. Steve knows it’s all an
illusion. He’s about as much of an American hero as the Boston Red Sox were the Yankees’ best
friend. Parading around in tights, making Hollywood pictures, having comics created after you –
sure, they helped to sell war bonds, but Steve was never the one firing a gun and putting his life on
the line. In the grand scheme of things, what he had been doing – is still doing – was
inconsequential.

And he can understand why those who have been fighting the real fight wouldn’t be too keen on
some jackass showing up, trying to rile them up about a battle he’s never had to be a part of in his
life. He wishes he could just come right out and say, “Look fellas, I know, trust me – I don’t agree
with this, either. It shouldn’t be me standing up here getting all the glory; it should be one of you.
Any of you. All of you.” But he doubts anyone would listen. The only people who might be the
ones in charge of the tour, and then perhaps they’d kick him out and go in another direction.

That’d be a blessing if it weren’t for that fact that, for all of his ‘glorious battlefield stories’ portrayed
in the Captain America films, or in the comics, no one who could actually get him onto the frontlines
seems to think he’s capable of actually doing it. So the USO tour is all he has. He’s not proud of
what his life has been reduced to, but it’s his only option and opportunity to help. And, though he
can’t say it out loud, he’s still holding out hope that it’ll eventually provide him with the chance to
reunite with Bucky. In that sense, it’s sort of helped; he’s over in Europe, after all. That’s a start.

It’s harder these days to shut off the amount of noise screaming away in his brain - what with all of
his conflicting thoughts and troubles - but he settles himself onto his back in his own tent and forces
himself to close his eyes. It takes a few minutes, but eventually he’s able to conjure the spot in the
privacy of his mind. He sits down, and then proceeds to go through every step of the process
meticulously. He never strays or does anything different; it helps to keep him calm and relaxed in his
solitude.
And maybe – *just a bit* – he likes that it’s familiar, since nothing else seems to be anymore.

Tonight, his mind seems to be a little frazzled, because the memory it decides to scrounge up isn’t necessarily a bad one, per say, but it’s not exclusively to do with him and Bucky. Usually he’s pretty good at filtering any memory that might not make him feel all that great from the possible options, but admittedly, sometimes he’s bound to make an error. He’s almost glad of it when he does – reminds him that he’s still human, most definitely not perfect like everyone else seems to assume.

When he accidentally remembers something less than perfect for his own sake, he’ll usually toss it aside and go searching again. But then he gets the waft of a smell, and that’s – *their apartment*. Home. It’s enough to intrigue him and let the memory start playing out, because he really can’t resist something like that.

Tonight, his mind must indeed be frazzled, because for whatever reason, it wants Steve to remember the first time he’d ever accidentally walked in on Bucky being intimate… like that. At first, Steve considers abandoning it and turning his back on it, but something makes him stay. He remembers what he’s about to see before he even peers around the corner and actually sees it.

He remembers being smaller. It’s about the one time he can ever recall what that felt like – when he’s so far deep in his mind like this. He can feel the temperature of the floor beneath his feet, which were bare because, *that’s right*, it was the tail-end of Spring and Summer was just around the bend. He remembers how he’d been feeling that night, exhausted and out of it and curious, because he hadn’t been feeling well that day and so he’d spent most of it in bed. Bucky had brought over his then-girlfriend, Mary-Beth, for some company – even though he’d spent most of the evening in their room, checking up on his best friend.

Bucky must’ve assumed Steve was going to sleep through the night, which is why this had happened in the living room… So they wouldn’t have woken him.

But Steve had woken up anyways, and he remembers now, tip-toeing towards the living room because Bucky’s shoes had still been by the door, and so were Mary-Beth’s, but he couldn’t hear a sound if his life depended on it. He can feel his heart racing a little faster, but this isn’t right – he can also feel some sort of fear gnawing in the back of his chest, and he’s certain he didn’t feel that when this had actually happened.

It’s a strange thing – reliving a memory. Because Steve goes through the motions and feels the same things, thinks the same thoughts, but there’s a part of him that’s also consciously aware that it’s no longer really happening. Perhaps if he were still a normal person, he wouldn’t be able to be both at the same time and somehow still coexist. Either way, it makes for that same sense of shock, followed by the same sudden embarrassment, when he gets his first real look into the darkened living room and sees Bucky on top of Mary-Beth on the floor. Yet, he also knew this was coming, so Steve’s surprised and yet not at the same time.

He tries not to over-think it, because all it ever leads to is a headache (something he can still in fact get).

In the memory, he hadn’t immediately walked away, although he knows he should’ve. He knew it then and he knows it now – but he doesn’t do anything differently, because that’s not the way remembering like this works. Then it would no longer be a memory, but a fantasy – a deviation from the path that would border into the possibilities of what could have been. So he does exactly what he did then but probably shouldn’t have: he watches.

For the first few seconds, the only reason he hadn’t left was because he’d been rooted to the ground in shock. He’d blamed that on the fact that he’d never actually seen intercourse before, and that’s
indeed what Steve had seen and is seeing again now. But then he keeps himself hidden around the corner and only peers out just enough to still make out what’s going on.

Bucky had seen Mary-Beth for about five months before they’d called it quits. He’d really liked her. Steve has no doubt about this, as his baby blues take in the gentle way Bucky’s hips rock up and down, in and out of her. Her dress is pushed up past her hips and her legs are wrapped tightly around his waist. Bucky’s slacks are around his ankles. They’re both still basically clothed, and Steve remembers thinking that it must’ve been a spur of the moment decision; that they just couldn’t keep their hands off each other and fully undressing themselves meant waiting too long.

Steve watches, and listens, and he can hear even better now - the way that Bucky’s barely audible pants fill the intimate space between him and Mary-Beth… The way she stares back up at him and produces only the tiniest of whimpers. She’s trying just as hard as Bucky not to wake up Steve; Bucky must’ve asked this of her.

He remembers wondering what Bucky was suddenly doing differently when he shifts his hips a little bit and suddenly Mary-Beth is widening her eyes and grabbing the brunet’s ass in both hands, as if to pull him closer. Of course, now there’s also that part of him that realizes exactly what Bucky was doing – but back then he’d obviously had little clue. He only knew as much as Bucky would describe to him.

They’re so quiet as they move together that Steve can’t help but be certain that, if not for his newly acquired, heightened senses, he probably wouldn’t be able to hear them so well – because he certainly doesn’t remember catching all of those little secretive sounds being shared between the couple.

He also, for that matter, doesn’t remember himself feeling that sense of jealousy - some inexplicable betrayal lurking around his heart. He would’ve remembered that, but he doesn’t. And Steve remembers everything.

Then he gets it – why his brain had sporadically settled on this memory. As soon as he figures it out, he chooses to stop reliving it. In fact, he’s had enough of sifting through his past for one night. Just as abruptly as he’d been feeling everything in the recollection, he’s suddenly opening his eyes; staring back up at the top of his tent. Frowning, he sighs to himself and scrubs his hands over his face.

It isn’t the memory itself that leaves Steve feeling sort of… How is he feeling? Not jealous or betrayed; those were feelings tied to his old self, in that moment. They aren’t part of what he’s feeling now. He’s not angry… Nor is he regretful.

Sad… Maybe that’s the right word.

It isn’t the memory that leaves Steve feeling sad. It’s the discovery he just made. Because Erskine’s serum really had made everything in him more… That included things like being more present, more aware. And as he’d remembered every single detail of walking in on Bucky making love for the first time, he was suddenly aware of things he hadn’t even realized back then.

Like puzzle pieces finding their proper spots and coming together, it now made sense why Steve had turned and gone back into their room not longer after that; why when Bucky had finally come into the room to turn in later that night and he pressed his hand lightly to Steve’s forehead to check his temperature, Steve had just pretended that he was asleep. And it also explained why, instead of feeling aroused by it, Steve had laid there all night telling himself that the pain in his chest – how difficult it got sometimes to breathe – just had to do with being ill.

He can’t lie to himself now. He understands clear as day that the only reason he felt all of that was
because it was from seeing Bucky… seeing Bucky doing that with another person.

Seeing Bucky making love to someone who wasn’t Steve.

Damnit, the serum had hyped him up so much that he’s now capable of discovering things about himself he’d repressed so powerfully before.

That can’t be normal.

Funny enough, that’s the thing that makes him the most unsettled when he finally falls asleep.

November 3rd, 1943

The ladies do their number and everyone cheers; cat-calls, claps. Then Steve gets up there and he’s met with nothing but dead air. He’s used to this part. This is usually exactly how it goes, every time they ‘perform’ in front of the troops.

He’s just finished his in-depth speech about the importance of selling war bonds back home; how their country’s been standing behind them, how every effort counts. The words taste like lead as they pour from between his lips, stiff and overly rehearsed. It’s meant to inspire; at least, that’s its purpose on paper. But for Steve, it’s just another one of those moments where he feels like nothing but a hypocrite. He wonders how he’d be feeling if he were sitting in that crowd and the roles were reversed. How would Bucky feel?

The tension could be cut with a knife.

“How many of you are ready to help me sock old Adolf on the jaw?” he asks into the microphone; trying to keep his tone light, in an effort to match the very uncomfortable smile hinting at the corners of his mouth.

Yeah, he may be used to this but it never makes it any less awkward. His chest feels a little hot beneath the costume – the costume that he’s suddenly very aware of, and how absolutely ridiculous it must make him look. Because that sea of men staring back, it seems to stretch out far too long, like it’s never-ending, and they’re the ones wearing the only uniform that counts.

For a second, he forgets what’s supposed to come next. They always want him sticking to the script; not a whole lot of wiggle-room for improvisation. The words aren’t coming to him yet, so all he can manage is to stammer out, “Okay… Uh…”

He’s going to pass out. It’s going to happen. He wishes someone – anyone – would intervene and put a stop to this.

Finally, thank the Lord, he remembers what usually happens around this part of the show. Maybe he’s skipping ahead a few lines, but given how south this whole thing is currently going, he doubts anyone will really notice. Trying to appear all-the-chipper, he says, “I need a volunteer!”

And then… of course… he hears that all-too-familiar reply:

“I already volunteered – how’d you think I got here!?”

Whoever shouted that, he sounds angry. Within seconds, the rest of them do, too; angry and bitter, and for those who find it in them to laugh, the hollow, uncommitted sound they make is dripping with condescension. Steve feels his face flare; just like the last time, he’s in way over his head here.
“Bring back the girls!” someone else hollers, and now they’re cheering… Cheering only because they want ‘Captain America’ to get the fuck off the stage so they can feast their eyes on the only thing they really care about right now – another welcoming distraction from the Hell they must be facing on a day-to-day basis.

Steve doesn’t know what to do, but bringing the ladies back onstage definitely sounds like the best idea. Looking as lost as he feels, he glances off stage to look to his bosses. They’re waving their hands back and forth in front of their throats, as if to say, No, no, you stay up there.

Desperate to keep the crowd from falling into madness, he answers, “I think they only know the one song, but, um…” He glances back to his bosses, and they’re waving their hands even more frantically now. Ignoring them, Steve sighs and assures into the mic, “Let me – I – I’ll see what I can do.”

He’s about to step offstage when one of the soldiers taunts, “You do that, sweetheart!”

“Nice boots, Tinkerbell!” someone else coos.

And suddenly Steve doesn’t feel like Captain America anymore… just Steve Rogers, standing alone while the world mocks him all over again. Only he doesn’t have Bucky to come running in to help him defend himself anymore. He wishes he hadn’t taken that for granted for so many years; insisting that he didn’t need any help, that he could do it on his own. He’d be mighty thankful for some backup right about now.

“Come on guys,” he says lamely. He’s trying to sound firm but it really isn’t working. Because he knows… Of course he knows. He’s aware of how stupid he looks in general wearing that costume, much less in front of the last people he’d ever want to see him in it. Not knowing what he should say, he tries for, “We’re all on the same team here.”

“Hey Captain!” one man calls out, before turning around and pulling down his pants to moon him. “Sign THIS!”

Cheering again. Anything that involves making him look like an idiot and they’ll cheer, of course. Steve tries to keep things in perspective and understand where they’re coming from. But all he’s trying to do is all he’s ever tried to do… He just wants to help. He wishes they could see that. Or, if there was a speck of compassion left for him, maybe see how hard he’s trying right now.

He isn’t sure where they got the tomatoes, but suddenly one’s projecting towards him, and it’s only thanks to his newly strengthened reflexes that he gets the faux-shield up in time to block it. In flies another, and then another… He blocks all three, and he’s sure he must look pathetic. He must, because they’re still cheering and clapping, and they only do that when they feel the Captain’s been taken down a few pegs. Everywhere… It’s been like that everywhere.

He’s always too preoccupied to think about it when it’s actually happening, but sometimes he wonders if Bucky’s ever been sitting in one of those crowds. Of course, he can’t think about it for too long because then that would mean that Bucky was right there and Steve missed his chance. But for just a little bit, before the possibility becomes too much to keep considering, he can’t help but wonder…

Would Bucky be just as unimpressed? Would the sight of Captain America upset him the same way it does every other soldier? Would he be one of the men hurling spoiled fruit at Steve? If Bucky realized the Captain was Steve, of course his tune would change – at least, Steve hopes. He wonders: if Bucky had been in one of those crowds, how did he not recognize Steve’s voice? He thought that was still the same… And Ginny seemed to think that hadn’t changed, either.
Steve supposes, when he thinks about it, that it could be chalked up to two most likely answers. Either Bucky wouldn’t have recognized him because Steve was supposed to be in Brooklyn and Steve was supposed to be smaller. He wasn’t supposed to look like this; the old Steve Rogers would’ve never been destined to become ‘Captain’ anything, much less ‘Captain America.’ So perhaps – if Bucky had been in one of those crowds and Steve just never knew it – his brain just hadn’t put two and two together, so it ignored the familiarity in Steve’s voice.

Either that, or… or Bucky had recognized it… Was so flabbergasted and thrown off and disgusted by what Steve had become – how he was prancing around now in tights with beautiful women and being lavished with fame and good fortune, while he was only off in this war because Steve had guilted him into it – that he no longer wanted anything to do with his old best friend.

It’s that possibility that always forces Steve to abruptly stop thinking about it.

Later, when he’s alone, these thoughts will come to him again. But for now, as he’s trying to avoid getting pegged in the face by a rotten tomato and feeling the hatred these men have for him, his thoughts are too busy for that.

They stop throwing things at him. He looks out at the crowd. What would the old Steve Rogers have done in the face of this sort of treatment? For a moment, he pictures that scrawny kid with a bloodied lip, standing next to him on that stage with his fists up. He’d probably have to tell him to tighten them – remind him that the thumbs go over the knuckles and not under his fingers, since he used to get that wrong a lot of the time.

What would the old him say? What would he do?

Probably not look quite as helpless and then turn and retreat, disappearing offstage – which is exactly what he does. He’s not even fully off of it and the girls are already pouring back out again. His bosses must’ve realized that sending them back to perform again was the right decision.

“Don’t worry about them,” one of the show managers, Irvin, says to him as he puts a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “They’ll warm up to you, don’t worry.”

No they won’t, Steve thinks. They never do. He just keeps walking further from the stage. He isn’t sure where he’s going but he just needs to sit down by himself for a few minutes. He wishes he could take the suit off, but of course they’ll find some reason to need him again in a bit, so for now it has to remain on.

Like a constant reminder of a whole new world of failures.

It starts pouring rain not long after the girls do their second set, so they bring the show to a close. Steve doesn’t even pretend not to be relieved. After getting the news, he goes back to where he’d been distractedly sketching and gets back to it. The entire time, as the tip of his pencil finalizes the details of that all-too familiar dancing monkey on the tight-rope wire, all he’s trying to do is not have those unsettling thoughts again about Bucky.

He’s right back to feeling as though he doesn’t have a single friend in the world, when he hears a gentle, familiar voice behind him say, “Hello, Steve.”

The accent sounds like something straight out of a dream, and yet it’s not until he sees her face that he fully realizes who’s standing right there, coming towards him. Peggy. He hadn’t thought he’d ever see her again – and what was she doing here in Italy? It’s not as if he expected her to stay holed up in New York for the entire war. But admittedly, the idea of her staying back home where it was
considerably safer had just sort of become the reality he held onto whenever he happened to think of Peggy Carter.

“Hi,” he replies, surprise in his tone and written in the way his eyes widen.

“Hi,” she says again, bundling up her jacket in her arms. Now that Steve’s acknowledged her, he realizes how her movements seem a little tense. Even her tone is a tad apprehensive. What’s going on?

“What’re you doing here?”

“Officially, I’m not here at all,” she confesses. Oh… Something must really be amiss then. She’s immediately got Steve’s full attention. But she doesn’t go into any more detail. He’s just about to ask her what it is she meant when she says, much to his horror, “That was quite the performance.”

Shit.

If Bucky is the number one person Steve would never want to see him standing up there, making a fool of himself like that, then Peggy Carter is the second person. Being so close to her again without any warning or time to prepare himself is bringing back all of those same things he’d felt around her before. As if he needed something else on his plate to add onto the ever-growing list. He makes himself look away so she won’t see the blush threatening to stain his cheeks; so she won’t be able to notice that he’s still just as flimsy around her as he had been before.

“Yeah, uh… I had to improvise a little bit,” he replies, trying to sound far more suave and calculated than he’s currently feeling on the inside. “The crowds I’m used to are usually more, uh… twelve.”

“I understand you’re America’s ‘new hope,’” she says. Peggy has an interesting way of saying things sometimes; it could just be the accent, though Steve suspects it’s just all her, but even when she’s making a simple observation, she says it like she knows exactly what you think about it before you’ve already told her.

Which means there’s nothing about the way she states that that makes it sound endearing. On the contrary, it’s said as though she’s already well aware of how Steve feels about it.

And she’s not wrong at all.

“Bond sales take a ten percent bump in every State I visit,” Steve parrots flatly. He’s still keeping his eyes forward.

“Is that Senator Brandt I hear?” Peggy quips, not missing a beat.

Steve considers coming clean; telling her she’s exactly right – he’s been doing nothing lately but speaking the words everyone else had been feeding to him. He can’t even remember the last time he spoke his own mind… The last time his opinions were actually his own… But then he’d be admitting that he’s too well-molded to find his own spine again, and well… Be it as it may, even if it makes him feel awful, he still doesn’t want Peggy to see him in a negative light. He still cares a little too much of what she thinks about him. He’s finally in the presence of someone who actually sees him - him, not the illusion - and yet all he wants to do now is be invisible all over again.

So instead, he answers, “At least he’s got me doing this. Philips would’ve had me stuck in a lab.”

“And these are your only two options,” Peggy asks rhetorically, “a lab rat or a dancing monkey? You were meant for more than this, you know.”
He can feel her eyes on him, so he peers over his shoulder to meet her stare. *God, she’s so beautiful. What is wrong with him?* He can’t do it; he has to look away again. He thinks about her words. He believes her; he feels like he should be doing far more than what he is – though he wouldn’t really go as far as saying that it’s because he’s *meant* to.

*You were meant for more than this…*

“You’re gonna be somethin’ real special in the great big world one day – you’re gonna make a difference.’

He wishes Peggy’s advice didn’t sound so dangerously close to Bucky’s; to the things Bucky had always told him, over and over. Why did they both seem so certain that Steve was *destined* for anything like that? And thinking of Bucky again right now certainly isn’t helping…

“What?” she asks when Steve doesn’t respond.

He’s so tired. How can he just come right out and say that when he’s *always* had trouble admitting when he needs some help?

Sighing inwardly, he finally answers, admitting, “You know, for the longest time, I dreamed about… comin’ overseas and being on the frontlines; serving my country… I finally got everything I wanted… and I’m wearing *tights.”*

His train of thought gets interrupted when they hear a horn start beeping, not too far off from where they are. Looking behind them to see where it’s coming from, Steve gets a good glimpse of the medic truck pulling in. It immediately gets swamped by the medical team; shouting back and forth to each other as they swing open the back doors and two of the men come out with an injured soldier lying back-down on a pole stretcher.

“They look like they’ve been through Hell,” Steve says sadly.

Peggy looks back to him. “These men more than most,” she tells him. Steve can’t take his off of the men in the distance at first. He wishes there was some way he could just make things *right*. He wishes he could help them. His baby blues flicker up to meet Peggy’s.

That’s when she explains, “Schmidt sent out a force to Azzano. Two hundred men went up against him, and less than *fifty* returned. Your audience contained what was left of the 107*th*.”

*The --*

*No.*

“The rest were killed or captured,” Peggy adds.

*No… This isn’t… This can’t…*

“The 107*th*!?” Steve repeats, as if he’s heard wrong. He’s *praying* that she’ll tell him again and this time, he’ll hear *correctly*, because *no… There’s no way…*

“What?” she asks with concern. Her brows quickly knit together.

Steve feels like the ground spins out beneath his feet, taking his heart with it. In an instant, he’s suddenly too hot and too cold, and *this isn’t happening, she was wrong, that wasn’t the 107*th*, that was some other battalion, not the 107*th*, not Bucky, not Bucky, oh God, please…
“Steve?”

He’s on his feet and before he can even think about it, he’s running – right out into the rain, with only one place in mind. He needs Colonel Philips to tell him Bucky’s alright. His name won’t be on that list. He’ll have turned out to have been in the audience the whole time, and Steve had always dreaded the possibility of that but he’ll be grateful for it now. He won’t mind that Bucky saw that God-awful performance; he’ll offer to do it ten times over again, just to make Bucky laugh… Or if he thinks Steve looks stupid in his costume, or even if Bucky somehow hates him now… Steve won’t care. Bucky just needs to be alive and he needs to be safe.

“Steve, talk to me!” he hears Peggy shout, and he realizes she’s following him, despite the rain; despite the fact that, officially, she’s not even supposed to be here. His legs carry him a bit further, but then he glances back over his shoulder to see her trying to shield herself with her jacket, and he beckons hectically, “Come on!”

On the inside, he’s falling apart, waging war; a million emotions trying to claw their way to the surface at once. But he won’t give Philips the satisfaction of seeing him as anything other than stable, so when he’s finally in the Colonel’s tent and approaching him, his voice is collected and firm as he says, “Colonel Philips!”

“Well, if it isn’t the Star Spangled Man with a Plan,” the Colonel mocks. “What is your plan today?”

“I need the casualty list from Azzano,” Steve immediately demands.

“You don’t get to give me orders, son.”

“I just need one name – Sergeant James Barnes from the hundred-and-seventh,” Steve presses. He doesn’t give a single damn what sort of trouble standing up to Philips will get him into. He refuses to back down. If that means subduing the Colonel and then ripping the place apart until he gets his hands on it – if that’s what it needs to come to – then so be it.

“You and I are going to have a conversation later that you won’t enjoy,” Philips says to Peggy, pointing the tip of his pen in her direction.

“Please tell me if he’s alive, sir – B-A-R--”

“I can spell,” Philips replies back to Steve curtly. For a moment, they just stare at each other. Steve makes sure he doesn’t even blink, and that seems to do the trick. The Colonel breaks eye contact first, casting his gaze downwards as he gives the tiniest little nod. Giving in, he reluctantly rises to his feet and turns his back on them.

Shuffling through the documents in his hands, he tells them, “I have signed more of these condolence letters today than I would care to count. But…” He drops the papers on the desk in front of him and then turns back to Steve. “The name does sound familiar. I’m sorry.”

The entire world falls away… and Steve remembers everything.

Every smile, every musical note of laughter, every fight, every joke--

‘James Buchanan Barnes.’

Every bloody nose, every fourth of July, every lie, every truth--

‘Steven Grant Rogers.’
Every secret, every heartbreak, every scare, every thrill--

‘I can give you a nickname if you want... Buchanan’s too long... Bucky? What about Bucky?’

Every arch of his brow, every twinkle in his eye, every single one of those smirks--

‘I can like ‘Bucky.’ Bucky’s good.’

Every tear, every kiss, every whisper, every moan, every touch--

‘This’ll hurt.’

‘I trust you.’

’S-Steve...’

Every moment, every breath, everything... They’d all been Steve’s, they were supposed to be Steve’s, he was supposed to have more of them, of all of them, once this war was over--

‘BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!’

Bucky...

Steve seems them all, hears them all, feels them all – like a very quick flash. There, all at once, and then it’s gone. And he’s still standing there, and Philips thinks ‘I’m sorry’ is supposed to make things better?

Maybe Bucky had been right all along; maybe Steve really is a punk. He was a punk then and he’s a punk now because there’s no way in Hell that he’s letting himself believe that what Philips said is true.

No. Bucky is alive, and Steve’s going to find him.

Taking a breath and gathering himself, he asks, “What about the others? Are you planning a rescue mission?”

(He stares at the map Philips has pinned to the tent wall. The Colonel doesn’t know how easily Steve can process and memorize information these days.)

“Yeah, it’s called ‘winning the war.’”

Steve can’t help but look back to him in astonishment. “But if you know where they are, why not s-”

“They’re thirty miles behind the lines,” Philips interrupts, “behind some of the most heavily fortified territory in Europe. We’d lose more men than we’d save. But I don’t expect you to understand that because you’re a Chorus girl,” he adds flatly, aiming his last blow while looking directly into Steve’s eyes.

Steve can feel his blood boiling and something unpleasant simmering just below the surface, but he keeps it contained. He’s been good at following orders lately – at keeping his mouth shut and never saying what it is he really thinks. So he finally gets the chance to utilize that now. Bucky’s life depends on it.

Tightening his jaw, he chooses only to reply, “I think I understand just fine.”
The Colonel, now done with this little exchange, starts to walk past him. “Then understand it somewhere else. If I read the posters correctly, you have somewhere you need to be in thirty minutes.”

Steve’s eyes are already back on the map.

“Yes, sir. I do.”

They’re playing one of the *Captain America* movies for the 43rd Infantry Division, currently stationed for rest over in New Zealand. Most of the men there have read the comics – same as everyone else in the English-speaking world these days. The quality isn’t as nice as what you’d see if you were actually in a fancy-shmancy theatre, but in the middle of a war, a projector and a white sheet are a luxury.

What they wouldn’t give for a nice, crisp bottle of Coca-Cola to wet their whistles with. A beer. *Anything* besides water. Normally, they’re happy as a clam with water – *can’t get too picky when the goin’ gets tough*. But watching a film reminds them all of home, of better days… so it’s hard not to get a little nostalgic for some spoils.

Captain America looks different than he does in the comic books. On the pages, he looks buffer; harsher around the edges. *Manlier*? He looks manlier. Not that this guy up on the screen doesn’t look like that, necessarily. It’s just… there’s something softer about him. It’s hard to tell because so much of his face is covered, but…

His lips look soft. And even with a gun firing away in his hands, as he takes down Hitler and his goons and leads an entire army to victory, there’s something almost *sweet* and *innocent* about his eyes, his—

His *eyes*.

*Jesus… fucking… Christ…*

There’s no fucking way; it’s not possible. No one could change that much in – *how many years has it been* – four years? *Five* years? *Five* years. He was just a kid then, but there’s still… there’s no…

*Is there?*

‘*Captain America*…’

He could never forget those eyes. He stares up at the screen, a pleasant look of disbelief on his face, and shakes his head. *Can’t fucking believe it* – but he knows. He *knows*.

One good look at those eyes, and he *knows*.

I… *see*… you.

“I’ll be damned,” he whispers under his breath. “It’s been a long time, kiddo.”

All great ideas begin somewhere.
He smirks, just a little hint of a thing, and wears it for the remainder of the movie. His buddies chatter away around him and every once in a while, he’ll join in. That night, he’ll go to sleep and instead of the bombs and the gore, he’ll dream of beautiful boys - one blond and one brunet – and the pictures he’d never gotten rid of. He’ll fall asleep, as he always does these days, clutching his dog tags in one hand.

Name, rank, and serial number - in that exact order. The name always comes first, always.

Arthur Waylon Peterson.

But some of his friends just call him Peter.

Chapter End Notes

*I’ll be including one more chapter to this story this weekend, with a full playlist of all the songs that have either been included in this story, or used as inspiration while I've worked on Part 1. :)

Stucky pictures to leave you off with:

Source: pain-art
Source: fyeahsteveandbucky (I had difficulty finding the original artist, so if you have a link to them, please let me know in the comments so I can add them)
Source: Source: fyeahsteveandbucky (I had difficulty finding the original artist, so if you have a link to them, please let me know in the comments so I can add them)
Source: Source: fyeahsteveandbucky (I had difficulty finding the original artist, so if you have a link to them, please let me know in the comments so I can add them)
Source: Source: fyeahsteveandbucky (I had difficulty finding the original artist, so if you have a link to them, please let me know in the comments so I can add them)

Thank you to everyone who's ever read, commented, left, kudos, rec'd, or whatnot on this fic. You're all the best and I love you dearly. See you soon for Part 2!

Feel free to come chat with me or laugh at my awkwardness on Tumblr :) It's also mainly filled with Stucky, Sebastian Stan, and Chris Evans haha Not even gonna lie.
LITTLE LIES Part 1: Playlist

Chapter Summary

The playlist for Part 1 - the songs used in every chapter, as well as songs that inspired me somehow while I wrote it, or reminded me of the boys during these chapters of their lives.

***The full playlist can be found here***

TRACK LIST:

1. *Come to My Window* - Melissa Etheridge (*Chapter One*)
2. *Wake Up* - Arcade Fire (*Chapter Two*)
3. *When You Say Nothing At All* - Ronan Keating (*Chapter Three*)
4. *Asleep* - The Smiths (*Chapter Four*)
5. *Head Over Feet* - Alanis Morissette (*Chapter Five*)
7. *The First Day of Spring* - Noah & the Whale (*Chapter Seven*)
8. *The Boy Who Blocked His Own Shot* - Brand New (*Chapter Eight*)
9. *Your Song* - Elton John (*Chapter Nine*)
10. *The Scientist* - Coldplay (*Chapter Ten*)
11. *Please Don't Go* - Barcelona (*Chapter Eleven*)
12. *All of Me* - John Legend (*Chapter Twelve*)
13. *Closer* - Nine Inch Nails (*Chapter Thirteen*)
14. *You Took the Words Right Out My Mouth* - Meatloaf (*Chapter Fourteen*)
15. *I Will Follow You Into the Dark* - Death Cab for Cutie (*Chapter Fifteen*)
16. *Coney Island* - Death Cab for Cutie (*Chapter Sixteen*)
17. *Run* - Snow Patrol (*Chapter Sixteen*)
18. *Skinny Love* - Birdy (*Chapter Seventeen*)
19. *Silhouettes* - Of Monsters and Men (*Chapter Eighteen*)
20. *One* - Metallica (*Chapter Nineteen*)
21. *Come Back to Me* - Trading Yesterday (*Chapter Twenty*)
22. *Begin the Beguine* - Artie Shaw (*Seen in Chapter Two*)
23. *Nice Work if You Can Get It* - Fred Astaire (*Seen in Chapter Two*)
24. *The Bridge of Khazad Dum* - LOTR Soundtrack (*Inspiration in Chapter Four*)
25. *Blue Dahlia* - The Gaslight Anthem (*Inspiration*)
26. *I Miss You* - Atraler (*Inspiration*)
27. *Fools* - Lauren Aquilina (*Inspiration*)
28. *Goodbye My Lover* - James Blunt (*Inspiration*)
29. *Creep* - Scala & Kolancy Brothers Cover (*Inspiration for post-serum!Steve*)
30. *Fall to Pieces* - Avril Lavigne (*Inspiration*)
31. *Say Something* - A Great Big World (*Inspiration*)
32. *In Your Eyes* - Peter Gabriel (*Inspiration*)
33. *Echo* - John Walker (*Inspiration*)
34. *More Than Words* - Extreme (*Inspiration*)
35. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* - Simon & Garfunkel (*Inspiration*)
For those interested in the sequel, part 2 of this series, Little Lies to Give Me Hope, is now in the works :) It can be found by following the link provided. Thanks again to everyone who read, commented, etc. on this story. I hope you enjoy Part 2! <3

--OhCaptainMyCaptain

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!