Take Me to Church

by neversaydie

Summary

Steve Rogers is a struggling artist. It's not as romantic as it sounds.

What Steve really wants is a job as a session musician. He can play enough instruments that he could make a decent amount of money doing it, but in New York there are just too many talented musicians and not enough jobs to go around. So he takes jobs in hipster bars, hotel lobbies, at weddings and bar mitzvahs and office parties.

If he gets one more request for Let it Go, he swears he'll find it within himself to punch a child.

He lives in a tiny, shitty apartment with Sam, who was his sort-of-boyfriend for a few weeks until he decided Steve's very domestic relationship goals weren't for him. They're still pretty much best friends, luckily for Steve, because when the regular pianist at Sam's dance company runs away to Canada he's recommended his roommate and got him the job before
Steve even knows about it.

Dancers. Steve's going to have to spend his days with dancers. Great.

Notes

Inspired by that video of Sergei Polunin, the fic I've been threatening to write for weeks.

Warning from the get-go that there's HEllA eating disorder stuff in this fic, if not this chapter. Please be warned!
Steve Rogers is a struggling artist. It's not as romantic as it sounds.

What Steve really wants is a job as a session musician. He can play enough instruments that he could make a decent amount of money doing it, but in New York there are just too many talented musicians and not enough jobs to go around. So he takes jobs in hipster bars, hotel lobbies, at weddings and bar mitzvahs and office parties. Mostly he plays muzak, sings covers of old standards, and since the end of October he's performed the entire soundtrack to Frozen more times than he cares to count.

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He lives in a tiny, shitty apartment with Sam, who was his sort-of-boyfriend for a few weeks until he decided Steve's very domestic relationship goals weren't for him. They're still pretty much best friends, luckily for Steve, because when the regular pianist at Sam's dance company runs away to Canada to get married he's recommended his roommate and got him the job before Steve even knows about it.

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He knows one of the ballerinas at Sam's company, Natasha, and she's about the furthest thing from what he'd imagined a dancer to be, but at Sam's last party things had been pretty dire where his work friends were concerned. A lot of them work hard and play hard (two girls ended up in the emergency room, apparently that was normal), but equally Steve had been freaked out by the girls clustered at one end of the room sniping competitively at each other. He'd never have believed that a Mean Girls, five people sharing the same Diet Coke moment could happen in real life unless he'd seen it for himself.

So yeah, dancers. This might not be as much fun as the time a touring burlesque show had needed a pianist for three nights at a fancy hotel. There are probably going to be a lot less boobs and booze and a lot more hair pulling and nervous breakdowns. And apparently no fucking sleep.

Sam wakes him up at five a.m. (five fucking a.m.) to go running before his first day of work. Usually Steve only goes with Sam on his cool-down jog after rehearsal, and he swears his eyes aren't open for the entire time they're supposed to be warming up. It's not like Steve doesn't work out, this is New York and the gay scene is absolutely brutal about looks, but he's blessed with a good metabolism and he's always managed to avoid the early-morning shit.

When he follows Sam into the studio space a couple of hours after his rude awakening, showered and clutching a large cup of coffee, he suddenly wishes he'd been hitting the early-morning workouts a hell of a lot more.
"Is that… Is that fucking Tayte Hanson?!!" Steve hisses at Sam in what might be a somewhat overexcited whisper. The guy is warming up pretty vigorously, but the hair and the jawline all scream that Steve's favourite porn star is actually sharing air with him right now.

"Put your dick away, man." Sam rolls his eyes and shoves him in the shoulder dismissively. "That's just Bucky."

When the guy stops spinning (Twirling? Pirouetting? Steve knows fucking nothing about ballet), Steve sees it. He's not Tayte Hanson, although he looks a lot like him, but when Steve sees what he actually looks like there's only a small part of him that's disappointed he's not a porn star. Bucky's eyes are blue all the way across the room, his cheekbones could cut glass, and there's something about his lithe muscles and careful posture that just makes Steve feel things. Cold shower things.

The guy catches sight of Sam and waves at him, face transforming into a beaming grin that makes Steve think of sunshine and really, really good sex. Steve would keep staring like an idiot for way too long if Sam didn't start shepherding him over to meet the dance director. Maria has the cropped hair and firm handshake of someone Steve kind of wants to work with, kind of fears, but she's friendly enough and thanks him profusely for stepping in at such short notice.

He's leafing through the sheet music Maria's left on the piano in the corner when he hears Sam laughing and glances over, and suddenly remembers the guy he'd been staring at again. Bucky has his arms folded and his jaw set, and Sam is pretty creased over with laughter.

"I'm not doing a routine to Lady fuckin' Gaga." Steve can feel the force of Bucky's eye-roll all the way across the room, and he hides a smirk behind his sheet music. "Or former bisexual Jessie J."

"Are you ever going to stop being bitter about that?"

"No. I downloaded her album and then she turned into a queer-baiter on me." Bucky gestures indignantly and Sam just snorts. "I paid nine bucks for that shit!"

"Remind me to teach you about this great thing called pirating."

"Hey, supporting queer art—"

"Alright, everybody!" Maria clapping her hands inspires immediate silence. "First positions. We open in two weeks, no fucking around today. I'm looking at you, Bucky."

When Steve looks, Bucky's eyes are wide in a ridiculous parody of innocence and his arms are spread in a totally unconvincing who, me? gesture. His hair is scraped back in an untidy bun and the lines of his pale temples seem impossibly sharp against the tight, dark hair.

"Ms Hill, I would never." Steve has to stifle the laugh that creeps out at the indignation in his tone, and he looks away before he can notice Bucky's eyes flick in his direction curiously.

"No improvising Barnes, I mean it. Next time I see you showing off I'm giving your role to Sam." She ignores the way Bucky rolls his eyes like he knows it's a hollow threat and claps her hands again. "Come on, places."

The company assembles quickly, and Steve finds a strange pleasure in seeing them all slot into place, the same satisfaction he gets from lining up his pencils in a precisely straight line. It's strange how a change of posture suddenly transforms a group of people into a group of dancers. He's never seen Sam dance before, and seeing his friend in his element makes him twitch a smile before he turns to his sheet music, striking the first notes when Maria indicates to him.
He's sight-reading, so he can't look across at the dancers and it takes him a while to tune into what he's playing. It comes to him suddenly, and then he's slightly stunned. Johnny Cash, he's playing Johnny fucking Cash as he hears the boards thump and creak behind him, underneath the sounds of Maria's barked instructions. It's not exactly what he'd expected when Sam told him about the job.

The number comes to an end and Steve looks over his shoulder as the notes fade out. They're in different positions, but he's been so busy trying not to screw up his first number that he hasn't even looked at them dancing in the mirror. Sam catches his eye and gives him a grin and a thumbs up, chest heaving as he catches his breath. So Steve didn't fuck up completely, awesome.

"Good work everyone. Pietro, watch your back foot on that last jump." Maria glances at her watch and walks over to the stereo sitting on the floor in front of the mirror. "Everyone take a break. Natasha, Bucky, we'll go through your duo."

"I, uh, I don't have sheet music for this." Steve is even more intimidated by Maria after he's seen her giving orders like the most intimidating drill sergeant, but he has to pipe up before she tells him to play something that doesn't exist.

"We're not using live music for this one, too heavy on the vocals. You can take a break." She smiles, which makes the tight nervousness in Steve's stomach lessen slightly. He turns around and sits cross-legged on his stool, watching Natasha and Bucky get into position.

Okay, Bucky's definitely not that much like Tayte Hanson on closer inspection. Despite the hair and the jaw, he's definitely thinner than Steve's favourite porn star. He has a working body rather than something gym-crafted, all lean, corded muscle and very little flesh from what Steve can see underneath the baggy t-shirt the guy's wearing. The dancing leggings don't leave much to the imagination, but Steve tries not to stare because he knows he'll go red and Sam will notice and know exactly what he's thinking.

Next to Bucky, Natasha is stunning even in her training gear and no makeup, possibly more so than the last time Steve saw her all dressed up for dinner. Every time Steve's met her outside of the studio it's impossible to mistake her for anything but a dancer. She has the casual grace of movement that she must have been born with, and she wears it well on her tiny frame. Steve doesn't understand how someone can look like they're made out of smoke when they're reaching for a cup of coffee or laughing at Sam's terrible jokes, but she does.

They make a beautiful pair, two slips of silk standing in each other's arms, Natasha's red hair a neatly-tied shock as her head rests elegantly back against Bucky's chest. Bucky leans down and bites the top of her ear playfully, and Natasha twists around enough to give him a withering stare that he just grins back at. Maria clears her throat pointedly and the pair settle into their proper positions again, straight-faced.

This time, Steve knows what song is playing as soon as Maria starts the CD. *Heartbreak Hotel* is something Steve would have never imagined could be the soundtrack to a ballet dance, but it's definitely working. Natasha and Bucky move together like oil and water, as if they're an extension of each other's bodies and always have been. All smoke and bad intentions. There's no trace of the playful expressions Steve saw on their faces earlier, only focus and passion and surprising strength in skinny limbs as they dance.

Steve's mouth is hanging open, he only realises as the music comes to a close. He snaps it shut quickly when Natasha catches his eye and smirks. All Sam's friends can't possibly be mind readers. He hopes.
The company painstakingly work their way through seven more numbers (the fifth one three times, since apparently there's something they're just not getting right) before Maria calls it a day. They got there at nine this morning and now it's dark outside. Half the dancers have bleeding feet, even more bruises from landing too hard, and Steve suspects the rest are just hiding their injuries. He's never appreciated the sheer athleticism of dancing until now, and he makes a note on his phone to buy Sam several hundred shots when this run is over.

Steve catches sight of Bucky ducking out of the side door, behind where Sam is obviously doing his very best to flirt with Natasha and probably crashing and burning spectacularly. The sight of his friend putting himself out there makes Steve's inner voice mutter something about not being a pussy, and he finds himself slipping outside after Bucky before he really has time to think about what he's doing.

He hasn't met a guy he likes since Sam, he might as well try.

"Hey." Bucky is leaning against the wall, arms wrapped around his middle like a shield, and he looks up like he'd vaguely been expecting someone else. "Piano guy."

"Steve." Steve introduces himself with what he hopes is a winning smile. "And you're Bucky, right? Sam's mentioned you before."

That's a lie, but he's not exactly going to tell the guy he mistook him for a porn star and had to be corrected. Bucky nods anyway, not subtle about the way he's looking Steve up and down appraisingly. Maybe he's in with a chance after all.

"It's freezing out here." Steve comments after a pause, when Bucky doesn't seem to be particularly forthcoming with conversation. It's a fair observation, there's the promise of snow in the air and their breath is clouding against the dingy brick off the alleyway.

"Helps your muscles recover quicker. Some people take ice baths, but fuck that shit." Bucky's smile is wide and easy, showing all his teeth as he shivers under his oversized hoodie (boyfriend sized? Steve tries not to think about it). "Wish I still smoked, though. That was pretty good at keeping me warm."

"You quit?"

"About a year ago." Bucky shrugs. "Wish I hadn't quit my boyfriend at the same time. He was pretty good at keeping me warm too."

The completely not-smooth way Bucky slips that into the conversation gives Steve a glimmer of hope that he's not batting above his average here.

"That sucks." Steve tries to hide his relief that Bucky is single, because he doesn't want to make a fool of himself when he tries to ask him out. He tries to tell himself to keep it subtle, not look too eager. "How come you broke up?"

"He didn't like my lifestyle." It's dodging the question, but Steve doesn't exactly mind as long as the guy's out of the picture. "He was an asshole anyway."

"Guess you're better off then, huh?" Steve smiles and the corner of Bucky's mouth quirks up again. "So, uh…"

"So how about you cut the crap and ask me out already?" Bucky turns to lean one shoulder against the wall, raising one eyebrow at Steve expectantly.
"Uh." Steve is blindsided for a second before he gets his brain in gear. "Do you wanna go out with me sometime?"

"Pick me up at eight tomorrow, take me for drinks. Not too fancy, my iron's broken. Not too expensive, this shit doesn't pay well." Bucky pushes himself off the wall with a smirk. "I'll text you my address."

"You don't have my number."

"Natasha does." He pushes the door to the studio back open and looks back over his bony shoulder to smirk at Steve. "Ciao."

Steve is left staring at the door as it swings shut and snow finally starts to dance down from the clouds above him. He's standing in a stinking back alley in Brooklyn and grinning like an idiot between the dumpsters. Snow lands on his eyelashes and he doesn't blink it away.

Somehow he doesn't feel the cold so much now.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you like it, I've got more ready to go soon.
It's been a very long time since Steve went on a date. He's a little nervous.

Steve figures that taking Bucky to dinner is more date-like than drinks. Plus the fact that he's got a stupidly high tolerance for booze and he doesn't want to look pretentious by ordering some kind of microbrew or getting too interested in the craft beer selection of wherever they go. Sam already makes fun of him for being a hipster, he doesn't want to put Bucky off the same way.

He puts his suspenders back in his closet for the same reason. First dates are totally not the time for bold fashion statements.

Bucky is shivering on the front steps of his building, wrapped up in a too-thin leather jacket and skinny black jeans, smoking a cigarette as Steve walks up. He breaks into a bright grin and tosses his smoke, hopping onto the sidewalk to kiss Steve on the cheek in greeting. There's a faint dusting of snow on the ground and Steve wonders how long Bucky's been out here because his lips feel like ice.

"Hey." Steve grins right back, feeling way more nervous than Bucky looks. "I thought you quit?"

"Only smoke when I'm nervous about going on a date with a hot guy." Bucky ducks his head slightly and Steve suddenly feels a lot better about them being on an even footing here.

"How do you feel about Indonesian food?"

"I thought we were going for drinks?" Bucky falls into step beside him, not sounding too concerned about the change in plans. Steve explains something about his embarrassing love of hipster beer and Bucky laughs brightly, which makes him think maybe this was a good idea to break the ice.

"Man, I haven't drunk beer for years." Bucky muses as they wait to cross the street, two blocks away from Steve's favourite Indonesian place. "Not sure I remember what it tastes like."

"What's your poison, then?"

"Vodka, usually." Bucky takes Steve's arm as they cross the street and as the same time as he enjoys the contact, it kind of makes him feel like the world's biggest boy scout. He's pretty sure someone's called him that in the past. "Living in Russia will do that to you."

"How long were you in Russia for?" Steve asks, curiously. "I've always lived in Brooklyn. Even before the rest of the hipsters moved in."

"Two years, I used to dance with the Novosibirsk Company." Bucky snorts at the image of Steve's pretentious people coming home to roost. "You should have seen me. I was tiny, best shape of my life because it's so fucking cold out there. But it was no fun, so I left. Can't get a date in fucking Siberia."
"Pretty sure you could get a date anywhere." Steve holds the door open for Bucky as they walk into the restaurant and he swears he sees the guy blush, just for a moment.

"You ain't so bad yourself, Stevie. You've gotta be beating them off with a stick." Bucky gets his cockiness back as they're shown to a table, trying to get the upper hand again. It's not quite as smooth as the line that Steve is still silently congratulating himself over.

"Please, I was a virgin for the whole first year of college." He brushes the compliment off with a shake of his head. He's never been good at taking them, not since he was a skinny teenager who shot up into Superman overnight.

"Seriously?" Bucky laughs disbelievingly, and Steve scowls at him playfully over his menu. "You?"

"It was a weird year, almost all the other music majors were girls. Not really my type."

Steve has had this place in mind as a potential date spot since he first came here, not that he's had the opportunity to try it out before Bucky. Contrary to what people seem to believe, he's not actually that good at getting someone to date him. He can pick up a guy in a bar and hook up, no problem, but as soon as he starts suggesting something a little more committed they always bail. Bucky's the one who suggested a date, so Steve figures maybe he's barking up the right tree this time.

He's getting tired of one-night stands. It would be nice to have someone to be actually intimate with again.

"The nasi goreng is really good here." Steve suggests, looking over the menu for something to do with himself, despite the fact that he already knows what he's ordering. "Or the ketoprak, if you like tofu."

"I kinda have a lot of allergies." Bucky shrugs with a twitched smile, running his finger down the menu. "Pretty sure I'm gonna be on salad again. Or whatever Indonesian salad is."

"You should've said, there's a lot of nuts in this stuff. There's this awesome vegan place on my block, though." Steve suggests. "We could go there next time."

"There's gonna be a next time, huh?" The smug grin on Bucky's face is back, but it's not quite such a mask as the last one Steve saw.

"If you play your cards right." Steve decides he can give as good as he gets, and he's rewarded when Bucky laughs.

"I like it when you get some balls, Rogers." Bucky's voice is deceptively light as Steve feels his foot suddenly running up his leg. He stifles a surprised noise and Bucky has a definite gleam in his eyes now. "Maybe we should skip dessert."

"Maybe we should." And Steve definitely has to swallow a squeak as Bucky's foot is suddenly somewhere very different from his leg.

"Maybe we should skip dinner." The suggestion is playful and the absolute opposite of innocent, and it almost kills Steve to turn that offer down.

"I'd like that. Believe me." He sees the flicker of doubt in Bucky's eyes and quickly explains himself, knowing how to feel to be rejected. "But I kinda promised myself I'd go on a date before the next time I hooked up with someone."

"Who's talking about hooking up?" Bucky's coy expression is firmly back in place. "I'm talking
about fucking with a future."

"Fucking with a future?" Steve laughs.

"I like you, Rogers. And I like sex. Why not combine the two?" He's totally unashamed when someone at the next table shoots him a disapproving look at how loudly he's talking, and that makes Steve like him even more. "Sex with Steve. Sounds like the perfect date to me."

The appearance of the waiter cuts off that particular part of the conversation, although Bucky's not shy about playing footsie under the table every so often.

It might actually be the best date Steve's ever been on. He and Bucky get along brilliantly, and Bucky even laughs at some of his lame jokes, despite the fact he's also quick to tell Steve how terrible they are. It turns out they actually have a few friends in common, and Steve is totally not going to ask Bruce eight thousand questions about Bucky when he gets a chance.

Bucky also softens up over the dinner, some of his bravado wearing off as he gets more comfortable around Steve. He's nicer than Steve had expected, and he sort of feels bad for assuming Bucky would be as bitchy as some of the other dancers he's met. They talk so much in the end that Bucky barely touches his food, but he waves Steve off when he suggests getting a to-go box.

"Got better things to put in my mouth tonight."

That means it's definitely time to get the cheque.

When they get back to the apartment, Bucky drops to his knees and sucks him off against the front door before Steve can even get them to his bedroom.

"Buck, my roommate—" Steve cuts himself off by biting his lip as Bucky pulls off him and raises his eyebrows.

"Sam sleeps like the dead. I stacked five water bottles on his head while he was napping after training and they stayed there for an hour."

"But—"

"Will you just shut up and let me suck you off?" He rolls his eyes and gives Steve's dick a long, slick tug. "Jesus. How hard is it to suck a dick these days?"

That pretty much shuts Steve up, that and the hot mouth suddenly around his dick. It's been a while since he did this, and he's dangerously close to blowing his load embarrassingly fast before Bucky pulls back again and stands up to kiss him.

"D'you wanna…"

"I want you to hold me down, call me a slut, and fuck me hard." Bucky quirks an eyebrow as he looks down at Steve's heaving chest. "If you've got the stamina, that is."

"Shut up."

"Playing the piano ain't so strenuous, is it? You need a break, grandpa?"

"I think I liked you better with a cock in your mouth." Steve hauls him up and shoves him towards his bedroom, Bucky grinning the smuggest grin he's ever seen the whole way. His lips are swollen red and Steve wants to bite them bruised.
"I want you to pull my hair, too. Just so you know."

"Get on the damn bed."

"Yes sir." Bucky sprawls back on the bed and even fully clothed he's somehow obscene, his legs falling open and just inviting Steve between them. Bucky rubs a hand over the front of his jeans and bites his lip, looking up at Steve through his eyelashes. "Your move, captain."

"You need to stop watching so much shitty porn, your dirty talk needs work." Steve pointedly ignores the way his dick jumps at the nickname, following Bucky onto the bed and crowding over him to kiss him hard.

Everything is teeth and tongues and shoving and biting, there isn't an ounce of tenderness between them and it's perfect. Steve dwarfs Bucky with his muscle mass and huge shoulders that Bucky digs sharp fingers into as soon as they're skin to skin. Steve sucks a hickey over a sharp collarbone before he flips Bucky onto his front and tugs his jeans off without any ceremony.

He has no problem calling Bucky a slut like he wants, because that's exactly how he's acting. Every touch makes him keen and pant for more, pressing close to Steve's body and demanding to be fucked. He barely lets Steve prep him before he's calling Steve a pussy and trying to turn them over again to get on top. Not that Steve's about to let that happen.

Steve gets his hand in Bucky's dishevelled hair and tugs it hard, shoving him face-down onto the mattress as he pushes inside him. Bucky groans into the sheets and revels in the burn of pain that makes him feel alive. Steve's hands are bruising his sharp hipbones and he enjoys every single throbbing pressure point. He's pretty sure Steve's hips are bruising his ass too, and he's going to enjoy being stiff and sore during rehearsal tomorrow.

There's only one thing missing from this night, and Bucky has to wait until Steve is asleep to make things complete.

Luckily (or unluckily), Steve doesn't take long to fall asleep after he comes and shoves Bucky onto his back to suck him off. Only minutes after Bucky finishes in his mouth and Steve spoons up behind him to cuddle, the big guy is snoring in Bucky's ear. He waits a few minutes before he slips out of bed, smiling softly over his shoulder as Steve grumbles and snuggles into the pillows, looking for someone to hold.

Bucky gathers up his clothes and pulls them on haphazardly, feeling satisfied and well-fucked, warm for the first time in a while. He catches sight of a stack of post-it notes on the desk under the window and grabs a pencil, wondering if the giant stack of books are sketchbooks (like he suspects) as he scrawls a note and leaves it on the bedside table.

*Early start tomorrow. Thanks for dinner.*

*Nice dick.*

*xxx*

The only thing spoiling his good mood is the rock in the pit of his stomach, and Bucky listens to make sure the apartment is quiet before he ducks into the bathroom and locks the door. He scrapes his hair back into a tight ponytail with a sigh of relief, because he's already calming down at the prospect of getting this relief. He's on autopilot as soon as he's inside the bathroom, in familiar territory as he sinks to his knees in front of the toilet and sticks two long fingers down his throat. It's probably too late to get rid of many calories by now, but that's not the point. He just wants to be
empty again.

He'd purposely avoided noodles tonight, even though he loves them, because they're so fucking hard to get back up and he didn't know when or where he'd get the opportunity to purge. Bucky might try something like that if he has to, in the privacy of his own bathroom, but not when he's in his hook-up's apartment and trying to be quiet in the early hours of the morning.

In his date's apartment, he corrects himself detachedly as he stares at half-digested pickled vegetables. Steve had been very adamant about it not being a hook-up. Bucky kind of suspects the flutter in his chest when he thinks about being more than a one night stand with Steve is nothing to do with throwing up.

He cleans up carefully before he leaves, because if he wants to be more-than-a-hook-up with Steve then he can't fuck it up on the very first date. He needs to be careful and keep himself even more controlled than usual, make sure he passes for normal for as long as he can. Still, even if he fucks up, he had fun tonight.

Bucky slips out of the apartment quietly, with an empty stomach and a smile on his chapped lips.
"Get a little drunk on your big date?" Sam looks smug over his weird all-bran cereal, but the expression fades to mild confusion when Steve comes out in his running shorts, fresh as a daisy and not hungover at all. Not exactly what he'd been expecting.

"Nope." Steve pops the p with a smirk, looking for his water bottle in the cabinets as if it's business as usual and he's not walking around like he's got rainbows shooting out of his ass. "Just had a fun time."

"You got laid, huh? Bucky's a slut." Sam rolls his eyes in total lack of surprise and Steve snorts. "You're just jealous someone else got laid last night."

"Hey, I had Netflix, rum, and the password to your Cocky Boys account. I had a great night and I didn't have to listen to Barnes bitch about the rest of the company."

"He did a minimum of bitching, actually." Steve finally retrieves his water bottle and fills it from the tap. "I was surprised."

"He's lulling you into a false sense of security, it'll come." Sam promises, scowling exaggeratedly in the way that always makes Steve laugh.

"Anyway, why the fuck do you have my Cocky Boys password?" Is it weird to not only live with your ex-boyfriend, but have him clicking through your porn choices on a regular basis? Steve tries not to think about it. "I pay monthly for that shit."

"You use the same two passwords for everything, Grandpa Rogers." And yeah, that's probably true no matter how much Steve tries to deny it. "And FYI, '123password' isn't a good password anyway. Neither is 'fuckyoussam', come on."

Steve flicks water at him and the only reason Sam doesn't retaliate with his leftover milk is that he doesn't want their kitchen to smell disgusting again. It's bad enough when one of them tries to cook.

Steve fishes out a box of pop tarts and puts a couple in the toaster, much to Sam's unconcealed disgust. It's difficult enough to live with a dancer at the best of times, the constant music and weird hours of extra practice, not to mention the occasional stress breakdowns, but the low-key judgement of his diet is something that has always rubbed Steve up the wrong way and he pointedly gives his friend the finger. He has the metabolism of a fifteen year old, he can eat junk if he wants to.

"How come you thought I was dunk?" He asks casually, really hoping Sam didn't hear the live show from the hallway last night. "Did we make that much noise coming in?"
"I didn't have to listen to your sex noises, if that's what you're asking." Sam shrugs, shovelling the last soggy spoonful of his cereal into his mouth. "Just thought I heard you puking last night. Thought your lightweight ass might've hit the tequila again."

"Not me. Might have been Bucky, but it's not like we drank that much." Steve is too busy burning his fingers getting his pop tarts out of the toaster to notice the dawning comprehension on Sam's face.

"You went out for dinner, right?" Steve nods distractedly. Sam twirls his spoon through the milk left in his bowl and looks around the room awkwardly for a minute before he decides now isn't the time to bring this up. "Well. I gotta get ready for rehearsal."

"I thought it wasn't until two?"

"I'm meeting Tasha before."

"Oh, so she's Tasha now." Steve smirks knowingly and Sam really does flick milk at him this time before he goes to shower.

He can't believe he's going to try and get a date and give the shovel talk in the same day. Being friends with Steve Rogers doesn't exactly make your life simpler.

*Bucky is fixing his shoes when Sam seeks him out before class starts. He's got that unfocussed look in his eyes when he greets Sam, and the fact he has to try and tie his shoes more than once tells Sam this isn't a good time to have this conversation. By virtue of being friends with Natasha, who's been living with Bucky for the last two years, Sam knows a little more about his behaviour than he would if they were just friends through the company. She isn't worried about him, but it's not Bucky that concerns Sam."

"So, you and Steve, huh?" He doesn't beat around the bush when he opens the conversation, but the genuine smile on Bucky's face throws him slightly.

"Yeah, me and Steve. Where have you been hiding him, Sam? I swear you're the worst wingman ever." Bucky finally manages to get both his shoes tied, but curses when his left ribbons unravel the second he stands up and flops back down.

"He's not part of this scene, y'know? I didn't want to bring him into all the bullshit. Speaking of which…"

"Hey, you can't be pissed I slept with your roommate. I didn't jizz on anything that belongs to you." Bucky jumps onto the defensive immediately. "That was one time and it wasn't even at your apartment."

"Having sex on my jacket is still a shitty thing to do, even if it's at someone else's house." Sam points out, although he's not dwelling on this old argument again. "That's not what I'm talking about, anyway."

"Okay…" Bucky finishes retying his ribbon but doesn't stand up again, looking at Sam with a measure of hesitation creeping into his expression. "So what's the problem?"

"You purged at our apartment." And probably hasn't eaten since then, if the fact that Bucky's already too pale for any colour to drain out of his face when he realises he's been found out is anything to go by.
Sam is kind enough to keep his voice down as more and more people are filtering in for class and Bucky's open secret could really wreck his career if it got out to the wrong people. It's not as if everyone doesn't have their own methods for keeping their weight down, keeping their bodies honed into the kind of shape that will get them a second look at castings instead of looked over for the dancer who's the perfect size, but it's more of a don't ask-don't tell situation.

If Maria finds out that Bucky has a problem then she'll be obliged to bench him until it's under control, and Sam's pretty sure that isn't going to happen any time soon.

"Yeah, so?" It only takes a few seconds for Bucky to get on the defensive for real, not the playful way he'd protested before, but Sam is prepared for that too. He'd got some advice from Natasha on how to try to get Bucky to listen to him rather than blowing him off immediately.

"So nothing. You already know what I think, and you're not gonna listen to a lecture so I'm not gonna give you one." Sam sighs. "But if you want this thing with Steve to be more than just hooking up then you've gotta tell him."

"Why should I?" Bucky's clipped tone suggests he has his claws out already, and Sam bites his tongue because this is going exactly the way he didn't want it to. "It has nothing to do with him."

"If you guys get together then it does. He's gonna be heartbroken if he finds out you're hiding something like this from him." Sam shakes his head, forcing a smile as someone across the room waves a greeting to him. "He can be a little naïve, Buck. He trusts people too much. I don't want him to get hurt."

"So I'll hide it better, he won't find out." Bucky folds his arms and slumps down on the bench, one leg folded up under him to stretch it. "It's only until this run is over, anyway."

"You say that every season, man. Then you put on five pounds and freak out all over again."

Bucky's semi-public breakdown at their last Christmas party has been politely erased from the company's collective memory. Dancers are highly-strung perfectionists and they'd just finished a difficult season, so most of the company have chalked it up to that. He's also claimed drunkenness ever since, but Natasha was the one who sat up with him until six in the morning and she's already told Sam she's knows differently.

"That's none of your business." Bucky is picking at his fingernails now, and Sam politely pretends not to notice the welts on the knuckles of his forefingers.

"It's not, but I'm your friend and I worry about you." Sam points out, gently. "But this isn't about that, it's about the fact that Steve is going to get hurt if you get together and don't tell him about this. He needs to know what he's letting himself in for."

"Who says we're gonna get together?"

"I saw him this morning, he's fuckin' walking on sunshine and you're the song he's whistling." Sam mentally rolls his eyes at his own sickeningly sweet metaphor. "And you're clearly into him too, or you wouldn't be looking at the door every five seconds to see if he's here yet."

Bucky is actually doing that as the words leave Sam's mouth, and he looks away guiltily like he's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Sam reaches out and squeezes Bucky's elbow, because for all he bitches about the guy he's also one of his closest friends and he doesn't want to see him hurt any more than Steve.

"Just think about it, okay?" He steels himself before he speaks. Natasha told him to be firm, that it
was the only way to make sure Bucky listened, but he's not exactly looking forward to it. "Because if you two get together and you don't tell him, I will."

Bucky's head shoots up at that, but Sam is already walking away to say hi to Steve. For all his watching the door like a schoolboy with a crush, Bucky managed to miss the moment Steve actually walked in.

Even in spite of the turmoil his mind has suddenly been thrown into, Bucky waves and smiles when Steve calls a hello to him. He's guiltily grateful when Maria calls the class to order before Steve can come over and talk to him, because he really needs to think without his head being clouded by how much he likes this guy.

His career or his love life, that's the choice Bucky feels like he has to make here. He can't stay in shape without doing what he does, can't go back to eating normally and still be able to stand to stay inside his skin. And if he doesn't stay in shape, he'll be out of work and washed up before his time. He can't do that.

He can't think about it now, anyway. He has work to do. Dancing always makes it easier.

Hunger is pinching at Bucky's insides for the rest of practice. Not the physical kind, the emotional hunger that claws in the back of his throat and makes him feel like he could puke all over his shoes every time he lands from a jump. Twirling makes him light-headed, and he almost stands on Natasha during their duo when a second of dizziness takes too long to recover from. She glances at him sideways and Bucky just shakes his head minutely. If they're going to fight about this they can do it back in the apartment, it's too risky here.

The second practice is over Bucky's out of the studio like a shot. He throws on jeans over his dance leggings and tugs on his sweater as he walks, not pausing to change and definitely not looking at Steve as he leaves. His mind is full of one thing and he's not sure he can hold enough of a normal conversation to flirt with the guy right now. He needs to get his head quiet.

There are three grocery stores and a McDonald's between the dance studio and his apartment, and he hits them one after another.

He buys ice cream in the first store, so it's soft by the time he gets it home and easier to get down fast. There's candy on discount so he gets that too. Bread, cakes, and cookies come from the second place, because he's got a thing for carbs and the starchier and more processed the better. Chips and soda come from the last place, because the soda is heavy and the feel of chips in his mouth is ruined if they get crushed in the bag.

Four cheeseburgers and two large fries, plus an extra-large milkshake, come from the McDonald's on the corner of his block. Breaking a fast with something hot gives him a shortcut to the warm, full feeling he's craving right now. Plus the fact that he likes to play with temperatures sometimes, and he knows that eating the ice cream after the hot food will be amazing even if it might make his stomach cramp. It's all coming back up anyway.

Bucky has a system, and he's refined it to be stunningly efficient over the years he's been doing this. He doesn't usually indulge, not when they're in the middle of working up to a show, but after the bullshit with Steve today he needs it. He needs the comfort of filling up and then the relief of being wonderfully, brilliantly empty. He needs to sully himself and then feel clean again, purged of all the crap the world has to throw at him.

He eats in his room, because if Natasha comes home and catches him again then things will get embarrassing. He's not in a position where he can stop today, wouldn't be able to break out of his
ritual if a truck hit him, and Natasha trying to talk to him while he's in the zone will just make everyone upset.

Crying and puking at the same time is not a good look, he knows from experience. Bucky really doesn't need that today.

He's lying on his bed with a damp towel shielding his throbbing head from the daylight, all evidence of his binge and purge disposed of, when Natasha gets home two hours later. She barges into his room and throws a Gatorade at him without ceremony, not fooled by his efficient clean-up job as she flops down on the foot of his bed.

"Sam talked to you." No nonsense, as always.

"Yeah." Bucky's voice is rough, always is after an afternoon like this. Natasha pokes him in the arm until he sits up and takes a grudging sip of the sports drink. "It's none of his business."

"It is if you start dating his best friend." Natasha raises her eyebrows at him until he takes a more substantial drink and she seems satisfied. "Who also happens to be his ex, by the way."

"Well, that explains why he wants me to fuck up my chances with the guy." Bucky groans and lies back down, pulling the towel back over his eyes.

"He doesn't want Steve back." Natasha pokes him again but he refuses to move. "I asked him today to make sure."

"Oh, so you've been having cosy little chats about me with Sam." Bucky puts his arm over his eyes as well, blocking out the light completely and wishing he could do the same with the rest of the world. "Fuck you both."

"You're a complete prick, James." She fires back, not that there's any heat in either of their voices.

"I know." He finds her hand blindly and squeezes her fingers. "Now please fuck off so I can take a nap."

"I'm coming back to put you in a choke hold if you ate my Oreos again." Natasha squeezes his hand back before she gets up to leave. "Seriously, think about what you want with Steve. He's a nice guy, you'd be good for each other."

Bucky mumbles something non-committal and pretends to start snoring until Natasha gets exasperated and leaves him in peace. He almost dozes off for real, feeling empty and relaxed now the buzzing in his head is gone, before his phone beeps under his pillow.

*Drinks tonight? X*

He hesitates for a minute, his thumb shaking over the reply button before he thinks *Fuck you both* and answers. He likes Steve, he can figure everything else out some other time.

*9pm. You're buying xx*

Chapter End Notes

After a couple of comments: yes Bucky is using pointe shoes and yes this is an
intentional choice, I do understand that it's unusual for male dancers. This is a modern company and they're experimenting with music (as we've already seen) and gender roles etc. Very light male dancers have used pointe occasionally in productions and this is inspired by that. It isn't a mistake.
Eating in Front of the Mirror

The night ends just the way Bucky had hoped it would: drunken, giggly, and with Steve none the wiser about why he'd run out straight after practice.

They're basically holding each other up as they stumble vaguely in the direction of Steve's apartment. Not because they're so drunk they can't walk straight, but because their level of intoxication makes everything so funny and it's so hard to stay on the sidewalk when you're laughing so much your empty stomach hurts.

Bucky's been forcing Steve to order him increasingly elaborate or embarrassing cocktails all night, figuring it's only payback for being on a date with a guy who spends twenty minutes talking to the bartender about grain varieties in beer. He's not actually sure what's in a screaming orgasm, but it was certainly much more pleasant going down than it will be coming back up.

"Sam gave you the shovel talk? Sam?"

"He can be very intimidating when he wants to! I thought he was gonna threaten me to have you home by ten and stay above the belt until I give you a promise ring." Bucky protests, resisting the urge to giggle again at the poorly concealed amusement on Steve's face. "Seriously! Don't laugh."

"I'm sorry." He's not the least bit sorry. "Maybe knowing that his grandma makes him kneel down so she can still slap him on the back of the head – and he does it – takes a little bit of the fear away."

"Ugh, I can't believe you two dated. I thought Sam had better taste." Bucky ducks Steve's attempt to recreate Grandma Wilson's punishment methods and cracks up, careering around the next corner to get away. He manages to almost knock over a trash can in his hurry, which of course sends Steve into another laughing fit.

The streets are never empty, no matter how late it gets. Not in this area of the city, where half the buildings are bars and at most of them have live bands a few times a week, the rest are half strip clubs, half 'celebrity hangouts' full of people trying to see stars and no actual stars. A small fraction that don't fit into any of the above categories are the hipster bars, more and more popping up weekly like an antibiotic-resistant herpes infection (or at least that's how Bucky described it, almost managing to wait until the bartender was out of earshot to say so). Their studio is also around here, which explains why Steve manages to walk his stupidly-tall head into the purple sign above the door when he follows Bucky around the corner.

"Shit. Did we make a circle?" He rubs his head and squints at the sign as Bucky creases up with giggles. "I thought we were going straight!"

"You're hanging out with the wrong person for that, doll." Bucky winks and Steve tries really hard not to be charmed by the expression.

"You seriously think you're in some kind of forties detective movie, don't you?" Steve looks around, feeling fuzzier than usual as he's left his contacts out tonight, probably an oversight on his part (literally). "Maybe we should get a cab? I think it's gonna rain."

The dark sky is low, ominously pregnant with rain as he glances up at it thoughtfully. Bucky is fishing in his pockets for something and he shakes his head at Steve's concern.

"Nah, we can just hide in the studio for a while." He produces a set of keys with a triumphant sound and gets to fumbling with the lock on the studio door. That's the decision made, then. For all Bucky
likes to be bossed around in bed, Steve has come to realise that's the only time anyone can tell him what to do without wasting their breath.

"How come you've got a key?"

"I used to teach the junior class on Thursday afternoons, Maria just never took it back when I made principal." He gets the door open and ushers Steve inside just as the first fat drops of rain start to fall. "Don't tell her I've still got it. I come in and practice after hours sometimes."

"Wouldn't she think that's a good thing?"

"Nah. She thinks we'll get injured before the show starts if we over-practice. But sometimes it's necessary." He doesn't specify why, exactly, but Steve's not asking either. "Gotta keep my ass looking good in tights."

"Yeah, because you look terrible in them now."

"I've seen you perving on me when you're supposed to be concentrating on music." Bucky looks at him sideways and Steve almost goes pink. He'd been pretty sure he was being subtle, although that's never really been a talent of his. "Your ears go red real easy. I swear you popped at least a semi when Tasha was helping me stretch my—"

"Do you seriously ever shut up?"

"Only when I've got something better to do with my mouth."

Before Steve knows what's happening, Bucky is shoving him up against the long mirror that covers one wall of the studio and kissing him hard. It's almost bruising, and he's breathless by the time Bucky pulls away with a certain amount of pride in his expression.

"Y'know, I can think of something even better to do with it than kiss you."

"Really?" Steve raises his eyebrows, a grin twitching at the corners of his mouth because Bucky is seriously beyond belief sometimes. "In here?"

"Well, over there. Nobody needs your ass print on the mirror." Bucky snorts at the scandalised look on Steve's face and pushes him to sit on the piano stool. "Get your cock out."

"Buck—"

"You're really not good at doing as you're told, Stevie." There's nothing Steve can do but watch as Bucky deftly gets his jeans undone and pulls his dick out, dropping gracefully to his knees between Steve's spread legs.

"Have you got anything?"

"Do I look like I carry lube around in my pocket?" Bucky meets Steve's gaze incredulously for a moment before he smirks. "Because I do. But we're not fucking here, I just wanna suck you off."

He wraps his hand around Steve's dick (which has been shamefully hard since Bucky shoved him against the mirror and, yes, at least a semi since Bucky picked a spot two feet away from the piano to do his warm-up stretches) and slowly jerks it a few times, just to make Steve squirm.

"Been thinking about this all practice." Bucky runs his tongue over his bottom lip and Steve almost groans just to watch it. "We're gonna address your Superman boxers later."
"Jesus, talk about mood killer." Steve really does groan at that, in an entirely different way, but he's soon distracted when Bucky licks a hot stripe over the head of his dick.

"You don't seem to have lost interest."

"Can you just—" Steve rolls his eyes and grabs Bucky's hair, pushing his head down onto his dick. Bucky's eyes glint and Steve can just hear him smirking _that's more like it_ before most of his coherent thought is sucked out by Bucky's mouth.

It's over almost embarrassingly quickly. Steve is so keyed-up from the situation (he's had a lot of embarrassing piano-based sex fantasies for a while now, this is the tamest of them) that he holds Bucky's head in place and fucks his mouth. Bucky doesn't seem to mind that at all, seems to enjoy getting shoved around just as much as Steve enjoys doing it, and his little noises of pleasure at getting his throat fucked are what finish Steve off more than anything else. He comes so hard it leaves him boneless, letting out a breathless laugh as Bucky grins up at him smugly.

"Don't ever say I have bad ideas." He tucks Steve back into his pants with exaggerated precision and Steve almost tugs his hair again just for good measure.

"Wouldn't dream of it." He leans down to kiss Bucky, who looks flushed and must still be hard.

"How about we get out of here?"

"Guess we'd better, since you made enough noise to wake everyone in the apartments upstairs."

"I did not."

"I think you underestimate how much of a screamer you are."

"You can't talk, Mr Call Me A Slut." Steve snorts and pulls Bucky up off the floor as he stands. Bucky's laughing right along with him, until he's not. He suddenly stops and turns chalk-white, his vision greying out in a way that's horribly familiar and he can do nothing to stop.

"Buck?" Steve only has a second to be concerned before Bucky's knees are giving out under him and he's catching him on his way to hit the ground. "Shit, Bucky?!"

"M'okay." Bucky feels like his mouth is full of marbles and he struggles to sound normal as Steve hurriedly sits him down on the piano stool, holding onto him tightly in case he can't balance.

"M'okay. I'm fine."

"You look like you're gonna pass out." Steve is squatting down in front of him, when Bucky's vision starts returning, and the fear in his face is enough to send a cold spike of shame into Bucky's stomach.

"It's just head rush, happens all the time." His mouth is behaving a little more as the feeling starts returning to his tingling fingers, but it looks like it might be too late to convince Steve he's okay. "Not dangerous."

"It looked fucking dangerous. You scared the shit outta me." Steve presses the back of his hand to Bucky's cheek, squeezes his fingers with the other. "You're freezing."

"I'm fine." Bucky tries to protest, even as Steve's big, body-warm hoodie is thrown around his shoulders. "It's normal, Steve. I'm okay."

"Bullshit, your blood pressure must be in the fucking basement." Now the sudden panic of seeing
Bucky's eyes roll back in his head is wearing off, Steve is more worried than anything else. "How often does this happen?"

"A couple of times a week. I never pass out, don't worry." Okay, maybe he did pass out a couple of times but that's not what Steve needs to hear right now. "It happens to a lot of people when we're building up to a run. Your weight goes down and sometimes it takes your body a minute to catch up. It's totally normal."

"I don't get how you can be so relaxed about it. If I was almost passing out on the regular I'd be pretty freaked out." Steve is still watching him with concern, one warm hand still cupping Bucky's cheek as his thumb runs absently over a sharp cheekbone. Bucky has to admit it's nice, even if he feels like he should push Steve away before he registers how tight the skin is stretched over the bone.

"You get used to it." Bucky shrugs, feeling his legs start to shake as everything slowly comes back online. He laughs unsteadily, trying to sound more blasé than he manages. "Mood killer, huh?"

"Yeah, kinda." Steve still has that insidious concern in the crease of his brow, but he smiles back well enough. "At least my dick was so awesome it made notorious slut Bucky Barnes almost pass out."

"Uh, excuse me? I prefer ‘infamous slut.’" Bucky rolls his eyes as Steve takes his hands and helps him up again, a lot more slowly and cautiously this time. He shoves his arms through the sleeves over the oversized hoodie grumpily as soon as his hands are free. "I'm keeping your sweater."

"Good, it suits you." Steve kisses him softly and for once Bucky doesn't mind feeling fragile against Steve's bulk. "C'mon, I'll walk you home."

"I can get myself home, I'm not twelve." Bucky grumbles, as if he minds having Steve's arm around him against the frosty air as they leave the studio, turning off the lights and locking the door behind them. "Natasha doesn't stop my allowance if I stay out past my curfew."

"Maybe she should, then you might get home at a reasonable hour." Steve presses a playful kiss to the tip of Bucky's nose and receives a scowl in return. "Just let me be overprotective for a minute, please? You scared me in there."

"Fine. Just for a minute."

Half-grudgingly, Bucky lets Steve walk him home like he's some kind of prom date. It's not that he minds the concern, it's the fact that he's let himself get so out of control that Steve has seen him this weak. Already. They're not even really dating yet, and if Bucky's not careful about keeping his mask intact then they never will be.

He needs to get a hold of himself before he fucks up any further and Steve finds him out. He's beginning to like this guy, he doesn't want to flush the relationship away before it's even started.

He'll get a handle on this thing. He has to.

*

It turns out that getting a handle on things is a lot harder than he'd anticipated.

"I'm gonna throw up."

"No you're not." How Natasha manages to be gentle and firm at the same time is beyond Bucky. "You've done this before, come on."
"I can't, Tasha." Bucky leans on his elbows on the kitchen counter, staring the protein shake down like it's pointing a loaded gun at him. "I'll gag."

"You won't gag. I kept it thin." She has a hand resting between his shoulder blades, right over the knob of spine that's starting to dig into the heel of her palm. "We're not leaving until you get it down and keep it there for at least ten minutes."

"We're gonna be late."

"I don't care."

"Can't I drink it on the way?"

"No, because you're really good at accidentally bumping into people and spilling it." These are old motions, they've been through this together so many times it's almost rehearsed. "You can't dance on an empty stomach. You'll pass out and everyone will know."

Bucky lets out a shaky, nauseous breath, and nods because he knows she's right. Just because he knows that, logically, it doesn't mean there's not sickness already clawing at the back of his throat before he's even swallowed a mouthful. He might bring it back up spontaneously, that's why he does this next to the sink when things get really bad.

"I feel sick."

"I know." Natasha is rubbing slow circles on his back now and it makes tears prick underneath his eyelids at how pathetically comforted that makes him feel. "But you can do it."

"I want to, I just…" He lets his head fall into his hands, digging the heels into his eyes until he sees spots. "This is so fucked up. Oh God."

"Don't freak out. Take a deep breath." Natasha talks him down with familiar prompts and then presses the issue again. "Come on, we can't miss rehearsal."

"I can't."

"For me, James." She rests her forehead on his shoulder blade and Bucky viciously hates that she knows his weak points so well. "Just half."

He takes a few more unsteady breaths before he bites the bullet and picks up the glass, downing half the shake in three big gulps. Natasha sighs silently, because he does this every time and it makes it so much more of a shock to his system than if he'd just sip it slowly. But the longer Bucky gives himself to think about it, the longer that infectious part of his brain has to convince him that he shouldn't be taking anything in at all.

One more gulp and Bucky puts the glass back down, lurching for the sink as he gags violently. Nothing comes up, and Natasha is ridiculously glad as she starts rubbing familiar circles on his back again.

"Swallow. Breathe." She instructs calmly. He swallows again, his mouth thick with bitter saliva, and breathes through his nose. "Still feel sick?"

Bucky nods, his lips a tight white line that nothing else is getting past.

"Go sit on the couch and count to a hundred, it'll pass."
She watches after him as Bucky moves, cautious like any wrong step will make him vomit. It might, when he's in this deep. Natasha sighs and puts the rest of the protein shake in the refrigerator, hoping she'll be able to talk him into drinking the rest after practice.

It's not enough, not by a long shot. If Bucky can keep it down until he starts dancing then his mind will quiet down and he won't feel the urge to puke anymore, but he has to make it that far first. Talking him into getting something in his stomach in the morning is fast becoming a part of their routine, a familiar part that Natasha wasn't expecting to re-emerge for a couple of weeks yet. If he's this bad now, she dreads to think what Bucky's going to be like when they start putting on a show every night.

*Maybe he won't make it that far*, a voice in the back of her mind whispers. She refuses to think about it.

They open in two weeks. The show must go on: there isn't another option.
It's 5am and Bucky is in the shower.

It's their last week before the show opens, so everything ramps up a notch. He gets up an hour earlier, exercises an hour longer, sleeps an hour less. Natasha's routine doesn't change as much, although she fits in an extra hour of dance class somewhere, because experience has taught her that if she doesn't sleep, she can't dance. Not at her peak, anyway.

They have very different philosophies about their bodies: Natasha is kind to hers in order to maximise her potential, Bucky beats his into submission until it does what he wants it to.

So it's 5am and Bucky is in a cold shower, trying to wake up.

"Cold water in the morning is good for your circulation. It will make your muscles strong."

He remembers his mother telling them this over and over, when he and his sister were still young enough to both be stood in the bathtub together in the early morning and have the shower turned on them.

Twins. At birth their grandmother had looked at their legs and declared them dancers, and that was the end of it. Their path was laid out.

Rebecca adjusted to a life of dancing easily, took to it like a graceful fish to water. James came less readily, following a step behind his sister just as he'd followed her into the world. Where she soared, he struggled.

They ended up at an equal level of skill, though she happened upon it and he clawed his way to it. She was Apollo, he Icarus.

They both still take cold showers in the morning.

Bucky spends nearly twenty minutes under the chilly spray before he finally feels like his eyes are open. He keeps the water just a few degrees warmer than his mother did, maybe that's why it doesn't wake him up with a gasp like it used to.

He tried to continue the same brutal wake-up when he moved away to join his first school at ten, but the lack of sleep and the morning shock played havoc with his nerves. After he started to get tearful in class and the teacher threatened to call his parents, Bucky soon got himself together and figured out what would work for him.

He never asked Rebecca if she kept up their mother's routine. They were in different dorms by then.

The air feels warm on his skin when he steps out of the shower, and Bucky dries himself and shoves his clothes on quickly. Sometimes he lingers in front of the mirror, touching clavicle, breastbone, shoulder, elbow, rib. But he's bruising more easily at the moment, so he doesn't look. He just throws
his clothes on as quickly as possible and wishes the mirror were steamed up.

Going into the kitchen is less traumatic than it was last week. He's stocked up on a few boxes of the no-sugar no-fat no-fun energy bars he knows don't make him want to purge, and he keeps himself distracted by packing up his dance stuff as he gets one down. Natasha drew the line last week, threatened to speak to Maria after things got really bad, so Bucky's been forcing himself to behave since then.

He throws a couple of energy bars and a carton of protein shake into his bag, trying not to sigh at the calorie content. He hasn't thrown up for two days and he can already feel the sticky fat clinging to his ribs. He'll ruin his lines like this.

"Your lines are ruined."

*His mother has them both in front of the mirror.*

*She turned one bedroom into a studio as soon as Rebecca got accepted into a school. Becky and Bucky have been dancing since they were four, shared a bedroom since they were five, and now they're fourteen and home from school for the summer.*

*Becky has already hit her growth spurt, and her gangly limbs have been mostly praised by their mother, although she worries that she's too tall and encourages her to focus on protein and cut back on carbohydrates. Bucky catches his sister's eye in the mirror and she rolls them, making him twitch a smile. She's never taken Mama's crap so seriously.*

*Then she started in on Bucky's pre-summer assessment, and he stopped smiling.*

*He's smaller than his sister, hasn't really hit puberty yet and still has a round, soft baby-face. He's put on weight over the semester and while he's not exactly fat (he doesn't think so, anyway), he's definitely thicker than he was when he left home.*

"What do they feed you at that place? I'll send a letter to the head of the school, this is completely unacceptable."

*Bucky has been holding third position for fifteen minutes now. It's not hard physically, but it gets increasingly difficult the more he wants to cover himself up.*

*Mama runs her judging finger down his arm, clutches his stomach demonstratively. Bucky tries to suck it in but he doesn't know how much difference it makes. When she was young, before she married their father and went to America, Mama was a dancer. Bucky's not sure how successful she was, doesn't think she made it further than corps de ballet, but then maybe that's why it's so important that he and his sister are perfect.*

"Mom, all the boys look like that at our age." Becky rolls her eyes again and Bucky is silently grateful to have someone in his corner. "Miss Anya says it takes a couple of years to get taller and slim down again."

"American schools don't know what they're talking about. I knew I should have fought harder to send you to Russia. I don't pay this much a term for fat, lazy children."

"Mama, that's not—"

*Bucky holds third position until his mother storms off because his sister tells her she's being stupid.*
Becky hugs him when he drops his arms, and he can feel her bony fingers pressing into his cushion of flesh.

By the time he goes back to school, he's fifteen pounds lighter. Mama is almost satisfied.

"Hey, you never texted me back." Steve is already there when Bucky gets to the studio, and he kisses him on the cheek apologetically.

"Sorry. I totally knocked out last night. I haven't even looked at my phone yet."

He's only worked out for an hour today and he's already exhausted. He dumps his bag unceremoniously on the piano and searches through it for another energy bar, shoving two bites into his mouth at once. The rest of the class is filtering in and he doesn't really want to eat in front of people, but he needs the energy before they start.

"Woah, don't choke." Steve jokes at the speed Bucky's shoving food into his mouth, and Bucky stalls. He forces himself to swallow the mouthful that now tastes like ash and grins at Steve.

"Why, you'd miss me too much?" He wraps up the rest of the bar and shoves it back into his bag, ignoring how his stomach cramps.

"You know I would." Steve always looks at him like he's the sun, and Bucky's smile softens into something genuine. "Maria's still freaking out about the solo after Carol hurt her knee, you got anything?"

"I'm working on it. I'll have something by tomorrow." As usual, Bucky volunteers for everything and takes on too much to prove he can do it, so when Carol had to drop out of a solo he was the first person Maria turned to. Some of the other dancers hate him for it, but at least they get to sleep at night. "Means I'm not gonna be able to make dinner tonight, though."

"That's okay, I figured you'd be busy this week." Steve squeezes Bucky's wrist briefly, even though they've established some ground rules about PDA at work. Bucky doesn't need any more reasons for other dancers to hate him. "You're eating right, though? I don't want you to start passing out again."

"Will you shut up about that?" Bucky plays it off as brushing off the concern, even if he's actually worried about someone overhearing. He'd told Steve it was normal, he can't have him finding out it's not. "I'm fine, mom."

"Fuckin' excuse me for caring." Steve shoves Bucky in the shoulder in exasperation and Bucky playfully flips him off as he goes to get ready for class.

"Why don't you two just start humping on the piano?" Sam sounds about as grossed-out as he looks, and Bucky flops down beside him in his usual place on the bench with a smirk.

"Been there, done that."

"Man. Do you have to have sex everywhere I like spending time?"

"He has sex everywhere." Natasha just has to pipe up on her way past. "You haven't seen his laundry."

"Hey, I do your laundry too Ms Part-Time Dominatrix." Bucky fires back, feeling triumphant as Sam chokes on a gulp of water at the name. Clearly they haven't got as far as he thought if Sam still
doesn't know about that side of her personality.

He owes Steve five bucks.

Maria calls the class to order before they can bicker too much. Everyone is stressed in the final week before a run, especially her, and she chews Bucky out for ten minutes in front of the whole class for not having the choreography finished on his replacement solo.

He's mostly shaken off his adolescent shyness, but he still ducks his head and takes it, promises to have it done for her to assess by the morning. Looks like he won't be sleeping tonight.

"You look terrible."

Becky never minces her words with anyone, even less so with her brother.

They're sharing an apartment in Novosibirsk and it's only thanks to their conflicting schedules that she hasn't caught on to him throwing up twice a day. They're one month shy of twenty and in their first real season independent of a school. Becky is the only one of them that speaks any Russian outside of dancing terminology and Bucky has been spending most of his (limited) free time in their tiny apartment, alone. His boyfriend and all his friends are back in America, he's lonely, and his teachers' criticisms are starting to get to him.

And yes, Bucky looks terrible.

"Seriously. Are you feeling okay?" Becky dumps her gym bag by the front door and goes over to the couch to put her hand on her brother's forehead. Bucky grumbles and tries to shove her hand away, but as usual she's not having it. "Did you go to class?"

"Of course I went to class." Bucky huddles down further into Brock's sweater, totally unsurprised when Becky flops down beside him. He's trying to watch some shitty gameshow that he can't understand, which isn't much of a cover.

"So what's wrong?" She catches the way he's got the sleeves of the sweater pulled over his hands and sighs. "Is it that guy again? The Norwegian guy?"

Bucky shrugs, and that's close enough to a yes for his sister. She sighs again and wishes she could figure out how to talk some sense into him, because this is getting ridiculous.

Loki Odinson is nowhere near as talented as Bucky, nobody is blind enough to think that. But one of their teachers in particular is fond of comparing the two aesthetically, as the only men in their particular dance, and it's starting to get to Bucky. Loki is built thinner, taller, with narrower shoulders and a better ribcage than Bucky was born with. Becky has tried to tell him over and over that there's nothing wrong with his lines, but she knows their mother's bullshit got to him early and it's hard to shake.

"Don't you dare start starving yourself again." She grabs his chin and makes him look at her. "Bucky."

"I'm not." He promises. "Honest."

It's not technically a lie.
Steve isn't quite sure what's wrong with what he's seeing today, but it doesn't feel good.

He knows the music well enough by now that he doesn't have to stare at the sheets the whole time to follow it, he can watch the dancing from time to time. And every time he looks at Bucky the concern in his chest grows and he can't put his finger on why.

Okay, so Bucky looks more worn down than usual, his skin a stark white against the pink spots of exertion on his cheeks and the dark circles under his eyes. But he said it was normal to get run down around the start of a show, so Steve's not sure if that should worry him. The fact that he stumbles a step and gets a dirty look from one of the other dancers, however, is definitely not normal by any standards.

"Bucky, are we keeping you from something you'd rather be doing?"

"No ma'am."

"Then can you at least pretend you're paying attention?"

Maria's criticism is also not so normal. She's going in on everyone extra harshly today, Steve can tell she's stressed, but it seems like Bucky's mistakes are wearing extra thin with her.

It's not until they rehearse Natasha and Bucky's duo that things come to a head in the worst possible way.

In the middle of a lift, Steve catches the ashen tone suddenly blooming over Bucky's cheeks. It's too late to say anything, and he can only watch as Bucky staggers backwards and drops Natasha hard on her elbow. The bang gets the attention of everyone not already watching, and Steve catches the wide-eyed, headlights look on Bucky's face as he realises what's happened.

"What the fuck was that?!" Natasha is already back on her feet, clutching her elbow and yelling at him even as someone goes to find an ice pack and the rest of the company try to pretend they're not watching the drama unfold.

"I'm so sorry, Tasha." Bucky looks mortified as he tries to take a look at her arm and she yanks it away from him. "I—"

"I don't give a shit if you want to fuck up your own career, James! But don't you dare fuck up mine!" Bucky looks like she's slapped him, and the rest of the room is awkwardly silent. "If you can't handle the dance then don't fucking do it!"

"Okay, that's enough." Maria steps between them. "Bucky, what the hell happened?"

"I just—"

"I can tell you exactly what the fuck happened." Natasha is livid, Steve's never seen this side of her before. He knows she's a perfectionist when it comes to dance, but he's never seen her furious like this before over a mistake.

"Tasha, don't." Bucky cuts her off, and Steve could swear he looks scared. Maria has clearly had enough as they stare each other down, and she pushes an ice pack from the first aid kit into Natasha's hand.

"Both of you in my office, now. Kamala, take them through the fifth number. I won't be long." She stands there waiting until they both trail into her office at the back of the studio, following them in and shutting the door behind her.
Steve stares after them until he realises Kamala is waiting for him to start playing and gets his head back in the game. He can find out what's going on later, but whatever it is doesn't look good. The fear in Bucky's eyes at whatever Natasha is threatening to reveal especially doesn't look good.

The music and sounds of dancing mostly drown out the yelling from the office. Mostly.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this while super sick today so I will, in fact, beg for comments because they cheer me up. Let me know what you thought of this chapter!
"Tasha, thank you—"

"Don't you dare thank me for being a complete idiot." Natasha swipes the cigarette out of his hand and takes a long drag, and that's how Bucky knows he's seriously fucked up. When my body is a temple starts smoking, that's when things are really serious.

They're not really walking out of the studio together, it's more that she's storming off and he's following her and trying to keep up. But being chewed out by Maria is over, Natasha kept her mouth shut, and Bucky no longer feels like he's about to have a heart attack any minute, so he'll weigh it out at being a successful outcome to a shit day.

"I just—"

"No, listen to me. The only, only reason I didn't tell Maria is because we don't have anyone who can take your parts in the show." She jabs a sharp finger hard into his fleshless shoulder and Bucky winces. It's raining thinly on the street and freezing, and he really wants his cigarette back. "If Sam and Pietro could handle it between them, you'd be benched right now."

"I know, I—"

"You're on thin ice. If one more thing happens then I don't care about the show, I'm telling Maria everything." She jabs a sharp finger hard into his fleshless shoulder and Bucky winces. It's raining thinly on the street and freezing, and he really wants his cigarette back. "If Sam and Pietro could handle it between them, you'd be benched right now."

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"It's not that serious." Bucky blurs it out without thinking, so used to denying that there's a problem that it never even occurs to him to tell the truth. He grabs his smoke back so he has something to do with his hands and tries to pretend he doesn't see them shaking. "I just got a little dizzy for a second, it's not—"

"You are so fucking stupid!" Natasha shoves him in frustration, which draws some attention from the other people waiting at the crosswalk. Bucky wishes the sidewalk would swallow him up. "You look like death, you haven't kept a meal down for weeks, and you're passing out all the time. How is that not serious?"

"It's never just until the show starts." Natasha looks very much like she might try and slap some sense into him, and Bucky backs up a step instinctively. "I didn't know you as a child, but I do know your sister. And I know you've had a problem for ten years, James."

"I haven't been throwing up for ten years." He snaps back, and Natasha isn't sure if it's progress that that's the first time she's heard him explicitly admit what he's doing to himself.

"No, but you've been starving yourself since you were a teenager. That's still a problem."

"It's none of your business!" Bucky's voice is rising now and it's only a matter of time before they're having a screaming match in the middle of the street. It's not unheard of in this area, there are a lot of dance and acting studios in the surrounding blocks, but it's still not a good look. "Everybody does it,
don't try and tell me you've been a saint your whole life."

"No, I haven't. But at some point I got smart enough to realise that being alive is more important than being perfect." She puts her hands on his face, cupping the sharp cheeks gently and trying to defuse the argument. Touch usually calms him down and it's worth a shot. "You're a good dancer. You don't have to push yourself this hard to be good. You don't need to punish yourself."

Bucky shakes his head weakly, his eyes downcast so he doesn't have to look her in the eye. Natasha runs her delicate thumb over his cheekbone and Bucky shakes his head again, that's when she realises he's not looking at her because he's trying not to cry.

"James, you are good." She can see his thought process and she wants to rip it right out of his head and grind it into the dirt. "Being thin is not what makes you better than other dancers."

"You didn't see me before. I wouldn't have got this far if I hadn't…"

"The fact you were a perfectly normal weight as a teenager doesn't mean anything." Natasha has heard the story from Becky, on the quiet to avoid Bucky feeling like they were ganging up on him, and she wishes she could rip that idea out of his head too.

Natasha had been dancing with the Novosibirsk Company when the Barnes twins joined for their first season. She only saw Bucky in class, because by all accounts he didn't speak Russian and was somewhat reclusive as a result, but she became friends with his sister in the canteen. Becky worried fiercely about her brother, confided her fears in Natasha because despite being the more outgoing sibling, she was actually almost as lonely as Bucky in a brand new country.

Soon they were spending enough time together that everyone in their classes had started calling them 'the triplets', and things got a little easier. Natasha and Bucky became a two-headed monster, while Becky's social life improved along with her language skills. Bucky still didn't quite fit, but Becky slowly carved out a place for herself in the company. She found a boyfriend, a solo in her second season, and a home.

When the unpleasantness happened, when Bucky had to leave, his sister had been quietly devastated at the possibility of going back to America. Out of loyalty, she never considered staying without her brother no matter how much she wanted to. Not until Natasha told her she'd accepted an offer to go to New York and promised to keep an eye on her stupid adopted brother while she was there. So Becky stayed and Bucky left, Natasha following him into what had been his and Brock's apartment three months later.

That's how it's been ever since.

"Whatever your body was like, it doesn't matter."

"Not anymore, because I got better." Bucky pulls away, unable to keep his emotions locked down with Natasha this close to him. "I'm nothing without this, Tasha."

"That's complete bullshit and you know it." Natasha calls after him, because Bucky is walking away. She knows what he's planning to do from the route he's heading, the one that takes him past the grocery stores that have a different kind of candy on discount every week, past the bakery, past the McDonald's. "James, don't you dare!"

"I won't." He promises over his shoulder, and the fact he doesn't stop walking or even turn around is enough to tell Natasha he's lying through his teeth. His hands are shoved in his pockets and his posture is terrible, every single tell that says he's about to give into his urges is starting her in the face.
Enough is enough.

Natasha lets out a harsh sigh of frustration and crosses the street, also taking a different route to the one she'd originally intended. The closest she's ever seen Bucky come to eating normally was when his ex-boyfriend got involved in trying to help him get better. Things worked for a while until she found out that some of Brock's methods were doing more harm than good, and he and Bucky broke up pretty soon after that. But now there's Steve, and he might be their last option to try getting involved before Bucky gets benched. Even if it works out like it did with Brock, Natasha's priority is keeping Bucky well enough to dance his role.

The show opens next week, and it must go on. Maybe all they need is for things to work for a while.

*

Steve is starting to feel sick.

"Look, I really don't think this is—"

"Just be quiet." Natasha waves her hand at him, concentrating on not scraping her key when she slides it into the apartment door. If she's right about this, she doesn't want to give her roommate too much warning that they're coming.

Steve had been expecting Bucky when the buzzer rang an hour after he'd left the studio. He'd been worried about the outcome of the argument, after class finished and packed up without Natasha, Bucky, or Maria emerging from the back office. Steve spent the afternoon worried Bucky was about to get fired, that's why he was so taken aback to see Natasha was the one he buzzed into the building.

"I have to tell you something about Bucky." Steve had noticed Sam attempting to subtly sneak off to his bedroom at the announcement, which only made him more nervous. "You're not going to like it."

She'd sat him down and come right out and told him what Bucky's problem was. The whole fucked up thing that had been going on since long before she knew him. Initially, Steve had found the gory truth hard to believe.

"Look, maybe you're reading into something wrong." He'd tried to suggest. "We've been out for dinner a bunch of times and it's been fine."

"How much did he actually eat with you?" Natasha prompted, not exactly taking his reasoning apart but not letting him fool himself. "Or did he just talk so much he didn't have a chance to put anything in his mouth?"

"I mean…"

"He told you he has food allergies, right? The only thing Bucky's allergic to is penicillin."

Steve didn't know what to say to that. He didn't know what to say to any of the abnormal behaviour she pointed out: the passing out, the over-rehearsing, the bones sticking out through the back of Bucky's shirt. The things Steve had thought were normal because that's what Bucky told him.

He didn't know what to say to any of it. He still doesn't.

When they walk in, the apartment is silent.

Steve follows Natasha cautiously, pausing when he sees Bucky curled up on the couch and
seemingly asleep. He smiles softly at the image before he sees how pinched Bucky's face looks and his feelings of contentment fade. Bucky is frowning even in his sleep, his brow creased up with thin skin like folded paper. He has his hand fisted in the sleeve of his hoodie, and Steve can just see that he's clutching the fabric so hard his knuckles are white.

Except the first two, which are scraped raw just like Natasha said they would be. Steve's stomach is so tied up in knots he almost forgets to breathe.

"Come here." Natasha is speaking quietly, beckoning him through to the kitchen. Steve follows her into the room and stops short, having to blink a few times to take in what he's seeing.

The kitchen looks like a bomb hit it. Brightly-coloured candy wrappers litter the table, dotted in between empty soda bottles and glasses. There's a paper bag of McDonald's wrappers standing next to the open microwave, half knocked over in haste that the empty box of hot pockets explains. There's half a loaf of white bread and mostly-empty jars of peanut butter and jelly and marshmallow fluff on the other half of the counter, which is littered with crumbs and cut-off crusts.

Steve reaches out gingerly to touch a carton of chocolate ice cream, abandoned on the table with a spoon standing in it. It's still almost cold.

"Do you believe me now?" Natasha is still quiet, and she doesn't hang around to see Steve's reaction before she walks back into the living room to check on Bucky.

The fact that he hasn't cleaned up after himself is a bad sign. Bucky always cleans up his messes before anyone can see.

Steve stands there frozen for a minute, just looking at the debris. He can't wrap his head around the sheer volume of food he's looking at, let alone how it even fits in Bucky's body. That thought is chased by well it's not like it stays there long, and Steve has to fight the nausea that's threatening to overwhelm him again. He turns away from the mess and pauses in the doorway to the living room, watching Natasha with her hand on Bucky's wrist.

"Is he okay?"

"As far as I can tell." Natasha feels his pulse strong under her fingertips and moves to carefully slip her hand under Bucky's hoodie, gingerly touching his stomach. It's not distended, he must have already purged. "He must have passed out before he cleaned up."

"So he… You're telling me he ate all that." Steve points back at the kitchen, feeling totally overwhelmed by all this. "And then he…"

Natasha nods, watching him carefully for his reaction. Steve fights back his emotions, the urge to demand information, the urge to grab Bucky and hold him and force him to feel better about himself, and slowly walks over to sit on the coffee table. He reaches out and gently brushes stray strands of hair off Bucky's face, seeing his cracked lips and the pinprick bruises on his eyelids like he's looking at him for the first time.

"Shit, Buck." He murmurs softly, his voice cracking. "Shit."

"This is why I need your help." Natasha is still watching him, but her expression is less guarded now. "He needs your help."

"He needs a doctor."

"He won't go. He won't admit it to anyone else and he won't listen to me anymore." She looks
weary, when Steve tears his eyes away from Bucky's face to look at her. He wonders just how long she's been the only one sharing this load. "Maybe he'll listen to you."

"What if he doesn't?" Steve can see where this might end, and it fills him with dread. He's just starting to really fall for Bucky, could see a future with him that now seems cut off by this thing that secretly consumes him.

"We just need to get him through the show's run." Natasha seems to have this all worked out in advance. "After that he can take time out, get properly better."

"Nat, how can he make it through a run like this?" Now he's seen the full extent of what's going on, Steve is almost afraid to see Bucky practice dancing, let alone perform six nights a week.

"He has to." She shrugs, and Steve is starting to think all his friends' priorities are screwed up. "So he will. You know he won't drop out voluntarily."

No, Steve thinks fearfully, he won't. Not even if it kills him.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you thought!
Bucky wakes up feeling sore.

His throat is gritty and god, he didn't brush his teeth again before he passed out. Everything tastes like acid and old dairy when he swallows. He'd just meant to sit down for a few minutes, he'd been so dizzy after he got done purging that he'd had to catch himself on the kitchen counter as he tried to clean up. It was supposed to be a minute to get himself together before he hid the evidence.

The living room is dark when he opens his eyes. There are voices in the kitchen, shit.

Bucky's muscles ache as he pushes himself up from the couch and tentatively walks over to the open door. He should have stretched better after class. His abs are tight and cramping from throwing up and he can feel his posture is terrible to try and compensate as he slouches over to the kitchen. He's not surprised to see the counters are clear, but he can't remember if he sleep-cleaned (he's been known to do that when he's exhausted) or if Natasha did it after he passed out.

His roommate is currently stirring something in a pot on the stove, and Bucky frowns because he can't remember the last time Natasha had time to cook. Maybe she's making one of the big batches of soup that she freezes so she can eat when they're really busy. Whatever it is, it smells good enough to make his treacherous stomach growl.

"Hey." He croaks, rubbing at his itchy eyes with the heel of his hand. "When did you get home?"

"A few hours ago." Natasha glances over her shoulder and looks him up and down. She definitely cleaned up the kitchen. "Your boyfriend's staying for dinner."

"My…" Bucky looks around blearily and sees Steve sitting at the kitchen table (and yeah, okay, the little wave hello is super cute but Bucky's got more important things to worry about). He grins before he puts two and two together and his blood just about freezes.

Steve was here while he was passed out. Bucky left the kitchen in a state after his binge. If Steve came home with Natasha…

"Don't kiss me, sleep breath." He throws his mask up as quickly as possible and flaps his hand, smiling sheepishly when he sees Steve about to stand up. "What time is it?"

"About eight-thirty." Steve is watching him with concern behind his carefully normal expression and Bucky suddenly wants to puke all over again.

He knows.

"Shit." He looks at the clock and his stomach flips for a totally different reason. "Shit, I gotta do my choreography. Fuck."

"Buck, you look like you're gonna fall over." Steve tries vainly to get him to stop rushing around, grabbing his dance stuff and throwing it in his gym bag. "Why don't you stay for dinner and go after?"

"No, I gotta… Maria wants to see it in the morning and I don't have anything." Bucky shakes his
head frantically, looking for the hoodie he stole from Steve and eventually finding it on the arm of the couch. "I don't have time. I didn't mean to sleep so long. Fuck."

"Hey, don't freak out." Steve exchanges a glance with Natasha as Bucky is shoving his shoes on. This is exactly what she'd warned him about. "It'll be okay, you've got time."

"Maybe just." He hurries over and kisses Steve on the cheek, so quick it might not have even made contact. "You're so sweet to come over, I'm sorry I have to run off. We'll get coffee tomorrow, yeah?"

"I… Okay." Steve blinks, overwhelmed by how much nervous energy is coming off the guy he just saw so passed out that even Natasha banging pots and pans around didn't make him stir. "Don't overdo it."

"I won't." Bucky grins and grabs his bag, calling over his shoulder as he rushes out of the apartment. "Bye Nat."

The door slams and he's gone. That was the big discussion Steve had planned out in his head while Bucky slept. Natasha's attention is still on her soup, and everything about her expression screams resignation as she turns the burner off.

"I told you." Natasha shrugs, when she notices Steve hovering in the middle of the kitchen like he's not sure what just happened. "He'll do anything to avoid talking about it."

Well, shit. He's going to need a plan B.

*

One time, one time, Sam will make it to class first.

It doesn't matter how early he gets up in the morning, he's never been the first one in the room, making everyone else feel lazy when they come in and he's already warmed up. He'd thought today was going to be the day, when his crazy aunt thought it was a good idea to call from the West Coast at six in the morning and got him out of bed early.

But no. Bucky Barnes, notorious slut and infamous workaholic, has beaten him yet again. Sam's going to camp out one of these days, just to prove the point.

"Hey." Sam calls out to him where he's focused on practicing the same move over and over again in the mirror, and Bucky jumps at the noise. He looks like he's going to collapse as he walks over, and the fact he actually sits down on the bench when Sam gently pushes his shoulders shows just how exhausted he is. "But it's done."

"You're crazy. You're actually crazy." Sam shakes his head, because he's committed to dancing but it's not his life like it is Bucky's. "Did you even sleep?"

"Sorta. I took a nap around three, there's a couch in the office." He runs his fingers through his ratty hair and grimaces when he manages to pull out a collection of dark strands. "You got a hairbrush?"

"Do I look like I've got a hairbrush?" Sam frowns when he notices his friend is still out of breath. "You want a protein bar before class? I've got the hazelnut ones Nat always steals."
"You're a saint, Sam Wilson. I'll suck your dick one day." Bucky grins tiredly, taking the bar Sam hands him and devouring it in a few hungry bites. "Seriously. I hope Natasha sleeps with you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Sam rolls his eyes. "And please don't suck my dick."

"Some people have no taste." Bucky hides his nerves under snark when he sees Steve coming into the studio. He tries to smooth his hair down one more time and gives up, tying it in one of the black bands he has around his wrist. "Do I look fuckable?"

"Please never ask me that again." Sam groans and hides his eyes, waving him away. "Go talk to your boyfriend and leave me alone."

Bucky decides to take Sam's advice and deprive him of his presence. He's nervous about seeing Steve after last night, but the lack of sleep is making it hard for him to feel particularly passionate about anything. Plus the fact that dancing always calms him down and he's feeling confident enough to bluff his way through what Steve might have seen last night.

That is, if Natasha kept her mouth shut. After their argument yesterday, Bucky's not sure she will have.

"Hey, Mr Piano Man." Bucky grins at Steve as he bounces over, hopping up to sit daintily on the closed lid of the piano. Steve doesn't look up from his music, pointedly doesn't look up, and Bucky's smile falters. "Was it something I said?"

"No." Steve is still looking through his satchel of papers (and a satchel, really, his level of hipster is getting too high to handle), and he's been through them all twice now so Bucky knows he's just avoiding him. His gut rolls at the rejection, because he's tried so hard to be good around Steve and he fucked up so badly yesterday.

"Uh…” Bucky shifts slightly nervously and then controls the movement, telling himself he hasn't done anything wrong. "You wanna give me some idea why you won't look at me? Are you mad about something?"

"No. Yes." Steve finally looks up, flipping the flap of his bag closed so hard the catch clacks together. His expression is pinched and he looks just about as uncomfortable as Bucky feels. "You didn't tell me about… You didn't tell me you're bulimic."

In the silence that follows the accusation, Bucky blinks once, twice, then his expression twists and he gets off the piano again. He lands heavier this time, none of the playfulness he had before.

"First, I don't see how that's any of your fucking business." He stands with his arms folded irritably, but all Steve can look at are the sharp, sharp points of his elbows. "Second, what the fuck would you have done if I did? It's not really something you talk about on a date."

"I—"

"No, seriously." Bucky raises his eyebrow in that sarcastic way again and Steve feels very small. "You're not my boyfriend—"

"I'm not your boyfriend?"

Well, that throws Bucky off his rant slightly.

"Do you wanna be?"
"Well, yeah."

"Okay then, so you're just my boyfriend." This is definitely the least romantic way either of them have ever entered into a relationship. "We just got together. Enlighten me as to how you deserve to know something I can't even talk to my best friends about."

"I just..." Steve trails off. Because Bucky's right, he's not actually sure why he feels so betrayed by not being told about this straight away. Maybe it's more that he feels stupid, that he thinks he should have figured it out before Natasha had to tell him.

"I don't owe you anything. If you think I'm disgusting and you can't handle this then that's fine, your dick wasn't that great anyway." Bucky turns on his heel and heads back to where his gym bag is, flinging himself down on the bench to change his shoes with none of his usual grace.

Steve watches him go with rocks in his stomach. He'd been prepared for Bucky to be upset, to deny everything, but he hadn't expected him to be angry. It seems like maybe he'd forgotten that Bucky is still Bucky, sarcastic, witty, short-fused Bucky, no matter what might be wrong with him. Whatever this illness might do to him, it certainly doesn't make him fragile.

He wants to tell Bucky this, wants to figure out a way to put it into words, but Maria is calling the class to order and signalling him to start the first number before he has time to collect himself.

It's an hour before they take a break, and Steve doesn't know how they're all doing this because even his fingers are sore from playing. The lack of sleep from worrying all night doesn't help his concentration either, and he doesn't even understand how Bucky's still on his feet, let alone that he's immediately getting ready to show his solo to Maria while everyone else is taking a break.

"I've got the music on CD."

"We're using a lot of contemporary music already, Bucky." Maria looks annoyed, and Steve feels a surge of protectiveness in his chest despite the fact that he knows Bucky is perfectly capable of looking after himself. "It would be better if you had sheet—"

"Just let me show you what I've got, please? If you don't like it then take it out, but you wanted a solo and the choreography is done. It'll save a lot of time if I don't have to change anything else."

Maria looks like she's going to say no again, then the corner of her mouth twists and Bucky grins like he can read her expression before she says anything. His smile is more muted than usual, but it's there. Steve can see it all the way across the room, just like he could the first day he laid eyes on his boyfriend.

"Alright, show me. Everyone else clear the floor please, take your break outside." She puts the CD into the stereo and waits for the rehearsal space to clear before she presses play.

Steve watches the first thirty seconds or so before he ducks outside too, following the dancers to the lobby. He doesn't know the song but he caught the lyrics and it's too much, it sounds and looks like Bucky's trying to dance out the apocalypse in his head right in front of him. Steve knows it's not the most supportive thing to do, but he just can't deal with it yet.

_I was born sick and I love it._

He can't watch Bucky dance to that.

He leaves the building and bums a smoke off one of the ballerinas in an effort to get his mind off things, but rather than keep him warm it just makes him feel sick and lightheaded. He follows the
group back inside just in time to hear the tail end of Maria's criticism.

"Some of the floor work could be better, but we can work on that." She nods, eyes making an appraising sweep over Bucky. Steve doesn't know how the hell she misses all the signs that now scream out to him that something is wrong. Maybe she just doesn't want to see them. "We'll put you in tights, black."

"No shirt?"

"Make sure your tattoo is covered."

Bucky nods, chewing on his lip anxiously as Maria moves on to speak to Natasha and Kamala. *No shirt means he needs to cut his body fat even more before the show starts and he hardly has any time left.* Steve takes the opportunity of the pause to go over to Bucky, who looks up warily but doesn't seem too unhappy to see him.

"Can we get coffee after class?" He twitches a nervous half-smile. "Maybe talk about stuff?"

"I'm cross-training next door until four." Bucky seems cautious, but it's more defensive than like he's hiding. He's not going to let Steve in if he's just going to reject him, he's had more than enough of that shit already.

"So I'll meet you at four." Steve isn't about to let Bucky get away that easily. No matter what the hell is wrong with him. He sees his boyfriend's shoulders relax slightly and feels like they can handle this thing. Together.

"Bring coffee to me." Bucky gets some of his sass back, flicking his hair over his shoulder where it's come out of its ponytail. "Large. Grande, whatever they call it. With at least two extra shots."

"Okay."

"And if you bring me Starbucks I'm breaking up with you."

"Whatever you say." Steve laughs and Bucky grins back with a hint of vulnerability in his eyes, and Steve leans over and kisses him on the cheek right then and there. Someone (Sam) wolf-whistles and when he pulls back, Bucky's hollow cheeks are pink.

It's a shame that the moment is ruined by the thought that this is the most alive Bucky's looked since he met him.

Chapter End Notes

As always, let me know what you think! I was trying to do some complicated things in this chapter so I hope it works.
Friends Will Hold You Back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Class finishes at one o'clock.

By the time four rolls around, Steve has been home and done a lot of very serious googling. He's called his mom to check in, been grocery shopping, and let Sam feed him a beer to make him chill the fuck out for five minutes. He picks up coffee and sits waiting outside the gym because he doesn't want Bucky to get annoyed if he shows up too early.

He can't believe his boyfriend (and yes, boyfriend, he can say that now without feeling like he's jumping the gun) is still on his feet at this point, let alone working out. When he sees Bucky emerge from the building, swamped in his stolen hoodie and looking like he's about to fall asleep, he gets the feeling that he almost isn't.

"I, uh, I brought you some coffee." Steve holds up the paper cup with a hesitant smile when Bucky walks over, looking more cautious than he was earlier. Fatigue seems to have stripped some of his bravado away. "Peace offering?"

"What did you put in it?" Bucky takes it anyway, looking at Steve's hands rather than his face. His own hands are shaking, he needs the boost. He knows he should eat right now, wants to even, but he's so nervous that he's pretty sure he'll have to purge if he puts anything in his stomach.

Steve can't possibly still want him when he's this disgusting, that's what he's been telling himself for the last three hours. If he convinces himself of that, maybe it won't hurt as much when it's proven to be true.

"Nothing, I grabbed up a couple packs of sugar and stuff if you want them." Steve offers, but he's not exactly surprised when Bucky pops off the travel lid and starts drinking it black.

They sit down on the wall Steve had been waiting on, Bucky's entire body screaming that it's too cold to be out here. He ignores the biological warning and forces the urge to shiver away, focusing on the warmth of the cup in his hands. Even the coffee is making him feel vaguely nauseated, sometimes it happens when he gets really hungry, and he has to take a moment to concentrate, get himself under control.

"Sorry." It's a few minutes of silence before Bucky mumbles the apology. "My ex used to hide all kinds of shit in stuff I was gonna eat. Butter and fat and… Anyway. Kinda made me paranoid."

"Wow. That sucks." Steve blinks in surprise because who the hell does that? "What an asshole."

"He thought he was helping." Bucky shrugs, wearily. "He knew about… the thing, too. That's part of the reason I didn't want you to know about it."

"I'm not gonna do anything like that." Steve promises, but from the way Bucky nods he can tell his boyfriend doesn't believe him.

Steve tells himself it doesn't sting. The disease has been in Bucky's life for a lot longer than he has, of course he's going to listen to an old friend over a new one.

"How long have you… has this thing been going on?" He asks, careful not to sound demanding.
He's spent the afternoon reading websites called things like *How to deal with a loved one with an eating disorder* in an effort to try not to fuck this up from the word go. The fact that most of them say there's not a lot he can do to help is something he's choosing to ignore.

Bucky isn't looking at him, staring into his cup instead like he's resigned. Before he'd been angry and defensive, but now he seems too tired for that. He just looks numb, and Steve hates that the spark in him has been stamped out.

"Ten years or so." The admission is quiet, and this might be the first time he's really seeing Bucky's soft underbelly. "I haven't been, uh, purging for that long. That's only been the last four years or something."

"Why did it get worse?"

"It didn't get worse, it just… changed." He takes another gulp of coffee for something to do that isn't speak and looks vaguely green as he shakes his head. "I don't wanna talk about it, Steve. Not the specifics, not today. I can't…"

"That's okay." Steve takes his hand and Bucky looks across at him in surprise as he squeezes his bony fingers. "I just want you to know that whenever you feel comfortable talking about it, I'm here."

"Why are you therapy-speaking at me?" Bucky catches onto something in the strangely-stiff statement and narrows his eyes at Steve appraisingly. "Did you google this? Oh god."

"I'm just worried about you."

"This is so embarrassing." He pulls his hand out of Steve's grip and covers his face with a groan. Steve is starting to notice that physically hiding seems to be Bucky's last resort when someone gets too close. "I'm fine, Steve. Really. It's not that big of a deal."

"Buck, you're… You're being so hard on yourself. It's hurting you, it's violent." Steve is pretty sure this is exactly what the website said not to do, but it comes spilling out anyway. "I'm scared you're —"

"Everything we do to ourselves is violent!"

The words burst out of Bucky with that same level of ferocity, and Steve is shocked. The spark that had been missing is back with a vengeance, and despite the fact that he's never seen Bucky lose control like this, Steve is relieved to see his fire is still there.

"That's what this life is! Have you ever seen Sam's feet after he gets home from rehearsal? You blister, you bleed, you pull out your own toenails when they're slowing you down. If you land wrong from some of these moves you'll break something, and that's the end of your career. You can't trust your body, you have to beat it into submission."

"You care about dancing enough to do that to yourself?" Steve presses him. "To beat yourself into submission?"

"All I've ever known is dancing. It's my life." It's definitely ducking the question, but Steve doesn't want to turn this into an argument so he lets it slide. "I'm a fantasy character, Steve. I don't exist when I dance, the audience doesn't see a person. I have to be something better than reality and I have to do what it takes to get there."

"Which means you kill yourself when you're not dancing."
"It's the only time I feel alive anyway." Bucky shrugs and sets his coffee cup down on the wall, standing up and slinging his gym bag over his shoulder. He's running away, Steve can see it from a mile off. "Call me when you're ready to get off your high horse."

"Buck, wait." Steve jumps up and grabs his arm, only noticing that Bucky is shaking when he can feel it under his fingertips. "I'm not... I want to be with you. Whatever happens with this thing. I don't understand it, okay? But if you help me, maybe I can."

It gives Bucky pause, enough to hear him out at least. Every instinct tells him to tell Steve to leave him alone, to nestle back into the comfortable little rut he's made himself. He has food to comfort him, he doesn't need to the fear and anxiety of someone taking that away. He doesn't need Steve.

But he wants him.

"Let me make this clear." Bucky looks him straight in the eye, and Steve is suddenly reminded of just how much strength is contained within his wiry body. "I want a boyfriend, not a carer. The minute this becomes about the... the thing more than me and you, it's over."

"Okay."

"I've been handling this for ten years. I've dealt with it before you and I can deal with it after you. I don't need you to save me."

"I don't want to save you." Steve can feel his hero complex protesting even as he says it. "But you're not the only one with conditions."

"Okay." Bucky resists the urge to pull away, lets Steve hold him there as he gives his side. He's shivering harder than ever, nothing to do with the cold by now, but he still doesn't move.

"I want you to try and get better." Steve can see the panic flare in his boyfriend's eyes as he says it, and he tries to softly explain himself. "I'm not gonna force you to do anything, but I want you to let me help you if I can. I can't stand by and just watch you hurt yourself like this and pretend I'm okay with it. I care about you too much to do that."

Bucky seems taken aback by the words. He must be, because for once he doesn't have a snappy comeback ready.

"You're not gonna make me eat?" His voice is very small, more vulnerable than it's intended to be, and Steve wonders what the hell Bucky's ex was like to make him this worried.

"I'm not gonna make you do anything. I'm just asking you to try." Steve squeezes his arm and carefully doesn't wince at the fact his big hand wraps around Bucky's entire bicep. "You okay with that?"

Bucky feels totally overwhelmed. This thing that consumes all the parts of his life that dancing doesn't, that fills him with shame as much as it brings him relief, Steve is willing to deal with it. For him. There's a lump in his throat, and the thought of showing weakness makes him want to shrivel up and die so he just meets Steve's eyes and nods silently.

"Come here." Steve pulls him into a hug to give Bucky the excuse to hide his face, knows he hates showing vulnerability and gives him a chance to collect himself. "It's fuckin' freezing out here. You wanna come back to my place?"

"Only if you're gonna fuck the stress outta me." Bucky straightens up with a subtle sniffle and Steve gracefully pretends he doesn't notice the fact his eyes are wet. The bravado is back in place, but it's
"I suppose it's my boyfriendly duty to keep you satisfied." Steve sighs exaggeratedly and Bucky tries not to smile at how happy the word clearly makes him.

"Why do you make it sound like that's a hardship for you?" Bucky raises his eyebrows and Steve just grins, because this is him back to normal. "I can take my glorious ass elsewhere."

"Don't you dare." He grabs Bucky's gym bag and puts it over his shoulder, taking his boyfriend's hand. He's just trying to be chivalrous, sort of, but Bucky bristles at the gesture.

"For fuck's sake, I can carry my own shit." He rolls his eyes so hard Steve's surprised they don't fall out of his head. "If you start treating me like I'm fucking fragile—"

"If you threaten to break up with me one more time today then you're gonna wish I treated you like you're fragile." Steve impulsively lets his hand go and spanks Bucky hard on the ass, making his boyfriend yelp. The satisfaction of the reaction is enough to make him not give a shit about the strange looks from the people walking by. "We've been official for one day and you've already threatened to dump me eight hundred times."

"Seven hundred." Bucky smirks and Steve seriously considers shoving him into the wall and dealing with his sarcastic ass right then and there. "And you'd better be building up to spanking me properly, because that was pathetic."

"I'm gonna spank you right here if you're not careful."

"Exhibitionist streak, Rogers?" Bucky slips under Steve's arm to cuddle into his side. It's an unusually public display of affection and Steve finds he likes it. "Kinky, I like."

"I haven't shown you my handcuffs yet."

"Okay, home. Now." Bucky starts pulling him along the street and Steve laughs, more than partly out of relief.

There was a large part of him that had been convinced this conversation would be the end of their fledgling relationship. They're still a little cautious around each other, true, but it feels like they're getting back on the same page now. Bucky is doing what he usually does and ducking the issue, but they talked about it seriously and that's enough of a start for now. Things are back to normal, or what passes for it.

And if handcuffs are part of their normal, well, Steve isn't going to complain.

* 

Bucky hasn't stayed the night with anyone since Brock.

He wants to leave after he and Steve fuck (handcuffs do get involved and Bucky is totally smug about the resulting bruises), but then Steve heats up some soup and he's being so sweet about not pushing the issue that it's not like Bucky can bail. So he figures he'll leave after they eat, but then Steve is kissing him again and saying something about a sex toy drawer and Bucky is too distracted to remember that he wants to leave.

It's getting dark outside by the time he's curled up, cuddling with his boyfriend and enjoying the afterglow. They've fucked twice and even notorious slut Bucky Barnes isn't getting it up again any time soon. He figures he's got the perfect excuse to leave without hurting Steve's feelings, because he
has to be up at five in the morning for class, but he's so tired and his muscles are so sore and Steve is so warm and he lets himself just drift for a minute…

Then he wakes up in the pitch darkness, sweating. It's not that he's too hot, even though Steve is a furnace, it's the sudden anxiety that makes Bucky shoot up in a panic that it's morning and he's late for rehearsal. He looks at the clock and relaxes a little bit because okay, he's not late for anything and it's way too early to be up. He can lie back down and enjoy this. It's just cuddling, and Steve is asleep.

And Steve's arm is around his waist.

And Bucky can feel his chest start tightening up again at the thought that his hand is on his belly.

And his mouth fills with the thick spit of nausea because his stomach is right there his love handles are right there and Steve is going to feel his fat when his fingers sink into the disgusting mess of it and –

"Thinkin' too loud."

Steve isn't even really awake, his eyes don't open, but his face scrunches up as he grumbles the words that jerk Bucky out of his panicking spiral. He gropes up from under the blankets and brings up his other arm to tug Bucky down to rest back on his chest with a slurred shushing noise.

Bucky breathes. It's shaky, but he breathes.

Steve sloppily works his fingertips over his boyfriend's scalp, knotting up his hair more but making the tension drain out of Bucky's spine until he's as boneless as a cat getting petted and Steve is fully asleep again. The gentle touch grounds him, doesn't let him get out of his mind enough to start panicking again.

Maybe he can stay for a few more minutes, Bucky thinks as he starts drifting off again. Maybe Steve won't notice his fat while he's asleep, and he's still unsteady from the almost-panic and maybe it's okay to just enjoy…

The next time he wakes, it's morning. It really is time to get up.

Steve shows Bucky where the shower is and lets him have first dibs (Sam didn't come home the night before, wisely avoiding their sex noises like the amazing, traumatised roommate he is). Bucky doesn't figure out the temperature controls properly in his sleepy haze and turns the dial to the warm side rather than cold by accident.

He almost corrects his mistake as soon as he steps under the water. Almost. But the hot water feels so good on his strained, still-aching muscles. It reminds him of Steve's oven-hot hug from last night, sleeping curled up around his back like Bucky was something to keep warm and protect. Like Bucky's body was important for something other than dancing.

Bucky doesn't know why he starts crying, standing there under the first warm shower he's ever taken in the morning, but he knows it's not because he's sad.

Chapter End Notes

A long-ass chapter for you guys. Thank you so much for all the comments, it means a
lot and it gives me a lot of ideas for where to take this story. Let me know what you think!
"I can't."

"C'mon. For me." Brock has been all sweetness and light ever since Bucky came back from Russia in disgrace. He's moved in with his boyfriend to help him get better, to beat this disease, and he's been understanding so far.

Clearly, his patience is starting to run out.

"It's... Brock, I can't." Bucky stares down the sandwich with nothing in his stomach but nausea. Soft white bread, thick peanut butter, and sticky raspberry jelly. He can't do it. "I-I binge on this stuff, I can't eat it and..."

"C'mon sweetheart, I know you can do it." The hand on Bucky's shoulder feels like it's restraining, rather than supporting, as it squeezes tighter. "You love me, right? You can be normal one time for me, I know you can."

"I love you." Bucky croaks, wishing Brock wouldn't say it like that. He knows his boyfriend is only trying to help, that he's doing his best to motivate Bucky to get better. But when he says things like that Bucky feels like he's failing him, letting him down if he can't do what Brock wants him to.

He's been getting worse since he got home from Russia. He's purging every day now, he's losing his voice more often than not, and his knuckles are starting to scar up. Brock is covering everything financially since he's not well enough to join a new dance company, and all his savings go on binge food. Bucky owes him in more ways than one now, he has to do better.

The last time Brock caught him in the middle of a binge he was so upset he punched him. Bucky can't blame him for that, he wants to punch himself a lot these days.

He gets halfway through the sandwich before he has to bolt for the bathroom. He's not doing this on purpose, it's that his heart is hammering so hard in his chest that he can't swallow anymore and he can feel the thick lumps of bread in his throat and they're coming up before he can stop it.

"You'll do better next time, it's okay sweetheart." Brock holds him tightly when it's over, and Bucky tries to find comfort in the gesture instead of feeling trapped. "I'm not mad."

"Just disappointed." Bucky mumbles into his shoulder.

Brock doesn't say anything, just rubs his hand over his boyfriend's bony back. That's enough to tell Bucky he's right.

The last week has been good. Better than good.

They open in two days and Bucky is feeling better than he has in years. Things with Steve have made him feel so much better that he's actually been eating and keeping it down, except for a couple of incidents where he's tried to push himself too far, too fast. He hasn't done a full binge and purge for a whole week, partly because he hasn't let himself be alone for long enough to carry one out, and
he thinks he's doing better.

He's feeling good enough about himself to only spend an hour getting ready to go and meet his family for drinks. Becky is over from Russia for two weeks and he's invited his sister and parents to come and see the company's opening night. His parents flew out to see her big opening last year, so he's hopeful that they'll actually turn up this time. Besides, he's looking forward to seeing his twin in person for the first time in forever.

The fifth shirt Bucky tries is acceptable. It doesn't show off his ribs or stomach but it flashes enough collarbone to make him feel confident and it's blue so it brings out his eyes. His mother gets annoyed when he wears his usual all-black. His skinny jeans are too big around the waist and too tight around the thighs, his regular (fat) jeans won't stay up on his hips, so he fishes out a pair of slacks that used to be too small and will at least satisfy his mother. He brushes his hair back into a neat, low bun, and practices smiling from a couple of angles to make sure it looks real.

He purges his dinner before he leaves the apartment. His anxiety has been under control for most of the week, but the show is looming and spending time with his parents is making his chest hurt like he's been in class for an hour straight.

He texts Steve on the way, smoking furtively before he gets around the corner to the fancy little place and has to pretend he doesn't smoke within his mother's eyesight. Steve texts back immediately and sends him a snapchat of he and Sam making stupid faces to try and make Bucky smile, and it works.

At least, his heart stops hurting as he takes a final desperate drag of his cigarette before he discards it and heads into the restaurant.

"Buck." Becky gets up and waves from the table she's settled at near the back and Bucky grins. He hugs her tightly and feels that weird shift in his chest, the settling in his stomach that he only ever feels when his sister is around.

Maybe there's something in the twin thing after all. Who knows.

"You're too skinny." Becky squeezes him and lets him go, holding him at arm's length for a second before she sits down.

"At least one of us is in shape." Bucky snorts as his sister kicks him in the shin under the table.

"Okay, kidding, you look great. It's so good to see you."

"You too. You don't think I have a Russian accent, right? I had lunch with Bruce yesterday and he's convinced I have a Russian accent." Becky rolls her eyes and pushes a glass over to her brother. "Double vodka tonic, still? All the grossness and none of the calories?"

"You want me to be drunk when Mom and Dad get here?" He smirks and picks up the drink anyway, downing half of it out of nerves before he catches his sister's expression. Bucky swallows hard and can't help the sad twitch of his lips as he looks down at the table. "They're not coming, are they?"

"Dad's working, he sends his love." Becky looks like she's just about as upset about it as Bucky is, although he knows that can't possibly be true.

"And Mama?"

"You know what she's like." Becky shakes her head. "You sent her the details and she's not… She doesn't think it's… appropriate."
"It's because I'm en pointe for a number, isn't it?" He fucking knew this would happen, and he throws back the rest of his drink into his churning stomach. If his mother wasn't so insistent on scrutinising the way 'these modern companies' work before she came to see him, Bucky wouldn't have said anything.

"She thinks it's degrading." Becky reaches over and grabs her brother's forearm, trying to reassure him. "She's a traditionalist, you know she's stuck in the past. If it were Manon or Swan Lake she'd be in the front row, you know that."

"But it's not. So she won't even sit in the back." He wishes dearly that he hadn't finished his drink already. Becky signals the waiter (she's always known what he was thinking before he did) and Bucky forces a smile, because it's not his sister's fault that his mother doesn't support him. "Anyway, fuck her."

"I wish you wouldn't take her bullshit so hard, Buck." Becky says, quietly. "You don't have to."

Bucky just shrugs, forcing a wider smile and knowing it doesn't meet his eyes. His sister will know the difference, between this and him being genuine, but then he can't remember the last time she saw him being genuine so maybe it'll stick.

"Don't worry about it. It's fine." He takes his new drink from the guy with an extra-flirty smile, because that's his default for boosting his self-esteem when he can't immediately get his hands on something to stuff his face with. Becky snorts at the display.

"I thought you had a boyfriend now?"

"I do." The smile on his face becomes genuine as he fishes out his phone, holding it out to show his sister the background of Steve making coffee in nothing but sweatpants. "Cute, right?"

"Yeah, wow. Nicely done, little bro." She whistles exaggeratedly and Bucky finds her foot and stamps on it lightly under the table. "He's a step up from Brock. Like, ten steps up."

"Don't talk about that asshole." Bucky takes a gulp of his drink and yeah, he should probably slow down a little but this night has made him feel like shit in a completely different way than he'd expected. "You wanna stay over tonight? It's gonna take you a while to get all the way out to the old place."

"It's okay, we're staying at a hotel in town." Becky sips her wine delicately, and Bucky feels his stomach clench for an entirely new reason."

"We?"

Bucky hates his sister's boyfriend.

Loki hasn't done anything to him. Not directly. Bucky knows his problem with the guy is all his own fault, but he can't help it. It's pure resentment. Every time he comes around Bucky can't help but stare at his wrists, his sharp jaw, his collarbones poking out of his shirt.

Becky thought he had a crush on the guy, and Bucky has let her continue in that delusion since she started teasing him about it. There's nothing about Loki that he wants to be with, just things that he wants to be.

It's after the first time Loki comes over for dinner that he purges for the first time. The guy had sat
there with him, his sister, and Natasha, being totally charming and perfectly pleasant. He'd eaten two plates of food, no pushing away his carbs or hiding his meat under excess vegetables or scraping off fat. Bucky had watched him eat and thought, yes, maybe that's how I become thin.

And so he'd filled his stomach. Then everyone was sitting in the front room drinking and his stomach hurt so much he couldn't handle it. The sudden panic was crushing, like a lead pipe underneath his sternum.

Before he knows what he's doing he's locking himself in the bathroom and sticking his fingers down his throat because of his burning need to getitoutgetitout –

And then he's calm. He's emptier and cleaner and calmer than he has been since he can remember.

But he won't do it again, Bucky promises himself. It's just this one time.

"So, I went for drinks with my sister."

Steve came over a couple of hours ago, swapping his couch and Netflix for Natasha's couch and Netflix. Natasha was happy to let him make camp in her living room, since she was going out on a date anyway (mysteriously, not with Sam). Steve had been worried about looking clingy, but he doesn't think Bucky minds since he doesn't even pause when he sees Steve sitting on the couch.

What gives Steve pause is the box of Oreos in his boyfriend's hand, which Bucky digs into to shove another cookie in his mouth as he stomps into the kitchen. He thinks Bucky seems a little tipsy, but he doesn't think that's why he's eating.

"I thought your parents were coming too?" Steve follows him, leaning against the doorframe as he watches Bucky toss the box on the counter and grab a pan from a cupboard, filling it with water before he puts it on the stove.

"Yeah, well. Mama was busy and Dad never comes." Water splashes onto the counter when Bucky tips dry pasta into the pan, but he doesn't seem to notice. "Doesn't matter that she flew out to fucking Russia to see Becky in the Nutcracker last year, she can't make it across town to see me for an hour."

"That sucks." Steve's not sure what else to say. He knows Bucky's family is a touchy subject, but he didn't realise how deep the problems went. He's not sure what to say to help.

Bucky shrugs and finally shoves his jacket off, tossing it over the back of a chair. He fills a glass with water and chugs it down as he roots in the fridge, and Steve is starting to get concerned. He's not exactly sure what's happening, where all this manic energy is coming from, but he has a bad feeling about it.

"It's fine, I didn't expect her to come. Dad doesn't even bother responding to my emails anymore so I knew he wasn't coming. I wish she'd just be like that instead of pretending she likes me." He sets out cheese on the counter and slams the fridge shut with a carton of milk in his hand, refilling his empty glass.

"I'm sure she—"

"And then." Bucky doesn't seem to notice that he cuts Steve off, still in full rant mode. He pulls pop tarts out of another cupboard and puts two in the toaster, pausing to shove another cookie in his
mouth and down half the milk. "And then Becky tells me she's bringing her boyfriend to opening night."

"That's nice, isn't it?" Steve is starting to realise what's going on, but it's taking him a second to get himself together to say something about it.

"It's the opposite of nice, I hate the guy. I used to have class with him in Novosibirsk. Fuckin' Loki Odinson. Stupid skinny asshole." He's talking with his mouth full now as he fumbles in the back of a cupboard for something else, and Steve is stunned by the loss of control.

Bucky, while having his bitchy moments, is always collected. He has a sense of poise about him even when he's exhausted from training, or when he's pissed off about something and making sure the world knows why. He got manners from somewhere, and they seem to be hardwired no matter what state he's in.

That's why it's so jarring to see him like this. The wildness is new, and somehow it's almost scary.

"Bucky, babe." Steve gets his attention calmly. "What are you doing?"

Bucky looks over his shoulder at Steve like he's crazy, like he's not flipping over lukewarm pop tarts to make them heat up quicker while also shoving dry cereal in his mouth.

"I'm hungry." He says, like the answer is obvious. "I'm making some food."

"Maybe you should stick to the pasta, if you're hungry." Steve suggests, carefully. "You're kinda… emotional."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Bucky snorts, frowning at Steve's awkward phrasing. Then the water in the pan splashes onto the stove with a hiss and something about the sound seems to snap him out of it. He realises what he's doing and goes white.

"Oh." It's an oddly wounded sound, as if it's been punched out of him, and Bucky yanks his hand out of the cereal box like it's burned him.

The box falls to the floor and cereal scatters everywhere, crunching under Steve's feet when he hurries across the kitchen to put his hands on Bucky's shoulders.

"Buck, it's okay."

"Oh god. I… in front of you." He puts a shaking hand over his mouth and tries to shrug Steve's hands away. "Don't touch me, I'm disgusting."

"You're not disgusting." Steve just holds him tighter, ducking his head slightly. "Bucky, look at me. You're okay."

"No. No, no. I've gotta…" He's shaking like a leaf under Steve's touch, like all the adrenaline that had been fuelling his binge has nowhere to go. "Steve, lemme go."

"If I let you go you're gonna go throw up." He's trying very hard to be calm and reassuring, but inside he's freaking out because he's never dealt with anything like this before. "You don't have to do that."

"I do. I… in front of you. I'm so disgusting. I-I have to…"

"Bucky, listen to me." Steve cuts into the stammering, unnerved by the thought that this is what
Bucky's fighting to control all the time. "You didn't eat that much, okay? You're really upset and you don't have to punish yourself for eating a few cookies."

"I-I…"

"C'mon, I've got you." Steve reaches over and turns the stove off, never not touching Bucky as he shepherds him gently to the couch. He can feel his boyfriend's muscles tense as they pass the bathroom, and he holds on tighter in case Bucky tries to duck away.

"Okay, you're okay." Steve grabs one of Natasha's too-thick blankets from the back of the couch and puts it over them, putting his arm around Bucky and cuddling him into his side. "We're gonna watch a movie, take your mind off it."

Bucky makes a soft sound of distress, apparently too worked up to keep his mask of bravado in place, and Steve hugs him tighter.

"Everything's okay. You didn't eat too much and you haven't done anything wrong." Steve kisses his temple and can hear Bucky's breath coming way too fast.

"I made a mess." He protests quietly, panic still rising in his voice.

"I'll handle it later, don't worry about it." Despite his efforts to keep everything calm and comforting, Steve can't talk Bucky down. His boyfriend kicks the blanket off and gets up off the couch, an arm clutched around his stomach like it's in pain.

"Steve, I can't. I'm gonna have a panic attack and it hurts and it's too close to the show and I gotta have my shirt off and…” The words are pouring out of him like he can't stop them, and it really is scaring Steve now. "I gotta get it out, I can't—"

"Bucky, Buck. It's okay." Steve can see Bucky totally breaking down and he's not sure he can help him by trying to make him be normal right now. "Don't panic, okay? Do what you gotta do."

There's a second of relief on his boyfriend's face, like he's been given permission to fuck up, and then Bucky rushes for the bathroom and bolts the door behind him.

Steve sits up on the couch and puts his head in his hands. This is a hell of a knot he's trying to help Bucky unpick here and he's not sure he can do it without knowing the full story. He sees Bucky's phone sitting on the coffee table and picks it up, scrolling through his contacts as he tries not to hear the water running full-force from behind the bathroom door.

Maybe he needs to ask for reinforcements.

Chapter End Notes

Longest chapter yet. Hope you guys are enjoying it and keep letting me know what you think! It's really helpful for coming up with new ideas.
"I swear to god! If you fuckin' run into me one more time…"

"Bucky, that's enough." Maria shoots him a withering glance and Bucky shuts his mouth with a glare. The rest of the class don't even bother staring at this point, stress outbursts are too common this close to the show. "Everyone is stressed, but that doesn't mean we can lower our standards of behaviour."

Bucky grudgingly mumbles an apology to Pietro, whose run-in is too damn fast and keeps sending him into Bucky's back. Neither of them will hold a grudge, they know it's not the other's fault. They've only got one day of practice left before the final dress rehearsal, and they need to get this right.

In spite of his humiliating loss of control last night, Bucky is back to firing on as many cylinders as he can. Steve had stayed the night after his breakdown, curled around Bucky while he shook himself apart for hours after he came out of the bathroom, white-faced and distraught. His family rejecting him again had been the straw that broke the camel's back, and he didn't realise that he trusted Steve enough to let his guard down around him until that point.

Steve being there kept him from doing something really drastic, when purging didn't make him feel human or clean again.

In the morning, after a few hours of fitful sleep, Bucky got up with a smile plastered over his face and acted like the night before had never happened. Steve let him, not entirely happily, because he could see the fine tremor in his boyfriend's hands and didn't want to make him any more anxious than he clearly already was about everything at the moment.

Bucky took a cold shower before rehearsal. It almost helped.

"Bucky, can I have a word?" Maria beckons him over as they wrap up class and Bucky reluctantly walks to the mirror with her. He really doesn't want to get chewed out about his attitude again, not with the headache thumping behind his temples making him see spots in time to his heartbeat.

Steve catches him for a second to press a kiss to his cheek, a little gesture of moral support. He's going to the movies with Sam after class, because they're both starting to get nervous about the show and want to take their minds off it, and so Bucky waves him off with a smile. He put enough crap on Steve last night, he doesn't want to do it twice in less than twenty-four hours.

That's what drove Brock off, the fact that Bucky couldn't get a hold of himself for one measly day when his boyfriend wanted him to. Bucky isn't going to make that mistake with Steve as well.

"I'm sorry about yelling at Pietro. It won't happen again." He tries to pre-empt the telling off when he reaches his teacher, but Maria waves the apology away as dismissively as ever.

"It's fine. Like I said, we're all stressed." She's looking him over, and Bucky feels like he's a bug under a microscope. He folds his arms self-consciously over his stomach. "Kamala told me you returned two of your opening-night tickets to the box office. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Everything's fine." He forces a smile under her evaluating gaze. "Turns out my parents
"I don't want you to be distracted." Maria might be genuine or she might be good at acting like she cares, Bucky can't tell. He's not good at figuring out people's motivations anymore, not since Brock. "If you're having family problems…"

"It's not a problem, don't worry. I wasn't expecting them to come." He shakes his head and is vaguely surprised by the way the world swims in front of his eyes. He's starting to think he should skip cross-training this afternoon. No matter how much he wants to burn the calories, he can't afford to pass out again.

"So you're sure you're okay with this?" Maria presses. "I don't want you to get stressed about this and check out on us before opening. Natasha said you've been having panic attacks and we don't have an understudy for your part."

Bucky feels his cheeks heat up involuntarily, lowering his gaze to stare at his battered shoes. He's been careful at hiding his anxiety from the company, controlling his panic through his eating rituals no matter how destructive they are, and he's humiliated by someone knowing about it without him specifically admitting it. He's not fragile, he doesn't need to be checked up on.

"It's not a problem, I'm fine. I'm committed and the show is my priority." Bucky insists, fingers tightening on the strap of his bag. He can feel his muscles start to lock up and knows he's going to be sore later from the tension and lack of potassium. "Is that all? I've got to get to cross-training, so."

"That's all." Maria looks like she wants to say something else, but she decides against it at the last minute. She scrutinises him for another moment and Bucky wants to hide under something even bigger than him, but she doesn't say anything in the end. "I want to see you thirty minutes early tomorrow, we need to go through your solo again. And if you could come in and practice before that it would be helpful."

"Sure." Bucky doesn't know when the hell he's going to sleep, but that doesn't matter as long as his dancing is perfect. "I'll be there."

He texts Steve as he leaves the studio, letting him know he's not going to cross-train. After the complete fiasco of last night, Bucky thinks he might just be allowed to go home and recover for a little while before he starts working all over again without feeling guilty. At this point, even the idea of greeting the receptionist at the gym is making his chest feel tight, so he makes the executive decision to not tempt fate with the anxiety and just give into it, for once.

Mama wouldn't allow it. Fuck Mama.

Bucky means to fall asleep in front of some shitty movie on the couch, but he's so tense he can't manage it. When Steve comes back from the movies (minus Sam, he'll have to text Natasha and see what's going on there), he's still sitting upright and uncomfortably awake in spite of how exhausted he is. He'd been worried Steve would be annoyed that he'd lifted the spare key and let himself in because he didn't trust himself to be at home in his safe binging environment, but Steve looks like he almost expected his boyfriend to be there.

"Hey." He dumps his jacket and comes over to the couch, Bucky tipping his head back so he can kiss him hello. "Is your back still bothering you?"

"It's just my neck." Bucky has been kneading his traps distractedly when Steve asks, and is too ashamed to admit that the strain is from purging. He's usually good at keeping himself in a decent position when he pukes, but last night had been so panicky and stressful that he hadn't thought to
To be honest, his whole body is aching. Rehearsal and class have both kicked up a notch again and it's so cold out that he's shivering hard enough to make his muscles cramp on top of the exhaustion. It's the only reason he doesn't flinch away when Steve's big, warm hand covers his own where it rests on his neck. He lets out a sigh when Steve takes over the rubbing, enjoying the gentle touch.

"You've got knots like iron in here." Steve murmurs, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of Bucky's head. "Why don't I give you a massage, huh?"

"Ugh, no." Bucky grimaces, getting even tenser at the thought. "Those things kill. I'm not injured, it's fine."

"Not like a sports massage." Steve frowns at the suggestion. "I mean a back rub."

Bucky just looks over his shoulder at him blankly and Steve rolls his eyes. He's got no idea.

"You and your weird fucking life. C'mon, take your clothes off. I promise it won't hurt."

"That's not a great advertisement for anything, Stevie." Bucky smirks and tugs his sweater and shirt off anyway, not letting himself think about how disgusting he looks shirtless. Steve doesn't reach out and trace the prominent shoulder blades like he feels the urge to, because he's not going to spook his boyfriend.

"I'm pretty good, I can give you references."

"Is Sam one of them?" Bucky holds up his hand as he follows Steve into the bedroom curiously. "Actually, I don't wanna know."

"Just lay down." Steve shoos him towards the bed and Bucky flops down tiredly, his usual dirty smirk back in place when Steve pulls a bottle of something out of his mysterious bedside drawer (not the sex toy drawer, sadly) and sets it on the bed next to him.

"What is this crap?" Bucky grabs the bottle and squints at it, letting out a laugh when he reads the description. All-natural, organic, no artificial elements or unnecessary chemicals involved. Hipster crap, of course. "Seriously? All this shit and you couldn't get the kind that warms up?"

"It's not lube." Steve grumbles, clearly appreciating the finesse of the product more than his heathen boyfriend does.

"It could be lube." Bucky wiggles his eyebrows in a way he thinks is suggestive but is actually ridiculous, and Steve smacks him lightly on the ass.

"Would you just relax and let me give you a massage?"

"Are you seriously just gonna touch me and not fuck me?" The kicked puppy look is as hilarious as it is adorable, and Steve tries not to laugh.

"Maybe if you're good." He tugs Bucky's baggy jeans off, which leaves him lying face-down on the bed, naked. "No underwear, seriously Buck?"

"It's my laundry day." Steve can hear the smirk in his voice even with his face buried in the pillows, and he swats Bucky's bare ass once more for good measure.

"See, there was a time when I wondered where you got your notorious slut reputation. I don't
wonder anymore." He grabs the oil where Bucky's discarded it and shuffles up the bed to kneel over his thighs. "You comfy?"

"Be comfier with a dick in me."

"I'm gonna make a twitter for the shit you come out with, I swear to god." He pours some oil out onto his hands and warms it up for a second before he sweeps them over Bucky's back. He ignores the prominent ribs, tells himself he doesn't feel them under his hands because he doesn't want to freak either of them out. "How's that feel?"

"Uh, oily."

"I mean the… Just shut up and stay still." Steve rolls his eyes and lightly pinches the back of Bucky's neck, feeling the laugh coming through the back of his boyfriend's chest as he starts to work his hands over his back.

It takes almost fifteen minutes just to begin, but the tension that had been holding Bucky's muscles as tight as springs gradually seeps away under Steve's gentle touch. Steve slowly works the knots out of Bucky's shoulders, kneads his wiry back until he's boneless underneath him. Bucky keeps letting out these involuntary whimpers, like he's half-surprised that his body can actually feel this good without it being directly related to fucking. Steve smiles to himself and leisurely slides his hands down lower, making Bucky let out a choked moan and start to squirm when the touch reaches his ass.

"I thought I told you to stay still?" Steve admonishes lightly, kneading his boyfriend's flesh a little harder.

"You try and stay still with your dick like this." Bucky grumbles, and it's only when Steve looks that he notices Bucky is rock hard, his dick trapped between the sheets and his stomach. He smirks and presses his thumbs lower into Bucky's thighs, making the squirming worse.

"Ste-eve." It comes out as a whine, and that just makes Steve enjoy it even more because he's never heard Bucky on the edge of desperate like this.

"Ah-ah, no moving." He presses a kiss to one of the dimples in Bucky's lower back and swears he feels his boyfriend shiver. "Be good and just relax."

"Fuck you." Bucky is clearly trying hard to snark, but the rough undertone of his voice lets Steve know that he's only just holding it together. "Steve…"

"What do you want, baby?" Steve lets his slick fingers slip between Bucky's cheeks and his boyfriend moans brokenly into the pillow, starting to give up the swagger and admit to what he wants.

"Please." Bucky's hips twitch and Steve shushes him with a grin playing across his lips. There's no small amount of pride in being the person to reduce notorious slut Bucky Barnes to a begging mess just by giving him a massage.

"I've got you." He pushes Bucky's thighs apart a little wider, pours a little more oil onto his hands and circles his hole with one slick fingertip. Bucky lets out an unconscious sound of want and tries to close his legs. Steve wonders what the problem is before he sees the dark flush spreading down his boyfriend's chest and back and smirks.

"Aw, babe. You getting all shy on me?" He moves his knee so he's holding Bucky's thighs open and Bucky whimpers like he's not sure if he wants it or not. "C'mon, you're so pretty. Let me see you."
He purposefully waits until Bucky relaxes again before he strokes his fingertips over his hole, laughing silently at the keening sound it elicits. Steve slowly pushes one finger into Bucky, biting his lip at the greedy tightness sucking him inside. Bucky is a dream wrapped in a nightmare and Steve will sleep for days if he'll let him.

"Come on." Bucky grunts. Clearly Steve's not going fast enough for his impatient boyfriend. "More. I can take it."

"I don't care, this isn't about what you can take." Steve leans down and sucks a bite into the top of Bucky's ass cheek, causing a strangled noise of protest. He steadily pushes his finger in to the knuckle and Bucky goes quiet. "I'm gonna work you open for me, get you all nice and slick and begging for it."

"Steve." Bucky gasps as Steve pushes a second finger in, working it so slowly alongside the first.

"And I'm not gonna fuck you." Steve starts crooking his fingers deliberately, smirking with satisfaction when Bucky's hips stutter back involuntarily.

"Please." Bucky whines, rolling his hips to try and get some friction on his leaking dick. Steve tuts theatrically and yanks him up by the hip, pulling him up just enough that there's no chance of him humping the bed.

"No, I'm not gonna fuck you. And I'm not gonna let you hump anything either." He feels drunk on the sight of Bucky falling apart beneath him, on the power of being the one to cause it. "Cause I bet you can come just like this, can't you?"

"Steve, please."

"No baby, you come just like this." Steve has a sudden idea, something his inner porn star has always wanted to try, and figures now is the perfect time to see if it's as fun as it looks. "Or... you want more?"

"I want more. For fuck's sake." Bucky chokes out, trying to push back on Steve's fingers and grunting in frustration when he finds himself held in place.

Steve raises his eyebrows at that and curls his fingers hard against Bucky's prostate before he pulls them out altogether. His boyfriend cries out at the mixed sensations and lets his head drop back onto the bed, distracted enough that Steve's tongue swiping over his hole takes him by surprise.

"Oh fuck. Holy fuck." Bucky doesn't care how loud he's being as Steve licks him open. Nobody has ever touched him like this before and it's almost overwhelming. He leans all his weight on one arm and reaches back to try and get a hand on his dick, crying out in protest when Steve grabs his wrist and pins him to the bed.

"I told you. You're gonna come just from what I'm doing to you." Steve pushes his fingers back in and Bucky is a writhing mess under his touch. He works his tongue around his fingers and Bucky almost shakes from how badly he wants more as his cock jumps.

"There you go baby." Steve pulls back to look at him, drinking in the sight of Bucky coming apart at the seams, so close he's leaking all over the bed. "Let go, c'mon. Come for me."

Bucky seems to be fighting within himself, torn between not wanting to lose control and giving into the urge to just lose it. Steve crooks his fingers again and rubs relentlessly against his prostate, watching hungrily as Bucky squirms and jerks and goes completely rigid as he comes without a touch to his dick. Bucky lets out a hoarse, surprised cry as he spurts onto the sheets, like he can't
believe what's happening to him.

"You're so beautiful." Steve keeps up the pressure until Bucky whimpers in a less happy way and he slowly pulls his fingers out before things get uncomfortable. Bucky collapses onto the bed and Steve kisses his way up his back with the taste of oil on his lips.

Bucky is too brain dead to even try to protest the compliment. He reaches out and makes a weak grabbing motion at Steve, who gets the picture and crawls up to sit against the headboard, pulling Bucky into his arms. Bucky is too warm and fucked out to even think about moving, to worry that he's crushing Steve with his bulk as he curls up in his lap. To be paranoid about Steve feeling how fat he is when his boyfriend's hands snake around his waist and hold him tightly.

He's not thinking about his size. It might just be the first time in years.

"You want me to…" Bucky reaches clumsily for Steve's dick, feeling it hard against his thigh, but Steve gently bats him away.

"No babe, it's all about you right now. Just relax." Steve kisses him on the cheek, because he's dirty but he's not about to kiss Bucky on the lips after where his mouth has been, and Bucky sighs quietly. He looks sweet like this, soft in a way he's usually angular and hard.

Bucky's never had sex that wasn't rough, that wasn't all about getting his partner off as quickly and explosively as possible. It's weird, this new sensation of tenderness, but it's welcome.

"I… I didn't know it could be like that." Bucky mumbles after a long minute, curled bonelessly against Steve's chest like a very large cat. "Didn't know it could feel like that."

Bucky wonders why he feels so still, why his chest feels so empty and his head is quiet. It takes him a long minute to figure out that he's not worrying about anything. He wonders vaguely if this is what it feels like to not be anxious. If other people feel like this all the time and that's why they smile so much.

"Someone should've showed you every day." Steve presses a kiss above his ear and Bucky smiles to himself, feeling human in a way he hasn't for a long time. "You deserve it."

This is exactly what Steve wanted to get out of this interaction. Bucky used sex to distract him and change the subject all the time, so he figured maybe that kind of intimacy was the key to getting his boyfriend to actually let himself go enough to actually relax. It seems like it's worked.

"I'm gonna fall asleep." Bucky slurs quietly, and Steve stifles an affectionate laugh in his messy hair. "Sorry."

"It's okay, Buck. Just sleep." Steve tugs the blanket over them from where it's been kicked to the side, and Bucky feels like a person in his arms instead of a broken piece of machinery. "I've got you."

"You got me." He murmurs, half intelligible although Steve manages to catch the meaning with a warmth in his chest.

Bucky sleeps dreamlessly.

For once, nothing hurts.

Chapter End Notes
Another record for longest chapter.

As always, thank you so much for reading and please let me know what you think. I take a lot of ideas from comments so it's worth suggesting ideas if you have them!
Losing Your Voice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The emergency room is not where Natasha had imagined spending the night before their final rehearsal.

The company had spent the day in the theatre, blocking the show for tech so the light and sound would be correct and not all over the place like last season's disastrous opening night. Things had been tense, none of the joking around that had been so commonplace in their early rehearsals.

They have the dress rehearsal in the morning and then that's it. They have to be ready to open.

Natasha and Bucky had gone home at the end of the day, too exhausted to socialise. Despite the stress, they'd been in a good mood and not sniping at each other as they were prone to do when under pressure. Bucky actually ate dinner with his roommate, even if he only picked at his portion, and Natasha started to think that maybe getting Steve involved had been a good idea. Things seemed to be looking up.

Then Bucky got up from his chair to get something from the kitchen and collapsed, totally out of the blue. He didn't lose consciousness, as far as Natasha could tell in her sudden panic, but he wasn't breathing right. As soon as he gasped out something about pains in his chest, that was it: they weren't going to be able to deal with this on their own.

So here she is, sitting in the emergency room and waiting to find out if her best friend has done himself real damage this time.

Natasha stares at her phone for a long time under the harsh clinical light, torn between contacting people or not. She knows if she texts Steve then he and Sam will be down here like lightning, but it's also nearly midnight and she doesn't want them all to be useless in the final rehearsal tomorrow. Especially if Bucky is out of commission.

Bucky can't be out of commission. They don't have a show without him.

She also debates telling Maria what's happening, so she can start figuring out what they'll do if Bucky can't dance. But then there's also the possibility that Maria will bench Bucky for this even if he's able to perform, which nobody wants. Bucky will be totally crushed if he can't dance, and Natasha isn't about to jeopardise a show she has a starring role in if she doesn't have to.

So she doesn't tell anybody. If they can keep this a secret, they will. If not... they'll figure something out.

"Ms Romanov?" A tired-looking, middle-aged doctor holding a clipboard calls her name and Natasha is up like a shot.

"Is James okay?" She might be thinking about the show more than anything else, but Bucky is still her best friend. Natasha doesn't know what she'd do if anything serious happened to him.

"He's dehydrated and his electrolytes are out of whack, but we should be able to fix him up in a couple of hours with some fluids." The doctor is business like, reassuring, and it makes the knot in Natasha's stomach start to unclench some.
"And the pains in his chest?"

"Tachycardia can be caused by electrolyte imbalance, but we didn't find anything to suggest that's what it was. Most likely he had some kind of panic attack. It doesn't look serious." The doctor smiles blandly, used to dealing with scared people in stressful situations.

"He has a history of them." Natasha nods, already thinking about how much a few hours will throw off their schedule now she knows Bucky's not in danger. They need to sleep as well as rehearse. "Once he's rehydrated and everything, will James be able to resume dance rehearsals? Our company's show opens in a couple of days."

"I wouldn't recommend it, but I'm pretty sure there's nothing I can say to make him not do it. It's all he's asked about since he got here." The doctor sighs. "As long as he gets some rest and he stays hydrated and doesn't vomit any more, he should be okay."

"I'll make sure he stays hydrated." Natasha almost doesn't catch the look on the doctor's face, but he doesn't move when she expects him to end the conversation.

"Are you aware that your friend is bulimic?" He asks the question sensitively enough, but with the same brisk nature as he's had throughout the conversation. Natasha appreciates it, she's never been good at the touchy-feely side of things.

"Yes." She's immediately on the defensive, because she's not about to let them keep her principal in hospital when they have a show to perform. "He's currently seeking help."

"That's good to hear. Because with this level of dehydration and his job, things could get very dangerous, very fast. I've seen it in dancers before and it's not pretty." He takes a card from his clipboard and hands it to Natasha. "These are some resources he might be interested in accessing, therapy and nutritionists, things like that."

"Thank you." She slips the card into her pocket, intending to pass it along in spite of the fact that Bucky will never look at it. After the show's run finishes, of course, because he can't take off to fix himself in the middle of a run. "Can I see him now?"

Bucky looks like he's made of paper under the bleak light of the ward. He's back in his clothes, had clearly discarded the backless gown as quickly as possible (too revealing, Natasha doesn't know how the hell he's going to dance in front of an audience shirtless), although he's still hooked up to a heart monitor and an IV drip. It looks like something inevitable.

The bags under his eyes look like holes punched out of tissue paper. It's not good.

"They're gonna let me out, right?" Is the first thing he anxiously asks, voice cracking. It's always rough these days, usually gone altogether in the mornings and at the end of the day. "I can dance, I'm fine."

"You're in the hospital, this isn't fine." Natasha stalks over to the bed and looms over Bucky, who shrinks back like he's trying to make himself even smaller than he already is. She jabs a sharp fingernail into his shoulder and thinks he deserves to wince. "You scared the shit out of me."

"I'm sorry." Bucky looks genuinely apologetic, even though he doesn't meet her eyes. "But it won't affect the show, I promise. I'm fine, it was just a stupid panic attack."

"You had pains in your chest. I thought you were having a heart attack." She sits down heavily in the chair beside his bed, folding one leg underneath her because every movement should be a stretch if possible. "Your electrolytes are fucked up."
"I could've told them that." Bucky sighs, letting his eyes slip closed tiredly. He doesn't want to be here.

"What happened to you doing better?" Natasha finds his hand and holds it, feeling every knuckle and bone poke against her own. "I thought Steve was helping."

"He is." Bucky keeps his eyes closed, as if he can just will himself out of this fucking predicament. "It's... It's the show. I..."

"I thought you hadn't been throwing up so much?"

"I wasn't. I was doing better." Bucky swallows hard, trying not to gag when his spit feels like acid moving over sand. "Then Maria said I have to do the solo shirtless and... Things got difficult again. But I have been doing better."

"If you've been doing better then why the fuck are you in the hospital?" Natasha doesn't let him wriggle out of it, and Bucky sincerely wants the ground to swallow him up sometimes.

"Because I panicked. Because the only thing that stops me freaking the fuck out half the time is being in control of what I'm eating, and apparently I'm not allowed to do that anymore. Fuckin' excuse me for not realising I was having a full-blown panic attack because it's been so long since I was this anxious all the fuckin' time!" He can feel his face heat up as his voice rises, and this is what he hates about not being in control of himself.

He needs to keep his emotions under control, because they're too strong and too painful to handle when he doesn't. When he can't smother them with food and purge them out, when he can't dance until he's too exhausted to feel anything, it's unbearable to be inside his skin. The anxiety only ebbs when he can use one of his tried and tested methods to choke it, and when he can't it flows.

And Bucky drowns in it.

The heart monitor beeps warningly and he forces himself to take a deep breath, blowing it out slowly and feeling like a fucking fool. He's not going to have another panic attack, not in public. Natasha is watching him worriedly when he opens his eyes, and he forces his face to remain neutral.

"You need to get your shit together." The words are harsh, but Natasha's voice really isn't. "You can't fuck this show up."

"I know."

"If doing what you do with food is the only way to keep yourself stable..." She sighs like she can't believe she's about to say this. "Maybe you shouldn't rock the boat right now."

"Is that you talking as my friend, or as a dancer?" Bucky looks at her levelly, a little too levelly, and Natasha gets the feeling she might have just been manipulated.

"You know I'm not okay with you hurting yourself, not as your friend." That answers his question, without her actually saying it, and Bucky squeezes Natasha's hand gently.

"I'll hide it better. I'll make sure I keep on top of the electrolyte thing, stay hydrated." He promises, feeling relief loosening his chest and calming the blood pounding audibly in his ears. "How long do I have to stay in here?"

"A few hours, the doctor said." Natasha doesn't like this, not one bit, but the ambitious part of her knows that she won't allow anything to stop the show unless it absolutely has to. This is something
that doesn't have to, not if they manage it correctly and Bucky keeps himself together.

"Can I sign myself out before that?"

"No! For fuck's sake." Natasha punches him in the shoulder and Bucky actually manages to smile. "Don't even think about it. You're staying here until the doctor says you can go."

"Unless that cuts into rehearsal time."

"Don't put words in my mouth." She scowls, not denying that that's exactly what she means. She stands up and leans over to kiss Bucky on the forehead, like the little brother she still sees him as. "I need to go home and sleep. You need to get some rest too."

"We're keeping this between us, right?" He meets her eyes nervously. "Or preferably never speaking of it again?"

"We're telling Steve and Sam in the morning." Natasha cuts Bucky off as he opens his mouth to protest. "We can tell them about the panic attack, okay? Tell them everything was fine but we overreacted. They're not going to tell anyone, but they need to know. I'm not keeping your secrets on my own."

"Steve's gonna freak out." Bucky rubs a trembling hand over his face, IV tugging uncomfortably in his skin.

"It's better than than lying to him. You don't want to start down that road." Natasha shakes her head. "Remember what happened with Brock?"

"Wish I didn't." Bucky mutters and closes his eyes in a futile effort to block out the world again. He wishes people would stop bringing his ex up, seriously. "Fuck off and lemme sleep."

"Just be ready to work tomorrow." She doesn't say take care of yourself or please be good, but Bucky hears it in her voice anyway. He pretends to be trying to sleep until she leaves. The ward isn't quiet, even at this time of night, so he's still awake when the nurse comes to disconnect him from the heart monitor an hour later, telling him everything looks normal.

When he's alone again, Bucky stares at the plastic curtains screening around his bed and wonders if it's possible to do sit-ups with an IV in the back of his hand. He doesn't sleep.

*

"There's nothing wrong with you, suck it up."

"Pull yourself together. God, you're so stupid sometimes."

"You're gonna ruin this for yourself. Don't fuck up."

*

Bucky gets released from the hospital at six in the morning, and even then he's running late.

They want to keep him until eight, because that's when the doctor will come and check him and make sure he's ready to go, but he signs himself out AMA because he doesn't have time to wait. He
needs to make it to the dress rehearsal like nothing happened, people will ask questions if he's late. He's never late.

Steve and Sam's apartment is closer to the hospital, and Natasha texts him to meet her there. Bucky just about cries in relief when he gets there and sees why. His dance gear is packed with Natasha's usual military precision, along with the lucky charms she knows he only brings out for shows and the pan stick to cover his tattoo. She makes him talk to Sam and Steve, who Bucky is pretty sure have already been told about what happened last night, before hurrying to take a shower before they head to the theatre.

Telling Steve and Sam about ending up in the emergency room is surprisingly painless. Sam looks like he's been expecting it, which he probably has been, and Steve looks him over worriedly before pulling Bucky into one of his crushing hugs. He might just be good at hiding how hard he's freaking out, but Bucky will take what he can get. He hugs his boyfriend back just as tight, hating himself for not being fully honest with Steve. It's just because Steve isn't a dancer that he can't tell him the whole story, because Bucky knows he doesn't have the same priorities as the rest of them.

Steve puts Bucky's welfare above the show. That's never happened before.

It's terrifying to be that important to someone, and the only way Bucky can handle knowing it is to pretend Steve takes the show just as seriously as he does. Pretend that Steve wouldn't tell Maria about his boyfriend's condition in a heartbeat if he thought it was the safest thing for Bucky. He's loved, sincerely, and it's too scary to handle. He can't afford to be loved right now.

Now Bucky has implicit permission to get back into his comfortable rut of controlling what he eats, he feels liberated. He drinks plenty, as a compromise to Natasha's watchful gaze, and because he really doesn't want to pass out again. He even stretches to a zero-calorie energy drink and protein bar on their way to the theatre. He still hasn't slept, he's going to need to do that at some point.

As if running to clockwork, Bucky's energy starts to flag before they even begin rehearsing. He's going to need something stronger than caffeine to get through this day, he's not even in his first costume yet. Luckily, he always keeps his secret weapon in his gym bag for just such an occasion.

"Are you sure you should take this stuff?"

"Says the guy who performed on ecstasy last year." Bucky snorts and offers Sam the little baggie of pills he's been saving for a special occasion. Despite the token protest, his friend doesn't hesitate to take one. "It's not coke or anything, it's just a little speed."

"Can I have some?" Pietro pipes up from the other side of the dressing room, and Sam and Bucky both look at him incredulously.

He's a sweet kid, very young and very green, but a good dancer. Usually it's just Sam and Bucky crammed into whatever closet they put the male dancers in to get changed (the girls get actual space and mirrors with good lighting), and they'd almost forgotten he was there.

"No."

"You're twelve." Sam swallows his pill with a gulp of water and passes Bucky the bottle.

"I'm nineteen, c'mon!"

"Then you're old enough to find your own drugs, aren't you?" Bucky smirks and takes his, wincing when the chalky pill drags against his raw throat. "It's bad for you, don't do it."
"You do it!"

"Now you just sound like you're twelve." Sam laughs and ducks the sneaker Pietro throws at him. "Seriously Buck, you sure this isn't gonna give you some kinda panic attack again?"

"That doesn't sound like 'never mentioning it again'." Bucky shoots him a dirty look. "It's fine, don't worry about it."

"Why did you have a panic attack?" Pietro asks curiously, and Bucky gestures at Sam as if to say see what you did?

"I always get nervous before we open." He lies smoothly, taking a deep breath before he shrugs off his shirt to start applying cover-up to his tattoo. His duo with Natasha is up first, but the red star on his shoulder will take a while to cover and he won't have time between pieces.

"Really? You?" Pietro is still staring at him, and Bucky feels his skin start to prickle under the scrutiny. Maybe it's the speed starting to kick in, it always works fast on an empty stomach. "But you're awesome, why would you get nervous? Half the people in the audience are here to see you."

Bucky feels a lurch in his chest and swallows hard. That's exactly why he's fucking nervous. So many people there to see him and yet all he'll be able to focus on are the two empty seats where his parents should be.

"Yeah, well. My biggest secret is that I'm a huge pussy." He puts the pan stick down when he notices his hand is shaking, leaving the job half-finished. The protein bar is sitting in his stomach like a rock that he swears he can actually feel expanding as he thinks about it.

Get it out getitout

"I'm gonna go piss before we start." He gets up as casually as he can, pocketing the pills and ignoring Sam's concerned look. Sam knows exactly what's going on. "If I drink any more Gatorade I'm gonna burst like a fuckin' water balloon."

The bathroom is blessedly empty, the first good thing that's happened to him since yesterday, and Bucky locks himself in a stall hurriedly because the privacy might not last. He doesn't stick his fingers down his throat, is worried about Natasha or Steve noticing if he scrapes up his hand by accident, he just leans over and presses on his stomach, contracting his muscles in a certain way until energy drink and bile and clogging lumps of sports bar are burning their way back up.

Bucky curses audibly a second after he flushes the toilet. He forgot to check if the pill he'd taken had come back up whole or not. He sighs in frustration and tips another one out of the baggie, swallowing it with a handful of lukewarm water from the tap. He's taken more before, it won't make a difference.

Things are quiet as Bucky washes his mouth out and wipes his face, only the muffled noise from the dressing rooms disturbing the stillness that's settled in his head. He meets his eyes in the mirror and whispers aloud the mantra that runs through his head all day, every day.

"You're useless. Don't fuck up."

Don't fuck up.

Chapter End Notes
You can find me on tumblr at saferforeveryone.tumblr.com if you want to see a lot of gay stuff and make fic suggestions at me.
Diet Pills

Bucky's too tired to protest about going out for dinner after the dress rehearsal is finished.

There's no more preparation, nothing they can do that will make anything better than it is now. Maria sends them all home with strict instructions not to practice or work out until they're back in class in the morning. Rest is as important to being at their best as practicing, and they need to be at their peak tomorrow. So plans are made to go out for dinner, and Bucky doesn't even try to get out of it.

He pops another pill to try and perk himself up. He knows he's setting himself up for a bigger crash later but that's for later-Bucky to deal with.

"You sure you're gonna be okay?"

Steve is lounging back on Bucky's bed, watching him get dressed. His 'costume' for tomorrow night is a white shirt and black pants, and since that's about as dressy as he gets he hadn't bothered to go home and get changed. It's not like he needs Sam making fun of him all night for breaking out his bow tie.

Steve will admit that he's also hanging around to keep an eye on Bucky after last night. He's got Natasha's number, has figured out where her priorities lie, and he's pretty sure he's not getting the full story about what happened to land Bucky in the hospital.

"I'll be fine." Bucky flops down on Steve's lap, shirt unbuttoned and his hair loose and still wet from the shower. He's holding all his weight on his knees as he straddles Steve playfully, so he's sure he won't crush his boyfriend with his bulk. "Panic attacks are no big deal, honestly. I used to get them all the time and it just surprised me."

"You just look wiped out, that's all. I used to end up in the hospital all the time when I was a kid and I never slept right in there." Steve reaches up and tucks Bucky's hair behind his ear, making him duck his head to try and hide his smile. "Nobody'd be offended if you wanted to get some rest, Buck."

"It's fine, stop worrying." Bucky shakes his head vigorously, intentionally spraying Steve with water like a dog. He smirks triumphantly at the screwed-up expression he causes, because he's pretty sure Steve gets cuter every time he looks at him. "Besides, I haven't seen Becky in forever and I'm not missing out on watching you squirm while she judgest you."

"So you're not bothered by having dinner with this Loki guy?" Steve grabs Bucky's hips and pulls him so he has to put his full weight on his boyfriend, subtly proving a point and reassuring him that he's not so heavy he'll crush Steve. "I thought you kinda had a problem with him?"

Bucky doesn't actually remember what he said to Steve, the night when he was in a binge-driven, drunken haze. Apparently he'd mentioned Loki. The information throws him enough that he forgets to think about how heavy he is on Steve's lap for a minute.

Yes, it is going to bother him having to sit there and watch the physical embodiment of a fast metabolism eat. It is going to bother him to see the guy who unintentionally pushed him into a deeper problem. It is going to bother him to sit there and swallow food while he looks at the skinny wrists and defined collar bones he can never see when he looks in the mirror. But he can't tell Steve that without sounding totally crazy, so he won't.

"Nah, not really." Deflect. Change the subject. Smoke and mirrors so nobody can see what's behind
the curtain. "How come you didn't freak out this morning?"

"About the hospital?" Steve runs his hands over Bucky's sides thoughtfully, under his shirt so he's touching warm skin. "In case you haven't noticed, it really bothers you when you think you've upset someone. Me freaking out was only gonna make you feel worse. I was freaking out on the inside, believe me."

"I'm sorry." Bucky ducks his head slightly, submissive in a way he wasn't when he turned his face that way to hide his smile, and Steve kisses him upright.

"See? That's why I didn't tell you that earlier." He runs his hand up Bucky's chest, trying to make him smile, when he feels something that makes him pause. He moves the edge of Bucky's shirt and looks at the patch of skin he'd felt change under his thumb.

There are three scars there, on the left side of Bucky's chest, so light in colour that he hadn't noticed them until he'd felt them with his fingertips. Thicker than a cat scratch and raised, they look deliberate.

"How'd these happen?" He asks, curiously. Bucky is flushed slightly pink when he looks up, and Steve pauses when he thinks he might have crossed into territory he shouldn't have. "Sorry, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine. It's just kinda embarrassing." Bucky shakes his head, shifting his weight awkwardly in Steve's lap. "I was kind of an angsty teenager, did them to myself. Only one time. Dunno why because it fucking hurt and I didn't feel any less emo after."

"Emo, huh?" Steve reaches up and pushes Bucky's hair so it covers one of his eyes, grinning widely at the resulting scowl. "Did you wear eyeliner?"

"Shut up." Bucky's ears are pink now and Steve is having way too much fun with it. "I looked like a sexy raccoon, fuck you."

"Sexy raccoon, oh my god." Steve cracks up, catching Bucky's hands as he tries to start tickling him in revenge. "Skinny jeans? Did you dye your hair black and get into mosh pits at shows?"

"You're the worst, I knew I was gonna regret telling you this." Bucky is trying not to laugh even as he says it. He pauses dramatically before he admits something that makes Steve just about piss himself laughing again. "I've seen Fall Out Boy three times."

"Stop, I'm gonna cry." Steve gasps through his laughter and Bucky manages to poke him in the ribs. "Talk about a tragic past."

"Hey, the last time I saw them was last year."

Natasha doesn't even bother to knock when she barges into Bucky's room, raising her eyebrows at the sight of two grown men having a tickle fight. The people she chooses to hang out with are becoming more questionable by the day.

"Put your dicks away, we're leaving in five minutes."

* 

Dinner is a struggle from the word go.
Bucky's so tired he keeps zoning out of the conversation, which would be a help if he didn't keep tuning back in right when his sister's boyfriend is making everyone laugh. He's aware, objectively, that Loki is charming and well-spoken and all the shit that made Becky fall for him in the first place, but the guy just rubs Bucky up the wrong way like sandpaper.

He wishes he hadn't taken that last pill before they came over. It's keeping him awake but it's not helping him stay present.

At least Becky and Steve seem to be getting along well. She'd looked him over when they first came in and told him straight up he was 'even less cool than she'd been expecting', which Steve just laughed at. It takes some of the tension out of Bucky's shoulders, because introducing his boyfriend to his sister is nothing like it would be to have Steve meet his parents, but it matters to Bucky more.

Bucky knows this is the first time Steve and Becky have met in person, but he doesn't know it isn't the first time they've spoken. Steve had got her number from Bucky's phone, when he came home from meeting her mid-binge, and had called her to make sure nothing worse than Bucky told him about had happened that night. Becky hadn't been surprised about the state of her brother, had offered Steve some advice about helping him calm down and assured him it would pass.

Steve had panicked in calling her, had known as soon as he'd done it that it probably wasn't the best idea to do it behind her brother's back. Still, it seems like they've both silently decided to pretend it never happened.

Bucky ends up sitting opposite his sister at the table, which is fine except that it means he has a perfect view of Loki all night. He's got Steve on one side, Sam on the other, and Loki slap bang in front of him all **wrists and collarbones and thin thin thin**. Loki eats his plateful and half of Becky's too (Bucky tries not to notice), and Bucky comes back in from one of his little zone-outs when Steve is laughing hard at a story Loki's telling about drinking in Moscow or something. Apparently it's funny.

Bucky can't help the little spike of jealousy he feels at Steve's reaction, no matter how irrational. He decides to get Steve's attention back in the least bratty way possible.

"This is really good, babe. You should try it." Bucky grins and deposits a large portion of his chicken onto Steve's plate. Steve tries not to be disappointed that it's almost all of the sauce, leaving Bucky with mostly-plain meat and salad (dressing on the side, of course).

"Sure. You want some steak, Buck?" He asks, knowing it'll be futile but figuring he should keep up the charade. Bucky, to his surprise, leans over and steals the bite of steak right off Steve's fork (the little flash of tongue is totally unnecessary and goes straight to Steve's dick), eyes lit up as he smirks on his way back to sitting upright.

"You're so kind." He looks so cocky, the opposite of the fragile guy Steve has been worried about, and he leans over and kisses Bucky right there. Becky complains loudly about PDA and Bucky feels a little better when he pulls back with a grin.

Things are okay for a little while after that.

Natasha and Becky are catching up, slipping into Russian now and then which Bucky explains to Steve he can't translate for the life of him. Sam and Steve are slotting into the group nicely so there's no awkwardness. Bucky picks at his food as the conversation moves without him, not being anti-social but just too tired to keep his mask of normality up and talk at the same time. He's starting to crash, he can feel himself on the edge of the cliff and he's looking at the rocks below.
"Are you alright?" He jerks his head up when he hears the question. Loki is looking at him with a slight smile, politely concerned, and Bucky's stomach rolls.

People can tell there's something wrong with him. He's not being normal.

"I'm fine. Just tired." He forces himself to smile back, and he's not sure if it's possible for his face to cramp but he feels like it might. "You know how it is with final rehearsals."

"I can't blame you." Loki nods, understanding, and Bucky knows he's imagining the sarcasm in the guy's voice. "Make sure you eat enough, that's my biggest problem when work picks up. I've skipped lunch and fallen asleep backstage before, nearly missed my cue."

Bucky nods politely and is relieved when Loki gets pulled into another conversation. He feels frozen, anxiety thrumming through his blood. Becky gives him a funny look and he turns his attention to his plate. He can't panic. He needs to be *normal*, for fucks sake. This is how he drives everyone away.

*Just drink your wine and stop shaking and everything will be fine. How many calories? 85, could be double that – is this a small or large glass? Stop shaking. One bite of steak, no idea. Stop fucking shaking there's nothing wrong with you. Three bites of chicken won't kill you. Cooked in oil or butter, too much fat, should have got it baked or broiled. Pull yourself together, you're being pathetic. Swallow. Drink. Swallow again. Nothing is stuck in your throat you fucking moron. Stop shaking stop –*

"Buck?" Steve's hand is on his leg under the table, the warm weight of touch pulling Bucky out of his head. "You look like you're about to fall asleep, why don't we duck out early?"

Bucky knows he doesn't look like he's about to fall asleep. He knows his knuckles are white around his fork and Steve is close enough that he can probably see his hands trembling.

He feels like there's a medicine ball crushing his chest. Minutely, he nods.

Excuses and goodbyes pass in a blur of hugs and settling their share of the bill, and then they're outside and Bucky can't smell food anymore. He shivers in his too-thin jacket and Steve's scarf is looped around his neck. The city smells like city, not edible.

"Bucky?" Steve had taken his hand to lead him out of the restaurant, Bucky realises. He's still holding it. He looks concerned. Bucky notices it all from far away.

"I can't remember my choreography." He hears himself say. That starts to bring him back to Earth even though he fights it because *no nothing hurts here*. "For tomorrow. I can't remember. I need to practice."

"No you don't." Steve is holding both his hands now. Squeezing them. Bucky feels it. "You're too tired, Buck. It's okay to not remember stuff when you're exhausted."

Bucky doesn't say anything, he just shakes his head. He looked like he was going to have a panic attack in the restaurant, pale and tight like he'd snap if he moved wrong, but now he really does look like he might fall asleep. Steve puts his arm around his shoulders and starts leading him in the direction of his apartment.

"C'mon. We'll go home and get some rest, okay? You'll feel better once you've slept."

Bucky shakes his head again, but he's too tired to protest and ends up laying his head wearily on Steve's shoulder as they walk. Steve doesn't understand that sleep doesn't fix anything, it's just a reset
button. You close your eyes and hope for change and then you wake up and everything is the same as you left it. Everything still hurts, you just have more energy to feel the pain. It's better if you don't sleep and you just keep going because maybe then you can stand it.

Bucky doesn't realise he's been speaking aloud until Steve has stopped walking and is looking at him with oddly-shiny eyes. Nobody notices their moment on the dark street, the city moves along just fine without them.

"Is that how you feel about your life? Really?"

"T-Told you I was emo." Bucky stutters, weakly. He meets Steve's eyes and looks away quickly, his face crumpling even as he tries so hard to keep it together. This is how he drives people away, by telling the truth. "I'm sorry."

"Babe, no." Steve pulls him into his arms and Bucky doesn't even care how pathetic he is right now as he buries his face in Steve's chest. He's too tired and too worn out and everything is just too much. And Steve is still here and somehow that's more overwhelming than anything else.

"Buck, you can't carry on like this." Steve sounds choked up, fighting to keep his voice level now he's got an accidental insight into the way Bucky talks to himself all the time. "You need to get some help, you can't feel like that all the time."

"The show." Bucky counters, instinctively. The arms around him tighten and he can feel Steve shake his head.

"I don't give a fuck about the show." There's heat in his voice, and Bucky thinks he should be afraid but he's too tired to react. "There's more to life than dancing, Buck. Like wanting to be alive."

"Dancing is my life." It's another automatic response, and Steve just holds him tighter. As if he can protect Bucky from his own mind.

"It doesn't have to be."

Bucky's never thought of that before.
"You smell like puke."

"Not helpful." Bucky hisses back. Natasha is wrapped in his arms in the starting position for their duo, and every fibre of his being wants to be anywhere but here.

"We're going to be great." She promises through the teeth of her fixed smile before the music starts. Then they're dancing, and Bucky forgets everything else.

Most of the day has passed like that, with Bucky physically present but mentally checked-out, going through the motions. He's been in a weird fog since last night, caught up in his head after Steve said something that cracked his world open. He can't accept that he has options outside of dancing, he's never considered it for a reason.

Any time he tries to seriously think about what he'd do except dance, all the can hear is his mother's voice. You would be nothing without ballet and you're not even grateful for it. It's like a stumbling block his brain can't get past, a spike in the road that keeps blowing out his tyres before he can flee.

He would be nothing without ballet. He has no other skills, his family had valued dance training far above education and it shows in the handful of shitty qualifications he's picked up in between show and rehearsal and bingeing and throwing up and show and rehearsal over the years. His talent is a blessing and a curse, trapping him in a gilded cage.

Steve has been worried as hell all day, but he's been keeping it under control. His nerves about performing had kicked in at precisely the time he didn't need them, and he and Bucky had gone through their morning routine mostly in silence. At least Bucky had slept, crashed out the second his head hit the pillow because he'd been so exhausted, even if he was up again panicking silently at four in the morning. Everything in his body is screaming at him to run, but he can't.

Before they'd left for the theatre, Steve had pulled Bucky into his arms and just held him for a few minutes, trying to give all the reassurances he didn't know how to put into words. Trying to tell Bucky that he'll be there at the end of this. Bucky hid in his boyfriend's shoulder and let himself pretend for a minute that he didn't have to be on stage that night. That this was where his day began and ended.

It's the only time Bucky has felt like he could breathe all week.

The dressing rooms were tense, always are in the last few hours before a show opens. All the dancers have their own rituals and their own good luck charms, some of which overlap and some of which clash. There had been a couple of arguments, a few breakdowns into tears, but overall things were quietly tense. Sam is one of the few who get excited and hyperactive before a performance, and Bucky swore Natasha was going to punch him if Maria hadn't stepped in and shooed everyone off to their respective dressing rooms.

Bucky has rituals of his own. He'd ducked Steve's concerned gaze and sneaked out to the nearest bodega, making it back into the theatre without being seen and locking himself in the furthest bathroom he could find with his grocery bag. He'd binged mechanically on candy and white bread, his go-to foods to feel comforted and ward off anxiety, losing track of time and bringing it all back.
up in a rush before hurrying to his curtain call. He studiously ignored the streaks of blood in the toilet bowl.

He knows he smells like puke, he doesn't need Natasha to tell him that.

Everything disappears when they dance. Bucky can't see beyond the bright lights of the stage, is too blinded to see into the dark wings, and his whole existence is boiled down to his screaming muscles and the forced smile on his face. It's the only moment in his life that doesn't hurt, the moment where he blanks out the pain of moving and everything is in order. Order comes from pain, and in this moment he understands that with perfect clarity.

In this moment he knows, doesn't realise or understand but knows, that he can never give up dancing. As long as he's able to dance, he won't be able to stop. That tells him what he has to do.

They finish, the music ends, they smile, they bow. Everything is clockwork. Everything is in order. Bucky is useful.

Bucky collapses into a chair backstage, chest heaving as he blinks hard to try and clear the spots from his vision. Sam claps him on the shoulder and palms him the baggie of pills on his way to the stage, rightly assuming that his friend needs the boost. He's performing his function, he's a working machine.

Bucky's mind is blissfully blank as he chases down three of the pills with a gulp of water. He's empty, they'll kick in fast and nobody will be able to tell he's exhausted. He'll continue to perform. He rinses his mouth out and spits into a plastic-lined trash can, trying to wash the taste of bile away. He's got a group number, the intermission, and then his solo. Then he's done. It all feels mechanical and very far away. Maybe it's the pills.

Steve comes to find him at intermission and he can immediately tell Bucky is on something. He's not exactly grinding his teeth, but the way he holds himself is completely off and the hammering pulse Steve feels when he grabs his boyfriend's wrist is more than enough to confirm what he's seeing.

"Are you serious?" He pulls Bucky away from the group and keeps his voice low, not trying to get his boyfriend in trouble with the director. "Bucky, you're gonna hurt yourself. What the hell did you take?"

"I know what I'm doing." Bucky yanks his arm away viciously, voice tight because the speed tends to make his jaw clench in large doses. "It's for energy. I need to finish the show."

"This is totally fucked up." Steve groans, rubbing a hand over his eyes like he can't believe what he's seeing. Bucky takes the comment totally wrong and explodes, physically shoving Steve away from him and drawing attention to them that he really doesn't want.

"I'm totally fucked up! You already knew that." He doesn't want to do this, but it's better this way. He cares about Steve, and the guy is too fucking determined to love Bucky to be pushed away by his usual fuck ups. He deserves to be kept at arm's length, pushed out of the line of fire. "I told you this was gonna be over when you started acting like my keeper, so back the fuck off."

"Buck, that's not what I meant." Steve holds his hands up and tries to calm the situation down. He can see the tremor in Bucky's limbs and the wildness in his eyes and it scares him. Control seems to have left the building, but Steve's not going anywhere. "The show isn't worth this, you're more important than some dance."
"Shut up." Bucky's hands twitch from the effort of not putting them over his ears like a child. He can't let Steve convince him of that. He can't afford to matter. "I've got to get to my curtain call."

"Please, Bucky. Don't do this." Steve catches his arm, not caring if Bucky punches him in the face for his trouble. With that much amphetamine in his system, Steve's pretty sure dancing isn't going to end well.

He doesn't know that's what Bucky's hoping for.

"I have to." His voice isn't angry, not anymore, and Steve stares after him as Bucky pulls away and walks towards his side of the stage.

He looks like he's going to his execution, not a dance.

It's the longest four and a half minutes of Steve's life. He watches from the orchestra pit, forces himself to take in every moment of the dance he hadn't been able to watch a few weeks earlier. He's starting to understand that Bucky talks with his body because he can't make his words work, and he figures it's time he listened to what Bucky was trying to tell everyone weeks ago. It's about time someone started listening to Bucky at all.

It's painful to watch someone wrench the storm out of their head and offer it up for judgement. Steve feels like Bucky is screaming for someone to see him under the dance but all he gets is applause. He dances like a weapon aimed at himself, ribs casting shadows under bare, wire-tight muscle. His dark hair has come loose from its careful bun and there's no semblance of propriety or order left. This is as pure as poison.

He stumbles. He's graceful enough and his training automatic enough that he makes it seem part of the dance when he tries to shake the blurriness from his vision. Steve wonders why he finds it so different to other solos he's seen and then he figures it out all at once: Bucky is letting the audience see how hard he's working and how much pain he's in.

He's not smiling, he looks like he's tearing into the space around him rather than gliding through the air stylishly. He's a supernova barely contained by the stage, and Steve thinks he's starting to understand why Bucky works so hard to keep himself under control all the time.

This is a man being ripped apart, and there doesn't have to be blood for it to look like it hurts.

Bucky falls into his final position like he's been shot in slow motion, slumped gracefully on his knees as if he's praying for forgiveness. The audience burst into applause, but he doesn't rise to take a bow.

Natasha realises what's happened a few seconds after witnessing it and tells the stage manager to close the curtain. Maria nods and the curtain closes without Bucky getting up to take the traditional bow. Just another thing his mother would have been appalled by if she'd bothered to show up.

His chest is heaving, his face slack as he stares at nothing. He looks disappointed that he didn't give himself a heart attack and he doesn't react when there are strong hands on his shoulders, trying to get his attention.

"...no, he's conscious. Bucky?" Sam is in front of him, notices when he checks back in and focuses on his face. "Hey, big guy. You okay?"

"Can't get up." Bucky manages. His tongue feels too big for his desert-dry mouth. Over Sam's shoulder he sees Maria wave the company medic away. Of course. She just wants to get him off the stage and out of the way as quickly as possible.
"Hey, it happens. You went hard, man. Sometimes your muscles are just done." Sam is pulling one of Bucky's arms over his shoulders, hauling him up so he can get his feet under him. "C'mon, you're okay. Let's get you sitting down somewhere."

"I'm not okay." He says it flatly, clearly, doesn't mumble. He wants to be heard. Nobody listens as Sam helps him backstage and the dancers for the next number move around them like they're awkward rocks in a stream.

"You're fine, you just gave it everything you have." Sam lowers him down into the nearest chair, distracted and not listening to what his friend is saying.

"I'm not fine." Bucky sounds so distressed all of a sudden that Sam stops and pays attention. He hasn't seen Bucky without his mask on, not since he broke down at the company Christmas party and Natasha had hustled him away before he could embarrass himself. "Sam, I'm not. I can't do this anymore."

"Buck—"

"I'm gonna hurt myself." Bucky is a mess, shaking like a leaf from the amphetamines and exhaustion, and now that he's seen it the last thing Sam wants to do is leave him by himself. But the curtain call is sounding and he has to be onstage. "I need help."

"We'll help you, okay? We're gonna figure this out." Sam grabs a bottle of water from a nearby table and presses it into Bucky's hand, wishing he could actually do something useful right now. This has been a long time coming, but he can't do anything with the impatient call of his name from somewhere outside. "I've gotta go, but we're gonna talk about this as soon as I get back. It'll be okay, I promise."

Then he's gone, and Bucky is alone in the empty dressing room. The bottle of water slips from his hand and falls to the floor with a dull thunk, almost drowned out by the music that starts up from the stage. Piano. Steve.

Steve deserves better than this, better than the mask that Bucky can no longer maintain. No matter how hard he pretends to be a person, Bucky has never been more than a machine designed for a single purpose. In order to get off the wheel, he has to break the chains tying him to it.

If he cuts the strings, the puppet can finally stop dancing.

It takes a couple of tries for him to stand, supporting himself on shaky legs that don't want to work. Bucky moves like he's in sleep paralysis, forcing himself to walk through the sickly treacle he feels is clinging to his legs, weighing him down like the last five pounds he can never ever shift enough to be satisfied. He's so tired. He's tired of his body letting him down like this.

If it's not going to work, he's going to punish it. If he punishes it hard enough, he won't have to go through this anymore.

Nobody still backstage takes any notice of Bucky as he half-stumbles his way along. He's still shirtless, shivering from dried sweat and dying adrenaline and he's just done. He has no more to give, finally empty in the way he's been filling and purging himself to try and reach for years.

He thought it would feel good to be empty. He was wrong.

Bucky reaches his destination and has to lean on the bannister to catch his breath while he makes up his mind. The staircase is as old and rickety as the rest of the backstage area, overlooked when the front of house was modernised. He leans over the railing and looks down to the next floor, judging
the distance. It's far enough that someone could do some real damage if they accidentally fell down the stairs. Enough damage that they might never have to dance again.

He walks to the top of the stairs like he's dreaming. The darkness looms in front of him like an open mouth, ready to be filled. He closes his eyes.

Bucky takes a deep breath, and falls.

Chapter End Notes

Of course, Bucky's dance can be found here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-tW0CkvDfI
The space between the washing machine and the wall is the best place to hide when he doesn’t want to do his exercises. Mama is too big to get in there and look for him, and if he backs right up into the dark against the wall she might not see him.

She’s calling now, starting to lose her temper when he doesn’t come. Bucky hurries into the kitchen and goes for his safe hiding place, but he can’t get into the gap. He starts to panic, did the gap get smaller? He doesn’t fit.

The gap didn’t get smaller, he realises with a sickening lurch. Bucky got bigger.

Mama’s hand comes across the back of his head and makes him see stars, but he doesn’t even register the pain. He's too caught up in the idea.

He’s not safe anymore because he got bigger.

*

Sounds come back first.

"I shouldn't have said that. I should have realised how bad it was."

"Tasha…"

"He's always got through it before, I should have paid attention. I shouldn't have expected him to carry on like that."

"You're damn right."

"Steve, it's not her fault."

He drifts out.

*

The school doctor frowns and checks the weight chart again. Bucky had asked to go on the scale backwards, but he can't help reading the numbers upside down on the notes.

Too high. He knew it.

"I'm going to recommend some changes to your diet." The doctor taps something into the computer on her desk and Bucky desperately wants to know how badly he's been found wanting. "Your weight is a little low. You need to up your intake by a few hundred calories a day."

He just stares at her. He can see himself in the mirror, how can they say he's too light when all he sees is lard? He wants to see the other boys' charts, see where he measures up to them. He has to be the smallest, he has to be.

Still, he smiles and nods like the good, polite boy he was raised to be. He can pretend to let them trick him into getting bigger.

He can eat the calories, he doesn't have to keep them.
He drifts back in.

"… I just didn't know. Sam says you did it on purpose, and I don't want to believe him but I do. Why didn't you… but you did. You did say something and nobody fucking listened. I'm so sorry I listened to Natasha and Sam and Maria and everyone except you. I knew how you were feeling and I was a fucking idiot and didn't do anything because I didn't want to smother you. I should have told Maria what was going on weeks ago, and you'd have hated me but at least you…"

He slips away again.

"If you think order comes from pain…"

Bucky doesn't flinch as the second line goes through the meat of his chest. He's had worse.

"…then I can give you pain…"

Brock wipes the knife on the bloody towel sitting on the bed, and Bucky tells himself that he imagines the pallor of his boyfriend's face and the tremor in his hand. He offered to do this after Bucky tried to explain his problems with food, he must want it.

"…you don't have to do it to yourself."

A few cuts aren't enough. They're never enough.

The third time Bucky slips back into consciousness, he can hear things like he's not half-stuck in a dream. This is the present, he can tell by the heaviness in his head and the fact that he can feel his chest start constricting with worry despite his confusion.

There was part of him that hoped he wouldn't wake up. He's not sure if that part is winning or not as he struggles to open his eyes. Someone is talking.

"… and then… Buck? Bucky?" Everything is blurry when he forces his sluggish eyes open, and he almost panics before a smudge of yellow comes into view. He lets his eyes fall closed again, because he's safe. "You're in the hospital, don't try and move."

"You crying?" Bucky's throat feels even shittier than usual and his voice is almost nothing but a whisper as he forces the words out. "Told ya you'd miss me."

"You stupid fucking asshole." Steve is definitely crying, Bucky can feel the dampness on his fingers as they touch his cheeks, warm. "Bucky, what the hell did you do?"

"I fell." He thinks he smiles.

It doesn't seem to make Steve feel any better.

"You could've killed yourself." Bucky forces his tired eyelids open when he hears the distress in Steve's voice. He can focus a little better this time and see the puffiness of his boyfriend's eyelids, the sore red of his eyes. He's still the sweetest thing Bucky's ever seen.

"You're beautiful." He smiles again, and Steve makes a strangled noise that Bucky thinks is a laugh.
He's starting to realise he must be on a lot of painkillers, everything has a strange halo to it and he's not really grasping the seriousness of the situation. "Lay down with me, Stevie."

"I can't, baby." It makes his face crumple all over again and Bucky frowns because that's not what he wanted. "You're hurt, I can't."

"I'm hurt?"

"Yeah, Buck." Steve has clearly figured out that he's high too, Bucky's not sure when his boyfriend knew that, because he's got a soft tone to his voice now. "Are you in pain anywhere?"

"I can't feel anything." He tries to lift his arms to pull Steve down to him, but nothing happens. That sobers him up really fast, and Steve can see the second where his eyes widen in panic. "Steve, I can't feel anything."

"Shh, it's okay. It's just the painkillers." Suddenly Bucky feels a large hand in his right, squeezing his fingers, and the wash of warmth that fills him feels like another shot of morphine. "You feel that? Squeeze my fingers, Buck."

He does, and he can move his fingers to do it, and he closes his eyes again in pure relief.

"I can feel you."

"See? You're okay." Bucky can tell Steve is lying just from the tone of his voice, but he's too hazy to demand the truth.

"M'so tired."

"Just rest, I'm here." Steve's voice is closer, he must be leaning forward again. Bucky feels lips brush against the stubble on his cheek and he wants to wake up, wants to ask why Steve is so scared, but the medicated fog is dragging him down into the darkness again.

"I don't wanna fall again."

"I won't let you fall." Steve's voice is close, his hair brushing against Bucky's neck. He must have his head on his shoulder. Bucky smiles softly to himself as he drifts out again. "I'm not going anywhere, I won't let you fall."

* 

Sam is waiting in the corridor when Steve ducks out to get some coffee. He looks about as shitty as Steve feels, totally exhausted and still in the sweats he'd pulled on after the show ended, after they were told that there had been an accident backstage. He'd known who the 'accident' was immediately.

"He awake yet?" He holds out a cup of vending machine coffee like a peace offering and Steve takes it gratefully.

"Came around for a few minutes. Totally out of it on painkillers." Steve slumps down onto the uncomfortable metal bench that passes as seating in the hallway and Sam sits beside him. "He looks awful."

"What did the doctor say?" Sam fidgets with the plastic lid of his own shitty coffee, and Steve can tell he's seriously upset because he's never usually one for nervous tells.
"He won't tell me anything except that the surgery went well, he's waiting for Bucky to wake up to explain everything." Steve recites the facts numbly. He feels like he's living in a nightmare right now, like everything is three feet away from him behind glass. "Did Tasha go home?"

"She took Becky back. They're staying at her place tonight in case they have to come back to the hospital." Sam's voice wavers and Steve looks over just in time to see him crumple. "This is all my fault."

"How is it your fault? Come on." Steve sighs and slings his arm around Sam's shoulders, pulling him into a half-hug.

He wants to blame everyone, lash out at the world the same way he did when he yelled at Natasha when they first rushed into the waiting room and were told Bucky was in surgery. He wants to have someone to scream at, some big bad to defeat so he can keep Bucky safe, but that's not how this works.

The only thing to blame lives inside Bucky's head, and it's well protected by the person it's killing.

"I left him alone. He told me he was gonna hurt himself and I left him." Sam is trying to keep himself together on Steve's shoulder, and Steve really can't handle this right now. "And I knew he was still purging, and about the speed, and I didn't do anything."

"Nobody did anything." Steve closes his eyes for a second, rests his cheek on Sam's head. Sometimes he wonders what would have happened if they'd never broken up, but they were never very good at dating. "We all knew what was going on and we just watched it happen. It's on all of us."

There's a long, uncomfortable silence between them. The guilt is crushing, and even together they can't handle the weight. Blame is not a team sport.

"Are you sure he did it on purpose?" The question is quiet, but Steve asks because he has to know even if he doesn't want to. "It couldn't have been an accident?"

"Steve, the guy was a mess. He straight-up told me he needed help because he was gonna hurt himself. And I… I told him I'd help him and to stay there and I'd be right back. And I left him."

Steve doesn't say anything to that, not for a long time. The minutes tick by with only the ambient noise of the hospital breaking the silence, that is until Steve finally admits what he hasn't told anyone yet.

"He kept telling me dancing was his life. I told him it didn't have to be. He couldn't get his head around it." He pulls away when Sam sits up to look at him, drawing in on himself like he's still a hundred pounds and shy. "Dancing doesn't have to be your life if you don't have a life."

"Steve…” Sam reaches out, but Steve is already standing up to get away from the conversation. Of all the habits to pick up from his boyfriend, it's probably the least destructive.

"Go home, Sam. Get some sleep. I'll call you if anything happens."

"You didn't make him do this." Sam tries, but Steve keeps his back turned.

"You gave him the opportunity, I gave him the motivation." He hangs his head for a second before he squares his shoulders and looks back at Sam, haunted. "Like I said, this is on all of us."
Bucky's mouth tastes like stale bile the next time he wakes up. It's almost comforting in its familiarity.

"Hey." He croaks, and Steve jerks awake from where he's been dozing fitfully in the chair beside Bucky's bed. "Am I awake?"

"You're awake." Steve rubs his eyes with the back of his hand and leans forward, taking Bucky's right hand in his again. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

"Kinda." Bucky tries to sit up but stops himself with a groan. Steve's mouth twitches in concern and he puts his hand gently on Bucky's chest to still him. "Am I okay?"

"You had surgery on your arm. The doctor's coming by in a minute to talk to you." Steve looks like he's about to cry again and Bucky turns his head so he doesn't have to see it. The mass of white bandages and flesh-coloured tape around his shoulder catches him by surprise, and he almost gags with the shock of it.

"Why did you do it, Buck?" Steve is either crying or he's just about holding it together from his voice, and Bucky closes his eyes so he doesn't have to see anything at all. "I was so scared, I saw you at the bottom of the stairs and I thought you were dead."

"I'm not dead, I'm here." Bucky can lift his head just enough to touch his forehead to Steve's where it's bowed over him, and that doesn't help Steve keep his composure. "I had to do it. It was the only way to make it stop."

"To make what stop? You had options, Buck. You didn't have to…" Steve trails off and kisses him. It takes Bucky by surprise. How can anyone want to be near him after what he's done? After he's shown them exactly how messed up he is?

He fell. He never expected someone to catch him.

A knock on the door pulls them out of the moment, and Steve sits up to see the white-coated doctor who'd performed Bucky's surgery standing in the doorway. He's got a lot more to say to his boyfriend, but it can wait.

"Sorry to interrupt." He walks in and picks up the chart from the end of Bucky's bed. "How are you feeling, James? Any pain?"

"Since I woke up." Bucky admits. The doctor steps around the bed and adjusts the valve on his IV, and it must have medication in it because Bucky feels the wash of opiates through his veins almost immediately.

"That should help." He nods and writes something on the chart, adjusting the drugs dosage. "You had quite the fall, has your partner explained what happened?"

"He caught me up." Bucky nods sleepily, pretending that he didn't know exactly what he was doing when he fell. He's starting to feel dizzy from the meds again, but he's not stupid enough to admit to anything that'll keep him in hospital on a psych hold. "What's wrong with my arm? Steve said I had surgery."

"It was very badly broken. We pretty much had to rebuild your left arm, to put it bluntly." The doctor clearly realises that Bucky isn't going to be following specifics with the painkillers in his veins and gives it to him straight. He almost appreciates it.

"You've got screws in your forearm and shoulder, a plate in your wrist, and a lot of muscle tearing."
Recovery will take a while and you'll need physical therapy to get back a limited range of motion. Apart from that, you've got a badly sprained ankle and a lot of bumps and bruises, not to mention a probable concussion. You're lucky you didn't break your neck."

It's a lot to take in. Steve looks pale in the chair next to him, but Bucky is only holding onto one thing.

"Limited motion?" He asks, marble-mouthed and clumsy as the drugs kick in.

"Well, you have excellent muscle tone generally, so with some work you should be able to lift your arm up to shoulder height with the fusing we had to do. Anything above that will be a miracle." The doctor looks apologetic, interprets the smile on Bucky's face as him trying not to cry. "I know you're a dancer, kid. I'm sorry."

"So I can't dance anymore?" Bucky presses. Steve reaches out to take his good hand, and for once Bucky isn't the one shaking. He thinks vaguely that Steve is worrying about him freaking out, but he feels totally calm.

"We'll see how things go." The doctor clearly thinks he's going to freak out too, not giving it to him straight this time. Bucky hears the no under the careful statement as clearly as if he'd said it aloud. "But it doesn't look promising."

"It's gonna be okay, Buck. We'll get through this." Steve is squeezing his fingers now, holding the bicep that isn't black and blue with his other hand. Bucky thinks it would be really bad to laugh in this situation, although they'd probably think he was hysterical and they might be right.

The doctor sees him still smiling and opens his notes with a studied, understanding expression.

"I know this is a lot to take in, and it's okay to be overwhelmed. You could be in shock." He makes a note in Bucky's chart. Clearly they're all expecting Bucky to lose it when reality hits him. "Relax, try to get some rest. The nurse can give you something to help you sleep if you need it. And your partner is welcome to stay with you, under the circumstances."

"Thank you." Steve doesn't even try to pretend he would have left if they'd asked him to. The only way to get him away from Bucky right now is to shoot him.

The doctor nods and leaves to see his next patient. Steve turns to Bucky slowly and sees his good shoulder is shaking, his breath hitching in an odd sort of hiccup he can't immediately place.

"It's gonna be okay." He reaches out to comfort him, and it's only when he reads the expression on Bucky's face that he gets it. He's not crying, he's laughing. "Bucky?"

"I made it stop." He's laughing with tears in his eyes, and he's definitely hysterical as the laughter slowly subsides into sobs. "I cut the strings."

"Oh, Buck." Steve gets up and wraps his arms around his boyfriend, being careful not to touch or jostle his shoulder. Bucky keeps heaving those awful sobs of relief, his bruised cheek pressed over Steve's heart. He's destroyed himself so he can be free, Steve gets it now.

It's terrifying, but Steve holds on. He's not letting Bucky fall again.
"I wasn't... That wasn't what happened, I tried to explain it to you..."

Steve pauses outside the room when he hears the distress in Bucky's voice on the other side of the door.

"No, I can't get back to class in a few... Mama, nyet. Vy menya ponimayete? I'm in the hospital, I can't train... I'm out of the show... I don't care what Becky told you, I know she didn't say that... Please don't pretend you don't understand what I'm telling you..."

The crack in his voice is what makes Steve give up lurking and push through the door slowly. Bucky doesn't even notice him, curled up on his good side and facing away from the door with the phone pressed to his ear.

"Yelling at me isn't gonna change— I know. I'm sorry... I said I'm sorry..." The fight has gone out of his voice and Bucky sounds like he's about to cry, turning his face further into the pillow and messing up his dishevelled hair even more.

Steve awkwardly keeps hold of the backpack he's brought with him, wondering if he should set it down and make his presence known or not. The last couple of weeks have been rough, and Steve notes the tray of food sitting untouched on the side table with a mixture of disappointment and relief. At least if Bucky hasn't eaten, he won't have made himself throw up.

Since he's been in the hospital, Bucky's eating habits have swung suddenly towards not eating at all. Becky had seemed to anticipate it, showing up with a packet of glucose candy that Steve thinks looks disgusting and chalky but is about the only thing he's seen Bucky put in his mouth since 'the accident'. It's probably the fact that his mobility is limited that's caused the change, along with the lack of privacy to make himself puke in peace. Bucky doesn't want to give the medical staff any more ammunition to keep him in than they already have.

The doctors want him to go to inpatient treatment, which of course Bucky has flatly and absolutely refused to do. They want him to see a nutritionist, which is also high on Bucky's list of Things That Aren't Happening. They've started talking about an NG tube if he doesn't start eating more, which Steve thinks might be a tactic to try and scare Bucky into accepting help, but it's ended up having the opposite effect.

Bucky has been trying to get out of the hospital since the drugs wore off on the second or third day, and the threat of being forced to eat has only made him more determined to run and hide.

"I'm sorry. Mama, please don't..." He trails off as his mother hangs up, sending the room into sudden silence without the stream of unclear, angry words over echoing the phone line.

Bucky lets out a wounded little breath before he sets the phone down on the side table and pushes himself up, jolting in surprise when he sees Steve standing there.

"Jesus, how long have you been there?" He swipes at his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to hide how upset he is. He's never been comfortable with showing his emotions, even to Steve.

"Gonna give me a heart attack, Stevie. Then who's gonna suck your dick?"

"I've got a waiting list, half the guys in Brooklyn are looking for a piece of this action." Steve grins unsurely and sets the backpack down on Bucky's bed. He's getting less and less happy with letting Bucky swerve acknowledging his feelings, but he's not going to pick him up on it when he's already
hurting. "Brought you new clothes."

"Probably won't fit into any of them anymore, not since I've been sitting on my ass for nearly two fucking weeks." Bucky grumbles, fumbling to undo the bag with one hand and rifling through the clothes inside.

It's a ridiculous statement, since Steve can see the lines of his collarbones through his sweatshirt and he knows Bucky's lost weight since he's been here, but trying to bring it up will only make Bucky feel like shit. He finally twitches a smile when he sees the soft blue of the sweater he'd stolen from Steve and his expression softens as he looks up.

"Thanks."

"No problem." Steve sits down on the edge of the bed, cupping the back of Bucky's head gently as he presses a kiss to his forehead. "How're you holding up?"

"I'm not, really." The quiet admission is a surprise, because since he got his head clear Bucky's done nothing but insist he's *fine thank you very much* and he's ready to go home. "How's the show?"

"Not so good without you." He's wary of telling Bucky *anything* about the show, considering how he got here, but he figures Natasha will just fill him in if Steve doesn't. "They're just about holding it together. They cut the solo and Pietro's doing your duo with Natasha."

"Pietro?"

"He's good, the kid's a fast learner." Steve shrugs, seeing the conflicted expression cross Bucky's face and wishing he could do something to help him figure out how he feels about being out of the show. "Was your mom upset when you told her?"

"Upset's kinda the wrong word. She was pissed as hell." It's scary how Steve can pinpoint the exact moment the shutters come up on his boyfriend's face, and he knows he's treading on a minefield. "She didn't spend her life making sacrifices for me to throw it all away and make myself useless."

"Did she say that?" Steve stares, wide-eyed. He'd been surprised that Bucky's parents hadn't come to visit him yet, since they don't live far away, but the Barnes twins hadn't expected them to. He's starting to understand why. "Buck, that's horrible. Does she always talk to you like that?"

"She's all about tough love, I guess." Bucky shrugs, feeling somehow embarrassed and trying to divert the conversation. "Did they say I can get the fuck outta here yet?"

"They want you to talk to the therapist first." Steve holds up a hand to cut off the protests before they start. "C'mon, Buck. The sooner you do it, the sooner you can get out of here. And I'm worried about you, I don't want you to hurt yourself again."

"I wasn't thinking straight, you know that. I was all messed up from the pressure and the drugs and shit. It's not gonna happen again." Bucky watches the tight line of Steve's mouth, the 'take no shit' face he's starting to get used to, and sighs. "Alright, fine. I'll see the therapist. *Then* I'm coming home."

"Don't make me promise shit I can't deliver." Steve tugs him forward and presses his lips to his forehead again, making Bucky scowl and tip his face up to kiss his boyfriend properly. He's not fragile, he'll get out of this bed and fight Steve to prove it, if he has to. "We'll see what the doctors say."

"Okay." Bucky finally stops pressing the issue and rests his head on Steve's shoulder wearily. He
tires quickly since he's been here, the dull pain in his arm wiping him out fast no matter how many
drugs he takes. "M'sorry about all this shit."

"It's okay. I'm not going anywhere." Steve shuffles up the bed so he can sit on Bucky's good side
and his boyfriend can curl up against his chest. The nurses think they're adorable, which is the reason
Steve gets to break visiting hour rules pretty much constantly. "Want me to tell you what happened
on the Walking Dead? There are gays now."

"Tara's not dead, right?"

"No, she's still alive."

"Then there were always gays. Just because her girlfriend's dead, doesn't mean she's not gay. Lucky
for you, I'm too tired to lecture you about queer erasure." Bucky grumbles sleepily against Steve's
chest and feels the laugh rumble through his cheek in response. "Okay, tell me about the new gays."

"Okay, so there's this guy—"

"From the start. I wanna hear the pictures." He pokes Steve in the side insistently, even though it
sounds like he'll be asleep before Steve fills him in up to the first commercial break.

Steve nuzzles a kiss into his boyfriend's scraggy hair, smiling widely because he's starting to sound
like the Bucky he knows again. Now the stress of the show has disappeared, now he's burned
himself to the ground, maybe he's starting to rise from the ashes.

"So the last episode ended when that guy walked up to Maggie and Sasha, remember the creepy
music box? This time it opens with them coming into the barn…"

*

"Order comes from pain."

Mama makes him kneel on rice when he doesn't turn out correctly. It's an effective deterrent. It hurts
more than the thin cane she clips his limbs with when they're in the wrong position, but it doesn't
leave a mark for anyone to ask about. Efficient as always.

"This is the philosophy of the ballet. You make yourself bleed for perfection and you never show the
audience that you're hurting."

She jabs the end of the cane into his gut, and Bucky sucks his flab in obediently. It's easier to go
along with what she says, to roll over and hide and hope that she gives up. Going against her only
spurs her on and makes things worse.

"You must never, ever display your pain. You are not a person on stage, you are not human, and
you must never remind the audience that you are. You must be perfect at all times. You must hide the
pain and smile."

The cane doesn't leave his stomach. That's why he's here, because he finished his plate at dinner and
Mama needs to remind him what happens when he doesn't watch his weight.

He's more talented than his sister, he knows that no matter how much he wishes it wasn't true. That's
why Mama pushes him harder, why they have these private training sessions while Becky is allowed
to do her homework in their father's office upstairs. That's why Mama has to be hard on him, so he
can realise his full potential and make him worth all her time and money.
Bucky wishes he wasn't talented. He wishes with all his heart.

"Smile."

He does, so used to appeasing her that he obeys instinctively now. Mama pushes the sharp cane harder into his stomach, never letting up the pressure. The pain spikes and Bucky is scared his skin will break, that he'll be run through.

He smiles.

"Good."

Finally the cane is taken away and Bucky can breathe again, a thin bead of sweat itching as it trickles down the back of his neck. Mama nods and taps the cane hard of the floor, making him jump. He's still smiling, completely in order.

"First position."

*

Once he's finished, Bucky's not sure he told a single truth to the therapist they send to his room the morning after he promises Steve he'll speak to them. The guy is perfectly nice, very polite and professional, but Bucky's lied about himself for so long he's not sure he could tell the truth even if he wanted to.

"It was a total accident, I must have fainted as I was walking down the stairs. I'd just come off stage, I should've waited to cool down a little. I feel like an idiot."

"To be honest I just kinda don't like the food in here, no offence."

Charming smile, bullshit.

"Sure I've made myself puke a few times. Everyone in my profession does, now and again, because weight is so important for castings and stuff. I couldn't do it all the time, though. Super gross."

Flirt a little, smile, total bullshit.

"Sure I'd like to lose five pounds or something, wouldn't everyone?"

That one gets a funny look from the therapist, and Bucky keeps his smile up as he curses himself mentally for fucking up.

"I have a very good relationship with my family. They were hard on us growing up, sure, but they made a lot of sacrifices for our careers. We get along fine."

He can't really keep his smile up at that one, not even when he forces himself to remember Mama's lessons and shove his face into a rictus of politeness.

The verdict shouldn't come as a surprise, but it does.

"What the fuck d'you mean, residential treatment?!" He blows up in the guy's face, and the therapist looks like he's expecting it from his studied non-reaction. Bucky never gets nasty until he's pushed over the edge, then he snaps into defensiveness with claws out. "You can refer me all you want, pal. I'm not fucking going."

"James—"
"I'm not paying for it, my insurance won't cover it. And I'm not staying here another fucking day while you assholes make up this bullshit about me." He's panicking, he knows he's panicking, but he shoves himself out of bed anyway, shakily shoving his possessions into the rucksack Steve brought them in.

Fight or flight. Bucky had the fight knocked out of him a long time ago.

"James, please sit down. There's no reason to—"

"I'm fine, there's nothing fucking wrong with me." He pulls out his IV and doesn't even flinch. That's when the therapist seems to realise he means business and stands up too. "You can't lock me up. I'm signing myself out."

"If you continue the way you are, you're going to die."

"It's not like I've got anything to live for now." Bucky indicates his arm sarcastically, grabbing Steve's hoodie and pulling it awkwardly over the cast. He feels light headed just standing up, but fear is driving him and the adrenaline is enough to keep him on his feet.

He hasn't acknowledged how hard being unable to dance is hitting him until now. He wanted this, he did it to himself, so why does he feel like his life is over?

There's no way in hell he's letting them shove him into some treatment centre and brainwash him into eating. He's not going to be fat as well as useless.

"I'm going to address that some other time, but seriously James, you have to get into treatment." The guy looks like he sincerely wants to grab Bucky and shake some sense into him, it's only professionalism making him keep his distance. "Even if it's outpatient, you've got to do something. Please. I can refer you to a clinic—"

"I'm outta here." Bucky slings the rucksack over his good shoulder and shoves his way out of the room, sucking in a pained breath as opening the door sends a jolt through his bad arm.

Every step jostles his injuries just the same, and his sprained ankle makes him limp worse than when he fucked up his knee when he was seventeen. He must look like death, if the duty nurse's reaction to him asking to sign himself out is anything to go by, as she does everything in her power to convince him to stay or at least wait to see the doctor before he goes. Bucky ignores it all and signs himself out AMA, getting the hell out of there as fast as his broken, useless body will take him.

Things go wrong from there. Bucky's got no money on him, he realises as he pats down his pockets for the wallet he doesn't have, so he can't take a cab or the bus. He knows Steve and Sam's apartment isn't too far from the hospital, so he must be able to walk there. Two weeks ago he wouldn't have even thought about it, his body will do what it's told no matter how bad he feels.

It turns out he's underestimated the state he's in. Bucky hasn't eaten at all for maybe three days, and the raw hunger in his belly makes him lightheaded from maybe the second block. He also hadn't anticipated how badly every step would jar his bad arm, and the pain becomes a dull stab into his nerves that seems eternal.

Bucky makes it maybe four or five blocks before he collapses to sit on some steps; sweating, pale from pain, and gasping for breath. The adrenaline of his panicked escape has worn off now, and he can't force his body into submission anymore. There's nothing left in the tank.

He's going to have to do the worst thing he can think of: he's going to have to show someone how badly he's hurting and ask for help.
"Steve?" Bucky tries not to stutter or slur when Steve picks up the phone, because he knows sometimes his voice fucks up when he gets like this and he doesn't want to scare his boyfriend. "Can you come get me?"

"Buck? What's wrong?" Steve sounds concerned, as far as Bucky can tell through his fogy brain, with a note of panic in his voice. "I went to the hospital and they told me you left, where the hell are you? What happened?"

"Nothing. I just got… I'm just kinda dizzy. I don't wanna walk on my own." He doesn't say he can't, doesn't try to untangle the rest of what Steve said. He can't concentrate that much, even as he tries to play down how bad it is.

"Are you sitting down somewhere?" Steve is definitely panicking now and Bucky feels like complete shit for causing it. "I've been calling you for a half hour, where are you?"

"I'm on some steps on…" He looks around and can't focus enough to read any signs, but he recognises a convenience store opposite where he's sitting. "Y'know that bodega that does five kinds of slushie?"

"No, I don't." It occurs to Bucky that maybe people don't remember locations depending on what food they can get there. It wouldn't be the first time he's been made aware of how fuked up his thinking is. "Wait, the one on tenth? Next to the Polish place that sells all the church candles and shit?"

"Yeah, that one." Bucky pinches the bridge of his nose and screws his eyes shut as he feels a headache start pounding at the base of his skull. This is beyond hunger, his heart is pounding out of his chest and he feels like he's about to die. "Please come get me?"

"I'm a few blocks over with Sam, I'll be there in a few minutes." He raises his voice when Bucky doesn't reply. "Buck? Bucky?!"

The silence over the line is deafening.
"Are you watching Food Network?" Becky isn't surprised by what's on the TV, but she knows how to approach her brother when he's in a funk like this. She has to engage to see if he'll push back.

Bucky grunts at the question and burrows further into his nest of blankets on the couch, snaking one bony hand out of his cocoon to pointedly move the remote out of Becky's reach. She rolls her eyes, typical. This is the crash phase of his denial, she's seen it before.

After Steve and Sam ran five blocks, only to find Bucky awake and alive sitting on some steps with a dead phone battery (Steve was torn between laughing and crying, Sam just can't believe this is his life now), they'd brought him back to his apartment. Bucky's insistence that the hospital told him he could leave was shut down immediately, not that being caught in a lie fazed him as he point-blank refused to go back.

Steve couldn't talk him into it, Natasha and Sam couldn't get him to consider it, even Becky couldn't do it after she pulled out every trick she knew to get her little brother to do her bidding. It wasn't like they could force him into it, no matter how much they wanted to. No matter how much they felt like Bucky wouldn't be around much longer if they didn't.

Steve spent more than an hour chewing him out for signing himself out of the hospital, once the dust settled and they'd established that Bucky wasn't about to die and also wasn't going back to be taken care of. He needed to make sure that Bucky knew just how much he cared about him and exactly how fucking terrified he'd been, hoping that being the cause of that fear might motivate his boyfriend into agreeing to treatment. It doesn't. It makes Bucky cry and apologise for about three whole days, but it doesn't shake his resolve to stay the hell away from anything that looks like a doctor.

The problem is, since dancing has gone out of his life Bucky has had too much energy and nothing to do with it. Once he started eating a little better at home (that is, eating at all and mostly not making himself puke up his 'safe' foods), his arm had stopped hurting as much and his energy shot through the roof again. He burned through Sam's DVD collection and Netflix account, donated out of guilt, plus all Steve's art books on kinbaku rope bondage and Tom of Finland ("Seriously, Steve, did you come out of the womb doing jazz hands or what? You're literally too gay to function."). It took a few weeks for him to run out of culture to devour, and then the trouble started.

Bucky used to sleep-clean when he was exhausted from class, his body giving up before his mind was ready to and then being driven to move by his restless brain. He always purged after we woke up and found out he'd done it, after a single incident in which he realised he'd eaten in his sleep. Now he has as much time to sleep as he wants, Bucky throws himself into cleaning and re-organising the apartment in his waking hours. It becomes almost an obsession, the smell of bleach overwhelming every time Steve comes into the apartment (he starts bringing his inhaler, just in case, but doesn't tell Bucky about it). The place is totally spotless, but it's not like Bucky cares about it getting messed up. He practically encourages it, because it means he can start all over again and make something else perfect now that he's not.

When Natasha finally put her foot down and took away the cleaning supplies, after Bucky 're-organised' her floordrobe and she couldn't find anything for days, Bucky turned his attention to exercise. Sitting around all day waiting for his arm to heal is messing with his head, so he spends the next week or so trying to sneak off to the gym and getting increasingly frustrated and pissy when he doesn't get to. Sam distracts him, tries to divert him into doing something else instead of bringing the hammer down and making him get defensive. Steve reasons with him and Bucky often feels guilty enough to stay home. That or Steve distracts him with sex, which Bucky really doesn't mind because
he's still burning calories that way. Natasha is the one who straight-up tells him he's not allowed to go, and their screaming matches are getting worse and worse.

Or at least they were, before it seemed as if Bucky's energy ran out completely. One day the pilot light was on, and the next it was just out. One morning he shuffled out of bed and made camp on the couch, staring blankly at the TV. He stayed there.

It's been days.

Becky had actually been relieved when Steve called to let her know that manic-Bucky had turned into slug-Bucky. She's on another visit from Russia, making her trips to the US more frequent since Bucky's 'accident', and she's glad to be around for this stage of his recovery. The same thing had happened after Novosibirsk, anger and fear had turned into energy had turned into a crash.

The crash is good, because now he can start getting up again.

"Seriously. How can you watch this when you're hungry?" She goes over and turns off the TV at the screen, and Bucky makes a disgruntled noise from within his protective nest. "You've got physical therapy, come on."

"Fuck off." Bucky sounds like he hasn't spoken since he started camping out on the couch, his voice rough and abrupt. Becky smiles sweetly and grabs the blankets, yanking them off her brother unceremoniously and making him yelp as the cold air hits him.

There's a reason she's doing this instead of Steve. The time for the gentle approach is over.

"Becky, what the fuck?!" Bucky grabs for the blankets and his sister holds them just out of his reach. Anger is a good motivator, they've always used it to fuel them, and she's counting on pissing him off enough to get him moving. "I'm not fucking going to PT."

"Yes you are." She smirks when she hears her brother growl. "You've done enough wallowing for eight lifetimes already and it's not cute. Get your ass up and get moving."

"I'm not——"

"I'll find a way to put butter in everything you eat for the next month. Butter coffee is a thing now and I bet you'd love to try it." Becky narrows her eyes at him and Bucky knows his sister well enough to know it's not an empty threat. "Get. Up."

"God, I hate you." The scowl is totally withering and could probably frighten small animals, but Becky just grins back. That's her brother. He stands up reluctantly, still favouring his right side since his arm came out of plaster. "You're the worst. You're banned from my apartment."

"You've got five minutes to put actual pants on." She points him towards his bedroom and Bucky glares at her the whole way across the front room. "I'm not taking you outside in a leopard print onesie, that's even less cute then you sulking."

"I have no sister." Bucky gives her the finger and skulks back into his room to change.

Becky texts Steve a smiling poop emoji. It pretty much sums things up so far.

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Nick, Bucky's physical therapist, is pretty high on the list of people who don't buy his bullshit. If Becky and Natasha are CEO and President of the Bucky Barnes is A Fucking Liar association, then
Nick is definitely vying for the Vice-President slot. It's becoming very inconvenient.

"Push up against my hand as hard as you can."

"Isn't it too soon for this?" Bucky protests, trying to lift his arm as high as it will go. "I only just had the last stitches out."

He's starting to get freaked out by how 'well' he's doing in physical therapy, especially after his most recent evaluation. He's got a lot more movement in his arm than the doctors were expecting at this stage, although healing completely is taking longer than they'd like because of his shitty nutrition. The news has left Bucky caught in this total contradictory bind in his head and it's starting to really get to him.

He wants to do well, because he doesn't want to be imperfect and he wants to get his life back on track. He wants to be able to work out again and not feel guilty about every tiny piece of food he puts in his mouth and doesn't purge out. At the same time, he's terrified of doing too well, because then he might be able to dance again.

"I'll tell you when it's too damn soon." Nick rolls his eye and Bucky scowls because he's clearly having none of his shit. The fake leather of the PT bench creaks underneath him and he imagines it's because he's so heavy it's about to give out under his weight. "Push against my hand."

"I'm tired." Bucky tries not to whine, but he hears it in his voice anyway. It works on Steve sometimes, and he pulls his best wounded face to compliment his words. "My arm already hurts."

"Listen, kid. You can manipulate your boyfriend all you want, but you can't manipulate me." Nick gets his gaze and holds it, and Bucky is too thrown off by being caught out on his tactics to look away. "Let me explain exactly what's wrong with you."

The last thing Bucky wants to hear right now is the truth, but Nick just keeps giving it to him. He feels like he's back in the company doctor's office in Novosibirsk, being taken apart.

"You're tired because you puke up everything you eat, which is also why your arm hurts because you're not getting enough nutrition for it to heal properly. You're not trying to get better, for some damn reason, and you're trying to convince everyone around you that you are." He fixes Bucky with the most unimpressed stare and Bucky shrinks from it. "My job is to try and get your fucked up muscles into shape until you tear your oesophagus and you're not my problem anymore. So if you could be honest for five fucking minutes, that'd really help me out."

Bucky finally tears his eyes away and looks at the floor, trying to hide how the words have hit him like a sledgehammer. Nick sighs and holds out a bottle of water, waving it insistently until Bucky takes it.

"Drink. Get your shit together. Then we'll try again. Try, this time."

Bucky nods, fumbling with the cap on the water and taking a sip obediently. Nick looks him over, taking in the slump of his posture and the defeated droop of his head with concern. For all he's a pain in his ass, he likes Barnes and his sarcastic sense of humour. It's not pleasant to see him lose that.

"You want to tell me why you're holding back?" Nick's voice is level, and Bucky supposes this is probably about as comforting as the guy gets. "You had twice the strength in your arm last week, and you haven't gone backwards. You're pretending you can't do it."

Bucky stares at his hands, blanking on excuses as he's distracted by the calluses on his forefingers. Healing.
Is he healing? Is that what this is?

"I did this to myself." He doesn't look up as he speaks, keeps his focus elsewhere so he can't see Nick's reaction. "I... I couldn't handle dancing anymore and I'm scared that if I get better I'll have to go back to it."

"Do you want to go back to dancing?" Nick asks, not surprised that Bucky shakes his head before he's even done with the question. "Then don't, nobody's making you."

"My Mom'll never speak to me again if I don't." Bucky makes a watery sound that he thinks is a laugh. Nick sighs slowly through his nose.

"Look, I'm not a therapist and I don't know your situation that well. But if somebody wants you to do something that makes you this unhappy, just for their benefit, then maybe that's not someone you want in your life."

Bucky swallows hard and half-shrugs, he can only do it with one shoulder these days since they bolted him back together. It's not like his mother has spoken to him since he called her from the hospital, maybe she's stopped caring. Maybe he doesn't have to worry about what she thinks anymore.

"I'm only gonna say this once, so pay attention. I do not enjoy this touchy-feely shit." It's awkward, but he reaches out to put his hand on Bucky's good shoulder. "It doesn't matter that you fell, kid. It matters that you get back up."

There's a long pause where Bucky lets that sink in, actually thinks it's starting to make sense for once. Then he raises his head with a shit-eating grin and the moment is over.

"Aw, Nicky. I knew you liked me." Nick removes his hand with a scowl as Bucky tilts his head sideways coquettishly. Flirting has always been his second stop to hide his feelings, after flat-out denial. "You know, I've got a thing for buff guys."

"And I've got a thing for you doing your godamn exercises so you can get the hell out of my sight." He holds his hand up just below Bucky's shoulder height again. "Now push against my hand, you little shit."

Bucky pushes.

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"Okay, that hurts."

Steve and Bucky's sex life has definitely taken a hit since he ended up in the hospital. Things have been better since he came home, since Bucky actually started wanting to make out again, but they're yet to actually 'do the do', as Steve insists on calling it just to make his boyfriend smile.

He takes his hands off Bucky the second he says something hurts, ignoring the ache in his dick and backing off.

"Like, how...?"

"That's gonna put pressure on my shoulder, I can't hold myself up like before. That position's not gonna work." Bucky rolls awkwardly onto his back and looks up at Steve with a sheepish smile. He's flushed and sweaty from making out and totally beautiful, and Steve couldn't give less of a shit how they do this. "This is awkward."
"No it's not." Steve shakes his head and leans down to kiss him, messy and tender because he's missed this so much. "Awkward's cute, anyway. You're ad—"

"If you say adorkable I'm gonna squeeze your balls until they fall off." Bucky pinches Steve's side right where he's ticklish, trying not to smile.

He's been scared of letting anyone see him naked, letting Steve see his arm all scarred and still swollen up, but Steve keeps telling him he's gorgeous and perfect and Bucky's fear melts a little more every time he hears it. He's wanted to do more than give Steve a sleepy handjob for a week now, and they've finally got the apartment to themselves. He's not going to let a little self-consciousness hold him back.

Bucky's been shirtless in front of over a thousand people, he can be naked and fat with his boyfriend.

"Why don't you get on top?" Steve suggests, running his fingertips over the hollow of Bucky's throat just the way he likes it. "Might be easier."

"Why don't I just top?" Bucky counters, and Steve shrugs far more willingly than he'd expected him to.

"Sure, you can top."

"I don't want to top, I was just saying." Bucky pokes his side again, feeling the muscles under his fingertips and still marveling at them no matter how many times he's touched Steve like this. "I'll keep that information for later, but I just want you to fuck me tonight. I miss your dick, please."

"Okay, so get in my lap. I'll do all the work." Steve kisses him again and slides his arm under Bucky's back, lifting him up and pulling him close as he moves back to sit against the wall. "Better?"

"Mm, much." Bucky doesn't waste time, settling into Steve's lap and smirking as he makes his boyfriend moan brokenly by grinding his hips down against him. "Touch me."

He's so focused on sucking possessive hickeys into Steve's neck that it takes Bucky a second to notice when his boyfriend's hand pauses at his crotch. Steve's whole body stills next, and that's what makes Bucky pause.

"S'wrong?" He murmurs, pulling back to get a look at Steve's face. "Babe?"

"Buck, you don't have to do this if you don't want to." Steve is so gentle as he slides his hand up to cup Bucky's neck, and Bucky doesn't understand why everything has suddenly stopped. "It's okay, you can take all the time you need to feel ready again. I'm not gonna rush you."

"I do wanna do this. What..." Bucky looks down in confusion and freezes.

He's not hard. He'd been so caught up in worrying about what his body looked like that he hadn't even noticed.

The shame hits him like a slap in the face, and Steve clearly realizes what's happened the same moment that Bucky does.

"Oh. I read about this. Sometimes it happens with eating disorders and..." He trails off when he sees Bucky's face and realizes he's really not helping. "It's okay Buck, you don't have to be embarrassed."

"Yeah, well I am." Bucky shrinks in shame, staying curled in on himself even when Steve pulls him into his arms. He wants to sink through the floor and die, it's only Steve's arms around him that are
keeping him from going into the kitchen and shoving food into his mouth until he doesn't feel anything anymore.

It has to stop.

"I gotta fix this." He says it quietly against Steve's collarbone, barely a whisper, but Steve hears it loud and clear. The decision has been made, Bucky's done taking this lying down.

It doesn't matter that he fell, what matters is that he gets back up.
"I've got resolutions." Bucky taps his list with the chewed-up pencil in his hand. He's been scratching away in one of Steve's old sketchbooks for most of the afternoon, curled up in his usual spot on the couch under Natasha's favourite blanket.

Steve is flopped down beside him, doodling in a sketchbook that Bucky hasn't managed to appropriate and draw dicks in. Parks and Recreation is playing in the background, punctuated occasionally by Sam's giggling from the other couch (he's taken a leaf out of Leslie Knope's book and started calling them all 'majestic transatlantic starfish', or whatever he can come up with at the time. Bucky loves it, Steve thinks they need to stop marathoning this show). Becky and Natasha are doing weird things to microwaved snacks in the kitchen, and things almost feel normal.

"I'm gonna do a liquid diet."

"And how much of that is vodka?" Sam tosses a piece of popcorn at him, missing spectacularly.

"Like half." Bucky sticks his tongue out and Steve can't help but snort a laugh. "But not for the first three weeks."

"How long are you gonna do it for?" He pokes Bucky's good shoulder to get his attention. "I thought liquid diets were just detoxes."

"I figure six weeks or something." Bucky shrugs and taps his pencil against his teeth as he looks at his list again. It doesn't look like there's a lot there, for how long he's been working on it.

"Buck, six weeks is a long—"

"It's totally healthy! Fruits and vegetables."

"And how much protein are you getting in that?"

"There's some peanut butter." Bucky grumbles and turns the notebook towards Steve with what his boyfriend could swear is a pout. "See?"

"Okay. So protein powder." Steve leans over and adds to the list himself as Bucky makes an irritated noise. "Greek yoghurt. Milk."

"I've got fucking avocado in there." From the tone of his voice, Steve can tell that he's pushing one of Bucky's boundaries. It's been happening more and more over the last couple of weeks, but the results are worth the grumbling as Bucky slowly increases the amount he eats and keeps down. "Dairy makes me bloated."

"Babe, big picture. You need to get some fats and proteins in your diet, especially to get your arm better." He's used to talking Bucky down now, knows that often all it takes is a little reminder that he's being unreasonable. "Just try it and see how you feel."

"I'm not gonna like it."

That's definitely a pout, along with the puppy-dog eyes that usually get Bucky whatever he wants. Steve's wise to his tactics by now, though, and stays firm.

"Then you can change it." Steve says it gently, putting his hand over Bucky's, cold where he's
gripping his pencil with white knuckles. "Okay?"

There's a little grumbling before Bucky leans over and headbutts Steve's shoulder grudgingly. That's enough to tell Steve he's won this particular discussion, and he smiles to himself as he nuzzles a kiss into his boyfriend's hair. It's not over yet though, because after avoidance comes –

"Jizz has protein in it."

Flirting.

"Yeah, well man can't live on jizz alone." Steve rolls his eyes and Bucky smirks up at him in a way that makes Steve think he really needs to flip him over and spank him one of these days.

"Is that in the bible?"

"It'll be in you if—"

"Guys, I'm right here." Sam interrupts and waves sarcastically, a scandalised look on his face.

"What? You want some extra protein in your diet?" Bucky leers playfully and Steve yanks him possessively under his arm as his boyfriend laughs. Bucky's good shoulder is sharp against Steve's ribs, but Steve couldn't give less of a shit.

"If you could not preposition guys right in front of me, that'd be great." He's cut off as the voices in the kitchen suddenly rise in volume, making them all glance towards the door curiously. Natasha and Becky are speaking Russian, as they usually do to each other, and it sounds like they're fighting pretty hard about something.

"Should we be worried they're gonna kill each other, or…?" Sam trails off. Steve is about to make some comment about how he'd probably rather watch the cat fight than break it up, when Bucky holds up his finger and listens for a minute.

"Nope, I understood 'movie' and 'crap', they're just deciding what to watch." He shrugs, unconcerned as Sam looks over like he's not convinced.

"And they sound like they're about to rip each other apart because…"

"That's what Russian sounds like. German's worse." Bucky snags the remote and turns the volume up, restarting the episode from where Netflix has decided they've watched for too long and tried to guilt them into stopping.

"How come you don't speak that much Russian, anyway?" Steve asks after a few minutes, leaning over to steal some of Sam's popcorn and trying not to crush Bucky in the process. Bucky makes an irritable noise when he can't see his notebook, poking Steve in the back of the neck with his pencil until he straightens back up.

"My mom spoke it while we were growing up, I kinda made a conscious effort to ignore it." He shrugs, concentrating on his list. "Figured it was better if I didn't know what she was calling me."

He's concentrating too hard to notice the silence that falls until he looks up and sees Steve and Sam both staring at him with wide eyes.

"What?"

"Dude, that is tragic." Sam looks vaguely disturbed, and that's what Becky and Natasha hear as they
walk in with big bowls of what look like marshmallow-covered popcorn.

"Are you bumming everyone out again?" Becky flops down on the armchair to their right and Bucky gives her the finger. "Sad childhood or disappointing adulthood?"

"Sad childhood." Bucky looks at Steve pointedly when Natasha sits down beside Sam and doesn't slap his hand away when he grabs some of her popcorn. Something has definitely changed in that dynamic and they're going to be making fun of Sam about it later.

"Speaking of sad childhood." Becky steals the remote from her brother to switch over to the movie they've chosen, and Steve is seriously never going to get over how they're so blasé about this shit. "We're going to Mom and Dad's for dinner on Friday."

They're close enough that Steve can feel the second Bucky's muscles lock up.

"You're invited too, Steve. I'm taking Loki. It's fancy, so wear a tie." She points at her brother emphatically, most of her attention on the screen where the Rocky II credits are starting up. "And don't even think about trying to get out of it. She specifically invited you this time."

"Okay. Sure." Nobody else seems to notice the weird tone to Bucky's voice, the stark absence of any force or inflection behind the words, and Steve looks over at his boyfriend with concern.

All the colour has drained out of Bucky's face, leaving him as white as the paper he's staring at blankly. Steve still has his arm around Bucky's shoulders, and he can feel the way his boyfriend's breathing has picked up unsteadily. Panic attack?

"Buck, come help me make some of that avocado toast you like." Steve grabs his boyfriend's good hand and pulls him into the kitchen, ignoring Sam's cry of 'hipsters!' behind them as he shuts the door.

Bucky is clearly not okay, burying his face in his hands and slumping down into a seat at the table as soon as nobody can see him. Steve is getting experienced with handling his anxiety now, and he doesn't push Bucky to talk as he grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and sets it on the table in front of him.

"We don't have to go." He sits down beside Bucky, giving his boyfriend space and speaking quietly. "If you don't want to eat with people then—"

"It's not the eating." Bucky shakes his head, finally lifting it from his hands and grabbing for the water to kill the sudden hunger twisting in his stomach. He's making good choices, this is better than reaching for the cookies he has hidden under the sink. "It's my mom. We really don't... We don't get along."

"I kinda got that, after what she said to you in the hospital." Steve nods, watching nervously as Bucky chugs water like his life depends on it. "Look, you don't have to go if you don't want to. You—"

"You don't understand. It's not an invitation from Mama, it's an order." Bucky spits out bitterly, ripping at the label on the bottle of water with unsteady fingers. Steve can't believe how shaken up he is, there has to be something deeper going on than just his mom being a pushy stage parent. "I have to go, but you don't. You should get out of this while you can."

"I'm not letting you go on your own, not when just the idea of going upsets you this much." Steve reaches out and puts a hand on Bucky's knee, which seems to calm him down a little. He slumps over and rests his head on Steve's shoulder, breathing more steadily now.
Sometimes it's like this since Bucky made the resolution to get better, sometimes he just has to work through whatever has triggered the urge to shove food into his mouth until he feels comforted. Sometimes he can walk it off. It hasn't stopped things altogether, not by a long shot, but sometimes it works.

Bucky still has horrible days where he locks himself in his room and won't let Steve in because he's too busy eating his way through the snacks he has hidden in his closet and purging into plastic bags to throw out when nobody's looking. He still has days where he wants to cut his own head off because he's fucked his whole life up by ruining his arm. But things are getting better, the bad days are less frequent and Steve has been most of his driving force to make sure it stays that way.

Bucky isn't about to let Mama ruin that, no matter how hard it'll be to keep his shit together.

"I'm coming with you, so don't even try to put me off." Steve insists, his determined expression very much in its usual place.

"So we're gonna go. We're gonna go, it's gonna be horrible, and then you're gonna get me very drunk after." Bucky sighs out a resigned puff of air against Steve's neck. "I mean it. I'm talking vodka in the car back drunk."

"I'll bring a flask." Steve quirks a smile and Bucky huffs out something that's on its way to being a laugh.

They sit together quietly for a minute, letting Bucky collect himself and get his people-face back on. He finally straightens up and kisses Steve softly, a silent thanks before he smiles wryly.

"I hope you like pickles."

"What?"

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It's raining when they get to the Barnes family house. Hopefully that's not an omen for how the evening is going to pan out.

It's a big place, outside the city far enough to be a long way away from their nearest neighbour and have a private road to drive up to the house. Steve looks across the back seat at Bucky with wide eyes, wishing he'd had time to iron his shirt properly. This is all very unexpected.

"You didn't tell me you guys were rich." Bucky mumbles, knuckles white where his fists are clenched in his lap.

"We're not. Our parents are." Bucky grumbles in front of them, Loki's thumb moving over the nape of her neck under her swept-up hair the only indication that she's probably stressed about this dinner too.

"They don't give us anything. Hence why I had to rent this piece of shit car instead of something fancy." Becky scoffs audibly from the driver's seat and Loki's fingers tighten slightly on his girlfriend's skin, probably trying to hold her back from reaching back and slapping Bucky.

"Did you just say hence? Getting all your English out of the way now, Rivka?" Her brother sneers, and Steve pokes him in the leg to remind him to chill out. Becky scoffs audibly from the driver's seat and Loki's fingers tighten slightly on his girlfriend's skin, probably trying to hold her back from reaching back and slapping Bucky.

"I hope you brought booze, Steve, because I'm not dealing with him sober." Becky snipes back. Bucky looks at Steve with puppy-dog eyes and Steve sighs before he digs in his jacket and hands over his stitched-leather hipster flask.
"Do your parents not drink, or…?" He asks, trying to steer the conversation away from Becky and Bucky tearing lumps out of each other. Loki sends him a relieved glance, it looks like they're here to keep the Barnes twins away from each other as much as provide support.

"Mom's Russian, Steve, what do you think? Buck, I thought you said he was smart?"

"Fuck yourself." Bucky takes a couple of swigs from the flask and grimaces as he hands it back. "There'll be plenty of booze, I just don't want to deal with my parents sober. Not even for the half-hour it'll take to get drunk enough to handle their bullshit."

Steve's aware. He witnessed the panic attack while they were getting dressed to come over here and the nightmares Bucky sweated his way through the night before. He knows exactly how ill-prepared Bucky is to handle this, the dinner aspect on top of spending time with his parents. His sister sniping at him isn't helping.

Steve thinks he's catching on to Becky's tactics, though. She knows her brother, knows he won't handle their parents well, so poking him into having a fortifying drink before they get there will do him more good than harm. A small irritant to prevent a big one.

Either that or she's just being as much of a little shit as Bucky is, but Steve will give her the benefit of the doubt and hope it's the former.

The house is even more intimidating up close, ornamental columns with ivy climbing up them beside the door and some kind of butler to show them into the hall (Bucky and Becky both hug him, so he must have been working there for a while). Bucky grabs Steve's hand and holds it tightly enough that Steve's convinced he's bruising bones as they follow Becky and Loki through to what he supposes would be called a drawing room.

Steve grew up in a single-parent family in a studio apartment in Brooklyn, living paycheck to paycheck. He's so, so out of his depth.

Tables have been set up with drinks and canapés on one side of the room, and Steve doesn't get a chance to take in much of the dark wood décor as Bucky's parents are rising from their seats to greet their guests. Bucky suddenly doesn't look nervous at all, the slick mask Steve hasn't seen for a while now sliding back into place easily when he needs to protect himself. It's not a pleasant sight.

Bucky's mother, Irina, kisses them all on the cheek three times, gripping her children's shoulders firmly as she does it. She was clearly beautiful in her day, her dyed-blonde hair swept up into a careful bun as manicured as every other inch of her, from her glossy fingernails to her perfectly-shaped eyebrows. She looks Steve over critically, and he can see the shade of Bucky's bitchy lip curl in her tight smile of greeting. He can't imagine being pinned under that gaze his whole life, he's definitely figuring out why Bucky's been so freaked out about coming here.

Bucky's dad, Jim, looks like the kind of guy whose idea of 'relaxed' is not wearing a tie, although his pale suit suggests he's going for 'relaxed-smart' tonight. He's clearly a lot older than his wife, and Steve's pretty sure he catches sight of his initials engraved on silver cufflinks when he shakes the old man's papery hand. Jim claps Bucky on his bad shoulder when he shakes his hand, but Bucky doesn't even flinch despite the tightness in his eyes Steve catches immediately.

They're going to need a lot more vodka to get through this evening.

"I see you've been… relaxing." Is the first thing Mama says as she looks her son over, and Bucky feels the crawling sickness of panic in the back of his throat. The floor has been pulled out from under him and they've only been here for five minutes. He can't do this.
He's fat. He's disgusting. Oh god, he looks awful.

He's so fucking hungry he could puke.

"It's taken a long time for Bucky to recover from the accident, Mrs Barnes." Steve steps in politely, seeing the words die on Bucky's tongue and trying to divert things. "But he's doing much better now."

"So you'll be getting back to class soon." She fixes Bucky with a pointed stare and he opens his mouth to say something before his mother turns away and addresses Becky in Russian, effectively shutting him down and out of the conversation.

Bucky gives up and goes over to the table of food and drink to get away, his boyfriend following close behind. He shoves a canapé in his mouth and Steve touches the back of his wrist gently, letting him know he's not alone.

"It'll be fine." He murmurs quietly, trying to convince himself as much as Bucky. Bucky nods with a tight smile, pouring himself a measure of vodka and knocking it back in one swallow.

"Sure it will." Bucky shoves another canapé in his mouth (salmon and some kind of cheese? He doesn't taste it, just feels the texture on his tongue) and grins, dead behind the eyes when Steve catches them. He pours another shot of vodka and downs it, and Steve feels the distinct prickle of eyes boring into his back from the rest of the party.

It's going to be a long night.
"That's… a lot of pickles." Steve mumbles under his breath as he eyes the table.

Bucky almost chokes on a sip of wine, and it's the first time he's cracked a smile since they got here so Steve counts it as a win.

"I warned you, we love our pickles." Bucky smirks loosely, booze having clearly hit his empty stomach quickly. He leans over and whispers in Steve's ear. "Wanna see me fit a whole one in my mouth?"

"Maybe not at the table, babe." Steve squeezes Bucky's leg and straightens up, quietly hoping he's not going to have to dodge getting felt up under the table in front of his boyfriend's parents.

The intoxication isn't surprising, given that they've been here an hour and a half and Bucky has been drinking pretty continuously since the first of his mother's pointed comments. It's been hard to believe the sheer amount of scorn Irina has been pouring passive-aggressively on her son since he got here (everything from 'You didn't have time to iron your shirt, I see' upwards), and Steve doesn't think he's the only one who's shocked by it.

Maybe now Bucky isn't useful to her, his mother has given up pretending to be kind to him in front of other people. At least, Becky and Loki definitely don't seem to have seen her like this before.

Becky has seemed pretty thrown by her mother's behaviour tonight, and Steve has noticed her trying and failing to catch her brother's eye on more than one occasion. She's tried valiantly to keep things civil, to the point where she replies to Irina in English when her mother tries to hold a conversation in Russian, seemingly specifically to shut Bucky out. For his part, Bucky accepts the snide remarks and rejection with the kind of passivity that's out of character and makes Steve really, really angry. He even shrugs off Steve's disbelieving look at the Russian incident with a 'that's Mama'.

Bucky reacts to his mother like he's used to this treatment, and Steve is absolutely fuming.

"So, Steve. What do you do for a living?" Bucky's father asks, wasting no time in cutting into his fish starter. He has a brusque manner that seems friendly enough, for now, and Steve thinks he's probably a safer bet to hold a conversation with than Irina.

"I'm a musician. I play piano for Bucky's company at the moment."

"Former company." Irina corrects, immediately. Steve is totally thrown by the sharp comment and doesn't really know how to react, catching the way Bucky flinches beside him.

"I'm still part of the company, Mama." His voice is lifeless, submissive, and totally not the guy Steve knows.

"Really? That's very generous of them." She doesn't even look at him as she says it, and somehow that's more dismissive than what she says. "American companies always seem so lax."
"Mom, you don't know anything about American companies, you've never been part of one." Becky steps in, tries to deflect attention from Bucky. It seems practiced, and Steve wonders how long the twins have been juggling Irina's poison between them.

"I only say what I see." Irina arches an eyebrow at her daughter, effectively shutting down the comment. She starts a conversation with Loki, who looks just as awkward as Steve feels, asking pleasantly about the company in Novosibirsk with a friendly smile that hasn't been directed at her son all night.

Bucky shoves a forkful of vegetables in his mouth and barely chews before he swallows and does the same thing again. Steve notes the warning signs for Bucky eating his feelings and puts his hand gently on his boyfriend's leg again, squeezing lightly to try and get him out of his head. It's a few more hurried mouthfuls of food before Bucky seems to catch himself and looks across at Steve guiltily, putting his cutlery down and taking a sip of wine to force himself to stop.

His recovery is as fragile as spun sugar right now, this dinner and his mother's judgement are the last things he needs. The whole atmosphere is toxic, and it lies heavy over them like thick smog.

Dinner only goes downhill from there, and they still have three courses to go. Once Bucky's started on track towards a binge, the only way for him to avert it is to step away from food altogether and distract himself, which is definitely not happening now. Steve can see the tension in his shoulders and white knuckles as his boyfriend fights every fibre of his being that urges him to eat everything in sight as fast as he can to fill the twisting, gaping hole in his stomach. Bucky forces himself to eat as slowly and delicately as he can and he still finishes his plates in half the time it takes anyone else. He sips wine self-consciously when his plate is empty, and manages to get through that at about double the speed of the rest of the party too.

Irina doesn't comment on it, but Steve notices her looking pointedly at Bucky's empty plate and then meeting her son's eyes disapprovingly, arching her eyebrow in the way he's seen Bucky do when he really hates something another dancer is doing but can't comment on it. Steve sees the way Bucky's throat works to swallow the food in his mouth like he can't force any more down under his mother's gaze, and hands Bucky his still-full glass of water to help.

He catches Irina's eyes and holds her stare as the conversation flows around them, making her aware that he knows exactly what she's doing. She doesn't have the decency to look ashamed, just looks back with the bland smile of a pleasant host, and Steve is seriously going to punch something before this evening is over.

He just hopes it's not one of his boyfriend's parents. He's pretty sure that won't get him invited back.

Dessert is the last straw. Irina pointedly doesn't touch her plate of fancy chocolate mousse (whatever the French name of the dessert is, it's outside Steve's working knowledge of the language), and Becky and Loki both take polite bites but leave most of the rich course. Bucky is practically vibrating at this point, and he bolts the plateful down before mumbling out a 'please excuse me' before getting up shakily from his seat.

"Feeling a little unwell from all that food, dear?"

Irina not only draws attention to Bucky leaving but also the amount he ate, and Steve sincerely wants to throw something as Bucky pales and mutters that he's fine before hurrying to the bathroom. It's like she's taking the book on everything that triggers him and working her way through it starting from page one.

The idea that she wrote that book hits Steve hard enough to stun him. Of course.
There's no way that he's even going to try and engage with Irina after that display. She seems happily preoccupied with Becky and Loki anyway, very interested in everything to do with their company and their more prestigious performances. She doesn't look up when Bucky comes back to the table, face flushed and shirt collar slightly damp from where he's splashed water on himself. Steve catches his eye questioningly and Bucky looks away in shame, and that's about all he can take.

Bucky's mother might not give a shit about him, but maybe his father does.

"Mr Barnes, could I talk to you privately for a minute?" Steve approaches him when they're heading back into the drawing room for after-dinner drinks (this is all so fucking weird for him, they've had people serving dinner all night for fuck's sake). Bucky's father has been tapping away at his phone distractedly, detached from the party, but he looks up with a distant smile.

"Call me Jim. And sure, we'll go outside for a smoke." He produces a silver cigarette case from inside his jacket and collects a glass of scotch from the drinks table on their way out to the balcony. Bucky is backed into a corner with his mother, Loki and Becky awkwardly trying not to watch the car crash.

"James." Bucky's dad gets his attention and holds up the cigarette case. "Smoke?"

"You expect him to be fit for class with that in his lungs?" Irina doesn't even give Bucky a chance to answer, and despite the fact that Steve knows Bucky's probably been desperate for nicotine for the last hour, he shakes his head.

"Suit yourself." Jim shows Steve out to the balcony and closes the door behind them. He offers Steve the case and he takes one of the fancy cigarettes, just to be polite.

He's starting to think politeness is the last thing this situation needs, so he launches right into it.

"Look, I don't know if you can't see what she's doing to him, or if you just don't want to, but it's not right." Steve doesn't light the cigarette he's been handed, two decades of shitty lungs teaching him better. "Bucky was terrified to come here tonight and now I can see why. Your wife is awful to him."

"It's always been her way to be a little… strict." Jim sighs mildly, lighting his cigarette and tucking the silver case back into his jacket. "I didn't have much of a hand in raising the children, it was always Irina's area."

"But they're still your children." If Steve's staring at him like he's speaking another language, it's because he's pretty sure he understood the Russian at dinner better than Jim's attitude. "Don't you hear how she talks to him?"

"Tough love, isn't that what they call it?" Jim practically shrugs, one hand nonchalantly in his pocket like they're not talking about anything serious. "James was always sensitive, you can't baby a child like that."

"He's not sensitive, sir, he has an eating disorder. It's an illness, not a flaw in his character." Steve is getting increasingly irritated and he's sure it's starting to show. "He can't stand himself, he punishes himself for every little thing he thinks he does wrong. And all Irina does is reinforce that and make him feel worse."

"That's exactly what I mean, he's sensitive. Rebecca was brought up exactly the same way and you don't see her moping around with this… behaviour." He gestures and wrinkles his nose slightly, like Bucky's illness is something distasteful. "It's looking for sympathy, that's all. He's always been like
that. Being firm with him is the only way to deal with that sort of child."

"Firm?" Steve's pretty sure that Bucky won't appreciate him telling his dad off like this, for talking to him at all, but he's so angry it's like he's being pulled along by an unstoppable force. He wonders if this is how Bucky feels when he's bingeeing. "Bucky practically killed himself trying to live up to the standards your wife beat into him and you think it's because nobody was fucking firm?"

"There's no need for that kind of language." Jim's expression turns cold, and Steve realises that he's definitely not about to get any help here. The denial runs so deep he might as well be talking to a brick wall. "And you could show me some respect in my own home."

"I would if you deserved it." He tosses the unlit cigarette off the balcony and heads back into the drawing room.

Bucky and his mother are standing next to the drinks table, and Steve can read his body language well enough to not feel at all awkward butting into the conversation.

"C'mon Buck, we're leaving." He takes Bucky's good arm and pulls him away from his mother. His protective instincts are in overdrive and he stopped giving a fuck if it's a bad thing or not the moment he got here.

Bucky looks at him wide-eyed, like it had never occurred to him to leave without permission whether he got overwhelmed or not.

"We can't, Becky's our ride." Bucky is starting to slur, and Steve is totally fucking done with him being in a situation he has to get blackout drunk just to handle. Someone has to stop this, and apparently that's him.

"So we'll get a cab. We're not staying."

"It's okay, we're not staying either." Becky grabs her handbag from where she'd left it on a chair, her politeness running out when Steve pushes down the first domino of this shitshow. She turns on her mother with hard eyes, voice carefully measured. "I don't know what your problem is tonight Mama, but I've had enough of it."

"What do you mean? I've been nothing but kind to you all!" Irina gets spots of colour high on her cheeks when she raises her voice, and Steve doesn't miss the way Bucky flinches away from her instinctively. He grabs his boyfriend's arm and holds onto him firmly, letting him know that they're getting out of here.

"No, Mama. You've done nothing but be horrible to Bucky since we got here." Loki dutifully hands Becky her wrap, and Steve's pretty sure he's held his girlfriend's coat while she took people apart before. Becky has the same coldness as her mother, when she lets it out. "You've been mean to him all night, it's not his fault he can't dance anymore."

"Can we please go?" Bucky tugs desperately on Steve's arm, suddenly hell-bent on getting out of there as quickly as possible. Now the dam is broken, Steve can see him starting to panic when his family starts fighting over him. "Steve, please."

To Steve's surprise, Loki notes the panicked tone of Bucky's voice too and touches Becky's shoulder. He's silently grateful to him for understanding, because he's not sure he could wrangle both twins out of here without a screaming match.

"Becky, we have to go." He keeps his voice even in the face of Becky and her mother looking like they're about to knock lumps out of each other, and Steve wonders just how similar the Barnes twins
are when they need to be talked down. "Darling, come on. Nothing good is going to come of this."

"She can't fucking…" Becky clenches her jaw and turns on her heel, storming away from her mother. Steve pulls Bucky after her, Loki following close behind them.

Steve spends the entire journey to the car focusing on trying to help Bucky avoid a panic attack, so he doesn't really notice the raised voices. Later on he'll realise that Irina was yelling after them, that Becky was yelling right back, but until they get into the car and pull away from the house his focus is entirely on his boyfriend.

Bucky eventually seems to check out, drawing in on himself and making himself smaller, less of a target. Steve touches him lightly, figuring Bucky won't be mad at him for being careful with him, just this once.

"I can't believe her!" Becky is ranting in the front seat, Loki driving them back because he volunteered to stay sober and let both siblings drink their way through this encounter. "She was so horrible to you, Buck."

"It's fine." Bucky mumbles flatly, although the platitude does nothing to slow Becky's roll.

"How can she talk to you like that? I'd fucking slap her if she said some of that stuff to me, god!" She twists around to look at her brother in the back seat, curled up into himself tightly with Steve's hand on his back. "How can you let her talk to you like that and just take it?!"

"Becky…" Steve tries to get her to stop when he feels Bucky tense up again, but it's not effective when Bucky looks up at his sister and answers her quietly.

"She always talks to me like that."

"What?!"

"Darling," Loki tries to break in. "I really think you should leave this conversation for another—"

"What the fuck d'you mean she always talks to you like that?" Becky's voice lowers slightly when she gets a look at Bucky's blank expression. He's drunk and tired and emotionally drained, there's nothing left to hide the things he's been keeping back for so long. "Buck?"

"You never heard it." His voice is so quiet that she struggles to hear. Steve isn't sure if this is a good thing or not. "You were allowed to do homework and take a break. You didn't have to do extra training. You didn't need the push."

"Bucky, what—" Steve falls silent as Bucky continues, matter-of-fact like he's reporting the weather.

"You didn't get told you were worthless every time you gained a pound. You didn't get hit if you finished your plate at dinner. You didn't get weighed and measured every fucking week. You didn't get told to smile while you were in so much pain you'd do anything to make it stop." It would almost be better if he raised his voice, but he keeps talking in that cold monotone as if he has no feelings about what he's saying.

Becky looks like she's been slapped.

"You didn't know. You didn't see it. It didn't happen to you." Bucky mumbles into the stunned silence of the car, finally running out of steam and sagging. "So when I say she always talks to me like that, I mean it. It's no good getting outraged about it now."
"Bucky..." Becky doesn't know what to say, staring at her brother like she's seeing him for the first time in years. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Why? It made me a good dancer." He shrugs, one shouldered. "Isn't that what it's all about?"

Silence falls again, and Bucky lets himself slump over to rest his forehead against the window, letting the cold glass keep him present. Steve is so angry he doesn't trust himself to speak, because he'd known Bucky's family life was fucked up but he'd never thought it was anything like this. Becky opens and closes her mouth a few times before her face crumples and she turns back to sit in her seat, overwhelmed by her brother's words.

There's a long, dead silence. All the air seems to have gone out of the car, leaving them in the hideous vacuum the evening has left behind.

"Are you gonna puke?" Steve notices Bucky looking pale again, but his boyfriend just shakes his head, eyes fixed blankly on the window as he looks out into the dark.

"Nothing left."
Getting Your Feet Under You

Chapter Notes

Thanks you guys for all the wonderful comments, I love to hear what you think about this stupid little story.

To address a couple of things people are worried about: remember that this fic isn't finished yet. There are some things people have picked up that they feel haven't been dealt with properly or have been left hanging, and I'd like to remind everyone that everything will be handled by the time the story is over.

Thank you so much for reading, let me know what you think!

Bucky sleeps for two days straight after they get home from his parents' house.

He crashes out the second they get through the door, walking past Natasha and Sam without even saying hi (possibly interrupting canoodling on the couch, Steve will question them at a more appropriate time) and passing out face-down on his bed immediately. Steve pulls his boyfriend's shoes off, gets him out of his tie and uncomfortable pants and pulls the covers over him before he goes into the living room.

He's exhausted too. Everything hurts.

"What the hell happened?" Sam asks, taking in Steve's demeanour with concern. Steve just shakes his head and goes to grab water from the kitchen. "Steve?"

"It was awful." He comes back out and slumps down onto the couch, Sam and Natasha both watching him worriedly as he mumbles like he never does. "I can't talk about it, it's Bucky's business. But… can someone please hug me?"

Sam pulls Steve into his arms without a moment of hesitation, holding his friend steady as he curls up against his chest like he's still a skinny teenager and not a giant man. A grown up dog who hasn't realised it's not still a puppy. Steve closes his eyes and finally lets himself feel the shivery, sick feeling the evening has left him with. It's like the worst adrenaline crash he's ever had, everything hitting him at once now the tension has left his body. He feels Natasha's small hand stroking over his hair and squeezes his eyes shut, overwhelmed by how much he loves his friends at this moment.

They shepherd him to Bucky's room later and Steve crashes out right beside his boyfriend, face buried in Bucky's sweaty neck. But when Steve gets up the next morning, Bucky doesn't.

He's not in a slump, not one of the depressed funks that leave him refusing to get out of bed for days on end, it's more like his body is just done. Totally exhausted. Any time someone tries to wake him up he'll come around a little and mumble something about 'just a minute', and he'll smile slightly and kiss Steve sleepily when his boyfriend talks to him, but apart from that he's dead to the world.

They're just starting to get worried when Bucky shuffles out of his room on the third morning of his Sleeping Beauty act, hair an absolute bird's nest as he blinks around blearily.

"What day's it?"
"Monday." Natasha replies, and Bucky mumbles and nods slightly before making his way to the kitchen. Natasha and Steve exchange a glance before Steve gets up to follow him.

"Buck?"

He's bashing around the kitchen, clumsily making one of the protein shakes that Steve thinks taste like cement but are one of the few things Bucky can almost always keep down no matter how he feels about food. All the dancers Steve knows have the same kind of instinctive, measured grace when they move, and somehow seeing it even in Bucky's clumsy movements now makes him feel a little better. Like Bucky is still Bucky.

"I haven't slept like that in years." He comments, having a little trouble with the lid of the shaker since his hands aren't that steady. His blood sugar must be totally off after not eating for two days straight. "Sorry I just crashed out on you, it hasn't happened in forever."

"That's okay. You obviously needed it." Steve watches him with growing unease as Bucky makes precisely no move to acknowledge the dinner party, finally biting the bullet. "Are we gonna talk about what happened with your parents, or…?"

"I'm sorry you had to see that." Bucky shrugs, tone weirdly light to show that he's OK, capital letters. "I warned you they were assholes."

"Buck, that's not what bothers me. I don't care about them being assholes." Steve frowns, becoming increasingly aware that this conversation is going to be like getting blood from a stone. "The stuff you said in the car…"

"I was drunk. I shouldn't have said it." Bucky finally stops busying himself with nothing and turns to look at Steve. "Don't you dare get all sympathetic about my shitty childhood."

"How else am I supposed to react?" He moves a little closer, stopping when Bucky backs off to keep his space. He's obviously more affected by the night than he's trying to let on. "What your mom did to you… that's abuse. Serious abuse, Buck."

"I don't want to talk about it." The walls have gone back up, and Bucky is definitely not about to have the heart to heart Steve was thinking he might need. He should have known that his boyfriend's first reaction would be defensive, experience has taught him that much. "Really."

"I just, I didn't know about how she—"

"Steve, I don't want to talk about it." Bucky cuts him off sharply and then seems to deflate, realising who he's talking to. Even after two days of sleeping, he still looks worn out when he talks about this. "I… I don't want you to look at me differently. I'm still me, whatever happened in the past doesn't matter."

"Babe, I'd never look at you differently." Steve moves forward again and rests his hands on Bucky's waist, and this time his boyfriend doesn't back away.

It's the truth, because the broken parts of Bucky have always been there, have always been part of him, knowing why they're there doesn't change them or make him whole again. Bucky's been trying to fill the hole in himself with food for years, it only ever hid in plain sight or not at all.

"You shouldn't have to deal with that shit on your own, that's all."

"I'm fine, there's nothing to deal with." The everything's fine tone isn't as convincing as before. Bucky doesn't look at him, but Steve doesn't go anywhere.
"But you know if you want to talk about it, you can. Right?" He runs his thumb over Bucky's skin where his hand has slipped under his oversized t-shirt, and Bucky ducks his head even lower. "You don't have to talk if you don't want to, but it's not gonna change how I see you.'

There's a pause before Bucky takes a shaky breath, like he's not sure he wants to say anything at all but the words are coming out anyway.

"I said something to my dad once, about her hitting me. I was a kid, I hadn't learned to keep my mouth shut yet." He mumbles, so quietly Steve barely hears it from inches away. "He told me to man up and stop being a baby. That I was just making up stories for attention. That's why I never talked about it. Nobody ever saw it, she said nobody would ever believe me."

"I believe you." Steve says, just as quietly, and his heart just about breaks when Bucky looks up at him with a mixture of cautious wonder and disbelief in his eyes.

"What if I'm lying to you?" Bucky counters weakly, a last line of defence slowly crumbling before Steve's eyes as he stands his ground against the insecurity. "I've manipulated you before. I've done it to everyone. I do it all the time. I flirt and I hide stuff and I lie, Steve."

"Not about this. I saw it, Buck. I know it happened." He brings his hands up to lift Bucky's chin where his head has dropped again and finds his cheeks damp. Even standing inches away from him, Bucky can hide how much he's hurting so nobody can see his weaknesses until he's forced to let them show. "I believe you, Bucky. I see you."

Bucky's breath hitches like he's about to shatter, and he buries his face in Steve's shoulder.

Natasha finds them like that a few minutes later, after she becomes concerned about the silence that's fallen over the kitchen. She gets a glimpse of them tangled together and lets out a silent sigh, backing out of the room again and going to find her phone.

She's felt horribly guilty about how she acted in the lead-up to the show, ever since Bucky fell and the shock snapped her out of the hyper-focus on dancing. She gets caught up in projects, always has done, but realising how much she'd pushed her concern about her friend to the side to make way for something transitory, when looked at rationally, makes her feel like shit now the haze is lifted. She's promised herself that she'll find a way to make it up to Bucky, somehow, or at least help him heal. This thing with his parents is just the push that tells her she needs to do it sooner rather than later.

As Natasha scrolls to her most recent messages and hits reply, she thinks she might have found a way to do that.

*  

After getting his head around the fact that someone knows about his childhood, Bucky throws himself into getting better with a zeal his friends haven't seen before. He puts on five pounds and works very hard to not freak out about it, because he can do this. He can be better and healthy and fuck the world, he can do this.

He freaks out a little. Maybe. Quietly. But he can handle it.

It takes another week or so for him to feel strong enough to go back to the dance studio to talk to Maria. She's been asking to see him for a while, but Bucky hasn't felt like he can look at the rest of the class and not die of shame until now. He finally steels himself and turns up before a technical class, where he'll only have to see some of the people he used to rehearse with since the class is focused on specific skill work and not mandatory for everyone. He's hoping he can pop in, say a few
quick hellos, slope into the back office to talk to Maria, and skulk out again before anything too anxiety-inducing happens.

The first person he sees when he comes through the door is Pietro, and it's not like he could have missed the kid if he tried.

"Did you bleach your fucking hair?" He quirks an eyebrow at the almost white colour of Pietro's hair as the kid pulls Bucky into a firm hug. "I wasn't serious when I said you should find your own drugs, y'know."

"My roommate is training to be a hairdresser." Pietro runs a hand over the shitty dye job self-consciously when they pull apart. His roots are at least a half-inch long, how long has Bucky been away? "It's good, no?"

"No. Not even a little bit." Bucky shakes his head, surprised and scrambling to take it back when the kid's shoulders slump and he suddenly looks like he wants the floor to swallow him. "Hey, I'm just kidding. It looks fine. It's, uh, unique."

A smile perks up on Pietro's face immediately, and Bucky sternly reminds himself how self-conscious he was when he was nineteen, especially about his appearance. Hell, he never really grew out of that part. He still pulls on his t-shirt constantly when he's out of the house, worried that someone will see the bulge of his stomach through the thin material. He doesn't want to make anyone else feel as shitty about the way they look as he does, not if he can help it.

Although, something is giving him pause. Pietro is like a yappy little puppy sometimes and he's hugged Bucky more times than he cares to count, but this time didn't feel like the others. There was... less of him.

And there's something throwing Bucky off about his friend's appearance, now that he watches the kid walk over to the mirror to start warming up. He's always sensitive to changes in people's weight, but Pietro has visibly dropped a lot since the last time Bucky saw him. He looks tired, sluggish in his warmup as Bucky watches him move from across the room. He might be totally off-base here, reading his own shit into someone else's body, but now he's started thinking about it he keeps finding little things in the heaviness of Pietro's posture, the circles under his eyes, the shoulderblades pushing through his shirt...

He's got a suspicion, and he really doesn't like it.

"Bucky!"

"Hey, Kamala." Bucky grins and embraces his friend, getting a face full of black hair and not minding in the slightest as he's pulled out of his head. "Sorry I didn't see you, Pietro's hair blinded me."

Pietro gives him the finger when he overhears and Bucky smiles back sweetly.

"See what happens without you around to bitch us into shape?" Kamala smiles and squeezes Bucky's good arm, clearly trying very hard not to stare at the healing scars on his bad one. He appreciates the effort, unsubtle as it is. "Are you coming back to class yet?"

"Nah, I'm just here to talk to Maria." He smiles back, trying to sidestep the question and feeling like he's lying. "I'd better go grab her before class starts, I've got physio in like a half-hour."

"Sure, don't let me keep you." She waves him off quickly as soon as he says the magic word. "Just come back and see us soon, okay? We really miss you."
"Of course." Bucky smiles, guilt settling heavy in his stomach as he turns away and heads for the office. Not only did he not realise that anyone from class missed him (and they seem genuine about it), but he feels awkward lying about having physiotherapy to get out of here as quickly as possible. He’ll have to live with it though, because he still needs the escape option.

Maria had visited him in the hospital, weeks ago, but Bucky had been pretty out of it on painkillers at the time. That's why it seems like so long since he's seen her when he knocks on the open door of her office and she looks up.

"Bucky." She actually gets up and hugs him, which just freaks him out further. People are happy to see him now? Even after he fucked up and ruined their show? He doesn't deserve this. "It's so good to see you."

"You too." He sits down when she gestures, immediately shoving his hands under his legs like a nervous child. It's a habit he's never been able to break after he used to get his fingers rapped with whatever was to hand for fidgeting. "You, um, wanted to talk to me?"

Even though he knows he can't stay with the company when he can't dance, he's terrified of actually hearing the words. The hole inside him is so much emptier without ballet to fill it, Bucky doesn't know how he'll take it when his final ties to his life's work are ripped away.

"Yes, I do." Maria is as business-like as ever, once she's established that he's in front of her in one piece. "I've been thinking about your future with the company."

Bucky steels himself, carefully doesn't deflate or look ashamed, but every muscle in his body feels like it just got replaced with steel as he braces himself for the inevitable.

"We're looking for a new instructor for the under-twelve class. Since you've taught before and because it won't require you to do too much dancing yourself, I was wondering if you'd be interested in the position."

"Me?" Bucky blurts out, stunned and blinking like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck. He can't even censor himself. "Really?"

"You were great with the junior class, we kept Pietro and Kate because of you. Plus, Natasha recommended you for the job." Maria explains, and Bucky raises his eyebrows as his shock just about doubles.

"She recommended me. To work with children."

"She seems to think you have wells of untapped compassion and patience." Said in that dry a tone, it almost sounds sarcastic. Bucky can't find the will to be offended. "I'm willing to give you a shot, if you want to."

Bucky swallows against the sudden, anxious nausea that rises in his throat.

What if he's just like his mother? What if he hurts someone?

But his mind suddenly flashes back to Pietro, to his new hair and the way his face fell when it was criticised. The way Bucky felt like total shit and scrambled to make the kid smile again. Mama would never have felt bad about something like that, she's never cared if a callous comment made him upset or tried to correct herself after she shoots him down over something he's proud of.

He's not like her.
"Yeah. I'd love to." He smiles, only the soft corners of his mouth giving away his lingering nerves. "I… I don't want you to think this is a build-up to me coming back as a member of the company though. Not as a dancer."

"I don't. From what I understand about your injuries… I know that's not an option for you. I won't be pressing the issue." Maria seems to chew on her words for a moment before she looks down at the pen she's fiddling with and speaks quietly. "I'm sorry I didn't notice your… that you were having issues leading up to the show. I should have picked up on it and benched you before things got so far that you were passing out. I didn't do my job and I apologise for that."

Bucky blinks hard and then clears his throat awkwardly to try and hide how emotion has suddenly knocked him sideways. He doesn't understand why people are being nice to him. He's the one who fucked up, he should be apologising.

"It's okay, it wasn't your fault I was messed up." He shakes his head, suddenly desperate for the exit. "Can we meet up another time to talk about the details of the job? Or you can email me? I just, I've got physio really soon and I need to get moving. Sorry."

"No problem. I'll email you the details and you can let me know if you want to discuss it more." Maria nods and smiles, a genuine expression instead of the professional mask she usually wears. "It's good to see you getting better."

"Thanks. I'll, uh, I'll see you soon." Bucky heads outside as fast as he politely can, waving to Pietro and Kamala on his way. He wants to stop and talk to them, but he also wants to run until his heart doesn't feel like it's going to thump out of his chest anymore.

It's strange, happiness. Sometimes it feels like panic until Bucky looks at it closely. He's not used to it.

He catches his breath outside, safe from prying eyes, and finds that he's smiling. He touches fingertips to his face to make sure that it's real before he grabs his phone out of his pocket and texts Natasha.

You recommended me to Maria for the teaching job???

The reply comes quickly, punching the breath out of him all over again. Why do people keep apologising to him for something that's his fault?

Trying to get some of the red out of my ledger. Sorry I was such a dick x

*

That night, with everything churning around in his mind so much it makes him feel dizzy, Bucky binges.

He gives himself to the impulse wholly, going on a shopping trip and then wolfing down everything in sight like he hasn't eaten in days. He lets himself feel the comfort of the food, the safety in being full and satiated, like warm arms wrapped around the cold hollow inside him that never really goes away. Then he purges and purges until he tastes nothing but bile and he feels clean. Cleansed.

Happiness that's harder to deal with than being depressed ever was. The shock at being apologised to for something he knows is his fault. The shock of being apologised to at all. The fact someone trusts him and wants to give him responsibility. The guilt of not replying to his sister's worried texts. The suspicion about Pietro and the anxiety of feeling responsible for addressing it with him. The weight of Steve's belief in him. The memory of the last thing his mother said to him before Steve pulled him
out of the dinner party. *What good are you now?*

Bucky eats until it's all suffocated and can't whisper to him anymore, then purges it all away. He feels better.

He sleeps like the dead.
Dealing with stuff, actually dealing with it, is fucking hard.

"Have you noticed anything weird about him lately?" Bucky presses Sam, after he's stumbled his way awkwardly through explaining his suspicions about Pietro.

Part of Bucky really wishes that he could be selfish about this. It would be so easy to tell himself some of the shit his friends keep telling him is true, stuff like how it's okay to put himself first, it's okay to put his own health above other people's feelings. It would be so easy to let himself believe that right now, to convince himself that he should just ignore what's going on with Pietro because it might trigger him to relapse worse than he already is.

A bigger part of him knows that he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he did that. So here he is, trying to figure out how to actually Deal With something rather than eat until he's not worried about it anymore. Sam is a person who Deals With things, so Bucky figures he's probably a good person to ask about it.

"Weird?" Sam thinks about it, fingers busy braiding Natasha's hair while he does so. "Like, you-weird? Because the kid is kinda weird all on his own, have you seen his hair lately?"

"I mean… you know what I mean." Bucky huffs. "I'm being serious, Sam. Have you noticed anything?"

"Not everyone is as hyper-aware of other people's eating habits as you, James." Natasha pipes up from the floor, sat in front of Sam on a couple of pillows with a chalky mask smeared over her face. "Although, I did notice that he sat out of class a couple of times this week."

"Yeah, the kid's been more tired and he kinda looks like shit. I got that much." Sam agrees, words slightly muffled through the hair elastic he's now holding between his teeth. "But I don't know. You should talk to him."

"I don't know how to talk to him." Bucky grumbles, passing Sam the hairbrush from the arm of the couch when he flaps his hand at it insistently. "I could just tell Maria about it."

"Do you remember how far you went to stop Maria from finding out about your problems?" Natasha manages to look incredulous even through a layer of clay. "And after what happened to you she's going to be totally paranoid. If she gets the slightest idea that there's something wrong with Pietro then she'll bench him immediately. You could ruin that boy's career, he's only young."

"Isn't this exactly what we learned not to do from my mistakes? Cover this shit up?" Bucky gestures emphatically, bewildered.

"Nobody's saying you should cover it up. We're saying you're the one with the experience that might help him here. And that maybe talking to him would be better than throwing him to the wolves."

"That doesn't help me. At all."

Bucky groans and slides down to sit on the floor beside his roommate. Natasha pats his hand sympathetically and offers him the pale pink polish she's been painting her nails with. He takes it with a sigh and unscrews the top, growling quietly when his bad hand shakes too much to be
accurate and he gets a smear of pink on the side of his finger and hardly any on the nail.

"Here." Natasha takes the bottle back and pulls Bucky's hand to rest on her knee, sedately painting his nails with her usual care and efficiency. "See how much better it is when someone realises you're struggling and helps you?"

"Did you just metaphor me? With nail polish?" Bucky groans louder this time and slumps over to rest his head on her shoulder. Sam moves seamlessly onto brushing his hair and yeah, it's nice. "You're the worst."

"Love you too, James."

* 

As it turns out, there's a lot of paperwork to fill out in order to work with children. Bucky has to get a background check, apparently, and has to go down to the studio to get his ID photocopied so Maria can start the process before the class starts up again with new students. He's getting slightly nervous about this whole teaching thing, but he does his best not to think about it too much. Not yet.

Running into Pietro again isn't exactly what he'd hoped would happen on his 'quick trip' into the building. Another skills class has just finished and Bucky hadn't expected the kid to be there, walking over groggily rather than bouncing as he usually does. He's moving slowly, there's definitely something wrong.

"Hey Bucky." There's a dull looseness behind his eyes, like something isn't quite connecting when he smiles, and no no no Bucky doesn't want to recognise that from the mirror no. "Maria is in her office."

Pietro's accent is thicker than usual and he looks so, so tired. Bucky makes a snap decision that he's pretty sure he's going to regret, but he can't just leave the kid there, not knowing that someone knows what's going on. Not knowing that someone gives a shit.

If someone had just grabbed him when he was nineteen and told him that they cared about more than his dancing…

Which is exactly how he got into the bad situation with Brock, because he thought the guy was the first person who gave a crap about him. Bucky definitely doesn't want that shit for Pietro either.

"I was looking for you too, actually." He smiles and Pietro lights up like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. "I was wondering if you'd like to grab a cup of coffee after I get my ID copied. Shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

"Me? Yes, sure." He nods and some of his vitality seems to return, the spark back in his eyes. Bucky recognises nervous energy when he sees it and it makes him curious. They've been kind of friends for a while, why is coffee a big deal? "I'll put my clothes on."

He hurries off to change out of his dance clothes, running a hand self-consciously through his hair. Or is it a nervous gesture? But why the fuck would he be nervous about a cup of coffee with Bucky?

Maybe the kid really is as weird as Natasha thinks. Although some of that impression seems to be a whole Russia/Sokovia rivalry thing that Bucky doesn't really follow, so he's not sure how much he can trust her judgement. He shrugs it off and goes to find Maria to get this done before anyone asks to see his horrible driver's license picture. That's one indignity he just can't handle today (his face looks so fucking fat in the picture), even if it would take his mind off the uncomfortable conversation he's about to have.
By the time he comes out of the office, Pietro is waiting for him. The kid looks nervous, and also like he's combed or brushed his hair, which is weird because Bucky doesn't think he's ever seen it neat even before it went randomly platinum. He's clutching his gym bag and smiling nervously, like he's anticipating something, and Bucky suddenly realises what it is.

The kid thinks this is a date.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Ready?" He forces a smile and they head out of the building, Pietro letting Bucky steer him to the nearest palatable coffee shop as he talks a hundred miles a minute.

It's a decent-sized place Bucky leads them to, big enough to have a private conversation without someone breathing down their necks but small enough to have decent coffee. He's been a coffee snob most of his life, being one of the few food items that he enjoys besides vodka (do drinks even count?) but it's got so much worse since he started dating Steve's hipster ass.

Dating. Shit.

"Uh, so." When they sit down with their coffee and the small talk about the other people in the company is out of the way, Bucky rubs a hand awkwardly over the back of his neck when there's a lull in the conversation. It's as good a time as any. "I've been, uh, I've been thinking about you since I saw you the other day."

Pietro gets this hopeful look on his face and Bucky wants to punch himself. Why did he say it like that?

"About me?" Pietro points to himself with raised eyebrows and Bucky's chest aches because he looks so young and so worn down and this is him looking hopeful, and Bucky's about to rip that away because he's a stupid asshole who can't think before he speaks.

He almost reaches for the half-cookie the last person at their table left behind on a plate that hasn't been cleared yet, but he catches himself. He picks up the plate and shoves it on a nearby empty table, trying to convince himself that his stomach isn't twisting with stabbing cramps of imaginary hunger.

"Yeah. You, um, you looked kinda tired the last time I saw you." And oh, the light is already dying behind the kid's eyes and Bucky wants to stab himself in the neck. He swears he can feel his jeans digging into his gut every time he breathes. "Is everything okay? You don't seem very okay."

"I… You're right, I'm just tired." It doesn't even sound like the truth and Bucky almost thinks come on kid, you're almost twenty, I could throw up every meal for a week and nobody could tell when I was your age before he realises that's probably one of those things other people find horrifying and stops himself.

"Tired for a reason?" Bucky presses, gently. "You've been under a lot of pressure since I had to leave the show."

"Pressure. I… I'm a twin too, you know." Pietro turns his coffee cup around in his hands, a wan half-smile curling at the corner of his mouth as he stares into the black liquid. Bucky's not sure if he's trying to duck the subject or just trying to give himself time to think of an excuse. He's done both himself before. "I'm twelve minutes older than my sister."

"Really? I'm eight minutes younger than mine and she's never let me forget it." Bucky looks at him curiously, running with it. "I've never met her. Your sister, I mean."
"She hasn't been around. She's not well." Pietro shrugs and taps the side of his head without looking up. Ah. "She doesn't like to see people. I take care of us."

"Ah, pressure. Is that why you're running yourself into the ground?" Bucky asks, watching how Pietro's fingers move restlessly over the side of his mug. Always moving even though he's exhausted, Bucky remembers that all too well.

"I can't talk to her. She has enough going on, I don't want to make it worse." He explains, quietly. "If I lose my place in the company then we lose our visas and we have to go back to Sokovia. It's still rebuilding from the revolution, there's no treatment like she needs there."

"So you think that starving yourself is going to make you a better dancer? And then you'll be able to stay?" Bucky doesn't know that Pietro's doing that, just thinks so from the weight of experience, but the kid's reaction to him throwing it out there (his face going bright red and his hands finally stilling around his cup) confirms his suspicions.

"I just need to get a little lighter." Pietro's voice lowers even further, and Bucky has to lean forward to hear him over the ambient noise of the coffee shop. "If I'm not so heavy my jumps will be better, I'll be faster. It was okay for you, you're small. I took over most of your parts, I can't keep up with your choreography at this size."

"I'm not small." Bucky blurts out immediately, reflexively, the denial automatic. It freaks him out that there was no thought process leading up to the statement, it was nothing but instinct to deny he's anything but huge.

"You're tiny." Pietro doesn't notice the look on Bucky's face, just shakes his head. "I can't get that size and eat normally. People like you can use diets, I can't."

"Pietro…" Bucky doesn't know what to do say to that. He scrubs a hand over his eyes and tries not to feel proud that he's small. He can't let his fucked up brain get in the way of this. He can't fuck this up. This kid needs him to be together right now and –

"I… I've been starving myself since I was a teenager. I've been making myself throw up everything I eat for years. It ruined my career. It almost ruined me."

The confession comes out all at once, and Bucky only glances up long enough to take in the kid's wide, startled eyes before he has to look away again.

"So please, please listen to me when I tell you it's not worth it. You're a good dancer, you don't have to ruin yourself." He shakes his head and looks down at his fists where they're white-knuckled before he shoves his hands under his legs again. Hiding. "My teeth are fucked up, my arm is fucked up, I can't eat anything without knowing how many calories are in it and feeling like it's gonna make me fat just by looking at it. Please don't do that to yourself, kid. Dancing isn't worth it."

"But…" Pietro blinks at him, brow creased with incomprehension. He looks like not only the rug, but the rest of the floor has been pulled out from under him and Bucky caused that expression. "But why would you do that? You're perfect."

Bucky groans and puts his head in his hands. Shit.

*

"Does Pietro have a crush on me?"
Natasha is doing stretches in front of the TV when Bucky bangs into the apartment, grocery bag in hand. Steve is sketching at the table and they both look up in a synchronised motion that would be comical if Bucky wasn't so preoccupied with how shit everything is. Especially him.

"What?" Steve looks mildly amused until he sees the grocery bag and his heart sinks. "What happened?"

"I took the stupid kid for coffee after class. He's fucking starving himself because he's taken over my roles since I fucked myself up." Bucky bangs the bag down on the counter and turns to look at Natasha again. "You didn't tell me he's got a crush on me."

"He's nineteen, I assumed he had a crush on everyone." Natasha straightens up and pops her neck with a satisfying Crack.

"You didn't maybe think of telling me that? Before I asked him out for coffee and he looked fucking Crushed when he realised it was an intervention and not a date?" Bucky's hands are shaking as he pulls things out of the grocery bag, and he pauses with white knuckles as he grips a box of double-stuffed Oreos tightly for a second before turns to his roommate again. "I got you Oreos. Put them in your room or something or I'm gonna eat them."

They're not the kind Natasha likes. Clearly they were intended to be binge food, what with the marshmallow fluff and peanut butter jars Steve notes already set on the counter, but this is Bucky making good decisions. A couple of weeks ago the fact that he'd bought the food would have led him to think Fuck it I already fucked up and give into the binge. Now he's able to divert himself later on, which is a big step considering how bad things have been.

Natasha comprehends the situation too and takes the box, reaching past Bucky to collect the jars of sandwich spread without comment and taking everything to hide in her room. Bucky can't communicate how grateful he is, in spite of the gnawing psychological hunger twisting his stomach so painfully he feels like he can't breathe, so he doesn't. He just sits down heavily at the table and puts his head in his hands.

"He's starving himself." Bucky mumbles, feeling Steve's warm hand take its place on his shoulder and getting some of the tension to seep out of his muscles. "He's starving himself to dance like me."

"Buck..." Steve squeezes his shoulder gently, since it's his bad one, working his thumb over the knot that always forms under the largest swathe of scar tissue. "It's not your fault. Whatever he does is nothing to do with you."

"He said I'm perfect." Bucky looks up with confusion in his eyes, like he can't imagine anyone thinking something like that about him without it being a mockery. "I'm not. I used to be close. Now I'm broken and scarred up and fucking Fat."

"You're not perfect, okay? But nobody's perfect." This is territory that still makes Steve nervous, like he's not sure which way to go. On one hand he could tell Bucky he's perfect, it sounds romantic, but it's not life. "I've got asthma and shitty eyesight and Sam's got webbed toes and Natasha's got the world's worst temper—"

"Thanks." Natasha nods appreciatively on her way past as she heads out to yoga class, mat under her arm and gym bag slung over her shoulder.

"But seriously. Nobody's perfect, Buck."

"I don't care about anybody else. I care about me." He lets his head bang onto the table once, twice,
before Steve's hand is in the way and he stills miserably. "I'm so fucking selfish. I'm dirt. Break up with me."

"No." Steve rubs his thumb over Bucky's forehead where his hand is still awkwardly trapped by Bucky's head, and he wonders if now is the time to try and divert the situation.

Bucky wants to binge, he's being self-destructive (sort of), and he hates himself. Sounds like a good time to throw him a curve ball.

"Hey, can you cook?"

The question seemingly comes out of nowhere and makes Bucky lift his head and stare at Steve like he's got two heads. At least it seems to jerk him out of the self-hatred spiral he's in. Point one to Rogers.

"I've lived in dorms since I was ten, I can just about boil water." He shrugs. "Why?"

"I've been doing some research – don't get mad –" Bucky can react badly when he thinks Steve is paying too much attention to his illness over him, but he just looks curious this time "– and apparently some people with eating… problems find it easier to control their relationship with food when they cook."

"Oh… kay." Bucky thinks he follows, but he's not quite where Steve is yet. He knows Steve is trying to distract him so he just goes with it. "So…"

"You're hungry right now." Steve says it like it's just hunger, not like it's wrong, and Bucky feels the wash of relief like a physical release. "And you binge on processed stuff, quick snacks and junk food. So I thought maybe if we took time and cooked something then you'd be able to eat it without feeling like you didn't earn it or just shovelling it down like it didn't matter. Maybe."

He's stumbling slightly and mixing his ideas together, but now Bucky follows. He lets out a slow breath and nods, a tiny smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. He needed this. He'll never get over how grateful he is to have Steve in his life, especially when he comes up with ideas like this.

"Uh… Natasha has stuff to make soup." He offers, and the words are enough to make Steve kiss him on the mouth and lose that look that suggests he's not quite sure what Bucky's going to do next.

"Okay, soup." He gets up and offers his hand. Bucky lets himself be helped. "It's a start."
"Katie, that doesn't look like third. Turn your feet out and bring one arm in front of you."

Bucky calls out as he walks through the class, trying very hard to pretend he knows exactly what he's doing. The little girl adjusts herself and looks up for approval so he nods before he moves on.

"Let's see you in fourth, arms high." The class complies, with varying degrees of success. They're only beginners, little skinny things in brand new leotards watching each other nervously from the corner of their eyes. "Okay, someone needs to come and demonstrate the arms for us. Uh… Peter, stop poking her and c'mere."

Peter is a little ball of energy (ballet is apparently a way to try and manage his ADHD, Bucky's not sure how much it helps but the kid sure has fun), and he bounds to the front of the class and gets into fourth position with his arms low, grinning widely at being chosen to help. Bucky stands behind him and moves his arms into the high position, explaining the movements to the class as he goes.

It's easier than he thought to do it this way. Last night he'd had a moment of major panic, practicing basic positions in front of the mirror and almost crying when his arm just wouldn't go more than a couple of inches above his shoulder. He's teaching basics to children and he can't even do them himself. He's useless. He hadn't even had to purge his dinner, it had come up automatically from anxiety and he'd barely made it to the sink in time to throw up.

Unclogging half-digested vegetable soup from the drain the night before his first class. Somehow he knew this would happen. It almost feels comforting in its inevitability, like an old friend taking him into its arms. Drinking feels the same way.

Bucky Barnes, King of Self-Sabotage. All hail. It's a good thing his friends won't let him destroy himself completely.

Natasha found him when she came home a few hours later, curled up on the couch watching an old production of Swan Lake from Novosibirsk with the best part of a bottle of vodka in his stomach. He was Rothbart in this production, young and wiry and evil onstage, had dreamed of playing Siegfried during his second season in Novosibirsk. It never happened because even back then he'd fucked up. He rambled this all to Natasha as her younger self swirled across the screen as the Black Swan. They'd always been a lovely pair, back when Bucky wasn't broken.

Less broken, rather. He always has been.

She made him throw up again, after that, because the hangover would be fierce otherwise and sometimes Bucky's life is one big exercise in damage limitation. Then Natasha held him steady and took him through the basic positions and movements in the living room, helping him modify the arm
movements so he could at least indicate what he wanted the class to do.

It was Steve who'd suggested help from the class, when Bucky texted him drunk even after he'd promised to be good while Steve was playing a club tonight, and Bucky thanks whatever fucked up god is in charge of his life a little more every day for his boyfriend and his brilliant brain. The kids feel special when they get to help, and Bucky doesn't have to hurt himself trying to force his body into positions it just can't achieve anymore.

"See how Peter's arm is extended but not rigid." Bucky points his finger along the length of the boy's limb. His lines are good, though his feet could use work. He's got potential. "And see on his right hand how his fingers aren't stiff. That's how you need to hold yourself. Thank you, Peter."

Peter practically skips back to his place at the barre, chest puffed up with pride. Bucky smiles at the sight because he can't ever remember feeling like that at his age, he was always too busy looking at the other boys in the class to make sure he was the smallest. The girls, too. Gender didn't really matter when it came to worrying about his size, not back then.

"Now we're going to practice the positions with a plié. Does everyone know what that is?" He gets a murmured response and demonstrates, holding the barre at the mirror with his good arm as he bends his knees and explains how to keep their feet turned out. He takes everything slowly and carefully, encouraging them to move if they need to see better. "Okay, ready?"

The rest of the class continues just like this. There's no yelling, no snide comments, no grabbing limbs and shoving them to where they're supposed to be. Bucky doesn't care that he has to tell Peter to pipe down eight times, or that some of the kids are totally confused by the French terminology even after he explains it to them. By the end of the class they're all moving in sync and mostly correctly, but most importantly they're smiling.

Bucky feels his chest loosen. He didn't upset anyone, nobody feels bad about themselves because of his class. He's not like his mother.

He greets the parents after class, making sure everyone has someone to take them home. Some of the parents have seen him dance before, some were in the audience at his last performance, and Bucky manages to field compliments and questions about when he's returning to performing with a minimum of freaking out. He's got a couple of stock answers that he practiced in the mirror this morning, and they help him keep his wits about him when someone asks him something he's not prepared for ("Are you Rebecca Barnes' brother? I saw her in the Nutcracker and she's brilliant.").

This is handling it. Actually handling it and not just convincing himself that he is while actually being on the edge of panicking. Bucky feels good.

"Mr Bucky." Peter pokes him in the arm to get his attention, and Bucky gets the feeling he's going to be telling him not to do that a lot this year. The kid is one of the last to be picked up, he'd already said his grandpa might be late again. "I gotta question."

"Fire away." Bucky shoves his phone in his pocket and smiles at the boy.

"When you're showing us stuff, how come you do the legs but you don't do the arms?"

Bucky almost freezes up, but he lets out a controlled breath and manages the sudden wave of panic. He's fine, he can handle this. The kid doesn't know anything except what he tells him, and he's feeling pretty confident after realising that both his lessons today have gone well. He's in control of this.
After a second of thought, Bucky pulls up his long sleeve and turns his arm to show Peter the healed surgical scar that runs the length of his forearm and disappears under the material. The kid stares with wide eyes, curious rather than disgusted.

"Remember how I tell you guys to always make sure you're doing the movements safely? And to stop if anything hurts?" Peter nods, still staring. "I didn't do that one time and I got really hurt. That's why it's important to be safe."

"Did you fall down?" The kid touches the end of the scar gingerly with one fingertip, like he's interested but worried about hurting his teacher.

"Yeah, I fell a long way." Bucky twitches a smile, and it's not just for the kid's benefit. "But I got back up again. That's the part that matters."

* *

"How was it?"

Steve is in the kitchen when Bucky gets back to his apartment, practically buzzing after his first day of teaching. There are two classes of under-twelves, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, so Bucky has actually been out of the apartment and busy for a whole day for the first time since his 'accident' happened. He made and packed himself a lunch this morning, so he wouldn't be tempted to binge on junk from the vending machine, and it worked.

No urges to binge, no panic attacks, and no fingers down his throat. Bucky almost feels like a new man.

"It was awesome." He's grinning as he comes into the kitchen and tosses his gym bag on a chair, his empty lunch box in the sink. Steve practically gapes because he's never seen Bucky this genuinely happy.

He's seen shades of happiness, of cockiness and laughter and pleasure, but he's never seen Bucky radiate joy like this.

"It was so much fun. I never realised ballet could be fun. They were having a good time and they only fucked around a little bit. I had to tell some of them off, Steve. Me. And they took me seriously, I've got authority now, it's so weird. There's this one kid, Peter, he's got the potential to be really good if he can just concentrate and stop messing with his neighbour for five minutes…"

Bucky keeps talking at a mile a minute, grabbing a slice of bread from the bagged loaf on the counter and spreading peanut butter on it as he tells his boyfriend all about his day. Steve has a moment of worry when he sees Bucky going for food, but then he stops and looks. One slice of bread. Eaten one bite at a time. Normal.

"And you were right about getting volunteers to demonstrate the arm movements. They pretty much fight over who gets to stand at the front and show off and none of them think it's weird that I don't do it." Bucky finally pauses for breath and smiles slowly, slightly confused at the look on Steve's face. "What?"

"I love you."

Bucky finally stills, swallowing the final bite of his snack with a gulp. Not of sickness. For the first time in forever, there is no sickness. He stares at Steve with wide eyes, cautious as if this could turn out to be some kind of cruel joke.
But Steve's sitting there with a dopey grin on his face, like Bucky's something to love.

And he… does.

"You… what?"

"I love you." Steve says it simply, like it's just the truth and not the most wonderful thing Bucky's ever heard in his miserable life.

"I… I love you too." He stutters the reply, grin slowly spreading back over his face until he's beaming again.

He's known for a while that he loves Steve, that Steve loves him back, but he doesn't trust himself to understand people's motivations anymore. Not since he thought he knew what Brock was about and that went to complete shit. So he's been cautious, not putting himself on the line, waiting for Steve to make the first move just in case it turns out that it's not one they have in common.

But they do. Of course they do.

Bucky is across the kitchen before he thinks about it, leaning down and kissing Steve so hard it leaves them both breathless. He's in Steve's lap before he knows it, putting his whole weight on his boyfriend's legs and not even caring about how heavy he is. There's a sudden fire in his belly that he hasn't felt for a long time, probably not since before he fell.

He realises he's hard at the same time Steve does. Steve pulls back and almost says something but Bucky presses a finger to his lips quickly.

"Shh. You'll scare it away." He grins, grinding his hips down and letting out a soft gasp at the feeling. It's been so fucking long. He kisses Steve again, harder and more desperate now he knows it can go somewhere. "Fuck me."

"Yeah." For once, Steve isn't cautious. Bucky isn't trying to distract him from something terrible with sex. He's happy and healthy(-ier than usual) and it's been a long time since they could do this and both enjoy it properly. "Bedroom?"

Bucky shakes his head and grinds down on Steve again, already fumbling the buttons on his jeans open. He's got electricity running under his skin, needs every touch like burning and doesn't want to be apart for the time it would take to go to the bedroom. He wants to ride Steve right here in this chair until he's full of come and too exhausted to move.

"Buck, lube." Steve groans against his lips as Bucky gets his jeans open and wraps his hand around Steve's dick. "Bucky."

"Don't care." He grumbles, latching onto Steve's neck and sucking an impressively dark hickey over his pulse.

Steve moans breathily at the wet heat of Bucky's mouth and forces himself to focus. If they'd just fucked last night he might risk doing this with just spit, but not when it's been a while. He's not going to hurt Bucky by rushing into it, even if he might want him to. Bucky makes a surprised noise when Steve wraps his arms around him and lifts him up as he stands, carrying him to the bedroom. It's not like he weighs anything.

"This is ridiculous." Bucky wraps his legs around Steve's waist, still trying to grind against him like he's just discovered what his dick is for. "You think we could fuck like this, muscle man? You holding me up like this?"
"I think I'm never letting you get this sexually frustrated again." Steve drops Bucky on the bed and crowds over him, kissing him slowly and softly in a way that makes Bucky melt but wrap his legs insistently around his boyfriend again.

"I love you, okay? But I want you to fuck me like you hate me." Bucky's already trying to pull Steve's shirt off, and Steve breaks into laughter when it gets tangled over his head. Bucky whines and whacks his shoulder lightly at the giggling. "I'm serious. Stop giggling and do me."

"Well, if you insist." Steve sighs theatrically, like it's a chore, and Bucky scowls. He shoves Steve with his good arm and manages to roll them over, trapping Steve's arms in his shirt and twisting the fabric around his wrists so he can't get out easily. "Hey!"

"Too slow, Rogers." Bucky leans over awkwardly on his bad arm to grab lube and a condom from the bedside drawer. He's too wound up to wait, now the dam has finally broken, and he's already hard enough to feel his pulse in his dick. "Now you just get to watch."

"Bucky, c'mon." Steve is suddenly taking it seriously now that he's unable to touch, but Bucky just smirks and strips his clothes off as quickly as he can, not bothering to take the time to make it a show.

The fact he actually considers making it a show, the fact he doesn't want to do this with the lights off and keeping his weight off Steve in case he crushes him, it's too weird for Bucky to think about it for too long in case he starts getting self-conscious. The fact that he's not self-conscious is threatening to freak him out, and isn't that a bitch?

He fingers himself open quickly, managing to smear lube on the sheets and making Steve curse a blue streak as he has to watch every expression flicker across Bucky's face and not touch. He's not quite prepped enough when he rolls the condom onto Steve's dick and slowly sinks down on him, but he can't wait anymore. The burn is intense, but it's just what Bucky needs and he feels like he's coming apart at the seams as he pushes down until Steve is all the way inside him.

He feels complete again, muscles trembling as he ducks down to bruise Steve's lips with a biting kiss. Steve makes a wounded noise of frustration as he struggles against the shirt tangled up around his wrists, trying to get free so he can grab Bucky's hips.

"Slow." He pants, overwhelmed by the unbelievable tightness of it's been too fucking long around him. "Don't hurt yourself."

"Not fucking fragile. Just take what you're given and enjoy it." Bucky growls, feeling feral and wound too tight as he starts rolling his hips, barely lifting them as he grinds on Steve's cock. "Fuck, you feel good. Fuckin' split me open. Shit."

"Keep talking like that and this isn't gonna last long." Steve groans, because Bucky knows his dirty talk is a weak point for him and the little shit knows exactly what he's doing. He's got a hand on his dick and he's clearly not trying to make this last any longer than he has to. It's been too long for that.

"I could've been on top if you'd just hurried the fuck up." Bucky smirks and picks up the pace a little, letting out a shivery moan that goes straight to Steve's dick. "You could've been shoving my face into the mattress and pulling my hair right now. Pounding me like I'm your slut."

"You are my slut."

"I love being your slut." Bucky twists his hips as he moves and Steve's eyes roll back into his head. "I'd bend over for you anywhere, take your dick in front of the whole fuckin' studio. Let 'em all see
how good you fuck me with your big fuckin'—"

"Jesus." Steve finally rips the fabric of the shirt and grabs Bucky's hips once his hands are free, fingers bruising as he holds him still and pounds up into him just like he wants.

Bucky lets out a sharp, approving moan as Steve fucks him properly, his breathing turning into quick _ah ah ahs_ as he jerks himself off at the same fast, rough pace. Steve thrusts into him as deep and hard as he can and Bucky loses it, going silent and flushing red as he spills all over Steve's chest. The sight sends Steve over the edge right behind him, fucking Bucky's pliant body through his orgasm like he's trying to knock him up.

Apparently he says as much in his sex-haze, because Bucky lets out a trembly little groan and collapses on top of him, overwhelmed and not giving a shit about the mess that's going to be sticking them together pretty soon.

Which is exactly the right time for the buzzer to go at the apartment door, obviously.

"For _fuck's_ sake." Steve looks so disgruntled as he lifts his head up, still flushed and sweaty and so obviously post-coital, that Bucky can't help but laugh. "Is that Tasha?"

"Probably Sam looking for her. Don't know why she doesn't just give him a fucking key." Bucky rolls his eyes and gets up reluctantly when the buzzer sounds again, pulling on a pair of jeans (Steve's) and wiping the mess off his chest with a shirt as he goes to the door.

"Alright, Jesus. I hope you know this is _coitus—""

Interruptus. Literally stopped in his tracks.

Pietro looks exhausted. The circles under his puffy eyes look like fading bruises, slightly yellowed, and his dry, cracked lips are bleeding in places. Bucky's heart sinks right to the floor.

"I-I think I need help." The kid stutters quietly.
"Jesus."

Steve comes up behind Bucky, expecting to see a sheepish Sam being let into the apartment, and the curse slips out quietly when he gets a look at Pietro. He doesn't mean to make the kid feel worse than he already apparently does, but he can't help his shock when he sees the state of the bubbliest kid in the company. He looks halfway dead.

Steve's suddenly very glad he decided to put on pants instead of coming out with his dick on display just to fuck with Sam. Nudity might be the only thing that could make this situation worse.

Bucky seems surprisingly in control of things, *Seems* being the key word, because Steve's pretty sure he knows better.

"Come in, sit down." He's shepherding Pietro gently into the apartment, none of his usual snark in the soft tone of his voice. Pietro seems to wobble on his feet and Bucky takes his arm carefully to help him inside. It's all so careful, like Bucky's piloting someone else's body and he's not sure where all the controls are yet. "Steve, grab a Gatorade out the fridge for me?"

"Sure." He's not exactly sure what's going on, and a large part of him wants to give into his tendency to flap around and try to fix everything by sheer force of will, but he contains himself and does as Bucky asks. He can hear his boyfriend talking as he hunts in the fridge, though he can barely make out Pietro's murmured responses.

"When was the last time you ate something?" There's a mumble Steve can't hear and then Bucky's voice comes back firmer. "Try. Was it yesterday? The day before? I saw you on Tuesday, have you eaten since then? How does your chest feel?"

Whatever Pietro says can't be good, because Bucky looks worried as hell when Steve comes into the living room and passes him the Gatorade. Bucky takes off the cap and hands it to Pietro with a pointed look, and Steve sees the kid's hands shaking as he lifts it to his mouth. This isn't good. And part of Steve is mad at the poor kid because Bucky had been doing so well just an hour ago. He'd had confidence like Steve hadn't seen since he stopped dancing, inhabited his body like he owned it for once, and now that's all gone. It's not Pietro's fault, he knows that, but that doesn't mean Steve isn't pissed.

"You need to see a doctor." He says immediately, but Pietro is shaking his head before the words are even fully out of his mouth. This is so familiar it hurts.

Bucky looks ashen at the whole thing and Steve knows why. This is like looking in a mirror, even he can see the similarities and he's not looking at his own reflection.

"I can't get kicked out of the company." Pietro's voice is raspy, his accent thicker than Steve has ever
heard it, and Bucky nudges him to drink again. He looks dehydrated as hell, on top of everything else. "I-I was fine until class but then I got dizzy and I… I can't go home. My sister would know something was wrong so…"

"So you came here?" Bucky's voice is still calm, but Steve can see the grip on his control start to loosen even from a distance. He already feels responsible for the kid's condition and this isn't helping at all. Being sought out as a place of safety is totally new, and Bucky's clearly not prepared to handle it. "I don't know how to help you, Pietro. I…"

"Please, you're the only one who knows what it's like." He grabs Bucky's hand, their bones knocking together through paper thin skin, and Steve sees his boyfriend stiffen up warningly.

"Look, the only thing that's really gonna help you is seeing a doctor. Bucky'll tell you the same thing. You don't look like you're in good shape, that's the first thing you've gotta fix." Steve tries to intervene, tries to derail this before it can push Bucky into a guilt spiral. "Or a therapist, alright? Someone outside the company, so they don't have to know if you're worried about getting fired."

"I… Can I? I don't know how to do that." Pietro is still clinging to Bucky's hand like a much younger boy, and Steve is sharply reminded of how reliant the kid is on the company. He doesn't seem to have much idea how to get by in America without their help, since everything is usually taken care of by the company and he's probably been too preoccupied with his sister outside of that to learn how everything works.

"We can help you get in touch with a doctor." Steve offers, gently. "It's good that you know you need help, and you're not alone. We'll help you."

Pietro nods gingerly, taking a voluntary sip of the Gatorade this time, and Bucky still looks like he's about to hurl. Cold, bony fingers are still clasped around his, and he feels like this is a drowning person clinging to someone who can't swim. He can barely keep himself afloat, he doesn't know how to help somebody else.

You should worry about fixing your own oxygen mask before helping somebody else with theirs. This is a sudden loss of cabin pressure and Bucky can't breathe.

"How do you even see a doctor for this?" Pietro's asking, but Bucky feels like it's from far away. He vaguely registers that Steve looks concerned, but he can't tell if it's for him or the kid. "Is it… will they make me stay in somewhere? Wanda needs me at home."

"I don't think they can make you stay if you don't want to." Bucky tries to make himself present, although he feels like he could disconnect from his body quite easily if he wanted to. "I think they'll just talk to you about the problems you've been having and try to help you fix them. They might suggest stuff, but they can't make you do anything."

"You think?" Pietro looks across with his eyebrows pinched together in confusion. "But you said you had to do this after your accident. Don't you know?"

"Well, I, um, they wanted me to do stuff, but I didn't." Bucky flounders for an answer. He's suddenly so hungry he can't think straight. "I never got professional help. I didn't want it."

"So you're lying, you can get help without seeing a doctor." Pietro lets go of his hand like it's burned him, and Bucky can see exactly where this is going. He's done exactly the same thing himself, got just a little too far in asking for help before he was ready and then cut and run when he got freaked out.
"Pietro, that's not—" Steve tries to cut in, seeing the same thing Bucky does, but Pietro shakes his head and pushes himself off the couch. His face blanches and he sways at the sudden headrush, and it's probably only pride that keeps him on his feet through it.

"You just want me not being your problem." The kid wraps his (what Bucky would describe as screamingly eurotrash) tracksuit top around him tightly as he folds his arms around his middle. Bucky recognises the gesture, knows he's probably pinching the skin above his waist to reassure himself that it hasn't suddenly turned into fat. "That's okay. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"That's really not what we meant." Steve tries to do some kind of damage control. "Bucky should have got professional help, that's the best option. That's why I'm saying you should do that."

"I should have got professional help? Haven't I done just fine on my own?"

_Oneucked up dancer at a time, please._

"Now's not really the time for this." Fuck his life, how does he manage to piss off everyone in the room at once? But Bucky is trying to do the same thing as Pietro now, bailing out of the conversation because it's touched a nerve too far.

"So you're saying I haven't done fine? Am I not doing fine now?" His voice is rising, and Pietro looks like he's accidentally walked into the middle of daddy and daddy fighting and wants to be anywhere but here.

"Buck, you can eat about three foods without hating yourself, you binge at least once a week, and you think you're being sneaky when you throw up but you're really not. That's not fine." He doesn't mean for it all to come out like that, with that weary tone of voice like Bucky's a problem, because he's not. It's all a mistake but Bucky looks like he thinks he deserves it. "You still have an eating disorder. It's not fixed just because you don't want to kill yourself right now. You should get professional help, that's a fact."

An awkward silence falls between the three of them. Steve hadn't meant to slip into what Bucky jokingly calls his authoritative 'captain's voice' when he said all that, and he definitely hadn't meant to do it in front of someone they barely know. Now he's embarrassed Bucky in front of a stranger and they'll both probably never get professional help. Steve really isn't dealing with this situation.

So nobody's coping. Fuck.

He mutters something about making things worse and grabs his shoes from beside the door, shoving them on without socks in his haste to get as far away from this conversation as possible. If Bucky calls anything after him, Steve doesn't hear it. He's not the only one in this relationship who can cut and run when things get too much to handle.

Steve's preferred bar is only a few blocks away from Bucky and Natasha's apartment, and apparently he's taking several leaves out of Bucky's book of (anti-)coping mechanisms because getting drunk sounds like the best thing to do right now. The Shield and Sword is cosy and dark enough to be comforting even in the early evening, and Steve's spent enough hours in there sketching to know that there's unlikely to be a party crowd at the start of the week. A guilty part of him almost turns and walks right back out the door when he sees Sam is already occupying their usual spot at the bar, but his roommate looks sad and Steve is a fucking sucker.

Sam catches sight of him and raises a hand in greeting, getting the attention of the bartender and acquiring a bottle of their own microbrew that Steve is crazy for. So he feels even guiltier for almost being a selfish jerk and kisses Sam on the cheek as he sits down.
"So, my boyfriend's fucked up. What's wrong with your life?" Steve takes the beer Sam hands to him with his best attempt at a smile. Sam shakes his head, looking into the dregs of what looks suspiciously like Baileys in his glass.

"Tasha wants to hook up." He mumbles quietly. Steve drains about half his beer in one long swallow, because he's getting the distinct feeling he's going to be sorting out another fucked up life instead of getting quietly drunk like he wants.

He should get a costume for this. Or at least a cape. Because this people tell me their problems superpower sucks.

"With someone else?" He prods, when Sam doesn't elaborate. "'Cause you've been trying to get with her for like… ever. Right?"

"Yeah. No. I mean…" He mumbles, starting to play with the wax that's dripped from the little tea-light on the bar (because of course hipster Steve goes to bars where they have candles on the table, he can almost hear Bucky laughing at him in the back of his mind). "But that was just flirting. It was fine when it was just flirting."

"So you don't want to hook up?" Steve doesn't know what's going on, it's becoming a theme of his life.

"No, I do. I just…"

Sam takes a deep breath and Steve quickly drains the rest of his beer. He feels like he's going to need it.

"I'm gay as fuck, man. I always have been. I drink Baileys when I'm upset, for fuck's sake." Sam sighs hard, frustrated. This is obviously really getting to him and Steve feels another pang of guilt at not noticing anything until now. "I dunno how to love a woman. I have no fucking idea how to act like a straight guy and have a girlfriend and…"

"A girlfriend won't automatically make you straight." Steve reaches out and squeezes his shoulder. This conversation should probably be an awkward one to have with your ex, but he and Sam have always been a special case. "Everybody has exceptions, you can be gay as a fucking rainbow and still be in love with Natasha. There's such a thing as bisexual, y'know."

"I know, I'm not that stupid. But I don't feel like I'm bi. I only ever liked one girl, it's only her."

"That's why she's an exception." Steve shrugs. "You're not gonna start giving a shit about cars or like, doing home improvements just because you're dating a woman."

"That's not what I'm worried about." Sam's definitely getting frustrated, hopefully at the situation rather than at Steve not getting it. Maybe offering advice isn't the best way to go here, Steve's already fucked that up once today so perhaps it's best if he just shuts up and listens.

"D'you know how hard it was to convince my parents that I'm gay? My family weren't happy about it, they're still not but at least they've accepted they can't pray the gay away." He rubs a hand over his hair irritably. "But if I start dating a woman then my whole identity's suddenly in question. They think they're right, they think I got over the phase."

"I dunno what to tell you, I only act like I know everything." Steve takes his hand and squeezes it, because even if today is everyone expect me to fix their life day, he'd do anything for Sam and he hates it when there's nothing he can do. "I guess you've gotta decide what's gonna fuck you up more, not having them accept your identity or not having her. Think about it."
"I've been thinking about it. I don't wanna think about anything anymore." Sam leans forward to let his head rest on the table with a defeated groan. Steve rubs his palm sympathetically over his friend's hair and signals the bartender.

"Now you're talking my language. I'm officially calling this a level three tequila emergency, Jose protocols."

"Aye aye, Cap." Sam rolls his eyes as he straightens up, but he's got a hint of a smile on his face so Steve is going to call it a win.

"You know Bucky calls me that in bed, right?"

"I could've lived without knowing that. Thanks for ruining everything, shit like this is why we broke up." Sam groans and takes the shot the bartender passes him with a grimace. "Don't talk for a while."

"Probably a good idea." Steve takes his shot and signals for another, because silent drinking is probably about all he can do without fucking up right now.

"You wanna talk about what happened with Bucky?"

"Really not."

He deliberately doesn't think about what might be going on back at the apartment. Bucky always insists that he doesn't want his illness to be the focal point of their relationship, and removing himself from the situation is the only way Steve can do that right now.

He's a boyfriend, not a caretaker. If Bucky asks for help then he'll give it but, as much as his hero complex hates him for it, that's as close as he'll get to trying to save him.

Steve just hopes it's the right way to play this, although Sam's right about not wanting to think anymore. He takes another shot and deliberately doesn't.

*

The apartment is silent and smells like bleach when Steve finally manages to fit his key into the door and stumble inside. Bucky is casually doing the splits between the couch and the coffee table, flipping through a collected edition of *Bizarre* and squinting at a complicated-looking picture of rope bondage.

"Hey." He looks up calmly, apparently cooled down by the time apart, although his nose wrinkles when the smell hits him. "Did you drink Mexico or what?"

"Ran into Sam, he's having problems with Nat. Long story." Steve flops down on the couch, running a hand over Bucky’s loose hair like he might get bitten for his trouble. "What happened with Pietro?"

"I managed to talk him into eating some soup, walked him home. I think that's about as good as it's getting right now." He breathes out a silent sigh and his thin shirt shifts softly over his shoulder blades. "He was pretty shaken up, but he calmed down."

"I shouldn't have bailed on you."

"I don't need a babysitter, Rogers." Bucky nuzzles against his hand like a reluctantly affectionate cat, and something in Steve's chest loosens. Bucky reaches out to grab something from the coffee table and passes it to Steve over his shoulder. A business card?
"I didn't realise how hard it's been on you, dealing with my shit all the time. I'm kinda self-involved, dunno if you've noticed." Bucky has definitely rehearsed this little speech, and Steve finds that strangely endearing. "Bruce said he'll do an assessment on me, recommend someone I can start seeing on a regular basis."

"A therapist?"

"Yeah. Maybe a nutritionist. I dunno yet." Bucky nods, clearly trying to project more confidence than he actually has about the situation. Steve is so fucking touched his chest physically aches.

"Buck, you don't have to do this for me." Steve shakes his head, but Bucky leans back and narrows his eyes at him upside down. It's not a bitchface to be messed with.

"I'm doing it for me. Maybe for the first time in my fucking life." He sighs, softening. "But only because your little hissy fit made me realise I actually need to. I keep thinking 'oh one day I'll do it', but that day never comes. Until today, apparently. Because of you, you asshole."

The statement is awkward and clumsy in a way Bucky never is, and that's how Steve knows he means it. And okay, Bucky might be purposely not disclosing the fact that he binged and purged three times as soon as he was alone, working up the courage to actually call Bruce and finally struggling through the phone call with more stuttering than he's ever done in his life, but that doesn't mean he's not going to try this shit with everything he's got.

"You're really amazing sometimes, you know that?" Steve is leaning down to kiss him upside down, Spiderman style, and Bucky hopes his mouth doesn't taste as sour as it feels.

He's got no idea if he can do this, but he'll try. Maybe getting back up doesn't just mean getting on your feet, it means staying on them. Bucky's not sure about anything these days.

He smiles at Steve, terrified.
Chapter Notes

I made you wait over a week for an update...

so you get two chapters in two days because I'm nice like that.

Bruce Banner's office is a shithole, to put it politely.

Bucky feels calmer in imperfect rooms like this. Safer. Bubbles in the wallpaper and the shadow of lightbulb burns on the ceiling make him feel like he doesn't have to live up to anything. The room is as beat up as he is and it almost lets him breathe.

"I'm not totally sure about this as a long-term setup." Bruce says immediately, getting it out of the way as he sits slightly nervously with his notebook on his lap. "But I'm happy to do an initial assessment and recommend you to someone else."

"That's all I need right now." Bucky nods nervously, knuckles white as his fists clench. "Thanks. I really appreciate you helping me out."

"It's no trouble." Bruce smiles, and he looks exactly the same way he did the last time Bucky saw him, back when he used to do the intake assessments for the company dancers. Back then, Bucky remembers lying through his teeth to the kindly doctor about everything to do with food. He's going to try his best not to do the same thing now.

It's kind of strange that Bruce hasn't changed at all. Even his shirt is the same colour as it had been in that clinical office, back when Bucky was tiny and couldn't feel his stomach bulging out from underneath his shirt. He looks down and sees the curve of his fat beneath the material, so huge it must be noticeable from across the room. He curls his hands around his flesh protectively, seeing his knuckles disappear into dimples in chubby fingers as they bend.

Did he binge without purging? How did that happen?

"So you gave up on dancing after all your hard work." Bruce is saying, although it sounds like he's further away than just across the small room. "What are your plans now that you're useless?"

"I-I don't know." His feet don't touch the floor, it feels like he's a little boy again. "I don't know anything except ballet."

"That's true. You're not good for anything except dancing." Bruce nods seriously and writes something in his notebook. He looks so disappointed. "You're ruining your body in more ways than one. Even if you could get your arm back to where it used to be, your body shape..."

"I've been careful. I've been working out and keeping my food intake low and—"

"I'm afraid it's not good enough." Bruce shakes his head with a disapproving sigh and Bucky wants to puke. He wants to shove his fingers down his throat until he bleeds black bile. "You're not in shape at all. Your body is terrible."
"I know, I—"

"You have a boyfriend at the moment, don't you?" The doctor presses on, not waiting for Bucky's answer. "How long do you think he's going to find you attractive if you keep gaining weight like this?"

"I-I only gained five pounds."

"Weeks ago. Don't you think it's worse by now? Your lines are ruined, you'll never get them back."

The room seems to be darker now, and Bucky catches sight of himself reflected in the wall parallel to where he and Bruce are sitting. There's a mirror covering the entire wall that he hadn't noticed before, has it always been there? The barre splits it in half, a black line between Bucky's head and body in his reflection. He looks pale, bloodless and washed out in spite of the rolls of flab he can see overwhelming his tiny frame.

He looks like an overstuffed child. He feels like one too.

"So what's the point of your life now? You don't have any skills, you don't have any value. You're nothing but a burden on the people around you." It's not Bruce's voice he hears, it's something weirdly distorted and suddenly Bucky's standing in front of the mirror. There's a jab to his stomach and he gags on the mass of food that wants to force its way out.

"You're useless. You're nothing without ballet."

He's standing in front of the mirror in third position, his arm on fire as he struggles to maintain it. His eyes are black pits and he's nothing but globs of puckered flesh supporting a skull. His mother's finger pokes into his gut and he gags, half-digested insects crawling up his throat. He deserves this.

"You're worthless."

Bucky wakes up with a choking sound, spit caught in his throat. He heaves once, twice, and manages to lean over the side of the bed just in time to throw up. The violence takes him by surprise, and for the first time in forever it doesn't feel cleansing to have nothing in his stomach. Disoriented, he gasps for air and sits up, looking around wildly and only starting to calm down when he realises where he is. He's home, he's safe, Mama isn't going to be mad that he made a mess.

The apartment is empty in the dark, Natasha's open door letting him know that he's alone, and Bucky is glad for the isolation as he stumbles to the bathroom. It's not so humiliating if there's nobody around to witness him not coping, as he cleans himself up and then goes to clean his bedroom on autopilot. He's going to start putting a bucket next to the bed if this keeps happening, this is the second time this week.

He thanks god that Steve was playing a gig tonight and slept at his own place for once, so nobody had to witness him puking on the floor like a child with no control over himself. He thanks god for wooden floors that don't stain with his shame. He thanks god that he didn't have spaghetti for dinner, because he might have choked for real trying to bring noodles back up without being prepared for it. He's not sure there's a god listening, but he thanks the universe all the same.

Cleaning up after himself is actually comforting, and Bucky's heart rate returns to normal as the smell of bleach covers bile. Things being clean usually meant he was safe, usually meant nobody would find out about his purging or that his mother wouldn't be angry when she found candy wrappers hidden under his bed when he dared to binge in the house. He went through a real phase of being
obsessive about cleanliness after he started to recover from his fall, but Bucky's pretty sure his friends
 don't know how deep it goes. He'd like to keep it that way. He doesn't need to seem crazier than he
 already is.

Getting back into bed won't help him feel better, not after the nightmare he's been having over and
 over for the past week, so Bucky trudges through to the kitchen to put on some coffee. The clock on
 the microwave says 04:23 and he sighs, lifting his left leg up to rest on the counter as he fumbles
 with the coffee pot. Steve thinks he stretches around people like this to be show off and be
 obnoxious, and Bucky lets him because again, being crazier isn't on his to-do list. Novosibirsk had
 been very strict at the beginning, very insistent that every movement should be a stretch if possible,
 and it's still hard-wired into him to start warming up for an intensive class that he isn't going to take.

Although he has started to attend classes again, tentatively. His friends don't think it's a good idea,
 except maybe Natasha who understands how hard dance is welded into his DNA, but they're
 supportive if not subtle about their reservations. Bucky's worked up to a couple of classes a week
 and stays near the back, trying to get his body back into a condition he's happy to live with even if it
 isn't perfect. His arm frustrates him so much he almost walks out the first couple of times it fucks up,
 but he's getting better at handling his limitations.

Pietro always stands next to him when they're in the same class, and Bucky's skin crawls a little
 when he feels the kid's eyes on him while they're dancing. It makes him uncomfortable because he's
 pretty sure he's Pietro's Loki, that the kid is looking at him and thinking why can't I look like that,
 why can't I have those wrists, those ankles, those collarbones. Bucky starts wearing legwarmers and
 long sleeves to class, trying to cover up as much as possible because maybe it'll make it easier for the
 kid. Maybe he's just being selfish, but he doesn't want to be inspiration. Not like this.

Especially not when it makes him secretly, horribly proud in the back of his mind. He's still small
 enough to make someone want to look like him. He knows it's a shitty thing to think but he can't help
 it, he's weirdly proud of his fucked up body in those uncomfortable moments. It makes him want to
 get smaller again.

The coffee is too hot and burns his raw throat, but it's a good pain. Grounding. Bucky scrapes his
 hair back into a familiar low bun and shuffles through to the living room to find wherever he
 abandoned his phone. There are a few messages, mostly from Becky because of course they have the
 same sleeping patterns even when they're in different timezones. Twin thing, he guesses.

I had a dream about our first summer back from school. There was rice on the floor in the studio
 room? Am I imagining this? X

Since his sister found out about what went on when they were children, she's been slowly asking
 Bucky more and more questions about it. As she thinks over their childhood, things that she never
 wondered about are suddenly flagged up as weird and she asks Bucky straight out if her suspicions
 are correct. Steve can't believe it when he gets texts like Did anyone ever bad touch you when you
 were a kid?, but it doesn't faze Bucky at all. He and Becky have always been blunt with each other,
 a virtue of partially knowing what the other is thinking before they do themselves, and he actually
 appreciates being able to talk about stuff that happened without it being A Serious Issue. His life is
 too A Very Special Episode already right now, being normal about horrible shit feels like a positive
 change.

Still, he lights a cigarette and takes a few long drags before he brings himself to reply.

Kneeling on rice, google it. Ballet is suffering with a smile, it was a lesson. X

The response takes a few minutes, but for going to and from Russia Becky must still be awake and
replying immediately. It's kind of comforting to know they're both awake at the same time. He misses having his other half around sometimes, especially when it's the middle of the night and his stomach hurts.

*Dad asked me if you were okay yesterday.*

That makes Bucky pause. He freezes until he drops ash on his shirt and curses, brushing it away and stubbing out the remains of his cigarette irritably, transferring some of his anxiety onto being mad at an inanimate object. At least he's not stubbing it out on himself.

Brock flashes behind his eyes and he lets his head *thunk* back on the couch angrily. No, concentrate on this now.

*Why does he care?*

*Steve talked to him at dinner, he says he's concerned about you. Maybe he's figuring out she was too hard on you??*

Too hard on him. Bucky almost laughs, but what comes out is more of a strangled cough. It sounds so innocent like that, all the teeth taken away until it sounds like he was just being *sensitive* the whole time. He can hear his dad's exact phrasing behind it, of course Bucky was always too *sensitive* for his liking.

*Might he should have figured that out years ago.*

*He's trying, B. don't be an asshole.*

Fuck Becky, he'll be as much of an asshole as he likes. Bucky stalks to the kitchen and searches in his junk cupboard for something to shove in his mouth until he feels better. He realises what he's doing and catches himself, pressing his knuckles hard into the countertop until the pain gets him back from the brink of a binge. Barely.

He feels like a fucking idiot as he carefully portions out a plate of junk. Three Oreos, a handful of chips, two chunks of chocolate with caramel pieces, a tiny scoop of the potato salad Natasha keeps in the fridge that's got too much mayo in it for Bucky to not class as junk. He's *allowing* himself this, he's in control of it, that's what he tells himself even as he totals up the calories in his head and knows he'll either starve himself tomorrow or puke a second time tonight because of this. But he needs the comfort, and the burst of sweetness on his tongue from the first tiny bite is almost worth it.

Not bingeing, see? Nothing behind the curtain, nothing up his sleeves. He's fine. He's *better.*

There's another message waiting on his phone when he carries his plate of shame back to the couch, and Bucky allows himself to savour a chip on his tongue until the taste is gone before he opens it. He could break out the vodka, then he might feel better. At least it's Russian, Mama would probably think it was less of a fuck up than food.

*What should I tell him?*

50% fat 30% want to kill myself 10% want to kill everyone else 5% hungry 3% tired 2% ok.

*So not okay, then?*

*It's better than 1%*

Bucky's very tempted to turn his phone off and go grab the rest of his junk food from the kitchen, but
he knows Becky will worry if he stops answering now. With everything going on with Pietro, Bucky's recently gained some perspective on what it's like to be on the other side of this issue, and he's trying to be a little bit less selfish about not giving the people who care about him heart attacks.

A little bit. Can't completely change the habits of a lifetime.

Are you drunk?

No, I had a nightmare. Now I'm awake. I said 50% fat not 50% vodka.

Can you be serious?

I'm always serious.

He sends her a snapchat of his most serious face and can feel her rolling her eyes from another continent. It feels good, normal. Maybe it's not that normal to be semi-bingeing on junk food while trying to convince your sister that you're not actively suicidal, at the same time as having a sarcastic conversation, but it's as close to normal as Bucky's ever felt.

I told Bruce to tell me if you don't show up to your appointment.

Ummm dr/patient confidentiality??

He's not your dr.

Communist bitch.

Bucky growls under his breath and lights another cigarette. Of course Becky would anticipate that he's been seriously considering not going to his assessment in a few days. He knows it's the right thing to do, and he knows he told Steve he was trying to get help, but the stress dreams and anxious hunger have almost been too much to handle since he made the appointment. He's going to be a nervous wreck by the time it comes around, Bucky just knows it.

Natka is also spying on you for the glory of the motherland. Just FYI.

Communist bitches. I'm gonna move in with Captain America and make my escape to the land of capitalist pigdogs.

????

Steve is like aggressively all-American = Captain America.

That was the most reaching joke.

Fuck you. I'm hilarious.

He rubs the heel of his hand over his eyes wearily, trying not to ash in his hair as his other hand is very occupied with shoving chips into his mouth. He could eat a few more, the bag's only half-full and they'll just go stale and go to waste if he doesn't—

Bucky pushes the plate away suddenly when he realises he's getting out of control. How is it this hard? He's started to be good at only allowing himself a little of what he's not supposed to have without it turning into a binge, why does he have to fuck up tonight? He has classes to teach in the morning and a trip to the movies with Steve and all this stuff happening that means he can't fuck up.

Things were so much simpler when fucking up was part of his job.
Please just promise you'll go to the assessment?

I'm scared.

He can't believe he actually types the statement and sends it. Since when did he think it was okay to start telling someone how he felt, even if it is his sister? He should have learned his lesson about driving people away with Brock, it'll be Steve next. This is already putting strain on his boyfriend, Bucky can see it. The guilt is starting to eat away at him almost as much as the shit with Brock does.

I know, buckybear. But please? It's important.

The childhood nickname should piss him off, but for some reason he finds himself getting hot behind his prickling eyes as he stares at the bright phone screen in the dark room. He hadn't turned on any lights when he woke up from the nightmare, the thought didn't occur to him since he could get by without them. Maybe that's the kind of thinking he's supposed to change.

Fine.

Thank you, ilu. Go to bed, it's stupid early there xx

Bucky sends a middle finger emoji back, with a heart immediately following because he's not one hundred percent a dick, and then sits there in silence for a few minutes. The living room is cold and nothing feels real at this time in the morning, when even New York hasn't woken up yet outside his windows. He doesn't feel real, nothing does except the sharp taste of salt on his tongue and the soothing pang of sweetness over his wrecked teeth.

He should go to bed. He should stop eating. He should keep eating. He should get drunk. He should call Steve, or Natasha, or Sam. He should tell someone he doesn't feel safe. He should put his fingers down his throat. He should do a lot of things right now.

What he actually does is text Bruce, trying not to feel guilty at the possibility of waking the doctor up at stupid o'clock in the morning.

Can I see you today? Don't think I can wait. Sorry.

Bucky tips his head back to lean on the back of the couch and breathes. Closes his eyes.

Sleep doesn't make anything better, but it might make the time pass quicker. He should do a lot of things, but this is all he can do right now.
Swallowing Guilt

Chapter Notes

As a warning and reminder, remember that Bucky is seriously sick. His actions reflect this.

Bucky has two Peters in his morning class. They're both a pain in the ass individually, but together they're a giant pain in the ass. Today, that small fact is enough to threaten to push him over the edge.

It's not a good day.

"I'm sorry, Kate. We're all going to have to wait until P1 and P2 stop messing around at the back." He folds his arms and stares pointedly at the boys, who have been busily engaged in a who-can-kick-higher competition instead of paying attention to the class. "Are you done? Can Kate demonstrate our arm movements now?"

"Why don't you do the arm movements?" Peter Quill is a little brat sometimes, especially when he's already acting out and gets called on it. Bucky can't blame the kid for acting up, apparently his mom is ill and he's not dealing with it very well, but that doesn't mean he doesn't bristle at the kid's snide remark.

"Because Kate is doing them for us." He tells himself to chill, internally. Getting mad at a kid is a bad idea. It's not Quill's fault that he didn't get any sleep, and it's not his fault that Bucky's got his therapy assessment looming straight after class.

"It's 'cause you got a metal arm. You're a robot." The kid is just trying to push his buttons, using the knowledge about Bucky's arm to feel superior, but Bucky doesn't take it well today. He snaps.

"Go and sit down at the side." He points, the sudden movement making Kate jump where she's standing beside him. "You don't need your mouth for dancing, go sit down until you can keep it shut."

Peter scowls at him all the way across the room as he trudges over to go and sit on the benches with all the gym bags and shoes, and Bucky could seriously scream at the kid right now. He forces himself to take a deep breath and not think about the vending machine in the hall, packed with all the junk that would make his heart rate come down to normal. He forces himself to smile and act normally after the little blip in his composure, because ballet is suffering with a smile and this is one thing he can do correctly.

The lesson continues and the kids actually behave. Bucky tells himself he didn't scare them, he can't have, he couldn't handle that. He's not like her. He's not.

Bucky has time to eat his lunch and throw it up before he goes to his therapy appointment, another small mercy he thanks the universe for. There's blood streaked in his bile and it doesn't even make him blink, it's bright red not brown so he must have scratched his throat again. The fact it doesn't faze him makes him feel strong, calmer as he makes his way to Bruce Banner's office, chewing on breath mints and trying not to think about how many calories are in the sweet little pills.
Unsurprisingly, Bruce is a lot nicer than his nightmare counterpart. He's greyer around the temples and a lot more smiley than Bucky remembers, even though he's clearly not entirely comfortable with assessing a sort-of friend like this. He and Natasha had a very misguided fling, back in the day, and mutual friends let Bucky small talk enough to get settled without having a panic attack before Bruce starts in on the difficult questions.

The worst part is, Bucky knows exactly how to lie his way around the test so he can skip out of here with a clean bill of health. He could be honest when he told his friends he went, Becky would get a positive report from Bruce, and he would have fulfilled all his obligations. He'd be free to get back to…

To what? To hating himself even more? To sneaking around and disappointing his friends? To pushing Steve away because he's so in love with his eating disorder that there's no room for anyone else?

Bucky grits his teeth until they hurt and forces himself to answer honestly.

Most of it is standard. Does his weight affect how he feels about himself? Obviously. Does he think he's overweight? He feels like it. Does he ever eat in secret? Mostly. Does he feel like he's lost control of his eating? Yes, by agreeing to try and be more normal about it. Does he make himself puke? Obviously, that's why he's here. The questions are pretty predictable.

Some of it throws him though. Does he feel uncomfortable seeing himself in a reflective surface like a mirror or a shop window? Yes, doesn't everyone? Would he be upset if he wasn't allowed to weigh himself? Not if he could still measure himself to make sure nothing changed. Has he excluded foods that he likes from his diet to influence his shape? Everyone does that, that's not weird. Has thinking about food or his body made it hard for him to concentrate on other things? Maybe it was more important than the other thing at the time. Does he dream about food or his weight? He's not responsible for his fucking dreams, they're not his fault.

He catches himself getting defensive and stops, ducking his head sheepishly. Bruce just pauses and offers him a glass of water, which Bucky gratefully accepts so he can take a minute to cool down. His head feels very full, his stomach painfully empty, and he curls his arms protectively around his middle when Bruce sits back down opposite him.

"Okay, I'd need to talk to you more for a concrete diagnosis, but I'm going to call this an eating disorder. It's pretty obvious and I think you know that." Bucky nods slightly and Bruce looks sympathetic, which is much better than the pity he was expecting. "I also think it's a lot more serious than you realise. Some of the attitudes to food that you think everyone has aren't as common as you think."

"So what does that mean? I'm more fucked up than I thought?" Bucky's already stiffening up, body bracing itself to flee even as he forces himself to sit still and listen to what Bruce has to say.

"It means that if you were my patient, I'd be seriously recommending residential treatment." Somehow the way Bruce says it, in the gentle tone of a good teacher, doesn't make Bucky's chest tighten. "But you're not my patient, and I'm pretty sure you'd run for the hills if anyone tried to make you go into a clinic."

"Basically, yeah." Bucky grits out, bowstring tight. "You think whoever you send me to is gonna say the same thing? 'Cause it's not happening."

"I can speak to them first, let them know what we talked about and how you feel about your treatment options." Bruce is obviously very interested in not spooking Bucky, and for once he
appreciates it instead of being offended at being treated gently. "Are you happy for me to go ahead and set you up with someone? I have somebody in mind I think would be a good fit."

"Sure." Bucky shrugs, bad shoulder twinging and threatening to cramp up because he's holding himself so tense. "Can't hurt."

He makes himself reach out to the table and pick up the glass of water with his bad arm, do something to stretch the muscles out even if taking a sip makes him want to puke. When does anything not make him want to puke? Bruce is watching the shaking of his hand as he sets the glass back down and Bucky's reached a point where he doesn't care now. Bruce already knows how fucked up he is, it doesn't matter if he sees it first-hand.

"How do you feel right now?" The question is calm, doesn't feel like an accusation. Bucky kind of wishes Bruce would have agreed to be his therapist, although he gets why it would be ethically iffy.

"Generally? Guilty, I guess." Bucky looks down at his lap, glad he'd untied his hair so he has something to hide behind. "I didn't get much sleep, so I yelled at a kid in my class this morning. Threw up my lunch. Almost lied to you about everything. Probably gonna throw up again when I get home but tell my boyfriend everything's fine."

"But you didn't lie to me. And there's nothing making you lie to your boyfriend." Bruce's voice is very soothing, but Bucky figures it'd be weird if he told him that. "If you feel guilty, maybe you can try to be active about not doing the things that make you feel that way. Your disordered behaviour, that's one issue, but you can try to be honest with Steve. That could make you feel better."

Bucky walks out of Banner's office feeling strangely grounded. He'd expected to pull away from his body like he usually does when he's overwhelmed, but he feels weirdly present. It's not entirely pleasant, sometimes slipping out of his head is preferable to being stuck in it. Right now it's actually more distressing to him to feel good, because he doesn't know how to process that any more than he does feeling shitty.

Banner's words about guilt keep sloshing around in his watery brain, and he pauses on the sidewalk for a moment before he makes a decision he's pretty sure he'll regret. When did Bucky ever make good decisions anyway? It's fucking exhausting to do the right thing.

The King of Self-Sabotage has been letting his crown slip today, might as well shove it back into place.

Long time no talk, you wanna get coffee or something?

Fuck off.

Come on. Old times sake. I don't want to get back together, I've got a boyfriend.

Does he know you're fuckin crazy???

Mostly yeah.

It's a long time before he gets a reply to that one.

Why the fuck do you want to talk to me?

I'm not as crazy as I used to be. Kinda feel guilty about what went down between us.

Another long, long pause between messages. Bucky almost gives up.
"Hey babe." Steve pauses in the doorway of the kitchen when he realises there's somebody with Bucky. The guy sitting in his usual spot at the table is built like a greyhound, has tightly-gelled hair and wears too much Axe (Steve can smell it from here, Jesus), and he's holding a smouldering cigarette between his fingers. Something about him immediately sets Steve on edge.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't know you had someone over."

"It's okay." Bucky twitches a nervous smile, his body language closed off and defensive in a way that gives Steve pause. "You're back early."

"Oh yeah, the gig was a bust. They double booked guitarists because people are idiots." He sets his guitar case down and keeps his eyes on the new guy, feeling weird about the way he's raking his eyes over Steve like a piece of meat.

"So this is the new boyfriend?" The guy pipes up, throwing a smirk Bucky's way. "Can't say he's a step up."

"Don't be an asshole." Bucky's voice is sharp, some of the bitchy tone Steve hasn't heard for a long time creeping back into his words, and that just puts him more on edge. "Steve, this is Brock. He came over to—"

Steve is across the kitchen and has Brock by the throat, shoving him up against the wall before Bucky can even finish his sentence.

"Steve!" Bucky jumps up and grabs his arm, as Brock tries to shove the bigger guy off him. "Stop, what are you doing?!"

"What the fuck, man?!” Brock tries to kick him ineffectually, but for all Steve is a soft hipster he's also built like a tank and could clearly squash him in two seconds flat.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Steve turns to Bucky, totally ignoring Brock for all he's keeping him pinned to the wall like a vice. "Did he hurt you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Steve. Let him go, he didn't do anything." Tugging on his arm again, Bucky manages to make Steve reluctantly let Rumlow go. He's starting to feel dizzy, like he can't get off a train headed straight for the edge of a cliff.

"Why the fuck would I hurt him? He's my ex, I'm not a psycho." Brock rubs at his neck theatrically, straightening his clothes mostly for the effect. "You find a boyfriend as crazy as you this time or what?"

"Shut your mouth." Steve moves toward him again with anger flashing behind his eyes, and it's only Bucky holding him back that keeps them apart. "I know you hurt him, I've seen the scars. You keep the fuck away from him."

"I never did anything he didn't ask me to!"

"But…”
"You let people think I beat you up?!" Brock seems genuinely hurt by the suggestion, and that stops Steve in his tracks, suddenly equally bewildered. For once Bucky looks like he's not ready to be caught in this lie, face flushed and eyes wide as he tries to find a way out of it. He drops into a chair as his knees give out on him, totally unprepared for this.

He did this to himself, he knew it would happen but he did it anyway and now he's not ready for it. Suddenly, sabotaging himself is the last thing he wants.

"No, I didn't. I never said that."

"You said he punched you." Steve cuts in, hardly believing he seems to be on the side of Bucky's ex in this conversation.

"He did, once. He caught me binging and he lost his temper." Bucky shoves his hands under his legs, hiding his trembling fingers and not looking at either of them. "It was easier to just let people assume what they wanted to assume after we broke up."

"But, Buck. The burn marks and the…" Steve trails off, watching his boyfriend's posture and feeling totally blindsided by the whole thing. "What the hell?!"

"Can I defend myself here?" Brock is holding his hands up, looking between them like they're both crazy. "I punched Bucky one time. I shouldn't have, alright? But it was after fuckin' months of trying to handle his crazy behaviour and I snapped. I was trying to help him so fuckin' hard and he wasn't even trying to get better. I was twenty-one years old and I felt like a fuckin' nurse instead of a boyfriend."

The words hit like bullets, and Bucky ducks his head lower. It's the truth, he knows it's the truth, but he didn't want Steve to find out like this. He never wanted Steve to find out. Now he'll never trust a word Bucky says ever again.

"And the burn marks? I caught him putting cigarettes out on himself." Brock actually shivers at that, and Bucky is viscerally reminded of the night his boyfriend caught him, drunk on the bathroom floor using himself as a human ashtray to try and make his head shut up. "I was scared he was gonna do something worse. So I told him that if he needed pain then I'd give it to him, as long as he stopped hurting himself. He asked me to cut him and I did it, but I almost puked. I couldn't handle it."

He turns to Bucky and shakes his head with his lip curling. An image of the scars on Bucky's chest flashes across Steve's mind and his blithe dismissal of the marks suddenly makes a lot more sense.

"This is exactly why I dumped your crazy ass. I couldn't handle this shit anymore. And you told people I abused you?! I'm an asshole, Buck, I'm not an abusive asshole!"

"I didn't say that." Bucky mumbles, because he knows he's pinned down like a dead butterfly right now. "I just… I didn't say anything."

"No wonder you said you felt fuckin' guilty. Jesus." Brock runs a hand over his greasy hair, looking for the exit. He's had enough of Bucky Barnes' crazy shit for two lifetimes. "I'm outta here. Steve, seriously man, save yourself the pain and get outta this while you can. He uses people up and spits them out when he can't bleed them for anything else."

"Just get the hell out." Steve snaps, and Brock doesn't hang around this insane apartment any longer than he has to.

The door slamming behind Brock feels like a lifeline has been cut off, and Bucky swallows hard against the lump building in his throat. He knows how to push Steve's buttons, he could cry and get
upset right now and postpone this conversation for another time. And he's had a shitty horrible day and he wants so badly to do that, but he can't. He fucked up with Brock, he can't do it to Steve too.

"Bucky?" Steve is standing still, just outside Bucky's peripheral vision where his head is still tipped down towards his lap.

"I told you I lie." His voice is hoarse, when he finally forces himself to speak. Must have scratched up his throat worse than he thought this morning. "I told you I manipulate people. I told you."

"Buck—"

"You just didn't listen because you think I'm good, Steve. But I'm not. I told you I'm not a good person." Bucky finally raises his head and Steve looks like he's had his heart ripped out. It hurts more than a cigarette to his skin ever did. "I let you think Brock hurt me because it meant I wasn't to blame for fucking the relationship up. It meant maybe I wasn't as crazy as I was back then. I was fucked up, okay? But I'm still that fucking selfish now and I told you that. I don't magically become a good person just because you love me."

"I didn't think you were being… literal." Steve is struggling with the concept and Bucky doesn't blame him. It would be so easy to cut and run right now but he won't, he won't, because he's trying not to be that fucking person anymore and he doesn't know how to explain that without choking on it because it feels like just as much of a lie as everything else.

"I was. I'm fucked up. I lie and I manipulate people and I'm selfish and I'm like that all the time. This isn't me being hard on myself, Stevie, it's the truth. I even told you to dump me and you didn't listen." He shrugs, one-shouldered and cut open and bleeding his guts all over the kitchen floor.

And that small, vicious voice in his head whispers if Steve doesn't love him anymore then he doesn't have to give up his eating disorder.

"So, what do you want to do?"
"Being Honest"

"Rumlow was a scumbag."

Natasha's never minced her words about anyone, but she's got plenty of choice ones to describe Bucky's ex. Steve lets out a sigh and pushes his food around his plate, heated up leftovers from yesterday that Natasha foisted on him so she didn't have to eat alone. Eating is starting to lose its appeal lately, another bad habit he's picked up from his boyfriend.

Natasha had come home from class at just the right (wrong?) time, breaking the atmosphere and sending Bucky scuttling to hide in the bathroom, mumbling something about needing a shower. He's been showering for half an hour now, or at least the shower has been running while Steve quietly fills Natasha in on what happened. Steve wonders if his boyfriend has actually got under the water yet or he's still busy with his fingers down his throat. This is what he meant when he told Bucky that he's not as sneaky as he thinks when he makes himself puke: it's not like they hear or see it, but his friends know it's happening just as sure as if they did.

"He didn't hurt him." He points out, not minding as Natasha steals the rest of his broccoli. "Bucky just let us think that."

"I knew that already. And you really trust Bucky's perception of the relationship? Really?" And just like that, she pulls the rug out from under him all over again. "I was there for the end of it. Rumlow didn't beat him, no, but there's such a thing as emotional abuse. James got himself so tied up in knots trying to be 'normal' for him… I really think he would have killed himself if I didn't intervene."

"It was that bad?" Steve is still having trouble processing everything, but it does make more sense. It would explain why all Bucky's friends think Rumlow is an asshole, even without knowing all the details or inferring the wrong ones like Steve did.

"Look at it this way." She sets her fork down with vegetable still on it, and that's when Steve knows she's being deadly serious. "Think about how hard he takes failing. Now imagine that eating is failing yourself, but not eating is failing the person you love. Eating and getting rid of it is failing both of you, but you can't help doing it. Then you have the person you love begging you to do what you can't because they want you to be normal, telling you you're killing them if you can't do it."

"That's… intense." Steve's eyes widen at the realisation, but Natasha keeps going. He'd forgotten how protective she can be of her adopted brother, since he hasn't been classed as a threat in her eyes for a while now.

"It was intense. And it went on for months and nobody knew. He barely left the apartment, he relied on Rumlow for everything. It wasn't until I came over from Novosibirsk and saw how bad things were that they snapped out of the spiral they were both feeding into." She shakes her head, keeping eye contact in that pointed way she has that suggests not paying attention would be detrimental to his state of being. "So James lies and manipulates people, yes. He does. But they manipulated each other, don't trust one half's perception of that shitshow."

"I get that, but—"

"If Bucky asked you to hurt him, to cut him, would you do it?" Natasha cuts him off, keeping up that sharp stare like he's a bug under glass.

"No, of course not." Steve shakes his head immediately, never considering his answer for a second.
"No, you wouldn't. Because you know he's sick and you love him." Okay, Steve thinks he gets it now. "That's how a normal person responds, you don't feed into his illness. Rumlow was fucked up too, it wasn't all James."

The shower must have shut off without Steve noticing, but he notices when Bucky darts from the bathroom to his bedroom. It's bad, must be worse than usual right now, because he's clearly put his clothes back on without taking much time to dry himself off, given how his shirt is sticking to his back. That only happens when he can't stand to catch sight of himself in the mirror for long enough to get dry, and it doesn't usually get that bad anymore. The bedroom door snaps shut behind him quickly, covering his retreat and closing the world out.

"I'm gonna…"

"Go ahead." Natasha nods, giving up on subtlety and pulling Steve's plate in front of her. "Don't let him push your buttons."

"Gonna try." Steve flicks her a dorky little salute and grabs a bottle of water before he heads into his boyfriend's bedroom to try and figure out what to do next.

Bucky is lying curled up on his side, wet towel over his face and fingers balled protectively in the sleeves of Steve's hoodie. He definitely purged, then, because that's the usual position he takes when he's in pain. Steve closes the door quietly behind him, but Bucky doesn't move from his curl of misery. Maybe it's part shame too, reverting to childish thinking and hoping that the world will go away if he doesn't look at it.

"Want some water?" It doesn't take long before Bucky sticks his hand out to take the bottle, so he must be hurting right now.

Natasha accidentally barging into the confrontation and stopping it in its tracks might actually have helped them. Steve doesn't feel so emotionally raw now that he's had a while to think about it, to gather himself together and actually process what he's been told. He feels less inclined to yell in bewilderment, at least.

Bucky sits up, hair in disarray and sticking damply to his face as he takes greedy swigs of water. Under his jaw is noticeably puffy, his cheeks starting to get that chipmunk look that confirms he's been making himself sick. The bloodshot eyes would have been enough, but everything combined suggests this is a terrible, no-good, very bad day. The perfect day to have a confrontation, obviously.

"You're breaking up with me, right?" His voice is hoarse, almost gone completely, and he looks up at Steve with total defeat in his eyes.

"You sound like you want me to." Steve says levelly, folding his arms as he looks Bucky over. "Is that what that stunt with Brock was supposed to achieve? Did you let me find out the truth because you want me to break up with you?"

"No, of course not." Bucky chews on his chapped lip and sits up a little straighter. "I don't want you to dump me. I just… I'm a bad person, Steve. You wouldn't listen to me when I said it, but now you've seen it. How can you want to stay with that?"

"You can keep telling me you're a bad person all you want, Buck. I'm never gonna believe it."

"You're so fucking naïve." He groans, frustrated.

"I'm naïve as hell and you're screwed up six ways to Sunday. We make a great pair." Steve sits down on the bed beside him, and the fact that Bucky doesn't shuffle up to give him space that his
imaginarily huge body is taking up is probably a good sign. "Have you ever considered that maybe the lying and manipulating shit is part of your illness?"

"Are you gonna therapy-speak at me again?" Bucky's tone instantly turns bitchy, and Steve has had enough of that shit. "Because—"

"Yeah, I am. And you're gonna listen to me, because that's a pretty big lie I just found out about and maybe I want to get my head around it." He snaps. Bucky actually shuts his mouth at that, which is a surprise, and Steve's tone softens again. "Unlike you, I actually know a lot about eating disorders. I read everything under the fucking sun once I found out you were sick."

"Told you not to." It comes out as a tetchy little mumble, but at least Bucky's listening to him.

"Telling me not to do something is the easiest way to make me do it, you know that." It draws the slightest twitch of a smile onto his face, which is a relief. "You're scared of giving up your eating disorder, so you're trying to scare me away."

"I went to see Bruce, I said I'd get help. That's the truth." Bucky protests immediately. "I'm not saying you're doing it on purpose, I don't think you are. But this thing in your brain is like another person, it'll do anything it can to live." Bucky's lost for words at that, because Steve definitely knows what he's talking about. When did he do all this research? How lost in his head has Bucky been? "I'm pretty sure it's the disorder that causes the lying and the manipulation, because if you were honest with everyone about how bad it is then it would die."

"So you… you don't think it's my fault? You don't think I'm just… bad?" He asks, tentatively. How could it not be his fault? How could Bucky be anything but totally rotten from the inside out?

"I think it's not okay that you let me think Brock hurt you, and it's not okay that you're still lying and saying everything's fine when I know it's not. But I'm pretty sure you've been lying for so long you don't know how to tell the truth on instinct, and you don't learn that overnight. I'm pretty sure it's the disorder, not your personality, because I know you and you're not as awful as you think." Steve takes Bucky's hand gently, squeezing his bony fingers with raw knuckles scraping against his palm. "I think you're fucked up, but you're not a bad person."

"You're too good for me." Bucky is looking at him sideways, partly in awe and partly like he can't believe Steve is saying this. "You really believe I'm not a bad person, don't you?"

"I think shoving something as complicated as a person into something as black and white as 'good' and 'bad' is ridiculous." He shakes his head with a tiny smile, trying to bring the conversation onto smoother ground. "And what can I say? Not everyone is as cynical as you."

Bucky ducks his head, like he can't accept what Steve's saying. It's what Steve expected, so he just holds his boyfriend's hand through it. It's about all he can do, much as it pains him. In truth, sometimes Bucky's illness terrifies him, the mental part more than the symptoms. Bucky purging his dinner doesn't scare him, but Bucky not being in control of himself and lying about it automatically does.

It might get too much for him, he might just end up another Brock to Bucky, but nothing's managed to scare him off so far. That's the best he can offer: one day at a time.

"This is why you get all twitchy about me being a boyfriend not a nurse, right? What happened with Brock?" Bucky nods, not looking up. "That's not how I feel, Buck. You don't have to hide what's going on from me because you think it's gonna scare me off. Finding out about it after the fact scares
"You're fucking impossible to scare off." He mumbles. "I really did go see Bruce, that wasn't a lie."

"I believe you. I might not believe you quite so easy on some stuff now, but we'll figure it out."

"You… You probably think I lied about my mom too." The fear squirms its way up his throat like so many worms, and even though there's nothing left in his stomach and his throat is raw Bucky feels nauseous again.

"No, I don't. I know you didn't lie about that." Steve shakes his head, voice firm. "I saw how she was that night. You were telling the truth."

"How can you even… How can you trust me?" Bucky meets his eyes helplessly, not comprehending how this hasn't made his relationship blow up in his face. "I could be manipulating you, I could be —"

"I'm naïve, Buck. I'm not stupid." Steve stops him in his tracks, seeing the start of Bucky working himself up into a panic for exactly what it is. "I know you're faking when you tell me your stomach hurts too much to eat. I know when you throw up dinner and tell me you didn't. I know when you're doing that stuff."

"So why don't you call me on it?"

"Honestly, because I didn't want to make you feel worse. I thought I was doing the right thing by not fighting with you." Steve squeezes his hand again and Bucky just looks more confused than ever. "I'm not gonna let it slide anymore, I'm gonna call you on it now. And I'm gonna ask you to try and not lie to me about that stuff, if you can."

"I'll try." He's still chewing on his abused lip, and Steve reaches up to gently tug it from between his teeth before he can do more damage. "Don't be mad if it takes a minute for the whole honestly thing to take. I'm kinda used to doing it… automatically."

"I get that." The tiny smile returns and Bucky starts to actually breathe again.

"I-I'm sorry about Brock. That I lied about what happened. That I brought him here." Bucky mumbles, dropping his eyes again to avoid Steve's gaze. He'd been trying to handle his guilt by doing it, and all he'd managed to do was make himself feel worse because this time it was Steve he hurt. "I… Bruce said something about being honest with you and I guess my brain was a couple steps ahead of me."

"At least I know the truth now." Steve cups Bucky's swollen cheek to raise his face again. "If there's anything else big that I don't know about, it'd probably be a good thing if you told me now."

"I don't think there's anything else." Bucky's eyes are welling up with relief now, sheer relief that he didn't fuck everything up. He spilled his guts and showed Steve the real ugliness inside him and he's still here. He sniffs and turns his face into Steve's hand, closing his eyes to try and keep the tears at bay. He doesn't want Steve to think he's trying to manipulate him. "M'sorry."

"I know." Steve doesn't say it's okay, because it's not, but he understands now. He pulls Bucky into his arms and his boyfriend lets out a hurt little noise, like he can't believe Steve is actually here. "It's over, okay? We dealt with it. I love you."

"Love you too." Bucky sighs, muffled in Steve's chest. "How can you be a fucking mature adult and I'm this mess?"
"We can take it in turns. Give it about six months and it's my turn to be the mess." Steve presses a kiss to his damp hair with a small smile. "You okay now?"

"I should be asking you that. And I feel like I got thrown off a mountain." His voice is still rough, tired, but he's too amped up to feel like sleeping. "Can we stay like this for a minute?"

"Yeah, babe." Steve settles down a little more comfortably and tightens his arms around Bucky. They don't move until it's already dark outside the window.

*

"Mr Bucky?"

Bucky found it hard to get himself together enough to be 'Mr Bucky' today, but he's made it through his morning class and the kids are mostly picked up by now. He's not eating lunch, he told Steve that in advance in the name of honesty, but he's got a disgusting protein shake to get down as a compromise. He's pretty willing to do anything to put that off, so he smiles when the two Peters slope over to him as the crowd of children thins.

"What's up, P-squared?" They look at each other and he can tell they're planning something. They get the same look just before something gets broken.

"I'm sorry I called you a robot yesterday." Quill says sheepishly, scuffing the heel of his battered sneaker against the floor.

"Thank you for saying sorry, it's not nice to call people names." Bucky figures that sounds like something a responsible adult would say in this situation.

"But we made you something to make it better." Parker is falling over himself to get into the conversation, bouncing on his heels, and he shoves a piece of paper into Bucky's hand.

The drawing is pretty detailed, in that two of the characters have got elaborate costumes (a morph suit and a cowboy-style coat with a helmet?) and plenty of ten-year-old boys’ ideas of big weapons. The third character is almost entirely dressed in black, with the exception of a grey arm that seems to have shiny gel pen or whatever kids use these days scribbled over the top of it.

"We make a comic book, that's Star Lord and Spider Boy." Parker points out the figures as Quill whines that he wanted to tell Bucky about it. "And they've got cool powers and they fight bad guys and save New York or sometimes outer space. And we made you this one, he's got a robot arm and it's awesome and he's a superhero too."

"He's got a robot arm?" Bucky looks at the drawing and feels a strange bubble in his chest. His character is scowling, does he always look like that?

"Yeah, 'cause he lost his real arm fighting bad guys." Quill jumps in this time, wanting to be part of the big presentation. "So he's gotta robot one and it's super strong and he can choke guys and stuff. He got hurt and he got back up and became a superhero, see?"

It sounds like he actually listens to what Bucky says, when he's not busy disrupting the whole class, and that chokes Bucky up almost as much as the drawing. He's not allowed to hug his students but he seriously could right now. But then Parker's Uncle Ben is waving from the door and telling Quill his grandpa is outside and they're both gone in a flurry of 'bye Mr Bucky!' and sneakers squeaking across the floor in their haste to get outside into the sun.

When he gets home that night, Bucky pins the drawing on the fridge with some of the build-you-
own Shakespeare's poetry magnets that Steve thinks are so cool. His boyfriend comes up behind him and wraps his arms around Bucky's waist, resting this chin on his shoulder as he looks at the picture curiously.

"Is that you in the middle?" He asks, and huffs out a laugh when Bucky nods. "They got the expression right."

"Hey, I'm a superhero. Fighting bad guys is hard work." Bucky leans back against his solid bulk and tries not to think about whether or not he feels fat in Steve's arms. He feels Steve laugh against his back and smiles softly to himself. Maybe right now it doesn't matter if he feels fat or not.

"Good day, then?"

"Yeah." He nods, honestly. "Better."
Bucky's therapist isn't exactly what he'd been expecting. He figures that's probably why Bruce sent him here.

"Dude, I'm so sorry I'm late. My dog threw up in my car and then the damn car overheated in traffic and my shoe... nevermind. Anyway. Nightmare. Sorry." He sticks his hand out, not noticing it's sticky with sugary coffee until Bucky shakes it. "Hi, I'm Clint. Promise I'm not late every time."

Clint Barton is stocky, with the build of somebody who plays sports for a living rather than sits in an office all day. He shows up to the appointment late and harried, casually dressed, with a giant travel mug stained with coffee drips in hand and yellow dog hair all over his clothes. The disarray actually puts Bucky a little more at ease, because suddenly he's pretty convinced he's not the most undisciplined person in the room.

"Okay, so. Uh, lemme tell you a bit about myself. We should get to know each other, right?" Barton finally settles into the chair opposite Bucky's, notebook crammed with crumpled loose sheets sitting on his lap. His pen has leaked on his sleeve and Bucky's not sure if he's noticed yet.

"Sure. You know more about this than me." Bucky eyes him doubtfully, shoving his hands under his legs defensively as he instinctively tries to make himself smaller. He's not thinking about the coffee on his hand and whether or not calories can be absorbed through the skin, he's not. "No offense, but you don't really seem like a therapist."

"Well, nah, guess not. I wasn't originally, this is my second... no, sorry, third career. I used to be an archer, was in the Olympics and shit." He explains, like this is a story he's told many times before. "But I got in a car accident when I was thirty, fucked up my ligaments. I can still shoot recreationally but I can't compete, so I had to start over. Tried out being a teacher but math, right? Fuck that."

"Why'd you decide on being a therapist?" Bucky can't think of anything worse. He's not really interested, it's already pretty transparent why Bruce has sent him here, but this guy seems nice enough so he asks anyway.

"People always tell me their problems anyway." Barton shrugs, and Bucky's pleasantly surprised because he'd been expecting some spiel about wanting to save people. "Figured I might as well get paid for it."

Trying to be a little less cynical about it, Bucky understands why Bruce thought they'd be a good fit. Clint can probably relate to a lot of the stuff he's been through, having one path laid out and then having to start over, hopefully without Bucky having to voice it all and pull it out of himself all over again.

"Alright, that's some stuff about me." Barton nods, like he's concluding a section of a job interview or something. "So, how about you? When did you decide you wanted to be a ballet dancer?"

The question should be predictable, but Bucky suddenly finds all words stuck in his throat like full-fat yoghurt. Barton eyes him questioningly and raises his eyebrows slightly.

"Did you ever want to be a ballet dancer?" He changes the question, matter-of-fact in his tone. He's direct, which Bucky finds easier than the touchy-feely approach. He doesn't understand his feelings within his own mind, he definitely doesn't want to talk about them and get it all wrong.

"I love dancing, it's my life." It sounds hollow, even to his own ears. Barton nods slowly though, and
Bucky's afraid the guy's starting to think he's stupid.

"Okay, but that's not the question. I want to know when loving dancing became dedicating your life to it."

"It… wasn't my decision. I started dancing when I was four, there weren't any other options." He gets out, eventually. The words taste like ash, and his stomach squeezes like he's going to get in trouble for saying them. That's the fear that runs through him all the time, irrationally, that he's going to get in trouble. "My Mom wanted my twin sister and me to be dancers. She was, before she got married and had us. It wasn't a choice."

Barton doesn't look surprised. Maybe this stuff more common than Bucky thinks. Maybe he… maybe he was too sensitive about his mother.

"Did she make a lot of decisions for you, your mom?"

"Mom, where are my clothes?"

His closet is empty. Bucky stands in front of it in bewilderment, looking over his shoulder as his mother comes into the room.

"You left them here when you went away for the weekend with your friends, so I assumed you didn't want them anymore." Irina basically shrugs, although that's too common of a gesture for her. She's smiling slightly, benevolent.

"I… Mama I went away for one night. I wasn't going to take my whole…" Bucky realises what this is, and even at sixteen he sees red. "Is this because I missed practicing with you and Becky? For one day?!"

"If you don't appreciate what you have, then you don't deserve to have it." She smiles wider, so sweetly it hurts, like she's doing him a favour by throwing out his clothes in some kind of petty revenge. "You could do with learning some discipline. Afternoon practice starts in ten minutes, your dance clothes are in the bathroom."

He spends five minutes with his head against the empty closet door, trying desperately to blink back tears. If his face is puffy then she'll know, she'll be able to see how weak he is, and it'll only bring him more punishment. He feels sick to his stomach.

He makes practice on time and smiles at his sister so Mama doesn't get mad at him for having a bad attitude. Everything is in order.

"I… I'm not here to talk about my parents. I'm here to talk about my eating disorder." Bucky ducks the question, even if he can see that Barton isn't buying the evasion for a minute. He writes something down on his paper and Bucky glares at the pen warily. He can only read numbers upside-down.

"Sure. 'Cause that just came outta the blue, nothing to do with your childhood or anything." The words could sound mean, but Clint somehow delivers the line like they're friends having a beer, like he's already reached the point where he can rib Bucky about being defensive. It puts Bucky at ease, just a little, makes the situation feel less clinical and fucked up.
"Okay, okay. I just... I really don't like talking about my family." He fidgets nervously, almost willing to admit to weakness to get off the subject. He's had a bad week and talking about this is only going to make it into a terrible one, he's sure.

"Alright, we can ease into the hard stuff." Barton's good at reading people, and he backs off without making Bucky feel like he's failed by bailing out of the conversation. People get frustrated with him sometimes, even Steve and Natasha, but Clint just nods and runs with it. "Can we talk about what you think you need to get out of this first, then? Where do you feel you are now with your relationship to food?"

"Uh..." He doesn't know how to answer that. Too many words trying to get out all at once, all clamouring to get through his swollen throat with their tiny claws.

"Okay, Bruce gave me some notes on your assessment with him, so I know the basics." Barton tries another tactic. He can already tell that Bucky isn't going to be an easy patient, but he likes a challenge. "So level with me, how bad is it right now?"

"Me and food?" Cautious about getting it wrong, Bucky makes sure he's answering the right question before he sighs, shrinking in his chair. "It's... not good. It was easier for a little while, when I first stopped dancing. But now... I don't know why things are getting worse again."

"So you wanna get that under control again, right? We gotta stick a band-aid over it and keep you physically okay before we can start looking at what caused it." Bucky nods, relieved, because that's what he was trying to ask for but didn't know how. Words have never been his strong point, not about himself. "How bad is it now, like on a scale of one to ten?"

"I don't know what... What's the scale? What's one and ten?" He feels stupid for needing the parameters, knowing how to answer the question correctly so the twist in his stomach that tells him he could get in trouble calms down, but Barton just sets it out for him clearly and Bucky doesn't feel so dumb about needing it spelled out.

"Let's call one eating healthy." He stops himself, struck by the memory of Bruce's notes making clear that this guy has no idea what 'eating healthy' is. "So without disordered..." Still not the right approach. "Okay, one is when you can eat a healthy amount of food without feeling out of control. You don't want to binge and you don't purge, and you're not obsessed with how 'good' or 'bad' the food you're eating is. Ten is... let's call ten where you were when you injured your arm. Does that work?"

"Eight." Bucky thought he'd have to think about it, but the answer comes blurring out involuntarily. "Right now. I think."

He didn't consciously realise it was this bad, not until he had it laid out in front of him. Shit. Steve was right, maybe he's not doing as well as he thinks.

"That's fine, an eight is kinda where I'd expect you to be without any treatment so far." Barton makes a few notes about that, cataloguing his failures, and Bucky tries to pretend he's not swallowing bile. "I've gotta ask, when does wanting to hurt yourself come in? Do you feel like that now, or does it happen when things are worse?"

"I..."

"I'm not planning to lock you up, here. I just need to know where we're starting from so I can help." Bucky's pretty sure that's a lie, but when did he ever understand people's motivations?
"I… it's gotta be a ten before I want to… die." He swallows again, expecting… some kind of negative consequences for admitting that, but Barton just listens. "I don't feel like that now. It's gotta be worse before I want to hurt myself. It's only been like that a couple times."

It's cold.

He hurts. His head is clear for the first time in months.

"James!"

Natasha or his sister? Does it matter?

"Bucky, come down from there!"

Both of them. Great. He just wants them to leave him alone. There's snow in his eyelashes and it's freezing the tear tracks on his cheeks and he just wants to be alone. His wet hair has frozen and the wind whipping it across his cheeks stings the fragile skin like razor wire.

It's the first time he's felt alive since the meeting with the company doctor and administrators, when he sat in front of the panel and felt so much adrenaline surging through his veins he thought he was going to have a heart attack. Then they said the words, we don't think you're in a fit state to be part of this company, and numbness descended on him like his spine had been severed by a single blow.

"Buckybear, please! What are you doing?" Becky sounds frantic, but there's no guilt making Bucky's stomach hurt. There's nothing there at all. He'd thought they wouldn't find him on the roof, not with the weather, but it's not like it matters. "Come down from there and we can talk about it."

"Nothin' to talk about." He's slurring, maybe from the cold or the vodka. Whatever. In a few minutes it won't matter anymore.

Then someone is yanking him backwards off the ledge, and he hits the snow-covered concrete of the roof with a thud. It doesn't hurt as much as he'd hoped. Natasha stands over him, red hair streaming in the wind like a warrior, and he doesn't think he's ever seen her look panicked before. He'd tease her, but he can't find the will to speak.

They drag him inside. Sometime between near-hypothermia and warming up, he falls asleep. Passes out, it's not like the specifics matter.

When he wakes up, his ticket to New York is sitting on his bedside table.

"Okay, so an eight is where you are now. What would a six look like?" Barton breaks into his thoughts determinedly, pulling Bucky out of his head and back into the conversation. "That's a reasonable goal for a couple of weeks from now, yeah? What do you want your eating to look like by the time you hit a six?"

Bucky likes how he phrases stuff, like there's not a huge deadline looming in front of him by which he has to be Better-Capital-B. The ball is firmly in Bucky's court, it doesn't make him feel so out of control. He might not know what he's doing with therapy, but food is something he knows intimately.

"I… I don't want to purge so much it hurts. My throat and my teeth and stuff." He sketches it out
gingerly, like he's not sure when he's asking for too much. "I'd like to be able to eat dinner with my boyfriend or my friends without panicking about it. I... I don't wanna try eating anything new, like foods I... can't eat. But I want to feel less nervous about eating the safe ones."

"Those are good goals, very reasonable." Barton writes them down, and Bucky feels a rush of relief when he's praised, even a little.

"I think that's the first time anyone's called me reasonable for a while." He mutters, and Barton laughs. Bruce was right, Bucky does feel comfortable with him. As comfortable as he's about to get around a stranger, anyway.

"Hey dude, last month I fell off a fire escape trying to catch a Frisbee. I'm not the most reasonable guy either." That actually makes Bucky smile, still wound up but starting to feel his anxious chest loosen, and Barton looks genuinely pleased with that.

"Okay, so your goals are cutting down on purging, eating dinner with people you like, and feeling better about your safe foods." He confirms as he taps down his list, Bucky nodding along. "Alright, I'm not going to ask you to try anything new for a while, not until you feel a bit more stable. How about this week, you try and write down whenever you feel out of control about eating? Make a note of the date and time, and how you feel or what caused it if you can."

He sees the twitch in Bucky's expression and cuts him off before he can even start getting worked up.

"It's okay if you can't write about your feelings yet, just when they happen is enough for us to start looking at what makes you feel nervous."

"Okay." Bucky nods slowly, digging his fingernails into his thighs where Clint can't see. It grounds him, no matter that he knows it's not healthy. If nobody sees it, nobody can get mad. "I can do that."

He's not alright, not by a long shot, but things are getting better.

*

Better never lasts long in Bucky's life, so he should have seen it coming.

He's picked up an extra class on Fridays, straight after he teaches, and of course his best friend is there waving hello when he comes in to warm up. Pietro looks tired as hell, but the teenager doesn't look as terrible as he did the last time Bucky saw him. He still looks like death, but at least he looks warmed up this time.

"Why leg warmers in the summer?" He asks quietly, looking at the fabric that obscures part of Bucky's legs as his friend gets his shoes on.

_Because I'm sick of you staring at my skinny fucking ankles like you wanna eat them_, Bucky doesn't say. He was exactly the same when he was nineteen, he reminds himself for the hundredth time.

"Uh, Baryshnikov wore them to make his feet look better." He winks at Pietro and pretends he doesn't see the kid blush. He knows he shouldn't flirt with him, but he really doesn't know how to deflect without it. "Top tip."

"Thanks, I'll remember that." Pietro smiles, ducking his head and running a hand through his bleached hair shyly. Bucky bites back a sigh and feels a surge of relief when his phone beeps obnoxiously in his pocket, giving him a way out of the conversation.
The relief doesn't last long. He scrolls through the email that's just arrived with growing confusion, hunger twisting his stomach into knots as he reads. He feels like he's barely taking in the information, like the words don't make sense. This is the last thing he's been expecting.

"I was wanting to talk to you about some things. Hoping to." Pietro sounds like he's been working up the confidence to say that for a while, but Bucky isn't paying attention.

"Yeah, yeah. Just a sec." He mutters, scrolling down to the next paragraph. It's not a long email, but the fact it's there at all is amazing enough.

We need to talk about your mother and what happened between you.

"If it's not too much trouble..." The kid's confidence is waning as he's brushed off, but Bucky's distracted and doesn't really notice what he's saying.

"It's fine, just gimme a minute." His voice is faint as he scrolls down to the end of the message, caught between nerves and sickness and... and he doesn't even know what. Hope?

I'd like to meet and discuss things. Where is up to you (not sure if you're comfortable meeting for a meal?), but I'd appreciate it if you let me know soon.

Becky said he's trying. She said he asked if Bucky was okay. Maybe their dad really believes him, maybe he really does want to deal with this.

Bucky swallows through his scratchy throat and taps out a reply, fingers shaking as he agrees to meet up with his father. It's not an order when it comes from him, not like from Mama, but this time he wants to. Bucky doesn't really know his dad, maybe the mask of indifference has been hiding some kind of care that just needed a push to come out.

He's not sure how long it takes him to get the message written. No spelling mistakes, no slang, that's how he's always addressed his father. Careful, not because he's afraid of being punished but because he's afraid of being judged and found lacking. Dad likes what he likes and aggressively disapproves of everything else. If Bucky can get himself onto his good side, maybe things with his family will start to get smoothed out again.

"Sorry, P. What did you say?" He finally puts his phone away and turns to talk to Pietro, but the kid isn't there. He's not even in the room, despite the fact that class is about to start, but Bucky didn't even notice him leave.

Shit.
Doubting Yourself

Chapter Notes

A little bit of a change this chapter, a little bit of someone else's POV.

Also I'm sorry here have some dad feels for father's day.

"Wanda? Are you home?"

He switches to Sokovian as soon as he gets his key in the apartment door. Their roommate Maya isn't fluent, but she's picked up enough to follow what the twins are talking about from time to time. It's a stupid question to call out: of course Wanda is home, she hasn't left the apartment for weeks, but there's still the possibility she could.

Pietro makes his way through the silent apartment wearily, dropping his gym bag on the couch (his bed, he sleeps in the living room while Wanda and Maya have the bedrooms) and peeking into his sister's bedroom when he doesn't get a reply. Wanda is sprawled out on the bed fully-clothed, and Pietro has a stab of cold panic spike through his gut at the sight. But he sees her chest rise and fall and forces himself to be calm, looking around quickly and seeing no pills, no bottles, and no blood. She's asleep, just sleeping, she's fine.

He goes into the bathroom and counts the sleeping pills in their bottle in the medicine cabinet anyway. The instructions in English on the bottle have been scrawled over with his translation, not that Wanda is likely to read that. She intends to take the medication as prescribed, he knows that, but then her mind will change and suddenly she knows that more is best or that someone is trying to poison her. Pietro is constantly afraid of her overdosing. Again.

He gets up three times a night to put a hand on her back and check she's still breathing, otherwise he wouldn't sleep at all.

All but two of the pills are accounted for, and Pietro edits the note on his phone where he keeps track of her medication. Two won't hurt. He still needs to talk to Wanda about not taking the pills in the middle of the day, but two isn't a cause for alarm. He puts the bottle back carefully, turning it around so the label is at exactly the same angle as when he took it out of the cabinet. He's busy with the company lately, since he got given the roles that had previously been earmarked for Bucky, and he really doesn't have the time to deal with his sister getting paranoid that some evil force is tampering with her stuff again. He doesn't think he could handle it if she ended up in the hospital again, not right now.

Pietro's stomach growls and cramps painfully, and he has to lean over the sink for a second when empty nausea overwhelms him. He breathes heavily through his mouth and doesn't gag, doesn't dare move until the expanding sickness passes. After a minute, he tentatively straightens up and looks himself in the eye in the mirror. It's time to eat, he can do this. He's been working on empty all day, he's not going to put on any weight by refuelling like he badly needs to.

He had been saving his daily calories for when he asked Bucky to get a cup of coffee and talk, letting himself get dizzy in class for what he thought was the greater good. He'd planned to drink and eat something in front of his friend, show him that he's trying to get better. But then Bucky had
barely looked at him and Pietro got the message loud and clear. He wasn't wanted.

Pietro can handle Bucky not returning his feelings, he knows the guy has a boyfriend, but pushing him away as a friend just makes him feel totally alone. Rejected.

Ever since they moved here, Pietro hates making food for himself. Even before he'd started struggling to force himself to eat every day it was a problem, and he stares at the half-empty kitchen cabinets for a few long minutes without making a decision. Everything here is foreign, and it all tastes weird to him. All the food is too salty or sweet or soft, even the potatoes are strange and turn to powder in his mouth. The cheese tastes like plastic and the bread is like candy and sticks to his teeth. He never thought he'd miss the cheap food they had to eat in Sokovia, but everything here is just wrong.

Instant noodles are the safest and cheapest bet, so he grabs a packet from their dwindling supply. Wanda's medication isn't cheap and dancing doesn't pay brilliantly, so they're on a pretty tight budget that doesn't help Pietro's compulsion to refuse food. The spicier the better, the strong flavour of the noodles usually tricks his body into thinking it's taken in more food than he's actually eaten. Pietro wants to ask Bucky if he has those little tricks too, if he chews gum to quell the cramping of his stomach or can't remember what butter tastes like. But his friend doesn't want to talk, so Pietro keeps his mouth shut and wonders alone.

He fills a small pan with water and glances at the back of the packet of noodles as he waits for it to heat up on the stove.

1. [???] a [???] with 500ml of water
2. [???] noodles and [???] [???] and [???] to the [???]
3. [???] for 4 minutes

It's not like he needs to follow instructions, he knows how to make noodles, but he's still frustrated as he scans the text for key words to try and understand what it says. His spoken English is pretty good, but he still finds it hard to understand the words when they're written down. Nouns are the easiest to follow, along with the small connective words he sees all the time, but he has problems with fluency. He speaks and understands a lot more than Wanda, who isn't helping herself by staying in the apartment and refusing to speak to her brother in anything but their native tongue, but it doesn't feel like an achievement.

Not much feels like an achievement to Pietro lately.

"You're being very loud."

Wanda always appears from nowhere like that, giving him a heart attack as she creeps silently through the apartment. Pietro makes sure to smile widely when he turns to look at his sister, because she'll only worry if she thinks he's sad.

"Sorry. I just got home." Small bubbles are rising to the surface of the water, so he dumps the dried noodles in as Wanda comes over and rests her forehead on his shoulder. "Did you have a good day?"

"I had nightmares." So, no. Her hand snakes out suddenly and grabs his wrist when Pietro goes to tear open the little packet of spices and add it to the boiling water. "That's poison."

"It's not poison. It's flavour." Pietro's heart sinks, and he shows his sister the packaging with his free hand. It's definitely not a good day. "See?"
"It's poison. The chemicals will poison you." Wanda's voice is rising in panic, and Pietro's fear rises with it. She must have woken up during a nightmare to be this fragile straight away, he just hopes she actually took her medication today if she's worried about poison again. "You'll get poisoned and die and I'll be here all alone."

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere. I promise." He gently pulls his wrist from her grip and goes over to the trash, letting her watch him throw the spices away. It's the only thing he can do that'll definitely make her calm down. His stomach twists painfully with hunger, but he smiles reassuringly at his sister. He needs her calm more than he needs to eat. "See? Everything's okay."

"You were gone for a long time." Wanda mutters, accusingly. Her eyelids are starting to droop again, the sleeping meds still in her system. "I thought you left."

"I was working. I told you I'm not leaving." His sister grabs his sleeve like a child when he comes back over to the stove, and Pietro turns off the heat with a silent sigh. He can eat later. "Come on, let's go and sit down. You can sleep some more."

"They'll get me." Wanda protests weakly, letting herself be steered to the couch. Pietro sits down and lets her curl up with her head in his lap, her preferred position when she's feeling vulnerable. Her hair is clean, when he runs his hand over it gently, so she must have showered today. That's one good thing.

"They won't get you, I'll stay right here and protect you." He doesn't know who 'they' are, but if he can keep his sister safe from them, he will. Even if he can't rip the paranoid thoughts out of her head the way he wants to. "Close your eyes, I'm here."

"They'll get you." Her voice is faint, already fading back into sleep. Pietro takes a fortifying breath and forces a smile, running his hand reassuringly over Wanda's hair again.

"They can't get me, I'm too fast." He promises softly, repeating the line he's been telling her since this illness started. His stomach gurgles loudly, and he sternly tells his body to shut up and let his sister sleep. "I'll keep us both safe."

He doesn't get a reply, but the even breathing of Wanda sleeping is enough to put him at ease. Pietro lets his head fall back to rest on the couch with a sigh, figuring he might as well close his eyes too. He can't move without waking Wanda up, and his stomach hurts too much to just sit here and do nothing but think about it. His sister needs her rest, that's more important than shoving food down his throat.

He should be getting protein to help his muscles repair themselves and carbs to keep his energy up and fats and everything else his body is crying out for. But sometimes life just doesn't work that way.

Maya is kind enough to give him a slice of her pizza an hour later, when she gets home and sees his predicament. Pietro's so hungry he thinks he might actually puke, so he accepts it gratefully and takes his time eating it. The grease threatens to gag him, but he gets it down and his stomach doesn't hurt so much anymore. He can get to the studio and work out earlier tomorrow to make up for it. It'll be okay, he promises himself. He doesn't have to panic, he's in control.

Pietro doesn't have control over anything in his life. He can't control his sister's illness, he can't control how homesick he feels, he can't control how the company treats him or what parts he's given. He couldn't control what he had to do to survive before they came here. But he can control food. Nobody puts anything in his mouth but him.

It's getting worse, and he's starting to think Wanda's not the only one who's sick. He wishes he had
someone to talk to, he's never been this lonely before and every time he tries to reach out there's no hand to grab and pull him to safety.

Pietro feels totally trapped, and he's starting to think there's only one way out.

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Bucky's trying really hard not to get drunk in front of his father.

He'd appreciated his dad actually being sensitive enough to ask if he was comfortable meeting for a meal (Bucky very much isn't), so they'd arranged to meet for drinks instead. Jim showed up dressed as casually as he gets, not even wearing a tie, so Bucky can tell he's trying to make his son as comfortable as possible.

The subject matter of their conversation, however, doesn't. That's why he's trying not to get drunk on an empty stomach and pretty much failing. Especially since Jim keeps buying him drinks as some kind of apology or method to butter him up. It's certainly making him more suggestible, if nothing else.

"Your mother's very upset about what happened at her dinner party." Jim steers the conversation to where Bucky has been trying to avoid it going all evening. He runs his finger over the line of his phone through his tight jeans and tries to push away the urge to bail.

He didn't tell anyone he was coming here. He figures that they'd only try and talk him out of it, and he needs to know if his dad is being genuine or not. Becky seems to think he is, and Bucky usually trusts his sister's judgement more than his own.

"Yeah? I'm not sorry for it." He lies. Because there's still a little, deep-buried part of him that wants to grovel for forgiveness no Mama I'm sorry please be happy with me again. Because someone being unhappy with him still kind of feels like the world crashing around his ears.

Jim sighs and takes a long drink of his scotch, mouth twisting into a thin line of disapproval. Bucky's almost immune to that expression, he's been seeing it his whole life. Becky was the one who got the smiles from their father. He'd promised himself that if it looked like his dad was just here to bully him then he'd leave, and it's starting to feel like this meeting was a futile exercise.

"Son, I don't expect you to be." Jim sighs. "If what Becky told me you've been saying about your mother is true… I wouldn't expect you to be sorry for upsetting her."

There's that word again, if.

"It is true." It's almost a physical exercise to stand his ground, and Bucky drains the rest of his drink with his knuckles white around the glass. Drinking together is pretty much the only bonding exercise he and his father have, maybe he's trying to invoke some kind of nostalgia with this meeting, soften Bucky's defences.

Maybe that's a little paranoid, but he wouldn't put anything past his parents.

"It's just… very difficult to get my head around it." Jim sounds like he's trying to, which is a first, although Bucky's still suspicious that this could all be a very carefully orchestrated act. "It's not like there's any evidence."

"You don't think the fact I can't eat like a human being is evidence?" Bucky bristles, spitting it out even as his cheeks heat up with shame at admitting this in front of his father. Jim is the kind of man who probably thinks his eating disorder is a girl's disease, it took him long enough to get over his son
being gay in the first place.

"James…"

"You don't think me trying to kill myself is evidence that something wasn't right when we were growing up?"

"I'm not saying that everything was perfect. I'm not accusing you of lying." He signals the waiter to refill Bucky's glass, which is his usual attempt at placation when his son gets a little too emotional for him to be comfortable. "I'm just trying to figure out what really happened."

"You said Becky told you what I said." Bucky takes a burning sip of vodka and silently thanks the bartender who's clearly noticed their tense conversation and sympathetically upgraded him to doubles. "That's what happened."

"Becky told me what you said, she also told me that's she's not sure she believes it."

"She…" Bucky feels betrayal stab him deep in the gut like a hot needle. He'd thought his sister was on his side. He suddenly feels like he's standing on one side of a chasm and his family are all on the other.

He feels totally alone, freefalling.

"Look, if it happened like you claim then why didn't I see anything? You and Becky were joined at the hip as children, how is it even remotely possible that she didn't see any of these terrible things you say your mother did? She would have at least heard something, seen how you mother was with you while you were all together."

"Dad…"

"James… Bucky, I'm not saying you're lying. I'm saying maybe you believe what you're saying, but that might not be how it actually happened." His father smiles with a warmth Bucky hasn't seen for years, and he suddenly doesn't know what to think. "Your memory's not the best, especially with the… medical problems you've been having. And you are sensitive, you know that's true."

"I… I guess." Bucky mumbles, swirling his drink around his glass so he doesn't have to look at his father. He's telling the truth, Bucky is sensitive, and starving himself for years hasn't left him with the best memory. That's all true. And a lot of the memories aren't exactly distinct, sometimes they do blur into one dark cloud when he tries to look at them too closely.

What if his dad is right? What if Bucky is remembering it wrong?

"Look, if you really think about it and you still decide it happened exactly how you say, then I'll believe you." Jim sighs quietly, and he sounds like he's being reasonable here. "But your mom's very upset that you'd say those things, and your sister doesn't remember any of it. There's no harm done if you're confused about what happened, we won't be angry with you if you made a mistake."

"I don't… I don't think I did." He's suddenly not sure, everything is somehow unsettled inside him now his dad has made him doubt himself. "Dad, I'm pretty sure—"

"Maybe you should take some time to think about it." Jim smiles again, and Bucky hasn't felt this kind of affection from his father since he was a little boy. It makes it hard to stand his ground and not just agree with what he's saying. "I want you to be alright, that's all. If you stick to this story now and it turns out to not be true, it'll only be harder to take back later."
He reaches out and puts a hand on Bucky's arm, warm and supportive and everything Bucky used to imagine dads were supposed to be like. It makes him feel strange, he's never experienced this with his father before. Love.

It's suddenly hard to remember Steve promising him that he believed him, that he saw Irina treating him badly. Suddenly, nothing is solid.

"I'm just looking out for you, son. God knows I've said some things I wish I could take back once I thought things through." Jim sounds genuine. Bucky's starting to believe him. "You should come over to the house sometime, whenever you feel comfortable. Maybe talking about things with your mom might help you feel better."

It's a horrible idea, a distant part of him knows that.

"Yeah." Bucky nods, because it makes his dad smile and squeeze his arm like he's proud of him. He'd forgotten what that felt like, and it makes it easy to ignore the nervous lurch in his stomach. "Okay. I'll come over."
Surrendering Control

I was born sick, but I love it. Command me to be well...

The music isn’t loud enough to completely drown out the sound of Bucky's heavy footfalls as he puts all his effort into the steps. The studio lights are too fluorescent after a few hours of exposure and they're making his head throb almost as much as his feet, but he needs to do this. It's the first time he's danced this piece since he fell, he needs to see how far he's built himself back up from the pit he put himself in.

He watches himself in the mirror, focusing on his lines and how long he can hang in the air when he jumps. Does it look effortless? Does it look pure? He misses being graceful, feeling fluid, feeling like he can defy gravity in spite of the flab he can feel sticking to his frame. His arm is back at probably 70% capacity, which has astounded his physiotherapist (who chalks it up to his superior muscle tone and how quickly he got back to exercising) but also makes Bucky very nervous. He's torn between needing the excuse not to dance and the thrumming in his veins that has always driven him to move. He doesn't know if he wants to get back that last 30% of movement or not, doesn't even know if he can.

Mama thinks there's a shortcut, or a lifeline, depending on how he looks at it.

Bucky knows he shouldn't have called her, replaying the conversation in his head as he finally stops dancing. He catches his breath as he walks over and changes the track on his ipod where it's hooked up to the studio speakers. Something classical that he remembers some of the choreography to. Coppelia, the last thing his parents had come to see him dance in Novosibirsk. His mother had been impressed, she'd even hugged him afterwards.

She'd reminded him of it this morning, when she'd actually sounded happy to speak to him on the phone. Bucky had been too nervous (scared?) to bring up the abuse, to mention the accusations that apparently only he believes, and his mother had been more than happy to gloss over the whole incident. She said something about him not holding his drink well, and Bucky laughed at himself dutifully. It was easy to pretend that's all it was when she sounded so encouraging over the phone, like she actually wanted to speak to him and make sure he was okay.

He mentioned that they needed to talk about it at some point, but Mama immediately dismissed him with an 'I'm not dealing with this nonsense now', so he shut his mouth.

It had taken Mama a whole five minutes to bring up his returning to the company full time. It's a whole five minutes more than she's given him her attention about things other than dancing for years, if ever, so Bucky sees it as a good deal. Her plan to get his injured arm back to its full capacity, he's not so sure about.

She'd ignored his eating disorder completely during the conversation. Bucky's pretty sure she sees it as more of a bonus than a disease, as long as it keeps his weight down and he keeps a lid on the whole wanting to die thing. He really doesn't know what the hell to think anymore. That's why he'd come to class straight after the conversation and hasn't left the studio since, even though the building is mostly empty now.

He's killing his confusing thoughts with the only tried and tested method he has that doesn't involve puking. He's sure his therapist would be proud.

"It's been a long time since you stayed here after hours."
Bucky nearly jumps out of his skin when the music ends and someone speaks up from the back of the room. Natasha is leaning her back against the door, wearing jeans with her hair loose around her shoulders. She must have missed him at home, figured out where he'd be once she realised he wasn't at Steve's place. He's getting predictable, or maybe he always has been.

"Been a long time since I could." Bucky looks at her in the mirror, keeping his back to her as he re-ties his unruly hair into the bun he usually wears to rehearse. "Remember our pas des deux in this?"

"How it took a week of walking through the steps before you didn't throw me over your shoulder by accident? I remember that." Natasha is still watching him closely, arms folded. "Your arm is working remarkably well."

"I know. Don't say anything." He raises it straight up to demonstrate, only just falling short of a full vertical extension. It's not enough to dance solo, but it's getting there. "I don't want anyone to know yet."

"So you're re-joining the company?" Natasha cuts right to the chase, as usual. "Are you sure about that?"

"No. I'm not. I'm not… I don't know." Bucky stumbles over his words, because he really doesn't know what the hell he's doing here. He's just doing. "I don't know if I want to. I don't even know if I can."

"You're basically on a full schedule of classes again, except for your teaching. We all know, everyone's just waiting for you to say the word." She raises her eyebrow. "You're not hiding your progress as much as you think. Standing at the back can't hide talent."

"Nat…” Bucky leans his hands against the barre and drops his head between his arms, not looking at himself in the mirror this close. "I'm trying to do this without pressure. I've never danced on my terms, that's what I'm going to do this time. If I decide to."

"James. Think about this." She doesn't move, doesn't come closer. Sometimes whatever's inside Bucky that makes him such a driven dancer gets so big it fills the room, and she feels like there's no space for her to displace if she comes closer. "Last time you almost killed yourself."

"That's because I wasn't doing it for me. I wasn't thinking straight and I wasn't looking out for myself first." Bucky finally raises his head, looking his reflection straight in the eye and not flinching. "That's why I don't give a shit if everyone's just waiting for me to say the word. I'm waiting until I'm ready. Okay?"

"Good." Natasha smiles approvingly, which weirds him out. Was this a test? "I won't say anything. Just don't push yourself too hard. You might injure yourself again before you even get to make the choice."

"I'm being careful." He lies, trying not to think about how much time he'd be sitting out of class if he did what his mother wants him to. It might work out in the long run, but injuring himself again doesn't sound appealing. "Now stop watching, you're putting me off."

"Alright. But if you ever want someone to teach you how to actually do a brisé correctly…"

"Ha ha. You're hilarious." Bucky gives her the finger and waves her away as he walks back over to the stereo, trying not to smile as he starts up another track and starts running through the dance again.

It's kind of nice to be back to the point where his friends have stopped treating him like an empty eggshell. Maybe if he takes a gamble on his mother's plan then he'll not only be able to get back his
place in the company, but he'll also be able to prove to everyone that he's strong enough to handle
the pressure of dancing professionally again.

He must be strong enough, his parents think so. A sudden stumbling block in his brain distracts him
from concentrating on his movements when he notices what he's thinking. How is he sure that his
parents aren't lying? That they're not manipulating him to –

"Fuck!"

Bucky spits out the curse involuntarily when he forgets his limitations for a second and tries to
extend his arm further than it can go. He lands heavily, thudding onto the floor with no grace as he
clutches his shoulder and squeezes his eyes shut against the white hot pain that shoots all the way
through his back and chest. It quickly fades to a dull throb, but the frustration it leaves in his lungs is
worse than the pain itself as it muddies his thoughts and narrows them down to tunnel vision again.

Mama's right, he can't get back to full capacity on his own. Maybe he should take her advice and call
the doctor she recommended.

"Are you okay?" A voice almost makes him jump again, and Bucky opens his eyes to see Pietro in
the mirror, standing in the hallway and poking his head into the room. He feels a guilty roll in his
stomach that only makes it harder to think straight.

"Yeah, just pushed my stupid arm too far." Bucky rotates his shoulder and loosens his arm up as
Pietro lingers awkwardly in the doorway. "I didn't know anyone else was still here."

"I was practicing down the hall." The kid is in his dancing clothes, still has sweat drying in his hair.
He must have been dancing for hours if this is the first time he paused his music and heard Bucky's.
He looks pale, tired, and Bucky switches his focus completely from the mirror to his friend,
switching off his music so they don't have to raise their voices.

He realises vaguely that his throat isn't sore in spite of raising his voice. He must be purging less.

"Hey, listen, I'm sorry about the other day." He turns to Pietro, smiling apologetically. The
conversation they didn't have has been playing on his mind since it happened. "I had a whole family
thing going on and I got distracted. What did you wanna talk about?"

"Oh… It's okay." Pietro shakes his head, looking down at his feet. He almost looks guilty, and
Bucky frowns hard at that. "It wasn't important, and you're busy."

"No I'm not, I've gotta take a break and let my shoulder settle anyway." Bucky lies, trying to coax
Pietro back into the conversation. The kid looks like a strong breeze might blow him over, so
hopefully he won't take that much convincing. "Talk to me, what did you want to say?"

"It's really nothing." Pietro doesn't leave though, scuffing the sole of one shoe against the top of the
other shyly. Maybe it's not what he has to say that matters, it's just that someone hears him.

Bucky remembers painfully well what that's like.

"So? It doesn't have to be important." Pietro is still chewing on his lip, weirdly still, and Bucky
moves a little closer. "Hey, you're my friend and I'm kinda worried here. What's wrong?"

"I…" Pietro glances up and then looks down again, obviously nervous as hell. "In the last months,
I've—"

The impatient chirping of a phone cuts him off, and Pietro fishes his cell phone out of his tracksuit
pocket hurriedly, looking at it like a rattlesnake about to bite when he sees who's calling. Bucky's pretty sure it's similar to how he used to look when Mama called him three times a day to make sure he was spending enough hours practicing outside of class.

"My sister. Excuse me, I have to…" Bucky makes a vague gesture giving him the go-ahead, and Pietro picks up the call, switching immediately to Sokovian.

Bucky doesn't speak the language, and even though it's close enough to Russian for him to recognise a few words he has no idea what Pietro is saying. It's only by the tone of his voice and the stress in his expression that he figures out things are probably not okay back home. He only gets more worried when Pietro hangs up, looking distressed.

"I'm sorry, I have to go. My sister is sick." His hand is shaking as he fumbles his phone back into his pocket, which just makes Bucky's stomach drop further. "I-I'm sorry."

"Hey, do what you've gotta do." Bucky is seriously concerned by the desperation in his friend's eyes. He feels even guiltier for not listening to him when he had the chance. "You've got my number, right? Call me if you want to talk, doesn't matter if it's late."

Pietro stutters out a thanks and then practically runs out of the studio. Bucky watches him leave with a sigh, feeling like he's missing something again, and goes back to the barre to stretch before he locks up.

He can't exactly tell Pietro to talk when he's not doing the same thing himself. It's definitely time to fill his boyfriend in on what he's been stressing over for the last few days.

*  

"That's some stupid shit, Buck."

Steve doesn't mince his words with Bucky, especially since they made a deal to start being honest with each other. And even if it took him a couple of days to get with the programme, Bucky was honest about being back in touch with his parents.

Currently, Bucky is lying upside down on the couch with his feet over the back and he gives Steve the finger at his statement. He feels better already for being called out, sturdier for not getting a soft response to telling Steve that he met up with his father. Steve grunts and takes the Oreo out of his boyfriend's hand, shoving it defensively in his own mouth on the way past, and Bucky could seriously kiss him right now. That little gesture of looking out for him telling him that Steve isn't really mad, lets him see the emotion without panicking that he's in trouble.

"Yeah, I know. I just didn't figure it out fast enough." He lets his head fall back again, looking at the TV upside down. He's been streaming BBC Young Dancer of the Year, always trying to figure out what the new kids are doing before they can be better than him. "I… I kinda called my mom too."

"Bucky." Steve flops down beside him on the couch and groans audibly at the news. "Why?"

"I… My dad emailed me, we met up. He said she wanted to talk about stuff." He concentrates on the dancing on screen, correcting the movements in his head to be as perfect as he could do them. If he was fixed. "She knows this doctor, talked to him about my arm. She can get me a consultation with him… I could get my arm fully functional again if I had surgery."

"So you can dance, right?" Steve doesn't sound mad, just resigned, but Bucky flinches anyway. "Is that why you've been picking up more classes? You're in the studio almost full time now, do you want to go back to being part of the company?"
"I… I could already be in the corps. I'm good enough even with my stupid arm." Bucky mumbles, still not looking at his boyfriend. There's nothing wrong with him wanting to go back to dancing, he knows Steve would say it's his decision, but he fears making the wrong choice here and pissing Steve off. It's learned behaviour, but it still applies.

"But you don't want to, right? You want to go back to being a soloist, even if you're not principal." Steve still doesn't sound mad, and Bucky has to look at him to make sure he's not waiting to unleash rage when he fucks up. His boyfriend just looks unsure, and that throws Bucky completely. Why isn't he mad? "Buck, I thought you didn't want to dance anymore. You went to pretty serious lengths to stop yourself from dancing."

"I… I was so stressed and I was fucked up… I'm always gonna want to dance. It's in my DNA." He tries to explain, clumsily. "It's the only thing I can do."

"That's bullshit. No, it's not just bullshit, it's your mom talking." Steve scowls and Bucky tries not to flinch again. He knows it's not directed at him (or at least he hopes so), but it's instinctive. "You said your physio told you more surgery wouldn't do much. Why do you suddenly believe it when your mom has some random doctor she pulls out of nowhere? You don't think she has some ulterior motive?"

"I… I don't know. I didn't…" Bucky closes his eyes defensively, trying to shut the world out. He actually hadn't thought about it that way.

It was automatic and so easy to just go along with what his mother suggested. Mama gets what she wants, so it's better not to fight. Trying to resist her only ever results in pain; physical, mental, or emotional, so it's safer to just roll over and play dead until she's happy. That's the behaviour he'd reverted to the second he heard her voice over the phone, no matter how hard he'd intended to be strong and stand his ground. It had all melted away like ice under stage lights.

"Bucky, babe, you're worth so much more than dancing." Steve lays his hand on Bucky's chest (not his stomach because hello panic attacks, they learned that early on) and sighs quietly. "Look, if you want to do this and get back into the company then I'll support you. If that's what you want. But if it's what your mom's telling you to do, then I think you should run a fucking mile."

"I don't know if it's me or her. I can't tell the two apart." Bucky mumbles, pulling himself to finally sit upright and looking at Steve openly, letting his vulnerability be seen even though it's a struggle not to hide. "I really don't know. It made me fucking miserable before, but maybe if I did it on my own terms… I love dancing, I just… I don't think I had a good attitude to it before. I'm not lying when I say it's my life, y'know."

"I know, babe." Steve sighs quietly, hand still resting over his boyfriend's heart. He thinks this is a seriously bad idea, but the last thing Bucky needs is somebody else telling him what he can and can't do. "Maybe you should try and figure out if there's anything you want to do with your life that's not dancing."

The fact Bucky looks at his boyfriend like that's never occurred to him before really breaks Steve's heart.

"Like… gymnastics?" He tries, unsurely.

"Like something that's not to do with working out all the time, maybe?" Steve smiles when Bucky ducks his head sheepishly. "You have trouble expressing yourself, maybe you could try art or music or something? I can teach you to play an instrument if you want."
"I wouldn't be good at any of that stuff though." Bucky mumbles, tugging at a loose thread on his jeans.

"You've never tried, how do you know?" Steve knows exactly what Bucky's thinking and cups his boyfriend's cheek to make him look at him. Bucky looks totally lost, and Steve is going to do everything he can to wipe that expression off his face. "You're good at stuff that's not dancing, I know you are. You just need to find out what that stuff is. Then maybe when you've got something else in your life you'll be able to look at whether you want to dance or not more clearly. See what I mean?"

"Are you gonna be mad if it turns out I'm not good at any of this stuff?" He's hesitant, but it at least sounds like he's coming around to the idea. Steve leans forward and kisses Bucky, a soft press of lips to let him know he's there.

"Nah. I'm gonna be mad if you end up being better than me though. Don't get too good." Steve smirks, and Bucky rolls his eyes as he tries not to smile. He's nervous, but Steve always makes his stomach settle. "It'll be fun."

"Alright." Bucky agrees reluctantly, and Steve breaks into a genuine smile. "I trust you."

He trusts Steve more than he trusts his own mind right now, and definitely more than he trusts his parents. Steve's worth giving up some control. Bucky can do that, push away his mother's words and surrender for a little while.

He can try, at least.
"Yeah, that's gaslighting." Barton shakes his head, looking more serious than Bucky's ever seen him. It makes his stomach lurch and he's thankful that he still compulsively starves himself before events that make him nervous, including therapy appointments.

He has yet to mention that to his therapist, of course.

He'd hesitated about bringing up what happened with his father, worried that Clint would think he was creating problems for himself on purpose or looking for attention. But Bucky steeled himself and forced his way through the fear about his therapist's reaction, reminding himself over and over that it's okay to do things other people don't approve of. At least some of the things they're working on in his sessions are starting to stick.

"Gaslighting is really not okay." Clint looks worried about it, and Bucky feels slightly nauseous.

"What's gaslighting?" Bucky asks nervously, worried that he's done something wrong when he doesn't recognise the term. Clint catches his sudden tensing and anxiety and forces himself to appear relaxed, trying to calm his patient down. He's noticed that Bucky, like a lot of patients that were abused as children, is hypersensitive to the way he reacts to what they say. If Clint looks tense, they'll be tense and clam up, so he does his best to appear neutral no matter what comes up.

"Hey, it's nothing you did." He promises gently, not patronising but making sure Bucky understands that he's not at fault. "Gaslighting is something abusers do to make you doubt yourself. They try and convince you that stuff that happened to you never occurred, which makes them innocent and puts you in a vulnerable position again. Your dad's not doing you a favour by making you question your own mind, and the fact he's trying to act like he is, that's just another red flag."

"But what if he's right? What if I'm not remembering it properly or I'm just overreacting to something normal, or –"

"Everything you've told me about your mom points to her being abusive." Barton cuts him off carefully, matter of fact and stopping the anxious spiral before it can start. "I believe you, your friends believe you. Don't doubt yourself on this."

"So you really think they're manipulating me?" Bucky feels more secure, safer in his skin now someone's set things out clearly for him. "What do I do now?"

"My advice? Don't go over to your parents' house. Don't talk to your mom. Don't talk to your dad unless he's gonna support you and not try to undermine you. The same thing goes for your sister." Clint makes a note on his paper, flagging this up as a serious concern. "Family's an important support system in recovery, but it's not the only support system. And seriously, I think yours are gonna do you more harm than good."

"That doesn't sound very therapist-y." Bucky picks at his jeans nervously as he talks. He doesn't hide his hands under his legs around Clint anymore. "Aren't you supposed to be all about the reconciliation?"

"Not when the people you're looking to reconcile with are abusive assholes." Clint shrugs, and the plain language settles Bucky's stomach.

He's being taken seriously, his version of events isn't being questioned. It makes him feel like an adult, which is probably something normal people are used to by this stage in their life. He's so used
to feeling like a helpless child that it's strange to think he doesn't have to get someone's approval before he makes a decision.

"How's everything else going?" Clint asks, drawing a line under the conversation on his notepad. They'll be revisiting this again when Bucky's ready to deal with his parents more. "How about the goals your set last week? Feel like you've made any kind of movements towards them?"

"I, um, I raised my voice to talk over music the other day and my throat didn't hurt. So I figured I hadn't been purging as much, and when I looked back on the diary thing you asked me to keep I hadn't been."

"That's great." Clint looks genuinely pleased, and Bucky feels a weird kind of relief in his chest. He tries not to talk about the specifics of his illness with Steve or his friends, because he doesn't want them to know how bad it gets and because he doesn't want it to be the focus of their relationship, and it's liberating to actually talk about this stuff without shame.

"How about eating dinner with your friends? Any movement there?"

"I tried a couple of times. But they're too… I feel like they're trying not to watch me all the time. They're kinda too supportive and it's weird. We're assholes to each other, that's how we get along, y'know? Then all of a sudden they're being too nice and it was just… I couldn't do it."

"Could you talk to them about it?"

"I… No." Bucky fumbles to explain, to tell Clint that the idea of telling his friends they're doing something wrong when they're just trying to be supportive feels like betrayal, like he's no better than his mother, but the words stick in his throat. Clint seems to get it, though.

"Okay, so we shelve that goal for a while and work up to it." He nods, and Bucky somehow doesn't feel like he's failed because he didn't meet his target. It's a foreign feeling, but not a bad one.

They set his goals for the next week, which include having dinner with Steve and working up to eating when someone else is in the apartment, not necessarily sitting at the table with him. It sounds easy enough to let Bucky breathe, though he's starting to worry that things are going to get hard sooner rather than later.

"Anything else you want to talk about?"

"I'm going to a Pride party at Steve's apartment tonight. Celebrate marriage being legalised and shit." Bucky smiles nervously, trying to put his anxieties into words. "I'm looking forward to it, but I'm kinda nervous. It's mostly people from the company so they might ask me about coming back and stuff. Plus I usually binge when I'm drunk and if I start thinking about getting back in shape for work… it's probably not gonna go well."

"You could try drinking less… but c'mon let's be real, it's Pride." Clint snorts, and Bucky wonders for the first time if the guy is gay or not. It's not like it makes a difference, but he's curious now because of the topic. "Maybe you could talk to Steve before you go, let him know you might have trouble. Even if you don't want to give him details, it might help just to have someone know you're struggling there."

"I mean, I don't wanna worry him. It might be fine. It's just, usually…"

"So tell him that. I'm sure he'd rather know you might have trouble than have no idea you're feeling nervous." The suggestion isn't an instruction, and Bucky feels like it's progress that he can tell the difference between the two, that he can choose to follow the idea or not. "Or don't, it's up to you, but
have a strategy in place that you can fall back on. Even if that's going home when you feel bad."

"An escape plan?" Bucky nods, confident he can do that. He has choices, he's confident he can choose to do that. "Yeah, okay. I'll think of something."

*

As it turns out, Bucky doesn't seem to be the one who needs to escape.

Sam and Steve's apartment is resplendent in all the dollar-store rainbow decorations a tight budget can buy. Flag streamers hang down from the ceiling, slowly dampening as the sweat from the summer night rises up from the increasingly-rowdy crowd. Steve definitely had a hand in painting some of the flags stuck to the wall, because Bucky's pretty sure you can't buy bi-pride flags even in Brooklyn, but he's looking distinctly lost at the moment.

Bucky grabs a drink from the kitchen counter and heads over, smirking at the relieved look on Steve's face when he catches sight of sanctuary on the way.

"Want me to save you?" Bucky grins at the way Steve looks totally out of his depth. He's a head taller than mostly everyone here and his bulk makes him stick out like a sore thumb, not to mention that he looks totally confused by whatever they conversation has turned to.

"Please." He grabs Bucky's hand and lets himself be dragged away from the group he's been hovering with awkwardly. Dancing world gossip is like Greek to him. "Should I know who Sergei Polunin is and should I care that someone shares his coke dealer?"

"Yes and no." Bucky snorts, steering them into a free corner. "He's the next Nureyev so yeah, you should know who he is, but everyone already knows all the 'bad boy' shit. If you had something on Oksana Skorik, that might be news."

"How do you even keep up with all this shit?" Steve takes a swig of whatever colourful concoction Sam tipped into his plastic cup and grimaces. He's never letting his roommate play bartender again.

"Gotta have someone to bitch about when the rest of your company's within earshot." Bucky's own drink is a lot more palatable, given how quickly he's getting through it, and Steve glares at him enviously. "All we do is rehearse and gossip."

"And drink." There's the sound of a glass breaking from the kitchen and scattered cheers. They've reached the point where most people are good and buzzed by now, so casual acts of destruction aren't being taken very seriously. "I can't believe how much liquor you people can fit in your weird little bodies."

"You love my weird little body." Bucky smirks, and it's not a problem until Steve hears his words spoken back to him and makes a face.

"Shit. I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to talk about your body like that." He looks like he's trying to remember something he read online through the veil of booze, and Bucky cuts him off before he can start trying to awkwardly explain something about body image. He really doesn't need to hear it tonight, not when he's already nervous.

"It's fine, don't textbook-talk at me and make it weird. Forget about it." He kisses Steve to shut him up, tasting a weird combination of cherry and mint on his lips with a grimace. "Don't drink anything else Sam mixes."

"Excuse you, my drinks are fabulous." The man himself cuts in, because Bucky's luck is such that
people are usually near him when he's bad-mouthing them. Sam is wearing gold lamé hotpants and a rainbow flag tied around his neck like a cape, and Bucky sincerely hopes someone has taken a picture.

"Yeah, I tried to explain that just because the drinks you pour in are the colours of the rainbow, it doesn't mean the punch is going to taste good. I was ignored." Steve sighs exaggeratedly and Bucky tries not to laugh. "I'm dumping this for something drinkable."

"You're missing out!" Sam calls after him as Steve makes his way through the throng to the kitchen, flipping his cape dramatically for the hundredth time that night.

Earlier, there had been a loud conversation about how he was seriously considering making capes part of his regular wardrobe. Bucky wonders just how strong the punch is and if he could use it to get the last of the polish off his nails.

"I can't believe this many people fit in your apartment." He leans against the wall and tugs on Sam's cape playfully. "Dibs on not helping you guys clean up tomorrow."

"I think half the goddamn company's here, I didn't invite all these people." Sam shrugs, clearly not unhappy about how popular his parties are. Bucky checks his phone and sees there's still no reply to the text he sent earlier, reminding Pietro about tonight.

The silence doesn't worry him, exactly. It just puts a slightly sour taste in the back of his throat.

"I thought the kid was coming too?"

"Maximoff? Yeah, he was supposed to. He never comes to anything though, I'm not holding my breath." Sam rolls his eyes and downs the rest of his drink. "Never seen him at a party once."

"I think his sister's sick, he's probably preoccupied." Bucky feels a guilty swirl in his stomach and tries to ignore the stab of hunger it inspires. He'd never noticed that Pietro didn't show up to social events with the rest of the company before tonight, he'd always been focused on his own stuff. He's starting to think everyone has been too focused on other things to notice the kid.

"Huh. I figured we were just too cool for him." Sam shrugs, already distracted by Natasha and Kamala waving him over from across the room. "There's still some rainbow punch left, by the way. Get it before it's gone."

"Yeah, I don't think it'll be gone anytime soon." Bucky snorts and pats Sam on the back as he stumbles across to their other friends. For all he teases Steve about being a lightweight, Sam is definitely the one who can't hold his liquor. He'll be passed out under a pile of coats before midnight, Bucky would almost put money on it.

The urge to shove food into his mouth hasn't hit him yet, but Bucky decides it's time to take a break anyway. He'd talked it through with Steve and figured that maybe taking time out before he gets overwhelmed might stop him from his usual drunken binge eating. He waves to his boyfriend as he ducks out of the living room window, relieved that the fire escape is empty.

Bucky's grateful for the cool breeze outside, smoke whipping away into the night when he lights up a cigarette. He's thinking about trying to quit again, because he's sure he's not making Steve's asthma any better, but he's scared he'll put on weight like he did last time. Natasha was partially to blame for that, since it was right after he and Brock split up and she was always feeding him to make sure he didn't—

He shakes his head as if to throw the thought away and takes another drag of smoke, working his
way through the sudden feeling like he's been learning to in therapy. He's slowly figuring out how to
tell the difference between his emotions and hunger, and it doesn't make the twist in his stomach go
away but it makes it easier to handle. Guilt is getting familiar, but this is slightly different. Regret,
maybe.

Bucky huffs out a sigh and tosses his cigarette over the railing, heading back inside. He doesn't want
to think about it anymore, so he needs another drink.

He's surprised and slightly relieved to see a familiar bleached head through the crowd, and he pushes
through to find Pietro clumsily fumbling with a stack of cups, trying to get them apart. Bucky reaches
over and takes them from him, pulling one from the stack and handing it back with a smile. Pietro
looks across and smiles back, although it doesn't even get close to meeting his eyes.

Wherever the kid was before now, he's already 
*wasted*.

"You made it." Bucky reaches out to help when Pietro almost spills vodka all over the table as he
tries to fill his cup. "I was starting to think you weren't coming."

"You don't care if I come here." Pietro shrugs, only just speaking loudly enough for Bucky to hear
him over the music. He tries to snatch the bottle back. "I can do it."

"Yes I do." Bucky lets him take the bottle back, frowning as he's stung by the comment. He doesn't
know what's got into his friend, but this isn't how he usually acts at all. Especially not towards
Bucky.

"No. Nobody does." The cup is pretty full of straight vodka by the time Pietro brings it inelegantly to
his lips and takes a swig. He almost loses his balance and knocks into one of Sam's college buddies
doing it, and Bucky's pretty sure he should be steering him to a seat right about now.

"Come over here before you fall down." He pulls Pietro over to the wall, propping him against it
with a frown still etched onto his face. "Of course I care if you're here, we all do."

"You don't." Pietro insists, poking his finger haphazardly into Bucky's chest. There's no strength
behind the gesture, but Bucky's taken aback all the same. "I don't exist."

"I don't get what you mean." Bucky's trying to keep up with the train of thought, but Pietro's not
making sense. "Of course you do."

"You don't understand. People see you." Pietro is slurring by now and his pupils have shrunk down
to tiny pinpricks ringed with blue, which is setting off some warning alarm in the back of Bucky's
mind that he can't focus on yet. He's leaning on the wall heavily and Bucky puts a hand on his elbow
to steady him. "Nobody sees me. Even in the company I'm just a worst copy of you, and when you
come back they won't want me anymore. Nobody notices when I'm gone."

"Hey, that's not true." Bucky has to steady the kid with both hands when he lists away from the wall
and almost overbalances again. "And I see you, okay? I know things are shitty right now and I'm
here for you. I told you, I want to help."

Yeah, maybe he's a little drunk when he says it, but it still feels like a big step for Bucky. He can't
remember the last time he felt stable enough to actually offer to help someone else, let alone wanted
to feel responsible for them, but he can't just let the kid drown right in front of him. Even if he's
barely keeping himself afloat, he has to hold out his hand.

That train of thought is killed it its tracks by the sudden, clumsy press of Pietro's lips to his.
Bucky makes a muffled noise of shock and pushes the kid away, his bony shoulders hitting the wall hard as he's shoved back. Pietro looks almost as surprised as Bucky feels, one trembling hand reaching up to touch his mouth like he's not convinced he still has control of it.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't... I know you have a boyfriend." His face looks almost grey now, and Bucky's surprise is quickly bleeding away in favour of concern. There are those warning bells again. "I didn't have done that."

"It was a mistake, it's okay. People make mistakes when they're drunk." He has to catch Pietro again as he sways away from the wall, and Bucky's been to enough parties to know there's no way this is just booze, he must have taken something as well. The realisation hits him like he's been dunked in cold water, the reason why Pietro's been setting off alarm bells. He's not just high, he's taken too much.

"Pietro, what did you take?"

"You said find my own drugs." Pietro lets out a choked giggle, like his body can't decide whether to laugh or cry. "Pills make Wanda better, maybe me too. I didn't know what else to do."

"What pills?" Bucky's rapidly approaching panic, and he looks around instinctively to see if he can find Steve. This isn't good, this really isn't good. Pietro's eyes are closed when he turns back and Bucky shakes his shoulder frantically to make him blink blearily back into consciousness. "Stay awake, what pills? How many did you take?"

"Many." Pietro's head lolls forward onto Bucky's shoulder, forehead hot and sweaty where it touches bare skin above his collar. "Tired."

"Shit. Shit, no, don't go to sleep." Bucky has to catch him suddenly as the kid's knees give out, falling back heavily against the wall. "Pietro?!"

There's no answer and no movement. Nothing but dead weight in his arms.
"Then move your fingers up into E like this."

Steve has been trying to distract Bucky for two days.

"This is fuckin' bullshit."

It's not working.

"It's fine, you've just gotta—" Steve reaches over to move Bucky's fingers slightly and receives what he's pretty sure is the growl of a cornered cat in response. "Don't snap at me, I'm only trying to help."

"I know. I'm sorry." Bucky's hair is hiding his face, but Steve could swear he sounds choked up. He reaches out to touch his boyfriend again, but Bucky pulls away abruptly and gets up, setting the guitar down on the bed where they've been sitting for the impromptu lesson. "I just, I need a break."

"Okay, take a break." Steve knows how hard the last couple of days have been, on all of them but especially Bucky, and he tosses him the pack of cigarettes that are sitting on the nightstand. "Smoke, get some air. Take a shot if you've gotta, there's gross vodka in the kitchen."

"I'm trying to quit, y'know." Bucky catches the smokes gratefully, feeling bad that Steve is being so supportive when all he's doing is being a bitch, as far as he can tell. "Your asthma and shit."

"I was hoping you were quitting because it makes your jizz taste awful, but I'll take what I can get." Steve tries valiantly to put a smile on his boyfriend's face, relieved when he manages a tiny quirk of the lips in response. It's forced, but at least it's there.

"I don't mind coming on your face instead, if you insist." Bucky succeeds in sounding less depressed than he feels before he ducks his head and slopes off to the balcony. And to think, when he started dating Steve he wasn't smoking at all.

How times change.

The fact Steve is telling him to take a shot if it helps him calm down pretty much sums up how bad the situation has become since Sam's party ended in dramatic fashion. It's been two days of purgatory after a night of hell, and Bucky is seriously starting to think it's possible for guilt to eat him alive from the inside out. He closes the window behind him and slides down the railings to slump onto the fire escape, knees pulled to his chest and arms wrapped around them protectively after he gets his smoke lit. He needs to be small right now, god he wants to be small.

He can't stop thinking about the party, the feel of Pietro's dead weight in his arms and the panic shooting through his veins like the worst kind of amphetamine. He has to hand it to Sam, even drunk in gold lamé shorts he'd come to the rescue as soon as he realised what was going on in his kitchen,
and Bucky never thought he'd be so grateful to hear *out of the way bitches, nobody's dying in my apartment we just had the carpet cleaned.* Sam had done his time on the party scene, Bucky knew, but he never expected it to have left him knowing how to deal with an overdose so efficiently. Maybe there are secrets there he still doesn't know about, Sam keeps bad things locked down pretty tight.

When digging his knuckles into the kid's sternum and calling his name hadn't brought him round, Sam called an ambulance immediately. That was the point where Bucky checked out, staring at the limp body unmoving in the recovery position and unable to hear anything but his heart pounding in time to *my fault my fault my fault.* Steve found him later, after the mess of getting people out of the apartment and getting Pietro to hospital was over, curled up in the corner of his bedroom. He told Bucky he'd had a panic attack, when his boyfriend woke up the next morning, but all Bucky hears is that he was a coward.

Pietro needed him and he checked out, *again.* He couldn't handle it, he couldn't help because he's *weak.* He feels like the scum of the earth.

Bucky scrubs his hands hard over his face to try and wipe the image away, the body lying on the kitchen tile barely breathing. It keeps flashing up behind his eyes since it happened, paralysing him when he's trying to do something, anything, that isn't think about what happened. Sometimes he sees Pietro, sometimes himself. That's what makes this even harder to deal with: a few months ago that could have been him, so low and confused that he'd do anything – take anything – to make his head shut up. He could have been in that exact position, and if death came for him he would have shrugged and stretched out his hand.

He bangs his head back against the metal railing, and the burst of pain actually shuts his brain up as he sees stars. So he does it again, but he's expecting the relief and so it doesn't come.

Bucky stares at the smouldering cigarette in his hand for a long time. He follows the pale blue veins in his bony wrist with his eyes and wonders if the bite of a burn would be enough to make his brain behave. Order through pain has never failed him so far, he could do with embracing an old friend.

He closes his eyes, breathes.

It takes him a long time to toss the cigarette off the fire escape and climb back inside the apartment. It doesn't feel like a victory, because he still wants to feel that searing sting on his skin. He's just delaying the inevitable, but at least he's delaying it.

Bucky bypasses the bedroom and stands in the living room, not sure what the hell to do with himself. He wants to hurt, but Steve's in the bedroom and he couldn't do that to his boyfriend. If he feels this guilty over Pietro, he can't imagine making Steve feel the same way because he didn't stop something he didn't know was happening. Bucky's hungry, his belly cramping on nothing because he hasn't eaten for three days, fasting on the day of the party and unable to swallow since, but the kitchen feels even less safe than usual right now. It seems somehow disrespectful to stuff his fat face right where Pietro almost –

Bucky squeezes his eyes shut against the image flashing in front of him again. He needs to get this shit out of his head, it feels like it's choking him from the inside. His cell phone is sitting on the coffee table and he grabs it, figuring that maybe calling his therapist would be a good idea. Yesterday's appointment had been a washout, Bucky hadn't been able to face the idea of explaining everything that happened so hid in bed instead of going. Clint is probably worried, he sent an email yesterday that Bucky hasn't made himself read yet. He should call and explain why he's been a fucking failure again.
The phone starts ringing before he can even start looking for Clint's number. Bucky freezes on the spot when Mama lights up on the screen, red and green options screaming at him to make a decision nownowNOW. If it goes to voicemail she'll be pissed. But he's not supposed to talk to her. But he might feel better if he let her take control again. But he's not allowed to –

A hand comes from behind him and swipes the red circle. The call is dropped. Bucky looks over his shoulder like he's half asleep, staring at Steve with a weirdly blank feeling in his chest underneath the building anger. Now she's going to be mad and it's not even his fault, that's his instinctive thought.

"Sorry." Steve looks like he knows he's fucked up. He definitely shouldn't have done that, even if he was only trying to protect his boyfriend. That's why Bucky doesn't lose his temper, because he gets that it was coming from a good place even through the haze of his anxious brain.

"Don't ever do that again." The words taste sour. He shouldn't be saying them, what if it pisses Steve off and then he's all alone again? He doesn't deserve to take up space like this, to make his own decisions when they're all wrong.

"I won't, I'm sorry. I know it's not my decision who you talk to, even if it's… her. I just thought, today it probably wasn't a good…" Steve trails off when he stops rambling to explain himself and really looks at his boyfriend's expression. "Bucky?"

"I don't feel… good." It feels like he has to force out the broken pieces of syllables, but Steve frowns with concern like he's speaking fluently.

"Like you don't feel safe?" He asks gently, putting a grounding hand on Bucky's elbow.

Bucky thinks of Pietro lying on the kitchen floor and the guilt becomes a living thing, swirling in his stomach and crawling up his throat. How dare he have people that worry about him? How dare Steve look at him like that when Bucky's just being weak and –

"Yeah." He nods, swallowing against nothing. Empty, good, but so hungry to fill the black hole inside him. "I need to distract myself."

"I can help with that." Steve lets him go and grabs their shoes from the bedroom, urging Bucky to clumsily pull his boots on (it's not like he has other shoes that aren't for dancing, even if it's a hundred degrees out). "I had an errand to run today, you can come with me. I think it'll make you feel better."

"I'm not gonna be much good at the grocery store." Bucky tries to joke weakly, and Steve smiles back because he knows how much of an effort it is for his boyfriend to hold himself together right now. He's just relieved that Bucky's trying so hard.

"No grocery store, promise. Y'know how I'm always threatening to show you what a nice mom looks like?"

"You're going to see your mom?" Bucky baulks slightly at the prospect, not sure how much more stress he can take right now. "I… I don't…"

"I promise she's really nice. She's easy to talk to, and if she sees you getting uncomfortable she'll back off." Steve doesn't push, just gives him the option. "I'm happy to go by myself, Buck. I just figured it might stop you thinking about shit."

He's not wrong, actually. Even the stress might be good for getting Bucky's mind off the body on the floor lips turning blue eyes –

He nods, taking his boyfriend's hand. Anything is better than being alone with his memory today.
The subway is hot and crowded, and Bucky has to stand beside the door and let his head rest on the glass when he starts to feel dizzy. It's just the lack of food, he tells himself, he's not nervous about meeting his boyfriend's mother. He knows she's the only family Steve has left, aside from some distant relatives in Ireland he's only met once, but his boyfriend keeps telling Bucky that she's relaxed. She knows he's gay, she's happy he's got a boyfriend, and she knows 'he has some issues' (Steve says vaguely) so Bucky doesn't have to worry about being too high-energy around her.

He doesn't know what to expect, and it's making his palms sweat even after they leave the sauna of the subway and start walking. The mercy is that something is more prominent in his mind than what happened at Sam's party, at least that's something. Bucky clings onto the knowledge as Steve lets them into an apartment building and they climb the stairs to the third floor.

Stairs burn calories, Bucky takes no small comfort in that too.

The woman who answers the door is tiny, short and bird-boned as she goes up on her tiptoes and Steve bends down so they can embrace. It's hard to believe that this is Sarah Rogers from her size, at least until he gets a look at her eyes that are pretty identical to her son's. Bucky lurks awkwardly in the background, smiling nervously when Steve slings an arm around him and introduces him as his boyfriend. He almost pulls back instinctively when Sarah hugs him in greeting, but he hugs her back clumsily at the last moment. This is very different from anything Bucky's experienced from a parent before.

"Did you take the subway? You keep telling me you make good money now Steve, how the fuck are you still too cheap to spring for a cab? Pardon my French, dear." She smiles at Bucky and shepherds him inside, leaving Steve to close the door behind them. "Poor boy looks half dead, you couldn't bring a bottle of water with you?"

"He's fine, Ma. Jesus." Steve rolls his eyes as she pushes Bucky gently but firmly into a chair at the battered old kitchen table. There's an icon hanging over the fridge, but Bucky doesn't exactly know his saints.

"I'll be the judge of that. Be good for something and put the coffee on." Sarah pats him on the shoulder and Steve starts bustling around the kitchen obediently. Bucky sits on his hands nervously and doesn't know what the hell to make of this.

Sarah says things like Mama, but she doesn't sound like she's trying to make Steve feel bad when she does it. And Steve doesn't look stung like Bucky feels when his mother tells him he's good for nothing. Is she just joking? Do parents do that? Bucky feels like he's trying to translate from a language he should already know.

It doesn't take long before Sarah gets the old photo albums out ("I've been waiting for this opportunity, that's why he never brings friends over to meet me. I live to humiliate this kid." "Ma, seriously."). Steve could definitely be described as a goofy looking kid, who apparently was into theatre and every other school club Bucky can possibly imagine (including glee club, which is information he's definitely filing away for later). Buck-toothed and skinny, he looks a lot more like Sarah's kid than the giant guy blushing at pictures of himself in a Marilyn Monroe wig today.

"I tried baseball, remember that?" Steve points out a Little League pictures and laughs at his mother's long-suffering expression.

"Yeah, one of the eight hundred clubs you joined before you finally figured out you didn't like sports." She shakes her head with an affectionately exasperated expression. Bucky looks between them, slightly confused.
"You were allowed to choose what you wanted to do?" He catches the flash of what looks like pity on Sarah's face and flushes red, suddenly wondering just how much Steve's told her about his disastrous dinner date with the Barnes family.

Bucky excuses himself to the bathroom for a minute and tries to breathe. He works very hard on not purging in Steve's mother's house. He likes this woman, he really doesn't want to piss her off when he's just starting to think she might like him. He doesn't make himself throw up and he doesn't think about how he still hasn't been to the hospital to see his friend and… he tries not to think about anything. In the end he splashes cold water on his face until he can look calm and then goes back to the kitchen with a smile.

At least he's not thinking about Pietro on the kitchen floor. That's something.

Sarah takes one look at him when he sits back down and looks to her son with a smile. She's commanding in the exact opposite way to Mama, she makes you want to make her happy, rather than fearing the consequences of her temper if you don't.

"Steve, can you rehang the pictures in my bedroom? Your father's tilting further right every day and it'd only upset him. He was always a liberal."

"Still stumbling into them when you go to bed after a couple whiskeys, Ma?" Steve smirks back, clearly tapping into an old joke. His mother just gives him a look and he kisses her on the cheek on his way to the bedroom, shooting Bucky a look to make sure his boyfriend's okay.

Sarah turns to Bucky as soon as Steve's out of the room, the same *don't give me any bullshit* look that her son gives him on an almost daily basis. Shit.

"If embarrassing pictures didn't cheer you up then something must be really wrong, kid. What's the matter?" Her look softens slightly when Bucky's eyes widen like he's about to get hit by a car. "My boy's good to you, right?"

"Yeah." His voice cracks a little, because Steve is so, so good to him and he feels like he's not capable of giving anything back over the last few days. "He's the best."

Bucky doesn't know how it happens, but he finds himself shakily stuttering out the whole story about Pietro to Sarah. Steve had told him before that his mom was easy to talk to, but Bucky hadn't really understood the concept until he met her in person. He'd never imagined he'd want to tell a mother what was making his hands shake, that he wouldn't jealously guard the inside of his head as the last place of freedom he has.

Sarah listens, without telling him he's stupid or overreacting or he needs to man up and get over it. She waits until he's purged all the words from his system before she says anything, voice level and soothing. Bucky guesses this is where Steve gets his patience from, and he couldn't be more grateful.

"Sweetheart, what that poor boy gave you was a wakeup call. You should listen and realise that you can't let things get that bad for yourself again. Getting worked up about what you might have done isn't helping you any, you've got to look forward."

"But he… he needed me to help him." Bucky's voice shakes, and he's almost overwhelmed when Sarah reaches out and covers his hand with her own bird-boned fingers. She's not disgusted by his weakness, she supplements it with her own until together they make something strong. It's a foreign concept in a language he wants desperately to learn.

"No, he needed somebody to see him. We all need to be seen, that doesn't make it your job to do the
seeing." Sarah squeezes his hand and Bucky's vision might get a little blurry. "I know you're probably not much for bible stuff, but it's not a lie that you've got to take care of the log in your own eye before you start trying to pick a splinter out of someone else's."

"I just don't know what to do. He's got nobody, and he's just a kid. I feel so fucking guilty." He can't express his feelings well, but at least he's trying. Sarah seems to understand what he's trying to say, maybe the Rogers family being perceptive is genetic.

"Be his friend. Go visit him in the hospital, talk to him. You can see yourself in him without acting like it's contagious and you're going to end up back there again." Sarah advises, softly. "Be a friend, you don't need to be a hero. I spent Steve's entire life telling him that, I guess it takes a while to get through to a person."

"What's that?" Steve comes back into the room, ancient-looking hammer and nails still in hand, and something about the image and the open expression on his face makes Bucky fall in love with him all over again.

"How it took about twenty years for you to realise you didn't have to save the world." Sarah smiles at him, Bucky's hand still in hers. She's not trying to hide that they'd been having a serious conversation, and Bucky somehow feels light for it. Do other people grow up without judgement for having feelings?

Is this how family is supposed to work?

"Not the whole world, I'll settle for half." Steve quips back, looking just as relaxed about the situation.

Maybe they really do talk like this all the time, maybe it's not a big deal that Bucky tries to swipe at his eyes surreptitiously and is pretty sure he fails. He's never had a family like this, not by blood, but it almost feels like he has the rest of his life ahead to build one.

Yeah, maybe half the world is still worth something.
My gf has vehemently instructed me to tell you guys that I worked on this for 7 hours straight today. I don't feel like it shows but she's adamant that I worked hard and you should know.

"I didn't think starving was your thing."

Sometimes Natasha is seriously the worst person to share an apartment with. She has a habit of popping up with pointed observations right when Bucky's at his most vulnerable. Like before his first cup of coffee when he hasn't slept all night, for example. She can sense his weak moments from behind two locked doors, Bucky's convinced of it.

He's ninety percent sure she was an assassin in a previous life. She doesn't deny it.

"Trying to keep life interesting, y'know?" He grunts flippantly, hands too unsteady to get the coffee pot in order quickly and efficiently. Bucky needs caffeine yesterday, he's going to start keeping the gross off-brand energy drinks nobody will steal in the fridge at this point. Fuck his heart and all its fragility.

"Seriously, how long has it been? You haven't even stolen my Oreos." Natasha hops down from her perch on the counter and shoos him away from the coffee pot before he breaks it. Bucky tries not to hiss at her as he retreats to the table to flop into a seat.

Maybe Steve's not exaggerating that much about his catlike tendencies, although he maintains that the only clawing he does is during sex.

"Five days, I think. Maybe six, can't remember if I ate the day before Sam's party." That's not a lie, his brain tends to fog when he goes a while without food. It's kind of nice, in a sick way, because it means he's not seeing Pietro turning blue behind his eyes anymore. "I'm not throwing up, right? That means I'm getting better."

"You're not that stupid, don't pretend you are. It's not cute." Natasha shoots him a look over her shoulder. "Is it Pietro?"

Bucky shrinks involuntarily when she says that. It's a pretty effective answer.

"You should go and see him." She suggests, in the tone of voice that telegraphs clearly that it's not really a suggestion.

"I don't wanna go to the hospital." Bucky mutters, only half using it as an excuse. After his 'accident', he's pretty set on staying away from anything that smells like disinfectant and death as much as possible. "Bad fucking memories."

"He's not in the hospital anymore." Natasha is putting milk in his coffee and Bucky bites his lip, knowing better than to argue even if the thought of full-fat milk sliding thickly down his throat makes him want to hurl. "He went home yesterday."
"What?!" Bucky's surprised with the force of his own exclamation, and it even makes Natasha start a little as she puts their coffee on the table. "The kid tried to kill himself, they can't just… let him go."

"Says the guy who checked himself out of the hospital after he had to get bolted back together." The pointed eyebrow raise is as deadly and intimidating as it's ever been. "He told them it was an accidental overdose, what are they supposed to do?"

"Fuckin' talk to the kid! Jesus, if they just talked to him for five minutes they'd…" He trails off when Natasha just keeps looking at him with that pointedly patient expression, like she's waiting for him to pull his head out of his ass and connect the dots. "Ugh, fine, okay. I'll go see him."

"Good. I made golubtsy yesterday, you can take him some." Bucky makes a face as soon as her back is turned. He's not a fan of Natasha's Russian comfort foods, especially the cabbage-based ones, but maybe she's right that Pietro will eat it.

Bucky knows he should go and see the kid, he actually wants to in spite of all his foot-dragging over the issue. He's just afraid he'll do something to make it worse again, after Pietro basically told him it's his fault that his position at the company is in jeopardy. Bucky's not sure if that's the truth or just Pietro's perception though, since his position was secure even before Bucky blue-screened and his roles got passed over.

But if there's anything Bucky's learned from the extremely shitty year he's been having, it's that perception is just as important as reality. If not more. It doesn't matter if the reality is that they care about the kid and that his job is safe, it doesn't matter for shit if Pietro doesn't believe it.

"They probably make this wrong in Sokovia, but it should be familiar enough." Natasha is mostly talking to herself as she packs some of the cabbage rolls into one of her pristine plastic boxes. Bucky's pretty convinced she made this specifically for Pietro, although she does cook pretty often when they're less busy at the company. "He said he's been homesick, a taste of home might be good."

"Did you go see him in the hospital?" Bucky's not surprised. He knows his roommate has been dealing with her own guilt after he ended up in hospital, Pietro probably brings it all back. "Does Maria know what happened?"

"He's not getting fired." Is all she says, cryptically, and Bucky wonders how the hell she swung that with the director. Natasha's powers are many and varied, and almost always kept mysterious. "I went a few times. He was worried about his sister so I checked on her too."

"She wasn't at the hospital?" He frowns, because he'd thought the twins were close. His empty stomach rolls slightly when he thinks about his own sister, anger rising like bile when he remembers his father telling him Becky didn't believe his story about their childhood.

The bile only burns harder when he realises she might have lied to his face. She might have been on Mama's side the whole time. How is it possible to feel this sick with such an empty stomach?

Bucky swallows the nausea down and concentrates on what Natasha is saying. His therapist has been trying to get him to understand the importance of staying in the present moment, not getting caught up in unpleasant memories and trapped in a cycle that he feels he can only break by bingeing and purging. He can feel the urge itching at the back of his neck now and he shoves it away. Natasha. Pietro. Concentrate.

"She's agoraphobic, she can't leave the house. Pietro talked to her on the phone but she was still pretty terrified that he wasn't okay. I said I'd go over." Natasha takes a fortifying breath when she
pauses, and Bucky realises that seeing Pietro's sister seems to have shaken her up. "She doesn't speak English, but there's enough crossover with Sokovian and Russian we could mostly understand each other. She was… paranoid. I think she's used to having him around all the time."

"No wonder he wanted to get home as fast as he could. Poor fucking kid." Bucky chews on his lip and feels like a freak when the tang of blood on his tongue makes his stomach rumble. He's just meat, after all. Underfed, overworked, stringy meat.

Steve really needs to stop making him marathon *Hannibal* so he can gush about the 'aesthetics, Bucky, look at the colour palette of this scene!'. All that show does is make Bucky hungry and weirder than usual, apparently.

"They have a roommate, I think she was a little overwhelmed." Natasha snaps the Tupperware shut and puts it back in the fridge. "He's not a poor kid, he's your friend. Start thinking like that and you might not feel too guilty to swallow."

Bucky narrows his eyes, but Natasha cuts him off before he can come up with a snappy comeback. She's doing terrible things for his sass practice.

"Go shower, then go and see him. Steve's coming over after work, so you've got an excuse to leave if things get hard."

"I've got class—"

"Class won't miss you, he will." Natasha Romanov, hands on hips and that look on her face, is a force Bucky doesn't intend to pit himself against. "Go."

Bucky goes. No matter how far he comes, it's still always easier to do as he's told.

*

Pietro yearns for the soft click of European light switches. That's the first thing he thinks of as he turns the living room light off way too late. He fell asleep with the light on and just woke up, groggy and guilty as he turns off the bulb in the bright daylight. Electricity isn't free.

It's an oddly-specific sound that he misses whenever he's sick, sparking the memory of his mother tucking him into bed and turning the light off quietly behind her. He was never afraid of the dark, not until his sister started to think it hid demons within it. The harsh click of the light turning on and off is just another thing that's wrong in this place, and he's starting to think he'll never get used to the strangeness he's caused himself.

Even the doorbells speak differently here, a harsh buzz jerking him out of his head instead of the *dindon* he still expects. His friends (and he really believes he can call them that now, almost) came over enough yesterday that he wasn't expecting to be left alone today, but the sound surprises him all the same. Maya was relieved to have him home, both that he was okay and that she didn't have to babysit Wanda anymore, so she's made herself scarce for a well-needed time out from the Maximoffs.

He's a little nervous about how Wanda will be with another person coming over, as he shuffles to the door. He's still stiff and feels shaky on his feet, and he's glad Natasha told the director some story about a bad flu so he has time to recover. He kind of hopes it's her visiting, his Russian friend has been very helpful and he thinks he owes her a lot of favours after this horrible episode is over. And it must end soon, the nightmare can't possibly continue forever.

It's not Natasha.
"Uh, hi." Bucky is standing slightly awkwardly in front of the apartment door, holding Tupperware like a shield. "The door to your building was open so… Uh, Nat made a cabbage thing. For you."

"Hi. Thank you." Pietro forces his frozen limbs into movement to be polite and take the box Bucky is holding out like it'll protect him from some invisible threat. He's hit with the same sudden, hot wash of shame that threatened to smother him when he first woke up in the hospital. "Please come in."

"Thanks." Bucky steps over the threshold and Pietro closes the door behind him, feeling see-through. He mostly remembers what he said to Bucky before he passed out, and the awkwardness of truth hangs heavy in the air between them. "Um, Nat said put them in the fridge if you don't want them right away."

"What is it? A cabbage something?" Pietro is glad for the distraction, something to do with himself, and he takes the food into the kitchen, popping off the lid curiously.

The smell hits Pietro as soon as he opens the little box, and his eyes slide closed involuntarily as the image of their apartment back home rises up behind them. It smells like their mother, like the home he's been missing so badly since the pressure at the company started to build and build. It's familiar, comforting, it's not wrong like everything else.

Something is finally right, and Pietro's stomach settles.

"They don't make these correct in Russia. Natasha's talented." He closes the box carefully and puts it in the refrigerator, because Wanda won't come out when Bucky's around and he wants to share them with his sister. "Say thanks for me."

"Sure, I will." Bucky is hovering awkwardly in the kitchen doorway, twisting his fingers together like he doesn't know what to do with his hands now they're empty. "How are you doing? I'm sorry I didn't come to the hospital."

"It's okay, I think you didn't like it after you fell." His voice is still hoarse. The tube they used to pump his stomach was about as wide as his thumb. That's what the doctor said, and he believes it. "I'm sorry I… I'm sorry."

That's about all he can say. Because he doesn't exactly want to die anymore (and he's not sure he ever really did, he just wanted his brain to be quiet and everything to be okay again), but his little breakdown didn't actually fix any of the problems he's facing. Wanda is still sick. He's still trying to navigate a world he doesn't feel prepared for. Starving himself is still the only thing he feels he's in control of. He's still terrified of losing his job when Bucky comes back to work.

He's still in love with someone he can't ever have. That's only a small part of it, which kind of shows how fucked up his whole situation is right now.

"How are you now?" Bucky asks again. Pietro hadn't even been conscious of ducking the question, but he supposes he really doesn't know how to answer it so maybe he did.

"I took pills and they gave me pills." He shrugs, feeling fragile again, like Bucky can see right through him now he knows his darkest thoughts. He forces a half-smile, because if he looks like he doesn't care then maybe he can pretend he doesn't. "That's how you do it in America, right? Stark Industries drugs fix everything? I have to hide them from Wanda in case she takes the--"

"Why are you talking about me?!"

Of course she's listening, even if she can't be seen. The sudden rapid-fire barrage of Sokovian makes
Bucky jump, and Pietro turns to glare at the tiny gap in her bedroom door that his sister is obviously hiding behind. Even before she got sick, she was always a little shit when Pietro's friends were around.

"Don't spy. I'm just telling Bucky how you're doing."

Bucky is staring at him with concern, and Pietro figures out that all he understood was probably his name.

"My sister. Sorry. She doesn't like—"

"To see people. It's okay, you told me." Bucky pulls what Pietro thinks is an attempt at a reassuring smile, and something in his chest does relax a little. "You think we can sit down and talk, maybe? Or is that gonna make her too nervous?"

"That's fine. She'll just spy on us, but she doesn't speak English so it doesn't matter." Pietro shrinks slightly when Bucky continues to look freaked out by the whole thing. "I'm sorry, I…"

"Hey, it's cool. I'm an attention whore anyway." Bucky smiles hard enough that Pietro feels okay about leading him to the couch and sitting down as far away as he can get on the thin cushions.

"That's probably what you think of me now. After the party." He looks at the wall, at his bony hands, at anything but his friend's face. "I shouldn't have gone there and said that stuff to you."

"Bullshit. There's nothing wrong with wanting someone to see you." Bucky sounds very sure about it, and Pietro finally meets his eyes with a decent measure of confusion in his own. "I threw myself down the stairs because I wanted to be seen so bad, remember? I get it, it's not a bad thing to want someone to pay attention to you when you're hurting."

"Then why do you hide from me?" Pietro blurts it out and tries not to feel like he should hurt himself again when Bucky looks stung. "I know I said wrong things but I—"

"No, you didn't. You said the right things, I just didn't listen." It sounds like Bucky actually believes it, and is that guilt in his expression? For once, Pietro doesn't let his eyes flick compulsively to wrists or collarbones and listens. "I haven't been the best friend to you lately, but I promise I'm not doing it on purpose. I've been trying to deal with my own problems and there's not enough left of me to deal with your stuff too, you see? That's why I've been hiding from you, I can't do both things at once."

Pietro thinks he understands, and he drops his head and tries not to look hurt. Bucky's right, of course he should be taking care of himself with all his energy (if Pietro stopped him from doing that he's pretty sure he'd never forgive himself), but it feels like another lifeline just got cut. Nobody else knows what he's going through like Bucky, nobody –

"Hey, that doesn't mean I'm abandoning you. I'm not gonna do that again." Bucky reaches out and the slender hand on his arm feels like all the warmth in the apartment concentrated to a single point. "I'm gonna help you come up with a plan to handle this stuff, okay? I can't fix it for you but I can try and help you figure out how. I can navigate the system here, we'll figure out how you can get some real help."

"You'd do that for me?" He feels like glass, but Bucky squeezes his forearm like he can handle it.

"Yeah, of course. I had to pull my head outta my ass sometime." He smiles, and it reaches his eyes this time. "You wanna eat some gross cabbage stuff while we make a plan? I'm starving."

Pietro actually, genuinely smiles back. He's hungry for the first time he can remember since the plane
to America gave him nausea that never seemed to abate. He can save some for his sister, he can fix his own oxygen mask before he helps with hers.

"I could eat."

Much later, when Bucky's leaving after he's spent a couple of hours helping him figure out therapy avenues and calling doctors for him when he lacks the confidence in his English, Pietro finally plucks up the courage he's lacked sober.

"I know I shouldn't have done it, but I'm not sorry I kissed you." Pietro admits, head tilted bashfully in spite of the wavering confidence in his words. "If it only happened once, I'm happy I got to do it. I just wish I could remember better."

Bucky laughs, a bright musical thing, and Pietro's cheeks heat up.

"Well, if you're only gonna do something once… you might as well do it right."

Pietro lifts his head questioningly, only to have Bucky's lips pressing softly against his. He's warm and soft and he tastes like golubtsy and home when he parts his lips slightly. There's nothing passionate about the kiss, it's more like a warm, firm hug that's been needed for so long finally having it feels unreal. Like oxygen. Pietro makes a soft sound in his throat and Bucky finally breaks away, a tiny smile on his lips and his hands still cupped at the base of Pietro's skull.

And although he knows it can't go anywhere, Pietro does feel better for the kiss. He feels… accepted.

"I… I didn't see that coming."

"You'll remember it though, better than a bad memory."

Pietro smiles then, and his stomach is still. He doesn't feel like he's fixed, not by a long shot, but after today he feels like he could be.

"Yes. Better."
"So has everyone in this group made out with everyone in this group now?"

"That's the kind of question that starts threesomes." Steve gets to his feet with exaggerated weariness, and Bucky might reach out from his position flopped on the couch to subtly (or in reality, not at all subtly) grope his ass. It's right in front of him, after all, and he's only human. "I need more beer."

"There's four of us, that makes it an orgy." Bucky calls after his boyfriend as he trudges into the kitchen, nuzzling back into the cushion he's claimed for his personal pillow and cackling to himself.

The last week has been more like getting back to business than moving on from the latest disaster. The world doesn't stop turning because they have therapy appointments and welfare checks to schedule around class, so they make the best of it. Bucky's starting to feel like that's how life ends up, maybe for them if not most people: moving from disaster to disaster and learning to enjoy the calm moments in between. Maybe that's maturity, but how the hell would he know?

Currently, 'enjoying the calm moment' means slumping in Bucky and Natasha's living room, sprawled over every available soft surface with a host of shitty movies queued up onNetflix and a lot of alcohol. Bucky's officially back to a full load of classes as of next week, but he's ignoring the 6am start he has tomorrow in favour of more vodka. He's still not 'officially' back in the company, but it's basically confirmed. All he has to do is say he's in.

He won't, not yet, because he's not sure how it's going to affect Pietro if he does. Bucky isn't going to do anything that might push his friend over the edge again, not when things are still in such a fragile balance.

"No, seriously." Sam has his 'for science' voice going on, so they're not getting out of this without an answer. He and Natasha had already started this flop session when Bucky and Steve came over, so he's a few drinks ahead of them. Steve had the right idea to swerve this conversation as much as possible. "I fucked Steve, obviously."

"Wait, hold on. I thought we were talking making out, not fucking." Bucky waves his hand expressively, absent-mindedly shoving a potato chip into his mouth and speaking through it obnoxiously. "Otherwise I can't have Nat on my scorecard."

"Since when did you two make out?" Sam almost looks jealous and there might just be the shade of a pout developing on his face, which is adorable.

"Uh, notorious slut." Bucky points at himself incredulously, like it's the obvious answer. Natasha nods and pats him on the head on her way to the kitchen.

"He made his way through most of the company." She sighs affectionately, like she's proud her baby slut is all grown up now. "I can't buy milk without running into nine guys he's fucked."

"I can still hear you in here!" Steve calls from the kitchen, not sounding too offended as Natasha goes to join him.

Bucky grins proudly.

"You're a whore, Barnes." Sam grumbles, and Bucky sticks his tongue out.

"I'm a slut, whores get paid."
Bucky finally finds the energy to sit up and point emphatically at the crop top he's been wearing since he got home from class (because it's too fucking hot this summer and the AC is broken again). A gift from Sam and an example of his terrible fashion decisions (capes notwithstanding), it has a day-glo orange triangle on the front emblazoned with the slogan 'I'm Always A Slut For Doritos!'. It's a reference to Steve's unfortunate nickname, because the guy is a stupid giant triangle of muscle, and Bucky's pretty sure Sam had been hanging onto it to humiliate his friend for a while when he presented it to him for his birthday.

And if it had made Bucky feel a little sick the first time he saw it, because Doritos are right up there with Oreos as his favourite binge foods, he didn't let it show. He's doing better, he doesn't want to be the kind of person who thinks about using colourful chips as markers so he can stare at his puke and tell when he's got everything back up after a binge. He doesn't want to be that way, so he tells himself he's not thinking about it. He wears the stupid shirt aggressively, just to prove he can, with the kind of stubbornness he and Steve are both prone to.

"See?" He points harder. "I even come with a label. Slut."

"Please take that off. It was a gag gift, I could happily have lived my entire life without seeing you in a crop top." Sam wrinkles his nose expressively and pokes a finger into his mouth like he's trying to throw up. "And I mean a gag gift, dude. Crop tops aren't your thing."

Well, now he's thinking about the thing he's specifically trying not to.

"I've gotta get naked and shower anyway. And my therapist would be nine shades of pissed at you for that extremely triggering remark." Bucky snorts, getting to his feet. Sam blinks sluggishly as he gets his booze-sodden brain in gear and realises what he just did might have been inappropriate, but Bucky's already leaning down to peck him on the lips before he can react.

"Hey! Assault much?!" He squawks, scrubbing the back of his hand over his mouth with an exaggerated look of disgust. "I don't need the taste of Steve's jizz in my mouth!"

"Now I've made out with everyone in the room, so I win." Bucky smirks and points to himself again as he straightens up, trying not to laugh at the scandalised look on his friend's face. "Told you. Slut."

He hears the predictable whine of Ste-e-ve! as he heads to his bedroom to grab fresh clothes, and Bucky grins to himself. It feels good to be able to joke with his friends again, to be able to make fun of himself in a way he couldn't have imagined doing three months ago. It's a relief to be in a place where he doesn't take every horrible thing about himself so deadly seriously.

That good feeling doesn't stop him from ripping the shirt off the second there's nobody able to see him and shoving it into the back of his closet, under the garbage bags and box of cookies he keeps hidden for emergencies. And there's no good feeling strong enough to stop him from leaning his head against the closed closet door, swallowing hard against suddenly-thick saliva and the lump in his throat. His logical brain knows he can take a joke, but the lizard part of him still thinks it can trick him into fucking up over it.

Bucky's doing better, he even hit a six on Barton's makeshift scale of fucked-up-ness (Clint has another name for it, but Bucky prefers his) at his last therapy session. He's doing better, but that doesn't mean he is better. He works through the trigger now, but the trigger is still there lurking in the back of his mind and just waiting for him to let his guard down.

It's getting really old. He wants this thing to die already so he can get on with living.

The cool shower feels amazing after the oppressive heat of the apartment, and Bucky tenses and
relaxes his muscles in steady groups under the spray in an effort to calm down. At least in the summer his habit of cold showers doesn't make him feel weird, although it's a different story in the winter. He briefly thinks of texting his sister to ask if she still carries out Mama's tradition of freezing showers to wake up in the morning, but then he remembers that he's not speaking to her and scowls, tensing up all over again as his stomach gives a threatening gurgle.

Drunken showers are usually a nice capsule space out of time, but Bucky is only tipsy and it's not enough to let him shake off the anger that bubbles up when he thinks about his sister. He gives up trying after a couple of minutes and shuts off the water, leaving most of his skin wet when he gets dressed so he'll have something to help him stay cool. He carefully avoids the mirror, because he doesn't need to see himself right now. Not when he's caught between being okay and wanting to stuff his face until his stomach bursts.

He hasn't spoken to Becky since their dad said she didn't believe him, and he's not sure if he wants to. Her texts have gone unanswered, and Natasha's asked him to reply a couple of times because his sister is worried enough to chase him through his roommate. Bucky doesn't know what the fuck he'd even say, if she doubts his story about his childhood then there's nothing to say. He just hasn't brought himself to confront the issue yet, not with everything else going on.

There's a hole in his chest without his twin to fill it. So far he's managed to avoid trying to fill it with food. Today, he turns to his third-best resource (sex comes in second) for burying his head in the sand: alcohol.

The universe doesn't seem to be on his side with the whole 'trying not to get triggered' thing, as the afternoon slides into evening and the group gets progressively tipsier. Natasha puts on Center Stage, because dance movies are their guilty pleasure, in spite of Steve's protests about 'more ballet, guys, seriously, do you ever have a day off or what?'. His alternative suggestion had been Time Bandits, which he's been lobbying for all day with increasing intensity the more beer he drinks, but nobody has the concentration for that at this point. Although Bucky wishes they'd given in when one of the dancers on screen is revealed to be bulimic. There's a very, very awkward silence, at least until Bucky gathers himself enough to drawl:

"Psh, fuckin' amateur. I could puke silently by the time I was eighteen, this chick needs to take a step back."

It only manages to inspire a little nervous laughter, and a funny look from Natasha because Bucky thinks he's probably a little too loud when he's drunk, but it gets the conversation going again so they can abandon the incident. If he needs to learn to deal with this shit he guesses his friends have to as well, so he doesn't hold the awkwardness against them.

Still, the pressure behind his eyes is building steadily, each tiny incident stacking up to make something big and ugly in his gut. He steals some of Steve's trail mix (pretty safe because all his boyfriend eats are the M+Ms) and chews slowly to try and stave off the hunger that he knows is all in his head. Steve casts him a worried glance and Bucky kisses him to reassure him. He's okay right now. He might not be in twenty minutes, but at the moment he can handle it.

That reassurance is meaningless five minutes later. Bucky's phone rings and he picks it up absent-mindedly, too busy focusing on the dancing on-screen and trying to catch the actors out to bother looking at the caller-ID.

Rookie mistake.

"Hello?"
"James, why have you been avoiding my calls?"

Mama. The voice sends ice water cascading down Bucky's back, and he snaps up straight like someone's taken a cane to him for bad posture. Steve notices the movement immediately but Bucky waves him off as he ducks into the kitchen, because he doesn't want to have this conversation in the middle of the living room. Just because his night is ruined, it doesn't mean he has to ruin it for everyone else.

"I've been busy, Mom." He intends to tell her that he doesn't want to talk to her, but the words stick in his throat and come out more submissive than he wanted them.

The pressure is still building, gaining speed now.

"So you've re-joined the company? Are you back on a full schedule now you're finished with your teaching nonsense?"

"No, I didn't say I—"

"How quickly can you become principal again? You're going to have to increase your practice time if you want to lose weight and get back into show shape. I spoke to Doctor Brant for you and—"

Bucky's a child again, it's like a horrible dream. She's straight back in control and he has no say over anything in his life. This isn't what he's been working his way through nightmares and triggers and fucking therapy sessions for, to have his life ripped away from him again because he can't say no to his mother.

That's what makes the pressure explode.

"No, Mom. Shut up." Bucky feels like he's teetering right at the top of a rollercoaster, and it definitely doesn't feel like he's wearing a seatbelt. He white-knuckles the kitchen counter like he has to hang on tight before the drop. "I'm not back in the company, I'm not trying to lose weight, and I'm not seeing your crazy fucking doctor. Listen to me."

"How dare you—"

"I dare. I fucking dare because I don't have to look at you right now and it's the only time I'm not too scared to tell you to shove your bullshit up your ass where it belongs." Bucky can't believe the words coming out of his mouth, he's going to get in so much trouble. But they keep coming, like all it took was a little crack for the whole dam to come down.

"Are you drunk?" She must hear it in his tone of voice, and Bucky's face flames even as he doesn't slow down.

"I am fucking drunk or I wouldn't have been dumb enough to pick up the phone. Normal people don't have to be drunk to talk to their moms!" His voice cracks. Is he upset? Is he angry? He just feels his stomach lurch and he can't tell what's emotion and what's hunger.

"You—"

"You abused me. I don't care what Dad and Becky think, because I know it happened." Is his voice getting louder? He can't hear a damn thing over the ringing in his ears because he's going to be in trouble. But the hunger in his belly dies, and it makes him feel strangely steady. The calm in the eye of the storm. "You forced me into a life that almost killed me because you couldn't have it. And now I have to live it and make it work, but I don't need you in it."
"James—"

"I don't want to hear it. I found my own family because you didn't fucking give me one, and I don't forgive you for that. I don't forgive you for any of it." His hands aren't shaking. His stomach is full and his hands aren't shaking and Bucky feels like he's watching a movie of himself from far away as he does something he could never do.

"I only ever tried to do my best for you!" Irina finally gets a word in edgeways, and the sound of his mother's expressively wounded voice is almost enough to weaken whatever strange fury is driving Bucky. Almost.

He's in so much trouble, but he's not going to be punished this time.

"That's not my problem. You were supposed to be my mom, not my coach. Your best fucked me up for life, I'm not going to pretend that's okay to make you feel better about something you did to me." He's never this eloquent, the rage is making his mouth work quicker than his brain and Bucky is still just hanging on for the ride. "I don't want or need anything from you anymore. Don't call me, don't email me, and don't get Becky to do your dirty work. I don't want to speak to you."

"I—"

"Lose my fucking number, Mama."

The force he smacks the end call button with might have cracked his screen, but tunnel vision is too intense for him to notice. He slams his phone down on to the counter and tries to breathe evenly, because he can't believe he just did that. The part of his brain that instinctively tries to avoid punishment is screaming at him to pick the phone up again, to beg for forgiveness and make everything alright, make it all go –

A prickle at the back of his neck tells him he's being watched, and he looks over his shoulder to see Steve standing in the kitchen doorway. He can just see Natasha and Sam in the gaps between the frame and his boyfriend, still sitting in the living room, and they're staring at him with wide eyes. He flushes scarlet, blood still pounding anxiously in his ears.

"Sorry. Was I loud?" He asks, shaky and quiet. Steve doesn't answer, just crosses the kitchen in two massive strides and pulls Bucky into his arms.

Bucky closes his eyes and slips his arms around Steve's waist, burying his face in his shoulder and breathing him in. It works, he can feel his thumping heart rate start to come down to something nearer normal. Not that normal is a concept he's that familiar with in most areas.

"Careful, I might throw up on you." He jokes quietly, although it comes out a little strangled. He's still not sure what the fuck just happened, what explosion he just unleashed.

"Try not to." Steve nuzzles his damp hair and presses a kiss to it, and Bucky curls his fingers in the soft fabric of his shirt. "You finally told her off. I'm so fucking proud of you, Buck."

"I feel like I'm having a heart attack and I need to change my phone number, it's not that great." The quip comes out only a little stronger this time, but a little is better than nothing. He raises his head and looks over Steve's shoulder, relieved that his voice is still getting stronger as he catches Sam's eye. "Come over here and kiss me again, Wilson. I need to celebrate growing some balls."

"Fuck you, man." Sam is smiling though, now they've figured out Bucky's okay after all the yelling. They all kind of look proud, and the attention is a little too intense for Bucky when he feels this raw. "You've got a bedroom and a giant ugly boyfriend, go celebrate with him."
"You heard the man." Bucky is dragging Steve across the apartment by the wrist before his boyfriend knows what's happening. Whether Bucky needs to hide his head under the pillow and relearn how to breathe or they actually have sex is irrelevant, as long as Steve is there he'll be happy.

Shutting the door behind them to shut out Sam's dry Mazel Tov behind them, Bucky finds he's actually smiling. Because he feels like he's allowed to do that now, to be happy. No, not like he's allowed, but that he's finally realised he doesn't need permission to feel.

He meets Steve's eyes, still watching him with a tinge of concern, and beams.
Relapsing and Rising

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay folks. If you follow me on Tumblr you'll know the circumstances but to recap: started 2 jobs this week, am super allergic to mosquitoes and got bitten 8 times, hand and wrist swelled up so I couldn't type for a while. So sorry for taking so long, life fucked me over.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two boxes of Oreos. Four pop tarts. Two hot pockets. Two litres of full-fat coke. One giant share-size bag of Doritos. Half a loaf of soft, white bread with enough peanut butter and jelly to make it worthwhile. Cheesy pasta and cheese straight from the block when he runs out of cardboard carbs to smear it on.

One hour to get down, twenty minutes to bring back up.

Lather, rinse, repeat until he feels clean. At least three times a week, mostly once a day. Sometimes twice a day when the voices get too loud and everything is too bright and sharp like there's no skin between the world and his insides.

After confronting his mother, Bucky relapses hard.

It's the first time since the start of their relationship that he tells Steve to leave him the fuck alone. It comes out harsher than he means it to, the first time he snaps it when his boyfriend is just a little too attentive, a little too gentle with him after a particularly bad day. Because how dare he act like Bucky deserves to be treated with care when all he's doing is fucking up all the progress he's made by being a weak, whiny little bitch? Steve looks hurt by the comment, and Bucky at least still has enough sense to force himself to calmly explain, in clipped, tight syllables, what the problem is. He asks Steve to stay away for a few days, to let Bucky try and get his shit together on his own without worrying about trying to seem better than he is. Steve, damn his compassion that Bucky doesn't deserve, listens. Bucky doesn't get his shit together, he just spirals deeper into his pit of self-loathing.

Bucky Barnes, King of Self-Sabotage, is slowly earning back his crown. That's one thing he does feel like he deserves.

"It's totally normal to relapse." Clint reassures him gently, as Bucky sits curled up in the chair opposite him with his knees drawn to his chest. It's a defensive position his therapist hasn't seen in the last few weeks, not until the fateful phone conversation that was both Bucky's moment of triumph and the thing that knocked him totally out of his head all over again.

"Seriously, if you never relapsed then I'd be worrying you weren't being honest with me." It should be reassuring, but Bucky's throat hurts and his stomach hurts and he's still fucking hungry right now even though he puked right before he came here. "What happened with your mom was traumatic for you, it's okay that your eating disorder behaviours popped up again."

"It doesn't fucking feel okay." Bucky mumbles, voice hoarse and dry. Clint nudges the glass of water that's sitting on the table in front of him pointedly, but Bucky doesn't move to touch it. He might throw up if he gets anything in his stomach right now, and he's not even nervous. "It was supposed
to be a good thing, telling her off. Everyone was proud of me.

"It was a good thing, and I'm really proud of you too man. But ripping off a band-aid always hurts like hell." Clint is clearly treading carefully, not quite sure what's going to push Bucky's buttons and what's going to actually help him. "You developed an eating disorder to cope with stuff you couldn't handle otherwise. This is your brain trying to protect you the only way it knows how."

"So what, I'm always gonna be like this?" Shit, that was a misstep. Bucky doesn't slump in his seat, but he looks like he's having a hard time keeping his shit together. Clint's been watching him struggle all session, and he feels like he's walking a tightrope to try and keep on track without triggering his patient any more than he has to.

"That's not what I'm saying, recovery is definitely possible and you've made a lot of progress already." Clint scrambles to get them back on topic without outright lying to Bucky. He won't do that, not even if it would make the immediate situation better. "I'm just saying that your brain has learned to manage your anxiety this way from a very young age. It's likely the thoughts will come back when things are more stressful than usual or something bad happens."

"What's the fuckin' point of doing all this shit, then?!" Bucky snaps, a streak of violence peeking out that Clint hasn't seen before. Interesting. "What's the goddamn point of forcing myself to do what other people fuckin' want if it's not gonna stick?!!"

"I didn't say it wouldn't stick. I'm saying that we're helping you learn to get your brain to cooperate when you get stuck in that thought pattern, rather than just falling back into your disorder and endangering your health." He sighs, because that's a hell of a lot more therapy-speak than he likes to use in one go, particularly with Bucky since his patient seems to have an inherent suspicion of doctors. "You're happier now you're in recovery, right?"

"No, I'm fucking not." Bucky grunts, and Clint really wants to point out what a huge leap forward it is for him to feel comfortable expressing negative emotions, but it's not exactly the time. "I'm uncomfortable all the time, I'm anxious all the time, and I feel like a fucking blimp. I'm fat and sad and nothing's changed except I feel shittier."

"That's not what you told me before. It's okay to feel shitty when you crash, but don't let it blind you to the progress you've actually made." Clint levels with him, and Bucky actually seems to calm down a little for it. "And seriously, I'd rather have you sitting here feeling like shit than have you dead. That's where you were heading before, don't forget that."

"Would've been better off." Bucky mutters, and Clint meets his eyes for the first time this session.

"Dude, you don't mean that. Don't say that if you don't mean it. You know I've got a duty of care and if you sound suicidal…"

"Sorry." Bucky ducks his head again, and Clint lets out a silent sigh. He can't let his personal human-car-crash feelings get involved when he's dealing with a patient. He nudges the glass of water towards Bucky again and tries to get his professional head back on.

"Don't be sorry. If that's how you feel then you should tell me about it. I was just trying to let you know that I've gotta report it if you sound like you're really going to hurt yourself. It wasn't very professional of me to tell you not to be honest, sorry man."

There's a slightly frosty silence before Bucky breaks it, weirdly steady. He seems to have a knack for talking about the parts of himself he thinks are bad if he also thinks it's going to scare someone away. It's either the world's worst defence mechanism or a therapeutic gift, Clint's not sure yet.
"Did I ever tell you why I got kicked out of my first company, in Russia?" Bucky is still looking at his knees, which makes it more difficult for Clint to read his completely flat tone of voice.

"No." He responds, neutrally as possible. "Would you like to?"

"I don't think I ever told anybody before." There's a note of hesitation in his voice, and Clint resolves to wait it out and give Bucky the time he needs to find the words. He knows about the betrayal Bucky feels from his family right now, perhaps this will give him a little more insight into how that's played out in the past.

"My sister's boyfriend got me kicked out. He caught me throwing up in the bathrooms and ratted me out to the administration. I think he just wanted me out of the apartment so they could bang in peace. Or he was jealous I was a better dancer than him, who knows." Bucky swallows, finally picking up the glass of water and taking a sip. "I tried to kill myself the day they kicked me out."

Ah, okay. Definitely a misstep to pull up the suicide thing. Clint is already thinking about starting over with a fourth career at this point, because he feels like the worst fucking therapist ever. It doesn't matter what the fuck is going on in his personal life (with the car crash and the mafia guys trying to buy his building and his ex-wife and and…), he needs to remain present and focused for the good of his patient. If he can't do that, then Clint knows he shouldn't fucking be here.

"What happened?"

"My sister and Natasha found me, pulled me off the roof before I could jump." He takes another unsteady sip of water, trying to force away the throbbing in his head without taking painkillers because he can't find any information on how many fucking calories are in the things. "That's the kind of shit that makes it hard to understand why Becky doesn't fucking believe me about our mom. She knows I have problems, all the way back to when we were kids, for fuck's sake."

"What did she say? What made you figure out she didn't believe you?"

Bucky stalls there, blinking and actually thinking it through. It's not like he hasn't been thinking about it every damn day since his twin betrayed him, but he'd been too busy being upset and pissed off to actually look at the facts critically.

"She didn't say anything, I heard it from my dad."

"The dad who manipulated you into letting your mom back into your head?" Clint says it like he's clarifying, not like it's a glaringly obvious point he's been missing, but that's how Bucky feels. He feels like the knowledge just knocked him on the head with a slab of cement.

"Shit."

* *

When Bucky gets home, all he wants to do is eat and puke and go to sleep. He's so hungry his stomach feels like it's full of acid, and he just knows purging isn't going to be as reassuring as he wants it to be. He just wants to get his ritual over with and crash, because he's already used up all his damn energy today and he doesn't want to be conscious anymore.

The last thing he expects, let alone wants, is to walk into the living room and see his sister sitting on the couch.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" He manages to spit out, after a moment of stunned silence during which the twins just stare at each other. He's missed her for a long time, and this is probably
the first time in his life that he can remember not being happy to see his eyes and lips and hair reflected back at him in a way that makes the world a little bit less frightening. Usually does, anyway.

Becky is still busy looking him over worriedly and Bucky drops his gym bag to startle her out of her reverie.

"I said, what the fuck are you doing here?"

"You haven't replied to any of my texts." She jerks into the defensive almost immediately, and Bucky kind of feels calmed by the familiarity in spite of himself. "I got worried."

"Why the fuck would you be worried about me?"

"Maybe because you've tried to kill yourself at least twice that I know of in the past few years." Becky's got him there, there's not much he can say to that. In the back of his mind, Bucky sincerely wishes he hadn't had that conversation with Clint in his stupid therapy session, because he already feels like an exposed nerve and he's not ready to deal with this. "Sometimes I feel like I'm just waiting for the next phone call to tell me you're in the hospital, Buck."

"Don't fucking guilt me, what I do is none of your goddamn business.” It's actually physically difficult to be this harsh with his sister, because for all they snark and speak plainly to each other they've always been close and had each other's backs. Almost always. Until now.

"It is my business, you're my brother." Becky looks even more worried at the unexpected hostility, and Bucky's skin prickles as he feels her eyes sweeping over him, cataloguing all the damage he's done since the last time he was doing well. "Natasha said you've been fucked up since you talked to Mama."

"It's called a relapse." Bucky mutters viciously, trying on the terminology for size. He's too fat for anything to fit and this kind of feels the same way. "And it's not my fucking fault."

"I didn't say it was." Becky tries to move closer, but Bucky backs up in a strange, instinctive jerk. It's not like he thinks his sister is like their mother, about to grab his hair and yank it because he's let it grow too long (the one, tiny piece of rebellion he's been holding onto since his teenage years is his hair. It didn't matter how many times Mama shaved his head, he kept growing his hair back as long as he could), but it's the first thing his hindbrain thinks of because he's being bad again.

Becky looks upset when he flinches away from her and moves back a step. Bucky almost feels bad about it, would apologise if she wasn't a fucking traitor. As it is, he just swallows emptily and tries not to feel guilty about nothing.

"So what? You here to tell me Dad wants to reconcile? Mama feels bad? I told her not to fuckin' send you to do her dirty work." He backs up further, feeling trapped in his own damn apartment. He's going to yell at Natasha so hard after this, fuck that she could probably take him apart with one hand tied behind her back.

"I'm sorry about Dad, okay? I thought he was being genuine." Becky looks honestly as betrayed as Bucky feels, and it makes him stumble over his own rage. Maybe Clint was right, maybe his parents have been playing them both.

The concept is kind of terrifying. The messy apartment suddenly feels very small around him, the smell of Natasha's old cooking and Becky's perfume making his stomach twist and the sight of five or six of Steve's instruments stacked in the corner of the room doing little to comfort him. It's
supposed to be home, but right now it feels like a battleground.

"He… He said you don't believe me. About Mama." The anger burns out of his hoarse voice and Bucky suddenly feels young, like he needs his big sister to be right this time like she always was. "He said…"

"That's bullshit. That's such bullshit!" Becky explodes, and for once Bucky isn't afraid that the anger is directed his way. "I never said that! I told him I believed you even if I didn't see anything. He kept asking me what evidence I had and I told him I didn't need fucking… This is bullshit!"

Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes bright with rage as she snarls at the betrayal, and Bucky feels weirdly comforted by it. There's a large part of him that's relieved that Becky's seen their parents' manipulation first hand, that the golden child might understand what the scapegoat has been trying to scream without words for so long. There's a larger part that's relieved she can show her anger so freely without fearing the consequences, which is something he's still trying to learn.

"You really believe me?"

Bucky doesn't mean to sound so damn fragile and unsure, like he might shatter like a thin mirror if his sister says the wrong thing. He also doesn't mean for Becky to storm across the room and scoop him into her arms like he's not half a foot taller than her and probably twice her weight (or at least that's how he feels). A strange, painful little noise creeps out of his throat as Becky crushes him with her deceptively strong, slender arms. His chest hurts and he's not sure if it's from all the purging or that he's about to cry. Neither is particularly appealing.

"You're my brother, you fucking idiot. I don't care if you're being stupid or you're just being a cabbage, I know when you're telling the truth and I know you didn't lie about Mama. I didn't see it, but I don't need to." Becky sounds choked up herself, and Bucky blinks furiously to try and maintain his dignity even when she can't see him. "I'd never go behind your back like that, Buck. I'm not that much of a bitch."

"I… I thought you were like them." Bucky means to keep his stupid mouth shut and not make things worse, but he's started to shake and he feels totally overwhelmed and so not ready for this conversation. "I thought… when I thought you lied to me… I thought you were manipulating me and… I don't know."

"I'm not like them. I'm never gonna play you, dumbass." Bucky doesn't think he's ever heard the insult delivered with such affection, and he finally starts to feel the anxious knot that's been cramping in his stomach all week unwind. "Dad's being an asshole and Mama's a fucking psychopath. Let them deal with each other. Me and you are two and two, remember?"

The childish little rhyme, that they'd picked up god knows where and doesn't make much sense, makes Bucky let out a choked little laugh. He rubs his sweaty forehead on his sister's shoulder and twitches a smile when he feels her cringe. It's not like he's still more tense in her arms than he should be, and it's not like she's not holding like he's made of glass, but they're back in sync again.

Half and half make a whole, and Bucky's stomach doesn't feel so empty.

"I'm still pissed that Nat let you in." He mutters, and Becky scrubs her hand over his head to mess his hair up.

"I told you, she's spying for the motherland." She pinches his shoulder pointedly, despite her light tone. "Don't cut me out again, okay? I was really worried. I nearly called Steve."
"He's been taking good care of me, don't worry." Bucky sighs quietly, and Becky snorts.

"I wanna see you taking good care of yourself, Buckybear."

"Yeah. I guess so."

He's done it before, he can do it again. Bucky knows how to fall, but now he also knows how to get back up.

Chapter End Notes

Language note: in Russian you don't say 'don't be such a girl', you say 'don't be such a cabbage', hence what Becky calls Bucky.
Protecting Yourself

Bucky knows there's something wrong as soon as the guy walks into the studio.

He can't put his finger on what it is, not exactly. He's in a better place than the low he hit last week, so he's been in class frequently enough to hear the gossip that the new director (if he's even a director, the guy bought the company out of nowhere so they're not exactly sure what the hell he is) would be coming by at some point. Bucky's not crazy about authority figures, but he knows well enough that it's important he's around to meet the guy who decides if he gets his job back or not. So he goes to class as much as he can now the relapse has subsided and he doesn't feel the urge to stuff his face every couple of hours, and waits.

The new director, when he does show up unexpectedly to a morning skills class, has the general air of someone who used to be hot shit and still has the money to prove it. He's short and kind of blond under the grey and looks like he probably used to be attractive as a young man. Bucky clocks the suit from a mile away and puts a little more effort into his practice. He's not sure if the old guy actually knows anything about ballet, but it would be stupid to assume he didn't before he has more intel.

He feels like he's picked up a few things from Natasha 'not an assassin' Romanov, especially when he sees her also subtly observing the guy from across the room.

Maria is polite and welcoming, more so than usual to visitors, which Bucky's sure is influenced in no small way by the fact the company has been rumoured to be having money troubles for a while now. He and Sam exchange a glance as the director is introduced to a few of the other dancers, including Natasha and her fakest, most sugary sweet smile. Maria is just steering him towards Bucky, because he'll be able to play up to whatever shade of professionalism or perversion is this guy's bag, when Pietro bangs into the studio late for class.

The kid is skinny and looks tired and slightly desperate because he's still afraid of being fired if he doesn't keep up his classes, and Bucky catches the moment the glimmer crosses the old man's eyes when he takes the kid in. Definitely predatory, definitely interested in the young, wounded animal trailing behind the rest of the pack.


Despite the fact that the old man kind of makes him queasy now he's caught a glimpse of what's beneath the slick exterior, Bucky jumps on the grenade and throws himself into flirting with him.

"Hi, I'm Bucky Barnes." He sticks his hand out even though he's supposed to wait for the senior man to offer his (Mama was very particular about teaching her children good manners, it's stuck with Bucky even as he tries to unlearn a lot of her other 'lessons'). "Nice to meet you, sir."

The smile he pulls out of himself is as crooked and charming as it's ever been, and he's pretty sure the old man can't tell that it doesn't touch anywhere outside his mouth as he takes Bucky's hand.

"Nice to meet you, Bucky." He's got a firm handshake and a strong voice, sounding younger than he looks as he isn't subtle about giving Bucky the once-over. "You were principal here recently, weren't you? How are you recovering from the accident?"

"Just fine, much better than the physios expected." He notices Sam giving Pietro a look out of the corner of his eye, trying to get him to move while the attention is off him. They make a good team, when Bucky's not threatening to make out with his friend and Sam's not calling him a slut.
"So you'll be back with us before we start our next show." The guy doesn't ask it like a question, and Buck's stomach clenches uncomfortably as a slow smile slides across the man's thin lips. "I hope you won't be offended if I ask you to audition."

"You're the boss." Bucky forgets his manners a little and, from his expression, the director seems to like that even more. Shit.

Pietro stumbles off to get warmed up, and Bucky tries very hard to be charming enough to keep the guy's eyes off his friend (his young friend who's only nineteen and going through a lot of traumatic shit and... and it's Brock all over again and Bucky wants to hurl). It works.

He does hurl, a few minutes after the director finishes his little introductory tour and squeezes Buck's shoulder on his way out. Buck just makes it through their cool-down stretches before he has to duck into the bathroom and the protein shake he'd chugged that morning is coming up without any digital encouragement.

There's just something about the director that rubs him up the wrong way, makes his skin crawl more than it should just from the touch of papery old-man skin and slightly suggestive conversation. It's something small and leeching in the assured power of his handshake, slithering inside the way his eyes slid over Pietro while he was still having a conversation with someone else. Buck might just be reading into things wrong, getting his own experiences mixed up with the reality of the situation. Maybe. It wouldn't be the first time.

He's quiet on his date with Steve after he gets out of the studio, and of course his boyfriend notices. In spite of his bad eyesight and shitty contact lenses, Steve always sees what's going on with Bucky.

"Did something happen at work? You're kinda quiet and... weird." Steve has been rambling about the aesthetic potential of steampunk for fifteen minutes, and Buck hasn't told him he's a fucking nerd yet so something must be up. Buck's busy chewing at the corner of his thumbnail and it takes him a minute to get words together.

Steve waits patiently for him to figure out what he wants to say. Patience is still foreign to Buck and he doesn't feel like he deserves it, even though Steve just keeps quietly demonstrating how he should expect to be treated and waiting for him to adjust to it. He's even still teaching him to play guitar, despite the fact that Buck could probably win the title for World's Worst Student. The least he can do is repay that patience with honesty, Bucky supposes.

"Do you... Does it bother you when I flirt with people?" The question comes out more hesitant than he wants to sound, and that's the story of his fucking life since he started trying to shake his eating disorder. Buck does miss feeling confident, even if it was killing him.

"What, like Sam?" Steve shakes his head immediately, running a finger through the condensation on his beer glass. He doesn't have to think about his answer to that. "Nah, I don't care. I know you only do it because you want people to like you."

Bucky grimaces a little at that statement, internally starting to regret being so upfront and honest with Steve about what lies behind his casual flirting. He'd tried to explain a few weeks ago, after the whole making out with Sam thing happened, because he didn't want Steve to think he was still acting out his notorious slut persona while he had a boyfriend. When he hears his own reasoning spoken back to him it sounds kind of pathetic, or maybe it's just that everything about him sounds kind of pathetic today.

"There was this guy at the studio today, the new director. I flirted with him." Buck admits, feeling like he should have had more to drink before he decided to stick to his whole honesty pledge like a
fucking boy scout. "It was obviously what Maria wanted, keep him sweet and stuff, so I just kinda went with it."

"I get that, you do what you've gotta do. It's not really fair of her to expect you to do that though." Steve seems to sense there's more, leaving the conversation open for Bucky to dive back in when he sorts his thoughts out.

"I know. I just… that wasn't the only reason." There's a hoarse crack to Bucky's voice and Steve can tell he's purged today, but he doesn't say anything right now because his boyfriend is clearly more upset about this thing than he's trying to let on. "The old guy was looking at Pietro like… like a piece of meat. I was trying to distract him from the kid."

"Well, that's icky." Steve makes a face and Bucky feels slightly relieved, like his boyfriend gets why he's so worried. "Still, Pietro's not a little kid Buck, you don't have to worry about him so much. I'm sure he can handle himself."

"You don't understand." Bucky fires back, more forcefully than he intends because Steve doesn't get it after all. "He's nineteen and fucking tried to kill himself a few weeks ago and he's confused about shit. Plus the fact that he's terrified of getting fired and thinks it's gonna happen as soon as I re-join the company, he doesn't trust them to keep him for his talent alone. He'll do anything to keep his job, Steve. Anything."

"Bucky, seriously babe –"

"I was just like him, okay?" He really doesn't want to talk about Brock again, but he will if he has to in order to make Steve understand. The bar is too fucking quiet for this conversation and he's pretty sure the couple at the next table are already eavesdropping in case there's drama. "And I am really worried about him. I can't just switch that off."

"Is this about the time you kissed him?" There's a weird kind of rehearsed sound to the words, like Steve has been waiting for the opportunity to say them for a while but hasn't had the right circumstances until now. Well, at least the couple at the next table will get their drama today. "Do you think you're developing some kind of feelings for Pietro?"

"What?" It knocks Bucky sideways and the floor suddenly doesn't seem to support his equilibrium. He hadn't even thought of that, that's how wrong Steve is, but his boyfriend is looking at him like he's expecting Bucky to say he's been fantasising about the kid or something.

For the second time today, Bucky feels like he might puke. Is his reputation really that bad? Is that what people think of him, that he'd mess with Pietro's feelings when the kid is clearly not in a stable enough place to handle anything like that right now? Sure, he flirted with his friend in the past, but he flirts with everyone and that was before Bucky knew how bad things had got. He's not that much of an asshole that he'd do it if he knew there was something wrong.

Is he? Did he?

"Do you think you're starting to have feelings for him?" Steve repeats the question, his voice slightly softer when he sees the confusion and panic start to shudder behind his boyfriend's eyes. "I'm not accusing you of cheating, Buck. I'm just asking the question."

"I… No. God no. He's a baby." Bucky shakes his head vehemently, knuckles white around his glass as he drains it. Even Steve thinks he's disgusting, oh god. "I only kissed him because… for a full stop. I made sure he knew nothing was ever gonna happen between us… it was a goodbye kiss, why would I have told you about it if I'd done something wrong?"
"Buck, breathe." Steve is reaching for his hand across the table and Bucky jerks back reflexively. If he's touched then he might just come apart. "I was just asking, I wasn't accusing you—"

"I'm a slut, Steve. I'm not a fuckin' pervert." His hand is shaking around his glass and he moves it to shove under his legs to get himself under control. "He's still a teenager. He's been through something fuckin' traumatic and I wouldn't take advantage of him. Even if I felt something, which I fuckin' don't because I love you. If you think I'd—"

"Bucky, that's not what I said." There's something urgent in Steve's voice, like he can see that he's stepped on a landmine and sent Bucky careering out of control by accident. "I know you wouldn't cheat on me, even if you did have feelings for Pietro. I was just asking the question because you've been talking about him a lot and I know you see a lot of yourself in him."

"I see a lot of myself in him, yeah, but that doesn't include my dick." Bucky pushes his chair back and gets up unsteadily, wishing he was fucking drunk because vodka is going to burn twice as bad coming back up and he could use being numb. "You still live with your ex, Steve. Don't talk to me about feelings."

Why did he say that? Why is he trying so hard to push Steve away with everything he has? Why does he fucking do this to himself?

"Wait, what? When did this become about…" Steve looks bewildered, but he's getting better at recognising Bucky's self-sabotage for what it is and doesn't rise to the bait. "You know there's no feelings between me and Sam, don't try and start an argument because you're uncomfortable talking about this."

"It's still weird that you live together." He mutters it like a child who won't let go of the argument even though he knows he's wrong, and Steve rolls his eyes.

"Bucky."

"I… I gotta take a piss. Get me another drink." Bucky meets Steve's eyes grudgingly, just for a second, because he's embarrassed as hell about being caught out. He doesn't even know what the hell he's doing, how does his boyfriend? "M'sorry."

"It's okay. We'll talk when you get back." Steve knows as well as Bucky does that he's going to throw up, but he doesn't fight him on it. Bucky's almost grateful for the display of wilful ignorance.

All he feels for a few minutes, when he hangs his head over the toilet bowl and curses himself for not bringing a goddamn hair elastic with him, is vertigo. He has to grip the toilet tank with the hand that isn't holding his hair back as the floor turns to waves under his feet and he can't figure out if he's going to fall over or start drowning again.

If anything, this date has been him strapping himself to a table and begging to be waterboarded for some imagined sin. Bucky concentrates on the hiccupping burn in his throat and tries to let it straighten his thoughts out. He's thrown by Steve asking if he has feelings for Pietro because if he did, then he'd be as bad as Brock or anyone else who took advantage of him when he wasn't stable enough to look what he thought was a gift horse in the mouth.

He has the same feelings about Pietro that he does about his fucking mirror. A strange hatred and a strange affection and a strange drive to protect the fragile, fucked up thing he sees there. Maybe he's overthinking things, it wouldn't be the first time he spun himself off the face of the Earth because he doesn't understand how his fucking head works.
Bucky has his damp hair tucked behind his ears when he comes back to the table, breath freshly minted and hands scrubbed pink as he tries to keep the guilty look off his face. Steve slides over the glass of water and vodka tonic he's acquired, and Bucky would kiss him if he weren't so disgusting right now.

"Okay?" He asks, gently, and Bucky really hopes that he's not pissed. He swallows half the water in big gulps before he nods.

"Yeah." He can do this, he's been practicing. Honesty and clarity and not bailing. He won't bail again. "Let's talk."

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Being called in to audition for the director is more than a little intimidating. Mainly because Bucky's not exactly sure if the guy means auditioning or 'auditioning'.

He'd looked at himself in the mirror that morning (actually met his eyes too, Clint would be so proud), and told himself calmly and firmly that he's allowed to refuse to do anything he doesn't want to and it won't get him in trouble. It should be setting off alarm bells already that he feels about as able to refuse his boss' whims as his mother's, but Bucky's sense of self-preservation has already taken a battering this week. Long, slightly awkward talks with his boyfriend about his impulse control and tendency to lash out haven't exactly left him feeling like he's someone who deserves to have their own say in things.

Still, he's not going to cheat on Steve. He wants to re-join the company, but his feelings are ambivalent enough at this point that he'd rather leave on principle if the director propositions him than go along with anything to keep his job. He already told Steve that, so he has to go with it.

Bucky's so caught up in his head that he arrives slightly late for his appointment, and heads to the director's office when he doesn't see him in the studio. Maybe he's blown his chance already, that's what he's afraid of, so he pushes straight into the office to apologise when he sees the door slightly ajar.

He's seriously got to learn to knock.

Things kind of go into slow motion because Bucky is so shocked by what he walks in on. The director is leaning back against his desk, sharp suit weirdly neat despite his pants being down. His wrinkled fingers are gripping the dark wood with one hand as the other tangles roughly in familiar, badly-bleached hair. Bucky doesn't need to see the movement in the skinny shoulders or the head bobbing over the director's crotch to know exactly what's happening.

Bucky doesn't need to see any more to know that whatever fucked up battle he was fighting to protect Pietro, he's already lost.

Neither of them seem to notice him, so he swallows his shock and backs out of the room quickly, pushing the door closed again like he's not really in control of his movements. He failed, he fucked up, he wasn't enough to protect his friend from thinking he's not worth more than his mouth.

He reads the words Dir. Alexander Pierce on the door's nameplate distantly, like he's in a dream. Maybe more like a nightmare.

Bucky can't wake up.
Bucky wakes up and immediately wishes he hadn't.

The overwhelming guilt hits him like a freight train as soon as he's conscious enough to realise what he was dreaming about. The vivid images of Pietro on his knees in front of him, of pushing his cock in and out of that slick mouth while yanking on that ridiculous hair, have left him so hard he can already feel the ache in his balls. From the position he woke up in, Bucky's pretty sure he's been humping the damn mattress at the thought of Pietro sucking him off. His boxers feel slightly damp and he wonders vaguely how stupid he must look when he's humping in his sleep, until the reality of what he's been dreaming about hits him right in the gut.

He feels sick to his stomach. He really is the worst kind of pervert, just like his reputation made Steve suggest last night. How can he look his boyfriend in the eye and keep defending himself from his past actions now? As if he's changed, as if he's any less of a slut just because love has him on a leash.

He can only change his mask, now he knows his insides are just as rotten and hollow as ever.

Bucky needs to eat something now. He needs to put ice on his dick and shovel food into his mouth until his stomach hurts because that's what he deserves. He dimly remembers telling Clint (or was it Banner? His brain is so foggy and feverishly unclear right now) indignanty that he couldn't control his fucking dreams. But that was about food, that's something he can't control. Being a pervert who's no better than Alexander Pierce wanting to shove his –

"Hey." Steve slurs sleepily, rolling over and grinning with his eyes closed when he feels Bucky hard against his hip. He reaches down and rubs a clumsy hand over him once, lightly, and Bucky's glad his boyfriend can't see his expression. "You been dreamin' about me?"

"You wish." He tries to sound flippant, and it must sound better than it feels in his throat because Steve snorts and pulls Bucky closer into his arms.

The embrace should be comforting, but Bucky's skin feels too small to hold him together and he squirms around in Steve's arms so at least they're not face to face. He's afraid that if his boyfriend opens his eyes then he'll catch the guilty expression immediately and everything Bucky's said about not being a pervert will be exposed as a lie. Getting morning wood over his boyfriend is one thing, getting it over the guy he spent most of yesterday convincing Steve he doesn't have feelings for is something much worse.

Steve rolls his hips against Bucky's ass, and Bucky holds himself very, very still when he realises he's hard too. This really isn't a good time, he can't do this when he feels so guilty he wants the ceiling to fall on him just so he has to stop thinking about his dream. He could do this, technically, he just feels like it's somehow dishonest.

"Steve…"

"Shh, m'sleeping." His voice is light, sleepy and happy, and this is probably a really nice way to wake up as far as Steve knows.

There's sunlight coming through the partially-open drapes and the faint sound of Natasha singing to herself in the kitchen and Bucky squeezes his eyes shut against it all as a hand slips down the front of his boxers. Steve's fingers curl around him gently and his breath hitches in his throat.

"Babe…" He tries again, but Steve kisses his neck softly and he stops again.
"Relax, Buck. Lemme do all the work." He still sounds half asleep, and his touch is so light as he starts stroking Bucky's dick that his boyfriend knows he's not ignoring anything that sounds like Bucky doesn't want it, he just doesn't hear it.

His stomach clenches, half pleasure and half guilt, and Bucky forces his eyes open as the dream-blurred image of Pietro on his knees floats in front of them again. He feels sick. Steve is grinding against his ass and jerking him off and Bucky stares at the open closet door and waits for it to be over. It's weird to look at his gym clothes and his stacks of old ballet shoes in such a mundane way while he tries not to think about the person he can't think about right now.

If he stops this now then Steve will just feel bad over something that's not his fault, and after their semi-fight yesterday Bucky doesn't want to push him any further. Brock was forever accusing him of sleeping with the guys he flirted with (or had a conversation with or looked at or breathed near), and Bucky just wants to avoid the conversation coming up again. If he taps out of sex then he'll have to give a reason, and then Steve will know he's as disgusting as he'd suspected because Bucky promised not to lie to him anymore and he won't. So he won't say anything at all. How he feels doesn't matter, not as long as he's still performing he way he should.

He goes along with the train of thought, even as he recognises that it's fucked up and he can just about hear Barton's heavy sighing in the back of his mind. Bucky's always learned to be mercenary, it's not about to change when it's a person he wants to hold onto, not a role.

Orgasm takes him by surprise, and he spills over his boyfriend's hand with a choked, shocked moan. Steve groans into his neck and bites down on the corded muscle there as he comes in his pants a minute later, grinding his way through it against Bucky's ass before he goes limp against him, tugging his boyfriend languidly into his chest. Bucky closes his eyes and tries to let the soft warmth comfort him, the muscle he loves to bury his face in that makes him feel shaky and full of guilt today.

In his sleep he was fantasising about skin and bones and taking what he wanted without consideration. Is that his subconscious, or is he really just a sick fuck disguising himself as a victim of his past?

He waits an appropriate amount of time, until Steve's breathing evens back out and Bucky can tell he's drifting back off to sleep, before he presses a dry kiss to his boyfriend's collarbone and slips out of bed. Natasha is no longer in the kitchen, he can't remember if she has an early class or not, which makes it easier for him to stumble to the bathroom without putting up a façade of normality. The dream would have been bad enough alone, but the fact he let Steve make him come when he'd spent the whole time trying to force somebody else out from behind his eyelids…

Bucky spits into the toilet bowl and breathes painfully through his nose. He shouldn't have done that. Steve is wonderful and he's never treated him badly for a second, of course he would have stopped if Bucky said something. He's not like Brock, not like Bucky's been imagining Alexander Pierce is, but there was some little voice in his brain that told him he needed to keep Steve happy if he wanted to keep him around, especially after yesterday.

Bucky stares into water murky with bile and grits his aching teeth.

Shit, he's really not that different from Pietro at all.

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"Hey, can we talk?"

Getting hold of Pietro turns out to be harder than Bucky expected, not least because the kid doesn't
show up to class for two whole days after the 'audition' with Pierce happened. Bucky's not sure if it's better if the kid didn't want to be near anything to do with the company for a while, or if he's so assured he'll keep his job now that he took a couple of days off to be with his sister. Either way, better isn't good in this situation.

He finally manages to catch up with the kid after a tense class in which the new director stops by to chat. Maria has clearly rethought her opinion of the old man, for reasons unknown to Bucky, but is as minimally polite as she can get away with until he leaves. Natasha and Sam don't know about Pietro's meeting with the director, so Bucky tells them he'll catch up later as he hangs back to talk to the kid while he's busy packing up his dance clothes.

"Okay." Pietro's smile is a little more guarded than it usually is with Bucky, and he's really not sure if he should feel happy or sad that the kid isn't looking at him like the sun shines out of his ass anymore. "Did you go to your audition Thursday? I didn't see you when I left."

"Uh, no. That's kinda what I wanted to talk to you about." Bucky doesn't sit down on the bench beside his friend, because he's not sure how this conversation will go and he's too antsy to stay that still anyway. "I went for my audition and I kinda walked into the office and saw… you. The two of you."

Pietro flushes crimson to the dark roots of his hair and Bucky could swear he doesn't look ashamed, he looks like he's almost… proud of himself. Shit.

"Um… Sorry you saw that." He shrugs a little, one-shouldered and with a shade of what looks like triumph under his expression. "But, you say, no hard feelings, right?"

Okay, what the hell is going on here? Bucky does sit down now, because Pietro is acting like he's won some kind of victory rather than been forced to trade sexual favours for job security. What kind of bullshit is Pierce feeding him and how much does the kid believe it? Establishing the situation is Bucky's first priority, he barely thinks of his own discomfort at the conversation.

It's kind of a thing, for him, getting the job done in spite of how he feels. His therapist is really not going to be happy with him once he hears about this whole debacle.

"I don't think I understand." Bucky treads carefully, or at least tries to. "What exactly did he say to you before you guys… hooked up?"

Pietro still looks proud, or at least flattered, and Bucky feels like they've missed something really serious somewhere along the way. Or maybe he's reading something into his friend's face that's not there, at least that's his hope until Pietro starts to talk about Pierce with a note of appreciation in his voice, if not reverence.

"He says I'm very, um… captive. Like I'm pretty to look at and I keep attention."

"Captivating." Bucky winces at the slip-up because the mistake sounds more like what's going on here than what Pierce actually said. Pietro nods and smiles widely.

"Yes. And my dancing is ex-, exquiz… um… good. He says he could make me principal if I work hard."

"P, you do work hard." Bucky sighs and tries to figure out how the hell he's going to talk to Pietro about this seriously without just sounding like he's shitting all over his friend's dreams. "I… Look, I don't think he's gonna make you principal, I think he's manipulating you."

"Why wouldn't he make me principal? I'm good, he said I'm good." There's a kind of feverishness to
Pietro’s words, and Bucky finds himself studying his pupils unconsciously. He wouldn't put it past the kid to be self-medicating again under the circumstances. "You don't think I'm good?"

"I know you're good, man." Bucky feels like he's standing in the middle of a room full of broken mirrors in his bare feet. Eventually, he's going to stand on something that hurts. "It's just with everything else you've got going on, I don't think anyone who gave a shit about your welfare would make you principal right now."

"I could handle it."

"I'm not saying you couldn't, but someone who cared about you wouldn't ask you to try at the moment."

"At least he gives me the time of day." Is the quiet response, which takes the wind out of Bucky's sails completely.

"Other people give you the time of day, don't we?" He catches genuine sadness flicker over Pietro's face and scrambles to figure out why. "P? Don't we?"

"I'm not… I know I'm not your really friend." The kid mumbles, suddenly very eager to look anywhere but at Bucky. "You and everyone else. You're nice, you make sure I'm alive, but you don't want me around. You're waiting for me to be okay so you can go away."

"That's not true." Bucky sighs heavily, trying to figure out where the fuck he went wrong this time. "I'm a shitty person, okay? I don't think about what other people need sometimes and I'm sorry if I don't show you I care enough. But I promise you that we care about you so much more than the creepy new director does. He's just using you, he'll chew you up and spit you out."

"And you're not doing that? Using me? You're using me to stop yourself feeling…" He fumbles for the word, and Bucky can't think of an option that would be better or worse at this point. "Guilty. You don't care. I know Pierce doesn't care, but you don't either. And maybe he could care, if I'm good enough."

That's what makes Bucky put his head in his hands and groan in frustration, because he's been in exactly this position before and he thought he would get off this Groundhog Day treadmill at least for a little while in his life. The whole point of kicking his eating disorder in the ass was so he could stop making stupid decisions and getting himself stuck in this cycle, and seeing it from someone else is almost as bad as being trapped himself.

"Pietro, I've been there. I've said exactly the same shit about a guy who wasn't worth my time. I thought if I was good enough then he'd care about me and I'd get what I needed from him." He shakes his head bitterly, swallowing the sour taste in his mouth and trying not to think about getting caught with cigarette burns asking him to hurt me Steve finding out about everything. "And y'know what? It never happened. He never cared, and when he got what he wanted from me he took off."

Pietro doesn't reply. Bucky tries to breathe and tries to remember what it was like to be nineteen and think he knew how everyone worked and that he could never be fooled and he tries and tries and tries.

"You're going through a lot of shit right now. I know it feels like it's flattering when someone pays you a lot of attention like that, but he's not doing it for the right reasons." It's really hard to get his words right with Pietro looking at him incredulously. His friend has never seemed like such a teenager before, looking at Bucky like he knows everything. "You deserve someone who really cares about you, not some weirdo like Pierce."
"You never even spoke to him." Pietro still looks almost petulant and it's doing nothing but remind Bucky how young he is and squicking him out more about this whole bullshit situation. That's why he loses his cool where he just might be getting somewhere.

"Yeah, 'cause I bet you two did a whole lot of talking before he got you on your knees." Bucky snorts. Terrible misstep, because now Pietro is fully on the defensive.

"Are you jealous, old man?" Pietro has never sassed at Bucky like that, never had that cocky tilt of his head before, and Bucky really doesn't know what the hell to make of it. He doesn't know how to navigate this conversation because he was always the one making the fucked up choices in the past. He's floundering, and Pietro can see it.

"Jealous? Of some creepy bastard expecting me to suck his dick for a part?" Bucky looks at Pietro like he's crazy, trying to tamp down the anger that wants to rise in his chest because his friend is mixed up about this, it's not his fault. "Nah, I'm not. I did my time with casting directors trying to feel me up, but I never gave into it."

"Not everybody is as fucking talented as you." Pietro spits back, and there's a steely anger in his voice that's never been there before. "Some of us have to work with what we've got. I can't be better than you at dancing, but I can be better than you on my knees!"

"That's not something you should be fucking proud of." Bucky hears himself, hears a lot of people from his past at once, but he can't stop himself before the words leave his mouth. What has he turned into, that he can't be empathetic to this shit anymore?

"Watch me." Pietro shoves the last of his stuff into his bag and gets up quickly, and Bucky's starting to think he's definitely medicated but he can't say anything without starting a whole other argument. "I tried to give you everything and you didn't want it, don't now come in on your white horse and pretend to care. You got your love and your talent, some of us never do."

"That's bullshit!" He jumps up after Pietro, but the kid is already storming out. "You're just a kid, you don't have to put up with—"

The studio door slams shut, and Bucky is left alone. A scream of frustration growls out of his throat and he leans against the mirror to bang his head against it once, twice, three times, until his vision is grey spots and his heart is pure anger. Not at Pietro, not entirely, but at the lecherous old asshole who's put him in this position.

Bucky's going to do something about Alexander Pierce. He has to. He's not letting his brain get in the way this time.

For better or worse, whatever it does to him, he has to do something.
"Okay, this whole thing has got to stop."

Bucky likes having Clint as his therapist because he doesn't pull any punches. That's also exactly why he hates having him as his therapist at times like this.

"You and Pietro and this thing you have about protecting him? It has to stop. Period." Clint has waited for Bucky to finish telling him about the past few days before putting down his notebook, so serious about this that he'll drop his shield that reminds him to remain professional. It's a little scary to see someone who's generally easy-going get so serious, so fast.

It's weird how quickly Bucky can go from thinking he knows what the hell he's doing to being thrown completely off-balance because of something somebody else says. Sure, he figured his therapist would probably be annoyed with him after all the terrible decisions he's made since the last time they met, but he thought trying to help Pietro might make up for some of the damage he's done. It seemed like the right thing to do and he doesn't know why Clint is so annoyed about it. The idea that he's pissed off one of his lifelines sends his brain into panic mode.

He doesn't know how he fucked up. He doesn't know how to fix it. He's going to get in trouble. Should he apologise? He doesn't know what he's apologising for but maybe it would fix –

Clint stops the train of thought skilfully, stepping in to bring his patient's focus back to the here and now. If Bucky gets stuck in his head right now then this talk will be for nothing, and he won't have been able to prevent the shit he sees looming on the horizon.

"I don't like to be like this with you, alright? You need to arrive at your own conclusions about this stuff, therapy-speaking at you isn't effective because you clam up and get scared you're in trouble." Clint leans forward and makes sure Bucky is really listening to him. "But right now I'm worried that you're gonna do something to hurt yourself in the time it'll take you to figure this out on your own, so try and listen. I'm not mad, I just need to be straight with you because I'm concerned."

Bucky nods hesitantly, drawing his knees up into the defensive position he usually takes when he's dealing with something he'd rather run from. It's enough for Clint to be confident that he's paying attention, at least.

"You're projecting, Bucky. It's not about Pietro, it's about you."

"I… I don't understand." Bucky can admit that now, which is progress from being terrified to admit he didn't know something in case he got punished for it. He guesses that, even if nothing feels like progress right now.

Barton doesn't sigh and doesn't get annoyed, he just sets things out calmly and clearly so Bucky can get a look at what's going on in his own head. It helps like nothing else, because Bucky's motivations have always been a mystery to him.

"You couldn't protect yourself from the things that were done to you, by your mom and others, or from the way your brain responded to them. You couldn't protect yourself from your eating disorder or from the times you were suicidal." Clint lays it all out like that, like Bucky's so easy he doesn't even need cheat codes.

"Then here comes this kid, and he's going through the same stuff. He has an eating disorder, he's struggling at home, he's suicidal. And because you can't go back in time and protect yourself with the
strength you have now, you put all the feelings you have about your past self onto Pietro. He represents everything you wished you could have protected yourself from, that's why you're so obsessed with this."

"I'm not obsessed." The defence is automatic, but Clint just raises his eyebrows.

"I'm not saying it's your fault that you're obsessed. It's your brain fucking you over again. And Pietro isn't making it any easier, since he clearly still has feelings for you and he's desperate for your attention."

"So what do I do?" Bucky honestly just feels hopeless at this point. He's starting to feel like his brain is so fucked up that there's no way out but… out. Barton sees the defeat in his expression and swiftly moves to cut off that oncoming train-wreck of thought before it can get too far off the tracks.

"Generally, I think you should focus on protecting yourself now. That means good self-care, eating when it doesn't make you feel bad, good sleep hygiene, that kind of thing. I think you need to try treating yourself the way you want this kid to treat himself, the way you wish you could've treated yourself in the past." Clint pauses to let Bucky get his head around that, waits for the jerky nod before he continues. "Protecting yourself also involves talking to your boyfriend about what happened the other morning. You definitely need to talk about consent."

"But I didn't tell him to stop or… do anything that'd make him think I wasn't into it." Bucky mumbles, embarrassed by the situation and how stupid he was. "I knew he would've stopped if I told him to, and I knew he wouldn't be mad, I just…"

"I think hearing that from him directly might help you get your head around it." Clint doesn't cut him off, just steps into the sentence gently. "And I also think Steve deserves to know what's going on in your head with this. He's affected too."

"I get that." Bucky nods, sounding like he's kind of pissed that he didn't want to do it on his own. Clint could explain to him that it's okay to need a push, but he's got more pressing matters to handle right now. Hopefully if he gets Bucky through this crisis then there will be time to address it in later sessions.

It's a big if.

"Aside from the self-care thing, I'm gonna tell you something else that you're not gonna like. I don't even know if I should, professionally, but you're my patient and I care about your wellbeing." Bucky almost appreciates the warning, because it gives him a second to prepare himself for something vaguely horrible his brain conjures up before Clint speaks again. "In my opinion, your dance company is toxic. You have the new director being a creep, you have Pietro in your face all the time, and you're surrounded by constant reminders of how bad your eating disorder used to be, and you know that triggers you regularly."

"You want me to… leave?" Bucky looks almost afraid of the idea, and Clint swallows the frustrated noise he wants to make because his patient will only interpret it as anger directed at him when it's the exact opposite.

"I don't want you to do anything. I'm just giving you my opinion. I want you to make whatever you think the right choice for you is. I can't tell you how to do that."

Bucky still doesn't look like he gets what Clint is trying to say, maybe it's the first time he's thought of leaving the company voluntarily, and Clint figures maybe he should explain more before the defence mechanisms that want to keep him sick kick in.
"Look at it this way. I've given you multiple suggestions, multiple ways that you could manage your time and how much you give to the company better. Multiple methods to de-stress and get your mind off dancing, many different ways to try and manage your eating disorder. And you always try them right up until the point it gets in the way of what the company wants you to do. Then everything goes to hell and you go back to work."

"I haven't re-joined them yet." Bucky points out, feeling slightly petulant despite the fact that he knows everything Clint is saying rings true.

"You haven't, but was it ever really a question that you were going to? Right after your injury you were so terrified of going back that you faked how bad your arm was. Then your learned behaviour kicked in and you started doing what you thought would make people happy again." Clint sighs quietly. "You're terrified of pissing anyone off. That's why you're so upset about Pietro telling you you're not a good friend, and why you didn't stop things with Steve when you weren't into it."

"So you think it's not a good environment for me… okay. But… But what about Pietro?" Okay, Bucky kind of understands why he sounds like he's obsessed now. He thinks he's starting to get it. "I can't just leave him when he needs help."

"Bucky, that kid needs to make his mistakes just like you made yours. You couldn't save yourself and you can't save him, that's something you need to accept. You being there isn't going to stop him from being manipulated or fucking up just like you did, it just means that you're there to see it and feel shitty about not being able to stop it."

"But, I…" Bucky's mouth twists unhappily and he draws his knees further into himself. He can't just leave the kid. Everybody abandoned him when he was that age, how can he act like he's worth more than someone in the same position?

"When you talked to him about what happened with the director and he wouldn't listen to you, what did you do? What was your first reaction?" Clint clearly isn't going to fill this blank in for Bucky, and it takes a minute for him to get past the way his head is reeling from everything his therapist is saying to actually think about it. He's sure he mentioned this already when he was first telling Clint about the whole thing, so he's not sure why he has to repeat himself.

"I… I got frustrated and banged my head against the wall." He shrugs, frowning. What does that have to do with anything?

"Right there, that's why I'm concerned." Clint doesn't point and make his patient flinch, he's still too professional for that, but Bucky gets the feeling he wants to. "You have a tendency to self-harm, and that's self-harming behaviour. I'm really worried it's going to escalate if you stay in this situation. You're not in a safe place right now and your company isn't helping you get into one."

Bucky doesn't say anything, just stares silently at his knees. Clint sighs quietly through his nose and hopes to god that he didn't fuck this up by trying to be blunt with his patient. But he can see the path Bucky wants to go down, the self-sacrifice that could send him into a lethal tail spin, and he had to make some kind of attempt to steer him off it.

"Seriously, if the kid is as manipulated as you're saying then that's abuse. He's not doing it willingly, any more than you willingly gave into your mom when you were a kid." Bucky looks up at that, and it gives Clint a little bit of hope. "The best thing you can do for him is report it to the appropriate person at the company. They're the ones who need to take action, not you."

"But what if they –"
"Bucky, you cannot control everything by micro-managing it. You definitely can't control Pietro, or the director, or how the company reacts. You've already admitted to me that you don't feel in control of yourself, and that's what you need to worry about right now." Clint tries not to sound like he wants to hit his patient over the head with it, because he's still very concerned that the situation is going to send Bucky back to the hospital again. He's not sure he could take the guilt, not when he saw it coming and felt like he was powerless to avert it.

"This is one time in your life where you need to put yourself first. I'm honestly, seriously worried about what's going to happen to you if you don't."

Bucky tries to get his head around that idea, the concept that he should worry about his own needs without considering how they might affect the people around him. It's not the first time his therapist has told him to do it, but the idea still doesn't fit.

Nothing fits Bucky, that's kind of the problem here.

*

"You let me…"

Steve looks kind of nauseated. Bucky knows exactly how he feels.

"Oh, Buck. Why?" Steve puts his arm around his boyfriend's shoulders, where they're sitting on the couch in what had been awkwardly stiff poses since Bucky announced that they needed to talk. It's never a good conversation when that's how it opens, but this is worse than most. Bucky feels like Steve should be angry with him, not being sympathetic.

"You know I'd stop if you wanted to, right? Why didn't you say something?" Steve looks so distressed, and it makes Bucky feel sicker and hollower than ever. "You know I'd never make you do anything you didn't want to, don't you?"

"I know. I just…" He swallows hard and feels like a fucking child, because he can't pull himself together and talk about this without looking down at his knees so Steve can't see his face through his hair. "I thought if I tapped out then you'd wanna know why. And I didn't want to tell you why. It was easier to just…"

He trails off with a gesture because he's run out of words. He's so nervous that Steve is going to get mad that it feels like he's choking every time he tries to give voice to the shit that’s going through his head. It's not rational, he knows that, but his hands are still shaking with adrenaline because he's going to be in so much trouble.

"Okay, firstly you don't have to give me a reason. It's not like wanting to have sex is mandatory and you need a doctor's note to get out of it." Steve sounds really worried and his hand is squeezing Bucky's bad shoulder so carefully, and Bucky feels like he doesn't deserve a second of this treatment. He's sure it'll just get yanked away when his boyfriend finds out what really happened. "I mean, if I'm doing something you don't like then I want to know about it so I don't do it again, but you don't have to tell me that right away if you can't."

"Steve…"

"You can always tap out. Tell me you understand that, Buck." There's a note of demand in Steve's voice, and Bucky finally raises his head to look him in the eye. He looks so fucking upset, Bucky feels like he shot a puppy. "I'm never gonna be mad at you for not wanting to have sex, I don't care what the reason is."
"I had a sex dream about Pietro." It comes blurting out before Bucky can swallow the words like bile, and he's not sure if this is self-destruction or not. He twitches some twisted semblance of a tiny smile, more like a grimace. "Bet you're mad now."

"Buck—"

"That's why I was hard. I didn't want to have sex because I couldn't get it out of my head and it felt like cheating and if I told you then you'd know I'm disgusting and I'm really sorry—"

The words keep spilling over themselves as he gets more and more worked up, until there's that warm hand on his shoulder again, squeezing insistently until he finally takes a breath that's not shallow and panicked.

"Bucky, hey. I'm not mad." Steve's voice is carefully level, and Bucky's pretty sure that means he's at least a little mad. "You can't help what you dream about, I dream about all kinds of weird shit."

"But he's a kid and I don't have feelings for him." He meets his boyfriend's eyes again, hearing and hating the undercurrent of desperation in his voice. God, he's so pathetic he wants to put out cigarettes on his tongue to make himself shut up. "I wasn't lying, Steve. I really don't. It was just a dream and—"

"Babe, one time I had a dream about getting a blowjob from my cousin Ryan." Steve looks so genuine with the tiny, worried smile tugging at the corner of his mouth that it actually brings air back into Bucky's lungs again. "Does that make me disgusting? Does that mean I want my ugly cousin—who I hate, by the way—to suck me off? No. Dreams are fucking weird, you can't control them and they're not like cheating."

He sounds so sure of himself, Bucky can't ever remember feeling like that. Not for the first time, he wonders if he's poisoning Steve somehow by being with him. If he's somehow smudging dirty fingerprints on the bright soul who, for some unknown goddamn reason, has decided to love him. Fuck the company, Bucky's pretty sure he's the toxic one.

"There's... There's kind of another reason I had that dream." Bucky mumbles, stalling over it as long as possible. There can only be so much patience his boyfriend has left, but Steve just waits for him to spit it out. "The creepy new director... I walked in on Pietro blowing him. The kid thinks he's gonna make him principal if he lets him fuck him."

Steve is silent for a second, then he curses with surprising force. Maybe he doesn't hate Pietro as much as Bucky's been imagining. Maybe he has been working himself up over the wrong things. Again.

"Shit." He raises his eyebrows in what looks like genuine surprise. But then Bucky's sure he shouldn't be shocked that Steve cares, he's too much of a good person to not care if someone's being taken advantage of. "Did you tell Maria?"

"No. I just tried to talk to Pietro." Bucky feels stupid for not doing that right away, but somehow it had seemed more important to get Pietro's side of the story than actually do something straight away. He feels like an idiot. "Pierce has been sweet-talking him and feeding him all kinds of crap. The kid thinks he'll care if he's just good enough."

"Sounds like somebody I know." Steve mutters, just loud enough for Bucky to hear, and somehow that's the straw that breaks the camel's back. His face crumples, and it takes Steve a second to notice the unnatural stillness with which Bucky holds himself to try and hide the fact that he's losing it.
"Babe? Hey." There are warm, stupidly big arms wrapping around Bucky's narrow shoulders, and for some reason being comforted actually makes him break down more. Bucky hides his face in Steve's shoulder and doesn't care about the awkward angle he's twisting his back to be in this position. "You're gonna tell Maria about Pietro and then it's not your problem anymore, okay? You can't keep getting this upset about him."

"B-But I can't abandon him like that." Bucky stutters, breath hitching and making him feel like a stupid kid. "Everyone always abandoned me an-and…"

"You're not abandoning him, you're doing exactly what somebody should have done for you back then. Like before you fell, we should have told someone who could have actually helped you rather than trying to deal with it ourselves. This is kinda the best thing you can do for him, babe."

Bucky smushes his face into his big stupid boyfriend's shoulder and tries not to feel like a fucking traitor. He knows they're right, Clint and Steve and all his other friends, he knows he can't go on the way he has been. With everything going to shit with his family, he's put so much of his energy into Pietro that he can't see the wood for the trees right now. He's starting to spiral again, and he can't do that to Steve.

Or to himself, Bucky reminds himself tentatively, he's allowed to care about himself too.

"I…" Bucky swallows hard and pulls back from Steve's shirt just enough to breathe, pretending he doesn't know he left it damp where he couldn't control himself. "I'm thinking about leaving the company."

The rush of relief that seems to fill Steve's body when he finally gets the words out is what swings it for Bucky. Maybe Clint is right, maybe the environment really is toxic and, once again, everyone else can see it but him.

Maybe it's okay to put himself first, this time. Bucky could try that on for size. Maybe this time something might fit.
It's after midnight when Steve gets the call, jerking him from a half-peaceful mostly-exhausted post-gig sleep.

Bucky is in the emergency room because he slashed his wrist open.

Just one, not two, Steve thinks feverishly on his way over through the dark, slick early morning-night streets. It's been raining recently but the clouds have broken, and there still aren't enough people on the streets at this hour to get in his way. Steve's not sure he'd even notice if there were, he can't stop thinking about Bucky and blood. If it's only one then he didn't mean it, then he didn't want to opt out and he just wanted relief. If it's just one then he wasn't…

Steve can't even think it. The fear has been crawling in the back of his mind ever since opening night and the fall, since Bucky told him about Brock and Novosibirsk and since Pietro's overdose. Since… since before he and Bucky even knew each other, although his boyfriend doesn't know about that. The fear of this has been building for so long that it's almost a sick relief that it finally happened.

Except it's not a relief at all, because Bucky is in the emergency room and everything in the entire world is wrong.

Natasha and Sam are already in the waiting room, but Sam has to grab his arm to stop Steve in his tracks when he almost walks right past them in his panicked haze. Natasha is still in the raggedy sweatpants she wears to bed and what looks like Sam's American Ballet Theatre shirt, and Sam looks like he threw on the first thing he could find in a hurry. There are smears of blood on Natasha's pants and Steve feels like the world is too bright, too immediate, like everything is fluorescent right when he wishes it would shut down and go away.

"What happened?"

"He's okay." Sam has to hold him back again, grab Steve's other arm like he's a shying colt when he starts away to go he doesn't know where. "Steve. He's okay."

"What happened?"

"He was drunk." Natasha breaks in, flat and unaffected. That's the tone she takes when she really can't handle whatever it is she's dealing with. Sam glances back at her with concern and Steve is suddenly filled with an out-of-place calm that they're looking out for each other. It actually brings him some comfort in the eye of the storm. "He was being stupid, saying all kinds of dumb stuff and acting like a fool. So we went to bed and left him there."

"We didn't know he was… he didn't sound like he was upset or anything." Sam says it as much for her benefit as Steve's, because the guilt is blooming red and looming behind her eyes again and he's not about to let that happen now he knows how deep those barbs press into her soul. "I thought he was just being a jackass 'cause you were working tonight and he was third-wheeling. Everything
was fine."

"I got up to get a drink of water and found him." Her tone is still flat, but with Sam's reassurance Natasha isn't so dead-eyed as before. "There was blood everywhere, I couldn't tell where he was actually hurt. I..."

"We brought him here. Doctor said he needs a few stitches and they want to keep him overnight because... y'know. Circumstances. But it's not serious, physically." Sam sits down, his hand on Natasha's arm allowing her to duck her head and give into the emotion she's experiencing. "His therapist must really like him, since the guy came down here in the middle of the night to talk to him."

"Where is he?" Steve is slightly reassured by the therapist being here, because Bucky seems to genuinely like and trust the guy from how he talks about him, but there's nothing except seeing his boyfriend breathing right in front of him that's going to slow down the cold caffeine anxious ants running under his skin.

"Down the hall, like third or fourth left. The therapist guy is in there right now, you might wanna wait." Sam tries to tug Steve to sit with them, but he doesn't budge and his friend frowns warningly. "Steve."

"I need to see him." Steve shakes his head, stubborn and not budging from what he thinks is right. He's been the same his whole life, he's not about to change now. He ignores Sam's pointed look and hopes his friend will concentrate on Natasha at the moment because she needs it more. Steve is too icy cold to need coddling. "Don't worry. Go home if you want to, we'll be fine."

"I need to sleep." Natasha admits tiredly, because she's always been able to advocate for herself, in complete contrast to Bucky. It's also her polite way of saying that she's overwhelmed, not that either of them would say a word about it. "But call if you need us."

"For anything." Sam agrees, his hand still a constant, steady presence on her arm. "I can stay if you need someone—"

"It's fine, really. I just need to talk to him." Steve shakes his head. Natasha and Sam have had to deal with this trauma enough already, they deserve the chance to reel and recover. "You've done enough, guys. Go sleep, I'll call if I need you."

He immediately heads down the corridor Sam had pointed out, because his friends will only try and talk him out of it if he stays still. In these situations, Steve knows that to stop moving is to die. He's a shark right now, he has to keep swimming to keep breathing. Whatever happens, he'll keep swimming and he'll survive because he always has and there isn't another option. Steve refuses to see another option, and he'll drag Bucky along with him if he has to.

Finding the room Bucky's in feels like it takes forever. He doesn't have the insurance for private, but he's not on the main ward so Steve has to keep awkwardly peering into rooms of five or six beds to see if he can see his boyfriend. When he finally happens upon him, it looks like Bucky's been put in the start of a new ward because he was admitted at such a strange hour. There's nobody in the room but him and who Steve assumes is his therapist. The guy gets done saying what are obviously goodbyes and runs into Steve right outside the heavily-swinging door, where he was about to forgo politeness and barge straight in.

"Shit, sorry." He catches himself from bouncing off Steve's chest, built smaller than him but stocky like a boxer, and blinks up at him like he was recently asleep. The guy is rumpled and looks kind of hungover, wearing purple pyjama pants that are absolutely covered in yellow dog hair and what
looks like the sweater of a much larger man. He's clutching a large travel cup of coffee and there's a brown stain on his sleeve where the lid has leaked. His eyes spark recognition even as Steve opens his mouth.

"Hey, you must be Steve, right? Kinda good to put a face to the name. I'm Bucky's, um… Sorry, I'm really not supposed to disclose this shit but I guess you already know who I am, so…"

"You're his therapist. Is Bucky okay?" Steve cuts to the chase immediately, not sparing the time for social niceties because he figures this is one situation where it's really not required. Clint (he thinks it's Clint, Bucky's said the name enough but he's blanking right now in his panic), to his credit, seems to understand perfectly and goes with the immediacy of the question.

"He's okay. He's drunk and stupid right now, but he's not suicidal or meaning to do any real harm to himself." He rattles it off so matter-of-factly that it actually makes Steve's shoulders relax some, and he thinks he understands what Bucky says about the guy being a slightly weird but calming influence.

"So he's not… He wasn't trying to kill himself?" Steve forces himself to stick with the forthright line of questioning, because otherwise he's not going to be able to handle this. Until he's in the room with Bucky, he can't afford to feel a single thing.

"No. He's a busted up mess, but he's not checking out. And he's trying to make it work, far as I can tell." Clint looks at him sideways, although there's nothing subtle about him and he looks like he knows it. "He's really trying. His brain fucks him up more than half the time, but I honestly think he's doing the best he can without real treatment. Except, y'know, when he downs a bottle of vodka and this happens."

"Real treatment is residential, right?"

"For him in his position, yeah." Clint sighs and takes a sip of whatever caffeine concoction is still steadily staining his sleeve when he tips his cup. "I'm only telling you this because you're his boyfriend and I'm not making any progress saying it to him myself. I was worried something like this was gonna happen. Now it has, and he's still not entertaining the idea of the treatment that would help him. He's got a lot of shitty thought patterns that he needs to break, and getting out of his normal environment would do that. But he refuses, so there's not much I can do to persuade him."

"D'you think he's a danger to himself right now?" Steve has to ask, no matter how much he doesn't want to hear the answer. "I mean, not tonight, but…"

"I'm the worst fuckin' therapist." Clint mumbles to himself before he shakes his head. Steve can't see why he's a bad therapist, since he clearly has Bucky's wellbeing at heart. "I think as long as he's in the situation he is, with his work… it's not healthy for him. I think. I can't make judgement calls. I'm already being fuckin' unprofessional by discussing this with you, I'm sorry. I just want to help."

He sounds genuinely broken up about it, and Steve reaches out and squeezes his shoulder in an uncomfortably masculine gesture of thanks because he's not sure what else to do. Clint gets it though, thankfully, and pats Steve glancingly on the shoulder before he heads off down the hall towards the waiting room and the parking lot beyond. Steve wonders vaguely if he comes out in the middle of the night for all his patients, if he has a husband or wife to pick him up when he's too tired to drive straight. It's only a brief thought, because he has bigger things to worry about the second he pushes through the door that separates him and Bucky.

The air smells oddly stale, even though he knows Bucky's been here for a couple of hours at the most. He hasn't seen his boyfriend for a few days with his crazy work schedule, has Bucky even
taken care of himself in that time? He doesn't look composed, not with the lank hair and the whiff of vodka emanating from him, and Steve is at once heartbroken and blindingly angry that Bucky could get to this state when he's supposed to have a plan and ideas about what he's doing in the near future. He's supposed to be okay, Steve is supposed to be able to leave him alone and trust that he'll be okay.

He stands there for a long time, looking at the love of his life so broken that the sharp edges cut him all the way across the room.

"Told them not to call you."

That's what finally croaks out, when Bucky breaks the silence. Steve can tell from his voice that he's drunk as fuck, the kind of drunk he only gets when he can't stand his skin anymore. Tonight, Steve refuses to feel guilty for working when Bucky needed him. Because it's not his job to anticipate when he's needed, Bucky made that very clear from the start. He clenches his fist on the side his boyfriend can't see and tries to keep his face neutral.

"Told them I was fine. I'm fine. I just made a dumb mistake. Didn't even need… I could've handled it on my own, it didn't really need stitching, for fuck's sake." Bucky sounds like he's rambling, like he's shoving together all the words that usually make Steve calm down so he's not in trouble. He's slumped into himself like he's desperate to be small, and Steve doesn't want to keep seeing this. "I fucked up. I'm so fuckin' ashamed of myself. I-I just made a mistake."

"Why did you cut yourself?" Steve is so calm when he asks it. Not that dangerous calm that signals an explosion on the horizon, but Bucky ducks his head and tries to hide anyway.

"I don't know." He mumbles. "It… it seemed like a good idea. I couldn't stop thinking about everything, and how I'm always gonna be fucked up and there's no way out and if I quit the company then I'm letting everyone down… I wanted to feel something and I didn't want to feel anything and… I don't know."

Steve gets it, he understands the long, slow self-destructive ideation because he's seen it before. He moves into the room and lets the door swing shut behind him, tries to ignore Bucky's involuntary flinch. He thought they had an end in sight, didn't anticipate how badly his boyfriend would struggle with the idea of leaving the company. He can't let this go on anymore.

Steve tells himself he's not a bad person for what he's about to do, even if he might throw out some habitual Hail Marys for it. Maybe a lot of them. He's not trying to guilt trip his boyfriend, he just wants to make Bucky understand.

"Y'know, people always ask me why I'm so goddamn compassionate. I've had people tell me 'you're so young, how can you care this much?'. I've had people ask me how I can handle being with you, how I can love you when there's this thing. When in the back of my mind I'm always waiting for the call that you've really hurt yourself this time."

Bucky doesn't say anything. He's weaving slightly even where he's sitting down, and Steve knows just how drunk he has to be to reach that point. Still, he hopes this conversation will stick in that vodka-sodden brain, because he never talks about this and he really doesn't want to have to say it more than once. Not a word about this has passed his lips for years, and he doesn't intend for this to be more than a one-off.

"My father killed himself when I was twelve."

Bucky's head snaps up at that, staring at Steve with wide, suddenly very present eyes. Steve's just glad he can be sure that his boyfriend is listening.
"He was always depressed, I guess. I don't remember him all that well. But he was like a fog, you knew when he was there because something was always not right." He sighs silently to himself, because he hasn't talked about this for so long that he can't remember beyond telling the school guidance counsellor. The words feel foreign, and he feels every inadequacy that trying to be a man without a template to follow had pricked into him when he was still malleable, sharp even through the shield he's built.

Still, he perseveres. The centre must hold, because Bucky can't right now and Steve will be steel for as long as he can. The centre must hold. He has and he still must hold.

"Sometimes things were okay, we'd go to the movies or the park, and when we were at home he'd come up behind my Ma in the kitchen and kiss her hair and she'd always pretend she was annoyed, but she was smiling so I knew she wasn't." Steve doesn't let himself get caught up in the nostalgia. He's never had the luxury, was never able to do so as a child and so as an adult the fuzzy cushion of the past doesn't appeal to him so much. "Then one day Ma found him hanging from the shower rail. She knew it was coming, no matter how much she fought it."

Bucky still doesn't say anything, and it's not like Steve blames him. Nobody ever knows what to say, when they find out something so horrible, something people feel is unspeakable has touched him. He thinks maybe it's partially superstition, as an adult who can dissect motivations rather than just want to fight the entire world, that people are afraid of letting the bad spirits into their home by acknowledging that they exist at all. He remembers the mass his father didn't have, and his blood still boils at it. He still wants to fight the entire world, even if he's now able to keep the anger carefully simmered down so low that it's barely noticeable.

It's that taboo, that instinctive rejection of other, that makes things so hard for Bucky. Both to accept that he needs help and to get it. Steve is not having it anymore.

"My Ma loved him. She loved him so hard and so fierce and she did her best to help, and she still couldn't save him from himself." Steve's hands are steady but firm as he moves closer and puts them on Bucky's broad but bony shoulders. "That's why I don't feel guilty about you. That's why I'm not trying to save you, I know there's no point. The only person who can really save you is you, I'm just along for the ride because I love you more than anything in the entire world and sometimes I wish that wasn't true."

"Steve…"

"No, Buck. Listen to me." He cuts Bucky off, head down and the muscle in his jaw twitching where he's fighting so hard to keep himself together. He needs to get this out without stuttering or breaking down or not being clear. He needs to keep swimming to survive. "I thought I could do this, but I can't. I can't just sit back and watch you die."

"I don't want to –"

"Not right now, no. But you will. Maybe you always will. But as long as you're at that fuckin' company…" Steve lets out a harsh breath that's startlingly close to a sob for how level his voice is. "When you said you were thinking about leaving it was like… like I'd been sitting on death row and they finally found me innocent. I thought you had a chance. It's as toxic as your goddamn mother and when you finally shook her off…"

"Babe –"

"I love you. I want you to be happy. You can be, y'know, you're allowed to be happy and you don't have to ask a goddamn person for permission. But you have to want it. Sometimes I think you do,
and then sometimes you're so stuck in your comfortable rut of being fucked up that I don't think you even want to know what happiness is because it would mess up your normal."

"I wanna be happy." Bucky's eyes are suddenly brimming with tears that he didn't feel start, but Steve's gaze doesn't soften. Bucky is covered in blood and bandages and this is far too serious for softness. People think he's soft because he's compassionate, and he lets them. It's easier than having to be strong all the time. "I do. I just don't know how."

"I'm telling you how." He leans down to get on his boyfriend's level, refusing to break down under the emotional strain, because his shoulders will be big enough to carry them both even if it twists his spine forever. "You go to treatment. You keep your parents out of your life. You quit the company that makes you feel like you have to work harder, better, beyond what even you can do, and doesn't support you in return. You want happiness? Nobody's gonna hand it to you. You go after it with your nails and teeth and you fight for it, because I can be your shield, but you have to be the weapon."

"I…"

"Buck, this, right now, is not sustainable. We can't go shuttling from crisis to crisis like this. I can't spend the rest of my life waiting for a fuckin' phone call!" Steve slams his hand down on the metal frame of the bed beside Bucky, some of the anger finally spilling through a weak point, and his boyfriend flinches instinctively away from the surprise and violence. Steve can't find it in himself to be sorry, not right now. This is the part of himself he tries so hard to keep buried, the rage and the righteous fury that something is hurting someone he loves and he can't do a fucking thing about it.

Bucky blinks hard, like he's overwhelmed with everything, and then the slurred question that spills from his lips is so him that Steve wants to shake his boyfriend and kiss him at the same time.

"The rest of your life?"

"Yeah, you asshole. The rest of my life." Steve finally slumps to sit on the edge of the mattress, drained and just exhausted. From tonight and the last long months, he's just tired. He nods to Bucky's bandaged wrist slightly. "Does it hurt?"

"Like a bitch."

"Good." He cradles the injured wrist gently in his callused fingers and artist's palm even as he bites out the word. This is Steve as raw as he's ever been, and he knows nothing will be the same between them now Bucky has seen the dark parts of him just like he's seen Bucky's. "Don't do this again."

"I don't know how to promise you that." Even drunk, Bucky's voice is soft and sincere and he seems to grasp the gravity of what's passed between them tonight.

"You don't have to. Just promise you'll go to treatment, because this shit's gone on long enough." Steve meets his eyes again to find Bucky's are wet, when his own are hot and arid and still angry. "I'm not gonna be second behind your disorder anymore, Buck. I said the rest of my life and I meant it, but I mean with you, not this. I can't watch somebody else die. I just can't."

"What if I can't fix it?" Bucky finally finds his voice, just like he always does when the comfortable destruction of his disorder is threatened. Steve smiles sadly, because he knows his boyfriend isn't doing this on purpose but it's so predictable he could set his father's old watch to it.

"I know there's probably shit you can't fix. I'm not expecting you to get help and skip out of there a hundred percent happy-clappy normal, or whatever the fuck that means." Steve tries to reassure
Bucky, because he can see the fear and that's the biggest enemy they have aside from the thing that lives in Bucky's head and tries to kill him. "But this thing, this not knowing if you're gonna be alive from one day to the next? That's what I can't take. That's what we have to fix."

"You say we." Bucky mutters, sour and humourless. It's justified, Steve figures, but he squeezes his boyfriend's uninjured arm gently to try and get his focus back and out of the bitterness that will make him shut down.

"Yeah, we. I told you before that you have to do the heavy lifting, but I'm here to support you. Whatever you need me to do." He twitches another tiny, grim not-smile, not because he feels like it but because he doesn't want Bucky to shut down defensively. "I just need to know that I'm not gonna wake up and find you dead. I don't think that's a hell of a lot to ask."

Bucky looks down at his lap, at the pilled green-grey hospital blanket covering him against the chill of the ward, like he needs to process this. Steve looks at the top of his boyfriend's head that's tipped towards him and reaches out unconsciously to move a chunk of hair where it's falling on the wrong side of his parting. He cares, he cares so deeply that it's a river through his soul, and he still gives a shit even at this moment that Bucky's self-conscious about his looks and wouldn't want his hair to be wrong.

"That's why I still live with Sam, y'know." Steve continues, softly, when Bucky doesn't respond for a few minutes. "You asked me about it like I still had feelings for him, but I don't. Sam is a rock, he's so stable that I'd bet my life on him over and over. He has his problems but he's a mountain, nothing moves him. I had my share of instability, I think I tried to date him in the first place because he's the opposite of everything my life usually is. So I don't have feelings for him still, not beyond friendship, but I know that I'm not gonna wake up and find him on the bathroom floor. That's important to me, I need that."

"So what if I can't be stable?" Bucky has been chewing his lip and it's bloody and raw when he finally lifts his head to look Steve in the eye again. He has dark circles around his fever-bright blue eyes and he looks like he's just done. "I don't know if I can ever give you that."

"How do you know until you try?"

"Because I'm fuckin' trash, okay?!" Steve always knows when Bucky's brain overrides the careful filters he places on it, because the words come blurted out like this, angry and vengeful and hissing and spitting at something that's not Steve and never has been. Anger is good, he figures, because it's fuel. "I'm trash! I'm never gonna be the person you want me to be! I've always been like this, I've always been fucked up and I'm always gonna be fucked up. I don't know how to undo decades of fuckin' programming, Steve!"

He curls in on himself, drawing his knees up to his chest in his usual defensive position, but Steve isn't having it. He pushes Bucky's knees down and crowds into his space with all his bulk, not letting him run away into himself. Bucky might be done, but Steve is done letting his boyfriend drown in front of him. Bucky couldn't swim and he still offered a drowning man his hand, but Steve can swim like a fucking champion and he'll carry them all to shore if that's what it takes.

He isn't small anymore, and he wasn't weak back then but he sure as hell isn't weak now. He can do this all fucking day if he has to. He can swim for miles if that's how long Bucky needs him to hang on. Steve isn't going to let them drown, not now and not ever.

"You're my fuckin' trash, asshole." He surges forward and kisses Bucky fiercely, tasting copper from his bloody lip and relishing the life it holds. "That's why you go to treatment. Of course you don't know how to do this on your own, I'm not expecting you to, but you have to get help.
Otherwise I can't do this. I'm not gonna watch you waste away in front of me. It's treatment or we're over, Buck. I'm serious.

It takes a few minutes, of Bucky snuffling and trying to act like he's not crying and ripping his bottom lip to shreds in the process, but he finally looks Steve in the eye. Bucky's eyelids are swollen and his eyes are pink and he looks like a lost little boy, but there's something in his dark pupils, some speck of steel that tells Steve he's not lying about this. This isn't a face, not a façade or a front or something Bucky is doing to make somebody else happy. He's not scared of being in trouble or punishment, he's finally meeting Steve on level ground and his feet are under him.

This is Bucky fighting for his life.

Steve smiles like he's bleeding out before Bucky even forces the word out. They're not going to lose each other, so they have to weather the storm no matter how hard it howls. Steve doesn't know if they can, but he'll be damned if he's not going to try until there's blood under his nails and flesh between his teeth. For Bucky.

"Okay." It's almost breaking him to say it, but Bucky bites it out from between his wrecked teeth anyway. "I'll do it."
Walking Away

It's one thing to agree to go to treatment drunk, it's another to navigate the minefield of what 'treatment' is sober.

"What the fuck is CBT?" Bucky's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline when he gets to the term in the index of the fourth treatment centre brochure. "Because if it's the porn thing, I'm keeping the hell away from this place."

"It's not that CBT, Jesus." Steve rolls his eyes and knocks Bucky gently with his hip where they're both leaning on the kitchen island. "You need to watch better porn."

"You're the one who sent me the link!"

"Just for... research. Shut up." Steve's cheeks flush pink and Bucky smothers a tired laugh with his hand. He uses his uninjured arm for everything in the past week, Steve's noticed and commented on it before. Bucky keeps telling his boyfriend the stitched wrist doesn't hurt, but to be honest it hurts like a bitch to move or flex and he kind of feels like he deserves that.

That's part of the reason Bucky's sticking with his reluctant decision to go to treatment. He can't keep lurching from crisis to crisis and feeling like he deserves to hurt, he needs to get a handle on himself before he can start the real work of beating his disorder for good, or at least into submission. Clint said that treatment is a way to break the cycle of every minor problem becoming the end of the world, and that's all Bucky wants out of it.

That's a lie, he secretly hopes it'll fix him. As if it could be that easy.

"It's cognitive behavioural therapy. They work with you to like, practically divert your bad thoughts. I think I read it's supposed to be good for eating disorders." Steve shrugs, explaining the best he knows and getting Bucky off the topic of his questionable porn choices. "It's not so much 'tell me about your mother' as 'don't give into the urge to binge'. I think. Don't quote me."

"Does it stop you wanting to do the bad stuff?" Bucky lets himself be vulnerable enough to ask the question, trying to sound like he doesn't care too much, because Steve has proven over and over that he's gentle with the fragile bird's egg of Bucky's confidence. Steve twitches a miniscule smile and covers Bucky's thinner hand gently with his where it rests on the counter.

"I don't know. I don't think so. I think that's what talking therapy's for." He presses their shoulders together, a tiny gesture of support because he knows it's not what Bucky wants to hear.

"Dunno why we're looking at all this shit anyway. Insurance is only gonna cover wherever Clint recommends I go." As usual, Bucky falls back on his old patterns, tries to run away from the subject when things get too hard, and Steve lets him this time. They've been at this for a while, they could both use a break.

"Yeah, true. We can think about it later." He takes the brochure gently from Bucky and stacks it in a neat pile with the others, and his boyfriend's shoulders slump a little in relief. "You okay? You seem kinda spacey today."

"M'fine, just tired." Bucky kisses Steve on the temple when he gets up to pour himself another cup of coffee, and Steve suppresses a sigh when he gets the opportunity to look Bucky over without him noticing.
He's been dropping weight hard since he agreed to go to treatment, pounds upon pounds. Natasha has theorised (only between her and Steve, because Bucky doesn't want to discuss it, no surprise) that it's probably a last hurrah, a final dip into Bucky's comfortable patterns before he has to force himself out of them. That doesn't stop Steve worrying when he feels the hard knobs of his boyfriend's spine when they sleep curled up in each other's arms, but the explanation helps him breathe a little easier. Bucky's been training full-time too, picking up extra dance classes with a fervour that had last been in him before he fell, and Steve is concerned that he'sregretting agreeing to treatment.

He won't believe it's happening until he actually sees Bucky walk through the treatment centre doors, in short. He loves Bucky, but when it comes to his eating disorder Steve doesn't trust him as far as he could throw him.

"I need to change my phone number." Bucky mumbles out of the blue, concentrating on adding sugar to his black coffee (a concession for energy, since he's not eating much else. Steve is just grateful he's not chugging energy drinks and putting his heart in danger again) so he doesn't have to make eye contact while he speaks.

He's appropriated Natasha's Yoga is for Posers mug, and something about the slump of his shoulders in contrast to the cheery pink slogan makes Steve strangely, incredibly sad.

"Again? Why?" There's that familiar sinking feeling. Bucky shrugs as he turns around, and he looks so tired that even that steel spark of resilience in his eye seems to have gone out. There have been moments like this since he agreed to treatment, moments that make Steve afraid that it's not that Bucky doesn't want to try, it's that maybe he doesn't have the energy left.

"My mom called me." He admits, quietly, and now Steve understands why his boyfriend has been acting so weird all day. "I dunno how she got my new number. Maybe Becky gave it to her and she's really –"

"Babe, Becky wouldn't give her your number. Don't get paranoid about that." Steve cuts him off before he can go too far down that rabbit hole again. Things with Bucky's family haven't been at the forefront of his problems lately, and Steve has to shove down a flash of blinding anger that they'd pop up again right when he doesn't need this shit. "So she called you. Did you talk to her?"

"For a minute. Mostly I was trying to find out how she got the number. She was crying. I made her cry." Bucky's shoulders are hunched and his hands are shaking where he has his mug of coffee in a death grip, and Steve recognises all the signs that he's fighting the urge to shove food in his mouth until everything else goes away. "I've never heard her cry before."

"She's manipulating you, Buck. You know that." This is exactly why Steve has to get his boyfriend to treatment, this is the cycle they have to break. Bucky's family is always going to trigger him one way or another, so he has to learn how to handle it. "Don't fall for it. How many times have you cried because of her?"

Bucky doesn't say a word, his mouth a thin, pale line of grim concentration. It's better than trying to defend her, at least.

"See? She deserves to be the one crying for once." He doesn't pull punches when it comes to Mama, and the twist in Bucky's mouth make it look like he's almost grateful for that. He downs his coffee in three long gulps that leave him feeling nauseous and dumps his mug in the sink.

"I gotta get to class." He ducks out of the conversation with a convenient excuse, and Steve doesn't look happy about it but he lets his boyfriend go without trying to push the subject more. Right now
Steve knows he's clinging to the prospect of treatment like a lifeline, but *something* has to get Bucky past this. It has to, or he's really going to reach the end of the line.

"Don't work too hard." He throws out familiar admonishment as Bucky shoves on his sneakers, and there's the twitch of a weary smile on his face as he comes back to kiss Steve goodbye. Steve knows Bucky doesn't exactly understand what 'working too hard' looks like, or why it would be a bad thing, but hopefully he'll try.

After the last two weeks, even while clinging to the idea treatment with his fingernails, Steve is starting to feel like hope is a mistake.

* 

There's a part of Bucky that's starting to regret not quitting the company already.

That part usually comes out when he catches one of the new (skinnier, did the standard get smaller or did he get bigger?) dancers side-eyeing him for eating before class. It comes out when he jars his healing wrist and keeps smiling through gritted teeth just like Mama taught (*don't think about order through pain don't think about cold fingers grabbing don't*). But more than anything else, the part of him that wishes he was already a world away from here comes to the fore when he spends any time around Pietro Maximoff.

Whatever the hell has been going on between him and Pierce, it's clearly not been good for the kid. Pietro looks strung out, Bucky recognises the blue-veins bobbing too fast over almost-exposed bone in wrists and jaw and the glassy, slightly-unhinged look in his eyes when he concentrates feverishly on his work. It might be pills again, it might be not eating, it might be all of the above or even something worse. Bucky tries to remind himself that it's not his problem, but that's easier said than done.

Pierce slinks around like a hunter, waiting for moments when he knows they're switching between classes or taking a break to ask Pietro if he could *speak to him in his office for a moment, please*. Pietro only hesitates a few times, and Bucky wishes he could grab the kid's skinny shoulders and hold him back when he catches the reluctance in his eyes. But Pietro always goes, and Pierce always gets his way.

Bucky tries not to think about it. He tries so hard that he loses concentration and almost drops Natasha again during a move he should be able to do in his sleep. He gets a slap to the back of his head for the trouble and he's *still* thinking about it.

The other dancers aren't blind, and since Pierce isn't exactly subtle they've caught onto the fact there's something going on between Pietro and the new director. They don't have all the facts, not like Bucky, and most of them arrive at the conclusion that Pietro is trying to sleep his way into a principal role in their next show. It's only half-right, but they start shunning him for it anyway. The kid used to be the life and soul of the class, but these days he warms up alone, keeps his head down, and leaves immediately after classes are finished without talking to anyone. Not even Natasha can get a word out of him.

Bucky's starting to miss the days Pietro looked at him like the sun shone out of his ass. He never thought he'd see the day where that was true.

"Bucky."

He looks up from where he's adjusting his dance shoes before class starts, freezing when he catches sight of Alexander Pierce standing at the top of the stairs that lead down into the studio. The offices
are on the upper floor, the director's included. When Pierce sees he's got Bucky's attention, he smiles with the kind of pleasantness that looks like it's been practiced in front of the mirror.

"Can I speak to you in my office for a moment?"

It's not like he has a choice.

Bucky glances over his shoulder as he trudges up the stairs to follow Pierce to his office and catches Pietro watching him. The kid looks pissed off, sure, but there's something more heartbroken in his expression than just anger. He already thinks Bucky's going to take his place in the company, and now he thinks he's going to take his place with the director too. He thinks the last thread of hope he has of keeping his job is being snipped away by Bucky just because he can.

Bucky is sick of being looked at like that. If he doesn't have any choices, he needs to make some for himself.

"You never came to your audition." Pierce closes the door behind Bucky and moves through the office with a fluidity at odds with his stature and age. It's unsettling, and Bucky clenches his fists nervously where they rest at his sides as he's looked over like something edible. "I'm beginning to think you don't appreciate my patience."

"I do, Mr Pierce." Bucky is quick to promise automatically. Authority figures aren't his speciality, not when they're standing so close he might as well be able to feel breath on his skin.

"Alexander, please." Pierce smiles again, and it makes Bucky have to fight to keep his position and not back away. There's something in the non-casual casualness of the man that reminds him of his father, and that doesn't make Pierce's proximity any more comfortable.

"I do appreciate your patience, Alexander." The name feels like a worm in his mouth and Bucky struggles not to gag on it. He doesn't want to be familiar with this guy. "I've been dealing with some personal issues. Sorry."

"So I heard." Suddenly there are dry fingers around his bad arm, and Pierce is lifting it to look at the wrist support Bucky has been using to hide the healing cut. The contact and the scrutiny makes Bucky's skin want to crawl right off his body and hide, how can Pietro stand it? "Ms Romanov said you had an accident. You do seem to attract them."

"Story of my life." Bucky tries for humour and pulls his wrist awkwardly from Pierce's grip, unnerved by the way the old man's fingers tighten for a second before he allows him to pull away. This is so, so not good. Did Pierce lock the door behind them? Why wasn't he paying attention?

"That's unfortunate. I want all your attention on our next production, no distractions. No accidents." Pierce leans half-sitting on the edge of his desk, and it would be casual if Bucky hadn't seen him in the exact same position with his cock in Pietro's mouth. "It's an entirely new production based on Greek mythology. We're thinking of calling it 'Hydra'."

"That sounds interesting." And it does, the artist in Bucky wants to see the snakelike choreography his mind immediately conjures up, but he forces himself to stay on track. "But I'm not sure I can give the company my full attention. To be honest, I'm thinking about leaving."

"Leaving?" Pierce raises his eyebrows in what looks like mild surprise, but Bucky suspects he's merely planning out his next move since he's been thrown a curveball. "I thought you were dragging your feet on re-joining us after your previous accident."
There's an ugly undercurrent to the way he stresses the word, like he doesn't buy for a second that anything like an accident has happened in Bucky's life for a while now. Bucky swallows hard, sure it's visible through the pale, vulnerable skin of his neck, and tries to be clear about what he means.

"I… I haven't been entirely honest with you." He has no idea how to handle this situation, no idea how to push Pierce's buttons enough to get him on-side. Bucky's invested so much in learning how to not manipulate people that when he reaches for the skill he finds it withered like a wasted muscle. He tries to fall back on the skill he has been working on: honesty. "The past year has been hard for me. I… I've been dealing with an eating disorder and I've agreed to go to a treatment clinic for a while, I think it's necessary. That's why I'm thinking about leaving."

There's a slight pause while Pierce mulls that information over. Bucky rips the skin off the side of his thumb with a fingernail and tries not to flinch through the bright flash of pain.

"Well, I must say you certainly don't look like you're suffering from an eating disorder." The director comments lightly, and Bucky feels a lurch of sickness in his stomach so viscerally that he almost throws up right then and there. He swallows the sudden bile of the trigger and tries to breathe through his nose as Pierce looks him over again pointedly.

It's a tactic, he remembers hearing it in his mother's voice and that knowledge lets him weather the storm. This is one time when his past is an advantage, because Pierce clearly doesn't know that the mind games that work on Pietro aren't about the knock Bucky down too.

"I admire your courage, though. Seeking help for your problems is always a struggle, it takes guts." He nods sagely, and Bucky's slightly thrown by the seemingly-supportive comment. Maybe honestly was the best policy after all, maybe that's what it took to get Pierce's favour. "But I do wish you'd been honest with us before now, Bucky. The company employs doctors who could have helped you sooner."

"I'm sorry." Wait, why is he apologising? Bucky chews his lip and tries to regain his focus, he refuses to be manipulated into apologising for something that's not his fault. "I wasn't ready to ask for help until now."

"Then I'm glad you finally did. And I'm glad you talked to me before you made a big mistake." Pierce sounds like he's being helpful, and that's why it takes Bucky a second to realise his words are being twisted. He didn't ask for Pierce's help and he doesn't want it. "That kind of mainstream treatment isn't designed for people like you, Bucky, for athletes. If you went to a clinic for six weeks then your career would be over, you'd never be able to get back the form you lost. Especially after they brainwashed you into thinking you need to eat ridiculous amounts of food to be healthy."

Is he dreaming? Bucky has to bite the inside of his lip again to make sure he's really awake, because Pierce's words are everything that rattles around inside his anxious brain while he's having a nightmare. Is this more manipulation, or is the director telling the truth? Bucky can't tell which way is up right now.

So much for weathering the storm.

"However, if you decided to re-join the company on a full-time basis then our medical team could work out a treatment plan for you. That way you could maintain your career and control your eating disorder without having to give up your life over it." Pierce smiles in a grandfatherly way, encouraging, and Bucky doesn't know what the hell to think. "You have support here, don't throw that away over some strange notion of normal."

It's exactly what Bucky wants to hear, exactly what pushes his buttons and makes him feel hopeful.
Maybe the company isn't such a toxic environment, he's just been seeing things from a fucked-up perspective because of his disorder. Steve has never understood dance culture, maybe his insistence that Bucky leaves is just misguided, meant to be for the best but missing the mark.

Bucky could almost agree right there on the spot, there's a huge part of him that wants to.

Except there's that other part. The inconvenient part that's not as cold as the rest of him. The part that thinks of a too-fast pulse and unhinged eyes and can't pretend a drowning man is just waving goodbye.

"What happens to Pietro Maximoff if I stay?" He asks, trying to stand his ground firmly. Pierce looks mildly surprised, and Bucky can feel a muscle in his cheek twitch at the bland expression. Clearly the director hadn't expected anyone to care about Pietro.

"Is that important to you?"

Bucky nods, and the old man sighs like he's trying to sound sincere about a regret but the pantomime doesn't quite reach authenticity. It makes Bucky both uneasy and suddenly, sharply angry. His friend thinks this man will care about him if he finds a way to make himself perfect, and there's nothing Bucky can do to make the scales fall from his eyes.

"He'll be superfluous to requirements once you come back." If Pierce weren't so straight-laced, Bucky's sure he would shrug. That's how little he gives a shit. "It's too much work to keep him stable with his family situation as it is, he couldn't handle a leading role. He may get a place in the corps, I suppose, but we'll probably send him back to wherever he came from. The Ukraine or somewhere?"

"Sokovia." Bucky's surprised by the strength in his own voice, the quietly-contained fury that makes him think of Steve and lets him see Pierce's manipulation for what it is. "He's from Sokovia."

"Anyway, I wouldn't be concerned about what happens to him. You have your own career to worry about." Pierce straightens up, forcibly casual, and every nerve in Bucky's body is immediately on red-alert. "You know, it would be terribly unethical of me to give you a leading role in a production when I know you're struggling with a life-threatening illness."

"But you said…" Bucky is taken aback by the sudden turnaround, all the strength leeching out of his voice in bewilderment, and Pierce takes the opportunity to step closer and close the gap between them.

"Personally, I know you could handle it. But if our sponsors were to find out about your problem…" He lowers his voice and his hands curl lightly around Bucky's biceps and Bucky can't move. "I suppose I could keep it quiet for you, we could come to some arrangement."

Suddenly there's hot breath on Bucky's skin and then Pierce is leaning up and kissing him forcefully, hands tightening like claws around his arms to hold him in place. For what seems like eternity, Bucky is frozen in shock and can't move. His mind blue-screening to blank in his inability to process what's happening. Pierce makes a wet, throaty noise of pleasure, shameless in his confidence and his power over the situation, and that's what snaps the sheet of ice keeping Bucky trapped.

Animal instincts kick in, and Bucky bites.

"Fuck!" Pierce snaps his head back, and Bucky shoves him away as hard as he can. The old man stumbles back into his desk, raising a hand to his mouth and practically growling at the blood that smears onto his palm. The predator isn't hiding behind the benign exterior anymore, not now there's blood in the water. "You're going to regret that, you fucking –"
But Bucky is already fumbling with the door handle and gets it unlocked before Pierce can make it
two steps across the room. He flings it open wide, surprising Maria where she's walking along the
hall as he barrels out of the office so fast he almost falls down the stairs.

He catches himself just in time. He's not falling again, not this time.

"I quit." Bucky throws over his shoulder, hurrying down into the studio. Maria's presence will
protect him for now, because Pierce clearly doesn't want anyone to know what a creep he is, but he
needs to get the hell out of here before the director figures out a way to get him alone again.

"Bucky?" The class below, waiting for Maria to come and start instructing them, has clearly heard
the commotion from upstairs. Pietro is the only one who comes over to him, starting at Bucky with
wide, frightened eyes as he rips off his dance shoes and hurriedly shoves them into his bag. "You're
bleeding."

"Not my blood." He pulls on his sneakers and doesn't bother to tie them in his haste. Pietro is
watching him with panic behind his expression, and Bucky pauses to point shakily towards the top
of the stairs. He doesn't look to see if Pierce is watching, it doesn't matter anymore. "That guy will
never care about you. No matter what you do, he'll never make you principal and he'll never give a
single shit about you."

"But…"

"When you realise that, when you're ready to get out, call me. Not before then, I can't do this for
you." He slings his bag onto his shoulder and doesn't even notice when he jars his injured wrist. Pain
has nothing to do with his order now. "Take care of yourself, Pietro. Don't let him destroy you."

As much as it hurts to leave his friend behind, staring after him in lost confusion, Bucky goes. He
pushes out of the damp, sweaty air of the studio into the newly-cold autumn of the street. The heavy
door swings closed behind him with a satisfying thunk, and Bucky breathes lungfuls of pollution and
garbage and it smells sweeter than anything he left behind. His heart slows and his head clears and
he keeps breathing, deep and even.

It's a long time before he can make his jelly legs move, but he does. He's got a promise to keep, after
all.

Bucky puts one foot in front of the other and walks away.
Letting Go

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Airports are holier, in some ways, than churches. The emotions expressed within them are purer, closer to the bones of truth, because there is no ritual way to say goodbye to someone. There is no ritual way to welcome a loved one home or embrace without knowing if it’s the last time your skins will touch. Tears and laughter are unpredictable, tangible, felt in the gut and the heart rather than the head. Ritual is a comfort, and all Bucky’s comforts seem to have deserted him now.

Bucky has spent probably more than his fair share of time in airports over the years, flying between cities and countries with ballet snapping at his heels. There was never anyone to cling to his clammy, nervous fingers until the last possible moment at the departures gate, nobody to welcome him with open arms and genuine smiles when he reached the other end of his journey. What he mostly remembers of airports are the bathrooms. Eating a mysterious meat-filled pastry during a layover in Berlin and purging it all up as his gate is called, retching over a low-flow monstrosity in dim lighting in Moscow as his head spins from paint-stripper vodka, hands shaking with amphetamines in JFK and scratching his throat raw as he tries desperately to find relief but his stomach is too empty for anything to come up but bile. It always ends up the same, the only ritual that really comforts him hurts him just as much. And even that twisted warmth has deserted him this time.

Life has brought him to another airport bathroom, and Bucky stares at the blank wall where he’s bracing himself above the toilet and tries not to think about all those other times. He's dropped enough weight that his knuckles are popping out of his paper-skin again, and the beds of his nails are tinged a vague, concerning blue with the cold that refuses to leave his core. His stomach aches with the sickly junk he's crammed into it over the course of the morning, slowly bingeing in freefall without trying to stop himself. He needs to get it out, can feel the bread and candy and cookies and chips right below his gag reflex and the sheer mass of it all terrifies him.

But he doesn't put his trembling fingers down his throat, not like all those other times when he gave in so easily. Bucky stares at his hand braced against the wall and doesn't purge. He can't make himself do it, but he can't make himself walk away either. Today is the last day, and he's so, so not ready to give up his oldest, best friend.

It's been a week since he quit the company, and his friends have been amazingly supportive while he waited for the treatment paperwork to go through with nothing but dead time on his hands. Steve was right about Sam being a rock, because the guy has been a steady presence despite Bucky being snappy and cranky and probably a total asshole to be around most of the time. Between him and Natasha, Bucky has been thoroughly supervised whenever Steve couldn't do it himself. He kind of felt like he was being babysat, but he appreciated it because he knows himself well enough to understand that self-destruction was just around the corner if he was alone for any significant stretch of time.

It's not like any of them could keep that tendency at bay completely, though. Bucky's pretty sure he's spent a large portion of the week half-drunk, clutching a bottle of vodka and just trying to white-knuckle his way through the storm in his head as the countdown to treatment ticked relentlessly on. Clint says the treatment centre is nice, that he's had clients there before who made good recoveries, and promises that the centre understands Bucky is an athlete and his goals might be different from their standard expectations. He's spent a lot of time reassuring his patient that all the paranoid thoughts Pierce sparked off are just that: paranoia. He isn't going to be forced to eat huge amounts of
food, he isn't going to be given any medication he doesn't consent to, and he won't be the only guy there.

Bucky suspects Clint is going to be relieved when he's not allowed his phone in treatment. As much as his therapist cares, he's only human and probably getting sick of the anxious phone calls at random times of the day and night. He's already going above and beyond by travelling to the treatment centre in Chicago with Bucky, most likely because he thinks his patient will bolt at the last minute if left to his own devices.

Bucky can't blame him for that. He probably would.

"Buck?" There's a tapping on the flimsy cubicle door and Bucky realises he's been hanging over the toilet for who knows how long, lost in his head. Of course Steve came to find him, they're all scared he's going to run if he gets the slightest opportunity. "You okay?"

"Yeah." It's only a white lie, because Bucky feels more numb with fear than anything else. He straightens up and cracks the crick out of his neck before unlocking the door, not even bothering to pretend to flush the toilet. He meets Steve's concerned gaze and shrugs, not trying to hide his nature anymore. "Didn't purge. I was just… hiding."

"It's okay." Steve smiles, it doesn't touch his eyes because he's so anxious but it's there despite the strain, and holds out his hand for Bucky to take. "Ready to come back out?"

Bucky slips his cold, bony fingers into Steve's warm, solid ones and looks down, shaking his head in a nervous twitch. He wants to go back outside because his friends have come to see him off and he's grateful for it, but if he steps out of the door then the thing will happen, and he doesn't want the thing to happen for as long as possible. As long as he stays in here then he's safe. Steve seems to understand what he's thinking, regardless of the fact Bucky can't find any words, and pushes his boyfriend gently back into the stall, locking the door behind them.

"C'mere."

Strong arms pull Bucky to rest against the broad muscle of Steve's chest and he hides his face unashamedly, because he can't disguise his vulnerability now so there's no point in trying. Steve rests his cheek on Bucky's head and presses gentle kisses into his hair, holding him so tightly that Bucky almost feels like the rest of the world couldn't get to him if it tried. It's almost a comfort. Almost.

It takes him a minute to realise that he's not clinging to Steve here, Steve is the one clinging to him.

"I'm going." Bucky mumbles into the soft, worn cotton of his boyfriend's t-shirt. He's packed mostly Steve's clothes instead of his own, because he knows the next thirty days are going to be a rollercoaster and getting through them on his own is going to be so hard he can't even conceive of it without threatening to melt down in fear. "I promised. I'm not running away."

"I'm scared of what's gonna happen if this doesn't work." Steve sounds like he's choked up, voice thick and gravel-ground, and Bucky wonders just how much fear he's been shoving down to keep his surface level. To keep Bucky level. "If nothing changes, then…"

"If nothing changes then you need to move on." It's strange how firm he can be when it comes to Steve, how much easier it is to be strong and sure when it's not about him falling to pieces. Steve lets out an involuntary sound of distress and Bucky shakes his head. "I mean it. You can't watch someone else die and I'm not gonna do that to you, babe. I hope this works, but if it doesn't then you've gotta promise me you'll protect yourself."
"Buck…"

"Promise me."

"I promise." It sounds like it's ripping him apart to say it, but Steve forces the words out anyway. If he can't even save just half of the world then his last resort must be to save himself, as much as he'd hate himself for the rest of his life if it came down to that. Steve isn't practiced at self-preservation, that's something they have in common.

Bucky buries his face in his boyfriend's neck and breathes him in, tries to memorise his smell and the way his heartbeat sounds against his cheek. The prospect of going through the next month (at least) without Steve's hand to hold and pull him through is fucking terrifying. Bucky has become so used to being half of a whole that he's not sure he remembers how to be alone again. It's supposed to be good for them to get some distance, but it sure as hell doesn't feel like that. Bucky slips his hand under the back of Steve's shirt, touches fever-warm skin, and breathes. Tries to, anyway.

It's a long time before either of them can bring themselves to move, but eventually they make it out of the dingy bathroom and head reluctantly back to their friends. Clint has showed up by this point (late as ever), carrying his usual giant coffee cup and in the company of a huge, heavily-tattooed guy Bucky hasn't seen before. Sam and Natasha are talking with them both, but Bucky sees a familiar face behind them and suddenly isn't curious about the newcomer anymore.

He detangles his fingers from Steve's and practically runs past the group, straight into his sister's arms.

"Hey." Becky's tone is light, but she squeezes her brother tightly and he can tell she's putting on a brave face without seeing it in a way he can't quite explain. Twin shit, that's the usual explanation. "Don't be such a cabbage, you big baby."

"Fuck you." Bucky sniffs and kicks her shin lightly as he smushes his face into her loose hair and ignores everything around them. He'd felt like half of a whole before, but that isn't strictly accurate. He's divided into thirds, between Steve, himself, and his twin, and now the missing piece is finally back in place he thinks he might just be strong enough to do this. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Couldn't let you go off being all brave and shit without stealing your thunder." She pulls back and holds him at arm's length, looking him over and unable to hide the worry behind her expression now Bucky can see her head-on. "You look like shit."

"I know." He grunts, curling his fists in the too-long sleeves of the soft-blue sweater he'd stolen from Steve way back, right before his fall. He knows it must be weird for Becky to see him in pastels, out of his usual defensive uniform of all-black and practiced indifference, but he thinks he's allowed to comfort himself today.

"How long are you going for?" Becky hasn't exactly been kept in the loop, not since Bucky's been slowly spiralling into self-destruction since he agreed to treatment and hasn't exactly kept up with replying to messages. Natasha has told her enough for her to be here today, so he doesn't let himself feel that guilty about it. He probably should, but he's already used up all his bad feelings in this situation and he's too drained to squeeze more out of himself.

"Thirty days." He shrugs, too tired to pretend that the stretch of time isn't a petrifying prospect looming in front of him like a prison sentence. "Then the insurance company talks to the doctors and I might stay for longer. I dunno yet."

"That's good." Becky nods, still looking him over like she's worried she's not going to see him
breathing again. Bucky's getting used to that look, like his friends are trying to burn him into their memories in case that's all they end up left with, but it's still not a comfortable microscope to be under. "Tasha said you quit the company."

"Yeah." The instinctive fear of getting in trouble for doing the wrong thing isn't gone just because he's not in contact with his mother anymore, not by a long shot, and Bucky ducks his head in an automatic gesture of submission to try and minimize the punishment. "Are you mad?"

"Hell no. That place was making you miserable Buck, I want you to be happy. There are always other companies." Becky misses the slight cringe her statement brings, but she was brought up under the same regime as Bucky and she can't conceive of a life outside dance any more than he could before it was forced upon him. "How come you finally took the plunge?"

Bucky hesitates, because he really doesn't want this shit to come up now, not when he's already hanging by a thread. At least he's not thinking about treatment for a minute.

"Uh… remember that shit Pavel Volkov tried to pull with you back in Novosibirsk?"

"And I broke his toes? Yeah." Becky raises her eyebrows and twists her lips into the expression that Bucky knows from experience heralds doom for whoever causes it. Volkov had been a choreographer for a very short time in Novosibirsk, before he had to leave his position after offering Becky a leading role in exchange for sex and ending up unable to dance due to his broken toes. "Which bitch was it and tell me you broke toes?"

"The new director. And nah, I bit him." Bucky holds up a noticeably-unsteady hand to stop her train of thought in its tracks when she opens her mouth again. "On the lip, Jesus. I'm too old to go that far with some creep playing grab-ass."

His sister isn't buying his flippancy, Bucky can tell, but he doesn't let down the front. It's taking the last of his strength to maintain the shield, but if he lets himself be vulnerable about this on top of everything else then he's going to crumble well before he even gets on the plane. Becky is looking right through him and Bucky lets her, but he's not going to admit to shit voluntarily.

"Does Steve know?"

"No." He shakes his head and cuts her off quickly before she can tell him he's being an idiot again. "I'm gonna tell him what happened, just not right now. I don't think he can handle anything else on top of all this. Please don't say anything."

"Bucky…"

"Please." He must look desperate enough that Becky caves, giving in and acquiescing despite the disapproving look she shoots at her brother. Maybe he's still the king of self-sabotage, he'll have to wait and see how things pan out.

"Whatever gets you to that clinic, idiot." She sighs and squeezes his elbow briefly before pulling away completely. "Come on, I wanna say hi to everyone."

"Yeah, sure. Don't use my fucked up life to socialise or anything." Bucky rolls his eyes and leads Becky reluctantly back to their little rag-tag group of friends and medical professionals ('professionals') and… medical professional’s boyfriends apparently. He assumes that's who the giant guy is anyway.
Clint looks relieved to see Bucky fairly stable and not as ashen-faced as he had been earlier, after he ducked back out of the bathroom after his little hiding session, and smiles when they reach the group. Becky immediately goes to Natasha and Steve latches back onto Bucky just as fast, lacing their fingers together like he needs to be touching Bucky to be sure that his boyfriend is still really there.

"Ready for this?" Clint asks with a slightly wary smile, like he knows it's a stupid question before it even comes out of his mouth. "I've got magazines and, uh, medication. I figured sleeping pills were a good idea for the flight."

"Not gonna help much." Bucky tries to sound like he's joking, but when he hears it come out of his mouth he's pretty sure he doesn't hit the mark. His smile turns to ash before it even hits his face, and Steve squeezes his fingers supportively when he sees the uncertain curve of his boyfriend's lips.

"It'll go fast if you can sleep on the plane."

"Sleep doesn't help shit, it's just a fucking reset button." Bucky grumbles irritably, and Steve tucks him tighter under his arm because he's heard that before. Bucky is a petulant little shit sometimes and Steve's going to miss the absolute hell out of him for it. "It's still gonna be horrible afterwards."

"I know. But it'll get better once you get there and get settled." Strong arms envelop Bucky completely again and it's suddenly impossible to imagine leaving this embrace. He hides his face in fabric again and lets himself have a full minute of blissful ignorance, of pretending this isn't happening for the last time he possibly can.

The coming month will be filled with therapy sessions and monitored meals and group exercises and Bucky's pretty sure he's going to hate every minute of it. He's going to hate sharing a bedroom and talking to doctors about his feelings and being supervised when he uses the fucking bathroom to make sure he doesn't purge. Meal plans are going to suck, positive affirmations are going to suck, and talking about his past is going to absolutely, completely, suck. But Bucky will do it all and try his hardest if it means he can come home to the warm arms around him.

It's going to be horrible, but he's doing it. For Steve.

"We need to go through security." Clint prompts gently, when it doesn't look like Bucky is about to let go of Steve voluntarily. "The more you drag it out the harder it'll be, c'mon."

Grudgingly, Bucky hugs first Sam and then Natasha goodbye, committing the wiry muscle and slender limbs to memory, little things to keep him warm while he's away. His friends have only ever known him sick, and he wonders if they'll even recognise him if he manages to beat this thing. Still, sometimes Bucky feels like he was born this way and not much will ever change, even if he stops treating food like heroin. He clings to Becky for a little longer, listening dutifully while she whispers promises to be there when he needs her and threats to kick his ass if he doesn't co-operate with treatment in his ear. He's promised his sister and his boyfriend that he'll co-operate now, so Bucky supposes he has to.

Steve is the hardest to leave, of course. He walks them all the way to the security barrier and tries to pretend his eyes aren't wet as he pulls Bucky into a fierce kiss that he feels all the way down to his toes. Bucky blinks the wetness from his own eyes and tries to smile when they pull apart, ignoring Clint and his guy saying goodbye to each other as he tries to pretend his mouth isn't being pulled down at the corners by the weight of all the mistakes that have brought him here. He doesn't think he can feel empty anymore, not after everything he's learned how to feel. Putting on a brave face doesn't mean he's pushing his emotions away, trying to smother them with something that's easier to handle, and he can feel everything raw and sharp and painful but there. Bucky thinks that maybe, just maybe, he can do this.
It doesn't matter that he fell, it matters that he's getting back up.

"I'll see you soon." He goes up on his toes to rest his forehead against Steve's, and it's strange to think that might be the only thing he uses his dance training for in the future. "Take care of yourself."

"I'm not the one who needs to do that." Steve lets out a tiny, damp laugh that's all nerves and no humour. Bucky reaches up to cup his cheek and feels stubble and heat and commits it to memory for when he'll need it most. He doesn't know how he's going to go a day without feeling Steve's skin against his, a month is too big to think about.

"I told you, we take turns. If I'm not the mess anymore then you get your chance." He kisses Steve again, softer this time. A promise. "Not until I come back, okay? I love you."

"I love you too." Steve closes his eyes and presses their foreheads together as he composes himself. He looks up again when he can, and Bucky meets his eyes steadily. They can do this.

When Bucky comes down off his toes, Steve lets him move away to scan his boarding pass and walk through the gate, glancing over his shoulder to give a forced smile and a shaky wave to his boyfriend. He walks away without looking back because he thinks it's bad luck, an old superstition, and follows Clint towards security with only a minimum of foot-dragging. They turn the corner and it's like they were never there, swallowed up by the crowded airport. The group is standing a way back to give him a little privacy, and Steve is left alone.

If going to treatment is the hardest thing Bucky's ever had to do, letting him go in that moment is the hardest thing Steve's ever done. Airports are holier than churches, and he just has to hope that this is the blessing it really doesn't feel like in his suddenly-empty chest. It's not like he's been to church since his father died, but Steve starts praying right then and there and doesn't stop.

He watches until Bucky is long out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

Only the epilogue still to go! It's been a long nine months but this baby is almost finished, shit.

If you've enjoyed this monster, thank you so much for reading and commenting. If you'd like to help me keep creating more monsters for you guys, please hit me up on tumblr at saferforeveryone.tumblr.com
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's almost nine o'clock by the time Bucky finally gets back to the apartment.

His breath has been frosting up in front of his face the whole way home, and the first thing he does after he dumps his messenger bag by the door is crank the heat up. Neither he nor Steve can stand the cold, and since his boyfriend finally managed to land a few jobs as a session musician, they can afford not to freeze this winter.

Bucky had suggested they find 'alternative' ways to keep warm (accompanied by his least-subtle ass grab), but it's nice to be warm without a dick inside him too. If he has to.

There's nobody home, so Bucky heads straight for the bedroom to change out of the formal clothes he's wearing. It's strange to think about the fact that he wouldn't have been able to wear so little clothing this time last winter without his teeth chattering and his lips turning blue. Bucky does think about it though, watching his toes as he flexes them inside the fluffy black slipper-socks Becky sent him as an early Christmas present (there's a red star emblazoned on the sole of each 'for the motherland', she said). This time last year he was crashing hard after the end of their run of Swan Lake, and about two weeks from today marks the anniversary of when he broke down at the company Christmas party and Natasha had to sit up with him all night to make sure he didn't try to walk off another roof.

Yeah, Bucky finds it strange to think about the past year. It's even stranger to think about the present.

Safely draped in a sweater stolen from Steve's side of the closet (his boyfriend has accused him of not wearing his own clothes anymore, and there's no denying that might be the case), Bucky goes into the kitchen to make some of the herbal tea Steve is trying to get him into. It's more for something hot to hold and warm up his hands than the taste, which he finds slightly swampy and weird. He catches sight of himself in the hallway mirror and pauses for a second to see and accept how he looks before moving on and forgetting about it. Clint had suggested the method, after Bucky got out of treatment twenty pounds heavier and was shakier about it than he'd expected to be.

The method is working so far, so Bucky sticks with it.

The extra weight is probably why he's handling the cold so much better this winter, he muses as the water boils. He'd been released from the treatment centre just in time for Halloween (he'd gone to Sam's party with his face and body completely covered, because he was convinced he had chubby cheeks and he wasn't about to let his former colleagues gossip about that) and has almost managed to maintain his weight since then.

There have been a few relapses, including a spectacular three-day binge session when the invitation to his mother's annual birthday dinner arrived with a note on the back that he ripped up before anyone else could see, but Bucky's still managed to keep around fifteen pounds of his restored weight on. It's mostly muscle, since he works out as often as he's allowed to, but he still cringes every time he realises his ass and thighs are thicker now, or that his abs aren't as defined after a day of eating and drinking as they are when he wakes up in the morning.

Steve approves of the changes, vocally and physically and very frequently, which helps. Bucky's slowly starting to accept that his body is different now, and that different doesn't always mean worse.
Some strange notion of normal, Pierce had said. It comes floating to the top of his mind at night sometimes, when everything is still too sharp and too big and he doesn't have the comfort of his routine to stamp the feelings down. The first thing Bucky learned in treatment that actually got through to him was that there's no such thing as normal, it doesn't exist. His family isn't normal, his thoughts about food and control aren't normal, and he sure as hell isn't normal, but nobody is. There's no objective standard Bucky has to hold himself to, that's something that was pushed onto him by other people until he started destroying himself to try and fit a mould that was never meant for him.

Strange notion of normal his ass.

Once that concept sticks, once he gets it, that's the turning point. That's when Bucky started actively trying to fight his eating disorder instead of just going through the motions of treatment because he'd promised to and hoping it would somehow magically fix him. Fighting his disorder fucking sucks, and it's the hardest thing Bucky's ever done, but he's still on his feet and he's getting stronger the more he works at it. Steve told him he had to fight for happiness, and now Bucky understands that he'll go to the mat before he gives in.

And if he doesn't tell Steve everything that came up during treatment, everything he remembered from his past that he'd shoved down and locked away before, then that's okay. He's starting to learn that access to his mind isn't all or nothing, that he has the right to keep things to himself as long as they're not going to hurt him, or Steve, more that way. Some of the stuff that was dragged from Bucky's foggy memory will probably end up hurting them, but once he's had this eating disorder thing locked down for a few months then maybe, just maybe, he can start dealing with everything else too.

The kettle boils on the stove and Bucky glances at the microwave clock before deciding to make a pot of the gross tea instead of just a cup. Steve will probably be home soon, and the big idiot either doesn't seem to understand the concept of dressing appropriately for the freezing weather or takes the cold as a personal challenge. Scarves are white flags of defeat, obviously.

Bucky considers starting dinner as he fumbles with teabags, because his brain is swirling with everything that happened at the meeting he just attended, plus the odd nostalgia that realising he's not cold enough to bite through his tongue has foisted on him. Preparing food is comforting to him these days, when eating until he's comforted is no longer an option. When did he get so fucking domestic? Becky won't believe it the next time she visits, which had better be soon since Bucky's pretty sure she's not allowed to fly after a certain point in her pregnancy.

He's looking forward to there being at least one good mother in their family.

The meal plan he worked out with the nutritionist in treatment is pinned to the fridge with Steve's poetry magnets, and Bucky slides his finger down to Thursday as he takes a too-hot sip of tea and grimaces at the taste. His options are chicken fajitas or beef lasagne: two or more vegetables, one protein, one carb. He's allowed to swap out sour cream or cheese with the fajitas, but he has to have one fat. It's clinical to break it down like that, but it keeps him on track.

It's been a good day, he figures after a moment's consideration, he can make the fajitas and push himself to attempt to eat two fats. He has to keep pushing himself, that's what Clint says, otherwise he could get stuck in a rut and backslide. His giant boyfriend will devour anything he can't handle, anyway. Steve has the appetite of some kind of Norse god (as well as the dick of one, which Bucky goes out of his way to mention as often as possible just to make his boyfriend blush).

Bucky is cutting peppers into strips when his phone buzzes, and he takes a moment to check the caller-ID before deciding not to answer. Mama has managed to get through to him a few times, despite Bucky blocking every number she's used, so to protect himself he no longer picks up straight
away if it's a number he doesn't recognise. The call goes to voicemail, and after a few minutes Bucky hesitantly picks up the message, ready to hit delete the second he hears his mother's voice.

"Bucky?"

It's not Mama.

"I hope this is still your phone. I hope." Pietro sounds like he might have been crying, but he's not slurring and it sounds like he's probably sober. "It's Pietro. You were right about… You were right. Alexander. The company… I'm sorry I didn't listen."

There's a pause, a few shuddery breaths, and then the words Bucky has been waiting to hear.

"I need help. I… I want to get out. Please call me."

The message ends, and Bucky can't deny the relief that's washing over him. Finally, finally Pietro is ready to accept the help he needs. Bucky's been putting the kid out of his mind while he's been busy trying to fix himself, but the concern has never been far away. It floats behind his eyes at night, along with Pierce and Mama and everything else he can't make right.

Now that Bucky can take care of himself, maybe he's strong enough to help the kid he used to be, too. All he can do is try, and he'll be damned if he won't.

A key scraping in the lock pulls him out of his head, and Bucky looks over his shoulder to grin at Steve. His boyfriend lugs his guitar case through the door and waves with a cheery 'honey, I'm home!'. It's a relief to see him smiling and acting like himself again, so much that Bucky feels his shoulders physically relax when his boyfriend looks happy, even if he's a little frozen around the edges.

While Bucky was away in treatment, Steve took the chance to be a mess more literally than either of them had expected. Without meaning to, he steadily went to pieces as he tried to figure out how the hell he was supposed to live without worrying about someone every other second. There had been a lot of concerned phone calls from his mother, a lot of trying to figure out if he'd been attracted to Bucky in the first place because of his damage, if that superhero complex was more deeply ingrained than they'd thought. Self-destruction isn't Steve's bag, never has been, but he came pretty close to it when he crashed hard during the first two weeks of Bucky's treatment.

Then Bucky was allowed to call him, and any worry that he would only love his boyfriend while sick melted away immediately. Bucky sounded better on the phone, clear and focused and with none of the scratchiness in his voice that meant he'd been throwing up. He told Steve that things were finally clicking into place, that he was starting to make plans for what to do when he got out of the clinic and started over. And Steve felt nothing but relief to hear the hope in his voice, nothing but happiness, and hoped that meant he could stop beating himself up for latching onto someone sick because some part of his hindbrain wanted to save someone.

He's not entirely convinced yet, but Bucky's convinced enough for both of them.

"What are you smiling about?" He dumps the instrument and kicks off his boots before he comes over to kiss Bucky hello. "Good meeting?"

"Awesome meeting." Bucky slings his arms around Steve's shoulders and privately revels in the fact that his boyfriend can now touch his waist without it sparking a panic attack. "Coulson's going to invest. Said he'll match whatever the Stark Arts Grant contributes."

" Seriously?" The grin that spreads over Steve's face matches Bucky's in size and brightness, and it
looks like he might start doing the dorky little hopping dance that happens when he gets over-excited. "So it's happening? You can really do this?"

"Yep. Coulson wants to put some of his people in charge of financing, which works out great for us. Plus he thinks he can drag a few investors away from the old company now the rumours about Pierce are getting louder. Then we just start from the ground up." Bucky nods, no trace of shakiness or hesitation behind his beaming smile. He's steady now, he's solid and so ready to move on to something that isn't thinking about his fucked-up head all the time. "It's happening, we're really doing it."

"Oh my god!" Steve actually picks him up and spins them around, socks sliding on lino as he laughs, an ungraceful mirror of what Bucky's life used to be. It takes more effort to pick Bucky up than it used to, and he's very okay with that. "Your own company, Jesus Christ."

"Language, Stevie. Your Ma wouldn't like that sort of talk."

"Fuck you." Steve rolls his eyes and drops Bucky inelegantly on the floor, but his boyfriend stays on his feet without any effort. He hasn't been to a dance class since he quit the company, but his muscle memory is apparently more reliable than his mental one. "Have you decided what you're gonna call it yet?"

"Nah. I've gotta consult with people now there's money involved and it's not just a pipe dream." He shrugs, feeling slightly embarrassed as he offers up the name he's been kicking around in his notebooks for a while now. It's only because he's a big enough name in the dance world that he's managed to secure funding, but there's no way he's splashing his 'famous' name all over this thing when he's trying to take a step back from the spotlight. "I was thinking about Shield. Shield Studios or something. But that's all a lot of meetings away."

"This isn't too much, right?" There's always an element of caution whenever Bucky takes on something new, especially this early into his recovery, and Steve is usually the one to voice it. But this time Bucky shakes his head determinedly, not willing to give up now he's getting so close to everything he's been working for.

"I'm not doing as much as it sounds like. Once things are set up I'll pretty much just be teaching and going to meetings. For a while anyway." He frowns slightly before nodding, because that's what he hopes is going to happen anyway. The whole point of this, as he's pointed out to Coulson numerous times, is that he's not under as much personal pressure as he was before. "Yeah, I think that's pretty much it. Until we get the funding for shows and stuff. I'm checking in with myself, promise."

"Good." Steve trusts him to tap out if things are getting too much, which Bucky thinks might be slightly premature but he's doing his best to honour the faith his boyfriend has in him. "Did Sam and Nat give you an answer yet?"

"They're in, but not until the company is set up and we can make a formal offer. Gotta keep the lights on. I think we'll get a few others too." He shrugs and kisses Steve lightly before he goes to finish prepping dinner. It's too early to ask his friends to make a commitment to leave the company when he can't even guarantee them a paycheque, but the wheels are slowly grinding into motion.

Soon there'll be nobody telling Bucky what to do except him, which is more exhilarating than terrifying at this point. A little fear still lingers in the back of his mind, the expectation that he'll probably find a way to sabotage himself and fuck all this up, but it's not the loudest voice in his head anymore. It's a change, and change feels good.

It's still slightly surreal to prepare food (take the time to prepare it, not heat it up in the microwave)
and place some value on it that isn't related to how easy it'll be to puke up. Bucky hums to himself as he dices onion and is softly struck by the realisation that he doesn't have any feelings about dinner tonight. It's just food.

Just food. It's so simple, but it's fucking revolutionary to him.

Lazy snow has started to fall outside the kitchen window, and Bucky smiles to himself again when he notices. In the past, winter had only ever reminded him of Novosibirsk and almost walking off a roof in despair, but he's getting better at shoving the bad thoughts away now and clearing the path for new associations. Now he's thinking about how winter means he has an excuse to curl up on the couch, huddled under a blanket with Steve pressed against him, and catch up on all the TV he missed in his years of obsessive training without feeling guilty about it. He thinks he could grow to actually like winter now.

"Seriously, what are you smiling about?" Steve slides his arms around Bucky's waist from behind and hooks his chin over his shoulder, scrubbing stubble against his cheek playfully. "You look like you've got a secret."

"Nah." Bucky shakes his head, still smiling, because he's just happy. He doesn't think about whether he's allowed to be, not anymore. "Sometimes things go okay, that's all."

Chapter End Notes

It's finally finished! I can't believe it!

Thank you for riding through this almost-nine-months of my life with me while I wrote this beast. I really hope you enjoyed it, thank you for reading and commenting and letting me know what you thought, I've loved hearing from you guys. Such love.

I TOLD YOU THERE'D BE KIND OF A HAPPY ENDING DAMMIT

Update: the sequel has begun! It's posted here:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/5447657/chapters/12591473

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!