Political Animals

by crinklefries, Deisderium

Summary

Okay, so the real problem is that you shouldn’t fuck your arch-rival, political enemy, and the person you loathe the most in the world where you work. Or like, at least, you shouldn’t keep doing that.

But okay, the thing that Descartes or whoever didn’t know was that Steve really tries, but Bucky Barnes has a mouth that should probably constitute an eighth sin or something.

Jesus fucking Christ, Sam’s going to kill him.

(or—Steve’s best friend is the U.S. Constitution and he can’t seem to stop fucking a hot Republican. They shouldn’t fall in love, but somehow they do. That’s it, that’s the fic.)

Notes
crinklefries: Thank you and welcome to Political Rivals: The Fic, also known as Red, White, and I Hate You. This fic appeared in the dark crevices in my mind, half because I love politics and half probably because I saw a picture of Chris Evans and Sebastian Stan in suits and thought what if I put them in the White House, but made them hate each other?

A TON of thanks to sobermeup and deisderium because a handful of months ago I appeared in their Twitter DMs and said so listen—this political AU is knocking around in my brain, but I cannot write smut to save my fucking life. So what happened, but I said deisderium, will u be my smutsmith, and deisderium replied, let me FIRE UP THE SMUTFORGE.

I could not have asked for a better smutsmith and partner in ding dong crime. ♥

Thank you also to Elsa for the most KILLER banner and moodboard. They're fucking amazing, thank you for lending us your graphic design skills at such short notice!

deisderium: When Snuzz asked me to smutsmith for this au, LITTLE DID I KNOW how much fun we would have writing it. It's been an utter joy to see just how idiotic we could make these dinguses on their voyage of enemies to dumbasses to lovers. Thanks for asking me to do this, Snuzz; it's been and continues to be an absolute delight. I hope the rest of you enjoy reading this even a fraction as much as I have enjoyed helping write it. <3

To our readers—thank you for reading and I hope you find this as utterly ridiculous and funny and fun as we found writing it. Please heed the tags—that is to say, when I say Republicans Do Not Interact, I c a n n o t stress that enough. This is not your kinda fic, pals. I promise you.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The problem, as the saying goes, is you shouldn’t fuck where you work. Who said that? Descartes? Voltaire? Rousseau or, whatever, fuck, he doesn’t know.

Steve drags his zipper up and looks at himself in the bathroom mirror and feels something not so much like a stab of self-loathing, as an overwhelming, unmitigated deluge of the feeling. He has sex hair, which is bad, and he has pink-splotched sex skin, which is also bad, and he smells like sex too, which is just not very good, and the worst part is that he always tells himself he cannot do it again, and he will not do it again, but then here he is, with his pants around his ankles and Bucky Barnes with his knees pressed into the tiles and—

Okay, so the real problem is that you shouldn’t fuck your arch-rival, political enemy, and the person you loathe the most in the world where you work. Or like, at least, you shouldn’t keep doing that.

But okay, the thing that Descartes or whoever didn’t know was that Steve really tries, but Bucky Barnes has a mouth that should probably constitute an eighth sin or something.

Jesus fucking Christ, Sam’s going to kill him.

“That was faster than usual,” Bucky fucking Barnes smirks at him as he comes out of the stall they had just been—whatever against. “Eager, or you just have somewhere to be?”

“Suck my dick, Barnes,” Steve says, running a wet hand through his hair to see if he can do something about—any of it.

“Just did,” Barnes smirks again. He washes his hand, rinses out his mouth, and lingers too close to Steve, hand pressed hard into his hip as he passes. Steve tries not to actively flinch or like, lean into the touch. Should he report this? Is it sexual harassment when you just got sucked off by someone who may or may not suck you off on a semi-regular basis, even though you hate him? No wait, don’t answer that, Steve takes HR violations extremely seriously. Wait, what was he thinking about again?

Bucky must see the endless self-loathing commentary scrolling through his head, because he leans closer and then the fucker kisses the back of Steve’s jaw. Like he has any place there, after the other place he just was.

“See you at the fundraiser,” he says. And then smirks, “Oh wait, you weren’t invited.”

Steve glares at Bucky as he leaves, contemplates five kinds of murder, but then he has to glare at himself in the mirror too because like, what the fuck, Steve Rogers?

Jesus fucking Christ, Steve’s going to kill himself.
Here’s what happens.

Steve is high off of a successful political campaign, the chief of staff to Sam Wilson, former underdog candidate, to wrest a somewhat swing district out of the grasps of an entrenched establishment Democrat who had held the seat for the past 30 years. The House of Representatives has no term limits, but after three or so odd decades of much of the same, people start to think hey, that handsome, funny, charismatic black man with the amazing progressive politics is really something to pay attention to.

So Sam wins the election, much to the chagrin of half of the establishment and all of the Fox News, and he gets thrown into the 117th Congress and where Sam goes, Steve goes, so now he’s chief of staff to one of the Democratic Party’s biggest and mouthiest rising stars.

It’s all pretty great, if he’s going to be honest. He doesn’t renew his lease on the overpriced two bedroom Brooklyn cement block he called an apartment for four years, says goodbye to his roommate and the old lady next door who always baked a loaf of cardamom bread for him on Sundays, tells his Ma he’ll call her at least once a week, loads all of his things into a UHaul, and follows his best friend to the political dream that is Washington D.C.

He and Sam find a place in Adams Morgan and only briefly consider if there’s a conflict of interest for your chief of staff to also be the guy paying half the rent every month. They decide it’s a conflict of exactly nothing because as Sam says, “I’ve seen you butt naked after drinking too much, Rogers, you think I don’t know how to blackmail you into coughing up rent?”

To which Steve says something to the effect of, “Pretty sure blackmail’s a federal offense, Representative,” and Sam punches his shoulder and says “Stop being a pain in my goddamned ass and sign the goddamned lease, you goddamned drama queen.”

Steve gets called drama queen a lot by Sam, but that’s in between “idiot” and “moron” and “you absolute, goddamned white fool.”

So anyway they move to D.C. and they share an apartment and Sam Wilson starts on Capitol Hill as Representative from New York-9.

Sam’s an instant hit, of course. He’s young and he’s handsome and he has enough charisma to single-handedly power a locomotive engine of anyone’s choosing. He’s also warm and intelligent and progressive, every sentence out of his mouth genuine and thoughtful. He’s the real fucking deal.

Steve knows this. Steve’s known Sam’s stubborn, sincere ass since they met in Mrs. O’Neal’s 7th grade homeroom and Sam, the new kid, slumped into the seat next to Steve, took one look at him and said “You’re gonna be some kinda trouble aren’t you?” Steve had, in fact, been some kinda trouble for most of their lives, but he wasn’t the one who had run for public office and what’s a handful of childhood brawls against phone banking and going door-to-door before campaign season? Anyway, they’re in this together now, which is just as well, because if anyone can handle Steve Rogers it’s Sam Wilson and if anyone would absolutely and covertly kill a human being for Sam Wilson, it’s Steve Rogers.

Anyway, Sam stays busy with actual work on the Hill—TV appearances, radio call-ins, panel discussions, press conferences, the whole thing. His time is divided between his constituency and the country. And where Sam goes, Steve goes, so even though he’s not much of a moth to the proverbial camera light himself, he does what Sam does, stays up as long as Sam stays up.

Their first year in D.C. is a monumental, unequivocal success.
The only problem in the entire set up is, well, not a thing, but a person. A who.

Steve meets him six months after moving to D.C.—not on Grindr or Tinder or OKCupid or any other miserable online platform, but at a bar.

The problem isn’t that they don’t connect or that Steve doesn’t find him disgustingly hot. It’s not even that he can tell he’s a rich, entitled, egotistical douchebag because, in fact, he can’t tell these things at all.

The problem is that Bucky fucking Barnes doesn’t immediately tell Steve who he is or, specifically, that he’s working for Sam’s political rival.

Six months ago.

It’s hard enough to transplant yourself to a new city without your best friend being the newest political darling in a seventy mile radius. Luckily, Steve’s always been an all or nothing kinda guy, so it’s challenging, but he doesn’t hate grinding gears day in and day out. He’s usually up before Sam is and sleeps well after Sam does and even when Sam takes normal, dinner plans, like a normal, human being, Steve finds himself poring over notes or scheduling or just popping into the office to catch up on work that, frankly, he was never behind on to begin with. He happily lets Sam’s schedule eat up six months of his life until one day, Sam gets fed up with him. He stands tall, glowering at his best friend, and tells him to “get the fuck out of the office and go get laid” before slamming his office door in Steve’s face.

It leaves Steve with a slightly indignant headache and absolutely nothing to do besides, so he does what any overworked millennial and borderline workaholic does and downloads one of those apps. Steve spends the next ten minutes staring at his screen and frantically trying to piece together words for a semi-coherent profile that doesn’t make him come off too much like a new douchebag transplanted to a city already teeming with them. His glare grows more and more pronounced, until, finally, he gives up after attempting to take a selfie for a profile picture and ending up taking at least three consecutive shots up his nose instead.

When that venture fails, he texts Sam’s new college intern—America—about where to get a drink and ends up wandering into the closest dive bar within walking distance of the House Office Buildings anyway. It’s one of those bars with dark wood panelling and enough beer seeped into the floorboards that the air feels humid with it. The lighting is low and the booths are covered in dark red leather that’s worn enough to show age, but just shiny enough to reveal upkeep. This is a dive bar, make no mistake, but it’s the dive bar for political elites or, at least, the overworked office personnel of political elites. It’s called something dumb like The Triskelion, which could be a real word or the name of a spaceship from a sci-fi novel.

Anyway, Steve lets the door swing shut behind him and only hates himself a little as he looks around and finds an open seat at the far end of the bar.

“What can I get for you?” the bartender asks as soon as Steve sits.

“What’s on tap—” Steve starts and exhales. It’s been a long... six months. Maybe something stronger to start off. “Whiskey on the rocks. Whatever you have.”

Desperate times call for desperate drinking, apparently. And alone in a new city, with the political
success of a rising political darling resting casually on his shoulders, and only a single friend to his name in a three state radius, Steve feels more or less desperate.

You know what they say about desperation, right? One person desperate is pathetic, but two desperate people, drinking whiskey morosely on opposite sides of the bar at a dive bar at 11 pm on a Thursday night in the nation’s Capital? Well that’s pathetic too, but if they make eye contact and both raise their eyebrows at the exact same time—misery loves company, or something like that.

The point is, Steve looks up from his drink at the exact same time the guy at the far end of the bar looks up from his drink. The guy is—well, not the worst to look at. He has this wavy, kind of curly brown hair that’s short on the sides and floofs up at the top, these cool blue eyes, a full mouth, and cheekbones so sharp Steve could cut his teeth on them. He has the most well-defined jaw this part of the Atlantic seaboard, Steve is almost positive, and he’s wearing a white button up under what is almost definitely a well-tailored and very nice suit jacket, but the thing is—the button up is buttoned down, so Steve can see a sliver of his throat and—

Listen, it’s been easily over six months since Steve has so much as blatantly checked out another human for anything more than poor political intentions and the guy looks him up and down like Steve’s offering something he’s more than happy to take and Steve thinks—well, what the hell?

Steve throws back the whiskey, hisses at the burn, and sets it back down on the slightly damp bar a bit more forcefully than is strictly necessary.

Then, he gets up, straightens his own suit jacket, and makes his way across the bar.

They don’t get much talking done. There’s a time and place to feel bad about these things, but four shots in and definitely drunk, pushed up against a locked bathroom door is not one of them.

“What did you say your name was?” Steve asks, mouth full of—the other guy’s tongue.

The other guy pulls back and kind of takes Steve's lower lip with him, pulling off with an audible pop that Steve's not entirely sure why he finds as hot as he does.

“I didn't. But it's Bucky.”

"I'm Steve," Steve says, and leans in so he can chase his mouth again. He's just on the right side of buzzed; his skin is tingling and whatever inhibitions he had about making out with a stranger whose name he didn't find out until after they started making out got left back at the bar with the remnants of his melted ice.

And look, Bucky is hot and it's been more than a while, but even more than that, Bucky uses his mouth like he knows he means it, and he's pressed up against Steve like he needs it just as bad as Steve does, and that's more than enough to get Steve's blood boiling.

Bucky leaves Steve's lips to press a trail of kisses from the edge of his mouth to the corner of his jaw, and Bucky's lips are soft and his stubble is scratchy, scraping across the soft of Steve’s skin in a way that sparks up Steve’s spine. Steve is apparently useless to resist whatever’s been done, because he lets out a moan and Bucky sucks on the tender skin of his throat.

"Fuck, that feels good," he tells the other man and feels his lips curve into a smile against Steve's neck.
Instead of answering, Bucky runs his hands up Steve's side, over his shirt, and Steve has never wished more that he could incinerate an article of clothing because he wants the other man's hands on his skin. He's hard and aching to be touched and they are in a public bathroom with a lock of dubious structural integrity and it should be deeply tawdry and it probably is, but it is also, somehow, the opposite of that in every conceivable way.

Possibly Bucky is some kind of witch. Or, more likely, a demon.

Or maybe he's psychic, because he untucks Steve's shirt and slides his hands up over his torso, fingers digging in exactly where Steve had wanted to be touched, as though he can read Steve's mind through their haze of publicly pursued lust.

“Hng,” Steve says intelligently.

It must have been the right thing to say anyway, because Bucky rubs slow circles into his skin with one thumb and pops open a few buttons on his shirt so he can kiss and lick at Steve's chest. He runs a hand over Steve's dick, sensation muffled through Steve's pants, and Steve makes a frankly embarrassing noise.

That makes him think, or, at least, makes the single brain cell still pulsing in his head realize he's the only one getting compromised here.

He grasps at Bucky's arm and flips them around so Steve is pressing into him and Bucky's back is against the questionable bathroom door. He's bigger than Bucky, although not by much, but he uses that height as leverage to press more firmly into him. Bucky makes a surprised little hum at the change and Steve threads his fingers through that fluffy hair so he can pull his head back and follow the line of his neck with his mouth. Bucky gasps, and Steve frees one hand to fumble with the buttons of Bucky's shirt. It's absolutely worth it when he leans down to suck on a nipple and Bucky arches his back like he's been electrocuted and makes a sound that does not pass go, does not collect $200, but instead goes directly to Steve's cock.

"Oh, fuck," Bucky says, and he sounds almost surprised, and, well, that's the moment that Steve decides that he doesn’t need a CV attached to want to make this stranger make every possible noise. He slides to his knees, not caring at the moment what might be getting on his pants, and gets Bucky's belt unbuckled and his fly open while Bucky is still staring down at him wild-eyed, like maybe he too can't believe how hot this is. Or unhygienic, it's definitely one or the other.

Steve pulls Bucky's waistband down just enough to get his cock out. He's hard and flushed and breathing audibly above him and the moment his breath catches on another small sound, Steve decides he would rather get his mouth on Bucky than get his own dick touched, so he that's what he does. He wraps a hand around the base and swallows him down with all the finesse honed in an adventurous youth and sadly neglected the past six months. Bucky sags back against the door and looks at Steve like Steve is Christmas and his birthday and an unexpected hundred in his wallet combined. His moans and grunts are fucking music to Steve's ears, but he pulls Steve up before he comes.

Steve frowns a little, but then Bucky is pawing at Steve's pants and pulling his dick out. Bucky slides a leg between Steve's, fits their cocks together in his hand, and between the sight and the feel of it, blood-hot and slick with precome and Steve's spit, he doesn't think either of them are going to last very long.

Bucky starts moving his hand, and as predicted, the feel of them sliding together has Steve lighting up, gasping and coming what would be embarrassingly quickly if it weren't for Bucky being just as quick on the trigger.
It’s over almost as soon as it begins, which would only be a problem if the two of them weren’t clearly flushed, hot and struggling to catch their breaths.

The two of them lean against each other for a second, panting and sweaty. The afterglow isn’t so much of a glow as it is a slow, hot spark, sliding up and down his back. He feels it in his gut and it feels, well, good.

Steve waits a moment for Bucky’s breathing to even somewhat before pressing a kiss on Bucky’s mouth and leaning over to get them both toilet paper to wipe down with. They get cleaned up, for a degree of cleanliness that definitely wouldn’t pass inspection under a black light, unlock the bathroom door, and wash their hands together at the sink, which feels weirdly domestic for an ill-advised, if hot, hookup in a public bathroom.

“That was…” Steve starts, and then doesn’t know how to finish. He’s not a stranger to hook ups, but they’re not usually quite so desperate or…public.

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees, and meets his gaze in the mirror. His eyes are bright and his lips are red, and he very definitely has a line of hickies down his neck—whoops. But he looks much happier than the relateably tired and semi-dejected man Steve had spotted across the bar thirty minutes ago.

He guesses an orgasm or two can do that to a person.

Steve colors and clears his throat.

“I don’t usually—” Steve starts and stops.

Bucky reaches for a paper towel and his smile curves into something that looks a little too much like a smirk.

“Suck dick in a public bathroom?”

Steve is no stranger to his delicate, Irish heritage, so although he can’t see his skin turn an embarrassing shade of pink, he sure can feel it start to burn.

“Hook up with random guys,” he says. He coughs. “In a public bathroom.”

That makes Bucky laugh, which is not altogether an unpleasant sound. He tilts his head back just a little and Steve finds himself watching his Adam’s apple a little too closely, before averting his gaze with an embarrassed smile.

“Maybe we can do this again sometime, though,” he ventures. “Maybe someplace that’s not used for…public urination.”

Bucky makes a face and laughs again and this time even Steve chuckles with him.

“Yeah,” Bucky smiles. He crumples up the paper towel and throws it in the trash. “You live around here?”

“Not too far,” Steve says. He finishes washing his hand and reaches for a paper towel too. “I work on the Hill.”

“Oh yeah?” Bucky tilts his head. “Me too.”

“I guess most people must,” Steve says, slightly awkwardly. “D.C…and all.”

Bucky gives him a look—not weird, exactly, but somewhere in between amused and hey, you’re
“It’s a town of politicians and would-be politicians,” Bucky agrees. “You’re either working for one or getting your rocks off on following the voting record of another.”

Steve gets a funny twisting sensation in his gut. It’s not exactly a premonition, but that’s what it’ll feel like when he remembers this later. He laughs anyway.

“Steve Rogers,” he says again, and holds out his hand like an absolute dork, like he hadn’t had Bucky’s dick in his mouth about ten minutes before. “One of the former, I guess. I’m Sam Wilson’s chief of staff.”

There’s a pause that feels almost awkward to Steve. Bucky freezes for one, impossibly long moment.

Then Bucky’s face smooths out into an amused kind of look.

“Bucky Barnes,” he says. His hand is firm against Steve’s, his fingers still wet from washing off their come. “Legislative director. To Tony Stark.”

There are moments in a person’s life when the shock of a disastrous decision is direct, immediate, and, frankly, overwhelming. For years to come, Steve will remember this moment to be exactly one of those.

Bucky’s blue eyes narrow and his mouth curves up into a smirk and Steve thinks back to a lifetime of very emphatically telling anyone who would listen that he has only one hard and fast dating rule and that rule is: absolutely, under no uncertain terms, will he ever, not once, ever, fuck a Republican.

Bucky’s smirk widens and Steve, definitely not panicking, swallows.

“Thanks for the good time,” Bucky says. “Steve Rogers. See you on the Hill.”

He presses a hand against Steve’s side as he slips past him and Steve, bright red and dangerously close to spluttering, nearly knocks over the trash can in his rush to scramble away from the touch.

The door closes behind Bucky, the sound of his cackle left trailing behind him.

“Oh my god,” Steve breathes out loud in horror. He drags his hands down his face and lets them fall loosely to his sides. Then he looks down and sees that his fly is still unzipped.

That, Steve thinks distantly, staring at his fly, is what it feels like to make a terrible mistake.

Finding out someone's name before having unfortunately hot bathroom sex should maybe be his policy going forward. And also, possibly, their political affiliation. Just to be safe.

“Sam is never, ever going to find out about this,” Steve says, looking at his reflection in the mirror and giving it a stern talking-to. He looks satisfied but also deeply, deeply horrified. “And you are never, ever doing that again.”

It seems easy enough, at the time.

“You’re late,” Sam says.

Steve, who has never been late to anything in his entire life—or, at least, not intentionally—or, he
guesses, not late enough that someone has called him out on it—looks guiltily at the beat up old timepiece on his wrist that he guesses passes for a watch.

“Have you considered—” Steve says and glances down at the timepiece The face of it has a very obvious crack across the glass, which he’s almost positive wasn’t there before his lunchtime...activity. “—that you’re just early?”

“First of all, no,” Sam says, leaning back in his chair. “Second of all—also no. Third of all—”

Now this—this, Steve almost certainly does not want to hear.

“So about your schedule tonight—” Steve tries to start, but he’s interrupted by two things.

The first thing is America, who leans back in her own chair at the intern desk in the front room, popping a bubblegum, and says, “Hey, your jacket’s inside out.”

The second thing is Sam, who throws one of those apple-shaped stress cushions at Steve’s head and shouts, “Are you shitting me!”

Steve—now, Steve isn’t one to panic, but, well, the apple kinda bounces off his head and he realizes that not only is his jacket on backwards, but half of his shirt is untucked, and if his face didn’t say before, Hey, Sam, sorry I’m late, but I was kinda getting sucked off in a bathroom by the person I literally want to punch in the fucking face even though I have promised you no less than five times that I will not continue sucking off and/or getting sucked off by such person, well it might as well be written across his forehead in black Sharpie now.

The smart thing to do, of course, would be to distract both Sam and America with, you know, the schedule. Talking points. An overview of the panel on affordable housing developments that Steve had gone to the night before when Sam had been feeling under the weather and resting at home.

However, Steve Rogers has, in six months, had to come to terms with some facts and one of those facts is that he is a complete, absolute, unparalleled—idiot. He’s just an unmitigated, goddamned fool.

So what he does instead of deflecting attention is completely confirm Sam’s correct suspicions by groaning and dragging his hands across his face. The self loathing hits him about the time he all but moans, “I didn’t even know he was going to be there.”

“My god, that’s so much worse,” America absolutely cackles.

Sam, on the other hand, gives Steve the most eviscerating look he can manage from his very important and very official political office and bellows across the room—“Boy, I know I told you to stop hooking up with him if I gotta continue hearing about it!”

And listen, it’s not really Steve’s fault that the person he hates the fucking most in this entire, miserable, godforsaken world has a mouth and an ass that won’t quit, but he guesses he can admit that it’s at least partially his fault. No one forced him to follow Barnes to the bathroom and lock the door behind them and Steve can even say he waited a full minute after Barnes shot him that horrible, arrogant, smirking look, but that doesn’t change the fact that he did, well, do that. Doesn’t even change the fact that the look, calculated to go straight to Steve’s dick, did, in fact, go straight to his dick.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Steve groans again and lets his head thud against the wall outside of Sam’s office.
“Of all the guys you could keep going back to,” Sam mutters, from somewhere beyond Steve’s direct line of vision. “You gotta pick the dick running Tony Stark’s office.”

“Does it help if I tell you the sex is unbelievably good?” Steve says, voice muffled.

“God no,” Sam says, sounding repulsed, which is fair.

“Okay,” Steve acknowledges. “What if I told you I have never hated myself more?”

“I mean, it’s a little better,” Sam says.

“Okay,” Steve says, taking a deep, rattling breath. “What if I said the next time he even looks at me, I’m gonna drop myself to the bottom of the Potomac and let the fish feast on my limbs?”

Steve can hear America roll her eyes.

“Yeah, I’d like to see you follow through on that,” Sam snorts. Then he sighs. “Get your head out of your ass or off Barnes’s dick or like, wherever it is. Tell me what I’m on for for the week, like I goddamn pay you to do.”

“In my defense, I was trying,” Steve mutters.

He allows himself a full five more seconds of uncontrolled self loathing, which is about five more seconds than America would allow him if Sam wasn’t there to check her, and then pulls himself off the wall.

Listen, Steve has a problem. The first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem, right?

And it is Steve’s displeasure to announce that he, Steve Rogers, has a goddamned fucking Bucky Barnes problem and it’s not the worst problem anyone is facing on Capitol Hill but it’s a pretty goddamned grave one. When he uprooted his entire life and moved to D.C., the plan was to help run the ship of America’s most charismatic and progressive Democratic politician, not get stuck on the dick of some asshole Republican’s….well, asshole Republican assistant. It’s all going very off plan and not only does Steve hate himself, but, importantly, he hates Bucky Barnes so much more.

So he’s going to examine this problem later, in the comfort of his own room, in the apartment he shares with his best friend and boss, and if he can get past just how much Bucky makes him want to scream, maybe he’ll even find a lasting solution.

Until then, Steve flips his jacket back the right way, tucks his shirt back in, adjusts his tie and his shirt and his hair, and pulls out the iPad.

“All right, Sam,” he says, walking into Sam’s office and leaving his drama at the door. “You have an interview with NY1 tomorrow morning, a lunch with Senator Rhodes, and then we start preparing to introduce your bill to the floor.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Sam grins. He leans back in his chair and starts throwing another stress ball up in the air and catching it. “Now what’s this about a fundraiser I’m missing?”

“Don’t get me started,” Steve mutters darkly.

He closes the door behind him.
chapter two, or, they’re getting hate sex on these symbols of democracy

Chapter by crinklefries

Chapter Summary

“If you get me kicked out of the National Archives for life, I will murder you, Barnes,” Steve mutters, too quiet for his voice to echo, but loud enough for Bucky to hear his threat.

Chapter Notes

No pocket constitutions were harmed in the writing of this chapter.

**Some points of clarification:

1) The political universe this fic exists in does not have the Cheeto-in-Chief as president, even though we've made reference to some political figures from modern politics. This is a full on political AU that deals with the current political temperature, but isn't an exact parallel of it! We're operating on pre-2016 levels of Republican bullshit. Definitely not advocating that that's great. Just saying the President and maybe Congress is slightly less fascist. Take that as you will.

2) This fic clearly has a political bias/bent. This is not a fic that posits that there are Fine Folk on Both Sides of the Aisle. It is a heavily left-leaning fic, written by two leftists, that tries to take a thoughtful view on how such a relationship could develop into something more, but it is STILL a left-leaning fic with a clear bias. We will not be apologizing for that bias or the conclusions that come with it. We have done our best to be meaningful about our choices in this fic and, at the end of the day, that's all that we can really do--try to write the fic we envisioned and tell the story we want to tell with a version of these characters that exist outside of strict canon.

If any of that bothers you, this might not be the fic for you.”
It turns out that School House Rock, while unreasonably catchy, does not quite tell the whole story of how a bill becomes a law. Or rather, it turns out that that cherished relic of every American kid’s childhood included only the fun parts of the legislative process and left out all of the boring, technical parts. It also turns out that the boring, technical parts are almost, well, all of it.

The song doesn’t, for example, mention anything about the actual drafting process, which involves far fewer bills with musical sentience and far more Steve spending well past his technically allotted hours for the week, going back and forth with their assigned attorney from the Office of the Legislative Counsel. Don’t get him wrong, he loves Sam’s robust and idealistic view for a future where the planet isn’t a burnt pancake, but if he has to listen to Wanda explain the legal significance of a semicolon one more time, he’s going to fucking lose it.

He knows the whole legality of it is a very important part of creating a law and he can respect that punctuation marks can make or break the legal field and you know what, he gets that legislation to try and save the planet from reaching its literal boiling point is no small task, but he and Wanda and Kamala are on so many conference calls for so many months that one day Sam asks him how Code Green is going and Steve looks up from a thick stack of papers and blearily says to him a word that might have been “Good” but could equally have been “Question Mark.”

It takes months of going back and forth with the OLC, but they finally reach the point around one in the morning one day in the middle of April. Steve’s going nearly cross-eyed from reading and rereading the proposed legislation and, to her defense, Wanda is working from her office as well, on the line with him.

“And that would retrofit buildings?” Steve asks, taking one last exhausted look at the final paragraph of the last subdivision of the third chapter of the bill. “But churches—”

“There’s an exception,” Wanda says, sounding equally tired. “Churches and hospitals. It takes into account the pushback we’re expecting on that front—”
“Pushback for wanting to save the planet,” Steve exhales noisily. Three sheets of paper flutter in front of him. “I’m sorry, Mother Earth, we wanted to make sure you don’t melt into space, but some people thought it was too expensive.”

“I do not think you can melt into space,” Wanda points out.

“That’s not the point!” Steve exclaims. Then he runs a hand over his face. “This is good, Wanda. Thank you—seriously. My eyes are rolling into the back of my head, I don’t know how you drafted this thing in three months.”

“As it turns out, this is what I get paid for, Steve,” Wanda says, sounding amused.

“Enough?” Steve asks, cautiously.

“If you’d like to write in a pay raise for legislative counsels, I wouldn’t say no,” she laughs.

Steve gives the phone a rueful smile and shakes his head.

“Okay, go home and get some sleep. I think we’re done here. I’ll have Sam look at it first thing in the morning. He looks at his phone all of a sudden. It lights up to show 1) that it is 1:15 am and 2) that he has at least three missed calls, all from Sam. “—shit. Get some rest, we’ll touch base tomorrow.”

The conference line goes dead and Steve runs a hand over his face. The bill sits open in front of him, a dense, seventy page outline on how the United States of America can start to eliminate its staggering carbon footprint and pull back from polluting half the planet besides. This isn’t the sexiest topic, by any means, and certainly not the most important issue according to the Brooklyn constituents of New York’s 9th congressional district, but it is an issue that’s important to Sam and, if Steve is being honest, himself.

They’ve spent half of their adult lives scheming ways to save the planet and to have the result of that sitting here on his desk, in front of him—well it feels staggering. In the palm of his hands is the result of a dream he and Sam came up with almost a decade ago, at the shitty bar off their college campus, after a grueling Environment Science final had left them feeling both a little ragged along the edges and a lot emotional about climate change. Back then, with too many big ideas and more than a handful of student loans to their names, Steve and Sam had thought the extent of their involvement would be their final grade from Professor Erskine.

He takes a breath and flips back to the front page.

It’s 1:20 am and Steve should be headed home, but he can’t stop staring at the cover sheet.

H.R. ____ - To reduce the environmental impact of the United States and mitigate the adverse effects of climate change

116th Congress (2019-2020)
Sponsor: Rep. Wilson, Sam T. [D-NY-9]

It’s been such a hectic first year, Steve has barely had a moment to stop and breathe and take it all in—the dream, the work, the unsubtle feeling of pride he gets when he sees the political waves and knows that Sam is the one causing them.

He smiles, feeling inordinately relieved, and picks up his phone. He swipes over to Sam’s name and presses dial.

It takes three rings and then Sam picks up.
“Boy, you better be getting laid somewhere,” Sam says, sounding more than a little groggy. “And I don’t mean by Barnes.”

“Don’t ruin the moment by calling the devil his name,” Steve frowns. His irritation at even hearing that jackass’s name lasts only a moment. Then he’s breathing out, the smile widening across his face. “It’s done, Sam.”

On the other end of the line, a sleepy pause.

“What?”


“I knew you were gonna steal that from me,” Sam mutters, but then he sounds more awake. “Forreal? It’s...ready to go? We’re introducing it?”

Steve is so giddy, he nearly laughs.

“Yeah, Representative,” he says, with a genuine grin. He picks up the packet of paper and lets it fall back to his desk with a satisfying thud. “It’s done. We’re ready to introduce it.”

Code Green is, as expected, equal parts lauded and feared. It’s innovative, it’s daring, it’s controversial as hell.

_A bold move from a bold politician_, the Washington Post says.

_In man vs. planet, only one man is trying to save the planet_, USA Today reports.

_Representative Wilson’s Code Green is legislation that could make him—or break him_, the New York Times runs as a headline.

_Sam Wilson wants to kill American jobs and give them to trees_, Fox News says. Or maybe it’s Breitbart. Is there really much of a difference anymore?

America’s personal favorite coverage comes from BuzzFeed.

“They’re calling him a superhero,” she grins and forwards the article to Steve. “Captain Planet.”

Steve is sleep-deprived and close to loopy, but he reads it and then prints it out to stick on the bulletin board in the front room. Then he spends an hour on Photoshop, photoshopping Sam’s face onto Captain Planet’s body. As far as tasks he’s paid for go, it’s definitely worth every penny the taxpayers are contributing to his wages.

“It’s on!” America says to him and Steve leaves his desk to come stand next to the TV.

The announcement is on every channel—CSPAN, CNN, MSNBC, even Fox News, probably, sandwiched between more important coverage of whatever white supremacist Tucker Carlson wants to give a platform to today, probably.

Sam is at a podium, a handful of democratic Representatives and Senators behind him—Maria Hill, James Rhodes, T’Challa Udaku, Hope van Dyne, the former general Okoye.

“I am proud and honored,” Sam says. He has on a dark suit with a wavy blue tie and an American
flag pin on his lapel. His eyes are bright, his grin infectious. He looks every bit the young visionary everyone is rightfully calling him. “To introduce this piece of legislation to the House. Its companion bill is sponsored by my great colleague, James Rhodes in the U.S. Senate.”

He pauses and Rhodey stands behind him, grinning and clapping Sam on the shoulder. Sam shakes his head.

“I—listen, I gotta be honest with you guys. This bill is the great work of my life. If and when I leave this planet behind, I want to make sure I leave it better than I got it, you know? It’s my duty, as a citizen of Earth, and frankly it’s all of our duties—to make sure we don’t destroy it. We’ve got to do everything we can to reverse the destruction we’ve caused. We’ve got one planet and it’s about to go to code red, so to counteract it, I want us to go to Code Green.”

The reporters descend on Sam with a million and two questions almost immediately, but he stands tall and proud, ready for them.

“Mr. Zemo,” Sam says, nodding to one of the familiar reporters in the crowd.

“Representative Wilson,” Zemo says. “How does this all work? How does this bill save the planet? And what do you think about the opposition it’s going to face?”

Sam takes a breath.

“I’m glad you asked, Mr. Zemo,” Sam says. “Because I can answer that. As for my opposition—I say, whatever you have to say, say it. I’m not afraid of a little challenge—do your worst. I’m ready to walk the walk and talk the talk and do the work we need to do, to stop destroying the only home we all got.”


It’s not just a good press conference, it’s a great one. America spends the next hour tracking every mention of the speech and Sam over Twitter and Facebook and drafts a tweet that Sam doesn’t end up using, because he’s feeling himself so much he tweets what’s on his mind. The tweet hits a thousand retweets within the hour, which means Steve’s not even surprised when Sam comes over to him with a cold bottle of beer.

“Sam,” Steve says, amused, but taking the beer anyway. “It’s two pm.”

“It’s five o’clock somewhere over the Atlantic,” Sam grins. He loosens his tie and hangs his jacket over the coat track in his office.

“Great, you get on a plane and when you hit that median, you start drinking,” Steve says. He’s all talk though, because he takes a mouthful before setting it back on his desk. “It’s tracking pretty well so far. Code Green’s the boldest climate initiative anyone’s taken so far, so everything’s coming out like we projected. Big businesses hate it, Republicans hate it, Fox News hates it—”

“—they hate everything,” America mutters, scrolling through Twitter.

“No, they really love guns and racism,” Steve says. He leans forward toward his laptop, skimming news headlines and pundit hot takes. It’s too early to tell how everything will shake out, but Steve’s tragic character flaw is that he loves the ridiculous charts that Wolf Blitzer pulls out whenever someone so much as asks him his name.

“I’ll drink to that,” Sam says, raising his bottle. “What about the people we care about?”
Steve takes a drink and gives Sam a thumbs up in lieu of answer. He scrolls through a half a dozen more headlines before leaning back in his chair with a sigh.

“It’ll be tight though,” Steve says, thoughtfully. “Not impossible, but—”

“There are only a couple of swing Democrats,” Sam says. He takes his beer to the couch and nods at America, who turns the TV on to MSNBC. “West Virginia, Alaska, Texas, states that depend on traditional energy sources. We knew it was always gonna be an uphill battle with them. I get it. I mean I don’t because we’re fucking up the entire planet so I have like this much—” he moves his index finger and thumb close together “—empathy for the coal industry, but I guess I get it in like a human kinda way.”

Steve considers this. He finds a stress ball in his drawer shaped like a baseball and takes to throwing it up in the air and then catching it when it comes back down.

“Not undoable though, with some compromise,” he says. “We can work on that. I mean the Democrats we can get in line and the Whip is good at that. But what we need is, well I hate to say it.”

Sam groans and leans back into his couch. He puts his feet up on the coffee table and America raises a single eyebrow at him.

“Don’t look at me like that, I’m your boss,” Sam says. America rolls her eyes and goes back to social media, like any self-respecting member of gen z. “Anyway—you never hate to tell me anything, so ruin my day like you do best.”

“First of all, that’s rude,” Steve says and throws the ball into the air again. He nearly misses the catch, but gets it right before it drops to the ground. “Second of all, I hate to say it, but what we need are some Republican turncoats.”

Sam pauses, the mouth of his bottle halfway to his, well, mouth.

“You mean centrist, bipartisan Republicans who want to cooperate with us?”

“Isn’t that what I said?” Steve says, innocently.

“No,” Sam snorts.

“ Weird,” Steve grins.

It’s mostly unfortunate because it’s true. It’s not the end of the world, to require some sort of bipartisan support for a bill of this magnitude, but America’s kind of a shit hole recently, so what once would have been a little finessing could very well be the veritable end of the world for some of the extraterrestrials disguising themselves as human members of the Republican party in 2019.

Anyway, the point is, strategy matters. And the first part of strategy was identifying who the weak (or strong, depending on how you looked at it) link of the party was, where “weak” meant persons most willing to compromise for the good of the human race.

It’s not as though Steve and Sam hadn’t been preparing for this.

The problem, inasmuch as one existed, actually, was much more particular. It was not one that either of them could have foreseen, when they had first envisioned this legislation.

The problem was—
“Sorry, Tony got caught up in a meeting,” a voice says from the doorway.

Now, Steve. Steve’s not much of a superstitious or a praying man. His Ma had raised him Catholic, inasmuch as it was possible for a single mother of mostly agnostic origin to raise her only son Catholic, and he knew the general rituals and beliefs and he was a red-blooded American so he knew, like, to avoid black cats and cracks on the sidewalk. Still, despite all of the aforementioned skepticisms and precautions, when Steve hears that voice, he thinks maybe he believes in the devil, after all.

A chill sinks into his spine and his hand, halfway back to his bottle of beer, freezes mid-air.

The breath goes out of the room, it grows suddenly fifteen degrees colder, and Steve’s not much for spiritualism, but he’s almost certain a malevolent spirit has entered Sam’s office and now they’ll have to spend at least some of their internal budget on an exorcism.

He looks up and the chill turns a little, well hotter, but not in a good way. It’s not entirely accurate to say that there are flames on his face, but, well, there might be flames on the side of Steve’s face.

“So he sent me,” the asshole says and walks in, with what can only be described as a smug, arrogant, shit-eating smirk.

“And who are you?” America asks, looking up from her monitor with moderate interest.

“Beelzebub, some call him,” Steve mutters under his breath.

“James Barnes,” he says and throws himself onto the couch Sam had departed, just ten minutes before. “But you can call me Bucky.”

There is a pregnant, approximate fifteen second pause during which time Bucky spreads his legs wider than is strictly necessary and America’s eyes swivel from Bucky on the couch to Steve at his desk and during which time Steve turns a violent shade of purple-red and wonders if someone in his family lineage could possibly have been cursed by a witch at some point in human history.

“Oh boy,” America says and Sam chooses this moment to emerge from his office without a jacket, tie loosened.

“Hey, why don’t we take the evening and go to——” he pauses, three steps into the front room because Sam Wilson has a lot of things to think about, but not even a head full of extremely complicated political policy is enough to distract from what feels and looks like a veritable land mine of a situation. That is to say, Sam looks at Steve and at Bucky and at America and the different expressions on all of their faces, and blinks rapidly, trying to catch up. “Who’s this?”

Bucky stands up fluidly, smoothly, and straightens his jacket.

He steps forward and Steve doesn’t stick his leg out to trip him, but he sure does consider it.

“James Barnes, Representative,” Bucky says, extending his hand. “Legislative director to Tony Stark.”

Now Sam’s not stupid. Even if Steve didn’t have the expression of his parent meeting his fuck buddy for the very first time written plain across his face, he probably would have figured it out. But as it is, Sam isn’t stupid and Steve very much is, so when Sam takes Bucky’s hand, it’s with a single, devastatingly raised eyebrow.

“James Barnes, huh?” he says. “You go by Bucky, by any chance?”
Steve groans into his hands and Bucky looks surprised for just a moment, before his expression melts into what Steve can only assume will one day gain him entrance through the gates of hell. It’s wicked, is what Steve is trying to say.

“You’ve heard of me?” Bucky says and shakes Sam’s hand.

“You’re reputation proceeds you,” Sam says. “Or something. Where’s your boss? I thought we had something on the books.”

“Yeah, about that,” Bucky says and smoothly transitions from slick bastard to...professional slick bastard. “Something came up, so he sent me. He’s willing to reschedule for another time, but thought it might be a good idea to open...channels early.”

Sam raises an eyebrow and Steve only barely keeps himself from saying, are you shitting me?

“Are you shitting me?” Steve says out loud. Whoops.

Bucky turns slightly toward him.

“Excuse me?”

“ Seems a little unprofessional, don’t you think?” Steve says and Sam gives him a look.

“Steve,” he warns, but warning against bad behavior has only ever made Steve more prickly.

“Come on, he couldn’t be bothered to come here himself, so he sent his assistant?” Steve says, loudly.

“Legislative director,” Bucky says, giving Steve an icy look.

“Are you a U.S. Senator?” Steve asks. He’s standing at his desk now. “Is your name Tony Stark?”

“Pretty sure you know what my name is, because the last time I saw you—” Bucky says and he opens his mouth to say something that Steve just knows they’re both going to regret and Steve is honest to god ready to slug that son of a bitch’s smug face, but Sam cuts both of them off before they can descend into some petty round of hostility.

“Hey, cool it, both of you,” Sam says. He looks at both of them sharply and then drags a hand over his face. “Okay. What’d he send you for, Barnes? Guessing he didn’t send you with his stamp to officially sign onto the bill.”

Bucky and Steve are so busy glaring daggers at one another that Sam’s words barely register with either of them. After a moment, though, Bucky manages to tear his attention away from Steve and back to Sam. He metaphorically rearranges his jacket, regaining his composure.

“It’s a no go,” Bucky says. “There are too many restrictions on industry—it would be political suicide to sign onto this thing.”

“It’s planet suicide to not sign onto it,” Steve says and Sam motions for him to shut up.

“It was never going to be easy, Barnes,” Sam says, crossing his arms at his chest. “Easier to destroy something than build it back up. But if we all bent to the whims of capital lobbyists, we’d, well—”

Bucky raises an eyebrow.

“—be Republicans,” Sam shrugs. “Sorry.”
“No you’re not,” Bucky says and Sam shrugs again, but this time with an unapologetic grin.

“Is he willing to talk?” Sam says. He leans back against Steves desk, his arms still crossed at his chest.

“Don’t know what there is to talk about,” Bucky shrugs. “It’s a non-starter. Senator Stark respects your idealism, Representative—”

“Call me Sam,” Sam nods at him.

“—Sam,” Bucky nods at him. “But it’s just that—idealism. It’s not practical. The coal industry, for one—”

“We can handle coal,” Steve says, behind Sam. “You think we haven’t thought about coal?”

“—there’s Big Oil, there’s all of the businesses, not to mention the cost,” Bucky says. He runs a hand through his hair and Steve is distracted for just a second, momentarily distracted by how effortlessly rumpled it ends up looking. “I mean this is what, how many hundreds of millions of dollars is this going to cost taxpayers?”

“It’s front heavy,” Sam admits. “You pay the costs now and reap dividends in different ways later. It was never going to be a popular proposal, but what we need is something dramatic and drastic and if it makes it unpopular with Big Oil, then—”

“Listen, Represen—Sam,” Bucky interrupts him. “You don’t have to sell me on it. I heard your speech. It was a good one.”

“Thanks,” Sam says, eyebrow raised. “But?”

“But,” Bucky says. “Dreams don’t make the laws in this country. Money does. Money talks. In this case, it means Senator Stark isn’t going to risk pissing off half of his donors and constituents for—well, like I said. It would be political suicide. I’m sorry.”

Of all of the things Bucky Barnes could have said to Sam, the thing that was guaranteed to piss him and Steve off the most was money talks. Like Steve doesn’t know that. Like Steve hasn’t spent his entire fucking life knowing just how much money talks.

Steve’s hands curl into fists, but luckily Sam is much more collected than him and the actual politician besides. He nods before Steve can cut in and eviscerate Bucky like he wants to.

“That’s certainly a position to take,” Sam says. “Tell me about political suicide when we don’t have breathable air or potable water anymore. If Stark wants to talk to me about that, let me know. Until then—”

Bucky straightens.

“—tell him I’m not interested in signing onto his tax cuts,” Sam says sweetly.

Bucky is, to his credit, more self-contained than Steve could ever hope to be. Still, there’s a second where he can’t hide the purple mottled fury that ripples across his features.

“Steve,” Sam says and turns to Steve. “I’m in meetings for the rest of the day. If you don’t have work to catch up on, take the day. America, forward me my calls.”

America gives Sam a thumbs up and Steve tries to swallow the fire he would otherwise be spitting.
“Barnes,” Sam says and nods to him as he grabs his jacket to make his way out of the office. As he passes by Steve, he leans in close and whispers into his ear. “This jackass, really, Steve? Tell your dick to do better.”

Steve manages not to groan out loud, but he doesn’t quite manage not to turn purple himself.

The three of them watch Sam leave and then Bucky turns to Steve, which Steve absolutely cannot have.

“Hello? Sam Wilson’s office,” Steve says into his cell phone.

Bucky stares at him.

“Your phone didn’t ring,” he says.

“No, the Representative has just stepped out,” Steve says, holding up one finger to Bucky and slowly back away from him into Sam’s office.

“Your phone didn’t ring,” Bucky says, voice growing louder.

“But yes I can answer that question for you—”

“I know you’re not talking to anyone, jackass!” Bucky calls out. He cranes his neck, staring after Steve as he disappears into the office and Steve smiles at him widely, beatifically, and sticks up his middle finger before slamming Sam’s door in his face.

Steve doesn’t usually have an afternoon off, but he has caught up on all of his work, which Sam knew, of course. Steve loves Sam and would probably die for him, literally and metaphorically and definitely politically, but Sam does tend to be a bit heavy-handed with all of these things. He tries to scroll around on Sam’s computer for a bit and when he realizes there’s literally nothing left to do for the day he sighs.

He fishes his phone out from his pocket, scrolls through his very short list of numbers, and dials one of the only ones that aren’t Sam or his, uh, mother.

“You busy?” Steve asks, spinning in Sam’s plush, leather chair. He stares up at the ceiling. “No, I was thinking a late lunch. If you hadn’t already—okay, fine, a second lunch then. No, I haven’t eaten. No, I’m not on a diet. Will you—okay, the usual place? Great. See you then.”

Steve hangs up the phone, stares at the name, and sighs.

Make friends, they said.

You’ll have fun, they said.

That was all well and good until you did make a friend and that friend was—

“And I don’t exactly know what game we’re playing, but I think it’s a game.”

Steve watches, a little in bemusement, as Clint polishes off his third plate of fries.

“I thought you already ate lunch,” Steve says.
“I’m a growing boy, Steve,” Clint Barton replies and shoves another three fries in his mouth.

“Aren’t you in your thirties?” Steve asks.

“That’s ageist,” Clint informs him and swallows his fries. Then he reaches for his extra large coke.

“Anyway, were you listening?”

Steve was, in fact, listening. But the fact is that Clint has been on again and off again with Natasha so many times at this point that Steve has become extremely unclear about whether “on again off again” actually means what he traditionally assumes it to mean or if Clint is using it loosely like, “oh we didn’t see each other for two days because we were too busy, so we were off for those two days.”

Anyway, Steve’s not entirely complaining because Clint and Natasha’s fraught romance gives him something to think about that isn’t his own disastrous love life, but he has to admit that he doesn’t know where in the playbook Clint is anymore.

“Have you considered, I don’t know, asking her?” Steve asks. He’s demolished his burger and fries and is working on finishing his own extra large coke. It’s a nice enough day that he’s considering leaving Clint and buying himself an ice cream cone.

“It’s 2019, Steven,” Clint says, making a face. “Communication is for robots, not humans.”

“That sounds just about as wrong a statement as I’ve heard,” Steve says. “Which is funny, since Nat is, you know—”

“Hot?” Clint says, dreamily.

“Uh, I was going to say Maria Hill’s Communications Director, but sure.”

Clint grins at Steve and takes another fry.

“Sam and Rhodey still on for their lunch on Friday?” Steve asks. It’s on the calendar and Senator Rhodes would never flake out on Sam like Tony fucking Stark, but Steve likes to ask. It’s nice, having another politician as dependable as Sam, but what’s even better is having a friend working for him. Even if that friend spends more time mooning over the redhead in the office next door and less time managing the office that he gets paid to, you know, manage.

“Yeah,” Clint says. “Rhodey likes their lunches. Says it’s nice to get away from the white zoo or something.”

“Is that politically correct?” Steve asks.

“Beats me,” Clint shrugs.

They finish their Cokes, sharing stories of their respective offices back and forth and by the time they pay the bill, Steve is feeling much more relaxed and, blessedly, full as well.

He stretches as he gets up. The tension has been bunched in his muscles for so long, he lets out a sigh when he rolls his shoulders and feels some of it just disappear.

“Headed back to the office?” Clint asks, nodding at him.

The sun is still high enough in the sky and the air still and beautiful and Steve thinks—no, he’s been to the office enough the past few months.
“Actually,” he says, brightly. “I might go to the Smithsonian.”

“Nerd,” Clint says.

Steve thinks about denying it, indignantly and with fervor, but then he realizes he has a pocket Constitution in his literal pocket and decides to let the point go.

The thing is, he means to go to the Smithsonian and even might after, but first, Steve thinks he might visit an old friend he hasn’t been to see in a little while.

“I’m not a nerd,” Steve whispers to himself, eyes wide, as he looks through the glass at the Declaration of Independence.

The National Archives is obviously a very cool place for a very cool individual to go by himself on his day off, Steve thinks to himself, because of National Treasure and Nicholas Cage and all of that. Anyone would spend their afternoon off, breathlessly walking around a beautiful marble rotunda with large murals of the founding fathers stretched out across stone colored walls and two columns topped with alabaster bald eagles because of the life, liberty, and freedom of it all.

Steve hangs back just long enough for the crowds of tourists to move from one document to the other and then, when he sees an opening, he slips himself in front of one of the glass panels holding one of the foundational instruments of the entire nation. He has, admittedly, been here and seen these documents before and he has, admittedly, been here often enough to develop some kind of routine. He likes to do them in a very particular order, looking carefully at each document according to year, as though his head is playing a History Channel documentary on the founding of a great nation as he makes his rounds.

He starts, first, at the Declaration of Independence, the very document that wrested the country from its tyrannical, monarch overlords. Then he moves clockwise to the Constitution. Here he spends more than a few minutes just reading over the preamble—*We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice…*—and then, when his chest is too tight with feeling, he ends on the Bill of Rights.

As far as charters of freedom go, the Bill of Rights, although arguably the most important, gets the least fanfare. There’s always somewhat of a crowd here, but it’s not nearly so sexy reading about the First Amendment as it is to see what piece of old paper declared a sovereign nation.

Steve likes it, though. Steve is not a nerd, of course, but he loves knowing that here, in this document, is codified foundational and unalienable rights for all men, women, and everyone in between, in the country.

This is what Steve believes in—this is the vision he and Sam share.

Steve stands in front of the Bill of Rights—just him and the first ten amendments—and closes his eyes. He opens them and breathes out, smiling happily.

He has half a mind to take a selfie of himself and send it to Sam, but he’s caught short by someone hovering over the Declaration of Independence. He can’t see the guy’s face, but he can see the lines of him—neat shoulders, a smooth back lined with lean muscle, and brown hair that’s somewhere in between waves and curls. He’s observing the Declaration of Independence closely and Steve sighs a little, because what he wouldn’t give for someone who looks like that and *is that* interested in history to just appear in Steve’s life. The apps are sad and his bar hook ups evidently disastrous.
This is all Steve wants—a nice boy (or girl, he supposes) of the same political leaning, who will go on dates with him to the Smithsonian and maybe, if they’re feeling particularly cliche, kiss under the cherry blossoms in the spring. What he’s gotten so far, instead, is an arrogant, selfish, tragically hot bad hook up that he just can’t seem to quit.

“No,” Steve says, maybe a little too loudly. “I am stronger than one man’s dick. I can quit him. I’m strong!”

His voice goes echoing around the rotunda in a way he certainly did not mean for it to and at the very last syllable, who turns around but the hot guy with the hard-on for the Declaration.

“What?” hot guy says and in the literal two seconds between him turning around and Steve’s eyeballs identifying him, Steve realizes he’s made a very very very big mistake.

“You!” Steve definitely doesn’t shriek, because he’s very manly and men do not shriek, but hisses loud enough that Bucky almost certainly hears him from across the room.

“What are you doing here?” Bucky stares at Steve, blinking rapidly in surprise.

Steve recoils, approximately seventeen sirens going off in his head. His hands go up, palms up, and he starts backing away.

“Are you serious?” Bucky says. “You’re running away from me again?”

“I’m getting a phone call—” Steve says, fumbling for his phone.

“No one is ever calling you!” Bucky hisses at him, also from across the rotunda.

They’re starting to get dirty looks from tourists and the guards, so it’s to Steve’s extreme displeasure that he’s not even surprised when Bucky ends up next to him, grasping his arm and dragging him away from his best friends, the charters of freedom.

“I’ll miss you,” Steve mouths sadly to the U.S. Constitution, but the Constitution does not reply back to him and inside of five minutes, he finds himself pushed through a closed exhibit and into an empty room covered in tarp.

“If you get me kicked out of the National Archives for life, I will murder you, Barnes,” Steve mutters, too quiet for his voice to echo, but loud enough for Bucky to hear his threat.

“If we get kicked out, it’ll be because you knocked over the Magna Carta in the rush to avoid me,” Bucky says.

Steve gives him a dirty look because if Bucky knows Steve is trying to avoid them, then it is not only bastardly, but frankly rude that he won’t let Steve accomplish his goal. Also Steve would never do that to the Magna Carta—unlike some people, he has actual respect for human rights and democracy. All of this is very clear to him in his head, but Bucky just smirks at him for his effort. Steve rolls his eyes and looks at the room around them.

The entire room is cordoned off, blocked from the outside due to ongoing renovations to the exhibit. There’s tarp on the floor and tarp hanging from the ceiling, which makes the area look like a construction zone. Steve is careful not to knock into anything, because the last thing he wants is to accidentally destroy a 700 year old document he respects very very much.

Still, he can’t help but drift closer to the closed exhibit. The Magna Carta is under a thick pane of
glass in a well-lit alcove that says *Records of Rights* above it. Steve’s heart ticks up a little as he approaches it and for a second his eyes widen, lighting up, but then his shoulders slump in disappointment.

“It’s not here,” he says.

“Of course it’s not here,” Bucky says, approaching the display from his right side. “You think they’re just going to leave it laying out here while there’s construction going on?”

“No,” Steve says, voice strained. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Could have fooled me,” Bucky snorts and Steve’s light-hearted twist of devotion for a seminal instrument of human rights turns into something a little angrier—a spiteful twist in his gut. He has half a mind to say something, but Bucky’s looking up at the display information on the wall, with a little smile on his face. “I took this class in law school and the professor brought a cake in for the Magna Carta’s birthday.”

Steve can’t help the surprise that flickers across his face.

“Law school?” he blinks and then, realizing he’s being a rude dick, amends, “Was it good cake?”

“Chocolate,” Bucky says, his mouth twisting into a wry smile. He turns toward Steve, his hip leaning against the empty case. Steve’s eyes flicker down to the movement and then back up to Bucky. “Yeah, law school. You think I’m some kinda moron, Rogers?”

Steve wills his Irish complexion from turning pink and it probably, tragically, doesn’t work.

“Can’t see any other reason you’d willingly be Republican,” Steve says. It’s probably stupid to pick a fight over something as personal as political ideology, but Steve doesn’t suffer Republicans and it’s killing him that he keeps running into this one. Anyway, he’s never been very good at not running his mouth—it’s what made him the perfect campaign manager.

Bucky’s face twists into something just bordering on ugly and Steve takes the moment to feel smug, like finally, he’s got the upper hand on Bucky fucking Barnes.

He realizes his mistake, about five seconds later, when he feels Bucky’s hands on his chest, shoving him back against the alcove wall.

“You think you’re the only one with morals around here, Rogers?” Bucky hisses.

“Of the two of us, who’s sucking Big Oil’s dick?” Steve nearly spits.

Bucky’s shoves him harder against the wall and Steve hisses as his skull bounces against the marble, pain shooting through the back of his head as it does.

“What can I say?” Bucky says, eyes flashing furiously. “I like a good dick.”

There’s more than a brief moment of glaring. In fact, in the resounding, heated silence, all that can be heard is their angry, breathing, so close to panting and just shy of gnashing. It’s all pure, unbearable hatred in here.

Then, without warning, Steve feels Bucky’s mouth press against his. Bucky kisses him, hot and angry, like they’re continuing some acrimonious debate, and it hits Steve’s stomach like a sack of burning bricks.
“Fuck you,” Steve growls and shoves Bucky off. Then, before his mind can catch up with the rest of him, he grabs Bucky’s collar and drags him back, mouth on mouth.

“I hated the way you looked at me earlier,” Bucky snipes, trying to bite at Steve’s mouth.

They grapple with each other, hands over jackets and under shirts, panting furiously, trying to shove each other against the walls and tripping over tarp.

“I hate you,” Steve tries to bite back.

Their teeth are about as sharp as their words and soon they’re kissing as furiously as they are trying to wrestle with belt buckles to shove them out of the way. Steve feels feverish, like there’s a fire licking up his skin and under his skin; the flames of his bad decisions, maybe.

He is, to be honest, a little frantic. He hates Bucky and he hates that he wants Bucky so much, but this is all very little consolation when his brain is sending him warning signals that his dick is choosing to wholeheartedly ignore. His only real consolation is that Bucky seems at least equally desperate, his mouth panting into Steve’s mouth, his hands tearing at Steve’s belt. They’re only getting in each other’s way, as frenetic as they’re being, so Steve bats Bucky’s hands aside with a frustrated growl. He gets Bucky's belt open and fumbles with his own. Once Bucky realizes what he's doing, he pulls his hands away and just gropes Steve through his shirt.

Steve is not ashamed of the fact that he spends a lot of time in the gym. Nor is he ashamed of the fact that his nipples are a personal hot spot. He is, maybe, a little bit ashamed of the noise he makes when Bucky fucking gropes his tits, but only because it echoes around the Magna Carta room, barely muffled by all the tarp. Freedom and human rights have probably never sounded so filthy and for that, he apologizes to all of the Founding Fathers.

He gets Bucky's fly open and takes his revenge by reaching in and wrapping his hand around Bucky’s dick. Bucky makes a high-pitched squeaking sound that quickly turns into a moan as Steve moves his hand. The angle is not the greatest, but Bucky's cock is hard and warm beneath his fingers, and he would be lying to himself to say he wasn't enjoying the way Bucky's eyes are wide, echoing the desperate sounds he's making.

"Doesn’t seem like you—you hate me," Bucky gasps out. He's bracing one hand on Steve's side, while the other is tugging at Steve's zipper, which is—good. It's embarrassing how badly Steve is aching to be touched, not that he will ever let Bucky know, on pain of death or otherwise.

"I do," Steve insists, or thinks he does. His verbiage is currently—distracted. His head falls back as Bucky finally gets his hand on Steve's dick, and he takes in the arches of the vaulted ceiling for a second as he tries not to lose his train of thought. Hate. He definitely—hates Bucky. This he knows—if he could, for a moment, think about why. He has a reason, he’s almost sure of it. “I hate you—uhn!”

Bucky twists his hand and Steve has to bury his face in Bucky’s shoulder, to keep from making a noise families and their children might hear in the room next door.

The room with the, you know, founding documents. Such as, for example, the Constitution. Such as, also for example, the Bill of Rights.

Steve cannot believe he is getting a handjob by the person he hates most in the world in the room next to documents that established democracy and rights and a whole fucking country. The country they live in. He’ll never be able to come back here again, motherfucker.
“—you're ruining the Declaration of Independence for me!” he exclaims frustratedly, into Bucky’s throat.

Bucky shifts to kiss Steve’s neck where it joins his shoulder. His hand is still very much on Steve’s concerningly hard dick. Steve is certain that Bucky is, in no uncertain terms, some kind of monster for being so borderline tender when they’re busy getting their hatesex all over these symbols of democracy.

"Yeah, you seem really furious about it," Bucky says, and first of all, how dare he sound so composed? And second of all, Steve can feel the smirk against his neck.

Steve is going to kill him.

He does the next best thing, which is, obviously, to get Bucky off, but like, furiously.

Steve wraps his fingers around the tip of Bucky’s dick and slides fingers wet with precome down the length, and that's better, because Bucky has to bury a moan against Steve's shoulder this time. Steve is furious about it, and he's going to tell him so as soon as stops feeling so fucking turned on.

Steve finally gets a better rhythm going, and then the two of them are leaning against each other, hands in each other's pants, gasping and swearing—“Quietly,” Steve manages to hiss, because the room might be closed for construction but anyone could just walk in, just like they did, and Steve doesn’t have the savings to get a face transplant if they end up on the front page of every D.C. tabloid and newspaper because they couldn’t keep it in their pants.

Bucky moans as they tip closer to the edge, but it’s a soft thing, into Steve’s skin, like he’s actually listening to Steve for once and Steve—well fuck if that doesn’t do something to his already hazy head.

He must go crazy, in that second, because he has a moment where the thought crosses his mind that what he really would like to do is to lay Bucky down on one of the tarps, strip him naked, and fucking wreck him, but that would be over the bounds of decency, and anyway he has a pocket Constitution in his pocket, not condoms and lube.

The condoms and lube are important, probably, but more important to Steve is that he not destroy his pocket Constitution.

So hasty handjobs it is, and really, it has no right to feel as hot as it does, given how haphazard and precarious this whole situation is. It would be infuriating if Steve wasn’t turned on out of his goddamned, fucking, traitorous mind.

He twists his hand again, out of spite, which does the trick, because Bucky comes first, arching against Steve and whispering his name, which is extremely inappropriate and definitely unfair. Somehow it's that sound, his name on Bucky's lips, that has Steve following almost immediately after, spilling over Bucky's fingers in the middle of the day, his work pants not even pushed down around his hips, in the middle of the National fucking Archive. At least the Magna Carta isn’t actually here right now; it's bad enough that the Declaration of Independence is in the next room.

Their breathing is synchronized for a full minute as they lean against each other, panting and trying to calm their dizzied, frantic, blissed out minds.

It goes against everything he stands for, but Steve is just out of it enough that he kisses Bucky anyway, in front of God and the exhibit about documents that established basic human rights and everybody. He’s always been something of a terrible cuddler. He winds the hand that's not covered
in come through Bucky's hair. There's only a moment of hesitation, but Bucky kisses him back. There's an edge to it, like he can't get enough of him, even though it's killing him inside, and honestly, not only can Steve relate, but if this hadn't been an enormously risky undertaking and terrible idea in the first place, Steve could probably go again.

They pull apart after a second, breathing harshly, and Bucky shakily pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket. Steve blinks at him, in a daze, and watches as Bucky very carefully wipes Steve's hand clean, or as clean as it's going to get. It's so confusing that Steve might honestly prefer Bucky yelling at him. Then Bucky wipes off his own hand with much less care and shoves the handkerchief back in his pocket.

"That was stupid of us," he says, which is the first thing he's voiced that Steve has ever agreed with him about.

"You started it," Steve says, dully, as though that is at all an excuse for what he very enthusiastically participated in.

Bucky raises an eyebrow, giving him a withering look, and Steve is both too tired and still too close to his high to really defend himself.

"Are you going to get that?" Bucky gestures at Steve's general crotch area and Steve scowls at him in irritation before fixing his situation and zipping himself back up.

Bucky fixes himself too and then they give each other a half-hostile look over. Bucky's mouth is horribly red and his hair is raked up everywhere. His jacket is rumpled and his shirt is unbuttoned and everything is just very askew. He looks as debauched as Steve feels, which must mean Steve also looks as debauched as Steve feels.

This is all very problematic.

"Stop looking at me like that," Bucky says. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone and Steve knows from the look on his face that whatever break Bucky took to come to the National Archive has cost him. If Steve had to guess, he would say in the span of a simple handjob, Bucky has received no less than five calls and twenty emails.

"Where else am I supposed to look?" Steve mumbles. He pulls out his phone too, because he's not going to be the one staring, like a loser.

"Motherfucker," Bucky groans and runs a hand through his already messed up hair. The resulting effect is that he looks even more fucked up than he had a moment before. It's disgusting how good it looks on him. "I gotta go."

"No one's stopping you," Steve says sourly.

"Listen," Bucky says, looking up at Steve with clear annoyance. "I need your number."

Steve freezes, staring at him.

"What?"

"Your number, idiot," Bucky says. "For work?"

If Steve couldn't clearly see how much Bucky hates him—and vice versa—he would think this was the lamest kind of line. But, as it is, Bucky is halfway to a sneer already and the thought of anything other than hatesex is absolutely out of the question. This works out great for Steve, because the only
way he’d date Bucky Barnes is if Tony Stark literally held a gun to his head.

“Is your brain offline or something?” Bucky stares at him when Steve doesn’t answer.

Steve scowls.

"Give me your phone."

This is objectively another terrible idea, but he guesses they’re running a special on them today, so he takes Bucky's phone and enters his number in anyway.

Bucky puts it in his pocket—not the pocket with the come-covered handkerchief, thank God—and gives Steve an unreadable look. Then he pats him on the ass with a grating smile and turns to leave. Steve could say multiple things right now, all of which would probably sound cool, like—Thanks for the handjob, asshole or See you never, jerk or even Guess you exercised your First Amendment right to suck my dick, which, okay isn’t accurate in the least, but sounds scathing in his head.

In the end, Steve just watches Bucky go, breathing a low sigh of relief and feeling more than a little disgusted with himself.

He’s just grateful that Bucky didn't grab the side with the pocket Constitution. Steve doesn't want Bucky to know about it; Bucky would probably make fun of him and he couldn't stand that.

Some things have to be sacred. A man's pocket Constitution is one of them.

A man’s dignity, on the other hand? Apparently a very different fucking story.
Steve is partially horrified and partially irate and almost entirely angry that this person—this person is who he is so stupidly attracted to that even the thought of getting his hand—or mouth—on any part of him keeps short-circuiting his brain.

It doesn’t matter, Steve thinks. We do not reward bad behavior.

Chapter Notes

A copier may have been harmed in the writing of this chapter.
There are bills that are introduced in the House and the Senate that cause a flurry of publicity, only to die a quiet and muffled death in committee. Code Green is not one of them.

The wait between introduction and being heard in committee is a period, not of weeks, but of a few months. During this time, Steve works with Wanda on a handful of other pieces of legislation and Sam travels back and forth between D.C. and NYC to make face time with his constituents, but also to troll his Republican opponents out of house and home. Fox News has a vendetta and a half against him, as do most of the old, white members of Congress, which only makes Sam’s robust Twitter presence all the more popular. The old guys hate him, but Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez loves him and, as Steve has told him multiple times, that is literally the only thing that matters. All of the time in between is spent in meetings—meetings dressed in cocktail attire, official meetings, closed door meetings, lunch meetings, and meetings disguised as social networking, but which are still meetings, make no mistake.

By the time Steve gets the email from Margaret Carter’s office, the weather is turning from only just humid enough to feel damp everywhere to classic D.C. swamp weather. The heat wave is relentless and the moisture oppressive. Anyone outside for longer than two minutes appears red-faced and downtrodden, the close human approximation of an oil spill. Steve has his jacket hung over his chair and the sleeves of his button up rolled up, his tie loosened at his neck, because it’s nice and cool inside, but Steve has been in and out of the building all day and at some point, he accepted the thick sheen of damp that’s clinging to his skin with some resignation. Still, it takes only a single scan of the email from Angie Martinelli for Steve to shake away any residual misery.

His face breaks into a wide grin.

“Chavez! Where’s Sam?” Steve looks up from his computer at the intern and America shrugs.

“Aren’t you two married?” America says, popping a piece of bubblegum. “How am I supposed to know?”

“First of all, it’s part of your job,” Steve says. “Second of all, Sam is married to his constituency.”

“Who’s that leave you with? Your sad social media presence and your right hand?” America smirks and Steve scrambles for a stress ball to throw at her head.

“That is inappropriate,” Steve says, mostly because he’s loathe to admit to a college student how dead accurate that is. He dials Sam’s number on the office phone instead and ignores the stress ball as it comes flying back from America’s desk and bounces off his head.

“Steve, kind of in the middle of something—” Sam says, sounding harried.

“Hey, yeah, sorry,” Steve says. He’s grinning and sounds like it. “Good news.”

“I—what?” Sam asks. There’s some sort of chattering in the background and Steve remembers Sam’s taking a meet and greet with housing advocate groups.

“We got a date,” Steve says, barely able to contain his enthusiasm.

Sam pauses.

“You’re serious?”
“Dead,” Steve grins, scanning the email again. “Committee’s meeting July 1st. Angie says the entire hearing is about the bill.”

“No fucking way,” Sam says.

“Yes fucking way,” Steve grins wider.

“Holy fuck,” Sam breathes out. “Holy shit.”

“I know,” Steve agrees. He’s feeling—God, honestly a little giddy right now.

“I know it’s just the first step, but,” Sam says and Steve can hear his pause, but also his awe. “Shit. Forreal? We’re on? We’re doing this?”

“Wouldn’t be worth my life to lie to you about this,” Steve says, grinning unrepentantly. “We’re on. We’re doing this, Wilson.”

There’s a pause and more talking in the background of the line. After a moment it dims, as though Sam’s moved away a bit.

“Think we’re gonna really change shit, Steve?” Sam says, his voice quieter, more thoughtful.

That makes Steve pause too. It’s so nearly inconceivable to him, even here, sitting where he is, that he has to read it again. But no, it’s all there—every word of it.

Hey Steve,

Good news—I know you’ve been waiting on this! The Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change has set the hearing agenda for July 1st. Peggy wants the headliner to be Code Green, nothing else. It’s right before the Fourth and August recess, so we want it to be fireworks, that ball-busting momentum we’re going to carry into September. We’re going to drum up as much publicity and coverage as possible on our end, but I know Sam must have his own press contacts for this piece.

We have a list of witnesses we’re going to invite to come testify at the hearing, but if you and Sam want to round up your advocates and send us the list, we’ll get them out too.

Let’s touch base after the hearing and see if the Committee wants to move it forward. (Just between you and me, Peggy is...a huge fan. And so am I! Love to save the only planet we live on, am I right?)

Anyway, let me know if you have any questions!

Best,
Angie Martinelli
Legislative Director
U.S. House Representative Margaret Carter

“Steve?” Sam says over the phone and Steve shakes himself out of his reverie.

“Saving the world?” Steve says, with a more tempered smile. “We’re sure as hell going to try.”

There are only so many ways to make a hearing interesting, even a hearing on a bill that has every single member of the Republican party rankling. The hearing room is packed and the members of the
committee—and Sam—are at the dais, sitting around in a semicircle, while members of the public testify, passionately, for and against Code Green.

Every once in a while Steve looks up from the side of the gallery, but the Republicans stay purple in the face and Sam stays asking the questions that really matter. Steve frowns when someone says something stupid and nods when someone says something he agrees with, but mostly he’s texting back and forth with America—who’s handling the office by herself—and fielding the dozens of emails and phone calls he keeps receiving from members of the press.

“Hi Helmut,” Steve says quietly, taking the call and stepping out of the gallery into the hallway. “Yes, Sam can comment on that...when he’s not in the middle of a hearing.” A pause. “No, you can watch the hearing yourself and report on it.” Another pause. “Can I check and get back to you? Yeah, we’ll have something prepared. What? No, he didn’t say that about Peter Quill—”

Not that Sam hadn’t wanted to, but that was a whole different can of worms Steve wasn’t going to reveal to a reporter from the Washington Post.

He walks around the hallway for a little while, finishing his conversation with Zemo and then takes another call from a different reporter—this one from the Huffington Post.

By the time Steve hits ignore on a third call, the hearing has moved on to a third panel of advocates. This one, filled with Big Oil and coal lobbyists, are much less happy about environmental regulations.

He steps back into the side gallery, nodding at a few chiefs of staff and interns he vaguely recognizes from some of the other offices. There’s someone slimy looking testifying on behalf of some oil corporation and Steve inadvertently makes a face that is so transparent that he only notices Sam giving him a funny look when he catches his eye a moment later.

Sam’s mouth twitches and Steve bites back a grin and goes back to his phone. Natasha sends him some press clipping that’s already tearing into Code Green and mischaracterizing all of the sections he and Wanda had gone over a dozen times before introduction and Clint sends him a video of a cheetah and a dog making friends, which Steve is sorely tempted to open.

He grins at his phone and leans against the wall, looking up every so often before scrolling through Twitter again. Sam is in the middle of questioning Big Oil about the environmental impact of their toxic waste policies or something when the back of Steve’s neck prickles with the feeling of someone staring incredibly intently at him.

He looks up with a faint frown. It takes a moment of scanning before he sees a pair of familiar blue eyes boring down on him.

He’s wearing a full suit today, something charcoal grey with light green stripes criss-crossing into diamonds. His hair is curled at the sides, creating a kind of poof at the top where it’s brushed back. His legs are crossed at the ankles. He’s leaning against a pillar, on the other side of the hearing room, the mirror image of Steve if Steve was, you know, a rich jackass.

Steve’s eyes narrow and Bucky raises an eyebrow.

There’s no reason Bucky Barnes should be at a House committee hearing, even if it is one as highly publicized as this particular one, which leaves Steve to believe that either 1) Bucky is stalking him or, 2) God has a particular grudge against Steve that he is manifesting through the most irritating means possible.
Steve redirects his attention toward the Committee, toward the witnesses, toward his phone—anywhere, really, other than Bucky. That feeling doesn’t go away, though, and the next time he purposefully checks his email instead of looking across the floor, he finds a text message waiting for him instead.

BARNES: You’re being obvious

Steve takes in a breath through his nose because this—this is exactly the kind of regretful consequences of poorly thought out mistakes that result from letting your dick act as the puppetmaster for your brain.

He ignores it, switching back to his email, so, of course, thirty seconds later, he gets another text.

BARNES: Seriously? I can see you on your phone.

Steve swipes away again, on purpose, and this time the wait is fifteen seconds.

BARNES: I can see your boner too

That almost makes Steve splutter and for one, horrifying moment, he almost thinks he does have a boner, except of course he doesn’t, because one, he would feel it, and two, he would have to kill himself on the spot if he was sporting a boner that someone clear across the floor could see. Steve can’t hide his flush or how angrily he starts typing a response.

This isn’t your committee. Or your part of the legislature, actually. Is there a reason you’re harassing me?

The response is immediate.

BARNES: Gives me a purpose in life

Steve can feel the vein throb in his temple.

Your purpose in life is to drive me to murder?

BARNES: I said a purpose, not the purpose. Anyway yeah, that’d be pretty fun.

Be careful what you wish for, Barnes.

BARNES: Is that a threat? I couldn’t tell bc you’re so red you look like someone’s sexting you.

BARNES: Honestly, all you gotta do is ask

Steve makes a choked sound just loud enough for someone’s legislative director to give him a dirty look. Steve chooses not to acknowledge the glare, but also chooses not to acknowledge the hot feeling he swallows at the suggestion.

Why are you here.

BARNES: God you’re no fun. I’m here for the hearing. Why, did you think I was here for you?

Are you trying to flirt with me? I would rather date my phone.
BARNES: I’m sorry, that would be different than now...how?

Steve flushes and repositions himself on the wall so that he’s fully parallel to Bucky. Bucky looks up at him, that aggravating smile on the edges of his mouth. Steve doesn’t know how he manages to look like a condescending asshole just by existing, but Steve has never met someone he’s disliked by sight more. He imagines wiping that smirk off Bucky’s face by successfully passing progressive legislation that leaves Republicans seething. It’s followed very shortly by the thought of hooking his thumbs into Bucky’s thick bottom lip and dragging them down.

There are different ways of wiping a smirk off someone’s face, okay?

Steve certainly ignores the different physical responses his body has to certain thoughts over others.

BARNES: I’m bored

Steve rolls his eyes and looks back up. Bucky is staring so intently at Steve that a lesser being might evaporate on the spot. Steve raises an eyebrow.

What do you want me to do about it?

BARNES: Suck my dick

You’re the one who texted me, asshole

Steve sees Bucky snort.

BARNES: No, I want you to put your mouth on my dick and suck it

The thing about Steve’s skin already being hot and flushed is that it should not be possible for it to grow even more hot and flushed, but presently he swallows and feels as though he’s going to burst into flames.

This is so unprofessional. We’re at an important hearing.

BARNES: Yeah, yeah. Climate is on fire, oil companies suck, the ozone is trying to kill us, I don’t care.

What the fuck. How can you not care about that?

BARNES: I said I was bored.

The planet doesn’t care about how bored you are, jackass

BARNES: Maybe if the planet got me off I would care more. But 1) it’s useless to do that and 2) we’re not going to save it in this minute by listening to this Hulk Hogan look-a-like testify about how his grandma gave him baby’s first oil rig or whatever

Steve is partially horrified and partially irate and almost entirely angry that this person—this person is who he is so stupidly attracted to that even the thought of getting his hand—or mouth—on any part of him keeps short-circuiting his brain.

But also, he’s partially dying because that’s exactly what the large man currently testifying looks and sounds like.

It doesn’t matter, Steve thinks. We do not reward bad behavior.
BARNES: Come on, Stevie. Just a quickie. There’s that unused overflow room one floor up....

The thing is. They’re in the middle of a very important hearing and Sam is doing a great job of grilling everyone who’s trying to pollute the planet and this is forever going to be one of the highlights of Steve’s professional career, one of the proudest moments of his life.

But, also. He can’t help but trace Bucky’s mouth with his eyes and Bucky moves a hand down casually to rest on his pocket, one thumb hooked in, so close to his crotch and—Jesus Christ, Steve’s lizard brain cannot seem to fucking help it, he actually considers it, Lord help them all.

Luckily, or unluckily, it’s the nickname that does it.

Steve stares at it—Stevie—and the part of him that isn’t minutely flattered is absolutely certain with the knowledge that Bucky is taking the shit out on him.

Well thank god, Steve has two moods total and the biggest one is anger. He snaps from whatever lizard thirst he’s been stuck in to instant irritation.

Pass.

Steve turns off his phone and pockets it.

He says sorry to the legislative director sitting at the end of the staff benches and moves past him to sit at the far end.

He crosses his large arms across his chest and focuses intently on Sam and the rest of the hearing. At some point that feeling at the back of his neck fades away.

When he looks back up, he sees the pillar across the room is empty.

Sam’s schedule, already a veritable tetris puzzle of political and public meetings and hearings, somehow becomes even more chaotic than it was going into the hearing. He adds speaking engagements and interviews into his days, which means that Sam is perpetually exhausted, but so is Steve. The office phone won’t stop ringing and the email notification alert starts slowly driving both Steve and America out of body and mind.

“We need to hire someone else, Sam,” Steve says, blearily, one day, when he and America are still going through Sam’s inbox close to 8 pm at night. “There’s too much work for the two of us and, technically, I think we’re violating twenty different labor laws keeping the kid here.”

“I’m not a child,” America says, pinching Steve’s arm.

Steve is so tired that he doesn’t even try to bat her away, just slumps head-forward onto the desk.

“That’s bleak,” America says, staring at the top of Steve’s head. Then she looks up at Sam. “But he’s right. We’re kinda going crazy here. I heard him giving his reflection a pep talk yesterday. I’m not white enough to handle that.”

“Neither am I,” Sam mutters. He looks at Steve with concern, though.

Steve can’t see it, but he feels it. He waves his hand vaguely above his head.
“It’s fine,” he says. “I’m fine. This is fine. The reflection didn’t talk back to me and I think we can all agree that is the most important thing.”

There’s a semi-tense thirty second pause.

“Put out a posting for an administrative assistant, I guess? And another intern,” Sam says. “We got enough work for two?”

“We got enough work for ten,” America says. She closes Sam’s inbox and turns off the computer. “I expect a raise, also.”

“How about I give you a day off?” Sam levels with her.

“Deal,” America says and pops another bubble. “Well, I’m off. Is he going to be okay?”

Sam and America are evidently still staring at Steve.

“I’ll be fine,” Steve mutters. “I’m fine! We’re fine. This is all fine.”

Steve hears America leave and feels Sam’s hand on his shoulder.

“Why don’t you go home, man?” Sam asks. “You’ve been working too hard lately.”

This makes Steve sigh and blearily sit up.

“No, we have a deadline,” he says, rubbing his eyes. “For the next draft. Wanda and I have been working on it. And there are your other requests and those requests we need to file—”

“Steve,” Sam says and he really does sound and look worried.

Steve looks at the clock. It’s 8:15 pm, which means Sam has a dinner he needs to get to with a handful of senators from the Democratic caucus. It’s not the usual hobnobbing affair—Sam’s gathering support for the bill with the Senators. Senator Rhodes is sponsoring the companion bill and the House is a separate entity, but that doesn’t mean Senators don’t have ties to Representatives and that backdoor dealings don’t make up the, well, backbone of American politics. What was it Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote into Hamilton? Something about the room where it happens? There are a lot of rooms where it happens, so to speak, in Washington D.C. and the room doesn’t usually only contain one kind of politician.

“Go,” Steve says, straightening. “You’re going to be late. I’ll finish all this up and be home by ten, easy.”

Sam raises an eyebrow and slides on his suit jacket.

“Why does that sound like the biggest load of bullshit I have personally ever heard?”

“ Weird, considering you had a full conversation with Tony Stark yesterday,” Steve mutters.

Sam snorts and fixes his tie.

“At least order yourself dinner,” he says. “Promise me, Steve. I know what you get like with deadlines and not taking care of yourself. I don’t want Sarah Rogers breaking down my door and wringing my neck because I was supposed to make sure her son didn’t stupid himself to death and I failed.”

“She’d wring mine before yours,” Steve mutters some more. Then he looks up and looks Sam
straight in the eye. “Promise. This’ll be easy.”

He knows he’s lying and Sam knows he’s lying, but D.C. politics waits for no man so Sam just sighs, claps Steve on the shoulder, and makes him promise him to text him when he heads home.

That is a promise Steve can keep, although chances are Sam will be home long before Steve opens his phone to text him.

He stays awake and alive only by the virtue of coffee. They have a machine in the office that Steve and Sam had bought at Wal-Mart together before moving and it doesn’t make the best cup of coffee, but it certainly makes a cup of coffee—a pot, even—and two and a half hours later, at 10:45 pm, that’s all Steve can really ask for.

He’s drunk four cups of coffee and eaten them out of all of the snacks in their office—including a whole box of mini blueberry muffins, half a bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, two bowls of granola, and America’s entire secret stash of Hershey’s kisses. He’s both tired and wired, which makes for a strange combination at best and has Steve hallucinating that his reflection is talking back to him at worst. Anyway, he’s in this surreal state of too much exhaustion and an inability to take a nap on Sam’s couch and he thinks, he never did drugs but he’s certain this must be how it feels. Except, like, more miserable.

Anyway, Steve has switched from coffee to a cup of Earl Grey tea and is blinking blankly at the screen in front of him and a corresponding stack of forms and copies that he has to walk across the street to get submitted and stamped by the midnight deadline when he frowns.

“No,” he says, his eyebrows furrowing. “That can’t be right.”

He looks closer at the screen and then at the forms next to him. Then he looks back.

The moment he realizes that the two do not match, he feels something like the very fabric of his psychology crack clean down the middle.

“Fuck!” Steve shouts, scrambling up. “Fuck!”

There’s a very obvious mistyping between the two forms, changing the information in an incredibly substantial way. Steve, under the weight of four cups of coffee, a black tea, and a veritable mound of sugar, feels the horror crashing down around him in a panicked kind of way—his heart pounding in his ears, his vision narrowing to a black tunnel.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Steve curses.

He looks at the time—

10:50 pm.

He has an hour and ten minutes to fix this, run it to the copy center, print out 250 copies, and then run them all across the street to get stamped.

If not—

If not—Jesus, God, he is fucked.

The copy center is on the fifth floor of the Congressional office building. Steve fixes the mistakes in
about ten minutes, double checks, triple checks, and prints out a copy on their own, small, pathetic printer. The panic ratchets up as he gathers his ID and the paperwork, checking the clock hastily as he does so.

11:00 pm.

Heart racing, nearly swaying on his feet, he throws himself into the elevator and punches down to the fifth floor. He stumbles out and the hallway is pretty empty, but for a lone body here and there. Steve stumbles his way down the hall toward the large, industrial-sized Xerox copier that he knows is in the room at the back.

His feet slide to a halt at the open door. There’s noises inside and he sees a silhouette of someone standing casually by the printer. It’s pretty late, but there are always deadlines on the Hill, so it’s not the most surprising thing. It is, however, the most annoying thing.

Hopefully this person won’t be too much of a dick when they realize Steve’s in dire straits.

“Hey, I’m sorry to ask this, but it’s an emergency—I need to make like 300 copies of this form and I need it like, right now, could I—”

Steve stops mid-panicked ramble when the person at the copier freezes and slowly turns around.

“Motherfucking fuck,” Steve curses, his heart sinking through his stomach and straight into his loafers.

“Hey, Stevie.” Bucky Barnes raises an eyebrow and smirks.

"Bucky," Steve says flatly. He'd really like to come back with something scathing, but his brain cells are composed of ninety percent panic at the moment and nothing is floating up through that.

"It's an emergency, you said?" Bucky's eyebrow has not come down yet. It makes him look, first and foremost, like the smug son-of-a-bitch that he is, but, more concerningly, it makes him look hotter, somehow, which Steve is only willing to acknowledge in the back of his panicked lizard brain. It’s a testament to Steve’s devotion to his career that he’s irritated before he’s thirsty. Anyway, Bucky looks like he knows exactly what it means that he got to the copy room first and, frankly, Steve doesn’t have the fucking time.

"I've got to get these across the street to submit by midnight," Steve snaps. He's aware that he could possibly have used a more conciliatory tone to ask a favor. As it stands though, there's so much caffeine in his body that his blood is majority coffee at this point and he can feel his pulse in his eyeballs. There’s no room left in his fucking brain for tone analysis.

"That is a problem," Bucky muses, letting his eyes rove from Steve's face to at least his knees and then back up again, stopping at various points along the way. Steve's nipples, the traitors, press against his shirt in a way he probably wouldn't even notice if Bucky weren't looking at him like that.

"It's not, however, my problem," Bucky concludes. The copier whirs smoothly behind him, spitting out sheets of whatever it is that Bucky's copying.

Steve just keeps from worrying at his bottom lip and looks down at his dinged up Apple watch.

"When do you need your stuff copied by?" he asks.

"I need to have it on Tony's desk by tomorrow morning." Bucky leans back against the copier and looks at Steve again, that frank, appraising gaze that reminds Steve that every single time they've
been alone, they've gotten their dicks out. Not that they can do that now; Steve is on a tight schedule, and anyway, he hates Bucky and if anything makes him less than willing to get his dick out it's certainly the mixture of a looming deadline and sheer loathing for the person he would be getting his dick out for.

He finds this realization very mature of him, frankly, and he thinks that maybe if just this once he can get out of the room without sucking Bucky’s dick or getting his own dick sucked, then perhaps it will be the beginning of a new pattern of behavior where he can be around Bucky Barnes without wanting to fuck him. Or like, actually fucking him, he guesses.

But he's been pondering this train of thought too long now, because Bucky's smirk changes to a frown, and his brows draw together as he says, "What?"

Steve means to say, "Since my deadline is tighter, could I please use the copier?" but what comes out of his mouth is a hissed, "Stop eyefucking me."

Now both of Bucky's eyebrows leap up toward a hairline composed entirely of very soft, touchable curls. Steve realizes he is clenching his fists, not out of an actual aggressive instinct, but to keep himself from reaching out, because that—would be bad. That would be terrible. That would also be nonsensical and not to the point at all—the point being the copies he needs to be making and the line his ass is on.

Bucky must notice anyway, because the edge of his lip curls up and he takes a step forward. "Think a lot of yourself, don't you, Rogers? This is what you call projection. You're just accusing me of what you want to do."

"That's—ridiculous," Steve spits, because it is. He's not projecting. If he notices Bucky's curls, his stupid soft sweater vest, and the way his slacks always seem to cling to his ass, that's not leering like Bucky was doing, that's just being observant.

Bucky takes another step closer, and now he's getting awfully close. Steve clutches his papers in front of his chest like they could shield the virtue he hasn't possessed since he was an inquisitive teenager. He doesn’t make a squeaking noise, of course, but he thinks it. It’s somewhere in the air, just floating around between them, the idea of a squeak that Steve makes.

Bucky says, "You think you're better than me, but we're a lot more alike than you think."

That helps, a little. Steve bares his teeth and tries to hiss.

"We are not alike at all," he glares; or tries to. He’s utterly disgusted at how breathless the words come out, instead. In his mind, he said them the way he imagines granite would emote if it could talk: firm, cold, immovable. Alas, his mouth is made of the same too, too solid flesh as his dick, apparently. They're both traitors as Bucky takes one more step closer, into Steve's personal space, and puts up a hand to touch his face.

"Shut up," Bucky says.

"I have—a deadline," Steve says.

"So do I," Bucky replies.

"It’s a very important one," Steve tries again.

"They’re all important deadlines, jackass," Bucky says. His fingers brush the small hairs just below Steve’s hairline. It makes something hot spike in Steve’s chest.
"What are you doing?" he whispers.

Bucky hooks a hand around the back of Steve's neck and pulls him closer.

"What do you think?" he asks, and kisses him.

Bucky's lips taste like gum, and underneath that, coffee, so at least he's right in that they have one thing in common. He kisses hungrily, like he wants to crawl inside Steve's mouth, or pull him on top of him or something, but if Steve's being honest, he has every single time they've done this. His hand exerts pressure on the nape of Steve's neck, not too hard but inexorable enough that Steve doesn't want to resist. He pulls Steve closer until they are pressed chest-to-chest, Bucky's body a warm line against Steve's own, Steve's hands moving to pull Bucky closer in return—

—until paper crinkles.

"Fuck!" Steve says, perhaps a little more loudly than necessary with Bucky right against him.

"What?" Bucky says, pulling back maybe six inches. His eyes are hazy, his mouth hot. It's not far enough.

Steve looks at his watch and sees that is no longer eleven but in fact 11:14. He looks up and feels despair break over his face like a wave crashing on a shore.

"Shit," he curses. "Fuck!"

"What?" Bucky asks again, perplexed.

"I really need to make these fucking copies," Steve says and now the panic edges into his voice. "I have less than an hour to get them filed. Come on, Bucky. Please."

It would kill Steve to beg, but he's willing to do it. For Sam, he would do anything.

Surprisingly, it doesn't take that. He's about to open his mouth again, desperate, when Bucky runs his hand through his hair and slowly backs away. He runs a tongue over his slightly red lips, his expression tight and slightly unreadable. Steve's an idiot for missing the warmth of his body. It's probably some kind of physical reflex that Steve can't be blamed for.

"All right," Bucky says, and presses the cancel button on the copier. "Do what you gotta do."

"Really?" Steve breathes.

Bucky waves a hand, but he also pulls his papers off the tray and sets them on the supply shelf.

"Put your paper on the machine," he says, voice inscrutable, and takes maybe one step back.

Steve doesn't question this sudden change of heart when it's working in his favor. Instead, he loads his documents into the paper feed and keys in 300, then start. Soon the machine is whirring and the chemical scent of toner smells like snatching a colossal fuck-up from the jaws of failure. His heart rate is still elevated, but he's feeling marginally less like he's going to have a public meltdown. As long as the copier doesn't jam, anyway, in which case not only will he have a public meltdown, but he will almost certainly find the nearest window and fling himself from it.

"Thanks," Steve says awkwardly.

There's some expression on Bucky's face that Steve doesn't quite know what to do with, but thankfully it only lasts a second before he's finally smirking again.
"That's going to take a minute," he says. "Whatever will we do to pass the time?"

Steve fully intends to say something cutting, he does, but then Bucky is standing right next to him, and Steve's stupid body is still missing the warmth of him and also he smells so much better than anyone has a right to at—oh, god, 11:16 pm—so Steve just kind of leans toward him as Bucky is leaning towards him, and then they're kissing again somehow.

Unlike every other time they've done this, no one immediately goes for anyone's dick. They make out like teenagers instead, kissing, messy and open-mouth, while their hands wander with abandon. There's an edge to it, because Steve can hear the copier going and he can hear the clock ticking down in his head, but he's distracted enough to grasp at Bucky's sweater, softer than it has any right to be, and scrape his hands up the hard planes of his body. Before Steve knows it, he's untucking Bucky's shirt so he can slide his hands underneath and touch Bucky's warm, smooth skin.

"Hng," Bucky says and tips his head back, eyes closed, his expression more like Steve grabbed his dick than just stroked his sides and belly. Steve can't help sucking kisses along his throat, once exposed, letting his fingers dig a little harder in to Bucky's hips.

Then Bucky is rucking up Steve's shirt and kissing him again and Steve threads his fingers into Bucky's soft hair and tugs. Bucky's eyes go wide and he lets out a little gasping moan, which, look, all of Bucky's sex sounds make Steve do questionable things but this comes out of nowhere and hits Steve right in the gut. The consequence is unavoidable. Steve is suddenly very regrettably hard.

Regrettable both because he should not want to bone Bucky Barnes so very much and because the numbers ticking down inside the part of his brain that is not all nerve endings are starting to flash red, sirens blaring and all. His pulse surges, his heart beating faster. Anxiety and lust are a hell of a combination.

Still, Bucky's reaction to having his hair pulled is interesting data. For later. Or never! Never would be better, really. Much more sensible, for reasons he can't fully articulate right now.

The copier beeps and hums to a stop.

"Your documents are ready," Bucky says against his mouth. Steve wills his erection to subside, with very little effect, seeing as how Bucky is still pressed up against him and Steve very much wants to fuck him. Also since Steve's mouth is still very much pressed against Bucky's own and Steve is still very much tonguing his arch nemesis.

He glances at his watch. 11:34.

Motherfucking fuck.

He pushes back, away from Bucky, and if Bucky seems reluctant to let him go, well, it's only because it's undeniable that they have chemistry, sexually. Not romantically, of course; for that, they'd have to not hate each other.

Steve pushes his shirt back into his pants and grabs the still-warm stack of papers from the copier. "Thanks again," he says awkwardly, trying to look at anything else but the bruise he sucked into Bucky's neck.

Bucky picks up his own stack of papers off the shelf.

"Get your documents filed, Rogers. Some of us still have work to do." Then he shoots Steve a sidelong look from under criminally long lashes. "I'll probably still be here when you get done."
“Great,” Steve says, backing out of the room with his armful of copies. “Good information. Lots to do on Capitol Hill, politics uh, waits for no man. Good luck and all of that.”

He turns and runs.

Still, Steve thinks about that as he dashes across the street, heart pounding, thinks about it as he submits the paperwork, panicked and breathless, with eight minutes to spare. He thinks about it, unfortunately, as he lets himself back into the building.

The sensible thing to do would be to go to his office, collect his things, text Sam, and head home to get some sleep. That would be the adult course of action, of course. However, he reasons, he is clearly too caffeinated to fall asleep any time soon and anyway, it's 12:02 and Bucky might well have finished and gone home already. It can't hurt to look. To make sure he’s turned off the Xerox machine and put all of the papers away.

So he tells himself.

He questions his own judgment soon enough because what he sees when he looks in the copy room is a rumpled Bucky Barnes collating papers, his hair still askew from where Steve ran his fingers through it, his shirt still untucked...the mark at his throat still bruise-dark. Steve did that to him.

The effect that thought has on him is as electrifying as it is unwelcome.

Bucky looks up and for just a fraction of a second, Steve thinks the expression he sees, right before his lips twist up into their usual smirk, is something like surprise. But then Bucky says, “Couldn't stay away, huh?” and that makes it much easier to remember that he is, in fact, an asshole.

“I just left something,” Steve says, which is a lie, except that maybe the thing he left was his dignity, because now Bucky is laughing at him. Not out loud, but worse—in the crinkle of his eyes, in the way his smirk is turning into an actual smile. That won't do.

Steve makes the only rational choice left for him—to wipe the smile of Bucky's mouth with his own mouth. Really, what else could he possibly do?

He curls a hand into Bucky’s rumpled shirt and pulls him close, kissing him hard.

Bucky isn’t one to be caught off guard. He’s just as eager, leaning into Steve and grabbing his hips. His mouth is open, waiting for Steve to slip in, so he does, crushing Bucky’s collar in his fist and tasting him hungrily. Bucky makes a little sound at the back of his throat and Steve’s stomach burns with it. If he had been aware of the timer counting down to midnight before, now all he can think of is the relief of having made it and of having all the time in the world with Bucky's body pressed against his.

Well, all the time in the world a person who’s supposed to be at the office in the morning has, but that’s for future Steve to worry about.

“Jesus fuck, I'm glad you came back,” Bucky mutters against his mouth with what cannot possibly be sentiment. Rather than try and tease out what Bucky means, Steve just rocks forward into him. They both groan as their hips line up. Steve can feel Bucky's erection through his pants and it shouldn't feel that good pressed against his, but it does.

Bucky manhandles him, turns him around so that he's pressed up against the copier. He untucks Steve's shirt again and gets his hands on him, sliding them up Steve's abdomen. It feels unbearably
good. Bucky attacks his neck like it insulted his mother, sucking and nipping up Steve's throat to the
corner of his jaw. Steve gasps out what is certainly not a protest and is in fact actually encouragement
and tightens his grip on Bucky's hips.

Bucky runs his hands back down Steve's abdomen until he gets his hands on Steve's belt, and before
Steve knows it, his pants are undone and shoved down to his ankles.

“What if someone comes in?” Steve gasps as Bucky drops to his knees. This is probably more skin
than either of them has ever exposed at once in any of their—whatever this is. Also, the door is open
and also right there.

“It's after midnight,” Bucky says, wrapping a hand around Steve's cock and looking up at him.
Bucky from this angle is a personal attack that Steve has gotten to know only too well, unfortunately.
He's unfairly handsome and also scorching hot and it only has about 45% to do with the fact that he's
about to put his mouth on Steve's dick. The rest of the percentage is undefinable. Anyway, Steve
hates math.

"No one's here but us," Bucky adds and that may not be strictly true, but it feels true enough, the two
of them alone in a world of office supplies.

Bucky deep throats Steve in one smooth motion and Steve makes a strangled noise that may or may
not sound like Bucky's name. It shouldn't be possible to smirk around a mouthful of cock, but Steve
swears that Bucky manages it anyhow. Steve grabs at the copier behind him with one hand because
his knees are wobbling and he doesn't want to fall down, but he tangles the other in Bucky's hair.
Bucky moans around his dick in response and the reasons this is a bad idea—of which there are
many—momentarily retreat out of Steve's mind.

In fact, Steve is happily experiencing an utter lack of any thought whatsoever when he feels Bucky's
finger pressing against his hole, slick and welcome.

Steve says, "Oh, God, Bucky, fuck!" which is a series of words but not exactly a sentence.

A second later a thought circles the runway of his brain without quite landing. He takes a few
breaths, then his eyes pop open and he says, "Wait a second—do you...do you just carry around lube
in case you get lucky?"

Bucky pops off his dick long enough to say, "Well, I keep running into you," and then he goes back
to enthusiastically blowing and fingering Steve at the same time, and the logistics elude Steve in the
screeching noise his brain makes in response.

A moment later, Bucky finds Steve's prostate and Steve arches his back like a salmon leaping a
waterfall to find its way home. In the ensuing motion, his elbow hits a button on the copier. The
copier whirs to life and starts spitting out copies of nothing, Bucky laughs, and Steve is coming
down his throat while making nonsense sounds.

He takes deep gulps of air to steady himself as all of the pleasure circuits in his brain light up like a
fucking pinball machine. His brain is fuzzy in the aftermath, while a faint tremor goes down his
limbs. It takes him a minute to make thoughts again.

When Steve collects himself enough to think, Bucky has his face pressed against Steve's stomach,
still heaving with his panting breaths, and has tucked Steve's dick back into his pants.
Steve pulls him to his feet and kisses him roughly, getting Bucky's fly open and his dick out at the
same time. Steve jerks him a few times, savoring every rough sound that Bucky makes, then gets his
mouth on Bucky's cock. It doesn't take long before Bucky's hands are scrabbling at Steve's
shoulders, and he comes too.

Steve swallows and stands and Bucky kisses him before he gets too far, wrapping an arm around his neck and sucking his bottom lip into his mouth. They spend a glorious few seconds just holding on to each other, sucking face, before the sound of the copier, still printing nothing, penetrates Steve’s hazy brain. He pulls back enough to hit the cancel button on the machine.

They don’t move for a full moment. Then, like everything’s coming back online, they push apart.

Steve’s mouth is still burning, but he swallows the sensation, trying to get his bearings. He stares at Bucky, attempting to keep his eyes from bugging out. Motherfucking fuck.

"Well," Bucky says, putting himself away and zipping up. His voice is deceptively smooth for how much his hands are trembling. "Guess it’s pretty late."

Steve doesn’t even look at his watch. Who cares what the actual time is when it’s terrible fucking ideas o’clock?

"Better get going," Steve replies. He’s trying not to stare at the state of Bucky’s hair and think about how he’d moaned when Steve pulled it. He’s trying not to think about how his fingers are itching to do it again. Anyway, there’s a time for thinking and that time was before the copy machine sex, but is certainly not now.

"Don't forget your...whatever it was." Bucky picks up his stacks of collated paper.

"Huh," Steve says, and grabs a highlighter at random. That's what he forgot. Not his sense of decency. "Funny how the cover sheet on all of those papers is a blank page."

Bucky tilts the pages closer to his chest and glares at Steve and starts edging toward the door. "See you later, Rogers."

It takes Steve an embarrassing ten seconds to come up with Not if I see you first, and he only says it in his head, not out loud. Bucky is already gone by then anyway, blessedly.

Steve sighs, suddenly exhausted, his entire body boneless with adrenaline and that other thing. He clutches his highlighter to himself, hopes that the copy room doesn’t smell too much like late night sex and bad decisions, and heads home.

*

The next morning, Steve wakes up late, with a life full of regrets and the sound of copy machines beeping in his head.

His head is fuzzy with memories he would rather not have—something about blank cover sheets and curly hair and blue eyes staring up at him through long eyelashes. It’s entirely way too early to be up, given how little he had slept, and also way too early to have to deal with morning wood...or whatever it’s called when you think back to whatever happened the night before and your body reacts accordingly.

He drags himself into the kitchen at least two hours past when he usually wakes up, in his pajama bottoms and loose robe, no shirt underneath. His hair, he knows, is sticking up everywhere. His skin is still pink in places. His eyes are blurry. He looks and feels and probably smells like late night mistakes.

When Sam, hunched over the kitchen island, reading his phone, sees him, he raises an eyebrow.
“You didn’t text me,” Sam says. “How late did you stay?”

Steve loves his Ma to death and back, but he will never, ever forgive her for passing along her Irish skin.

He can feel himself turn a red that he cannot explain to Sam and, in fact, will refuse to explain to Sam if asked.

“Not too late,” Steve mumbles.

Sam’s eyebrow remains raised, but he pours Steve a cup of coffee and slides it over.

“Thanks,” Steve mutters.

“Uh huh,” Sam says, going back to his phone.

They settle into a blessedly quiet silence.

It remains that way until Sam gets ready to leave.

It’s only then that he nods his head at Steve and says, with a wry smile, “Might want to cover up that bruise. America sees how many hickeys you got and you’re good as dead.”

Steve groans out loud and buries his face in his hands.

Sam’s cackles ring in Steve’s ears long after the door’s shut behind him.
chapter four, or, that's one way to use a bench press

Chapter by crinklefries

Chapter Summary

_Dear God let me not end up on the cover of The New York Post_, he thinks about two seconds before he gets a hand on Bucky’s ass and hauls him bodily to himself.

Chapter Notes

We're halfway to done, with so much left to go. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bill is popular—that much is clear. It depends on the network whether that popularity leans positive or negative, but Steve spends so little time thinking about Fox News’s climate change denial asses that it’s all coming up Planet Earth as far as he’s concerned.
This also means that Steve’s already long hours grow even busier and Sam is in more meetings than he isn’t. Every once in a while Steve will emerge from a meeting of his own, trekking back from across the Hill with two foot long subs from an off-brand Subway sandwich shop that now knows him not only by name but by sight and has taken to rating how harried he looks, according to the girl at the front who serves him submarine sandwiches four days a week.

It’s no different today, which is to say that Steve opens the door to the office, his jacket slung in the crook of his arm, his tie askew, sweating from his temples, with two sandwiches in hand, to find voices coming from Sam’s office.

They’re louder voices than usual, which makes Steve pause and nod to America with a questioning look.

America makes a face and mouths back to him: *Tony Stark.*

Steve makes a gagging face with a gagging sound, which is obviously pretty mature, and America grins and takes one of her earbuds out of her ear.

“They’ve been in there for like, an hour,” she says.

“Was this on the schedule?” Steve frowns, dropping his jacket onto the back of his chair and the two subs onto his cluttered desk. He’s usually better about keeping a workspace that is semi-visible for professional appearances, but he’s been running around so much the past few weeks that his desk looks like a small mountain had an avalanche above his desk and the avalanche consisted of papers, business cards, Manila folders, and empty candy wrappers. He’s pretty sure he’s lost his favorite space pen in the pile, but at this point he’s too afraid to go looking.

He loosens his tie, slips it over his head, and sets it on top of his jacket.

Then he grabs the big trash can and drags it over to his desk.

“Now you decide to do something about that situation?” America asks, waving her hand at the evidence of Steve’s professional career.

“Shut up, I’m a very busy man,” Steve says and starts sorting through the papers.

“Is that why your face looks like that?” she points at Steve’s general facial area with a pen and waves it around to make some sort of a point.

“What?” Steve blinks and pauses. “What’s wrong with my face?”

“You look like the idea of someone with a beard,” America says and pops a bubble. “Not someone with one, but the idea of someone with one.”

Steve scowls at her and America smirks and Steve has to wonder who he pissed off in another life to make everyone around him all the same brand of cocky. How many people smirk at him how many times a day? Does he have something written across his forehead, like, **STEVE ROGERS: OPEN TO BE LAUGHED AT?**

Anyway, Steve gestures at America to be quiet and tries to hear what’s going on in Sam’s office.

Sam isn’t that loud, but Stark certainly is. It’s not the clearest audio, but Steve thinks he hears Stark going on about “industry” and “innovation.”

He frowns and America rolls her eyes.
“Yeah, he’s like a broken record in there,” she says.

“What’s he even doing here if he’s going to toe the fucking party line?” Steve says aggressively and starts throwing papers and trash out a little less delicately and a lot more diligently. “Stop wasting our fucking time and go get your dick sucked by the planet’s biggest polluters. So glad your fucking family inherited an oil rig down in Texas or whatever arms industry you made your fortune off of, I’m sure your children will appreciate their inheritance along with the dying fucking planet.”

America pauses and raises an eyebrow at him.

Tony Stark’s voice comes through the door again, now a little louder—“Of course I believe in science! That’s not the point—but you can’t throttle industry with regulations—”

“Are you fucking shitting me?” Steve hisses and nearly throws his keyboard out too.

“Steve,” America hisses. “Shut the fuck up!”

Steve glares at her, but really he’s glaring at Tony Stark instead. Stark not only holds sway in the Senate, but half of the Energy Committee is in his fucking pocket. Sam has to break his back trying to get enough votes to get the bill through the House. It’s an uphill fucking battle, but the numbers are there, possibly. Stark holds the key to a handful of House Republicans and more than a few Republican Senators. He hasn’t always been a belligerent asshole—he’s even showed reason in some surprising instances—but he’s digging his heels in here because of course Big Energy has his family by the billionaire balls or whatever.

Steve could wring his fucking neck.

When it becomes clear that he doesn’t have any sort of strategy for his desk anymore, Steve lets out a grunt and just starts sweeping paper into the trash can.

“New assistant starts next week, by the way,” America says.

“What?” Steve asks, distracted.


“Oh huh,” Steve says and dumps more things into the trash can. “There’s—an extra desk. We can pull it out and put in an order for a computer. A phone. Business cards? Listen, Sam has a meeting with AARP in like an hour, what the fuck does Stark think—”

“You’re a fucking scientist, man,” Sam’s voice interrupts Steve, clear and loud as the door to his office swings open.

“Yes, and?”

Here’s the thing about Tony Stark: he’s a fucking dick. There’s probably a scientific way to prove that, but Steve doesn’t need a theorem for his eyes and ears to observe the truth, which is that Tony Stark is a dick. He oozes that kind of unearned confidence that only a white man born into wealth and privilege has—the world exists to serve Tony Stark and Tony Stark only. He’s in his late 40s, with salt and pepper hair, a goatee that makes him look like he’s a James Bond villain, and a perpetual smirk that Steve would love to wipe off his smug face. He’s always in some expensive suit, although he never buttons it, and his ugly tie is always some outrageous pattern that hurts Steve’s brain to even think about. He has these tinted glasses he wears that wouldn’t be out of place in an 80s retro-future science fiction movie and when he talks, Steve hears a flock of extremely pretentious
birds screaming.

Anyway, Sam needs his cooperation and support otherwise Steve would dump iced coffee across his white pants. Who wears white pants in the summer? Does he think he’s on a yacht? What the fuck?

“What do you mean and? I know you’re not one of these Fox News hacks who thinks the jury’s out on science and vaccines killed the dinosaurs or whatever,” Sam’s saying. His tone is light enough, although Steve knows him well enough to hear the tight note of frustration most people wouldn’t detect.

“First of all, we don’t know what happened to the dinosaurs,” Tony says, waving his hand around a little. “That’s just common sense. It’d be bad if it was vaccines though. I like vaccines. I’m all up to date. Polio? Bad. Measles? Bad. Smallpox? Really bad. But I also like dinosaurs. See my problem?”

Sam looks at Tony like he’s grown four heads and an extra set of eyeballs.

Steve catches America’s eyes and she mouths at him, *What the fuck?*

“Senator,” Sam says, but Tony interrupts.

“Yes, I believe in science and climate change,” Tony says. Then, abruptly, he turns and points at Steve. “Don’t quote me on that.”

Steve stares at him.

“You look like a narc.” Tony squints at him.

“What the f—”

“If you believe in science, you know it’s all true,” Sam interrupts, shooting Steve a warning look. “The planet is heating up, Senator. We’re killing off species that have been around way longer than we have. The oceans are going to ravage coastal cities. In the next few decades, the number of refugees fleeing from environmentally impacted areas is going to increase exponentially. We’re making the entire planet into a dystopian hellscape, a dry, uninhabitable wasteland. It’s not signs, it’s hard, physical evidence. Have you seen the polar bears?”

“Yes, but—polar bears?” Tony blinks.

“They’re starving,” America says, with a dead voice and a dead look in her eyes. She turns her monitor toward Tony and there’s a picture of a thin, starving polar bear. It’s awful.

“Do you just have that thing pulled up at all times?” Tony blinks some more.

America shrugs.

“Focus, Tony,” Sam says.

Tony turns back to Sam and the look he gives him tells Steve everything he needs to know. This is a hopeless fucking case. They can’t hedge their bets on Tony Stark. This is absurd.

“Listen, Wilson,” Tony says. He runs a hand through his hair and Steve glares at him. He has that knot in his chest, the tight kind he gets when he’s so pissed off all of his words manifest, primarily, in a low, internal shrieking sound.

“There are parts that are negotiable,” Sam says. He leans against his door, arms crossed at his chest. “It’s not a lot. It’s not most of it. I don’t negotiate my fucking principles. But I do want this passed.”
“How sweet,” Tony says and the condescension almost makes Steve snap. “You’re new and wide
eyed and optimistic, trying to save the world. I get it. We were all there, kid. But politics is brutal, it’s
a shark’s game, not a man’s game. No one’s going to say it, so I will. It’s hard to make change. The
people don’t like it. Pierce, in fact, hates it. So sometimes you believe and want a thing and you can’t
make it happen because no one’s going to let you.”

Now Sam, Sam’s a good guy. He listens to Tony’s political bullshit and answers with a slightly
pissed off smile. Steve, on the other hand, is all anger and impulse and he has had it with Tony
fucking Stark’s edgelord politics and blatant condescension.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he says, loudly.

Tony pauses. Sam looks over at Steve. It’s a testament to just how pissed off he must be that he
doesn’t even stop him.

“Oh, the narc,” Tony says. “What is it, narc? Are you going to hit me over the head with your
political science degree and youthful optimism?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Steve says, heatedly. “It’s people like you—and Pierce, who keep this country
dog eat dog. You come into politics with the silver fucking spoon you’re born with and you think
everyone out there has one too. Or maybe you don’t and the truth is you just don’t fucking care. But
there are real people out there, dying because you can’t bring yourself to give two shits about
humans but will break a country in half to get tax breaks for your fucking yacht.”

“That was Paul Ryan,” Tony almost splutters. “Don’t mix me up with him, he sucks! I don’t like
him. No one likes him!”

It looks could kill, Tony Stark would most certainly die on the fucking spot.

“Your yachts won’t matter, Senator,” Steve says, his voice shaking almost as much as he is. “Your
houses, your trust accounts. Nothing. You can be as rich as you want, but you live on the same
planet as the rest of us. We fuck it up beyond repair and that’s it. All the money in the world won’t
save you. Or your daughter.”

“What?” Tony jerks.

“You have a daughter, right?”

“Morgan.” Tony frowns.

“Morgan,” Steve repeats. “You’re leaving the planet behind for her. And her kids. If you’re going to
be selfish, at least think about the legacy you’re leaving her. Yeah, she’ll have her trust fund, but will
she have breathable air?”

Tony looks, to his credit, more disgruntled than Steve thought he would.

“Think about it,” Sam says, finally. “I told you what’s on the table. What we’re willing to bend on. I
also—and I can’t stress this enough—don’t care about throttling industry. Industry will find a way to
capitalize off the backs of poor black and brown people. It always does. So, pardon my language,
Senator, but fuck industry.”

Tony looks like he’s going to say something dickish again and Steve’s ready to bite back, but,
instead, surprisingly, the senator grins.

“You’re feisty,” Tony says. He points at everyone in the room. “You all are. This is going to be
fun.”

Sam gives Tony a weird look, but Steve sees the resignation on his face. He knows he’s done as much as he can, at least for the day.

“Call me,” Sam says and offers his hand.

The senator takes it and shakes it.

“I’ll have my people call your people,” Tony says enthusiastically.

“Please don’t,” Steve mutters under his breath.

Like one arrogant egomaniac isn’t enough; he doesn’t need more Bucky Barnes too.

Tony takes his leave, clapping Steve on the shoulder and saying, affectionately, *Narc*, before he goes.

Steve, Sam, and America stare after his retreating back.

A minute later, Steve exhales.

“Give me just a minute with him. One minute in the boxing ring.”

America snorts.

“I’d pay to see that.”

Sam lets his shoulders slump wearily for a minute. Then he straightens himself and looks at his team. They’ve wrung every last ounce of energy and optimism out of him for the day, but, in the end, that doesn’t matter. A congressman’s job is never done.

“All right,” Sam says, trying to shore against how exhausted he looks with a shallow smile. “AARP?”

“Sandwich,” Steve says and hands Sam his foot long sub. “Then AARP.”

“Thanks,” Sam says, taking it from him gratefully. “I’m starving.”

*

The Congressional gym is located two buildings down the street from the Congressional offices in an otherwise unremarkable and, frankly, old white building that’s weathering years of discoloration. The gym is unmarked except for a street number and although the going rumor is that it’s for the “safety” and “anonymity” of members of Congress, Steve is of the opinion that it’s mostly because taxpayers don’t need to know how many backroom deals happen while their Congress members are naked in the locker room, after a good workout.

Technically speaking, the gym is reserved only for Senators and Representatives, but there’s the occasional chief of staff or legislative director who can steal their boss’s badge to get in some measure of cardio during the day. Fitness is very important, or something. Can’t destroy the nation politically if you’re dead.

Steve has a Planet Fitness membership that he keeps forgetting to cancel, but luckily Sam managed to sweet talk security into giving Steve his own badge for the Congressional gym. It’s not the nicest or most luxurious gym, but it is a gym and it’s within walking distance of the office, so even on his
busiest day, Steve can sneak out with his gym bag and hit the weight room for an hour or run on the treadmill for a half an hour if it’s one of those days he can’t get a breath in edgewise.

The gym has other, if sad, amenities—an old paddle ball court, a small boxing ring, an indoor basketball court, a men’s and women’s sauna, locker rooms, and showers—but Steve sticks mostly to the cardio and weight rooms. Once, he had seen Paul Ryan near the boxing ring and he had had to drag himself physically away before he asked the human slime mold to a round of boxing that the sleazy, spineless physical manifestation of a rich man’s asshole would almost certainly never recover from.

Anyway, sometimes Steve needs to blow off steam and sometimes he needs to make sure his muscles are physically functioning, but mostly it’s nice just to get out of the office and do something mindless for thirty minutes.

“Going to the gym,” he tells America and she gives him a thumbs up and otherwise ignores him, which is par for the course as far as America is concerned.

He slings his gym bag over his shoulder and leaves the office, checking his text messages as he goes.

There’s an invitation from Clint to go drinking after work on Friday, two texts from his mother about how the cat is doing and, more importantly, how her garden is withstanding the NYC heat, and a short text from Natasha telling him to check his email. There’s a notification for some deal that LYFT is running this week and, apparently, Regal cinema will give him a free popcorn if he goes and watches the latest summer blockbuster right this instant. Buried somewhere behind all of that, there’s an unread text message from BARNES (knife emoji) that Steve has been avoiding for at least four days. This is fine. Steve hasn’t run into or accidentally fallen onto Bucky’s dick in like two weeks, so he’s a recovering addict. He’s going to make it out of this with his dignity only somewhat damaged, he’s positive.

He swipes into the gym, gives the guard a smile, and dumps off his gym bag in the locker room. He strips right there and changes into his Adidas joggers and a soft white tank that’s so old the arm holes go down far lower than is probably appropriate. This particular gym outfit is a little on the slutty side, but that’s fine, the point is that Steve maintains a good physique and if his tank top shows off the way his muscles sculpt around his sides, then it’s nothing less than what his hard work has earned.

Steve stuffs the bag into a locker, grabs his bluetooth headphones, and scrolls to his gym playlist before walking down the hallway to the cardio room.

Steve’s gym routine really changes depending on the day and how wound up he is, but he likes to keep a solid mix between cardio and weight lifting when possible. He’s hitting mid-levels of panic and stress today, which means that he’s in the mood to run mindlessly on the treadmill for a half an hour before switching to lifting weights. He considers the boxing room briefly, but when he looks in there, there’s some douchebag with a weird shaped head that he’s pretty sure works for Pierce and there’s not enough good energy in the world to combat that kind of fuckery.

So he finds himself on the treadmill, punching up the incline and starting the speed off low enough that he’s jogging instead of running. There’s some punk song that starts blaring over his headphones and the belt picks up and soon Steve’s lost in his own head, his heart rate ticking up with the beats, his feet moving quickly, his arms pumping up and down to either side of him.
He’s fifteen minutes into his run when a movement catches his attention from the corner of his eyes. Congressmen and their select staffers come and go from the gym throughout the day, but the cardio room has been surprisingly empty for the middle of the afternoon. Steve skips to the next song without skipping a running beat and turns his head to see who’s come into the room.

It doesn’t take a fucking genius to recognize the curls at the back of one very familiar head and Steve’s no genius, but also he has a distinct memory of pulling on that very hair just a few weeks back.

He doesn’t stumble on the treadmill, but his stomach does drop a little and his chest tightens and suddenly he’s hot all over and just slightly panicked in a way that in no way corresponds to how fast he’s running.

He must make some kind of a distressed, choking noise because Bucky looks up from his phone. The look that flickers over Bucky’s face in that instant could probably be described in a book somewhere, using words, but the point is he begins somewhere at the surprised end of things and then moves down a list of expressions and ends up at his usual home smirking aggravatingly at Steve.

Steve glares at him and then looks straight ahead, turns his music louder, and, totally unrelated, turns the speed up on his machine.

If, by the time Bucky gets on his own treadmill, a row down from Steve, Steve is running so fast his lungs are fit to burst, then, whatever. That’s just exercise.

That’s how it begins.

Since they’re both idiots, it’s certainly not where it ends.

What happens is the classic tale of two morons trying not to check each other out blatantly at the gym, while trying to also outdo each other at the same time.

Steve only realizes this is what is happening about ten minutes later when he’s running so fast on his treadmill that he nearly topples off of it.

Bucky starts off at a moderate pace and then speeds up. Then Steve speeds up. Then Bucky looks over at him, makes eye contact, and smirks. The bastard. The absolute asshole. He speeds up. What’s Steve to do? He goes faster and Bucky goes faster and at some point Steve really thinks his pulse is going to go racing off with his heart and his organs are going to explode from exertion, but then the timer goes off and his machine slows down and Steve grasps the handles and he’s at least attempting to not go into cardiac arrest by like, walking a little slower.

By the time the machine stops all together, Steve has jelly legs and there’s sweat pouring down his forehead. He takes a towel and tries to mop it all up in the same movement that he unscrews his water bottle and chugs half the bottle in one gulp. His tank is clinging to his body from sweat and he’s so overheated, he considers taking the rest of the bottle and just pouring it over his head. He doesn’t, but it’s more because he’s thirsty than out of any sense of decorum.

He eventually calms down enough to climb off the machine.
Steve locks eyes with Bucky, narrows his vision a little, and then walks out of the cardio room to the weight room. He doesn’t flip him off along the way, physically, but he definitely does it in his heart.

There’s no one in the weight room, which suits Steve just fine. Once the ache in his calves calms a little, he starts to feel the endorphins from his run kick in. His muscles are both tight and loose at the same time. He’s overheated, but his blood is searing, his heart pumping. He grins, eyes all of the equipment in front of him, and moves to the corner.

He starts off at the half rack, just to warm up. He loads about ninety pounds total onto the bar and lets out a little oof sound the first time he picks it up. He’s been doing this for a while now, so the burn hits him the way water hits a man dying of thirst in the desert. His face scrunches, but his heart pumps. He’s grinning, on the inside.

He finishes two sets of ten reps, chugs some more water, and starts again.

He’s in the middle of his third set when he feels, rather than sees, a pair of eyes burning into the back of his head. Without looking, he knows who it is. He can fucking feel it.

It makes his blood pump faster, despite himself.

Steve tries not to let it go to his head, but he can’t deny that he envisions what it must look like—him squatting to pick up the bar and weight, his ass out behind him, his biceps straining as he lifts. He lets out a little grunt, not to show off, but because it comes naturally.

From where Bucky is standing, well, he can see all of it.

Steve doesn’t watch for him, but he doesn’t not notice Bucky move from out of the corner of his eyes. He continues his set and Bucky comes to stand by the rack of dumbbells against the wall. He leans against it, his arms crossed at the chest, his expression intrigued and—a little hungry. He’s in a black t-shirt that looks sculpted onto his lean body and black gym shorts that do little to hide the emerging bulge underneath. Bucky doesn’t seem to care though. His curls stick to the sides of his forehead, slick with sweat. He drinks his bottle of water, makes eye contact with Steve, and doesn’t move away.

Steve finishes his set and puts the weight down. He takes a minute to catch his breath and drink the rest of his water.

In that time, Bucky moves forward.

“Can you do more?” he asks, his voice steady and so low that it hits Steve’s gut with heat.

“Yeah,” Steve says, watching him.

He doesn’t look away as Bucky takes two twenty five pound weights and adds one to either side of the bar.

“Again,” Bucky says.

He doesn’t leer at Steve, which makes it all the hotter. It makes Steve’s pulse tick up somewhere near his throat, his head a little dizzy from just how turned on he’s getting. It’s all bad, but Bucky is also looking at him like he doesn’t fucking believe Steve can and if there’s anything Steve hates more than Republicans it’s being told he can’t do something. Verbally or nonverbally.

He puts down his water bottle, looks Bucky in the eyes, and without breaking eye contact, squats to
lift up the bar.

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky groans, biting Steve’s lips.

There’s hands all over Steve currently—Bucky’s hands roaming up and down the planes of muscles in his abdomen, fingertips pressed into divots, Steve’s tank top rucked up so everything is half visible.

Bucky had stopped at that, initially, staring at the ink against Steve’s rib cage. A blue, watercolor ship, with the words do not go gently written below it. His mother had designed it for him and he had it inked onto his body in college.

“I want my mouth on that,” Bucky had said, his hand hot on Steve’s side. “I saw the writing from under your shirt and—fuck.”

Bucky kept his word, just fell to his knees and gotten his mouth on Steve’s ink and if that hadn’t gotten Steve hard, well all of the fumbling and groping certainly had done the job.

“We’re in public,” Steve had protested, just once, the moment he had set the bar safely on the ground and Bucky had immediately pushed into him, barely managing to skirt gym equipment, and crowded Steve back until his back had hit the gym wall.

“Yeah we are,” Bucky had said, like it was the hottest thing he had ever heard, and something about hearing it in Bucky’s voice had made Steve’s brain go blank and then he had thought Jesus fucking Christ, maybe that was the hottest thing he had ever heard.

Too bad Steve’s brain on Bucky Barnes is incapable of making a good decision to spare his life, because the fact that someone could walk into the Congressional gym at any moment to see the two of them about to fuck should be terrifying to him, but, somehow, it only makes Steve more desperate to do it. Dear God let me not end up on the cover of The New York Post, he thinks about two seconds before he gets a hand on Bucky’s ass and hauls him bodily to himself.

“Oh, motherfucking fuck,” Bucky says, and winds his hands around Steve's biceps and squeezes. "Fuck, you're so strong."

Steve lets a low gasp out, almost accidentally, because, look, he does try to maintain his muscles and he's never had anyone appreciate them so blatantly. Bucky gets him hot just by, seemingly, unfortunately, existing and while he knew Bucky had found him attractive enough to inappropriately bang in every place they've ever ended up in, this is different. Bucky is looking at Steve like he wants to devour him. It makes Steve’s throat go dry.

Bucky, in response, digs his fingertips into the curve of Steve's arm and squeezes a little harder.

"What's this," he says breathlessly and pulls Steve's arm to the side to look at the line of script tattooed down the inside of Steve's bicep. It’s kind of embarrassing, Steve guesses, a moment of pretentious literary sentiment that he felt with his whole chest when he was eighteen and put on his whole bicep when he was nineteen.

“I contain multitudes,” Bucky reads off the taut skin of Steve's arm. “Whitman, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve swallows, a little embarrassed and a little more breathless, because so what if Bucky knows a famous line of poetry from the poet who wrote about loving men that Steve had really connected with as a teenager? A lot of people knew Whitman, probably, and Bucky was educated, so it wasn’t, like, unusual or anything. That shouldn't be a turn on in any way and yet.
His heart is beating so fast in his chest he’s nearly dizzy with it. His eyes flutter closed, but then
open, because Bucky has committed to his plan to put his mouth on Steve's ink, apparently. He holds
Steve's arm far enough away from his body that he can bend down and press a kiss to the tattoo, lick
up the line of it.


Bucky sucks a bruise right on the end of the line of poetry and pushes Steve back a little. Steve
doesn't push back, exactly, but he doesn't go easy either, and Bucky’s eyes dilate, flicking up to meet
Steve’s gaze.

“Fuck, Steve.” Bucky grabs Steve’s waist and yanks him forward. There’s more than one part of
them that’s hard, nearly banging into each other. “I bet you could bench press me.”

Steve swallows hard. He entertains a momentary vision of doing just that, of laying flat on the weight
bench and lifting Bucky up into the air and lowering him back down onto his dick, and it’s not like
it’s realistic, but Steve rocks up against Bucky then, cock against cock through layers of thin
material, and both of them groan.

Bucky’s t-shirt is tight and Steve can see his nipples pressing against the thin fabric, so he takes the
only reasonable course of action and starts mouthing at them over Bucky's shirt. Bucky arches into
his touch and Steve lays one hand flat against his back and gets a grip of his hair with the other so he
can pull on his curls.

Bucky makes a shocked, needy noise that fills Steve with some sort of caveman satisfaction. Bucky
slides his hands into the gaping armholes of Steve’s tank and rubs his hands over the muscles,
lingering on the tattoo. He presses forward, crowding Steve back against the wall, then lets his hands
move back to Steve’s arms again.

“How do you even fit these into a suit jacket?” he asks Steve's biceps.

Steve can feel the blush sweeping down from his face onto his chest, and the narrow straps of his
shirt do nothing to hide it. Bucky, of course, notices, and his gaze flicks to Steve’s face. His pupils
are huge, the irises a thin ring of blue-gray around them. He looks consumed with lust, and Steve,
frankly, wants to consume him in return.

There’s something to the feeling that it’s him, his body, that’s making Bucky feel this way. It’s that
same sort of prehistoric smugness—he likes that he can do this to him. He likes, he realizes, that
Bucky hasn’t smirked at him once since he walked into the weight room. Well, if Bucky likes him
strong, he can do that.

He turns them around so that Bucky’s back is against the wall. Bucky’s eyes go wide with surprise,
but Steve doesn't give him a chance to say anything, just gets a tight grip on his ass and heaves him
up, so that his legs are around Steve's waist. Bucky makes a squeaking, surprised sound that quickly
turns into a groan. He cups Steve's face, leaning down a little to kiss him, and for a minute, they just
make out, and it's... It's nice. Almost sweet, with Bucky running his fingers through what, through
lack of shaving for a couple of weeks now, even America would admit is, in fact, Steve’s beard.

“I like this,” Bucky mutters, his nails scratching at Steve’s facial hair. That turns the kiss less sweet,
Steve unintentionally pushing against Bucky harder, his tongue firm in his mouth.

But Steve wants to actually impress Bucky with his muscles, and it's not even really in a competitive
way, although that would be a nice side benefit; it's just that Bucky so clearly likes him strong and
Steve, well, he likes to be strong.
Steve starts pushing Bucky higher up the wall, his hands cupped around Bucky's ass. He's solid and not small himself but Steve's got good leverage and is highly motivated. He can feel things in his arms and shoulders and back flex as he gets Bucky high enough that he can hook his arms under Bucky's muscular thighs; Bucky's back is supported by the wall, but the rest of him is supported by Steve.

“Jesus fucking fuck, Steve, fuck,” Bucky says with deep feeling, his hands on Steve's shoulders to steady himself.

Steve smiles up at him as he pulls the waistband of Bucky's shorts down just enough to get his cock free. Some tiny part of his brain is screeching that it's the middle of the day and anyone could walk in, but the rest of him is not listening as he gets his mouth on Bucky. The moan Bucky lets out and the clunk of his head hitting the wall behind him is much louder than the part of him that engages in rational thought.

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky says breathlessly as Steve swallows him down and starts to move, licking and sucking. He can't use his hands on Bucky's dick, but he digs his fingers into the meat of his ass. It's not a great angle, but Steve figures the novelty of being held up like this must be doing something for Bucky, because before too long, he's coming with nonsense sounds. Steve squeezes his fingers on Bucky's ass while he swallows, then slowly lowers Bucky enough to kiss him. He lets the waistband go and the shorts snap back into place, as though experiencing no disruption.

Bucky's thighs are pink with beard burn, and honestly, Steve is deeply, deeply satisfied by that—a mark that Bucky will wear for a few days, a sign that Steve was there, that Bucky sought him out and he made the time worth it.

Bucky surges forward against Steve as soon as his feet hit the ground. His hands press against Steve's shoulders, rubbing where the muscle has been tensed to hold him. It feels good, and Steve groans.

“How the fuck did you even do that?” Bucky mutters against Steve's neck. His nose nudges at the back of Steve’s jaw and Steve feels his heart spike in response, just once, just enough to acknowledge and then ignore.

“I'd say practice, but I've never done that before,” Steve tells Bucky's temple.

“Fuck, you're disgusting,” Bucky says emphatically. He kisses Steve's jaw once, and then pulls away. “Come on. I have to test something.”

He massages Steve's biceps and lats, manhandling him backward.

Steve doesn't really know where Bucky is directing him, but he's okay with it. It doesn't really matter. He can barely deal with the external world outside of the very small personal bubble that is the approximately four inches between himself and Bucky, so it comes as a great surprise when Bucky suddenly stiffens, his hands freezing in place, and hisses, “*Lat machine!*”

Steve doesn't know how to process this whatsoever, but Bucky sort of swoops him onto a bench and thrusts a handlebar into his hands, and yes, Steve doesn't usually do this with the world's hardest erection, but he has handled a lat machine before, so he flexes more or less by instinct. Is the weight heavy? Is it light? Who the fuck knows?

“Hmm, yes, good work,” Bucky says as Steve pulls the weight by rote muscle memory, and then Steve hears footsteps in the hallway and suddenly all of this makes sense. Sneakered footsteps
squeak on the aged linoleum as a Senator walks by on the way to the sauna or whatever, waving vaguely at them.

Both of them are very still, and then the footsteps fade away. Steve's arms tremble a little with the effort of holding the lat machine in place. His heart is fucking pounding, his face obviously flushed.

Bucky runs his hands through his hair and lets out a breath. It sounds as shaky as Steve feels. Close. Too fucking close.

Still, his body is primarily an animalistic idiot, so even after the close call, he is unfortunately still very hard, which his workout pants do very little to conceal. Maybe he'll just take a very sad cold shower and Bucky can get him next time. That would be the sensible thing. That they are dumb enough to fuck in public spaces Steve is incapable of denying, but actually getting caught would be an enormous boner killer.

“Shit,” Steve says, pulling the machine to shoulder level and then slowly releasing it so the weights don't clink as it sets back into starting position.

Bucky's already come and probably not nearly as horny as Steve still is, which is why it's a little confusing when Bucky leaps on him like he's the very last donut at the breakfast bar, sliding a leg over him to sit on Steve's lap. He's warm and sweaty and kissing Steve like he's got something to prove.

Bucky gets one hand on Steve's dick and runs another along his jawline.

“This looks good,” Bucky informs him between kisses, stroking his beard. “Feels good, too. God, you make me crazy.”

“Buck—” Steve gasps. The nickname falls out accidentally, and it makes Bucky groan into his mouth, tighten his fingers on Steve's cock. There's not really enough room between them for Bucky to get a good grip, but fuck it feels so good, and Steve can't help picturing, if they were somewhere they could get naked, what it might be like to fuck Bucky in this position. It would feel incredible, he knows it. Everything feels incredible with Bucky. It's the current bane of his fucking existence.

“Weight bench,” Bucky says.

“Hng?” Steve manages. All of his brain cells are occupied by the feeling of Bucky straddling him, on the lat machine, with Bucky's hand stroking his dick.

“Get on the weight bench, Steve,” Bucky tells him, slowly, as though he's stupid. Maybe he is, honestly, that would explain some things. “I can't mess you up how I want to like this.”

It's stupid, obviously. It's moronic—monumentally, catastrophically so. They just now almost got caught and it's really a stupid fucking idea to keep going, and yet somehow Steve gets on the weight bench anyway. It’s like he’s too goddamned fucking stupid to not automatically listen to his lizard brain. The bench is off to the side, pushed against the wall by whoever used it last, and he’s thankful to that person because at least this way it’s out of the line of sight of anyone walking by.

But if this is where Bucky wants him right now, then this is where he wants to go. He gets on the weight bench and Bucky pushes him down. He can't lie totally flat—his shoulder blades are pushed up against the wall—but most of him is sprawled over the weight bench. He has a moment of feeling too-big and ungainly, his limbs flopping over the edges of the bench, but then Bucky is running his hands up over Steve's thighs and looking at him—

Well. Looking at him like he has been since he came into the weight room. With open, naked want,
and nothing else. Steve isn't sure how to deal with it, really, except by returning his own hunger for Bucky. They’re a full blowjob-in-a-public-location past pretending they’re not going to have a second round today.

“Just stay there,” Bucky says in what’s more of a whisper, because they have to be quiet. “And don’t make any sound. It's my turn to do the work.”

Steve slumps back, his bones turned to jelly, and looks down his torso as Bucky kisses every exposed bit of tattoo, hooks his fingers around the waistband of Steve's pants and inches them down.

“This is such a slutty outfit,” Bucky murmurs.

“Excuse you.” Steve would glare if he were capable of glaring, but unfortunately all he is capable of at the moment is slithering down against the weight bench while Bucky peels his admittedly slutty pants down and gets his dick out.

“I said no sound,” Bucky says and pinches his thigh.

“Christ,” Steve gasps out while his hips try to hit bridge pose without his conscious volition.

Bucky runs his thumbs over Steve's hipbones soothingly, pressing him back down.

“It's okay, I've got you,” he says, before very enthusiastically swallowing Steve's dick to the root with no preamble.

Well, Steve has never listened to a person in his goddamned life and he sure isn’t about to start now.

“Oh God, Bucky,” Steve moans and manages to summon up enough thought to get his hands into Bucky's hair. He doesn't pull him forward, just tugs on Bucky's hair. Bucky groans, which feels amazing, and then he starts moving, which feels even better, and Steve becomes aware that he is saying most of these thoughts out loud and just praising Bucky's mouth and Bucky in general. Oh well. Cannot be helped.

He's been so turned on through all of this and the result is that he comes in hardly any time at all, his fingers tightening in Bucky's curls, and Bucky's name a murmured gasp on his lips.

Bucky swallows him through it and then tucks Steve back into his underwear and pulls his pants back up. Steve's still trying to catch his breath when Bucky pulls him into a sitting position and kisses away what little sense Steve had managed to regain. Steve absently notes that Bucky's hair is a hot mess, sticking straight up in all different directions, his curls a floofy, tugged disaster. He absently notes, furthermore, that he likes it this way.

It's not as desperate as their earlier kisses—this one is a lazy, slow thing, that feels as good as it tastes and Steve is sorry when it's over. Heponders, not for the first time, what it would be like to have sex with Bucky somewhere actually private, where they could take their time. He watches Bucky’s chest rise and fall rapidly as he tries to catch his breath. He decides it’s probably best to not explore that thought further.

“I've got to get back to the office,” Bucky says quietly, but then he kisses Steve again so it doesn't really feel all that purposeful a statement.

“Yeah, so do I.” Steve says against Bucky's mouth. He tries to remember he needs to let go of Bucky, his political rival and definite archenemies, but his brain is fuzzy with orgasm. He kisses him again. It seems like the only natural thing to do.
“I’m just gonna go get cleaned up,” Bucky says, after another minute of making out, and of course Steve needs to get cleaned up too, so when they finally unentangle, they end up walking to the locker room together anyway.

Bucky frowns when he sees the state of his hair, and shoots Steve an exasperated look, but Steve regrets nothing, because he’ll never forget the sounds Bucky made when Steve was busy fucking up his curls. Steve grins, in response.

And then they’re showering together—not together but next to each other, separated only by a slightly mildewed shower curtain and honestly, Steve wants to squeeze in with Bucky and lather him up and then rinse him down, but he has reached his limit of potentially getting caught for the day.

Also, he’s not sure Bucky would want him to and their bodies are probably spent for the afternoon anyway.

They finish getting cleaned up at about the same time, straightening their ties, and shouldering their gym bags. Their eyes meet briefly in the mirror. There’s a tug at his stomach, like there’s something more his body wants—one last touch or a hard kiss to say goodbye. He ignores both of these impulses, with some effort, because they don’t do that, and there’s also someone pissing in one of the urinals on the other side of the wall which doesn’t really enhance the mood, if Steve’s being honest.

“Well,” Steve says.

Bucky’s lips in the mirror tick up at the corners. It’s still not a smirk. Steve doesn’t really know what to do with that. “Thanks for the workout. See you around, Rogers.”

He turns and leaves. Steve gives him a beat, then follows. Bucky goes left, Steve goes right—there are a bunch of ways you can leave the gym and they’ve already said their goodbyes, so it makes sense that Steve cuts through the boxing room, ducking to the side to avoid a heavy bag.

He stops dead in his tracks, when on the other side of a heavy bag is a freshly-showered Bucky Barnes. They stare at each other for a second, as though they can’t believe their fucking eyes. Then Bucky’s eyebrow shoots up and Steve grabs the hand that’s not holding the strap of Bucky’s gym bag and drags him close for the kiss he had wanted to give him in the locker room. Bucky’s lips are soft, and he smells like shampoo and fresh deodorant, and Steve could probably kiss him for much longer than they have, but he gives himself thirty seconds to push him against the boxing ring.

“Back to work, Barnes,” Steve says when he pulls away.

“I was trying to get back to work,” Bucky says with a growl, but his mouth twitches up slightly and ruins the effect.

They both go their separate ways, and Steve decides to take a shortcut through the equipment room instead of going through the sauna, and at this point he doesn’t even question it when Bucky walks in a second after him.

“Really?” Bucky says.

“I’m honestly just trying to leave,” Steve says, “but I feel like we could speed this up and set it to ‘Yakety Sax.’”

Bucky can’t seem to help throwing his head back and snickering. “I’m trying to leave! You keep showing up, like some kind of brick-built stalker. Also, that is the least sexy thought, thanks a lot.”
But he leans in to kiss Steve anyway, as though they had wordlessly agreed that was the only possible culmination of their stupid luck, and the two of them lazily make out for another minute or two. Their gym bags are awkward and ungainly, but it's really nice anyway.

“This is stupid,” Bucky says into Steve’s mouth, his hand on Steve’s jaw.

“Stop following me,” Steve gripes back, kissing him, his one free hand on Bucky’s side.

“You stop following me,” Bucky replies.

“I hate you,” Steve growls, without heat.

“I hate you,” Bucky replies and opens his mouth and kisses him again.

Eventually, they do break apart and leave. It’s inevitable, although the suspiciously tame smiles they share aren’t. He supposes sex endorphins will do that to a guy.

Steve half-expects to run into Bucky again when he cuts through the echoing paddle ball court, but mercifully he doesn't; the sounds of their kissing magnified by the echoes would be too ridiculous to bear. Steve reminds himself that he's not disappointed. His chest gives a weird sort of lurch anyway and he ignores it, steadfastly.

The fact is he's got work to do and, furthermore, he hates Barnes. He’s the worst and his boss is definitely the worst and what’s best for Steve is to keep his distance. The Days Without Dicking Down Bucky Barnes calendar might have reset to zero, but tomorrow’s another day. Tomorrow, he’ll be stronger. Tomorrow, he’ll be well past satisfying his inexplicable craving and definitely remember that Bucky Barnes stands for absolutely everything opposite of what he stands for and that if there’s one thing he can’t forgive, it’s a rich, arrogant asshole with the political awareness of Elon Musk.

Or that’s what Steve tells himself, anyway.

It's, perhaps, not entirely convincing.

Chapter End Notes

I stand by every word I have written about Paul Ryan.
“That’s a bad idea,” Steve says.

Bucky looks at him once, more than a little charged, and then lets go of his face.

“It’s all a bad fucking idea, Rogers,” Bucky says. He sounds as hungry as Steve feels.

“What’s one more to the pile?”

Chapter Notes

Oh what tangled webs two dumbasses weave.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
NPR. He’s watched School House Rock. The whole thing isn’t shocking, per se, but it sure isn’t as fun and painless as four grown men sitting around a microphone recording a podcast make it sound.

The fact is that Code Green isn’t just legislation, it’s a package of bills, and one part of the package is passing through the internal machinations of the Senate while the other half is passing through the House. God bless bicameralism, or something. Someone put a gun against the heads of the Founding Fathers and they had said, well fuck you, we’re going to make the government as complicated as possible.

Anyway, Steve and Sam are in close contact with Senator Rhodes’ office, keeping track of how the Senate legislation progresses, but in the meantime, there’s the whole matter of their own package of bills. Passing a bill doesn’t end with having a public hearing—if anything, that’s where it all begins. America spends two full weeks gathering all of the public testimony from the hearing and compiling a list of summaries and matrices of issues and suggestions for Sam and Steve to consider. The document is almost thirty pages long and when Sam sees America’s eyes begin to roll back into her head, he gives her an extra day off, which means that it’s Steve’s turn to be inundated with information.

It’s thankless work, but nothing Steve is unhappy to be doing. He has a million different tasks on his plate, because Sam has two million different tasks on his, but the two of them pull some late nights in the office, with an inordinate number of take out containers and it’s not so bad.

“Did you think it would be like this?” Steve asks one night, over a half destroyed pint of chicken lo mein.

It’s September now and the August recess went about as well as it could have for an office in the middle of a major campaign for controversial and possibly life-changing legislation. That is to say, Sam tried to give Steve a month off and Steve made it about two weeks of staying in the guest bedroom in his mother’s two bedroom Brooklyn apartment before some press crisis had him packing his bags and taking the Amtrak back to D.C.

“Spending even more time with your dumb ass and then going home and still not escaping?” Sam grins. Steve snorts and Sam shakes his head. “It’s more work than I thought, but I’m not mad. I’m liking what we’re doing. Feels like we got a seat at the table, even if it’s a table we’re forcing our way into, you know?”

Steve knows that feeling. He’ll never know it as acutely as Sam, of course—Steve’s still a young, attractive cis white man—but he’d grown up poor and sick, with some invisible disabilities. He’s queer. He knows he has it better than the vast majority of people, but that doesn’t mean he always has a seat at the table either.

“It always looked so much more exciting than Chinese takeout at one in the morning in an office building that hasn’t been renovated since the 80s,” Steve grins at Sam and this time Sam chuckles. “Not that I envy you all of your social...engagements.”

That makes Sam sigh particularly loudly.

“We knew that was part of the job too,” Sam says with a shrug. “Just not...how much.”

Sam’s calendar is so full these days that both Steve and America try to go in and defer social, networking, and political engagements that he absolutely does not have to be at. Sam has an enthusiasm and supply of energy that is near boundless, but that’s not to say Steve doesn’t see him going prematurely grey. Even Barack Obama went silver fox at the end there.
“Well you keep shaking hands and schmoozing, and I’ll—” Steve waves his chopsticks around at the pile of papers that they’re sharing. Other offices have other people doing this, but for Sam’s team, it’s just them. They’re getting the testimonies in some kind of order and then going through them to better understand how to amend Code Green going forward.

“The lobbyists aren’t going to like all of this,” Sam says, taking a dumpling and chewing on it while looking over red lines that Wanda and Steve had been going back and forth on.

“Lobbyists are never happy about anything,” Steve says, shrugging. “No one’s going to get everything they want.”

“This part,” Sam says, taking a pen and underlining something Wanda had put in, based on testimony by EarthRights International. “That’s cold.”

Steve pulls his long legs back and leans over the desk to see what Sam is pointing out. A slow grin steals over his face.


Wanda and Steve go back and forth for weeks, poring over edits and amendments to the bills that were introduced and heard by the subcommittee. It’s a long process and tedious, but Steve knows the importance of it. The bill has to be heard again, with its amendments, in the committee, before it goes to vote. If the bill gets tabled or doesn’t get voted out of the committee, it’s dead in the water—it’ll never go to the floor for action by the whole House.

No pressure or anything, though, Steve thinks, on another late night, when he’s tugging on his hair and trying to figure out how he and Wanda should edit a certain clause so that the Republicans don’t pull the immediate kill switch on Code Green once it goes back to committee.

It’s a warm, slightly damp day that cools off as the evening progresses. Sam is in New York City this weekend, tending to one political engagement with his community and taking one Saturday to go to a cousin’s baby shower. Sam offers to take Steve with him—it’s been months since he’s been back home and he misses his mother and her ridiculous garden and her fat cat, who does nothing but sit on Steve’s lap every time he’s back—and it’s tempting to say yes, but Steve knows they’re in the heart of it now. Angie Martinelli tells Steve that the subcommittee wants to hear the amended version of the bill soon and the speed to which Sam’s package is moving through the political machine would be thrilling if it wasn’t giving Steve a bit of an ulcer.

“I’ll go once we get Code Green signed by the President,” Steve tells Sam the night before, standing in Sam’s doorway and watching him pack. It gives him a bit of a thrill to say it and when Sam looks up, they both kinda smile goofily at each other.

“You’re putting in a lot of hours here, man,” Sam says, straightening after stuffing his boxer briefs into his suitcase. “Don’t think I don’t see it. I do. I couldn’t appreciate it more.”

Steve smiles at that, rubbing his hand against the back of his neck.

“It’s what we came here for,” he says. “I’ll put in all of the hours I need to to make it a reality, Sam.”

“I know that,” Sam says and claps Steve on the shoulder. He squeezes and gives Steve a smile. “You’re the only guy I would trust with this. But just—don’t kill yourself over it, okay? We’re gonna get it done, but I don’t want to see you burn out before we do.”
It’s easier said than done, Steve thinks that Friday night. He’s shrugged out of his jacket and has a t-shirt tucked into his slacks. He’s stealing Sam’s office for the night, which is already proving to be a long one.

“You don’t have plans on this Friday night, Steve?” Wanda asks over speaker phone and Steve shrugs, although she can’t see him.

“It’s D.C., Wanda,” Steve says. “If you’re not doing politics in an office, you’re doing it at a bar. At least here I can hear myself think.”

“You sound like an old man,” Wanda laughs and Steve at least has the wherewithal to feel bad. It’s a Friday night and he has to be stuck here, but Wanda doesn’t.

“I’ll take a look at everything and get you changes back by tomorrow, okay?” he says. “Go have a good night for both of us.”


Steve definitely makes no promises on that front.

Once Wanda is no longer on the phone with him, Steve has a difficult time not... noticing. How quiet the office is, for example. He can hear his breathing, the sound of the air conditioning blowing faintly in the background, a clock tick-tick-ticking somewhere from the other room. He becomes aware of how still the office feels, without the frantic movements of Sam going through his day or America spinning around in her seat for the four hundredth time that morning. The air isn’t humid, but it feels heavy. Steve tilts his head back and sees that the large window behind him—the one looking out onto the D.C. streets—has water marks and splotches that should be better cleaned. He notices how dark the D.C. sky feels from up here; how the city, small and busy, seems to pulse outside, things happening out there that certainly aren’t happening in here.

He notices everything around him just to avoid noticing the stack of papers in front of him and when he gets tired of that, he spins in his chair once, stops himself with his foot against the bottom of Sam’s desk, and then, grinning, spins himself back the other way.

He can’t seem to get comfortable no matter how he sits in Sam’s expensive, leather chair. First he reads with his legs up on the desk. Then he crosses his legs under him on the chair. Then he spins and presses his feet against the wall under the large window. Then he returns to just sitting on the chair, one leg under him, one leg dangling. He remembers someone once telling him that queer people don’t know how to sit right, so he gets his phone out, Googles that, and loses a solid thirty minutes just randomly looking at shit on Twitter. He emerges from the Internet in a daze, a weird, rolling fog crowding his head, having learned nothing about the bill he’s supposed to be working on, but knowing far too much about something called “Tik Tok.”

He stands up when he can’t take it anymore, one hand closed around a stack of papers from the third section of the second bill. Outside, the night sky seems hazy with warmth. Below the window, there are cars and lights, a city getting ready for a good Friday.

Steve puts the papers down, feeling a little stir crazy.

He grabs his cell phone, shoves it into his pocket, rummages for his wallet in his jacket, and leaves the office.
He doesn’t go far. At first, Steve thinks he’ll just go out for a drink at the closest bar, but no one will answer his texts and then he starts to feel guilty anyway. He checks his phone and sees Sam hasn’t said anything in hours. Neither has anyone else. He feels suffocated by the late night silence. He compromises by going down two floors to the good vending machines.

It’s past nine on a Friday night, so when Steve steps down the hallway, he expects flickering lights and an empty kitchen. Maybe there will be a janitor or two, but he’s more or less prepared to be haunted by the ghosts of Chiefs of Staff past. Hopefully, he thinks, they will have left him some of the good snacks.

What he doesn’t expect is to see someone else feeding money into the good vending machine. And, even worse, he doesn’t expect that someone to be familiar to him.

It shouldn’t surprise Steve by now. It’s a small enough city and an even smaller Hill. They work in the same building and work out in the same building and, in between, have more or less the same duties for two very different people. But seeing Bucky, squatting in front of his vending machine, when he’s least expecting it catches him entirely off guard.

“What are you doing here?” Steve blinks, coming to a halt a few feet away from him.

Bucky, trying to get something out of the machine, freezes, his arm halfway in.

“What?” he says with a scowl. “You own this machine now?”

There’s something about the sight of it—Bucky with his arm up to his elbow rummaging for a bag of Jalapeno chips, squatting in front of a machine, glaring at him—that disarms Steve. He’s ready to return Bucky’s scowl with force, but, instead, he finds himself shaking his head.

“You’re doing it wrong,” he says, by way of answer.

“Doing it wrong,” Bucky repeats, slowly. “What does that mean, doing it wrong? It’s a fucking vending machine. I put money in for it to vend, to me, and it is not doing its job of vending, to me.”

Steve gives him a look and then, more amused than is probably warranted, walks up to the machine.

“Move, genius.”

Bucky’s glare intensifies, but he withdraws his arm with a grunt and scoots back. He falls on his ass and stays that way, legs pulled up in front, hands bracing him behind. He’s in slacks that are absolutely going to get dirty on the floor and a nice, white button up that’s unbuttoned at the throat and at the cuffs. Steve takes this all in distantly, like a sponge soaking up a spill. It’s undeniable that even like this, a failure at vending machines, dirtying his extremely nice work clothes, his curls all piled on top of his head and slight askew—like he’s been running his hands through him—Bucky Barnes is. Well. Devastatingly gorgeous.

Steve isn’t about to say anything about it, but he does tuck it away, to look at another time.

“If you just give it your money, you’re gonna get shit all for your efforts,” Steve says. He moves to the right of the machine. “What you gotta do is—”

Steve bangs the side of the machine twice. This makes all of the buttons light up at the same time. Then, with some effort, and a little bit of a grunt, he braces his hands around the machine and lifts it up, just a little, and then lets it fall back down.
The machine makes a whirring sound and suddenly two bags of Jalapeno chips, a bag of M&Ms, and a Twix bar falls out into the vending slot.

Grinning at Bucky, Steve bends and scoops up their prizes.

Then, without thinking, he sits his ass down next to Bucky on the floor and hands him their spoils.

“Thanks for the candy,” Steve grins and starts opening the Twix bar.

Bucky doesn’t say anything for a moment and Steve’s mouth is full of chocolate and caramel cookie when he looks over to see what’s up. He finds Bucky staring at him—not in any kind of way, really, but with slightly wide eyes and a look that says what the fuck did you just do?

“What?” Steve says, swallowing.

“What happens to people who can’t…you know. Lift an entire fucking machine. With their bare fucking hands?” Bucky looks at him with crazy eyes and Steve grins.

“That’s why it’s the good machine,” he says. “It never runs out of the good snacks because no one knows how to work it.”

Bucky scowls at him and then opens his chips. Then he shakes his head with a laugh.

“You’re really—”

“What?” Steve says, squinting. He leans in closer to Bucky, squinting further. “What?”

Bucky turns his face and their mouths almost collide. He doesn’t stop his eyes from flickering down and Steve doesn’t quite get to ignore the warmth pooling in his stomach. Steve takes another bite of his Twix bar and Bucky snorts and fishes out chips from his bag.

“Something, Rogers,” Bucky says and Steve breathes a little easier. “You’re really something.”

“Don’t really know what that means,” Steve shrugs. He nods at Bucky. “You’re getting your...Armani dirty.”

“Armani?” Bucky makes a face. “Do you think I’m in Armani?”

Steve considers this.

“Gucci?” he offers. He tries again. “Ver...sace.”

“You’re an idiot,” Bucky says and eats another chip. “It’s Brooks Brothers.”

“How am I the idiot?” Steve exclaims. Steve, whose most expensive suit was bought on sale at Macy’s. “I’ve been to Brooks Brothers, once.”

“And did they take your communist card from you?” Bucky says with a smirk and Steve literally puts his hand on Bucky’s face and shoves it away from him.

Bucky bursts out laughing and Steve huffs and tries to sneak chips from him.

“There’s a whole other bag, asswipe!” Bucky shouts and Steve grins and tries to steal some more.

They don’t really tussle, but they do end up kind of shuffling against each other, Bucky protesting and Steve letting out puffs of laughter, until they both end up laying on their backs, Steve finishing
his Twix and Bucky’s hand wrapped around his bag of chips.

“First of all, how can you follow up chocolate with Jalapeno chips? That’s disgusting,” Bucky says. “Second of all—are you a communist? You didn’t answer me. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“First of all, you’re a dick,” Steve says, with very little heat. “People eat sweet and spicy, that’s a whole thing. Second of all, why, you gonna get the ghost of Joe McCarthy to chase me out of the Capitol?”

“Maybe,” Bucky grins, turning his head so he’s looking at Steve. “Maybe I will.”

“I could take a ghost,” Steve says. “I’m strong as hell.”

Bucky eyes Steve’s bulging biceps at that and looks as though he has some ideas about testing that theory. Steve offers him the remaining Twix instead. Bucky takes it and hands Steve the Jalapeno chips in trade.

“What are you doing here this late?” Bucky asks. “It’s a Friday night. You don’t have a...Grindr hook up or something?”

Steve rolls his eyes.

“I’m here working,” he says. “Why am I the one with a Grindr hook up?”

Bucky pauses.

“Well you are the one who...picked me up at a bar.”

“You picked me up at a bar, jackass!” Steve says.

“That is not how I remember it,” Bucky insists. “If I recall, I was just sitting there—”

“—staring at me—”

“—doing absolutely nothing—”

“—undressing me with your eyes—”

“—and suddenly, out of nowhere—”

“It wasn’t out of nowhere—”

“This guy is dragging me to the bathroom begging me to get my mouth on his dick—” Bucky finishes. He’s not so much smirking as he is grinning, triumphantly, at the ceiling. Like, the bastard really thinks he’s won this round—he’s done something, blaming Steve for the Situation they’re in.

“That’s not how it happened at all, asshole,” Steve says. It’s not with any sort of heat, really, maybe because they’re both lying sprawled in a cafeteria in front of vending machines. It doesn’t leave much room to get all worked up.

“Pretty sure it is,” Bucky says. “Pretty sure you looked at me with those pretty eyes and—”

Steve feels a fluttering, somewhere near his clavicle.

“You think I got pretty eyes, Barnes?” Steve smirks and turns on his side to face him.
“What?” Bucky says, in alarm. “No. I did not say that.”

Steve grins and then he grins wider and then his grin is so big it feels like it’s going to break his face and Bucky looks so mad, like he’s going to punch him in the gut, so imagine his surprise when Bucky wraps a hand around Steve’s jaw and drags him closer to kiss him.

It sinks through Steve like he’s swallowed something hot. The funny thing is, it isn’t hot at all. Bucky’s kiss is soft, with just the edge of something harder. He knows they can’t get anything started, not here, really in public. It’s more like he can’t help it—or maybe he doesn’t want to. Steve kisses him back, breaks the kiss, his chest tumbling once more, and then kisses him again. This time it’s a little rougher and when Bucky opens his mouth for him, Steve’s brain almost lets him kiss his way in.

Instead, they both pull back at the same time, a little out of breath and a little more dazed.

“That’s a bad idea,” Steve says.

Bucky looks at him once, more than a little charged, and then lets go of his face.

“It’s all a bad fucking idea, Rogers,” Bucky says. He sounds as hungry as Steve feels. It frustrates him. He remembers that Bucky is, actually, a rich, feelingless jackass, but tell that to his dick. And, more recently, his mouth. He’s not even going to begin to address his chest, which is only acting out of turn because of his childhood heart condition. “What’s one more to the pile?”

“Tell me you don’t believe it,” Steve says, to get his head out of his ass.

“Believe what?” Bucky asks, dryly.

Steve pauses.

“The bullshit Stark thinks,” he says. “All of the bullshit reasons he has for not signing onto the bill. Industry and innovation—god, it’s garbage. The planet is fucking dying, Bucky.”

“Don’t call me that,” Bucky says.

“What?”

“Bucky,” he says. “If you’re going to be a self-righteous asshole, don’t call me Bucky. It makes it harder for me to hate you.”

Steve rolls his eyes and lets out a frustrated breath.

“You’re avoiding the question,” he says. “I know you’re not a fucking idiot—”

“Gee, thanks,” Bucky says wryly.

“—you’re just a conflict avoidant asswipe,” Steve says. “Answer the question.”

“Did you ask me a question, Steve?” Bucky says and Steve can hear the irritation pick at his voice. “Because I didn’t hear a fucking question.”

“I asked—”

“No,” Bucky says, hard. “You didn’t ask me a question. You said tell me this. You want me to tell you I believe in everything you’re saying, that I agree with you on every fucking topic—and why? Because you don’t want to feel guilty about dicking down someone who is morally reprehensible to
“Technically we haven’t dicked down yet,” Steve mutters and Bucky lets out a noise kinda like he wants to scream and has just stopped himself from doing so.

“You know your problem, Rogers?”

“What?” Steve says. He’s readying himself for the fight he knows they’re hurtling toward.

“Your problem is you think you’re some paragon of morality and virtue,” Bucky says. “You think what you say is right and what Wilson says is right and there couldn’t possibly be any other fucking solution or opinion. Because why would anyone want to be Republican or have—any other view from what you have? It doesn’t even occur to you that when you’re shoving your opinions down someone else’s throat, you’re not only being an aggressive douchebag, you’re also disrespecting them.”

“Disrespecting,” Steve says. He’s irritated enough now that he pushes himself up to an elbow. “Disrespecting? We’re not disagreeing about someone’s haircut, Bucky—Barnes. You didn’t come to work in a Hawaiian shirt that I think looks bad on you. Politics is more than that and you know it. People aren’t disagreeing about what flavor of ice cream they like best, one side wants poor people and minorities to die and the other side gives fuck all about anything other than tax cuts and—yachts.”

“It’s easy to paint it that way, isn’t it?” Bucky hisses. He pushes himself up to a sitting position. “Well there are poor people and minorities on our side too, pal. There are poor Republicans, there are gay Republicans, there are fucking Muslim Republicans. You think it’s all rich white dudes jacking off in their Teslas? It’s not. You’re taking a whole fucking brush and painting out all of them and maybe if you didn’t, the Democrats wouldn’t be up shit’s creek with no paddle. So maybe you’ll think about that next time you take a fucking axe to my head.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” Steve nearly growls in frustration. He gets up to his knees and then pushes himself up to his feet. He’s getting angry again—that kind of anger he feels whenever he turns on Fox News or hears a Republican talk for longer than 10 seconds. There’s a tick in his jaw, a slight ringing in his ear. “The fact is that everyone has to make decisions they can’t always rest easy from, but one side doesn’t even fucking pretend to care. I’m giving you the easiest issue on a platter. It’s the environment. It’s climate change. Most of the scientific community believes in it. There’s evidence. Science. It doesn’t have to be a partisan issue, but it is—why? Tell me why.”

“I don’t have to tell you shit,” Bucky says. He’s on his feet too and brushing off his shirt and pants. He can act as cool and detached as he wants, but Steve can see the way his hands are shaking. “I don’t owe you anything. What, you think because you’re a good fuck and I think you’re hot, I’m going to stand here and let you insult me to my face? I don’t owe you fuckall just because you got your mouth on my dick once. And I don’t give two shits about your bill or your black and white sense of morality, Rogers. Your bill can die for all I fucking care.”

That makes—God, that makes Steve so angry, he can barely think straight. He certainly can’t see straight. He has his hand wrapped in Bucky’s collar faster than he can think, dragging him forward, Bucky up on the balls of his feet. Bucky sneers up at him, his hand in Steve’s shirt too, and Steve glares down at him, and they look at one another, seething, with a kind of sickening, bone-deep hatred that Steve doesn’t think he can recover from.

They both let go and push each other away.

“Fuck you, Barnes,” Steve says, lowly. “You’re so hell bent on not caring about anything that you
think it’s a crime for someone to care about something.”

That makes Bucky livid—for some reason. Steve can see the anger spill across his face. It’s stark as day, in the middle of the fluorescent-lit cafeteria.

“Go to hell, Steve,” Bucky says.

He shoves bodily into Steve as he goes past him.

Steve can hear his nice shoes clatter angrily against the tile floor as he shoves his way down the hallway and to the elevators.

On the ground, there’s a bag of M&Ms and another bag of chips. Steve scoops them both up and, hands shaking, head pounding, waits until he hears the elevator leave before he makes his way out too.

It’s hard to work after that, but he tries. He paces around Sam’s office, the stack of papers scattered on nearly every surface, Sam’s large monitor on, Steve’s tablet lying lit on the sofa. He kicks his shoes off and walks from one side of the office to the other. He reads one page, then another. He walks back to the other side of the office.

His head is buzzing, the words blurring in front of him. He pops three ibuprofen, drinks another cup of coffee, and continues walking around, reading the bills out loud. There’s this amendment from Sam and that amendment from Wanda, a different amendment proposed by a Representative from an oil-rich state and yet a different revision suggested by a Representative from Oregon who prides himself on being ultra liberal and, honestly, smells like patchouli more often than he doesn’t. There’s the copy of Senator Rhodes’ bill that’s passing through the Senate. There’s a binder of testimony from Big Oil and Big Coal that says this is a disaster—all of Code Green is an unmitigated, ridiculous catastrophe and not only will it lose American jobs, it will throttle industry and impoverish coal mining communities and anyway, didn’t anyone hear? Climate change isn’t fucking real!

At some point Steve gets so fed up, he throws the stack of bills down and gets out his phone.

She picks up on the second ring.

“Baby, give me a minute—” there’s a rummaging sound and the sounds of something screeching open and then some shouts and Steve really has a fucking heart attack before she comes back on the line. “Whoops! Sorry about that.”

“Jesus Christ, Ma,” Steve says, his heart beating entirely too fast.

“You keep the Lord’s name out of your mouth, Steven,” Sarah Rogers says and Steve rolls his eyes.

“You haven’t been to church since I was a kid,” Steve says. “And even then you took the Lord’s name in vain every opportunity you could.”

“Yes, well,” Sarah says brightly into the phone. “Do as I say, not as I do.”
“Speaking of,” Steve says, suspiciously. He leans against the wall and stares out the window. “What were you doing?”

“Not getting into a street brawl, I’ll tell you that,” Sarah says and, once more, Steve rolls his eyes. “I was trying to drag my easel out onto the roof.”

Steve pauses and rubs at his eyes.

“Through the fire escape?” he says, flatly.

“The super shut the door to the roof, Steve,” his Ma says over the line. “Something something renovation something staircase. What am I supposed to do about my garden? I can’t leave my plants to die.”

“You can try to not die in the process of getting up to them,” Steve mutters.

“I’m sorry, does my son want to tell me about not doing stupid things? The same son I spent years cleaning up after? How many First Aid kits did I go through for you?” Sarah says. Steve can hear her voice coming in puffs, which he takes to mean she’s trying to get out onto the fire escape again. “Why, at one point I thought the pharmacy was gonna come to our house and buy gauze off of me.”


“Is it, honey?” Sarah asks and Steve wrinkles his nose, although she can’t see it. There’s a little more puffing and then his mother must pull herself onto the roof because she exhales bigly. A few more background sounds and then her voice softens. “Now, what’s wrong?”

“Why’s something gotta be wrong, Ma?”

“It’s almost midnight and I’m not saying you never call your poor old Ma, but, Steven Grant, you never call your poor old Ma.”

Steve bites back a grin at that.

“First of all, what are you doing dragging your easel out onto the roof at midnight?”

“I have lights up here now. Anyway, don’t you avoid the question,” Sarah says.

“I wasn’t,” Steve says. “And second of all, you got a busier social schedule than I do. I can’t hardly ever catch you on the line.”

“Oh, I’ve been meaning to tell you,” Sarah says, calmly. “I’ve been seeing someone.”

“What?” Steve nearly shouts.

“Oh shush, you’re so dramatic, Steve,” his mother says, amused. “It’s nothing. Just someone from down at the co-op.”

“Someone,” Steve says. “A guy someone or a girl someone?”

“I’m a grown woman, sweetie, we don’t call them girls, we call them women,” Sarah says. “Anyway, this one happens to be a man.”

“I thought you swore off of men,” Steve says, with a frown.

“You know, I could have sworn I did too,” Sarah says and Steve can almost see the smile on her
face—bright and mischievous. People have told Steve he’s a firestarter and a handful his whole life, but that’s only because they’ve never really gotten to know Sarah Rogers. “Anyway, it didn’t stick. He’s nice though. Funny. He gives me a head of cabbage every week whether I ask for it or not, it’s a whole thing.”


“Sure he does. Everyone has a name.”

Steve pauses, then sighs.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“Not yet,” Sarah says, after a moment. “But soon, I promise. Anyway, you’re still avoiding the subject. What’s wrong, darling?”

Steve exhales, something low and deep from his gut, or into his gut. He hadn’t realized his shoulders were hunched up by his ears, but he does now, when they come down, inch by inch. He feels tired, yes, exhausted in a bone-deep kind of way. He could sway on his feet if he tried to take another step. Trying to make a difference—that’s hard. He works himself to the fucking bone trying to do this thing and then to have someone like Bucky say he’s being un fucking fair or whatever—

Steve must make a noise, because his mother tuts over the line.

“That’s your someone made you angry noise,” she says, knowing him entirely too well. “So who was it? And what did they do?”

Steve is quiet for a minute, trying to figure out what to say. He figures he’ll say what comes first to his mind, so what he wants to ask is am I being unfair? and what he says instead is—

“You and Dad,” he says. “Did you always like each other?”

Sarah seems surprised at the question, although not nearly as surprised as Steve.


Steve doesn’t know how to say what he wants to say—he doesn’t know how he would describe his situation to begin with. He hasn’t told his mother about Bucky yet, mostly because there’s nothing to say. He’s just some guy he keeps hooking up with; an asshole who gets under his skin in all the ways there is to get under someone’s skin. If Steve can’t stop thinking about him, it’s for no other reason than he’s never met anyone even close to as infuriating.

“What do you do?” Steve asks quietly. “If you’re put in a situation that...compromises you? But you can’t compromise?”

Sarah Rogers has been dealing with her son’s moral and ethical dilemmas for as long as he’s been alive, so she doesn’t even ask a follow up question.

“What would happen if you compromised?” she asks.

“I would...lose myself,” Steve says. “And to myself. I would hate that part of me that gave in to...this thing. It would disgust me.”

“Would it?” Sarah asks, lightly. “Okay. And what would happen if you didn’t?”

Steve thinks about Bucky—in infuriating, aggravating, horrifyingly irritating Bucky Barnes. He wants
to kill him half the fucking time he sees him.

The other half, he’s confused by. He remembers, distantly, a soft mouth on his own.

“I guess I’d lose...something else,” Steve says. “Kinda.”

“Okay,” Sarah says. “I guess then you have to ask which one you’re willing to lose more. Or maybe—you don’t have to lose either.”

Steve frowns.

“How?” he asks.

Sarah sighs lightly over the phone.

“I love you very much, Steve,” she says. “But you’ve never done anything by half measures. This isn’t something I can teach you. Compromise has never been in your nature and that’s okay, until you need to compromise. Sometimes it’s something worth doing and sometimes it’s not. I don’t know who or what this is about, but it sounds like maybe you need to think about what you want more.”

That’s easier said than done. Steve isn’t here to compromise his morality.

But then, maybe that’s not what the compromise has to be.

“Do you think I listen?” Steve asks, changing the subject. He frowns more. “Or do I just...barrel over the other side?”

That, Sarah Rogers laughs at.

“Oh, honey,” she says. “You’ve never met something you didn’t want to bulldoze.”

It’s not the answer he wants to hear, but maybe it’s the answer he needs to hear. It helps and it doesn’t help. It’s been a very confusing night.

“Go home, Steve,” his Ma says. “And call me this weekend. Gabrielle and I have an art project I want to tell you about.”

“Don’t graffiti anywhere you’re going to get arrested,” Steve advises his mother. Then, softer, “Love you, Ma.”

“Love you, darling,” Sarah Rogers says, before hanging up.

It leaves Steve feeling...well, not better, but more grounded, somehow. He never knows what he’s asking his mother and she likely doesn’t know what she’s answering, but together, they make it work. Together, they understand each other.

He shakes his head, cleans the mess off of Sam’s desk, and grabs his jacket. He turns off the light, feeling better situated, and makes his way out of the building.

Steve is waiting at the corner, having called a Lyft, when he hears a voice at his shoulder.

“Hey.”

He can’t help the way his stomach clenches, or the way his grip on his phone tightens at that. He
takes a breath in through his nose and lets it out through his teeth.

“Hey,” he says, looking over at Bucky. He looks back at his phone, studiously watching his car’s route. He had splurged on a private one, half because he doesn’t want anyone to talk to him and half because he’s so tired he’s considering just passing out in the back seat. It’s important to him that he watches what streets the car is taking in order to get to him, because of the money he had paid for it and certainly not because the air around him is suddenly so tense, he’s having trouble breathing around it.

“I’m not stalking you,” Bucky says, after a minute.

Steve ignores him.

“You know,” Bucky says. “In case you thought that.”

He pretends to get a text message.

“It’s just a coincidence,” Bucky continues. “That I came out here at the same time.”

Steve switches back to the Lyft app. *Hassan*, 4.5 stars, is 7 minutes away.

“Because I’m going home,” Bucky says, voice a little louder. “So I’m taking a car.”

Steve glares at Hassan. Hassan needs to be a little faster.

“Come on, are you really going to ignore me?” Bucky asks.

Steve’s going to kill Hassan. Or, at least, give him a three star rating.

“Steve,” Bucky says.

Steve still doesn’t answer, so when Bucky goes to grab his arm, he tries to tear away from him.

“Get off!” he says, louder than he means to and Bucky covers his mouth with his hand. “Leggo—”

Steve’s words are muffled into Bucky’s hand, his back crowded up against the brick building. His heart is pounding somewhere in the vicinity of his ears and he’s mad—he’s so spitting, fucking mad, that he nearly bites Bucky’s palm.

“Will you stop?” Bucky says and presses him harder into the wall. Steve glares at him with the power of a thousand suns. In his mind, Bucky has been burned to a crisp, but in reality, Bucky just looks at him with wide eyes and a slightly upset expression. His hand over Steve’s mouth is firm and when Steve opens his mouth to say something back, his tongue flicks across Bucky’s palm, tasting the salt there.

The two of them stare at each other, Steve livid and Bucky—something else. Insistent. Maybe a little angry, too.

“If I let you go, are you going to continue being a child?” Bucky asks. Steve’s glaring intensifies, so Bucky gives him a hard look. “Fine, then you’re going to stay like this until I’m done talking.”

Steve considers biting Bucky’s hand. He really does. It’s like, right there, on top of his mouth, which holds his teeth.

“Don’t do the thing I know you’re thinking about doing.” Bucky glares in return. They have a glare off. Steve doesn’t lose, but Bucky starts talking again anyway. “I’m sorry, okay? For...what I said
earlier. You just talk so fucking much and you never stop to think that maybe someone else should talk for a while.”

“Ishnawdjawdpao?” Steve says.

“What?” Bucky asks.

“Ishnawdjawdpao.”

“What are you—” Bucky starts, then blinks. “Oh.”

He relents to easing off Steve just a little.

“Is that your idea of an apology?” Steve asks, heated.

“I fucking apologized, didn’t I?” Bucky says and he’s glaring this time.

“Yeah, I’m sorry you’re such a dick, Steve,” Steve says, sarcastically. “That’s a great apology. What, Satan teach it to you?”

“If you’re going to be a dick, I have every right to call you a dick,” Bucky says in frustration. Finally he lets Steve go, hand and body retreating. Steve bounces a little against the brick wall as he regains autonomy. He’s so on edge he takes a moment to brush himself off. “God, you drive me crazy.”

“Right back at you, pal,” Steve says in a low, tight voice.

Bucky doesn’t say anything immediately and neither does Steve. The air between them is thick, muted with tension. Then, Bucky runs his hand through his hair.

“Do you think I’m thrilled about this?”

“What?” Steve glares.

“This,” Bucky says, gesturing between them. “Whatever we’re doing. My family’s been card-carrying members of the Republican Party since Nixon. Probably before then. We have a framed picture of Reagan in granddad’s house. I went there every summer, saw his face staring at me from his study.”

This doesn’t endear Bucky to him. If anything, it reminds Steve that what they’re doing is stupid—that Steve cannot be one of those liberals who’s active in the streets and then doesn’t care about politics in the sheets. Steve refuses to be one of those.

“I was president of the College Republicans at Princeton,” Bucky says. Steve rolls his eyes. Of course Bucky went to Princeton. “I hate—hated guys like you. So self fucking righteous, you don’t stop to think that there might be other viewpoints. Other ways of doing things. You take one look at me and you think you’re better than me. Fuck you, you’re not.”

Steve doesn’t even know how to process those words. Bucky Barnes, with his Brooks Brothers suit and his shiny shoes from God knows what designer store, his Ivy League pedigree and clearly more money than he knows what to do with—that Bucky Barnes telling him, Steve, that he thinks he’s better than him.

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” Steve mutters under his breath.

Bucky runs his hand through his hair again and blows out a breath in frustration.
“This is why I don’t ask the guys I hook up with their politics,” Bucky says. “It just ruins—
everything.”

That makes—Steve’s heart misses a beat, just from the pure privilege of it all. He takes a quick
breath, the fire lighting up under his lungs. He squeezes his fingers into his palms, his nails leaving
crescents along the soft skin there.

“Ruins what, Barnes?” Steve asks slowly, a little coldly. “You think it doesn’t matter? The way you
view the world, the way you frame it. You can’t just fall into bed with someone and continue falling
into bed with them and say it’s fine that their views are just—antithetical to yours. How can you
sleep next to them knowing they hate you and everything you stand for? That what they think and
fight for goes against the core of who you are? I don’t—I couldn’t do that. I don’t get it.”

“Why does it have to be a fight?” Bucky says, his voice on edge. “God, not everything is personal.
People believe what they believe. Everyone has a different reason for what they support. You don’t
like my reasons? Fine. You don’t have to. I have different experiences than you. I have a different
point of view. Not everyone’s going to see eye-to-eye. Who cares? We’re still people, Steve. We’re
two guys who are into each other and like—whatever. A good time. At the end of the day—doesn’t
that matter more?”

“No,” Steve says and his voice sounds cold even to him. He runs a hand through his hair, tiredly.
“And if I have to explain why—that’s my entire point. You don’t get the stakes, Bucky, but I do.
They’re there and I’m not willing to ignore them.”

Bucky stares at him for one, unreadable moment, then lets out a low breath. His shoulders, which
had hitched up near his ears sink down.

“This is unworkable, isn’t it?” he says. “Even though you have—everything but fucked me.
Knowing who and what I am.”

Steve doesn’t know how to answer that. He doesn’t feel particularly great about it. His phone lights
up.

Your ride will be here soon. Look for Hassan.

He puts his phone away.

“We’re just fucking, Bucky,” Steve says, evenly. “It’s not my best...idea. It’s actually a really
fucking stupid one. But we’re just fucking and if that’s all this is—then whatever. That’s what hate
sex is, isn’t it?”

Bucky doesn’t say anything for one long minute. There’s tension in the air again, tension in Steve’s
guts; tension in the vein pulsing against Steve’s throat. He feels shitty, although he has no reason to.

He’s just a bad fucking decision for Bucky and Bucky, well, he’s the worst fucking decision for him.

“Yeah,” Bucky says with a shaky laugh. “I guess you’re right. Why’re you making such a big deal
out of it for, then? We’re just two guys fucking.”

“Right,” Steve says.

Hassan pulls up to the curb.

The two of them stand there in silence, awkwardly, Steve’s hands in his pocket and Bucky fiddling
with the cuff of his jacket.
Steve takes a breath and turns, his nerves a cocktail of mixed, very shot feelings.

“Where do you live?” he asks.

“Close to McLean, why?” Bucky asks.

Steve nearly laughs. Of course he lives in one of D.C.’s wealthiest suburbs. That almost makes it easier, honestly, which is fine with him.

Steve gives Bucky a half-smirk.

“Need a ride?”

Eighteen different expressions pass over Bucky’s face and Steve can read none of them before Bucky mutters, “Sure,” followed by something that sounds suspiciously like how much worse can it get? which, honestly, Steve is just going to pretend he didn't hear.

Bucky gets into the car and Steve slides in after.

Hassan doesn’t mind adjusting his route and once there’s been a little fumbling with apps and getting everything into place, he pulls out onto the street and the backseat is left in a thick blanket of awkward silence. Steve takes off his jacket and spreads it on the seat next to him so it won’t wrinkle. Hassan clicks on the radio and it’s unfortunate that Hassan seems to enjoy both country and western, but at least Steve doesn’t have to listen to Bucky not saying anything.

For the first five minutes, the ride is awkward, tense to the point of making his skin crawl. Bucky keeps shooting Steve these looks, which Steve only knows because he can feel the hair stand up on the back of his neck every time he does. It’s about a half an hour ride to Bucky’s apartment and it’s going to feel like days if this goes on the whole way.

“Look,” Steve says, but quietly, because Hassan probably has no interest in backseat dramatics, “I’m not trying to be a dick, okay? This thing between us, it’s just—”

He trails off, because honestly, he doesn’t know what he’s trying or not trying to do with Bucky. It just keeps happening, like a force of nature pushing them together or the kind of magnets that scientists make in labs to power quantum computers and possibly also for the hell of it. But being attracted to each other, like some fucked up magnetic polar opposites doesn’t mean shit. At the end of the day, they’re still wrong for each other, diametrically opposed on every conceivable level, and Steve’s not going to try to reason it otherwise. It’s one thing for them to be doing this for the hell of it. Anything else—well, there is nothing else. It doesn’t mean anything more or anything less. Steve’s not looking to change that.

"Save it, Rogers,” Bucky says, rolling his eyes and looking up at the ceiling. “I can fucking hear your brain grinding from over here. I know. Hate sex. You said.”

The difference between his tone and his body language is jarring, because Bucky rolls his eyes and speaks like the devil’s caught his tongue, but that’s not what the lines of his body say. They’re tenser than the expression between his eyebrows. He tilts his head toward Steve, giving him a lazy smile that Steve can pick apart immediately for how fake it is. It doesn’t seem to matter though, because he tilts his body just a little closer to Steve’s, the distance between them closing, the angle getting just a little more acute, and without really meaning to, Steve is leaning toward him too.

The streetlights passing by highlight the crest of Bucky’s cheekbones, then cast shadows around his
eyes that make him unreadable. All of this would be easier if he weren't so unfortunately handsome, because then maybe Steve wouldn't feel a strange ache in his chest looking at him. It doesn’t really mix with the rest of him, the part of him so angry he wants to press his thumb against Bucky’s wrist until he lets Steve go. His chest keeps leaving him wrongfooted tonight; he doesn’t know what to do about it.

Bucky goes for sharp, but the shadows smudge his intentions. They make him look less like the arrogant viper he is and something softer instead, something sad and tired, like someone with a human edge, and Steve can’t stand that. He’d rather see him mad again, rather see his face twisted in disgust than the way it looks right now, caught in between. But he’s too fucking tired to fight with him again and certainly not in the back of a car driven by a stranger who's mumbling along to a regrettable song about beer and heartbreak.

Bucky snorts, head tipped back. He seems content to spend the ride in silence as a honky gets tonked or whatever the whiny guitar is doing on the radio. It’s Steve who’s rankled by this, the brief expression he’d seen on Bucky’s face sinking under his skin. He doesn’t want to fucking second guess himself. Not about this.

Steve needs to get that expression off his face.

There’s always some kind of heat between them; it’s really circumstance that decides if it gets channeled into yelling or fucking. He already decided he doesn't want to argue any more tonight, so...that leaves the other thing.

He reaches out and touches Bucky’s thigh with the edge of his hand. It could almost be an accident except that obviously it's not, and he swears, even from that small and innocuous of a touch, heat unspools in his gut.

Bucky turns to look at him, his eyebrow raised, his expression saying very clearly what the fuck are you doing? This is more familiar territory, at least, Bucky looking at Steve like Steve is an idiot. Steve obviously knows this is bullshit decision-making, but it’s not stopping him. It never seems to. They just had a conversation about that, didn’t they? And now—it's stupid, but knowing that it’s dumb as fuck doesn’t make it any less true—now Steve feels like it’s a challenge, and that’s something he’s never been able to resist.

Steve slowly runs his hand up Bucky's thigh, moving so slowly it feels like he's barely moving at all. Bucky watches him out of the corner of his eye. His expression is heated, even angry, but he’s not moving.

Not that Steve can do much in the back of a car. Just maybe touch Bucky a little—touch is the one thing that makes sense between them. Not that he would do much more anyway. Not with Hassan singing along off-key to a nasal ditty about the singer's previous relationships all relocating to Texas, potentially able to look in the backseat, and catch them at any moment.

Still, it doesn’t stop him. His fingers curve over Bucky’s thigh and Bucky’s eyes grow darker.

The car moves onto the highway and Hassan sings a little louder.

Bucky’s expression is barely discernible as he leans closer.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Steve watches Bucky in the dark. The air hangs between them, thick and wretched. Whatever they’re doing, it’s a bad fucking idea. But what’s worse is not doing it. What’s worse is trying to do
something else. Steve’s tired and emotionally spent, he doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing.

His mouth curves up into a smirk.

“I think it’s obvious,” Steve whispers back. He takes his jacket and tosses it between them, half-on Bucky’s lap. Bucky’s spine goes stiff and straight for a second, like maybe he’s working on some indignation and is going to tell Steve to stop, but instead, after a second he slouches over, shoulder pressing against Steve’s.

“Thought you said this was a bad idea,” he says, voice low with derision. “The worst fucking idea. What was it? I’m morally antithetical to you?”

“Yes,” Steve allows, equally quietly. “You are.”

He adjusts the jacket so he can reach further up Bucky’s leg. It’s a fairly ridiculous shield of plausible deniability, mostly meant to protect Hassan’s eyes, but now he feels like he can really touch Bucky. In an ideal situation, there would be one of those tinted glass partitions between the driver and the passengers, but he’s pretty sure those are for limousines, not Lyft Honda Civics. His hand reaches Bucky’s dick, which is not entirely hard, but not soft either. He reaches out, over the fabric of Bucky’s pants and underwear, and moves his hand along the length of him.

Bucky stops him then, his hand gripping Steve’s wrist.

“You said you didn’t want this,” Bucky says, low and borderline angry. "You said—"

He doesn’t finish his sentence, just stares at Steve. Steve doesn’t break eye contact with him. He doesn’t move his hand either.

“Tell me to stop,” he says. “And I will.”

Bucky doesn’t, although the look he gives Steve is pure loathing—of Steve or himself, he couldn’t say.

“I fucking hate you,” Bucky hisses and for this, Steve is glad. This, Steve can hold onto.


He strokes slowly and Bucky huffs out a breath.

“Whatever,” he says, closing his eyes. “Meaningless hate sex, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, gratified by the hitch in Bucky's voice. “Doesn’t mean a fucking thing.”

Bucky lets his head fall back against the headrest. His dick is hot even through the layers of cloth, harder than it was.

Steve keeps stroking, his touch light, listening to the infinitesimal shifts in Bucky's breathing, the way it gets faster, not quite even anymore. He's not sure what it says about himself that he can be in a screaming fight with this man one minute and then want nothing more than to touch him the next, but here they are. He doesn't even want to get off himself, he doesn't really need to get Bucky off, he just wants to make him feel...something. Something that he, Steve, gives him. Something no one else will. His brain is a miasma of confused half-thoughts and the brambles of pent up feelings he can’t quite shake.

Bucky swallows, and Steve watched the motion of his throat. His own mouth is dry and, absurdly,
he wants to kiss Bucky. It’s an impulse he almost can’t contain, but he knows it would come about all wrong now, full of teeth and vitriol.

Steve's tangled up inside, he knows that, anger and what can't possibly be regret tingeing the way he wants to touch Bucky. It’s complicated in his head and it’s loud, but he is touching Bucky, and if nothing else, that can be uncomplicated, just one guy getting another guy off, or close enough, regardless of how unworkable they are.

The miles pass by quickly and Steve catalogs the tension in Bucky's jaw, the clench and unclench of his fists, every time he has to make himself be quiet. Once Bucky reaches for Steve's lap, like he wants to reciprocate whatever this is. but Steve pushes his hand away, even though he is achingly hard just from touching Bucky. For one thing, it's not about that. For another, Steve's jacket isn't big enough for the both of them.

Bucky doesn't reach for him again, which is just fine by him. They don't need this to be more than it is. Steve works on him instead and Bucky's quickening breathing, the way he's gritting his teeth, the way he can barely control himself from bucking up, is more than enough reward.

Eventually, Hassan pulls up in front of an elegant brick apartment building with honest-to-god columns around the front door.

Steve almost snorts.

“This is me,” Bucky finally says, his voice low and very rough. There’s a heavy, untouched silence in the car for a moment. Then he leans forward, his face perilously close to Steve's, and for a beat, Steve thinks maybe they're about to kiss and he's conflicted, because god he fucking wants to but also he doesn't, not after the conversation they had, not after the fucking night they've had, but Bucky just leans past him to grab his messenger bag.

On the radio, a song starts that Steve knows but can't identify just yet. Bucky's expression twists a little bit as he leans back, and their eyes meet for a long, tense, silent moment.

“All right then,” Hassan says, and Steve is positive it's not his imagination that he sounds completely judgmental. Steve is going to have to leave him five stars and an enormous guilt tip, and he'll be lucky if Hassan even leaves him one out of pity.

Steve thinks he's going to say something—what, he's not sure—but, for once, Bucky doesn’t say anything at all. He shifts his bag so that it covers his dick when he opens the door and stands up.

It's colder than Bucky's ever been to him and it's exactly what Steve wants. He thinks.

Steve doesn't say anything either—doesn’t see what he could say, after all that—and pulls his jacket over his own lap with its incriminatory boner instead.

Bucky closes the door behind him, the loud slam jarring the still air of the car.

He watches Bucky walk away, unable to reconcile the cocktail of fucked up things going through his head. The chorus of the song on the radio comes on and suddenly resolves itself into Jimmy Buffet twangily singing why don't we get drunk and screw. First of all, ugh. Second of all, wasn't that the start of all of Steve's problems?

“Fuck,” he breathes out loud.

He leans back and lets his head thunk on the headrest behind him. He's got twenty more minutes of this before he can finally get home. What he needs, is to sleep. What he wants, is a fucking drink.
Under the colonnade, Bucky gets the door open and disappears into the building, throwing one last look over his shoulder at the car. From this distance, Steve can't read his expression, and then it occurs to him that maybe he should stop trying.

“You know,” Hassan says thoughtfully as he pulls away, “it would have been shorter to drop you off first and then your...friend.”

He pauses before the word friend. Steve feels the headache building in his temple.

“Yeah,” Steve says, watching the building diminish in the rearview mirror as they pull away. “It would have been.”

Chapter End Notes

+ Art by the INCREDIBLE em-dibujas and commissioned by the LOVELY mitsususu. Art can be RTed here on Twitter and here on Tumblr.

+ Apart from Sam, Sarah Rogers might be the only person in this entire fic universe with an ounce of common sense.

+ Thank you so very much for commenting and tweeting at the two of us! This ridiculous ride has been extremely fun and gratifying so far and your enthusiasm is to blame for all of it. In case it hasn’t been said enough--we appreciate your readership and your engagement greatly. Thank you!! ♥
chapter six, or, where the fuck is the social media manager?

Chapter by crinklefries

Chapter Summary

The thing about a Twitter fight is that it’s not nearly as good as the real thing.

Chapter Notes

As a point of clarification, that I suppose we should have made earlier, the political universe this fic exists in does not have the Cheeto-in-Chief as president, even though we've made reference to some political figures from modern politics. This is a full on political AU that deals with the current political temperature, but isn't an exact parallel of it! I don't know if that assuages any feelings or provides context, but we're operating on pre-2016 levels of Republican bullshit. Definitely not advocating that that's great. Just saying the President and maybe Congress is slightly less fascist. Take that as you will.

This is an inexplicably, terribly long chapter--so buckle in!

**Warnings** for some physical violence (a brawl), an almost racially abusive remark, and Brock Rumlow, generally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Whatever is happening with Bucky—whatever happened with Bucky is, frankly, inconsequential.

The fact of the fucking matter is that Steve doesn’t have time. He doesn’t have time to date and he barely has time to screw, nevermind screwing with weird, tangled complications. What he needs is something easy. He needs something that’s a breath of fresh air, because he’s working in the fastest political city in the fucking world and the more time he wastes trying to figure out why hate fucking Bucky Barnes is so fucking complicated, the less time he has for things that actually fucking matter.

Like, submitting legislative requests for Sam. Like, going through the legislative requests that are being drafted currently. Like, sitting down with America and the new girl, Kate, and digging up voting records and abstention records because if half of their job is running Sam’s political life, the other half is surely digging up political details to use as some sort of leverage in the future.

Steve cares about what he does and that’s the main thing. He cares. Bucky doesn’t. There’s no way around that, even if there was some way to reconcile his abhorrent political and social stances. In no world will it not matter to Steve that the person he’s fucking doesn’t seem to care about anything; that no matter how hot or charming he might appear to be, the laissez-faire attitude he’s operating on means that nothing really means anything to him. What was it Hamilton asked Burr in the musical? If you stand for nothing, Burr, what will you fall for? That answer matters to Steve, even if it doesn’t to Bucky.

So, it’s just like Bucky says: they’re unworkable.

But that’s just fine.
Steve has other things that are workable.

For example: his actual work.

So the slightly cooling damp of September slides into the slightly cooler, but sometimes warm, and definitely less humid month of October and Steve focuses on that instead of the fucked up mess that’s his love life. He might be bad at saying no to men who are bad for him, but he’s very good at the legislative process.

He and Sam and Wanda work together on a handful of bills apart from Code Green and two of them even make it through committee to the vote.

They’re good bills, strong, progressive bills. Nothing Earth shattering, but they try to do something, make some good in the world.

That’s what he and Sam came to D.C. for—to do some good. Steve feels like he’s finally making some kind of difference and at the end of the day, no matter how exhausted he is or how run down to the bone, full of coffee and very little else—it’s this that keeps him running. It’s this that makes him feel good. That would be at least one thing in his life, anyway.

Speaking of running, Steve decides that until he figures out his complicated sexual situation with Bucky, he has to avoid the gym for the foreseeable future. It helps that the weather’s so much nicer, so he starts waking up at six and going for an early morning run. It helps him in more ways than one. Running helps him feel more awake in the morning, which means he’s more focused and productive during the day. It also makes him happier because exercise gives him endorphins and endorphins make people happy. And happy people? Don’t kill their political rivals turned fuck buddies.

Anyway, he likes running around the National Mall just before D.C. begins to buzz with energy. The sun spills slowly into the sky in bright oranges and pale yellows, the brightness creating a wreath of color behind the Washington Memorial. The air warms up slowly as Steve makes his loops around, his lungs burning lowly and the lactic acid building up in his calves. It’s different from the rest of his day—slow and clean, where the rest is busy, almost frenetic.

He puts his headphones in as he runs, the music drowning out the constant to-do list buzzing at the back of his head—legislation, engagements, press conferences, voting records. Steve loves what he does. He’s good at it and he’s grateful for the opportunity, but he’s turning into a hyper-focused D.C. gremlin and he knows it. He doesn’t know what to do about it really, but the running helps. The music helps too.

He takes the headphones out at the end of his run and collapses on the ground by the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. Trying to bring his heart rate back down, he brings his knees up to his chest and leans back onto his hands, looking across the water at the Washington Memorial all the way at the other end.

Once upon a time, all he had wanted was to get to D.C. And now he was here.

The magnitude of it strikes him sometimes, when he lets it. It hasn’t been exactly everything he’s planned, but life is like that, sometimes. That, Steve figured out a long time ago.

He lets a breath out this morning, smiling as he picks up his phone. Some days it’s hard to be here, far from home and his mother. Other days, other mornings, like this one, when the sun hits the pool just right and his limbs are warm and loose—well those days make him think maybe all of this was just a little bit worth it.
He switches to the camera app and holds it up.

Steve catches the sunrise behind the monument and for just a moment, relaxes.

Then, as if on cue, his phone rings.

“Hey Sam,” Steve answers, with a half-smile, barely looking at the name and picture that pops up on the screen. “Yeah, just finished. I’ll go home and shower and meet you in the office. No, go there first. I’ll have Kate pull up the schedule.”

He stretches his legs out in front of him and tries to shake out his shoulders. “Yeah. The Committee meets at noon. Vote’s scheduled for three this afternoon.”

He gathers his legs to himself again and gets up. He stretches all the way to the tips of his toes. There are nerves in his stomach, but—he has to admit—good ones.

“Don’t worry, Sam,” Steve says and watches D.C. wake all the way up. “It’ll pass.”

It does. It doesn’t pass without some kind of a fight—nothing in Congress ever does—but it passes. There are twenty-two members on the Subcommittee for Environment & Climate Change, a mixture of Democrats and Republicans and led by the Chair, Representative Margaret Carter. Luckily for Sam, Peggy is as enthusiastic about Code Green as her legislative director indicated she was. They hear Code Green in a markup session that lasts about four hours total. By the end of the session, all of Steve and Wanda’s hard work mostly makes it through, although politics will be politics. Sam is there, with his package of bills, and he compromises where he needs to and tells the committee members to, in much politer terms, go fuck themselves where he’s not willing.

“I understand your concern, Representative,” Sam says over and over to various Republican members. “But I assure you, we account for that. We’ve met with advocates. We’ve met with test groups. We’ve scoured through the testimony from the hearings—my office has given you each a thorough copy and mark up of what we found. I understand your concern and I hear it. But that amendment would undo all of the good this bill would do. And I won’t let that happen.”

Sam is tough and fair and stern and that’s exactly what he needs to be to get the attention of some of these politicians. The ranking member of the committee is a sleazy looking Republican by the name of Jasper Sitwell. He’s been on the subcommittee for about seven years now and has never once, not even under a more Democratic administration, voted for measures that could save the planet and the species on it when he could do the opposite. Sitwell grills Sam on the bills, the amendments, and how untenable and ruinous it will all be for industry and democracy and Sam just looks at him, smiles graciously, and tells him that he’s wrong.

It’s the best fucking thing Steve has ever seen.

So yes, it takes four hours and some revisions and amendments that require passage, but at the end, Representative Eli Bradley makes the motion to order the bill reported to the House, with the approved amendments and Representative Hope Van Dyne seconds. The Subcommittee for Environment & Climate Change passes Code Green and Steve, watching from the gallery, feels something like a whole fucking feeling.

He switches from texting Natasha and America to Twitter.

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
Wilson. There’s at least one guy in Congress standing up for our future and I could not be more grateful to call him my best friend.

It’s definitely on the cheesier side, but Steve can’t help but feel it when the vote passes—Sitwell’s sour face makes their victory all the sweeter.

The legislative process is a grind—long and arduous and not everything makes it through. Most pieces of legislation die, in fact, and there are a variety of ways they can die in the U.S. government. Code Green doesn’t, though, and if it’s not by the divine intervention of Gaia herself, then it is at least by the sheer tenacity of Sam Wilson.

It also helps that Peggy Carter loves it. Because if it was up to the House Majority Leader—that absolute scumbag Alexander Pierce—nothing good in this world would ever get put on the calendar for hearing. Peggy Carter though, is a strong and fierce spokesperson for the Democratic Party. When the Democrats take back the House—and they fucking will, Steve tells himself every single night—she will be runner up for House Majority Leader. Until then, she uses her power and persuasive skills to help put Code Green on the calendar.

So it gets on there.

It gets put on the calendar to be heard and voted on in the House of Representatives.

That’s the kind of invincibility that Steve is chasing. He and Sam can’t exactly hit the bar the way that they used to when they were younger and Sam’s face wasn’t posted on every single media outlet and all of the top political podcasts besides, but they can split a couple of beers on the roof of their apartment building.

“It feels good, right?” Sam asks.

The night is on the cooler side, although they’re too elated and stupid to think about what their mothers would say if they saw them now. So they stand side-by-side on the roof, looking over what part of D.C. they can see in t-shirts that are invariably too thin for the wind that cuts across the night. It doesn’t really bother them, mostly, and what Steve’s thin t-shirt lacks in warmth, the press of Sam against his side more than makes up for. This is what happens after a lifetime of friendship—there’s no real boundaries there, only a dozen memories of each other fucking up and more memories of being there for each other.

Steve’s never known a better person. Every day, he feels more grateful that Sam had caught onto what a little shit he was that day in middle school.

“Doing what we set out to do?” Steve laughs. “Yeah, Sam. It feels good.”

Sam smiles at that, wry and pleased. He moves the bottle to his mouth and takes a mouthful of some hipster beer that Steve picked up from Whole Foods of all places.

“So what’s next?” Sam asks. “Where do we go from here?”

“House vote,” Steve says. It’s still a thrill to him, just thinking about it. Their first bill, The Bill, getting voted out of one of the chambers. That’s fucking—he doesn’t have the word for it. Insane, probably. “The debate. Reading and more amendments. Voting on the amendments. Voting on the
bill. Then it gets sent to the Senate.”

“Rhodey’s doing good in there,” Sam remarks lightly and Steve looks at him.

“Yeah?”

“We’ve met a couple of times on the topic,” Sam says, with a shrug. “Our bills aren’t that far off. Reconciling them shouldn’t be too bad unless the House fucks with the whole thing.”

That makes Steve frown. He knows Sam would fight tooth and nail to not let that happen, but with a Republican-led House, you never knew.

“How’s the votes?” Steve asks.

Sam gives him a sidelong look, half amused.

“Isn’t that your job?” he asks. “As my Chief of Staff. The fuck I pay you for?”

“To look pretty,” Steve grins and finishes his beer. “Another one?”

“Please,” Sam says and hands him his empty bottle.

Steve turns to go to the cooler they dragged up, sets the empty bottles on the picnic table set on the roof, and grabs two more.

“We can make it work in the House,” Sam says. “It’s going to be cutting it close. Most of the Democrats are on board, although I still have some lunches on the books for—Alaska and West Virginia, I think?”

“Ah,” Steve replies, knowingly. Texas is almost always a no-win situation, but some of the smaller states can be convinced to lean in favor of humanity. Every once in a while, Steve can’t remember the Representatives from over there. Someone named Drax, he thinks.

“Anyway,” Sam takes another mouthful and looks at Steve brightly. “It’s not a total wash. There’s a couple of Republicans we can get to if we promise some stuff in the future and Rhodey’s doing what he needs to do in the Senate. Everything in politics is about exchange, isn’t it?”

Steve snorts.

“Imagine, doing something for the greater good, with no strings attached.”

Sam grasps his chest and looks shocked.

“Who do you think we are, a bunch of do-gooders? We came here for the tax cuts.”

That almost makes Steve ugly laugh.

“It’s Quill, right?” he asks Sam. “He’s one of the loose canons.”


Steve’s eyebrow shoots up.

“Really? He lives for chaos.”

“That’s why he’s a loose cannon.” Sam grins. “I have an in.”
Like that’s hard to figure out.

“You mean Odinson?” Steve asks. Thor Odinson is one of the newer Democratic senators. Newer not because he’s new to Congress, but actually because he used to be Republican for years before some family tragedy knocked him into being a Democrat. He doesn’t like to talk about it, but he’s been mostly liberal-line since. He’s also Laufeyson’s brother, of some brand. Half, maybe. He seems to be the only person who can keep the Representative in check anyway.

“We’re going to a boxing match,” Sam says.

“Uh huh,” Steve says. “Wait until Twitter gets a hold of those pictures.”

“You think they’ll suspect corruption?”

Steve laughs out loud this time. He drinks half of his beer.

“No, idiot,” he grins. “They’ll want you two to suck face, guaranteed.”

Sam seems to contemplate that, amused.

“Well, that’s one way to get your politics done.”

“God bless social media,” Steve says and leans his bottle against Sam’s.

“God bless social media,” Sam agrees and clinks the bottle. “And whatever devil came up with it, I guess.”

They finish a couple of more rounds of beers, talking quietly into the night. They talk about politics, sure, and the bill, yes, but they’re more than that because they’ve been more than that. For their entire lives, they have been best friends first and everything else second.

So it’s only a little surprising and not at all jarring when Sam leans into Steve and asks, “So, Barnes.”

Steve freezes at that. He’s a little tipsy by now—warm enough from the press of his best friend and even warmer because of the generous amount of beer running through his system. Still, if anything is going to sober him up, it’s thinking about Bucky Barnes and all of the ways that’s gone wrong.

“What about him?” Steve asks. His voice is too listless to be casual, which is why Sam raises an eyebrow immediately.

“You break up?”

“We,” Steve says, staring pointedly ahead, “were never together.”

“Uh huh,” Sam says. He doesn’t follow up for a minute, then he nudges Steve again. “Did you know that?”

“Yes,” Steve says, annoyed.

“Uh huh,” Sam says again. Then, “Did he know that?”

Steve doesn’t answer. He doesn’t answer long enough that Sam starts talking again.

“What do you like about him?”

It’s not the question Steve expected.
“What?”

“What do you like about Barnes?” Sam asks again. “I don’t know him, so I couldn’t tell you a thing about why he’s bad for you. All I know is he’s rich, he’s a Republican, and he’s working for Tony Stark.”

Steve stares at him.

“Is that not enough?”

Sam snorts.

“Yes, sometimes,” he says. “But sometimes not. Clearly there’s something there. You guys can’t seem to quit each other and I know the sex must be good, but I also know you.”

“What’s that mean?” Steve asks.

Sam rolls his eyes.

“It means, there are plenty of people out there who are good hook ups, Steve. You could get on Tinder right now and half of D.C. would want to bone you. Hell, you call up Sharon again and I guarantee you she’ll give you another chance.”

“I don’t know about that,” Steve mutters. His break up with Sharon had been inevitable and not exactly acrimonious, but it’s never easy to break up with your girlfriend of three years over—what was it? He had never been able to define it.

“But you don’t,” Sam says, pointedly. “Haven’t seen you on an app in months. Haven’t seen you go out to a bar to bring someone home or hook up with anyone else.”

“What, I’m supposed to just bring someone back to the home of a Representative?” Steve mutters into his beer and Sam, rightfully, ignores him.

“I can’t remember when you met the guy because it seems like fucking forever to me now, but I know you haven’t looked anyone else’s way that entire time. So what is it, Rogers? Is it just the sex? He that good looking?”

Steve is feeling more and more—if not irate, then at least wrong-footed. Sam’s a pushy friend and Steve needs that, but that doesn’t mean he has to like it when he’s actually being pushy. Steve Rogers is a master class in ignoring his problems and he’s not entirely sure why he cannot continue to ignore this particular problem, given how successful he’s been so far.

In the three weeks since their yelling match and awkward Lyft hook up—if it can even be called that—Steve’s been avoiding Bucky and, to his credit, Bucky seems to be avoiding him as well. Steve doesn’t go to the gym anymore, so he can’t run into him there. If he sees Bucky outside somewhere, he turns around and walks the other direction. If he sees Bucky across the House floor during a session, he resolutely stares anywhere else but him. Once, they had gotten caught in an elevator together, unfortunately, but Steve hadn’t said a word. It had been the most awkward twenty seconds of his entire fucking life, but he hadn’t folded.

He had wanted to turn and press Bucky into the back of the elevator, but he hadn’t done it.

He had been strong.

And now they’re—well, nothing. And that’s just what he tells Sam.
“He’s nothing to me,” Steve answers. “He’s just a guy I can’t seem to quit because he’s hot and the sex is good. I don’t even know anything about him, Sam.”

Sam looks at him funny.

“Well, have you asked?”

Steve glares at him.

“What?” Sam shrugs. “Yeah, his political affiliation is shitty, but have you ever like, talked to him? Maybe he has a reason for making the worst decision possible.”

“It doesn’t work that way and you know it,” Steve says. “You don’t choose to be Republican and say that you’re still human at the end of the day.”

“Oh, okay,” Sam says. “But he is.”

Steve’s feeling of annoyance intensifies.

“Hey, don’t get me wrong, I understand why you’re acting the way you’re acting,” Sam says, looking at him out of the corner of his eye. “You think I don’t get it? Politics matter. Ideology matters. There’s life or death shit going on out there and you don’t want to get feelings for someone who isn’t on the same page as you. Who doesn’t have the same values as you. I get it.”

“But?” Steve swallows his annoyance with some more beer.

“But, Rogers,” Sam says and this time his nudge is softer. “Sometimes you like someone. They do something for you. And you gotta figure out why and what that is. Is it something that outweighs their shitty political opinions? Maybe. Maybe not. You gotta figure that out. And you can’t figure it out by avoiding the guy.”

Steve doesn’t like getting advice. Not because the advice isn’t practical or reasonable, but usually because it is. Steve likes to be right. He derives a joy from it that is unparalleled by anything. It gets him off, so to speak.

The point is, his mother and Sam are his least favorite people in the world (while being his favorite people in the world) because Steve likes to be right, but most often, when the two of them are involved, he is the one who is wrong.

He doesn’t think he’s wrong in this instance. But he might not think Sam is either. Maybe his mother is right and there’s some middle ground he’s missing.

“I don’t know,” Steve admits. He sighs like the breath is coming from the depths of him. “I think he’s—funny, probably. He’s smart. Charming, I fucking guess. He gets under my fucking skin. He drives me fucking crazy. God, I can’t stand him. But.”

“But.”

“But, I can’t stay away from him,” Steve says. “I know he’s a bad fucking idea, but I can’t stay away from him.”

Sam snorts. He finishes his beer and then stretches.

“I gotta piss,” he says. Then, “You know what they say about love and hate, Steve.”

“It’s better to feel neither because being a fucking cyborg is all we have left to us?”
“You’re so fucking weird, man,” Sam laughs. “No, asswipe. It’s a fine line. Looks like you might have found your fine line.”

“You’re so fucking weird, man,” Sam laughs. “No, asswipe. It’s a fine line. Looks like you might have found your fine line.”

“Bullshit,” Steve mutters. Sam claps him on the shoulder and bids him goodnight.

Steve opens another bottle and stands at the edge of their rooftop.

Their building isn’t tall enough to see all of D.C. around them, but it is tall enough to see their neighborhood. Adams Morgan is colorful, weird, and vivacious, even in the middle of the night.

“Bullshit,” he says again.

He nurses the beer for another hour, the alcohol growing warmer and warmer in his hands. Eventually, he has to pee too, so he gathers all of the bottles to take back inside.

Sure there’s a fine line between love and hate, Steve thinks. But sometimes, it’s not love. Sometimes, Sam, it’s just hate.

It gets put on the calendar for the beginning of November, when the weather gets colder and slightly wetter. It’s not the biting chill of December quite yet, but it’s like the city is getting ready for it, everyone dressed up in their middling weather coats because one fact of living on the East Coast is that there is a different shoe required for every ten degree difference in weather and, similarly, the uses for layering sweaters and scarves and multipurpose coats are endless.

The point is, Steve finds himself at some staffer Halloween party three days before and, Sam’s words ringing in his ears, even hastily hooks up with someone dressed like a Supreme Court Justice in what could ostensibly be called a closet. It’s not the best hook up he’s ever had, but then again, he’s never really had the chance to get blown by someone who’s dressed like Justice John Paul Stevens and looks more like that Six Flags guy. Apparently, imagining a Supreme Court Justice down on his knees for him doesn’t do as much for Steve as he thought it might, which is knowledge he files away for the future. Mostly, he gets really drunk and leaves Sam a bunch of voicemails he definitely begs Sam to delete exactly one morning and multiple cups of coffee later.

Three days later, he’s still finding candy wrappers in the pockets of his peacoat, which really makes him wonder what the fuck he thought he was doing at a Halloween party three days before the biggest vote of their lives.

He watches the proceedings nervously while sucking on a Werther’s Original.

Then he makes a face, because it’s 2019 and he’s sucking on a Wether’s Original.

The Representatives begin milling in from outside, sitting at and around their desks, their voices a low hum as Pierce calls the session to order.

Steve’s too nervous to sit down and the side gallery isn’t an appropriate place to pace, so he kinda just leans against a wall, sucking on the fake caramel flavor, his arms crossed at his chest, and watching the floor come to life.

This is one of his favorite parts of the job—standing to the side and seeing how democracy manifests itself. Steve is a huge believer in progressive politics, but he’s also a huge believer in the democratic process. He believes in the adversarial method. He believes in dissent. He believes in debate. So it’s
not for lack of enthusiasm and a sharp thrill that runs through his stomach that he watches as the bills on the slate are introduced and the floor opens for business.

He takes his phone out of his pocket to check and finds himself on the receiving end of multiple texts.

**BARTON:** how many days is too many days to be hungover?
**BARTON:** asking for uhhhh a friend
**BARTON:** the friend is me

Steve snorts. He scrolls past.

**Natasha R.:** It depends on how he wants to package the narrative. The spin is going to be important, but we can’t spin it too much—that’s how everything becomes inauthentic and for Wilson, that would be the death knell. Don’t listen to Fox News, they’re going to lose their fucking minds one way or another.

That’s one way to put it. Steve types back a quick response and sends Natasha a thumbs up emoji. He has to think about the spin more carefully, but the time for that is when his blood isn’t pumping from nerves.

**Ma [bear emoji]:** Actually, darling, he has been staying the night and I know you’re going to get weird about it despite what I’ve taught you about sexual liberation, but the point is I even let him stay the next morning. Me! That’s progress, right?
**Ma [bear emoji]:** Oh I almost forgot—is your vote today? Good luck, baby! Knock em dead. Is that the right saying? How do you wish your son and his best friend the best of political success on their shining hour? Break a...legal textbook?

Steve makes a face and texts her back something like *Too much to unpack there. Thanks, Ma. I will be calling this evening to make sure you didn’t accidentally let a serial killer stay over.* Steve’s not convinced a head of cabbage means whoever his mother’s seeing *isn’t* a serial killer and he will be letting her know this.

**Intern America:** Ayyy I see him on the feed now! Okay, I got it working. Well, Kate got it working, but I’m taking the credit because I’ve been here longer. Anyway, can you text him and let him know his pin is crooked? It’s bugging the shit outta me.

Steve rolls his eyes and ignores her.

**Barnes [knife emoji]:** Good luck.

He pauses.

He sucks in a breath and reads it again.

**Barnes [knife emoji]:** Good luck.

Bucky says good luck like it’s something he wants—Steve’s success, the passage of this bill. Maybe from any other person, there would be something meaningful there—a well-wish or an olive branch, but Steve knows an empty gesture when he sees one. Luck’s going to do shit-all for them. They need votes and the person Bucky works for, the man he puts his ass on the line for, won’t vote for them. So Steve knows better. He might be stupid, but he’s smart enough to know better.

Still, is he though?
He sends the text just to not be a dick. Then he deletes their conversation.

When he looks up, Pierce is introducing the bill.

Steve settles back against his pillar, watching the game begin. He reaches into his pocket and finds another piece of candy.

He pulls it out. A peppermint. Honestly, what the fuck candy were they passing out at that party?

Steve unwraps it, sticks it in his mouth, and pays attention.

Debates in the House often reach levels of political drama heretofore not seen or anticipated by the country’s forefathers, but the House has one thing going for it: no filibuster. Say what you will about the 19th century, at the very least, one man, Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed, had the guts to look at his compatriots and say you guys talk way too fucking much, enough is fucking enough.

So no matter how heated the debates get, no matter how red Pierce’s slimy face turns, no matter how fucking stupid Quill sounds when he speaks out loud, at some point the debate has to end.

That’s not to say the debate can’t go on for hours. In most circumstances, debate on bills is limited to 40 minutes maximum, but Code Green is big enough and controversial enough that there’s no way the House will have the two thirds votes it needs to pass a suspension of the rules. What that means is that the only real limit on talking is that no member can speak for more than one hour total during the course of the debate.

It shakes out like most areas of life—some Representatives don’t speak at all and some Representatives speak some and some Representatives speak way too fucking much.

Peter Quill, for example. The guy likes to hear himself talk. Steve doesn’t always hate him, but he does come off as a former fraternity president who swept his conservative district in rural Missouri and now spends most of his time on the Hill letting everyone know he’s still a libertarian at heart, but he supports the troops. Almost all of those details are almost certainly true anyway and Steve’s not going to say he doesn’t think Quill would be fun to throw a few beers back with, but he’s also willing to go on record and say that Quill doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
Not to name names, but someone is one five minute speech away from claiming global warming can’t be real because winters are getting real cold. [rolling eyes emoji]

Then, there’s Representative Jack Rollins, who has the face and personality of an off-brand packet of oatmeal. Rollins isn’t the most talkative member of the House, but when he does open his mouth, he proves that substance is hard to come by and not easily given to members of the Republican Party.

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
I watched a ten minute speech on something, but couldn’t tell you what it was about. Do we think there are Flat Earthers in Congress? Actually, there’s no way in hell I want an answer to that.

And, of course, there’s Alexander fucking Pierce. The Speaker of the House has been a member of Congress so long he’s lived through nine U.S. presidents and was probably personally responsible for Watergate. Pierce has as sordid a track record as a member of the GOP can have, which, of
course, means that his rise to power was more or less swift and he’s been a distinguished member of the party three times as long as the anti-vaccination movement has been in existence. What this means, ultimately, is that people listen to Pierce and if they don’t, it doesn’t really fucking matter because he sets the calendar and loves leveraging his political power to the devastation of millions of American and non-American lives every fucking day.

When Pierce starts talking, there’s a vein near Steve’s temple that starts throbbing and it doesn’t really stop until he pops four ibuprofens. He chews that ibuprofen like that’s how you’re supposed to take painkillers and when his jaw stops grinding pills, it begins ticking instead.

Pierce begins a supercilious speech about how much the oil and coal industries have done for the country and how many people they employ and that while Representative Wilson’s heart is in the right place—he says it like he says everything, as though who and what he’s talking to is a child who simply could not know any better and certainly not better than him—these measures are not only unnecessary, but they’re destructive and fundamentally unpatriotic, if not unconstitutional. It’s a whole load of bullshit, but it’s ten minutes of slimy, smooth-talking bullshit and Steve just fucking knows if he checks Twitter now, it’ll be verbatim the only thing Fox News spreads to their kingdom of Good Americans Who Are Just Experiencing Economic Anxiety.

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. Has the Speaker actually read the bills he’s talking about? This is a fundamental, willful misrepresentation of what’s inside those pages. This isn’t just bullshit, it’s downright irresponsible.

And then, because he just can’t fucking help himself—

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
Maybe people who won’t be around to see the Earth dry into a barren, uninhabitable husk shouldn’t do any more damage than they already have.

For better or worse, it’s this tweet that catches an audience. He looks up to watch Representative Hill deliver a smart, concise, and blistering critique of the Speaker’s speech and when he looks back down, meaning to text Natasha about it, his mentions have blown up.

RT 3,472 FAVE 5.6K

His mentions are a mess—some familiar faces, some unwelcome faces, and more people on the Internet with more opinions than Steve has ever asked for.

America Chavez | @thebetteramerica
@stevegrogers lol you put all Baby Boomers on blast

Kamala Khan | @khantstopmenow
@stevegrogers damn Steve! You’re right to say it.

Wanda M. | @scarletm
@stevegrogers Full offense, has anyone in that room ever read a single law? Or watched a single episode of Bill Nye? I can’t believe what I’m watching.

Aldritch Killian | @akillian
@stevegrogers this is liberal fearmongering at its worst and, frankly, at its most dramatic. I’m sure whatever liberal arts college gave you your degree in basket-weaving and flowery language will be thrilled at your contributions to working society. Grow up.
Natasha gets to him before he even manages to switch apps.

Natasha R.: Rogers, you got some balls on you. Let’s hope the Internet loves it, because I can’t be running a scandal spin for a chief of staff, you don’t get paid enough to afford my time.

Steve almost replies to her, but what gets him—what really ticks him off is Brock fucking Rumlow, the Speaker’s reptilian excuse for a chief of staff, trying to pretend like Steve’s somehow got it all wrong.

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
@rumwhileyoucan you got something to say to me, Rumlow?

He doesn’t have to wait two minutes.

Brock Rumlow | @rumwhileyoucan
@stevegrogers you know I do, princess

Steve met Brock Rumlow during staff orientation. Rumlow’s been Pierce’s right hand guy for a handful of years now, but he was on some panel to welcome the new Hill staff during onboarding season. He had kind of looked like the douchebag he is, but Steve hadn’t had much context at the time to pin him one way or another. The panel had been more or less pointless, although Rumlow shared some benign stories about his time on the Hill and made jokes that nobody thought was funny.

It was during the Happy Hour that he really showed his ass. Steve watched him make homophobic and sexist joke after fucking joke when he thought only the Boys were paying attention. The shit he had said about the younger female politicians—Steve hadn’t punched him at the bar, but he had “accidentally” spilled an entire mug of beer on him. Rumlow had been pissed as fuck, but Clint Barton, who had also been there, had grinned and given Steve a fistbump later.

Anyway, now, a year and change later, Steve still thinks he owes Rumlow a kiss with a fist and he and Clint get lunch once a week.

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
@rumwhileyoucan class act as always. Say what you gotta say. I’m looking forward to hearing this.

Brock Rumlow | @rumwhileyoucan
@stevegrogers fine, I’ll say it. your bill is garbage and your entire positions dramatic. yeah the climates changing, that’s what the fuckin Earth does, bro. dont see anyone complaining we made it out of the ice age

Steve stares at that—really, stares.

Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
@rumwhileyoucan even you can’t be that dumb…

Brock Rumlow | @rumwhileyoucan
@stevegrogers you’d like that wouldn’t you?
Steven G. Rogers | @stevegrogers
@rumwhileyoucan There’s nothing natural about losing billions of tons of ice a year, Rumlow. There’s nothing natural about rapidly melting glaciers and the sea level rising 8 inches in the last 100 years and rising even faster now. You think a 2 degree increase in weather means nothing? Earth is inhabitable because we live on the fucking margins.

He almost writes dumbfuck, but stops himself at the last minute. He closes his phone, looks up at the debate, and continues to seethe while not really listening to what anyone’s talking about.

His text messages start firing off again.

**Intern America:** hey, not that I don’t love what you’re doing, but jsyk the Twitterverse is like half coverage of the debate and half coverage of your fight with Rumlow

**BARTON:** ohhh someone’s about to get a beat down

**BARTON:** honestly surprised it didn’t happen like ten months ago

**Natasha R.:** God, I can’t fucking stand him. Did you know he’s had three sexual harassment complaints filed against him?

**Natasha R.:** Obviously didn’t go anywhere.

**Intern America:** okay Fox News is reporting some bullshit about us not having enough votes—hold on, gonna email it to you.

The latter distracts him for a moment, a sharp panic shooting through his chest. Steve looks up at the floor, scans across the desks and milling congresspeople to see Sam at his desk. Sam’s watching Representative May argue in support of the legislation, with one or two amendments to consider for practicality’s sake. Steve types out the text fast.

*Do we have the votes?*

There’s a lot a chief of staff can do, but ultimately, it’s up to the Whip to gather the votes the party needs. The Democrats chose well in Maria Hill, who could wrangle a vote out of a dying succulent, but that’s not to say that Steve doesn’t worry. He watches Sam glance down at his phone, a slight wrinkle crease his brows.

**Sam [eagle emoji]:** I think we’re three down. Maria and Peggy are working on it, last I heard.

**Sam [eagle emoji]:** Should I be worried?

There’s always a reason to worry in politics, but Steve doesn’t need to witness Sam’s worried face on national television or be the cause of it.

*Just some Fox News bs.*

Sam nods and looks back up, although the frown on his face doesn’t really go away. Ten minutes later, in the middle of some blathering bullshit from Representative Sitwell, Sam gets tapped on the shoulder by Peggy Carter. She leans over his shoulder, her red lips bright even from this distance. Her curls, always pristine, and streaked with just enough grey to look distinguished, brush the top of his shoulder as she leans in to whisper something to him.

Sam and Peggy whisper back and forth for a minute, before Sam nods and gets up. Then, ignoring the withering look Pierce sends both of them, they step out with Maria, Peter Quill, and Representative Maya Hansen.
Steve hopes that’s a good sign. He takes a deep breath and goes back to fighting trolls—and Brock fucking Rumlow—on Twitter.

The thing about a Twitter fight is that it’s not nearly as good as the real thing. Sure, Steve and Rumlow trade barbed insults over the course of the next hour, but all it does is ratchet up the frustration and anxiety Steve’s already feeling. The heat on the debate floor increases and so does Steve’s fight with Rumlow. Steve tries to reason with the asshole, giving him facts and logic, but you can’t logic the human manifestation of a swastika. Rumlow is all ad hominem attacks and refusing to engage with any of Steve’s points. He’s a Fox News troll and Steve fucking knows this, but it doesn’t stop him from engaging. He shouldn’t, but Sam’s busy doing his actual job and America’s busy manning Sam’s official Twitter and Kate’s busy scouring for news sources and Steve’s fighting with Bucky, so all he really has left to his name are about two dozen facts about the catastrophic effects of climate change and the absolutely unrepentant desire to punch Rumlow in the face.

The thing is, Steve finally leaves the floor, mid-debate, to use the bathroom and get something to eat.

The thing is, obviously Rumlow’s gonna be in the fucking area because Pierce is on the floor too and the Hill is irritatingly, devastatingly small.

So when Steve skids to a halt in the back courtyard of the Capitol Building, he does it with little surprise and increasing ire. He sucks in an angry breath and finds his hands curling into fists through no control of his own.

Brock Rumlow is a tall, dark-haired son of a bitch with a head shaped like a fucking block and a face that wouldn’t be out of place on a Wanted sign. His laughter is as ugly and obnoxious as he is; Steve hears it from yards away, the sound crawling over his skin like something sharp and barbed.

“He’s never going to get the vote,” Rumlow’s saying to some blandly attractive looking white guy Steve recognizes as a staffer on Senator John Garrett’s team. The guy’s name is Grant or Gus or something and Steve’s never had to talk to him, but he knows what kind of circles he runs in. Rumlow isn’t the only staffer capable of political evil.

Grant or Gus says very little and, honestly, looks a little disgruntled by having Rumlow so close to him, but Rumlow has never needed a responsive audience. His voice grows louder, echoing across the yard.

“What, he thinks he can just come here, with his over-inflated sense of ego and do whatever he wants?” Rumlow snorts. “No one cares about this bill. He thinks he’s got the votes to go, but Pierce’s made clear he doesn’t want some political upstart thinking he can just do shit. It’s D.C., baby. There’s rules and protocol and if you don’t pay the price, you don’t get the prize.”

Grant seems to roll his eyes, but he’s smoking so Steve misses what he says.

“Nah, Pierce has a couple of loaded guns he can fire,” Rumlow snickers. God, he’s a fucking moron. He’s an idiot who think he can just spill his boss’s secrets out in the open and no one will fucking hear. Or maybe he’s an idiot who knows that and doesn’t care. “You think he got where he got without cashing in on secrets? Anyway, CNN might be on Wilson’s small dick now, but he’s going to be a fucking laughingstock when the vote goes south.”

Steve can hear his blood pounding in his ears, his anger ratcheting up so quickly, he almost misses how it sets him alight.
Grant says something and Rumlow smirks.

“Fuck Rogers. And fuck Wilson. Just because one’s a fucking queer and the other’s a black—”

And Steve? Doesn’t listen to anything else.

Steve doesn’t fucking have to listen to anything else.

It’s about fifteen seconds between the word black leaving Rumlow’s mouth and Steve’s fist connecting with his jaw, hard.

When Steve gets into fights, his thoughts go flying out the window. His fists move faster than his brain and his brain sorta never catches up. It’s no different this time. Rumlow curses, staring at him, wild-eyed and slack-jawed, for just two fucking seconds before he launches himself at Steve.

The two grapple at each other, Rumlow grabbing Steve’s jacket and Steve landing another fist in his stomach. They go at each other with all of the pent-up anger of an Internet fight, yelling and cursing out loud, fists landing on jaws, Steve cutting up and Rumlow kneeing his stomach. Their suits get rumpled, the buttons on their nice, white shirts ripping.

Their voices ring across the courtyard and Steve is pure aggression and Rumlow’s bleeding from the temple, but Steve’s bleeding from the jaw, so call it fucking even. At some point, other people get their hands on them, but Steve and Rumlow break free of the restraints, colliding together, until they go down onto the brick ground, hard. Steve’s breath gets knocked out of him and Rumlow takes that moment to try and slug him across the face. Steve turns his head in time and Rumlow’s fist goes smashing into the concrete. He howls in pain and Steve, dizzy and in pain himself, elbows up, connecting with Rumlow’s sternum. Rumlow curses loudly and Steve swings up again, this time dislodging Rumlow from top.

Rumlow goes falling back and Steve falls him, landing a punch on his shoulder and another in his stomach. Rumlow cries out, a curse or mercy, Steve couldn’t fucking say, and Steve’s about to finish the job, one blow to his jaw, when a hand grabs his fist and pulls him away.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Let go!” Steve growls out loud, trying to break free again, but the person has a hand over Steve’s fist and a hard arm hooked over his chest. “Let me go!”

“You’re—going to get—yourself arrested,” a voice hisses—nearly spits—in his ear.

Steve’s so out of his mind with anger that he tries to break free one more time. The person doesn’t let go. If anything, he holds on tighter, with surprising strength, and drags Steve yards back.

“Steve!” the man says again. “For the love of God, Rogers, Wilson’s in there fighting for his fucking life and you’re out here throwing it all away? Get yourself together.”

It’s only then—only at the mention of Sam’s name, that Steve snaps out of it. He doesn’t go limp in the man’s arms, so much as he suddenly returns to his senses, his breathing heavy and his head aching.

It takes another minute to realize that it’s not some random person who’s dragged him back.

Bucky Barnes lets Steve go long enough for Steve to stumble slightly forward. Then he grasps Steve by the upper arm, hard, and drags him across the Hill.
“Fuck,” Steve hisses, with a wince.

Bucky gives him an unimpressed look.

Bucky’s been giving him an unimpressed look for the past half an hour.

“Are you doing that on purpose?” Steve complains, flinching back.

“Would you,” Bucky glares at him, “shut up?”

Steve returns the glare with everything he has in him, which, admittedly, isn’t very much. His head is still ringing slightly, his eye is just a little swollen, and every part of him aches—his jaw, his cheek, his chest, his ribs, his knuckles. He couldn’t put a time on his brawl with Rumlow, but it was long enough to take almost every part of his body out of commission for the afternoon. He doesn’t remember the last time a fight made him feel like he’s been laid out, but if he closes his eyes now, he might not open them again for the next one hour to seven days. He must be getting old.

“God,” Steve says after a moment. “Sam’s going to kill me.”

Bucky gives him a look like he thinks he might deserve it, which would make Steve bristle if Bucky didn’t currently have one hand on his uninjured jaw while he scrubs, gently, at the other side with a warm, wet cloth. Bucky’s thumb is firm against Steve’s chin, his other fingers curling underneath. Steve feels too battered to feel anything even close to desire, but he doesn’t mind the touch and he minds the warmth even less.

He closes his eyes and falls quiet while Bucky works.

He doesn’t know how long he does, time marked only by the feeling of the cloth sliding against his jaw, over his nose, gently across his eyes. Bucky turns his face one way and then another, the movement unbearably gentle, as though he’s afraid Steve might break or something.

“Hey, I’m going to unbutton your shirt,” Bucky murmurs. “That okay?”

Steve, halfway to drifting off, opens his eyes, slowly and sleepily.

“What?”

“Just want to see how bad it is,” Bucky says. His hands are paused at the top of Steve’s ruined shirt. “Is that okay?”

“Sure, that’s okay,” Steve says, drowsily.

It doesn’t take Bucky much work to get his jacket off of him and then, starting at the top, undoing the few remaining buttons on his shirt. Steve watches Bucky quietly through half-lidded eyes, his head pounding, but the rest of him strangely warm. When Bucky gets to the undershirt, he gives Steve another look which makes Steve, in the weird, hazy headspace he’s in, laugh. Fortunately, or unfortunately, that makes Bucky’s mouth twitch up. Steve watches that while Bucky takes the bottom of his dirty, torn shirt and lifts it up.

“Holy shit, Steve,” Bucky says.

Steve looks down dumbly as both he and Bucky take in the purple and red splotches all over his torso. There are ugly bruises coloring up the sides of his ribs, just to the left of his navel, across his
collarbone, on his right side, just under his armpits. They’re tender to the touch, which Steve only realizes because Bucky reaches forward and gingerly presses a few fingers to the biggest bruise.

Steve hisses out loud and Bucky pulls back his hand, as though burned.

“Shit,” he says quickly. “Sorry.”

“Just, a little tender.” Steve winces.

Bucky looks up to Steve for permission once more and Steve nods. Then Bucky leans forward again, gently—oh so gently—running his fingers across Steve’s bruises. The touch is soft at first and then firmer, Bucky testing the places where Steve is sore and the places his skin has softness left to give. Steve sucks in his breath at the sensation, his head swimming, body tingling everywhere he’s being touched and aching in the places he isn’t.

For once, it isn’t even close to sexual. He just wants to tilt his head forward, lean into Bucky’s shoulder, and let him hold him while he drifts off to sleep.

“What?” Bucky blinks.

“Oh, thanks,” Steve says and takes the painkillers. He pops them in and swallows dry and then nods at the certificate. “It says James Buchanan Barnes.”

“Who’s James then?” Steve says. He’s not trying to be an asshole actively, only his head kinda feels
like it’s filled with cotton and his limbs feel both tight and loose and he’s sitting almost shirtless in Bucky’s office on a day that should have been the biggest in his life, because he had to pick a brawl with Brock fucking Rumlow. Maybe he’s missing something.

Bucky sighs.

“Give me your hand, dumbass,” he says.

Steve frowns and Bucky glares at him, which makes him hand over his right hand. Somehow, Bucky’s found another wet cloth. He begins scraping at Steve’s busted knuckles with as much gentleness as he’s done everything else so far.

Bucky doesn’t say anything for a few minutes and Steve’s content to just watch him take care of him. Steve doesn’t usually let anyone take care of him, but then, he hasn’t had anyone try to take care of him in a long time. He feels warm in that spot, just beneath his rib cage.

“My name is James Buchanan Barnes,” Bucky says, frowning and rubbing at a spot where blood has crusted over. “That’s what my parents named me, I guess. But it didn’t stick. I guess they always expected a James, but they got a Bucky.”

“Why Bucky?” Steve asks, watching him.

“Becca named me—my sister. She’s a couple of years younger than I am, a total brat. Guess Ma told her my full name once when she was a kid and all she caught was the Buchanan part. I’ve been Bucky every since.”

“That’s okay with you?”

“My baby sister gave me the name,” Bucky says, looking up at Steve. “It’s the best thing about me.”

Steve doesn’t know whether to frown or smile at that. It occurs to him that he’s never heard Bucky answer an honest thing about him in the entire time they’ve known each other.

It occurs to him that he’s maybe never asked.

“Where’s she now?” Steve asks.

“New York,” Bucky says after a moment. He puts down the dirty rag and it’s only then that Steve notices the First Aid Kit he has pulled next to him on the coffee table he’s sitting on. Bucky rummages through and pulls out some antiseptic and a roll of gauze.

“Buck—” Steve starts, but Bucky shoots him a look.

“Shut up, Steve,” Bucky says. Steve doesn’t hold back his sigh and Bucky doesn’t hold back his eye roll. Steve offers his cleaned hand anyway and Bucky takes a moment to spread the Neosporin across the injured knuckles. It smarts, of course, and Steve lets out a little hiss that puts a somewhat smug look on Bucky’s face. Bastard.

“Where in New York?” Steve asks to distract himself from the pain. “I grew up in Brooklyn.”

Bucky pauses in his ministrations.

“Really? Me too.”

“Really?” Steve blinks. “Where?”
“Park Slope, close to Prospect Park,” Bucky says.

Steve lets out a low whistle.

“In one of those nice brownstones, huh? Wow, you really are rich.”

“God, you’re irritating,” Bucky says, making a face. “Somehow Rumlow didn’t beat the annoying out of you.”

“He got it worse,” Steve says, straightening, suddenly heated. “You shoulda seen his face—”

“Relax, Rocky,” Bucky snorts. He gets the gauze out and starts wrapping it around Steve’s knuckles. “What about you? What neighborhood?”

“Red Hook,” Steve says, still making an irate face. But then it smooths out. “Mostly. We had a rent-stabilized apartment for most of my life, so we could afford it. Then I went off to college and when I came back from the dorms, Ma had moved, so I had to too. Bounced around Brooklyn after that.”

“But stayed true to Brooklyn?” Bucky’s mouth twitches.

“It’s the only borough.” Steve grins.

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees. He finishes wrapping Steve’s right fist and asks for the left. Steve sighs, but hands it over without complaint.

“Tell me,” Steve says.

It takes him this long—this many months, but his thoughts are far enough away that he finally asks.

“Tell you what, Rogers?”

Steve pauses.

“About yourself.”

The problem with asking Bucky a question is that he answers. He’s not shy about it, not even close. He answers Steve like he’s been waiting for him to ask him all along.

Bucky tells Steve about growing up with the Barneses—an old money family that had found its roots on the Upper East Side before George Henry Barnes I had moved the whole family across the river to Brooklyn. That had been before the first World War, and the Barnes family had been in Park Slope ever since, growing up and raising children in a beautiful, spacious brownstone that had been handed down from father to son until it reached George Henry Barnes IV, Bucky’s father. George Henry Barnes IV followed the family’s legacy of making a lucrative career on Wall Street, but broke tradition everywhere else. He named his son, for example, not George Henry Barnes V, but James Buchanan Barnes. He also married someone from an upper middle class family and carried no political aspirations whatsoever.

It’s just a matter of luck, or genetics, that Bucky got the gene that skipped his dad. He grew up a red-blooded, old money Republican from a red-blooded, old money, card-carrying Republican family, although, Bucky admits with a smile, he had considered himself a Libertarian in college. Steve only manages not to gag at that and Bucky laughs in his face.

Bucky doesn’t mind talking about his family, it turns out. His face actually lightens when he does,
his eyes crinkling at the corners, his mouth twitching up, his expression brightening at each story. Bucky’s a good storyteller, Steve learns quickly. He’s funny and compelling, a snarky, cynical bastard who knows exactly when to lay the emotional beats and when to lay the humorous ones.

He tells Steve about all of the trouble he and his sister would get into growing up, hiding under tables and locking people in closets and causing general mayhem whenever their parents had anyone respectable over. He tells him about their summers in the Hamptons and their winter vacations to chalets in Europe, where his father and mother had friends in high places and knew various dignitaries besides. Some people only see ambassadors and minor princes and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies on TV, but Bucky grew up with them coming around, like it’s a perfectly normal thing to go home for winter break to have the son of a former U.S. president drinking coffee with your father.

Bucky had friends too, of course, and Steve doesn’t catch the names, but he catches the stories—the troublemaking of boys growing up together in the streets of Brooklyn and then, one by one, going to different boarding schools and Ivy League colleges. That part, at least, doesn’t surprise him.

“I’m surprised to see you slumming it now,” Steve says with a wry twist of his mouth.

“You mean with you?”

“Yeah,” Steve snickers. “Obviously I mean with me.”

“Yeah, well,” Bucky says, about a second away from a grin himself. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

Steve snorts in response.

“When have you ever begged for anything in your life, Barnes?” he asks, eyebrow raised.

For some reason, Bucky tinges pink and doesn’t really answer.

“What are you passionate about?” Steve asks.

“Excuse me?” Bucky, elbows on his knees, raises an eyebrow himself. He’s finished wrapping up Steve’s fists, the Neosporin now capped and the roll of leftover gauze on his lap.

“Come on. There has to be something. You don’t just end up here on the Hill because you don’t care about anything.”

“Some people end up here because they want power, Steve,” Bucky says, wryly. “In fact, most people do.”

“Are you one of them?” Steve asks.

What crosses Bucky’s face isn’t troubling, per se, but at least a moment of pause.

“No,” he says. “Or maybe I am, I don’t know. Counter question—how can you be passionate about everything?”

“What?” Steve stares at him.

“You find time to yell about everything. To get mad about everything. Tell me that’s not an act,” Bucky says.

Steve feels a stab of irritation.
“It’s not an act,” he says. “Why the fuck would it be an act?”

“Most things are an act,” Bucky says with enough amusement that Steve feels himself rankle.

“I can’t just care about things?”


Steve pinches the bridge of his nose and it stings. He doesn’t want to get worked up. Not right now.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Bucky asks.

“Why don’t you buy it?”

Bucky sits back, as though he’s really contemplating it.

“Because people are selfish,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“People are selfish, Steve,” Bucky says. “Fundamentally. They might do things with good intentions that have a net positive effect, but there’s something selfish underlying it. Always.”

“You don’t think there are any good people?” Steve asks, flatly.

“Did I say that?” Bucky shoots back. “Don’t be precious.”

Steve glowers and Bucky rolls his eyes, considering his words. Then he shrugs.

“I said that people do what they do because it benefits them in some way. That’s not a bad thing. Good intentions still have good results. And maybe someone does a good thing because that makes him feel good about himself. Maybe he does it because he thinks he’ll get good karma. Maybe he does it because he thinks helping poor people in a poor neighborhood will make that neighborhood more valuable and that will help the city, which will, in turn, help him, or the people he loves. Maybe it’s for the good guy reputation—I don’t know. Don’t really care. But people are self-serving and driven by ego and I find it hard to believe that someone could care about that many things because at some point, nothing benefits you that much.”

Steve—for a moment he’s rendered speechless. He doesn’t know what to say in the face of such painfully cliché cynicism. He’s not even angry so much as he is—confused. That one person can sit there, having picked someone off the ground in the middle of a fight and bandaged him up, with no apparent ulterior motive, and still say that no one and nothing is truly genuine.

“Wow, did you get that from the Nihilist’s Handbook?”

Bucky snorts.

“Feel free to counter.”

Steve rubs one side of his temple aggressively.

“You’re wrong,” he says, after a moment. “I get what you think you’re saying, but you’re wrong. That’s—needlessly cynical. Edgelord politics. People can be irritating and stupid and self-destructive, but that doesn’t mean they’re pure ego. I believe in the fundamental goodness of people.”
“You do,” Bucky scoffs.

“Yeah, Barnes,” Steve says, annoyed. “I think people tend to be good and gravitate toward good and, if given the right resources and opportunities and support in life, will be good. I do care about all of the things that I yell about. I care because I’m one person on a goddamned planet inhabited by goddamned billions of other people.”

He straightens, his shoulders tensing.

“We don’t have the luxury of not caring, Bucky. We’re in a position to make a real change—to make some kind of difference. Not everyone can say that. People are out there fighting tooth and nail just to survive. We have the luxury of not worrying about that, so it’s our responsibility to do the rest, when they can’t. What you do and what I do might not impact everyone directly, but it’ll impact enough people in enough ways that it matters. It will have—it can have some net, positive impact.”

Bucky stares at Steve, but he doesn’t stop him. Couldn’t if he tried, probably. Steve never was easy to stop when he had something to say. And he as fucking hell has something to say.

“We owe it to people to do that for them—to try for them when they can’t try for themselves. And if that means running myself into the ground about a bunch of things you think are bullshit—I don’t fucking care. I’ll do it. It’s the least I can do. So yeah. Yes. I care about all of those things and if more things come up, I’ll care about them too. I don’t go down without a fucking fight. I won’t do that.”

To his credit, Bucky says nothing for a minute. Then again, Steve is breathing so hard and clenching his teeth so tightly, that there’s nothing he probably could say, without getting a knuckle sandwich himself.

So he seems to just absorb what Steve says and when he answers, it’s with a half-smile.

“Yeah,” he says. “I see that. Dumbass.”

Steve’s mouth is open, ready to bite back against Bucky’s dismissal of what he’s said, but Bucky just puts his hands up.

“Okay,” he says. “I hear you.”

Steve’s mouth snaps shut. He looks as uncertain as he feels.

“You do?”


“You don’t agree?”

“Do I have to?” Bucky tilts his head.

Steve struggles to find his tongue. The easy answer is yes. The harder answer is no. The complex answer is somewhere in the middle.

“No,” he says, finally. “I guess you don’t.” A pause. “Although it would be easier if you did.”

Bucky gives him a crooked, soft smile, but says nothing.

After a moment, Steve unclenches.
The tension only lasts for a minute, anyway. Another thing Steve learns is that Bucky, unlike Steve, is capable of letting moments roll off his shoulders. It might not be a good thing, but it’s not the worst thing, either. Bucky’s quiet, as though chewing on what Steve’s said, up until the moment he’s not. Then he decides he’s thought about it long enough and switches topics, just like that. Steve struggles to keep up, because he’s a one-track minded, bull-headed asshole, but Bucky doesn’t really wait for him. He moves them along and Steve, not having any other option available to him, gets swept along.

Steve learns things he could have lived without—that Bucky is charming, that he’s loud on the things he wants to be loud about, that he’s a hard worker, that he takes what he wants when he sees it, and that he is unapologetically himself, no matter how much others want him to be someone else. It’s just the kind of stubborn, intractible, cantankerous attitude that Steve would admire the fuck out of if it didn’t pose the problems it did. For a moment, it almost makes Steve wish that it could be different—that there was the possibility here of more than just a hate fuck. But the more Bucky tells Steve about his card-holding Republican family, the more Steve has to swallow the bile that naturally comes up.

Does it matter to him that Republicans before were a different brand of Republicans than the modern iteration? Does it matter that neoliberal, blue dog Democrats are more or less cut from the same cloth as the Barnes family? It doesn’t matter that Reagan wasn’t a Nazi, he was still a terrible human who hated poor people and let the AIDS crisis spiral out of control. The line between Republicans then and Republicans now is a thin one—but still. It is a line.

Does that matter? What’s Steve going to do with that?

“Actually, we have some cousins who are Democrats,” Bucky says, grinning in the middle of a story. “The Minnesota Barneses. I think my great-grandad cut them out of the will, so now there’s just some poor, middle-class cousin out there with my face, asking for universal healthcare.”

“Ah, the better Bucky Barnes,” Steve says, wistfully.

“Yeah, too bad about the face,” Bucky grins wider.

“The face? What’s wrong with his face?” Steve asks.

“It’s not mine,” Bucky smirks.

Steve rolls his eyes, and shoves him.

The thing is, Bucky Barnes is beautiful. Yeah, he’s hot and he’s an unbelievable lay, but he’s beautiful too. He’s that kind of beautiful that belongs in old Hollywood, when every man wore pinstripe vests and spit-shined black shoes and had a pristine curl in the middle of his forehead. He’s that kind of beautiful that kind of defies logic, so bright that his face almost doesn’t make sense to look at, when taken all together. His smile is just as deceptively bright as his eyes. His hair curls across his forehead, laying in a spiral against his temple. When Bucky looks at him, through the fringe of his long eyelashes, when Steve’s gaze lingers on that dimple pressed into his chin, when Bucky’s fingers brush Steve’s knuckles, softly, Steve is almost overwhelmed by how stupendously, unbelievably, terribly beautiful he is. It almost doesn’t make sense, that someone could look like that and that he could be here, in front of Steve, gently taking care of him.

He and Bucky don’t make sense, any way he turns it. They’re bad together—both uncompromising, opinionated, loud assholes—but they’re also good together. They could be terrible, but they could be
Steve doesn’t know exactly what he’s feeling, but he knows it’s looser than he was—looser than he used to be. Bucky makes him looser and maybe that’s a good thing and maybe it isn’t, but it is something and maybe that’s where he needs to start.

“You haven’t heard a word I’ve said,” Bucky says, slightly bemused.

Steve blinks rapidly.

“What?”

“You don’t have a subtle bone in your body, Rogers,” Bucky says. He puts the Neosporin and gauze away. “All done.”

“Thanks,” Steve says.

“You always do this?” Bucky asks.

“Do what?”

“Get into fights over pending legislation,” Bucky says. He doesn’t move from where he’s sitting on the coffee table, but he doesn’t come closer either. They sit, opposite each other. “Because there’s a lotta legislation out there and I can’t always be out taking a smoke break at the exact same time you get whaled on.”

“I wasn’t getting whaled on,” Steve mutters. “You smoke?”

“Bad habit,” Bucky shrugs. “When I’m stressed.”

“You’re capable of that?”

“Don’t he be an ass,” Bucky gives him a look.

“Sorry. You’re just about the least ruffled person I’ve ever met on the Hill.”

Bucky snorts and stretches, leaning back onto his hands.

“You think it’s easy working for Stark?”

“What, you don’t braid each other’s hair at night and talk about how poor people are ruining the country?”

“No, he’s balding.” Bucky grins. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Shit, where’s my phone?”

Bucky snorts and shakes his head.

“Tony’s a family friend,” he says. “The Starks and the Barneses have been in business together since the Mayflower set sail to hear my old man tell it. More like since the turn of the century. We’ve always had ties, had Howard and Tony over to dinner since I was a kid.”

“Good old nepotism.” Steve smiles, but Bucky doesn’t.
He lets out a frustrated breath instead.

“I know you think I’m just some entitled rich kid and okay, you’re not completely wrong, but I worked for what I got. I went to school. I made the grades. I got offers to join a bunch of Big Law firms and I went to Jones Day and worked my ass off for three years.”

“The Republican feeder firm,” Steve mutters. Then, “You didn’t get those things out of nowhere, Bucky. It was your privilege that let you go to the schools you got into. Privilege that you had the money to do that. Privilege that you’re not strapped with a mountain of student debt like an albatross around your neck like the rest of us.”

“Jesus Christ, Steve,” Bucky swears, irritated. “I get it. Nothing I’ve ever done has meant anything. It doesn’t matter that I worked my ass off or that I could have become another rich kid cliché and instead I skipped parties and hanging out and shit that would have made me popular with my peers to go after what I want. Do you know what I hate?”

“What?” Steve looks at him warily.

“I hate being looked at and dismissed. Yeah, it happens to privileged, rich assholes too. I worked for this. Okay, maybe I had some ladders handed to me others didn’t, but Stark doesn’t just give jobs to family friends. I went through four rounds of interviews. They looked through my law school transcript and found nothing wanting. My old firm had nothing but good things to say about me. You can—call me whatever you want, think I eat poor kids for breakfast and I’m scum of the earth, I don’t fucking care. But don’t you dare say I didn’t work for what I have. Don’t you dare say I didn’t earn it.”

Bucky’s breathing hard, his eyes wide and his hands curled into tight fists.

Steve could easily tell him that it’s easy to earn things when you’re already three steps up the ladder. He could look Bucky in the eyes and tell him the fact that he was able to go to an Ivy League law school, that his pedigree and his white skin and his rich background got his foot in the door to a Big Law firm, that Tony Stark had even looked at his application—that these were all signs of privilege and sure, maybe Bucky worked for all of it, but he necessarily didn’t have to work as hard as people who didn’t come to the table with those privileges.

Steve could say all that, but he watches Bucky closely and he—doesn’t.

Steve knows better than anyone what it feels like to have his every accomplishment dismissed, belittled. And it’s not as though he doesn’t come to the table with a leg up himself. He grew up poor and queer, but he’s an able-bodied, traditionally handsome, cis white man with an unbelievably supportive mother. He will never know what it’s like to be Sam or America, what they had to fight to get to where they are.

Maybe this isn’t workable. Or maybe it’s a conversation for another time, a time when Bucky will listen.

Bucky runs a hand through his hair, shakily.

“I know you don’t think much of me, Steve, and I get it, but—I’m not stupid. I just don’t think it should matter.”

Steve frowns.

“What?”
“Political parties—ideologies. I like your stupid, stubborn ass. And I know you like me too. No matter how hard you try not to. Like I said, you don’t have a subtle bone in your body. I just don’t get why it has to matter who we work for. It’s just politics.”

It’s this—this more than anything that closes Steve up. He doesn’t flare with irritation so much as frustration. Every time he thinks they could make something work, that there’s something here to salvage or at least compromise, Bucky proves why they can’t. Steve closes his eyes, his temple throbbing with headache. He breathes out through his nose and looks at Bucky.

“The personal is political, Buck,” he says.

“I don’t know what that means.” Bucky’s mouth turns down at the corners and Steve has to suppress a sigh.

“I know.”

Bucky doesn’t ask him, is the thing. Maybe if he had, it would have changed something. Maybe if he had, it would have meant something. Maybe it wouldn’t have, but he doesn’t, so they don’t get to find out one way or another.

The silence between them is awkward after that. Steve wishes the painkillers would kick in. His jaw aches, his torso is riddled with bruises, his fists hurt. He wants to lay down where he is and go to sleep.

“Here,” Bucky says after a while.

“What?”

Bucky gives him a look and when Steve is still lost, he leans forward and starts buttoning him back up.

“Oh.”

Steve watches Bucky slowly make his way up his chest, the discolored skin rising and falling as he breathes. Bucky’s fingertips slip over the buttons, brushing against him. It’s warm, the smooth touch of skin on skin, and Steve takes in a shaky breath. He watches the top of Bucky’s head, feels his warmth cascade against him.

Bucky reaches the top, or the last button still remaining on the shirt halfway up his chest. He doesn’t move.

“Buck,” Steve says, and his voice comes out thin and hollow.

Bucky looks up at him and it’s there—laid bare in clear blue eyes. It’s just hate sex, Steve tries to tell himself. They’re just two guys, diametrically opposed, who like sex and, especially, sex with each other. That’s the only reason Steve is here and not someone else.

But that’s not what it looks like. It’s certainly not what Bucky’s expression says. There’s a vulnerability Steve’s never seen before and it hooks itself around his middle and pulls, his stomach and breath dropping away.

Bucky touches Steve’s face.

It burns there and sparks everywhere else. In Steve’s chest, his mottled, hurt, terribly frightened,
disgusted chest, he feels a distinct keening, a longing so strong it startles him.

Bucky’s eyes drop to his mouth.

Steve swallows.

“No,” he says, quietly.

Bucky, an inch away from his mouth, freezes.

Steve closes his eyes.

“Please,” he says. “Don’t kiss me.”

It’s not what Bucky wants to hear and, truthfully, if he takes a single moment to be honest with himself, it isn’t what Steve wants to hear either. It makes him ache to say it out loud, to see the shuttered expression that comes over Bucky’s face. But if respecting principles was easy, everyone would do it. It’s not what he wants, but he knows it’s the right thing to say.

They should have drawn boundaries a long time ago.

This is unworkable.

Bucky holds on for another moment before letting go.

“Okay,” he says. “I won’t.”

Steve opens his eyes again.

They sit facing each other, unspeaking, and Steve begins to feel terrible. It only has partly to do with the brawl.

“What about sex?” Bucky asks, after a minute.

“What?” Steve blinks.

“What?” Steve blinks.

“Sex,” Bucky repeats. He fortifies himself with a breath and when he looks back up, all traces of his previous expression are wiped clean. He just looks neutral now, curious even. Maybe a little cold. “Is that still on the table?”

It shouldn’t be. Boundaries and all.

“I’m tired, Buck,” Steve says, by way of response.

“That’s not a no,” Bucky says and it comes out softer than he likely means for it to. “You got yourself knocked about, Steve. Come on. Let me get you off.”

Steve looks at him uncertainly, wavering, and Bucky moves closer. He has a different look in his eyes now, both familiar and unfamiliar.

“You got me last time,” he says, and there’s that crooked smirk Steve hates so much. “I want to pay you back. Let me make you feel good.”

Steve doesn’t think it’s a good idea. No—scratch that. He knows it’s a bad idea. But he’s so unmoored, so unsettled by the afternoon, so bone-exhausted, that the last thing he has left to him is the fortitude to say no.
So he doesn’t.


Steve Rogers, the King of bad ideas.

Bucky looks surprised, just for a second; but then his face is unreadable again. He touches Steve’s elbows, slides his fingers down to his wrist bones, stopping shy of his bandaged hands. He tugs at Steve’s wrists, and Steve raises one eyebrow because he’s unsure. His ribs still hurt from the fight, but that aching spot inside has nothing to do with fistfights, and everything to do with the man in front of him. He’s too tired to ignore it, but he’s too tired to not. He watches Bucky, instead.

“So lean back,” Bucky says quietly, and pulls Steve how he wants him to go, head back against the leather of the couch, legs spread wide. Bucky stands up from the coffee table only to sit back down next to Steve. It feels like a weight taken off Steve’s sore body somehow, to sit back the way Bucky wants to, with Bucky next to him. Steve closes his eyes, lets gravity pull his aching body into the couch. He breathes in the faint, familiar smell of the man next to him, coffee and cologne.

He almost jumps at the touch at his jaw, right where the bruise is coming up, but it’s light enough that it doesn’t hurt. Bucky’s fingers trail down his neck, over the cotton of his shirt—over, he realizes, the path of the bruises Bucky touched earlier.

Steve opens his eyes to see Bucky watching his own hand move lower over Steve’s torso, his expression intent. But he notices Steve’s attention almost immediately, and his gaze flicks up to meet Steve’s. He doesn’t smile, and he doesn’t smirk; he just keeps his eyes on Steve’s as his hand slides inexorably lower to Steve’s belt.

His eyes dart down once or twice as he gets Steve’s belt undone and his pants unzipped, but by the time his hands snake through Steve’s open fly, he’s making unflinching eye contact again. And it’s that, as much as the touch of his fingers to Steve’s dick that has Steve gasping, the blood rushing to his cock.

He wasn’t hard before, whatever arousal he might have felt subsumed by his own physical pain and by what he unfortunately has to think of as the two of them talking about their feelings, or whatever they have, but he’s rapidly hardening now. His body is like a tuning fork, and for whatever reason, Bucky’s touch is the perfect frequency.

He’s not a complete idiot; he knows that Bucky isn’t thrilled any more than he is by wherever they’ve ended up. It’s a muddy, middle ground—a purgatory of sex, the hate fading faster and faster, a place where rational thought and reasonable actions go to exist in stasis, in perpetuity, until one or the other is brave enough to say no. It’s a moot point, anyway. As much as they seem unable to stop, they can’t really go on, either. But Bucky strokes slowly, a light touch, and he doesn’t look away from Steve’s face.

And Steve can’t look away either. His body hurts, and the inside of his chest feels bruised in a way no asshole’s fists could make it. It’s a cliché to say that his heart is sore, but that’s what it feels like. And there’s some part of him that wishes—he doesn’t know what. People don’t change for other people, not really. People change for themselves, if at all. He’s not going to change who he is, and maybe it’s selfish to wish that Bucky would become someone else for him, so that he could see this leading somewhere else. Maybe it’s selfish for Steve to let Bucky do this for him, even knowing that’s not possible. But just for a second, looking at the familiar, beautiful planes of Bucky’s face, Steve lets himself wish.
Bucky tugs at his waistband, and Steve lifts his hips so Bucky can pull his pants down. Steve’s hard now, his cock flushed, and when Bucky wraps his fingers around it, Steve can’t help saying, “Bucky,” on a breath that’s half exhale, half moan.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and the corner of his mouth ticks up into an expression that’s not quite a smile. He runs his fingers through the precome at the head of Steve’s dick and slides his fingers down, just as slowly. Steve thrusts up, chasing Bucky’s hand, but Bucky shakes his head and presses Steve’s hip back to the couch with his other hand.

It’s a little awkward, but Bucky slides closer and suddenly it’s the perfect angle, the movements of Bucky’s hands effortless, easy. His body is a warm, solid line against Steve’s, their shoulders pressed together.

He keeps going at the same slow pace, and pleasure is building inside of Steve like an oncoming train. He’s panting, gasping, shallow breaths that don’t seem to bring in enough air, trying not to move his hips even though he wants nothing more. Bucky’s breathing isn’t steady either, but when Steve puts a hand on his leg, he moves it away, replacing Steve’s gauze-wrapped hand on the couch.

All he seems to want is what he said: to get Steve off, to make him feel good. And god, it feels so good, the slow, relentless motion winding Steve higher and higher, Bucky watching Steve’s face all the while. Steve is so hard and Bucky’s hand on him feels so good. It’s pleasure and tension wound together, cresting higher and higher, until the exquisite burn of it crescendos and Steve is on the brink of orgasm.

“Bucky,” Steve warns, his voice breathy.

“I know,” Bucky says, and leans his head on Steve’s shoulder, finally looking away from Steve’s face so he can watch him come. The weight of his head resting on Steve might not be affection, but it feels enough like it that the fingerprint of pain on the inside of his ribs twinges as he comes, spilling over Bucky’s hand with a moan. He feels wrung-out and blissful; he feels hollow. He tilts his head back onto the couch.

Bucky cleans Steve off gently with a handkerchief, of which he seems to have an endless supply and must launder frequently, and then wipes his hand clean. Steve pulls his pants back up and zips up. He feels—not lost exactly, but not quite right either. He feels unbalanced, if he’s going to put a word to it. This is the first time they’ve been in a room with a door that locks, and as many times as Steve has thought about it—

This was not what he had imagined.

He guesses, he’s not exactly sure what he had imagined. He guesses, it doesn’t really matter one way or another.

“Bucky,” he says again, like it’s the only thing he can say, and he doesn’t sound as certain as he wishes he did. Drawing boundaries is the right thing to do; it’s only that he’s pretended not to have any for so long that it’s making it feel wrong, somehow. He reaches to touch Bucky’s thigh again, and when Bucky glances up at him, he looks tired. “Come on, I could get you back.”

Bucky smiles at that, but it’s an expression without much humor. He reaches over and touches Steve’s sore jaw, a touch so feather-light that it doesn’t hurt at all, just leaves an impression of warmth. Then his hand falls away and he taps Steve’s bandaged hand.

“No, you couldn’t, dumbass—you’re hurt.”
He stands up and straightens his clothes as if they’d gotten rumpled, so Steve stands up too and puts himself to rights.

His head rings, but it’s as much from trying to process what’s happened as it is from his injuries. He sighs, his hands hanging limply by his sides.

Bucky turns away, but Steve stops him.

“If everyone has a self-interested motivation for everything—” Steve begins. Bucky pauses and turns back to look at him, eyebrows drawing together, a tiny pin-scratch of a line forming between them. Steve takes a deep breath. “What was possibly selfish about this?”

There’s a moment of silence. Then the line between Bucky’s eyes eases.

“Just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean I don’t have one.” He opens the door. “Try not to get into any more fist fights on your way home, Steve.”

Steve leaves.

He doesn’t.

The bill passes, 222 for to 213 against. It scrapes through along party lines, with four Republicans defecting for the good of the planet.

Alexander Pierce is fuming, but Sam Wilson looks triumphant—he looks radiant.

He looks like a brilliant, empathetic, progressive political powerhouse come home.

“Representative,” Helmut Zemo raises a hand at the press conference. “What is next?”

Sam looks at him, a grin spread across his face. He leans into the microphone.

“The Senate,” he says. “Then—the President.”

Chapter End Notes

+ Art by the INCREDIBLE em-dibujsb and commissioned by the LOVELY mitsususu. Art can be RTed here on Twitter and here on Tumblr.

+ We appreciate your readership so much, but we also understand that there are a lot of complicated feelings and political overtones/undertones here. It's hard to conceptualize the Bucky Barnes We Know and Love as a Republican, but in the universe of this fic he grew up as a white, privileged rich boy facing little to no consequences.
+ We hope this chapter helped paint that picture a little clearer! If you still want to talk about the decisions & politics of this fic--leave us a signed in comment and we're absolutely happy to discuss! Cheers! ♥
Steve has always been good at compartmentalizing, good at ignoring difficult personal crossings and hyper-focusing on his professional career instead. It makes him bad at being human, but great at contributing to the capitalist structures that assess a person’s value by their productive output and little else.

That is to say, Steve’s a great worker, but a disaster of a human being. He’s used to it, at the very least.

Chapter Notes

This week’s chapter came in at over 18K (?????????? how), so for ease of reading it’s been split up into two chapters--Chapter 7 and 8! Chapter 8 will go up in a few hours once the editing process has been completed.
Hearts may softly break in the background, but the political process doesn’t give two shits about that. Code Green passes the House to tremendous, overwhelming applause and not a few hot takes from Fox News about how this is the future liberal snowflakes want. There’s some meme going around with Sam’s face on it as he smirks at Pierce and America and Kate print it out and stick it on Sam’s door. Sam’s in such a good mood that he even lets them.

The legislative process, as long-winded and unbearably tedious as it is works like this: legislation passes from one chamber to the other, unless there’s a comparable bill in the other chamber at the same time and if there is that, the other bill has to also pass its chamber and both bills then go to a conference committee to be reconciled. God bless bicameralism, the Founding Fathers really got away from a monarchy only to devise a system of government that was even more annoying.

This is how America describes the political process to Kate. Kate’s response is to look so confused and irritable that America grins wildly, shortly before kissing her.

“That’s not sexual harassment is it?” Steve asks Sam, the third or fourth time it happens during the work day.

“Stop being grumpy,” Sam says, elbowing Steve. “They’re young and in love.”

“I don’t remember you taking that approach with me.” Steve squints at his best friend.

“That’s because you were old and in dumbass,” Sam says. “The rules are different.”

Steve crosses his arms, grumbling.

That seems unfair to say, considering the emotional trauma that Steve is currently weathering, but he supposes it’s not Sam’s fault. Sam’s too busy to have to deal with the romantic catastrophe of his best friend’s life and Steve’s not selfish enough to tell him about it. It’s easy enough to ignore anyway, to put on a smile and do his work and ignore the fact that his head is a muddled mess of half-thoughts and semi-regrets most of the time. Steve has always been good at compartmentalizing, good at ignoring difficult personal crossings and hyper-focusing on his professional career instead. It makes him bad at being human, but great at contributing to the capitalist structures that assess a person’s value by their productive output and little else. That is to say, Steve’s a great worker, but a disaster of a human being. He’s used to it, at the very least.

Anyway, the House bill is out of their hands by this point, but Senator Rhodes’ version is stalled in the Senate. Their bill won’t necessarily fail if Senator Rhodes’ bill does, but given how interconnected the two packages are, chances of the Senate passing Sam’s Code Green if they choose not to move on the Senate version is precariously slim.

It puts everyone in the office on edge, even Sam.

He’s so over-scheduled these days that Steve barely sees him in the office and sees him even less at home. Sam is in meetings during the day—with other Representatives, with Senators, with advocates he and Senator Rhodes are trying to galvanize to put pressure on Senate Republicans. The fact is that the current state of Congress is as divided as it’s ever been. Legislation rises and falls on party lines and the Republicans have the edge in the Senate. This means that for either Code Green or Senator Rhodes’ bill to pass the chamber, the Democrats will have to flip at least five votes. The Republicans, as Steve is reminded every single day, are obstinate, spineless assholes who put party over country, so the process of flipping votes is not only difficult, it’s almost impossible.

Still, there’s something to be said about tenacity and even more to be said about lack of sleep.
Sam sacrifices his sleep and free time to work behind closed doors, trying to help Rhodes get the votes. Their coffee machine drips in the background of the office at all hours of the day and Steve has to make a trip to Costco to buy an industrial-sized bag of pre-ground beans. It kind of tastes like cardboard, but it can’t be helped; sometimes quantity does matter over quality. Everyone in the office is buzzed on coffee so much that it stops working on them altogether.

“This is crazy,” Kate says one day when she pulls up Sam’s schedule and sees he has three back-to-back meetings, a lunch, and two more afternoon meetings that day alone. “He’s going to lose what’s left of his mind. I’m going to lose what’s left to my mind.”

Steve, who is trying to politely harass Senator Borson’s chief of staff into giving him her schedule so that Sam can put some kind of lunch on the books with her, looks up at Kate with a mildly perturbed expression on his face.

“The great part of politics,” he says to her, “is that you don’t actually need it.”

“Need what?” Kate stares at him.

“Your mind,” Steve says and taps his temple. “It’s actually discouraged.”

“How else am I supposed to get my work done?” Kate asks.

“Sheer willpower and spite?” Steve offers.

“That would explain a lot about our political system,” America comments from her computer. She’s on her third cup of coffee and there’s a handful of chocolate wrappers littering her desk. It’s about as disorganized as Steve has ever seen America, which is the real indication of how close to the verge everyone on Sam’s staff currently is. The second indication is how her expression clouds. “Oh, fuck me in the eyeball.”

“That sounds unsanitary,” Kate says.

“And logistically suspect,” Steve mutters and hangs up his phone in frustration. He scrolls down his contact sheet to look for her legislative director’s name. It’s someone named Fenris.

“Fuck!” America says, louder. This time Steve looks up. “We overscheduled him.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how, I always check the schedule a hundred times!” America frowns. For once, she sounds stressed. She looks stressed too. The entire office seems to be on their last leg these days, but especially today. “Senator Angrboda...Flokisdottir?”

“That’s a name?” Kate blinks.


“Friday,” America says, frantically clicking through the schedule. “1 pm. It’s her and—”

“Sam and Rhodey have been working to flip her,” Steve says. “He can’t miss this lunch, she’s impossible to get a hold of.”

“Yeah, well,” America says and looks up at him. She sounds like she’s on the verge of panicking. “It’s her or Stark.”

Kate inhales sharply.
“Stark?” Steve says immediately.

“It’s here,” America says, definitely panicking now. “I don’t remember putting it in. I don’t know, god, there’s been so much shit going on, maybe I did and I forgot, fuck—but he’s never free, Steve, you know he never agrees to anything—it took us months to get him to agree to—fuck, if Sam misses this, he—”

Steve doesn’t have to be told twice.

“Can you talk to him?” America asks, wild-eyed.

“Tony?” he asks.

“No, Barnes,” America looks at him, nearly begging. Her eyes are wide, her jaw clenched. Her chest is fluttering rapidly and Steve feels sympathy pangs almost immediately—he’s no stranger to panic. “You’re both—you’re still in contact, right?”

Steve tries not to blanch and evidently fails because, much to his horror, America’s expression crumples into something so close to pleading he almost inadvertently says something reassuring to her.

“Please,” America does plead. “Steve.”

Steve feels something protective flare up in him that he will never admit to if asked. They’ve all been young and fucked things up. America shouldn’t have to feel guilty for something of this magnitude if all it will take is for Steve to swallow his pride and call up Bucky.

It’s not her fault they’d left things the way they had.

“Yeah,” Steve says, swallowing thickly. “I’ll talk to him.”

The relief is almost immediate; it sweeps across her face in a way that Steve can almost feel himself.

“Thank you,” America whispers and he nods, blankly.

Steve turns back to his contact list for Hela Borson, an anxious knot forming in the pit of his stomach. He scrolls through, distracted, and doesn’t notice when he’s actually dialed the numbers.

Of course they pick up this time.

“Hello?” a throaty, deep voice answers.

“Hello, Fenris?” Steve says, trying to shake himself back into focus. “This is—Steve Rogers from Representative Wilson’s office. I’ve been trying to get a hold of your office. We want to put a lunch on the books.”

Their efforts pay off. On Wednesday, Steve’s in the middle of composing a reply email to Angie Martinelli on potential Senate and committee strategy when he hears yelling from Sam’s office. Steve freezes, hands positioned over his keyboard and America freezes, the phone hovering somewhere in between her ear and her shoulder. Kate doesn’t freeze, but she does look mildly concerned from where she’s pouring herself another cup of Costco coffee.

“Sam?” Steve calls, cautiously, and there’s more yelling. He gets up, his chair clattering behind him. “Fuck!”
Steve’s ready to body slam the locked door open when it gets flung open from the inside and suddenly he has an armful of best friend draped over him.

“What the—” America says out loud at the same time Steve says, “Are you okay? Is this a cry for help?”

“We. Flipped. Castle!” Sam says, loudly. He’s grinning ear to ear, his eyes wide and nearly sparkling.

“What?” Kate gasps loudly.

“Shut. The fuck. Up.” Steve stares at him and Sam extracts himself from the very platonic friendship hug and grasps Steve by the shoulders. His face is too bright to be kidding. “Shut the fuck up!”

“Frank Castle?” America says, hanging up the phone gracelessly. “Holy shit—we flipped Frank Castle? That guy doesn’t listen to anyone. Seriously, I’ve seen him not listen to himself. How many people did you have to kill to make that happen?”

“No one! Not one! We don’t have to bury a single body,” Sam says, grinning.

He has his jacket off and is loosening his tie as he nearly bounces up on his feet. For the first time in weeks, the lines of his body aren’t tense. His shoulders seem soft, he’s almost—relaxed? Steve only realizes then how long it’s been since he’s seen Sam smile, genuinely. If the rest of their overworked, underappreciated obvious has been busting their asses for the past few months, then Sam’s been bursting enough ass for all of them, with more than enough ass busting to spare. Steve will never tell him this during his time of need, but he’s starting to go slightly grey around the edges, like second term Barack Obama. It’s about time they started seeing some wins.

“Okay, if you know black magic, Wilson,” America says, holding up both of her hands. “I don’t fuck with that.”

“Her abuela worked the fear of the supernatural into her,” Kate says, with a fond look on her face.

America crosses herself.

“No black magic,” Sam says. He leans against Steve’s desk, which has slowly been filling up with paper again. Steve eyes the stack behind Sam apprehensively, but then decides fuck it, if the tower collapses, then they’ll deal with the cascade of papers when it happens. “Just some good old fashioned politics.”

“Okay, so we’re back to the bodies then,” Steve says. He offers Sam a stick of gum, which Sam takes with a half-smirk.

“Told you not to get rid of that shovel.”

“I had to, that was part of Ma’s last art installation,” Steve says.

“Oh yeah, she’s working on a new piece, right?” Sam asks, popping the gum into his mouth, crumpling the wrapper and throwing it across the room. It bounces off of America’s head, which makes her scowl. “I told her I’d come to her next show.”

“What?” Steve blinks. “Even I didn’t promise her that.”

“I know, that’s why Sarah Rogers loves me better.”
“Hey—!” Steve protests and Sam smacks the gum in his mouth loudly.

“Hello, is there an answer to my question?” America says, picking up the ball of wrapper and pitching it into the nearest trash can. “Or like, an adult in this room?”

“Definitely not,” Kate replies and Steve throws a crumpled bubblegum wrapper at her head for her effort.

“This is harassment!” Kate cries and Steve grins at her.

“Quid pro quo or whatever,” Sam says, ignoring them both and turning back to America. “He was on the fence about it anyway and I’ve been working on trying to ease his reservations the last two weeks. Also there’s some corruption clean up legislation he wants sponsored in the House that doesn’t sound half bad, so I told him I’d put my name on it if he signed onto ours. Well. Rhodey’s.”

“Is that wise?” Steve asks. He hasn’t looked at whatever Castle wants Sam to sign onto, which makes him nervous, even though he trusts Sam. “Getting into bed with...Frank Castle?”

The visual is almost as troubling as the reality.

“It’ll be okay,” Sam says, after a moment. “Everything comes at a price and it wasn’t the...worst one to pay.”

They stand still for a moment, acknowledging what is said and what remains unsaid. The truth of the matter is that politics isn’t a clean game. This is the hard part of chasing their political dreams. They can run the cleanest game in D.C. and still come up with their hands dirty. That’s not to say Sam will ever do something to compromise his morality or principles, but that’s not to say the grey areas don’t get stretched.

Steve trusts Sam, more than anyone. His grey is someone else’s high ground. If Sam says it’ll be okay, then Steve knows it’ll be okay. And if it isn’t, they’ll work their asses off to make sure it is.

“Just a couple of more to go,” Steve says, breaking the silence. He claps a hand on Sam’s shoulder and squeezes. “We’ve sacrificed everything for this. Let’s just get this over the finish line. We’ll cross the other bridges when we get to them.”

Sam lets out a shaky exhale. He’s human too. Sometimes he just needs to be told that it’s okay, that making compromises is okay. It’s funny that this task falls to Steve, but for Sam he’ll do it. For Sam he’ll do almost anything.

“Any word from Stark?” Sam says, turning to Steve. He looks so grateful that Steve doesn’t have the heart to tell him how much he would rather die than make this call.

“Yeah,” Steve says, swallowing the hot ball of lead that’s settled into his stomach. “Almost there.”

Ultimately, he does it because he would rather eat his own hand than let America know he’s too much of a fucking coward to call Bucky Barnes.

He’s left the office by then, his peacoat wrapped warm about his shoulders. The mid-November wind is icy, the cold in the air cutting through a coat that wouldn’t pass muster if Sarah Rogers ever saw wind of it. Steve had bought it on a whim from some website after seeing targeted ads on Instagram and eventually falling for every one of them.

It’s not thick and it’s barely warm, but it cuts a good shape on him, which he figures is definitely
what ultimately matters.

He wraps his scarf tighter around his neck and braces himself against the cold, trying to cross the courtyard as quickly as possible to get to the train. The sky is a thick grey above him, that kind of heavy that portends some kind of precipitation, although it’s not clear which.

It becomes clear when Steve is struggling across the yard and suddenly cold rain begins pelting his face at a slant. He swats at it in irritation, as though that will help, and in revenge, it seems, the skies open up.

Cursing, Steve stumbles through the downpour, the water soaking his hair and coat and sweeping into his nice, dress shoes. He nearly runs into two other staffers—literally—trying to make it to shelter and eventually stumbles under an outstretched awning. He’s so close to the metro that it doesn’t make sense to call a Lyft at this point.

Instead, he catches his breath and glares at the dark skies themselves, as though they’re to blame for his predicament, which he supposes they are. He waits out the rain, which means he has no excuse to keep putting it off.

Steve pulls out his phone and dials.

The thing is, it almost goes to voicemail. Steve tenses, clenches, and almost releases a breath of relief. If it goes to voicemail, he’ll just leave a message. Bucky will answer or he won’t, but it will be beyond Steve’s realm of responsibility. He can move on from this purgatory of action and inaction.

He’s not that lucky.

It’s just before the call goes to voicemail that he picks up.

“Steve?” Bucky’s voice comes, cautious. “Is everything okay?”

Steve leans against a brick wall, feeling the water splash against his already waterlogged feet and almost laughs. He’s cold and he’s wet and he’s tired and it’s barely been two weeks, but god, it’s good to hear Bucky’s voice again. He has the strange, unwelcome realization that he missed it. He shoves that realization under sheets of cold rain.

“Hey Bucky,” Steve says, equally careful. “Yeah I’m okay.”

“Okay,” Bucky says. He gives Steve a chance to speak, but Steve can’t seem to get the words out. There’s a pressure squeezing at his rib cage.

“Did you call me on accident?” Bucky asks, when Steve doesn’t say anything.

Steve raises a hand and rifles it through his wet hair. The strands cling to his fingers, then drop onto his forehead and stick there.

“No,” Steve says. “I had a reason.”

“Okay,” Bucky says again. After another bout of silence, he says. “Are you outside? Why’s it so loud?”

As if in response, the rain increases. The loudness of it rings in Steve’s ears.

He covers his face with his hand and tries to shake this off.

“Yeah,” he says. “Got caught in the rain.”
“Oh,” Bucky says. Then, curious, “Did you need company or—”

“I was wondering,” Steve spits it out through gritted teeth. “If you could do me a favor.”

The silence doesn’t sound like Bucky wants to do him any favors. How strange.

“What kind?” Bucky asks. “I could try.”

It occurs to Steve that this would have been easier if Bucky had said no. He’s not saying yes, but he’s saying he’ll try, which is almost worse. This is hard enough—awkward enough—without Bucky Barnes showing he has any kindness left to give.

“Stark—” Steve starts and stops. “Tony. He has a lunch on the books with Sam. For this Friday. America...she made a mistake. He has another lunch he can’t miss. Can you talk to him—Tony? Another day—any other day. Tony can have his pick. Sam will even pay. Just not Friday.”

Bucky doesn’t say anything in response. In Steve’s ears there’s a resounding silence, punctuated by the sounds of rain hitting concrete.

“Please,” Steve says. He leans his head back against the brick wall. “It would really—mean a lot to me. America’s just a kid, our office has been so busy. It was just a clerical error. And she’s going to blame herself for it if he misses this and I don’t want that for her, she’s such a good kid and—”

“Steve,” Bucky says softly.

“Please, Buck,” Steve says. He reminds himself he’ll do anything for Sam. He’ll probably do anything for America too. “I’d owe you. Anything you want. As long as I can give it.”

The pause shakes Steve and then he realizes—it hasn’t shaken him, he’s been shaken. Talking to Bucky has shaken him.

“What I want, you can’t give, Steve,” Bucky says, quietly. And for a moment it sounds so heartachingly soft that Steve kind of wants to die. His head thuds back against the brick.

Bucky sighs. “I’ll talk to him. You don’t gotta give me nothing.”

“That’s not—” Steve frowns, immediately. “Everything comes at a price around here. Everyone is—self serving. You said it yourself. You’re right in this case. What’s your price? Name it.”

“Leave it,” Bucky answers and this time he sounds cross. Steve can almost see him, running a hand through his hair, his eyebrows knit together and his mouth tugged down at the corners like they get when he’s frustrated. “I’ll talk to him and tell you when.”

“Buck—” Steve tries again, but he’s cut off.

“Get in out of the rain, dumbass,” Bucky says. “I’ll call you later.”

Then he hangs up.

It’s funny how deafening silence can be. Even when the world is howling around him, even when nature is bashing itself against the thin awning above his head, it’s still quiet. It still sinks into his bones, makes him heavy to the core of him.

He doesn’t like how it makes him feel.

“Fuck,” Steve says, out loud. He covers his face and presses his fingertips into his eyes. “Fuck!”
The rain lets up five minutes later.

The thing is, Steve is a person who processes stress externally. When he’s anxious or overwhelmed or stressed out of his mind, it comes out through external, physical means. He will start replacing meals with coffee, channeling his excess energy into hours at the gym. His voice will grow louder, his words faster. When Steve is stressed, he will develop insomnia.

During his senior year of high school, he was taking so many AP classes and was so determined to score as high as possible on the SAT that he had nearly sleep walked out of his window onto the fire escape and then right off of the fire escape to become one with his maker on the grounds of Brooklyn. It was by a mother’s intuition and, more specifically, the virtue of Sarah Rogers and her razor sharp observation skills that Steve hadn’t put one foot onto the fire escape before she had dragged him back inside.

Steve’s gestures become wider, he somehow takes up even more space than before. He vibrates with excess energy, the evidence of his stress on his body, writ large.

So he doesn’t notice it when his internal processes start to break down.

At first he can’t sleep, which is fine because he’s suffered through insomnia more than once in his life. Then he loses his appetite, which is also fine because he’s only really ravenous when he’s always working out and with the cold weather and his abject avoidance of the gym, he hasn’t been working out or even going for morning runs lately. But then what happens is that he loses his ability to focus.

It happens gradually. He starts to read the same paragraphs over and over and then the same sentences. Then he can’t sit still for longer than ten minutes at a time. He drinks more coffee, which is somehow possible, but can barely keep his eyes open. When Sam or America ask him a question, there’s a lag until he processes what they’ve said and then he shakes his head and scrambles to give an answer. He doodles on every paper he comes into contact with and he’s caught looking out the window so many times on any given day, Sam finally tells him to go take a walk.

It isn’t until it’s just him and Kate in the office that he realizes just how out of it he’s been.

“Hey,” Kate says, coming to sit next to him.

Steve, who’s been half-heartedly answering questions Zemo’s sent and taking his shift replying to constituent emails, blinks rapidly at the light touch to his shoulder.

“Hey,” he says, slightly sluggish and frowns.

“You want to take a break?” she asks. She has a cup of coffee in her hand that she offers him. “You’ve been looking at emails all morning.”

“Oh.” Steve exhales. His eyes actually do feel sore, so he rubs them and takes the coffee from her. “Thanks.”

Kate tugs the laptop out of his hands and he frowns as she snaps it shut.

“They’ll still be there after, Steve,” she says with a slight smile. “Trust me. There will be more, even. You can tell your FOMO to take it easy.”

“My constituent email FOMO?” Steve asks wryly and takes a mouthful of coffee.
“Oh yeah, gotta answer those sweet, sweet emails,” Kate says. She reaches into her denim jacket and pulls out a Jolly Rancher. “Want one?”

“I’m sure that’ll go great with coffee.” Steve smiles. “I’ll pass though.”

“Weird you don’t want your coffee to taste like fake strawberry syrup,” Kate says. She unwraps hers and the crinkling is loud in his ears. “So.”

Steve’s hackles raise. He raises an eyebrow.

“So?”

Kate sighs.

“Guess we’re doing this the hard way.”

“We’re doing what the hard way?” Steve asks.

Kate levels him with a look.

Don’t tell America I said this,” she says.

Steve raises an eyebrow. “Okay?”

“Seriously, I like her too much to have her break up with me because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.”

“Is there a possibility of that?” Steve asks, mouth twitching.

“Oh yeah,” Kate grins. “I have a total inability. To shut up. She tells me all the time.”

“Right before she shuts you up?”

“Something like that,” Kate says and she dimples so affectionately that Steve bumps her shoulder. “Anyway. More on that later. The point is, Steve. America’s worried about you.”

That wipes the smile off Steve’s face. He looks puzzled instead.

“Worried about me?”

“Yeah,” she says. Kate looks up at him and Steve’s startled to find the open expression there. He doesn’t know Kate as well as he knows America—he hasn’t had the chance to get to know her half as well—but he can read her easily. She’s an open book, the opposite of America in every way possible. She looks at him genuinely now. “We all are.”

“There’s nothing to be worried about,” Steve says, automatically. “I’m fine.”

“Steve, you mixed up like three different emails yesterday,” Kate says gently.

“That was a mistake.”

“You still haven’t finished that press release. We’re supposed to send it out tomorrow.”

“It’ll get finished.”

“You’ve been working on it for a week,” Kate says.
“I was...distracted.” Steve shifts slightly, frowning at his mug.

“You’ve been distracted for a little while now.”

Steve knows he’s been tired, but he doesn’t think he’s been that tired. He’s shown up to work. He’s gotten his work done, mostly. He hasn’t missed any deadline yet. He had even gotten that lunch with Stark moved.

Bucky hadn’t called him back. He had just sent a text instead—*Tuesday. Capitol Club. 1 pm.*

Steve had felt stupid for wishing he’d called instead, but that hadn’t stopped him from getting the job done. America had asked him to do this thing and he had done that thing.

“Hey, none of us think you’ve done anything less than you have,” Kate says and nudges him back. “America takes the shit out on you, but that’s because you’re like...her older brother. Not that she’s ever had one. So you’re basically it. We all look up to you a lot, you’re like some overeager political golden retriever. Our own ethical superhero. But.”

Steve takes another mouthful of coffee and sighs.

“But?”

“You haven’t been focused. We know what our golden retriever looks like, that’s why we...are concerned.”

“It’s a We now, huh?”

“Are you burned out? Or is it...something else?”

Steve can’t tell, at this point. He just wants this bill passed. That’s the only thing he wants and if he’s burned out, if he’s so tired his eyeballs ache, then he’ll rest, eventually. He’ll rest—after.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You always have a choice.” Kate shrugs.

Steve sighs and nods.

“Barnes,” she says, like he knew she would. “Haven’t heard you curse his name to Lucifer in a while.”

“I wasn’t cursing him to Lucifer, I was saying he is Lucifer.”

Kate rolls her eyes.

“Okay, so Lucifer Barnes. Is that over?”

Steve fiddles with his cufflinks. Then he looks up at her.

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s over.”

“Mm,” Kate says and nods. Then, “Do you want it to be?”

“What?”
“I know what heartbreak looks like. You can’t eat. You can’t sleep. You can’t focus.”

“I’m not heartbroken, Kate,” Steve says, slightly annoyed.

“You look heartbroken, Steve.”

“I’m not,” Steve says. His voice grows louder in that way it does when he’s trying to defend himself. “I didn’t have feelings for him. We just got into a weird situation and I couldn’t compromise my morals and he didn’t have any. It was stupid. I forgot I hated him for a while, but I have since been reminded. That’s why it’s over. I’m relieved. I can get back to work now without worrying about him harassing me everywhere I go.”

Kate gives him a look that is so reminiscent of America that Steve blinks.

“Oh brother,” she says.

“What?” Steve asks.

“Good grief.”

Steve says, louder, “What!”

“Steve Rogers, you’re so stupid for someone so smart,” Kate says and gets up.

“Hey!” Steve protests. “You can’t say that to me!”

“Sure I can,” Kate says. “First of all, you’re not my boss. Second of all, you’re an idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Steve mutters, more to himself than to Kate. “You’ve been spending too much time with America.”

“Yes I have, Steve,” Kate says, looking at him in the eyes. “Because she’s my girl-friend. My girlfriend. That’s what happens when two people who have feelings for each other acknowledge those feelings and then act on those feelings and then they can hold hands and make out whenever they want.”

“I don’t need to hear what you do in your spare time,” Steve says and Kate rewards him for his efforts by throwing a Jolly Rancher at his head.

“Why is everyone always throwing things in this office!” Steve exclaims, rubbing the spot on his forehead the hard candy bounced off of.

“Because everyone in this office is an idiot, primarily,” Kate snorts. She tucks Steve’s laptop under her arm, ready to go back to her desk. “If it isn’t Barnes, then it’s something else. And whatever it is—we care about you, okay? We want you to be happy. So deal with It.”

Steve sighs. “Can I have my laptop back now?”

“No,” Kate says. “Sam texted me and told me to tell you to take a walk.”

“It’s freezing outside!” Steve says, looking out the window at the overcast, grey November sky.

“Take it up with your boss,” Kate says and turns away.

“He’s not the boss of me,” Steve grumbles. He finishes his coffee and gets up. “No one’s the boss of me.”
Which he definitely believes and has nothing to do with why, five minutes later, he has his dumb peacoat and scarf on and is walking out the door.

It’s just past that time in the afternoon when it’s too late to eat lunch, but too early to eat dinner, which means that if Steve texts Clint he’ll almost certainly agree to eat a made up meal somewhere in between. Steve’s feeling wound up after that conversation with Kate, so he doesn’t know if a burger is what he needs. Then again, Clint’s been so busy actually managing Rhodey’s office instead of mooning after Natasha while trying to beat his previous level of Candy Crush—which is what he’s usually doing on a Thursday evening—that maybe he needs something stronger too.

Steve sends a text and barely has time to pocket his phone before Clint’s replied.

**BARTON:** I told Rhodey I was contemplating a career change to circus entertainer and he said I’d be good at it but also I should get a drink before making any big decisions so what I’m saying is I need like seven

Steve commiserates.

That bad, huh?

**BARTON:** I hate politicians, they are just overgrown babies with big egos who need THEIR HANDS HELD ALL THE TIME

Ah yes. Vote wrangling is fun, isn’t it?

**BARTON:** I THOUGHT THIS WAS MARIA HILL’S JOB

_I dare you to stop by her office, where Natasha works, and tell her that to her face._

**BARTON:** …

**BARTON:** thanks, i think i’d rather become a circus entertainer, actually

Steve snorts and promises to buy Clint a beer and they make plans to meet in an hour. That leaves Steve an hour to kill, so he sticks his hands in his pockets and lets his feet wander across the courtyard.

D.C. is gloomy in the winter, to be sure. That’s just a facet of the East Coast—the heavy, rolling clouds, grey during the day and dark and overcast at night. The trees have since shed their leaves and the buildings, white and bright in the summer, take on the same pallor as the sky. The wind is chilly, that kind of sinking, dragging, wet cold that burrows itself under every layer of cloth, clinging to skin that never fully warms again until spring. Everything is a shade of cool, listless grey besides and it makes him feel that way too, like he’s lacking energy or he just can’t catch his breath.

The energy on the Hill doesn’t die down, but some of the enthusiasm does. They hit the middle of November and it’s just like anywhere else. People are tired of working. They just want to go home to their families, whether they like them or not. Steve happens to like his Ma quite a lot, so he misses her on days like this, when the chill makes his limbs grow heavy.

He hasn’t seen her in months and he thinks he could use her hand in his hair right about now, Steve laying on the couch and Sarah smelling like the dough from her famous chicken pot pie. He’ll tell her all about D.C. and their efforts, the politicians he sees scarfing down a cone of fries as a meal replacement during high times, and she’ll have colorful commentary for him. She’ll tell him about whatever guy she’s seeing and her art and he’ll ask her a hundred questions that she’ll choose to
answer, or not. They’ll watch a movie they’ve watched a dozen times before. They’ll eat the pot pie and he’ll do the dishes for her. They’ll sit down on the couch, thigh to thigh, and share a bucket of Rocky Road ice cream. He’ll go to bed, warm, knowing he’s loved and known by his favorite person in the whole world.

He misses his mother, he’s not ashamed to admit it.

Steve has his phone back out, halfway to absentmindedly scrolling the Greyhound website for weekend bus tickets when he hears laughter. It puzzles him at first, like a stray thought breaking away from the back of his mind. Then he hears it again, louder and closer than comfortable.

It would happen this way, of course. He would think Kate manifested this somehow, if he thought she had half the power. Maybe she does. Maybe she and America have been witches this entire time. That would explain many things, anyway, the least of which is who cursed him.

Because what could summon Bucky Barnes to him, at this moment, except for a curse, uniquely cast to torture him personally and exquisitely.

Steve tells himself to watch his phone. What Bucky does is none of his concern. His finger hovers over the Safari icon.

He hears his laugh again and then he can’t help himself, like one magnet drawn to another. His eyes flicker up and he catches a glimpse of a familiar smile, a laugh on a mouth that curves up at the corners. Steve’s familiar with this smile, happy, with just a hint of asshole, just the way Steve likes. Or hates. His stomach swoops, despite himself.

“Shut up!” Bucky’s voice accompanies that laugh.

He catches a hint of it just before someone else catches Bucky’s wrist. Steve hadn’t noticed him before. He—whoever he is—is tall, with broad shoulders and blond hair down to his shoulders. He tugs Bucky closer and there’s another soft peal of laughter before he has his mouth on him.

Steve freezes where he stands, rooted to the ground in a horrible, stunned kind of way. There’s the muffled sound of a laugh caught by a kiss and, without realizing it, Steve nearly cracks his phone across the screen.

He doesn’t turn away fast enough, so he’s slammed with the feeling immediately—an awful, boiling, spike of heat erupting in the pit of his stomach. He feels it crawl up his chest, the feeling so hard his throat burns with it. He feels it on his skin; heat skimming across and sinking underneath, like claws in his abdomen. It sparks in his lungs, makes him so angry he can barely breathe.

There’s a word for it, if he chose to acknowledge it. He could acknowledge it if he could think straight.

As it is, the man curves a hand around Bucky’s jaw and Steve feels it like a punch to his gut. He stumbles back and his phone rings.

He picks it up without thinking—without much breathing either, really.

“Hello?”

“Hey, I’m done,” Clint says. He pauses, sounding confused. “Are you dying?”

Is Steve dying? He might be.
His voice must carry on the wind, because against all odds, he sees Bucky still. It’s not obvious, but Steve hasn’t looked away and he knows Bucky’s body language, almost intimately. One moment he’s loose, languid against this person and the next, his shoulders freeze, his back straightening rigid. He turns before Bucky can look up. There aren’t a lot of things Steve can handle right now, but that sits at the top of the list.

“Meet me there,” Steve says. He hangs up before Clint can reply and tucks the phone into his pocket.

He doesn’t wait to see if Bucky noticed him. And he especially doesn’t wait to see if he didn’t.

He doesn’t have to wait long. He’s in through the door of the dive bar and has barely ordered two beers for them when the door opens and a head of blond hair attached to an increasingly slumped body almost bodily throws himself through.

“Okay pros of joining the circus,” Clint says and slumps onto the seat next to Steve. “Love the outfits. There are animals. I like animals. Tightrope walking’s kinda dope. I feel like after dealing with politicians I could walk a tightrope without breaking a sweat.”

Steve, who’s just barely breathing in through his nose, his stomach still a roiling, angry mess of feelings he absolutely cannot handle, tries to shake himself out of his head.

“It’s almost less dangerous,” he manages to say.

“Like on the one hand, it’s high and you could fall to your death,” Clint gripes. “But on the other, no one will talk to you and at least death by falling is swift and not...what’s the phrase? Death by a million arrows?”

“...by a thousand cuts?”

“Arrows cut you and a million’s more than a thousand,” Clint says. He makes sense in his own Clint Barton way.

Steve exhales. He eyes the bartender, who’s filling up two mugs with whatever’s on tap for them.

“Hard day at the office?”

“Hard day?” Clint mutters. “Hard week. Weeks. The phone won’t stop ringing. No one we want to call us back will and everyone crazy can’t seem to stop calling. Constituents know it’s on the calendar, so the lines are clogged with people supporting the bill.”

“That’s good,” Steve says, hesitantly.

“That’s about half of them. Then you have the rest—lobbyists, the oil industry, the coal industry, the solar energy industry, the fracking industry, churches, mosques, synagogues, the air force, the marines, the Concerned Citizens for Extraterrestrial Rights!” Clint bangs a hand on the counter.

“That’s not...real, right?”

“Of course it’s real, Steve,” Clint exclaims. “Do you know how many calls I have answered asking us how the package will impact aliens! Do you!”

Steve winces. Actually he has an idea. America had fielded the majority of the constituent calls before their vote, but she had left a running list of the craziest calls they had received on a dry erase board behind Steve’s desk. On any given day, there were at least three constituents claiming they had
been hexed by their neighbors, one who knew, for a fact, that their City Council Member had been bodysnatched by an otherworldly life-form, and a bird organization that was very concerned about the rights of like, pigeons or something.

So unfortunately, looking at Clint’s face and thinking about old Mrs. Koslowitz who called to leave a message about how the city of New York was insidiously poisoning her pet gecko every day through the water supply and tracking her phone calls for her complaints about how the city of New York was insidiously poisoning her pet gecko every day through the water supply, Steve knows for a fact that the Concerned Citizens for Extraterrestrial Rights not only exist, but they’ve probably been clogging up Rhodey’s phone lines.

“Here you go,” the bartender says and puts the beers down in front of them. Clint nearly dives for his.

“I cannot stress enough how much I empathize,” Steve says and reaches for his own.

“I don’t know how you did this, Rogers. I’m going out of my fucking mind and I’m not even his chief of staff.”

Rhodey’s Chief of Staff is a stalwart man named Happy Hogan who spends half of his time meticulously caring after Rhodey’s schedule and the rest of the time telling Tony Stark he can’t just show up in Rhodey’s office, unannounced, to use his couch to nap.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure we all lost our minds in the process and I, for one, am unclear if I’ve gotten mine back.” Steve drinks his beer and Clint looks at him.

“Why would that make me feel any better!”

“I don’t know,” Steve remarks, mildly. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

Clint snorts and drains a quarter of his beer in response. Steve raises an eyebrow, but Clint slams the mug down and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand so dramatically that he can’t help but deeply empathize. What could Steve possibly want right now, but to do the same thing? For a very different reason.

“How is it?” Steve asks, nudging Clint’s shoulder and this seems to take something out of his friend. Clint is reliably happy-go-lucky in even the worst of circumstances, so to see him deflate right next to him at such an innocuous question kind of punches Steve in the gut.

“It’s, I don’t know,” Clint says and runs a hand through his hair. He cradles his beer and looks ahead at the bar. “We’re trying, Steve. You know? We’re busting our asses every day to get the votes. The Democrats look fine. There’s a couple of blue dog Dems who need convincing, but I think they’re easy enough to get to. Rhodey’s been around for a while, he’s respected. He has some give here and there on other packages. But it’s that numbers game. Even if we pick up every single Dem—”

Steve can’t stand it either. The knot in his stomach twists, metamorphoses from one purpose to another. It’s a versatile knot that doesn’t much care what it’s there for.

“We don’t have the numbers.” Steve exhales. “God.”

Clint stares at his beer gloomily. The Senate is closer in number than the House, but not close enough to not require extreme flipping when controversial, progressive packages come down the line. At a total state of neutral, there are 52 Republicans, 46 Democrats, and 2 Independents. For a progressive package to get the majority it needs to pass, the Dems have to grab the two independents and flip at least three votes. That’s five votes total that Rhodey and Sam have to rescue from
conservative hell when flipping one Republican in the current, divisive political climate is a veritable impossibility.

That Sam managed to flip Castle was a huge, almost astronomical win for them. The last Steve heard, Rhodey was closing in on the two independents—Bernie Sanders was an easy sell, but the other was Phil Coulson, who was inscrutable enough that no one ever knew what way he was going until he voted. Coulson has allegiances to both Rhodey and Stark, but Rhodey had told Sam two weeks ago that Coulson was more empathetic to green energy than he appeared on the face of it.

That left two votes they needed. There was no telling with either Borson or Flokisdottir, although they seemed the most promising at the moment. What they needed was someone who had standing and power—someone the other senators would listen to. Sam and Rhodey needed to flip one vote who could flip another.

There’s no real question who that person is.

“I could kill him,” Clint growls. “Honestly. Really. Would it be murder if it was Tony Stark?”

Steve has his own opinions on that and not any he can say out loud in the middle of a dive bar a stone’s throw from the Capitol building.

“I don’t get it,” Clint says, drinking again. “His background is in science. He’s Rhodey’s childhood friend. This should be a no brainer for him. He should be a slam dunk.”

Steve runs a finger around the edge of his glass.

“He’s bought, Clint,” he says. “Oil, coal, you name it. He’s smarter than this. I don’t think he even believes in the...shill Fox News puts out. But he’s up for re-election and he has to keep those donors satisfied.”

Clint makes a disgusted noise. Then he sits down his glass and rubs at his nose.

“We’re fucked if we don’t get him, Steve. If Rhodey’s bill goes down in the Senate, there’s no way in hell Code Green’s passing. The only way any of it makes it through is if we flip.”

That’s the reality of their situation. If Rhodey’s bill fails the Senate, then it’s dead in the water, but Sam’s bill is still out there. The problem is that if Rhodey’s bill doesn’t get the votes to pass, then Sam’s bill definitely won’t have the votes either. The stakes aren’t even high, they’re astronomical. What was the prophecy in Harry Potter? Neither can live while the other survives? It’s like that, but the opposite. If one dies, so does the other. Everything they’ve worked for—*everything* they’ve sacrificed for, all of it will be for nothing.

“Tony Stark is the key to the planet’s future?” Steve laughs. It isn’t particularly humorous. “Really? That guy?”

“Seems fucked up, doesn’t it?” Clint says, staring at his beer bleakly.

Clint finishes his drink and runs a hand through his sweaty, blond hair again. He sighs.

“Rhodey’s tried everything to get to him and it’s just—nothing. We need another in, but I don’t know. We’re trying, man. Rhodey’s breaking his back trying.”

“I know,” Steve says. “Sam and I—we know you guys are.”

This is the truth of the governing system: you can break your back trying to do one good thing for
the world and politics will always trip you before the finish line. Sometimes it’s about sheer willpower, tenacity, and the back-breaking work of publicity and compromise. But more often than that, it’s just money. Money talks and in the U.S. government, money doesn’t seem to shut the fuck up.

“I’m gonna head out,” Clint says, with a sigh. “Got some last minute tasks I’m doing remotely and we have an early start tomorrow.”

Steve doesn’t know what to say to Clint. He knows what that feels like—to put every single ounce of himself into something and hope for the best, but fear for the worst.

“Hey, you and Natasha—” he says, instead, trying to distract him.

Clint gives Steve a thin smile.

“I’ve got her right where I want her.”

“Ignoring your calls and forwarding your text messages to her friends to make fun of?” Steve says, clapping Clint on the shoulder.

For a moment, Clint’s exhaustion sloughs off and he just looks like a regular guy, smitten.

“So she’s thinking about me,” Clint says. “Like I said—right where I want her.”

Steve laughs and Clint, gratefully, gives him one carefree grin back. He slides off the stool.

“Thanks for this,” he says. “Next one’s on me.”

Clint shrugs his jacket back on and winds his way back toward the door. Steve watches him go, thinking: this is the price they pay, for hope.

He turns back to his beer and the anxious knot in his stomach clenches tighter, the gloom settling back over his shoulders.

Sam has dinner plans and Steve doesn’t feel like digging through his phone for a dating app he’s going to end up hating, so he stays at the bar, finishes his beer and orders another one. The bartender slides him a menu and Steve looks at it, contemplating all manners of bar food that he’ll definitely regret in the morning and settles on mozzarella sticks.

The bartender takes his empty glass and replaces it with a full one and Steve nurses his beer while watching some hockey game on the one TV at the end of the bar. Steve doesn’t know the first thing about hockey, except Sam likes it, so he has a passing allegiance to the Rangers, whatever that means. He doesn’t know who’s playing and frankly, he doesn’t care. He watches the game listlessly, mouthing at his beer intermittently, distracted.

With nothing to focus on, or to avoid focusing on, Steve can identify it more accurately, because he feels it more acutely—the way details keep sliding out of his head and the way he can’t stay still in his seat. His mind flits through a dozen different thoughts, unable to settle on any one, and this is a sign too, of just how disoriented and unsettled he feels. The bartender slides over the mozzarella sticks and for a moment he doesn’t think he has much of an appetite, except the smell hits him and he realizes he hasn’t eaten much today.

The thing is, he can’t stop thinking about it. It festers at the back of his mind, sliding around the rest of his thoughts, until it’s clawed its way back to the front. Steve tears a mozzarella stick in half and
watches hockey, but what he’s seeing is something different. Broad shoulders, blond hair brushing
the top of it, a large hand on a slim wrist, a laugh, a smile, a mouth on a mouth. He plays it in his
head on loop, like he’s unable to stop it, and he wonders when he became possessive of someone he
can’t stand. It hits the pit of his stomach, that same, hot spike of jealousy that claws its way up his
chest until he can barely swallow the cheese.

Steve closes his eyes and presses a palm against them, trying to shake this feeling, dislodge the
unwanted memory like it could be that easy. As though any of this could be that easy.

When he lets go, his vision spritzes, little bursts of light appearing around the bar. It clears eventually
and when it does, he’s appeared, like something out of a vision.

Steve shouldn’t be surprised anymore, but he almost is, anyway. It seems like too much, that he
should want to see someone so much that he manifests him, just like that, just in front of him when
he had been nowhere in sight before. Bucky doesn’t see him, but Steve doesn’t miss him. He comes
in through the door, hair tussled from the wind, his peacoat unbuttoned at his throat, his face tinged
pink. He’s alone.

Bucky loosens the scarf around his neck and takes a seat at the bar, all the way on the other side. It’s
nearly exactly where he had sat, all those months ago, when Steve had seen him across the bar and
thought—he’d never seen someone so handsome or so tired.

It’s no different now, is the thing. Bucky’s still handsome, almost absurdly so. But he’s still tired, too.
Steve can tell by the way his shoulders droop, as though carrying weight, the way his mouth curves
down into a slight frown, the way he keeps running his fingers through his hair, shocking his curls
into a loose kind of frizz.

Bucky sits at the counter and orders a drink and takes his phone out. He stares at it and his frown
deepestens. He reaches up and runs a hand down the stubble of his jaw, his fingers lingering in the
cloth of his scarf.

Maybe he’s looking at an email from Stark, or maybe he’s reading the news. Maybe he’s gotten
some text message from his sister that he needs to reply to, or maybe he’s gotten an alert from his
bank that his account has dipped below a million dollars. Maybe it’s none of those things. Maybe,
he’s staring at his phone, waiting for someone to call him.

Steve’s stomach hurts at the thought. His fingers itch. He aches, somehow, every bit of him.

He stares at his beer and wonders: is this normal? Maybe it could be normal, for someone to so
desperately want to hate someone that he mistakes the feeling altogether. Could that be true?

The thing is: he hates Bucky.

The thing is: Bucky drives him crazy.

The thing is: Bucky is a certified, arrogant bastard, but he makes him laugh, and he makes him feel
good, and he makes him so angry he can’t think straight.

The thing is: sometimes it’s okay for Steve to not think straight.

Because, really, the thing is: Steve is all impulse and passion. Steve Rogers is big ideas and
checklists for the future; he’s sticky ethical quandaries and unshakeable principles he’s not willing to
abandon, and he’s fine with that, except that it makes him a stubborn, bull-headed asshole, the kind
of person who lives and breathes politics and is difficult to be around and even more difficult to be
with. He’s under no misconception that he’s some kind of easy person. He doesn’t know how to be
easy. So it’s something that he’s found someone who matches him across the board—someone who is just as infuriating and just as dogged; someone who is just as much a dick so that when Steve’s being a jackass, he’ll look him in the eyes and tell him he’s being a jackass.

He hates that Bucky tells him to shut up and when he doesn’t, he finds a way to make him. It infuriates him. He can’t stand it. He can’t tolerate that Bucky listens to him when he talks, that as Steve grows angrier and angrier, he leans back, onto his hands, and tells him he understands, as though maybe he does or at least that he could.

He hates that Bucky’s hair sticks up when he runs his fingers through it, that his mouth turns red when Steve’s done kissing it; he hates that he has one dimple when he smiles and that when he’s reaching his climax, his whole face flushes, pink crawling up his neck. He hates that Bucky had looked up at him with an open, clear expression that had hidden nothing when Steve had told him not to kiss him. Steve hates that he listened.

But mostly he hates that Bucky can be compassionate, that he can be thoughtful, that if he stopped to think, for one minute, he would realize that he has the capacity to do good—that he is capable of taking his privilege and turning it into something better, using it for something good, and he’s too much of a cynic to actually do so. That he doesn’t seem to really want to. That Steve considers breaking his rules for him, but Bucky doesn’t seem to have any to break for him.

He hates that the most.

He hates that he considers it at all.

Because the real truth of the matter is that Steve can’t remember when he stopped hating Bucky, and if Bucky had given him one thing—one indication—a single inch, he would have taken it. He would have swallowed his misgivings, taken apart his principles, just for a chance at a boy who shakes when he laughs and texts about blow jobs in the middle of important hearings; someone who can stand toe to toe with Tony fucking Stark and lets his mortal enemy use the copier when he’s on a deadline. Steve would have laid aside his ethics, considered dismantling his moral framework, just to kiss this person—a person who visits the Declaration of Independence in his free time and loves his little sister enough to let him name him something as dumb as Bucky for life. Steve knows that kind of unconditional love. He knows that can be the best thing about a person, the one thing that saves them from being Satan’s best man.

It’s staggering: the truth of the matter. It hurts to acknowledge, but it hurts even more to ignore. Steve is tired. Steve is out of excuses.

He’s out of his seat before he can think twice about it.

Bucky doesn’t look up when he appears, a six foot something shadow flickering over his shoulder. His hand curls around his mug instead, the lines of his body tensing. He seems to take in a breath and then he lets it out, long and slow.

When he looks up at Steve, it’s as though he’s been expecting him—as though this—whatever this is—is inevitable.

“Steve,” he says, quietly.
That’s what this is, at the end of the day. Feelings.

He had somehow hate fucked his political enemy right over tolerance and straight into fucking feelings. He’d laugh at how stupid it all is if he didn’t feel like he was unraveling where he sits.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 8, as promised!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve doesn’t know what to do here. He doesn’t know the protocol for this. In truth, he doesn’t even
know what he’s doing.

“What is it?” Bucky says. His fingers curl harder into his glass. “What did I do wrong now?”

That doesn’t make Steve feel good. Nothing about this situation makes him feel good. He doesn’t like the look on Bucky’s face and he doesn’t like the sound of his voice and most of all, he doesn’t like that there’s nothing he can do about it, except stand here, his head a tangled mess of briars he can’t pick through.

“Who?” Steve says. He’s surprised, himself, and then he isn’t. Maybe this was the inevitable part—not him, standing here in front of Bucky, but him, nearly rocking on his feet with unwanted, misplaced jealousy.

“What?”

Steve swallows. Then he slumps into the seat next to him.

“Who was that?” he asks. “That guy?”

Steve runs his fingers down the wood grain of the bar and Bucky gapes at him, angry and flustered, until he laughs.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“What?”

“You’ve got some fucking nerve, Rogers,” Bucky growls.

Steve pauses, his nails pressed against the wood.

“Are you seeing him?” He tries not to sound as hurt as he feels, jealousy crawling up his skin. He doesn’t do a particularly good job.

“So what if I am?” Bucky glares. “Is it any of your business who I’m fucking?”


Bucky doesn’t say anything for a moment, his jaw ticking.

“I know,” he says. “I saw you too.”

Steve looks away. He doesn’t know what to say. It’s not that he doesn’t know it isn’t fair, it’s just—

“What do you want from me, Steve?” Bucky asks, after a minute. He sounds as hurt—as raw—as Steve feels. “Seriously, just tell me. I can’t—be any clearer than I’ve been. But you’re not interested. Or you say you’re not. Can I not see other people now, either? Are you not going to let me move on?”

“Move on from what?” Steve says, gritting his teeth.

Bucky’s breathing grows heavier at that and Steve can’t help himself—he turns back to him.

“You told me not to kiss you,” Bucky says quietly. His eyes are narrowed, his nostrils lightly flaring.

“I know,” Steve says.
“So I didn’t,” Bucky says.

“I know.” Steve doesn’t break eye contact.

“Call me naive, but to some people, if someone asks you not to kiss them, then it usually means they
don’t want you to kiss them.”

Steve says nothing.

“That they’re not interested.”

Steve doesn’t answer.

“God.” Bucky laughs, without mirth. “What do you want from me, Steve?”

“Who is he?” Steve asks. He doesn’t know why he needs to know. He just knows that it’s driving
him crazy—that if he doesn’t get an answer, that if he doesn’t know, for sure, he won’t be able to
move on from this one fact, this one thing. If Bucky just tells him, if he just says I’m seeing him,
we’re together, I’m with this person now, he can let the whole house of cards collapse.

He just needs to hear him say it.

Bucky laughs again. It’s low and bitter at first and then a little louder. He lets out a groan and covers
his face with his hands.

“It’s just some guy I’ve been on a couple of dates with,” he says. He presses his palms into his eyes.
His voice is slightly muffled. “God, I’ve been trying to get over this, but I can’t. Are you happy? I
couldn’t even get it up with the last guy I tried to hook up with.”

“Bucky,” Steve says, voice tight.

Around them, the noise of the bar filters through, sharp and loud, but hazy too, as though muffled
sounds through a wall of cotton.

“Jesus, I know, okay? We’re not compatible. I’m antithetical to you. I’m Republican scum. We’re
political enemies. You don’t respect me, you hate me—”

“I don’t,” Steve says.

Bucky stills.

“What?”

Steve takes a breath.

“I don’t hate you, Buck,” he says. He tips his head up to stare at the ceiling. “I wish I still did. It
would make this a lot easier, actually.”

“This,” Bucky says after a moment. “What’s this?”

“This,” Steve says. “Us. God, why did you have to turn out to be a decent guy?”

Bucky turns his head in surprise.

“I don’t like this,” Steve says, honestly. “God, I’m so fucking conflicted—you don’t understand.
Maybe you do, I don’t know. My head feels like a fucking—mess. I can’t think straight. I haven’t
been able to focus in weeks.”

He looks back down at his hands.

“Steve—”

“This was so much easier when we were just hate fucking.”

Bucky inhales.

“Is that not what we’re doing anymore?”

Steve doesn’t know when his head tilts forward, but one moment he’s closing his eyes and the next his forehead is tucked into Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky hesitates, then lifts a hand to his hair.

“What are we doing then?” Bucky asks, quietly. “Tell me what you want.”

It takes Steve a minute to untangle the words on his tongue.

“I don’t know if this is workable. I don’t know how to make something long-term out of this, Buck. I know I’m right. Politics means everything to both of us, but our politics aren’t—we’re not compatible. But, god, I missed you and when I saw you with that guy—”

Bucky’s hand stills and Steve shakes his head.

“You were right.”

“About what?” Bucky asks, suspiciously.

Steve laughs. He has the distinct desire to curl into him. He thinks: if he could just fold himself into this space right now, then he wouldn’t have to think about this any more than he already has. He could lay his burdens at Bucky’s feet. He could rest.

“I can’t stay away from you,” Steve says. “I’ve tried. God knows I’ve tried. But I like you, Bucky. Maybe—I don’t care what you believe. You were right—I like you.”

It comes out like a rush, his breath hitching. This, right there in between them, the truth—that no matter how much Steve tries to deny it, no matter how many layers he tries to hide it under, there’s something here he can’t pretend to ignore anymore. At some point, at some time, he had taken a wrong turn and he had ended up here, with Bucky’s hand in his hair and Steve’s face tucked into his shoulder, Bucky’s breathing soft and Steve’s chest tight with feeling. They’re at the same fucking bar they met in and Steve’s a single scrape of nails against his skull away from fucking losing it.

That’s what this is, at the end of the day. Feelings.

He had somehow hate fucked his political enemy right over tolerance and straight into fucking feelings. He’d laugh at how stupid it all is if he didn’t feel like he was unraveling where he sits.

“You like me?” Bucky says, quietly.

“You talked to him,” Steve says, his voice thick. “Stark. You made him move the lunch.”

Bucky pauses.

“You asked me to.”
Steve hates that. God, he can’t stand it.

Bucky takes in another breath and repeats—“You like me?”

“It comes as a shock to me too,” Steve says. “But that seems to be what I am afflicted with.”

“You have...feelings for me?” Bucky asks. “Real...actual, feelings?”

Steve laughs, although it kind of sounds like he’s dying, which maybe he is, or maybe he would like to be doing.

“Yeah, asshole,” he says. “I have feelings for you.”

“Even though—?”

Steve snorts and digs his face deeper into Bucky’s shoulder.

“Don’t push it,” he mumbles. “I am going through a very difficult time.”

Bucky snorts in return. Then he snorts again. Then his fingers are curled into Steve’s hair and he tugs his face back so he can look at him. What Steve sees there, in Bucky’s face is—it’s almost unbearable for him, a person who can barely handle his feelings for historical political documents, to see someone as cocky and arrogant as Bucky Barnes look at him like he’s some key to happiness he’s only just discovered. Bucky smiles—he grins, really—the act taking up his whole face and Steve’s chest does a little swoop he definitely didn’t consent to.

“So what does this mean?” Bucky asks. “What do we do now?”

“Well,” Steve says carefully. “Are you done kissing other guys?”

Bucky makes a face at him.

“That depends,” he says. “I liked being kissed. You have someone in mind who’s gonna kiss me instead?”

Steve takes in a breath and bites back a smile.

“There was someone I was thinking about.”

Bucky’s hand curls around the back of Steve’s neck.

“Yeah?” he says. “Can I get his number?”

Steve snorts and inches closer.

“You already took it, jackass.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bucky grins. “That was a move, by the way. I never planned to text you about work.”

“I knew it!”

“I just wanted to—”

“Harass me?” Steve glares.

“Mmm,” Bucky says and his eyes drop to Steve’s mouth. “God, you’re so fun to harass.”
“I can’t stand you,” Steve says.

“Jesus fucking Christ, kiss me before I shove you against the bar and do it myself,” Bucky replies.

Steve grins, tilting his head forward, and this time when their mouths meet, Bucky, fingers curled into the nape of Steve’s neck, doesn’t even pretend to let him go.

Making out in public is about the most PG-rated public activity they’ve done yet, although objectively it’s still pretty gross. Luckily, it’s a cold November night in D.C. and everyone’s too done with the state of politics and the nation, so no one so much as bats an eyelash at the two grown adult men grinning and tugging at each other as they kiss each other breathless. Steve feels dizzy with it, almost giddy, his skin running hot and his stomach doing swoops every time Bucky presses against him.

Bucky’s busy messing up his hair and Steve has his fingers curled into his collar, so that’s getting messed up too, and they bump teeth a few times and noses a few more times than that, but it’s the messiest and most open they’ve ever been kissing, so they tolerate it for that. Bucky tastes like beer and Steve is certain he must taste like mozzarella sticks and they could both use some freshening up, but they stop only to catch their breaths and press their foreheads together and then Steve, his brain fuzzy, skims a finger across Bucky’s lower lip and Bucky sucks his thumb into his mouth.

That makes something hot drop into the bottom of his stomach and when Bucky’s eyes meet his own, Steve is only a little surprised to see how dark they’ve grown. Steve swallows hard and Bucky lets go, which only draws Steve closer in, almost desperate to suck the salt off of Bucky’s mouth. He feels like everything around them is hazy, bright colors and distant images, and he feels a lot drunker than he is, on the close warmth and taste of Bucky Barnes. He’s itching to press him against something solid and drag his tongue across more parts of him than just this one, but Steve is just lucid enough to realize he doesn’t want it to be hasty blow jobs against a bathroom stall this time.

Bucky kisses him back and Steve loses himself in that for a few more minutes before pulling back. He gulps in air, his skin feeling hot and flushed all over.

“Jesus Christ,” he manages to say and Bucky lets out a laugh, something a little breathy and a lot breathless.

“I’m going out of my mind here, Rogers,” Bucky says, voice rough, and Steve gives him a somewhat sharp look, because it’s not like he doesn’t feel Bucky’s fingers trying to inch their way up under his sweater.

“Let’s go,” Steve says, swallowing.

“What?”

“Somewhere else,” Steve laughs. “Somewhere with a fucking door.”

“The bathroom has a door,” Bucky grins, his mouth curved up into that stupid, fucking, horrible, cocky grin that Steve no longer wants to punch off, unless he’s punching with his mouth.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” Steve replies and Bucky tips his head back and laughs. It’s a beautiful, ridiculous, terribly attractive sight.

They’re both extremely stupid. Steve gets up, gets his wallet out, and grabs a few 20s to way overpay for their few beers.
Then he grabs Bucky by the lapel and drags him to his feet.

“Take me somewhere private, rich boy,” he says.

“Finally.” Bucky exhales and wraps his arms around Steve’s waist, drawing him in for a kiss. “You understand what I can bring to the table.”

“A black credit card and constant irritation?”

“A huge dick and a great head of hair.” Bucky grins.

Steve groans.

“I hate you,” he says again.

“The feeling,” Bucky says and kisses him once more, like he can’t help himself, “is mutual.”

* *

They have to stop at a corner store to buy condoms and lube, which would be embarrassing, Steve guesses, if they weren’t both too busy kissing and groping at each other for it to matter. Steve’s not the only one who missed this, that much is clear, and this time Steve is allowing himself to enjoy it—letting himself feel the heady warmth of looking over at Bucky, smiling for no reason, to find Bucky smiling back at him, the corners of his eyes crinkled up in contrast to the rest of his face, which is wrinkled as if to make a face, although the only face he’s making is accompanying his laughter. Maybe Kate was onto something: Steve would rather die than to admit it, but he feels more present than he has in weeks. Everything feels bright on his skin, every sensation dialed up to 10, the feel of Bucky’s fingertips on his wrist and his mouth, warm against Steve’s, and the cold, frigid air sharp against anything exposed. The thoughts feel lighter in his head. He can breathe and that’s startling as well.

They pay for the condoms and lube, ignoring the glare from the bored cashier, who seems to be very done with the way they keep giggling into each other’s shoulders, unable to stop touching in some manner, and walk back onto the street.

“So much for being prepared,” Steve says teasingly.

“I stopped carrying them around when I stopped running into you.”

“Hey,” Steve protests. “I wasn’t that much of a sure thing!”

Bucky grins instead of answering, a cocky twist of his mouth that Steve absolutely will not stand for. He pinches his side, which has Bucky squirm away, which has Steve crowding him against a wall, against which they continue making out for a few more minutes.

“We’ll never get anywhere at this rate,” Bucky says, against his mouth, as though he has taken a single measure to stop—which, to be clear, he has not—happily pressed in between Steve’s coat and a brick wall.

“I’m not planning on blowing you in an alley,” Steve says, nosing his way down Bucky’s jaw. Bucky’s breath hitches. “But I won’t say it’s out of the question.”

“This is why you’re a sure thing, asswipe,” Bucky says, loudly, and Steve bursts out laughing.

“I’m very strong,” Steve says and presses one more kiss to Bucky’s throat before letting him go. “I’m
the very vision of willpower.”

“Ever consider going to the optometrist?” Bucky asks, straightening his clothes, and Steve snickers.

Bucky gives him a look and then, bumping his shoulders, reaches down to tangle his fingers with Steve’s and tug him along.

You can’t throw a stone without hitting a hotel in this part of D.C., so they walk to the nearest one. Or, actually, they walk past several.

“Bucky,” Steve murmurs into his ear. He’s got his arm wrapped around Bucky’s waist, his other arm tucked into his pocket with a bag full of condoms and lube that he’s more than ready to use, if they didn’t keep passing by perfectly good hotels with perfectly good beds. “Are we going to…stop somewhere?”

“Yeah, I have a place in mind.” Bucky leans into him a little harder and Steve doesn’t actually care as long where they stop as long as they get someplace where he can touch Bucky like he wants to sometime before he becomes a centenarian.

“A place,” Steve says.

“Uh huh.”

“What kind of place?” Steve asks.

“A place with beds.” Bucky grins.

“A place with beds that is different from all of the other places with beds we just passed—and keep passing.” Steve watches as they walk past a perfectly respectable Days Inn.

“Not all places with beds are made equally.” Bucky smirks. “Some of them have better pillows, for starters.”

“Uh huh…”

“And some have even better doors.”

“Doors, you say.” Steve smiles.

“That’s the sign of a good hotel,” Bucky says, with a wide grin. “How thick their doors are.”

Steve knows where this is going, but he bites anyway. “And why’s that?”

“All the better to fuck against, my dear,” Bucky says against Steve’s mouth, and then pulls away, pleased.

“Is there a Yelp filter for that?” Steve says, trailing after Bucky.

“I’m your Yelp filter, Rogers,” Bucky says, so it’s his fault entirely that Steve asks him questions about all of the doors he has evidently fucked against the rest of the way there.

There being—here.

Steve stares up at the building, thinking: this place better have thick fucking doors. The doors better
have belonged to the King of France. The doors better be gilded in fucking gold.

“How did I not fucking guess this?” Steve asks.

They’re walking by the fucking Ritz-Carlton, past the Ritz-Carlton, when Bucky pulls him toward the lobby door. Of the Ritz-Carlton.

“Bad forward thinking?” Bucky says, tugging on his arm. “I have a membership.”

Steve follows him in—of course he follows him in, he’s an idiot and would follow him anywhere at this point—and his eyes nearly bug out of his head. The lobby of the Ritz fucking Carlton is all shades of cream and gold with expensive contemporary art and flower arrangements that probably (definitely) cost more than Steve’s rent. The floors are slick marble and furniture is all dark woods and modern metal. Everything is probably imported from fucking Italy. There’s no less than three fucking chandeliers dangling from the ceiling. Steve gapes, taking in every detail while trying not to get whiplash from staring around so quickly, storing it up, because it's not like he's a Mama's boy, but he will be telling Sarah Rogers all about this.

There are people at the counter and people on the dark leather couches. Everyone is wearing slick black jackets or long, slinky dresses and no one has a single hair or diamond out of place. Steve, on the other hand, is very aware that he is carrying a plastic bag full of condoms and lube, and that he has no luggage. Also, he can’t be certain that his Instagram boutique peacoat isn’t in disarray and that his hair isn’t sticking up at all angles from Bucky’s...ministrations.

He tries to do what he can, but some things—like his hair—are just beyond any realm of control, for him or any higher power watching over him.

He stands next to Bucky at the counter and he doesn't know if he should feel sleazy as Bucky takes out his card and checks them in for the night, but, strangely, he doesn't. Or maybe he doesn’t want to think about it too deeply. He just feels good for now. He feels light, excited even, like this is finally going to happen and he's happy about it and that it’s okay. He thinks: he’s allowed to be happy about this. He feels anticipation in every cell of his body, and he doesn't know exactly what's going to happen, but he knows that he's been thinking about it and wanting it, and now, one way or another, it's finally here. They’re past the tipping point, it’s all a tumble one way or another.

At least, that's how he feels until the professionally-dressed woman behind the counter says, “Thank you so much, Mr. Barnes, it's so good to see you again.”

Steve blinks.

“Come here often?” he hisses.

“My name is on the credit card.” Bucky drives an elbow into his side.

“I'm going to kill you,” Steve tells him, into his ear, “but, like, with my dick.”

Bucky bursts into a laughter that echoes around the marble lobby and makes him look young and carefree or maybe like a person who’s definitely going to get laid. Both can be true. The woman behind the desk smiles at them both and hands over two plastic keys. Steve does his best to keep his hands off Bucky in front of the reception desk, but once they’re in the elevator on the way to their room he doesn’t bother. He’s heady with this—the rich, disgusting hotel around them and how he feels both like they’re doing something illicit and something earned. It’s a cocktail of sensations that can only be processed through touch. So he does that. He threads his fingers through Bucky's hair and tugs, and Bucky melts, going boneless against him, and maybe it's a dirty trick, but he doesn't
They kiss again and they're both so eager for each other, it's almost sweet. Bucky's hands press against Steve's sides and Steve's head goes kind of dizzy with the pressure. He feels hot under his collar, warm under every inch he's being touched. Steve is going to die probably if he doesn't get those hands directly against his skin.

The elevator reaches their floor, and they manage to pull apart from each other for long enough to walk down the hallway to their room. Bucky presses the key against the reader, the light switches to green, he pushes the door open, and—

“Oh my fucking god,” Steve says, because it's not a room, it's a suite.

It's beyond any human conception so far as he, Steve Rogers, son of a single mother and recipient of a liberal arts degree, has had. There's a living area with a fancy, printed couch that looks like someone stole it from the British royal family and a glass table with roses in a crystal vase on it. There's an enormous flat-screen TV mounted on the wall, and through the open door a King-sized bed. All the decor is shades of white and gray and while Steve wouldn't want to live in such a colorless place, he has to admit the aesthetic is striking.

He takes in a breath and stops on the other side of the room. The city glitters through the floor-to-ceiling windows, all the politicking and back door deal-making reduced to twinkling lights below them. From up here, D.C. is breathtaking.

“Wait till you see the bathroom,” Bucky says, coming up beside him.

Steve stands in this monument to late-stage capitalism, the nicest hotel room he's ever been in, much less been in for the express purpose of fucking a guy who, against all common sense, and certainly against every measure of reason, he really likes. The suite is nearly as large as his and Sam's apartment and despite his Marxist soul and general anti-capitalist principles, he knows that he will tell his mother all about it tomorrow.

This, Steve thinks a little wildly, is my cabbage.

He sets the plastic bag down on the dark gleaming wood of the coffee table along with his discomfort about how much all this must be costing Bucky, and turns to tug him into a kiss.

"Why don't you show me?"

The bathroom is bigger than Steve's kitchen. Everything in it is white-and-gray marble, clean and almost sparkling to touch. The tub—of course it has a separate tub—looks deep and spacious, and the shower looks big enough for two grown men. Only one way to really test that theory, though.

In the name of accurate data collection, the two of them pile in together, but there's really no excuse for the way they strip each other out of clothes, snickering and fumbling as they go, and soap each other up, or the way they laugh into each other's mouths as the perfect water pressure rinses away the rosemary-scented shampoo. Steve's hands slide over Bucky's wet, warming skin. For as many times as he's watched Bucky come, he's never seen Bucky actually all the way naked, and it's a sight worth savoring now, smooth skin over planes of muscle, the beautiful notch of his hip bone.

Bucky seems to be enjoying him just as much, if the way he clutches Steve to him under the water is any indication. He traces Steve's tattoos better this time, his greedy eyes drinking them in again while his hands slide over Steve's pecs and along his biceps.
They kiss under the spray of the showerhead and they keep kissing, and it feels so good, both of them hot in the water, sliding against each other. They're both hard, but there's no urgency to it. Steve knows that there's an enormous bed in the next room, and for once there's no rush to get each other off. They've got all night. It's almost as luxurious a sensation as the hotel.

They step out of the shower once the hot water gives out and take their time towelling each other off. Bucky's hair is enormously fluffy and curly as it dries, and Steve runs a hand through it to make it stand up just because he can and because it's fun to see Bucky's grumpy face and hear him say, "You asshole," affectionately.

Then they're kissing again and Steve runs his hand down Bucky's stomach and wraps his fingers around his cock. Bucky gasps against his mouth and Steve is floating on a tide of his own desire. Bucky breaks the kiss and rests his forehead against Steve's, mouth still a little open, and both of them are panting hard. Steve doesn't know why everything with him feels so good, but that is one constant here, the one thing that hasn't changed in months of them doing—this.

Bucky tugs at his hand, leading him out of the bathroom to the bed.

"Wait here," Bucky says, and detours to get the lube, so Steve stretches out on the bed, which is more than roomy enough for all of him. It only takes a minute, but Bucky stops in the doorway between the rooms upon his return, condoms and lube clutched in one hand, and looks at Steve with an expression caught between hungry and soft.

"God, Steve," he says quietly, and then starts moving again, setting the supplies down on the bedside table and and stroking his way up Steve's body. He runs his hands over Steve's calves, up his thighs, digs his thumbs in at Steve's hips, runs his fingers over Steve's ribs. He drops a kiss on the tattoo of the ship, then kisses Steve's collarbone. It sparks hot everywhere he touches and burns at the point of his mouth on Steve's skin.

He settles in next to Steve and cradles his face with both hands, kissing him like he can't spare the breath to not. It's overwhelming; almost dizzying. Steve has never felt so wanted in his whole life.

So he sets out to let Bucky know that he wants him too, as if that weren't terminally apparent by now. He waits until Bucky is on top of him, then heaves them over so he's on top instead, and watches Bucky's eyes go gratifyingly wide. He kisses Bucky's chest, licks over his nipple, then does it again when Bucky makes a strangled noise. He moves so that he's between Bucky's legs and runs his hands over the long muscles of Bucky's thighs.

"Can I?" Steve glances at the bedside table where the lube and condoms are waiting, "I mean, I don't care which way we do it, but I've been thinking about getting you on a bed forever."

"I knew you've been undressing me with your eyes." Bucky leans back on his elbows and smirks at him, but this time Steve finds that he doesn't mind it at all. "Kill me with your dick, you promised."

"Your sex talk is terrible," Steve tells him, but he picks up the lube anyway.

"Maybe, but it seems to work on you."

As unfortunately true as that may be, Steve has a vested interest in making sure Bucky doesn't find out, so he takes the opportunity to shut him up by putting his mouth on his dick. He's done this often enough that he knows what Bucky likes by now. Bucky curses as Steve licks the length of him, and Steve would smile if his mouth weren't full. As it is, he uncaps the lube and gets his fingers wet.

Bucky moans as Steve presses gently at his hole. Steve has both done this and had it done to him
enough to know how to be patient, to take his time until it starts to feel good for his partner. He keeps sucking Bucky's cock, not with the intent to make him come, but just to keep all of it feeling good.

“You could go faster,” Bucky grits out, although the noises he's been making seem to indicate that Steve is doing just fine.

Steve pops off his dick long enough to say, “You will take my sucking and you will like it.”

Bucky groans again and covers his face with his arm, which makes Steve smile.

“I've been looking forward to this. Let me do it right.”

And then for good measure he crooks his finger and finds Bucky's prostate, and Bucky's muscles clench as he arches his back off the bed.

Steve keeps going until Bucky is languid with pleasure, his face flushed and his breathing close to pants, and then Steve kisses his hipbone and carefully withdraws his finger. He gets a condom on and slicks himself up. Bucky watches him through half-lidded eyes as he lines up and slowly pushes in. It feels almost too good: Bucky is hot and tight around him, and it feels like the nerves in his cock connect to every part of him, light up every inch of his skin.

They both moan along the way and when he's all the way in, Steve leans down to kiss him again. Bucky's eyes are wide and his pupils dark. His fingers slide along Steve's sides possessively, like he’s unwilling to let him go. The kiss is an afterthought—a chance for them to breathe into each other’s mouths—but it’s just what they need, an anchor in the middle of increasing, building sensation.

Steve pulls out slowly and slides back in again, letting them both get used to it, then starts moving faster. Bucky's hands clutch at his shoulders, nails digging in. Steve braces himself on one arm so he can get a hand between them on Bucky's cock, and Bucky's face is so intent that it almost looks like he's in pain, but his expression is open, too, wiped clean of everything but need.

Steve watches him as he falls into a rhythm, not too fast, but not slow either. Bucky's breathing hard and fast, moaning when Steve thrusts in, and Steve is certainly making all manner of sounds himself. It envelopes them both, this feeling of complete, whole synchronicity. Distantly, Steve registers a thought that he could keep doing this—Bucky under him, their bodies lined up, synced—just drag it on until he’s reduced to nothing but this hot, lazy sensation, but his body is already hurtling towards orgasm like a precipice he wants to throw them both over. It's a big feeling, but all of his feelings about Bucky have been big, for better or for worse.

He speeds his hand on Bucky in time with his thrusts. Bucky says, “Steve—Steve,” and his muscles clench around Steve as he comes. Steve doesn't know if it's the physical sensation or the way Bucky says his name that throws him over the edge after him, but his breath catches in his throat and then every muscle in his body tenses in an unending moment of release, a pleasure so intense that it whites out everything for a second—everything but the heat in his chest and the man lying under him, his skin as hot as a brand.

Steve takes a beat to catch his breath, his forehead resting against the crook of Bucky’s sweaty shoulder. When he can move again, he pulls out slowly, and collapses next to Bucky instead of on top of him. Bucky barely waits for him to sprawl on his side before he leans in to kiss him. It’s a soft brush of their mouths this time, their breath intermingling as they both try to come down from their highs together.

They lie there after, entangled in each other, while their breaths and their heartbeats slow, and it feels
good just to hold Bucky, to run a slow hand down his back and feel him shiver faintly under the touch. It feels both fuzzy and clear in his mind, like a fading thought he’s just caught in his grasp. Bucky closes his eyes and Steve steals another kiss from him.

“Stay there,” Steve says after a minute, and disentangles himself to go to the bathroom.

“Do I look like I’m in any position to move?” Bucky calls after him. “You did it. I’ve been murdered by dick.” He pauses and seems to close his eyes again. “That’s actually the only way I’m willing to go.”

Steve snorts, because of course Bucky would use any remaining energy after sex to be even more of a smartass than he usually is. It figures that he’s developed feelings for the only person more annoying than him.

Steve disposes of the condom and cleans himself up a bit, then dampens a washcloth in warm water to bring back to Bucky.

“Thanks,” Bucky says, and gets rid of most of the mess of come and lube. No need to be too thorough, Steve thinks hazily; there’s plenty of time for round two. He's more than content to lie back on the bed for now though, putting his arms around Bucky while Bucky's fingers lazily trace the lines of his tattoos. Steve turns his head so he can press a kiss into Bucky's shoulder.

“So you were thinking about that,” Bucky says. “Looking forward to it, I think you said.”

“No,” Steve says. “I don’t remember that.”

“Something about you dying to put your dick in me,” Bucky grins.

“I cannot recall.”

“You said to me, Bucky Barnes, the only purpose I have left in this life is to sex you up.”

“No one talks like that, you smug asshole.” Steve bites where he just kissed, gently. Then he sighs. “So sue me for wanting to fuck you someplace other than a bathroom or the fucking gym.”

Bucky snorts a laugh, which should not and could not possibly sound fond, but, impossibly, does.

“I don’t know, I think we made some pretty fond memories in those.”

“I can never go back to the gym.” Steve groans and Bucky grins, turning to face him.

“I could get used to this, though,” he says. “An actual bed with actual privacy.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, “imagine how loud you can be when you’re not trying to scandalize a room full of Magna Carta enthusiasts.”

“If you read the Magna Carta closely, I think you’ll find it calls for the freedom of religion and the human right to fuck as loud as you want.”

“I can’t stand you,” Steve says loudly and Bucky is overcome with snickers.

And then, because Steve can’t help but feel the magnitude of the room around him and he never wants to know how much this hotel cost, and also because he doesn’t know how not to go one hundred percent, he adds, “You could come over to my place sometime.”

It comes out as one or the top ten thoughtless things he’s ever blurted out. He pushes the thought of
the metric fuckton of shit that Sam will give him, for example, to the side, for the moment. He'll cross that bridge when he comes to it, reluctantly and with something thrown at his head, probably.

The smile Bucky gives him lights up his face, slowly, like a lightbulb flickering on in the dark. The skin around his eyes crinkles up, not that Steve’s watching the space obsessively or anything.

“Yeah? That sounds awfully domestic, Rogers. ‘Hi, honey, how was your day?’”

Steve elbows him in the ribs. “Fine, except for this absolute jackass I have to talk to in Tony Stark’s office.”

“Yeah, what an asshole,” Bucky says, laughing. “You might have to rail him into next week again in retaliation.” Then his face goes more serious, though his eyes are still smiling. “How's all that going, anyway?”

“The railing—?”

“The bill, asswipe,” Bucky snorts.

Steve runs a hand over his face. He lets out a breath, the loose, easy feeling in his chest tightening at the thought.

“Good, I guess? Goodish. I don’t know.”

“That’s two different answers,” Bucky says and Steve lets out a sigh.

“We're on the edge with it. It's going to be real fucking close. Too close,” he says and the goodwill begins to evaporate quickly, leaving behind the shadow of anxiety. This isn’t his idea of pillow talk, but, well, Bucky did ask and once Steve’s brain latches onto something, he can’t not process it all the way through.

Bucky touches his side.

“It’s all partisan politics in this place and nothing gets done without numbers. We need the fucking numbers or—”

He exhales noisily.

“Sam's going to talk to Tony about it again. Never catch me calling him reasonable, but compared to everyone else on your side of the aisle, at least he admits that science exists. The bar is on the ocean floor at this point. Anyway, he has seniority and power. If he went in on it, people would follow him.”

“I don't know if that's going to happen,” Bucky says slowly. “There's a lot of external pressure for him not to.”

That rankles him, try though he might not to let Tony Stark into their bed.

“He could do it because it's right,” Steve says, and then shakes his head, because what are the chances Tony Stark’s going to suddenly grow a conscience overnight? “He’s not stupid. He’s annoying as fuck, but god, I know he’s not an actual idiot. He has a background in engineering, for fuck’s sake. This bill just means—we’re almost there, you know? We could do so much fucking good, Buck.”

Bucky says nothing and Steve turns his eyes to look at him.
“We’re down to the wire,” he says. “Stark’s the wire. He won’t listen to me, but...you could talk to him about it. If you wanted to.”

Bucky stiffens next to him.

“He’ll listen to you, Bucky, if you just—”

“No. Steve, don’t ask me to do that. I'm not going to start being your mouthpiece across the aisle just because we're sleeping together.”

“What? That’s not what I—”

“My feelings for you are totally separate from my job,” Bucky says, sounding more and more irritated. “Don't try to use them to get what you want.”

“I'm not—that's not the point.”

Bucky sits up, so Steve sits up too.

“Bucky, stop—I’m not asking you to parrot what I’m saying back to Tony.”

“No, you’re just asking me to use my relationship with him to change his mind for your benefit,” Bucky says.

Steve's trying not to snap at him, but the anger is flash quick, boiling up behind his breastbone before he can think.

“For my benefit? Mine?”

“It’s not my bill,” Bucky says and it’s almost so borderline patronizing that Steve nearly loses it.

“No fucking shit,” he grits out. “You’d have to take a fucking stand if it was yours, wouldn’t you?”

Bucky’s eyes narrow.

“Excuse me?”

Whenever Steve gets angry—this angry—like, body-shaking, vision spotting angry—his mother tells him to count backwards from ten. By the time he gets to one, she says, he’ll be slightly more rational.

This has about a 25% success rate, but Bucky’s jaw is such a hard tense line, and Steve’s hearing a ringing sound in his head, so it doesn’t hurt him to try.

“I’m not trying. To make you do what I want. I’m not a complete dick, Bucky.” Steve breathes out through his nose, his vision trained on the ceiling. “That’s not what I’m saying here.”

“What are you saying, Steve?”

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose.

“You know what this bill means to me. You know what we’re trying to do. What I want is for you to care. That's all I'm asking. Just really, honestly think about it and whether it's meaningful to you, and to talk to Tony about it. To get him to understand what's on the line here. To push past—lobbyists. For something bigger. For something better. That’s all. It's nothing to you, but it means everything to me.”
Bucky's cheeks are flushed again, but it's not arousal this time. He looks at Steve, and he says, low, “I shouldn't have asked you about this.”

“Why, because now you have to pretend to care?”

“God, Steve, you’re such a dick—” Bucky starts and Steve scrubs a hand over his face, hard.

“I’m giving you the easiest fucking issue. It’s climate change. It’s the fucking planet. Do you think the planet cares that your grandfather had a hard on for Reagan?”

Bucky’s eyes flash and Steve swallows, knowing he is, actually, being kind of a dick, but unable to care. This is the crux of the issue and always has been—that he should care so much and Bucky should care, not at all.

“I’m sorry,” he exhales. “That’s not what I meant, just—god, I feel like I’m losing my mind here. I’m grasping at fucking straws.”

“Steve, I like you, but I can’t make your issues my issues,” Bucky says. “That’s not how this works.”

“Why isn’t it?” Steve asks and looks up at Bucky. He feels himself unspooling, somewhere to the center of him. He’s searching for something there—anything; a single indication that Bucky understands that for this to work, they’ll both need to give some ground. It can’t always be him. It can’t always be Steve compromising, Steve giving ground. He thinks, if he gives Bucky this, if he gives him one more inch, he’ll have no ground left for himself.

“What?”

“Why isn’t the planet your issue, Buck?”

It should be an easy answer, really. The answer should be that it is—that something as simple as saving the fucking rock they live on isn’t a partisan issue, but one of humanity. It’s a scientific, forward-thinking, non-brainer of a problem. The only people who want to make it political are the people who don’t care about what they leave behind.

Steve—he cares. Steve is nothing but care.

So he watches Bucky closely and hopes for a single shred of evidence that he’s willing to put down his nihilism for long enough to care about something. About this something—the one thing he knows Steve has been killing himself for.

Bucky doesn’t look at him any which way. He doesn’t say anything either.

And just like that, all the anger drains out of Steve, vanishing like water into sand, to be replaced be a terrible hollowness. He had been so happy not ten minutes before. He can't remember, right now, how that felt.

“You can’t even give me one reason,” he says.

“Fuck you, Steve,” Bucky says, his voice going high. “Please, go on and tell me again how fucking abhorrent I am to you. You haven’t told me to my fucking face even once today.”

God, Steve—he can’t do this. He can’t keep doing this.

He puts his hand on Bucky's arm, and for a second, he thinks Bucky is going to throw it off. He tries
to make his fingers gentle, even though he feels like he personally is going to shatter any second now.

“I think that’s the easy answer,” he says. “I think you want me to tell you I think you’re scum because that saves you from doing the work.”

Bucky stills.

“What?”

“Do you think if I thought you were some kind of Republican monster I would be here with you? There’s only so much sex can make up for,” Steve laughs, without any mirth. He runs a hand through his hair. “If it was that easy, I would have jacked you off in the bathroom and not thought anything of it. Why do you want to take the easy way out?”

“Why would I want to do anything the hard way?”

Steve gives him a look.


“I didn’t create any of those policies, Steve,” Bucky says, coldly. “You’re giving me a lot of credit here, pal.”

“Do you think being complicit in evil is somehow better than actively being evil?” Steve asks. “It’s all shades of the same fucking thing.”

“Oh, so I’m evil now—”

“Oh, stop,” Steve exhales. “I’m trying to tell you I don’t think that about you. I think you’re a good person who’s grown up privileged and has never had to—challenge that. It’s easy to lay down and let the status quo do whatever the fuck it wants when you’re benefitting from it. It’s easy to say someone should lay their politics at the door when you’re never willing to challenge your own.”

Steve takes a breath. It wavers, but he doesn’t.

“I think you’re a spoiled, rich kid with a good heart who’s never had to challenge what he grew up with or how he thinks about things. You refuse to consider whether your stance on this might be wrong because that’s fucking hard to do. To go against everything you were raised with.”

Steve looks at him, but Bucky’s expression remains blank.

“I’m lucky that way, I guess. I grew up with a poor, queer single mother with an immigrant background. I lived in poor neighborhoods. My friend—everyone I grew up with—we all had to fight to survive. We didn’t have the luxury of not doing that. So fighting is something I’m good at. Sometimes, that’s all I have left to me.”

“I don’t want to fight with you, Steve,” Bucky says, finally.

It rings in his chest, a little dully. That of everything he said, this is the only thing Bucky takes away from him.
“How do we bridge this, Buck? Are we going to spend our time together pretending we don’t work for the people we work for? What, I just ignore Stark on the floor and you ignore Sam and we just never ask each other about work? When it’s what i care about most? At the end of the day, how could we come home to each other, if you don’t care about what’s important to me?”

He thinks: if you don’t really care about anything at all?

“I—” Bucky swallows. His face has gone from red and listless to pale and tight. “Come home to...?”

It’s not the right answer. It’s just not the right answer at all.

Steve reaches up and cups his jaw. He feels like he's swallowing glass.

“I thought we could have this. I thought I could have you.”

The words feel like ash on his tongue.

“Steve, please,” Bucky says, and he looks—Steve doesn't know. He doesn't think it's desperation, but he doesn't know what else it could be.

“I think I miscalculated.”

The silence between them stretches tight, the words lodged in their chests, like knives under skin. Steve is out of things to say.

Bucky, isn’t.

The tension snaps. Bucky reaches out to him, fingers on his shoulders, and pulls him close, kisses him frantically.

“We can make this work,” Bucky says, into his mouth. “Trust me. All we have to do is try.”

It’s funny, how for a cynical nihilist who doesn’t question and doesn’t care, how strangely naive he sometimes is. There’s a strange optimism that Bucky can’t seem to shake—Steve sees walls and impasses and all Bucky sees is a path waiting for them to take. This is the nature of privilege, at the end of the day. Bucky can ignore what Steve can’t. And how can Steve trust that?

“This is important to me, Buck,” Steve says quietly.

But Bucky isn’t willing to bend, not even for this.

“You’re important to me,” Bucky says. “Can’t that be enough?”

No.

Bucky uses his free hand to trace Steve’s face. Steve could back away, but he doesn't. Bucky must take that for assent, because he smiles. He leans forward and kisses Steve again.

Stupid.

He lets Bucky push him down to the bed. Bucky’s skin is smooth and warm pressed against his. Steve holds onto it, fingers pressed into divots.

He's almost angry at his own stupid body. It was bad enough that he responded to Bucky’s touch when he hated him; this is infinitely worse, when everything inside of him aches with loss, and he's still getting hard.
Bucky kisses him and Steve, head spinning, the King of idiots, hesitates only a moment before kissing him back.

Afterwards, Bucky curls into him and Steve lets him; he indulges himself in holding Bucky to him one last time. It doesn't change anything.

If only it could.

He stares at the ceiling while Bucky's breathing evens out, waits until he's sound asleep before sliding gently away from him.

He could wake him up, try to argue with him some more, but what good would it do? He's said everything he could possibly say. He's said it so many times it's become meaningless.

He doesn't kiss Bucky again, although he wants to—even more than that, he doesn't want to wake him up. Instead he just looks at him, drinks in the sight of his dark curls against the pillow, the line of his closed lashes, the way his arm crooks beneath his head. He's just as beautiful as he ever was, and it hits Steve hard.

But he can't do this. It was a mistake to think that he could—that it could be so easy, laying his principles at his feet just because this person has come and wormed his way into his—heart or bed, he supposes it doesn’t matter. It's just what they said it was at the beginning—unworkable—the gap between them far too vast. They don’t need a bridge, they need a fucking strait.

Because like can only get them so far. At some point, Steve has to look at the blood on his hands and determine what’s worth compromising and what isn’t. That's what his mother had said to him—and Sam too. And that’s the question, isn’t it? What is important and what isn’t? How much can a person give up before he has nothing left of himself? Is it enough that a beautiful man makes him laugh and feel good when he can’t look at himself in the mirror after? Is it enough that Bucky’s touch makes him feel like he’s on fire when their lived experiences are so different as to make them virtually incompatible? Bucky offers him something light, something easy, when what he really needs is someone to shoulder his weights with him.

Seeing the expression shutter across Bucky’s face, knowing he’s spilling his blood for something Bucky can’t be bothered to care about—it makes it clear to Steve, what he had struggled to tell his mother that night. That Steve has a duty, at the end of the day, to himself—to be as true to himself as he can be. It doesn’t matter how much he likes Bucky or how much his ribs feel like they’re breaking under the weight of his feelings. This is a compromise he can’t make.

Steve can't be with someone who refuses to care. He can't abandon his beliefs—can't be in a relationship where he has to hide the best part of himself, and, more, he can't make himself less than who and what he is. He can't bend toward someone who's not bending back.

Maybe someone else could, but not him.

It would make him a Steve Rogers he couldn’t bear to live with.

So Steve puts on his clothes in the middle of the most opulent room he's ever stayed in and wishes, briefly, that he could have stayed longer. He runs a hand through his hair, his throat tight with regret, and as quietly as he, can leaves, the door closing with a near-silent click on the beautiful room and the beautiful man behind him.
Politics isn’t a fairytale, Steve Rogers, he tells himself. This is D.C. You were only ever going to get some of what you wanted.

He walks back through the cold and waits at the corner for a cab.

Chapter End Notes

We at CrinkleDerium Ltd would apologize for the mess above, but, frankly, this was always going to get worse before it got better. To build something long-term, you gotta deconstruct everything that’s wrong and build something better from the ground up.

Thank you so much for reading and commenting! ♥

ETA: As always, we are more than happy to discuss turns in events and why things are working out the way they are working out in this fic. We’ve answered some thoughts in the comments section, so take a look if you'd like. But also if you'd like to have a greater dialogue about character motivations and etc. we are very happy to engage in good faith!
chapter nine, or, what doesn't kill you makes you more caffeinated

Chapter by crinklefries

Chapter Summary

“Steve, you are the light of my life. You are my baby. I labored ten hours to bring you into this world and I only regret that when you have the wrong opinion on things that are obvious, like what constitutes a Christmas movie.” He can almost see his mother’s patient, gentle smile. “To me, you can do no wrong. But you, my darling, are absolutely fucking awful at communication.”

Chapter Notes

One point before the final few chapters—this is long, so bear with us.

A lot of the comments in the last chapter were interesting, to say the least. There were valid frustrations that were expressed and the authors had, of course, planned for that. It was the tipping point for a bunch of things and it was always going to hit you one way or another.

That being said, the background of your authors is thus: we are writers who were raised in the Midwest and Deep South of the U.S. The depiction of Republicans here and character growth are based on our experiences, real conservatives we have known, and their ways of thinking. We assure you, if you think we haven’t put thought into that depiction or the ramifications of the resolution—we have. We promise you there are experiences that happen just like this.

This was never going to be an easy across-the-aisle romance. That is not a story we are interested in, in this political climate. This is a fic with a clear bias and we have never hidden the ball on that. We will not apologize for being critical of Republicans and privilege. The most we can do is try to examine that thoughtfully and set these two up for a realistic relationship, given their upbringings, that has some basis for longevity.

That is the story we have conceived and that is the story we have written. The resolution might ring true to you and it might not. You might like where it ends and you might not! That’s the very nature of politics and truth is, American politics is a weird beast. Partisanship in this country is a cult. If you’re from elsewhere you might not quite understand that, but we are happy to answer questions that are asked in good faith.

Wherever you fall on this spectrum, know that we have put thought into this and made decisions deliberately and we feel this is a realistic ending based on our own experiences.

We hope you’ve enjoyed this story so far—thank you so much for your patronage, love, and debate.

—Crinklefries and Deisderium
The cab ride is quiet, although it would be at 2 in the morning. The D.C. scenery slides by outside of the window, impressions of houses and apartments, dark because of the late hour, and the occasional laundromat or pizza slice corner store lit up in between bars that Steve feels too old to even look at.

His skin is sticky and his head’s a mess. That’s not the long of it and it’s certainly not the short of it. There’s something lodged in his throat and if he thinks too long about the last few hours, the ups and downs of it, he’ll press his head against the cool cab window and break the glass trying to find an answer no one can give.

He tries to clear his mind as they inch closer to Adams Morgan, but it’s playing a losing game. His brain is too busy parsing through soft touches and the muddied waters of an argument not fully carried through to stop grinding. He has flashes of the night and none of it feels particularly real.

He thinks: this is what happens when two, immovable objects collide.

He thinks: this was inevitable.

He also thinks: but was it?

That’s the part he can’t decide. Steve runs through it in his head—if he had stopped Bucky from kissing him again, if he had asked Bucky in a different way, if he had asked Bucky at a different
time. But the truth in front of him is almost as clear as his feelings: he’s tried. He’s tried to engage Bucky time and time again and Bucky, proving he’s almost as terrible as Steve at communication, has deflected. If Steve is a bulldozer, then Bucky is a deflector. He doesn’t answer questions when he doesn’t want to, and the thing is, he almost never wants to.

Steve doesn’t think it would have made a difference, ultimately, the when or the where. No situation has ever been good. No time has ever been right. Bucky had looked Steve in the eyes, heard him plead, and decided no answer was better than some answer.

That’s not good enough. Not even Steve is a good enough liar to pretend otherwise.

So he sits in the car, sluggishly moving toward home, his heart cracked somewhere in his chest, his feelings tangled, his head a mess, and wishes there was a way to change the unchangeable.

The cab deposits him outside of their apartment building. He pays in cash and stumbles out, exhausted and desperate for the cold night air to sink in past his layers. He craves that kind of cold—the bitter, sharp claws that will remind him what it’s like to be alive.

He stumbles onto the stairs leading up to the front door, draws his knees up, and drags his hands down his face. He hasn’t been drinking, so he’s not drunk, but it feels that way—the way his brain is overloaded with sensation and the way nothing can seem to quite work right. He fumbles in his pocket for his phone and draws it out.

Hands shaking, Steve pulls up the window to text Bucky. He doesn’t really know what he wants to say or how to say it, so he just starts typing, hoping that somewhere along the way his brain and heart will cooperate and that what he says—well, that it will be enough.

To: BARNES (knife emoji)

Buck—

You’ll see this sometime after you wake up and I’m sorry about that. I know I was a dick to leave while you were asleep, but I don’t think I can say what I need while you’re standing there, looking at me.

Tonight was one of the best I’ve had in a long time. Maybe ever. But I meant it when I said I don’t know how to make this work with us. I wish I did. I wish it could be enough that you’re a great guy and hot and that you make me laugh and we’re great together in bed. I think I could let myself believe for a while that would be enough, but I’d be lying. I owe it to you not to lie.

There are a lot of people who can put their politics aside to be with someone. I grew up with people like that. They had parents on two sides of the aisle and they’d come home and they wouldn’t talk about what they did that day. They wouldn’t watch the news together. Their views were so opposite they couldn’t reconcile that.

I think for some people that’s okay. They don’t need to put that on the table. They can sit down at dinner and talk about TV and whatever they did at work that day and I don’t know, church gossip.

If that’s what you need, I’m not the person who can give you that. I want to. I hope you know that I wish I could be that guy. For you, I almost want to be that guy. But politics is my whole world and thinking I can make it anything less than that is...disingenuous. I
I don’t know how to not be my principles and I don’t think I’d want to be, even if I did know. I believe in the things I believe in so much I sometimes can’t get my head out of it.

I know the easy answer is to relax a little, to compromise sometimes. I don’t know how to be easy, Bucky. I’m not an easy person. And I don’t think that’s a bad thing. Maybe some people would, but Ma taught me to be unapologetic in standing up for what you believe in. And this is the thing I believe in—that there’s right and there’s wrong and you have to put everything on the line for what’s right. I don’t think it’s a bad thing to be that way and I’m not going to apologize for it.

So where does that leave us?

I don’t think that’s the person you want. You want someone easy, someone who’s willing to put all of that aside because they love you. And I can’t say that’s wrong either. You deserve someone like that.

That’s not me.

I hope you can understand I didn’t mean to lead you on. I was trying to do the best I could and I guess I fucked that up a few times, but I promise I was trying. I thought I could be that person for you. I hated you and then I didn’t and then I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I thought maybe I could make myself into the kind of person for who that mattered more than anything. I don’t think it’s fair to me to be someone I’m not and I don’t think that’s fair to you either. We’re not on the same page and that sucks, but that doesn’t make it not true.

Anyway it’s 2 am and I’m rambling.

You don’t have to reply back to me. I hope one day you think about the things you think and why you think them. I hope there’s something or someone that makes you reconsider some of the policies you support and examine some of your privileges. I know you can do good, but I also know it’s hard.

I’m not here to be your moral compass and I’m sorry if that’s how I came off.

I’m really rambling now, fuck.

I guess what I’m saying is I’m sorry. And I wish it could be different. But for now it can’t be.

Steve swallows, pressing send after each message. He doesn’t know if any of it makes sense and come light of day he’ll probably regret it, but for now it’s what he wants to say. For now, it’s what he needs to say.

Some things he leaves unsaid, even to himself. Like how sending those text messages feel. Like the ache that blossoms in the middle of his chest, catching him in between his rib cage, burning up and down his sides. It’s like a sentiment caught far too little, too late, that he’s not willing to say out loud.

Some things are better left unearthed and other things are better left unsaid. He feels like he’s dying, briefly, and he wonders if it would be so bad.

It’s 2 am and he has a broken heart.
Steve stares at his phone until the light goes out and then he continues sitting outside until his hands turn numb.

*\*\*

The next few days are a hazy blur that he can’t quite pull himself out of. If he had been unfocused before, he’s listless now. He feels terrible all the time, hurting to hear from Bucky and wishing for anything but. He doesn’t know what would be worse: an answer or silence. It turns out he doesn’t have to choose.

Bucky doesn’t answer and, eventually, Steve deletes his number.

It’s to the wire, but Sam gives him the day off. Steve wakes up one morning, late, and finds himself unable to move his body.

Sam checks in on him twice and then lingers in the doorway.

“Hey,” he says softly. “The office is going to be quiet today. Why don’t you take the day off? I’ll finish all my shit and we can get pizza and watch a movie tonight. That sound good?”

Nothing sounds particularly good, but Steve is an adult, so he says yes.

“I’ll call you later,” Sam says. He pauses. “To see what pizza you want.”

He doesn’t say to check on you but Steve can hear it in the pause.

Sam leaves and Steve turns in his bed. He goes back to sleep.

He’s awoken by the inexplicable sound of his phone ringing. Blearily, Steve reaches to his nightstand and picks it up without checking who it is.

“Hello?”

“Oh, honey,” says Sarah Rogers.

Steve doesn’t cry hearing his mother’s voice because he’s a fucking adult, but something inside him dislodges. He drags himself up against the headboard.

“What time is it?” Steve asks. His throat is already burning.

“It’s four in the afternoon, plum,” Sarah says. “You’ve slept this long?”

Steve doesn’t answer. He runs a hand through his unruly hair.

“I haven’t heard from you in a few days,” his Ma says, gently. “How’s my incorrigible son?”

There’s something about hearing your mother ask how you are that makes everything come rushing to the surface. Everything Steve’s been trying to ignore for days catches in his chest, making him feel heavy and waterlogged everywhere. He’s overwhelmed under the weight of his feelings. He sways under the heaviness of his regret.

No, not regret.

Under the heaviness of his decision.
“Fine,” he gets out just before Sarah lets out a chuckle.

“Want to try that again?”

Steve groans.

“Steve, you are the light of my life. You are my baby. I labored ten hours to bring you into this world and I only regret that when you have the wrong opinion on things that are obvious, like what constitutes a Christmas movie.” He can almost see his mother’s patient, gentle smile. “To me, you can do no wrong. But you, my darling, are absolutely fucking awful at communication.”

“Ma!” Steve complains and Sarah laughs again.

“I’m serious. Do you know what you do when you can’t find the words to say what you want?”

“What?”

“You stop talking. You bottle everything inside until you just can’t anymore. That was fine when you were seven and you could go outside and run around and burn all that energy out, but you’re not seven anymore.”

Steve doesn’t say anything. He looks at the top of his knees.

“I’m not here to judge,” she says, gently. “I’m here because I am your mother and because your best friend and my congressional representative is very worried about you.”

Steve glares at the ghost of Sam, somewhere in the ether.

“Talk to me, Steve,” his mother says.

And because he’s had an unbelievable few days, because he’s tired, because he’s hurt and unsure and misses Bucky, and, most of all, because she’s his mother, Steve finally talks.

As always, Sarah Rogers is correct. When Steve starts talking, he finds everything pouring out, like a dam that’s released a river that’s been building. He starts at the beginning and leaves out only the most explicit content. He lays it all bare for her—the good, the bad, and the ugly. He tells her how compromised he feels, he tells her what he asked of Bucky. He tells her how he left, and he tells her about the texts he sent. He tells her maybe he has more feelings than he thought, although he can’t say the word he feels in his chest to be true.

He hides nothing from his mother and Sarah Rogers, she listens.

“I made a decision,” Steve says. “It didn’t make me happy, but I think it’s what I think I needed to do. I did what I thought was good for me. But I don’t know. What if I made a mistake, Ma?”

Sarah doesn’t reply immediately.

Then she says, “Decisions aren’t always easy, Steve. But you made one and I’m proud of you for that.”

He’s grateful to hear it, but he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know about anything.

Steve sighs and runs a hand over his face. His chest aches, dully.

“I think it takes guts to do what you did,” Sarah says. “Sticking up for what you believe in, even if
it’s the hard thing to do—even the best people fail at that, honey. We see it every day, don’t we? It’s all over the news. There is nothing harder than sticking to your guns.”

“But?” Steve asks, dreading her answer.

“You’re harder on yourself than anyone else could ever be,” his mother says, kindly. “There’s not a but. Feelings are complicated and so are people. If people were that easy to solve, if everything could always fall into place all the time, therapists would be out of a job!”

“Ma!”

“I’m serious!” Sarah laughs, then quiets. “Your principles aren’t the problem. You are right to feel the way you do. Do you understand that?”

Steve looks at the ceiling listlessly.

“You care for Bucky. But you’re different people. You don’t believe in the same things and you don’t function the same way. Sometimes that’s okay and sometimes that’s not. You care for this boy and you’re attracted to him and you’re conflicted because he’s everything you hate, everything you’ve ever worked against.”

“Am I a bad person?” Steve asks. “For not being able to see past that?”

Sarah thinks it over.

“No,” she says. “You can only prioritize what means the most to you and he can try to do the same. Maybe that aligns and maybe it doesn’t, but it’s all you both can do.”

Steve feels the heaviness in his limbs, like he could sink to the bottom of the ocean if set on top.

“What do you think?” he asks his mother. “Tell me honestly. Do you think I did the right thing? Leaving him before we could try?”

Sarah doesn’t think this time, she answers.

“I think you did the smart thing,” she says. “I think...you did the only thing you felt you could do.”

It’s not exactly a satisfying answer.

Maybe, Steve thinks. Maybe that’s true. But that doesn’t help him from wondering what he’s missing; whether he gave up when he should have tried.

It doesn’t help him from missing Bucky.

“Whatever happens now, Steve,” his mother says, “you’ve told him everything you’ve had to say. If he chooses to listen to that and respond—that’s up to him. You can’t change that, do you understand? You made your decision, it’s time for him to make his now.”

Steve takes a shaky breath and nods, although his mother cannot see.

“I know it’s hard,” Sarah Rogers says and her voice softens. It feels like her fingers are in his hair, her touch gentle against his scalp. “The things that matter the most often are.”

Steve can’t stay in bed forever, so he pulls himself together the next day, after a night of sitting on the couch with Sam, just watching shitty old movies and eating pizza and drinking beer together. Sam
doesn’t ask him what’s going on and Steve doesn’t offer. Instead, they sit side by side, quietly at first, and then starting to talk more and more until they’re nudging each other and making smartass commentary about all of the Die Hard movies.

It hadn’t healed Steve’s broken heart, but it had gently scooped him out of his head and reminded him there was more here than just the remains of a potential relationship he could have had with a guy he had once hated. They had eaten way too much pizza and gone to sleep way too late, but it was the closest to normal Steve’s felt in over a year—not Representative Wilson and his Chief of Staff, but Sam and Steve, best friends since middle school. Sometimes what you needed was a night of no expectations with someone who’s known you since you had shaggy hair and light acne.

He’s better at work the next day, his head a little clearer. Sam has an early meeting across the city, so Steve leaves the apartment by himself, scarf wrapped tight, stopping at Krispy Kreme for some slightly burned coffee and a box of glazed donuts.

By the time he gets into the office, America and Kate are bent over America’s desk, scrolling through the morning’s headlines.

“If you don’t ask me about the circles under my eyes, you get two donuts each,” Steve says, setting the box down on his desk.

Both of their heads snap up.

“What kind?” America says, eyes narrowing.

“Glazed,” Steve says, opening the box. The two of them abandon their post and shuffle closer. “Krispy Kreme.”


“Your skin?” Kate adds, taking one herself. “Clear. Your mind?—”

“Shut up and eat your donut,” Steve laughs. He picks up his cup of coffee and nods at them. “What’s the schedule today?”

“You know the saying we keep having meetings to plan meetings that could otherwise be solved through email?” Kate says, mouth full of donut.

“Uh huh.”

“It’s like that, except the meetings are really important and could make or break the thing that we’ve all been working our asses off to pass for the past, oh, year or so,” America says. She finishes her donut in like three bites because eating a Krispy Kreme donut is like inhaling a cloud of syrup air. “So you know. No pressure.”

“Oh good.” Steve snorts. “Wonder what it would be like to be under pressure.”

“I would like to see it,” Kate says. She finishes her donut too and grabs a second. “Sam won’t be in the office until this afternoon, but we have a list of things to do before then. Also.”

Kate and America exchange looks.

“What?”
The looks deepen.

“What have you done?”

Kate takes a careful bite of her cloud air.

“Rip off the bandaid,” Steve says. “Be gentle.”

America snorts.

“You got signed up to do a thing,” she says. “With the new batch of interns. Someone somewhere either thinks you’re inspiring or qualified or hates you and wants to ruin your life, but either way you have to give them a talk about like, working on the Hill and hopes and dreams or whatever.”

Steve’s eyes don’t bug out, but he drinks more coffee than he means to. He doesn’t have time for this. He barely has the brain cells for this.

“Sorry,” America says, not sounding at all sorry.

“I’m sure it’ll be fun,” Kate offers, sounding marginally sorry.

“When? I have to—do things.”

He’s almost certain that’s true. He had missed a full day of work, his email is probably trying to break away from him.

“Friday,” Kate says. She finishes her second donut and daintily licks his fingers clean. “After lunch. So you know, you have until then to think of some hopes and dreams.”

“I thought those were discouraged,” America says.

“You want to give the talk instead?” Steve asks.

“That’s one way to get smaller government.” Kate snickers. “Just have America talk to everyone trying to get into government and then they’ll all leave.”

America pinches Kate and Kate twists away from her, snickering some more, and Steve rolls his eyes and finishes his coffee.

They close the box of donuts and start on their list of high priority and medium priority items. At some point, Sam comes back and they stick the remaining donuts in the microwave—did you know that if you nuke a Krispy Kreme donut for exactly 8 seconds in the microwave it returns to its original state of cloud of syrupy air?—and stress over votes.

In Steve’s head, as usual, the lyrics of Hamilton play on loop: you don’t have the votes. You’re gonna need congressional approval and you don’t have the votes.

He sighs and thinks to himself: he really needs to watch another musical. Also, one day, he’s going to have some choice words with Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Sam’s not the only one in meetings the closer they get to the vote because Stark’s not the only one who has to field lobbyists. Some of the bigger advocates Sam takes personally and for the others, Steve steps in. Sometimes it’s a lobbyist that wants a personal piece of legislation or personal policy advanced and other times it’s whole industries that have something to say.
Steve takes Sam’s meetings with the AARP, with FedEx, with ConEdison, and Verizon. He takes constituent calls when America and Kate are too inundated with emails and personally handling Sam’s activities. He loses an entire afternoon in a futile conversation with a Koch-funded fossil fuel group that nearly has him tear a chunk of his blond hair out at the roots.

When he emerges from their tiny closet of a conference room, he thinks he’s bleary-eyed and has more or less lost the will to live. He’s about to ask America for her thoughts on whether it’s worth donating his body to science at this point when Sam’s office door opens.

“Man, you really like to hear yourself talk,” a familiar voice says.

“I thought that was obvious,” comes a different voice that is instantaneously so irritating that Steve is certain a chill has gone down his spine and the temperature in the room has dropped at least five degrees.

His mother had never taught him to be the praying sort, but he thinks it’s never too late to call on God to protect them from demons.

“Was that not obvious?” Tony Stark asks. “If I’m not being clear on that point someone tell me because I have a lot more opinions and a huge need to share them all.”

“I’m begging you to shut up,” Senator Rhodes says.

America catches Steve’s eye from her desk.

“You know my terms,” Stark says.

“You do not get free access to my couch.”

“It’s the best couch on the Hill!” Stark protests.

“Yeah, I know.” Rhodes smirks. “That’s why I bought it, douchebag.”

There’s some grumbling and loud clashing before Steve sees Sam come out of the office, on his phone.

“Oh, is this still going on?” He looks up at Rhodey and Stark.

“It’s been going on for the past thirty years, I’m afraid to say.” Rhodey looks like he could not be in more pain and Steve, frankly, commiserates.

“Stark, I’ll get you those numbers,” Sam says. “Just hear me out.”

“I’ve heard you out. I’m here, currently, hearing you out,” Stark says.

“You know you say one thing and then…”

“I am a man of my word,” Stark says, putting up his hands. “Mostly.”

He points at Steve suddenly.

“Do not quote me on that!”

“I don’t know how to tell you you’re not quotable, Senator,” Steve can’t help but to say, which makes Sam groan and America and Kate snicker into their hands.
“Oh, Narc,” Stark says. “We have to do this more often.”

“No thanks,” Steve says, expression dead.

“I’m serious, Tony,” Sam interrupts.

“So am I,” Stark says, turning back to Sam. He loses his shit-eating demeanor, bearing something that is, if not serious, then as close to it as Tony Stark has ever gotten. “They’ll have my head on a platter for this, Wilson, make no mistake. Virginia consumes twice as much energy as it produces. If I’m going to risk all of those relationships, there better as hell be something in it for me.”

The silence in the room that greets Stark is a little tense around the edges.

“That’s not what I meant.” Stark sighs. “I mean it better be worth it. You’re going to war with some of the biggest industries in this country. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to lose your seat for that?”

“Tony,” Rhodes warns.

“I’m not sugar coating it, Rhodey,” Stark says and turns back to Sam. “This is politics, like it or not. You want Code Green and I want tax relief on businesses. You want to talk about principles? That’s fine. You have yours and I have mine. That’s what’s on the table. Shake my hand on it or don’t, but that’s where my line is.”

The silence is less tense and more thick this time. Steve watches Stark carefully, that same anger burning both sharply and dully beneath his breast bone. He doesn’t know how Rhodey does it. He doesn’t know how he stands there, fighting with him on issues that mean so much, and still, at the end of the day, carries on a friendship with him.

He supposes Rhodey’s a better person than he is. Him and Ruth Bader Ginsburg both.

“If that’s how it is,” Sam says, wearily. “Then that’s how it is.”

“That’s how it is, Representative,” Tony Stark says.

Rhodey sighs and runs a hand over his bald head.

“Thanks for coming in anyway, Tony,” he says. Then, he quirks him half a smile. “I want you to know this isn’t over.”

Stark, whose shoulders have been as tense as the atmosphere in the room, relaxes at that. He grins that horrible, arrogant Tony Stark smile that Steve assumes must pass for charming.

“Hasn’t been over in thirty years, Rhodes,” he says. “If you randomly stopped being a pain in my ass now, I’d think something was wrong.”

“Unfortunately, the feeling is very mutual.” Rhodey nods at him. “I’ll call you later for dinner. Read the emails I send you, asshole.”

“Oh I have a guy to do that,” Stark says, grinning. He gives Steve a wink that automatically makes him want to die. “How’s it going, Narc?”

“Please leave,” Steve says, emphatically.

“I do love our time together,” Stark says. Then, nodding to everyone in the office, he leaves.
There’s a weary sort of silence in Stark’s absence. America and Kate watch the room and Steve tries to balance how he’s boiling with how bone-tired he is. If, after all this, even Sam and Rhodey can’t get to Stark—if none of them can get to Borson or to Flokisdottir. If, after all of this, they just can’t get the votes. They haven’t been defeated yet, but he’s never felt quite so disheartened before.

“There’s still time,” Sam says. He rubs a hand over his head too. “We have a couple of more pieces in the air. Peggy’s working on it too. And Maria. It’s not over until it’s over.”

Rhodey sighs and seems to sag where he is.

“I hope it’s enough, Sam,” Rhodey says. “God, I really hope it’s enough.”

Friday afternoon finds Steve facing a room full of bright-eyed young people here to change the world, or at least D.C.

Well, bright-eyed might be an inaccurate descriptor.

Some of them are on their phones and some of them are cradling cups of coffee—a counter to the post-lunch nap that Steve wishes he himself were taking. Not that he feels sleepy; he's got a room full of interns waiting to hear about hopes and dreams or whatever, and he wants to get this over with, but he does actually want to impart to them the best part of what he does: the ability to, with time, patience, a burgeoning sleep deficit and attendant caffeine addiction, actually enact change.

Steve would prefer to be giving this little talk sometime when he's not sleep-deprived and still feeling more than a little fragile and heartsore, but the latter doesn't seem to be happening anytime soon, and the former will probably never happen, if he's being honest. He glances down at his notes, then back at the clock. It's 1:32, so he guesses he should get started with imparting his wisdom to the Youth.

"Hi," he says. "I'm Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson's chief of staff. Thanks for coming today."

There’s a half-hearted rustle as about three fourths of the room actually look up at him.

Kate gives him a thumbs-up from the third row. He's still not sure how he ended up doing this, but he catches her eye and gives her what feels like a wan smile.

He shuffles his notes again.

"So, you've been here a little while, and you might be wondering what those of us here for the long haul get out of it. The Hill is a notoriously cynical, bottomless pit of despair and overworked, over-caffeinated staffers and politicians, so—what is there to respect about this, about the process? What's the point of it, other than resume-building, right?" Steve smiles and a few of the kids smile back at him.

"If you don't remember anything else I say today, the one thing I want you to take away is that it is possible to change things. It takes work, and it takes time, but you can be the engine that drives this government towards a better place. Or part of it, anyway."

That gets the rest of them to look up.

“It’s cheesy, I know,” Steve says, with a lop-sided grin. “Someone in government thinking that they can make the world better? Isn’t that naive? I guess the answer is—maybe. But the answer is also that just because someone tells you you can’t do something doesn’t mean you should listen. Just because someone says to you that things are too hard—that D.C. is too political, that the only things
that pass are the deals that get made behind closed doors—that doesn’t mean they’re right. It doesn’t mean you should listen. You’re here because you care about something. And that’s what matters—that you’re here, in the place where things happen, and that you’re here because you want something done.”

Steve’s heart ticks up. He looks down at his notes and shakes his head.

“Remember that, okay? No matter what your reason for being here is—remember that it’s okay to care. It’s important to do that. It’s the only way good things get done.”

Steve stops and swallows, the message hitting too close to home, all things considered. But he’s started and now that he knows people—these kids—are listening, he sure as hell isn’t going to stop.

He clears his throat and keeps talking, shifting to more concrete things, touching on some of the more tangible details of how things work without dwelling on them to the extent that he’ll scare anyone off, hopefully.

“But the details are just that—details,” he continues. “What's exciting about the work we do here is that it’s both sides trying to reach the point where the balance will tip one way or the other. It can be slow work, and it often is. It can be frustrating too, at times—but it's worthwhile in the end, because after the whole slow process, the thing that you've been dreaming about, the thing that you've been wanting to make happen, for the betterment of everyone—well, it becomes a reality.”

Steve is getting into it now. He doesn't know if he can explain the kind of sense of awe he feels when he really thinks about what he’s done here, about the chain of legislation that he can trace from his pocket Constitution right to Code Green. But he can try. If he can capture even a drop of that enthusiasm, of the deep pit of feeling he has—for the process, for his part in the process—then that will be good enough for him. Maybe it will be good enough for even one of the interns here.

Kate gives him enthusiastic eyes and is either taking notes on her phone or texting America and laughing at him, but either way he appreciates the support.

“And sometimes, it might not work out the way you think it will—it might not work out favorably toward the end you put all the effort into, but that just means you have an opportunity to try again, you know? You are part of a unique tradition of lawmaking that goes all the way back to the founding of our country. And that's something special, that's something bigger than any one person or any one law. It's the opportunity to examine yourself and what you believe in, and take action toward those things. It's the opportunity to change things, not only for your own constituents, but for everyone.”

He shakes his head, smiling. There are a couple of interns now, following along thoughtfully.

“That means something to me. It means something to a lot of us here. The American Dream isn’t just about sacrificing everything to one day become something else, some lofty, intangible goal. It’s something more than that—it’s about using the resources you have, the privileges you have, the strength and knowledge and power you have and uplifting yourself and your community and everyone around you. The Dream is to be here, in the heart of that kind of power and do the things you believe in because you know it’s the right thing to do. It’s—god, I can’t describe it. To be able to do something, really make some kind of a ripple or a wave—when you’ve never been heard before, when you’ve grown up thinking your voice doesn’t or could never matter—that’s the kind of thing people die for every day. And I think if you’re here and you can do that—speak up, stand for what’s right, work for something good. If you can do that without dying, then it’s incumbent on you to do it for the people who can’t.”
Maybe this isn’t the appropriate lesson for a room of college and law students. It’s possible Steve’s in over his head and proselytizing his vision for a functional, healthy, and compassionate D.C. is so naive as to be cloying. Maybe the students will hate it or maybe they will love it. It kind of doesn’t matter to him either way. Steve knows that if there’s one thing he has to share with the youth—with the future—it’s this.

He takes a breath and a quick drink from his bottle of water and looks up. He immediately stops talking, because there, at the back of the room, is Bucky Barnes.

He’s standing by the door, leaning against the wall, just—watching him.

Steve doesn’t so much lose his train of thought as it violently derails.

Steve hasn’t seen Bucky since the night he left him. Bucky looks—well, he always looks good, but he also looks tired. There are circles under his eyes, mirrors to the ones under Steve's, and he looks...blank. Maybe sad. Maybe just thoughtful; maybe thinking that Steve’s a bloviating ass, it’s hard to tell.

Their eyes meet for one long second, and Steve doesn't want to think anything too dramatic about the emotion that he thinks he sees there, because he knows he hurt Bucky. He knows. But he doesn't want to ascribe to him the same kind of feelings he's been having, doesn't want to project any bigger sense of hurt or anger or loss than Bucky is actually feeling, just because that's what he himself has been feeling.

He takes in another shaky breath, then looks down at his notes. He doesn't want to make this any weirder than it already is for the interns listening to him, and if he looks at Bucky's face, as beautiful as it ever was and more unreachable, and tries to figure out what he sees there any longer, he might actually lose his shit.

His head buzzes as he tries to gather his next thought.

"Sorry, I—what I was saying is that—"

When he looks up again, Bucky is gone.

Steve exhales, but he inhales too. Somehow, he lets out a breath and keeps one, deep inside.

He starts talking again, looking down at his notes to hopefully guide him into some sort of semblance of sense-making, but the fact of the matter is that he has no idea what he actually says after that point. He hopes he is imparting some kind of knowledge and that it isn't just a bunch of babble strung together. He would think that he imagined Bucky, standing there in the back of the room, but if he were going to hallucinate him into existence, it would be in different circumstances, surely.

Kate looks concerned at his lapse in the ability to speak coherently, but as he goes on, she gives him another thumbs up, so he must have recovered the thread at least a little bit.

By the time he's taken a few questions, his sudden speechlessness is a mere blip in the rear-view mirror of time, or so he hopes.

Kate lingers after everyone else files out, though.

"You okay? What happened up there? You looked like you'd seen a ghost."

Steve considers for maybe half a second responding with, I did, but that would be fucking dramatic even for him, and Kate doesn’t deserve that.
“Nah,” he says with as close an approximation to casual as he can manage. “Barnes just stuck his head in. Distracted me.”

“Oh,” Kate says, and there's enough compassion in that one syllable that he has to swallow hard and dig the heel of his palms into his closed eyes.

Then he drops his hands from his face and says, before she can say anything else, “Let's get back to the office. Constituent emails wait for no man.”

“Yeah.” Kate elbows him in the ribs. Her elbows are extremely sharp. “I got that from your talk.”

“I talked about constituent emails?” Steve yelps. “What else did I...talk about?”

“The importance of a good cup of coffee,” Kate says. “Don’t worry, I recorded all of it. America and I have plans to rewatch it this afternoon with popcorn.”


He follows her back out, his materials in his hands. Kate talks to him as they go, but Steve can't help his thoughts from drifting away from interns and paperwork and emails to brown curls and blue eyes and dark circles smudged carelessly underneath. It's not healthy, but then, heartbreak rarely is.

The office is pretty quiet when they get back; Sam is out at a meet and greet and America is, in fact, answering emails.

“How did it go?” America says when they walk into the office.

“Pretty good, I think,” Steve says. Kate wiggles her hand in an *eh* gesture that maybe she thinks he can't see.

“It's over anyway,” Steve continues. "What else have we got on the calendar for today?"

America clicks some keys, presumably answering an email, or maybe still texting Kate, who knows, and then sits up.

"Sam's got a meeting with Tony Stark," she says.

"I didn't know about this," Steve says, blinking. "Why didn't I know about this?"

"Because you didn't check the calendar, dumbass," America says. "It's been on the calendar forever. Like, at least a day."

Then she and Kate exchange slightly guilty looks and Steve wants to smack himself in the face because the only reason they're giving each other that look is because they feel bad because he's been such a fuck up lately.

“Okay, that's fine.” Steve does in fact have other things to do and Sam is perfectly capable of handling Tony Stark by himself. It's not like Steve is chomping at the bit to get called weird names and listen to Tony go on and on about tax relief and scratching each other's backs or whatever it is that Tony would say if Steve took two seconds out of his long and hard-working day to listen to him.

Steve settles in at his desk with a cup of Costco coffee instead. He finds an ossified piece of chocolate that he decides to eat anyway and assesses that the paperwork stacks have gotten out of control again. There are vast swathes of paper slumping into each other and very little actual desk
surface. He grabs his trash can and starts sorting through them, making stacks of relevant and not-relevant and should have been dealt with already. He finds several pens, including one that he's been looking for for a while, a Kit-Kat that he doesn't remember buying, and several receipts from lunches and coffees that are definitely business expenses. He tucks the receipts into a folder, the Kit-Kat into his top desk drawer for later, and the pens into a mug made by Sarah Rogers in her pottery-throwing phase of artistic development, glazed all in shades of blue.

After scraping the not-relevant pile of papers into the recycling bin and taking a brief moment to lament that the paperless office does not yet exist, he's cleared sufficient space so that he can really dig into the should have been dealt with already pile and see how much of it he can push onto America and Kate and how much he needs to deal with himself. He's commending himself on his excellent delegation skills when he comes across a document that, alas, requires Sam's signature and was supposed to be returned yesterday. It's not vital and that's probably how it got overlooked, but Steve is aware that every day he continues to not return it, he's making someone else's job harder, and if they end up having to email him to ask him about it, or god forbid, call, that will just be deeply annoying for both of them.

"Hey, America," Steve says. "Where's Sam's meeting with Stark?"

"Little Pearl," she says, checking the calendar.

And that decides it; Steve had passingly thought about asking her or Kate to run the document over to Sam, but he'll run it over himself and maybe pick up a potato donut and a falafel since he didn't actually eat lunch before his talk and maybe could use more than a square of mystery desk chocolate and Costco coffee to keep him going. Purportedly. According to his "doctor" who is a practitioner in the "medical field."

"Thanks," Steve says, already getting his coat. "I'm going to run this paper over to him."

"I could go," Kate says, looking up from the papers that she's folding and stuffing into envelopes. "You could take over this important task."

"Nope," Steve says. "I would be remiss in my duties as Sam's Chief of Staff if I did not take this opportunity to get out of the office and hand him this very important document to his hand, importantly."

"I didn’t know the Chief of Staff had duties," Kate, who has been spending Too Much Time With Her Girlfriend, says.

"If that's how you're going to be," America—said girlfriend—says, "you can take him this memo too."

She hands him a piece of paper and Steve tucks it into a manila folder along with the other paper.

"Okay," he says. "Keep everything running till I get back."

This gets him two sets of rolled eyes, which he accepts as his due. He tucks his scarf around his neck and buttons up his coat.

It's only about a mile to the Little Pearl and since the weather is cold but clear, it's a good opportunity to both stretch his legs and clear his thoughts. Or rather, the thoughts that he's been very carefully not thinking since seeing Bucky.

It's not that he's dwelling on it; in fact, he's actively trying to think of other things. But the fact of the
matter is that he's still sad, still hurt, and still not over how very much it seems it wasn't meant to be, and how much he still likes him anyway. He can't regret breaking it off, but he regrets that it was never going to work. He regrets knowing how happy Bucky was to lean against him as they walked together, how delighted he looked when Steve was kissing him. And he regrets seeing him today, that flat, tired look on his face such a contrast to the last time Steve saw him. Even if it was never going to work, it's just another clear reminder of how much Steve wishes that it could have.

But the crisp air is perking him up as he walks. He hasn't really had time or the inclination to go to the gym or go running lately, and it feels good to set a brisk pace, to let his muscles warm up under his coat and slacks. It's a cloudy, overcast day—there's some storm coming up that has meteorologists freaking the fuck out—but for now the streets are clear and the occasional sunlight breaking through the clouds seems to be physically reaching into Steve and lifting his spirits by force.

So by the time he turns onto Pennsylvania Avenue, he's feeling a little bit better, and ready to hand Sam his papers and maybe take thirty minutes to sit down and eat instead of trying to jam falafel in his mouth as he's walking back to the office, which seems like a surefire way to get harissa on his nice Instagram coat. But as he's passing the Metro station about a block away from the Little Pearl, he sees two familiar men walking and talking around the park across the street.

Sam...and Bucky.

He stops in the middle of the sidewalk, gets bumped into by the irritated person walking behind him, who says something quite rude that he doesn't process because his heart is in his throat and his brain is making some short-circuiting noises. Both men are wearing long, heavy coats against the cold, and Bucky has his messenger bag slung over his shoulder.

If it were Sam and Tony, he'd just duck over there and hand Sam the folder, briefly get insulted, and go get his falafel. But he has so many questions—why are Sam and Bucky talking? Did Tony not show up at the meeting? What the fuck could they possibly be talking about?—and he doesn't know if he can take any of the answers.

Both of their faces are serious, and Sam waves his hands as he answers something. Bucky doesn't look blank and tired when he's talking to Sam, not the way he did when he was looking at Steve. He's intent on whatever it is that Sam's saying, hands jammed in his pockets, responding with what looks like a question.

Steve suddenly feels like he's got a bowling ball in his belly, like he can't stand to watch for one second longer. Whatever's happening there is something he's probably going to be glad about—anything for Code Green, and he can't imagine what else they'd be talking about—but if he keeps looking at Bucky, the knot in the back of his throat is going to possibly express itself through his tear ducts, and he cannot possibly have that, not in this weather and not with America and Kate in a three mile radius. The documents in the manila folder at his side are just going to have to wait until Sam gets back to the office, and that's all there is to it.

He turns around and starts walking back to the office, his heart pounding, his head a brambled mess. He tries not to turn around—to take one last look at them, to stare—and he even manages not to. Maybe his self defense mechanisms are finally kicking in, ten months too late.

Anyway, he's really not hungry anymore. If his doctor asks, he’ll tell him chocolate counts as protein.

Chapter End Notes
So last week we LIED. Unintentionally. It turns out this chapter also came in at over 18K (shocking), which means instead of one final chapter, you will be getting four more total!

We will unfortunately have to take a short break bc crinklefries is traveling for the next two weeks, but the final chapter + epilogue will be posted on **October 30th**! In exchange, you get TWO chapters today, so watch out for Chapter 10 in a few hours!! ♥
chapter ten, or, you're gonna need congressional approval and you don't have the votes

Chapter by crinklefries

Chapter Summary

So it’s a bright and cold day in December before the Session recesses for the winter when the call comes. One way or another, votes or no votes, the docket is set and what’s on the docket is everything they’ve been working for.

Chapter Notes

The legislative process has been highly, and with full knowledge, truncated to fit this chapter, so don’t call us out on that. Call out the American political process, which is too long and unwieldy by half.

I, too, have been singing Hamilton lyrics for the past two chapters, so I’m sorry for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The end of the session is rapidly approaching. Code Green will be up for the vote, and win or lose, Steve knows that he wants to go home afterwards. He wants to see his mother, wants to see her latest art project, wants to hear all about her cabbage-gifting beau. He wants to tell her about this hollow feeling of loss that he just can't shake. He thinks that maybe being around her and coming home, he will find some kind of solace.

And even if he doesn't, he'll still see Sarah Rogers, and she won't mind if he's still sad or not himself. She'll make things better just by being herself.

He thinks it will do him good to get away from D.C. in any case. The swamp is pretty in an iconic, political kind of way, but being away from Brooklyn for too long makes Steve start to fray a little along the edges. He misses the uneven slabs of dirty pavement, the 24 hour bodegas, and his favorite corner deli. He misses the view across the water of the Manhattan skyline and cool days walking along the Brooklyn Bridge. He even misses cursing at all of the MTA delays, which is how he actually knows he’s getting unbearably homesick.

Brooklyn isn’t perfect, but it is home. And after everything that’s happened to him in the past few months, he could use a little bit of home.

It's snowing though, the storm that's been threatening finally breaking across the stormy, grey D.C. sky. There’s swirls of white outside the window, the wind blowing the cold, white crystals sideways. Steve fights through the snow more than once, digging out snow boots that have been shoved into his closet for so long that he’s had to check for cobwebs. He’s not unused to snow, but it’s clear not everyone is. The people he passes in the streets are harried, faces pink, the look of utter misery that accompanies being out in a mounting blizzard when the smart and desirable thing to do is to watch from the couch with a mug of hot chocolate. Still, the East Coast waits for no one, so as long as there are jobs to do, people will have to fight against storms to do them. Every time Steve gets in from out of the snow, his nose is so pink he looks like he's unintentionally cosplaying Rudolph in the worst rendition of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Political Assistant.

Anyway, it's more snow than D.C. usually gets, but at least the city can handle it. The East Coast, as cold and miserable as it can be, has institutional memory going for it. Other places aren’t quite so lucky. The news has been almost nothing but stories about southern cities incapable of adapting to the snow, places that usually get a couple of inches at a time suddenly inundated with over a foot, lacking snow plows or salt or snow chains or, according to the news reports, any ability to drive in the snow. What this means is crazy coverage of people in the south being stranded in the snow, but everyone on the coast grimacing, sighing, and, much beleaguered, carrying on business as usual. Steve's glad that he's heading north, selfishly pleased that he'll be able to get home.

He buys his tickets without any troubles, noting the destinations on the website with big orange delayed signs over them, or red canceled.

He clicks on the two week weather report for D.C., and the two week weather report for Brooklyn, just to make sure nothing else is lurking that might keep him from getting home. A video starts auto-playing before he makes it there, a news report that he’s seen several times now, but he watches it just in case there's an update. There have been loads of videos about yet another snowpocalypse in Atlanta, about the cars abandoned on the highways and people stranded overnight, but the video that he's seen played the most is about a children's hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia.

The first time he’d seen it, they had been in the office, Sam on the phone, and the rest of them, tired and overworked, watching the snow drift outside with one cautious eye and the television with the
“Holy shit,” America had said, just before Kate had turned the volume louder.

That was about all any of them could say for the next five minutes, hands over mouths, eyes widening as the horror set in.

As Steve is now well aware, the usual snowfall for Williamsburg in December is less than one inch. That’s what they prepare for and, for the most part, receive. This most recent storm dumped over 48 inches on them. Four feet of snow. For a place unprepared for more than a dusting, it did more than strand the city—it shut it down completely.

Cars stranded on the road, people stranded in buildings, the entire city without electricity, generators putting out where there were any to begin with. The footage is of multiple rescue efforts, trying to find people before they freeze to death. What they never say about a state of emergency is that it’s not only for hurricanes or forest fires—it’s for snow too. And the thing about snow is it’s not moving water, so it just sits there until someone—or something—can displace it.

The streets were impossible to cross—and the city without any equipment besides—until a group of volunteers from the more mountainous parts of the state and from surrounding states, brought in vehicles equipped to navigate the snow.

The centerpiece of the panicked coverage is the Williamsburg Children’s Hospital, one of the only hospitals around for miles caring for children sick with chronic illnesses, cancer, and in need of emergency operations. The hospital’s power got knocked out during the brunt of the storm. Luckily, the back up generators kicked in almost immediately. Then it lost its emergency power. The aftermath was—and continues to be—a frantic, horrifying, panicked race against time. There was more than just hypothermia at stake and, for once, every news station across the country seemed well aware of that.

Steve doesn’t think he’ll ever quite unsee the viral video footage of a volunteer in camo hunting clothes pulling a small girl, her IV stand, and her nurse into the back of his four-by-four. The story has a happy ending; the guy drove the little girl, her equipment, and her nurse to Richmond where her treatment was able to successfully continue. But the happy ending rarely erases the horror that precedes it. And she wasn’t the only sick little girl stranded inside. At least three children had died, stranded in the powerless hospital, cold and unable to receive the medicine they needed.

As he watches it now, the news story updates—the girl and the other stranded children were finally, successfully moved to Richmond and most are reported stable, and the Williamsburg hospital has power again so no other kids need to suffer any more than they already have. The snow won’t clear for a while and the city is still locked down in a state of emergency, but it’s as happy an ending as it can be, for that one little girl and that hospital, at least.

And that’s not to say anything for any of the kids at any of the other hospitals who have already been or soon will be impacted by unnatural weather conditions and storms that are the Earth’s way of telling their generation that their parents’ and grandparents’ generations colossally and irrevocably fucked up the entire planet. Not to get political about it or anything.

Once Steve has his tickets in hand, or anyway, the confirmation email in his phone, he's slightly happier. Well, he’s marginally less morose. Dire state of the planet aside, he feels more settled knowing that he's going home soon and that the rest of the children are safe in a functioning hospital.

As much as he wants to go home to see his mother, Steve also wants to just get some distance from
D.C. Fortunately or unfortunately—and at the moment everything feels deeply unfortunate—everything about this place seems to remind him of Bucky. He doesn't want to go to the gym. He can't even go to the National Archives anymore.

He doesn't know what he wants and, frankly, he doesn't know what to do about it.

At least there’s always more work to do. It’s tiring, but it’s a good distraction that he can throw himself into. It seems inconceivable to say everyone is even more exhausted than usual, but everyone is even more exhausted than usual in the run up to the vote, because this is it, the final push.

They don’t have confirmation of how the final votes will go—all they have is hope that everything will fall out the way they want. It’s as exhausting as it is thrilling. Kate gives up and starts putting her hair up in a ponytail. One day she comes in sweatpants and America is so tired, she doesn’t even have anything to say about it. Once, Steve sees America’s head loll onto Kate’s shoulder in the middle of a meeting and he’s so tired himself, he can’t even fault her for taking a nap when the opportunity—or shoulder—presents itself.

Steve feels like he hardly sees Sam and when he does see him, he projects a general air of manic exhaustion, if that's a thing, which is not totally dissimilar from the air that Steve feels he also projects, although he personally is falling down in the manicness department. He’s just tired, is what he's saying, but so are America and Kate, and they’re all powering through—or something close enough to powering through—because, well, what else are they going to do?

“You need to get some rest,” he tells Sam at the office, after the third day of Sam leaving for work before Steve's even out of bed.

He has to tell him at the office, because he's missed him for breakfast four days in a row, and Sam's lunches and dinners are booked. This is one of the liminal moments between meetings, one of those beautiful moments where there's not actually anything scheduled and Sam can eat a PowerBar and drink some Costco coffee. He gets about two of these moments per day lately and each for no longer than four minutes at a time. It has to be enough.

“Said the pot to the kettle,” Sam says, wearily. He tries to smile, though. “I can rest when this is over.”

And Steve can't really argue with that, since it's his own guiding philosophy at the moment as well. He could certainly try, of course, but this is how he knows they’re worn to the bone—Steve considers arguing, and then he doesn’t.

He does decide to play hooky for a couple of hours, however, when Sam is out and there's nothing that can't be moved on his own schedule, to go to the Downtown Holiday Market. He’s going a little stir crazy in their enclosed office and it occurs to him—after checking the schedule for the fifth time that day—that Christmas will, actually, one day, eventually, approach. He tries not to buy his mother gifts that can be purchased off Amazon and, looking at the calendar for the fifth time that day, he realizes he needs to buy his mother a gift soon or else he will be purchasing her a gift off of Amazon.

Anyway, is it really hooky, he argues to an audience of only himself, if you've been putting in ten to twelve hour days for months? And also if your boss and best friend actually likes your mother more than he likes you? Steve could be a lawyer, probably.

He takes the Metro to the market, and even though the weather is kind of shitty—fat snowflakes still drifting lazily down from the sky to land on snow that has long-since been churned to slush and hard mountains of dirt and ice—the banners and stalls and strings of Christmas lights faintly glowing under the clouds manage to spark a faint ember of holiday spirit in his soul. His soul, to be perfectly
clear, is the charred remains of what it used to be, but Sarah Rogers did train him to love Christmas when he was younger and, apparently, that training runs blood deep past whatever dumb shit he’s done to himself in the past year.

The market is unsurprisingly crowded, a sea of long black coats enlivened by the occasional bright scarf or bobble hat, and Steve brushes elbows with a vast swathe of humanity as he looks at handcrafted jewelry, hand-thrown pottery, and jewel-bright scarves woven from artisanal goats. The smells of donuts and hot coffee and something savory waft out temptingly, but Steve is here on a mission. The problem with having an artist for a mother is that frankly, she has tried most of the crafts on view and could make her own, so what he picks has to be just right.

He sees a lot of things that are sort of but not quite right, so he keeps looking. There’s one stall where the vendor has jewelry made to look like little fruit and vegetables, and he is deeply tempted in the pit of his soul to get her a pair of cabbage earrings, but that seems like the kind of gift that is best left to the cabbage giver himself, not the son of the cabbage giftee. He doesn’t want to make fun of the gentleman caller, and it’s a fine line. Also he doesn’t want to encourage any of his mother’s shenanigans, to be absolutely clear.

He looks at them anyway, half-smiling to himself, and the moment of levity is almost so pure that, just for a second, he wishes he had someone to tell about his dilemma over vegetable earrings. It takes only a few seconds for his smile to flatten, because Steve is a confused bastard, but he can easily see this as the lie to himself that it is, because, of course, he could tell Sam about it, assuming they are ever in the same place and not working for five minutes, and he probably will tell Sam about it, either before or after his trip home. But the person he wants to tell, if he’s going to allow himself a moment of honesty, has messy brown curls and eyes that crinkle when they smile, and unfortunately, a basic incompatibility with Steve, no matter how much Steve can picture him laughing.

He swallows thickly. This is something that he’s been thinking more and more about: the things he’d like to tell Bucky. They spent so much of their time together fucking and then more time fighting that they’d only gotten a few snatched moments to share anything else between them. They hadn’t been terrible moments and that had been the worst part.

Steve can’t tuck away his attraction or his feelings as only attached to the sex. He had gotten glimpses of Bucky—his humor, his charm, his kindness—and he had grown to like those parts of him too. He doesn’t know how much of himself he had shared—everything is fuzzy in the aftermath of a break up, or whatever it was that they had done—but he wishes he had maybe shared a little more. That’s how he knows he’s truly, genuinely heartbroken—the fact that, despite everything, he wishes he could sit down and tell Bucky about his mother.

Steve's been trying to move on, he really has, but he gives himself one second here in the middle of the festive holiday lights, anonymous in a crowd of other people, to wallow, once again, in might-have-beens. It’s a perfect moment of sorrow following a perfect moment of levity and doesn’t that just perfectly encapsulate everything that’s happened so far?

He takes a breath and then, he shakes himself off—metaphorically, he's in a crowd of people—and tucks the thought away to look at another day. For now, he keeps looking for the perfect gift for Sarah Rogers.

He gets some handmade soap and lotion, both of which smell of lavender and jasmine, but that's not the thing, that's just a little something extra for whatever he actually finds. He buys some extremely fancy single roast coffee beans for Sam, because his taste buds deserve better than what they've been drinking lately. He picks up a soft purple scarf for Kate—who is always trying to steal his own—and
a leatherbound journal for America, mostly because the leather has something that looks like a Satanic symbol carved into the front and what could remind him more of America Chavez?

He roams around until he finds a glass blower's stall, and he has a moment of euphoria wherein he thinks ah-ha, because in Sarah Rogers’s long and varied artistic career she has yet to try glass blowing. He ends up looking at all of the beautiful shapes for ten minutes before getting a heavy, blown-glass ornament in jewel-tone shades of red, purple, and gold that she can put on a tree, or hang up somewhere. He also gets a vase in blues and greens, the perfect height for cut flowers or paint brushes, or maybe soldering irons, depending on what she's working on. The colors are what he imagines looking up at the sun through seawater might look like. The vendor wraps his purchases in layers and layers of paper, and he takes the heavy bag carefully, satisfied with his finds.

It's only then, laden down with holiday purchases, ready to leave, that he sees him—as if his thoughts have summoned him, again, as if no matter where he goes he just can't get away from Bucky Barnes.

Bucky is wrapped in that same heavy winter coat he was wearing with Sam the other day, and there's a very soft looking blue scarf wrapped around his throat. He's standing next to a woman who looks an awful lot like him, albeit with a softer jawline and longer hair. But the curls are the same, their noses follow the same lines, and even the way they stand is similar. Steve wonders if this is Becca, the sister who gave him his nickname, or if this is a different sister. It doesn't really matter, not the way things stand now, but he still wants to know.

He doesn't get to know.

He walked away, is the thing. He's the one who left. He doesn’t have the right to want the things he wants; but that doesn’t stop him from wanting it.

The ache of it hits him all over again, the reverse of the warm and loose feeling he had the last time he touched Bucky. Everything is hollow and cold beneath his skin now, the only warmth where he has to swallow the tight, hot feeling in his throat. He looks for a few seconds longer, steals the sight of Bucky smiling at something his sister said, the way she nudges into him with her shoulder. Bucky’s smile is soft, fond even, his eyebrows raised, the look of an exasperated, but doting older brother. He laughs and Steve can’t hear it, but he imagines he can. Bucky shifts and Steve has to turn away before Bucky sees him, because he knows that the sight of him would wipe the smile off Bucky's face entirely. And because he doesn’t know what he would do—if he did.

He starts walking the other direction, any other direction as long as it's away from Bucky. He fumbles for his phone in his pocket and starts searching under BARNES almost without thinking, but then he stops. He deleted Bucky's number and he shouldn't text him regardless. He said his piece—well, he texted his piece, anyway—and if Bucky had nothing to say in return to that, if Bucky doesn’t want to talk to him anymore, that’s Bucky’s right. It would be overstepping to get in touch when Bucky’s silence makes it very clear that he’s done with Steve.

He gets out of the market and heads to the Metro station. It's past time he got back to work.

Because the thing with work is—you can do it no matter what. It is always there waiting and it certainly doesn’t care what state your heart is in as you do it.

* *

In the end, all of the pushing and political maneuvering in the world can’t delay the inevitable. Code Green either will pass or it won’t, but the alternative to hearing it and it possibly failing is to not hear it and let it die a death in legislative obscurity. Sitting on bills, never to be heard, that’s the legislative
graveyard and it’s better they try than not.

So it’s a bright and cold day in December before the Session recesses for the winter when the call comes. One way or another, votes or no votes, the docket is set and what’s on the docket is everything they’ve been working for.

This is fine, Steve thinks, watching the Senators filter in to chambers. He’s not nervous or anything. He hasn’t had a stomach ache since last night and he definitely didn’t almost cry when America looked at him weird this morning. Steve is having perfectly normal reactions to a package of legislation that he has spilled metaphorical blood for. He wishes he had picked a different career or like, taken up a hobby.

Sam stands next to him, furiously typing on his phone.

“Okay,” he says. “I have to go talk to Peggy Carter. You gonna be okay here?”

Steve cannot in good conscience tell Sam yes, but he’s not selfish enough to say no. He nods and squeezes Sam’s shoulder.

In the end, in the beginning of this monumental moment, he can do nothing but this—squeeze his best friend’s shoulder and wish him luck neither of them control.

Steve’s heart is in his throat, so his touch lingers. Sam meets his eyes and both of their expressions soften, simultaneously.

“Good luck, Representative.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Sam says, giving him a warm, nervous smile. “For everything.”

Steve hesitates, but Sam doesn’t. He hauls him in for a hug.

For them, this moment means everything. And what’s more, it means everything to be here together for it. Those two idiots who met in home room, a lifetime ago, could never have foreseen this, although maybe Sarah Rogers could have.

“Put this shit to bed, Sam,” Steve says, more assertively, and lets go. “We go home with what we came here for.”

Sam gives him a thin, grateful smile, nods, and disappears.

The Senate majority leader is a man by the name of Johann Schmidt. Schmidt isn’t nearly as slimy as Pierce, but he is insidious in a way that rolls off of him. It makes him go a little red in the face, which Steve has always thought was one of his least attractive qualities in a list of endless unattractive qualities. Schmidt is a mean son of a bitch who’s been in the Senate for so fucking long it’s a miracle that term limits haven’t magically manifested just to oppose his existence. He’s not the most well-liked member of the Republican Party, but he is a scary bastard, so he controls the general legislative agenda. Johann Schmidt is where all good intentions go to die.

It’s a miracle or through extreme political maneuvering by another veritable bastard—House Minority Leader Nicholas J. Fury—that Code Green even makes it through Schmidt’s clutches and onto the calendar. Nick Fury, who is technically a Democrat, but politically somewhat of a loose canon, is a veteran with one eye and an imposing gait, although the most imposing thing about him, in truth, is how little of a fuck he gives. He cares about his constituents and he cares about systemic injustice, but he doesn’t give a single shit about political consequences and that, Steve can admit
begrudgingly, is kind of awe-inspiring. It also makes Fury the perfect Minority Leader because the only person who’s more of a bastard than Johann Schmidt is Nick Fury.

Steve watches him now, leaning against a pillar, unbothered with decorum or desks, his one eye swiveling around the room, watching. He almost catches Steve’s eye and Steve nearly breaks out into a cold sweat.

“Hey,” a gravelly voice says next to his left elbow.

Steve, startled, looks down and sees the crown of a vibrant red head and a woman who barely reaches his shoulder, but does have the most intimidating stance he’s ever seen in person.

“I didn’t know they let you out during the day,” Steve says. He has to fight to keep from smiling. “Aren’t there rules against that? You turn to dust or...sparkles?”

“I burst into flames, actually.” Natasha Romanoff tilts her head up and grins at him. “I’m not a vampire, I’m Russian.”

“You’re from Brighton Beach,” Steve points out.

“Have you ever heard of immigration, Rogers?” Natasha’s bright green eyes flash, which is usually a sign that she’s either amused or will he going for the jugular. Her mouth is pressed into the kind of thin line that indicates she’s trying to keep from smiling, so Steve assumes the former.

“Yeah,” he says, staring at her. “I mean you were born and brought up in Brighton Beach.”

“Don’t disrespect my culture,” Natasha says. Arms crossed, she turns toward the floor. “When’s this circus starting?”

“Looks like he’s just about ready to open it,” Steve says, tracking Schmidt at the dais.

“Want a drink?” Natasha asks. She doesn’t wait for an answer, just hands her coffee thermos over. Steve lifts it to his mouth and tries not to splutter when he tastes the vodka.

“I thought this was coffee!” he hisses and Natasha grins for real this time before taking it back from him.

“Now why would you think that?”

Natasha Romanoff is weird, but more importantly she’s scary. She’s a perfect fit for Maria Hill who is also weird, but more importantly, very scary.

“Did you just come here to watch me splutter?” Steve asks.

“Yes,” Natasha says.

It takes Steve a moment and Natasha pressing into his side to realize she means it, but in the most roundabout Natasha way.

He swallows.

“Really?”

She doesn’t answer for a moment.
“You’ve had a rough few months,” she says. “I thought you could use a friend.”

Steve doesn’t sag against her—it wouldn’t make any side of physical sense—but he feels like he does it metaphorically.

“This has nothing to do with Clint?” he asks.

Natasha smiles and sips her vodka wordlessly.


“Turns out,” Natasha says, turning to look at him, “I like sons of bitches.”

“Unbelievable,” Steve says. “Persistence really does work.”

“That and Krispy Kreme,” Natasha says. “He bought me like a box a day. What was I going to do? Say no?”

“I can’t believe all it took was donuts.”

“It was a lot of donuts. Anyway, one person’s donuts is another person’s curly brown hair and devastating blue eyes. You wanna talk about yours?”

“No thanks,” Steve says, flatly.

“Good, because you’re both idiots and I don’t have the time to fix you.”

Steve opens his mouth to argue and maybe to ask clarification, but before he can, a sharp elbow jabs into his side.

“Ow!”

“Shut up,” Natasha says, calmly. “It’s starting.”

Steve looks up and sees that the President Pro Tempore is calling the day to order. The chaplain takes his place to lead the prayer and the pledge of allegiance follows shortly after. There’s a low wave of noise that rustles around the room—the soft sound of cloth against chairs and the quiet murmur of voices. Senators are like restless children with far more power.

Steve breathes in through his nose and out through it too. He crosses his arms at his chest and fidgets and is so close to becoming the physical manifestation of anxiety that Natasha presses her thermos into Steve’s arm.

“Take it,” she says. “And drink.”

Steve isn’t in the habit of not listening to Natasha Romanoff. Anyway, what’s a little vodka at noon on the most important day of his life?

He takes it. He drinks.

The debate begins.

Unlike the House, the Senate does have the power of filibuster, which is rarely invoked, but does haunt the proceedings like some kind of dreadful spectral power move. In their case, the use of filibuster to defeat Code Green is not out of the question, mostly because Republicans are dirty sons
of bitches who will use any tactic to delay actual good things getting done if it might mean that nothing will get done except their own legislative agenda. Steve doesn’t think there’s too much of a threat of filibuster here, but only because he can tell from the smug faces, as he looks around the room, that no one thinks the legislative package will pass.

That makes Steve both angry and nervous, so he deals with it by taking another drink from Natasha’s coffee thermos and half-listening to the speeches given by people he mostly hates and half composing a series of blistering tweets in his head. It’s probably a good thing he’s not a congress person himself because Steve runs his mouth even when he has half the mind to control it and he doesn’t even have that when he’s spitting mad.

He listens to Schmidt give some stupid fucking speech on how a bill like this is overstepping and overreaching and Steve thinks, yes: he would definitely get thrown into jail for throwing fists in the middle of the Senate debate floor.

“Might be worth it though,” he mutters to himself.

“I don’t have to be a mind reader to know what you’re thinking,” Natasha murmurs next to him. She lifts her coffee thermos to her mouth and the corner twitches up. “But I don’t disagree.”

At some point, Steve sees Rhodey consulting with Sam at the opposite end of the chamber and they both stop and listen to a familiar head of blond who apparently has not joined the circus—yet. Clint is saying something, gesturing with his whole body.

“Was it the power that got to you?” Steve asks.

“It was the incompetence,” Natasha says. “With just the hint of potential for competence. That really gets my blood going.”

“You’re so weird,” Steve remarks and, despite his high strung nerves, manages a smile. “You two are perfect for each other.”

Natasha says nothing in response to that, but Steve does notice her watching Clint every once in a while.

Technically speaking, a bill can take up to a week to be voted on. There are about a hundred different parliamentary procedures that can take place and there are two kinds of people who know about the majority of them: the Senators who have been in Congress for the past three centuries and people who are just huge fucking nerds. Steve is the latter, but he’ll never admit it out loud.

Luckily there’s no need for a motion to proceed or to trigger the cloture rule in this case. Somehow—maybe because of the pure celebrity of Code Green—the Senate agrees to a unanimous consent agreement, which means that they’ve decided on a structured plan for debate and amending the package. In this case, they’ve limited debate enough that it shouldn’t take more than two days total to hear the bill, debate it, propose amendments, and vote on the amendments and the bill itself. Steve hopes it’s less than two days. He doesn’t think he can take more than a day of this and even that’s pushing his limits.

The first two hours of the debate go much as suspected—Schmidt speaks for fifteen minutes about why he thinks the bills are ludicrous, why there’s no need for them, and why bills like this are the reason the government is in debt and why government is growing and that government needs to get out of people’s lives or something.
“Our defense budget is over $680 billion and your fucking party loves it when the government gets in the lives of poor people and like, women’s bodies, but sure,” Steve mutters heatedly under his breath.

Schmidt is rebutted by Thor Odinson, who is a large, muscular, golden god of a senator from Minnesota who had once been a Republican, like his younger brother in the House, but, unlike his younger brother in the House, had come to his senses after an undisclosed tragedy that apparently made him question his humanity or something.

Odinson is also somehow related to Senator Hela Borson, although it’s unclear how, and they might not be the Kennedys, but Steve does watch the family dynamics play out with some measure of interest. Mostly, Senator Odinson gives a fifteen minute speech himself about all of the good Code Green will do and some of the dire impacts climate change will have on Minnesota and most of the world besides if they don’t do something about it now and Steve watches Senator Borson sneer at her relative from where she’s sitting on top of her desk.

She doesn’t provide a rebuttal, but she does lean over to Senator Flokisdottir and the two of them smile in a way that doesn’t inspire any confidence in Steve.

He gets his phone out.

what’s it looking like?

He gets a reply within a minute.

BARTON: bad.

“Fuck,” Steve curses and his anxiety increases not fivefold, but tenfold.

He thinks he’s going to develop an ulcer. He thinks he’s going to develop an anxiety disorder. He thinks, maybe he already has developed one or the other or, more likely, both.

The second hour of debate bleeds into the third and by then Steve is not only anxious, but he’s growing tired as well.

“How many more hours do I have to support you again?” Natasha asks, scrolling through Twitter on her phone.

Steve watches Senator Zola start to open his little rat mouth to speak about how climate change is fake.

“Too fucking many,” Steve says, mouth so thin that his lips disappear altogether.

Natasha sighs.

“I have to take this call,” she says, pats him on the shoulder, and steps into the hallway.

Zola starts talking about innovation of industry and Steve thinks he’s going to snap, or—at least—scream. He decides he needs a break too.

going to get coffee and a bagel. how are you doing?

He waits two minutes for a reply, but Sam doesn’t say anything back. That’s just as well, Steve thinks.
Their lives are on the line and it’s true, despite what he wishes, what Jefferson said: *you don’t have the votes; you need congressional approval and you don’t have the votes.*

It’s cold outside, but there’s a coffee cart within a ten minute walk and Steve makes it there, buys a coffee and a shitty bagel with shitty cream cheese, and walks back.

The debate is on its fifth hour, there have been at least four different proposed amendments, and every time Steve looks over at Rhodey and Clint they look graver and graver. The Republicans are all speaking now, each one emboldened by the assholery of the previous one. Senator Fisk speaks and then Senator von Strucker. Schmidt talks again and then there’s a break during which time Senators T’Challa and Okoye try to bring some sense back to the table, but then Senator Killgrave starts speaking and not only is that man stupidly persuasive, he talks for so long that when Steve looks up, it’s nearly 8 pm.

If Steve has one superpower, it’s that he feels a deadlock when it’s coming on. A deadlock would be just as much of a death knell for Code Green as anything else, but as far as he can tell the numbers remain the same. They’ve flipped only Castle and Stark is around, sitting at his desk, on his phone, but impassively, as though he cannot be bothered with the proceedings at all.

Natasha returns at some point and leads Steve to a seat by his elbow.

“Sit,” she says.

“Nat—” Steve starts and she glares at him.

“*Sit,*” she commands and Steve, nearly out of his skin with tension by now, obeys.

Here’s what happens: Johann Schmidt takes to the floor one more time. He has a smile on his face that would not be out of place on Alexander fucking Pierce’s and, in fact, when he talks, there is no difference.

There’s no difference between any of them, Steve thinks, wildly. Every single last one of them is the same—uncaring assholes in the pocket of industries that will gain from the destruction of the planet and not care until or unless their pockets are lined with gold. That’s the heart of the matter, if Steve stops to name it. It’s not a difference in principles or a difference in facts so much as it is a difference in caring.

Republicans just don’t fucking care.

At least these ones don’t.

The world could be ending and they could not, would not—will not care. It’s not dramatic, it’s the whole fucking truth.

**BARTON:** no one will budge.

His heart is pounding, his chest, his stomach, his whole body sinking.

**BARTON:** they’re going to call for a vote and then.

And then, Steve swallows thickly.

And then it’s over.
“I think we have debated enough,” Johann Schmidt says, a supercilious smile on his face. “There are a handful of amendments on the table, but, I think, not enough will to move on any of them. I think it is clear what has happened here. Good intentions, certainly, but an unreasonable package of bills that overstep. This Code Green does not do what it says it is going to do. It is a destructive bill that will throttle our hardworking industries to solve something that simply does not need to be solved. It is not only a waste of resources, it is simply irresponsible. It will increase our debt unimaginably. It will put Americans out of jobs. We cannot let this pass. We have been elected to do a job and that job is to protect. This package does not protect, it only harms. And that is why it must fail.”

Schmidt’s smile is smug. His eyes are smug. His entire face is smug.

“Pierce thinks they have it,” Natasha murmurs, looking at her phone. “He’s made his calls. They’re falling in line, all of them.”

Steve watches the proceedings, his stomach dropping.

He doesn’t know where Sam is and he almost doesn’t want to look.

He swallows, trying to remember how to breathe.

“There’s still your package, Steve,” Natasha says, quietly. “There’s still one more chance.”

“It has to pass the Senate too, Nat,” Steve says. “You know it won’t pass if this one doesn’t. If the Senate—Jesus fuck, if they don’t let Rhodey’s through, they won’t let Sam’s through.”

“I would like to call for a vote,” Johann Schmidt says, smiling.

“It’s over,” Steve says and he’s surprised to feel—hollow. Just drained of any feeling remaining to him. He would sway on his feet if he wasn’t sitting down. Natasha always knows how to handle him.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Natasha says, quietly, and that’s the worst thing of all.

“We will need a second,” the President Pro Tempore says. “To proceed with the motion.”

“I se—” Senator Zola stands.

“Wait,” Tony Stark says.

Tony Stark stands, leaning against his desk. There’s a silence that descends on the room after a brief spike in clamor.

The President Pro Tempore recognizes Tony, allowing him to speak.

Stark sighs.

“I’ve been going back and forth on this,” he says. “I’ve heard what Senator Rhodes has had to say. I’ve heard what the Majority Leader has had to say. Actually, I’ve heard what literally all of you have had to say and you know what? Everyone here talks a lot.”

There’s a smattering of tired laughter around the room.

“Seriously, it’s close to my bed time because no one in here can shut up,” Stark says. “But the point
is I’ve heard what both sides have had to say and I know what I have to say. The fact of the matter is
that this package of legislation is—enormous. It does too much and touches too many industries. It
targets oil companies and coal companies, gas companies and electrical companies. This entire
package says that the fossil fuel industry is evil, basically.”

Steve isn’t aware that he hisses, but apparently he’s loud enough that Natasha has to elbow his side
again and then he hisses some more.

“I’ve talked to Representative Wilson and I’ve talked to Senator Rhodes. They’re both good guys.
They have good heads on their shoulders, most of the time. So I read through the two different
packages a few times and I sat there thinking—why? Why would you go on record with two of the
most unforgiving, controversial packages for something that could cripple whole industries that we
need to survive off of?”

Stark gets up and starts walking around, tapping his mouth with a finger.

“Why? Why?” He stops, two fingers pressed to his mouth. “It’s a package that could throttle
innovation. It could put millions of Americans out of a job. It could, potentially, require this country
to change its very foundation—the way that literally everything works. We need fuel. We need oil,
we need electricity, and gas, and coal.”

Tony looks around him.

“That’s crazy, right? Like that’s genuinely insane.”

Steve’s so heated he nearly draws blood in his palms. Next to him, even Natasha is standing so
rigidly still that he can feel how pissed off she is; it rolls off her shoulders in waves.

Johann Schmidt and Arnim Zola exchange smiles.

Frank Castle raises an eyebrow and tilts his head.

“But then,” Tony Stark says. “I think you have to be a little insane to do something as bold as saving
the planet.”

For a moment, the entire chamber seems to freeze. Steve’s breath stills in his chest. Schmidt and Zola
stand—smiles frozen on their faces. Rhodey, who is standing next to T’Challa and Okoye, speaking
with them urgently about something—goes absolutely still.

Tony Stark sighs again, runs a hand over his face.

“I’ve maybe been a little bit arrogant, approaching all of this. Perhaps a little selfish.” He turns on his
feet and then turns back. He seems to fidget more as everything around him grows silent. “I’m from a
small town in Virginia. Originally speaking. You might have heard about it on the news? They got hit
with four feet of snow the other day. Four feet! We don’t get snow in Williamsburg. I can count on
one hand the number of times we got more than two inches. But we got four feet and the entire town
was nearly destroyed in the process.”

He starts pacing again.

“God! I saw that clip, of the little girl? I know you’ve all seen it. The whole country’s seen it. She
looked just like my daughter. I have a seven year old girl—Morgan. She’s the light of my life, the
only good thing I’ve ever seen. And that little girl had dark hair, just like Morgan. And I watched
that clip and I thought—that’s her. That’s my daughter. But no. That’s someone else’s daughter. And
I’m watching the clip and I’m thinking—God, there are children dying out there because the planet is
scientifically warming up too much.”

Stark stops and stares at Schmidt.

“Come on, this isn’t a natural cycle. We all know that’s a fucking lie.”

“Senator,” the President Pro Tempore warns.

“Sorry, sorry.” Tony Stark puts his hands up for cursing. “But it’s true. It’s a lie. We’re destroying the planet and we’re seeing it manifest in the worst of ways. Hurricanes larger than any ever recorded, high temperatures in November, blizzards in places blizzards shouldn’t be happening. Jesus Christ, did you guys see that Las Vegas got snow last year? Las Vegas! That’s not normal!”

Stark slows down, pulling on his goatee, looking slightly manic.

He sighs again.

“This isn’t normal. And I guess it’s time I say that out loud.”

Steve doesn’t know what’s happening. He can barely understand what he’s hearing. At some point, he’s gripped Natasha’s arm and it might be too hard, but she’s also so startled she doesn’t say anything.

“I can’t sit back, in good conscience, and continue doing nothing about this. There are little girls and boys out there just like my daughter who are suffering—who will continue to suffer, if we don’t do something about this. Industry will go on. In the words of someone unspeakably annoying and interminably good-natured—it always has and it always will.”

Steve sees Sam now, on the other side of the chamber. He’s frozen too, a look of disbelief on his face.

There’s a lot of that going around.

“Also, I like polar bears,” Stark says. He takes a breath and he smiles. “Did you know they’re starving? I’m over it. I’m against it. Starving the polar bears—not the bill.”

Steve’s ears are ringing. Suddenly, Johann Schmidt’s face turns bright red.

“I’m in support of the bill,” Stark says, looking around at the rest of the Senate. “To be perfectly clear.”

There’s a resounding silence. A pin drop would be deafening.

“To be clearer,” Tony Stark says, slowly, “I will be voting for Code Green. And I urge all of you to do the same.”

#

There is almost an uproar then, but the President Pro Tempore uses some force and a lot of banging of his gavel to get the chambers into order. Senator Rhodes motions a call to vote and the call to vote passes.

What happens is this: Tony Stark flips.

And with Tony Stark, come two others: Senator Namor from Hawaii and Senator James Howlett from Michigan.
It’s exactly what they need. It’s exactly who they need.

Senator Rhodes’ Code Green passes: 51 votes for to 49 against.

It passes.

Holy shit.

*It fucking passes.*

Steve’s head is a blur he won’t properly be able to decipher later. He remembers saying *holy shit.* He remembers managing not to scream.

He remembers picking up Natasha Romanoff and spinning her and when he sets her back down, she’s so happy for him, she doesn’t even kick him for his efforts.

“You did it,” she says instead, beaming. “You son of a bitch, you actually did it.”

“No, we did it,” Steve says, so fucking elated his face is nearly breaking under the beam of it. “Sam and I. And Rhody. And Clint and Kate and even America. *We* did it.”

Natasha shakes her head, but she can’t shake the smile from her face. She’s buzzing nearly as much as he is.

“Just take the compliment, Rogers,” she says. “Take the fucking bow. You’ve earned it.”

Steve doesn’t feel like it, but he does feel dizzy enough to let Natasha be right for now.

“I gotta go find Sam,” he says, squeezing her shoulders. “Thank you. For being here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Natasha says, returning to her phone immediately. “Talk’s cheap. Repay me in donuts.”

“A dozen a week,” Steve promises.

He turns, looking for Sam through the exultant, congratulatory crowd.

He spots him just outside the doors, being hugged and congratulated by a dozen different senators. Exhaling in excitement, nearly vibrating with unchecked pride, Steve goes to him.

He bumps into someone just as he’s coming out of chambers.

“Hold on there.” A hand grasps him by the upper arm and reels him back up so he doesn’t topple over into someone and cause an unintentional domino effect of U.S. senators.

“Sorry,” Steve apologizes, before seeing who it is.

Stark’s face widens into a smile that Steve almost groans at before he remembers that Tony fucking Stark just saved their lives.

“Oh hey, it’s Narc,” Stark says. “How are you doing, Narc?”
“I’m not—” Steve starts and stops. He grits out a smile. “I’m good, Senator.”

“I bet you are.” Stark grins. “So? Are you going to say anything? Congratulations maybe? Something about me being your savior? Oh Captain, my Captain? Anything?”

Steve knows he’s grateful for Tony Stark. He knows he will always be grateful for him in this one, very narrow instance.

He also knows that he will never like Tony Stark and will, in fact, want to punch him more often than he’d like to do anything else.

That doesn’t change the facts though.

“Yes,” Steve says, through gritted teeth. Then he stops and exhales, nodding. “Yes, actually. What you did in there—I don’t understand it. You were so against it. This entire time. Just last week. You were never going to vote our way.”

“But I did.”

“But you did,” Steve agrees. He means to say thank you. What he says, instead, is—“Why?”

Stark looks at him funny.

“What do you mean why?”

Steve frowns.

“I mean why did you vote yes when you were always going to vote no?”

“The...children’s hospital,” Stark says slowly. “Like I said. I saw it and I changed my mind.”

“That’s all?”

“You were right,” Stark says, shrugging. “Is that what you want to hear? Morgan deserves a habitable planet. Maybe I couldn’t see that before, but I see it now.”

That makes sense to Steve. It makes him a little dizzy, but it makes sense. He nods.

“Well, thank you,” he says. “I mean it. What you did in there—what you said—it meant a lot to us. Maybe that doesn’t matter to you, but you made a difference. I hope that’s good enough for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, bleeding heart liberals always crying over morsels handed to them—this is why your side never wins, you know that right?”

“What?”


Steve is so busy being annoyed at Tony Stark, he almost misses the crowd around Sam thinning. He’s about to make his great and swift escape when Tony speaks to him.

“You really don’t know?”

Steve, halfway to moving away, stops.
“What?”

“What, Stark?”

“Barnes, Stark says, staring at him.

Steve halts in his tracks, his head suddenly ringing.

“What about him?” he asks. Then, with a stab of anxiety, “Is he okay?”

“Yeah yeah, Romeo is just fine,” Tony waves it away.

“Then what?”

“Jiminy Christmas,” Stark says, rubbing a hand across his face.

“What, Stark?”

“Barnes is the one who talked to me.”

Steve stares, thinking he’s misheard.

“What?”

“You mean did he say he was telling me what you told him to tell me?” Stark says.

Steve looks at him sharply and Stark snorts.

“Please, I’m a genius and neither of you are particularly subtle. Anyway, no, he didn’t. He didn’t
mention you at all, I’m just not an idiot. He said he thought about it and our position didn’t make any sense to him. Something about us both being educated and the science being undeniable and the science being so undeniable, it was stupid of us to hold out for...no reason. He said this is what felt right to him. It’s funny.”

“What is?” Steve says with a frown.

“He never cared much by the way of right or wrong before,” Stark says. “Don’t get me wrong, he probably wouldn’t condone like, murder or anything. But taking a stand? Not his thing. I’ve known him a long time, you know.”

“Yeah,” Steve mutters. “He mentioned.”

“He’s started asking me a lot of questions lately,” Stark muses. “Why are we doing this? What’s the purpose? Why are we supporting this? Why aren’t we supporting that? Can we do something better? etc etc. It’s very irritating.”

Steve bristles.

Stark grins at him and winks—a hideous sight.

“I kind of like it.”

Steve stares at Tony Stark—really stares at the man, all five foot whatever inches of him, with his stupidly expensive suit and his salt and pepper goatee and his weird yellow glasses that make him look like some kind of 1970s sci fi movie villain. Tony Stark has a smirk that makes him a prime candidate to be beat up and he’s wriggling his eyebrows like he and Steve are best friends, aged 20, who giggle every time someone makes sexual innuendo. Tony Stark’s eyes are bugging out of his head. Tony Stark, Steve decides, is, without a doubt, certifiably insane.

But even certifiably insane folk can vote right twice a day. Or something.

“He’s been moping lately—your doing?” Stark asks and Steve backs away from that.

It’ll be a cold day in hell before he listens to Tony Stark talk to him about his love life.

“Tell him I don’t care how much he sulks—I expect him in the office on Monday!” Stark calls to Steve as he tries to lose himself in the crush of senators. “Do you hear me, Narc! Monday! With donuts!”

Krispy Kreme has a fucking stranglehold on the Hill, apparently. Not enough of a stranglehold to shut up Tony Stark, but not even America’s darling donut franchise can work miracles.

Steve slips behind Senator Odinson’s massive brick wall of a body and blessedly loses him.

“Rogers!” he hears his best friend’s voice and Steve’s head snaps up. Sam is grinning. His tie is loose, his shoulders relaxed, and he’s fucking grinning. “How fucking long does it get to cross a fucking room?”


Sam’s grin somehow widens.

“Holy. Shit.”
“Holy shit!”

“Holy shit.”

“Holy shit!” both of them exclaim at the same time and they don’t grab each other by the shoulders and jump around like they did the one time, but they do so in spirit. Steve grabs Sam by the shoulders anyway and pulls him into a crushing hug.

“We did it, Sam,” Steve says into the side of Sam’s head. “Holy fucking shit, we did it.”

“God, I know,” Sam exhales. When he exhales, it ripples through every part of him, like the poor man hasn’t taken a breath in a year and maybe he hasn’t. “It doesn’t feel real. I thought I was losing my fucking mind. We didn’t have the votes, Steve. We did everything we fucking could, compromised and negotiated everywhere we fucking could, and we still didn’t have the votes.”

Steve swears and pulls back. Sam’s getting a little emotional, which is making Steve a little emotional.

“I thought—this is it. We’re done for. It’s over, you know? This thing—this huge thing we’ve been working for, that we’ve been building—it’s dead in the water. I thought there was no way we were going to come back from that.”

“I know, Sam,” Steve says, exhaling. He feels it too, the way his body shudders under the weight of it—the breath sweeping through him, spreading to every nook and crevice, dissolving nearly a year’s worth of late nights and pure tension. “I didn’t expect it. I don’t think anyone in their right minds would have expected it.”

“Tony motherfucking Stark,” Sam says, shaking his head. “You know, even Rhodey was gobsmacked? He didn’t fucking know. Stark didn’t tell anyone what he was thinking.”

Well. Maybe not everyone.

Maybe there was one person who had an idea that Tony Stark had had a change of heart.

Steve swallows, his heart drumming quickly beneath his collarbone. He feels—he doesn’t know.

“Sam,” Steve says.

Sam looks at him questioningly.

“You met with Bucky.”

A brief look of guilt flashes across Sam’s face before he nods.

“Yeah,” he says. “You saw that?”

“I saw you two—” Steve starts and stops. “You think you got to him? And then he got to Stark?”

“What?” Sam looks confused now.

“Bucky,” Steve says. “Tony says he talked to him. Whatever you said to him, it must have—”

“Steve,” Sam says, staring at him.

“What?”
“Barnes—” Sam starts and stops. He runs a hand across his clean-shaven head. “Steve, Barnes came to me. He put the meeting on my calendar.”

Steve doesn’t understand.

“What?”

“There wasn’t any kind of secret meeting to convince Stark.” Sam shakes his head. “We gave up on Stark before that. It was clear he wasn’t moving, I wasn’t going to work on him through his LD. What good would it have done? He wasn’t even listening to his best friend.”

“But then…” Steve’s mind is racing. He remembers Sam and Bucky walking—remembers the way they had been speaking, thoughtfully, Sam telling Bucky something Steve couldn’t hear. “What was it about?”

“That’s between me and Barnes.”

Steve frowns, running a hand through his own hair.

“Why were you meeting with him if it wasn’t about the vote—what did he want to talk to you about—why—?”

“Steve,” Sam warns.

Steve’s temper flares—or it would, if they weren’t in the middle of Senate chambers, after the best day of their lives. Steve is confused and he’s frustrated and, if he’s going to be honest, he’s more than a little hurt. Sam’s his best friend. They’re not supposed to have glaring secrets they can’t share.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Steve swallows some bitterness and shrugs.

“What are you so afraid of?” Sam asks.

That catches him off guard. Steve blinks, feeling the ground shift beneath his feet.

“With Barnes,” Sam says softly, as though he could be talking about anything else. “I know you, Rogers. If there’s something to fight, you fight it. I’ve only ever seen you run away when it’s something that you were really afraid of losing. So…tell me. What are you afraid of?”

Now is not the time or the place to be seen through, but try telling that to Sam Wilson. Steve feels like thin paper or a glass pane, the light shining clear through him. All this time, he thought he was being subtle, that he was playing his cards close to his chest. It turns out, he’s had his cards turned over this entire time.

He swallows, that dull ache in his chest twinging sharply.

“I’m afraid…it won’t work,” he says. “I’m afraid we’ll try and it still won’t work. We’ll get attached and realize we’re wrong for each other, that we were always wrong for each other. I’m afraid that…the gap between us isn’t crossable.”

“Is it worth it for you to try?” Sam asks.

Steve doesn’t answer.

“Is it worth it for you attempt to cross it?” Sam says.
Steve doesn’t have an answer for that. Or maybe he does. His heart pounds painfully in his chest.

“Maybe you’re right, you know?” Sam says thoughtfully. “That could be. Maybe you try and you realize you guys can’t fucking stand each other because you don’t see the same on anything, you’re never on the same page, your values are completely mismatched. It’s happened before. It could happen to you.”

It hurts Steve to hear, but Sam’s right. Sam’s almost always right.

Steve nods.

Sam watches him.

“Could be you’re wrong too,” he says. His voice softens and so does his expression. “Could also be that you both just have to talk to each other. He’s not a bad guy, Steve. He has some pretty deeply held ideas, but when he listens, I get the feeling he really listens. You don’t always get that with the other side. Hell, you don’t always get that with people in general—even those on your side. Maybe it doesn’t have to be about sides at all. You’ll never know unless you talk to him.”

Steve swallows.

“I don’t think he wants to hear from me, Sam.”

“Steve, I love you man, but you’re a fucking idiot.” Sam’s voice is so amused that Steve looks up at him, ready to be indignant. It doesn’t quite work, because he’s never managed to work up the energy to be mad at Sam; not once in nearly fifteen years.

“You’re the only one he wants to hear from,” Sam says. “You think I’m the one who’s got his head spinning? If you’ve got something to say he needs to hear, make him listen. You’re good at that. You always have been.”

Steve doesn’t know what he’s done to deserve Sam Wilson. Probably not enough. Almost certainly not enough. But Sam has never made him feel like he has to earn his friendship and it’s this, more than anything else, that makes Steve realize that: if Sam Wilson is telling him there’s something here worth fighting for, then maybe, there is something here worth fighting for.

Because the fact is that what Steve has been waiting for—for months, for nearly a year—is some kind of sign; some kind of indication that Bucky is willing to care about something, that he’s willing to put himself on the line for something—anything. For nearly a year, Steve has been waiting for Bucky to show him that not only is he capable of listening, but that he has been—listening.

Maybe he didn’t get there fast enough, but in truth, neither did Steve. They’ve both been stubborn, both been bull-headed, both been too fucking loud to actually shut up and listen to what the other is saying.

What Bucky’s been saying, Steve realizes, is: I think there’s something here I’m willing to lay my heart on the line for.

And what Steve’s been saying is: the heart is not and cannot be the only thing you care about.

Maybe their truth lies somewhere in the middle. Wherever that truth might be—whatever compromise the two of them might need to come to, the fact is that there is a true middle now. There’s something they both want and there’s something they’re both willing to work for. Sam is right. There has never been a fight he’s run from. And his mother is right too. Sometimes, the things that matter the most are the things that are the hardest to address.
So here he is; here they both are. In the center of a perfect venn diagram of both.

“Sam,” Steve says, slowly. “Where is he?”

“I can find that out for you,” Tony Stark says.

Steve cringes away from Stark’s face, which has appeared unpleasantly over his shoulder.

“What the fuck!”

“Barnes!” Stark says into his phone, ears already to the receiver. “Where are you? I need you to—no, shut the fuck up and listen to me, I’m your boss. No, I am! I will fire you for insubordination! Oh—for fuck’s sake, just tell me where you’re moping and you can have Monday off.”

Sam gives Steve an look and Steve wonders, not for the first time, if it really counts as murder if it’s Tony Stark.

“Yes yes, whatever, have a nice weekend, when you come in on Tuesday make sure your energy is better, your negativity is getting all over my—hello? Hello?” Stark blinks and lowers his phone.

“The bastard hung up on me!”

“Stark,” Sam says. “Where is he?”

“He can’t just hang up on me. I’m a very important person. I’m a senator. Also I’m his boss. I pay his paychecks, I keep him employed, I—”

“Stark.”

“Oh,” Stark says, scratching his nose. “Lincoln Memorial.”

Steve doesn’t stop to thank Stark. He doesn’t even stop to thank Sam. Sam, he’ll thank when he gets back. Sam, he’ll spend his whole life thanking.

For now, his head buzzes with what he needs to do. He knows what he needs to say. He knows, even, how to make Bucky listen. There has never been, not once, something that he has been more certain of.

Finally.

Heart pounding, blood thrumming, a distinct ache in his chest, Steve turns on his heels.

He runs.

Chapter End Notes

Catch you on October 30th for the wrap up. ♥
chapter eleven, or, everything happens on the steps of the lincoln memorial

Chapter by crinklefries

Chapter Summary

His heart flutters in his chest painfully, although it’s no more painful than how his fingers feel inside his gloves now. He’s nervous. He wants this so badly, he almost turns around just to avoid it.

He doesn’t, though.

He’s done avoiding it.

Steve takes the stairs up.

Without saying a word, he sits down next to Bucky Barnes.

Chapter Notes

You all have been so patient and so wildly engaged and supportive of us; so as a thank you--a little early present from us to our readers. Thank you readers, we love and deeply appreciate you. ♥

**A reminder that this universe is pre-2016 politics in a slightly alternate universe where the president is not an openly racist, misogynist, fascist pos; so it’s still contentious and batshit, but not nearly as evil. Go into the final chapters with that in mind.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
It’s a cold night in the middle of December. One of those nights that burrow in under layers, the bitter cold crawling up any patch of skin it can find and clinging to clothing in the meantime. The air sinks into Steve’s lungs, making it hard to breathe. It’s the kind of night that would have made his asthma flare up when he was a kid, or compromise his constitution until he was down and out with a cold or a virus or both, simultaneously.

Luckily, his circulation’s gotten better since then. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel it, though.

He reaches the bottom of the steps to the Lincoln Memorial and looks up, his lungs burning, his face bright pink and smarting, his ears so cold they’re nearly hot.

It’s dark and no one should be out, but that doesn’t mean they’re not. That doesn’t mean that Steve can’t see the dark smudge sitting at the top of the steps.

His heart flutters in his chest painfully, although it’s no more painful than how his fingers feel inside his gloves now. He’s nervous. He wants this so badly, he almost turns around just to avoid it.

He doesn’t, though.

He’s done avoiding it.

Steve takes the stairs up.

Without saying a word, he sits down next to Bucky Barnes.

There’s nothing between them for a while, just heavy breathing and unspoken words.

Then Steve shifts.
“Hey,” he says.

There’s a beat and then Bucky, his gloved hands folded on top of his knees, replies.

“Hey, Steve.”

“It’s cold,” Steve says. He’s so nervous, so wound up, the words feel tight in his throat. “Weird time to be chilling outside a national memorial. What kind of nerd does something like that?”

Bucky doesn’t say anything for a minute. Then he tilts his head slightly. Steve can see him looking at him out of the corner of his eyes.

“Just needed a moment with Honest Abe,” he says. “We had a lot to talk about.”

“You and Abraham Lincoln?”

“Yeah, we’re good pals,” Bucky says. “I got a lot of questions and he has a lot of answers. Sometimes just doesn’t shut up.”

Steve suppresses a thin smile.

“You got a statue giving you advice, Barnes?”

“Like I said, we’re pals,” Bucky says. He shivers a little and pulls his coat closer around his shoulders. “Turns out, I needed a lot of advice.”

Steve nods. He plays with a loose thread on his coat and then stills.

“I talked to Sam,” he says.

“Oh,” Bucky exhales.

“I met him in middle school, did you know that?” Steve asks, looking at Bucky.

Bucky shakes his head.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah. Seventh grade, actually. He tells me he’s known since he met me I’m a stubborn, unrelenting asshole.”

“Steve—”

“We’ve been through a lot together, Sam and I. I’ve been there every time someone’s said something shitty and racist to him. He’s been there with me every time my mother’s been sick, every time I’ve had my heart broken.”

“Steve—” Bucky tries again, but Steve shakes his head and looks at him—really looks at him.

Bucky Barnes is beautiful. It’s not just physical. He’s confident and he’s arrogant and he’s kind and he’s a total jackass. He’s held together carefully, his edges and seams so neatly sewn there’s barely an impression left behind. This is what Steve remembers of the Bucky he’s known so far—that he is impeccably put together. The rich often are.

Now, looking at him, Steve notices the edges that are fraying; the stitches that aren’t so neat anymore. The frown lines around his mouth, the furrow between his brows. Bucky keeps looking
down at his hands, as though he’s uncertain about what to do or say and it’s foreign on him. Vulnerability is foreign on him.

Steve knows how to relate to that.

“Sam’s not perfect. And neither am I—God knows I am anything but. That’s how we work. We trust each other implicitly. We have each other’s backs. When one of us does something unspeakably dumbshit, the other calls him out. And because we trust each other, we know it’s the truth, whatever the other is saying.”

Bucky quiets, eyes on Steve.

“I talked to Sam,” Steve says gently. “And he basically told me I was being an idiot. Not for feeling how I did—not that. He’d never drag me for sticking up for what I believed in, even when it’s...not clear I’m doing a bang up job of it.”

The wind rustles at Steve’s hair and he tries to finally use the best words he can in a situation that could have used them months ago.

“He called me out for being so scared of getting hurt and being wrong and hypocritical, of...compromising this core...fundamental part of myself for you—for this—whatever this is, that I was running away from a fight. I’ve never run away from a fight in my life.”

Bucky doesn’t say anything.

“I should have been clearer,” Steve says. “I should have either stopped us, knowing what I was feeling, or I should have been willing to fight to change what was wrong. You didn’t want to talk about any of it, but I could have made you. I could have stopped the sex and made us talk—I should have done that. I didn’t do any of those things. Instead, I let us get all tangled up instead.”

Steve takes a breath.

“I was kind of a jackass to you, Bucky. I didn’t mean to be. We started with sex and then worked backwards and we never just—talked. I wanted boundaries, but I kept letting you cross them. If I led you on—I’m sorry. That wasn’t my intention.”

Bucky lets out a breath, looks down at his hands and nods.

“I just liked you so much more than I wanted to and—that’s not an excuse. I know it’s not, but I want you to know it wasn’t because I meant to be an asshole. I wanted to be with you and I couldn’t be, at the same time. It’s—God, it was so confusing.”

Steve lets out a low laugh he doesn’t really feel. His chest is tight, so tight his brain is buzzing with it.

“I’m sorry, Buck...for leaving you that night, without saying anything. I thought I could do it—this—and then I realized too late I couldn’t. I should have known better,” he says. He swallows. “And I’m sorry for not sitting down and talking to you about...everything. Using my words. I should have taken sex off the table and just told you.”

This makes Bucky shake his head, suddenly.

“I wasn’t trying to listen to you,” he says. “You weren’t leading me on, Steve. God, I knew you wanted to talk and I didn’t want to listen. I thought if I could distract you, if we could just have sex, then we wouldn’t have to talk about it. And if we didn’t talk—”
Steve gives him a wan smile and Bucky laughs, sad and rueful.

“Well it worked in that regard,” Steve says, gently. “You distracted me real good.”

“I’m an idiot,” Bucky admits and that makes Steve actually smile.

“There’s a lot of that going around.”

The wind picks up, slicing clean through them. They both shiver, simultaneously and Steve presses a little closer. Maybe it’s too soon, but it’s too cold to not capitalize on body heat. Bucky doesn’t move away. He stills and then, after a moment, leans against Steve too.

“I can’t apologize for believing what I believe, Buck,” Steve says, after a moment. “I won’t apologize for my principles. I won’t apologize for standing behind them or saying I couldn’t be with someone...who didn’t align with those. I know that makes me relentless. I know that makes me difficult. But it doesn’t make sense, for me to be against all of these things...to be against injustice and against people who make that possible and make an exception for myself personally. That would make me a hypocrite. Do you understand that?”

Bucky nods, although it seems hard given.

Steve says, “But I’m sorry about the rest of it. It wasn’t personal—it wasn’t you, the person. It was everything else. How we were set up. Fundamentally incompatible.”

“Steve,” Bucky says, and turns to him. For a moment, he just looks at him. The two of them, out in the cold, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, under the moonlight. “I need you to stop apologizing.”

Steve looks at him, startled.

“I mean don’t get me wrong, I appreciate it, but so much of this is on me, I can’t stand it.” Bucky takes a breath, as though fortifying himself. “You’ve done enough, it’s just—it’s my turn to talk now.”

Steve quiets, respecting that. It takes Bucky a minute to gather his words.

“You were clear about everything from the beginning. You’re not subtle, Rogers, and I’m not stupid. I was mad—so fucking mad, that you wouldn’t let me ignore the elephant in the room. We were having great sex. We were having fun. It would have been so easy to just continue it, if we didn’t have to think about anything else—if we could just keep doing what we were doing. That’s how my parents work, did you know that? I guess I never said. My mom doesn’t really believe in talking about politics or money, really. She thinks it’s gauche.”

He gives a faint smile, which fades almost immediately.

“I don’t even believe in that, I just didn’t want to deal with it. No one’s ever made me deal with that before, Steve, no one’s ever really asked me to. Maybe no one’s really been worth it, I don’t know. But fuck, then I went and caught feelings and—”

Bucky rubs a hand down his face.

“I thought because we were having fun and because we liked each other, that would be enough.” Bucky looks at him. He looks as though he’s trying to tell Steve something, that it’s important that Steve understand what he’s saying. “It’s not enough. And I understand that now. How are we going to make something work when we don’t have a common ground? When we don’t see eye to eye...on
anything?”

That makes something tug in Steve; a terrible, hopeless, selfish thing.

“I want to make it work, Bucky,” he says. “I just don’t know how.”

“What if I tell you...you were right?” Bucky says, after a moment. “I haven’t been taking things seriously. This entire time, I’ve had my views handed to me. I inherited them—from my parents, from my family. I never stopped to think about why. I guess I never needed to before.”

Bucky runs a hand through his hair, the frustration clear on his face.

“Why did I think the things I thought? Why did I support the things I supported? Why was I here in D.C.? Was it because I cared about anything I was working on or was it—am I one of those people I told you about? Just here for the power? I thought about that question for a long time that day, after you left me. I didn’t have an answer and that scared me.”

He shifts and his shoulder moves away from Steve’s for a moment. He feels the loss of warmth acutely; he feels the loss of Bucky even more.

“You weren’t wrong, Steve. I didn’t want to listen because I knew you weren’t wrong,” Bucky says. “You...make me see things on a bigger scale than I have been and yeah, you’re a bull-headed asshole about it, but if you weren’t, I wouldn’t like you half as much.”

Steve blinks.

“Because you’re a bull-headed asshole too?”

Bucky laughs. “Like draws to like, or whatever.”

Steve warms at that. Not just Bucky’s words, not just his understanding—but his laugh.

“I want you to know—it’s not you, Bucky. I know you’re good. You’ve been nothing but good to me. And I like that about you—that you have this strangely good heart underneath all of that cynicism. But I am my principles. I live and breathe them. Maybe that’s a flaw, but that’s a flaw I’m okay with having. We all have to bear our crosses, right? This is mine. I’m sorry I can’t change that.”

“I’m not asking you to,” Bucky says, voice almost hard. “God, Steve, don’t you get it? If you had changed that about yourself—you’d just be another Democrat wanting a vote on the Hill.”

It hits Steve hard, catches his breath and wrings it out of him.

“What?”

Bucky fidgets and this time when he looks at him, his expression is clear, intent in a way he has never been before.

“I watched you, giving those interns that...rousing superhero speech. I didn’t realize someone could be that passionate about something. Just...really believe in something so much, he makes everyone around him believe in it too.” Bucky’s eyes widen; he sounds almost in awe. “Do you know how rare that is? I’ve been to some of the best schools in the world, I’ve been around politicians and world leaders all my life, and none of them came close to matching that kind of...genuine belief. That vision.”

Steve’s own vision swims now. His emotions are dialed up to 11. He feels warm and cold and
terribly, horribly overwrought.

Bucky smiles at him. “I know you believe what you believe in because you’re willing to die on your hills. Don’t you get it? I like you because of that. You make me...want to feel even a quarter of that passion for something.”

“Like the planet?” Steve gives him a lop-sided smile.

“God,” Bucky laughs and this time it’s not nearly as tortured. “Did you know it’s dying, Steve? Did you know all of the oil lobby money in the world won’t stop it from not dying?”

“First I’ve heard of it,” Steve says and Bucky shakes his head.

“Like the planet,” he says, a self-effacing smile on his lips. “That’s a good starting point.”

Steve agrees. He presses his shoulder back against Bucky’s and they sit quietly, the silence between them shifting. Everything between them, always shifting.

This was never going to be easy; but, Steve thinks, maybe it doesn’t have to be quite so hard either. Maybe there’s something here he can work with—that they can both work with.

“I want this to work, Buck,” Steve says, again. “Maybe I shouldn’t, but I do. I want this to work so bad, you have no idea.”

Bucky nods, swallowing. He wrings his hands in his lap.

“I can’t promise you anything, Steve,” Bucky says, slowly. “I can’t promise you that I’ll become a liberal, a left-leaning Marxist. I can’t promise I won’t still believe some of the same things I believe. I won’t become the perfect political companion for you overnight—”

“Bucky, I’m not saying—”

“Let me finish, jackass,” Bucky smiles. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “I can’t promise that to you. But I can promise that I will...try. That I am willing to try.”

Bucky looks at him, his expression open now, the most open it has ever been.

“I want to unlearn some of the things I maybe grew up believing. If you’ll help me. I think...that’s a good place to start.”

Steve exhales.

“Really?”

“I saw the dying polar bears, you know.” Bucky shakes his head. “Honestly, Tony was already on the edge. Whatever you said to him about Morgan—it got in his head. So he kept babbling to me and then he showed me the polar bears and it kind of hit me in that moment—you were right. If Tony Stark was here talking about his anxiety for Morgan’s future on the planet or whatever, but still hesitating on the one thing we can do to try to fix that—what the fuck were we doing? Why were we doing it? I hadn’t been asking that question. I was never taught to ask it, Steve. I hope you understand.”

Steve nods. “I do.”

He does.
“But I want to.” Bucky straightens. “I want to ask those questions. Maybe I’ll come to the same answers you come to and maybe I don’t, but it won’t be because I didn’t ask them.”

Steve feels a little dizzy. There’s something spiking in him; a warmth that’s spreading, despite the cold. It starts in his chest and sinks throughout the rest of him.

Bucky looks back at him—really looks at him.

“I want to...be a better person than who I was raised to be. I want to unlearn some of the things I’ve been too arrogant to look at twice,” Bucky says, slowly.

“Bucky,” Steve breathes out.

“I went to Sam. I said I’d fucked up. I knew I had fucked up and I knew he was the only one who could help me. I wanted to know...what to do. To fix it.” Bucky looks down at his hands. “It was worth it to me to try to fix it. I couldn’t just text you back, it didn’t seem like enough. Words are meaningless without action, did you know that?”

Steve watches him.

“Sam said to me—he told me you’ve spent a lot of your life not being listened to. That you have a good heart and yeah, you’re stubborn, but you’re not unreasonable. He said the key to getting to you is to show I’m listening. I’ve...always been listened to, Steve. I’ve always had that...privilege.”

It’s the first time Steve’s heard him say the word, admit it out loud.

“When you have privilege, you think it’s a bad thing, to be called out on it. It’s not a bad thing, no one’s saying you’re evil or anything. It’s just the way the world works and you have to look at the things you’ve gotten and use it to help other people who haven’t gotten that and—it took him a while, but Sam explained it in a way even an idiot like me could understand.” Bucky smiles ruefully; then the smile fades. “He didn’t have to spend that time on me, but he did. He really loves you.”

There’s a hot lump in Steve’s throat. He nods.

“I wasn’t listening to you before and I’m sorry about that,” Bucky says, clearly. “I apologize. I liked you so much and we were having so much fun together, I got arrogant. I thought—if we talked, it would get in the way of a good thing.”

Bucky stops, his voice wavering, as though he’s feeling tight too, the emotions stuck in his throat. Steve understands. He’s coming apart at the seams.

“But I get it now. I was wrong about that. I don’t get to have it both ways. I don’t get to say...the personal isn’t political and expect you to ignore your personal politics. I don’t get to pick one side of you to like and ignore the other,” Bucky says. “We can either be casual fuck buddies who don’t really talk or we can try for something bigger.”

Bucky touches Steve’s jaw.

“You make me want to try for something bigger, Steve Rogers.”

Steve’s head spins.

His chest is a sticky, heavy, terrible mess.

“I don’t want you to do this for me,” Steve says, voice thicker than usual. “That’s not going to work.
I don’t believe in that—doing something like this for someone else, even if you like them. Even if you love them.”

“I can’t pretend you’re not the catalyst,” Bucky says softly. “But...it’s not just you. I want to do this for myself. I want to be a person who cares. Someone who...recognizes his privileges. Someone who—what was it? Speaks up, stands up for what’s right. I want to work for something good.”

And God, that? That’s more than a sign. That’s the whole billboard. That’s the whole fucking book.

Steve is more than just astonished. He’s knocked clean off his feet. He must look it, because Bucky’s expression softens, immeasurably. His fingers, still warm against Steve’s cool skin.

“I told you I was listening,” Bucky says, softly. “I’m sorry it took me this long. God, I’m so sorry, Steve.”

“Me too,” Steve says, a little more watery than he will ever admit to anyone on Earth, especially anyone he knows. “I’m sorry it took me this long.”

Bucky tries to withdraw his hand, but Steve catches it, keeps it there. His heart drums steadily, warmly, a tick-tick-tick just under his ribcage.

They watch each other, closely. Here, between them, in this moment, is set up a confluence of events, of ideologies, of moments that have brought them together and torn them apart. It’s not fate, because it’s not easy, it never has been, but it’s something more than that. It’s effort; it’s a goal; it’s something maybe worth trying, something worth fighting for.

To Steve, that is all he has ever wanted.

“We’ve done this all backwards,” he says. “Sex first and everything after. That’s not going to work for me anymore.”

Bucky’s face falls, but Steve doesn’t let him get too far.

“I’d like to take you out and really get to know you, Bucky. If you let me. But for real.”

Bucky—his face doesn’t warm at that, so much as it glows. It starts around the corners of his mouth, softening, and then spreads up up up, to the blues of his eyes, the crinkles at the corner. If he’s been carrying weight, it sloughs off from his shoulders and in that, Steve can relate too. It feels as though he’s been carrying lead in the center of his chest for months now—for nearly a year. And suddenly it loosens; slowly it begins to dissolve.

“If I’ll let you?” Bucky laughs, softly. “Well now that we’ve come so far and have spent all this time freezing our asses off on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and have spilled our guts to each other and—”

“You’re so fucking annoying,” Steve interrupts him and Bucky, mid-word, mid-laugh, gets cut off.

Because Steve has had it; he’s cold and he’s emotional and he’s over it. He has been missing Bucky for what feels like half his life, which is not at all accurate or true and is definitely a dramatic exaggeration, but their road here has been long and winding and full of fighting and lack of communication and more heartache than two former enemies and rivals should reasonably have to endure and Bucky’s face is pink and he looks so stupidly endearing laughing and anyway, Steve’s over it—

He tilts his face forward and kisses him.
“Oh,” Bucky says, his expression caught in surprise.

Steve smiles.

He cups Bucky’s cheek, spreads his fingers against his chilled skin and leans forward. His mouth sliding against Bucky’s mouth; their breaths mingling, the only warm point in a sea of bitter, sinking cold. His heart beats rapidly. He nudges Bucky’s mouth open and kisses him better. Bucky’s eyes flutter closed. Steve can feel it too, the way his pulse ticks up.

“Oh,” Bucky says again, happily this time.

Bucky leans forward too, his hand at Steve’s jaw, and then he wraps an arm around Steve’s shoulders and pulls him closer. Steve laughs breathlessly and nudges Bucky’s nose with his own. Their body heat collide, their limbs entangling, their mouths trying to find each other and missing. Their teeth knock together, their noses smashing. It’s a total, complete, utter mess.

They can’t stop laughing and that makes their mouths miss some more and their noses bump besides and it’s only when Steve gets fed up and he takes Bucky’s face between his two large hands to stop him from wriggling, to steady him, that, hearts beating rapidly, laughing like two stupid, fucking teenagers—happy; finally, so fucking happy—they kiss some more.

Abraham Lincoln doesn’t really offer them any advice that night, but then, maybe he doesn’t have to. All roads are winding and some are more fraught than others. It’s not a perfect solution, but things rarely are.

It’s a cold night in December, D.C. sparkling somewhere out there around them. There’s politics and social climbing; power gathering and power letting. That’s all somewhere else, to be considered at another time. For now, they sit together, bodies pressed close, and kiss for a while. They eventually pull apart and murmur for a while after that.

Bucky’s head tilts onto Steve’s shoulder and Steve leans back against him, one arm around his back; the side of his face tucked neatly against Bucky’s cold, soft hair. They’re freezing, but they’re lit up too, warmed from the inside out. Steve’s other hand ends up in Bucky’s lap, between them, palm up. Bucky takes it without hesitation. He lays his own on top, laces their fingers together.

Things can’t always be like this and they certainly won’t be. They will fight. They will misunderstand one another. They will come to the table with conflicting views and want to scream because of it.

They will have to put in conscious effort, sometimes Herculean, to make this work. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t get this moment, this space between them, for now. That doesn’t mean they won’t try.

It’s a common ground and it’s not magically perfect, but hey—it’s a start.

* *

Four months later

It’s springtime in D.C., and Steve has never been happier to be a cliché.

He has gone to the Smithsonian with his boyfriend, Bucky Barnes, and looked at the newly opened
Magna Carta exhibit with his boyfriend, Bucky Barnes, and kissed his boyfriend, Bucky Barnes, beneath the open, blooming cherry blossoms. He has avoided the very irritating boss of his boyfriend, Bucky Barnes, and argued through multiple movies with his boyfriend, Bucky Barnes, who he likes very much, but who, apparently and indisputably, just has the worst fucking taste in movies.

And today he's sitting in his apartment on the couch with his boyfriend, Bucky Barnes, watching the news.

Well, sitting is maybe a bit of a misnomer. Steve is slouching against the arm of the couch and Bucky is leaning up against him as though they've been vacuum sealed together. They are not so much sitting as lying down, Bucky on top of Steve, and not so much watching the news as making out. Sam is going to get home at some point, and then they'll have to, like, not completely melt into each other, but until then, there are no bounds of not having his roommate and best friend yell and/or throw things at him to keep him from kissing Bucky, so that's what he's doing.

The thrill of being able to kiss Bucky whenever he wants has not worn off with repetition, and he takes advantage of it now, dragging his hands along his sides, threading his fingers through Bucky's hair. Bucky moans, and Steve kisses him harder. He moves one hand into the gap between Bucky's shirt and the waistband of his jeans, dragging his fingertips across smooth skin. Bucky makes a helpless sort of hnnnn noise into Steve's mouth, then pushes up off him.

“If you keep escalating, we're not going to be able to watch the news.” He sounds gratifyingly breathless.

“Well, but we have to watch the news.” Steve pulls him back down for another kiss anyway.

“We're not watching the news now,” Bucky murmurs against his mouth.

“It's weather and traffic,” Steve says. “It's not the important part.”

“Steve Rogers,” Bucky says, eyes wide and faux-scandalized. “What would people think if they heard you say you didn't care about the weather? You, the champion of the climate. You, Captain Planet in a sales rack Macy’s three piece suit.”

“I care about the climate. I don't care about weather reporting,” Steve says. He jams his fingers into Bucky's side right where he's ticklish. “That's completely different. Also what's that about my suit?”

Bucky wheezes with laughter and twists to get away from Steve fingers without actually trying to get off of him.

“You're such an asshole,” he says affectionately. “Also I'm begging you to wear some Burberry.”

“I'm going to fucking kill you. Also you started it,” Steve says, because he is a mature and collected individual and not in any way a complete mess brimming over with fondness.

Bucky giggles, which Steve has to shut up desperately and, luckily, he knows exactly the right tools to do that now.

They leisurely make out through the next couple of news stories, but then Steve hears the phrase Code Green, and he says, “Wait, wait, this is it—”

But Bucky is already scrambling off of Steve and pulling him up to an actual sitting position. He then gets right back on the couch next to him and leans into his side. Steve throws an arm around his shoulders and pulls him in tight. Bucky presses a quick kiss to his cheek, and then they both lean
forward to listen to the news. Steve finds the remote beneath one of the couch cushions and turns the volume up a little.

“...we watch as President Xavier signs Representative Wilson's Code Green into law,” the news anchor says. “Joining us now live from the White House, our correspondent will review the historic bills' most salient points.”

Steve focuses in on the image of the President signing the bill, punctuated by camera flashes. Even though Steve knew this was happening, even though he was prepared for it, he can't help the wave of emotion that swells his chest and tightens his throat as he watches the President's pen scribble across the paper. He and Sam, and America, and Kate, Rhodey, and countless other people worked so hard for this for so long and here it is: the culmination of all their effort and belief in this bill; in the process and using the process to do something—something good. It was the right thing to do, the necessary thing. And it's happening. It's happening right now.

Maybe it's corny, but Steve feels proud to be one of the people that made this happen; to be a part of a change, the slightest part of a movement that creates a little hope for the future.

And Bucky is too; he did his part, helped bring this into being. Steve presses his fingers into Bucky's shoulder and he turns to kiss him as the White House correspondent starts going over points that Steve knows by heart. He and Wanda have struggled over every semicolon.

“You did it,” Bucky says softly.

“We did it,” Steve says.

“Thank you for acknowledging my very key role,” Bucky says, the corners of his eyes crinkling up as he laughs, and he's joking, but Steve's not. Bucky was part of this too. That means a lot to him. “You could acknowledge my handsomeness too, while we're at it, and my intelligence, my charm, certainly, and don’t forget my—”

And then Steve has to kiss Bucky again, because Bucky Barnes is a total fucking menace and as much as he might be right about certain aspects—for example, the handsomeness—it’s important that his head not grow any larger than it already is, lest it take up most of the oxygen in the room and then, the planet. Anyway, it turns out that's really the best way to get Bucky Barnes to shut up for five seconds.

Steve is distracted from the kissing by a brief audio clip of Tony Stark talking about Code Green and his last minute-conversion before the vote, and then Alexander Pierce frothing angrily about said conversion.

Bucky stops kissing and groans, dropping his head to rest on Steve's chest. Steve pats his back consolingly.

“Ugh, I hate that guy,” Bucky says.

“How is Tony taking his new status as traitor to the party?” Steve asks.

“I think he's secretly proud of it, but he likes to complain.” Bucky lips move against Steve's sternum and he shivers. “He definitely likes the attention, which ultimately is what matters.”

Steve snorts.

“He's a big boy, he can handle himself. Anyway, there are even other Republicans who agree with him, not that they'll say it on record.”
“That gives me some...hope,” Steve says. “I mean they’re all douchebags, don’t get me wrong, but maybe there’s like three collective brain cells in there. Maybe in the future we can actually accomplish...a few things?”

“Look, if you can flip Frank Castle, you can do anything,” Bucky says. “That guy is a mean nut to crack.”

“Not that I'm not happy to take the credit for that, but that was actually Sam,” Steve says. He grins and kisses Bucky again and Bucky, as he has taken to doing, with some frequency, begins to melt against him again.

“You’re wearing—” Bucky murmurs between kisses and starts to climb back into Steve’s lap, “—so many layers. I hate your clothes.”

“Shut up, no you don’t,” Steve says into the kiss, his hand slipping under Bucky’s shirt again.

“I’m going to burn all of them,” Bucky says, kissing Steve’s mouth and then the corner of it and then starting down his jaw. “And replace them—with quality. I’m thinking Tom Ford.”

“I hate you,” Steve groans and Bucky grins wildly into the hollow spot under his left ear.

As if his name summoned him, the sound of a key in the lock has Steve and Bucky suddenly freezing in position. The lock turns and the door opens and then they hastily rip away from each other—absolutely unconvincingly—sitting slightly straighter up and moving slightly apart so there’s some level of plausible deniability that they have been making out on the living room couch. As though their mouths aren’t red and their clothes aren’t totally askew. Bucky’s curls are sticking up on one side and Steve almost giggles about it.

“Gross,” Sam says by way of greeting once he's inside the door. “I do not need to see that.”

“Don't need to see us celebrating your victory?” Steve says, innocently.

“Is that what the kids are calling it?” Sam kicks off his shoes and walks in.

“I think the kids call it C-Span and chill,” Bucky says.

“I’m going to pretend that I didn't hear that,” Sam says, “and that nothing of an intimate nature has been happening on this couch—our living room couch, a communal couch upon which we all sit.”

“You know we prefer to do that kind of thing in public spaces,” Bucky says sweetly.

“I cannot stand the two of you,” Sam informs them and Bucky grins wickedly while Steve snorts.

“Then you shouldn’t have played matchmaker, cupid.”

“You try and look at your punkass, sorry face moping every single fucking day for a year and then you tell me you don’t try and do something about it,” Sam says. He hangs up his jacket on the coat rack. “Anyway all I did was tell both of you to get your head out of your asses.”

“Oh is that what you two were talking about?”

“He was nicer about it to me,” Bucky says.

“Hey.” Steve frowns. “Why’s he get the special treatment?”

“Because I’ve had to put up with your tomfoolery for too goddamn long,” Sam says. He goes to the
kitchen, rummaging around, and Steve and Bucky have a silent conversation, before he comes back with three beers. “All right scoot over, assholes. I’ve had enough of this. I’m a very important politician and I’ve earned one third of this couch.”

“You’re really going to leave room for Jesus us?” Bucky mutters as he slides over to the other side of the couch.

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“Yup,” Sam says, popping the p. He hands the two other beers over and plops himself down in the middle of them. “As is my God-given right as an elected official.”

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“What amendment was that again?” Steve asks.

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“The 74th,” Sam says, without missing a beat.

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“Hey, that sounds wrong,” Bucky says, taking a drink. “If you’re confused about the Bill of Rights, you could always borrow Steve’s pocket const—”

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“I’m going to murder you,” Steve says loudly at Bucky, looking over Sam and Bucky snickers and Sam rolls his eyes aggressively.

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“Can you two assholes shut up?” Sam says and reaches for the remote to turn up the volume. “I am trying to watch news coverage of the coolest thing any politician has ever done.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow this time and Steve drinks.

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“Statements like that are why America’s started putting weekly lunches on the books with Stark,” he says to Sam. “She thinks it’s good to bring your ego back down. Just as an FYI.”

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Sam tears his eyes away from the TV to ogle at Steve.

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“Say what now? I keep having to see Stark why?”

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“Shh you two,” Bucky says and nudges Sam’s side. “I want to see Pierce’s head pop off his shoulders in anger. This is the only thing I got going for me in life.”

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Rather than hear Steve and Bucky continue to bicker, Sam turns the volume so loud neither of them can speak over it.

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The three of them sit back, drinking their beers, bickering slightly when the coverage goes to commercial, and watching this, the fruit of their labor. Steve feels warm and happy and slowly full of alcohol. He’s in disbelief, sometimes, that it could happen like this—that he and Sam could come up with the kernel of an idea, a pipeline dream, a decade ago, and make it come true now. That they could be sitting on the couch together and that on the other side of Sam could be someone Steve had hated so terribly once and is now so close to admitting—he not only likes, but he, well, loves.

It’s not as though Bucky doesn’t know. He knows, Sam knows, America and Kate definitely know. Steve Rogers has the subtlety of a bulldozer, after all.

But it hits him sometimes, in moments like this, that it can be like this, for him, a kid from Brooklyn with a dream and his big-hearted, ambitious, forward-thinking best friend. It’s not just his dream, he thinks: it’s the American dream.
It’s pretty fucking cool.

They come back from dinner, full of expensive food, knocking into each other, hands tangled between them, Bucky laughing into his shoulder and Steve grinning so wide his face nearly splits from it.

They take their shoes off at the door and then Steve offers Bucky his hand. Bucky takes it and Steve pulls him down the hall to his room.

They make out for a while on his bed, warm and happy, but ultimately too lazy to do anything other than kiss and get a little rumpled. Bucky complains that he ate too much and Steve replies that Bucky didn’t have to take them to a Michelin starred restaurant and they could have gone to like, Nando’s, like they did last time when it was Steve’s turn to take them out, but—Bucky stops him in the middle of his sentence by squashing a hand to his face.

“I cannot listen to you any longer,” he says dramatically. “I’ve listened to you too much and now my brain is full of terrible ideas, like do-gooder policy. God, last week I even read an article from the Jacobin. I didn’t even hate it! I’m disgusted with myself. They’re going to take away my Republican card.”

“Reagan must be devastated in his grave,” Steve says, somberly.

Bucky does the sign of the cross and Steve laughs, hard. His boyfriend, he thinks, is an idiot.

They rearrange themselves a little on the bed until Bucky’s head is tucked against Steve’s shoulder and his body is half sprawled over Steve. Steve slings an arm loosely around Bucky’s waist and gets rewarded for the effort with a lazy kiss to his upper arm.

“When I went home for Christmas, I kept hearing your voice in my head every time my Dad said something, ugh,” Bucky’s saying. “He’d talk and say something that made him sound like a raging dick and I would hear your voice going but why?”

Steve smiles wildly at the ceiling.

“You asshole,” Bucky complains dramatically. “I can’t do anything in peace anymore. You’ve ruined my life!”

Steve snickers and Bucky tries to half-heartedly elbow his side.

“I’m not the boss of your brain,” he says. “If you’re going to listen to everything your Republican family says and, god, disagree with them, that sounds like a personal problem to me.”

“Personal? Personal?” Bucky says loudly. “Did you know, Steve, that the personal is political?”

Steve rolls his eyes so hard, they nearly detach from the socket.

“I hate—”

“Because for some people, you cannot divest the personal from the political, Steve. Their very existence is political. Everything about them has, without their consent, been made political. So, Steve, think about that the next time you—”
Steve loves that Bucky has actually learned what the phrase means now, however—

“I’m going to kill you.”

“With what?” Bucky grins. “With your dick? If I’m super annoying, can we speed up this process?”

“You’re always annoying, first of all, and second of all, if we speed up the process any faster, you’re going to come before we get started.”

He’s trying to teasingly insult Bucky, but Bucky is too far beyond that. He turns where he is, so Steve’s arm is caught under him, Bucky on his side, looking at him with eyes glittering with far too much mischief to allow Steve to feel safe.

“No, this is good,” he says. “Give me a list of bills you want me to ask you about next time you’re railing me. The sex has gotten kinda boring and I like a guys whose eyes are gonna pop out of his fucking head because the Pigeon Protection Act or whatever is on the line.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me about the pigeons. You know how much I suffered over that. You know how many bird lobbyists I’ve had to meet with! They’re insane! They brought dead birds to the meeting, Bucky.”

“I know,” Bucky says with a goofy look on his face. He leans forward and presses a chaste kiss to Steve’s mouth. “I saw the pictures. I heard the rant. I empathize deeply with your trauma.”

“Dead birds, Buck!” Steve says, getting heated all over again. “In cages! They asked if we wanted to hold them. Why would we want to hold them? Why? Anyway, pigeons are rats of the sky. Oh, and another thing—!”

It’s Bucky’s turn to shut Steve up now, which he does so, extremely effectively, by kissing his mouth shut and then running a hand up under his shirt. Steve is obviously too principled to be manipulated so blatantly and he’s about to tell Bucky this, but Bucky’s nails scrape against his stomach and his brain kind of peters out after that.

This clearly isn’t over, but they make out some more instead.

“Anyway,” Steve is saying. They’re perpendicular now, Bucky laying straight on the bed, Steve with his head on Bucky’s stomach. Bucky’s hand is in his hair and his nails keep scraping against his skull, soothingly.

“I don’t see the big deal.”

“The big deal is that in all of my years being alive, my mother has never dated someone for longer than three months. Six months tops! And now it’s Carl this and Carl that.”

“Are you...jealous?” Bucky grins.

“What?”

Steve refuses to tilt his head up and dignify Bucky’s comment, but he hears Bucky’s snickers anyway.

“Are you jealous of your mother’s beau?”
“No,” Steve says. He Does Not Splutter. “I’m just saying, how good is cabbage anyway?”

“Have you ever thought,” Bucky muses, “that maybe cabbage is a euphemism?”

Steve freezes.

“What?”

“You know,” Bucky says. “He’s giving her a head...of cabbage. Every week.”

Now Steve does splutter. He turns red.

“What—no—that’s not! What. Don’t be—”

“I mean,” Bucky continues. He’s enjoying himself entirely too much, the absolute rat bastard. “I think everyone deserves a head of cabbage sometimes, Steve. Even mothers. Even your mother. Especially your mother, with a son like you to deal with.”

“She’s not getting a head of cabbage every week from a guy named Carl!”

“Kinda sounds like she is,” Bucky says. He’s absolutely shaking with laughter and Steve tries to pinch his side from his awkward angle, but Bucky just catches his hand and then encircles his wrist with his fingers.

“I hate you,” Steve says, all heated and not meaning a word of it. The audacity.

“When do I get to meet her?” Bucky says. “I only talked to her that one time on the phone, but she told me I should Facetime her and then I got busy and I didn’t and I don’t want her to hate me, should I—”

“Can you not befriend my mother?” Steve grumbles. “One best friend is enough.”

Bucky runs a thumb over Steve’s pulsepoint.

“What did she say?” he asks. “About me? About...us?”

Steve snorts and tilts his head back to better try to see Bucky.

“She said I was an idiot for being dumb for so long.” He pauses, remembering the conversation with her—after Code Green passed, after he and Bucky finally talked. He’s had a lot of hard conversations with Sarah Rogers in his life, but that had been one of the easiest. He had been so, so happy and she had heard that in his voice from the first hey Ma. She had been thrilled, of course.

“Yeah?” Bucky’s voice is mild.

“She...Ma has my politics—or rather, I got my politics from her. The starts of it. Trust me, if you think I’m nuts, get that woman in the middle of a protest. She’s been arrested like four times.”

“Damn.” Bucky whistles.

“Yeah. But at the end of the day, what she cares about the most is that I’m happy.”

“And...are you?” Bucky hesitates.

Steve turns his head to catch Bucky looking at him.
“Am I happy, Buck?” he says. He smiles. “Of course I am.”

Bucky looks relieved, so Steve catches his hand now, presses kisses to his knuckles.

“Can I meet her?” Bucky asks again, eagerly.

Steve groans, but doesn’t let go.

“Yeah, asshole,” he says. “You can meet her. She can’t stop asking about you anyway. Steve, how is Bucky? Steve, has Bucky eaten today? Steve, where did you and Bucky go on your date? Steve, has Stark been working Bucky too hard? Steve, you better not nag that poor boy to death.”

Steve rolls his eyes, but Bucky is grinning so hard, his face looks hella cheesy.

“I love her,” Bucky declares and Steve rolls his eyes again.

“Yeah, I know,” he mutters darkly. “Everyone does.”

Bucky shifts away from him then and Steve’s head falls back against the bed. He’s about to protest when Bucky rearranges himself next to him. He turns on his side, so Steve does the same. Their legs are hanging off the edge, their bodies mirroring each other.

“But,” Bucky says, with a soft, wide smile. He presses a brief kiss to Steve’s mouth. “I love you more.”

Well, that’s just not fair. Steve’s face flushes, his heart going erratic in his chest. He feels it all over; how his skin tingles with the sentiment. He wrinkles his face.

“Gross, Republican cooties.”

Bucky laughs and Steve reaches forward, runs his fingers down the slope of his jaw, then back up into his hair.

His chest hurts. His whole body feels like it’s on pins and needles, but like, in a good way. This has probably been too long in coming, but it still scares him to say out loud.

Bucky’s looking at him though, with bright, hopeful eyes and Steve’s not going to make the same mistakes over and over again. If Bucky’s going to listen, then Steve’s going to speak.


For a moment, they say nothing.

Then Bucky’s expression melts into one of those unbearable looks of his—like he’s so fond of Steve, he doesn’t know what to fucking do with himself. It’s horrible. Steve can’t stand it.

“I always suspected,” Bucky murmured. “The signs were all there.”

Steve groans, which only makes Bucky smile wider. His eyes dip to Steve’s mouth and Steve’s mouth twitches in response. Bucky’s hand creeps to his chest, presses against the thin cotton of his shirt, just above his heart.

He doesn’t say anything, just feels Steve’s heart beat, quietly, as though he doesn’t need words for what he’s feeling; and maybe he doesn’t.

Then he ruins it.
“Wanna bang and then sleep in tomorrow?” Bucky asks.

Steve blinks.

“You literally have seven meetings with Stark tomorrow,” he says in response.

“Yeah,” Bucky grins. “So, let’s bang and sleep in tomorrow.”

“Oh no,” Steve says, loudly. “I will not have Tony Stark calling me because his LD has an overactive sex drive. Do you know what he said the last time you were late? You don’t want to know. I didn’t even want to know! Why does he have my number? What did you d—”

Bucky smothers him with a kiss. Steve tries to protest some more, his complaints muffled into kiss after kiss after kiss, until he finally gives up and lets Bucky pull him up to bed.

They get on their knees, facing each other, and start pulling off shirts, tugging at belts, and distracting each other with messy, laughing, open-mouthed kisses in between. There’s definitely some shittalking too, because what’s more romantic than telling the person you love his face looks like the bottom of a foot and that he has the personality of bleu cheese left out in the sun for too long?

There’s a levity between them that hadn’t existed before. An understanding, maybe. A mutual respect, or compassion, or genuine delight, that not only are they together, but they are happy to be together; that they may disagree—and they certainly will—and they might not always be on the same page—people often aren’t—but they will talk even when they do and especially when it is hard to, and try to compromise when they can, if it’s possible.

They don’t get there quickly and they don’t get there easily, but they do eventually learn this—that some things are worth standing your ground for and other things are worth listening to and sometimes, both can be true at the same time.

They still have a long way to go—they are political rivals, after all—but it turns out that they’re willing to put in that work; that Bucky is willing to re-examine those parts of himself that he hasn’t thought too deeply about and that Steve is willing to be patient with him, to listen, and to help.

Steve runs a hand through Bucky’s curls, making them stand on end. Bucky gets his mouth on Steve’s ink, marking his way over the ship and up his side, just like he likes.

They kiss, hands on each other’s chests, mouths slotted together, eyes crinkling at the corners. Steve places a hand over Bucky’s heart and pushes him down to the bed. Bucky, looking up at him, expression unbearably soft, reaches up and pulls him down over him.

They have this now and they can have more later. That’s the space they make for themselves, together; a now, but certainly, a later.

It turns out that anything is possible, with a little communication, a little listening, and an unbelievable amount of patience. It turns out that some things are worth that, even if it goes against your better, impulsive, doggedly stubborn, wildly impatient nature.

And it turns out that love may not be a magical cure-all, but—it certainly doesn’t hurt.

Chapter End Notes
The epilogue will be posted on Wednesday. Thank you, as ever, for reading, commenting, loving, and supporting this fic. You might not agree with the everyone's actions or politics in here and you might have chosen a different path personally, but this is the story we were interested in telling and we are confident it ended up being the story we wanted to tell.

It has been a Journey with a capital J and it has been a pleasure and a joy to share that road with you all. Thank you. ♥
epilogue, or, politically ever after

Chapter by crinklefries

Chapter Summary

A lot can happen in five years.

Chapter Notes

Here we are, at the end of the line. Thank you, as ever, for your love and support and enthusiasm for this fic! Honestly, it has been an absolute blast to write and sharing it with you guys has been even better.

This chapter dedicated to sablier_blocque who is not only a great friend, but an exemplary ally (and wonderful writer--check out her fics!). Support the poc in your communities and lives, folks. A little goes a long way and--it's what Steve Rogers would do. ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
A lot can happen in five years. For example, a person who is formerly a staunch Republican from a family of staunch Republicans, who has never really thought about his positions or policies too deeply, might fall in love with a radical, loud, unrepentant leftist progressive who slowly—and then quickly—changes the way he views the whole fucking world.

It’s really fucking annoying.

However, it has undeniably been five of the best years of Bucky’s life. Not that he’ll ever tell Steve that. The rat bastard spends half of his time gloating about how far Bucky’s come and the rest of the time relentlessly telling Bucky if he just moved a little more to the left, they could propose a complete socialist overhaul to the U.S. system of governance.

“Just kidding,” Steve will say, the unrepentant little shit, while they’re in bed, after he’s made this “joke” for the 700th time.

“Steven Grant Rogers,” Bucky will reply, glaring at his boyfriend, the apple of his eye, the love of his extremely stupid and very dumb life.

Steve will try to make that face he makes when he thinks he’s being cute, but is actually being a total little shit and Bucky will intensify his glare.

“You are running for Congress, you absolute dumbshit,” Bucky will say. “You cannot go around proposing things like ‘socialism’ and ‘eating the rich.’”

“Aww, Buck,” Steve will say, scooting closer. “But you’re so rich in nutrients from all of those Michelin star restaurants you go to.”

As though Steve doesn’t go to just as many, being the significant other of the same rich guy he’s threatening to eat.

“You could eat something else,” Bucky will say suggestively and drag his big, unbelievably annoying, blond boyfriend over him.

Steve will grin down at him.

“Let me take a look at the menu first,” he’ll say, which is so fucking cheesy, but then he’ll drag his hand down Bucky’s side, the rougher grooves of his palm catching on Bucky’s heated skin and Bucky will forget to give him shit back.

They’ll make out for a while and then Steve will dip his kisses lower and lower. He’ll go as far down Bucky’s body as he can go.

They’ll leave overturning systems of governance for another day.

The truth is, a lot changes in five years.

Truth be told, a lot changes from the moment Bucky meets Steve.

Five years along and several incremental and then some larger shifts to the left later, Bucky is a long way from where he had been the day Steve had met his eyes at that dump of a bar they used to like when they were younger and could see in dim lighting. He can barely remember that person he used to be, although he reminds himself of it often because one thing he’s learned from Sam and Steve is that you should never forget where you came from or what you used to be.
The fact is Bucky, as a former Republican, understands the other side better than Steve and Sam ever could. He’s maybe more empathetic than either of them would like him to be, but he looks at some of these younger kids and gets where they’re coming from. He’s been there. He grew up one way and never thought about it too deeply, thought that caring was a waste of time, that people were self-serving and calculating because that’s all he had ever seen in his life. Something something pull yourself up by your bootstraps, which is great rhetoric if you ignore the fact that some people are never born with shoes, let alone boots, and others might have a boot without bootstraps or be given a boot with no knowledge of what a bootstrap is. If American partisanship is a cult, then American political party rhetoric is a drug and Bucky? He had taken those drugs his entire life.

It hasn’t been easy to shake.

In truth, he hadn’t exactly wanted to shake it at first. He hadn’t looked at Steve and thought, he’s right about everything, it’s time to jump across the aisle. It never happens like that. Instead, it had been more of a slow burn.

Bucky had watched Steve, carefully, listened to what he was saying, thoughtfully, and seen, starkly, what he and Sam were building. Because that’s what Steve and Sam have done. Sam’s in the middle of his third term now and there hasn’t been a dull year, a single slow moment. They build momentum for a movement and join the movements begun by the people who have come before them. They follow in the footsteps of Okoye, of T’Challa, of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. Bucky, for the first time in his life, learns to shut up and listen to other people when they talk.

And when he does, he learns.

It’s not easy to re-examine that part of him he had inherited and left untouched. Dismantling privilege is hard when privilege is largely invisible. But he does it because he likes the person he sees in the mirror when he’s with Steve, when he’s supporting Sam.

Becca tells him he’s a hopeless, romantic idiot.

She might be right, but little sisters should never know that they’re right.

Becca loves Steve, incidentally. She tells Bucky he’s exactly who he needed. She also tells Bucky she’s been a closet Democrat for years.

“What?” Bucky splutters, upon hearing and his little sister shrugs, twirls a brown curl between her fingers and leans forward over her cup of coffee.

“Who was I going to tell? Dad? So he could lecture me on ‘personal responsibility’ and the ‘liberal media’?” Becca says. “Or Mom, who is allergic to politics?”

“What about me?” Bucky asks, indignant and offended.

Becca rolls her eyes so deeply he feels it eviscerate him in his soul.

“Yeah, imagine that for like ten seconds.”

Bucky does and makes a face. That makes Becca laugh.

“I didn’t need Tony Stark knocking down my bedroom door with a stack of pamphlets, thanks.”

Bucky’s offended, but mostly he’s impressed. He always knew his little sister was a little shit and a total badass, but he had never realized just how much.
“Welcome to the resistance, Bucky Barnes,” Becca tells him and it sounds so much like Steve that he kind of wants to die about it.

“I hope you and Steve never meet,” he tells Becca, which is, of course, hilarious to her because she and Steve have a lunch date planned for the very next day.

Bucky’s life sucks.

“What do we do about Mom and Dad?” he asks his sister, the night before he leaves Tony’s office. It’s right before Thanksgiving, two years after he and Steve have started dating. It’s been a difficult few years, Bucky’s increased awareness of privilege and increasing empathy toward the left making itself too apparent during family meals, mostly because he’s never learned to shut up, himself. He and Steve are perfect for each other in that way. Also the worst.

Tony had been more thoughtful since Code Green and since Bucky had turned slight turncoat on him, but he was still a Republican at the end of the day. On good days, he calls himself an Independent. Whatever his label, it takes the better part of two years for Bucky to realize that he can’t relate to him anymore; that they’ve drifted too far apart on the political spectrum for him to continue his position with him.

“I’m proud of you, Buck,” Steve, the eternal optimist, tells him when Bucky admits his plan to him.

“You came into my life with good dick and infected me with morals,” Bucky complains. “Ugh. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to anyone.”

Steve snorts.

“I hate you,” Bucky informs him.

“I love you too,” Steve says, fondly, and Bucky melts just a little before Steve kisses him.

Anyway, he and his parents feel more and more estranged and never quite so much as when he’s on the verge of telling them he’s leaving the job of a lifetime because he’s no longer a Republican.

“It won’t be easy,” Becca advises over a glass of wine. “You’ll fight. Dad’s going to have a total conniption. Mom will probably do that thing she does where she loses all ability to speak and you only know she’s upset because her lips have thinned so much they almost disappear.”

Bucky shudders.

“You might never see eye to eye,” Becca says.

Bucky swallows, nodding.

Becca covers his hand on the table.

“But they love you, Bucky,” she says. “They love us and we love them and we may not come around all the way to each other right away, but we won’t stop being a family because of it either.”

Bucky hopes she’s right.

And she has been, mostly. It’s weird being so at odds with his parents, but they’re getting older and old age brings perspective too. It’s better to accept the things they cannot change and have their
children in their lives than not. Bucky can’t say that’s the same of all politically divided families, but he has the privilege of it being true for him. Even if family meals are tense.

George and Winifred have even invited Steve over for Christmas this year. Five years too late and in the middle of a high profile political campaign, but Bucky will take it.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Steve says.

Bucky has been reading the same paragraph over and over in his book. When he looks up, Steve’s looking over from his side of the bed. He’s shirtless, with glasses on, checking something on his iPad. It is unspeakably hot. Bucky thinks he’s had a dozen different fantasies of varying filth that start exactly like this.

“Just thinking,” Bucky says. He puts his bookmark back in place and Steve takes that as his cue to put his iPad on the bedside table.

“That must have been difficult for you,” Steve says, seriously, and Bucky makes a face at him. Steve’s expression softens at that. “What’s up?”

“My parents,” Bucky says and looks up at the ceiling.

“Are they okay?” Steve sounds concerned, even though George and Winifred have given him no reason to act that way. They’ve ignored his existence for the entirety of their relationship. It must have hurt Steve even more than it’s hurt Bucky, but Steve has never said anything.

In contrast, Sarah Rogers had opened up her arms to Bucky from the moment she met him. They’re practically best friends now. Sarah calls Bucky more often than she calls Steve, sometimes to check up on her “unbelievably dumb” son, but also just to talk to him. Bucky’s never really had that before, someone who’s cared enough about his opinions to ask him about them. Sarah is just as opinionated and principled as Steve, but she’s softer about it. She’s a mother, and has that mother’s touch. Bucky knows he can go to her if he’s struggling to understand something. Hell, he knows he can go to her if he’s just struggling.

Every fight he and Steve have had over the last five years—and boy have they ever had fights—has been mediated by Sarah. Every time Bucky’s been certain that this is it, it’s this fight that ends them for good, Sarah will call him and talk him down. She’ll assure him that Steve loves him, that they just need to cool off and talk.

She’ll tell him, “My boys are a joy who love each other very much, but who are idiots, primarily. They just need to communicate. I keep trying to teach them the concept, but for some reason, it just won’t take.”

She says that often—my boys—as though it is that seamless to adopt someone into a family, without any judgment, with barely any effort at all. She’s been calling Bucky her son-in-law for a few years now too, which makes Bucky feel some kind of way. Steve’s never corrected her when he’s heard.

That, too, makes Bucky feel some kind of way.

“Oh they’re fine,” Bucky says. He reminds himself to call Sarah the next day because she’s worried about Steve’s sleeping habits again and she had texted him just that day about how Carl can’t seem to stop proposing to her. Sarah Rogers doesn’t believe in the institution of marriage, but Carl the Cabbage Guy sure does. Bucky has to have a whole talk with her.

“Buck?” Steve says and Bucky feels Steve’s bare shoulder pressing against his own. It fills him with warmth, a kind of mental and physical certitude. He drops a kiss to the top of Steve’s shoulder. “Talk
“Oh,” Bucky swallows. He sighs and leans his head onto Steve’s shoulder. “George and Winifred have...summoned us.”

He can almost see Steve blinking in surprise.

“Your parents?” Steve says. Then, confused, “Wait, us?”

“It turns out Becca is dating an anarchist.” Bucky grins, without much humor. “That makes you a prize catch, I guess.”

“That’s...a lot of information,” Steve says.

Bucky lets out a breath. He hopes, briefly, that Steve will hold him. Steve isn’t a mind-reader, but he has become an expert in reading Bucky’s tension, because a moment later, Bucky feels arms encircle him.

He immediately snuggles into them.

“They invited us both for Christmas this year,” he says.

“Are they...sure about that?” Steve asks. It’s kind of funny, how uncertain he sounds. “Maybe they meant your other boyfriend...Chad.”

“Ah, yes,” Bucky says. “Chad Thaddington the Fourth. He’s so good to me.”

“He loves yachts,” Steve says. “A huge fan.”

“Last year, he voted to cut Medicare so that he could have a bigger yacht,” Bucky grins.

“How much money do you need for a yacht?” Steve muses out loud.

“All of the Medicare money, apparently,” Bucky says. He leans into Steve’s chest and Steve tightens his arms around him. “No, not my fake boyfriend Chad. My real boyfriend, you.”

“Huh,” Steve says.

“Yup,” Bucky answers. He’s quiet for a moment, then, “Is that okay? I know they’re kind of...everything you hate. And they haven’t been the greatest about all of this, but it’s the most olive branch we’re going to get out of them and I don’t know, I’ve kind of missed seeing them for the holidays. Dad always gets drunk on wine by like noon and Mom spends the entirety of the holiday yelling at him to stop snoring. Like, every holiday. Also they give great gifts. Oh and Mom makes this apple crumble and I think she must have gotten the recipe from Gran, but it’s so good and I’ve been dreaming about it for like three years and I don’t know, I know it’ll probably be a little awkward and we’ll definitely get into fights with Dad, but I think—”

“Buck,” Steve says.

Buck stops mid-ramble. He tilts his head back to try and look at Steve and Steve presses a kiss to his forehead.

“I would love to have Christmas with your family,” he says. “Is Becca bringing her anarchist boyfriend?”

“I think her partner is non-binary, actually,” Bucky says. “But I do not believe they have been
invited. Give my parents like five years.”

Steve chuckles.

“Becca’s going to need a lot of wine,” Bucky says, with a lop-sided grin.

“We should have them over,” Steve says, thoughtfully. “Next time they’re back in the country.”

“Yeah, she’d like that,” Bucky says.

He quiets down again and then, breathing out, says, “Really though? You don’t mind?”

“My only worry would have been Ma, but I think Cabbage Carl wants to take her to the Alps or something for Christmas, so I don’t have to worry,” Steve says. He strokes Bucky’s chest. “I want you to have a good relationship with your parents, Bucky. I want to have a good relationship with them. Or...a relationship, I guess.”

“You don’t have to censor yourself or anything,” Bucky says. “When Dad says something stupid or offensive, you have full permission to go full Steve Rogers on him.”

“Okay, I don’t need your parents to hate me more than they do.” Steve gives him a thin smile. “I’ll keep it to like 30% Steve Rogers, how does that sound?”

“No like my boyfriend,” Bucky mutters.

Steve laughs and presses a kiss to the crown of Bucky’s head. It warms Bucky up, from his toes to the tip of him. He grins happily.

“Wanna fool around?” Steve asks.

Bucky takes like five seconds to think about this.

“Yeah,” he says. “But then we have to sleep, you have that press conference.”

“No, I don’t.” Steve says, already dragging his scratchy, half-bearded face across Bucky’s jaw. “We cancelled that.”

“No we didn’t, you asshole!” Bucky complains, which stutters into something a little less assertive and a lot breathier when Steve begins kisses bruises into his neck. “Steve.”

“Shh, I’m doing important work here,” Steve mumbles, taking skin between his teeth and Bucky’s brain starts short-circuiting, which has been true of his brain since the first time Steve gave him a blow job in that bathroom that one time—well now he can’t remember all the details, but the point is there.

“You’re—I’m your—” Bucky’s breath hitches. “Campaign—manager.”

“You are—” Steve sucks a bruise onto the skin and Bucky’s fingers dig into Steve’s side. “—doing such—”

Bucky makes some noises and Steve continues sucking, punctuating the bruising with some nonsense words, like—

“—a good job.”

Bucky shoves him away, trying to catch his breath. Then, because Steve is looking at him like he
wants to actually eat him and Bucky’s dick can’t not respond to that, he crawls back over and onto
him, straddling his hips.

“Managing.” Steve grins up at him, the absolute fucking rat bastard.

“I am very upset with you,” Bucky says. “For being who and what you are.”

Steve’s grin widens. He looks so stupidly goofy that Bucky has no choice but to lean down and kiss
him. They get lost in that kiss, slow and lazy and a little messy, Steve’s hands roving up and down
Bucky’s back and Bucky mapping the somewhat smooth planes of Steve’s chest and the
infuriatingly sculpted slopes of his disgusting six pack. His boyfriend is so hot it makes him
unbelievably angry and horny. He’s horngry, always horngry, for Steve Rogers.

Bucky pulls back just a very little, their foreheads pressed together. His breathing is already uneven.

“You are going to fuck me and then we are going to go to sleep,” he says. “And then tomorrow we
will wake up and have a press conference to officially announce your candidacy.”

That makes Steve’s libido calm long enough for him to look as nervous as Bucky knows he feels,
even though he would never say it out loud.

“What if no one votes for me?” Steve whispers.

“I’ll vote for you,” Bucky says. “And Sam. Becca. Kate, probably. America...I mean, jury’s still out
on that.”

“You have to live in my Congressional district to vote for me, Buck,” Steve says.

“Don’t tell me how voting works,” Bucky says. “I went to law school. I know the Constitution.”

“The evidence just really does not point to that.” Steve’s mouth twitches and Bucky has to kiss it. It’s
unavoidable. It’s been five years of this and maybe Sam’s sick of them making out at like, the drop
of a pin, but Bucky sure isn’t. He can’t help it. The more Steve is a little shit, the more Bucky has an
unbearable need to kiss his mouth shut.

“There will be people who hate you,” Bucky says, a thumb at Steve’s lips. “There will be people
who hate your politics and people who hate how you look and how you sound. There will definitely
be people who hate what you say and everything you stand for. But...don’t worry about them. You
know why you’re running and you know what you want to do in Congress. You know what you
already have done, Steve. They can’t take that from you.”

Steve nods, looking a little watery.

“You’ve already done so much good,” Bucky says and means it. “You’ve changed a lot of lives.
Remember when you changed mine?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, smiling. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” Bucky says and he means that too. “Be your unapologetic, optimistic, bulldozing self. I
mean, listen to people when they come to you with concerns. Learn and grow from that. That’s what
you and Sam tell me all the time, right? I still say stupid shit—god, all the time. Some things you
can’t shake, but you can listen to what people are telling you. You can learn how to be better. If
anyone can do that, it’s you. I believe in you, Steve.”

Steve looks like he’s going to cry. Honestly, Bucky feels like he’s going to cry too. Their foreheads
touch again and Steve closes his eyes.

“I will try to be unapologetically myself,” he says. “Within reason.”

Bucky chuckles.

“Within reason.”

Steve opens his eyes and Bucky looks into them, feeling as lost, as swept away as he had all of those years ago when they were first trying to figure this out, when they were fighting against this and each other and trying to parse through what were feelings and what weren’t. They’ve come a long, long way since then and Bucky thinks—it’s been worth every moment of agony, every fight, every single time either of them have admitted they’re wrong—to be here, leaning against each other, ready to do something bigger together, in the future.

He wasn’t wrong, then. Steve made him want to be a better person; he made him want to do something bigger. And now, with him, he has.

He swallows.

“I love you,” Steve says, quietly. “I love you so much.”

Steve is about as adept at feelings and expressing them as a wrecking ball, which is appropriate because every time he shows his soft insides, Bucky feels as though he’s been wrecked. He feels this way now too, his walls crumbling to pieces if, indeed, he ever had any. If Bucky’s the ship, Steve’s the anchor. He feels anchored to him, here, in their home of three years and the life they’ve—against all odds—made together.

“I love you,” Bucky says back, softly. “So much.”

They eventually resume their activities, because they are, at the heart of them, just incredibly horny for each other at all times, but first, they kiss. First, they share this moment—one of many between them—soft, sentimental, and expansive.

They’ll have more of these moments, Bucky decides.

They’ll have moments like these for the rest of their lives.

*

The press conference is set up in Red Hook Park, just a platform, a podium, and some speakers set up in the middle of greenery that seems to be too bright for October. It’s not a large park and certainly not as high profile as some spaces in New York City, but Steve had wanted it to be that way. He had grown up in this park, he said. This was his neighborhood, the community he wanted to serve. It’s this kind of authentic sentiment and vision that has already made him so popular among his potential, future constituents, his light grassroots campaigning already picking up momentum that neither he nor Bucky could have guessed when they had sat down at their kitchen table, two years ago, and talked about trying this.

Steve had been unsure—a campaign takes effort; it takes money; it takes mental energy and time that is difficult, even impossible, to ever get back. He had warned Bucky: running a campaign was like putting all of yourself into a void that might not reach back for you. He had told Bucky it wouldn’t be easy and that, if elected, that wouldn’t be easy either. Bucky had made some quips about becoming first husband, but in truth it was nothing he hadn’t already known. He was ready to follow Steve, into the very jaws of political hell.
Steve is running through his speech with America who, to everyone’s surprise, had told Steve that if she wasn’t his Chief of Staff, she’d kick his ass from Brooklyn to D.C. and back again. They’ve all known America long enough now to know what a salient threat that is and anyway, it’s not like it had been too much of a difficult decision. America and Steve act like brother and sister in a way that even Bucky and Becca can’t replicate. Weird.

“Okay, we have the banner,” Sarah Rogers puffs out.

Bucky, who’s been staring at Steve and America thoughtfully, turns to her. She has one end of an enormous banner and Kate’s holding the other end. It’s like...really big.

“Is that...a normal size?” Bucky blinks.

“Are you asking me if FedEx took up half of Steve’s campaign funds?” Kate asks. “The answer is maybe.”

“How much do we have left, would we say?” Bucky asks.

“I think you and Steve can get a nice bagel for lunch, if you split it,” Sarah says. “Where do we put this?”

Bucky helps the two of them get the enormous banner onto the make-shift, small platform stage that Steve will be giving his speech from later. The three of them bicker and chatter along the way—assessing the crowd that’s already gathering and the news vehicles from NY1 that are visibly parked at the entrance to the park and Sam’s latest lady love and whether Steve’s choice in tie has him looking a little too much like he’s ready to rip it off and get into a fight at the first hint of someone telling him that Universal Healthcare Is Unreasonable.

“I mean he’ll definitely do that,” Bucky says. “But it won’t be because of the tie.”

“I did raise him right, didn’t I?” Sarah Rogers looks at her son, wistfully.

Bucky sees Sam and his new Chief of Staff—a young black man who is a veritable political prodigy by the name of David Alleyne—stop to interview with some reporters who will undoubtedly be asking him how he feels about his former Chief of Staff running for political office.

Bucky smiles, because you couldn’t stop Sam Wilson from raving about his best friend, on or off camera.

“Oh, Carl, I told you to keep that box hidden!”

Bucky turns around to see Sarah Rogers peering down into a box held in the arms of her long-term beau who Steve, to this day, calls Carl the Cabbage Guy. Carl—an interminably good-natured man of mixed heritage and ambiguous ethnicity—actually thinks it’s hilarious, but also thinks that Steve really likes cabbage, which ultimately means that whenever he and Sarah come over to Bucky and Steve’s, he always brings some kind of weird boiled cabbage dish that Steve will eat, but will inevitably hate. Bucky thinks it’s about fifteen kinds of funny and he laughs his ass off every single time. Anyway, Carl dotes on Sarah—as he should—and is an enthusiastic member of this campaign—which is great for Bucky, the literal campaign manager—so Steve’s misgivings about his cooking aside, Bucky’s pretty cool with Carl.

“Sarah,” Bucky says and Steve’s mother looks up immediately, looking entirely too guilty. “Are those pins? Like, the kind Steve specifically said he did not want?”

“No...” Sarah says at the same time Carl offers, cheerily, “Yes!”
“Carl!” Sarah hits his arm and the tall man chuckles and then they begin bickering and really, is it any sort of surprise that Bucky and Steve’s relationship is like 80% good-natured fighting and 20% sex?

Bucky leaves them on the platform and takes the steps down. He looks out at the crowd around them, his heart ticking up as the area starts to fill. There are more people here than either he or Steve could have imagined. There are faces he recognizes and faces he doesn’t. There are white faces, black faces, brown faces, old and young, immigrant and non-immigrant, men, women, non-binary, trans, and everything in between—they’re all there for him, to hear Steve speak. To hear him say the words out loud that he has started his campaign with—that everyone deserves a voice, that no one’s existence is illegal, that without civil and human rights, we are nothing. *We have to rise up,* Steve keeps telling people and, to his surprise, they keep listening.

Anyway, it’s a pretty hippie dippie campaign message, but it’s one that Steve feels is worth saying. Bucky, five years away from who he once used to be, can admit it too—that it’s worth saying, and that he’s glad Steve is the one saying it.

He watches the crowd buzz and feels his chest buzz too. He slips his hands into his pockets. He fingers a velvet box nestled deep inside.

“Does he know?” a voice comes at his elbow.

Bucky blinks and a cloud of red hair appears next to him.

He swallows nervously and shakes his head.

“I don’t think so.”

Natasha grins. Her arms are crossed at her chest, her eyes following her dumb blond next to Bucky’s dumb blond.

“You’re going to make him cry, you know,” Natasha says.

“Yeah,” Bucky says. “He deserves it. I can’t always be the one crying in this relationship.”

“It’s not his fault you have the internal consistency of marshmallow fluff,” Natasha observes.

“Hey,” Bucky protests. “I’m very manly.”

That makes Natasha giggle and Bucky huff. Whatever. He’s super manly. He can cry to commercials about homeless dogs and like, babies hearing their mothers for the first time if he wants to.

“I’m happy for you,” Natasha says, after a minute. “Really. You two are both massive idiots and that gives me a headache, but you made it here eventually and I guess that’s something.”

“Thanks,” Bucky says. “...I think.”

“Make sure someone gets a video of him crying,” Natasha says, nudging Bucky’s side. “I want to use it for political blackmail in the future if I can.”

Bucky blinks down rapidly at her and by the time he finishes blinking, she’s gone.

What a total fucking weirdo.

Speaking of weirdos, Bucky cuts through the crowd to go to his.
“Hey,” Bucky says, coming up behind Steve, hand to his lower back. “Ready?”

Steve swallows and nods. It’s hard enough running for Congress. It’s even harder running as an openly queer person. But Steve’s not afraid of that, really. He’s not afraid of much and that’s why Bucky loves him.

“I have to do this?” Steve asks. “You don’t want to do it for me?”

“Oh honey,” Bucky says. “I could never talk as much as you can.”

Steve makes a disgruntled, indignant face that is so fucking cute that Bucky laughs in delight. He leans up to kiss him and Steve, forgetting his speech prep, forgetting even the crowd around them, tilts his head down to kiss him properly.

Steve takes strength from this and Bucky takes strength from him. They take strength from each other.

“Thanks,” Steve says, pulling back.

Bucky just strokes his thumb across Steve’s jaw.

“Art: bucky fixing steve’s tie; art by: deisderium

“All right, assholes, enough sucking face,” America says, interrupting them. “Time to do this shit.”

“Actually,” Steve says, turning to her, looking panicked. He puts his phone up to his ear. “I’m getting a call, I have to go—”

“No one is ever calling you!” both America and Bucky say, loudly, exasperated.

“No, this is a mistake!” Steve says, and America grasps his elbow and starts dragging him away. “I have to go! My mom wants me home!”

“Your mother is literally by the stage handing out pins with your face on it,” Bucky says, grinning and following them.

“Oh my god!” Steve exclaims, his face burning bright red.

They eventually get him to the stage—America on his left and Bucky on his right. Sam stands behind him and so does Natasha and Clint, Kate, his mother, and Carl the Cabbage Guy. It’s everyone who knows Steve and loves him. Everyone who believes in him.

Steve takes a breath and steps up to the podium.

Bucky moves to give him space and Steve shakes his head. He offers his hand to him instead and Bucky, astonished, takes it.

Steve pulls him up next to him, as though this—a visible sign of their queerness, of their love—is the only thing he could want to start his political career with. As though this is his truth and if he is going to run, if he is going to build a career on serving, then he will not hide his truth; he will share it instead.

“Good afternoon,” Steve says, looking at the audience around them.
Bucky’s chest feels tight, his head swimming. In his pocket, the engagement ring feels heavy; it burns bright.

“My name is Steve Rogers,” Steve says. Bucky squeezes his hand, next to him. “And I would like to be your next Congressional Representative.”

Bucky takes a breath and looks out into the crowd. They look back at him; at them.

He smiles.

They start their campaign.

* 

art: steve rogers campaign buttons; art by: deisderium

art: steve rogers campaign poster with the slogan RISE UP; art by: ardeospina

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Watch this space for a campaign coming (eventually) to an AO3 near you. :*

End Notes

+ We love to hear from you, so please feel free to share your every thought and reaction!

+ If you find the politics of this fic unrealistic or inaccurate, I challenge you to decipher this chart I have been studying for weeks now. THE US POLITICAL PROCESS IS IMPOSSIBLE TO WRANGLE. That is all.
+ We can be found on Twitter @ spacerenegades and deisderium for all of your absolute ding dong needs. ♥

+ Reblog the fic on Twitter here or on Tumblr here if you so feel the spirit!

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