Sunlight

by AgentCoop

Summary

When Bucky dreams himself into a club scene straight out of his past, he’s more than thrilled to get high, to drink, to dance like no one’s watching. When he gets caught in a mysterious loop, waking in the same club, during the same rave, night after night after night, he begins to question whether this is really a manifestation of his subconscious or some sort of alternate reality.

The thing is, the dream keeps throwing him into past memories: back to the 90s, to his college life, to a time before his family fell apart, to a time when he fell in love with his best friend.

And he’d do anything to have a chance to right his past wrongs.

He’d do anything for Steve.

Notes

At long last, I present my contribution to the Captain America Reverse Big Bang 2019!

I want to thank the incredible JessieLucid, who's stunning art inspired this entire work. She
was an absolute angel to work with from start to finish, cheerleading, beta reading, and helping me through every single plot hole. I'm so happy to have had a chance to work with her!

Thank you also to Mystrana, who not only gave birth during the event, but also wrote her own fic, and STILL managed to find time to help beta. You are the absolute best and the true MVP here!

See the end of the work for more notes.
He opened his eyes.

The floor was awash in light and movement and smoke and sound,

Bucky grinned, head already bobbing in time with the beat, sneakers scritching and sticking to the cold cement floor as he pushed through the crowd. People were dancing everywhere, their furious movements enormously exaggerated, intoxicatingly human. He could smell the sweat of bodies, taste the smoky air as it cloaked hundreds with a dark and dusky weight. Even as he moved through them,
he was jolted from side to side, deliciously thrust against skin and leather and mesh. The world was splattered in neon, in heavy plastic, in glorious polyurethane.

He smiled.

It had been a long time since he’d dreamed like this, since he’d remembered these moments so vividly. Since the inexorable pull of sleep had made him young again.

Tilting his head in in delight, Bucky watched a group of girls pass around something contained in sweaty palms, clenched fists. They giggled and screamed and jumped and Bucky laughed at their energy—yelled back at them approvingly. When he turned, his hair brushed at his shoulders, and he laughed with joy. It was long again, like it had been in his youth, and in the way of dreams, this wasn’t strange. There was nothing remotely odd about being this vibrantly young again. Being fresh; full of youth and vigor and electrifying bad decisions.

The beat was ceaseless, and Bucky pushed his way through the jumping chaos, towards the center of the massive, undulating throng.

His head swam with dizzying momentum, and he stopped for a moment to tug at the kandi-coated arm of the teenage boy who jumped along with the heavy beat alongside of him.

“What year is it?” Bucky yelled.

“Huh?” The kid screamed back, eyes half open, pupils so blown they were eclipsed suns. His dark hair fell past his shoulders and his mesh top was cut high above his abdomen. Bucky could see the way taut muscles moved underneath skin as he danced, watched the way his tight leather pants barely gripped his hips.

“What year?” Bucky yelled again, his voice wavering in pitch as he jumped; higher and higher and higher.

“You’re fucked up, man!” the kid returned. “What’r’ya on? Got more?”

Throwing his head back, Bucky screamed in time with the jarring noise of the music; the sound turning to colors, the colors turning to light, the light turning to sweat, and chaos, and life. He pressed his hands into his pockets and drew out a tiny white envelope. Bucky was always prepared—he knew it would be there. He tapped out two pills and handed one over to the kid, who took it with a glowing grin while Bucky studied his more carefully, his smile faltering as the image pressed into the pill came into focus.

Drugs were a frequent part of his early twenties, yet they were one that he wasn’t particularly specific about. He was ambivalent in his quest for a high on someone else’s dime, but if he was buying, then it had always been apples. Pure. Good fucking shit.

This particular pill had the standard apple pressed into the top, but it was strangled, rotten, foul. In the way of dreams, it was so much more detailed than it could possibly ever be in waking life. The apple curved upwards from it’s base, then shrunk inwards, a convex twisting of blackness, it’s stem shriveled and dead. His stomach churned and another wave of dizziness washed over him in warning, begging him to wake.

“It’s not real, he thought. It’s just a dream.

“You good, man?” The kid yelled in his general direction.

He was further away now. The crowd was moving, dancing in circles and screaming their pleasure,
and Bucky was getting left behind as he stood, examining the pill in his hand.

“Do you want this?”

The voice sounded like the kid’s, but when Bucky looked up, he realized that the teenager was nowhere to be seen—lost in the crowd.

“Do you want this?”

It reverberated through his skull, louder than the thumping bass of the music.

Somehow, Bucky’d ended up backed against a wall that was littered with peeling flyers. They were all the same, all featured an American flag, shredded but sewn back together with blood red thread, and the words:

SATURDAY | OCTOBER 5TH | 1991

CHRONO TEMPEST

This was something familiar. Something calling to him. Something buried deeper than memory, something scratching to be free of the dead.

The strobe lights flickered and bounced and the pounding sound of the bass increased, the volume going higher and higher and higher—

He swallowed the pill and let himself by overtaken by the crowd.

Even through the haze of dream drugs, Bucky could recall a certain order to these nights as they happened in the past. The rush to be free of the apartment. The copious amounts of alcohol gulped down at the bar. The taste of powder and of bitterness washed away by sweet water. The thumping sound. The need for movement. For touch. The cigarettes, smoked outside, breathing air that was no longer just from Earth. Now it was air from dinosaur’s lungs, from comets, from the fucking Big Bang. There were hands, and skin, and mouths on mouths on mouths, and more jumping. More moving. There was an inevitable weight to it all, the futility, the smallness.

And Steve was there.

That was the piece of the puzzle currently missing from the nostalgic pull of this dream: the warmth of his best friend, the sound of his laughter, the taste of his lips. Bucky pushed further and further towards the front stage, where a DJ wearing a leather dog hood was swaying, hips pumping in time with the beat, neck glistening with sweat in the spotlight. His right hand was thrown up to the ears of the hood, pressing in on presumably hidden headphones, and his head swayed from side to side in graceful, blissful motion.

Bucky flinched as an untouchable memories crashed against his temples, threatening to burst. **Remember, remember, remember**, they seemed to chant in time with the synthesizer. “What the fuck?” he murmured, tongue thick with drugs, and his body burning with the need for movement.

“He’s fucking incredible!” a young woman shouted in his ear. “Fucking unbelievable!”

Her long brown hair hung limp and damp, and her forehead was soaked with sweat. She reached her arms around him and pulled his head close, brushing strands of hair from his mouth with the tip of her nose. Then she leaned in and pressed against him, tongue against his lips, then inside his mouth. He tasted the bitterness of pills on her breath, as her body crowded against his, desperate, writhing and insistent. Just as suddenly as it began, she jerked away with a laugh.
“This DJ...he...he’s fucking incredible!” she repeated, then disappeared into the crowd.

Bucky watched her only for a moment before she was sucked away by the crowd. Then he threw his hands up, kept moving and pulsing. Kept his steady surge towards the stage.

The DJ took his hand away for a second as the song wound down, and Bucky was close enough now to see him move it over to a keyboard—nimbly dancing his fingertips across the surface—before reaching around the back of the leather hood and unhooking the closure. House music seeped in, perfectly synchronous with the fading rhythm of the previous mix, and the man saluted the crowd once to amorous cheers, then turned and pried off the mask. As he walked off stage Bucky saw a shock of short blond hair.

Something inside of Bucky tugged painfully, and he bit down on his tongue, hard enough to bleed.

“Do you want this?”

Bucky spun around but there was no one watching him, no one speaking to him. Furiously rubbing at his temples, Bucky threw himself against the waves of the crowd yelling, “Steve!” as the vibrations reverberated through his entire body.

There was no reply. Of course there was no reply. If it was a dream, then Bucky should still have some modicum of control, so he closed his eyes and counted to five and thought SILENCE.

The house music carried on and the thumping of feet on the floor reverberated through his entire body.

“Fuck,” he muttered, then pushed forward again, angling towards the back, towards the bar, towards the only place he could imagine the Steve from his memory being. It’s my dream, he internalized. Mine. Make it happen.

It took a frustratingly long time to weave his way through the drugged and inebriated masses and to keep his own footing steady as he did so. The rotten pill was starting to take full effect now and as his mind fuzzed he could taste the sound of the bass and it tasted of sex.

The bartender was serving two drinks to Steve when Bucky finally caught up: the first, a glass of water, the second a clear bottle. Zima. Bucky couldn’t help but smile. For as long as he’d known Steve, it had always been the same; for each bottle of preppy-as-fuck Zima, there was always a glass of water.

And no drugs.

Ever.

As the bartender moved down to help a group of chattering girls, Steve turned, his eyes meeting Bucky’s in the impossibly magnetic glow of the flashing lights.

“Buck!” Steve yelled, a bright smile blooming.

His heart began to thump against his chest, wild and unforgiving. Bucky couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t get enough air, he couldn’t think past the enormous welling of desire that pushed at his chest. Steve’s voice was the same. His smile was the same. His eyes were the same: blue with the slightest hint of grey at the edges, and full of a mischievous courage. “Steve,” he murmured, the name like thick syrup on his tongue.

Downing the glass of water in one gulp and smacking it down at the bar, Steve picked up the bottle
of Zima and walked up, throwing his hand around Bucky’s shoulders. “So?”

Bucky just stared at him. Steve seemed to be flowing out of his vision, body puddling into a viscous array of colors, then sucking back together again. “I…”

“Find some good drugs?” Steve asked with a grin.

“I…” Bucky tried. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. Steve was steadier this time, but still fuzzing at the edges, as though not entirely there, not entirely human. Bucky was no longer sure if it was the drugs or if it was the dream, so he nuzzled his head against Steve’s neck, smelling the smokey musk of the club, smelling intoxicating salty sweat.

Steve let his hand fall against Bucky’s jaw and the touch raised goosebumps on his skin, made every hair stand on end with electric fire. He didn’t remember a dream being this vividly real before, this galvanizing.

“I…” Bucky tried. “Some?” he offered up, a benign answer to the question. His words were liquid. His lips were stuck together. More than anything, he wanted to taste Steve’s neck, to lick a stripe up the intricate strand of tattooed stars that led from the top of his collarbone to the base of his right ear. He wanted to run his fingers along the short stubble of blond hair at the Steve’s temples, up to the lengthier strands that strayed in their casual disarray up top. He wanted to pull, and listen to Steve gasp against his cheek.

Steve’s grip tightened around his shoulders. “I’ve got ten minutes,” he whispered. “You lead.”

“What year is it?” Bucky asked. He couldn’t stop it, the tumble of words from his mouth. The question dripped with decay, and dread, impossibly morbid the second time around.

“91?” Steve supplied. “Man, what did you take, Buck?”

“Same as always,” Bucky muttered. The floor was turning to liquid mud beneath his feet, and his tennis shoes squelched beneath him as he followed Steve’s more tangible pull.

There were hallways in the club, spiraling outwards like clockwork mazes in a factory of misspent youth. Steve found a relatively empty spot, the house music still carrying through the building with a jarring frequency.

Bucky hit the wall hard and smiled, reaching up and pulling Steve closer to him. “I’ve fucking missed you,” he groaned tonguing at the lobe of Steve’s ear.

“You just saw me last night, Buck,” Steve murmured, bending his head and sucking on Bucky’s neck.

A wave of cold passed through him from the words and Bucky shivered under Steve’s lips. They inspired terror and fear and something vaguely…mystical.

“What do you mean,” he whispered.

Steve backed away, watching his eyes for just a second. Then he took Bucky’s left hand and held it up—tracing his middle finger along the curve of Bucky’s wrist.

There were three black stripes tattooed there—varying in size, looking more like they belonged to the pelt of a zebra than any human.

“I don’t…” Bucky muttered, unable to look away from the black ink.
Steve threaded his fingers into Bucky’s hand and pushed it against the wall, above their heads. He kissed Bucky, long and hard and full of everything Steve.

Bucky pulled back. “I don’t remember this,” he whispered.

Steve looked at him, a stark sadness in his eyes. “Do you want this?” he asked.

Bucky jerked back. The question was purely Steve’s voice—the light tenor of the boy he knew, the darker bass of the man he’d grown to be. Somehow it was all one, meshed in harmony.

“Where am I?” he said. The floor stopped swimming for a moment, then turned to sand before his eyes, sucking at his feet.

Steve just sighed. “With me.” He looked at the heavy watch that circled his wrist. “I’ve got seven minutes, Buck. Do you want this?” His grin perfectly animalistic.

Bucky bent forward and bit at Steve’s lower lip. “Always,” he whispered, words muffled against skin.

Steve pushed forward, pinning Bucky against the wall, and Bucky threw his left arm around Steve’s shoulders, feeling the curve of muscle rippling beneath the thin cotton t-shirt.

It was like this, between them:

They were almost, perfectly, incredibly, exactly the same height, but occasionally Bucky found himself pushing up on the balls of his feet, Steve curling in towards his chest and then, in that moment, they would lock eyes—Bucky looking down ever so slightly into the sea of blue.

Steve would never admit to it, but he loved it when this happened. Bucky knew this from the feral glint in his pupils, from the baring of teeth beneath dark lips.

Bucky would never admit to it, but he loved when this happened. The world knew this, from the shallow gasps that escaped Bucky’s open mouth.

As it was right now, they were lost in the taste of each other’s skin, a writhing, surreal fixture of the cement wall that lined the hallway. Thought the bass continued pounding and the rave persisted in its raucous energy, it was Bucky’s dream, and as such, there was no one else who walked the winding hallway. They were alone with each other for the first time in decades, or perhaps just the first time in 24 hours, and as Bucky’s hand danced down the front of Steve’s shirt and slipped underneath the brass button of his jeans, Steve clutched Bucky’s right wrist even tighter and mouthed at his neck, sucking, tonguing, tasting.

He never wanted to wake up.

“What?” Steve murmured into his neck.

“Fuck…” Bucky reached beneath Steve’s boxer briefs, drifting the pads of his fingertips across the tight skin of his stomach. Steve gasped against him and Bucky stroked further, the shock of his fingers against Steve coming back in bursts of erotic muscle memory.

The bass stopped and silence permeated the building, drifting like snow, heavy like wool.

“Steve?” Bucky whispered.

Steve was still moving, groaning and tonguing at Bucky’s jaw. “Don’t stop,” he whispered.
Bucky closed his eyes and stroked along Steve’s hard cock, moment building in anticipation, ready to burst.

There was a static fuzz in his ears and then nothing. Bucky opened his eyes, twisted his neck from side to side. He was dizzy, his stomach was roiling under the sudden press of silence. “Steve?” he asked again, but as his mouth moved, there was no release of sound.

Steve pulled back and their gazes caught, burning. Steve’s mouth moved, and he smiled—a soft, slip of a thing.

“Steve!” Bucky yelled, and still Steve’s mouth moved but there was nothing at all.

Bucky threw his hand up to his right ear. There was no sound, no semblance of motion there, and when he suddenly felt the calloused touch of his own fingertips, he flinched. “Oh my god—”

The color was leeching away from them. Steve’s blond hair was turning grey, the lighting above them that had just been flashing in vivid reds and greens was only illuminating Steve in a faint, dull, nothingness. Bucky reached out to him as his blue eyes began to run, color falling from them and dripping like paint to the cement below.

“What the fuck?” Bucky asked. “What the…what the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck…”

Steve let go of Bucky’s wrist, and Bucky watched his arm drop back by his side, casual, weightless, nothing. Steve reached out and ran his fingers along Bucky’s jaw. He was saying something. Mouthing something.

“Do you want this?”

It reverberated through Bucky’s body, loud, painful, and present.

“Stay,” Steve was saying. His lips moved through the word, slowly and purposely. “Stay, stay, stay..”

“How?” Bucky shrieked, but still there was no sound. The lights above stopped flickering their nothingness, and the walls began to disintegrate. “It’s a bad trip!” he yelled to Steve, but Steve was just shaking his head, eyes full of loss.

Stay, stay, stay...

Bucky plummeted, and then there was only utter blackness and pain.
Bucky lifted the cigarette to his lips and sucked in, letting the smoke fill his lungs, tasting the sweetness, holding that moment to him as long as possible, then letting it all fall—breath releasing into the air.

He sat, perched atop the barren face of his particle board desk, looking down at the busy street, four stories below. He’d done some rearranging—pushing the desk against the window, pressing the screen out, and opening the frame as wide as it would go so that the smoke would dissipate into the night with no questions asked. He had an economics paper to finish, and yet another translation of *The Odyssey* to work through. The first was why he was smoking. The latter was why he lived.

His father, Mr. George R. Barnes Senior, head derivatives trader of Barrings Bank, and all around odious human being, didn’t seem to consider a major in Classical Civilization with a minor in Latin a reason to live, so much as he considered it a personal failing.

Be that as it may, Bucky had never actually considered not following his gut feeling on the matter. He sucked in another breath full of green, exquisite nonchalance, and stared at the flickering lights across the street.

It was Thursday evening, and Thursday evenings were for studying. This, as everyone knew, was so that Friday and Saturday, and, if the will so demanded, Sunday, were left completely free for banality.

Excess.

The sort of sentience that came of far too many drugs and just enough alcohol.

He wondered what Steve was up to.

He didn’t need to concern himself with this thought for long, as the door to their shared dormitory bedroom was suddenly and ferociously thrown inward with a loud yelp of boyish laughter.

“Yes, of course they’re here, would I ever lead you astray?” Steve shouted as he entered, joyous and flushed in the way that boys were flushed after physical exertion, or sports practice, or merely living.

Bucky looked away, focusing on the thin, rolled paper at his lips as it crumbled into ash. He listened to the other boys, teenagers on the cusp of manhood, following their king and weaving through the small room. They were resplendent in their hideous Coogi sweaters, their perfectly pressed Dockers, their soft leather boat shoes, and their matching rich boy tans.

It frequently came to this. Forced entry into one’s most personal of spaces without so much as a thought. One of them guffawed loudly, and Bucky turned back for a moment to track the boy’s outstretched finger across the room to land on the print of Fuseli’s *The Nightmare*.

Bucky’s mouth quirked upwards--a grin of dominance, a mockery of a dare.

“What the fuck, man,” one of them exclaimed. “What in the ever living fuck, Steve?”

Steve just shrugged, glanced at Bucky in a momentary lapse of confidence, then, just as quickly, turned back to the mob of boys at his feet with a tip of his head. “It’s my roommate’s,” he said with
surety, with the hasty necessity of one not wanting to be judged.

“What the fuck?” one of the many repeated.

“Leave it, Sean,” Steve said, warning in his tone.

“No,” Sean said, his nose wrinkling. “What’s your deal, man?” he aimed towards Bucky. His own sweater was a woven masterpiece of browns, taupes, and beiges—perfectly, perfunctorily average.

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Nightmares, man,” he drawled, in perfect imitation. “Blood sucking, flesh devouring, chaos of the soul. Mortal fucking terror.” He sucked in again, and exhaled quickly letting the smoke bubble out around his face-- not holding in the taste anymore, merely desiring the effect of ghostly imperviousness. He didn’t blink.

“What. The. Fuck?”

Bucky turned to Steve. “Don’t you jerk-offs need English classes to graduate or something? The vocabulary of your minions is shockingly sparse.”

“Jesus Christ, Steve,” Sean Shit Sweater griped. “You drew the short end of the stick on fucking roomates.”

Steve half saluted towards Bucky, his eyes a murky, disastrous blue, and they all turned to leave again. There was a CD clutched within his grip now, something pulled from his massive binder of music that was now zipped up again and placed directly on top of his pillow on the top bunk.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “See ya, roomie.”

Steve ushered the mob out of the room, closing the door behind him entirely too gentle, horrifyingly polite. Bucky took another drag on his cigarette and his fingers drifting casually along the edge of the windowsill.

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There were many things to be done on a Friday night at eleven P.M. as the moonlight basked in its hard-won hour of secrets.

If you were Steven Grant Rogers, captain of the varsity soccer team, member of the Dean’s list, golden haired, blue eyed, perfect American idol, you’d be jogging on the treadmill in the weight room of the Palladium Athletic Center—a lecture from this morning’s Organic Chem class playing on repeat in your ears from the Sony Cassette Walkman perched haphazardly on the band of your Nike shorts.

If you were Bucky Barnes, you’d be half naked, leather pants tight at your waist, leather chest harness buckled tightly across your chest, hair curling and sticking to the back of your neck. You’d be thrumming your fingertips on your knees hard enough to make some sort of off kilter beat and chain smoking out the window of a ghastly yellow Chevy Caprice cab.

You’d also be doing your best to ignore the questioning looks from the cabbie that were desperately trying to penetrate the reason for leather, sweat, and copious amounts of eyeliner through the rear view mirror.

Bucky caught the glance for a moment and raised an eyebrow. “Wanna come with?” he intoned, lazily.
The cabbie quickly looked back at the road.

Weekdays were for monotony—cigarettes smoked at the screen window, hastily taken notes during lectures, and not so hastily taken naps against the large oak trees that sprouted in the quad. Rinse and repeat.

Weekends were for destruction and music. The salt of the earth. Fuel for future nightmares.

Bucky grinned as the cab pulled up to the curb. He hastily shoved bills across the console with the nonchalance that came of decades of having more than enough money and darted out the side door.

The street smelled of garbage, of piss, ever so slightly of old fish, and most certainly of bad decisions. He inhaled deeply, sucking the hand rolled cigarette down to his very fingertips. Then he dropped the butt at his feet, making sure to smudge it out on the cold concrete. This was something he prided himself on—his edge, his rebellious youth incarnate. Smoking cigarettes was an “asinine activity” and was a “ridiculously juvenile way to rebel” and “gives the tabloids even more fodder on the Barnes family for no good reason.” Smoking hand rolled cigarettes was also an “asinine activity” and was also a “ridiculously juvenile way to rebel” and most certainly “gives the tabloids even more fodder on the Barnes family for no good reason” but it was also “exotic”, and made him “look dangerously sexy”, and therefore an activity in which he was more than willing to gravitate towards.

He walked down the dirty alley then, stepping over broken pallets and nudging by a sleeping, and very homeless, teenager, before he turned right at a rather innocuous looking door. The burst of bass was barely contained here—though there was no melody to be heard, the thumping of the sound was quick to travel up his feet, directly along the path to his heart. Bucky knocked three times, waited a moment, then knocked twice more.

A moment later, the heavy door swung outward releasing a heavy bass beat into the New York streets. Bucky nodded his thanks at the bouncer—a large man, clad in the indiscernible black of bouncer standard—then he descended into the bowels of the club.

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The air inside was thick with smoke and chaos, making it hard to see. Hard to hear. Bucky felt his way through the press of bodies and the stink of exertion and, somewhere along the way, someone palmed something into his open hand. Bucky was quick to close his fingers around the pill, then, without even looking, brought it to his mouth and swallowed. It could be any number of things here, but, in the most likely of scenarios, it was ecstasy. He tasted the faint bitterness on his tongue as he swallowed, then moved further into the crowd and started dancing, started grinding against other willing participants, started to fade into the rave. Sure enough, after a bit of time, movement started to slow around him. Colors were more vivid, the press of flesh against him as he moved through the thick clumping of bodies was somehow more solid and yet full of ethereal lightness in a way that completely contradicted the logical reasoning and physics of regular, empty life. He closed his eyes and let it take him, sweeping him under, razing the emptiness in his chest and filling him with intoxicating and corpulent electronic beat.

Bucky smiled, blinked a few times, and started to jump.

It didn’t take long for someone to run a finger down the back of his neck, and Bucky turned in time to see the stranger pull back with a grin as he licked the offending digit. Tasting sweat. Tasting musk. Tasting Bucky.

Bucky shivered and pushed forward, grabbing the man’s hand and pressing it to the buckled strap across his bare chest. Bucky’s heartbeat was strong enough to pulsate through his entire body and he
jerked with it, letting it ride him and control him; feeding the energy of it back to the other body. Fingernails scratched rivulets against his chest, and Bucky moaned in pleasure. There was something so forbidden and so obscenely consummate in the touch of another body while high. It was a feeling of freedom he could never hope to emulate outside of the clubs.

A feeling of freedom he spent his days yearning for.

“Richard,” the man yelled into Bucky’s right ear.

Bucky laughed—a bubbling sound that burst from his lips as soon as it emerged. He laughed again and watched the sound float above him for a moment before popping once more. “Dick!” he shouted.

Richard laughed at that as well, but his hand moved and gripped Bucky tightly around his left forearm. “Richard,” he yelled once more. There was something more colorful about the delivery of the name this time. Now it was tinged with fervor, with heat. Richard began to pull him towards the back of the club.

Bucky followed him, obliging in every way, until they came to a black curtain, far behind the stage that the DJ was set up on. Richard looked him over once, and Bucky nodded—the barest of affirmations, but positive reinforcement nonetheless. He knew exactly what happened in this hallway. This was why he’d come.

Richard grunted once and pushed aside the curtain. They were funneled down a long walkway, lined with dark doors. The music was still ominously loud, still jarring and hopelessly unceasing, but now there were other sounds that fit into the beat. Moans, and yelps, and groans, and a ceaseless, unending thumping. The smell was stronger here too—resentfully pungent and almost entirely male.

Richard found an open space at the wall and shoved Bucky hard against it.

The cement scratched at his bare skin and he groaned in the pleasure of the harsh cold against his back.

“On your knees,” Richard ground out.

“Seriously?” Bucky snipped back. “That’s all you want?”

The backhand to his face wasn’t completely unexpected, though he hadn’t pegged the man for the violent type. Bucky raised a hand to his nose, and it came away wet. He regarded the dark, viscous liquid with a knowing smile, caught Richard’s eyes, then pushed his fingers into his mouth and licked them clean as he sank to his knees.

“That’s more like it,” Bucky muttered.

“Shut up.”

And though Bucky considered himself quite experienced at snarky comebacks, (and though there was a small part of him desperate to burst forth and punch the shit out of the asshole standing above him), he obliged and let the warmth and pleasure of submitting to another man fill him with its heady inebriation.

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He had to try the key in the lock several times before he actually got it to click open. This was apparently as much stealth as his wasted self could possibly muster. He kicked through the door with
all the grace of a wildebeest in heat, and as it slammed closed again behind him, Steve shot up from the top bunk, rubbing sleep and shock out of his eyes.

“What the…where’s…I…”

Bucky giggled. “Your lucidity is abnormally astounding on this fine eve!” He opened his arms and twirled around once to drive his point home even further, but proceeded to tangle himself in the cording of the small desk lamp.

The resulting crash as it hit the tile floor was...astounding.

Steve reached over the bunk and fumbled for a moment, then came up with a pair of glasses, perched haphazardly on his head.

“Glasses!” Bucky yelped. “You’re adorable!”

Then, just as quickly as the now-shattered desk lamp, he fell over.

Steve ran his hands through tousled blond hair. “Again, Bucky?” he groaned. “I don’t…I…Is there blood on your face?”

Bucky just shrugged against the tile. “Rough night,” he said with a grin.

Then, as though he’d had plenty of time to study the room for any other potential threats and found it lacking, Steve petulantly stripped his glasses off his head once more, placing them carefully back in their proper place, and threw himself back on the mattress, pulling the comforter up over his head. “If you have to puke, the trashcan under my desk is empty. And for fucks sake, please shower. You smell like sex and shit and fucking horrible decisions.”

Bucky laughed, ignoring the sick swirl of nausea in his stomach. “It’s not like this isn’t a common occurrence, Mother.” His voice was lilting and swirling in his ears in a most delightfully pleasing way, and Bucky closed his eyes to enjoy the sound as it echoed back to him. “I won’t need to vomit.” He grabbed at the desk chair, leaning against it as he stood, and allowed the swaying around him to envelope him in its mind altering bend for two straight minutes. Then, as though perfectly on cue, he promptly reached for the wastebasket underneath the first desk and puked.

“Oh,” he said, staring at the mess of paper and notes and garbage, now coated in stomach matter. “Your desk is…the second one. Right.”

Steve rolled over and tugged the blankets even tighter around himself.

Carrying his precious receptacle with him, Bucky walked a few steps to the small space between the two desks. He looked up at his poster of *The Nightmare*—reached a hand up to smooth the corner edge of the paper back down against the wall. It sprung up once more, unsatisfied with its particular relationship with the current splat of sticky tack. The demon creature glared down at him and then dug itself even deeper into the sleeping woman’s chest.

Bucky knew he was still high, still drunk, but somewhere in that imagined movement, there was a metaphor for his life. Bucky was positive that metaphorical tug had been the initial reason behind buying the thing, rather than any sort of emotional pull towards Swiss Romanticist painters.

He looked down past the bin, to the pretentiously tidy second desk. All pencils and pens were sorted into a single New York Giants mug that was pushed up against the corner. There was an assortment of textbooks, all stacked neatly against the cinderblock wall. The only thing out of place was a single cassette tape, with an off-center, grimy looking label titled: *House Mix 1*
“You secretly into clubbin’ too, Stevie boy?” Bucky drawled.

“Please shut the fuck up and shower,” Steve mumbled from the bunk.

His voice was thick with sleep again, and there was a subtle irritation there now. Bucky watched him a moment more—watched the comforter move with each inhale and move again upon each exhale. The world was silent but for the thrumming of Bucky’s heart—still loud, still impossible, still caged.

Another wave of nausea rose and he threw up again.

“Shower,” he mumbled, bending down awkwardly to grab the pair of sweatpants he’d been wearing earlier, then pulling the towel off the back of his desk chair.

“Shower,” Steve muttered after him.

Bucky pocketed his keys once more, then slipped out the door again. This time he was entirely aware of the swing of it closing, and, not wanting to bother Steve anymore than he already had, he carefully caught it just before it latched, allowing the lock to click almost silently before letting go.
He opened his eyes.

The floor was awash in light and movement and smoke and sound,

and an intense familiarity that he couldn’t shake.

Déjà vu.

Bucky frowned.

The music spoke through the pavement, against the soles of his shoes, up through his black leather pants, alighting on every nerve and hair follicle as it traveled all the way to his heart. His head bobbed rhythmically, suddenly full of learned and practiced fervor, but still he frowned.

This was familiar. This was entirely too familiar.

He looked down at his hands, and the grimace spread even further as his eyes lit on the tattooed patterns on his wrist. Four lines, uneven, sporadic, black ink but faded as though they’d been a part of him for longer than memory.

*There should be three,* his mind supplied, unequivocally ironic.

Still, the fingers of his right hand traced along the edges of the scoring of the ink, imperceptible grooves against his skin but nonetheless extant. Four.

He ran into the back of a taller man, who turned quickly. He was young and blond and beach tan and full of neon and glow. He had gloriously blue eyes that sparkled in the lights but did not glitter so much as narrow intensely and matte, and that was a sign of weakness.

The man shoved at him. “Fuck off, fag!”

Bucky’s eyebrows raised at that. He shook his head once, trying to dislodge the fading remnants of déja vu, then stepped forward and shoved back. Harder.

The man went flying into the crowd, and suddenly there was cheering and swearing and raucous insulting noise, and Bucky had launched himself on top of some homophobic asshole who was most likely too fucked up on shit to even know what was spewing from his mouth and was now beating the shit out of his face. His knuckles hurt and dark liquid dripped everywhere—on the floor, on his chest, spattered across the faded lines of his wrist. Still, the guy was fighting back, rolling and cursing and grabbing Bucky by the leather straps at his chest, tumbling forward and now Bucky’s back was to the floor and heavy weight lay atop of him.

Everything slowed for a moment as though suspended in plasma, and Bucky looked down at those leather straps and smiled.


Home.

“Fight, Fight, Fight!” The crowd was chanting, and just like that, the moment was lost. Gone. Forever swallowed by the life affirming beat that went on and on and on.
A heavy boot slammed into Bucky’s ribs and he yelped silently; his voice was completely gone, breath stolen. He shoved the guy off and made it to his knees, gasping for air before two more ravers were on top of him, scrabbling and kicking and yelling.

“Fuck you,” Bucky gasped out, his voice finally returning. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you…”

His fists kept seeking targets even as someone pulled him from the group, wrapping heavy arms around him and yanking him out of the fray.

“Fuck you,” he chanted, angry and hurt and bursting with malicious bad energy.

The beat stopped, and Bucky looked up long enough to see the pulsing lights quit and the overhead lighting come on. A lone man stood on the stage, leather dog mask askew, knee still ticking in time with some invisible bass line. There was something eerily familiar here, and Bucky fought harder against the bouncers, fingers slippery with someone else’s blood, hair matted with sweat and fury.


The night shimmered once and then faded—everything grey, everything colorless. “What the fuck?” Bucky yelled, and the sound was cavernous, all encompassing.

There was nothing else, only frozen, unmoving people. Bucky untangled himself from the arms of the still-as-stone bouncer and walked over to the frigid silence. His tennis shoes squelched against the concrete, turning a darker shade of black as they soaked up blood. He knelt down in the center of the tangle—pressed a finger against the forehead of the man who’d started it all, and pushed.

It was a computer effect, a frozen nodule of a moment, excess incarnate. Bucky shivered.

Up on the stage, the lone DJ stepped forward and removed his mask. “Oh, Buck.”

It was disappointment. It was fear. It was 40 years of memories pushed into one horrific nightmare.

“Steve?” Bucky whispered.

_Do you want this?

It was 40 years of sound.

The walls disintegrated, and Bucky tripped on the liquid at his feet, and then there was nothing but blackness and pain.
The season had changed. Instead of the steady, rhythmic excess of sound from students crossing the grounds and crowding the busy New York streets, there was only a hush of wind that buffeted against heavy down coats and scarfed throats. There wasn’t time for small talk outdoors now that the first snow had fallen, and for Bucky, this occurrence ushered in the beginnings of the darkness, the gloom, the yearly descent into ubiquitous and unsympathetic depression.

It also ushered in an actual roommate. Now that the soccer season had officially ended with a staggering, but not altogether unpredictable upset, Steve was around almost constantly. Just as quickly as he’d risen to an impressively inebriating fame amongst the student body during the fall season, Steve had been dropped. There were no longer hordes of students acting as escort for him to each and every one of his classes. No late night phone calls, no knocks at the dorm room door from doe-eyed girls looking for the famous ‘captain’.

Much to Bucky’s surprise, it didn’t seem to bother the guy. He wasn’t entirely sure he’d be able to shrug off the sudden drop in popularity with as much easy nonchalance were he in the same position. But Steve genuinely didn’t seem to mind.

Bucky finally brought it up one evening, as the snow began to fall silently outside of their window.

“Eh. Comes with the territory,” Steve murmured. Then he actually looked up from the open book in front of him and the pages of furiously scribbled notes. “Sorry…I’m probably totally in your space now, yeah? Didn’t think about the fact that you were used to it being pretty empty up in here.”

“What?” Bucky’s brow furrowed in confusion.

Steve just shrugged, pressing his glasses back on his nose and smiling sheepishly. “I just mean…I’m sure it’s been like not even having a roommate for the past few months. What with training and all… I just did most of my work in the library because it was closer to the gym. Sorry if I’m bugging you.”

Bucky stared. “You…literally live here?” he settled on. It sounded ridiculous, and he scoffed, turning back to his dresser where he started rifling through the drawers in search of vice.

It was Saturday night.

His hand closed around the ziploc bag in the top drawer, and he quickly reached for a few of the pills inside, letting his fingers graze over the sharply defined apple imprint. “I need a cigarette,” he muttered.

“Smoking kills,” Steve spoke, bright, and cheerful, eyes glittering an impossible shade of blue behind thick lenses.

“So does pollution,” Bucky shot back. He moved over to his own desk where he grabbed the small packet of rolling papers and went to work, fingers moving with practiced ease as he pinched out a small amount of tobacco and lined it up perfectly. “You want one?” He wasn’t sure why he was offering. He just didn’t want to be…a dick.

Steve laughed, and it was a buoyant thing that sprung further into the air than should be possible.
“My parents would kill me.”

There was a tug, deep within Bucky’s gut, indicative of a certain emotion that he most assuredly should not be feeling towards his roommate. He scowled. “Are your parents here?”

Steve just shook his head, and Bucky quickly swept the remnants of tobacco from his desk back into the bag. “Right. Well, see ya,” he called as he turned the knob on the door and let it swing outward.

The door was almost completely closed when Steve spoke up again. “You’re going out tonight?”

Bucky poked his head back in, the paper already starting to dampen in his mouth as the cigarette hung lazily. “It’s Saturday.”

“Right,” Steve said. “Hey, just…call the dorm phone if you need anything, you know? I’ll be here. If you ever…” he shrugged again, looking almost embarrassed. “Just if you need help getting back or something.”

“Yes, Mother,” Bucky drawled. Then he took off down the hall at a brisk pace, ready for the burst of cold New York air to mingle with the surge of nicotine in his lungs.

The door swung closed with a bang.

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He knocked three times, waited a beat, then another two.

The heavy metal door opened with a creaking moan, and the wild, thrumming bass of the music was released into the streets.

He handed over his ID to the bouncer and slouched up against the wall in an effort to look bored. The furious motion of his heel tapping against the floor would not stop and was entirely too telling of his current craving for another hit, but the bouncer just looked back at him and motioned him down the steps with a simple flick of his fingers. Bucky snagged his license back without even a second glance. The booming bass was perfection, was utter tumultuous madness, and Bucky paused for the barest of moments around the corner to swallow another pill before pushing aside the curtain and entering the frenzy.

This weekly routine varied only in the up and down swings of his desperation for human contact. Sometimes he came only to dance, to move, to burn with energy. Tonight, he desperate for companionship, and as the music sank into his skin, raising his flesh in otherworldly bumps that skittered and cavorted in carnal glee up and down his bare arms, he watched for a certain type of someone.

“Skitter,” he murmured, under his breath. The taste of the word was impeccable.

“Dude!” a young man in an unreasonably white wife beater answered.

“Skitter!” Bucky called again, thrilled to taste the syllables again, thrilled that his search had concluded that quickly. His head bobbed up and down with the endless motion of a tidal current.

“Skitter! We skitter! We are skittering!” The man twirled then, his feet tangling in a complicated array of dexterity and inebriation, before stumbling to Bucky’s side and pushing against him.

They held each other up for a mere minute, or perhaps an eternity. It was hard to tell when one song faded into the next and faded further into the third and faded invisibly into something else entirely.
new. At one point, he licked into Bucky’s ear and yelled, “Kyle!” And Bucky nodded in pleasure before yelling back, “Bucky!”

This was the essence of life, the stripping away of all things of import and melting into the basest human desires with each other. In the morning, the clubgoers would all roll over and strip off their latex and their leather and their plastic coated bracelets. They’d cradle their heads against open palms and grimace as the sunlight shone splendid, and painfully bright against their reddened eyes. Then they’d move on, hordes of young professionals, students, teenagers hiding behind expensive wardrobes and fake IDs and charismatic facades.

It was in the evenings that they shared a single secret: that the meaning of life drifted just within reach and was sometimes even able to be grasped if there was enough alcohol, enough pills, and if the music was just loud enough to forget that the sunlight existed.

“You know about the bottom floor?” Kyle shouted in Bucky’s ear.

In truth, it wasn’t so much a bottom floor as it was a lower level of disgustingly fluid covered rooms, all attached by one disgustingly fluid covered hallway. Though the entirety of the establishment was one disgusting fluid inspection away from a complete shut down, the state of the basement was a known integer in the equation the wild ravers who frequented the bar, and none of them would ever complain. It was a space filled with clandestine magic—a space where anything could happen.

Bucky snagged an arm around Kyle’s neck and pulled him even closer, biting at his earlobe and grinning at the gasp of air. “Fuck, yes,” Bucky said, and Kyle all but dragged him through the many grinding couples who lined the hallway.

It just so happened that there was a free room this evening, and that was where they went, pushing through the door in a wild tangle of arms and legs.

“Nothing but the best,” Kyle quipped, tripping over the curled up edge of the brown carpeting. Bucky laughed uproariously, as though the remark had been the absolute epitome of clever.

The strobe lights still flickered, reflected time and time and time again against the shiny, lacquered walls of the club, until they were diffuse and ghostly but still eternal in their dancing. Once behind the curtain, there was a dampness to the sound—it wasn’t acoustically less, so much as softer, more rounded in its presence, allowing for the sharpness of words to permeate at a more reasonable volume.

“You’re so fucking hot,” Kyle said, thrusting Bucky up against the far wall and pressing into him. There was no space between them, and every touch was a shiver of electric heat.

“Fuck’s sake,” Bucky moaned, as he fisted a hand through Kyle’s long, blond hair, pulling the man’s head down to his level and forcing their lips together. It was a kiss of sharp edges and violence, and there had never been anything so potent as the taste of a stranger’s tongue in Bucky’s mouth, sucking at his very soul.

Kyle moaned and the vibration from the sound traveled from Bucky’s tongue, to his throat, his chest, his abdomen, and his desperately hard cock. Kyle’s hands were all over him now—nothing slow, nothing romantic, just hard, rough, stripped of humanity.

He loved it—loved being taken apart, pulled like taffy in every direction. He loved being ordered around, surrendering his right to choice. Sometimes it was the drugs that did this, caused this unbearable itch to peel the flesh from someone’s bones in a wanton display of lust and sink deeply
Sometimes it was the unfettered, skeletal grasp of depression.

Tonight, he was banking on it being the drugs, because an unending joy danced and prickled and fought for dominance from the confines of his skull. He pushed back even harder and bent his head to Kyle’s neck. The skin was taut with energy and damp with sweat, and it tasted salty, and dirty, and almost, ever so slightly bitter.

Kyle nudged his knee up into Bucky’s cock and the resulting press of touch was almost too much. Groaning deeply, Bucky rolled his hips forward, wanting that contact more than anything. He sunk his teeth gently into Kyle’s neck, pulling and sucking his way through Kyle’s wanton moans, not letting up until he tasted blood.

He was feral now—an animal, a wolf, succumbing to techno beat and the inebriating aesthetic pull of tight leather pants. Kyle’s hands were wrapped around Bucky’s hips, pushing his pants down, shoving and tugging and grabbing with fingers and nails sharp enough to leave marks.

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky swore. “Let me taste you, fuck, let me—”

“Turn around,” Kyle ordered, and the sudden hardness in his voice made Bucky’s legs start to tremble.

He turned against the wall, and Kyle roughly shoved him forward. Bucky’s pants were around his ankles now and they were tight: like rope, like cuffs, like inescapable shame. Bucky craved this part: when the shame of it all made his cheeks turn red with heat. Biting back a moan of pleasure, Bucky swayed on his feet as Kyle dropped to his knees behind him. The sudden hot breath on the back of Bucky’s legs was almost enough to make him come. He quickly palmed a hand to his own cock and squeezed, the pain and frustration overwhelming him.

Wrapping his hands firmly around his hips, Kyle pressed his thumbs hard into Bucky’s ass. He separated the flesh with ease, then pushed his face against skin and kissed at the backs of Bucky’s thighs before licking up.

“Fuck,” Bucky groaned. “Fuck, fuck, I’m gonna come, fuck—”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Kyle ordered, and suddenly his hand was wrapped around Bucky’s cock, even tighter, more unforgiving, and more painful than the bright burn of sunlight. Bucky cried out.

“You’ll come when I tell you to come,” Kyle said, then he licked again, faster, and deeper, and with an impossible confidence.

Bucky’s legs began to shake.

Kyle’s right fist was still wrapped tightly around Bucky’s cock, but his left hand began to wander upward, stroking flesh, scratching on smooth skin. Fingers closed round Bucky’s neck as Kyle stood up behind him and threatened the barest hint of a squeeze at his windpipe.

“Please,” Bucky begged. “Please.”

“I’ve got you,” Kyle whispered, lining up behind him.

He leaned in, pressing slowly and exquisitely and with so much utter perfection that Bucky started to cry.
“It’s the fucking drugs,” he sobbed.

“Fucking drugs,” Kyle repeated, movement rising in pace, hand starting to move against Bucky’s cock.

“I can’t hold on,” Bucky said.

“Fucking drugs,” Kyle said again.

He bent his head against Bucky’s back and his smile burned against Bucky’s shoulder bone.

“I’m gonna—shit, Steve, I’m gonna—”

Kyle tapped him gently against his thigh. “Kyle,” he whispered as a reminder, with no malice. They were only two of millions of bodies, the product of an eternity of procreation, and they were lost in a sea of anonymous names. “You can come now.” He pushed forward suddenly and nipped at Bucky’s neck.

The last thing Bucky remembered from the night was bliss. Coming and shaking and spurting in the darkness of the bottom floor.

***

“Bucky!”

He groaned and rolled over, firmly ignoring the peel of stickiness on his leather encased legs.

“Bucky, come on.”

The voice was clouded, and faded, and full of a distant peppiness that belied adequate amounts of coffee, ample amounts of sleep, and definitely not ample amounts of boundless debauchery.

“Go away,” Bucky mumbled, pushing his face even further under his pillow.

“Bucky!”

Suddenly, the comfort of the pillow was blown back by the flying force of a paperback book.

“What the fuck?” Bucky said groggily, wiping the sleep from his eyes. He held up the worn copy of Hemingway in between his pointer finger and thumb. “Nice taste, jackass.”

“You berated me at 3 am for at least twenty minutes to make sure you were up by seven. Karma’s a bitch, isn’t it?”

Bucky peered out from his dark cave on the bottom bunk. Steve stood there, dressed for a run, looking chivalrous as usual, though a reddening flush was beginning to creep up his neck, showing his irritation. He walked forward and held out his hand.

Pressing the worn copy of *Islands in the Stream* into Steve’s open palm, Bucky watched as he closed his fingers gently around the binding. “Yeah. Take good care of that. Looks loved. Looks like it doesn’t want to be chucked at unsuspecting roommates.”

“Ha, ha,” Steve replied, less laughter, and more a mocking sort of statement—rebellious and beautiful. “You wanted to be up. Get up. And please, for fuck’s sake, shower.”

“Is my unsightly odor offending your delicate sensibilities, Hemingway boy?”
Steve merely set the book down on his desk and sat down to tie his sneakers.

“Fine.” Bucky sat up, sultry and full of excess, and not quite as leisurely smacked his head against the wire frame of the upper bunk. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Serves you right,” Steve muttered from across the room. “What on Earth do you need to be up for on a Sunday morning anyhow?”

“Church,” Bucky responded primly. “My piety knows no bounds.”

Steve just looked at him for a moment. “I don’t…” he started. “I don’t know if I should believe you or not?”

He looked adorable. His hair was still fluffy from sleep, his eyes were curious and questioning and impossibly blue. Bucky stared resolutely at his incredibly foul leather pants, and silently berated himself for falling for his All American Roommate.

Shrugging, Steve deftly attaching the Sony Walkman to the elastic band of his shorts and pressed play. “Shower,” he called out again as the door swung closed.

“ Fucking church,” Bucky muttered.

***

It was Barnes family tradition to be present at every Sunday morning mass together. Even now, in college, Bucky was not excused from following this particular custom with the prompt and well-dressed savagery inherent to generations of his family. His father always sent a car to wait outside the dormitory hall every Sunday at 7:30 am sharp, and every Sunday at 7:31 am, Bucky wound his way through the abandoned chairs and vacant halls of the building, plopping himself with some sense of unrest and a large sense of finality into the back seat of the leather encased interior.

Today was no different, despite his prior night of blissful titillation.

The massive stone sprawl of St. Ignatius of Loyola cast a large shadow on the busy intersection of Park Avenue and East 84th. Bucky stepped out of the limo into this dark display of godliness, then leaned down to call his thanks up to the driver. He shut the door, careful to gently lift the handle latch and push quietly.

Generally speaking, the Good Lord was not fond of loud noises.

Generally speaking, Bucky had already ticked off enough boxes on the ‘Should Be Considered for Eternal Damnation’ side of his personal checklist. He wasn’t taking any further chances.

The building was massive enough that, though there were hundreds upon hundreds who would be attending mass, it still only looked as if a handful of people were ascending the stone steps. Bucky joined this group, and as the door closed behind him with a shiver of dull sound, he walked quickly into the sanctuary, knelt in perfunctory righteous testimony to the sacrifice, then slid silently into one of the long back pews.

“Cutting it a little close there, Bucko,” remarked a tall, elegant teenager next to him.

Rebecca was perfectly made up, her hair tucked into a severe twist and pinned at the back of her head. She wore a white dress, a white hat, white shoes that probably cost as much as Bucky’s textbooks for the semester, and, most noticeably, a sneer of abhorrent loathing that was in direct correlation to the amount of desire she possessed for sitting through Sunday mass.
“Blame Dad,” Bucky growled. “The new driver got lost. Apparently NYU is far too philistine a location for one such as him to have familiarized himself with.”

“Oh, and feeling quite sorry for ourselves this morning as well! I’d at least pretend to offer a sympathetic ear, but this is hardly astray from the norm.” Rebecca turned towards him, casting the cutting smile entirely in his direction.


A row of older women three pews forward turned and glared, eyes flashing with a desire for instant repentance. Bucky waved cheerfully.

“Both of you, behave,” shushed the woman sitting to Rebecca’s left.

Winnifred Barnes was the perfect counterpart to George Barnes Sr. In every way imaginable she exuded grace, goodwill, beauty, maturity, and boundless intelligence. She unfortunately also exuded an appearance of graceful aging, as most humans were accustomed to, and it was for this reason that George Barnes Sr. kept a myriad of mistresses on call to keep him entertained. No matter how much she may hold a certain propensity for acuity, in his father’s eyes, having wrinkles would simply not do.

This was of no consequence to Winnifred, who kept her own lineup of men privy to her every need. She had money, she had wealth, she had fortune, and George Barnes Sr. was particularly heavy of gut lately and therefore made any sort of sex a regularly uncomfortable experience.

All of this was information that Bucky wished he didn’t know, but holiday soirees at the Barnes residence not only involved copious amounts of alcohol, but also numerous, talkative familial breakdowns after hours.

Bucky nodded in quiet assent towards his mother, pulling out the small leather cushion from beneath the pew in front of him and kneeling down.

When he was a child, during this pre-service meditation, he used to avidly consider what Rosa, their fantastically talented chef, might be cooking them for dinner. He had also taken to considering his baseball card collection and pondering his latent desire to quit the swim team and instead do something useful, like roam the neighborhood alleys while wielding a giant bat and screaming ‘Can You Dig It?’ at the top of his prepubescent lungs.

When he was a teenager, he was more prone to begging God’s forgiveness, considering the dark eternity of a life in hell, and frequently clutching a rosary so tightly that it left indentations in the palm of his hand through half of the mass.

Now, he knelt in quiet castigation, pressing a hand against his forehead as if praying might suddenly imbue him with the power to erase a hangover, and let his mind beat the phrase ‘I’m sorry, forgive me’ over and over again against the walls of his skull.

After he’d finished this internal reflection of despair and loathing, he scooted back into the harsh crease of the pew and turned towards his mother and sister. “Where’s Dad?”

“Shh!” their mother hissed.

“Drunk,” Rebecca said.
“Rebecca Lynn Barnes!” Winifred was loud enough this time that the paper program in Rebecca’s hands whispered in movement.

An insistent push of a newly formed migraine assailed Bucky’s temples.

“Spending money?” Rebecca modified, her voice sweet and pert.

“Keep your voice down, young lady,” their mother whispered.

The old women looked back again and glared, all in perfect synchronization, as though they’d practiced their entire lives for this moment.

Rebecca shrugged, then turned to Bucky and whispered, “then probably whores.”

“Lovely,” Bucky said. Then he leaned back in the pew, closed his eyes, and let the endless, monotonous slurry of words from the sermon wash over him.

When it came time for communion, he quietly followed Winnifred and Rebecca down the long aisle of the church. The stained glass reflected sunlight down on the edges of the pews and the parishioners who sat there were bathed in a colorful rainbow glow. When they reached the front, all three knelt simultaneously and waited for the priest. Winnifred and Rebecca received with a simple chorus of ‘amen.’ Bucky merely crossed his hands and laid them against his chest. Then they stood, and followed the somber procession back to their slotted seats.

As the service let out with a chorus of bells and the obnoxious, discordant ring of the organist hitting an obscenely wrong note during the final hymn, Rebecca grabbed his arm.

“Brunch?”

Bucky shook his head. “I’ve got homework to catch up on.”

“It will only be an hour, Bucky!”

“I’ve got to go to confession?” he tried instead.

Rebecca rolled her eyes, then pulled him closer, leaning forward to whisper in his ear. “I don’t know what you’re punishing yourself for. You haven’t received communion in eight months and Mother and Father are asking questions. Asking me questions. As if I know, or care!” She let him go and stepped back, regarding him with something akin to judgement. “Your hair looks good. Very Curt Kirkwood.”

Bucky ignored the comment on his appearance and combed his hair back instead, out of his eyes.

“Where was Dad?”

“He’s dealing with a lot at the company right now,” she said. “Just tell me what’s up.”

“I’m dealing with a lot at the company right now,” Bucky said, mocking and irritated. He moved passed her with a gently nudge, friendly, but very clearly ending the conversation.

“You’re coming home for Christmas, right dear?” Winnifred called after him.

Bucky paused, then turned and gave his mother a quick hug and perfunctory kiss on the cheek. “Of course. I’ll be there. See you for mass next week, Ma.” He waved to Rebecca, who crossed her arms and stared stonily after him, then pushed his way out the front door and down the steps into the chilly East Side neighborhood.
There was something more going on, something Winnifred wasn’t saying, something he could see in the fine wrinkles and dark circles under her eyes. His father was the one who demanded they all attend together, his father was the one who yelled and threatened and became impressively incensed at any absence from the Sunday morning ritual. It would take nothing short of a disaster to keep him from the ‘glory of the Lord’, and Bucky wasn’t particularly keen on finding what that might be.

Especially over Christmas.

He watched as Winnifred and Rebecca came down the steps, their heels clinking at the stone, grasping each other’s arms and chattering—more like sisters than mother and daughter.

He allowed himself a moment to indulge the blooming loneliness that threatened to overtake him. Just a single moment.

Then, attempting to tamper down his dramatics, he turned the corner and walked down the street to the waiting limousine.
Chapter 5

He opened his eyes.

The floor was awash in light and movement and smoke and sound,

and sound,

and fucking sound.

“Oh, fuck this!” Bucky yelled.

A woman so small she might be considered ‘petite’, or even ‘scrawny,’ and most definitely ‘coke addict’ looked over at him and scowled.

Bucky raised two middle fingers, stuck out his tongue in a stunning display of juvenility, and watched her eyes widen before she turned and pushed her friends towards the gyrating crowd on the dance floor. Pressing the heels of his hands as deeply into his eye sockets as they would go, Bucky waited for that telltale spike of pain and hoped against hope that he’d snap out of it, out of the dream, out of whatever this was.

“You cool, man?”

Turning, he found another guy next to him—slightly shorter, but eyes just as feral, lips just as wild, arms just as neon. “Hey,” Bucky said. “Glad I’m getting more than one recurring character in this nightmare. Makes it easier to navigate.”

The guy’s eyes narrowed, confused, his black pupils swaying ever so slightly. “What drugs you on, man?” he finally asked.

“No fucking enough!” Bucky yelped, reaching back into his pocket, familiar with this portion of the dream, certain of what would happen next. He handed over a pill and watched Kandi Boy swallow.

“Hey, what’s your name?” Bucky yelled.

“Brandon!” the kid yelled back, jumping, moving, infernally abound with motion. “Wanna dance?”

“Nope!” Bucky yelled back. “Maybe next time!”

“Cool, man.” Flashing a peace sign and a beautifully disarming bright white smile, Brandon jerked away, movements brimming with excess energy.

Bucky swallowed his own pill, counted his five tattooed stripes with something akin to tolerance, then tilted his head back and screamed, “Steve!”

The crowd in front of him parted, allowing him a path through the insanity. He took it without question, his limbs lifting in ecstasy, his body sliding along the fantastical path to excess. Still he screamed, “Steve, Steve, Steve, Steve—”

“He’s not done with his set, jackass!” someone near him yelled, and just as suddenly, the ceiling opened up, coating the entire floor in candy-colored foam.

Screams of joy, and happiness, and blissful energy surrounded him, and Bucky opened his arms to it. The cold, bubbling wetness against his skin was perfect, a fizzing harmonious counterpoint to the
impossibly loud music. “Steve!”

The beat changed then, morphing into something new, something dangerous. A toxic bass overlaid with four syllables over and over.

“Do you want this?”

The crowd went wild, jumping in time with the cadence of the words, and Bucky’s heart stilled, even the drugs unable to stop him from the terrifying fear that this might be eternity.


“Do you want this?”

“Do you want this?”

“Do you want this?”

“Steve!” Bucky screamed into eternity. He was steps away from the stage, but the DJ above was still dancing, completely unphased by the commotion below. The song delved deeper into a subatomic bass and the vocals cut out.

“Steve, take your fucking break already!”

The man in the leather dog hood stopped bouncing momentarily and looked directly at Bucky. The eyehole cutouts were sharp and vicious, and through them, there was only glorious blue. Bucky’s heart was pounding against chest, brutal and desperate, and in that moment, he was powerless to the pull of Steve.

The way the song faded into house music was deft and practiced as Steve reached over his equipment, flipping switches left and right. It only took a minute, but Bucky was already throbbing with a need to wrap his arms around him before time stopped, before color faded, before he was sent back to waking life. Finally, Steve jumped off the back of the stage and flipped his hand in a clear motion. Follow, it said.

Follow me.

The beat continued, now a pre-recorded instrumental mix and followed Steve back to the hallway behind the stage, his heart fluttering with a tingling excitement. Steve stripped off the mask, and Bucky reached out, fingers barely whispering against prickle of the shaved sides of Steve’s head. His hand dropped, and he traced a line up his own forearm, past his shoulder and then down again across the single leather strap that buckled against his chest. Then, he raised a finger to his mouth and swallowed it, tasting strawberry flavored foam.

“Jesus Christ, Bucky,” Steve said, and suddenly they were pressed against the wall; boys, amorous in their desire, absent in their words, living for the moment that their mouths touched.

The kiss deepened into something more, something infinite in longing, before Bucky pushed him away gently, just far enough to see his eyes.

“You taste like strawberry,” Steve said. “Can I lick it off of you?”

Kneeling faster than Bucky could even answer, Steve’s tongue scraped against Bucky’s stomach, licking up the line of his ribs. Bucky groaned. “I’m too high for this shit, Steve.”
“When’s that ever been an issue?” he questioned, curiosity burning in his eyes.

“It’s not so much an issue as a statement. I’m fucked up out of my mind right now, and I don’t know when the hell the world is going to shutter closed. “I need answers before…this.” Bucky motioned with his hands at Steve’s wet face below him, coated in foam, delightfully pink and pert and everything Bucky wanted to taste.

Wanting nothing more than to sink to his knees and touch the curve of Steve’s neck, Bucky traced the line of his jaw to his mouth, tonguing every single one of the perfectly congruous stars that were outlined in ink, dark against his pale skin, and tasting his lips again, and again, and again.

Instead Steve stood and regarded him with a look of excitement. “Oh my god,” he said. “Do you remember?”

“Remember what?” Bucky replied, coy and delightful, and insidiously funny.

Steve’s face fell. “Nevermind.”

Smacking his shoulder with a laugh, Bucky said “I remember you. I remember meeting you here two nights ago. Same spot. I remember the music cutting out and the motionless freeze of everyone but you and me. I remember the color leaching from your skin, your shirt, your eyes. I remember pain. Then I remember doing it all over again.”

Steve’s eyes were blue fire, anticipatory gemstones in the flickering strobe.

“So please,” Bucky continued, suddenly serious. “Before this all goes to shit and I start the damn night over from the back of the club, please tell me if you know what’s happening.”

Leaning forward, Steve kissed him. This was chaste and benevolent, and not at all the wild sensation of a boy learning the taste of skin. It was simple and sad, and Bucky wanted to cry with the stillness of it.

Instead his body thrummed in anticipation—the drugs shooting through his system like an inferno. He pushed Steve away again, still gentle, still desperate for more. “Steve–”

“You’re dying, Bucky.”

“Do you want this?” the voice screamed.

A coldness prickled through his skin, raising goosebumps at his flesh. “What?”


The color drained around them and the silence was a tomb of weight.

“No, no, not yet, no, no, no!” Bucky screamed, and then there was nothing but blackness and pain.
“Welcome home, James!”

“Mara!” Bucky smiled as he allowed their housekeeper to gently strip away his outer coat, gloves, scarf, and hat.

“Wet,” she remarked, a glint in her eyes.

“Indubitably,” Bucky responded. “Strangely enough, the very air seems to be spitting moisture. December is it? Must be…snow.”

Mara laughed, and though it sounded slightly forced, she hung up his sodden things in the hall closet before smiling at him again and motioning down the hall. “They’re gathered in the library. Would you like a drink?”

“God, you absolute angel. Yes. Please.”

“Your father had me open his Hibiki 21 this evening to celebrate.”

Bucky winked. “Celebrate, huh? Nothing like a good old Christmastime family reunion to soften his narcissistic clutches on the liquor cabinet. That will do just fine. Three parts Hibiki, 1 part orange liqueur, and 1 part lemon juice, if you will.” He bowed then, ludicrous and shameless as if the entire evening were merely a performance foreshadowing a winning audition.

“Oh, James.” Mara frowned. “You know that will—”

“Actually, I’ll make it myself. In the library, you said?”

She sighed, defeated. “In the library,” she repeated, quieter this time. “It’s good to see you, James. I wish…” Her voice fell, searching and finding no syllable worth the expenditure of a breath.

Bucky reached forward and pulled her into a hug. “Sorry,” he whispered in her ear. Then he turned and walked towards the sitting room.

***

The fire had already been stoked to a heated fury—flames devouring the simple wooden logs with crackles of delightful frivolity. The room smelled of wood, and of pine, and of the cinnamon scented cones that were tucked in every corner of every shelf. It’s Christmas they proclaimed with frightening glee. Inhale and breathe our festivity!

Bucky made sure to glare purposefully at the offending decor before turning to the large granite trolley. This boasted copious amounts of liquor, mixers, ice, and, in a pure statement of irony, beautifully plump and shiny garnishes that had, of course, gone entirely untouched.

“James,” his father barked from the corner. “Hello.”

Ignoring him, Bucky went about resolutely mixing his drink within full view of George Barnes Senior. He poured two fingers of the $800 per bottle Hibiki into the shaker, shook with some level of ferocity, and watched with glee as it diluted underneath the pour of liqueur and lemon juice. Then he reached across the bar, situated a lemon slice haphazardly on his glass, grabbed a ghastly red
maraschino cherry from the crystal garnish tray, and popped into his mouth. “Pops,” he said, turning back to his father, the stem hanging lazily from his upturned lips.

“Cut the shit and sit down, James.”

“Hey, Buck,” Rebecca stated. It was simple and prim, but it was his nickname—a thing that was absolutely off limits in the presence of his father.

Bucky eyed her suspiciously, let his gaze wander just past her to his mother who was sitting unusually silent in the large, horrifically uncomfortable Wassily chair. “Hmm,” he noted, before tonguing the cherry stem out of his mouth, placing it directly on the beautifully finished wood of the coffee table that stood between them all. Then he drank half of his sidecar in one long inhale, and collapsed onto the footrest of the antique rocking chair. “Doesn’t seem like much of a celebration in here.”

“You’ll need to cut your hair tomorrow,” George stated. “First thing. I’ll call Jacques in.”

“I’m sorry, what now?” Bucky sat back, surprised by the lack of outrage at the ‘wasted’ bourbon, or the use of his irreverent nickname. Surprised by the coldness in the room despite the crackling flames. “I didn’t realize that was any of your business.”

“The announcement will go public at 8 am.” His father turned, looking past Bucky through the open door and ignoring his protest. “Mara!” he screamed.

“Yes?” She poked her head in, demure and polite as always.

“Make sure Jacques is here no later than 6 am. In fact, call him now. See if he can’t come by this evening.”

“Yes sir,” she nodded, then vanished as silently as she’d arrived.

Bucky drained the last of his drink. “So…yeah,” he said, his voice seeming childish in the grandness of his family home. “Uh…not doing that. Next matter of business. What’s for Christmas Dinner this year, Ma?”

Winnifred kept her head bowed, eyes boring into the woven threads of the oriental rug underneath her feet.

“Get Pierce in here to draft a formal statement,” George called back to Mara. “We need to have speeches settled in the next few hours.”

“Oh good,” Bucky replied. “Glad to see your press secretary doesn’t have family obligations on Christmas Eve or anything. Will someone tell me what the fuck is going on?” His voice was raised now, and he took a deep breath, calming and centering himself before walking back to the liquor cart. This time he poured himself a liberal amount of Hibiki and nothing more. Just as his father had intended.

“Rebecca!”

She looked up.

George nodded in approval at her obeisance. “John and Emily will be here tomorrow morning for you. Be ready to leave in a prompt and dignified manner.”

“Yes sir,” Rebecca whispered.
Winnifred let out a gasp of a sob—the first sound she’d made since Bucky had entered the room.

Bucky downed the glass of bourbon. “Okay, seriously, someone tell me what’s going on. Dad finally get caught with one of his whores?” Turning to his father and raised his glass. “You being disgraced publicly, Dad? This ought to be good.”

“Were I you, son,” George began quietly, and very much pointedly. (His emphasis on ‘son’ could have meant ‘disaster’, and could have meant ‘failure’ and most certainly did not mean ‘son’.) “I would cease your pathetic patronizing of that filthy gay bar in Brooklyn.”

Bucky went frigidly still. There was no sound in the room but his mother’s quiet sobbing and his heartbeat, unbearably loud and hostile in his ears. “I…” he settled on. Not prolific, not certain, and most assuredly not indicative of his innocence. “I…” For some reason, his tongue was heavy in his mouth and seemed unable to perform even the most basic of operations.

It was like this:

He’d grown up wanting for nothing. He was posh, he was perfect, he was untouchable. He’d been a rebellious teenager and made shitty choices and still nothing could take him down. When it had come time for college, he’d frothed and he’d raged and he’d refused the bought and paid for place in Harvard Business School despite the fact that his father’s illustrious name adorned their newly renovated library.

Because nothing mattered.

“Oh, don’t act surprised.” George took a small sip of his own whiskey–pure and unadulterated with ice or mixers. “Pierce has at least three different documents drafted up for the eventuality that someone recognizes you. Your behavior is disgusting and unbecoming, but in the past it was always anonymous, so I let it slide. Now it needs to end.”

“I…” Bucky stuttered out. A raging heat was rising up his chest, to his throat, his cheeks, pushing behind his eyelids. He couldn’t understand why this was something his father was choosing to bring up now. The flush in his cheeks burned hotter—he was an idiot for thinking he could conceal something like this. “What’s going on?” he asked, eyes no longer holding his fathers.

“Dad’s being indicted for tax fraud tomorrow. He’s stolen millions,” Rebecca supplied. “Oh, and Ma’s to be tried as an accomplice.”

It was like this:

Even at his very worst, his family had always been there to clean up the mess before anyone else had seen—they’d always left a pristine silhouette of an agreeable and perfect son behind.

But then the world cracked and he wondered if his ridiculous posturing and rebellion was ever anything more than fear.

***


“Oh,” Bucky said as he walked in the door of his dorm room to find Steve sitting cross-legged on the floor. He was wearing nothing but a towel wrapped haphazardly around his waist and gripped a single Super Nintendo controller tightly enough between his fingers that the plastic looked in danger of cracking.
“Shit,” Steve yelped, grasping a corner of the towel and pulling it quickly over the display of pure white thigh. On the screen in front of him, a miniaturized Mario figure ran repeatedly into a wall until a goomba finally ended his suffering. “Shit,” he repeated, looking back at the screen. “Damn, that was my last life.”

On any other ordinary night, Bucky would have been struck dumb by the impossible workings of his inner mind as it pondered whether or not Steve was wearing anything at all underneath the towel. Instead, he was having trouble feeling much of anything.

“Thought no one would be here,” Bucky mumbled, shrugging off his backpack and letting it drop to the floor with a dull thud. “Sorry.”

Smiling, Steve set the controller down. “Nah, you’re good. Christmas happens pretty fast at my house, and then I do my best to get the hell out of there. Gets a little too chaotic around D.C. ‘cause my dad’s a senator.” He’d paused a bit in the delivery of the last line, as though naive enough to think that Bucky didn’t know exactly who Steve’s father was.

Everyone knew who Steve’s father was.

“Yeah,” Bucky forced out. Painstakingly, he unbuttoned his woolen coat, pulled out his rolling papers and tobacco, and then draped the coat over the back of his desk chair. It took three tries to roll the thing, even though his hands were perfectly still. “I need a cigarette.”

Steve watched him, a flicker of concern marring his otherwise unburdened face. “Uh, you alright?”

The window screeched as Bucky slid it open before jumping onto his desk and settling, one knee pulled up against his chest. He lit the cigarette easily and held it to his mouth. “Nope.”

“You wanna play Super Mario?”

“Nope.” Bucky exhaled and a long, winding trail of smoke wound artfully from his lips to the windowscreen before being sucked away by the chill New York air. He watched Steve turn awkwardly back to the tv screen, then glance back, and shuffle unbearably between the two over the course of only a few seconds.

It appeared as though Steve were considering. “You… do you want to talk about it?”

“Absolutely not.” The joint was crumbling to ash at his fingertips so he stubbed it out on the corner of his desk and watched the tiny pieces of burn flake to the pristine floor. “I need to go.” Without the distraction of a cigarette, his fingers started tapping an insane rhythm against the wood. “I can’t be here right now.” Bucky looked down into Steve’s clear eyes. “You wanna go get fucked up?”

“Oh!” Steve looked perfectly taken aback by this suggestion. “I’m not really…” He motioned to the towel at his legs. “Dressed?”

Something tore even further inside him at the simple rejection. Bucky grimaced, the desire for alcohol and drugs beating even harder within his head. “Right. Wouldn’t want to corrupt the star athlete.”

“Fuck, Bucky it’s not that. We’ve lived together for three months, you know it’s not that—”

“Naa, it’s cool.” Bucky launched himself off the desk, his heart picking up speed, his breathing quicker and harsher and infinitely more agreeable to the visions of chaos that danced through his head. “You’re cool. Maybe next time.”
The manic anticipation of the night took over, winning out against the loneliness.

“Right…” Steve said, looking utterly unconvinced by Bucky’s lukewarm overture of eventual friendship.

“Fuck, where are my pants. Fuck, fuck…oh!” Bucky exclaimed, grabbing plasticky pleather from underneath the bottom bunk. He looked up to Steve, who was studying him so hard the pants were practically starting to smoke in his hands. “What?” he asked.

“Please tell me those have been washed since—”

“Last time?” Bucky held them up to his nose and inhaled deeply, while Steve made a face of utter disgust. “Yup. Clean. Just forgot to put ‘em away.” Unbuttoning his jeans he wiggled out of them and his briefs. Luxury pleather had no business riding over anything but good old fashioned skin. Steve, rather quickly, turned back to the tv and started up another game.

Slithering into his pants, (a job that was best done on one’s back with the help of the bed for contact resistance), Bucky strapped himself into one of his many leather chest harnesses and quickly buttoned up his winter coat over the entire ensemble.

Steve was staring avidly at Mario, who was once more running repeatedly into a wall.

“Press B,” Bucky called, full of anticipatory energy. He stopped to dig in his top dresser drawer, swallow one of the pills he found there, pocket a second, then pulled open their door. “See ya, pal!”

His hands were already shaking, his movements fast and erratic. The door closed behind him with a heavy bang of sound.

When he got like this, nothing could stop him. When he got like this, the world was sparkling and brimming with color.

When he got like this, he leaned into the anticipation, breathed against the excited pattering of his heartbeat, and tried very hard not to think of the shame the fall would bring.

***

The club was crowded.

This was the first thing Bucky noticed after he walked down the steps and checked his coat. There was barely space to breath around the swarm of bodies that melted and moved, full of constant, feverish pandemonium. Christmas was a time for family togetherness, but it was also a time for excess, a time for despair and regret, a time for utter, utter, helplessness.

Bucky laughed, and the sound burst from his lips with all the grace of a thousand-pound steer. “Cow!” he shouted, and one of the many glistening and muscular men turned to look at him.

“What was that?” the man asked.

The name Jon was written across his hard-cut abs with something dark, and red, and sticky.

“My father’s been indicted for fraud!” Bucky screamed, and two more men looked over, smiling and laughing and jumping in heated urgency, causing the very air around them to shudder with motion.

“Yeah! The DJ rocks!” Jon shouted back, and Bucky merely smiled, letting the haze of drugs wash over him. Pushing his way through the edges of the crowd, Bucky found himself on the neon
flashing dance floor of the club. His shoes stuck as he walked, and still he bounced, the heavy beat
drowning out the screaming in his head. Everywhere he turned, there were more people, and the rub
of skin on skin was ephemeral yet tantric; it was gloriously human and he wanted to cry with
pleasure.

He danced, and he danced, and at some point, someone was pushing another drink into his hands, so
he drank, and at another point, someone else was pushing a sinfully white pill into his hands, so he
swallowed, and at all points, his head swam beautifully with the sensation of living.

A hand pulled at him, tugged him away from the floor and back to the curtained off section of the
club, and Bucky let himself be pulled along with glee, desperate to be touched, desperate to be
shamed and humiliated. Desperate to scorch some sense of morality back into the remnants of his
soul.

“Safeword?”

“Huh?” Bucky yelled. The floor was tipping out from under his feet, and he tried to balance atop it
before it carried him away in the current.

“Fuck, kid. Safeword!”

Giggling, Bucky stumbled into a very solid wall.

“Fuck it,” the man said, wrapping his hand around Bucky’s arm and steadying him. “You want this,
right?”

The warmth in Bucky’s chest spread all the way up his neck and his smile was full of eternal
sunlight. “Jesus Christ, yes!” His hands rose up to his chest, and he giggled as he made the sign of
the cross.

“Aww, sweet little Catholic boy,” the man purred as he dragged him deeper into the room.

Bucky laughed harder, tripping over the rolling floor and falling to his knees. “Fuck!” he exclaimed,
then tried to push himself up.

A heavy boot came down hard on the top of his left hand.

“Fuck!” Bucky yelped this time. “What the fuck?”

“Stay down, pretty boy.”

The room dripped colors like heated wax, and Bucky swallowed the flutter of excitement in his
belly. “Fuck yes,” he said, crawling towards the larger man on his hands and knees, the cold of the
concrete floor soaking through his pants and into his skin.

A hand came down and twisted painfully in his hair, holding his head up. “Shit, you’re pretty,” the
man said. “Turn around.”

Bucky smiled beatifically up at him, still as the stone gargoyles of St. Ignatius. The man holding him
glistened with darkly tanned skin. There was a dangerous glint in his brown eyes and Bucky
watched his jaw, observing the way it clenched and unclenched–the way that tension rippled out
along the salt and pepper bristles of his closely shorn head. “Let me—” Bucky started, but his head
was shoved forcefully back down.

“Turn around.”
Bucky relished the rough calluses of the man’s hands at his neck, at his back, pulling tightly on the
harness, peeling down pleather fabric. *Luxury pleather*, Bucky thought, and as he closed his eyes, a
tiny Mario appeared to hammer away at his eyelids. There were other sounds around them: moans of
pleasure, yelps of pain, all mingling with the ominous, thumping bass that reverberated through the
floor up against Bucky’s knees. He joined the chorus of pleading wails, wanting more, needing
more, wanting so desperately to be touched.

The man behind him was rough, and hard, and it hurt, but Bucky still wanted more, needed *more*.
There was something off tonight, the poison deep inside him was welling out, thick and black and
odorous and he had no way to stop it. “Harder,” he yelped, and someone cuffed him soundly across
the back of the head.

“Shut the fuck up.”

The thick red was still painted on his stomach: *Jon*.

“Jon, wait.” Bucky groaned, but Jon was already reaching down and fingerling him open, spreading
him wide.

Bucky gasped. “No, wait,” he gulped out, but his voice was lost in the cacophony of sound, soaking
into the wall and spreading exponentially outward.

Jon pushed in further, adding a second finger, then a third, too quickly, too dry, rocking back and
forth in a painful, jagged rhythm. He held Bucky’s head down with his free hand, pushing down
with so much pressure that it was hard to breathe.

“Harder,” Bucky mouthed to the floor. “Harder. Harder. Harder!” He screamed it, this pain, this
intoxicating acid, letting it eat away at the cement.

Jon only grunted harder, pulling his fingers out suddenly with a disgustingly wet and squelching
noise, then lining up and thrusting in.

“You should consider Harvard Business School,” his father had said when he’d turned sixteen. “It’s
a family tradition. You can continue the legacy.”

With every thrust, his head dragged against pavement. His mouth was open, he could taste the
coldness of the ground, but his eyes were pressed closed as tightly as possible. “Harder,” he moaned,
but the cement swallowed his syllables.

“Oh, do use the Douchesse,” his mother bossing around the event planner for Rebecca’s cotillion
ball. “It’s not a party if we don’t dirty the finest china!”

Jon’s groans were growing erratic behind Bucky now, and his hand tightened impossibly in Bucky’s
hair. *I could be dancing*, he thought. And then: *Steve was fucking glorious in that towel*. “Harder,”
he moaned, tasting the copper of blood from where his teeth had sunk into his cheek. *I shouldn’t be
here.*

Jon came with a groan and a final desperate clench at Bucky’s waist—hard enough to bruise—and
Bucky whimpered into the floor.

“What was that?” Jon yelled down at him, and then slapped him, hard, on his ass.

“I didn’t…” Bucky drifted off, confused. The ground was threatening to swallow him in it’s
unceasing movement, and his throat tightened nauseatingly. “Move,” Bucky said, and pushed off the
foul cement. He made it as far as his knees before Jon grabbed him by the hair again and swung his
face around.

“You up for more, baby?”

Bucky’s scalp hurt.

…just try to look presentable…

“I need a haircut,” he mumbled.

“Fuck, kid, you’re so out of it.”

Jon’s dick swayed in front of Bucky’s eyes, cut, wet, huge, and exactly the right kind of cock for someone seeking eternal damnation.

“I…” he repeated, confused.

“Come on in, guys!” Jon yelled, and Bucky tried to turn his head but a fist took him straight in the right eye. He jerked back, staying upright only because of Jon’s impossible grip fistling tightly in his scalp. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head, baby,” Jon purred. “We’re all good. No safe words, right?”

“Barrings International,” Bucky mumbled. His tongue was thick in his mouth and his head was splitting open. The swelling on his face was moving so quickly, he swore he could see the flesh rise from the periphery of his good eye.

“Right…” Jon drawled. “Come on!”

There were at least four other men now, surrounding him, touching him, stroking him, kicking at him, and Bucky didn’t know what was happening. The floor was a mass of motion, the men were appearing and disappearing and changing color at every blink of his one good eye, and he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe—

 “…you sure, man?”

And

 “…fucking wasted…”

And

 “…daddy issues…”

These were syllables and words and sentences and phrases that bounced from wall to constricting wall, over and over again as Bucky flinched down.

“Barrings,” he yelled, throat sore and mouth unflinchingly parched with drugs and liquor and anything but water. Still, his head was clear enough to know his safe words, and he didn’t understand why they weren’t listening. “I’m not into fucking gang bangs!” he shouted, and Jon backhanded him again across the face.

It’s fine, the sly little voice whispered. It’s penance. You haven’t fulfilled our end of the deal, it’s penance, it’s penance, it’s penance—”

“Barrings International,” Bucky tried again, but his voice was choked off as one of the men grabbed him around the throat, pulled him up, and licked at his collarbone.
He shuddered at the sensation, and then, thrillingly, one of the men offered an outstretched hand in front of his face with a glorious tiny little pill perched in eager anticipation. It wavered under Bucky’s swollen eye for a moment, but still he moved, jolted forward, and the hand closed in mocking fashion.

“Ah, ah,” the man said. “Nothing for free, yeah?”

Bucky closed his eyes. The right one was a mass of puffy pain and he let out the smallest hiss of a sigh. *Nothing for free,* the sly little voice whispered. *You can get up and leave.* Instead, he focused on the man in front of him: blond and tall, and sprayed in an excess of neon splatter paint. Nudging his head forward and opening his mouth, he let the man press a pointer finger in. Then Bucky sucked, and sucked, and sucked, and all the while *please* and *why* and *Steve,* and soon enough, the bitter taste of a dissolving tablet doused his taste buds and he let his other senses fade to obscurity.

***

“You good, kid?”

“Yup,” Bucky answered. He swayed in lackadaisical fashion, his body undulating softly and wave-like with the beat of the music that never faded, but this single syllable was sharp and pointed and fraught with acid.

“Uh…” the bartender replied, then again, “You sure you’re good kid?”

“You gotta phone?” Bucky asked. The words tasted like ashes in his mouth.

The bartender’s face fell. “Sorry. Not for patrons. There’s a pay phone just down the street outside the club?”

This was a respite, in that he could stew in his agonizing humiliation alone, inside the confines of a very small, very salient box.

This was not a respite, in that he needed to be able to walk that far without attracting the undue attention of local law enforcement.

“Cool,” was what Bucky settled on, pushing himself away from the edge of the bar. He swayed along, ignoring the ache of his face, ignoring the burn between his legs, ignoring the way his luxury pleather stuck to his skin in a filthy, desperate attempt at melding into one with his flesh.

“You sure you’re…good?” called the bartender in a ‘helpful, but not entirely sure that being helpful was the path he wanted to pursue for the evening’ sort of fashion.

Raising his hand in some sort of wave, or gesture, or self flagellation, Bucky pushed through the forever young crowd. He stopped by the coat check and grinned his winning smile as they handed him his woolen outer layer. *I could be dancing.*

He laughed out loud, and it was a boisterous enough thing that the ravers in the back turned and watched him ascend the steps to the New York streets.

Outside, the bitter chill bit into his flesh with a vengeance, and he hugged his coat to himself with a fervor he usually saved for his pillow in the deepest sways of dreaming.

“Fuck,” he mumbled. There were still enough drugs coursing through his system that he had to fumble with the phonebooth door three times before he could get it to press open in its accordion fashion. Then he was in, and he was feeling at the change slot, and by some fucking miracle, there
were three quarters laying there—pristine and untouched.

It didn’t take him long to insert them into the machine and dial the number that his eidetic memory had saved his first week of college. ‘For emergencies’, he’d told himself then. ‘There shouldn’t be any reason to need it’, he’d amended.

Steve picked up on the fourth ring with a scratching sound of static. “Bucky?”

“Fuck,” Bucky said.

“Bucky?” Steve repeated, this time with more fervor and more chaos and almost more care.

“I need…” his words drifted off, floating upwards, ethereal colors exploding behind Bucky’s swollen right eye. “Can you pick me up?”

This was quiet, though restless in its sincerity.

He heard the sound of a swallow, a hollow and thought filled action.

“Where are you?”

“Eros.”

“What street, Bucky?”

“Eros.”

“Bucky, I don’t…” There was silence then, a heavy weight of seconds passing as time moved unceasingly forward. “I’ll find you. I’ll be there soon. Wait for me? Are you alright?”

The top of the pay phone was coated in dust and Bucky traced a single finger through, leaving a swirling infinity symbol behind. He shrugged hopelessly. “I’ll wait.”

***

The cement lip of the sidewalk was frigid in the December chill, yet Bucky sat forlornly, legs splayed out into the deserted street, arms refusing to cross his body in some repentant show of strength. A perfect black Lexus pulled up alongside him in an impossibly short time. Bucky looked up at the sliver of crescent moon that hung so carelessly in the sky and noted its drastic change in position.

Perhaps not such an impossibly short time after all.

“Bucky?” Steve said, opening the driver door and peering over the top of the car. “Oh my god, Bucky!”

The flashing neon lights of Eros reflected against the black surface of the car, and Bucky watched the word blink on and off, on and off, on and off. Finally, he shrugged, then stood and pushed past Steve, throwing a hand forcefully on the passenger door. “Thanks,” he managed gruffly, then, “Gotta cigarette?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, you look like you got mugged! Are you…” Steve reached out a hand towards Bucky’s face.

Bucky flinched violently back.
“I could really use a fucking cigarette,” Bucky said, refusing to acknowledge the painful concern that was etching itself deeper and deeper into the lines of Steve’s openly honest face. He fixed his eyes on Steve’s throat and watched his Adam’s apple bob once, then twice.

“Sorry, I don’t—”

Bucky sighed. “Yeah, I figured.”

He folded himself into the passenger seat and shut the door. The interior of the car was pristine, devoid of any character, and impatiently thunderous in its repeated proclamation: I am a thing of Steve’s. Look at me, I’m resplendently Steve! The air smelled of clean wintergreen, and Bucky noticed the half empty carton of Wrigley’s Doublemint gum perched harmoniously on the console.

Rolling down the window, he inhaled the crisp scent of New York alley, complete with smoke, and pollution.

An eternity later, Steve settled down in the driver seat and looked over.

“Drive,” Bucky said. He looked down and noticed his hands were starting to shake. “Just drive.”

“Hey, man…” Steve started.

His voice was cautious, like he was speaking to a wounded animal, and Bucky lashed out in humiliated fury. “Look, I’m not thrilled you had to do this either. Just drive back to the fucking dorm, you can go back to sleep and dream about your cheerleaders or your precious jerseys, or your first fucking handjob. Dream about whatever it is you athletic scholarship kids dream while I puke my guts out.”

“You’re long winded when you’re high,” Steve noted, dryly.

“Would you just drive the car?”

“Do we need to go to a hospital first?” Steve asked.

The question made Bucky’s stomach roil and he threw open the door and puked into the gutter. To Steve’s credit, he didn’t flinch. Reaching over the console to the passenger glove compartment, he popped it open with practiced fingers and pulled out a stash of napkins, which he pushed towards Bucky.

“Thanks, Mom,” Bucky mocked, wiping at his mouth and trying to maintain some casual display of dignity about the matter. The street had stopped swirling in viscous colors around him, but that only meant the low was coming, and he really wanted to be anywhere but here when it hit. “Please. Drive.”

“Are you gonna puke in my car?”

“Hopefully,” Bucky groaned.

Steve actually barked a laugh at that, before putting the car into drive and pulling out onto the still empty street.

Despite his roiling stomach, Bucky couldn’t help but notice the way Steve’s knuckles were white against the steering wheel, or the way that only his eyes were moving, intently tracking New York traffic. “It’s not a big deal,” he finally said, unable to sit in silence and watch the way his fingers trembled.
“Your face is a disaster.” Steve said. “And you smell like sex.” His fingers were gripping the wheel even tighter now.

“Yup.” Bucky let his hand dangle out the open window, the chill breeze slipping through his open fingertips. Closing his eyes, he imagined he was underwater. Imagined that he no longer had to breathe.

“Just stop it with whatever this casual attitude is, Buck. I don’t care if you’re fucking high. It’s three in the morning and I just had to get my goddamn car out of the garage to rescue my roommate from God knows what!”

“Gee, sorry to spoil your evening. You didn’t have to answer the phone,” Bucky grated out, desperately trying to ignore the ache in his temples. “And don’t call me Buck.”

“Right. Because rescuing you from a fucking gay bar looking like you’ve been the victim of a fucking gang bang doesn’t entitle me to nicknames, Bucky.”

“It wasn’t a fucking gang bang. I okay’d everything going on because I liked it, and if you have a problem with it ‘Mr. All American Perfection’, then why the hell did you even get out of bed? You knew what you were getting into. You know what I’m like. You—”

“I know you’re a terrified little shit with some major daddy issues to work out, but you’re smarter than this,” Steve hissed.

“Fuck. You.” Bucky was cold all over, and he was two minutes away from vomiting his innards all over the plush leather seating of Steve’s Lexus.

Steve quieted for a long time then, still gripping the steering wheel tightly, still focused entirely on the street in front of him.

The flashing lights of the city never dimmed, never went out. There was always something going on, and Bucky found himself closing his eyes and leaning his head against the window, trying not to think about the rocking motion of the car as it moved.

“Come on, Bucky,” Steve said, finally breaking the silence. “If you wanna get high, get fucking high. If you wanna dance, go dance. If you wanna get fucked into oblivion behind the walls of some super secret club, be my fucking guest, just find someplace better then Eros!”

Bucky was going to hyperventilate; the rage was coming on so strong. “What the fuck do you know about it, Steve?” His hands gripped the pleather at his thighs and pulled, pinching skin underneath, looking for pain, looking for some way out of this pure, annihilating emotion.

“Jesus Christ, you aren’t the only one with rich, asshole parents! You aren’t the only one who’s rich enough to glide through life without blinking an eye. You aren’t the only one who might have other plans. And fuck, yes, I know what the fuck Eros is because I used to DJ there when I was starting out. It’s a scum hole and a shit stain of a club. But if you’re looking to get fucking roofied and raped in an alley then by all means, keep going back, you fucking idiot!”

Bucky gaped at him. “You…DJ?”

“Jesus Christ.” Steve groaned, carefully steering the car into the parking garage three blocks from the dormitory—the parking garage that cost more than some people’s yearly rent to use—and parked in a stall next to the open door, marked with a clean, white four.

The car idled for just a moment more before he turned off the ignition, closing a fist around the small
keyring that was utterly uninhibited by personality-declarative nonsense like keychains. Then he turned just his head, holding the rest of his body perfectly, athletically still, while managing to sear the heat of a thousand suns into Bucky’s flesh with nothing but two blue eyes.

“I DJ. I like club music. Occasionally, when I’m not otherwise occupied by homework, or practice, or any of the 8653 daily tasks I owe the world as the son of a US Senator. I also like to dance. I get good grades. I’m a fucking good athlete. My favorite drink is Zima because I can get away with drinking a lot of it and not getting fucking wasted while I’m DJing. I can’t stand ecstasy; it completely fucks me up, makes me massively horny, and usually I end up waking up somewhere I have no memory of actually going to. Not great for the papers. I do like cocaine. Just enough to get a buzz. On the gums or…you know.”

“I…” Bucky was entirely too wasted for this early morning confessional. “Zima?”

Steve’s eyes narrowed. “Try to keep up, yeah? Zima. I do my best to stay out of DC, because when I’m in DC, I’m a perfect Rogers boy who can do no wrong. I wear dockers and boat shoes and pastel colored polo shirts, some with stripes, some without.”

“You wear that here, in New York? Can we go inside now?” That gnawing feeling of emptiness was starting to eat away at Bucky’s stomach lining and he really didn’t want to be anywhere near this car when the fallout started.

When Steve’s eyes narrowed further, Bucky muttered, “Your eyes look really angry.”

There was some mix of entirely identifiable liquid that was drying to the inside of his pants in a crusty, sticky sort of way, and he shifted with a grimace.

“I hate the smell of rain, but I love the sound of snow. I’m a business major because it’s interesting, but it’s also the most reliable way for me to not fuck my family over in the tabloids. I’ve got three tattoos, and counting, but they’re all in hidden places. Someday, I plan to change that. I like to draw, but I don’t do it very much. Oh, and my absolute favorite food by a long shot is a New York hotdog straight from a street stand, with pickles, mustard, ketchup and onions.” Steve ran a hand through his hair, tousling the longer top locks even further. “I’m not some uptight, prissy human that you’re too deep for or too good for, or too goddamn cool for. You fucked up, and no offense, but you’re kind of a giant, walking disaster.” Turning away, Steve opened the driver’s side door, swiveling gracefully out, then bending down to call, “You coming?”

If he moved, there would absolutely be the sound of sticky pleather peeling off black leather and that was something Bucky wasn’t up to stomaching yet. “Nope,” he called, “I’m good. Just gonna sleep it off.”

“Oh really, James.” Steve held onto the full epithet far longer then was truly necessary, imbuing it with all sorts of irony, and venom, and an unmistakable hint of roundness.

Scrunching up his nose, Bucky flipped a middle finger at the driver’s side window.

“You’re not exactly a shining example of trust at the moment. Out of the Lexus.” Steve rounded the car, threw open the door, grabbing Bucky’s arm and hauling him clear out of the seat.

“Fuck!” Bucky exclaimed. The sudden movement ripped the drying cloth away from his skin in a decidedly distasteful fashion, and Bucky flinched from Steve’s grip. “Let go of me. Let fucking go of me! I’ll scream, I’ll fucking, let go,” he yelled, swinging his free hand with all his might and pounding Steve across the back, across the shoulders, across a very mussed head of golden hair.
“God, you’re a pain in the ass,” Steve said, shoving him away and wiping his hands on his purple and black New York University Athletics sweatshirt. “And you smell absolutely awful.”

Bucky stumbled away from Steve. “Thanks for the ride, asshole. Remind me not to call you again.”

“Yeah, remind yourself not to be a fucking idiot.”

He’d only been walking for thirty seconds when Steve caught up to him and grabbed him by the arm. “Jesus, man,” Bucky muttered, “I don’t need your help anymore. I’ve got it.”

Steve threw up his arms like he was sorry, even though the look on his face clearly said that he wasn’t. He trudged silently beside Bucky for a moment.

“I said, I got it,” Bucky muttered petulantly. His face ached, he was irritated and dirty, and the sea of self-loathing was threatening to burst free from his poorly constructed mental barricades.

“We live in the same place, idiot.”

His head was pounding and he could only see out of one eye. The wind buffeted against them in a ceaseless fury, and Bucky looked over to Steve again. “You should’ve brought a coat.”

“You think?”

There was some unknown emotion bubbling up in Bucky’s throat and he couldn’t quite place it. An almost warmth, an almost buzzing, a certain desire to strip free of his own wool and offer it out of the incredibly deep generosity of his heart. “Do you want to...” he started, fumbling at the buttons. His hands were still shaking, and he didn’t think it was only the cold.

Steve burst out laughing. “Oh my god, Bucky, you just tried to punch the hell out of me and now you’re offering me your coat? I mean, I appreciate the gesture and all but, no offense, it could use a wash. You could use a wash. My car could use a wash. This entire—” he stopped suddenly. “Look...” he said, reaching out for Bucky’s hands.

“Don’t,” Bucky whispered.

The sigh that left Steve’s lips was picked up by the wind that blew between them, tossed about in the frigid air, and then carried off far into the distance.

“Thanks. For coming.”

Steve’s head dropped, and he quickly pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt before walking again. “It’s cold,” he muttered. “Come on.”
Chapter 7

He opened his eyes.

The floor was awash in light and movement and smoke and sound,

and music,

and depth,

and a sudden warmth in his chest that rose so quickly and unexpectedly he almost choked with it.

Anticipation.

“Steve!” Bucky shouted. The waves of people surrounding him kept jumping, kept dancing, kept on with their spuriously energizing movements. “Hey, Steve!” He pushed towards the stage through a crowd of people and smiled at a familiar face. “Brandon!” The kid’s head was swaying just a half beat behind the music, mellow and frenetic all at once. “Brandon!” Bucky watched him put a hand to his face, press a finger in one ear as though trying to identify the location of the sound. Then his eyes popped open and focused on Bucky.

“Hey! Uh…man?”

Bucky laughed and grabbed ahold of Brandon’s arm, pulling him from the bouncing throng. “Come on!” he announced.

Every minute counted here.

Every breath, every conversation—they were all wasted time that he could be spending with Steve before the entire scene greyed out once more.

“Hey! Yo, dude, I mean…man, ouch!”

Looking down, Bucky realized he was pinching into Brandon’s flesh with the ferocity of his grip. He breathed in and loosened his hand, noticing with faint alarm the five black lines of tattooed ink that crept up his forearm. “Sorry. Just need to talk to you.”

“Fuck, man,” Brandon whined, rubbing at his arm. “I just wanna dance. Let’s dance. Let’s get fucked up…”

His words meandered—desperate, searching things—and Bucky scowled. “You’re already there, pal. Do you remember me?” He stepped back, almost flush against the wall, and watched Brandon’s pupils as they moved sluggishly up and down his figure.

“Oh…am I supposed to? Oh, shit, do I owe you money or something? Shit, Evan!” Brandon raised an arm, trying to catch the attention of a group of dancers highlighted in pink, neon strobe lights.

“No, no, of course not.” Bucky sighed. This wasn’t going to be an easy process if everyone else’s world revolved around a completely different reality than his own. “Sorry. Thought you were someone else.”

Brandon watched him for a second, then a grin spread across his boyish face. “Got any drugs?” he asked, stepping closer, close enough so that Bucky’s back hit the wall. Rising up on the balls of his feet, tongue against Bucky’s ear, he whispered, “I can make it worth your while…”
Bucky pushed him off gently. “Sorry, kid. Savin’ myself for someone else.”

Lurching backwards with a despondent sigh, Brandon waved him off, then jumped his way back into his rightful circle.

*Make your way to the front again and find Steve*, he thought, and this seemed a generally good idea as it was early in the evening and he hadn’t gotten himself fucked up beyond simple comprehension. Yet.

“Steve!” he called again. “Fuck!”

This was ridiculous.

*Get to the front, find the damn DJ with the dog mask, follow him off the stage, pin him against the wall, ask him what the hell is going on.*

*OR you could get to the front, find the damn DJ with the dogmask, follow him off the stage, pin him against the wall and fuck him into oblivion.*

(That seemed rather fruitless in the event that everything disappeared and he started up the evening again with no further information.)

*Get to the front, find Steve, follow him off the stage and fuck him into oblivion while asking crucial questions about the how, the where, and the why of this place.*

“That’s more like it,” Bucky mumbled under his breath.

Halfway to the stage, sirens started blaring and people started screaming and Bucky almost ducked for cover and reached for the M40 he kept strapped at his side. Instead of hostile fire, the overhead pumps opened up with a whir and thousands of brightly colored bubbles began to descend jauntily into the chaos below.

His hand was still at his side–reaching for a firearm that wasn’t there.

*Why would you reach for a gun?*

*Why is your heart racing in your chest?*

*Who are you?*

*Who are you?*

*Who are–*

Swallowing thickly, he brushed soapy film from his face with a shaking hand. He made it to the front of the stage where Steve was already a whir of motion, setting up the tracks to play while he took his break. He looked up for a moment, directly at Bucky, and jerked his head back in the sort of fashion that most definitely meant: “*Meet me in that back hallway.*”

Bucky saluted, then shoved his way through even more soapy bodies, letting the undulating coils of flesh push him to his destination.

He only had to wait two minutes before Steve was there, pulling off the mask and smiling absolutely brilliantly.

“Buck!”
Running forward, Bucky threw the entire weight of his body against Steve, pinning him against the wall. Even in that sudden act of violence, Steve smiled beautifully, closing his eyes and throwing his head back as though this moment was the thing he craved most in the whole entire universe.

“Bucky,” he whispered again.

The house music drowned out the syllables, but Bucky was very aware of exactly what the sounds of his name looked like in the movement of Steve’s lips. He leaned forward and opened his mouth, swallowing Steve’s words, breathing with him and gasping with him and tasting the way his mouth moved. His hands ran up Steve’s face, tangling in his short blond hair, gripping it tightly and pulling Steve’s head to the side as soon as he broke off the kiss. Then he licked along Steve’s jawline, across to his ear, down his neck and to his collarbone, tasting, tasting, tasting.

“Jesus Christ, Bucky,” Steve moaned underneath him.


Steve stiffened underneath him, then carefully grabbed ahold of Bucky’s wrists and pushed him back. “You remember?” he asked quietly.

This was full of a quiet hope, a desperate desire for Bucky to understand. Bucky wanted to close his eyes and touch Steve’s lips with the pads of his fingers, and he wanted to bite down on Steve’s neck and suck an imprint of memory there, and he wanted to touch him and feel him and listen to the small sounds he’d make in the early mornings so many years ago when they’d lived together.

Instead he nodded, repeating, “I remember.”

Steve gave in first, with a ferocity born of 40 years apart, and his hand reached out and grabbed a hold of Bucky’s, weaving their fingers together in a single perfect unity. Then, “Touch me.”

The bass pounded in the floor and it shook the walls with its callous beat, but Bucky only heard the desperation of Steve’s voice. He grabbed at Steve’s hips, rucking up his t-shirt and feeling skin, the tightness of his abs, the softness of his waist, the hardness of his ribs, the utter perfection of an athlete’s body trained for brilliance.

“Oh my god,” he whispered at Steve’s throat, and then Steve whirled around, grabbing at Bucky and hauling him up, shoving him against the cement. Bucky’s legs wrapped around Steve’s waist and his arms wrapped around Steve’s neck, and he was so hard it was painful.

Steve was just as hard, just as fraught with energy as he ground into Bucky with a moan of pure pleasure. “Buck,” he muttered, mouthing over Bucky’s jaw. “Buck,” he muttered, planting wet kisses along the edge of his collarbone, along the leather strap that clung, tightly buckled, against Bucky’s chest. “Buck,” he moaned as he nestled his head into that perfect spot between Bucky’s neck and shoulder, that perfect spot that had been missing this, missing Steve, missing life. Steve rocked against him, and it was like they were teenagers again, desperate, wanting, no time for any sort of finesse, just a grinding desire for friction.

“Oh my god, Steve, Oh my god, I miss you. I was so stupid, I miss you—”

There were tears running down Bucky’s face and Steve lifted a finger to them, wiping them away. “I miss you so much, Buck, please, you have to, you have to—”

The motion was ceaseless, and the vibrations of the wall from the omnipresent beat was inescapable, and still Bucky wanted more, he wanted more, he wanted more.
“Please stay,” Steve begged. “Please stay, Buck, you have to want to stay!”

“Of course!” Bucky said. Then, more quietly, “It’s only ever been you.”

“No!” Steve shook his head violently. “No, you don’t understand. You have to let go. You have to give up! You need to want this—”

**Do you want this?**

The pounding stopped, and the chaos stopped, and the only movement was Steve holding Bucky up and sobbing into his chest while flakes of snow white dust fell from the gray ceiling.

“Steve, I want this,” Bucky said. “Please.” He reached down and tilted Steve’s chin up, kissing him deeply. “I want this.”

There was a deep sadness in Steve’s eyes, but still he smiled. “I love you. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I love you too, Steve.” He leaned down and kissed him again. “I want to stay,” he whispered. The sentence resonated in the thickly stagnant air, bouncing off of the walls and disrupting the purity of the surrounding silence. Bucky reached out past Steve’s head with a finger and watched a fleck of dust fall. As soon as it touched his skin, it burst into nothingness—magical and otherworldly. “Where are we?”

*Where are we?*

*Where are we?*

*Where are we?*

The words bounced from the end of the hall to the front, off frozen bodies, off translucent, unpopped bubbles.

“I’m alive,” he whispered.

Steve sadly shook his head. “Let go.”

“I’m…”

*Falling.*

And there was nothing but blackness and pain.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Chapter 8 features absolutely stunning artwork by the amazing JessieLucid! Go give her a follow and some serious love <3

New York University | New York, NY | January, 1992

“Goddamnit, stop fucking leaving goddamn bananas all over the fucking race track!”

Steve didn’t answer, as he was focused entirely on the tiny screen of their tv, watching Princess jump another secret shortcut. Within moments, his car crossed the finish line, and a large number one flashed across the screen.

“Goddamnit, Steve!” Bucky yelled, throwing his controller. The line connecting it to the console pulled tight when it was less than an inch from the television, and then it jerked back, hitting the linoleum with a soft thud.

Steve just grinned. “Dude. Confession’s gonna take you a long-ass time this week if you keep it up with that language.”

Bucky flipped him the bird, then reached across his lap and pulled the controller back into his hands. “Again.”


“Watch it, smartass,” Bucky returned, and within moments, they were back at the welcome screen, choosing their racers.

It had been inevitable, Bucky figured, that they’d fall into some semblance of friendship after Christmas. Bucky had tried his best to adapt a firm facade of nonchalance, blatantly ignoring the memories of that one, horrible evening. Steve, for his part, went along with it—never pushing too hard, but also standing fierce guard of their weekend evenings. Despite having other friends (the soccer squad and every single girl on campus), and having other activities (running ungodly distances for the fun of it and kicking balls with all his might), and having no end to his academic demands (a degree learning to take over the world as a man of business required a fairly rigorous schedule), Steve steadily carved out small pieces of time for Bucky, and Bucky was strangely grateful for it.

He was not in the best place mentally and he didn’t need the weekly, hollow-worded sermons from his court-appointed psychologist to know it. He was adept at ignoring the stares, the murmurs, and the shocked whispers that followed him from building to building on campus. He was quite proud of achieving his personal goal of ‘social pariah’. He no longer had to make ridiculous conversation, associate with anyone at all, or even feign politeness in passing chatter, and this was an absolute gift. Still though, anytime he walked into the dining hall and MSNBC was blaring the most up-to-date details of the court case (they were not up-to-date, and half of the time they weren’t even vaguely up-to-month) or he walked into his dorm room to see Steve, shuffling awkwardly for the controller to switch the channel, he experienced a profoundly unsettling drop in his stomach.
He wasn’t entirely sure he knew his purpose anymore, and this was something new—something unequivocally frightening.

He was wary of Steve, and he was nervous around Steve, but he was also, unfortunately, in love with Steve. As such, he gripped tightly to Steve’s tenuous overture of easy friendship with every last bit of strength he had.

“Oh, sweet! Release B, then hit A and hold down your L/R key and you’ll get the boost longer!” Steve yelped with excitement.

“Oh, yeah, of fucking course,” Bucky muttered.

“No, this—” Steve dropped his controller and reached over, placing his hands over Bucky’s and fiddling with the controls. “Like, you’ve gotta…shit. You hit it too soon. Eh, next time.” He let go and scooched back, picking up his own control and turning his driver back around (despite it making considerable headway stranded, motionless, in a pool of water). “Next time,” he murmured again, once again focused on the race at hand.

Bucky haltingly steered his own character for a moment, before glancing over at Steve. His blond hair fell messily into his eyes, despite the sides being clean shaven, and it was a musty sort of blond—not so much type that inspired poetry but the sort that begged for hands to run through it and pull tightly.

Bucky swallowed hard, then turned his attention back to the ongoing race.

***

January passed by with all the grace of a bull in heat.

George R. Barnes Senior was sentenced to 50 years in prison and five million in reparations. Most of his business partners were sentenced to five years, and to varying degrees of large, monetary payments.

On account of still having a teenage daughter who lived at home, his mother was acquitted, but home was no longer the beautiful upper east side brownstone mansion. Now, Winnifred and Rebecca both lived in a simple two bedroom apartment in Queens, where Winnifred spent most of her days holed up in her bedroom, refusing to speak to a single soul.

Rebecca still thrived, attending her high school classes and earning exceptional grades, although Bucky was certain it was all an act. He met them both for church on Sunday mornings, every week as though nothing had changed, but Rebecca seemed distant; smiling and cheerful, but unwilling to speak about anything other than the most menial day to day subjects.

On certain days, he was quite complacent to wallow in the sort of melancholy that only seemed becoming of a teenager whose family had become destitute overnight. Most days though, he just burned with anger. He’d grown up under the cruel and meticulous hand of his father, had been expected to become a successful banking man and continue the family legacy by rising up at Barrings International. It wasn’t something he’d every wanted for himself, but it was still a future—a steady oasis of solidness that never wavered. Now it had disintegrated, and, quite suddenly, he was unsure of what his place in the world might be.

Quite suddenly he had a choice.

Quite suddenly, his love for classical civilization seem maudlin—the interest of a boy who’d had everything. Now that he was left without a cushy inheritance ready to feather up around him should
he fall, having a major in the humanities seemed ubiquitously treacherous.

Despite this, he walked to and from his classes, took careful notes, completed every assignment with meticulous detail. The other students watched him, whispers blanketing their small cliques. This was obnoxious at best, but what once might have been the impetus for a barrage of terrible loneliness and general self-doubt, was now only an irritating buzz. He held himself strong and untouchable because there was something else keeping him afloat. A crack in the facade where roots were starting to push their way through to sunlight.

Steve.

It was winter, and as such, snow blanketed the grounds, the streets, the parks, and most notably, the soccer stadium. Steve still had daily morning workouts with the team, but now, more often than not, he spent his evenings with Bucky. They played Nintendo and screamed at the television, or sat in mutual silence at their desks, pencils scribbling, a magnetic field of togetherness surrounding them.

Sometimes they left campus, walking the streets of Brooklyn until they came upon their favorite new pizza joint—the one that served entire pies with pineapple and cream cheese and green peppers. (This was not as sacrilegious as Bucky had once thought. Cream cheese on pizza was a discovery of Steve’s, and even though Bucky teased and cajoled him for it, once he’d finally given in and tried a piece, he’d been an instant convert.)

Sometimes they left campus and walked until they found some hole-in-the-wall eatery that they’d never known existed. Occasionally this ended well, and they added it to their ever growing list of ‘Cool Haunts’ that was taped to their dorm room door. More often than not, it resulted in a horrible stomach ache.

Either way, they were spending more and more time together, and something about that left Bucky with a desperate desire for more, for anything, for Steve.

***

“…and this just in on the Barnes litigation: George R. Barnes’ lawyer has filed another appeal for extension based on defamation of character. Picketers are already standing outside of the courthouse and—”

The television blacked out with the brief bing sound of the power clicking off.

“I was kind of watching that,” Bucky muttered, wrinkling his nose at something invisible and clogging and most certainly noxious.

Steve brushed by him, unconcerned. “Naa. You were torturing yourself with what might have beens, and what is nows, and what might still come to passes.”

“Thanks, Gandalf,” Bucky snarked.

Steve ignored him and started rifling through his dresser drawers. Unlike when Bucky performed this activity—throwing every item of apparel he owned into every corner of the bedroom—Steve performed this task as quietly and unassuming as everything else he did in life. He carefully pulled out folded t-shirts and set them lovingly, one at a time, on the desk next to him. Once he finally settled on the absolutely perfect shirt, he carefully layered his clothes back into the dresser, then closed the drawer, as though it had never been opened in the first place.

Then he tugged off his over-sized brown and gold striped sweater and pulled on the very crisp, very clean, very form-fitting t-shirt.
“Going somewhere?” Bucky asked as Steve knelt down at his desk and began pulling out equipment. A ridiculously expensive looking pair of headphones lay in an organized tangle at his feet, then two small turntables, and numerous other pieces of technology that Bucky had seen in clubs, but had never considered actually labeling with something so mundane as a name. Steve kept pulling out piece after piece of electrical equipment and Bucky was absolutely astounded that it was all capable of fitting underneath one average size dorm room desk. He was even more astounded that he’d never thought to question the giant box of shit underneath Steve ‘Sir Abnormally Organized’ Rogers’ desk. “Hey. Mary Poppins. I asked you if you were going somewhere?”

“Thought I was, Gandalf,” Steve replied, working at a knot in one of the cords and not looking up.

“Dude. You come waltzing in here, turn off my entertainment, then ignore me—”

“Damn, Buck, you’re needy today.” Steve looked up at him and winked.

Winked.

Bucky threw up his hands in exasperation and stood up. “Fine, man. Whatever. I’m gonna go get some food.”

“Aww, don’t be like that, baby,” Steve cooed.

Bucky swung back around, studying him. Steve was grinning, still focused entirely on the mess of cables at his feet, but he looked different. Contented? “Uh…” Bucky said.

“Kidding, man. No, just, I’ve gotta gig downtown tonight.” He continued to work at the knot a moment more, then pulled the cords free. “You want to come?”

This was so incredibly ‘Steve’ that Bucky fell quiet, unable to speak.

“You wanna come?”

Just an invitation. Another overture of friendship. It was nothing else, nothing more, yet Bucky was suddenly too warm and his heartbeat was too fast. He ran a hand self-consciously through his hair, letting his fingers catch in the tangle of curls. “A…gig?”

“Yeah!” Steve returned. “Club up in Manhattan. Mars Bar. ‘Bout a 30 minute drive, so we’ll take the car.”

“I…uh…I…” Bucky stuttered, unsure of when in this conversation ‘we’ had become an assumed thing. “I’ve never heard of it.”

Steve’s eyebrows raised. “Well. There’s not a basement sex dungeon, but I’m pretty sure we can find you some nice big leather daddies to rub up against if you need.”

“Jesus Christ, Steve!” Bucky was absolutely certain that his cheeks were flushing a brilliant shade of crimson.

Steve just shrugged. “Or you know, if you get tired of that, there’s a lovely Catholic church next door. I hear the pews are really comfortable.”

Bucky threw his head back in consternation. “Oh my god. Yes, I’ll go with you to your fancy little club to watch you DJ. But there had better be good drugs.”

“Anything for you, Bucky. Anything for you.”
The club was dark and cavernous, and filled with the sickly sweet scent of cigarette smoke—so thick you could almost lay across it and let it carry you through the bouncing, jubilant bodies.

Bucky breathed in with a sigh of happiness. It smelled like human debauchery and a damn good time.

He’d helped Steve unload all of his equipment, complete with two crates full of records, at the back entrance of the club before strolling around to the front and entering like any other normal patron.

“Pretend I’m not here,” Steve had said. “Have fun. Be ridiculous. Get high, get drunk, get fucking wasted, then tell me how good I am at laying down a fucking fantastic beat.”

These were instructions that Bucky had absolutely no issue obeying. He’d palmed a few tabs of E back at the dorm room, and now he slipped one into his mouth and waited for the delicious energy of the room to overwhelm him.

Soon enough, the amplified announcement of Steve’s set passed through the bar in aggravated waves of sound.

Suddenly there was roaring screaming, cheering, shouting and yelling and stomping. Fists reached for the air in pumping motions as Steve stepped onto the stage.

Bucky barely recognized him.

His white t-shirt glowed neon in the strobing blacklights, and his eyes flashed in glorious shades of dark purples and blacks. His left hand pressed one speaker against his ear while his right was a whirl of spectacular motion against the soundboard and the turntables. He was so in his element, and so in his zone, and Bucky could see absolutely nothing of the all-star athlete, straight A student, perfectly pressed, meticulously coiffed son of Senator Greg Rogers. Here, he was a wild animal, unfettered and untamed. Here, he threw back his head and Bucky could see the veins at his neck, pumping blood, pumping life, pumping chaos through his body. The flashing lights caught the edges of Steve’s hair, making it look white and ethereal.

Swallowing at the sudden lump in his throat, Bucky reached out to steady himself against the craggy and cold of the stone wall. As the light flashed, he could make out wetness that dripped from the rock, and as he watched, it flowed magically into curled and feathered flourishes, leaping out to him, stroking against the hairs of his arms and sending shivers down his back.

The drugs had kicked in.

This transitory scene is filled with deep eroticism. Bucky nodded his head at this, this sentient sort of thought. It might be his. It might be from down below or up above. Wherever it had come from, it seemed to fill him with rightness and warmth and a sort of buzzing that was familiar. He let his limbs guide him, followed the shimmering, winding of the path that led him through clumps of dancing bodies, through magically glowing baubles and objects and the swirls of their color as they danced in front of his vision.

He found himself at the front of the stage, body in constant motion, hair whipping about his face in wet curls, sweat dripping from his forehead and down his nose and to the arch of his lips where he licked and licked and licked the salt away.

Steve was in constant, frenetic motion as well. His was not the movement of the drugged or the impaired, but the stirring of something new, something birthed, something fighting for dominance.
The beat went on and Bucky lost time. One moment Steve was in front of the stage, arm raised, face alight with joy. The next he was to the side, shouting down at the crowd, stirring up activity. Then he was back again, reaching out, palm almost close enough for Bucky to touch before it was yanked away and returned to its proper place on the turntable.

Bucky didn’t mind. This was all part of the game, part of the scenery. Laughing with the swiftly shifting scenes and the tilting of the earth, he let the emotions bubble up inside before bursting from him in yells and shrieks of pleasure.

“Bucky!”

His nickname. A part of him that he’d chosen, that no one else could take.

“Bucky!”

He’d considered telling Steve the reason for the nickname once—as they’d been crossing the street towards the iron wrought gates that read St. Ignatius Cemetery. They’d been close together—two boys on a hunt for spirits after a particularly eccentric professor of Bucky’s had insisted on the graveyard near the church being haunted. It had been during the twilight hours of dawn, and there had been something enormous between them. Something otherworldly. Something that had belied truth and a deep wanting for secrets to be bared.

*I chose it for myself, he’d considered saying. My father was insistent that I bore an appropriately presidential name, so I chose to ignore the James Monroe of his intent and adopt the moniker of a certain James Buchanan who was delightfully abysmal as any sort of world leader.*

This seemed overwrought and entirely to conspicuous for such an unearthly trip, so he’d kept his thoughts to himself.

“Bucky! Jesus, Bucky!”

He turned finally, suddenly extremely aware that the voice inside his head wasn’t so much a voice inside his head after all but was instead a very real, very conspicuous Steven Grant Rogers shouting directly in his face.

“Space, Steven,” Bucky yelled. Then he lunged at him, throwing his arms out and wrapping them around Steve’s neck. “You’re so soft!”

“Jesus, Buck,” Steve said, but he was smiling. “You’re still so fucking high!”

“This transitory scene, Steve!” Bucky announced. The words felt familiar, as though he’d already said them once, and suddenly he realized he had, but that Steve hadn’t heard and that Steve needed to hear them so he could dissolve into a pool of their essence. He fished around in his pocket for the remaining pill and held it out. “For you!”

Steve just shook his head and carefully pushed Bucky’s fingers closed again. “Not my thing, man,” he said. “Besides. One of us has to drive home!”

“Or fly!” Bucky nodded enthusiastically. “Have you tried to fly? This is something that they should really consider in automotive laboratories across the world, you know. None of this airbag, crumpling aluminum nonsense. Really flying, Steve. Really flying!”

His hands were still wrapped around Steve’s neck, and Steve hadn’t done anything to remove them. Bucky wanted to cry at how soft his skin was. How concentrated the press of their bodies seemed. Full of molecules and atoms and cells all clamoring to be first, to be felt, to be heard.
The music had changed. Of course it had changed. Steve was no longer on the stage, instead, house music was booming out a solid, uninspired beat.

“Fuck,” Bucky murmured. His head was swimming with drugs and there was nothing for it. His body was full of wanton desire and need.

He pulled down hard and suddenly his lips were pressed against Steve’s, his mouth was open and wanting and searching and the taste of Steve was pure heaven—

Steve pushed him back. “Hey,” he started.

There was some flickering of emotion that was cascading through Bucky’s veins. He was too high to feel shame, but his cheeks were hot and his ears were burning. “I…yeah…shit, I get really physical when I’m high and…” The sudden barrage of vowels and consonants and syllables seemed superfluous and he had nothing to say.

“No, it’s fine, it’s just…just…you’re really high, Bucky.”

Steve didn’t look angry and he didn’t immediately pull away. Bucky’s arms were still wrapped around him, and his traitorous fingers were still dancing at the nape of Steve’s neck, letting the fine fuzz of hair tickle and bend back and forth, back and forth.

“Fuck it,” Bucky announced, then leaned in again, this time gentle, this time tender.

He licked at the plumpness of Steve’s lower lip, then licked at the curve of his mouth and then they were kissing, Steve surging forward and Bucky refusing to give ground.

He hummed against Steve’s mouth and he was hard against Steve’s leg and impossibly, Steve still didn’t pull away. He was calmer than Bucky, slower, but still his hands moved to Bucky’s waist and gently rucked up his shirt, the pads of his fingertips stroking along smooth, wet planes of muscle.

Around them, the mass of people moved, undulating like serpents, screaming in time with the heavy beat. The floor seemed to bounce, the walls seemed to shiver, the air seemed to heave with motion and throughout it all, there was nothing but Bucky and Steve, Steve and Bucky, the softness of shared exploration and the delightful innocence of a first kiss.
He opened his eyes.

The floor was awash in light and movement and smoke and sound,
and music,
and depth.

Bucky shoved through the crowds of people, bumping and jostling and making a beeline for the stage.

“Hey, Brandon!” he called, excited to recognize another familiar face in the dreamscape.

Brandon looked up, his eyes squinted almost shut in a confused manner. Then he shook his head and went back to throwing himself wildly into the air.

A girl reached out and grabbed at Bucky, pulling him close, and he bent down and kissed her chastely on her forehead. “I’m looking for someone,” he apologized, then carefully turned her back to her gyrating crowd of friends.

It only took him two minutes to push to the front tonight. His head was clear, and even as his hand brushed by the pocket where the smooth plastic bag crackled against his thigh, he had no intention of messing with it.

Not tonight.

“So!” he yelled.

The bobbing dog head just kept moving, hand held to ear, arm outstretched along the turntable.

“So! Goddammit, Steve!” he yelled again.

Still no change, just deeply throbbing bass that sent vibrations through his feet.

“For fuck’s sake,” Bucky said, then heaved himself up on the stage, swinging a leg over, and rolling. It was none too graceful, but it got him up there. The enraptured crowd started shrieking their delight at his antics, and three security guards detached themselves from the wall, shoving through with far more ease than Bucky had found. “Shit,” he muttered. “Steven Fucking Grant Rogers!”

Dog Face finally looked down at him.

The beat went on, and the security guards were almost to the stage, but Steve finally ran forward, pulling the hideous mask from his face, and grabbing his arm. “Oh my God, Bucky what in Christ’s name—”

“Lord’s name in vain much?” Bucky cut in. “Before you get all weird again, I remember, I’m not fucking high this time, and can we for fuck’s sake get out of this goddamn building?”

“Right, Uh...my set isn’t—”

“Steve!” Bucky yelled. The security guards were on the stage now, running for him. “A little decisiveness?”
“Right,” Steve repeated. Then he turned to the men bearing down on them. “It’s cool, it’s a friend, it’s fine, he’s drunk. I’m just gonna get him home, so...just play house music or something?” He grabbed Bucky and pulled him along, muttering, “It’s my fucking afterlife, just do whatever.”

Bucky was nodding along, eyebrows raised as though, yes, he did indeed realize he was receiving special treatment, and he did indeed think that made him hot shit. Then, the full impact of Steve’s words hit and he looked back. “Your…?”

“Just hold on,” Steve said. He moved over to one of the guards and started screaming something directly into his ear. The sound and noise and chaos of the club made it impossible for Bucky to hear, so he settled on watching the way Steve’s lips moved in the strobe lights.

As soon as he finished talking, Steve pulled at his arm, and they jumped off of the back of the stage with the magnificence of two men about to finally discover the secret of flight, ran down the dusky grey hall, and pushed through the emergency exit out to the glow of streetlights on an abandoned city street.

This, Bucky considered, was heavenly, because there was nothing so glorious as new scenery.

***

The silence was deafening.

Bucky looked down at his arm and slowly counted the tattooed stripes there. Seven uneven, zebra-like sets of stripes reaching just past his elbow. Seven nights and he’d finally beaten the fucking club.

“It’s cold,” he said, in wonder, in childlike delight.

Steve stopped, then turned to look at him. “It’s winter right now,” he said. “Do you need a coat?”

“Would be nice, but I’m not seeing one around.”

Steve looked at him for a moment—really studied him—then smiled. “Here.”

He handed over a black wool coat, strikingly similar to the one Bucky used to have in college. There were a few major differences though—the buttons were a headache inducing shade of purple, and there was only one lapel. “Uh...where?” Peering around Steve, he frowned. “Where did this come from?”

Steve shrugged. “I can will things into reality sometimes if the time is right and the ‘push through the cloudy-dimension-thing’ is feeling cooperative.”

“So you can make coats now,” Bucky said, “and I’m gonna just blow right by ‘cloudy-dimension-thing’. Sounds like a story for another night.” He smiled sweetly, shrugging on the hideously ugly mockery of his old coat.

Steve stuck out his tongue.

“I just...if you can make coats then why can’t you make it summer. This is horrible!” Bucky complained. “There is actual snow, and I’m freezing, and I’d hate to think you went to all that trouble of procuring a sad clown’s favorite outerwear only to have me smell like a wet sheep.”

“I suppose if I wanted it to be summer, it would be,” Steve replied primly. “I happen to like the snowfall. And the winter. It’s when I fell in love.”
Bucky looked at him, laugh halting and clattering against the empty cement of the sidewalk.

Gazing back, Steve’s blue eyes sparkled, but his mouth was so severely serious.

“You’re a hopeless romantic,” Bucky whispered.

“I am,” Steve agreed, and then they were kissing.

Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, letting his hands rub against every curve, every hard plane of tight muscle, and Steve tangled his hands into Bucky’s hair, tugging him even closer. Steve tasted of wintergreen, and with a shock of energy, Bucky saw a car and a flashing light and in the distance, a phone booth, and a hand, and a face, and Steve, and Steve—

“What…” He recoiled. “What was that?”

“Sorry,” Steve rasped. “Sometimes it gets a little feisty. Trying to push you into memory. Push you into stasis.”

“I don’t understand,” Bucky said.

“Do you want to stay?” Steve asked.

The ground buckled beneath them, and whining pitch fought for superiority over the silence. Bucky fell to his knees, covering his ears.

Do you want this? The voice asked.

“Fuck off,” Bucky snarled.

Cement unkinked and suddenly, his ears were clear. There was no ringing, no hollowness, nothing to indicate anything unusual had happened. “Steve?” he tried.

“Do you want to stay? Steve asked. It was the same inflection, and he was still standing in the exact same position, still reaching towards Bucky.

Standing up, Bucky reached for Steve’s hands, watching as their fingers intertwined. “Of course,” he said, then looked up at the sky.

There was no thunder. There was no voice. There was no noticeable graying out of landscape, of freezing of objects. “Huh,” Bucky murmured.

“You’re closer,” Steve said cryptically. “Do you want to see something beautiful?”

They walked down the street, hand in hand, and Bucky watched as the snow fell in delicate sparkles, coating the ground in newness, in virginal white. He listened to the crunch of it under his tennis shoes, and it sent waves of pleasure up his legs. They passed an array of adorable shops, all tucked behind umber brick exteriors and all with awnings, although this was where all similarity stopped. One was garish green, the next a bright pink with mustard yellow stripes. This was followed by three different shades of puce (a color that Bucky had thought up until this moment had been barely deserving of one shade.) Then a marvelous blue with orange polka dots. They looked magical. They looked as though they were out of a fairytale, or a children’s book.

Still the snow fell, releasing even more brilliance. There was a beauty in it, he realized, and maybe even a little magic.

They walked and passed a barren plot of land, and in the center there was a single stone garden
gnome who stood, watching them and tipping his cap in motionless judgment. They passed other people—couples walking arm and arm, a single child, spreading and closing his limbs in the middle of the street, a beautifully balanced snow angel forming beneath him.

“What did you mean, it’s your afterlife?” Bucky finally said. He hated the way the words fell, breaking the veneer of perfection between them.

Steve shrugged. “I told you once, do you remember? You’re dying. If you want to stay, you need to let go.”

“I’m not talking about me,” Bucky said. “What are you?”

Steve reached a hand out, as if in response. “We’re here,” he said.

Before them, stood a simple wooden gate. There was no fence around it, attaching it to anything in particular. Instead, it stood solidly alone, as though posing as some great barrier for those with no imagination. Despite the openness of the land on either side, Steve still stepped forward and unlatched the gate.

He motioned with his hand for Bucky to move through it, and so he did.

Beyond the gate were an array of fat stepping stones, winding and leading up a strangely exotic looking hill that Bucky was quite certain hadn’t been there moments before.

“Just follow the path,” Steve said.

And Bucky did just that.

He walked for what seemed an eternity, and yet the moon didn’t flicker in movement once, so he supposed it hadn’t been so long after all. Steve stayed close behind him, following in each of Bucky’s footsteps that seemed to press their imprints into the soft stones.

They wound and wound upwards and still the snow fell. The coat Steve had given him was surprisingly warm against it, and while his breath in the frigid air puffed a proper amount of steamy condensation with each exhale, his inhalations didn’t burn of cold. Finally, they reached the top.

It was completely flat, a flatness that most mountains consider undesirable, and there, perched on that smooth surface, was a single bench. Linking hands together again, Steve gave a small, shy smile, then tugged Bucky to it.

“Sit,” Steve said.

“What is this place?”

Steve patted at the soft wood beside him, and Bucky sat down, scooching close to him. Steve tucked his head against Bucky’s shoulder. “It’s memory,” he whispered.

The flat surface of the mountaintop began to coil around them, turning glassy and reflective, and churning with an almost sort of froth to it. Still, the bench stayed completely solid, unwavering.

The fraying gray of a picture appeared at their feet, burbling and moving until Bucky could make out what looked like a building, charred, decimated.

“Not that,” Steve whispered.
It swirled in the other direction then, and colors began to emerge, pooling together, forming the shadowy lines of a television set, the languid curves of two boys, and in the distance on the screen, two animated cars.

“It’s us…” Bucky murmured. “Memory?” he said, arm hugging Steve even closer.

“It pulls from my mind,” Steve said. “Sometimes it can be hard to control. But if I’m missing something in particular, longing for a certain glimpse of life, it tries.”

There was a poetry to this that Bucky couldn’t quite grasp. “Is it always a good memory?” he asked, thinking of the building. There was something burning at his unconscious mind then, something pushing and frightening in its quest.

“No.”

This was dropped carefully, gently. Bucky almost missed its utterance completely.

“Then why do you come?” Bucky asked.

“Because sometimes, if my heart is warm with it and my throat is clogged with it, sometimes it shows me you, and that is always worth chancing anything else.”

Bucky considered this for a moment, then nodded. “I’m dying,” he said, and Steve nudged against his shoulder. The thing began to push harder, loudly, impossibly dense at his mind. “Then you are —”

**Do you want this?**

And Steve was gray, frozen at his side, the pooling reflection of memory growing stale and dark and Bucky was falling and pain

and pain

and pain.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Chapter 10 features more absolutely stunning artwork by the amazing JessieLucid! Go give her a follow and some serious love <3

Dating a star athlete was a strangely specific phenomenon.

Everywhere they went on campus, Steve was instantly recognizable, and his insanely irritating habit of stopping and speaking with everyone who so much as smiled in his direction only made this worse. Bucky took to brushing by during these conversations, flipping his hand up in a quick and silent gesture of ‘goodbye’ and getting the hell out of Dodge.

Unfortunately, this solution didn’t mean that he escaped the microscopic evaluation that Steve was constantly under. No, he was studied just as hard, face quickly filed away in the minds of all the students and deemed ‘an obnoxious and stuck-up accessory to the illustrious Steve Rogers’ and someone who was ‘using Steve Rogers for social gain’.

Neither of these descriptions particularly bothered Bucky. He was already well used to ignoring the thoughts and feelings of NYU’s finest teenagers. Every now and again, however, he did experience a surge of irritation, and, rather than leaving, would spend the time doing everything in his power to make Steve as uncomfortable as humanly possible.

This just so happened to be what was occurring around noon on the far end of the small park that was situated directly in the middle of campus, as Steve was being unexpectedly interviewed by a student on the school newspaper.

“There are rumors swirling that the head of the Athletics Department might be looking at hiring a new head coach. Do you have any comment on the matter?”

Bucky wrapped his hands around Steve’s waist and promptly dipped his hands into the front pockets of Steve’s jeans.

“Uh,” Steve managed. “No comment.”

The student shot an irritable glance in Bucky’s direction. “Well…I guess I can let that one slide. But tell me. You’ve always been hugely active in student clubs on campus and a really important voice for politics, especially with your dad, umm, well being who he is?”

“Senator Rogers.” Steve nodded.

Bucky hummed in irritation against his ear, but Steve just smiled as though there were no place he’d rather be than standing in the chill spring air, answering boring questions about his family.

“Well, do you think you might consider lending your voice to the newly formed Gay Straight Alliance club here? Senator Rogers has always been fairly conservative. Do you have any plans to speak with him on the matter? It might be a fantastic show of support if someone as well known as you were…well...if you…” He stopped, suddenly very flushed and extremely flustered.
“Mmm,” Steve murmured.

There had been a world of annoyance in that simple ‘mmm’ and Bucky chose that moment to lick at Steve’s earlobe.

“Buck!” Steve exclaimed, shoving Bucky back. “Sorry,” he apologized, turning back to the student. “I mean…are you implying that you know my sexual orientation? Are you asking if I plan to ‘come out’ to my father in some sort of public space to affirm the validity of the gay students of New York University?”

“Oh…um…well, not necessarily that, you know. Just some show of support? Since you’re kind of…well…” He motioned lamely at Bucky.

Bucky flipped him the bird.

“I’m sorry…since we’re what?”

The student was starting to look extremely concerned that he’d picked a battle with entirely the wrong sort of human being. “Umm…dating?”

“First of all. We’re not dating. He’s my roommate.”

Bucky made a shocked sound of eternal sadness and affected a rather pathetic pout. Unfortunately, the student reporter didn’t even look at him once.

“Secondly. If you think that sort of thing would shock my father into action, you’d be sorely mistaken. And if you don’t think he already knows exactly who I’m friends with, who I’m dating, and who I’m fucking, then you really have no clue what it’s like to be the son of a Senator.”

“Oh,” the student mumbled. “I didn’t mean it like that…I guess…I just thought you might—”

“I have no problem supporting the groups on campus,” Steve said, with a sort of finalized formality. “And I’m really proud to be a part of a community of students are running with the ideas coming together in Boston. I’m really happy that we have a GSA here, and have no issue with any sort of agenda they may be pushing. I’d just appreciate it if you could remember that I’m not my father and that I’m not your ‘in’ to D.C. politics.” Steve stuck out his hand and prompted a sturdy shake. Then he smiled, a bright and brilliant thing, and all the land melted in a buttery puddle of ‘Steven Grant Rogers: God of Sunshine.’

The student smiled back and thanked Steve for his time, then the two of them were once more on their way.

***

They didn’t have a name for what they were to each other. It wasn’t so much a desire for eternal companionship that drove them, or, on the other end of the spectrum, an easy person to fuck.

Instead, they were absorbed in every moment, delighted in the taste of each passing day, burying themselves in the scent of each other, in the feel of each other’s skin, and outside the dorm room, in the simple melody of companionship.

They knew it would come to an end. It was a fact that Steve was slated to move further into the city and to work for his father’s campaign. This was unchangeable. So instead, they lived for the days of casual banter and friendship, and clutched the weekends filled with music and raves and pure excess tightly to their chests with a white knuckled grip.
On April 18th at 4:54pm, their dorm room phone began to ring.

This wasn’t a particularly strange phenomenon—in fact, it rang so frequently during the soccer season that Bucky had more than once taken the receiver off the hook and let it hang lifelessly from its pathetically tangled cord.

In this moment, he was very much wishing he’d kept up with practice, as he was lying on his back, fully clothed, but completely focused on the taste of Steve’s lips against his tongue.

“You wanna answer it?” Steve choked out, face scrunched in concentration.

Bucky groaned beneath him and tried to ignore the way the ringing was completely covering the delicious sound of Steve’s panting breaths. “Fuck, no,” he said, then went back to the extremely important act of kissing Steve.

The phone stopped and they both sighed in relief. There was a 30 second interval where the only sound in the room was that of two teenagers breathing heavily.

Then it rang again.

“For Christ’s sake!” Steve complained.

“Don’t use the Lord’s name in vain.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Steve corrected with a raised eyebrow, but he was already moving off of Bucky.

The phone stopped.

Then started again.

Steve threw up his hands in mock anger. “That’s it!” he called out to the phone. “You win. Clearly the Lord has looked down upon us and judged us. We shall forever more be punished by obnoxious people calling at all hours of the day and night until we repent our sins or some such.” He glared at Bucky. “That’s correct, yeah? We gotta repent and like flog ourselves or some shit.”

Bucky just laughed. “Jesus, you’re a mouthy little shit when you wanna be.”

“Jesus?” Steve replied. “Little?”

The phone rang again.

“I got it, I got it,” Steve said with a mocking lilt. He quickly threw a leg around Bucky and hopped off the bed, impressively graceful despite the tangle of blankets around his legs.

“Hello?” Steve said into the receiver.

Bucky sighed dramatically, then closed his eyes and tried, very, very hard, to remember the softness of Steve’s lips against his own.

“Uhh, yeah. Yes, I mean, umm, hold on.” Steve covered the bottom of the phone with his hand.

“Buck?”

“Tell them to fuck off.”
“It’s your lawyer.”

Bucky smacked a fist down on the soft mattress, resulting in a considerably less violent sound than he was hoping for. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, I…uh…” Steve was floundering.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, give me a sec,” he muttered, brushing the wisps of hair from his face. He lay for a few moments trying to gather himself and will down the impressive hard-on he was currently sporting. Then he rolled off the bed and relieved Steve of the phone.

“Hey. It’s James.”

The muffled voice on the other end of the line was full of static and remorse and Bucky’s jaw tightened with every word.

“I see,” he said, then, “well, I understand. Umm, yeah, I can make Monday work. I’ll be there.” He hung up the receiver and stared at it for a long time. Then, he sank down to the floor, pulling his knees to his chest.

“Buck?” Steve called. “Hey, what’s up?”

“He got convicted.” His tongue was sandpaper in his mouth. His palms were sweating, and he rubbed them on his knees, but all that happened was that they sweat more.

“Oh,” Steve said. Moving awkwardly, he ran a hand through his blond hair mussing it even further, then turned to organize his already perfectly organized dresser. Once that was done, he looked back to Bucky. He looked back to Bucky and asked, “Uh…didn’t we already know that was going to happen?” Reaching down to the mini fridge that sat between their dressers, Steve pulled out a Coke. “Want one?”

Bucky stared at the mini fridge. There was a little sticker on the top left corner that read ‘Frigidaire’. It was slowly peeling away, leaving behind a thin veneer of gunk.

“Shit, sorry,” Steve said. “I just…I’m sorry. I thought we knew this? Shit.” He knelt down by Bucky then, reaching out a hand.

“Uh…right,” Bucky managed as Steve placed his hand on his knee. It was cool. Dry. Not particularly comforting. “Yeah…I mean…yeah I knew it was coming.”

“Okay…”

His eyes were deep blue pools, and Bucky didn’t want to look at them. They were too perfect.

He kept his gaze on the fridge. The door stood slightly ajar, and the quiet buzz of the compressor had started up. “Uh…he lost everything?” He’d delivered this as a question. As though he didn’t understand the answer and needed help having it explained.

“Okay,” Steve said again.

“Everything. So…I…umm…I’ll uh…finish this semester out I guess and then—”


“Everything,” The word was starting to feel rough at his tongue, tangled, and heavy, and wrong from repetition. “I can’t pay for school next semester so…”
The buzz of the fridge had turned into a roar in his ears, drowning out everything else. “Could you close the fridge?” he asked, finally looking at Steve.

“Huh?”

Bucky motioned. “The fridge. The door isn’t closed. It’s wasting energy. Nevermind, I’ll get it.” He stood, shrugging off Steve’s hand, and walked over to the unit, pushing the door closed hard, and noting with satisfaction the way the rubber gasket sealed. “I’m gonna head out for a bit.”

“Bucky,” Steve called. “It’s alright. It’s going to be fine! There’s financial aid, there are scholarships, you’ll be fine, okay?”

“Yeah.” Standing suddenly, Bucky toed out of his athletic shorts, and reached over to the pile of laundry by his dresser. Shrugging on a pair of black jeans and his black boots, he mumbled over his shoulder, “I’ll be back later.”

“Wait, where are you going?”

Opening his dresser drawer, Bucky reached in, settling on the plastic bag near the back. He shoved it in his back pocket, then brushed by Steve to get to the door. “It’s cool,” he said. “I’m fine. It’s fine. You’re right. Financial aid or something.” Then he opened the door and rushed into the hallway, his heart pounding as an itching sensation crept up his skin.

Steve was still calling his name from the door, but it echoed around him, the shouts hitting the walls and popping like bubbles—leaving only a soapy film of memory behind.

Hurrying down the stairs and taking them two at a time, he ran down four floors until he finally burst free into the chill of the evening. There were still students clogging the streets, chatting animatedly with one another and smiling as though everything were perfect. It was unfair of him to expect the entire world to stop in its tracks with the revelation that his entire life was fucking ruined, but a small, petty, part of himself was angry at their indifference, furious that no one even looked at him as he shoved by.

He wanted to scream with it.

Instead, he fumbled out one of the pills and popped it in his mouth, swallowing it dry. There was so much anger and so much helplessness threatening to explode that it seemed like there was only one option.

He needed Eros.

He needed someone to hold him down and demean him and fuck him and take away all of his choices because it was the only way he knew how to release some of the foul poison that was coursing through his veins. Pushing past a group of chattering students, he made his way all the way to the lip of the sidewalk, intending to cross the street, when a hand grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“What the fuck?” Bucky snarled, whirling around, hauling back, and punching with all his might.

There was a single moment before the punch landed that Bucky’s eyes widened, and his heartbeat quickened, and he wanted to cry with the sudden, burning knowledge that someone, that Steve, chased him down.

And then the punch landed.
“Fuck!” Steve shouted, his hands covering his nose, his eyes watering. “ Fucking shit, fuck, Bucky! Shit, I think you broke my nose!”

This may have been true. Steve’s voice was hollow and pained and there was already blood soaking his hands, dripping down in between fingers and hitting the pavement. Bucky watched as the steady dripping turned spots of dull gray a bright crimson.

“Fuck!” Steve cried again, wiping one hand on his jeans, then holding it back up again. He tilted his head up, looking at the cloudy night sky, presumably trying to quench the blood flow.

They were attracting the attention of multiple groups of students now—some were closing in, looking unsure, and others already had cameras out filming. “Uh…” Bucky tried. “Fuck…I’m sorry, I—”

In a completely unhelpful turn of events, the drugs started kicking in right then, and he giggled.

“Fuck.” He laughed, then clamped a hand to his mouth, trying desperately to squash the sound. “Fuck, I’m sorry!” Bucky held out a hand to Steve, but completely missed and tripped forward.

It was Steve who had to catch Bucky, steady him, hold him up as they walked back to the dorm. Once in the elevators, (because there was no way in hell Bucky was making it back up those stairs), Steve shrugged out of his t-shirt and held it to his face. The fabric bloomed red immediately, and Bucky found himself looking at the floor, at the walls, at the bright number four on the console of the elevator.

Anywhere but at Steve.

“I’m really fucking sorry,” he said, and he laughed again—a short, loud burst of sound, punctuating the silence.

“Bucky?”

“I’m just...I just...I—” He’d been laughing just a moment before, but now his chest was heaving, a horribly solid weight tightening around his lungs. Breathing was hard, and the sounds coming out of his mouth were more like sobs, more like cries, more like—

Fuck. He was crying. He was crying in the elevator with Steve, and Steve was holding a very stained t-shirt to his face, and his eyes were already turning black and blue from the force of Bucky’s punch. Everything was wrong, everything was terrible, everything was turned upside down.

“Bucky,” Steve said again. “Hey, man, it’s fine, it’s alright, just breathe, okay? Just breathe.”

The elevator dinged its arrival, and the doors opened on their hall.

“Come on.” Raising an arm to Bucky’s back, Steve herded him to their dorm room.

The door stood ajar, a testament to how quickly Steve had rushed after him. The tears were coming harder now, and Bucky had no idea why, no idea how to stop—all he could think about was gasping in the next breath, and then another, and then another.

Steve helped him sit on the edge of the bed, then he walked over to the mirror that hung on the back of their door, inspecting the damage to his face. “Shit,” he whispered, prodding at the tender skin around the bridge of his nose. “Okay, it’s not broken at least.”

Looking up, Bucky quietly said, “Fuck…”
“I gotta go wash up, okay? It’s not broken...don’t worry about it. I’ve had way worse in games. I’m gonna go wash the blood off my face and I’ll be right back, okay?”

The room was swaying gently back and forth in front of his face, as though he were standing on the deck of a boat. He opened his mouth to speak, but there was nothing he felt particularly inclined to say other than, “Fuck…”

“Bucky! Come on, look at me!”

His head was so heavy, but he managed to tilt it upwards and look straight at Steve.

“Don’t go anywhere. Alright? I’ll be right back. I need you to stay here. Okay?”

“Yup,” Bucky said. He’d never been high in a quiet space before. Usually he was dancing, or fucking, or stumbling back home. Here, in the safety of their dorm room, it was just wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong.

The door clicked closed, and he turned toward the sound. Steve was gone.

*He’s washing up.*

Steve was gone.

*He needs to clean the blood from his face.*

Steve was gone.

*You hurt him. You hurt him, you hurt him, you hurt him.*

He closed his eyes for only a heartbeat, but somehow he was lying on the bed, then somehow there was yelling, then somehow Steve was there again, straddling him on the bed, and he was doing the yelling, right in Bucky’s face.

“Bucky! Fuck, Bucky, wake up!”

“Stop moving...the bed is moving...I’m moving...everything’s moving. Stop it!” Bucky threw a hand up at Steve’s chest, pushing him back as he sat up. His head narrowly missed the bottom of the top bunk as he swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Scowling, Steve scooched over and watched him from the end of the bed. “Jesus Christ, belligerent drunks have nothing on you,” he said. “How much did you take? What did you even take?”

“It’s fine. Same as always. It’s just too quiet here. Too...settled. Feels weird.”

Steve wrinkled his nose at this. “You seem more out of it than normal, Buck.”

“Naaa....” Extending his hand out in front of his face, Bucky smiled at the way his fingers splayed, long and lean. He moved them, let them dance through the thick air, and laughed at the aura of color that seemed to leech from them which each movement.

“Right,” Steve said. “Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do. You need to sober up a bit before we have any sort of real conversation, and, I’m sorry, but I’m not gonna let you just start freaking out right now. I’m not convinced you have any idea how much you took--”

“You don’t trust me?”
“I trust you just fine, you ass. I just want to play it safe. So talk to me. I’ll talk to you. Let’s play 20 questions or something dumb like that. Just to distract you till the worst of it wears off, kay?”

“20 questions?” Bucky considered this, then burst out laughing. “Can we take shots for every one we answer?”

Sighing, very loudly, Steve cradled his head in his hands. “God, you fucking idiot. No. No you can’t take shots. And I’m going first since you’re being impossible.”

“Cool…” His fingers were still dancing, passing golden and mauve and orange and lime threads of light between them. Drugs were so fucking fantastic.

“What’s your favorite book?”

His hand dropped back to his lap. “That’s not 20 questions, Steve.” Bucky snorted. “You’re s’posed to give me a hint and then I have 20 questions to guess it.”

Eyebrows raised, Steve gave him a rather pointed stare. “You,” he replied, “are an absolute pain in my ass.”

“I’m just letting you know! You’re doing it wrong. I gotta get a hint!”

“You can also play it to get to know someone. I ask you a question. Then you ask me a question. Then I ask you again, and so on and so on. Alright? Rules clear enough for you now?”

“Sounds dangerous,” Bucky said. “I can ask you anything?”

“Assuming you actually answer the first damn question, then yes! Anything.”

Thinking for a moment, Bucky swung his legs onto the bed, and scooted so his back hit the pillow at the end. Now they were staring at each other from opposite sides, and something in the air had changed—there was a tangible tension that threatened to burst.

A slow smile pulled at Steve’s mouth. “What’s your favorite book?” he repeated.

“The Neverending Story. Michael Ende. I read it in fifth grade, and it was the most magical thing, and I spent half of the year collecting old books from the library, from shops, from antique stores. I’d start them all the same way—on my floor, a blanket pulled around me, and an enormous hope that welled in my chest that maybe, just maybe, this would be the one that I fell into.”

“Huh,” Steve said. “Guessing it’s about...reading a book? Never read it.”

There was a thread poking from the seam of Bucky’s pants and he was suddenly, extremely invested in unattaching it.

“Your turn?” Steve prodded.

“How come you don’t do drugs?”

“Oh!”

Bucky watched the way his mouth formed that simple ‘oh’ of surprise and had a sudden, terrible urge to fit his mouth against it.

“I’m not judging you for it, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Steve started. “I just have to stay clean for the soccer team, and if my dad ever caught me fucking around with stuff he’d...well...let’s just say it
wouldn’t be particularly good for his image.”

“My dad’s not any better,” Bucky mumbled.

“No. No, he’s not.”

It had been a sigh of a thing, so quiet, Bucky almost didn’t hear. “So, you’re gonna just stay perfect forever then?”

A pillow thunked against his head, and Bucky scowled as it tumbled to the floor.

“My turn,” Steve chided with a grin. “Favorite movie?”

“These are awfully safe questions, don’t you think?

Steve just laughed and shook his head. “There’s time for me to work up to something more your taste. Favorite movie?”

“The Goonies. Favorite sex position?”

“You’re playing with fire here, druggie,” Steve teased. “With a woman? Or a man?”

There was a delightful red flush that had crept up Steve’s neck and ears, and Bucky was utterly transfixed. “Uh…” he tried. “Uh…either?”

The blush continued on to his cheeks as Steve looked down at his hands. “Uh, sorry. Haven’t been with a guy before. Was just being an ass. Missionary, I guess?”

“Oh my god, you are so fucking boring!” Bucky shouted.

“I just would rather see someone’s face...know they’re having a good time...I would...hold up!” Steve exclaimed. “Why am I explaining myself to you! I answered the question. If you want to know the whys and wheres and hows, then you’ll have to wait your turn.”

“Fair enough.”

“Favorite sex position?” Steve asked with a smirk.

Fuck. Fuck, he should have known this was coming. “Uh...don’t have one?” he tried.

“Try again!” Laughing, Steve pulled his knees to his chest.

Steve’s eyes were sparkling and there was nothing more in the world that Bucky wanted than to kiss him. The drugs were still in his system, he was still woozy with them, tongue still loose and unguarded, and thoughts bouncing everywhere. The urge was only growing stronger.

“I…”

I’ve never been with a woman.

“I…”

I’ve never been with a man. Not really. Not in the way that matters—in the quiet, without drugs or liquor or anonymity.

“I...I’ve never been in a relationship,” he blurted.
“Come on, Bucky,” Steve laughed. “I answered you! I know you’ve...done it.”

It sounded so ridiculous that Bucky started to laugh. “Had sex, Steve, Jesus! Are you 14? Done it…”

Grimacing, Steve ran a hand through his hair as though he were suddenly, extremely self conscious. “I’d throw another pillow at you if I had one, jerk. Just answer the question.”

Just like that, it was serious again. There wasn’t any way around it but truth, and Steve wasn’t moving, so Bucky closed his eyes and spat it out.

“I’ve only been with guys in clubs. I’ve never really had sex in the...love sort of sense. So I don’t know. The stuff I do isn’t particularly enjoyable, it just...it just is.”

“Oh…”

There it was again. That perfect ‘o’ shape of his mouth. Something stirred within Bucky’s stomach but he was no longer sure if it was desire or if it was shame.

“Why...why do you do it then?” Steve asked.

Ignoring the fact that it technically wasn’t his turn anymore, Bucky considered the question for a long moment. “It’s not so much about the sex, I think?” he started. “It’s more...the anticipation? The build up? The energizing danger of the whole thing? I know it’s fucked up. I know it’s not right, or whatever. It’s just that...sometimes I just get so amped up you know? I just gotta...I gotta let out somehow or I’ll burst with it.”

Steve nodded. “So anonymous sex is how you...find a release?”

“I guess. It sounds pathetic.”

“Naa, it’s not pathetic. I get it. I really do. It makes sense, I just...you’ve really never been in a relationship? You’ve never been in love?”

“Ahhh…” This was verging on dangerous territory, and Bucky was officially high enough that his thoughts were sharp prickling things, that were screaming for him to stop right fucking now. “It’s my turn. What’s your favorite book?”

Steve crawled over and squeezed in beside Bucky—back at the pillow and right side against the wall. “Bridges of Madison County.”

“Oh fuck off.” Bucky laughed, trying to ignore the buzzing electricity beneath his skin, trying to ignore the way Steve’s arm rested against his own, trying desperately not to breathe and disrupt their closeness.

Steve laughed as well. “God, I had to study that piece of shit in a Lit class this year. Absolutely fucking ridiculous.”

“Yeah, well—”

“Have you ever been in love?”

The question had been so sudden, so ludicrous, so surprising that Bucky answered “Yes,” before he even realized his mouth had opened.

Turning towards him, Steve studied him carefully and Bucky found himself unable to look away.
His eyes were so blue, his nose so straight, his hair so blond, his face was so fucking swollen because Bucky was an asshole.

And then, suddenly, none of it mattered because Steve leaned in, eyes still watching Bucky’s, and their mouths met.

It was the softest kiss Bucky had ever had. Steve’s lips were tender, his mouth warm. His breath tasted faintly of orange, and mostly of the wintergreen gum that he was always chewing and Bucky fell into it—chasing that delicious echo of mint. His hand came up, wrapped around Steve’s neck and pulled him even closer, and then Steve opened his mouth ever so slightly and let Bucky’s tongue in.

It was quiet.

It was so, so quiet.

There was no club music, there was no throng of people watching, there was only the sound of the heat clicking on in the dorm room and filling the space with a warm buzz.

Steve broke away first, eyes still on Bucky’s. His mouth turned up in a quirk of a smile, and his cheeks were flushed with color. “I’d like...to do that again?” he asked. So polite. So Steve.

“Yes,” he whispered, and then they met again, only this time Steve’s hand pushed up against Bucky’s chest, and Bucky’s palm fell on his lower back and then they were kissing but they were also exploring—touching the planes and curves and sharp edges of each other’s bodies.

“Like this?” Steve whispered against Bucky’s mouth as his hand strayed lower, hooking under the waistband of Bucky’s pants and stroking, perilously close to where Bucky was already growing hard.

Groaning, Bucky nodded, his own hand drifting across the curve of Steve’s ass, reaching for his upper legs, then back again. “Yes,” he moaned, drawing back just long enough to unsnap the button at his fly and unzip.

Steve was already out of his t-shirt, hair mussed, pupils blown with desire. They came together again, and this time, pushing even lower, Steve wrapped his hand around Bucky’s cock drawing up on his knees for just a moment and helping Bucky slide down onto his back. Then Steve was straddling him, and the taste of his tongue was pure joy. His thumb slid over the tip of Bucky’s cock smearing pre-cum around the flared head, while Bucky groaned in ecstasy and it was still soft, and still languid, but so intensely perfect.

It was unlike anything he’d ever experienced.

Steve’s hand twisted gently, and then he was stroking Bucky, slow at first, then a little quicker. With every jerk of his hand, Bucky let out a whimper of sound.

It was so fast.

Everything moved so fast.

The pooling of pleasure in Bucky’s groin was about to burst, he was about to come, he couldn’t hold it back anymore and Steve was still kissing him, breathless and perfect—

“Steve, stop, stop, I’m gonna—”

He couldn’t last.
He jerked with a deep groan, and Steve kept moving, stroking him through his orgasm.

“That’s it,” he said, “Fuck, Bucky, that’s it.”

Falling back against the pillow, Bucky started to laugh. There was cum everywhere. Sticky pools of it against his belly, covering Steve’s hand, dripping all over the clean sheets. “Fuck, I’m sorry, that was so fast, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be,” Steve whispered, and bent down to kiss him again.

This was nothing like the club.

In the club, he would come apart under the hands of anonymous men and when they’d finally separate he’d be dirty and shamed and humiliated. Even these would eventually drain, but then he’d be hollow, he’d be nothing, a hollowed out husk of himself.

Here, he was warm.

Steve collapsed next to him, a tenuous smile beginning to spread as he watched Bucky, as though this were everything he could ever want.

“Did I…” Steve murmured. “Was it alright?”

“Oh my god,” Bucky gasped out. “I’ve...I’ve never…"

“Now you have,” Steve smiled. “Now you’ve been with someone who…” He stopped, as though nervous to continue.

Bucky leaned across and kissed him—long and deep and full of bright energy.

I love you.

I love you when your knuckles turn white from how tightly you’ve clenched your Nintendo controller.

I love you when you dance on the stage and scream into the microphone and spin records and drop fucking fantastic beats.

I love you when you wake up at 5 A.M. for a run and you get ready in the darkness of the dorm room so you don’t wake me up.

I love you when you laugh.

All of this seemed too much for their first time, and so he settled on another kiss, another taste of Steve’s lips. “Can I?” Bucky asked, reaching for the soft fabric that bulged at Steve’s groin.

“Yes,” Steve groaned. “Yes...please...“ He closed his eyes as Bucky touched him, shuddering once as Bucky peeled back the waistband of his briefs.

Steve was quiet through it all—biting back small gasps and moans—and the silence was between them buzzed with the need for something more. I think...” Bucky whispered as Steve came apart beneath his hand, “I think I might love you.”

***

The bruising on Steve’s face took weeks to fade completely, and despite his insistence that his nose
wasn’t broken and that he’d had far worse during practice, Bucky still swallowed a mouthful of horrible guilt every time their eyes met.

In the daylight, without the help of drugs, or the darkness, or the slide of Steve’s hand against his stomach, everything seemed far worse.

His father was in prison.

His family’s fortune had been divested; stripped from generations of Barnes’s and used to pay reparations to victims.

Steve still talked cheerfully about FAFSA forms and government assistance and Stafford loans versus Perkins loans and on and on and on, but Bucky knew the truth.

He wasn’t returning in the fall.

Instead, he started following Steve to the Rec Center, working out for longer and longer each week. He stopped using drugs when they went out on the weekends and stuck to liquor—a supremely less satisfying mood enhancer, but crucial for his plan. He scheduled calls and took meetings and disappeared for random amounts of time during the afternoons. All of these things were questioned by Steve, and all were waived off by Bucky.

A month before NYU let out for the summer, while they lay intertwined in bottom bunk and the darkness of night blanketed their limbs, making them soft, languid beings, he finally spoke it aloud.

“I’ve enlisted in the Army.”

This was met by a stale silence. Steve’s nose was buried in Bucky’s collarbone, but Bucky could feel the fluttering of his eyelashes against skin and he knew he was listening.

“Steve?” Bucky whispered.

Steve raised his head and pushed back from Bucky’s embrace. “Am I supposed to be laughing right now? I don’t get it.”

“I…I joined the Army?” This time it was softer, more mellow, a dash of uncertainty flavoring the syllables.

Untangling himself from himself, Steve sat up. “I said, I don’t get it.”

“Uh…” Bucky floundered. It had seemed a romantic idea at first. A way to erase his debt to society. To give back. Then, after acing his required ASVAB testing and scoring near perfect in his physical aptitude tests, he’d started considering it as something more. Something meant for him.

Now, in the darkness of the dorm room, under the harsh, unforgiving glare of Steven Grant Rogers, it seemed absolutely inane.

“Are you telling me you want to join the Army?”

“No…” Bucky drawled.

Steve nodded. “Okay then. So what’s the—”

“I’m telling you I joined. I enlisted. I ship off to boot camp in July.”

Steve drew in a breath, so quickly that it must have been painful. “Bucky,” he ground out. “What.
“The. Fuck. Are you high right now?”

“Haven’t been for a month.” Bucky responded.

“You…right…you haven’t…”

Bucky watched as Steve’s eyes moved back and forth, watched as he thought it out, considered the missing weekend days, the uptick in liquor consumption to replace the drugs.

“Oh my god,” he finally said. “Oh my god, please tell me this is a joke.”

Bucky’s eyes fell to the blanket wrapped around Steve’s midsection. It was a crimson red color and already threadbare from use. It was soft though, and he loved to burrow into it in the early morning hours, waiting for Steve to turn off the damned alarm so he could close his eyes and sleep for another hour. “It’s not a joke,” he said. “I can’t stay here. And there are a lot of enlistment benefits. I won’t necessarily see any action. And there’s healthcare, and paid vacation time, and life insurance, and… Steve, they’ll pay for college after I serve.”

“Fucking FAFSA will pay for fucking college, you idiot!”

The room was pitch black, but Bucky could already see the way Steve’s face was flushing.

“I don’t want to take out loans. I don’t want to be even more in debt. I want to do something useful. Something my parents didn’t do. I need to give back. I need to know that my name isn’t worthless, that I’m not worthless. And…” he was surprised by how hard it was to admit to this, how hard it was to force the words from his mouth. “My mom’s not doing well and Rebecca is going to need help. She deserves a chance at college.”

“You…” Steve swallowed, holding a fist to his mouth for a moment as though trying to keep back an explosion of anger. “You aren’t worthless, Buck,” he finally said. “You deserve that chance also.”

His voice was raw with emotion, and Bucky reached out to touch his shoulder. “It’s going to be alright,” Bucky said. “I can write you! You can write me! You’re going to graduate from here and get some fantastic, amazing, career in…whatever it is you do—”

“You know very fucking well what I do, jerk,” Steve croaked.

“Right. Work for your father. Instead of actually following your passion—”

“Don’t you dare talk to me about following passion when you just fucking volunteered yourself to get shot in some fucking ridiculous war.”

“Fine,” Bucky amended, holding up his hands in surrender. “You’re right.”

“I’ll put in my time working for the campaign and then I’ll get to actually do something worthwhile. Head up a nonprofit or something.” There was a magic sort of lilt that tinged his words now, and Bucky knew that despite his teasing on the matter, heading up a nonprofit focused on saving the world was exactly what Steve wanted to be doing.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed. “You’re gonna be great. And when I come back, we can pick things up. Yeah?”

Throwing himself dramatically back to the pillow, Steve muttered “Fuck.”
“I’m sorry,” Bucky said, quietly.

Steve rolled over and kissed him, deeply. Then he pulled away and snagged a hand through Bucky’s hair, pulling taut. “Shut up.”

And Bucky did.
End Notes

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